
Being Forgiven: Toward a Thicker Description of Forgiveness

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The author describes the less frequently examined process of seeking forgiveness from others. Examples from the seminary classroom are used to describe the process. The examination of the seeking forgiveness process provides insight into the whole construct of forgiveness.

The increased academic and clinical interest in the topic of forgiveness has included a determined effort to define what forgiveness is and what it is not. Researchers have been careful to differentiate forgiveness from pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, or denying.¹ A number of authors have taken pains to differentiate forgiveness and reconciliation, noting that forgiveness may or may not lead to reconciliation.² The theoretical conceptualizations on forgiveness have tended to focus on one direction, the act of forgiving, when, in theory and practice, there are two directions of forgiveness—*granting* forgiveness and *seeking* or *accepting* forgiveness.³ These two directions of forgiveness are related to the two perspectives from which the forgiveness enterprise is engaged. From the perspective of the victim or forgiver the primary activity is that of granting forgiveness. From the perspective of the perpetrator or transgressor the primary activity is that of seeking or accepting forgiveness. In the literature on forgiveness the almost exclusive perspective that is examined is that of granting forgiveness. The task of seeking forgiveness is virtually ignored in the discussions about forgiveness.

The unifocal emphasis on forgiving rather than seeking forgiveness is not restricted to the literature on forgiveness. I also found this preference reflected in the classroom. Last year I taught a course on “Forgiveness and Reconciliation.” In the class students examined the many dimensions of

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¹Richard D. Enright and C.T. Coyle, “Researching the Process Model of Forgiveness within Psychological Interventions,” in E. L. Worthington, Jr., (Ed.), *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological Research and Theological Perspectives* (Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 1998), pp. 139-161.

²See Martha Alken, *The Healing Power of Forgiving* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997); Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz, *The Art of Forgiveness: Theological Reflections on Healing and Reconciliation* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publications, 1997); Robert J. Schreier, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1997); Lewis B. Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1996).

³Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, Carl E. Thoresen (Eds.), *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2000). It should be noted that while McCullough and his associates view forgiving and being forgiven as two processes operating in two different directions, Enright and his associates view forgiving and being forgiven as parallel processes that in their structure mirror one another.

forgiveness including the dual directionality of forgiveness. In addition to reading assignments on forgiveness students were also asked to choose a situation in their lives where they were in need of forgiving or being forgiven and to discuss this situation in small groups in class. The final assignment was for them to write a paper that described their definition of forgiveness in light of the readings, class discussion, and personal work on their forgiveness situation. In a class of twenty students only two chose a personal situation in which they were in need of being forgiven. The other eighteen reflected on a situation in which they were in need of forgiving. In the literature, as well as in my class, I was struck by the lack of interest in the issue of seeking forgiveness. This article, then, is an attempt to more fully investigate the seeking forgiveness dimension of forgiveness, as well as an exploration into the difficulties associated with the process of seeking to be forgiven. Along the way I hope to provide material that helps us acquire a more full understanding of forgiveness in its totality.

The Process of Seeking Forgiveness

The process of seeking forgiveness has been described in a number of different ways. It has been variously referred to as "seeking forgiveness,"⁴ "receiving forgiveness,"⁵ "feeling forgiven,"⁶ and "expressing repentance."⁷ When each of these different ways of identifying the process that perpetrators of injury undergo is presented as the all-encompassing being forgiven process it obfuscates our understanding of the seeking forgiveness process. Each of these definitions describes a particular set of dynamics and a distinct place where the injurer may be located in the process. Those who are "seeking forgiveness" do not yet have a sense that they have been forgiven. They are *seeking* forgiveness that has not yet been offered. Moreover, the person seeking forgiveness is an active agent in the process. He or she has embarked on a journey to acquire something for which there is a felt need. "*Receiving* forgiveness" implies that the recipient of forgiveness is playing a more passive role in achieving forgiveness, or that the seeking phase is over and a receiving phase has begun. In either case, the injurer is in the position of being given something for which he or she is the beneficiary. The injurer may or may not have sought what is to be given. The injurer's task is to receive (or not receive) the forgiveness that is being offered. "*Feeling* forgiven" is yet another manifestation of the being forgiven construct. Feeling forgiven is an exclusively intrapersonal phenomenon. Whereas seeking and receiving forgiveness may have interpersonal features, feeling forgiven is an internal state that the injurer

⁴Julie Juola Exline and Roy F. Baumeister, "Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance: Benefits and Barriers," in McCullough, *et al.*, *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2000), pp. 133-155.

