Mind-Killing Fear, Mind-Ressurrecting Love

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Introduction: Forgiveness and Research

Both our world and our human history are full of wonderful achievements but also of pain and darkness. One major part of that concerns what we humans did and keep doing each other. I would like to emphasize this last utterance: we keep doing. Jessica Williams (2004) wrote a very important and daring book where she informs us about 50 terrible contemporary facts. The majority of them concern directly what we keep doing. Let me point some of them:

- The average life expectation is 84 years for a Japanese woman and 39 to a Botswanan;
- China has 44 million missing woman;
- 81% of world's executions in 2002 took place in three countries: China, Iran and the USA;
- One fifth of the world's people live with less than one dollar a day;
- There are 44 million child labourers in India;
- The world's trade in illegal drugs amounts to some 400 billion dollars. That is the same as world's legal pharmaceutical industry;
- More than 150 countries use torture;
- A third of the word's population is at war;
- In 2003, the United States spent 396 billion dollars on its military;
- There are 27 million slaves in the world today;
- There are 300.000 child soldiers fighting in conflicts around he world.

I believe nothing more needs to be said about violence in our world. It is pervasive and so are feelings of fear, resentment and vengeance. I would even contend that many conflicts – like the very old one between Israelis and Palestinians – are kept alive and nurtured by resentment and revenge. Lots of people feel and believe they can regain their power only after "getting even" with perpetrators of different kinds of violence towards them. It is only too easy then to loose track of who did what to whom, in what amount, when. The balance of Justice is hardly brought to equilibrium by revenge. But then... Spiritual traditions tell us about forgiveness and we do feel it offers us a way out. But can we be sure of that? That is when Science becomes useful – and I totally believe it does as it represents one of Humanity's noblest movements in the quest for Truth.

The Templeton Foundation sponsored an important amount of research projects on Forgiveness (Templeton was the main sponsor for a very important project, the Campaign for Forgiveness Research) and from there

we get the feeling that indeed something new is happening in the field. Lets take a fast look at them.

Forgiving is not easy and victims tend to keep feeling they need some compensation from perpetrators (Audrey Chapman, 2003); however, Forgiveness training does have impact among adults or groups and does promote stress reduction or other benefits (Ervin Staub, 2001; Robert Wuthnow, 2001; Carl Thoresen, 2002; Thomas Bradbury, 2002; Frederick DiBlasio, 2004). Unforgiving and mentally rehearsing offense scenes tends to erode health (Charlotte Witvliet, 2002) as does forgiving favor it both physically or emotionally (Warren Jones with Kathleen Lawler, 2001; Wesley Perkins, 2002;). Something less optimistic: according to Lindon Eaves (2003),vengefulness correlates with anti-social behavior and seems partially a genetic trait as does forgiveness.

Research on the ways out of revenge and resentment are also promising. According to them, forgiving implies a transformation of our views on the transgressor, its acts or consequences, from negative to neutral or positive (C.R. Snyder, 2002); forgiving can be stronger if interactions among communities are higher (David Haskell, 2000; Ed Cairns, 2002) although it can be easier between individuals (Ed Cairns, 2002); forgiving is easier in organizations that somehow emphasize virtues such as compassion, integrity, optimism and trust (Kim Cameron, 2002); forgiveness is easier if one is motivated to keep an ongoing relationship (Caryl Rusbult, 2002). One can even construct therapist manuals for forgiveness training (Kenneth E. Hart with David Shapiro, 2002)

We also know something about obstacles and facilitators to forgiveness. Two pride-related *barriers to forgiveness* are a sense of entitlement for lots of good things ("I deserve") and a sense of self-righteousness (I am doing it right, you aren't) (Roy Baumeister, 2002). Forgiveness seems to be *facilitated* by religious commitment and also to enhance self-control and persistence in tasks (Roy Baumeister, 2002). This last aspect is quite compatible with our views within the Transpersonal field.

So Forgiveness is important, it can be cultivated and we know something about it from scientific research. Let me now approach it from my experience as a psychotherapist.

A Clinician's View on Forgiveness

I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear... I will permit it to pass over me and through me.
"Paul Atreides" while enduring a major test of courage and will in David Lynch's movie "Dune"

I love this quotation as I believe it to assert a deep psychological truth: fear can, in a way, "kill" our minds because with this feeling they tend to withdraw, shrink, forget, escape. But I will be talking about this later.

We want to get rid of evil and we want to get rid of the harm that was made to us. I have found it many times with my patients: they would like to forgive but something is making them unable to do so. And what we don't forgive, we carry in our memory and our remembering. Unforgiven evil is thus

kept in store, quite alive. We know that it is there because of re-sentment, re-volt... and the desire to get even. Memories of evil keep coming back because they haven't been digested. We did not accept evil and by not accepting it we keep perpetrators at a distance. They become aliens to us because of what they did.

