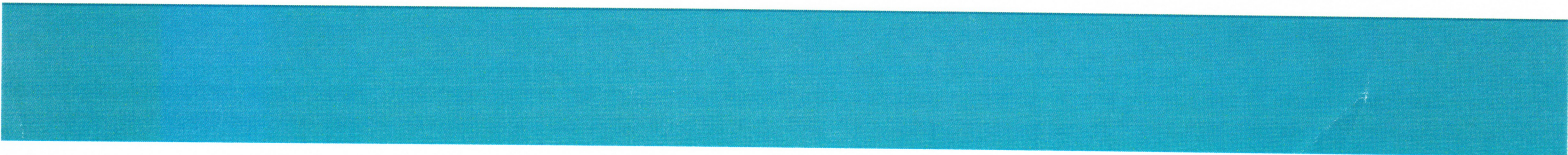




Forgiveness

A Personal Perspective

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Mitchell D Kaye



FORGIVENESS

Of all human emotional endeavors, forgiveness is one of the most complex, difficult and important to understand and to perform. I say human, because there I do not think that there is an equivalent behavior in the animal kingdom. An animal can learn affection, fear, trust and maybe even love but it can only modify or forget these emotional reactions. It cannot "forgive" in the full sense of the word as we are going to use it here today. This is a uniquely human trait. It may be one of the keys to our survival as a species. I believe that it is worth our careful consideration.

Forgiveness requires that we understand and remember the hurt or damage that has been inflicted upon us. Without that consciousness, we cannot truly forgive. The best that we can do is to forget. What we do with that injury, potentially is forgiveness. Many other responses are possible and probably more likely, at least initially. There is fear, revenge, denial, anger, and hatred in all of their doleful permutations. Clearly, much of what is damaging in human interaction can come from the inability or unwillingness to forgive. Forgiveness can stop the cycle of human misery. It can liberate the forgiver and possibly reform the forgiven. It is not easy to forgive and therefore it is rare.

When a person or a group experiences an injury, a memory of that injury becomes part of their identity to a varying degree. Typically there will be a negative emotional response which can manifest itself in a myriad of ways. On a basic, primitive level there will typically be a desire for revenge. This is not the same thing as justice. Justice is a societal modulation of this need to hurt back. As such, it is a major human accomplishment, when it is humane. If we think of the ancient formula of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the initial brutality of this equation seems less severe when we consider that the aggrieved party often wants and believes that he is completely justified in taking out one hundred eyes for his eye or something similar. All societies recognize the need to modulate the desire for revenge, if for no other reason than to prevent an individual from wreaking unlimited pain on the rest of the group. It is often true that this need for revenge can never be adequately assuaged and therefore the cycle is potentially endless, depending on the circumstances. From a neuroanatomical viewpoint, this is because rage and anger are limbic emotions. Forgiveness requires the suppression of these most powerful and ancient impulses. It is a higher cortical function, and may not be possible in everyone. The human desire for revenge is universal and it is enacted endlessly in our daily lives as well as in our mythologies, which are the psychic mirrors of each of our societies. It is so commonplace, that I do not need to give examples. I personally believe that justice must precede forgiveness. I recognize that this is not a prerequisite for other people or religions and is a major point of divergence in the consideration of forgiveness, as I will discuss later. I think that it is important that this honest difference does not in itself become a point of conflict and mistrust, as so many points in ethics and philosophy can become. Maybe there is more than one way. I do not claim to have the only answer.

I have thought for many, many years about this subject, although not necessarily at a conscious level. As some of you know, I am a Jew. The Holocaust, or in its Hebrew form, the Shoah has been a defining concept for me for as long as I can remember. It is a daily presence in my mind. This is interesting because I have never experienced it personally. The last Jew to be incinerated died 10 years before I was born. I have had the blessings of a good childhood with loving parents, a wonderful wife and children in the best country in the world. I have also had the good fortune to be able to choose my career and derive meaning from it by trying to help others. Why should this continue to affect me so?

My father immigrated to the US from Europe in 1938, just a few months before this became an impossibility. He was spared. His family that remained in Europe was not. Most of the women and children died and the men were used as slave laborers or joined partisan groups to fight the Nazis. The survivors either came here or emigrated to what is now Israel and restarted their lives. I grew up with them and others like them. They had children and some of them were my friends. The parents were never the same afterwards. I remember their soft sadness, their strange accents. Their stories were told to me by other members of the family especially by my fathers' mother, usually in whispers. It was like spending time with ghosts. They had numbers tattooed on their forearms to catalog them as inventory in the death factories. Their children were different too. Some of them wouldn't leave home without packing some extra food in their clothing for example.

