

Reflections on forgiveness

Alex, the famous grey parrot, spontaneously picked up the phrase "I'm sorry" not from a lesson taught by his handlers but from hearing it when they used it with each other. From the first time he uttered it, he did so appropriately – for instance, after investigating the contents of a cup and accidentally knocking it to the floor. In *Alex & Me*, Irene Pepperberg, Alex's primary trainer, includes this passage:

I wrote in my journal that evening, "Does he understand?" I mean, did he feel remorse, such as you or I might feel when we say "I'm sorry"? Or was it simply a means of defusing anger?

"You or I" rarely feel remorse that could qualify as genuine contrition and self-blaming. I can't speak for the parrot; but humans tend to be sorry only that it turned out badly – they use the apology solely as a means of defusing anger. This is true for roughly 99% of the times that they utter the phrase. Here is a glossary of actual meanings attached to apologies:

- I'm sorry your bowels are in an uproar. I would like you to get over it.
- I'm sorry I got caught doing what I wanted to do and which I don't regret doing. I would like the quickest route to hitting the reset button with you.
- I knew I was cutting a corner, but it was a morally insignificant corner and I

did my best to make sure you would never find out. I am sorry that you did. Now I do feel bad that you feel bad, but mostly I feel bad that I was not more careful to cover my tracks. I have apologized to you – handsomely, I must say. Therefore it is time for you to tell me that you forgive me.

- I did want to do it at the time, but almost immediately I realized that I had made a spiritual mistake. I was thoughtless and I wronged you. I am sorry; I wish to make amends or render full restitution under your direction. I know that my obligation to do this does not give me a right to expect you to forgive me.

I leave it to my readers to assign the percentages, as long as we can all agree that the last category covers fewer than 1% of the cases.

The philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum has written about apologies in *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Her most important point is to identify anger in the offended party as a stalking horse for revenge. The anger functions as a demand for restitution, which is expected to take the form of an apology by the offender. The apology in turn acts coercively to require forgiveness. Nussbaum recommends cutting this ritual off at the start: she points out the negative consequences of dwelling on the past offense, with its emphasis on "retributive justice," and urges an active effort to transform the anger into a more positive emotion that looks to the future. This will entail empathy and generosity on the part of the angry victim. Her examples of the utility of this approach are Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela.

Andrew Stark, reviewing Nussbaum's book for *The New Rambler* ("Forgive and Forget," August 15, 2016), speaks up for anger as a protest against injustice – the offended party has a right to be angry, and the anger serves as the first, indispensable step toward a meaningful reconciliation.

What both Nussbaum and Stark seem to pass over too quickly is a common-sense challenge to the concept of "wrong" at the origin of the dance of anger and contrition. My question would be, "Wrong for whom?" If the perpetrator acted in complete ignorance – an unlikely case – there is nothing to be angry about. If he *knew* it was wrong, why did he do it? The answer in all but the most philosophically contrived cases is that he *wanted* to do it. Therefore, by definition, he did not think that it was wrong *for him*. If, then, he wanted to do it and is only sorry he got caught, what is his contrition worth? And if his apology is suspect, what am I doing forgiving him? Alternatively, why am I considering a future that includes him?

So the short answer to my question must be that the angering action was "Wrong for *the victim*." Invoking common sense again, my forgiveness is absurd if the perpetrator feels no remorse and makes no apology. If he laughs at my forgiving gesture, and responds that he is only sorry that he did not finish the job on me, what exactly is my forgiveness about, other than a neurotic performance before an imaginary audience of saints? Perhaps I am trying to make myself more acceptable to God or to myself – but in that case, there is no transaction at all between me and the perpetrator. He is just an extra in a movie I am starring in and my scene has nothing to do with him.

The objection that evolved people have always lodged against the pursuit of revenge is that it eats up the pursuer. Outrage, however justified, is a negative emotion – a toxic bath of bad chemicals that, in the words of legendary baseball pitcher Satchel Paige, "angry up the blood." So I have a compelling reason to forgo revenge, regardless of how hurtful the offender's behavior was. In this spirit, I choose to strike anger and vengeance from the repertoire of useful moves – but in doing so I am

motivated more by self-interest than by magnanimity.

If I have been truly wronged – we will save for another day the possibility that I am exhibiting a "false positive," a narcissistic wound produced by my misinterpretation of the other person's intention – my first task will be to figure out whether the relationship with the offender is worth saving. If he feels no remorse, and is likely to repeat the offense, I need to remove myself from the situation, pronto. There is no need for the dance of anger, apology, and forgiveness, because on his part the apology will be *pro forma* and on my part the entire exercise is a fool's errand, keeping me enmeshed in the bad dynamic instead of freeing me from it. If, after mature consideration, I do wish to stay in the relationship with the offender, then the most important step for me to take is to attempt to understand what happened, especially by accessing his phenomenology. Why *did* he do it? What did it feel like to be him as he did it? I have to find out if I can empathize with the state of mind he was in.

