

Introduction

From interpersonal to international, these times are riddled with conflict. Abuser and victim, terrorist and defender, environmentalist and developer – which side are you on? After all, sides must be taken, because here is a right and a wrong. Or is there another way – a deeper, more all-embracing approach? The political buzzword these days is tolerance, in the humanistic realm it is forgiveness; are they our answer?

Enter a riveting, soul-baring journey to the answer, Forgiveness and Child Abuse: Would YOU Forgive? Offering child abuse as the metaphor for this quest, author, academic and child abuse survivor Lois J. Einhorn paints us a heart-rending picture of the grueling torture she endured. She then asks the reader the same self-searching question that has shaped her life and spawned this book, “You are a child in a family that sadistically abuses. You are forced to torture and destroy. What should you do now as an adult? Do you forgive your parents? How do you forgive yourself?”

She poses the same question to 50 distinguished contemporaries, many of whom are household names – Nelson Mandela, Patch Adams, Daniel Quinn; others are academics, religious leaders and working people who are making important contributions to healing from abuse. Their heartfelt responses are included in the book, and they are our guide and inspiration as we search for our answer to the same question.

Most notable is the fact that these esteemed healers, who have devoted their lives to the issue of abuse, are nowhere near agreement among themselves. In fact, their opinions span the spectrum from compassion to condemnation. And what a blessing that is for the reader! No matter what someone’s abuse history or what opinion they might hold, they are likely to resonate with some of the book’s contributors. From there, Forgiveness and Child Abuse takes the reader on a healing journey, walking beside 50 wise kin of our day.

Forgiveness and Child Abuse is an indispensable healing companion for anyone who has suffered abuse of any kind, and it is a potent guide for professionals who work with abuse victims. And yet that is only the beginning of what this book has to offer. We all live in this abuse-intoxicated culture; this book gives us first the mandate and opportunity, and then the forum and guidance, to engage in the soul-searching dialog we need in order to come to grips with the critical questions of our day:

- How do we face the wanton violence and exploitation that surrounds us?
- As we are continually at war or preparing for war; do we forgive our leaders? Our “enemy?”
- Does our right-and-wrong approach actually sanction abuse?
- Do tolerance and forgiveness really address the cause of abuse?
- What other options do we have?

The timing could not be better for this book. More than ever, it is becoming beautifully clear and painfully obvious that we are all related. Together let us begin this healing journey.

– Tamarack Song, author of Sacred Speech: The Way of Truthspeaking, and contributor to this book

Chapter Excerpt

Forgiveness: Virtue or Verdict?

Lois Einhorn’s tragic and private story, most courageously revealed, tells of a sequestered

time in a nameless place, and yet it exploded before me into a metaphor for myself and my culture. It was me, forced to the floor, whipped and raped. I became an indentured peasant, given only enough to keep me alive and working. And then I was a horse, forced to haul so much, and for so long, that I went blind and dumb from hemorrhaging. Finally, I found myself huddled with my beaten tribe, being pillaged in every imaginable way by soulless conquerors.

These stories – our stories – of abuse, are customarily either whitewashed away or given face lifts, so that they pass as acts of patriotism in time of war, or as the cost of progress in times of peace. Our foul stories are never-ending, because the disguisers, opiated with greed and given the sanction of forgiveness, have perpetuated an unbroken chain of abuse throughout the ages.

No one will tell Lois's story at a family gathering, nor will our culture's real stories be found in our history books, because pretense is more palatable than the truth, and because history is, after all, written by the victors. The news media often choose not see or report the real story, because they are controlled and paid by the victors. For the same reasons, questions like Lois's are seldom asked in our political and economic forums. And sadly, they are not often or loudly enough raised in religious and academic circles. They must, therefore, be addressed by you, and me, and anyone courageous enough to face them. I stress the must because these questions take us to the pith of our species' paradoxical ability to maltreat its own kind. They are the hard, underlying questions that we as individuals, and as a culture, need to ask of ourselves if we are ever to know peace.

This book is first our opportunity to serve Lois in her healing, and then it is Lois's gift to other abuse victims, our demoralized culture, and our plundered Mother Planet. And lastly, it is Lois's gift to us – our forum, our catalyst, our work, and I am honored to be a part of it.

