

Dealing with the Past Through Vengeance or Forgiveness

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Simon Wiesenthal – The Sunflower.

A Jew is asked to forgive the human rights atrocities of a dying SS soldier.

Karl has committed many atrocities against Jewish people. He is injured in an explosion and brought to German Military Hospital where Simon is part of the clean-up crew.

Karl asks that a Jew be brought to him. Simon is ordered to Karl's bedside.

Karl has deliberately set a house on fire with hand grenades, a house crammed with Jews.

'I am resigned to dying soon, but before that I want to talk about an experience which is torturing me. I want to die in peace I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace'. He would suffer more if only he could bring back the dead.

Simon regards Karl's confession as *true repentance*', but he walks out of the room without making a response. *'Crux of the matter'* is forgiveness. Simon Wiesenthal's question is *'what would you have done had you been in his position?'*

The story raises huge questions. It has personal and political dimensions.

Karl personally repents but the atrocities were not private offences but war crimes committed by the Nazi regime.

Is Simon being asked to forget? Can Karl apologise to a random representative when he is unable to say his sorry to his victims?

What are Karl's motives for repenting? Is Karl's repentance meaningful?

Would Simon's forgiveness have been meaningful?

Forgiveness is a complex issue and because it is, it is made to sound simplistic, or worse, moralistic. To forgive is an enormous moral struggle requiring huge moral courage. Forgiveness cannot be forced. To moralistically demand forgiveness is to increase the pain and deepen the injustice. Forgiveness is not a once activity but a process. It may be a life-long process. We journey in forgiveness. Through moral nurture we cultivate the art or practice of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not an isolated act. Partly personal, partly political it is bound up in a web of interdependent, interactive personal and communal dynamics. There is a relationship between forgiveness and repentance or contrition, and there is a relationship between victim, offender and the wider community to which both belong. The wider community has a responsibility for a forgiving or larger reconciling process. To expect victims/survivors to carry the sole responsibility for forgiveness or reconciliation is a gross injustice and a cop-out by the community from its shared responsibility for the past and for dealing with the past and a shared future. We are all in this together. Community creates conditions, atmosphere, where forgiveness becomes possible. Civic and political society can help or hinder, enhance or block the healing process of which forgiveness is a part.

THE NATURE OF FORGIVENESS

Unjust and undeserved wrong against a person happens in a number of ways. There is physical violence, psychological violence, destruction of life and property, violation of the other person's rights. There are two effects of such wrong-doing. The person is damaged physically and psychologically. Relationships are destroyed and the very fabric of community is destroyed, trust. That past which is both personal and communal needs to

be dealt with. It can be dealt with through retribution or through a process of forgiveness. There are three major models of forgiveness.

Classical Model

Forgiveness requires that offenders must acknowledge their wrong-doing and express remorse for harm and injuries they have inflicted on their victims. This may happen through public acknowledgement, public apology or repentance and making some kind of tangible, concrete reparation or restitution. The victim lets go of the desire for vengeance or refrains from acts of violence, tries empathetically to stand in the offenders shoes and releases the offender from all debts. If such forgiveness is authentic it will lead to healing of the victim and restoration or transformation of the offender and the social fabric of trust in the community can be built again. But authenticity requires certain preconditions.¹

- **Consensus on Truth**
Is there agreement on the nature, causes and responsibility for wrong-doing?
- **Repentance**
People have offered forgiveness without repentance – remorse, apology and a commitment to turn away from all violence. But without repentance relationships are not likely to be restored.
- **Renunciation of Vengeance**
Vengeance and retaliation increase the spiral of violence. *'Whoever opts for revenge should dig two graves'* – Chinese proverb. Victims give up revenge.
- **Empathy**
Ability to see the offenders as human beings who are to be treated with dignity and respect, even though they have not shown that to others.
- **Mitigation of Punishment**
To forgive a debt is to cancel a debt. Offender is released from deserved punishment. Forgiveness means surrendering the right to get even.

The dilemma in this model is that forgiveness is dependent on repentance. If the offender refuses to apologise or express contrition, she/he will then impede the victim's healing and restoration. The offender is rubbing salt into the wound. But if there is a genuine interaction between victim and offender there can be a restoration of relationship and community trust.

The Therapeutic Model

This model of forgiveness is primarily concerned with healing of the victim's emotional feelings and hurts. What the victim suffers has the effect of destroying self-confidence, self-esteem, dignity. Dignity is destroyed because the violence/wrong-doing created a moral inequality between offenders and victims. The suffering experience was not only then but it is on-going because there is often lingering resentment and hatred, feelings which are understandable and even justifiable. Its another big issue, the spectrum of hate at one end of which there is just hate, the response to intentional violence and violation which is a sign that we are morally alive. But hate, resentment and vengeance can

become destructive. We can become slaves to anger and resentment and develop an obsession with revenge. Psychologically there are inner, long-term effects of personal hurts and what is particularly destructive is unresolved anger and resentment.