If I am the perpetrator of the wrong, I may be in the last category of offenders: I may realize immediately that I made a terrible mistake, and quickly offer a heartfelt apology. This apology cannot be a tacit demand or even humble request for forgiveness: I am not entitled to forgiveness. My apology must be an honest acknowledgment of the harm I did and an attempt to right the wrong insofar as I can. I must offer to make such amends as are possible and carry out the restitution to the letter, still without expecting absolution. If I am the offended party in this scenario and I am offered such an apology with restitution, I must either accept it with an open heart or, if the hurt is too great, decline it with regret. I must do so with a good grace, and free the offender from feeling any further moral obligation to me.

Is this last a typical case? No, it is quite rare.

If, as is very much more likely, I see that the offender wanted the fruits of the harm that he did me, and cannot honestly renounce the benefit he took or hoped to take from his action, but wishes now to wipe the slate clean and start over with me, I have to carefully evaluate the entire configuration of our relationship and act in my own best interest. This is the hardest row to hoe: How much do I value this person, and what are our future prospects? I have to try to understand all the way down to the ground why he did what he did, what was "in it for him," and realize that he might well do it again, unless he has come to see that the loss of the relationship will be more costly to him than whatever he gained by wronging me.

The paradigm case is marital infidelity. It is usually not in the best interest of the person who was betrayed to treat the offense as a deal-breaker. Let us take a common scenario: the husband has had a casual affair with an available woman – his secretary, let us say. Upon exposure, he immediately renounces the liaison and terminates the woman's employment (with a generous recommendation); and he tries fervently and with convincing sincerity to save the marriage. In some percentage of these cases, he never strays again; in a higher percentage of them, perhaps, he strays again, sometimes repeatedly. Everything depends – assuming that an "open marriage" is unacceptable to the wife – upon her attempt to judge which category he belongs to.

Suppose my betrayer clearly wishes to resume the relationship. If my own cost-benefit analysis also favors the renewal of our relationship, we can bypass the dance, with Nussbaum's blessing: I forgo the demand for an apology (but accept it readily if it is offered); and I substitute understanding for anger, bestowing this understanding in

lieu of bestowing forgiveness – because to understand all, while it is not exactly to forgive all, is to leap over the forgiveness and land where the forgiveness is supposed to take us.

There is no getting around old age, sickness, and death; and perhaps I should add to those inevitable ills the suffering that may be callously inflicted on me by a career criminal or by a narcissist who is incapable of seeing to the bottom of his own behavior. But if I am living in the present, I will be very nearly immunized against the hurts that others can do to me. As much as is possible, then, live not only so that you need never apologize for your actions, but also in such a way that you rarely if ever need to hear an apology. This does not mean making yourself invulnerable, by means of an inhuman detachment, to the pain that may arise if you are betrayed by a trusted friend or associate; it means only that you have inner resources to cope with such interpersonal travails.

2

The statement "To understand all is to forgive all" embodies a deep psychological and spiritual truth, but it sticks in the craw of many punitively-minded individuals. I concede that the adage is so worded that it doesn't make sense to a person lacking in imagination, especially someone who is fixated on the evil done by impenitent malefactors and who is moreover comfortable wielding the rod of correction. But its wisdom is confirmed by the experiences of those who have suffered the greatest evils and forgiven them. What these people say, almost without exception, is that the desire

for revenge is poisonous, and that forgiveness of those who had tortured them was a gift that they gave *to themselves*. Dwelling upon their status as victims was debilitating; only by letting go of it were they able to move forward with their lives.

What forgiveness accomplishes is closure and, as Nussbaum emphasizes, renewed hope moving forward into the future. This is what victims of evil crave. Many surviving family members of murder victims expect to achieve this when the murderer is put to death, but here we encounter another large body of anecdotal evidence suggesting that peace of mind may not follow from seeing the ultimate penalty exacted. Contrary to long-established prison protocols, the families of those who died in the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City were allowed to watch the execution of Timothy McVeigh on closed-circuit television. McVeigh looked directly into the camera with steely determination, said nothing at all, and made no show of remorse. His lawyer admitted that McVeigh did not wish to apologize for his deed. He was on record as regretting only that his bomb had failed to completely demolish the building; and he never said he was sorry that he had detonated it next to a day-care center filled with children. Had he issued, with his last breath, a statement of contrition – surely it would have sounded perfunctory or insincere – I can only wonder at any witness who would have been consoled by it. Be that as it may, his clearly indicated defiance, and the easiness of his drug-induced death, enraged many of the onlookers and left them unsatisfied. I don't know where they went with their unpeased longing for more vengeance than they could get, but it would be natural to conclude that they stood in need of a spiritual palliative that would have enabled them to think less about McVeigh and more about the life that still remained to them.

