

## **Further Thoughts about Forgiveness**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

I devoted my November, 2008 article to the theme of forgiveness and described two unforgettable people, Sam and Betty, both Holocaust survivors. When I was a teenager they moved into the apartment below ours in the three-family house in which I lived in Brooklyn. They were the first Holocaust survivors whom I had met on a personal level. I vividly remember that they rarely, if ever, smiled and their eyes always conveyed a profound sadness. Years later as a psychologist I was reminded of their eyes when working with some children who had been abused and traumatized. Except for Betty's brother who lived in our neighborhood, all members of their once large families had been killed, most in the gas chambers of the concentration camps.

At times, especially after I read an article or watched a television show about the Holocaust, I wanted to ask Sam and Betty about their experiences in Nazi Germany. In many ways the Holocaust was incomprehensible to me. Six million Jews exterminated. Millions of others killed. How could it happen? How could so many people be slaughtered? What was it like to be in a concentration camp? Looking back, I realize that my questions were rooted in the natural curiosity of a teenager trying to make sense of particular events, even those that occurred several years earlier but were now part of a terrible history. I had many questions, but it was evident Sam and Betty did not wish to reveal any of the details of the unspeakable horrors that had infested their lives during World War II. However, the numbers the Nazis had tattooed on their arms bore a constant reminder of their imprisonment in the concentration camps.

In my earlier article I reported that for some inexplicable reason on a warm summer evening as we were sitting on the porch, Sam and Betty lifted their wall of silence for a brief moment. They described events of emotional and physical torture that had seared their hearts and souls and created wounds that were beyond healing. As I listened to their stories, I was torn by different emotions. There was a part of me that wanted to hear and learn more, but it was offset by another part that wished they had never broken their silence. Their accounts produced a sense of pain that enveloped all of us. The conversation quickly stopped. They never again spoke in my presence of what they and their families had been subjected to in Nazi Germany. But they could not escape

from a past filled with pain, a pain reflected in eyes that never sparkled and mouths that never smiled.

I think about Sam and Betty whenever the subject of forgiveness has been introduced in my clinical work or during my workshops. Throughout my career I have been asked about and struggled with the question, "What does forgiveness mean?" I have pondered, "How could Sam and Betty forgive?" "What form would forgiveness take?"

### **A Clearer Understanding of Forgiveness**

In my earlier article I reported that I found some answers to my questions about forgiveness in the book *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* by Dr. Stephen Post and Jill Neimark. Each chapter of this book is devoted to an attribute that contributes to a sense of happiness, and physical and emotional well-being. One of the chapters has the intriguing title: "The Way of Forgiveness: Set Yourself Free."

Post and Neimark emphasize that there is much confusion about the meaning of the concept of forgiveness. They quote research psychologist Charlotte Witvliet of Hope College in Michigan who states, "One of the most common and mistaken arguments against forgiveness is that when you forgive someone, you are showing them that they can have their way. Why people ask, should they give an offender such power? If you're really good at forgiveness, a deeper excavation has to happen, and it requires courage as well as empathy. . . . Forgiveness is a powerful act, definitely not flimsy or sappy. In order to forgive you must first tell the true story of exactly what happened, grieve it fully, and then turn away from grudges, bitterness, and the kind of ruminating that amplifies the story and gives it too much replay time."

Post and Neimark observe, "Forgiveness is love that can only emerge when the giver has first suffered harm. It frees the giver from bondage to a bitterness that could easily darken his or her view of life. Without forgiveness, retribution would haunt our lives. How long would any of us last?"

Post and Neimark cite numerous research findings that indicate that the act of forgiving improves one's physical health, alleviates depressive feelings, lessens anger, and lowers stress hormones. While reflecting on these studies, my mind drifted back to Sam and Betty, puzzled by, "How could they forgive?" "What would it mean to forgive?"

And then Post and Neimark offered the story of Samuel Oliner, a faculty member at Humboldt State College in California.

### **To Focus on Those Who Risked Their Lives**

As a child Oliner's entire family was killed by the Nazis. He was the only one to escape and he was taken in by a Polish woman who taught him the catechism and changed his name so that he could pass as a Catholic. He then worked as a stable boy for a Nazi sympathizer who was living in a home formerly owned by a Jewish family that had been exterminated. Oliner, who eventually came to the United States and earned a doctorate in Sociology, states, "I was a little on the violent side. I had to go to therapy and marriage counseling. I suffered from nightmares. I was not very considerate. I felt that anything you can tell me, I've already experienced. Any evil that you've seen—well I've seen my family murdered."

