

How Do I Live With You?

Reverend Sharon Dittmar
First Unitarian Church
536 Linton St.
Cincinnati, OH 45219
(513) 281-1564
March 14, 2004

In her book, *Forgiving the Unforgivable*, Beverly Flanigan writes

One Wednesday morning, [April] Roland drove home from her job as a nurse at the local hospital . . . When she pulled into her driveway, a midsize rent-it-yourself moving van was parked there. [April] got out of her car, approached the van and peered inside. There she saw her television, some chairs, a cardboard wardrobe, boxes of unidentified objects, and even one of her favorite paintings. Her heart suddenly sank in an eerie and unknown fear. [April] closed the garage door behind her and walked slowly into the kitchen. From there she saw her husband, Jerry, sitting in one of the chairs that remained in their living room. He looked slowly up at her and, his eyes finally meeting hers, said, "I'm leaving you. It just isn't good anymore, and I guess you'll find out anyhow . . . I have another woman. We've been together for three years and I want to marry her. . . He rose and opened the front door never looking back. Through the living room window she saw a woman driving Jerry's car pull up behind the moving van. . . That was the last [April] saw of Jerry until their first mediation hearing three months later. With four sentences, [April]'s world fell apart. A contract she thought she had made for life was shredded in her face . . . it involved right and wrong and how people treat each other. It concerned morality and personal integrity . . . Now all was destroyed. [April] had been unforgivably wounded . . . The singular characteristic that distinguishes human beings from all other species is that we knowingly and often without legitimate reason cause each other to suffer.¹

How do we live with people who hurt us, not minor insults, not break ups, not fender benders, but hurt us, people who cause serious emotional, physical, mental, and sexual damage? How do we live with these people who are our partners, parents, grandparents, our siblings, our children, our friends? For as Flanigan goes on to state in her book, unforgivable injuries are the injuries of intimate people.

I am interested in the concept that unforgivable injuries are the injuries of intimate people. More often we worry about the violent stranger or bully who might hurt us. But I think that Flanigan is on to something, unforgivable injuries are less likely to be random, less likely to be mistakes. Instead, they are violations of our social contract with people who are close to us. Flanigan has a broad definition of unforgivable injuries, as in the example of April and Jerry, but I think of them as injuries of violence, coercion, or threat. What makes these injuries feel so unforgivable is that people we know, people we trusted or needed, betrayed or hurt us. When Jerry tells April, his wife, that he has been having an affair for three years and wants to marry this other woman, he has wounded April more deeply than if her supervisor at the hospital suddenly fired her.

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Flanigan maintains that unforgivable injuries "permanently change a person," and that there are five major characteristics:

1. They start with an event that signals betrayal
2. They are initiated by intimate friends and family
3. They shatter concepts of morality [couples are faithful]
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As much as Flanigan refers to these injuries as unforgivable, I was surprised to find that she believes forgiveness is imperative. Her major concern being that when we have not forgiven others, the anger and pain can become self-destructive. We can become lost in the place of our deepest wounding. She counsels us to confront the people who injure us, explain our anger so they understand, and then ultimately reconcile and forgive them.

On a regular basis, people come to my office needing to talk about their struggle to forgive others. Most of them feel that they "can't move on" in their lives until they have been reconciled with these people. Some of them have become so bound up with their desire, yet inability to forgive, that they feel like failures. In these instances the initial wounds and then subsequent struggle to forgive are constant reminders of pain and loss. Like Flanigan I believe that people struggling to forgive need to enter the deep and haunting pain of their wounds so they can understand all that has been lost. Unlike Flanigan, I don't believe that forgiveness is necessary.

I remember a conversation with a man who was riddled with guilt, rage and frustration over his inability to forgive his mother. He was absolutely stunned when I asked, "Well, why do you have to forgive her?" In all his years he had never once considered that he did not have to forgive his mother. After five minutes of silence he said, "I don't know why." Which enabled me to ask an even more important question "Why do you want to forgive her?" This question is even more important because it focuses attention back on the person searching to forgive. What does this quest mean to you? Who is it for? What do you hope to achieve? Will forgiveness help you achieve that?

Like this man in my office, without knowing why, many of us believe that we have to forgive. Three thousand years of Western civilization theology has encouraged this quest. An underlying theme of Christianity and Judaism is that humans need to forgive so that we may be whole, so that we may be reconciled as individuals, as communities, and for those who believe in God, with God. Catholics believe that it is a sin not to forgive because judgment belongs to God, not to humans. An orthodox Catholic believes that active resentment cannot be annulled through confession, therefore he/she would be unreconciled to God, outside the sacrament of confession.

Likewise Protestants believe that without forgiveness they are unreconciled to God. According to Martin Luther human sinfulness creates a debt that is justified by faith. Faith calls Protestants to forgive just as Jesus did when he died on the cross. This is why the Lord's Prayer contains these words "forgive us our debts/trespases/sins as we forgive our debtors/those who trespass/sin against us."

