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FORGIVENESS

“As we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in.”

Parker Palmer

At the peaceCENTER we have an ‘F’ word, one that no one wants to talk about in public. About ten years ago we published a book entitled *Walking Jesus’ Path of Peace*. After 9/11 several people called us to find out about amending the chapter on forgiving our enemies: surely this could not apply under the present circumstances! We did not revise the chapter and probably lost some fans.

So can you guess what the ‘F’ word is?

One Good Friday a dozen years ago I had this thought: What if Jesus could not bring himself to say “I forgive you” at that extreme moment on the cross; so instead he stepped out of the way and said “Father, you forgive them, (I can’t do it right now) for they know not what they do.” That insight has changed how I saw my part, I just have to let go and get out of the way, letting forgiveness come through me.

This is a whole lot easier said than done. How simple it is to tell others to forgive and forget; how difficult it is to budge one iota from holding on to my own resentments and vindication. “All I want is justice (read: retribution) and then I will be satisfied.” Forgiveness begins at the home within. Allowing my heart to be broken open in order to be forgiven is an important first step on the sacred journey. Allowing forgiveness to flow through me out to my family and friends is another.

I divided this book of 33 stories into Self, Family and Friends, and added 33 films. This compilation of short stories about the ‘F’ word has helped me to study the actions of the heart, someone else’s not

mine, more closely. It is in sifting through the different scenarios, that I find myself remembering past and present situations in my own life still in need of release, needing me to get out of the way of the flow of forgiveness that is everywhere present.

An ancient map that leads us to that home within is the Cretan labyrinth shadowed here. Giving myself permission to find my way through my own personal history while reading or watching each one, has helped me to amplify forgiveness at the center of my life's pilgrimage. I enter the labyrinth burdened with fear, resentments, justifications, jealousies, retributions, fantasies of revenge. When I reach the center if I can open myself to forgiveness, I have felt a movement in my heart as it softens and warms to the flow. While emerging from the center, if I have chosen to release my need to control, I feel myself enveloped and carried along by love, compassion, empathy, reconciliation and remembrance, lightening my load and filling me with peace.

The hardest part is overcoming the fear of stepping into this channel of transformation, because I want to hold on tight and prove that I am right. Yet once I take the initial step it seems less daunting. Allowing myself to imagine a different outcome, brings about fantasies of healing for myself, my family and my friends.

Knowing all of this I'll admit that sometimes I still choose to withhold forgiveness, even or maybe especially, from myself. What am I still afraid of? Let's bring the 'F' word out into the light, into public conversations, into acceptable vocabulary, into my experience, into my heart. What have I got to lose? What have I been missing? Where do I start? When?

By relaxing and entertaining myself with these stories of forgiveness I am learning vicariously how to ask for forgiveness and how to offer it to others. I might even be tempted to forgive myself, to see how it feels; but for now let's just take it one story at a time.

Peace,

Rosalyn Falcón Collier



FOREWORD

Marietta Jaeger-Lane

“Forgive And Remember” is the name of this unique collection of stories, and yet “Forgive and Forget” was the idiom with which I grew up. Even as a child, try as much as I could to be good, the “forget” part was simply unattainable. As an adult, it seemed unimaginable. How does one forget hurtful words, violent actions, unrepentant injustices done to oneself, let alone to loved ones?! Short of developing amnesia, all those events are as much a part of one’s history, one’s memories, as are the kindnesses, acts of charity, respect and affirmation, and tender demonstrations of love. I did discover that exploring all the aspects and background of the situation or person that called for my forgiveness, enabled understanding and even compassion for the offender. However, because I couldn’t forget what the offender did, I was left in a steady state of bemusement and concern for my salvation.

That is, until – my youngest daughter was kidnapped in the middle of the night during a camping trip. Then, forget – “forget!” I couldn’t even imagine the possibility of “forgive.” Susie was an innocent, defenseless little girl and I had every right to avenge whatever she was enduring. Images of doing violence to the kidnapper, even taking his life with my own hands and a smile on my face, danced tantalizingly through my mind. After all, who wouldn’t say I was justified?!

However, the sound-track, deeply instilled in childhood, that still ran loud and strong through my being was “be a good girl.” Beyond that, my Christian faith, to which I was committed to live out with integrity and faithfulness, called me to forgive my enemies, in which category the kidnapper certainly belonged. Thus began a wrestling match with God, with me defending my justifiable stance of rage and revenge, and God patiently, gently,

but persistently reminding me that forgiveness is healthier than hate, and if I allowed myself to stay in my present state of fury, all that I'd accomplish would be to give the kidnapper control over my state of mind, and make another victim — me. Well, needless to say, it's not too difficult to know that when one wrestles with God, who wins! Knowing I couldn't do it by myself, I promised to work with God to move my heart from fury to forgiveness.

