

## **On The Intimacy of Self-Forgiveness:**

*A Relational Act of God-Centered Caring with Unconditional Compassion*

by

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*Text(s): Matthew 6:12, 14; “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . For if you forgive others their trespasses your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” 18:35. “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your **heart**.”*

### **The Challenge**

I believe that if *other forgiveness* is to occur, then *personal self-forgiveness* is a prerequisite for experiencing genuine forgiveness and for understanding the power of God’s forgiveness toward us.

I want to explore with you a pathway to self-forgiveness. I contend that self-forgiveness is an active process. Learning to forgive ourselves is rarely a discussed process, both in clinical and non-clinical environments—such as the church, for example. Self-forgiveness is an arduous process that requires an open and honest search of one’s heart. It requires coming to terms with our challenging life experiences, and especially challenging relationships with primary individuals from our family of origin. This challenge continues as we develop our own families and other relationships in adulthood.

Memories, recollections of personal stories, dreams and fantasies can all contribute to this process of self-forgiveness and healing. However, a number of questions must be considered on this emotional and spiritual journey:

- How have I been emotionally wounded, and by whom?
- Who have I emotionally wounded?
- How is the offense/sin creating suffering on the one experiencing the offense?
- In what ways do our society and our particular cultural beliefs contribute to the way or ways that I address, view or ignore my wounds from the offense?
- How does God invite me to be self-forgiving of my known wounds and willing to confront my unknown wounds?

Learning to forgive oneself begins with visiting, with some depth for the first time, and then revisiting our personal stories. We must attend to our early childhood wounds that we continue to nurse and that cause us to act out in ways in which are oftentimes unaware. This is because these wounds have been buried deep in our psyche’s unconscious.

Learning to forgive oneself, therefore, requires courage to actualize one’s faith and to develop an interest in and a willingness to engage one’s personal mystery with trust and openness to the heart’s calling to heal. When I transform my heart by

experiencing self-forgiveness, I am more open to understanding God's forgiveness of me.

I think we must begin by looking into our narratives and exploring any trauma(s) that we endured in our early childhood, especially from infancy through our preteen years, up to age 12. Learning to forgive oneself is a process toward being and becoming authentic to oneself, with oneself, and then to others. I must transform my heart.

## My Story

On March 19, 1967, my father (who adopted me) died. At the time, I was 11 years old. Two weeks prior to his death, we were sitting at the dining room table going over my paper route payment cards. When we got to one customer, Daddy asked me,

"Little boy, did this customer pay?"  
I replied, "Yes sir."  
"Why didn't you punch the card?" he asked.  
"I don't know," I said.

The next thing I heard was a loud popping sound as his hand smacked the left side of my forehead.

And then, these indelible words that I shall never forget: "*Don't you ever say [pause for a second or two here to catch a breath] 'I don't know' when you're dealing with other people's money.*" With that, he got up from the table and began to make his way to the bedroom—he was out of breath and desperately needed oxygen. You see, my Daddy was dying from lung cancer.

Immediately, my stepmother reinforced the lesson with her admonishment. "*See what you did to your Daddy,*" she said, her finger pointing and wagging back and forth in my face. I watched as he struggled to make it to his bed with my stepmother's aid.

I was more in a state of shock than I was in physical pain—what just happened to me? A few weeks later, on Saturday night, March 18, 1967 at 9:00 p.m. (my prescribed bedtime) on the night of my Daddy's death, I was mysteriously moved by a force beyond my conscious ability to comprehend my next actions and gestures. I boldly walked into Daddy's bedroom while he was lying on his side, laboring to breathe. He was exhausted and ready to die. His mother was sitting at the head of the bed; my stepmother was standing behind the bed.

"*Daddy, can I sleep with you tonight?*" I asked softly and timidly. Immediately, my stepmother firmly answered, "*No! He might need something, and you couldn't get it for him.*" She was right, but at the age of eleven, I just wanted to be with my Daddy like I used to before he married her just two years prior. (I did not like her!) So, with that, I turned to go to bed as I began to cry—I sensed more deeply than I had words to express at this age that my Daddy was dying. I simply wanted to offer him my

affection, comfort him in his suffering, and soothe my own suffering. Despite my stepmother's good intentions, Daddy had the last word.

