

FORGIVENESS

Someone once said that this was the definition of Hell --"Hell is the never-ending desert filled with the unforgiving and the unforgiven." We human beings love to hold on to the hell of unforgiveness. We like the righteous feeling we get from believing we are right and the other person wrong, that we are the Victim and the other person the Villain. It makes us feel powerful. We like nursing a resentment, holding a grudge, milking hurts: The parents who abused us or disappointed us. The teacher who flunked us. The partner who betrayed us. The child who has shamed us. The friend who wasn't there for us. The boss who didn't recognize our potential. The bank that foreclosed on us. The guy who crashed into us. The illness that stole our loved one. The church that wasn't there for us. The ministers who didn't live up to our expectations. The person who murdered our bodies, or our minds or our souls. The God who abandoned us. To varying degrees, everyone has someone who has hurt them, trespassed against them, someone to hold responsible and blame for our pain. And we love to hold on to that self-righteous knowing that we have been wronged. What we often don't realize is that unforgiveness is the guard that keeps us a prisoner to our own pain. It keeps us from knowing true joy. It holds us back from knowing what holy love is. It prevents us from trusting the goodness of the universe. It holds us back from being free and fully alive. When we live in a state of unforgiveness, we live in a state of hell, we are in bondage. And we can choose to stay captive in the land of smug self-righteousness and remain bitter, or we can choose to walk the pathway to forgiveness and be set free. But the journey to forgiveness is probably the longest journey any of us will ever make. It is one of the highest spiritual principles of any major religion but the most difficult to live out. It is at the heart of divine love. And if we truly practiced the principle of forgiveness and lived it as our lifetime accomplishment, our

relationships, our world would be transformed. Imagine how relationships could be brought into harmony if people could forgive. Imagine how families could be healed if people could forgive. Imagine how countries could lay down their weapons if people could forgive. The students of Jesus said to him: How often should we forgive 7 x? And Jesus responded 70 x 7. Forgiveness is the key essential value to the life of faith, the mark of the true follower of Jesus. As we have heard said: To err is human, to forgive divine, but have we ever learned to do it? So how do we journey to that pathway of forgiveness that we might be set free? As I reflected on my own journey toward forgiveness and the journey of many others that I have had the privilege of working with through the years, I realized that there are four phases that we must travel through.

The first being SELF-PITY. People believe that self-pity is a negative thing, something we should avoid, but it is a necessary first movement toward forgiveness. So throw a pity party and invite yourself. Forgiveness begins by first acknowledging the hurt. To deny a wounding is not to bring it out into the open for healing. We need to be able to honour that a wounding has occurred and to feel the anger and the sorrow of it. To pretend that it was no big deal, to deny that it ever happened keeps us captive. When I meet with people who have suffered harm even if the offending person is long since dead, I often encourage them to write a letter to the person who has hurt them. Not to ever send the letter, but to help them write on paper, the wound that was written on their heart, to give voice to their betrayal. Some people get stuck in this place of Self-Pity and never leave it. It can be a great place to hang out in, to grovel in. It can make us feel holier than thou and be like King Lear and cry out: "I am a man more sinned against than sinning." But to stay in this first phase would be to stay trapped in the pain of sorrow and anger. If we are to be set free, we need to move to phase 2: SELF-REVELATION

This next stage of forgiveness is to open up our own hearts and minds to unveil our own darkness. When we are caught up in a state of unforgiveness we tend to focus on the other and not to see our own flaws and inadequacies. We deny our own radically flawed humanity. I will often hear people say: "I would never do what this person did!" That just isn't true. It isn't how we are made. As Jesus pointed out in a very humorous way: "Why do you look for the speck of sawdust in another's eye and refuse to see the log sitting in your own, first remove the log from your own eye, so that you can see more clearly the splinter in another's.'" There are great logs sitting in our own eyes. We human beings are capable of great destruction. Every single one of us has the potential to become a murderer or a saint - given certain genetic make-up, certain upbringing, certain friends, certain circumstances, certain time and certain place -- anyone of us can make the same destructive choices as a person on death row. To not know that is to deny our humanity and to deceive ourselves. Someone once said something I will never forget. They said: 'Do not say, but for the grace of God, go I, but say, but for the grace of God, I am.' I am the prostitute and the prom queen, the philanthropist and the pimp, the victim and the villain. Everybody likes to think of themselves as the good guy and the other guy the bad guy, but the truth is that within us lies both. An exercise that brings us into awareness of our own darkness is something that I was asked to do in a conflict resolution course in Toronto many years ago. It was the story of the Good Samaritan and we were asked to make a list of all the people in our lives who had robbed us. I wrote madly. On the column beside it, we were then asked to write down the people we had robbed. Who moi, a robber, surely not? My list got longer and low and behold, when I compared the lists they were the same people. We have not only been robbed, we have also been the robbers. Within each of us is held the same paradox, and a particular life experience can draw out either saint or sinner at any given time. To stand in judgment of another,

is to deny our own humanity. When we come to terms with our own darkness, we can come to a new place of understanding for another's darkness and begin to open up the possibility of forgiveness. We need to own our own darkness if we are to travel the path of forgiveness. When we can look into the eyes of the person who has wounded us and say not: that COULD be me, but that IS me, we are well on the way down the road of forgiveness.