In such a situation, the sticky sentimentalism of Christian forgiveness would appear to be unhelpful. Logically, forgiveness only makes sense as a transaction between two parties, where it is offered by one and acknowledged by the other. For you to forgive the murderer of your loved one or the thug who has beaten and crippled you, even as he professes himself indifferent to your pain and spits in your face at your presumption, is surely what we mean by "an empty gesture."

The waters are only further muddied by the Christian emphasis on forgiveness as a moral duty. It then becomes a self-serving act – the ritual observance of a commandment undertaken without a thought for the perpetrator of the crime. You are attempting to ingratiate yourself with God. The person who wronged you, who is presumably to be blessed by your noble gesture of pocketing up the wrong, is reduced, as I have said already, to being a bit player in the theatrical dramatization of your godliness.

This assessment, however, does not do justice to the remarkable response of the Amish community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania when Charlie Roberts shot to death five girls and wounded five others in a schoolroom in October of 2006. In that case, the *pro forma* gospel quotations were backed up by gifts to the stricken family of the murderer and by an indubitable commitment to an ethic of compassion. Clearly, the Amish were of one mind about the injunction to refrain from hatred and to return good for evil. Their enactment of this ethic was conspicuous enough to draw down upon them a rebuke from Rabbi David Gottlieb of Baltimore and from columnists John Podhoretz and Jeff Jacoby. Even though the Amish had experienced evil in its most

horrific and heartbreaking form, they were adjudged by these conservative stalwarts to be soft on evil.

We may be correct to surmise that these devout Christians reached the forgiveness without really passing through the understanding, which would have required an act of empathy toward a man who shoots children in the head. It is difficult to make contact with the mind of a man who, up until the moment of his murderous deed, was regarded in his own church as a good husband and father. He left his wife a long handwritten letter that resembled the last messages of most such killers:

I am sorry to put you and the kids in this position but I feel that this is the best and only way. I love all of you and this is why I am doing this.

Such a deed is always felt by the killer to be necessary and inevitable; it is the only possible solution to the problem that is tormenting him. Roberts told his wife that he was angry with God because their first-born child had died; and he confessed to her that he had molested two young family members years before and had been fantasizing about doing it again. Needless to say, the "logic" of killing randomly selected children from a different Christian denomination as a way to ward off thoughts of sexually abusing one's relatives, or as a way to punish God, escapes us.

No doubt the "understanding" that the Amish evinced, some of them by words and deeds later the same day, was simple and monolithic. Perhaps it included the hypothesis that we will never, with the passage of all the ages, be able to grasp this man's motivation, so that understanding as a prelude to forgiving is permanently blocked. However that may be, their ethic was augmented by a faith, however sorely

tested at times, that "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." Whatever difficulty they had in coming to terms with the crime committed by Charlie Roberts was subsumed by their knowledge that he was a troubled person who took his own life and that he left behind a devastated family and community who were innocent of the evil and were suffering also. The Amish showed compassion to them, because no one should be imagined to be beyond it.

3

The spiritual wisdom of forgiveness is incontestable, but I admit that the adage about understanding is misleadingly phrased. Forgiveness is a formal act, an event in the world that is often publicly displayed or at least communicated to the party upon which it is bestowed. Understanding is cognitive, private, invisible. The motto implies a cause-and-effect relationship – *if* you understand, *then* you forgive – but the trajectory from understanding to forgiveness is a complicated internal journey, and in fact the perpetrator, whether penitent or incorrigible, *is* almost beside the point – as a destructive tornado would be. If I am the offended party, what I am seeking is not really to understand *or* to forgive the offender. I am seeking a way to reclaim my human birthright of abundance, beauty, and mirth after the damage that was inflicted on me. I must first purge my system of the toxin, compounded of my suffering and my natural desire for revenge, that has been driving the engine of my organism ever since the catastrophe. This venom gives me a kind of manic purpose, but it keeps me awake at night and eats me alive.

What I want is to re-emerge into the sunshine of happiness and health, even if my personal weather is never again to be free of competing clouds. For this to happen, I must put my trauma behind me, insofar as that is possible. So the "forgiveness" of the adage is more like a forgetting. Now, drawing upon our lexicon of tough-mindedness, we often like to say that we will forgive but we will *never* forget. We boast that this is our way of keeping faith with the victims; but it is really our way of withdrawing the forgiveness with the same breath that offered it. If we keep the grudge forever green in our memory, we haven't forgiven. Besides, the formulation is cracked: the wording indicates that we *could* forget if we chose to. But remembering the victims goes without saying: no Amish mother was in danger of ever forgetting her dead child. The idea that hardcore retributionists needed her to reassure them on this point is obscene. What she set her heart upon was to live for her other children and her community and her god, and this she could do only by entering fully into the only future that she had.