A cornerstone of our culture

I have had the privilege of knowing Lois for a number of years, so her self-searching question, "Do I forgive, and if so – how?" is not new to me. Even though I had the wisdom of my Native-American elders to draw upon, the guidance of other traditions, and the teachings that living in the wilds have given me, only recently was I able to take Lois's question fully into the arena of human experience. I was helped by a wedding I attended, where the poem, "The Art of a Good Marriage," by Wilferd Arlan Peterson, was read. The line, "It is having the capacity to forgive and forget," took me on a reflective journey into the dynamics of relationship: If I accept my mate for who and how she is, what is there then to forgive? What is there then to forget? If I am my spouse's soul mate and equal, who am I to presume the position to forgive?

There were no easy answers. All I heard was the echo of my culture's voice, "To err is human, to forgive, divine," "Forgive and forget," "You are richer today if you have laughed, given or forgiven." Norman Cousins summed it up when he said, "Life is an adventure in forgiveness." Some research quickly confirmed my hunch that forgiveness is a cherished value in most cultures. The French say that the confessed mistake is already half forgiven; the Albanians have a saying, "To forgive the letting of blood, even a killing, is to be a man."

"How deep do the roots of forgiveness go?" I asked myself. I found it at nearly every turn when I explored the Jewish tradition. "Thou givest a hand to offenders, and thy right hand is stretched out to receive the penitent," states the Hebrew Prayer Book. The same was true of Christianity, with their most popular prayer containing the line, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us" (from The Book of Common Prayer). Every other major faith offered the same message: "Forgive me, O Lord. Forgive my sinful past deeds," is a Hindu example from the Stotra Mala; "The Buddha resides in a place of forgiveness," says the contemporary Buddhist monk, Beopjeong; the Koran of Islam states, "With kindness Allah forgives and invites to Paradise;" and from A Book of Pagan Prayer, "If I have done anything to

offend you [Ancestors]...I ask for forgiveness.”

Is forgiveness natural?

My research shows that forgiveness is a common practice, however that was not good enough reason for me to accept it. The saying, “Choose to be forgiven,” hints that forgiveness might be a matter of belief or preference rather than a natural human trait. If so, what are my other choices?

In my Ojibwe tradition we have a practice called Chi Debwewen, which means Greater Truth. When a person wants to know if his or her knowledge or beliefs will hold up outside his own realm of experience, he will test them by applying them to a variety of people and situations. I did this with forgiveness, in order to determine whether or not it is a natural human trait. Reasoning that hunter-gatherer peoples would represent the essential human, I applied Chi Debwewen to a number of native groups from around the world.

Again, I had no trouble finding references to forgiveness. Southeast Australian Awabakal Aborigines have a term, Wa-re-kul-li-ko, which means to forgive. Antaa is reported to mean the same in the Saami (northern Scandinavian Laplanders) language. “Strange,” I thought, “I have personal friends who are Saami and Aborigine, and they are not forgiving. I know that the word booni in the Ojibwe language, which some linguists translate as forgive, merely means to leave alone or not think about.” That, coupled with my own awareness that people generally view an alien culture through the tint of their own culture’s lens, inspired me to keep looking.

“Wait a minute,” I realized, “forgiveness is not a word, it is a practice! More than that, it is a state of being, a way of life; how can one word in a dictionary begin to convey that?” With the inspiration that must have gripped Einstein when he discovered a new law of physics, I hurriedly jotted down notes from my own body of knowledge and tradition: “Ho'oponopono is known to most as the old Hawaiian practice of forgiveness. The literal translation of Ho'oponopono is make good-good, or simply correct. That is taking responsibility for actions – a matter of honor, whereas forgiveness is a pardoning – a matter of perspective.”

My notes continued: “My clan does a Smudging Ceremony (an invocation and cleansing done with incensing herbs) before building a new lodge, which some see as asking forgiveness for disturbing the land and killing the plants. The elders explain that they do it to ask if it was okay to be there, to give thanks for the privilege, and to voice their intent to live in harmony and disturb as little as possible.”

Why then forgiveness?