Phase 3 SELF-FORGIVENESS

Before we can forgive another, we need to forgive ourselves. The first line of the Lord's Prayer is Forgive us our sins. Once Pandora's box is open and we have peered into our own darkness, we need to forgive ourselves for being made of dust and ashes. As hard-hearted as we can be toward others, we can be just as equally hard-hearted toward ourselves. People of faith in particular can place unrealistic expectations of perfection on ourselves. We think we have to walk on water before God will accept and love us. Forgiving ourselves for not being Jesus is the key to this step. Sometimes we have to confess our mistakes to someone else in order for us to experience forgiveness, and sometimes we need to go to ourselves and God. I have found that the most meaningful way to go about forgiving ourselves is through a guided visualization. When people who come to me need to forgive themselves, I invite Jesus to come and converse with them. They have a heart-to-heart about what has taken place, make a confession and receive his blessing. In AA, the step inviting the person to make amends to those they have wounded is critical in coming to a place of self-forgiveness, and sometimes the person we have hurt the most is ourselves. We Christians beat ourselves up mercilessly. Punishing ourselves makes us punitive of others. Without forgiving ourselves, we cannot forgive another. If we want to learn to be gracious, we need to first extend that grace to ourselves. If you have ever experienced yourself as forgiven, you will want to share that gift with another. There is no gift more sacred, no gift that

helps you know what it is to stand in the presence of God than the experience of forgiveness for the wrongs we have done. What our Christian faith reminds us is that there is nothing we can do, that is outside of God's forgiveness - nothing can separate us from the love of God – NOTHING!

And finally, after we have journeyed through Self Pity, Self-Revelation, and Self-Forgiveness, we begin the last leg of the forgiving journey UNCOVERING THE GIFTING. In each wounding of our lives, there is a hidden gift waiting to be opened. At first, the pain of unforgiveness buries the gift and we cannot see the precious buried treasure that is lying there deep in the experience, but it is there. It shines like the sun behind a cloud. When we can recognize that there is a gift in the wounding, that we have learned something or gained something new, then we know that we can finally let go and forgive what was done to us and enter a new state of gratitude. No matter how tragic or seemingly unforgivable the deed was, there will always be a gift that came from it. Through tragedy and hurt, we can learn the gift of compassion, we can know the gift of love, we can learn the gift of endurance, we can know the gift of inner strength, we can know the gift of new relationships, we can discover the gift of ourselves; we can discover the gift of the healing God. When we can identify the gift, and know gratitude, the shackles of unforgiveness begin to loosen and the heart begins to open and the compassionate love of forgiveness begins to flow.

In 2001 I was in Vancouver for my Spiritual Direction course. One evening we were invited through a guided mediation in which the facilitator asked us to imagine ourselves being enveloped in divine love. Suddenly before my closed eyes was Jesus, standing there in radiant light. With him were my parents, my grandmother and about 30 other people who I didn't recognize but sensed I knew who were now in another realm of reality, bathed in a cloud of light. Their love for me poured out with such power; I had never before experienced such a love. And

I found myself thanking my parents for being the parents I needed in this lifetime, as tears quietly streamed down my face. Regardless of any remnants of unforgiveness that I had left over from childhood resentments and deep hurts, I recognized the gifts they had given me. I thanked my dad for his integrity and honesty, and I thanked my mother for her listening heart and nurture. I thanked them for being the perfect parents that I needed in spite of their many flaws. I realized that I needed their imperfections and humanity as much as I needed their gifts to grow into the person I needed to be -- and forgiveness and gratitude flowed.

SELF-PITY, SELF-REVELATION, SELF-FORGIVENESS, UNCOVERING THE GIFT - this is the path to forgiveness and freedom. To learn to forgive another from the heart is the highest calling one can ever aspire to in the spiritual life. It is one of Jesus' last words on the cross: 'forgive them, they know not what they do.' When Jesus uttered those words he unleashed the most powerful love the world has ever known - we have a name for it -- we call it resurrection. To forgive another from the heart is to know ourselves as resurrected, as new and divine people. You and I are called to the path of forgiveness and in doing so discover a freedom we have never known. I invite you to make this journey – again and again as it is needed. You will never regret it. May it be so. Amen!