

THE GRACE OF FORGIVENESS

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When I began framing this project in early 2015 I had no idea of the journey which was ahead. As the active part of my work towards this book comes to an end, I sincerely hope that reading this book will prove helpful to those who are battling with forgiveness and apology. Nonetheless, it is only as the final version of the book emerges that I begin to recognize how much I needed to write this book for my own process. Without doubt the most surprising aspect of this project has been that over the duration I have reconciled with several people with whom I had long since lost contact but with whom I still felt some awkwardness. These things were not really on my emotional radar when I began. I didn't feel badly enough about any of them to feel that any action was necessary. But there was some residual discomfort. In each case a simple interaction has led to a release of whatever misunderstanding or hurt had been there. More remarkably, I was not the initiator of the contact which has led to reconciliation. In some cases I needed to apologise, in others I needed to forgive. Now, at the end of the writing and editing, I am far more free. And this freedom has opened my being in ways I never considered possible.

There are some personal incidents recounted in this book. Where possible I have omitted the context or changed minor details to preserve the anonymity of those involved. There is one significant exception, the woman whom I call Sr Mary in this book will be clearly identifiable to those who knew me at that time of my life. For those few who know the real person I ask for your generosity on her behalf. Do not let my story taint your own memories. She is also the good woman that you may remember. To anyone else, grant her the peace of anonymity. She has read this manuscript and has been gracious about its publication.

Along the way there have been a significant number of people who have contributed substantially to this project and to the life journey which has allowed this book to emerge. I would like to express my gratitude:

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where forgiveness is not something we think about much. Certainly forgiveness didn't really cross my radar very often until I was in my mid-thirties. It is not a common topic of conversation until something exceptional happens. For example, in 2006, the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, gained huge attention. The initial media frenzy was precipitated by the tragic shooting of ten schoolchildren by Charlie Roberts, who committed suicide on the scene. But the story captured popular attention when members of the same Amish community reached out to the widow of the killer within hours of the tragedy. The unequivocal message from the community was one of forgiveness. Their actions supported their words; they set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter.

In our world, forgiveness of any sort is not often discussed. Until I stumbled into my own forgiveness journey, it very rarely came up in my conversations. Even now, with the exception of interactions with one of my sisters, the topic of forgiveness hardly ever emerges. I am a regular churchgoer, but even in that context, forgiveness is not often high on the agenda in the preaching.

It seems to me that the world we live in is becoming increasingly divided. Or perhaps the divisions that were always there are coming into sharper focus. Either way, in today's world—post-Brexit and after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States—we are in desperate need of ways to sustain real community. In *The Different Drum*, M. Scott Peck claims that real community emerges only after conflict. If this is true, and I suspect it is, then we need a method for dealing with hurts, misunderstandings, and genuine wounding. A major element of this is forgiveness.

I do not try, in this book, to deal with communal conflicts; my focus is on individual hurts. Why? Because we need to start practicing somewhere! And this is perhaps both the most acute and the most obvious place to begin.

When we read about forgiveness, the examples provided are usually the big ones. Nelson Mandela is perhaps the most obvious icon: a young, radical firebrand went into prison; twenty-seven years later he emerged with a message of reconciliation, even to the point of inviting one of the prison guards to his inauguration as President of the country. Another South African example is that of Linda Biehl, whose daughter Amy Biehl was murdered in Cape Town. Linda and her husband, Peter, forgave their daughter's murderers. Today Linda works with Easy Nofemela, one of the murderers, in the Amy Biehl Foundation. Northern Ireland has the example of Gordon Wilson, whose daughter Marie was killed when a bomb went off at a Remembrance Day service in 1987. He said soon afterward, "I have lost my daughter, but I bear no ill will, I bear no grudge... Dirty talk is not going to bring her back to life."¹ Gordon became a well-known peace campaigner.

The list goes on and on. It includes stories of people who have found the capacity to forgive those who have commit-

1 Think RE!, Book 2, Eds Michael Brewer, Ruth Mantin, Peter Smith and Cavan Wood Heinemann, 2005, p83,

ted egregious harm either to themselves or to members of their families.

But what about the smaller stuff? The everyday stuff? The thoughtless act which causes another's emotional distress? Many of these smaller offenses we brush off relatively easily. For the most part, we are able to give the offenders the benefit of the doubt. We know them well enough to recognize that they were just having a bad day and the negative interaction was an anomaly. We quickly forget the offense and move on. The relationship isn't really affected at all.

Occasionally, though, one of those offenses will knock us for a six. We are blindsided and are left wounded and sometimes even profoundly confused. *How could this person whom I have trusted act in such a terrible way?* When such a wounding happens, most of us react in one of two ways.

