

The Possibilities of Forgiveness

As I prepare for my upcoming “Gratitude and Forgiveness” retreats, I am resounding with the transformative potential living in each of these qualities. In the past I have written about gratitude numerous times, today I want to write briefly about perhaps “the most profound expression of love possible”- forgiveness.

We carry the past in our bodies. All that is unresolved in our heart lives in the tightness of our tissues, in the heaviness of our movement, in the cast of our eyes and in tone of our voice. Unprocessed guilt lives as a weight and often includes a need to remain hidden from view. We don't want to be seen or to see ourselves. Within forgiveness lives the possibility of resolving our past. It holds the potential for freeing past karma. The radiance of our life-energy, our aura is transformed through this noble act. If there was no forgiveness on this earth, we would live mired in hatred, pain and untold sorrow.

- * Do we carry self-blame for our inability to act differently in the past and for the pain that we have caused?
- * Do we carry blame toward others for the pain they have caused?
- * What are the “right”, effective and life-enhancing ways of acknowledging our errors?
- * At what point is forgiveness for our own misdeeds acceptable and helpful for a maturing conscience?
- *What does it really mean to forgive yet not forget?

It seems to me that when we are “off the mark” (which is the original definition of “sin”), regret is an important part of that acknowledgement. That human beings feel sorrow for causing pain to self and others seems a necessary evolutionary step in consciousness. When we cause hurt, it is “right” to feel the pain of those actions. Moral learning requires this capacity. The question becomes one of timing and amount- when do we allow that energy to transform through our forgiveness?

Simon Wiesenthal the famous “Nazi hunter” wrote a tremendously moving account of a profoundly disturbing event while a prisoner during World War 2. He had lost many loved ones and experienced unspeakable atrocities. One day while being forced to clean up refuse at a military hospital, he was invited into the room of a young SS officer who was dying. The soldier had a deep need to repent for his sins and to receive forgiveness from a Jew. In agonizing detail, he told of his participation in horrific deeds. At the end he asked Wiesenthal for his forgiveness so that he could die in peace. What would you do?

The last half of the book, “The Sunflower”, consists of many deep, thoughtful people writing about how they might act in such a situation. This is an instance of humanity struggling with an issue that confronts us all. Everyday we cause some kinds of harm to ourselves and others through our thoughts, words and actions. What is the accurate role for forgiveness in relation to the large and small misdeeds that inhabit our lives? Are there limits to forgiveness? Is “blame” ever necessary or helpful? Can one hold oneself and others responsible without blaming?

While in Rwanda last April these questions arose deeply for me. Listening to the stories of brutality that my new friends had experienced, hearing of their struggle to live amongst the people who killed their families and listening to the killers trying to make sense of their own actions and find ways to live as ‘normal’ people again brought new levels of anguishing reflection for me. While the situation in Nazi Germany and Rwanda are obviously extreme, can we see these as hyperbolic examples of our own challenges?

Forgiveness is essential for freeing our burdened hearts and adding light into the world. Self-responsibility is essential for our true maturation as human beings. Acknowledging our mistakes, our sins against life, feeling deeply for the pain we have caused AND freeing ourselves from the life-killing aspects of the unforgiving heart is a necessary task for evolving humanity. If gratitude is the front door to the loving heart then forgiveness might be considered the back door. I invite you to join in these reflections.