

## Notes on Diversity and Working Together Across Cultures on Traumatization and Forgiveness: Siblings by Choice

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**Abstract** The article addresses problems of severe collective traumatization by wars and discrimination not only for victims and perpetrators but also for the generations of children, nephews, and grandchildren. Two historical processes are exemplified in biographical experiences, slavery and oppression of African-American families, and the effects of Nazi ideology and World War II on German and Czech population. Aspects of forgiveness and healing are presented and discussed. One model of dissolving collective animosity and denial is explored in the intentional cooperation of caregivers and trainers in pastoral care and counseling from different cultures and religious traditions: siblings in struggle, siblings by choice.

**Keywords** Systemic thinking · Narrative agency · Intercultural realities · Differences in social and historical experiences · Interdependency of all beings · Intercultural dialogue · Traumata · Expelling · Post traumatic stress disorder · Safety · Mature forgiveness · Intercultural care giving

“Who are my mother and my brother?” “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mothers” (Mark 3:33, 35).

### Prologue

In our article we will acknowledge that there are significant barriers to working across cultures. Some of them stem from differences in social and historical experiences, language,

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culture and ethnicity, gender, religion, and experiences in general which shape our ways of being and seeing. But we also wish to make the more important point that there is something transcendent in experience that make it possible for barriers to not have final say. We will talk about our personal and social histories and how they shape our values and practices as Christian pastoral theologians, care providers and counselors/therapists.

The article contains a joint presentation at a congress of intercultural pastoral care and counseling in Seoul, South Korea (November of 2009). First, we will address our international and intercultural work and introduce key concepts of our cooperation which we have developed since 1983 across differences in family roots, contexts of upbringing, cultural and religious education, and life style. Trauma by oppression, discrimination, violence, and dislocation will be addressed in biographical vignettes and dialogical explorations. Concepts and questions of forgiveness and healing are discussed in the context of biblical messages from Isaiah and Matthew.

## **Introduction by Ursula Riedel-Pfäfflin**

### **Siblings in struggle, siblings by choice: systemic intercultural work**

The term sibling, or kindred, is used in our concept metaphorically. It means belonging together, in a human family, in the connectedness of all living beings. True, we are differently situated. We evolve through different cultural, economic, social, political, and personal circumstances. Each living being has a different story in a different context. Yet we are also dependent on one another, the natural environment, and caring relationships to sustain the one world we share. Ideally, we may come to recognize that our diverse yet mutual interdependency weaves a richly textured and common thread of human experience. We are challenged to listen, learn, care for, and help one another in the process of maturing in the one world we share.

The reality we encounter around the globe today is often shaped by the opposite of care. Care givers, pastoral counselors and therapists are challenged by the experience that more and more people struggle with processes and effects of poverty and pandemics, of violence, war and terrorism, of flight, migration and dislocation, of climate changes and natural disasters. The divisions between rich and poor siblings of the earth has not diminished by the so called “progress of civilization.” On the contrary, politicians expect more wars caused by famine in the near future. The struggle between social, cultural, religious, and political siblings has led to massive endangering of human beings and many species in nature. Violence is rampant in all parts of the world.

It is in this context that we address the challenge of trauma in care and counseling, the pain, the anger, the sadness, the losses which are linked with violations of the soul, the body, the mind, the community. We also raise the question of mature forgiveness, a freeing of the heart and the head, new action and the willingness to take responsibility, to turn around, and to dare a new beginning. We raise the question: How is it possible for women, men, and children from different cultural and spiritual backgrounds to come together and struggle against common forms of oppression, and in that process become siblings by choice? How can we create relationships of resistance, safety, holding, and trust and make connections as teachers and practitioners of pastoral care and counseling while we acknowledge and find value in differences? We use three concepts to explore these questions and address the challenges of traumatization, healing and forgiveness: systemic thinking, narrative agency, and intercultural dialogue.

