

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
March 8, 2009

What Binds Us Together

By Donne Hayden

According to Dr. Katherine M. Piderman of the Mayo Clinic,

Researchers have recently become interested in studying the effects of being unforgiving and being forgiving. Evidence is mounting that holding on to grudges and bitterness results in long-term health problems. Forgiveness, on the other hand, offers numerous benefits, including:

- *Lower blood pressure*
- *Stress reduction*
- *Less hostility*
- *Better anger management skills*
- *Lower heart rate*
- *Lower risk of alcohol or substance abuse*
- *Fewer depression symptoms*
- *Fewer anxiety symptoms*
- *Reduction in chronic pain*
- *More friendships*
- *Healthier relationships*
- *Greater religious or spiritual well-being*
- *Improved psychological well-being*¹

We all knew that. Now the medical establishment knows it too. Forgiveness is powerful stuff.

Last week during the Query discussion, I dropped in on the middle of a discussion about abuse and forgiveness. I made a remark about some things being “unforgivable,” particularly the abuse of children. In the same conversation I offered the opinion that we must get past pain and anger at those who have hurt us, stop dwelling on it, and get on with our lives. Over the past week, I have continued to think about forgiveness and what it really means. I realized that when I said some things are unforgivable, I meant that they are *inexcusable*, which is not the same thing. To forgive

¹ Interview with Katherine M. Piderman, “Forgiveness: How to Let Go of Grudges and Bitterness” by Mayo Clinic Staff, Dec. 8, 2007 < <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131>>

someone we do not have to *excuse* the person; to forgive someone does not release that person from the consequences of his or her actions. As Dr. Piderman says,

*Forgiving isn't the same as forgetting what happened to you. The act that hurt or offended you may always remain a part of your life. But forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help you focus on other, positive parts of your life. Forgiveness also doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act.*²

One thing that came out during that query discussion is the fact that some people feel guilty if they believe they can't forgive someone who harmed them and that guilt is a long-term pain in itself. This is an unfortunate result of the way we use and understand the word "forgive." Check the dictionary and you will find synonyms for "forgive" such as "excuse," and "condone." These words have different connotations, however, which are most significant to a victim or wronged party. To *excuse* is "to pass over a mistake or fault, usually minor one, without demanding punishment." To *condone* is "to overlook an offense, usually serious, and thereby give tacit pardon" or release from punishment, but to *forgive* is "to grant pardon without harboring resentment."³ Even more telling is the original Old English root of the word—*giefan* in Old English meant "to give"; *forbiefan* meant "to give *away*," to give something up, "to leave off anger." The power of forgiveness comes in the part about "leaving off anger" and letting go of resentment.

We all know we're *supposed* to forgive; it's in advice we receive about how to get along with people. Our understanding of forgiveness comes mostly from cultural

² *Ibid.*

³ *American Heritage Dictionary.*

teachings, and in our culture these often come from the Bible, as in Matthew 18:21: “Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord . . . how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.’” And in the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” and from our great poets: “To err is human, to forgive is Divine.” We are taught that the most worthy goal—whether we achieve it or not—is to forgive and thus follow the path of the divine.

We read inspiring stories of forgiveness like the one about a mother who was finally able to forgive the man who murdered her child. She wrote him this letter:

Dear Mr. Mickey,

Twelve years ago, I had a beautiful daughter named Catherine. She was a young woman of unusual talents and intelligence. She was slender and her skin glowed with health and vitality. She had long naturally wavy hair that framed her sparkling eyes and a warm bright smile. She radiated love and joy. She was raising two milk goats, her German shepherd with a new litter of ten puppies, and an Arabian mare.

Two months after her 19th birthday, Catherine left her earthly body. I know that Catherine is in a better place than we can ever know here on earth. I did not know that when Catherine died. I knew that I had been robbed of my precious child and that she had been robbed of growing into womanhood and achieving all of her potential. The violent way she left this earth was impossible for me to understand. I was saddened beyond belief and felt that I would never be completely happy again.

And indeed my loss of Catherine became the point of reference for my entire family. All family history was prefaced as happening either before or after Catherine’s

death. I was very angry with you and wanted to see you punished to the limit of the law. You had done irreparable damage to my family and my dreams for the future.

Four years ago, I started my journey of life. I met wonderful teachers and slowly began to learn about my God-Self. In the midst of this, I was surprised to find that I could forgive you. This does not mean that I think you are innocent or that you are blameless for what happened.

What I learned is this: You are a divine child of God. You carry the Holy Spirit within you. You are surrounded by God's love even as you sit in your cell. There is only the goodness of God.