I vividly remember reading articles in Life and Look magazines in the mid sixties that photographically documented the concentration camps and by the time I was 8 or so, I was very aware of what had happened only a few years before. Since then I have read countless books, seen hundreds of documentaries and watched too much video on this subject. I realize now that the subject is ultimately impossible for me to understand. I know what happened, how it happened and even to some degree why it happened but it remains a mystery to me. That is because it is a manifestation of a soul-sickness and evil that is beyond my comprehension. This subject cannot be approached in a normal scholastic and intellectual manner. It is irrational at its very core.

I do not want to claim the role of victim. Firstly, the Holocaust was not limited to Jews by any means. Slavs, Gypsies, Homosexuals, Seventh Day Adventists, Communists, Free Masons and millions of everyday local people who did not fit in the New Order for some reason or another were annihilated in a systematic manner. Indeed, Hitler and the Nazis first began by murdering tens of thousands of Germans secretly in the mid 1930s, especially those with physical or psychiatric disorders that were classified as dangerous to the racial health of the German people or who were considered genetically defective. The preliminary experimentation in mechanisms of efficient mass killing was committed on these helpless people first. As this was being done, the Nazis lied to the families of those that had been institutionalized and murdered. Deception of the victim was a Nazi technique used throughout the Holocaust. Remember, people walked into gas chambers willingly. That was because the gas chambers were disguised by the Nazis as showers and the people in line were deliberately given the hope that they were going to be cleaned. After all, why would the Nazis kill you if they were making the effort to

clean you first? The soap was made of stone however, and to realize this must have been the penultimate terror.

Who were these supermen, these *Übermenschen*? Heinrich Himmler, Reichsfueher of the SS was a bland faced, ex-chicken farmer with a crackpots' concept of eugenics and racial superiority. He apparently was physically upset at the sight of human blood. Propaganda Minister Goebbels was a swarthy, short man with a clubfoot. Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering was an obese morphine addict who liked to cross dress. He apparently had an IQ in the 140s when he was tested prior to the Nuremburg trials. Hitler was a sado-masochist whose coprophilia may have been expressed subconsciously in his choice of brown as the party color. Their belief system was ultimately about German racial superiority and their duty was to eliminate or at least enslave anyone who was not "Aryan." These men were not alone in their beliefs however, and Nazi ideology quickly took over German society and won the majority of its peoples' hearts and minds. In his book Hitler's Willing Executioners, Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust, Daniel Goldhagen of Harvard University provides irrefutable documentation of this complete penetration of Nazism into every aspect of German society at that time. A century's long, deep tradition of German and indeed pan-European anti-Semitism, often actively fostered by the Catholic and Protestant churches, made this virulent hatred of the Jew possible. The economic and social devastation that followed the First World War along with the draconian economic penalties imposed on Germany by the victorious Allies, was the trigger point for ultra-nationalistic groups to blame the outsider for this calamity. The Jew was the natural and time honored choice.

My personal response to this history, for most of my life, has been one of paranoia, defiance and more recently release. Although I am not proud to say it, all of Germany and all Germans represented the embodiment of death and horror to me. The sound of German was like glass breaking in my ears. I found it easy to hate them and I believed that I was justified in this hatred. I allowed another group to define me, and I maintained my identity as a Jew, in part, to prevent that group from attaining its final solution of obliterating my people. Ironically, despite my commitment to maintaining this identity, I have had great conflict in my belief in G-D. This brings up the question of why I should maintain my identity as a Jew at all if my core beliefs do not easily embrace this foundation of Judaism.

I was lucky enough to meet Anton and Gabrielle Renye about 10 years ago. Tony was working on an airplane in the hangar opposite of mine and he was sweating profusely in the humid summer weather of Kentucky. I stopped and gave him some of my shop rags, which are really unused OR towels. I recognized his accent as German. To make a long story short, he was a retired Veterinarian from Stuttgart who had brought his family here to begin a new career as an airplane restorer. After a several month period of getting to know him and his family, I gave him the job of restoring my Great Lakes biplane. It was their first major project here and it took nearly a year. By the end of that time, I was forced to admit that these people had many of the same values, hopes and passions that I did. In fact, they became our closest friends here. Tony was a man of great natural intelligence, with of love of learning, biology, music and culture. He was a dedicated humanist with a strong skepticism of authority.

