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I offer this reflection because as a spiritual director, counsellor, chaplain in a mental health context and former Women's Refuge educator, I have listened to many traumatised people wrestling with the subject of forgiveness, and often their guilt at being unable to do what they believe is necessary. While my case studies relate to women I have worked with, I am confident that the issues raised can also be pertinent to male spiritual directees. Many years ago I wrestled myself with the topic after a life-changing experience of abuse of power. I struggled with how to forgive, and guilt at being unable to do so. A therapist who called herself a non-believer yet described her practice as based on agape, told me 'You don't have to forgive'. This sounded quite shocking at first, but became powerfully freeing and healing. Then in my professional work I discovered I was far from alone in this experience, and that began this theological exploration...

Forgiveness, like dynamite, is a potent force, and can cause problems if misused. In the Christian community and beyond, forgiveness is considered the desirable if not imperative response by someone who has been injured to the one responsible. It is almost invariably presented in Christian settings as a given, a necessary response to harm done to one's self, with an assumption that we all know what is meant by the word. This understanding is transmitted as an important component of the Gospel teaching of Jesus, as a primary characteristic of the whole Christian ethos, and is often contrasted with the lack of this teaching in other faith traditions. It is how we try to avoid the cycle of revenge and bitterness that can be observed continuing for generations in some parts of the world. It is often promoted, particularly in a range of churches, as a necessary step on the route to healing from an injury, with the corollary that refusing to forgive is sinful, makes the injured party bitter and causes them further harm.

I too believed whole-heartedly in the necessity of forgiveness as the appropriate response to all injury, until some personal and professional experiences provoked me to have another look. The interface between religious belief and mental health and well-being is crucially important, and I believe with Jung that all our emotional difficulties implicate our meanings and values.

A simplistic understanding of forgiveness can be actually harmful to victims in some circumstances. I also believe that whatever work spiritual directors do on their own experiences of trauma, efforts to forgive and their understanding of the issues involved, they will be better able to accompany their spiritual directees on a journey of healing.

I hope through this reflection spiritual directors may develop a more nuanced ability to be with people struggling with the topic of forgiveness, a better understanding of the process of recovery from trauma, and enhanced pastoral sensitivity. To explore the common current understanding of forgiveness in some depth, and its possible outcomes I offer case studies, scriptures and other resources for consideration. The key focus is 'What would Jesus, the Compassion of God, want for victims damaged by others?'

### **Common Understanding**

The prevailing religious and cultural stories about forgiveness are along these lines: it is good, necessary, Christian, what Jesus said to keep doing, loving, reconciling, freeing, and – importantly

- opens the way to being forgiven and healed oneself. And in contrast, un-forgiveness is wrong, unloving, un-Christian, makes you bitter and vengeful, is bad for you, means you won't be forgiven your own failings. And so on.

### **The Teaching**

The source of these perceptions is generally church teaching and scripture. Four Sunday statements I have personally heard from ministers of various denominations:

'Revenge .... appeals to justice. Forgiveness is about love.'

'Anyone who refuses to forgive has one foot in hell.'

'Refusal to forgive is a cancer of the soul.'

'Anyone who says they have forgiven but not forgotten, hasn't forgiven.'

These don't leave a hearer in any doubt about the necessity of forgiving!

And then there are the familiar Gospel texts:

'Yes, if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours, but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either.' (Mt 6:14-15, JB)

Peter... said 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As many as seven times?' And Jesus answered 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.' (Mt 18:21-22 JB)

The story of the unforgiving debtor (Mt 18:23-35)

'When you stand in prayer, forgive whatever you have against anybody, so that your Father in heaven may also forgive your failings too'. (Mk 11:25, JB)

'Grant pardon and you will be pardoned.' (Lk 6:37, JB)

'If your brother does something wrong, reprove him and, if he is sorry, must forgive him. And if he wrongs you seven times a day, and comes back to you seven times and says 'I am sorry', you must forgive him. (Lk 17:3, JB)

'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing' (Lk 23:34, JB)

And the Sunday by Sunday, even day by day, repetition of the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those that sin against us.'