What led Oliner to relinquish his anger and bitterness? At the age of 48 he began to do research on non-Jews who risked their lives to save and shelter Jews, some of whom were strangers to them. Oliner, in collaboration with his wife, co-authored a book focusing on 700 of these rescuers. His research was his therapy, his path to forgiveness. He observes, "The project made me feel much better. I'm grateful for the people who cared. It's because of these people that I'm here." A rabbi who knew Oliner remarked, "He found the spark of decency in human beings."

Oliner did not discover inner peace by excusing or exonerating those who had slaughtered his family. I doubt if that would be possible. He did not deny the pain of losing his family. That too would be impossible. Instead, as Post and Neimark express, Oliner "shifted his perspective." He discovered solace by seeking those who placed their own lives in jeopardy to rescue others. In so doing, his anger and bitterness were replaced with respect and compassion.

I can readily appreciate and support the power of this "shifting of perspective," but it can prove to be a Herculean task to accomplish, especially if the wrongs committed against us have been extremely painful, resulting in intense hurt, torment, and humiliation. As a clinical psychologist I have witnessed firsthand the difficulties people have in shifting their perspective or changing counterproductive, negative scripts that dominate their lives. I have spoken with patients so consumed with anger and thoughts of

revenge that they had little energy left to assume a more satisfying path in life. I have interviewed divorcing parents whose anger towards each other overrode their love for their children so that the best interests of these children were rarely considered.

### **The Power to Control Our Reactions**

Two recent events focused my attention once again on forgiveness. During a workshop I offered about resilience in our adult lives I examined forgiveness and the ways in which I was coming to understand this concept. Afterwards one of the participants spoke with me alone, noting that the workshop discussion was helpful to her. She revealed that her father died when she was a very young child and her mother was emotionally abusive. "She never had an encouraging word for me. Instead she seemed to relish pointing out all my faults. She died two years ago and I still carry around a great deal of anger towards her."

I asked what parts of the discussion about forgiveness had been helpful.

She replied, "A couple of things. One was when you talked about personal control and said that while we can't control the behaviors of other people, we have more control than we realize over our reactions to these other people. It seems like such a simple statement, but all of a sudden I had this epiphany that I really didn't have control over my mother's behavior towards me, but especially as I got older I did have control over my reaction to her hostility and belittling. I have to realize that I have control over the way I deal with the anger I still feel towards her even though she's been dead for two years. The second point, which is closely related to the first, is that I know I have to continue to work to resolve this anger but to do so I have to be able to forgive and move forward with my life."

She smiled and said, "I recently began therapy and there are some new things I want to discuss with my therapist." I wished her much success as she embarked on this therapeutic journey.

### **A Son's Murder, An Act of Forgiveness**

The second event that highlighted the theme of forgiveness was an article that appeared in the November, 2012 issue of Spirit Magazine published by Southwest Airlines. I was on my way from Boston to speak at a conference in Nashville when I noticed the following words on the cover of the magazine, "A Story About Forgiveness."

In light of my interest in that topic, I immediately turned to the article, which was written by Megan Feldman. It was a truly poignant, insightful piece that generated much reflection on my part.

The article focused on two families in southern California whose lives were to become inextricably intertwined as the result of a tragic occurrence. In 1995, 14-year-old Tony Hicks, the only grandson of Ples Felix, murdered Tariq Khamisa, the only son of Azim Khamisa. Tariq, a 20-year-old college student, had recently taken a job delivering pizza. Tony and a couple of his gang member friends ordered pizza with the intent of robbing the deliveryman. Tariq resisted and attempted to drive away; as he did, the gang leader instructed Tony to shoot him. Tony fired his gun and killed Tariq.

Feldman writes that following Tariq's death, his father considered suicide. He had difficulty getting out of bed, eating, or taking care of himself. His struggles led him within a year of the murder to found the Tariq Khamisa Foundation (TKF), whose mission it is to teach the importance of nonviolence to San Diego middle schoolers and young people nationwide. It is beyond the scope of this article to detail the heartfelt experiences that led Khamisa to turn his despair into TKF, but you can read Feldman's powerful account of Khamisa's transformation by visiting the Foundation's website ([tkf.org](http://tkf.org)) on which there is a link to the article. What I wish to focus on is the significance of forgiveness in Khamisa's life.

