

# EMPATHY AND THE DISTURBING PARADOX OF FORGIVENESS

r u t h h e n d e r s o n

“I am human. I do not think of any human thing as foreign to me.” —*Terence*

It is well-known among psychologists that victims and their perpetrators are bonded together in a profound and uncanny intimacy. From incest survivors to hostages, the injured are psychologically galvanized to their abusers<sup>1</sup>. Forgiveness offers victims an opportunity to be freed from this terrible bond. And while the reward of forgiving is nothing less than liberation, the process itself can be terrifying.

Perhaps there are two key reasons that prevent more people from choosing forgiveness. First, in order to forgive, the injured must re-experience the injury in the process. To forgive, one must look directly at the traumatic experience and the devastation it has caused. In the process of forgiving, one addresses the perpetrator—directly, or in one’s mind—and says, “I know what you did to me and I know how horribly it has affected me. I know all about the damage to my life and as I look at it all, I forgive you.”

The other reason more people may not choose forgiveness concerns the demanding nature of empathy. Empathy, a crucial ingredient in any forgiveness process, is defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary*, as the “identification with and understanding of another’s situation, feelings, and motives” (713). The very notion of empathy highlights the inherent injustice of forgiveness: The injured is called to have feelings for the perpetrator’s situation when the perpetrator showed no regard for the injured.

Yet that is the awful paradox of forgiving: One gives the perpetrator compassion when it is justifiable to maintain one’s anger and resentment, and as a result of this unwarranted response, gets freed from the torment of the injury. But to be kind to someone who has been mean-spirited and destructive to you takes a great deal of courage. Indeed, our hearts and minds know the hurt that was caused and are quick to tell us it is dangerous to have any association

with the perpetrator at all—physical or otherwise. And those voices of warning are not without merit.

So forgiveness can be seen as a homeopathic remedy where like cures like. Our normal impulse is to stay as far away as possible from the person who has hurt us, to maintain those physical and psychological boundaries we have necessarily erected when we were first injured. But forgiveness requires we find some way of taking the hurtful perpetrator into our hearts; and that by holding this “toxic” person in some loving way, we get released from this individual. Only the act of forgiveness seems to have the power to melt that death-grip bond between perpetrators and victims.

Ancient Greek notions of forgiveness reflected this kind of empathy and focused on the merging of spaces or the removal of boundaries. “This concept is related to our idea of coming together,” classicist Carl Ruck told me.<sup>2</sup> The merging of places or removal of boundary lines can be thought of as undefining the differences between us. Here, one can imagine that the wounded enters into an empathic consciousness, finding a way to dwell with the offender. With this sharing of space, it’s as if the wounded says, “Since there is nothing separating us and you and I are really one, I should refrain from retaliating, because I would only be hurting myself. In fact, it behooves me to draw closer to you, for in doing so, I draw closer to myself.” In such a situation, instead of “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” it is, “Love,” for “thy neighbor is thyself.”<sup>3</sup>

Christians have a spiritual practice to help develop this empathy: praying for one’s enemies. The late short story author, Andre Dubus, spoke of this process when asked how he thought of forgiveness:

I learned as a young Catholic boy to pray for people  
I didn’t like, people who hurt me, and I still do

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that and one reason is, for my own soul. [One of the saints] said, "If you hate someone, the sword of hatred has to first pierce your own soul," and there was a time in my life, where I was full of hatred and I realized, "I can't go through my life this way, I have to pray for this person." And of course, it worked. It took a long time, I had to pray for that person everyday, even though my emotions did not feel like doing that. Personal forgiveness—it's work.

Dubus was then asked by the interviewer, "What is the effect on your own heart and soul of forgiving someone?"

I feel free, and the hatred and all that malignancy is gone, it feels like getting well. I can actually reach a point—I don't reach a point, I'm taken there through prayer—of wishing the other person well, maybe not wanting to be with that person, you know, but hoping that person's life is good. (Lydon, 1997)

Prayer is an essential tool for many who forgive. While there are a number of ways to pray, even the simplest, compassionate thought can be a prayer. I once heard a woman discuss how she started praying for the convict who had victimized her. "I started small," she explained. "I began by trying to have one kind thought toward him each day, something like, 'I hope he is better,' 'I wish him well,' or 'I hope he has a good day.' Just to have this one thought every day was difficult. Over time it got easier."