He was hard working, physically and mentally tough and a family man. His beloved wife, Gabrielle is a kind and beautiful woman on the inside and out. Their only daughter Michelle was like one of ours after a while. These fine people had nothing to do with the Holocaust and I did not ask about the roles of their parents, who would have been of that generation, because it is not who they are. I know that they felt a burden of guilt as post war Germans and were horrified by the behavior of the Nazis. I realized that this was not easy for them either. In fact, it was unfair to them. Our families have become the closest of friends and we tried our best to help the Renyes through Tony's terminal cancer and their immigration problems here. Tony died three years ago and I miss him daily. Gaby and Michelle have recently moved back to Germany to rejoin their family and we hope to visit them there in the near future as schedule permits.

I have belatedly come to appreciate my Jewish heritage for its positive aspects, particularly through the study of ethics. Judaism has a rich and incredibly deep source of thought on the relationship of person to person and person to G-d. The underlying bedrock of this system is the recognition of the sanctity of Human life. The saying in the Talmud "He who saves one life, saves the world" condenses that belief. Also the Talmud teaches, "What is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor". There is a compendium of profound thought on all aspects of human behavior recorded over three millennia.

In a very brief summary of Jewish thought, forgiveness should be dependent on the offending party's repentance. Forgiveness is obligatory if the person who has hurt you makes a sincere plea to be forgiven. We cannot grant forgiveness for another person or in their name. Finally, since only the victim of a crime or wronged person can forgive, murder by definition is unforgivable

As I understand it, the Christian approach is very different. For example, on September 11, 2002, the first anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by Islamic terrorists, Pope John Paul II offered the following prayer: "We pray for the victims today, may they rest in peace. And may God show mercy and forgiveness for the authors of this terrible attack." I respect this tradition of spiritual mercy. I welcome comments or instruction from my Christian brothers in this regard. It is an important facet of this great religion. I suspect that it may reflect on the different emphasis given to the afterlife and salvation by Christianity, but I am not certain.

By this set of definitions, which I believe to be reasonable and humane, the Holocaust is not a forgivable event. Those who perpetrated it should face justice, even at the end of their lives. The Nuremburg War Crimes trials helped to set the proper course for all of mankind in dealing with mass murderers and genocide. I would stress the need for justice and not revenge. These principles need to be universal and applied equally. All people have a moral obligation to fight ideologies that promote hatred and subjugation, such as Fascism, Communism and Jihadist Islam to name some prominent current examples. History has shown that pacifism only encourages and strengthens movements such as these. They see compromise as weakness to be exploited.

My deepest and most difficult understanding is that the Holocaust is only my peoples' version of an experience that has happened to so many others in the past, and continues to occur to this day. What of the genocide of over a million Armenians by the Turks in the early 20th century or the enslavement and deportation of millions of Africans to our country and others? What of the Native Americans of North and South America? What about Darfur, Rwanda, Bosnia and so many others? Millennia of Tibetan culture are being destroyed by China as we speak. There have been individuals who have shown the highest bravery in opposing oppression in every society. This includes Germans who fought Nazism, for example. Remember that man who stood in front of the tank in Tieneman Square? Do I possess that kind of courage? Conversely, many people seem to acquiesce to institutionalized evil if it is introduced properly and some will eventually become active participants. This too is universal and not limited to any one group or country. That was the secret of Nazism. Under the right circumstances, could I have worn the black uniform? This is the most important question that we can ask ourselves, in my opinion. There is nothing comforting in this realization. It is much easier to divide the world into "us" and "them". This removes moral ambiguity and tricks us into abrogating our moral responsibility to our fellow human beings. Unfortunately, it is a very easy step to make "them" the enemy and therefore to de-humanize "them". The rest follows with sickening regularity. We are all "us" *and* "them". We need to examine ourselves objectively and relentlessly, so that we do not repeat our most horrifying mistakes. Let us open our eyes and hearts, embrace our better angels and live as brothers and sisters in a world free of hatred and violence.

Mitchell Kaye MD

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