The ensuing year, still not knowing Susie's fate or whereabouts, was the greatest challenge of my life. In all honesty, forgiveness is hard work. It requires daily diligent discipline and control of mind and tongue. Like a recovering addict, most days I had to take it hour by hour — constantly calling myself to what I say I believe: God is crazy about all of us, no matter who we are or what we've ever done. Therefore, in God's eyes, I had to admit that the kidnapper was just as precious as my little girl. He had dignity and worth, just as we all do — not by any merit of our own, but because we all belong to God. I had to think and speak of him with respect and not use derogatory terms which came so easily to mind, given that I had no knowledge of what Susie was having to endure and if I would ever get her returned to me.

Finally, I had to surrender to God's call in Scripture to pray for the kidnapper, which of course, was the last thing I felt like doing. At first, the best I could muster were simple, unsophisticated prayers — just one a day — for trouble-free travel, good hunting or fishing, appropriate weather for whatever he was doing. But, as I made a true effort to be genuinely authentic in whatever I prayed, it became easier and easier to do so and to want him to experience God's providence and provision. I remember hearing long ago that whenever we pray for someone, it's our own heart that gets changed. I experienced that healing reality.

On the first year anniversary that Susie was taken from me — exactly one year to the minute, he said — the kidnapper phoned me in the middle of the night. His intent was to taunt and torment me, get me raging, laugh at me and hang up, leaving me hanging and waiting again. However, to my own amazement, everything that I'd been working and praying for during the past year, came to fruition in me at that moment. All that I had chosen to do and now really wanted to do, happened. My heart was changed from fury to forgiveness, from rage to reconciliation and I felt genuine concern and compassion for the man — no one more surprised at this than me! When I told him that I'd been praying for him and asked what I could do to help him, he broke down and wept. This mentally ill,

very violent young man was undone by what God had done in me. Still saying he wanted to exchange Susie for ransom, he remained in conversation for well over an hour. However, in that milieu of calm and forgiveness, the kidnapper inadvertently revealed sufficient information about himself that the FBI were able to identify him. My forgiveness was his undoing.

As he was being arrested, sadly, evidence was found that was concrete proof that my daughter's life had been taken long before, probably two or so weeks after she had been taken from me. Though we'd been searching for her all this time, she was already safely home — Home in the healing, loving arms of God. In all honesty, not the answer I was hoping for, but my spirit had been calmed and I had released my rage and desire for revenge. Because of his confession and other evidence, I know, but cannot bear to dwell upon, all she endured during her captivity. I will never forget any of it.

However, my faith tells me none of that is her reality now. Susie has been set free from her horrific suffering and I have been set free from the ugliness of hate and unforgiveness. My reality is that I am no longer controlled and captured by an event in the past which, whatever I do and however I feel, can never be changed. It is extremely difficult for our hearts and minds to be willing to embrace that truth but I have learned we can do it — with time and care.

I have also learned that we must do it, because, in spite of the old adage, we will never forget what happened, and the only way we can live with those hard memories is to forgive the offender and let go of all those negative feelings. Hatred and unforgiveness are not healthy and they will damage us eventually on every level of our beings. The medical professions are seeing evidence of this phenomenon more and more. There is an old Chinese proverb that states "One who seeks revenge should dig two graves."

Please hear me — I am not advocating forgiveness and then ignoring the responsibilities and appropriate consequences, legal and otherwise, for the offender. I have come to believe that God's idea of justice is restorative — the healing of the wounded human souls of all parties involved, appropriate restitution or service of some kind, reconciliation of relationships if possible. However, we must start with ourselves, learning to forgive, however long and how much effort it takes, and it's worth all the effort it takes.. Forgiveness is a gift to ourselves — of freedom, healing, and the ability to move on with our lives, unchained from the past.

FORGIVE AND REMEMBER

In reading this marvelous collection of stories of forgiveness, I was struck that they were all written long ago, prior to 1923. The ability to forgive is not a new idea, though I think it has always been counter-cultural. However, just as our bodies have the inclination and capacity to heal, so too, do our hearts. Clearly, the characters in these stories demonstrate for us that the principle of forgiveness has long been known to be one of the most life-giving things we can do for ourselves. So, don't forget — forgive and remember!

Marietta Jaeger-Lane
March, 2010