“If, as it appears, forgiveness was not commonly practiced by hunter-gatherers (which include all of our ancestors) where, then, did it originate? And why is it now not only found worldwide, but also held as a virtue?” I realized that I already had part of the answer, because I live it everyday in the wilderness, and watch others find it themselves as they learn primitive living skills.

Hunter-gatherers live what is called the Beauty Way – dwelling in the bliss of the moment, with little regret for the past and little care for the future. Earth Mother provides for virtually all necessities and desires, so there is no need to work, form governments, or accumulate wealth and possessions. With little to cause regret, tension or strife, there is little need for forgiveness.

When humans became agriculturists, they had to deal with feast and famine, wealth and poverty, bureaucracy and plague, and work, work, work. Their lives turned into routines of endless toil in the fields. With little contentment in the present, and much to cause the aforementioned regret, tension, and strife, people began looking to the future. Religions were

founded to support people throughout life, and promising that their long-suffering would be rewarded after death. Buddhists saw life as pain and suffering; if one suffered well, she gained enlightenment. Christians were rewarded with heavenly afterlives if they fared well through lives of suffering, temptation and sin. Karma, the legacy of a previous life, dictated the degree of misery for Hindus. If an individual's karma was worked out before death, he could expect to re-incarnate to higher states, eventually reaching Nirvana.

Reward upon death was usually not enough. The misery of daily life forced people, often through religious auspices, to come up with coping mechanisms for the here-and-now. Enter sin, karma, meditation, tolerance, justice, and forgiveness.

When people return to the Beauty Way, they gradually abandon these coping mechanisms, because they are no longer needed.

The paradox of forgiveness.

Mark Twain once said that forgiveness is the fragrance a violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it. Was he implying that forgiveness is a costly virtue? The Portuguese have a saying, "The noblest vengeance is to forgive." Noble perhaps, and yet it is vengeance. "Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong," said Mahatma Gandhi. But, what about the weak? And what does this say about the strong?

I have found forgiveness to be a trap, for both the forgiver and the forgiven. There is a saying, "To forgive is to set the prisoner free and then discover the prisoner was you." Trapped! Maintaining a prisoner also imprisons yourself. Prison is the metaphor for a life of misery, and freeing the prisoner is the metaphoric coping mechanism; however, the freeing creates only the illusion of freedom, because then you realize that you are the prisoner. Or perhaps the coping mechanism simply numbs the pain, and as soon as it is abandoned, one finds that he is still a prisoner – trapped in a life of misery. As the saying goes, "He has forgiven all but himself."

It is commonly believed that forgiveness is healing. In my experience, however, the healing is an illusion, and a short-term one at that. In the long run, forgiveness usually proves to be an impediment to healing. It is a diversion from the real work that has to be done – it can mask the truths that need to be spoken, and often leaves unresolved issues and raw feelings.

Perhaps its greatest disservice to healing is that in order to forgive, there must be both a victim and a perpetrator. This pigeonholing creates a distance between the two, which limits the healing and the manifestation of love that may still be possible.

Forgiveness is judgmentalism

The American Heritage Dictionary defines forgiveness as the act of "excusing for a fault or offense; a pardon." I wish to stress that a fault or offense was committed only if someone is judged as having done so. The mere fact that I have taken a bushel of apples from my neighbor's tree does not mean that I have committed an offense. It is up to my neighbor to determine. She might condone the act, and perhaps even offer more apples, knowing my need. Another neighbor might overlook the circumstance and judge me as guilty of stealing.

Even though the second neighbor may yet forgive, he first judged me as guilty. If he had not, there would have been no reason to forgive in the first place. There is no forgiveness, therefore, without judgment. Judgment contributes to the distance created when we label victim and perpetrator. This distance is vertical rather than horizontal – the victim assumes the moral high ground and the perpetrator is relegated to the moral cesspool.

In simple terms, the victim is right and the perpetrator is wrong. From this righteous position the victim bestows forgiveness.

Apology, defined by the American Heritage dictionary as “expressing regret or asking pardon for a fault or offense,” is judgmentalism in reverse – this time from the moral cesspool. The perpetrator judges himself wrong and the victim, right, and acknowledges this to the victim.

Several years ago a friend wrote me a letter of apology because she thought she had offended me. In my reply I stated, “An apology is not something you have to express to me. I feel that most people are doing the best they can at any particular time, so to be sorry for what you’ve done is to be sorry for doing your best.”