Khamisa met Felix in Tony's attorney's office. Feldman comments, "As Felix shook Khamisa's hand, he said, 'If there's anything I can do to be a support to you and your family, please call on me.' He added that Khamisa had been in his daily prayers and meditations."

Khamisa responded, "We both lost a child" and proceeded to tell Felix about his plan to start a foundation in Tariq's name with the goal of preventing children from committing violent crimes. Felix told Khamisa he would like to join in the foundation's efforts and a friendship was born. They regularly present their message of nonviolence to students throughout the country. Five years after the murder, Khamisa spoke with Tony in jail with Felix at his side. Tony was serving a 25-year to life sentence. "Khamisa offered Tony his forgiveness, told him that he looked forward to his release from prison,

expressed his hope that he would join Felix and him at the foundation, and hugged him goodbye."

Khamisa conducts two-day workshops for individuals, therapists, and community groups with a title similar to that in Post and Neimark's book. His workshop is called "Forgiveness: The Crown Jewel of Personal Freedom." Khamisa emphasizes a quote popularized by Nelson Mandela, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." Feldman describes research that supports this quote, citing the work of Dr. Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, who notes, "In multiple studies, forgiveness has been shown to provide benefits such as lowered blood pressure and increased optimism."

Luskin has developed interventions to teach forgiveness in a wide variety of settings, including war-ravaged countries. He believes that "anyone—from jilted spouses to widows who have lost husbands to terrorism—can heal." He offers the following viewpoint: "When you don't forgive, you release all of the chemicals of the stress response. Each time you react, adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine enter the body. When it's a chronic grudge, you could think about it 20 times a day, and those chemicals limit creativity; they limit problem solving. Cortisol and norepinephrine cause your brain to enter what we call 'the no-thinking zone,' and over time they lead you to feel helpless and like a victim. When you forgive, you wipe all of that clean."

Khamisa recognizes that forgiveness is a process that takes time and includes periods of mourning and grief. The path he chose away from despair and anger is one closely aligned with resilience and one that I have described in previous articles and books as components of "stress hardiness." One component of stress hardiness involved Khamisa giving purpose and meaning to Tariq's life by initiating a foundation in his son's name, a foundation with the intent of lessening the likelihood of other families facing the terrible losses experienced by both Khamisa and Felix.

A second component was reflected in Khamisa adopting the philosophy voiced by Mandela, described by Post and Neimark, and researched by Luskin, namely, that anger and grudges serve as shackles, limiting the kinds of choices we make and the actions we take. I appreciate the struggles involved in letting go of intense negative emotions and refraining from self-defeating behaviors, but confronting and overcoming this negativity

promises the emergence of a more resilient, purposeful life. Those who are embarking on the journey towards personal control and forgiveness might wish to keep in mind the reassuring words of Post and Neimark:

Think about the emotional relief you will give yourself if and when you decide to forgive the deepest hurts of your life. Remember that it's really difficult to hold inside yourself two opposing emotions at the same time, so that when you are in a forgiving state, you are unlikely to also be in a vengeful state. Understand forgiveness as a form of enlightened self-interest, a gift that you give yourself by learning whatever good lessons you can from an event.

### **A Few Final Questions to Consider**

In my clinical work, I often ask patients who cannot let go of their anger—anger that is impacting very negatively on their lives—what they think would allow them to give up their resentment and grudges. Invariably, the first answer is for the other person to acknowledge and apologize the perceived wrongs that have been committed. I agree that such a step would be very helpful. However, I remind my patients that such an action may not occur (in the example of the woman who spoke with me after my workshop, her abusive mother died two years earlier without ever apologizing) and I ask, "Even in the absence of an apology, what steps might you take to let go of the anger and move on with your life?"

I add to this question, "If you were not preoccupied with anger and grudges, if somehow these negative emotions were no longer there, in what way would your life be different?" "How would you feel about that different life?"

Many of my patients have reported that as they reflect on these questions they begin to realize the high price paid for being consumed by anger and not being able to forgive. I hope that it will be helpful to you to think about how you would respond to these questions.

**<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>**