

*Forgiveness — Wolfgang Somary*

Who am I? Why do I yearn for others to understand me instead of my pondering who am I? Why do I ask about God when I do not even know who is asking?

Forgive? Whom should I forgive if not myself? It is harder to forgive our own failures than those of others because, being proud, we cannot bear our shortcomings.

What is that *I* that cannot or will not forgive? Is it the *You* of the offender? How did the offender experience me? How did I fail him? (It takes two to tango.)

What has the source of my resentment taught me? Are all these lessons going to be wasted on me? If I pass the buck, I will have learned nothing and lost the chance to become enlightened.

What useful gift has the offender given me? A wretched mother turns her unloved son out of the home but gives him a hammer so he can earn an honest living as a carpenter or as coal-miner. The son discovers a rocky cavern, cracks it open with his hammer and discovers a treasure.

Do I prefer to die embittered or reconciled? Dying a good death means practicing the frame of mind that we want to be ours when we depart.

What profits me to play the victim? Play the royal and you get reverence, play the jester and you get a laugh, play the magnate and you get trusted, play a sweetheart and you get loved but, play the victim and all you get is pity and a yawn. It's been said at times that the sacrificer and the victim are one and the same. This may be worth reflecting.

Where have laughter and gratitude gone? Unable to laugh at myself, unable to count my blessings and honor those who have given me life, I opt to feel miserable.

Might not the *Other* be a manifestation of Christ? “Christ has no body now on earth but ours, no hand but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which is to look out Christ’s compassion to the world, ours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good, ours are the hands through which he is to bless men now.” (St. Theresa of Avila)

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Whoever said that marriage is a picnic? Well it ain’t except in fairy tales (before the changing of nappies begins) because:

Men dream of a wife that is a model mother, a gourmet cook, a brilliant conversationalist and a talented whore (how on earth does she find the energy for all that?), while women dream of a husband who is a cheerful provider (mutually self-exclusive), an attentive listener (men seldom are) and handy around the house (though two control-freaks are bound get in each other’s way).

When the dream-bubble bursts, libido sinks and life becomes fearfully normal. When passion converts to companionship and mutual toleration, the oscillation between periodic tiffs and hugs keep the ship afloat. Gaps in the dream need to be filled with humor and good will, peppered with an occasional pleasant surprise.

They say that marriage is a learning process. There is much talk of karma and “you get the spouse that’s right for you and you develop spiritually” as you rub each other the wrong way. But that’s a lot of conjecture.

The learning process never ends. One spouse outlives the other and that can be hard. The survivor continually reflects what he might easily have done differently had he only been more forgiving, less resentful, less ill tempered or suspecting bad intent, a bit more intelligent, self-sacrificing and more willing to take the risk of unconditional love.

Survivor’s guilt is a frequent visitor. Just this morning I woke thinking of the confession of sins I would make to my deceased wife, asking for her loving forgiveness, which I know she would give. I would confess

every sin committed since the age of reason began, because she has suffered the effect of them all. And thus I might eventually be able to forgive myself because the sinner suffers invariably from his own deficiency of love.

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Having just seen a small child mercilessly tyrannize her parents, who tried to be equally understanding and tolerant as they were helpless (the hysterical brat would have deserved a slap), and recalling mothers who at certain stages lived in fear of their daughter's sharp tongue, I wonder why it took psychoanalysts so long to realize that parent-child relationship is a two-way traffic with merit or fault on both sides. Although parents have the physical, mental and financial upper hand, the child is endowed with a psychic cunning that enables it exploit and manipulate the parents till it becomes the center of attention. This is part of the struggle for survival; it is natural and sets in early. And being sub-conscious, this cunning has no boundaries set by reason. Unlike an elephant, a human, taking ever so long to acquire autonomy, becomes confrontational before knowing why.

Did I tyrannize my parents? You bet I did. By punishing my mother with silence and non-response and by burdening my widowed father with my self-inflicted melancholy, I considered mainly my own feelings. Young people tend to be selfish. Did I want to be my mother's companion rather than her son and my father's best friend though rivaling his sisters? Most likely I did but was unable to admit this.

Was Mother abusive, unjust and choleric? Absolutely, just as she was beautiful, god-fearing and self-sacrificing. Was Father unapproachable? No doubt. Just as he was a perceptive mentor and responsible provider. If you take one side for granted, then accept also the other.

You do not live without accumulating debt. Concerned as we are with human rights, we tend to ignore the debts. Yes, we all know that parents owe their children material, moral and medical support as well as an education. But we forget that children owe their parents honor, which implies refraining from judgement. Seldom in history have the young sat with such ease in judgement of the old as in our time. Unaware of

the spirit of the times in which their ancestors were born, they apply post-dated moral judgements to condemn them. Denying our parents due honor, we usurp the judgement seat and undermine our credibility, as in due course we also shall be judged by our descendants.