To resist this sort of pressure takes considerable personal courage! However there is burden enough for spiritual directees and others who are living with the effects of trauma, without having added to that the guilt at being unable to forgive and reconcile.

### **Real Experiences**

So where does all that leave a spiritual directee – or a spiritual director – if, despite their best efforts, they find themselves unable to think, feel or say 'I forgive you' in their own understanding of those words? Perhaps spiritual directors might choose to engage with any struggles they themselves may have had around forgiving those who had caused them significant harm, their own inability to 'let go' and reconcile with a perpetrator. The feelings may be similar to those I have both experienced myself and heard from many others: guilt and anxiety about being unable to forgive, which often become a burden that not only impedes healing, but also consumes valuable energy that would be better spent on doing that personal work.

Here are four real-life case studies from my personal and professional experience for reflection. All names are fictitious. As a spiritual director, what are your feelings on and understandings of

the situations? What would you offer the spiritual directee? What supports your suggestions? How do you see God as present in each of the possibilities you might offer?

Michelle comes to you distressed because some years ago she and her husband Jim, both Christians, forgave a relative who had sexually abused their 6 year-old daughter. When they confronted him, he had apologised and promised not to do it again, so they had not laid charges and continued to welcome him into their home. She has recently discovered that he had gone on to abuse many other children, fears her forgiveness facilitated the re-offending, and wonders what went wrong.

Kate is regularly beaten by her partner but believes that if she is to receive forgiveness herself, she must continue to forgive him each time he apologises. She has left him with the support of Women's Refuge, but believes it is the Christian thing to do reconcile and go back when he has apologised and promised (again) not to repeat the violence.

Jane had a breakdown after a rape experience and remains severely depressed. She feels guilty that she 'can't forgive him'. Also she misses her church community but is afraid to go back because based on past experience she believes they will pressure her to forgive, and attribute her on-going mental health problems to her 'refusal' to do so. She is receiving therapy.

Nancy, an ordained priest, has resigned from all ministry because she 'can't forgive' the terrorists who killed her daughter in a bombing. She says she can no longer honestly preach forgiveness and reconciliation. Her resignation has been accepted.

What do spiritual directors make of these situations? What would Jesus do for these damaged people who, despite their best efforts, can't forgive? Where does healing lie?

Spiritual directees may have encountered what is effectively spiritual abuse. A friend who some years ago was being beaten by her husband talked about this to her minister. She was advised, 'Forgive him, go home and try harder to be a good wife'. Not at all OK! Instructions like that, assurances that 'God heals marriages', and the ministers' statements quoted earlier are what give rise to a Women's Refuge worker's rather shocking analysis of the Church generically as "an institutional support for battering". I understand there is now training here for clergy on domestic violence. Hopefully this is both mandatory across denominations and on-going. Spiritual directors are in a useful position to name this spiritual abuse and support spiritual directees in setting aside misguided advice.

When I heard her story from Jane, I wondered what Jesus would do, took a deep breath and said 'You do not have to forgive'. I was astounded by the reaction – there was a huge physical shift from her being bowed over, to standing up straight, and saying 'That is a huge weight off my shoulders'. Coaching in compassion for oneself and in patience for the long healing process is what truly helps. As can, with the spiritual directee's permission, a spiritual director's communication with the therapist.

And in Nancy's story, what if, instead of having her resignation from priesthood promptly accepted, she had been encouraged to be gentle with her own grief and trauma, understood with compassion, and been given leave and supportive space in which to heal? Her own capacity for ministry would undoubtedly have been significantly enriched by such an experience.

## Reflections

Here are some thoughts from several years' pondering where God's healing lies for traumatised spiritual directees and other clients:

To whom was Jesus speaking to when urging forgiveness? Very likely to men who had been brought up with 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', which itself was a development from the unrestrained revenge of earlier times. Certainly not to battered women!