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but also through work. Individuals seeking forgiveness must change. They must turn away from old, bad, hurtful behaviors and embrace new behaviors that bring wholeness and health.

These theologies are one reason why so many people come to my office struggling with the inability to forgive. As a society we focus more on forgiveness, rather than the themes of wholeness and reconciliation, particularly for those who feel injured or victimized. So often I hear someone say "I have to forgive her. She is old, dying." "Why?" I think. Is forgiveness merely a second self-inflicted injury we owe to someone who has already injured us? Why are we working so hard for someone who hurt us? What does it mean if we say "I forgive you," but in our hearts we are silently seething? Our conversations about forgiveness jump forward too quickly, across our personal pain, loss and confusion (which is often devastating). Our conversations about forgiveness make it seem as if forgiveness is the purpose, that forgiveness is the source of our wholeness instead of just one part. Our conversations about forgiveness seem to care more for the injurer than the injured.

In his book, *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal tells a story about his time as an inmate in a Nazi concentration camp. One day he was taken to a Nazi hospital where he was introduced to a young SS soldier, fully bandaged, mortally injured, and in pain. The soldier told him a story of murdering Jews, a story that was now haunting him as he approached the final days of his young life. He said to Wiesenthal "In the long nights while 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 almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace." Wiesenthal responded with silence.

Although Wiesenthal wanted to comfort this man, he felt he could not speak for the others he had murdered. He could not forgive this man while he himself was unjustly imprisoned and still in fear for his life, yet he was also deeply disturbed by their conversation, and uncertain whether or not he had done the right thing.

This story is very powerful for me because it says that perpetrators owe their victims an apology first, and that those victims have the power and the right to decide whether or not to forgive. Someone's day of death may not be the day you are able to forgive him or her, and why should it be? Do we have to remain on the perpetrator's time line forever? In a situation of injury or injustice, like feminist and liberation theologians, I side with the injured, the victims, the oppressed. Forgiveness should not have to come at the expense of a second self-inflicted wound.

My rationale for this is that those who cause unforgivable injuries took up too much space in the first place. It is, most likely, their way of being, whether with you or someone else. The theologian Sallie McFague argues that each of us has an appropriate amount of space. We should be neither too greedy, nor too meek, neither too self-aggrandizing, nor too humble. I would add to this that feminist theologians, beginning with Valerie Saiving, have noted that the sins of people in power are lust, pride, disobedience, and that the sins of those who are dis-empowered (whether male or female) are self-denial and disrespect for oneself.

Resting with those who have been injured or victimized, my question is always, "How can you, the person who has been injured, heal? How can you break the cycle of your wound and the potential legacy of injury that could continue? Just a few weeks ago I watched the 1994 film *Forrest Gump*. *Forrest Gump* is the story of Forrest (played by Tom Hanks), a charming, sincere, developmentally delayed southerner, who, through the certain love of his mother, improbably, succeeds in life. The character and success of Forrest is contrasted with that of his love interest, Jenny, who although pretty and kind, has a destructive father who takes up too much space in her life.

The first time I saw the film Jenny just seemed to have a lot of problems. Watching it this time I paid more attention and saw her story develop. Her father abuses her, I assume physically and sexually. There is this poignant scene when she is a young girl, her father shouts to her, and she runs into the cornfield with Forrest to hide. She makes him get down on his hands and knees with her to pray, and she prays that she will be able to fly away like a bird. Later in the film we see her always with the wrong man, the drug addict, the abuser. Jenny spirals down.

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Are we complete, healthy people if we don't forgive those who have hurt us the most? Yes and no. No, we are not complete, if like Jenny the injury disables us more than is necessary, keeping us from making good choices. Yes, we are complete and healthy, if like Jenny, we face the enormity of the loss, integrate the injury, and are able to move on, with or without forgiveness.

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Almost all wounded people continue to love their injurers. Love is, after all, not only a feeling but also a habit . . . Losing your ideals and habits is equivalent to losing yourself. It is hard enough to have been hurt, to have figuratively had a part of yourself blown away. But to give up the remainder of yourself - the love in your heart - is like losing everything. So when people let go of love, they have to feel the full force of an unforgivable injury. They have to grieve over the loss of a history with another person and for a future that will not be. They also have to grieve over the parts of themselves that are gone . . . When you claim your injury, you stop defending yourself against it. You stop denying that your offender has the capacity to hurt you. And you give up trying to pretend that nothing has happened . . . You must accept the injury as permanent and make it a part of who you are to become in the future.³

In her book, Flanigan, assumes that we can have a meaningful conversation with the people who have seriously injured us. This is variable, and it comes down to the space issue and the difference between atonement and forgiveness. Flanigan assumes that injurers will be able to talk about their wrongdoing whenever the injured parties need to talk. People don't work that way.