*Systemic thinking* is about connecting the dots or making the connections between and within events and experiences. Systemic thinking is a way of talking about multipersonal and reciprocal influences within certain contexts and making connections between our social location, immediate life situation, and the wider world of which we are part. We will show in the following notes how this connective thinking is relevant in regard to the case of trauma and forgiveness. Systemic thinking is different from causal and linear thinking in that it opens a multitude of perspectives and makes connections instead of following the pattern of “either/or”, “right or wrong” paradigms.

*Narrative agency* is the recognition that we are story makers and story tellers who co-create meaning, make decision and are moral agents who shape and modify the world through on-going activity. Narrative agency becomes a major role in systemic models because if we assume that reality is not out there right or wrong but we co-construct reality by our own views, patterns of perceiving, by our beliefs and projections, then the most adequate way of talking is narration, story, and not the once and for all truth sentence. Narration expresses the contextual truth of our views and experiences, and narrative agency is the unique possibility of each person to express, share and communicate their reality within the larger context. “Experience is the fundamental datum of knowledge about reality. Narrative agency assumes that both self and world are woven together” (Smith and Riedel-Pfaefflin 2004, p. 11).

Awareness of intercultural realities becomes a key competency in our time. It encompasses awareness of different experiences around the world, ethnicity and class, gender and religious differences, diversity in life style and construction of family systems, work and leisure.

*Intercultural dialogue* means that we live amidst diversity or difference and within many overlapping layers of meaning that evolve over time. Therefore we must find ways to hear and listen, talk and work together as we share our world and its resources. “Intercultural dialogue” may be defined as “a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organizations with different histories, cultural backgrounds or world views”. Among its aims are:

- To develop a deeper understanding of divers perspectives and practices;
  - To increase participation and the freedom and ability to make choices;
  - To foster equality; and
  - To enhance creative processes.
- We will see what this may mean for Christian counselors and trainers.

## **Introduction by Archie Smith: forgiveness and social location—biographical roots**

*Forgiveness* holds relevance for human affairs around the world. It shows itself in different ways in different cultures. It is a theme central to the work of pastoral care. Forgiveness is connected to experiences of social location: An African proverb says “I am because we are. We are, therefore, I am.” Personal existence is social existence and social existence is historical existence. These are always interrelated whether or not we recognize them.

First, a word about my origins and social world. My parents were born in the closed and segregated society of the Southern United States of America and in the early part of the last century. In that society, time and place, equal contact between black and white people was prohibited. Black people worked for white people and were considered inferior to them in every way. My parents told story after story of how blacks were murdered even for the

slighted perceived offence. My father made the decision to leave the United States and go to Russia because he believe that Russian communism would be a better alternative to American democracy. For him, American democracy would never treat black people equally. This idea proved to be true in his life time. For example, he worked 40 years for the city as a maintenance worker. He never missed a day's work because of illness. He drove himself to work he was never allowed to drive the maintenance trucks. His job status never changed. Forty years at the same job level. Should he have been bitter?