When does repeated forgiveness become collusion? Some Christians find it very easy to resort to a literal understanding of the Gospel quote: 'Jesus said just keep on forgiving.' We live in different days now, with different understandings of the complexities of human behaviour and the effects of trauma.

Power issues around forgiveness: the stories Jesus told were about more the powerful forgiving the less powerful, rather than about powerless victims forgiving powerful perpetrators.

Possible gender issues: *Communicating Forgiveness*, a book on forgiveness in committed relationships has 49 moving stories of reconciliation. When I looked more closely, there were 12 stories about men forgiving their women partners, and 37 about women forgiving their men. The happily-married male authors had not noticed this disparity. My professional and personal experience leads me to think women may have greater difficulty sorting the distinctions between forgiveness, reconciliation and victimhood, and perhaps have a greater motivation towards reconciliation. Without exonerating all women or misjudging all men, statistically speaking perpetrators of abuse and violence are likelier to be male. Gender difference in the perception and practice of forgiveness is an area that deserves significant research!

What are the actual implications of the word 'forgiveness'. This gets used and preached as though we all know what we all mean: it is generally understood as letting go of anger and reconciling. What if there is a valid spectrum of possible outcomes? What might one actually do? It could range from full restoration of relationship, to letting go of anger without resuming relationship, through acknowledging the reality of what happened, to simply not choosing revenge.

What about cyclic or addictive behaviours of perpetrators? Women's Refuge workers know the part forgiveness plays in the cycle of violence, and that it is often harder for Christian women to leave abusive situations than for others. Forgiving alcoholics or drug addicts their hurtful and damaging behaviours is a pointless exercise – sanity lies in Al-Anon's 'Detach with love'. Paedophilia too is addictive – information not available to the parents of the first case study.

Can the black-white dichotomy of 'Forgiving' and 'Unforgiving' be prised apart to make a space for accountability and justice-seeking? A 2003 paper by New Zealand Psychology Professor Tony Taylor described justice as a basic human need, as necessary as the other basics of life referenced in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Justice is not, as one of the clergy quoted earlier seemed to imply, equivalent to revenge! The Restorative Justice framework may have a role to play here.

I get concerned for the long term well-being of the families of murder victims who announce that they have forgiven the killers within a day or two of the incident, often to an approving audience of fellow Christians. The normal human healing process is being short-circuited in a

possibly risky way. If normal and natural emotional responses are suppressed indefinitely the outcomes can predictably be depression and physical illness.

### **Other perspectives**

There are other reference points other sources that I have found helpful.

Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery: Mourning Traumatic Loss* says:

Revolted by the fantasy of revenge, some survivors attempt to bypass their outrage altogether through a fantasy of forgiveness. This fantasy like its polar opposite is an attempt at empowerment. The survivor imagines she can transcend her rage and erase the impact of the trauma by a willed, defiant act of love. But it is not possible to exorcise the trauma through either hatred or love. Like revenge, the fantasy of forgiveness becomes a cruel torture because it remains out of reach for most ordinary human beings. Folk wisdom recognises that to forgive is divine, and even divine forgiveness in most religious systems is not unconditional. True forgiveness cannot be granted until the perpetrator has sought and earned it through confession, repentance and restitution. Genuine repentance in a perpetrator is a rare miracle. Fortunately the survivor does not need to wait for it. Her healing depends on the discovery of restorative love in her own life. It does not require that this love be extended to the perpetrator. Once the survivor has mourned the traumatic event she may be surprised to discover how uninteresting the perpetrator has become to her and how little concern she feels for his fate. She may even feel sorrow and compassion for him, but this disengaged feeling is not the same as forgiveness.

Community or church disapproval, whether perceived or real, of a victim's inability to forgive does not help healing! Are spiritual directors in general taught basic information about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the need for community support? PTSD needs to be understood as a brain injury which needs professional care. It is not amenable to the spiritual discipline of attempting forgiveness. Any spiritual directees suffering nightmares, flashbacks, hyper-vigilance, repetitive thinking or 'videos' must be referred for therapy. Spiritual direction still has a place in this journey of healing. The spiritual director can support the process by compassionate gentle care, and might usefully encourage the letting go of any sense of obligation to forgive.