If Jerry is happy with his new wife, do you think he will care to listen to the criticisms April has to offer? Likewise, Jenny's father could just be abusing the neighborhood children now, and he won't care what she has to say. It is important to think through what we hope to gain in these situations. If we just want to say our peace, whether we are believed or not, that is healthy. If we are hoping for confirmation to validate our experience that is different. The

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So often the people who come to my office want that person, that injurer to respond a certain way. I end up asking these questions taught to me by my colleague Dr. Laurie Proctor, "Do you think you have the power to make so and so change?" "Can you control what so and so does with her life?" "Can you control the choices she makes?"

There are always long pauses after these questions, because no one, including me, wants to say the hard truth, which is "No." We can't change others and we can't live for others, although we can hold them responsible for their choices. We can't fix others. We can't save people who are dying and have done great wrong. That's not our job. That would be taking up too much space in someone else's life, and not enough space in our own lives. The only person I can change is me, and the only person you can change is you.

And this, although it initially seems small, insufficient, is really enormous. We can name and claim our unforgivable injuries, and integrate them as one part of our whole person. The injury is permanent. It assaults our morals and fundamental beliefs. It was a betrayal. And there is more to us than this injury. We have been permanently changed and we continue to live a life of our choosing.

In *The New Story of Your Life* Michael Blumenthal writes

Say you finally invented a new story of your life. It is not the story of your defeat or of your impotence and powerlessness before the large forces of wind and accident . . . It is not, even, a story that will win you the deep initial sympathies of the benevolent goddesses or the care of the generous, but it is a story that requires of you a large thrust into the difficult life, a sense of plenitude entirely your own. Whatever the story is, it goes as it goes, and there are vicissitudes in it, gardens that need planted, skills sown, the long hard labors of prose and enduring love. Deep down in some long-encumbered self, it is the story you have been writing all of your life, where no Calypso holds you against your own willfulness, where you can rise from the bleak island of your old story and tread your way home.

What really is forgiveness? And what is moving on? Is it forgiveness if I still love someone but do not trust him? Is it forgiveness if I think someone is responsible for something that happened to me, but I work to be more than this injury in my life. Is it forgiveness if I believe someone failed and betrayed me, but also have sympathy for her? Is it forgiveness if I never want to see someone again but don't wish him harm (although I might be relieved when he is dead)? Sometimes we don't "forgive" because we are still afraid, and with good reason. Sometimes we don't forgive because the time isn't right. Although life can be long and that time might still come.

There are gradations to forgiveness and moving on. There are no rights and wrongs other than being true to yourself. Choose your own way, what gives you control, what lets you grow in a healthy way, what disentangles you from the injurer and their way of being. Learning how to live with an unforgivable injury requires honestly mourning the loss, and accepting and integrating what has happened. Learning how to live with an unforgivable

injury depends on what has been done and who you are. It is a journey for all of us to incorporate and reinvent our selves, to not be the sum of our hurt.

Simon Wiesenthal responded to the SS soldier with silence, but he also came to believe that the man's confession was repentance. Is that forgiveness? I don't know. It doesn't matter. I only know that Wiesenthal survived and thrived as a world famous Nazi hunter, a champion for the human rights of the living and dead. If you have been unforgivably injured, and your injurer apologizes, rest with this for a while. Are you ready to forgive? If so, tell him or her. If not, wait. You don't owe your injurer an apology. You owe yourself an authentic life of your own choosing.

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⁶ Flanigan.

What really is forgiveness? And what is moving on? Is it forgiveness if I still love someone but do not trust him? Is it forgiveness if I think someone is responsible for something that happened to me, but I work to be more than this injury in my life. Is it forgiveness if I believe someone failed and betrayed me, but also have sympathy for her? Is it forgiveness if I never want to see someone again but don't wish him harm (although I might be relieved when he is dead)? Sometimes we don't "forgive" because we are still afraid, and with good reason. Sometimes we don't forgive because the time isn't right. Although life can be long and that time might still come.

There are gradations to forgiveness and moving on. There are no rights and wrongs other than being true to yourself. Choose your own way, what gives you control, what lets you grow in a healthy way, what disentangles you from the injurer and their way of being. Learning how to live with an unforgivable injury requires honestly mourning the loss, and accepting and integrating what has happened. Learning how to live with an unforgivable injury depends on what has been done and who you are. It is a journey for all of us to incorporate and reinvent our selves, to not be the sum of our hurt.

Simon Wiesenthal responded to the SS soldier with silence, but he also came to believe that the man's confession was repentance. Is that forgiveness? I don't know. It doesn't matter. I only know that Wiesenthal survived and thrived as a world famous Nazi hunter, a champion for the human rights of the living and dead. If you have been unforgivably injured, and your injurer apologizes, rest with this for a while. Are you ready to forgive? If so, tell him or her. If not, wait. You don't owe your injurer an apology. You owe yourself an authentic life of your own choosing.