If the classical model has victim and offender in an indivisible, inseparable relationship, in the therapeutic model victim and offender are independent. So in therapeutic forgiveness the victim takes responsibility for their own emotional well-being. By forgiving the self and others the victims may well uncover repressed resentment, face into unresolved anger, the obsession with vengeance and victimhood, and find in the forgiving process healing and restoration. The destructive emotions are no longer in control, they no longer determine life and relationships.

The Moral Virtue Model

In this model forgiveness is a character trait. It is the morally right thing to do but it is also something which is learned or cultivated. Forgiveness is a qualified moral duty. It will stop at the point where an offender refuses to take responsibility for their actions or they refuse to change life direction and stop their violent, destructive and morally wrong actions. There are repeated wrongs which justify moral hate. In the Christian Gospels a question is asked, *'who can forgive sins but God alone?'* The question is put by the religious establishment whose power and control was threatened by an ordinary Galilean peasant like Jesus enacting forgiveness. In another and different context the question may be valid. There may well be atrocities and wrongs that from a human perspective are unforgivable and only God in the mystery and mercy of God can forgive. As humans we may not be able to answer that question.

The moral virtue model recognises that there are possibilities for forgiveness because we need to recognise and acknowledge the fallibility, constant weakness and finitude of all human persons. Its not that we are good and they are evil. That's the delusion at the heart of President Bush's *'axis of evil'* speech. To demonise the other is to justify ourselves. But the nature of every human being and institution is ambivalent.

A young English woman some months ago visited Auschwitz and could not come to terms with the fact that her grandfather, a member of the SS, had been part of the terrible crimes against humanity, and yet she had only known a kind, loving, good and generous grandfather. How could it be? It is an uncomfortable reminder that terrible things are not done by evil people. It is good people who do evil things.

From the perspective of moral complexity and ambivalence, the constant shades of grey, there is a moral duty to treat people as if they are decent even though their actions seem to contradict that premise.

In empathy we become more familiar with the offender's life and begin to see them not as mindless, evil monsters but as human beings like ourselves, with pasts, histories, experiences that compromise their decency. Like the young woman's SS grandfather, it was people like us who perpetrated the Holocaust.

In the process or act or craft of forgiveness as a moral virtue we learn not only more about the humanity of the other but also about the greyness of our own humanity. We share a common humanity which is both potentially good and evil, with the capacity for peaceableness and violence, the potential to be both victim and offender. So in a life-long

process, this model encourages us to learn and nurture the art of forgiveness so that there may be *'a constant willingness to live in a new day without looking back and ransacking the memory for occasions of bitterness and resentment'* (Kenneth Kaunda – President of Zambia).²

Also from the moral virtue model there may be the reality that if people are unwilling to forgive others, they may also have difficulty forgiving themselves. Ultimately the moral virtue model of forgiveness is about the restoration of human relationships.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FORGIVENESS

Whatever the value or helpfulness of these three models of forgiveness, the classical, therapeutic, moral virtue, the process of forgiveness has its importance and significance for victim, offender and community. In the classical model forgiveness is the way by which alienated, broken relationships can be restored because of reciprocity between victim and offender. In the therapeutic model forgiveness is the way to overcome anger, bitterness, resentment and hate so that the person can get in touch again with their true humanity. In the moral virtue model there is the presupposition that the difficult ethic of forgiveness requires cultivated and nurtured moral virtues, not least moral courage. In all three models forgiveness is a difficult act, a difficult moral response to hurt, violence, atrocity and wrongdoing. There is no forgiveness without personal suffering. Yet Desmond Tutu, out of the pain of his South African experience wrote a book with the title, *'No Future Without Forgiveness'*.³ Relationally forgiveness is important for four reasons.

Forgiveness is important because it is the only way by which victims can be healed emotionally. Another South African anti-Apartheid writer said, *'there is a hard law when an injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive'*.⁴ Retribution or penal justice may help a little but ultimately it does not heal our hurt and pain.

Forgiveness can be offered as a response to genuine repentance, contrition and reparation or change of life direction. There is no guarantee that an offender will do any of that, and if he/she does, how do we know it is genuine? But the victim can in compassion be ready to forgive if genuine repentance, regret is expressed.

Forgiveness enables reconciliation to begin or happen. Through forgiveness broken relationships can be healed and social harmony and community solidarity can be restored. Having said all that we need to recognise that forgiveness is, at the end of the day, a gift which cannot ever be demanded, forced or expected. If forgiveness is forced or earned it is no longer forgiveness.

Forgiveness may come from the realisation that there is no better alternative to confront and deal with the past and overcome past wrong-doing. Personal demands for vengeance or legal/institutional retribution are limited ways forward. In American states relatives of victims are often present to see a death sentence carried out, either by electric chair or lethal injection. But it doesn't heal the pain or overcome the past. There may be no other alternative to forgiveness, whether the classical, therapeutic or moral virtue model. But again let no one be under any illusion, forgiveness is hard, it is very hard and it may take a long time. It is not just about dealing with the past, it is also future because it may be the act or process by which we break the generational effects of wrong-doing and violence done. Through forgiveness we may avoid transferring the hurts, bitterness and vengeance to another generation. The process of forgiveness may liberate those yet unborn.

