

EVOLUTIONARY FORGIVENESS

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Sunflowers and autumn and the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, which begins at sunset tonight...

Yom Kippur ends what are called 'The Days of Awe' which began nine days ago with Rosh Hashanah the New Year. Yom Kippur is a day of fasting and prayer. The story recounts that the Lord takes down three volumes of the "Book of Life". Two of them are thin. In one are written the names of those who have been perfectly good in the year that has passed. These few are rewarded with happiness and contentment. In the other are written the names of those who have been perfectly evil in the year that has passed. They are rewarded with great pain and sorrow. The third Book of Life is huge containing the names of those who have been good and evil...which of course is most of us, I dare say, all of us. The members of the community are asked to face themselves in the light of God's presence, to acknowledge their errors, to repent of them, and to make every effort to right the wrongs. It is a solemn time of self reflection.

Sunflowers are large strong bursts of life that move toward the sun. They move their faces toward the sun and they are full of beauty and nourishment.

Autumn with its brilliance...its golden mums and its flaming oaks...its bobbing sunflowers ...even as we know that winter is nigh...autumn lends itself to both a celebration of the harvest and a thoughtfulness of the ways we have acted that have not brought nourishment to life. The Days of Awe and the autumn of the year can invite even those of us who are not Jewish to face fully our imperfections, our limits, our wrong doings, confess them, ask for forgiveness, be open to forgiving ourselves and thereby cleanse our lives: a rich and awesome and sobering and poignant time of the year. Like the sunflower we can turn our faces toward the light of forgiveness.

We humans do great harm to one another.

We humans are capable of wanting revenge and exacting it.

We humans are also capable of great love that requires the willingness to forgive and the willingness to ask others for forgiveness.

It turns out that we are biologically wired for both revenge and forgiveness. So writes Michael McCullough in an absorbing book called "Beyond Revenge: the Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct". In much of the world it is commonly thought that the desire to exact revenge when we are wronged is somewhat inhuman, that it arises out of the limbic brain and needs to be fought against...an illness almost. (Psychologist Karen Horney even named it an illness.) But, science has taught us that, in truth, revenge has been an adaptive survival skill in much of human evolution. There are many reasons through the

evolutionary history of homo-sapiens where seeking revenge for wrongs enabled people to survive and reproduce. Whatever we have come to think about the instinct to get revenge...there is no doubt that it is in the repertoire of each and every one of us...and that from a survival perspective it has been helpful. Yet, it turns out that this instinct was mostly operative when one group wanted to protect itself from another group. It turns out that revenge was used most often when humans understood little about how the world works and viewed it as an unsafe unknown with little predictability. Survival of one's kith and kin required being superior over another smaller group. Revenge for wrongs was an adaptive skill.

It turns out that forgiveness is a survival adaptation too. Evidence of our ability to forgive and reconcile...to forgive and be forgiven, has a long history in human evolution as well. Forgiveness is biologically present in us like revenge is. (There is even research about the forgiveness instinct in primates.) Way, way back people needed to be able to forgive in order to keep their own small groups and family intact.

In our evolutionary history as homo-sapiens, revenge has kept us safe from outside groups and forgiveness has evolved to make it possible to stay within our own small groups. And, by the way, all of the world religions have variously called for revenge and forgiveness in their scriptures...and in their history. I remember well wondering as a kid, "well which is it, "an eye for an eye..." or "turn the other cheek"? The truth is religions have adapted for their survival over time as well: sometimes calling its adherents to revenge and sometimes promoting forgiveness depending on the need to protect itself or grow itself or other cultural realities of the time. Religions are living, evolutionary systems too.

But now, at this moment in time, as we have evolved, we are aware that the world is one group, one clan, one family. Science has taught us of its essential connection. Knowledge and technology has taught us much about how the world works. Now it seems revenge is usually not adaptive to our evolution. Now we see that cooperation will be key to our survival, and that forgiveness will be more and more required of us to stay together as a world. Knowing the whole world as our kith and kin makes bringing the forgiveness instinct more and more the adaptive response.

Seeing life in this way, asking for forgiveness and granting forgiveness are not only private, spiritual practices...they will have to be practiced on larger scales in order for our species to survive. Because we can do great harm to one another and because the revenge instinct still lives in us, and because we are learning that there is no "other, forgiveness is a biological, evolutionary imperative for the human species.

Examples abound of public efforts of wrong doing being transformed into forgiveness: The Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa, the Pope's apology for Christian anti-Semitism, the truth process in Rwanda, our President's recent apology to Native Americans...these are all examples of the public dimensions of forgiveness. For our world to be able to move into a mode of mutual problem solving, we will have to forgive so very, very much about the past. To be sure problems of long standing like the conflict in the Middle East and racism in our own country have, as part of their intractability the need for some to ask for forgiveness and others to grant it.

This poem says it better:

The world is wept.
Blood and pain seep into our listening; into our wounded souls.
The sound of your sobbing is my own weeping;
your wet handkerchief my pillow for a past so exhausted it cannot
rest-not yet.
Speak, weep, look, listen for us all.
Oh, people of the silent hidden past,
let your stories scatter seeds into our lonely frightened winds.
Sow more, until the stillness of this land can soften, can dare to
hope and smile and sing;
Until the grass can dance unshackled, until our lives can know
your sorrows
And be healed

Anon

Simon Wiesenthal wrote a book in the 1960s called “The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness”. In the book Wiesenthal tells of his life as a young man, an Austrian Jew imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during WWII. He is part of a work detail taken from the camp to do clean up in a makeshift field hospital. As they are march, between the two, they come across a cemetery for German soldiers. On each grave is a sunflower. Wiesenthal writes: “I envied the dead soldiers. Each had a sunflower to connect him with the living world, and butterflies to visit his grave. For me there would be no sunflower. I would be buried in a mass grave, where corpses would be piled on top of me. No sunflower would ever bring light into my darkness, and no butterflies would dance above my dreadful tomb.”

