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**THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP: CONTEXT AND MEANS OF
FORGIVENESS**

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ABSTRACT

The client-social work relationship has the potential to be the context and the means by which change occurs: specifically forgiveness of self, others and God. This paper will examine the beliefs of forgiveness in several religions and discuss case examples within the therapeutic process. Forgiveness is important in repairing damage within interpersonal relationships and for individual physical and mental health. An individual's faith perspective can play an important role in the forgiveness process. The social worker's sensitivity to the client's beliefs, faith, ritual, and community of belonging may have an impact on the client social worker relationship and the context and the means by which forgiveness occurs.

KEY WORDS

Forgiveness; Belief; Relationship; Therapeutic Process

INTRODUCTION

This paper will begin with a review of the literature on forgiveness. Three cases will illustrate the therapeutic process of forgiveness.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Simon Wiesenthal (1998) was a prisoner in the Nazi Concentration Camps. Wiesenthal was taken to the bedside of a dying member of the SS who was haunted by the crimes in which he had participated. This soldier wanted to confess to and receive absolution from a Jew. Wiesenthal was faced with questions of compassion and justice; silence and truth. He said nothing. After release from the concentration camp, Wiesenthal interviewed fifty three men and women of various religious backgrounds. The interviewee was to imagine him or herself as a concentration camp prisoner and reflect on their decision to forgive or not. Was forgiveness an option? What would forgiveness mean for the victim as well as the perpetrator of these crimes? Wiesenthal (1998, p. 81) concluded that "One thing is certain: you can only forgive a wrong that has been done to yourself." Wiesenthal received many various responses but the Christian

response was overwhelming forgiveness and the Jewish response reflected Wiesenthal's sentiments. A brief review of some responses includes:

Abraham Joshua Herschel – “No one can forgive crimes committed against other people. It is therefore preposterous to assume that anybody alive can extend forgiveness for the suffering of any one of the six million people who perished.” (p. 171).

John T. Pawlikowski – “The public form of forgiveness is reconciliation And this is of necessity a much longer, more complex process, especially in a case such as this where Wiesenthal is being asked to reconcile publicly with the Nazi soldier through word and gesture in the name of a community of victims. Reconciliation entails several stages: repentance, contrition, acceptance of responsibility, healing, and finally reunion. Clearly in the limited and confined circumstances in which Wiesenthal encountered the dying Nazi soldier, reconciliation was an impossibility” (p.221).

Alan L. Berger – “I may forgive one who has sinned against me. I may not forgive one who has taken the life of another.” (p. 119).

Robert McAfee Brown – “For if we forgive, it will be a sign to those in the future that they can act without fear of punishment and that the universe has a moral escape valve labeled forgiveness that permits evil not only to survive but to thrive.” (p. 121).

Matthieu Ricard – For a Buddhist, forgiveness is always possible and one should always forgive. According to the Buddhist teachings, an action is not considered negative or sinful in and of itself, but because it produces suffering. Likewise, a virtuous act is what brings about more happiness in the world. ‘The only good thing about evil,’ goes the Buddhist saying, ‘is that it can be purified.’ In Buddhism, forgiveness does not mean absolution, but an opportunity for the inner transformation of both victim and perpetrator.”(p. 235).

Desmond Tutu – “Many claim to be Christians. They say they follow the Jewish rabbi who, when he was crucified, said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” I sit and marvel at it all as I preside over the process of seeking to bring healing and reconciliation to a deeply divided, wounded, and traumatized nation. It is clear that if we look only to retributive

justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future.” (p. 268).

The Dalai Lama – “I believe one should forgive the person or persons who have committed atrocities against oneself and mankind. But this does not necessarily mean one should forget about the atrocities committed. In fact, one should be aware and remember these experiences so that efforts can be made to check the reoccurrence of such atrocities in the future.(p. 129).

Edward H. Flannery – “It is a cardinal principle of Judeo-Christian ethics that forgiveness must always be granted to the sincerely repentant. . . . In the Gospel we read Jesus’ answer to the question of how many times one must forgive. Should it be ‘seven times’? Speaking out of his Jewish tradition, his answer was, ‘Seventy times seven times’ – a metaphorical way of saying ‘always.’” (p. 137).

