

## Exploring Forgiveness

By Charles Garvin, Editor for Special Issue on Forgiveness

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Charles Garvin, Ph.D.,  
Professor, School of Social  
Work, University of Michigan,  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

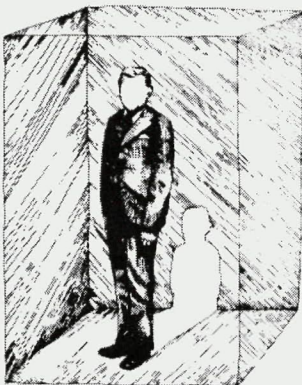
My interest in the topic of forgiveness began many years ago when Paul and Sonia Leib Abels still lived in Cleveland and I was staying with them while I offered a workshop at Case Western Reserve University. As was typical of our relationship, we would stay up late discussing and solving all the problems of social work and of the world! For reasons I can no longer remember, our talk moved to the issue of forgiveness. The three of us saw this as an important topic and one that was almost totally ignored at that time in social work writings.

The Abels and I discussed various occasions in our own lives, as well as in the lives of clients, students, and friends, that were associated with wrongs that had been inflicted. Some of these occasions had led to the parties involved seeking to "work it out" with each other and, whether it was called that or not, forgiveness was asked for and possibly granted. We also realized there were other situations in which no conversations to deal with grievances ever occurred. Sometimes the aggrieved party forgave the "other." Perhaps this was due to an understanding of the other or to a "letting go" of the burden of carrying around resentments or, to some, a spiritual state of mind in which forgive-

ness was seen as a virtue in itself.

As I reflect back on this discussion, I can think of many reasons why this topic had special meaning to me. As a child, I was one of the sensitive, somewhat fearful children who is often the target of teasers and bullies. I remember an occasion when I, a Jewish child, was held captive in a room at the local YMCA where my parents sent me to toughen me up. My captor insisted that I say something to indicate I adopted his Christian beliefs. I finally got him off my back by agreeing to recite after him "The Lord's Prayer." Even at about ten years old, I knew enough to know that the prayer, while created by Jesus, had no content that I thought I should suffer for if I refused to do what my captor demanded of me. It took me well into my teen years to let go of my resentments as I came to the conclusion that he thought that he was performing God's will and would probably be rewarded for his zeal. I learned from this that I could sometimes forgive others when I understood what was driving them.

In later years when I was already a social worker (and perhaps these efforts to deal with forgiveness had something to do with that occupational choice), I worked with a woman, now no longer living, who



was superior to me in the agency. We were the staff of a teen camping experience. On our return, I learned that she had gone to my immediate supervisor and had told her many stories of my presumed incompetent handling of events on that trip. To this day, I believe that she fabricated most of these stories. It was only when I, too, exaggerated the incompetence of fellow workers in order to bolster my own uncertain level of confidence through implying I had superior skills that I ultimately forgave her—although she never asked for this and probably didn't know I had heard of her denigration of me. I learned from this that my forgiving others had something to do with seeing in myself what I resented in the other.

On another occasion, the tables were turned on me when I complained to a superior that a colleague's wife was undermining me in her chats with a supervisee of mine when they were together socially. I never dreamed that the supervisor would take this matter up with the colleague who, to this day, several decades later, has never forgiven me. I understand now, better than I did then, that I was "triangulating" and should have taken my concerns up with the colleague and his wife directly. I learned a lot about triangula-

tion and have essentially forgiven myself, but have never really talked with these other people about it. Call it cowardice, but I do not believe that any of us will gain from opening up old issues now.

There is one situation about which I am still unforgiving and I haven't yet figured out what I want to do. I had learned that a colleague was spreading



a false set of damaging stories about me—I know not why. I contacted that person at the time and urged the individual either to confront me openly (such as by bringing charges against me) or to cease spreading the stories. That individual accepted the latter. Four or five years later we still greet each other when we meet, but I don't believe that person wishes to deal with the situation. I guess I am stuck on

this one. I have thought a lot, without resolution, about what I want to do.

As a Jew, I have the same feelings my people have about the Holocaust although I did not personally lose family members. My experiences with the Holocaust come from having been an American teen-ager throughout World War II. Unlike others in my family, I have no reluctance to buy German products or to travel in Germany and I even have close friends who were born in Germany. I think this means that there is a lot of forgiveness in me, but this may not count as forgiveness as my friends were not, themselves, Nazis. I am not troubled by the fact that I have no forgiveness for the actual Nazis, many of whom are dead.

The last personal story I will tell is of my youngest son. We adopted him when he was five and a product of a very destructive young childhood. He was the source of a lot of pain for me as he acted on his anger in his teen years. He now has worked out most of this in his adulthood and he is a very loving person. I don't think I ever thought of whether I should forgive him or not as I think I understood a lot of what he had gone through and was going through. This is another example of my tying forgive-

ness, at least in part, to understanding.

Now to resume the story of the Abels and me. We committed ourselves many years ago to think more about forgiveness and to come together again to collaborate on an article on the topic. As is so frequently the case, we did continue to see each other despite the distances that separated us and we often remembered our commitment to explore forgiveness together, but this never happened in the form we envisioned.

Meanwhile many things happened to underline the importance of this topic. First, a new field has emerged: forgiveness studies. Articles, books, colloquia have been devoted to this theme. Perhaps more important has been the connection of the issue of forgiveness to world and historical events. The president has asked for forgiveness on behalf of the white citizens of the United States for the many racist outrages that have been perpetrated upon African-Americans. A unique event in world history has been the process taking place in South Africa in which officials of all sorts have been given the opportunity to publicly admit their wrongs and to receive forgiveness in the form of amnesty. The President, in another widely discussed speech, has asked for forgiveness for his inappropriate sexual acts, although how adequate his statement was has been widely questioned. The Feminist movement has highlighted the centuries of oppression women have suffered through the ac-

tions of men. I also came to the conclusion through many years of struggling with this issue, through my participation in a men's group, that all men should seek forgiveness—at least for acts of omission on our part in the struggle for justice for women.

For many years the Jewish people, as well as many others, have debated whether or not some German people, or German society in general, should receive any form of forgiveness for the Holocaust. The issue of forgiveness enters into the interactions between Israel and the Palestinians, the Serbs and the Bosnians, the English and the Irish, the Greek and the Turkish societies, to name only a few of the peoples who have grievances between them.

Thus, it did not surprise me when Sonia Leib Abels called and proposed that I help bring about a special issue of this journal in which narratives on the subject of forgiveness are featured. She hoped that through narratives of people dealing with this issue, we could all better understand why and how people struggle with the issue of whether and when to forgive or ask for forgiveness. As I indicated above, I had also had my own efforts to cope with forgiveness and felt ready to do more work on this. I also appreciated the social context of how forgiveness has taken on large social meanings. The timeliness of this issue was also demonstrated by the ease with which

we were able to locate people who would be willing to share their forgiveness experiences.

I have learned a great deal that has helped me in my own struggles from the other papers we have included in this issue. Each of them illuminates one of the dimensions of forgiveness about which I still struggle. These include coming to terms with not forgiving someone; handling discussions when we or the other are asking for forgiveness; handling forgiveness issues of social work clients and seeing how these relate to our own lives; forgiving ourselves for things we tried to do and in which we failed; and forgiveness as it is dealt with at the end of life.

I hope that these brief introductory comments will lead you into reading and pondering on these narratives and that the readings will help you as you encounter similar feelings in yourself and in others. You may be inspired to share your experiences with other readers of this journal and to enable this ripple to continue to spread from your shores to the entire ocean. □



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