As a younger man he was determined to leave America behind. He worked his way to Seattle Washington, in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. His plan was to work there for a while. When he made enough money he would continue his journey up to Alaska and then across the Bering Strait to Russia. That was his plan. When he got to Seattle, his auntie, with whom he lived had other ideas. She took a picture of him and sent it back to Mississippi, the southern closed society from which my father escaped. My maternal grandmother received the picture and letter and circulated it among her daughters. She asked, which one wanted to write to this young man who needed to settle down. My mother and father began a correspondence. The end result was that they decided to get married. My father traveled back to Mississippi and arrived on their pre-arranged wedding day. So, the first time my parents actually saw each other in the flesh was on their wedding day. My father and his bride, my mother returned to Seattle Washington in the Pacific Northwest. There they encountered threats and harassment in the neighborhood in which they lived. My father was frightened because he believed that he and his new family could be harmed by whites and nothing would be done about it. He moved to what is now called the Central area of the city. He paid cash for his new home. He did not want to be obligated to a white owned bank. Our neighbors were middle- and working-class white, Jewish, Chinese, Japanese, black, Mexican, Pilipino. The kindergartens, grade schools and high schools we attended reflected this racial mixture. I grew-up believing that all neighborhoods were like this period. It was also typical for people to fall in and out of love, in relationships that crossed racial lines. Arguments and fighting, making up and forgiving were often across racial lines. In high school there were serious dating experiences across racial lines and a few marriages. We knew that the adult world did not approve, but sometimes that disapproval was what drove young people together. It was not until much later that I began to see that my early experiences with racial integration informed a desire to be interdisciplinary, that is, to think across categories and disciplines. The one place that mirrored the segregation of the wider society was the church. I attended the Black Baptist church. My friends attended the Japanese Baptist church, or the Chinese Baptist church or the White Episcopal church or the Jewish synagogue, others attended the Pentecostal church or the Church of God in Christ. Those religious, sacred borders never seemed to be questioned. One lesson that church left was that Jesus had died for our sin, that in Christ we were forgiven; that we must forgive others, as the Lord's prayer instructs. But what did that really mean? Whatever it meant, we had Monday through Saturday to figure it out. On Monday we would all be back in our integrated school setting. We knew that in sports we had to work together as a team if we were going to win the game, and we usually did. We usually came in first or second place when competing in sports. Our high school was often referred to as "Little American" because it reflected racial and cultural diversity in the decades of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. In those years we were aware that there was a World War and that Japan, the United States and Germany were at war. We were aware of prejudice against Japanese-Americans. We were aware of Hitler's presence in the world, We heard tales of Nazi Germany from Jewish classmates and knew what was happening

to Jews in Europe. Black and Native Americans added our own stories of enslavement, life on reservations and continued race discrimination in American society. If early life experiences in society prepare one for later life's work, then what were the messages we were learning?

The Message: What is the message from this set of experiences? On the one hand, we were learning that race hatred and discrimination was morally and spiritually wrong. It damages the personality and it destroys community. On the other hand, we were internalizing the idea that Hitler and the Nazi party represented and spoke for all Germans. And, all Germans were enemies to be feared and disliked. But what about Native and Black Americans, they too were considered dangerous, undesirable and disliked by the dominant population. Common ground can be discovered and we can become siblings by choice.

Questions arise: What questions arise that pastoral theologians, care providers and counselors might think about? What does forgiveness mean in the face of extreme prejudice? If it is the case that some people are more powerful than others, are to be feared, disliked or destroyed, then who offers forgiveness? Are the targets of prejudice expected to grin-and-bear it; gloss-over and forget about what is happening; turn the other cheek and look the other way; pretend that what is happening is not? Is forgiveness a form of denial?

What does forgiveness mean to you? Does what happened in the past matter? Is forgiveness conditional? Is it a demand, a requirement, something that is expected or is it something that we do only when we feel comfortable? Who forgives whom and when?

Some challenging imperatives from our Judeo-Christian traditions: There is an imperative "to forgive" in the Christian faith. We are to forgive others. And we are to ask God to forgive our sin as we have forgiven the sin of others. This imperative to forgive is potentially destructive and dangerous—when the understanding of forgiveness is to give unconditional pardon, to forget, to repress, to overlook an injury, to condone, or to excuse the perpetrator from responsibility, then forgiveness is shallow, premature, and potentially harmful to the one forgiving.

### **Collective trauma: more-generational aspects (Ursula Riedel-Pfäfflin)**

When Archie Smith lectured in one of my classes in Dresden, we were talking about the reality of segregation and discrimination experienced by Archie's parents' generation. Some of my students could not believe the level of hatred and violence that African-American women, men and children faced on a daily basis in the later-half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The severe trauma of being abducted, sold and dislocated from their native lands in the millions, was followed by the severe traumatization of slavery, segregated living conditions, separation of family members, especially separation of mothers, fathers and children, and inequality in all living conditions. The effects of these centuries-long traumatizations are still felt in contemporary America—especially in the health care and justice systems.

My students have the clarity of mind in which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned the threats of ongoing violence and injustice among human beings and people for the future of the world. In one of his speeches he said:

Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction....The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation. (Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963, p. 45)

## Social location, Nazi ideology, and trauma in my story

Even though I come from a completely different historical background than Archie did, my life story contains violence, mistreatment of persons and severe trauma, even before the moment of my birth. Yet, I was born into this traumatic situation that was created by my own forebearers, whereas Archie's family experienced discrimination that was created by others.

