

RUNNING HEAD: LEARNING TO FORGIVE

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The question should not be whether there are gender differences concerning power dynamics, forgiveness or reconciliation, or even what those are, but what is forgiveness and how can we learn more effective ways to forgive ourselves and reconcile with each other? Learning how to forgive and how to reconcile is important for both sexes as well as for victims and perpetrators.

All gender-based behaviors are to some extent learned through cultural scripts “created to limit and direct, to pattern and guide behavior along predictable the therefore safer paths” (Augsberger, 1992, p. 171). The expression of these scripts varies widely within cultures and infinitely between cultures, with male dominance a continuing theme perhaps based on the models of civilization and contacts between cultures: “Formation of states leads to a high degree of belligerence” (Galtung cited in Augsberger, 1992, p. 119). Within a culture, dealing with “otherness” varies with men and women, often giving men the credit for a solution worked out by women. War is a learned social response (Mead cited in Augsberger, 1992, p. 119) that apparently exists to protect egos of men, which are more fragile and delicate than the core identities of women (Augsberger, 1992, p. 186). Witty’s 1980 interviews with Middle Eastern women suggested, “[m]ediation gives men something important to discuss and pursue in their leisure time” (cited in Augsberger, p. 176). Such discussion may keep men “out from under foot” while women solve problems. Such patterns can be “unlearned” as Weldon suggests has already happened in Britain: “This is the Age of the Anima...Here in Britain, Tony Blair's New Labour Party presents itself as female, using the language of compassion, forgiveness, apology, understanding, and nurturing-- qualities conventionally attributed to women”

(1998, p. 65). Problem solving, in whatever cultural milieu requires reconciliation at some level, which requires both forgiveness and penance or reparation.

What is forgiveness? Should terrible acts be forgiven, be erased from the record, and the perpetrator reconciled to society and the victims? How can a loved one forgive those who kill their significant others, whether in war, a drive-by shooting, terrorist acts or domestic violence? Where is the place for retribution, and more importantly, prevention of future acts?

Defining forgiveness and reconciliation is difficult enough: “social scientists have found it easier to agree upon what forgiveness is not” (Rye, et. al. 1991, par. 3). According to Richmond (2006), “Forgiveness comes from sorrow. Not sorrow for anything you have done, but sorrow for the very fact that everyone, including yourself, has the same ugly capacity to inflict harm on others, wittingly or unwittingly. (“A Personal Experience,” par. 4) In Christian doctrine, forgiveness is the purpose of the death of Jesus, and the victory of the resurrection. But in Hindu beliefs, one’s injury is one’s karma delivered through the other by the other’s karma, which should engender patience and tolerance of others if one is strong enough to forgive (Augsberger, 1992, p. 268-69). Forgiveness may range from ignoring the offending behavior or excusing it to confronting, punishing or ostracizing the offender (Augsberger, 275-277; Kaunda (1980) says, “Forgiveness is not, of course a substitute for justice...to fight for justice without also being prepared to offer forgiveness is to render your struggle null and void” (cited in Augsberger, 1991, p. 277).

True forgiveness is first a gift. Offering that gift that heals the giver--the forgiver. Richman (2006) says, “If you cannot let go of your desire for vengeance, you will never

find true healing, and you can never be truly healed if you try to force someone else to pay for the cost of your healing” (“Penance” par.18). According to Rabbi Elliot Dorff, “Victims must be willing to let go of the idea that the offenders owe them something, they must be willing to release the psychological hold the victims believe they have over the perpetrator” (cited in Swanson, 2001, par. 9). The true difficulty is that “[you] cannot forgive someone until you have fully felt the pain he or she has caused you.” (Richmond, ‘A Caution’, par. 1-2.)” Western individualists tend to avoid that pain at many costs (Augsberger, 1992, p. 271). Do the genders differ in forgivingness?

Women are considered better at maintaining relationships, and so might be expected to be more forgiving. Some studies find no gender differences in willingness to forgive (Rye, et.al., 1991). According to McCaskill (2005), studies “suggest that sex is neither an important predictor of dispositional forgiveness nor a moderating variable.” With patients being treated for anxiety and depression, no gender differences appeared on scales of willingness to forgive, but Ryan & Kumar found that “anxiety and symptom severity were related to willingness to forgive in males, but not in females” (2005) . In some cases, “women were found to be more forgiving than men,” but there were “no sex differences in vengeance seeking” (McCaskill, 2005).