Do my patients at first really want to escape resentment? That is not what I have witnessed. It looks like many of us do believe we must remember evil so that we can protect ourselves from it. We can even understand that in survival terms: we must remember evil so that we can destroy it or at least avoid it. But with unforgiven evil we risk nurturing it inside, keeping the poison along with our identity. We keep the images of evil, we repeat them inside. We remember and by remembering, while nurturing the feeling that goes along images, we stay as prisoners of the past. We don't move on. That is why forgiving liberates us from the past. It liberates us from ourselves and what we introjected from others.

But why is it so hard? What is the nature of those chains that keep us locked into our past? We know they are poisonous and going through them again only brings more poison... But this is understandable. Sometimes we treasure the idea that the criminal will get caught and punished, that we will testify, that perhaps we will do the same to him/her. We dream about regaining our freedom and well being out of that. However we won't feel really better because there is no way one can get rid of evil by repeating it. If we repeat the evil that was done to us, we become the replica of perpetrators. This is true for the "fantasies of revenge" we sometimes keep playing in our minds and for the real thing. If we "get even", we get two wrong people instead of one. Or we have a croud of people that chose to import the evil that was made to them, allowing it inside. That is the price of revenge: repeating evil and therefore strengthening it.

The alternative of forgiveness implies being so humble that we acknowledge the offender as being like us. We could have done the same, we can do the same. Sometimes vengeful feelings are the demonstration of that. So by acknowledging the seed of evil inside us we become capable of understanding others. But then…perhaps they are not like us. We are too important, too strong, too virtuous. We would never do such evil deeds. So they are not like us, they are different. We know from Social Psychology that sometimes people invited to play the role of wardens will find ways to justify their activity by asserting that others are so evil and so different they deserve whatever is done to them. This is dehumanizing victims and projecting our guilt unto them. Also wardens can disindividualize themselves by thinking they are just obeying orders or an ideology (see the classical studies from Milgram, 1963). I believe that at the moment of revenge victims do about the same thing, believing in the ideology of justice as revenge and increasing the psychological distance between them and the perpetrators.

Also perhaps we cannot even accept ourselves for something we did or we failed to do. We cannot tolerate such evil within our identities. That's how pride gets into de picture. Pride stays in the way of both forgiving ourselves and others. And what is the available remedy? Self-observation and self-knowledge. They invite us to humbleness because we find our fallibility and our human condition – and perhaps our resemblance to others.

Then we have fear – and of course fear is one big reason for us to

nurture hatred and resentment and to not forgive. We are afraid that others will repeat what they did and also we want to regain our power – sometimes with the illusion that doing others what they did to us is just the way for overcoming impotence and feeling power and control over our lives again. Fear is the mind killer as it shrinks our mind. Because I am afraid, I withdraw and shrink. Fear shares the same nature of hatred as it makes us reject and close. *Hatred* makes me destroy objects or beings; *fear* makes me withdraw from them. Anyway I am rejecting, avoiding, expelling. Without fear there is no point in revenge because there is no need for me to make any move against others, be it to stay away from them or to make sure they stay away from me, be it to overcome helplessness or to regain power and control.

Some authors (like Alice Bailey) will say Love is the real opposite of fear. It has the virtue of expanding the mind, opening it and attracting instead of rejecting. With love it becomes easy for us to understand how close the others are to us, how similar they are, how their mistakes and shortcomings share the same nature of our own. Love is the royal way to forgiving

But then… We cannot forgive what we can't love and we can't love what we feel is different and separated from us.   And we fear what made us suffer. We want to get rid of it or to stay away from it. Fear kills our mind because it makes them shrink and close and withdraw. Fear makes us feel unequal. We can feel different because we are better or because we are inferior; anyway this illusion of difference can feed revenge.

Sometimes we don't even want to sacrifice our pain. we don't dare getting rid of it as it became part of our identity. Being hurt became one side of it and we fear that we will no longer be ourselves if we forgive and lose our pain. Also, to forget a danger is dangerous. So we keep remembering. We are afraid of more pain, even when sometimes we are no longer able to recall the first pains and offenses that now prompt us to feel angry or revengeful (see Monbourquette, 2004, one of the few deep studies of forgiveness I have found).

So perhaps we must learn how to love what we fear. Accepting it. Understanding it.

We can even forgive Hitler if we can acknowledge the little Hitler inside of us. But will we dare doing so? Will we dare facing our shadow side and find in there the little seeds that would make Hitler grow inside us if our life circumstances were bad enough or if we did the wrong choices? Acknowledging our shadow enables us to stop separating from others and understand that they are like us... In a way.

A resurrected mind – a mind that escaped fear – will be open to life through love. Thus it will not reject but integrate and include. Forgiveness is essential for that and so is the development of love. What I have found in my patients is a process whereby as they know themselves and their human strengths and weaknesses and as they learn to love and accept them, they also start learning how to accept others who did harm them in the past. They start understanding others as fellow human creatures and as mirrors of what they can do or could have done both in a positive or negative way.

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