### Some historical notes

The region where I was born is now called the Czech Republic. It is situated between Germany, Austria, Poland and Slovakia. For centuries, diverse Slavic and Germanic tribes lived and worked together in the area. It was an area of commerce and production of glass and textiles, called Bohemia. During the time of the Austrian Emperors, it belonged to the Hungarian-Austrian Empire. Only with the rise of nationalist ideas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the different regions wanted political autonomy, and asserted the claim that one nation would be unified with one language, one culture and one religious confession. The ideal of "purity" was developed which later became the fundamental elements of Nazi ideology; which incorporated elements of exclusion and racism.

After World War I the Austrian Empire perished, and the Czech Republic was proclaimed. Now, the German population of Bohemia who were dominant before, became dependent on the Czech minority. Hitler and the National Socialists used this antagonism when they came to power in 1933, and claimed that part of the Czech Republic for Germany—as the main population consisted of German speaking people.

When I was born in 1943, Hitler and Nazi Germany had annexed this part of the Czechoslovakian Republic by treachery with the consent of the Allies and established a regime of terror and exploitation of the Czech people, Jews, Communists and other minorities such as the Sinti and the Roma. One historical event is of particular note: in May of 1942 Czech Resistance fighters killed a high ranking SS official in Prague; the Nazi commander Reinhard Heydrich. In the days that followed, SS troops traced the attackers to a village called Lidice. This village was the home to many peoples of various backgrounds and cultural diversity for centuries. The SS forced Czech police to help them round-up 172 adult males (above the age of 15), and then shot them. One hundred ninety-five women were taken to Ravensbrück concentration camp. Seven pregnant women were taken to Prague. After given birth, the infants were separated from their mothers. The mothers were then sent to Ravensbrück. The village of Lidice was burnt to the ground and completely destroyed; no sign of the village remained. Later, it was determined that none of the resistance fighters had any connection to Lidice.

Ninety-five children were also taken and were separated based upon racial criteria; 12 were destined to be "Germanized." Other children were brought to camp and were gassed to death. In 1950, one of the child survivors, a female was found in a camp for refugees. After years of odyssey through psychiatric clinics in communist Czechoslovakia, after the fall of communism, she was finally acknowledged as a child of Lidice and received a compensation. These dehumanizing humiliating and devastating atrocities happened one year before my birth. It reflects a climate of coldness, arrogance, anxiety and a orientation toward death.

During the same time, in 1942, my father's son from his first marriage, was sent as a soldier to the Caucasus region. He was eighteen and convinced that Nazi ideas were right and Germany had a right to reign over Russia. The special unit climbed the mountains and

my brother was shot the very first day, and bled to death. Nobody in my family talked to me about this in detail. It was only 2 years ago that I met a friend and comrad of my brother who is now 82 years old, and who had seen his comrades killed.

We have met several times, and he has told me about the terrible experiences as a young soldier where he also had to kill men and women. Even today, some of the atrocities are not completely revealed, and some of his officers are still hiding and have not taken responsibility for their actions. It was hard to listen to his experiences of violence. Yet, his story revealed that it is not only the victims of violence that suffer the effects of trauma, but also those who were the perpetrators. This old man regrets and repents of his participation in war, and the German decision to begin war—yet his experiences torture him every day and night, he has lost his faith in God, and is distraught as he faces his own mortality.

I give this narrative and historical sketch because I believe that personal history is intertwined with the histories of our societies. We cannot understand ourselves or our problems apart from the society in which we live or separate from the social contexts in which we are embedded. We come to understand people in the context of their own evolving experiences. Hence, pastoral care and counseling interventions are fashioned in response to people in context. That is why this background is given.