### **Kairos Document**

Here are some significant quotes from the *Kairos Document*, the 1985 statement by 150 South African theologians on 'forgiveness and reconciliation' versus 'prophetic action' in the efforts to end apartheid. They contrast 'standard Church Theology' with the need for a 'Prophetic Theology' where there is oppression.

No reconciliation, no forgiveness, and no negotiations are possible without repentance (p12)

There can be no real peace without justice and repentance... like Jesus, we must expose (this) false peace, confront our oppressors and sow dissension. (p14)

When Jesus says we should turn the other cheek he is telling us we must not take revenge... not that we should never defend ourselves or others (p15)

... we can point to a lack of social analysis. Church Theology tends to make use of absolute principles and apply them indiscriminately and uncritically to all situations Very little attempt is made to analyse what is actually happening in our society and why. (p16)

Throughout the Bible, God appears as the liberator of the oppressed. He (sic) is not neutral. He does not attempt to reconcile Moses and Pharaoh, the Hebrew slaves with their oppressors... God takes sides with the oppressed (p20)

The Church must help people understand their rights and their duties. There must be no misunderstanding about the moral duty of all who are oppressed to resist oppression and to struggle for liberation and justice. (p27)

In their terms, standard Sunday Christian teaching about forgiveness and the earlier quotes are archetypal 'Church Theology', without the social analysis of what really happens to real people! As an aside, the response might be 'But what about the wonderful post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa?' Given the on-going problems there, there is growing appreciation that this may well have taken place too early in the process, before enough healing had actually happened.

### **Counsellors on Forgiveness:**

Several years ago I led a workshop on this topic with a group of New Zealand counsellors to discover how others in a more secular context approached this topic. They generated the following list of considerations, some of which would parallel those of many spiritual directors, others of which are worth serious consideration:

Our personal attitudes to, and experiences with injury and forgiveness influence our approach to clients when forgiveness of an injury is an issue of theirs. This may involve whether to forgive, unwillingness to forgive, guilt at being unable to do so, and the implications of doing so or not.

Belief systems must be re-examined and renegotiated to ensure they are life-giving.

Forgiveness is contra-indicated if:

- It is too soon
- Anger and other feelings have been suppressed, especially when there is significant trauma
- It is under duress/pressure, seen as a moral duty
- It is part of an abuse cycle
- It is 'to help the perpetrator' in some way (misplaced compassion)
- There are addictive behaviours involved
- When it is conditional – eg in the hope of restored love/acceptance
- When it is for the 'greater good' but damaging to the person
- When some institutional responsibility would be short-circuited
- When there is institutional support for the offending to continue

Forgiveness is nonetheless compatible with laying charges or complaints. This is handing over to the community responsibility for dealing with the offender and the offence.

The lived-out implications of forgiveness could range along a continuum from 'full re-commitment to the relationship and re-building trust', through 'moving on', 'letting go', 'unclipping a relationship', 're-deploying energy' 'a deep acceptance of the reality of what has occurred' to simply 'not seeking revenge'.

Ideas for helping clients:

- Permission to not forgive

Encouraging them to give priority to their own feelings and process, e.g. anger, grief. Where these are suppressed any short-term relief prejudices longer term well-being.

Alternative Bible quotes to those requiring forgiveness, e.g. the Hebrews did not have to forgive the Egyptians - they were told to get away (Ex 3:10); God is more interested in your recovery than in your ability to forgive (Lk 4:18).

Referral to a trained spiritual director if a counsellor is uncomfortable with a client's belief system. Consultation between a counsellor and spiritual director with the client's consent can be helpful.

Recognition by counsellor of developmental stages of maturity and faith, e.g. Fowler's Stages of Faith

The outcome for the person who forgives can be freedom and peace, a sense of a hold being broken, an ability to re-deploy energy, taking back one's power and strength. They alone can determine the timing.