Toussaint's (2001) studies show that "men may cling to grudges a little more tightly than women do" -- 49% to 54%--and "women were more likely to ask for forgiveness" 48% - 37%. (Toussaint cited in Gower, par. 5). Toussaint also found that those who were unwilling to forgive the 9/11 attacks "were more likely to suffer from depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, have trouble sleeping, or report some kind of health problem." (cited in Gower par. 7) Gender differences exist, but what is more

important is that people exist: “Are we opposite sexes or neighboring sexes? How are men and women to live together, work together, and interact with one another more harmoniously in the home, in the workplace, in the church?” (van Leeuwen cited in Miller, 2005, p.1). What is more important, however, was the finding that “The events were similar and were rated as equally hurtful for both sexes” (McCaskill, 2005).

Forgiveness is difficult. Its main benefit is to allow the victim to heal. If one believes that we create our own lives consciously or unconsciously, then it is crucial to learn forgiveness regardless of our gender. It is important that we learn to forgive ourselves to keep our health. According to Williams (n.d.), “The association between forgiveness and health is independent of other measures of religious involvement as well as psychosocial factors such as anger and self-esteem.” Brain chemistry changes with thoughts of forgiveness: “Empathic and forgivability judgments activate specific regions of the human brain, which we propose contribute to social cohesion. The activation in these regions changed with symptom resolution in post traumatic stress disorder” (Farrow, n.d.). Charlotte van Oyen Witvliet measured responses to thoughts of grudges: increased heart rate, blood pressure, muscular tension and sweating, while thoughts of forgiveness "caused the subjects' cardiovascular systems and nerves to calm down" (cited in Gower, par. 9). According to Maselko (n.d.), “The ability to forgive oneself and others is strongly related to [lessening of] psychological distress, marital happiness and personal happiness.”

Granting forgiveness heals. Reconciliation requires more: confession of guilt, contrition as acknowledgment of harm caused, and restitution to earn acceptance (Augsberger, 1992). The rituals of reconciliation vary with culture and are learned.

One must know what and whom to forgive and from whom one should ask forgiveness. Twelve Step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, rely on actions seeking forgiveness and reconciliation as part of the quest for a spiritual experience that will relieve the addiction. In the eighth step, one makes a list of every person that one has harmed in any way, and in the ninth, one goes to each person to make amends—not for forgiveness as such—but to offer to make amends in whatever way possible “except when to do so would injure them or others” (“Twelve Steps,” 1998-2006). The admission of guilt is the road to self-forgiveness and opens the person/ego to accept forgiveness and reconciliation with the higher power.

All of us hold trauma from our entire lives, but the act of awareness of the injury, acknowledging the pain and our survival of it strengthens us to forgive, and then perhaps provides the strength to set and enforce our own boundaries.

For my own health and sanity, I must forgive myself for allowing others to influence me away from my best interests.

For my own health and sanity, I must forgive others for manipulating my life, especially those who had my best interests in mind with their own interests at heart.

For my own health and sanity, I must forgive those whose unique path to joy cut me off from my path or ran me off my highway, because at some level, I was not paying attention to what they were doing.

For my own health and sanity, I must ask forgiveness and try to make amends to any that I perceive from my own pain to have been hurt by my actions. Whether they choose to forgive is irrelevant. I must ask. And I must forgive myself for being human

Whether there are binary differences or a wide continuum in gender perception of power, forgiveness, or reconciliation is irrelevant; what is important is that each of us learns how to forgive and reconcile ourselves to a state of inner peace for our own health, our sanity, and our effectiveness in the world:

Before we can begin again together, we must repent separately. In the beginning, we need simply to listen to each other's stories, the histories of wounds. Then we must examine the social-economic-political system that has turned the mystery of man and woman into the alienation between the genders. And, finally, we must grieve together. Only repentance, mourning, and forgiveness will open our hearts to each other and give us the power to begin again. (Keen, 1991)

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