#### How Germans experienced trauma: the untold story

It was one year later, in 1943, that I was born. My father was an engineer and produced glass. His mother came from an old Italian family. My mother's parents came from a farm estate in Northern Germany. I was meant to be a replacement for the only son of my father from his first marriage—the one who was killed in combat with Russian soldiers. My father was devastated. But even in 1945, he did not realize or believe that the war was lost. The ideology of strength, control and honor turned into total loss of everything, family, home, land, possessions, belief system, and rights.

At the end of World War II, the former victims took over and decided together with the Allied Forces, British, French, US and Russia, to expel all Germans from Northern Bohemia. Within months, four to five millions civilians had to leave their homes without any belongings. Often they received the same treatment of humiliation, slave work, or death which they had done to Czech and Russian people. Men, women, and children were expelled across the border, and had to walk for days, sometimes weeks before they found a place to stay. They were spread across the rest of Germany, the eastern and the western occupation zones which were controlled by Russian, British, French and U.S troops.

It was in this time that my family was split, and dislocated. As an owner of a big company and Nazi follower, my father was imprisoned and had to do hard work under worst circumstances for 5 years. My mother fled with the two girls, my sister and I at age two and four. The rest of the family was dispersed and still today lives in different parts of Europe and the USA. I know that for many Germans still today, the trauma of this experience is unforgotten and I believe, for many also unforgiven. Even though they acknowledge the German perpetrations, they feel that there has not been enough acknowledgement of the atrocities against millions of Germans following the war. The so called “Sudetendeutschen” refugees were young when the war ended, and were not the ones responsible for the atrocities and discrimination done by their parents and grand-parents. But they had already learned and experienced the principles of stern education and ideas of honor spread in the Reich.

## The need to talk: the trauma of not talking and the cost of denial

Their parents and grandparents did not talk sufficiently after the war, and the trauma of the flight. They did not give their children sufficient information about the German responsibilities and their own stories. There was much denial and much activity of survival after the war. This generation of youngsters and the children did not receive any empathy from the adults. The adults were full of shame, full of anxiety, full of insecurity. The children could not be cared for adequately, nor was there time and space to share deep feelings.

In addition to the trauma of the situation, the first generation after the war seldom had the experience of responsible acknowledgement of the part and repentance by their parents. They experienced much denial and that also numbed their own feelings and actions. Even psychoanalysts and care givers did not pay enough attention to the effects of denial and trauma by war, and thus participated in the denial. Only in the '80s and '90s therapists and counselors started to pay attention to the psycho-political dimension of their clients problems, and began to do research not only in personal life stories but also stories of family systems, and history of society.

I understand the history of my family as a starting point for my work as a pastoral counselor. As a child, I experienced trauma by dislocation, insecurity, and loss of father and brother. There was denial and not enough communication about the atrocities and trauma experienced. Theology and spirituality, issues of justice and forgiveness became a major theme for my work. Dislocation and loss of a long family tradition was a difficult experience yet I found in it resources for my life and work, especially in understanding the history of a discriminated people.

### Contribution of trauma research

In trauma research, one can see that the denial after World War II also has effects on the third generation after the war: a generation in which many young women and men suffer from psychosomatic problems of no clear origin, from addictions, from problems with work, and unclear feelings of identity. Similar developments were described by psychoanalysts who worked with Holocaust victims and their daughters and sons. Also in families of the victims where survivors did not tell their stories in order to protect their children, these children suffer from symptoms that are hard to explain.

I am telling these historical events and stories here because I am sure that the severe experiences of wars and destruction, of occupation and of separation in North and South, have also caused traumatization in many parts of the world. For example, Korea and various places in Europe and the United States. What does it mean to forgive in a situation where a whole country is involved in unjust behavior? Where that is the case, then evil is accepted as a typical dynamic of everyday life. It becomes 'normal' (Arendt 1963). Where violence is structurally intertwined, and in systemic perspective, responsibility has to be seen as a collective task.

What is necessary in order to work through traumata on all sides—the families especially, the Jewish and Eastern European families, and the Germans themselves—the perpetrators, bystanders and resistance fighters many of whom lost their lives, their loved ones, their homeland too?