What the forgiving person forgets is the commitment to bask in the negative emotions of hatred and revenge. The forgiving person shifts attention to memories other than the day of evil. The forgiving person remembers to breathe in all the good that is sufficient unto *this* day.

To do this is to live in the present, which is the mystical. In a fully realized moment of present-centered awareness, the past disappears, or is accepted with gratitude – the more so as it dawns on the person that, had any particle of the past been other than it was, it would have led to some other moment than this. (The Amish mother does not accept with gratitude her child's death as the culmination of her child's past. But with whatever heartbreak this entails, she understands that it *is* past.) When

the past is accepted *in toto*, and there is nothing to change – for to a certainty, there is nothing about it that *can* change – then there is nothing to forgive. In such a condition of beatitude, we forget why we thought we wanted revenge or what we thought it would accomplish. This is, I have said, a mystical state, experienced only during intermittent flashes of grace; but almost every person on earth has had a taste of it – its reality is easily verifiable. The clear path to this realization for the victim of evil is through a long process of understanding and reconciliation. It would be more accurate to say, then, that to understand all is to accept all – not merely the totality of the evil and the suffering, but the totality of *everything*. In this state, the offender and his crime against me are gathered up, bits of flotsam along with every other fragment of the past, in a great wave that breaks on spiritual plenitude. The perpetrator, along with every other thing that has led up to the epiphany, no longer matters – only the present, the eternal now, matters. This is a statement, not of gnostic esotericism or of New Age fatuousness, but of the most solid fact that I know, one that is manifest and irrefragable, and easier to prove than my own existence: that Life is now, and only now. The past is absolutely over and unreachable by any mechanism in the universe; the future is not yet here, or anywhere else either, and may never arrive. To understand all is to *transcend* forgiveness and to solve the problem by leaving it behind with the rest of the irrelevant past.

This is the real meaning of the verb "forgive" in the adage. Perhaps it should be reworded: "To understand all is to become reconciled to all." But any word less startling and counterintuitive than "forgive" sounds lame. In fact, the understanding is the end in itself – the all in all. It always takes the same form, which is easy to say, but

not easy to do – it cannot be achieved by reading about it. What the victim finally understands is that the evil was as impersonal as a weather system. Yes, it was "up close and personal"; the victim may have been specifically targeted, and the evil deed may have been done by the perpetrator with pleasure and with malice aforethought without the least apology or remorse. And yet, if we are fastidious about our use of language, it was *not* personal, even if the perpetrator himself insists otherwise. He was pursuing his own homeostasis, and the victim got in the way of that. The evil doer is, moreover, a person to whom many bad things have happened, which have shaped him the wrong way; and all the evidence supports the interpretation that he is not having a good life. He is not at the banquet; he is under the table mistaking the crumbs for the feast. But in spite of a damaged person's ability to create suffering in the lives of others, *life itself* is still good; and the universe is on the side of life. When we enter the numinous present, we see in an instant that life, the universe's unaccountable miracle, runs counter to the second law of thermodynamics, while evil reinstates it. In so doing, evil sets itself against the universe, in which life burgeons with ever more life and the sun shines for every blessed one of us. In the midst of this plenty, the evil doer, even more than his victim, suffers a terrible deprivation, and this fact is not changed by his false consciousness – it is nothing to the purpose that he cannot know his deprivation as we know it and may even, in his delusion, prefer his shanty of aggression and accumulated grievances to the palace of abundance. He may boast about his passage through life as one of the formidable ones, imagining himself autonomous and free of deadening conformity to conventional mores, and argue that his way is superior to the beauty and mirth of psychological mobility, health, and joy; he may even celebrate the

very crime he committed and brag that he was putting in good minutes. But actually he is an automaton, the least free of all sentient creatures, grimly obedient to the suffocating demands of his malignantly deformed sense of himself. His braggadocio confirms the direness of his spiritual disease. With this realization about the perpetrator, the victims relinquish the last vestiges of justification and the desire for vengeance. The perpetrator is already in a condition of unimaginable poverty and degradation; it is the survivors who are basking in riches, even after everything that the perpetrator has done to them. To understand all is to bestow, out of the gratitude felt by anyone lucky enough to still have a seat at the banquet, a benediction upon all – even upon those who scorn a place at the table. What else should we feel but compassion toward those who can only nurse their bile in resentment and envy, concocting fantasies of violent revenge? We are the children of good fortune, and they are not.