

FORGIVENESS: A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

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Difficulty in forgiving stems from a misunderstanding about the nature of forgiveness, a "Case of Mistaken Identity."

Forgiving can seem thorny when we think it concerns the other person or group. Forgiving benefits the forgiver. Forgiving does not let another "off the hook;" it does not mean we must renew a relationship or even talk to the other; it does not imply that what happened was not serious or painful.

However, if this is the unexamined interpretation, forgiving can feel like a diminishment of one's experience or condoning behaviour. This can feel like compromising our integrity. Who would want to do that?

To identify forgiveness effectively, we begin with the dictionary definition, "to cease harbouring resentment against..." Harbouring resentment is active; we are adding logs to the fire. The costs, usually unnoticed, are staggering: fatigue, high blood pressure, depression, distrust, ill health and ineffectiveness. Rehearsing resentments is like nailing one's foot to the floor and turning in circles; it accomplishes nothing and makes you dizzy.

By contrast, releasing resentments and regrets is accessible and available to everyone, no matter how serious the offense. Letting go of grudges frees up energy immediately, benefits health, renews a sense of humour, opens the door to new possibilities, and augments self-esteem. Forgiving as a declaration liberates us from repetitively replaying upsetting scenes in the mind. We forgive by declaration, a "performative utterance," as in "I do" in a wedding. This is a matter of the will, not feelings or thoughts. Feelings and thoughts do not act; declaration does.

When we declare we are willing to forgive, we create a new future into which we can live. After we forgive, we do not need to "walk away." We are now able to act effectively if action is needed.

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