In my view, personal encounter and narrating, sharing of one's personal life story and the historical events has proven to be the most effective way to work through pain, anxiety, sadness, and anger, and to pave the way for developing new openings, new trust, and maybe one day even reconciliation and mature forgiveness.

## Concepts of healing

Research in the diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder and healing processes in therapy and counseling were only developed more intensely after World War II. In her book “Trauma and Recovery”, North-American therapist Judith Herman has shown parallels between the denial of trauma by perpetrators and bystanders, and the denial of post traumatic effects on the health of humans in the health care system. Only after World War II, it was acknowledged that symptoms of trauma by catastrophes resemble symptoms of traumatized war participants, and symptoms of girls and boys, women and men as victims of domestic violence and abuse. The diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder was developed, and there are three main categories of symptoms which counselors need to recognize:

- Hyperarousal,
- Intrusion, and
- Constriction.

Herman (1992) states: “Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (p. 33), and she continues: “Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community; they shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis” (p. 51). Because traumatic experiences cause upheaval and damage for the person in their integrity, they are a spiritual challenge and task, and not only a psychological, social, or political problem. And therefore, I have seen a special responsibility for communities of faith to engage in the fate of traumatized girls and boys, women and men, and people.

Another concept of working with trauma was developed by the Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On. His interest was similar to our question. How can people from antagonistic groups or countries come together, and work through traumata? His answer is: by dialogue, by listening to each others life story. Dan Bar-On has interviewed 90 children and grandchildren of Nazi perpetrators, and also Jewish sons and daughters of victims. He has brought together groups of those who are interested in listening to themselves, to life stories of the other, and by reflecting to start new ways of understanding each other and society. He also founded projects in Israel, cooperating with Palestinians, and in other areas of the world (South Africa, Ireland)

I have learned from Dan Bar-On, who died sadly in 2008, that between children of perpetrators and children of victims, there can be acknowledgement of the depth of human guilt and cooperation for new development in the listening to life stories.

To summarize: I have shown how diversity can be a challenge. It has been in the past. When it becomes the basis for societal scapegoating and collective discrimination then everyone is affected, victims and perpetrators. Everyone is involved at some level. Trauma and shame is passed on from one generation to the next. Research has shed some light on the long and short term effects on trauma. Pastoral care providers can benefit from this research. Therefore, it is not without reason that I chose to become part of a helping profession and a minister to the Lutheran Church, the first woman minister in a district in Southern Hamburg, which was one of the most multicultural and marginalized places in the city. The experience of displacement and many moves to different contexts have not only challenged me, they also encouraged me to be open to new experiences, to be curious and

deeply empathetic with other peoples lives, and to engage in the development of theory and praxis which is experiential and unconventional. Like my colleague Archie, I was drawn to theory and praxis of intercultural and international development from the beginning of my work.

### Forgiveness (Archie Smith)

I am reminded of the words of the theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true, or beautiful, or good, makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, could be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our own standpoint; therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness (in Niebuhr 1952, p. 43).

Acceptance of limits and hope, faith & faithfulness, love and forgiveness. All of these virtues are central to the work of pastoral care and counseling. Today, we comment on only one of these, forgiveness.

My colleague, Ursula has talked about trauma. She has shown that it has wide ranging effects over time. It has consequences for individuals and between individuals; within groups and between groups. Trauma, necessarily leads to a conversation about forgiveness. What does it mean for Christians? If it is the case that one cannot live well in a state of trauma indefinitely; and if trauma is not to have final say, then is forgiveness a possibility? Can healing occur without some form of forgiveness?

### Forgiveness and case study

A Hindu psychiatrist and friend who recently came to hear me preach in a Methodist church in London, England told me that “forgiveness” had no meaning in her Hindu culture. When trauma occurs or when people do bad things to people or when bad things happen it is a result of Karma and is accepted as the way things are. I did not pursue what she meant by this at the time. While watching an Oprah Winfrey talk show, Oprah asked her audience to imagine situations that are so horrendous that you cannot forgive. And, in his book, a student tells of his meetings with his Brandeis University Professor. The professor tells of a situation where he did not forgive a friend of something that happened and that he lived to regret not having forgiven him. Now, the professor was dying. He said, first learn to forgive yourself and learn to forgive your friends. Forgiveness is difficult work. It means different things to different ones of us. It can get us into serious arguments. Forgiveness may not always be possible to achieve. And to some, “forgiveness” may not make sense.