The outcome for a person who sees themselves as withholding forgiveness can be the same.

The counsellors' conclusions are supported by another quote from *Communicating Forgiveness*:

Individuals who forgive too readily may be maintaining an unhealthy co-dependent relationship with a repeat offender. Low self-esteem and/or low relational power may discourage them from fully confronting wrongdoing. Forgiveness is potentially harmful because the goal is to maintain the relationship at the price of continuing unhealthy patterns of behaviour.

Are there other pertinent, more healing scriptures? Perhaps -

Let my people go (Ex 5:1, JB)

He does not break the crushed reed, nor quench the wavering flame. (Is 42:3, JB)

'Get up, take the child and his mother with you and escape into Egypt... ' (Mt 2:13, JB)

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives... to set at liberty them that are oppressed.' (Lk 4:18, KJV)

'They (the Pharisees) tie up heavy burdens, and lay them on others' shoulders...' (Mt 23:4, JB)

Importantly, the original Greek scriptural word that has been translated to English as 'forgive' is word ἀφίημι (aphiemi, Strong 863). It has multiple meanings: cry, forgive, forsake, lay aside, leave, let (alone, be, go, have), omit, put, send away, remit, suffer, yield up. Nothing about reconciliation! The 'let be', 'let go', 'lay aside' variations may seem like eventual healthy possibilities to damaged ones.

## A map

I now hypothesise a dividing line between those victims of injury or damage whose self-hood is relatively intact after the offending, and those whose self-hood has been seriously damaged (then or previously) for the possibly long term future. The first group's personal power may be dented by the offending, but not seriously affected. For them, generously extending forgiveness could eventually be a possible, useful and gracious gift.

But the damaged psyches of the second group will need long, patient and compassionate support and therapy, and some consistent experience of living free from fear to arrive at anything like the liberation and healing promised by Jesus. They can be usefully relieved of the often guilt-inducing burden of struggling unsuccessfully to forgive. This is where a spiritual director can

offer another perspective. The healing route for those 'below the line' is different from that prescribed for those 'above it'. There is a parallel here with quantum physics, where below a certain size particle, a whole different set of rules of behaviour operates, challenging the rules and systems of 'normal' physics.

### **Conclusion**

A similar analysis of forgiveness and the care needed when working with victims of abuse is found in the writings of two Catholic clergy prominent in the support of victims of sexual abuse by clergy, Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson and US priest Thomas Doyle. Doyle describes pressure on victims to forgive from church quarters as re-victimisation. They both have a profound concern for the healing the damage done by trauma to people's spiritual journeys, and recognise this can be impeded by standard simplistic understandings of forgiveness.

Given all this, I see a real need for in-depth teaching on the topic of forgiveness in any spiritual direction training course. The usually simplistic church teaching on this topic does not generally engage with social analysis and psychological realities in a way that is helpful to struggling victims of various types of abuse or betrayal. Hopefully any deeper reflection on forgiveness will better equip spiritual directors for promoting healing both for themselves, and for their spiritual directees.

The questions 'What would the loving, compassionate Holy One want for this person?' and 'What will actually promote healing?' are keys to creating a safe, healing space for damaged spiritual directees, so that they are more able eventually to move past the pain and find the wholeness, freedom and joy that is their human spiritual birth-right.

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### **Suggested Pull-outs:**

Kate is regularly beaten by her partner but believes that if she is to receive forgiveness herself, she must continue to forgive him each time he apologises. She has left him with the support of Women's Refuge, but believes it is the Christian thing to do to go back.

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'... we can point to a lack of social analysis. Church Theology tends to make use of absolute principles and apply them indiscriminately and uncritically to all situations. Very little attempt is made to analyse what is actually happening in our society and why.' (*Kairos Document*)

'Individuals who forgive too readily may be maintaining an unhealthy co-dependent relationship with a repeat offender. Low self-esteem and/or low relational power may discourage them from fully confronting wrongdoing.' (Waldron & Kelley)

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