In her book *“Left to Tell”*, Immaculee Ilibagiza (2006) gives a different response to the atrocities of genocide in Rwanda. Immaculee grew up in a small town in Rwanda. Her parents were college educated teachers in their small village and were well respected. Immaculee and her three brothers were encouraged to go to college. Immaculee describes herself as protected from and naive about the “hat mongering politics” between the Hutus and Tutsis. The Hutu tribe was the majority (85% of the nation population). The Tutsi and Hutu tribes shared a similar culture but exhibited some different physical features. Immaculee Ilibagiza was a young university student when the genocide holocaust began in Rwanda in 1994. Immaculee’s parents sent her to their pastor’s home where she survived by hiding in a bathroom with seven other women.

Immaculee had her father’s rosary which she prayed constantly during the 91 days in the pastor’s bathroom. She begged God to spare her from rape and murder. As she prayed, she realized her heart was filled with anger and hatred toward the Hutu tribe. From within, she heard God telling her that she must forgive her family’s killers. At that moment, she saw a vision of Jesus on the cross forgiving his persecutors. She was filled with peace. Immaculee’s family and friends were

brutally murdered in the war. When the war ended, Immaculee came face to face with the man responsible. She had remembered him as the father of her friend and a successful businessman. As he stood before her, she recognized him. Beneath his dirty clothing was an emaciated body and bare feet covered with sores. She wept and said “I forgive you. . . . Forgiveness is all I have to offer.” Immaculee states: “We both needed the healing power of God’s forgiveness to move forward if our country was to survive and rise from the bitterness, blood, and suffering of the holocaust” (2008, p.13). Following the war, she spent many months seeking solitude to discern meaning from what seemed to be a meaningless situation. Immaculee believes that God graced her with safety and life during the genocide so she could tell others how God had touched her heart and taught her to forgive. The solitude brought her a vision of helping orphaned children of Rwanda. Immaculee states “These children are the ones who will build the new Rwanda. If we don’t invest in their future we won’t have a future” (2008, p. 145).

Katherine Piderman (2010) refers to forgiveness as a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that one denies the other person’s responsibility for hurting him or her and it doesn’t minimize the wrong. Forgiveness brings peace that helps one go on with life. Piderman describes the benefits of forgiving as greater spiritual and psychological well-being, less stress and hostility, lower blood pressure, and fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety and chronic pain.

Enright (1998, 2007) describes four phases of forgiveness including 1) Uncovering anger; 2) Deciding to forgive; 3) Working on forgiveness; 4) Discovery and release from emotional prison. The first phase examines how one has avoided dealing with anger and if the injury has caused permanent change in life. The second phase is a decision to forgive, recognizing that what one has been doing hasn’t worked. The third phase is working toward understanding,

compassion, and accepting the pain. The fourth phase is discovering the meaning of suffering, that one is not alone the purpose of one's life and the freedom of forgiveness.

CASE EXAMPLES

The therapeutic relationship has the potential to be the context and the means for forgiveness. "The clinical relationship provides not only the context in which change can occur but also the means by which change occurs. As a real human relationship, it provides the client and the clinician with the opportunity to develop relational competencies, including how to tend and discuss process in a relationship, how to resolve interactional problems when they arise, and how to increase respect and mutuality in a relationship with another." (Dillon C. & Murphy, B. C.; 2008; p. 337)

Reconciliation with a deceased parent:

Client – "In the last session you had asked me to write a letter to my father. I couldn't do it. I know he is here with us. He knows everything. I didn't know what to say to him." (Her voice was choked up and I could sense the tears were about to flow)

Therapist – "We can talk in our session today about what you would want to say in the letter if you were to write it. I sense the tears are about to flow. Can you tell me what the tears mean?"

Client - "I was thinking about the last time I saw my father. It was in the hospital just before he died. I was about 17 years old. I don't remember what it was I said or did, but he was very stern and corrected me. I probably deserved it. But, I just wish that was not our parting words." (The client broke into sobs. We sat for a moment till the sobbing subsided and the tears were lessened. I handed her a tissue box.)

Therapist – "Is that what you would like to say to him now - that you wish your last words had not been ones of conflict?"

Client – "Yes, I would like him to know that I would have liked those moments to have been different. I would like to tell him that I appreciated all he did for us; that I respected him. That he had taught us to survive in the world. That I wanted him to be proud of all that I have done."

Therapist – “That you loved him?”