On a flight back to San Francisco from a conference in Denver my seat partner and I got into a conversation about forgiveness. He identified himself as a Jewish medical doctor and philosopher. He was born in Vienna in the early 1940s and left for the United States just before the Nazis took control. He commented that the Christian concept of forgiveness made no sense to him. After learning about the death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, it was impossible for him to believe in or pray to a personal God. He appeared a bit agitated as he said this. He threw his hands in a downward direction as if in disgust or to denounce something. He said, “I am not unreligious. I am just a-religious or non-religious.” He

repeated that “forgiveness” did not make philosophical sense to him. He then gave the following statements as an illustration of his thinking.

If 10 years ago a tragic event happened and the perpetrators were aware of their part in it but were not asking or seeking forgiveness, then what is the point of saying, “I forgive you”? If 10 years ago a tragic event happened and the perpetrators were not aware of their part in it and were not asking or seeking forgiveness, then what is the point of saying, “I forgive you”? If 10 years ago a tragic event happened and the perpetrators were asking forgiveness because they were a part of the general history (i.e. German guilt in the Nazi atrocities), but those seeking forgiveness never participated in specific acts of torture and extermination, then what is the point of the victim’s saying, “I forgive you”? How does this help the victim? If 10 years ago a tragic event happened and the perpetrators were asking or seeking forgiveness, but they were not doing anything to correct the behaviors that led to the tragic events in the first place, then they are basically the same people today and would do the same again should similar circumstances materialize. What good does it do for the victims to say, “I forgive you”? If 10 years ago the perpetrator was asking or seeking forgiveness and has been doing things to correct the behaviors that led to the first tragic event, then the perpetrator has already changed and is not the same person today. What is the point of the victim’s saying to the changed perpetrator, “I forgive you,” when the person who is seeking forgiveness today is not the same person who committed the tragedy 10 years earlier?

“You see,”... he said to me, “forgiveness makes no philosophical sense to me.” He could be right if forgiveness were solely a matter of cognition that could be expressed in a set of statements with logic and linear thought processes. His analysis was from the point of view of the victim whose act of forgiveness would release the perpetrator from responsibility and guilt. But it would not address the shame and humiliation of the victim or bring justice. That is why he claimed that forgiveness was a meaningless gesture. What sense does it make for the victim to forgive when perpetrators are not seeking it, lack comprehension of their deeds, or are essentially the same people today and would do the same if the opportunity were to present itself again?

The message is that forgiveness is complex, and it entails many different levels—the emotional, psychological, spiritual, intimate relational, communal, and political. When forgiveness is construed in narrow terms, and one is required to forgive, then forgiveness can be destructive. Forgiveness can be destructive when it traps the victim in a false sense of guilt and shame or helps enshrine the unrepentant perpetrator in self-righteous attitudes and supports the repetition of their harmful behavior. This situation is what my seat partner may have had in mind when he said, “If 10 years ago a tragic event happened and the perpetrators were aware of their part in it but were not asking or seeking forgiveness, then what is the point of saying, “I forgive you”?”

Is this too complicated for pastoral care and counseling; or, how might this complex picture relate to pastoral care and counseling? Isn’t forgiveness basically a matter between two people, counselor and counselee or perpetrator and victim, and a letting go once you feel comfortable doing so? Or is more involved?

The United States: racism, force and forgiveness?

It was the counseling session just after the Fourth of July holiday weekend. My counselee was a black man in his early twenties. He appeared a bit agitated as he entered my office. He sat down and blurted out the phrase, “This was a rough weekend!” “What happened?” I asked. It was Saturday night, and he was returning home from a gig in San Francisco. He was a musician, and his jazz combo had just finished playing for a dance. After he had

gotten off the underground train on his way home, police cars converged on him. One officer forcefully pushed him to the ground and held a cocked pistol to the back of his head, saying, “I know you are the one who did it.” My client asked, “Did what? What are you talking about?” He tried to explain where he had been and that he was heading home from work. He had an underground train ticket to verify his story. A police officer said in reply that anyone could grab an underground train stub for an alibi. He was shoved into the police car and jailed.