The obvious reaction is to strike back: *You hurt me, so now I am going to show you.* Pretty quickly, the initial wounding escalates into an all-out fire fight. And the relationship fairly quickly implodes. Here we get to be self-righteous in the end: *I see what she was really like all along. I truly am better out of the relationship.*

The second response, which is perhaps slightly less common but not really any better, is to pull out of the relationship—to simply let the relationship cool to that of a non-functional, amicable acquaintance. It isn't ugly, but again, we get to take the high road: *"I didn't strike back."* Often the person who has created the offense isn't even aware that there was a problem.

There is a popular saying: "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." Both of the above responses play directly into that saying. *If you manage to hurt me once, well that's on you, but I really shouldn't give you a second chance.*

The problem with these reactions is that the first strike isn't usually intentional. When you are dealing with any kind of sustained relationship that has been founded on mutual trust, the likelihood of that person out of the blue, without

provocation, intentionally causing you harm is actually very small. People may be thoughtless or selfish and so act in ways that are hurtful. But there aren't that many people who are just mean in the absence of perceived provocation.

I stumbled onto that lesson the hard way. Completely unintentionally, I deeply hurt someone I cared about a great deal— I'll call him "Peter." In retrospect, I can see that I was more than a little self-absorbed at the time, so I was thoughtless and certainly could have chosen a better way of handling the situation. Peter was so broken in the aftermath of the interaction that he had a psychological breakdown. I'd had no intention of causing him pain, and no idea that my words could precipitate such a result. For a while, I was genuinely concerned that he might harm himself.

Most of the wounding we cause does not have such dramatic consequences. But this incident, bad though it was, served a very useful purpose for me. It broke open the importance of considering intent. For the first time, I recognized that, in his view, Peter was fully justified in blaming me for his breakdown. That was his truth. Our one conversation on that particular evening had shattered his world. Certainly, if I'd had any inkling beforehand of the effects of my actions, I would have chosen a different approach. I'd known he would be surprised by the conversation and feared he might be hurt by it. But it was not my intent, at all, to wound him in the way that I did.

As the horror of what my actions had precipitated plagued my mind, I stumbled onto the concept that exposed the doorway to forgiveness for me: the first strike is usually not intentional.

It is worthwhile mulling that thought for a time. What if the first hurt you perceived was not actually intended to cause you harm? Does that change your perspective at all?

Certainly that idea got me thinking about a significant wounding which I myself had suffered.

As I perceived the story for many years, two people were

responsible for shattering my self-confidence on the cusp of my eighteenth birthday. I held them responsible for the full extent of the damage they had caused. It never occurred to me that their intent might have been far less sinister. The metaphorical ankle tap that they had administered was intended to trip me; it wasn't intended to leave me crippled.

The ankle tap was perhaps unnecessary and unkind, but those two people were not responsible for the entire extent of the damage. They could not possibly have known that their actions would feed directly into what I call a fault line in my psyche—an area of extreme vulnerability.

Nearly twenty years after that event, recognizing the separation between the knowledge of what I had experienced and the reality of their intent was the beginning of my pathway to forgiveness. I began to see them as the flawed human beings that they were rather than as the monsters I had created in my mind. And with that, I could begin to see why they might have made the decision that they did. After that it was, for me, a matter of praying for the grace of forgiveness and waiting for it to take hold.

In learning to forgive these two people, I began to grow conscious of other woundings which needed attention: some older and some much more recent. As I have journeyed on, I have come to see that a perception I have carried around for much of my adult life—that forgiveness didn't play a major role in my life—was absolutely true, but not for the right reasons.

Forgiveness didn't play a major role in my life not because I had nothing to forgive, but because I lived by "fool me once." No one got a chance to hurt me significantly more than once; I simply gently withdrew from relationships that no longer felt safe, so forgiveness never seemed necessary.

On further reflection, I realized that I am also very poor at admitting my own mistakes. I am poor at apologizing. So I had never really known what it is to be forgiven.

As you read this book, it will become apparent (fairly quickly) that one of the most fruitful places to begin in the

forgiveness journey is to consider the possible intent of the other. The fact that I am in significant pain as a result of someone's action does not mean that person intended to cause me so much pain. It is this invitation to see events through the eyes of another that can provide the key to unlocking the desire to forgive. In her book, *Rising Strong*, Brené Brown writes of the importance of considering that everyone might actually be doing the best that he or she can.

There will be invitations throughout this book to consider the possible position of another. If you are the one who inadvertently hurt the other, can you take on board the reality (to them) of the pain that you have caused?

The experience of forgiving the two people I mentioned earlier had a significant impact on me. For a start, I learned what it means to forgive. I discovered that, for me, the hallmark of forgiveness is the slackening of the emotional tag. I recognized that I had finally managed to forgive when I saw a picture of one of them on Facebook. It was a beautiful picture; the woman looked relaxed and happy. My immediate response was to feel glad that she looked so well. In that moment, I realized I had forgiven her. Up until then, every time I thought about the situation, it would trigger my memory. The thought would set off a painful response; there was still a strong, unconscious emotional link in my mind. This is what we colloquially refer to as "baggage."

