

Networks of Connection

Forgiveness or Forbearance?

The Essence

When forgiveness seems impossible, forbearance may be enough.

Just Do It

When she was a little girl, Natalie's father repeatedly molested her. At age thirty-two, Natalie found the courage to confront him, but she could not, would not, forgive him. News of the confrontation spread through the family. Relatives waded in with their opinions. "It happened so long ago; just let it go." But it wasn't long ago for Natalie; the violation stalked her every day of her life.

What offenses or affronts from your life have you found difficult to forgive? Record your answer in your spiritual journal.

Imagine That

Pen and ink have been called an "unforgiving medium" because every miss-stroke remains indelibly recorded. Explore the permanence of pen and India ink by creating a self-portrait. Hold in memory a recollection of past injustice. Try to capture the story your face tells. When you have finished, examine the face in your portrait. What do you see "written" there? Record your responses in your journal.

Breaking It Down

Well-meaning people counsel, "Forgive and forget." Unfortunately for victims of serious emotional trauma, violence, or abuse, that advice isn't always possible to follow; sometimes it isn't even appropriate. The victim's emotional truth tempers the readiness to forgive; they cannot forget. Admittedly, there is wisdom in the saying "Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself." But to victims granting forgiveness may feel like condoning the damaging behavior or letting the perpetrator off the hook of responsibility. Such advice is easy to dispense, but for victims, forgiveness may be hard to come by.

There is no single, simple answer. A conservative Christian therapist insists that her clients, teenage incest and rape victims, forgive their abusers because "That's what the Bible tells us we are to do: Forgive as we are forgiven." Elie Wiesel, however, when asked if he had forgiven his

Nazi tormentors, replied, "Forgiveness is up to God." The verdict on forgiveness is ambiguous; some hurts are too big or too deep to be easily forgiven.

Insisting that a victim forgive before the person is ready multiplies the hurt. Before we admonish forgiveness, even when the victim is ourselves, we need to assess the degree of healing that has taken place. Forgiveness may be premature because wounds are still too raw and emotions too exposed. The victim may need more time to heal. Folks urge clemency with the best of intentions, thinking that they are protecting sufferers from self-inflicted wounds of bitterness or retaliation. Actually, these advisers may be shielding themselves from discomfort at witnessing the victim's powerful emotions.

The victim of serious injury is the one best qualified to judge when and if the time is right to forgive. That time may not come until the negative reactions have played out, and the person is purged of emotional pain. Indeed, the person's rage, grief, and despair may be more hopeful than they seem from outside. One's anger, for example, may, in fact, be righteous indignation at the unjust violation of the abusive act. The victim's fierce ire can fuel assertions of integrity and personhood, moving the afflicted from victim to victor and from oppressed casualty to prophetic activist.

Rather than prematurely forcing the mere appearance of pardon, victims may find forbearing the perpetrator a more appropriate response. The distance of chilly civility enables the victim to maintain self-respect without giving tacit approval to either the offender or the hurtful act. Forbearance empowers the victim with the dignity of naming one's own reality and means that one is freed to remember the wrong and the injustice it represents for as long as one needs, so that forgiveness, should it come, will be bestowed as a freely given gift.

What's Next?

In your spiritual journal write a letter to someone who has injured you. What would that person need to do to satisfy your need for justice? What would forbearance look like in this situation? What would need to change in the situation, in the other, and in you, to make forgiveness possible?

When you have finished your letter, imagine that the person writes back to you; record their correspondence in your spiritual journal.