

“Why Should I Forgive?”

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Central Story:

Simon is a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. His work assignment is in the camp's makeshift hospital. One day, Simon is brought to the bedside of a badly injured Nazi soldier named Karl. Karl, knowing he would die soon, haunted by the crimes he had committed, wants to confess his crimes to a Jew in hopes of gaining forgiveness. Karl describes in gruesome detail his acts of murder, including one horrific event in which 300 Jews were killed.

Simon listens to the man's story and then leaves the room without ever saying a word.

Simon refused all subsequent requests to go back and see him again.

Simon is not sure that he did the right thing, and this uncertainty stays with him even after the war.

Years after his liberation from the camp, Simon went to visit the soldier's mother.

The mother described Karl as she remembered him: an innocent, brave child. Simon left without telling her what he knew.

Sermon:

Decades later, in 1969, when Simon Wiesenthal recounts this story in his book, The Sunflower, he is still not sure he did the right thing. “Was I wrong or was I right to deny that dying man forgiveness?”

The verb to forgive” has both a secular meaning and a spiritual one. This leads to some confusion about what forgiveness really means.

There are at least four misconceptions about the spiritual meaning of forgiveness:

First, forgiveness, like love, is often misunderstood as a timid response. Forgiveness gets branded as sappy sentimentality. In our overly macho world, offering forgiveness to someone who has hurt us is seen as foolish and a sign of weakness.

But if you have ever tried to forgive, you know it takes a strong disposition and a fierce passion for living a wide open life.

The second misunderstanding about forgiveness comes when it is confused with condoning or pardoning the offensive behavior. Wiesenthal reveals that this was a prevalent attitude during his time. “Today,” he writes, “the world demands that we forgive and forget...It urges that we draw a line and close the account as if nothing had ever happened.” (from The Sunflower).

Forgiveness is not the same thing as forgetting, condoning, or pardoning. Just because we forgive doesn't mean that we don't seek justice, speak out against the offender, or seek restitution. These things are all distinct from the act of forgiveness.

The third misconception about forgiveness is the idea that refusing to forgive is a fitting way to punish the offender. In the story, the soldier, Karl, made a deathbed wish—to confess his crimes to a Jew and to have that person forgive him. Some people believe that forgiving him would have given him exactly what he wanted. And withholding that forgiveness would have punished him—quite justly—for his heinous acts. More often than not, however, it is the one who refuses to forgive who suffers more. The American Buddhist Jack Kornfield gives us a vivid image to explain this idea. “The person who betrayed you is sunning himself on a beach in Hawaii and you’re knotted up in hatred. Who is suffering?”

Finally, we often see forgiveness as a single act. I forgive you. Then I’m done. But it doesn’t work like that. Years ago I forgave my younger brother for hurting me. Even though I forgave him completely at that time, whenever I see him, I still feel a pinch. It reminds me there is still another layer of hurt or grief that demands my response. It’s not very strong, it’s quiet and I could easily ignore it. But I’d rather face it. So I forgive again for the hundredth time, reopening my heart.

That’s on a good day—when I’m feeling extra “ministerial!” If I’m not feeling so strong, if I’m not feeling that fierce passion for the wide open life, I withhold that forgiveness. Not yet, I say to myself, no yet.

Forgiveness is a daily practice—a lifelong practice. Some Buddhist monks practice forgiveness hundreds of times a day until it becomes a habit of the heart—as natural as breathing.

Forgiveness is not for the weak or timid.

It is not the same as condoning a behavior.

Withholding forgiveness leads to more suffering for us than the offender, and the practice of forgiveness is not a one-shot deal--it is a life-long discipline.

Those are the things forgiveness is NOT.

Here’s what the spiritual discipline of forgiveness is:

Simply, to forgive is to let go, and it is the most courageous thing we can do for ourselves.

Forgiveness is for ourselves because there is no greater suffering than to carry around great loads of bitterness, resentment and grudges.

We carry bundles of judgments about
who our enemies are,
the people we can’t stand,
the offensive behavior we can’t tolerate.

Most of the time we’re not even aware that we are carrying around these bundles.

They've been with us for so long, they're part of us. James Baldwin once said that people cling to their bitterness so stubbornly because they sense, once it is gone, they will be forced to deal with the pain. (tikkundaily blog archive, 5/25/2010)

And so we cling even more tightly to our bundles of bitterness. We hide them well, dress them up in good manners, and close our hearts so they don't leak out.

Forgiveness is the opposite of that clinging.

Forgiveness is a discipline of the mind--just one of many spiritual disciplines that help to open the heart.

And ultimately, that's the whole point of life, isn't it?

To do everything we can, while we can, to arrive at the end of our days with a heart that is wide open--with a mind that has stopped clinging to regrets and resentments?

Yesterday was Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement.

This sanctuary was filled with our friends from Temple Beth El.

Their prayers of confession, forgiveness and atonement have blessed this space again this year.

For one full day, those who are able, observe a strict fast to bring themselves close to the experience of death. Just as Karl, the mortally wounded soldier in the story wished to find forgiveness in his final days, when we draw close to our own death, we too feel the need to make amends, confess, forgive and ask for forgiveness.