⁵Elizabeth A. Gassin, "Receiving Forgiveness as Moral Education: A Theoretical Analysis and Initial Empirical Investigation," *Journal of Moral Education*, 1998, Vol. 27, pp. 71-87.

⁶Katheryn Rhoads Meek, Jeanne S. Albright and Mark R. McMinn, "Religious Orientation, Guilt, Confession, and Forgiveness," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 1995, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 190-197; and Lydia R. Temoshok and Prabha S. Chandra, "The Meaning of Forgiveness in a Specific Situational and Cultural Context: Persons Living with HIV/AIDS in India," in McCullough, *et al.*, *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2000), pp. 41-64.

⁷Julie Juola Exline and Roy F. Baumeister, "Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance: Benefits and Barriers," in McCullough, *et al.*, *Forgiveness*, pp. 133-155.

comes to know for him or herself. The notion of feeling forgiven seems to belong at the end of the being forgiven process. An injurer may first seek forgiveness, then perhaps receive forgiveness, and finally feel forgiveness. While feeling forgiveness may be linked in a process to receiving forgiveness, these two features of being forgiven could stand distinctly apart from one another. Even after forgiveness has been bestowed upon an injurer, the injurer may have some difficulty in feeling forgiven. Guilt, fear, self-loathing, unworthiness may all be emotions that block the injurer from feeling the forgiveness offered either by the victim or a transcendent mediator of forgiveness. "*Expressing repentance*" is the phrase that is sometimes used to describe the counterpart to forgiving. Used in this way expressing repentance serves both as a defining category as well as an identified feature of the being forgiven process. When the phrase expressing repentance is used to describe the being forgiven process the suggestion is being made that an act of repentance should be included in the process of being forgiven. Expressing repentance, then, acts as both a descriptive label as well as a prescribed ideal.

Clearly, then, there is a different set of complex and distinct dynamics occurring within each of these ways of talking about the being forgiven dimension of forgiveness. Careful attention must be paid to the particular dimension of the forgiveness construct that the researcher or clinician is working with in order to more accurately understand and attend to what is being investigated or treated.

As a preliminary summary of the discussion thus far, let us say that under the broad construct of forgiveness there are two sub-constructs related to the directionality of forgiveness. Those two sub-constructs are forgiving and being forgiven. Under the sub-construct of being forgiven there are a variety of features and dimensions that give substance to its process. Some of them we have identified as seeking forgiveness, receiving forgiveness, feeling forgiveness and expressing repentance. Now let us look further at these and other features of being forgiven in order to more fully understand this sub-construct and discern what stages are suggested for moving through the being forgiven process.

The Being Forgiven Process

There are a number of questions that shape the format of our on-going investigation on being forgiven. Is the process for forgiving the same process as being forgiven? What if the forgiving and seeking forgiveness processes do not mirror one another, then what are the similarities and differences between the two processes? Is forgiving an intrapersonal process while being forgiven is an interpersonal process, or can both be either intrapersonal or interpersonal? Are there qualitative differences to the two processes? For example, is it more difficult to forgive or to seek forgiveness? Answering these questions will assist in our more comprehensive understanding of the seeking forgiveness process.

Robert Enright of the Forgiveness Institute describes a four-stage process for forgiveness:

- 1) *Uncovering Phase*—in which the person injured examines and becomes aware of the possible cognitive, psychological and spiritual impact of the injury.
- 2) *Decision Phase*—in which the injured party has a change of heart and is willing to commit to forgiving the offender.

- 3) *Work Phase*—Accepting and bearing the pain of the injury as well as reframing one's perspective on the offender so as to have greater empathy and compassion for the offender.
- 4) *Outcome/Deepening Phase*—in which the injured person finds deeper meaning for self and others in the suffering associated with the injury; realizes that one is not alone; and awareness of decreased negative feelings and of internal emotional release.

Enright suggests there is a parallelism between the forgiving process and the receiving forgiveness process. That is, to receive forgiveness one engages in a four stage process of uncovering (thoughts, feelings, and spiritual elements associated with having injured someone); decision (to commit to seek being forgiven); work (accept and bear responsibility for the pain inflicted and to open up to the pain felt by the victim); and outcome/deepening (finding renewed meaning for self and others, realizing one is not alone, and being aware of decreased negative effects and of increased internal emotional release).

