

SELF FORGIVENESS

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Some years ago a young woman came to see me in great distress. She was pale and thin, her skin was grey and she had dark circles under her eyes. She looked very small in her oversized coat. 'Janet' explained that she had come under duress. Her parents, siblings and General Practitioner were all extremely worried about her and it was for this reason that she had finally picked up the phone and arranged an appointment with a therapist.

Janet outlined her situation in the following terms:

Two weeks previously, on a Friday night, she was travelling home from Melbourne to the country, to spend the weekend with her parents. She had had a few drinks after work with some friends, but had not stopped for dinner. Halfway home, she fell asleep at the wheel. The car drifted to the wrong side of the road, where it collided with another car travelling in the opposite direction. Both the young driver and his girlfriend in the other car were killed instantly. Janet, who only awoke at the point of impact, emerged uninjured.

Janet was adamant that she would not have presented for therapy without the pressure of others. She described how peoples' comments, that it could have happened to anyone or that she was not to blame, made no sense to her. All she wanted to do was die. She had no concept of how she could possibly live with herself. She asked me, if I was in her shoes, how I could sleep at night, knowing that I had ended the lives of two young people and the peace of mind and happiness of all those who loved them.

I was blown away by Janet's story, overwhelmed by her sense of sadness, shame and self loathing and challenged by her question to me. I was able to appreciate exactly where she was coming from. She did not want absolution from me or anyone else. She felt her crime was too heinous.

Eventually, we had some discussion about what expiation might look like. To live life subsequently with self respect after such a huge mistake might require large good works. Perhaps this would be impossible to do directly with the families of the dead youngsters, but it might be possible to make a large contribution to the world that would somewhat ease the burden of guilt. Janet could not tolerate this line of investigation for very long.

At the end of our session, she decided not to return. Her reasoning was that, to use her words, she could see that therapy might provide “balm for my soul” and she felt undeserving of any such solace. I never saw her again, but her suffering and her dilemma have stayed with me.

Reflecting on Janet’s experience got me thinking about the complex question of self forgiveness and how it figures in our therapy and our lives. The more I think about it, the more sure I am that the two are closely interconnected. I don’t know about you, but I have done some bad things in my life. I have made mistakes that have had grave impacts on those I love. But it feels to me that, particularly in mid life, the challenge is to come to terms with these omissions or commissions so that it is possible to live a joyful life and make a real contribution. Those objectives can be most difficult to achieve if excess energy is being consumed dealing with an internal cacophony of self blame.

In the therapeutic world, I have experienced first hand the debilitating effects of self blame. When we first started working in the area of HIV/AIDS some 15 years ago, I remember having team conversations about how we would handle it if clients were preoccupied with establishing who had infected them. We talked a lot about how to assist them around issues of blaming and whether forgiveness would be an important area to investigate. This was before we began to see any clients. When we actually began to work with those infected with HIV, we found by and large that they were incurious about who might have infected them. We did little work around their rage, blame or forgiveness of others. What we found instead was that we did lots of work on issues of self forgiveness,

because typically people felt it was their own fault, and they found it very difficult to forgive themselves for their unsafe or self destructive previous behaviour.

Another area where the issue of self forgiveness seems crucial is for relinquishing mothers. I have had a long term association with the agency VANISH (Victorian Adoption and Information Sharing), and met many women who relinquished a child 20, 30 or more years ago. Most often, these women were very young at the time, unwed and frequently had the decision to relinquish made for them by the adults in their lives. With the changes to legislation they had never anticipated, many of these women have now become involved in reunions with their lost children. As a group, I have found that the incapacity to forgive themselves for the pregnancy, the relinquishment, or the secrecy surrounding their motherhood, has put a blight on many of their lives

Speaking personally, I know that I was full of self reproach when my marriage first broke up. I felt that because I knew my children would have to be raised in a single parent household – a prospect I dreaded for them. This was particularly so because I felt I had been lucky in that my own parents had stayed together. My failure to provide them with what I saw, at the time, as the ideal start in life, led me to make some harsh judgments about myself. It also encouraged me at times to overcompensate, to see myself as a poor parent, and to view their mistakes or problems as further evidence of my own failings. A decade later, I am much less prone to these ideas, but in times of stress they can still affect me. I look forward to the day when I have completely forgiven myself for the breakdown of my marriage, when time has finally done its healing.

Ultimately, I believe, the ability or choice to forgive ourselves is fundamental in life. As therapists, I suspect that our capacity to have truly healing conversations with the people who consult us and who feel that their behaviour is unforgivable, depends on our own capacity, in the first instance, to apply true compassion to ourselves.

It was great to read Patrick O'Leary's article challenging the idea that there is a moral imperative around forgiveness, that it is a higher order behaviour, necessary in all

situations. In my experience, like his, some people choose to forgive their abuser to heal themselves; others do not. I believe it is different with self forgiveness. I suppose it comes down to the large questions – like what makes for a truly human life? I find the Dalai Lama’s view on this question, as on so many others, helpful, albeit challenging. He says we have a responsibility to be joyful - not happy, which is an entirely different concept. I find his embodiment of that capacity for joy wonderfully inspiring, especially given his history and the history of his country. Without the capacity to forgive yourself a truly joyful life may not be possible.

Self forgiveness is undoubtedly a process, rather than an event. Janet probably came to see me too early. She was still in the absolute eye of her own personal storm. I do hope she eventually found peace.