The story about Simon and Karl takes up just the first half of The Sunflower. The rest of the book includes a symposium of responses to Wiesenthal's question: was it wrong or was it right to deny that man forgiveness?

In the first edition, just 10 scholars and writers responded. In later editions dozens more were added. Here are just three:

The first, from Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, who said Simon's action was right because no person can be expected to forgive on behalf of someone else. He tells a story to illustrate his point.

One day the famous Rabbi of Brisk was on a train from Warsaw to Brisk. He was sitting in the compartment minding his own business, reading, while a group of salesmen were playing cards. They didn't recognize the rabbi and in a friendly gesture, they tried to get him to join their game. The Rabbi brushed them off and refused to play.

The salesmen kept inviting him to join in, but the Rabbi remained aloof.

One of the salesmen became so angry at this insult that he kicked the Rabbi out of the compartment, forcing him to stand in the hallway for hours until they got to their destination. When they arrived in Brisk, the Rabbi was greeted by a large crowd of admirers, and the salesman realized whom he had insulted. He quickly went to him to ask for forgiveness. The rabbi declined to forgive him.

In his hotel room, the salesman was agitated and decided to find the Rabbi's house. Again he asked for the Rabbi's forgiveness and again the Rabbi said no.

The next day the salesman went to the synagogue to approach the Rabbi once again. This time, he offered money. “I am not a rich man,” he said, “but I have a savings of 300 rubles for charity if you will forgive me.” For the third time the Rabbi said no.

When the Rabbi’s son heard the story, he decided to approach his father, but indirectly. The son began a general discussion of the Jewish principle that a person who asks for forgiveness three times should be granted forgiveness, and then he mentioned the name of the salesperson. The Rabbi answered, I cannot forgive him. He did not know who I was. He offended a common man. Let the salesman go to him and ask for forgiveness.

Heschel concluded: “No one can forgive crimes committed against someone else.”

Going back to the Sunflower, it is literally true that Karl had not injured Simon. But Simon lost 89 of his family members in the Holocaust. His own mother-in-law was gunned down in the stairwell of her house. Those 300 people who were killed in the raid that Karl took part in—did they not belong to Simon? Do they not belong to us?

Heschel’s story about the salesman on the train also leaves me wondering about the Rabbi of Brisk. What would it have cost him to forgive the salesman? And what did it cost him by not forgiving him?

The second response is from the Christian theologian James William Parkes. He agrees with Heschel that Simon was not in a position to forgive, so it was not wrong to deny forgiveness. He goes on to present a Universalist gospel: after death, we all face the same destiny and we face it together. There will be no separation of saved and damned, so whether we forgive or not; whether we are forgiven or not, in the next life, we will be reconciled. The destiny we share reconciles “the infinite beauty and richness of creation, and the immeasurable horror of evil...”

The essay that resonated most closely with me was by John Oesterreicher. He narrowly escaped several Gestapo arrests during the war. Later, he contributed to the Vatican II Council’s declaration on the Church’s Bond to the Jewish People. He wrote, “to forgive is not an arrogant struggle to change the course of events, vain attempts to undo what has been done; rather they are daring, loving ventures to offer new meaning to the dead and deadly past. In doing so these acts give a new direction to history.”

The practice of forgiveness is to let go of the idea that we can change the past.

When we forgive, it is never to change the past—it is so that we can change the future—to offer new meaning to the dead and the deadly past.

Was Simon wrong or right when he refused to forgive the Nazi soldier?

For me, the question of right versus wrong sets up a dichotomy that doesn’t move us to a peaceful heart. The words of Rumi ring in my ears: “out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing, there is a field—I will meet you there.”

A big open field beyond the ideas of right and wrong--that's spiritual freedom.
Freedom from the bondage of anger, hatred and self-loathing.
Freedom from being ruled by automatic reactions based on pain and pleasure.

Victor Frankl, another survivor of a Nazi concentration camp talks about this big open field. It is a space between the moment someone says or does something that pricks us and our response to the situation.

In that space, Frankl says, is our power to choose how we will respond. "In our response lies our growth and our freedom. The last of human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."

The Dalai Lama was once asked if he could ever forgive the Chinese for destroying the Tibetan monasteries and their culture. He replied, "they've already taken my country; why should I let them have my mind too?"

The rational part of my brain can hear this message and say, yes, it would be very good for me to let go of that old grudge.
Yes, I can see how I could feel freer without that emotional burden.
Yes, I know that even though I have done a good job of covering up my resentments and anger and hurt, they still damage my health and keep my heart more closed than I wish.

My rational side can say yes, but...

Not yet, not yet—

The poet Denise Levertov puts words to our reluctance:

"Not yet, not yet--
there is too much broken
that must be mended,
too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven."

If this is how you are feeling, that's OK.

That's why there is a day of atonement every year.
That's why we practice renewal at the turn of every season,
Because we need the wheel of life to come back round again.

When summer turns to fall,
when Daytime turns to Darkness,
when breathing in turns to breathe out, there it is—
one more chance
to turn and say, yes, now!