This kind of prayer starts to smooth down the psychic walls erected against the perpetrator. The reward for the lowering of these walls is the release of precious energy. Hypervigilance, often the normal state for a traumatized person who hasn't forgiven, is psychically consuming. Such guardedness siphons off energy from life-affirming endeavors, keeping one's life deadlocked. While the development of empathy may need to begin as a mechanical exercise, over time, this practice not only releases energy, it yields insight.

Indeed, through empathy, a victim can begin to understand aspects of the situation that were completely obscured before. Seeing the situation from new angles offers a comprehensive, three-dimensional image. This allows victims to take the situation less personally; that is, while the victimization has had a profound personal impact, victims can begin to see, for example, how they could have been someone else—and the situation, given the circumstances—would have unfolded, nonetheless. When victims can see other parts of the picture, they are no longer trapped in an image that exclusively identifies them as victim.

Another important empathic tool in the development of a forgiving attitude is the act of seeking an aspect of the perpetrator that is in some way positive or good, and focusing on that in meditation. Again, this is normally difficult to do and might need to be approached as a mechanical exercise at first. Yet, such meditation serves to release energy and offer new insight. At some point

in this empathic development, the victim asks, what might have influenced the offender's behavior? What kind of background did the person come from? With this approach, one's view of the perpetrator continues to move from a flat, static image to that of a three-dimensional human being.

In the cases of perpetrators who are strangers, it may be difficult to discover something good about the person. It is best to look for something small. It could be some detail from a newspaper article by which one could infer something positive about the person. However small the detail may be, it can offer entry into compassionate consciousness.

It's also valuable for the injured to consider if any good has come out of the injurious situation. Whether it is the satisfaction of developing new job skills after a vicious divorce or some other discovery of inner strength, *forgivers look for what's positive and recognize it*. I once heard a peasant proverb that went something like this: He was wicked, it is true. In his wickedness, he once threw an onion at me. But you know, *I cooked it*.

By imagining other aspects of the perpetrator and situation, victims start to detach from the trauma. As this metamorphosis continues, empathy for the perpetrator becomes a state of heart and mind the injured *wants* to return to for the relief it provides—until one day this empathy becomes a part of the forgiver's every-day consciousness. The victimized forgiver now feels a new form of intimacy with the offender, and this one is not hostile, fearful, and obsessive. It is a closeness that offers comfort and peace.

I am not suggesting people who have been seriously harmed eliminate the *physical* boundaries between themselves and their perpetrators. It's important to make clear *forgiving does not mean one has deemed the offender trustworthy*. Indeed, many perpetrators are so sick they should never be given the opportunity to re-offend. One does not have to directly contact the perpetrator to forgive. Forgiveness is the spiritual experience of letting go with love. It releases the injured, and may also free the perpetrator, regardless of the injured's decision to remain separate from the offender.

It can be done in a private ritual, alone, or shared with a person or persons who feel safe. A forgiving person who wants to include the perpetrator may do so by letter or phone. Or, if one feels safe enough to forgive face-to-face, one could bring a friend to the meeting. These decisions are deeply personal and should be approached with careful consideration, in consultation with a wise person genuinely concerned about the victim's well being.

Many people view forgiveness as reconciliation—particularly, as the re-establishment of trust. In many situations, forgiveness can be exactly that. But in situations involving violent trauma, it is paramount a victim not get re-traumatized. It *is* possible to forgive a remorseless, violent offender—but this must be done with great caution. How does one empathize with a rapist and not

get raped? *From a distance*. “Abusers often use empathy to refute the value of the people they abuse,” write psychologists Michael McCullough and Everett Worthington (1994, 142).