Client – “Yes, I would want him to know I loved him. But, we never said things like ‘I love you’ or ‘I am sorry.’”

Therapist – “I sense that you would you have liked to tell him that you loved him before he died?”

Client – (The sobs resumed as she nodded her head.) “I would have liked for him to tell me he loved me too. But, he would never have said the word love. He was a man of few words.”

Therapist – “What if you had said ‘I love you. I need to know you love me too.’ Would he have said: ‘You know I do.’”

Client – (Laughed) “Yes I can see him saying that. In fact I can see the smile on his face as he says that. It is almost like he is here with us acknowledging his love without using the word.” . .

Client – “I am amazed that in my everyday life I cannot talk about these important things, but I can come here and tell a complete stranger. And, after every session I feel relieved. I am grateful for this opportunity.”

The client was able to come to a new awareness in her relationship with her father through the context of an empathic, therapeutic interaction. The words of love were never spoken between father and daughter but love was experienced at the deepest level of feelings. The client had carried, for ten years, the last harsh words of correction by her father for her misdeed. Surely, it was a simple misdeed of disrespect that any teen might make. But it was in the moment of her father’s last hours that made it feel unpardonable. These few moments of the therapeutic encounter allowed for genuine repentance, atonement through spiritual recognition of her father’s presence and his love implying forgiveness.

Reconciliation with Self and God

Leslie came to her first counseling session four months after the miscarriage of her first child. She was mildly depressed and unaware of grieving her loss. She reported being upset with herself for not taking joy in her sister’s pregnancy. She wanted to be excited about her first niece who would be born in five months. She struggled with feelings of life being unfair, envy of her

sister's life, and anger at God. She had difficulty being motivated at work and missed work frequently. Leslie talked about her miscarriage in great detail. She blamed herself. She had misgivings about what had occurred in the hospital. Leslie had not named her child and there was not a funeral or other ritual. In session, we talked about the importance of naming her child and calling her child by the name chosen. Leslie was raised in a Jewish family but currently practicing in a Unitarian church. She spoke of Shiva – a Jewish tradition of a week of mourning, following a death. She had missed the community of family and friends acknowledging her loss. Her family and friends did not speak about the miscarriage and she kept her sorrow to herself. Often miscarriage is not mourned or talked about. Leslie recognized that naming her child and talking about her miscarriage in session had lessened her pain but when with family the sorrow persisted. We discussed the importance of ritual and remembrance. A ceremony at the Unitarian Church was arranged to name her child, light candles and remember with family and friends. This shared experience with loved ones allowed for the expression of grief and the letting go of pain. While Leslie did not forget the loss of her own child, she was able to engage in the excitement and birth of her niece. She forgave herself, God, and others who experienced the joy of childbirth.

The Suffering of Forgiving too Quickly

Jan entered therapy in her mid 30's, presenting concerns were depression, anxiety, over-possessiveness of her children and suicidal thoughts. Jan was sexually abused as a child by her stepfather. Child protective services were involved. At the age of 13, she attended a perpetrator victim group. She was given the power to decide if her step-father could return home. At the time she felt responsible for breaking up the family and hurting her mother. She decided in favor of her step-father to return home but had not worked through her anger regarding the abuse. She thought "we will all grow together in the crises." Jan never allowed herself as a teen or adult to be angry at her step-father because this would bring to question her decision. She forgave too soon without repentance, atonement, and change. She gives to others at the expense of herself. After the birth of her children, she became anxious about their safety. This misguided resolution for a teen, too young to choose, put the need of a perpetrator to be resolved of guilt ahead of the child's need for recognition of having been harmed.

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness brings peace. It helps one go on with life. It is a commitment to a process of change. Forgiveness is important to interpersonal relationships and it benefits mental and physical health. Forgiveness does not always mean reconciliation. Reconciliation may not be appropriate, especially if the relationship would continue to be damaging. In the book *“The Sunflower”* we learn from Simon Wiesenthal (1998) that one can only forgive a wrong that has been done to oneself. In the book *“Left to Tell”* we see Immaculee Ilibagiza (2006) commit to overcome differences, following the genocide in Rwanda, to help the children of Rwanda heal. She found meaning in forgiveness and activism. “These children are the ones who will build the new Rwanda. If we don’t invest in their future we won’t have a future.” (Ilibagiza, 2008, p. 145). The therapeutic process can be the means and context to begin the forgiveness process.

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