If you are born at a time of dissonance between the Moon and Saturn, you are challenged to develop the love of a mother. If you are born at a time of dissonance between the Sun and Saturn, you are challenged to live up to the expectation of a father. Where we write “challenged to develop” and “challenged to live up to”, we formerly wrote: “failed to experience” and “failed to live up to”. Formulation can label you either a victim or a potential success.

The *kairos* or quality of time at birth shows “what manner of man thou art”, the role that you may be assigned, how you will be perceived, what pitfalls and opportunities await you, what lessons you may have to learn and wherein lies your strength. You are the doer as well as the recipient, the audience as well as the actor, the victor as well as the loser. Reflect on the saying: “Man and his destiny are one”.

Our *kairos* may also express something about our genetic heritage and environment. These are also part of our destiny. It is for us to redeem the shadow of our ancestry and to carry its beacon of light, to be receptive to our environment, help shape it and participate in the act of creation..

When there is resentment, we are fully blocked, Where there is lack of forgiveness, our vehicle no longer rolls. To ask God for forgiveness is easy, to ask another person for forgiveness means swallowing pride but to forgive oneself means accepting without self-hate ones human state of imperfection,

When I find I cannot forgive someone else, it is usually because I cannot forgive myself for having been gullible, careless, collusive, willing to be the play victim, reluctant to take responsibility, deaf and blind to intuition, or just determined to be vindictive. It is hard to forgive oneself for having been foolish, petty or mean. So one is inclined to take it out on others or to become self-destructive. God may have more important

concerns than the prayers of contrition addressed to him. But we do not.

Both hurting and healing can be developed into a fine art. A beating with a belt will hurt for the moment, a wound from a word may hurt a lifetime. We can build up or demolish a soul with one little sentence that may happen to be uttered in an instant of maximum impact. If Empedocles, philosopher in ancient Greece, was correct in observing that the rhythm of life is determined by cycles of love and hate, hope that is undermined by a mean denial of love hurts like a dagger.

Granted, human understanding is a grace bestowed, a talent that is innate, a skill to be acquired and a convergence of souls, You may be born into a situation of conflict that is predetermined and not yet have the insight to turn this liability into an asset. You may be born to irresponsible parents, or discover yourself married to a rotter or entangled in a partnership with a crook. Hard lessons to be learned will, if they do not break us, make us strong. Asking *why* will only elicit a speculative reply. Civilizations were built on foundations of hardship, not of ease. This applies to our personal condition as well.

With the magic of a glance, a word or a touch we can either make or mar someone's day. Which option we chose depends on the light or darkness that infuses us at the moment; blaming our lack of enlightenment on others will not excuse our darkness.

It has been said that a smile will bring dividends and cost us nothing. But when we want to be evil, and there is no denying the fascination of evil, the dividend we want is the hurt we inflict on the target of our discontent. If we are unable or unwilling to exalt one another with love, we may be disposed to pursue with rage and demean with hatred rather than to affect indifference, though our body, mind and soul may sicken with the poison of recrimination. Either we drink the poison we brew or we heal from the light we disseminate. Some may relish this poison, which they drink at the price of serenity and bliss. And others may be unwilling or unable to get out of this rut without help.

Upholding human dignity, we cannot, will not and ought not forgive the unforgivable. So what do we do? Take it out on others or on ourself. Be

a link in a programmed unending chain of tragic events or incarnations? Suppress painful memories or feign indifference? These are non-healing options. “Speak not of healing; we must never forget”, we say justifiably. Indeed to forgive, we must remember and even share the memories with a ready listener. But remembering, we will eventually want to decide whether to flow with life or, stopping time, look back and, like Lot’s wife, turn into a salt pillar.

“It is easy for you to talk, who have gotten off lightly”, you might say. “Then I should talk all the more if I can help you heal”, I reply. “What makes you think I want your help?” You might respond. “Do you find your *raison-d’être* in life consists in regurgitating past sufferings?” I’d chime back. “None of your business!” you’ll bark as you continue to project your dark thoughts unto others while I take a break from the helper syndrome. Did not Augustine remark that we need to be of good cheer in order to enter the kingdom of heaven? The kingdom is here but resentment is too heavy a baggage to drag along.

Reconciliation is not achieved through willing. We can only prepare for that moment of grace, whenever it may come. We open up by adopting a receptive state of mind, waiting with no expectation but also without lack of expectation. We talk with the soul that hurt us and listen to its reply, free of projection or intent. Whether we shall ever be able to forgive and love those who have hurt us remains to be seen but in refusing to love ourselves, we opt to abstain from joy.

Carry me from night into day,  
wading through leaden and diadem waters,  
bridging a narrow vale to a sun-swept shore.  
Bear me home with your heartbeat and breath  
now that I’ve died and freed you from dread.  
Be your redeemer, redeeming my spirit.  
Carry me over the river today  
as Christopher carried Christ.