Until that point, any situation that subconsciously reminded me of that particular incident would be flooded with the emotional baggage of that wounding. With forgiveness, the emotional tag slackened. I can now encounter similar situations without the baggage. I no longer have any need or desire to avoid thinking about that particular situation. That space, an area I had mentally tried to wall off to protect my vulnerability, is now openly accessible and no longer so sensitive. I have reclaimed that part of my interior world. I have greater interior freedom.

Possessing that interior freedom also means that I no longer unconsciously bring that baggage into new situations. I am able to deal with a new wounding for what it is. This gives greater freedom to my whole way of being in the world and my interaction with others.

The process of engaging as fully as I am capable with forgiveness has had a significant impact on every aspect of my life. I am less fearful of conflict; I am more willing to accept my mistakes; I am more able to own the hurts that I experience. The overall result is that I am far more able to cope with the daily stresses of life. I am more awake to my everyday experience. I am more peaceful, more joyful, and more grateful.

And opportunities to reconcile with people I had long since written out of my life have emerged.

All of this brings me to my desire to spread the word about forgiveness. In conversation with a wide variety of people, I have discovered that most of us struggle with forgiveness. Forgiving is not an easy thing to do because it forces us into a space of vulnerability and requires the greatest honesty we can muster—no matter which side of the forgiving bridge we may be on. I wonder what impact it would have on our world if we all engaged with forgiveness just a little more.

This book begins with a detailed account of why forgiveness is important. I explain the Fourfold Path, which has been used to very good effect by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho Andrea Tutu-Van Firth. As with any psycho-spiritual process, there are a myriad of different possible “methods” one can use. The Fourfold Path is probably one of the simplest. I then describe my own journey, followed by a discussion of some processes involved in coming to forgiveness. Next, we get to the challenges: the areas where many of us seem to stumble, and the reasons why forgiveness is usually not as simple a process as following

a formula. Finally, I address the idea of reconciliation. Reconciliation is not a goal of forgiveness, but reconciliation is truly impossible in the absence of forgiveness.

Before we begin, there are several important points that I'd like to address in greater detail.

It is impossible to gain interior freedom in the absence of forgiveness. Those incidents in which we cling to our role as wounded victim and cast others in the role of villain take up space in our being—space that we need in order to live out of the best version of ourselves. In the absence of forgiveness, unforgiveness will rear its ugly head again and again. It will continue to be the baggage we carry into new interactions, and it will continue to define relationships that resonate with similar dynamics. We will never be able to free ourselves of playing out the same roles in the same scenarios over and over again. Unforgiveness is toxic, whether we are aware of its poison or not.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are connected, but distinct. Reconciliation will always require forgiveness, but the opposite is not true. In cases where the person who has wounded us is incapable of recognizing the wounding, reconciliation will not be possible, and it may be that walking away from the relationship is the healthiest option.

Hurts that seem small but continue to plague us are just as important in learning to forgive as the big ones. Anything that remains as a smarting presence in our psyches for more than a couple of months needs attention. Most of the time, with small hurts, the real issue lies within us, rather than in the hurtful intent of the other. Failure to attend to the small hurts means that we are likely to keep stumbling over the same issues. This will slowly erode a relationship. When we face the issues head on, we can begin to see the patterns in our actions and reactions—and identify our own vulnerabilities. If we are open about our struggles, the persons with whom we are in relationship can begin to help us

to see what our trigger points are, and we will then be more able to face them in all circumstances with greater grace!

The biggest challenge around small woundings is that they require admission of vulnerability. If we are to continue in relationship with the person who has wounded us, we need to talk with that person about what has happened. This requires courage. To help with this, I have introduced three roles into the book: the one who needs to forgive, the one who needs to be forgiven, and the “forgiveness companion.”

The first two roles need no further explanation except to say that as you read the book, you may find yourself thinking about various incidents in which you have taken on one or another of these roles. The forgiveness companion is a third person who is unrelated to the incident at hand—someone who is trustworthy and who will not talk to anyone else about what you share. The role is discussed in greater detail throughout the book, but it is essentially someone who can hold your hand through the process while you are learning to forgive.

For now, as we launch into the book, you will need all the honesty and humility that you can muster. Honesty, to be able to cut through your familiar reasoning and get to a deeper sense of what is actually happening within you. Humility, because you need to be open to the possibility that the way that you have presumed things were may not be the whole picture. You need to be willing to let go of the story you have told yourself about the incident with which you are struggling.

It's not an easy journey, but it is well worth it.

If you are the one who is trying to forgive, then, before you go any further, you may want to give some thought to finding a forgiveness companion. Is there some person who is slightly removed from the situation uppermost on your mind, someone you can open up to, someone who will be able to walk with you on this journey?