As a broad and general description of the forgiveness process, Enright's four-stage process might well equally apply to forgiving and seeking forgiveness. Applied to the seeking forgiveness process the offender does need to uncover the feelings, thoughts and spiritual features of injuring another. The offender should also come to a decision to seek forgiveness. The offender's work will include a number of tasks related to the seeking forgiveness enterprise. The outcome/deepening phase would include coming to a deeper understanding of the meaning for self and victim of the offense, experience less alienation, find a more positive sense about one's self and feeling of release. Where the differences exist is in the particular features associated with each of the phases. In the first phase, the offender would more than likely begin to uncover feelings of guilt and shame for the offense. The psychological defenses of the offender would begin to dissolve allowing the offender to acknowledge that indeed an injury had occurred that had harmed the victim. In the second phase, the offender would come to a decision to seek forgiveness. Rather than live in denial and avoidance, the offender would commit to the forgiveness process. The third phase is where the difference in seeking forgiveness might most significantly appear. Part of the work might include an apology and a confession made to self, the person offended, or to a transcendent other to whom the offender feels a moral duty. The offender in the work phase would also engage in a grieving process for the pain caused to the victim, empathically taking on the pain and suffering the injured person must have felt. Part of the work might also include the task of making amends. Making amends might include trying to right the wrong that was done. It might also include adopting new behavior so as to eliminate the possibility of the offense occurring again.

It is this third phase of the seeking forgiveness process that I would identify as expressing repentance. Expressing repentance includes apologizing, confession, taking on the pain of the other, making amends, and changed behavior. In the outcome/deepening phase the offender would continue to reflect on the situation associated with the offense and the seeking forgiveness enterprise. The offender would attempt to seek the deeper meanings that lay beneath the actions of imposing the initial hurt and seeking forgiveness. Here is where the spiritual dimensions of the seeking forgiveness process might be most prevalent. If spirituality is defined as a rela-

tionship with ultimate sources of power and meaning, then the outcome/deepening phase of the seeking forgiveness would include an ongoing effort to draw upon spiritual resources to provide deeper meaning and to empower the offender to sustain the transformation process begun in seeking forgiveness. The outcome/deepening phase should not be viewed as a terminal end point. Rather, the outcome/deepening phase for the offender is a continuing process of further transformation and deepening awareness associated with being forgiven. As a result, the offender may come to newer understandings about self in relationship to others and new directions for the purpose and meaning of one's life.

The person who seeks forgiveness must be willing to allow the injured person to decide in his or her own time when to forgive. The offender must be willing to wait patiently for the gift of forgiveness to be given. Consequently, the offender is described as one who is in a position of receiving (the gift of) forgiveness. Such a description of forgiveness, however, places the person who genuinely seeks to be forgiven in a passive and constricted position. There are actions that the person who seeks to be forgiven can and must take other than imposing an undeserved or forced forgiveness on the part of the victim. The offender needs to acknowledge the wrong that has been committed. In addition, the offender needs to demonstrate awareness of the pain and suffering that has occurred as a result of the wrongdoing. The admission of wrongdoing and awareness of the extent of the negative impact constitute a confession on the part of the offender. The offender should also take action to offer to make amends. While there may be nothing that the offender can do to make up for the injury the offer to make amends reflects a desire on the part of the offender to restore, if possible, that which has been denied or taken away from the person injured. Finally, the offender must demonstrate that his or her behavior has changed. In order for forgiveness of the offender to not be considered condoning or accepting past behavior there has to be some transformation on the part of the offender. Otherwise, the offender is sending the message that the behavior was acceptable and does not need to be altered. Implied in that message is that the injured party can expect the injury to occur again.

While the offender may take initiative in seeking forgiveness, it should be left up to the injured party to decide if and when any overtures on the part of the offender should be responded to. It is the injured person who determines if forgiveness will be given. It is the injured person who determines when and at what speed the forgiveness process proceeds. From the perspective of morality the offender has forfeited any right to demand or expect anything from the injured person.

