## FORGIVENESS: BEGINS WITH THE SELF

By Pete Walker 925-283-4575

As published in: "Recovering: The Adventure of Life Beyond Addiction" Issue 35; November 1991

There has been a lot of shaming, dangerous and inaccurate "guidance" put out about forgiveness in the last few years, in both the recovery community and in transpersonal circles. Many survivors of dysfunctional families have been injured by the simplistic, black and white advice that decrees that they must embrace a position of being totally and permanently forgiving in order to recover. Unfortunately, those who have taken the advice to forgive abuses that they have not fully grieved, abuses that are still occurring, and/or abuses so heinous they should and could never be forgiven, often find themselves getting nowhere in their recovery process. In fact, the possibility of attaining real feelings of forgiveness is usually lost when there is a premature, cognitive decision to forgive. This is because premature forgiving intentions mimic the defenses of denial and repression. They keep unprocessed feelings of anger and hurt about childhood unfairnesses out of awareness.

Real forgiveness is quite distinct from premature forgiveness. It is almost always a byproduct of effective grieving and no amount of thought, intention or belief can bring it into being without a descension into the feeling realms. Conversely, cognitive and philosophical structures unreceptive to the possibility of forgiveness, sometimes block the access to forging feelings, even when such feelings are present. It might be that the most healthy cognitive position concerning forgiveness is an attitude that allows the possibility of its occurrence on the other side of extensive grieving. This attitude will work best if it includes the condition that feelings of forgiveness will not be forced or falsely invoked to cover up any unresolved feelings of hurt or anger. In this vein, it is also especially important to note that certain types of abuse are so extreme and damaging to the victim that forgiveness may simply not be an option. Examples of this include sociopathy, conscious cruelty, and many forms of scapegoating and parental incest.

When forgiveness has substance, it is felt palpably in the heart, and is usually an expansion of the emotion of compassion. Compassion is certainly not always the same thing as forgiveness, but it is usually the experience within which forgiveness is born. Often this happens via an intermediate process, where having grieved our childhood losses substantially, we occasionally find ourselves considering the extenuating circumstances that contributed to our parents raising us in neglectful and/or abusive ways. Most commonly these extenuating circumstances revolve around two issues. First, our parents often parent us in a way that blindly replicated the way that they were parented. And second, they were often supported in their dysfunctional parenting by the social norms and values of their times.

When considering this, we may sometimes "get" that our parents were also quite victimized, and we may consequently find ourselves occasionally feeling sorry (sorrow) for them. When and if this experience of feeling sorrow for them becomes profound

enough for us to comprehend how similarly awful and unfair their childhoods were, it can sometimes expand into an experience of feeling forgiveness. However, unless this feeling of forgiveness for our parents is grounded in compassion for our own individual selves, (one that has been won via effective grieving for our own losses), the above process will be nothing but an empty mental exercise.

As real forgiveness is primarily a feeling, one which right intention can sometimes gestate it is, like all other feelings, ephemeral. . . never complete, never permanent. It is governed by the same dynamic law of emoting that shows human feeling experience to be a frequently changing, unchoosable and unpredictable process of the psyche. No emotional state can be induced to persist as a permanent experience. As sad as this may be, as much as we might like to deny it, as much of a cause of ongoing life frustration for each of us as it is, and as much as we were raised and continue to be reinforced for trying to control and pick our emotions, they are still by definition of the human condition, largely outside the province of our choice or wills.

Forgiveness then, at best, like love, remains a human feeling experience that can only temporarily be ours. When grieving has been thorough enough to be reintegrated as a normal and easily accessible process of the psyche, love and forgiveness can also become our consciously chosen values. This can happen in the later stages of recovery when we begin to notice and experience that functional processing and grieving of interpersonal hurts can often lead us quite naturally back into loving feelings. Thus, when I am hurt by intimates I may not be able to immediately invoke loving or forgiving feelings towards them, but I know that with sufficient communications and non-abusive venting, I will be able to return to an appreciative experience of them.

As much as I can forgive myself, that much can I forgive others. What I really forgive in others is an old pain of mine, released from the disgust of self-hate and loved and welcomed like a bird with a broken wing. Shame and self-hate did not start with me, but with all my heart, I deign that they will stop with me. I will do unto myself as I would have others do unto me.