

FORGIVENESS

In his short story *The Capital of the World* Ernest Hemingway tells the tale of a Spanish father and his teenage son who have become estranged from each other. Eventually the rebellious son Paco (a common Spanish name) runs away from home. Some time after their separation the father has a change of heart and begins a long and arduous search to find his son and make amends. As a last resort the exhausted father places an ad in a Madrid newspaper hoping that his son would see the ad and respond to it. The ad read,

Dear Paco, Please meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. Love, Papa

As Hemingway tells the story, the next day at noon, in front of the newspaper office, there were 800 Pacos, all seeking reconciliation with their fathers.

The issue of forgiveness comes up often during spiritual care visits. For some the issue focuses on the need to be forgiven by others. During their stay in hospital patients can become acutely aware of the need to heal broken relationships. It is this awareness that can move them to restore broken relations with family and friends.

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.

Lewis B. Smedes



For others, the pain of illness can awaken past hurts that were thought to be long forgotten. When reminded of these past pains patients may want to work at healing the past. Sometimes those who have hurt them are deceased or live far away and reconciliation seems impossible. However, even in such situations patients can still work at forgiving those who have wronged them. The forgiving of the offender does not justify what was done but rather is a way of releasing themselves from the pain of the

past and any lingering bitterness. Author Lewis Smedes writes that “to forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover that the prisoner was you”.

Another level of forgiveness has to do with forgiving oneself. Again, during hospitalization people can become reflective and think back on what they did or failed to do in their lives. Past failings can cling like barnacles to the soul and greatly affect the quality of life and health. In such cases there is often the need for self forgiveness as lives can be hampered by this personal judgment.

Some time ago I met “Jack” who was nearing the end of his life due to cancer. His partner of many years had passed away years before but he still carried guilt about the way she died. One night his wife, who suffered from chronic pain, was feeling especially unwell. Since she often experienced a lot of pain neither of them thought much of it. They both believed that by morning it would have passed. It didn’t pass and in the middle of the night his wife died.

To this day Jack carried with him the guilt of not having called 911 that night. He hated himself for what had happened and constantly wondered what life would have been like had he called sooner. He wondered what it would have been like to grow old together.

Jack had clearly not been able to forgive himself. Part of our conversation focused on how his wife might respond to how he was feeling. His wife, he confessed, was a gracious woman who would have told him that it wasn’t his fault. She wouldn’t blame him and neither should he blame himself. It was simply a sad thing that happened. He did the best he could.

Undoing guilt over the past is difficult. But picturing his wife speaking to him with reassuring words seemed to help Jack come to the end of his own life in peace.

While much physical healing can occur during a person’s stay in hospital it can also be a time of spiritual healing in which patients experience the mending of broken relationships and the relief of forgiving themselves.

“Forgiving does not mean forgetting. When we forgive a person, the memory of the wound might stay with us for a long time, even throughout our lives. Sometimes we carry the memory in our bodies as a visible sign. But forgiveness changes the way we remember. It converts the curse into a blessing. When we forgive our parents for their divorce, our children for their lack of attention, our friends for their unfaithfulness in crisis, we no longer have to experience ourselves as the victims of events we had no control over.

Forgiveness allows us to claim our own power and not let these events destroy us; it enables them to become events that deepen the wisdom of our hearts. Forgiveness indeed heals memories.”

Henri Nouwen

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