Do not look to me to be a political or social advocate in your behalf. The law of the land will determine your fate. Do not waste your last days on earth with remorse and fear. Death as we know it is really a new beginning.

I hope that this letter will help you face your future. There is only love and good in the world regardless of how things may appear to you now. I am willing to write to you or visit you if you wish. I send blessings to you and to your children. The Christ in me sends blessings to the Christ in you.⁴

Most of us, thank goodness, don't have something so serious to forgive. Not surprisingly, this story comes from The Friends International Library Committee in a book titled *Power of Goodness: Stories of Nonviolence and Reconciliation*, a "multi-language book of stories showing love and kindness in action... to help children of the world learn the ways of peace."⁵

⁴ Aba Gayle, "The Healing Power of Forgiveness," *Stories of Nonviolence and Reconciliation*, *Power of Goodness Project* website <http://fil.quaker.org/power_of_goodness.html

⁵ *Stories of Nonviolence and Reconciliation*, *Power of Goodness Project* website <http://fil.quaker.org/power_of_goodness.html

And what do Quakers have to say about forgiveness? Strangely, I didn't find many references to the word "forgiveness" *per se* among the earliest Friends, except in regard to God's gracious forgiveness of human imperfections and wrongdoing. Contemporary Friends, however, are noted for extensive work in reconciliation and conflict resolution, and in their writings I found references to forgiveness, like this one from Quaker writer Jacob Stone who says:

Friends testimonies and practices all derive from the idea that we can seek and find that of the divine in everyone, and that we can resolve many of our differences if we approach them with love, respect and perseverance. . . . When I think about forgiveness I am referring to a model of forgiveness that has been described by Sue Regen, of Rochester Meeting in New York Yearly Meeting . . . she offered the insight that forgiveness is ultimately something that we do ourselves, by ourselves, without any expectation that the other person will manifest any remorse, desire for reconciliation, or changed insight. I learned that one way to look at forgiveness is to see it as a time when I can release my anger at the person and free myself for better thought and action.

This forgiveness doesn't imply that the "other" is going to change, and it doesn't mean that a restoration of friendship and trust is necessarily coming. I may still have to be wary and self-protective around the other person, but in an act of personal forgiveness I have found a way to be faithful to our testimonies.

With a dissipation of anger I am more able to respond with greater warmth and openness to that person, to seek the divine in that person, and keep looking for a way

*to add mutual reconciliation to my personal act of forgiveness, even while being self-protective.*⁶

Forgiveness has four faces or aspects. One aspect is forgiveness we ask for; another aspect is forgiveness we give when someone asks it of us; a third aspect is forgiveness we ask for which we do *not* receive, and finally, forgiveness we give though it is not asked for.

Asking for forgiveness means that I recognize my own wrongdoing; perhaps my conscience hurts me and I want to stop my own pain or discomfort. Asking for forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that I accept the consequences of my actions—but I do want the relationship restored in some way. I seek to be reconciled with someone I have hurt.

If we give forgiveness when another asks it of us—in other words, when forgiveness reflects the desire of both parties—we reinstate or reconcile a relationship. If someone acknowledges wronging me and then asks my forgiveness, he or she essentially asks to be released from *my* pain and anger, and in doing so, grants me a certain power or control.

We cannot force someone to forgive us, of course, so forgiveness we ask for but which is *not* given, remains problematic for restoration of a relationship. Reconciliation is not possible when it is one-sided. If I have acknowledged a wrongdoing and sought forgiveness without receiving it, I can either continue to seek a relationship with the other person or give up. Until forgiveness is granted, I am not entirely released. I can give up the hold I have on my own guilt or remorse, but I can't pry the other person

⁶ Jacob Stone, "Some Reflections on One-Sided Conflict and Forgiveness" *FGC Connections*, FGC Quaker.org website <<http://www.fgcquaker.org/fgconnections/some-reflections-one-sided-conflict-and-forgiveness>>

loose from his or her anger, so the two of us remain bound, not by love and reconciliation, but bound by pain and anger.

Perhaps most challenging is forgiveness we give even though it is not asked for—forgiving someone who does not even acknowledge hurting us. Maybe someone who never gave it a second thought. So long as we re-live what happened over and over, so long as we ponder the injustice, seek revenge, or long for restitution, so long as we are angry, so long as we hate and hold on to our hatred, we remain a victim. Unless we let go of anger and pain, we are, in fact, bound to the person who hurt us with bonds as strong as those of love. To forgive is about *releasing the victim*, not the wrongdoer. When we forgive, we leave off our anger, and *we* are released.

Of course, I haven't even mentioned the person we all find most difficult to forgive: ourselves.