Yet forensic psychiatrist James Gilligan challenges, “I would agree . . . that sadistic sexual psychopaths lack empathy. . . . But that is no reason for us to lack empathy for them” (1992, 183). Gilligan understands severely abusive offenders as people who hate themselves so much all their actions revolve around trying to protect themselves from the shame and ridicule that would come through others seeing their perceived inferiority. According to the violent offender, the best way to keep someone from laughing at you is to make them cry (77). Indeed, the psychopath turns the spiritual view of empathy upside down: Rather than concluding “Since you and I are one, I must treat you, as I treat myself, with love,” the psychopath seems to say, “If you and I are one, I’ll treat you with the same hate and disdain I have for myself.”

Empathizing with someone so profoundly disturbed requires substantial internal skills and a highly competent support system. Anyone who is able to empathize with a severely disturbed perpetrator quickly understands this person is also a victim of severe abuse. When a schoolboy learned about the problems the class bully had, he replied, “It takes all the fun out of hating her” (Shriver, 1995, 8). That’s just what empathy does—it draws out the venom of hate so one is free to love again.

Indeed, the power of empathy cannot be overstated. “Cynthia” is a successful professional who was sexually abused by her father when she was growing up. She went to an ivy-league college despite being reared in a family where, “The police were at our house so often, I knew each of them by name.”<sup>4</sup> Cynthia describes her forgiveness attitude:

I feel sorry for the perpetrators because I think they go through more than we [survivors] do. There isn’t any clearly effective treatment for sex offenders. At least we can get help. Can you imagine how horrible they must feel about themselves?<sup>5</sup>

While sex offenders can get help, Cynthia’s words strike me for their strength of compassion. Every time a person can muster up empathic compassion in situations like this, it is returned a hundred-fold.

### The Power of Empathy

The principle of healing through empathy encompasses such a vast spectrum of experience it includes murderers. I am thinking of a man I worked with at Bridgewater State Hospital. Suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, “Ed” had killed his father in the midst of a paranoid delusion. The courts found him not-guilty-by-reason-of-insanity and sent him to Bridgewater, where he was given anti-psychotic drugs that worked miracles for him.

The medication cleared his mind profoundly, and he awoke to the reality of what he had done. I have never met a person more deeply remorseful. Like so many murderers, Ed had tried to kill himself because of the

ultimate nature of his offense. During our work together, he struggled with whether he had a right to live—if he could be forgiven.

Ed took full responsibility for what he had done. He understood he couldn’t blame his mental illness for killing his father, realizing there are many delusional people whose visions are benign.

He came to recognize he had hated his father. The more I learned about his upbringing, it was not hard to understand why. His father engaged in torturous mind games like taking an eye dropper full of water and dropping little puddles onto the kitchen counter; his father would then accuse him of not cleaning up properly—using the water as an excuse to beat him. While he came to understand his father’s behavior was sick, he never used it to excuse or justify what he had done. In fact, he also had some love for his father and grieved the fact he had taken away his life—grieved there was no way to make restitution to him now.

The only place Ed found consolation was in helping his fellow patients—serving them from a place of profound empathy. Whether it was in helping a delusional man dress himself in the morning or giving cigarettes to a guy who ran out a week before he’d have money to buy more, Ed looked around and acted on his compassion for those worse off than he was. The only way he could live with himself was through empathic giving. It is this empathy that allows me to make sense of the fact Ed had copied the following words into his journal and used them as a meditation:

The growth of a person is the progressive liberation of desire. The liberation of desire, is not getting what I want, but coming to want what ultimately, I am. (Moore)

Astonishing words for a murderer to want to contemplate. I think they inspired him because of the compassion he had for himself. He could have compassion for himself because he knew himself to be a person who not only hated, but someone who loved. He was confident of the love he had inside himself, and this empathic love made life meaningful.

If compassion and empathy can help transform a dangerous murderer into a caring, patient-leader, the elimination of empathy enables killing. While all governments in wartime dehumanize the enemy to eliminate empathy, the Nazis were masterful in this arena. Himmler created many rhetorical devices to prevent empathy. According to philosopher Hannah Arendt, his speeches were full of remarks such as, “The order to solve the Jewish question, this was the most frightening order an organization could ever receive” (Scarry, 1985, 58). In *The Body in Pain*, literary critic Elaine Scarry quotes Arendt further.