While the person who is attempting to forgive another is engaged in a monumental work of cognitive re-framing, emotional vulnerability, and spiritual formation the task of seeking forgiveness is a more difficult one. Seeking forgiveness includes both seeking forgiveness from the other as well as self-forgiveness. In addition, there is no guarantee that as the offender initiates the seeking forgiveness process that there will be a granting of forgiveness by the person hurt. Moreover, the offender is restricted in his or her attempts at seeking forgiveness. If approaching the victim will produce further injury then the offender must desist in seeking forgiveness. Because the offender has to wait on the victim to decide if forgiveness will be granted, the offender has to live with the possibility that he or she

may never receive forgiveness from the person offended. If there is no gift of forgiveness, then the offender must attempt to achieve self-forgiveness and self-forgiveness is more difficult than forgiving or receiving forgiveness:

Whereas forgiving and receiving forgiveness from others have concrete referents, self-forgiveness does not. The idea of welcoming oneself into the human community, reconciliation with self, and compassion toward self are difficult concepts. The cognitive demands, then, in simply understanding self-forgiveness are more formidable than in other forms. Second, our experience is that most people are harder on themselves than on others. We find that most people can forgive others and even realize that they themselves are forgiven by others, but still they cannot offer forgiveness to self.⁸

Examples of the Process

Let us turn to the two students referred to above to see how their experiences coincide with what has been discussed thus far.

Joyce, a Euro-American woman, had been on a "Cross-cultural quarter" class trip to the Lakota reservation in North Dakota. While there she observed the deplorable conditions on a Native American reservation and learned about the role her fellow citizens and ancestors played in creating the situation. She says:

I have to recognize that my people were those who committed these injustices. My government quietly continues to oppress Native Americans. I am among those who continue to benefit from a government and culture that could only have come into being through stolen land and oppression...My experiences in South Dakota have not allowed me to disregard my complicity in the oppression and poverty I witnessed there.

Filled with shame, guilt, and regret Joyce struggled with how to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation. In class she explored how the unresolved feelings she brought from the reservation could be addressed. Joyce felt especially thwarted in the forgiveness process because she believed that the wronged person should make the first move in the forgiveness/reconciliation process. Joyce continued, "But it is my belief that it is the wronged party who must first say that they desire to be reconciled. I worry that too hasty a move towards reconciliation may serve the oppressor more than the group who was wronged...In addition, perhaps Native Americans do not wish to forgive or be reconciled at this point."

As Joyce reflected in class on the time she spent with her hosts on the reservation she began to discern ways in which the forgiveness/reconciliation process was at work while she was there. At the time she could not see it, but some months later, with the help of her classmates, she was able to discern ways in which forgiveness and reconciliation had taken place:

The interactions between our group and the people we met were often tense and tenuous, for there were so many ways that we might unknowingly cause offense in a culture that we did not understand. Yet, despite this discomfort, there were moments when I felt welcomed and accepted in ways beyond my wildest imaginings.

Her hosts' willingness to accept Joyce into their homes and the lack of anger and resentment with which they treated Joyce, were now viewed by Joyce as indications of her hosts' forgiving initiative toward Joyce. Reflecting upon these revelations Joyce concluded that, "I was given forgiveness

⁸Robert D. Enright, "Counseling Within the Forgiveness Triad: On Forgiving, Receiving Forgiveness, and Self-Forgiveness," *Counseling and Values*, 1996, Vol. 40, p.119.

without words.” Joyce still believes that the wronged person must be given the privilege to initiate forgiveness or not to do so. However, “forgiven people need to look for signs of being forgiven.” Forgiven persons must guard against manufacturing forgiveness where it does not exist, yet when seeking forgiveness they must be open to the subtle signs of forgiveness that may be given. If not, then the possibility for forgiveness and reconciliation to take place may be lost.

Tom, a Euro-American male, had been a missionary worker in the Philippines. While he enjoyed his mission ministry, “as the excitement of my new life dwindled and culture shock began to beat down like the tropical sun, I longed for some relief.” At those times he would retreat to the hut he shared with three Philippine community organizers and listen to CDs on his *Walkman*. Tom kept the possession of his *Walkman* a secret. On one occasion he was listening to a CD when one of his Philippine co-workers came into the hut and noticed that he was listening to a CD. That evening several of his Filipino friends asked to borrow the *Walkman*. For a few weeks this arrangement worked well. When Tom was not listening to his *Walkman* and his friends wanted to listen, Tom gave it to them. One day Tom was walking back to the hut and noticed a fellow worker listening to his *Walkman*. Tom became angry, went over to his friend and ripped the *Walkman* out of the hand in which it was extended. Tom angrily chided his friend for taking the *Walkman* without asking for Tom’s permission. Tom stormed off into the hut, never to allow his *Walkman* to be loaned out again. Tom spent two more weeks at the mission site. Relationships were seriously strained, and Tom hardly spoke to his co-workers. Tom was feeling guilt and embarrassment for his behavior. When he left two weeks later Tom simply left the *Walkman* in the hut. He had such negative associations with the *Walkman* he did not want to carry it back with him to the United States.