Apology also doesn’t take into account that how someone reacts has more to do with what they perceived was done to them, rather than what actually did occur. And apology does not acknowledge the control we each have over our lives. Many of us choose, consciously or unconsciously, to place ourselves in situations where we get hurt.

The bottom line is that forgiveness and apology – seemingly innocuous and supposedly virtuous acts – are both candy-coated judgments.

If not forgiveness, then what?

Robert Browning said it is good to forgive, better to forget. And yet forgetting closes the door to healing. “Sin is that which once had a place, but now has no place,” stated Oribundo. Sin, karma, punishment, hell, and perhaps even heaven, are all the results of judgments. If we ceased to judge, sin and its allies would cease to exist. There would be no need to forgive, or apologize. Guilt and blame would become things of the past.

This may sound utopian, and like many utopian envisions, it ignores a stark reality or two. In this case, woundedness. Oftentimes it is so severe that the lives of those involved will never again be normal. Usually it does not stop with the incident, and severe woundedness goes on tormenting throughout life, and then is passed on from generation to generation. No – forgive and forget is not good enough. We need answers. We need to be proactive in healing the woundedness and healing the behavioral patterns that cause it.

I do not claim to have all the answers; however, I have learned the first step – acceptance. With acceptance we acknowledge the event and all parties involved, without the judgment. We provide the groundwork for dialogue and understanding.

What does this give us? Acceptance is healing in and of itself, both for the individual and the relationships involved. Anger and judgment bleed the body and warp the soul. Acceptance is also a doorway to further healing – it opens a range of possibilities that forgiveness precludes. As notable is what acceptance does not give us – the distancing between perpetrator and victim that results from the standard judgment-based approaches. Without distancing we are less likely to demonize and deify. The line between victim and perpetrator fades, which encourages new perspectives. For example, some discover that the “perpetrator” has been, or still is, an abuse victim, or that the “victim” has become a perpetrator. I have witnessed miracles that I would previously never have imagined, such as both “victim” and “perpetrator” expressing thankfulness for an abuse incident, because it proved pivotal in their awakening and subsequent healing.

(Text Box Insert) The fuzzy line – an example

Christine was a young woman in her mid-20s, beautiful and bright. She came to me for help because she was incapable of meaningful intimate relationship. At the time she was living a reclusive life as a farm hand. This is her story: Coming into adolescence, she

enjoyed and often sought sexual attention from older men. “I was only half there,” she said, “like I was in a dream.”

“I still act like an adolescent,” she complained, “I can’t feel the way I think an adult should feel. And I have trouble touching a man – I feel dirty afterward, and often sink into depression. Sometimes I want to kill myself.”

She was raised by her mother, who was chronically depressed and suicidal. Men were Christine’s substitute for the loving attention her family could not provide. As much as Christine was suffering, she would not fault those men, because without them she doubts that she would have survived. (End of Insert)

Acceptance is not a virtue, nor is it a religious ideal. It is a simple a matter of practicality. Without acceptance, we are right back to judgmentalism in its various guises. With acceptance we can gain perspective on the situation and take charge of our lives by:

- acknowledging the relationship of all people involved
- identifying the behavioral patterns that trigger the abuse
- recognizing the generational history of the abuse
- contributing to the self-esteem of both perpetrator and victim
- encouraging trust
- inviting others to help and support
- opening to emotional honesty and the potential for love.

As insidious as child abuse is, and as sickening as it might strike us, we must recognize that acceptance is the first critical step to any real healing. It may help to remember that acceptance does not mean agreement; it is merely a recognition and honoring of another person’s reality, even though it may differ from our own. This includes past realities of our own that may not resonate with our present reality. In that case, acceptance of the incident can provide a giant step toward self-acceptance.

What is the cost of this acceptance? Few people, whether abused or abuser, come by acceptance easily, especially when first introduced to the option. Shame and anger cloud their perspectives, and fears of vulnerability and accountability loom. This can make them suspicious of any outside involvement, so rather than seeing acceptance as a doorway to healing, they fear it is being dangled before them as bait to lure them into the usual blame-shame scenario. For these reasons it is important to spell out, along with the benefits, exactly what they have to let go of:

- expectations of forgiveness or being forgiven
- desires for retribution or restitution
- anonymity – their story will be known to others
- being right – there are no sides
- remaining victim/perpetrator – acceptance is an opening to change.