The problem was how to overcome...the animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering. The trick used by Himmler . . . was very simple . . . it consisted in turning these instincts around... in directing them toward the self. So that instead of say-

ing: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!<sup>7</sup> (58)

Scarry explains, "Power . . . bases itself in another's pain and prevents all recognition that there is "another" by looped circles that ensure its own solipsism" (59). The denial of the "other" brought about by such looped language can also be seen in the violent domestic abuser, who says to his victim, "Don't make me have to do this to you." In this classic scenario, the victim is "making him" hurt her. Through the denial of empathy, the perpetrator gets to view himself as the victim, and thus be relieved of guilt.

If an absence of empathy enables people to rape and kill, an abundance of empathy seems to empower people to die for the sake of others. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Father Damien DeVeuster served leprosy patients for sixteen years before contracting their disease and dying of it himself. In a letter to his brother shortly before his death, Damien described his experience:

I am gently going to my grave. It is the will of God, and I thank Him very much for letting me die of the same disease and in the same way as my lepers. I am very satisfied and very happy.<sup>6</sup> (Cahill, 1990, 31)

While such words baffle normal consciousness, they point to the dynamic force of empathy. Empathy heals and empowers people. Crucial to the perpetrator as well as the victim's healing process, empathy facilitates both remorseful restitution and forgiveness.

#### ENDNOTES:

1 Perpetrators are also psychologically dependent on their victims. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman clearly articulates this need: "simple compliance rarely satisfies [the perpetrator]; he appears to have a psychological need to justify his crimes, and for this he needs the victim's affirmation. Thus he relentlessly demands from his victim professions of respect, gratitude, or even love. His ultimate goal appears to be the creation of a willing victim. Hostages, political prisoners, battered women and slaves have all remarked upon the captor's curious psychological dependence upon his victim. George Orwell gives voice to the totalitarian mind in the novel *1984*: 'We are not content with negative obedience, nor even with the most abject submission. When finally you surrender to us, it must be of your own free will. We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us; so long as he resists us we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him. We burn all evil and illusion out of him; we bring him over to our side, not in appearance, but genuinely, heart and soul.' The desire for total control over another person is the common denominator of all forms of tyranny." (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 75-76).

2 Thanks to Dr. Carl Ruck for reviewing the ancient Greek in this section and confirming that my suppositions here were appropriate to the cultural connotations of the word.

3 Arthur Schopenhauer offers the following explanation of how humans can sacrifice their lives for others, defying the natural law of self preservation: Such sacrifice happens as a result of the metaphysical realization that *you and I are one*. According to Schopenhauer, our normal sense of separateness is only an effect of our experience of time and space, but our true

reality is in unity with all of life. "The Altruist discerns in all other persons, nay, in every living thing, his own entity, and feels therefore that his being is commingled, is identical with the being of whatever is alive" (279). See "The Metaphysical Groundwork" in *The Basis of Morality* (264-282).

4 This quote was slightly altered to protect Cynthia's anonymity.

5 Cynthia. Conversation with author, Boston, MA, December 1, 2001.

6 Scarry elaborates: "A motive is [one] way of deflecting the natural reflex of sympathy away from the actual sufferer. The war did not cause but permitted Hitler's mass executions. According to Bruno Bettelheim, concentration camp guards repeatedly said to their prisoners, "I'd shoot you with this gun but you're not worth the three pfennig of the bullet," ... a statement...that...had been made part of the SS training because of its impact on the guards [not the inmates]. Every weapon has two ends . . . the torturer experiences the entire occurrence exclusively from the nonvulnerable end of the weapon. If his attention begins to slip down the weapon toward the vulnerable end...back to the... prisoner's sentence...[this] backward fall can be stopped...his movement toward a recognition of the internal experience of an exploding head and loss of life is interrupted and redirected toward a recognition of his own loss of three pfennig. It does not matter that there is always an extraordinary disjunction between the two levels of need...for the work of the false motive is formal, not substantive; it prevents the mind from ever getting to the place where it would have to make such comparisons" (58-59).

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