Like Joyce, Tom felt thwarted by the fact that processes of forgiveness must be initiated by the victim. Without person-to-person access Tom was no longer in close proximity to his friend so that a more easy initiative toward forgiveness could be accomplished. With genuine remorse and a desire to seek forgiveness, Tom entered into a process of self-forgiveness. As the course progressed Tom began to reflect with his classmates on ways in which he might respectfully initiate forgiveness as a perpetrator. Tom took Enright’s four-stage forgiveness process as it applied to receiving forgiveness and described a process of seeking forgiveness for himself. Tom proceeded through the four stages and identified his leaving the *Walkman* as an initial step in the self-forgiveness process. As he put it: “Leaving it did bring some healing to me. I was finally able to let go of one more bag. Perhaps the bags that Jesus speaks of (*Luke* 10:1-12) are not only the physical bags in which we carry our belongings, but the spiritual bags in which we carry our burdens.”

What these two situations demonstrate is that seeking forgiveness is a more complicated process than can be described by a general theory related to forgiveness stages. Rather, the forgiveness process, especially as it applies to persons seeking forgiveness, is a very complex and individual process. The stages create a framework within which to work. But beyond the framework there needs to be an exploration of the dynamic interaction between the underlying principles of the forgiveness process, the individual ways in which persons seek forgiveness, and the particular contextual sit-

uation in order to fully comprehend the forgiveness construct at a given moment. Both Joyce and Tom sought to be forgiven. However, each had different issues, concerns, and ways of approaching how to journey along the forgiveness path.

Specific Steps in Being Forgiven

For those persons who wish to be forgiven, is there then a process for being forgiven that takes into consideration the various elements presented in this essay thus far? I believe there is. I would like to provide what I perceive to be a more detailed and direction-specific process for the seeking to be forgiven process. It begins with acknowledgement. The person seeking to be forgiven must first acknowledge that as a result of their action and behavior another person has been injured. The acknowledgement includes a number of features. The person who acknowledges that he or she has harmed another accepts full responsibility for the role he or she played in injuring the victim. Honest acknowledgement does not try to dodge responsibility by blaming the victim in any way. Nor does an honest acknowledgement attempt to absolve one's self by pointing to the fact that others were participants in the injury or that circumstances contributed to the perpetrator's actions. Acknowledgement with integrity means that the person who is seeking forgiveness recognizes that what he or she did resulted in harm to another. In short, the perpetrator accepts responsibility for harm done and assumes the concomitant guilt associated with the action taken. Whether that action was to do something or to do nothing. If either action resulted in harm to another, the perpetrator's first step in the seeking forgiveness process is to acknowledge one's responsibility for what occurred. This first acknowledgment is internal. It is an admission; a confession to one's self that a wrong has been done. A later acknowledgement may come when the perpetrator apologizes and expresses repentance to the victim, but the first acknowledgement is characterized by the perpetrator's internal or self-ownership of his or her guilt.

The second step in the seeking forgiveness process is that of making a decision to seek forgiveness. This may seem to be an obvious and perhaps unnecessary step. However, it is crucial in the seeking forgiveness process and merits a step or stage of its own. While a person may acknowledge wrongdoing, it does not necessarily result in seeking forgiveness. The person may be so personally convicted by what she has done that she may believe that there is no forgiveness possible. She believes the proper punishment for the offense committed is to not be forgiven. Others may get stuck in the acknowledgement stage because they fear entering into the being forgiven process. The initial feeling of guilt and remorse feels so overwhelming already that additional emotional processing seems impossible to take on. A decision to seek forgiveness involves a commitment to pursue the restorative elements of the forgiveness process even though the rewards of renewed life call for deeper self-examination and vulnerability. The decision to seek forgiveness reflects both a desire to be forgiven and a determination to follow through in the process.

The third step in an ideal seeking forgiveness process shifts the process from an internal one to an interpersonal one. In the third step the offender makes an apology to the person who has been harmed. The apology should reflect both ownership for the offending behavior and repentance.

