

Can We Forgive? Can We Ever Forgive?

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Reading:

from *Forgiveness: The Hardest Act of Love* by Patrick T. O'Neill

In the crowded urban neighborhood where I spent my earliest growing-up years, there was an amazing array of people for a young boy to encounter and observe. One of the nicest and most exotic personalities of the long-ago place, I remember, was an elderly immigrant French woman who lived in our building.

Mrs. Boutellon was always very elegantly dressed, and she always carried herself with an upright posture and stately demeanor. She spoke with a very thick French accent, and she was my sister's piano teacher. She and her husband were both shy and very quiet, and how tolerant they must have been, living next door to the boisterous racket of seven O'Neill children wrestling past them night and day.

I was to have one very important encounter with Mrs. Boutellon. I was very young, first grade maybe, and several older boys -- second-grade thugs, I suppose -- had run by me and pushed me face-first into a snowbank. It was a great indignity, and I sat there on the stoop crying tears of outrage and frustration.

Mrs. Boutellon had witnessed the incident from her upstairs window, and she came down and collected me from the stoop and brushed the snow and tears from my face, and brought me into her kitchen for a cup of hot cocoa, and fussed over me in French-accented maternal phrases that seemed to right the universe again.

"You are angry at those boys for what they did to you, Patrick, and it is natural for you to feel that way. But now you must let it go," she said. "This day has other things to give you."

It wasn't until years later, after Mrs. Boutellon and her husband had both died, that my mother mentioned her name in conversation, and I told her of the day Mrs. Boutellon rescued me from that hard experience on the front stoop. "That sounds just like her," said my mother. "You know, don't you, that the Boutellons were both survivors of the Nazi death camps in the War?"

I had never known that. But it gave even more power to the words Mrs. Boutellon had offered me on that cold day when I was still a young boy. "This day has other things to give you." Imagine hearing that from a death camp survivor.

Sermon

'Tis the season of forgiveness, at least in the Jewish calendar. We are a day away from Yom Kippur, the day by which, according to Jewish tradition, we are supposed to have made things right with all those we wronged, to prepare ourselves for God's own forgiveness of us.

Having made it through a year of shock and mourning after the events of September 11th, we are also in a season in which the question of forgiveness is surfacing across our nation. Can we forgive those who hurt us with the horrors of that day? Can we ever forgive such actions?

Yet if forgiveness is hard for us in our daily one-on-one relationships with others, faced with only average slights and hurts -- it seems to take on a whole new dimension, an impossible girth, when we talk about it with respect to the events of September and those like them.

You think about people like Mrs. Boutellon, Patrick O'Neill's neighbor from another land, who endured the heinous suffering of a Nazi death camp. To imagine someone like that choosing to forgive can seem almost impossible, beyond belief. How could they forgive and why would they?

They are not alone in forgiving the unforgivable. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who himself suffered under the brutal and dehumanizing rule of South African apartheid, made the work of taking a nation through forgiveness his life's work after apartheid had ended. And there are countless others like them. Radical forgiveness for radical acts of evil happens more often than we might think.

Just the fact that such acts of forgiveness take place, however, doesn't make the work of radical forgiveness easy. Perhaps as recognition of this, the Midrash, a collection of ancient rabbinical writings, offers the consolation that even God sometimes finds it difficult to forgive. In one passage in the Talmud, God is portrayed as having to pray for the capacity to show divine mercy instead of divine justice -- mercy being his goal as it is ours.

Indeed, those who forgive the most heinous of crimes often struggle hard to get to the place of forgiveness. Desmond Tutu, speaking about his work on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, talks about the struggle: "The hearing that more than anything sent shivers down my spine," he said, "came toward the end of the commission's life when we heard testimony about the apartheid government's Chemical and Biological Warfare program. With the other instances you might have said that people acted on the spur of the moment, that things got unexpectedly out of control. But this program was executed by people wearing white lab coats -- it was clinical, quite deliberate ... The scientists said they were looking for germs that would target only black people."

I am sure many of you remember Matthew Shepard, the gay man who was beaten and left to die strapped to a fence outside of Laramie, Wyo. Not surprisingly, the men who

committed this hate crime, when caught, were eligible for the death penalty. One of the men, Aaron McKinney, ultimately was offered the option of life in prison and was offered such in no small part because of the determined lobbying of Matthew's parents, Judy and Dennis Shepard. "I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney," Mr. Shepard said to his son's killer. "However, this is the time to begin the healing process, to use this as the first step in my own closure about losing Matt, to show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy."

In Dennis Shepard's words to his son's killer, we hear the struggle to forgive and the determination to do so. And so we have to ask: Why it is that people who have been the victims of heinous crimes and unspeakable cruelty do, in some cases, struggle to forgive the people who have done this to them?

The answer lies in what Mr. Shepard said to his son's killer: They forgive so they themselves can begin the healing process.

