

A Reflection by Mariellen O. Gilpin

Some Thoughts On Forgiving

My father was a compulsive gambler. On paydays my mother drove me to the factory and sent me in to find my father and bring out a share of the paycheck. Sometimes I succeeded, and sometimes debts had eaten up the family's share. When he developed cancer, my father had no medical insurance. I dropped out of college and went to work in a prison; every morning I put on my barn clothes to feed and water the cows and pigs; then I changed into my secretary clothes and went to my job typing inmates' statements of their crimes. My friends' fathers were paying for their college education, and I was helping to pay my profligate father's medical expenses. I was furious.

I didn't cry at my father's funeral, and the next day I went back to school, determined to make up for the time I had lost taking care of my parents. I was rigid with anger and unshed tears. Two weeks later, I was working past midnight to write a paper. I grew sleepy and lay down for a twenty-minute nap. I dreamed that my father's spirit came to me as I lay there. He was suffering. I rolled off the bed and, still half-asleep, said out loud, "Daddy, I forgive you." I came out of my dream just enough to give my full waking consent to the words of healing. And I felt the weight of my anger drop away from me, never to trouble me again.

I had been saying, "I'm not going to forgive. What was done should not be forgiven. To forgive this wrong is to say it doesn't matter when it DOES matter." The load that was lifted off my spirit and body when I forgave my father is one reason I think it's important to let go of our anger and resentment. I am sure I will live longer and healthier because I forgave my father. Since that experience of forgiveness by grace 35 years ago, I have made strong efforts to forgive, not for my opponent's sake, but for my own. When Jesus told us to forgive 70 times seven, he was talking about our personal spiritual hygiene. The sooner I can shed my burden of anger and resentment, the better for me – not because God will reward me for being good, but because the spiritual laws of gravity will work themselves out with positive results for me.

The Importance of Challenging

Sometimes it's hard to forgive someone we have known for a long time. Then it helps to practice forgiving first on people we have known just a short time. This is one of the things I learned during the six years I spent in a self-help group for recovering mental patients. For four years I led the group. I learned a lot about recognizing maladjustments and challenging people to change. Challenging someone to change was something I did with fear and trembling; there was so much about the person's pain I didn't know! And some of the people I challenged were bigger and meaner than I was. Yet challenge I must, or the health of the whole group would suffer. I tried always to challenge in the presence of God; I prayed sometimes for most of the week

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between meetings before speaking up, although sometimes my prayer was a simple, "Oh, help," before I began.

I learned to challenge by making a sandwich: two outer layers in which I told my honest appreciation for the person's good qualities, and an inner layer – the meat of the sandwich – in which I told the person the pattern of behavior I saw, and the damage that the pattern was doing to the person him- or herself. I held the person in the Light as I tried to construct the sandwich in my mind, asking God to show me the person's good qualities, and to show me the person's pain that caused him to choose the damaging pattern.

When I finally spoke up, the sufferer often stormed out of the group, or at the very least was resistant – seldom did the person appreciate the challenge – and I learned to wait. The person often did not return to the group for awhile, and I simply held the person in the Light. I stayed in touch by postcard: hello, how are you, this is what's going on in my life. I made no reference to my challenge, and simply let the person think it over. Maybe he or she would decide to change. And if s/he did change, I welcomed the change and praised the person's efforts.

The fascinating thing to me, however, about challenging another in the presence of God was the effect on me. When I praised someone's good qualities and named the maladjusted behavior while holding the person in the Light, I myself experienced a deep love and compassion for the person. The sufferer might or might not change; I was changed – empowered to love him or her as s/he was. I was enabled to see a God's eye view of my suffering friend – a clear-eyed, more complete picture that included the person's pain, the lovely humanity and the unlovely pattern. All at once. When my friend aggravated me again, I would say again, "Oh, help," and the compassion never completely left me. I was changed, and I think sometimes my change left my friend free to change too. God wanted my friend to heal him- or herself enough that God let me learn to balance my own anger and frustration with a supporting love and compassion and hope. As I practiced challenging with the members of my recovery group, it became easier over time to challenge in my closer relationships. The effort to speak out in the presence of God has helped me forgive, even when the person persists in the unhealthy behavior.

Don't Wait For An Apology

On a recent Sunday, I went into meeting for worship asking that a former friend apologize to me so that I could stop being angry with him. During meeting, I found myself remembering a time about six weeks after I went to work in a men's prison. I had been warned not to fraternize with prisoners. Usually the four women in the office walked over to the officers mess to eat lunch, but one day there had been a freezing rain, and we phoned a request that prisoners bring our lunch to us. As we ate, I thought about the two young men in thin cotton coats who had brought lunch and were waiting to carry the dishes back through the sleet to the officers mess. I took a paper towel, scrawled "Thanks!" on it and drew four smiley faces. I propped the note against our dishes, and we left the lunch area.

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None of us thought anything about it. But one of the prisoners smuggled a note in the lunch boxes to a woman in the office, and when he was caught, told about my note. The older women got in trouble. Someone asked me if I knew about the note, and I was struck by a kind of fear-
amnesia. I denied any knowledge of the note I had written.

I sat in the silence of that meeting for worship, recalling that event 35 years before, recalling that it had been a year after I left the prison before I came out of my fear-amnesia and remembered writing the note. I wondered in meeting why I was remembering that old lie. Was I supposed to share it in meeting? It seemed not.

And then the Spirit moved: "Did you ever apologize to anyone for that old lie? Do you think you understand now the fear-amnesia that caused your old friend to lie to you? Do you suppose you can forgive him now?" And so I forgave that old wrong; if God could forgive my lie, then I could forgive my human friend's lie. It was a powerful meeting for worship, and a totally silent one.

There's the obvious point in this story: don't wait for an apology to do my forgiveness work. Another issue is the importance of humility. One of the mysteries about our being human is that we can conceive of perfection, but not attain it. Letting go of my desire for my friend to be perfect and acknowledging I wouldn't have done any better healed a relationship. I can't deliver perfection in my own behavior, so where did I get off expecting perfection of another person? It's essential to have a little humility. It's part of the God's eye view.

There's something else about this story that fascinates me: God is usually subtle and silent. This is the most direct, most immediate, most pointed message from God that I've ever received. I conclude that God thinks it's very important for us humans to forgive each other the damage we do. I can love a God who has his or her priorities so right, a God who shares the God's-eye view of myself with me in an effort to help me be clear-eyed in my understanding and compassion for another.

Sometimes forgiveness comes in an instant, an act of grace, as in the healing of my relationship with my father. Sometimes it comes in less deep-rooted relationships first, as in the challenges to my support group friends, because sometimes we have to grow stronger, wiser and more loving in other relationships first. Sometimes forgiveness must be a process, a progressive letting-go over time. But I need to forgive because it heals me physically as well as spiritually. I need always to challenge in the presence of God because of the resulting sense of compassion and wider vision. I need to remember the importance of humility, and the importance of not waiting for the other to change to do my forgiving. Always, I need to remember that the work of forgiveness is something God calls me to do.

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