With this approach we are honoring the relationship of the people involved. In the overwhelming majority of cases, childhood sexual abuse occurs within the context of established relationships. Focusing on the abuse itself is simply treating the symptom of an out-of-balance relationship, and it is seldom the only symptom. The core of the imbalance lies in the relationship, so healing focus ought to be on the relationship rather than a particular individual.

In my Ojibwe tradition, much healing is done through stories. I would like to share with you a story about healing with acceptance and relationship. This story is from the Cherokee People via my dear Irish friend, Patty Miller.

“Two Hungry Bears”

Our people have a saying that when all is quiet under a blanket of snow, Bears wake up. Now these are not ordinary Bears, because they hibernate when the snow lays deep. No, I am talking about the Bears who wait to come out during the long cold nights deep in the White Season, when virtually all of life is sleeping in a warm, sheltered place. On nights like this only the far-off call from Wolf or Owl reminds us that anything at all would still be moving about.

This evening is one such night, when a young boy named Otter Tail was sitting up late by himself. The radiant fire in the center of the lodge cast a warm-yellow glow on the tidy stack of dry firewood. His family was long asleep among the piles of plush furs, and yet his fretful mind would not let him join them.

He was a carefree child, and always clear in what he thought and felt. But now, as he approached his tenth winter, his life began spinning in a confusing web of feelings. Tonight he stared into the fading fire, as though searching for something deep in the embers.

The wailing chorus of nearby Wolves startled Otter Tail out of his meditation. As the howls trailed off to rejoin the stillness, Otter Tail’s eyes opened wide in a sudden realization, “I will go and see Grandfather! He is wise like a Mountain; perhaps he can help.”

It was all Otter Tail could do not to awaken his family. He quickly tended the fire, snatched his Fox fur, and darted out the door. Even before he got his robe fully wrapped around him, he was across the clearing and entering Grandfather’s lodge.

“It is very late and you are awake, honored Grandfather,” Otter Tail said in surprise as he entered the warmth of his Grandfather’s lodge. The elder was not only up but feeding an inviting fire, as though he were expecting someone.

“He is in the place for greeting visitors,” Otter Tail thought to himself. “Maybe the doorway is drafty so Grandfather is sitting where it is warmest. I came for clarity and only meet confusion,” thought Otter Tail as he sat to the left of the door, the traditional place for children; from there they could easily run errands for their elders.

“Honored Grandfather, my belly is being torn apart. It is like two hungry Bears are inside of me, who battle each other. Sometimes they fight in my dreams. Even in the day, when I feel impatient or sad, or angry or jealous, they wake up and lash at each other.”

Grandfather looked intently into the fire. “I know them well,” he replied. “They live inside of me also. And perhaps inside everyone. One is the Bear of the balance that comes with living the natural way of giving and receiving. The other is the Bear of imbalance that comes from thinking with the mind rather than the heart.”

Grandfather said no more. He stirred the coals, and then they both sat in silence.

After a while the boy spoke, “Grandfather, but which one will win?”

“The one that you feed, my child.”

“But does not the one who is fed grow strong, and the one who is not fed, grow weak? How do I feed the Bear of balance?”

“With your heart,” was his grandfather’s simple reply.

The fire had burned down to pale-orange embers, casting just enough light into the blackness to mark the features of their faces, before another voice was heard.

“But Grandfather, they are both inside of me.”

“Yes, my child. You are wise beyond the turns of the seasons you have been blessed to know. But in truth there is only one Bear. In the way that Cloud and Sun come together to make the day, the fighting Bears join to help us see both the dark and the light. Go now to be with your family under the sleeping robe, so that your Bears might find their place of rest within you. Together they will guide you through the loves and battles, and the visions and blindness that make up the journey of life.”

“Grandfather, you speak in riddles,” Otter Tail said with a lightened heart. “And yet you bring me comfort. Sometimes I understand the wisdom of your smile better than the wisdom of your words. Thank you dear Father of my Father. I shall carry your smile into my dreams.”

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