Indeed, the reasons for forgiveness are the same whether we are talking about forgiving a small slight, or a betrayal in a marriage, or large-scale atrocities. We forgive out of a desire to heal ourselves. We forgive because we no longer want to be anchored to old hurts that haunt us. We forgive because those old hurts, when we hold on to them, color our present and limit our openness to the future. Roger Wilkins, a professor at George Mason University and a civil rights activist, wrote a book titled *Jefferson's Pillow*. It is about black patriotism despite the legacy and trials of slavery. Wilkins is a believer in the healing power of forgiveness and the preservation of the self it allows. "After a while you figure it out for yourself," he says, "you can't be consumed by this stuff because then your oppressors have won. If you are consumed by rage, even at a terrible wrong, you have been reduced." You must, as Mrs. Boutellon said, let go and see what else the day has to give you.

Indeed, to *not* forgive is keep ourselves bound to the one person or group of people whom we least want to be bound to. It is to let what they did to us continue to define us. It is this, too, that forgiveness liberates us from.

Patrick O'Neill talks about how Mrs. Boutellon always wore long sleeves. One day, while at a piano lesson, O'Neill's sister saw the numbers tattooed on Mrs. Boutellon's arm. She asked about them and Mrs. Boutellon explained what they were. And then she explained why she wore long sleeves. She said to the girl that she wore such sleeves not because she was ashamed of those numbers, though they represented a time of great despair and humiliation. Instead, she covered her arms to remind herself that those events no longer defined who she was or would become.

There are often some fears or reservations about what it means to forgive radical acts of evil. There is the fear that forgiveness somehow diminishes the enormity of what was done. To forgive, in other words, might seem to put what was done in the realm of the admissible.

The reality is that forgiveness in no way diminishes or dismisses the evil done. To forgive someone is not to say that their actions won't have consequences. Forgiveness is not a pardon, pledging that all will be forgotten. It does not say that they or their acts are excusable, or explainable, and it certainly is not saying that what they did is acceptable. It does say that we -- looking honestly at what they have done to us, and the pain it caused us, and the hate it engendered -- wish to be free from this tie to the past. This is the path towards our forgiveness of another.

For *reconciliation* to happen, there are a few more steps. These are the ones Archbishop Tutu orchestrated on a national scale. Reconciliation entails that an honest accounting happen with victim and perpetrator present, that there be an acknowledgment by the perpetrator of the wrong done and some remorse or contrition and a promise to make amends, and a pledge to change our ways. That is forgiveness at its fullest and most complete. But rarely in cases of radical evil do we get complete forgiveness. Often the perpetrator is never caught or even seen, or perhaps the wrong done is by an entity so faceless that we are not sure whom to blame. Sometimes by the time we get to the work of forgiveness, the person who wronged us is dead.

So, very often, full reconciliation is not possible. More often the part of forgiveness we can offer ourselves is just what Mrs. Boutellon did -- the choice to let go of past hurts, and face each day fully present and free.

By all accounts, you cannot force such forgiveness. You can decide that you want it in your life. You can pray for it. You can take little steps practicing forgiveness where you can, like opening the fist a finger at a time. Some experts suggest that a first step is trying to see the humanity of those who hurt you. For Christians like Tutu, that means reminding yourself against all odds that those who have hurt you are still children of God. For Jews in this season of atonement, it means also reminding yourself of the God who struggles to forgive you no matter what you have done or will do in this lifetime.

For Desmond Tutu, what also made his own forgiveness possible was seeing the worst victims of apartheid, in their testimonies, show the desire for reconciliation. When asked what he thought made that kind of forgiveness possible, Tutu offers two reasons. First, that people were reminded that others were praying for them, hoping for the miracle of forgiveness, for indeed under the circumstances it would be a miracle. "The other part," Tutu said, "is rooted in what we refer to as *ubuntu*, the African view that a person is a person through other persons. My humanity is caught up in your humanity, and when your humanity is enhanced -- whether I like it or not -- mine is enhanced as well. So there is a deep yearning in African society for communal peace ... Anything that erodes this central good is inimical to all, and nothing is more destructive than resentment and anger and revenge." This is a bit like our Seventh Principle: the respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

However we get there, the mandate that we try is clear. For forgiveness is *not* primarily a gift we give others. It is a gift we give ourselves. Faced with the legacy of small hurts or cruelty that is unspeakable, for us to be able to forgive those who have wronged us is to

free ourselves from their hold. It is to let go of the pain and anger that can burrow into our souls and distort our spirit. It is refusing to see today through the lens of yesterday's pain and resentment, and committing therefore to do the hard work of finding a way to let go. It is not to excuse, not to accept, not to forget the evil done, but to let go of pain and hate that would hold us captive to it.

So I would encourage us to pray for each other in this work, that we may look honestly at what has happened to us, acknowledge the suffering, and still find a way to let go. Maybe even, some day, wish the person who did us such wrong healing and wholeness of his/her own.

Such is the radical task of forgiveness, but one that, for our own sake, we have no choice but to pursue. This day, after all, has other things to give us if we can find a way to forgive. May it be so.

Amen.