

Forgiveness

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I grew up in a three-family house in Brooklyn. When I was a teenager a family moved into the apartment below ours. The parents, Sam and Betty (these are pseudonyms), were both Holocaust survivors who met in the United States following World War II. They had one child, a son, who was several years younger than I was. A quick glance at the arms of each parent bore witness to their having been in a Nazi death camp. A sequence of numbers had been tattooed into their skin. The Nazis attempted to deprive millions of their identity and humanity by replacing names with numbers.

What struck me more than the numbers on their arms was the sadness that seemed a permanent feature of their facial expressions and body posture. Sam and Betty rarely, if ever, smiled and any sparkle that may have once existed in their eyes was long gone, erased by the unimaginable horrors to which they had been subjected. Years later as a psychologist I was reminded of their eyes when working with some children who had been abused and traumatized.

I had read articles about the atrocities committed during the Holocaust, but until this family moved into our building I had not personally encountered anyone who had been imprisoned in a concentration camp. Possessing the natural curiosity of a young teenager I wanted to learn more about their lives during the Holocaust, but I realized I could not ask them. If we were ever to converse about their experiences, they would have to initiate the discussion. I never thought this would occur. I sensed that it was far too painful a topic for them to address. Except for Betty's brother who lived in the neighborhood, all members of their once large families had been killed, most in the gas chambers of the concentration camps.

Unexpectedly, one summer evening as I was sitting on the front porch with Sam and Betty, they opened a door long sealed. The door was to remain ajar for just a brief time and they were never to open it again in my presence. Given the intense emotions that their stories aroused in me I cannot remember what prompted them to reveal their journey into what can best be described as "hell on earth."

Betty and Sam both recounted acts perpetrated by Nazis against family members and themselves. These acts were so disturbing that as soon as I heard them I wanted to eradicate them from my mind. It was difficult for me to imagine what it must have been like for Betty and Sam to witness such barbarism. One story in particular has stayed with me. Betty described a Nazi soldier throwing her infant niece up in the air and catching the child on a bayonet that sliced right through the baby in front of the infant's parents and other relatives. Such brutality is difficult to fathom.

A Discussion in a College Class

A number of years after Sam and Betty shared their stories of horror and pain, I was enrolled in an undergraduate Social Psychology class. The class was involved in a discussion of the roots of prejudice and hatred and the ways in which seemingly "normal" individuals could engage in acts of cruelty. Not surprisingly, the dialogue turned to the Holocaust and the Nazis. One of the members of the class questioned how people who had experienced intense terror and abuse could go on with their lives. Another student introduced the topic of "forgiveness," wondering if it is possible for victims to forgive their abusers and if it serves any purpose to forgive those who have been so cruel. A lively debate ensued about what exactly is "forgiveness." We did not arrive at any definitive answers, but during the discussion I was reminded of Sam and Betty and a bayonet. How could they forgive? What would it mean to forgive?

Stories in Therapy and the Emergence of Positive Psychology

During my four decades as a clinical psychologist, I have frequently reflected upon the concept of "forgiveness" and what it entails. I have conducted therapy with individuals who could not relinquish anger towards those whom they felt had wronged them in some manner. Their anger was all-consuming, not permitting them to move forward with their lives. I have worked with divorcing parents whose anger towards each other precluded them from keeping the best interests of their children in mind. I have reviewed research reporting the importance of letting go of one's anger, but questioned if to do so one must learn to forgive.

In previous articles I have described the emergence of "positive psychology" in which the focus has shifted from the study of pathology and negative emotions to appreciating each individual's strengths and positive emotions. A concept highlighted

within positive psychology has been that of forgiveness. In my February, 2005 website article, I reported that forgiveness is one of the components that contributes to happiness. In an attempt to articulate the dimensions of forgiveness, I wrote:

The topic of forgiveness is receiving increasing attention, especially within the field of positive psychology. I have conducted therapy with men and women whose difficulties letting go of anger and resentment have been major obstacles in their lives. Patients have frequently told me that it is not easy to forgive. I agree, especially in cases involving emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. However, I share with patients that I do not view forgiving as the same as forgetting, minimizing, or denying hurtful actions. Rather, a major feature of forgiving is to insure that our lives not be dominated by intense anger and thoughts of revenge. We must appreciate that while we may not have had control over hurtful actions, we have more choice than we realize in determining our response to the negative behavior of others.

However, as I wrote these words more than three years ago, I continued to question, “Would such a view of forgiveness apply to Sam or Betty or other victims of genocide?”