One day while at the field hospital a nurse orders Wiesenthal to follow her to the bedside of a 24 year old dying SS soldier named Karl Seidt. The Nazi soldier is wrapped in bandages covering his entire face with holes for his eyes, nose and mouth. He has asked the nurse to “bring him a Jew”. He wants to make a dying confession and he wants to make it to a Jew. For several hours Wiesenthal who lost 89 relatives in the camps, sits and listens to accounts of all of the heinous things that Seidt participated in. Things like forcing hundreds of people into a house where gasoline cans had been placed in the attic and igniting the house, watching a young family jump to their death.

For several hours Wiesenthal listens to this confession of horror. Karl asks Simon to hold his hand... which he did. Wiesenthal never speaks. He brushes away flies and he gives the dying man water...he listens. He in no way doubts the sincerity of Karl Seidt.

Listen to the words of the Nazi soldier:

“I am here with my guilt. In the last hours of my life you are here with me. I do not know who you are, I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough. I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. I know that what I am asking is too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace. “

With that, Simon Wiesenthal left the room in silence. Karl Seidt died that night and left his possessions to Simon, but Simon refused them.

Even though I agree with CS Lewis that when we want to work on being forgiving, “perhaps we should start somewhere other than the Gestapo”...Wiesenthal could not make that choice...and his reflections call us all to the great complexity of forgiveness. He lived his life bringing war criminals to justice and he provoked all of us to consider well the great complexity of authentic forgiveness.

The second half of the book asks important people to weigh in on whether or not Wiesenthal should have given his verbal forgiveness. Of course the comments are complex and across the board. Perhaps Jesus would have. Perhaps the Dalai Lama. But forgiveness is a process, not a few words that one can lay upon such horrors. That the SS soldier asked for forgiveness is part of that process, but it is only a beginning.

The ‘Institute for Forgiveness Studies’ in Madison Wisconsin has gleaned in their research four steps in the journey to forgiveness:

-1. Uncovering: expressing the anger, the hatred, the deep sorrow that the wrong has caused. This is so much a part of the journey to forgiveness. The trick is to not take up permanent residence here.

-2. The decision phase: Will I continue in this process toward forgiveness, or will, I stop now, or will I seek revenge? Remember the lovely Native American story: the young boy comes upon the elder who seems to be meditating or praying. The boy asks him what he is doing. The old man replies “I have two wolves inside of me. One is the wolf of rage and anger and revenge. The other is the wolf of compassion and understanding and forgiveness. They are both ravenous. I am trying to decide which one I will feed.”

-3. The work phase: Having made a decision to feed the energy that will bring forgiveness, we begin the work of forgiveness that can take us down many roads that begin to transform the situation in various ways. We begin to realize that not forgiving keeps us a victim forever. We begin to broaden the context of how we view the perpetrator...not to excuse them, but to understand them. Victims of child abuse might learn that their abuser was also abused as a child, for instance.

-4. The deepening phase: This is when the fruits of the journey become evident. We begin to own the compassion that we have. We begin to see our essential unity with others. We find the strength to begin to help others in their recovery from hate. We are no longer victims. Our hearts are softer and more able to embrace the suffering that is human life....and paradoxically the joy as well.

It is the time of turning. We humans can do great harm toward one another. We are learning that revenge against those who harm us is, in truth, harm to ourselves. We are learning that forgiveness is a process that requires a decision and effort. We humans have a great capacity for forgiveness. And it is in forgiveness and reconciliation that is the conduit for love.

And, it is love that will save the world.

The twenty year old daughter of Unitarian Poet Kathleen Bonanno was strangled to death with a telephone cord by an ex-boyfriend while at college. Bonanno has published a book of poetry giving expression to this experience called "Slamming Open the Door". She made a choice to travel the road to forgiveness...to continue to turn her face toward the light. I end with the poem that she read at the end of the trial to her daughter's murderer expressing to him her faith in life ... and perhaps inviting the perpetrator to turn his face toward the sun a bit too:

LIGHT HAS ITS WAY

You can try to strangle light:
use your hands and think
you've found the throat of it,
but you haven't.

You could use a rope or a gamete
or a telephone cord,
but the light , amorphous, implacable,
will make a fool of you in the end.

You could make it your mission
to shut it out forever,
to crouch in the dark,
the blinds pulled tight-

Still, in the morn,

a gleaming little ray will betray you, poking
its optimistic finger
through the corner of the blind,
and then, more light,
clever, nery, impossible,
spilling out form the crevices
warming the shade.

This is the stubborn sun
choosing to rise,
liket it did yesterday,
like it will tomorrow.
You have nothing to do with it.
The sun makes its own history;
light has its way.

Kathleen Bonanno

We are evolving toward being a more forgiving people: Homo Ignocens...Humans the Forgivers. For our individual spirits, our health and wholeness...for the unity of our families this is a worthy journey.

And, for the one family of life, this is the journey to which our very survival calls us.

May we each become more worthy of this awesome gift of life we have been given. May we choose when the sun goes down tonight to enter fully onto the path of forgiveness. It is not easy. But one gleaming little ray at a time, light will have its way.