A store had been robbed, unknown to my counselee. The storeowner came to the police station and identified my counselee as the one who had robbed his store. My counselee was roughed up. He called a friend and asked him to go to his bank and get out a large sum of money for his bail. The friend did this, and my counselee was released. After examining the film of the robbery taken by the camera in the store, the police concluded that my counselee was not the one who had committed the robbery. My counselee asked for the return of his money. He was told that it was not possible. He went to his attorney, who informed him that the police always make mistakes like that. He would just have to get over it and chalk it up as one of those experiences in life that happens.

This was not the first harsh encounter my counselee had had with the police. This experience of brutal police force is commonplace for young black men. Is forgiveness relevant to this situation? My counselee was falsely accused and forcefully arrested. When he turned to his attorney, a representative (or witness) of the justice system, for help, he was told to “forget about it, overlook the offense, and get on with the rest of your life.” Here, social and political issues of racial injustice were interwoven with traumatic and emotional experience. The victim was made to pay twice (once when he was falsely accused, forced to the ground, and jailed, and again when he posted bail to gain his freedom). His perpetrators were never held accountable. They never apologized. They were not seeking forgiveness. They were not interested in making restitution. They were merely going about their job. What sense does forgiveness make in the context of this experience?

If no one has acknowledged wrong doing, apologized, repented, offered or made restitution, then what sense does forgiveness make? How can past collective violence and institutionalized patterns of racism be forgiven?

The issues that may be dealt with in pastoral care and or therapy will center around previous experiences of abuse. History and the degree of trauma, and demoralization will influence understandings of forgiveness and whether or not one can or ought to forgive. An assessment of social and personal history must be made. Forgiveness or withholding forgiveness will vary and depend on whether or not one is able to resolve mistrust, despair, and demoralization and begin to build a new life. These capacities will depend on the binds, custom and set of social relations in which individuals are embedded, the individuals emotional strength, beliefs and capacity for resiliency. The available therapeutic resources for helping people to negotiate or navigate the issues of forgiveness will vary in different cultural context.

### **Repairers of the breach**

We have worked together for more than 25 years. Our backgrounds and experiences are very different. During the World War II, our countries were enemies. The experiences of men and women of different cultural traditions are diverse, often suffering from wounds. When we develop workshops and presentations, we have to take much time to listen carefully. Even after 26 years, there are many stories untold, many questions left. Yet we continue to find ways to raise questions together.

We believe that our work finds some resonance with the ancient text of Isaiah 58:

“If you remove the yoke from among you..  
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
Your sons and daughters shall raise up  
the foundations of many generations;  
You shall be called the repairer of the breach.”

The promise is conditional, “If,” “then.” Dare we be known as “repairer of the breach?” If so, then we need each other to do this work. No one can do it alone and develop the wisdom and resources required to repair the breaches in our world of many cultures. If it is the case that we are relational selves tied in a common garment of destiny, then we must co-operate in order to deepen our understanding of care in the cultural contexts where we are embedded and extend resources. We need one another to find the strength to remove entrenched yokes of oppression and recognize subtle forms of injury, express anger appropriately, seek relevant information and co-construct strategies that are beneficial. Even then, we must remain alert to new forms of oppression. If mature forgiveness (the unity of love, power and justice) is our aim then we need one another to co-create responsible forms of power where people from different cultural, social, and religious backgrounds are embedded and held accountable to each other. There justice must be connected with compassion. In this view the therapeutic work of trauma will acknowledge subtle and obvious forms of violations, acceptance of one’s responsibility and include the work of repentance and restitution. We are challenged to struggle together as siblings in repairing complex breaches of trauma. We are further challenged to learn anew how to rely on the grace of God when we co-operate in the work of forgiveness.

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