A Thought-Provoking Book, A Clearer Understanding of Forgiveness

At a recent workshop, a member of the audience asked if I had read *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* by Dr. Stephen Post and Jill Neimark. I had not. This individual highly recommended I do so, noting that the ideas and research described in the book parallel many of the major themes in my own work, including the importance of resilience, gratitude, compassion, giving to others, and humor. Post is Professor of Bioethics and Family Medicine in the School of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. He is also President and Founder of the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love (IRUL), which Post notes has funded numerous studies “focused on the traits and qualities that create happiness, health, contentment, and lasting success in life.” Neimark is a science writer as well as the author of several children’s books.

Each chapter of their book is devoted to an attribute that contributes to a sense of happiness, and physical and emotional well-being. One of the chapters has the intriguing title: “The Way of Forgiveness: Set Yourself Free.” The content of this chapter provided

me with a more detailed understanding of what I attempted to articulate in my 2005 article. In addition, the research studies and case illustrations helped me to appreciate more fully the importance of forgiveness in all of our lives.

Post and Neimark emphasize that there is much confusion about the meaning of the concept of forgiveness. They quote research psychologist Charlotte Witvliet of Hope College in Michigan who states, “One of the most common and mistaken arguments against forgiveness is that when you forgive someone, you are showing them that they can have their way. Why people ask, should they give an offender such power? If you’re really good at forgiveness, a deeper excavation has to happen, and it requires courage as well as empathy. . . . Forgiveness is a powerful act, definitely not flimsy or sappy. In order to forgive you must first tell the true story of exactly what happened, grieve it fully, and then turn away from grudges, bitterness, and the kind of ruminating that amplifies the story and gives it too much replay time.”

Post and Neimark observe, “Forgiveness is love that can only emerge when the giver has first suffered harm. It frees the giver from bondage to a bitterness that could easily darken his or her view of life. Without forgiveness, retribution would haunt our lives. How long would any of us last?”

The authors continue, “And yet, as every one of us knows, forgiveness is a challenging form of love. When we’ve been harmed—and sometimes deeply so—it can feel nearly impossible to let go of outrage, anger, and grief. Vengeful is enticing; there is almost a lust to eradicate those who have transgressed against us. Grudge matches are notorious between families, clans, and countries. The natural tendency is seductive, but we end up reliving the original harm a thousand times over.”

Post and Neimark cite numerous research findings that indicate that the act of forgiving improves one’s physical health, alleviates depressive feelings, lessens anger, and lowers stress hormones. While reading these studies together with suggestions offered to facilitate forgiveness, I could not help thinking once again of Sam and Betty and asking, “How could they forgive?” “What would it mean to forgive?” And then Post and Neimark shared the story of Samuel Oliner, a faculty member at Humboldt State College in California.

As a child Oliner's entire family was killed by the Nazis. He was the only one to escape and he was taken in by a Polish woman who taught him the catechism and changed his name so that he could pass as a Catholic. He then worked as a stable boy for a Nazi sympathizer who was living in a home formerly owned by a Jewish family that had been exterminated. Oliner, who eventually came to the United States and earned a doctorate in Sociology, states, "I was a little on the violent side. I had to go to therapy and marriage counseling. I suffered from nightmares. I was not very considerate. I felt that anything you can tell me, I've already experienced. Any evil that you've seen—well I've seen my family murdered."

What led Oliner to relinquish his anger and bitterness? At the age of 48 he began to do research on non-Jews who risked their lives to save and shelter Jews, some of whom were strangers to them. Oliner, in collaboration with his wife, co-authored a book focusing on 700 of these rescuers. His research was his therapy, his path to forgiveness. He observes, "The project made me feel much better. I'm grateful for the people who cared. It's because of these people that I'm here." A rabbi who knew Oliner remarked, "He found the spark of decency in human beings."

Oliner did not discover inner peace by excusing or exonerating those who had slaughtered his family. I doubt if that would be possible. He did not deny the pain of losing his family. That too would be impossible. Instead, as Post and Neimark express, Oliner "shifted his perspective." He discovered solace by seeking those who placed their own lives in jeopardy to rescue others. In so doing, his anger and bitterness were replaced with respect and compassion. When our hearts and minds focus on the kindness of others, there is less room for anger to dominate our lives.

I often wonder if Sam and Betty ever found peace in their lives. I wonder if given what they had experienced, if they had any room or energy left in their hearts or souls to search for and appreciate the goodness of others. I wonder if I had lost my family in the Holocaust, would I have been able to embark on the path that Oliner did.

In contemplating these questions I will keep in mind the following insight that Post and Neimark offer: "Think about the emotional relief you will give yourself if and when you decide to forgive the deepest hurts of your life. Remember that it's

really difficult to hold inside yourself two opposing emotions at the same time, so that when you are in a forgiving state, you are unlikely to also be in a vengeful state. Understand forgiveness as a form of enlightened self-interest, a gift that you give yourself by learning whatever good lessons you can from an event.”