STORIES OF FORGIVENESS

In the Jewish sacred text there is a story of family or tribal hurt, the moral struggle to forgive and the long difficult journey to restorative justice. The main character is a person called Joseph. Joseph is one of 12 brothers, his father's favourite and a very arrogant, obnoxious young man. His older brothers can't stand him especially when he tells of his dream in which they fall on their faces before him. Hatred, envy and jealousy become so intense that the brothers sell Joseph to travelling merchants who take him as a slave to Egypt. Somehow Joseph gains access to the royal household and over the years he rises to become the second most powerful person in Egypt. He wields huge economic and political power. A terrible famine hits the region but Joseph has set up a relief system that keeps Egyptians from starvation and death and increases the wealth of the Pharaoh and Joseph's prestige and power. His brothers come to Egypt looking for help. They encounter Joseph. They do not recognise him but he knows who they are. Joseph has not forgotten the terrible event of 20 years earlier. Resentment, anger and vengeance are all there. He manipulates them and plays with their emotions, accuses them of being spies. They are to bring their younger brother to Egypt. They buy sacks of grain but on the way home they discover the money they had used in the sacks of grain. Now they really feared the Egyptian authorities. Eventually they bring their brother to Egypt and Joseph invites them to a dinner party. Was this a trap to accuse them and punish them for stealing back the money, stealing the grain. Joseph is really turning the revenge screw on them. Yet Joseph has to leave the dinner party to weep in a side room. Their sacks are filled with food, the money again hidden in them and this time an additional emotional blackmail. Joseph's silver drinking cup is put in a sack of grain. They leave, innocent of all this and Joseph orders a steward to follow them, to order them to return and put the younger brother in prison.

Vengeance is sweet, or is it? Joseph breaks down and weeps uncontrollably in their presence, discloses his identity, *'I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt'*. Their emotions are running riot. Joseph tries to calm things by asking them not to feel grieved or angry with themselves over what they had done. They are asked to bring their elderly father to Egypt and live in the security and safety of the Pharaoh's system.

Years later when the father dies the brothers are still fearful that Joseph will still seek vengeance for what happened four decades earlier. They decide to express their remorse again and to ask this time for forgiveness. Joseph recognises and names the evil they have done, even tries to see an ultimate good that came from their evil, and another level of forgiveness takes place.

This is a decade's long story of forgiveness and reconciliation. It's a story of violation and violence, of vengeance which does not deal with the past, the admission of wrong-doing, remorse, contrition, the acceptance of remorse, the letting go of vengeance and revenge and restored humanity and restored community solidarity. It has been described as a saga of restorative justice. *'It is not the story of a model family but rather of how human community can survive some of the worst possible assaults against it'*.⁵

Every 17 March we celebrate St Patrick's Day. It's the celebration of a non-Irish person, an outsider or foreigner, a Romano-Celt from Britain. Behind the floats and majorettes is a painful story. Patrick at 16 years of age was wrenched by Irish pirates from his home, family and community. Deeply traumatised by this intentional act of violence against and violation of his adolescent humanity, he became a slave in Ireland. After some years he escaped with the deep painful memory of his terrible experience. Slaves have never been

treated as human beings. Somewhere Patrick embraced the Christian faith and then incredibly returned to Ireland to encounter his slave owners, to challenge the dehumanising system of slavery and to spend the rest of his life enabling the Irish to find an alternative way of living in community and in social solidarity. His was a violent abduction. He had every reason to hold an ethnocentric hatred of the Irish, every reason to seek for vengeance. He also could have denied his violent displacement, repressed his anger and resentment, avoided the past and lived in the relative comfort of his Romano British estate. But he helped with others to bring the Irish into the mainstream of Western history. He forgave and was forgiven, he suffered the violence of slavery and overcame it, he was the outsider who stayed or rather returned to transform the culture of his violators and conquerors. The story of Patrick is the story of liberating and transformative forgiveness. Forgiveness can deal with the past, heal wounded persons and restore communal solidarity. Maybe this Patrick needs to be allowed to speak and be heard by contemporary Irish victims and offenders. St Patrick's Day could become an inspiration for dealing with our troubled and painful Irish history and past. From Patrick we could renew our vision of moral courage by which forgiveness and reconciliation might become our alternative story.

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References

- 1 The preconditions are adapted from Mark R Amstutz, The Healing of Nations: The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness, (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, USA, 2005) p 55. Amstutz deals in more detail with the models of programmes in pp 54-61.
- 2 Kaunda quoted in Amstutz, p 58.
- 3 Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness, (Rider, London, 1999).
- 4 C J Arnold quoted in Amstutz, p 63.
- 5 Donald W Shriver, An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1995) p 24.