Sometimes an apology is made that really isn't an apology. When a person says, "I'm sorry that you felt hurt at what I said," it is *not* an apology. The person who has uttered the offending words is not owning the injury that was inflicted. Rather, they are trying to absolve themselves of guilt for what they said by pointing to the excessive sensitivity of the person to whom they were talking. A similar kind of pseudo apology is the one that sounds like this: "Well, if you say that it bothered you, then I apologize." This kind of apology also does not own the offending behavior. Rather, it calls into question whether or not the injured person should really feel injured or not. Such apologies only increase the original hurt, because they add a critical judgement about the person's sensitivities and sensibilities. The good apology is a straightforward statement of acknowledgement of what the offender did, recognition of the pain that the offending behavior caused and repentance for having offended the victim. It would sound something like this: "Alex, I know that when I shared what you had told me in confidence with Chris that I hurt you. You rightfully felt that I had betrayed you. I shouldn't have done it; it was the wrong thing to do. I am sorry and I apologize." This kind of apology is an apology with integrity. It does not try to blame the other person or ignore their hurt or avoid responsibility for the offense. Such an apology has a greater chance of being accepted and increases the chances that the offender will be forgiven.


Offering an apology, even in the most perfect form, does not guarantee its acceptance. Caution must be exercised at this phase of the process so that greater injury is not inflicted on the victim. If greater trauma will result from contact with the offender then making an apology should be avoided. Nor should an apology demand that the apology be accepted. This, too, is a perpetuation of the original injury. Whenever an offender makes an apology there must be freedom given to the victim to accept or reject the apology. It is the victim who has been hurt and thereby should be given the moral prerogative to determine how and with what speed his or her own healing will occur. If the offended person is not ready to receive an apology, then he should not be forced to do so. If, once the apology is made, the offended person is not ready or willing to accept it, then she should not feel obligated to do so. A preferred way of thinking about the apology dynamic is that of power differential. In the process of hurting or abusing another person the offender has exercised his or her power in the relationship in a destructive way. They have taken their power in the relationship and used it to hurt or injure such that the resulting occasion for forgiveness exists. In order for the forgiveness process to be genuine and one of integrity the offended person must be allowed to recover power. The recovery of that power can include the exercise of freedom and choice in receiving or not receiving the apology of the other person that is offering an apology.

The fourth phase of the seeking forgiveness process is that of receiving forgiveness. Having apologized with integrity the offender may receive words of forgiveness or a gesture of forgiveness (a hug, a nod, an invitation to participate in a ritual of reconciliation) from the offended party. The perpetrator should graciously receive the forgiveness that has been offered; the forgiveness that they have been seeking. If the person who is forgiving has taken the courageous step to express forgiveness then it is the obligation of the offender to receive with thanksgiving the gift of forgive-

ness that has been offered. The receiving of forgiveness is healing for both offender and victim. The offender receives that for which she has been seeking. The victim is aided in her recovery process when forgiving the other facilitates healing and moving beyond the initial hurt and pain.

Is it possible for the person seeking forgiveness to receive forgiveness even though the offended person does not express forgiveness? I think so. There are certain circumstances where receiving forgiveness from the other is not possible. It was noted above that in some situations it is best not to approach the other person because seeking forgiveness from them may only extend the trauma or abuse. In other cases the person who was injured has died. In these situations the person seeking forgiveness must undergo the seeking forgiveness process completely internally. Acknowledgement, seeking forgiveness, apology, confession, and the request for forgiveness are processed inside of the offender.

This internal process of receiving forgiveness, though, should not be used as a dodge to bypass the earlier stages. Forgiveness that is sought beginning at stage four is "cheap" forgiveness. Such forgiveness is unwilling to pay the cost associated with confronting one's self with what one has done to injure another and is not willing to assume the vulnerable position of making an apology with integrity. When the injurer does not receive forgiveness from the other person it is still possible to receive forgiveness internally precisely because the offender has been willing to pass through the prior three stages. It is at that point that the offender can turn to a "transcendent other" who has the power to forgive offenses. The transcendent other takes the place of the person who was injured, but is not available to offer forgiveness. This transcendent other may be a deity from one's faith tradition, such as God or Allah. Or the transcendent other may be an ultimate power or force to which one turns as an ultimate source of power and meaning. In either case the internal process of seeking forgiveness when the injured party is not available to offer forgiveness is completed in its fourth stage in relationship to this transcendent other.

Seeking forgiveness shares a similar stage-like process as forgiving, but within each of the stages there is a different set of tasks and assumptions. In addition each person seeking forgiveness has his or her own particular set of circumstances and experiences that shape the way in which the seeking forgiveness process proceeds. While there is more of a need for the complete process to include an interpersonal component, it is possible to receive forgiveness without being offered forgiveness from the injured person. Finally, a fuller description of the seeking forgiveness process adds to our understanding of the forgiveness construct and assists us in our guidance of persons for whom forgiveness, in either direction, is the focus of their concern. 

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