*"Good night, [pause for a second or two here to catch a breath] little boy,"* he said with endearment. Daddy received my affection for him. All was now forgiven.

The next morning, Sunday March 19, 1967, after going outside to get Daddy's newspaper, I entered his room and found him lying in the same position as the night before. Daddy had died, and my life would be forever changed.

### **A Transformational Moment**

I vowed that I would not be like Daddy when I became a father to my sons. I experienced him as emotionally unavailable, distant, intimidating and mean. He smoked and drank heavily, and I was afraid of him. However, when he disciplined me, his actions were stern, fair and effective (excluding the knock upside my head!).

As I grew into fatherhood, I found myself relating to my sons as he did me, even though I was more actively engaged in their day-to-day activities. As I became more aware of behavioral interactions, I knew I had to change, but I did not know how. This awareness began to disturb me in undergraduate days studying psychology. Once in graduate school, as I began the search for my biological father, I was suffering at the core of my being. I was especially struggling as to how to be a better father to my sons.

So, one day when I arrived at home, and without warning, I called my eldest son who was in the seventh grade at the time. Then the following happened.

I called him into the living room. I called my wife also. As she sat in a chair, I knelt on one side of it, with my son standing on the other. I began to offer heartfelt and heart-wrenching apologies and explanations for beating him and his brother when they were younger. I wept so hard that my sinuses cleared! As my son looked at me in utter confusion, my wife tried to explain what I was attempting to say. My heart ached so much. This act was the beginning of a more profound process of self-forgiveness.

I had to forgive myself for being self-condemning. For years, I unconsciously assumed the responsibility for Daddy's death. I had repressed my feelings of anger, resentment, hurt, shame and guilt and had projected these same emotions onto and into the very people that I loved most, my family. To my credit and the grace of the Eternal and many others who helped me, I was able to forgive myself—and more fully appreciate the texts from Matthew, cited at the beginning of this essay.

### **Self-Forgiveness: A Process of *Unconditional Compassion* and Reconciliation**

In conclusion, I believe that self-forgiveness is a core driven movement that is profoundly spiritual. I hold that it is a process that is fueled by acts and attitudes of profound compassion—that is unconditional. That is to say, where one is able to relinquish the conscious need and unconscious value of judging oneself with condemning consequences. Unconditional compassion toward oneself is an act of

experiencing self-love and love for others as the Teacher taught (“*love your neighbor as you love yourself,*” and “*forgive them because they do not know what they are doing*”).

I wonder if the Master understood the psychological/emotional and relational demands that He was inviting and challenging His listeners and followers to undertake? I am sure that He did. To hold oneself hostage for self-condemning acts and actions that one has claimed responsibility for is life suffocating. And, to continue to live a life of projecting the deeply buried wounds onto and into others threatens the relationships that I claim to cherish most.

The “little boy” had unconsciously carried a burden for over 25 years, believing that he was responsible for his father’s illness and death (“*See what you did to your Daddy*”). The process toward transforming the “sin” into grace and personal reconciliation is always an arduous journey. When we arrive here on earth, our journey becomes one of lifelong rebirths, healing and transformations, and self-forgiveness.

From a Christian perspective, God has already done God’s part by granting the Son to die as a symbolic gesture for our spiritual redemption and reconciliation. God calls us to be reconciled—to restore friendly relations between self and other—not only to God, but also to ourselves and to our fellow human travelers. God believes in us to do our part by honoring our spiritual vocation, by being open to our heart’s calling, and by exploring the shadow elements of our personal narratives.

To do so, to enter the shadowy elements of our lives with unconditional compassion and care—and with the passage of time, to exit with patience and resiliency—we can experience personal self-forgiveness. Then, forgiving others of their *debts against us* becomes an easier and more gratifying process. Then, it is forgiveness from the **heart**, because we have done it to and for ourselves first.

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