

Forgive? Maybe. Forget? Never!

By Valerie J. Shinbaum, MS, LPC, NCC, MAC

I'm not sure I understand why people are so quick to use the phrase, "forgive and forget." For starters, when do we ever forget anything? We might not remember everything completely or accurately, but certainly we have long memories and it seems even more so when it comes to harm done to us by others. And what does forgiveness mean anyway? If we're talking about moving on, I think it becomes more about acceptance. Then we have a choice to make around whatever it was a person did that harmed us, and whether or not we choose to continue allowing that person into our lives. Sometimes the nature of the relationship with that person might not even need to include forgiveness.

Our memories are crowded with bits and pieces of the tales of our whole lives - the good, the bad, the happy, the sad. We have the capacity to block out selectively that which we don't choose to dwell on or that which we don't want to "fix." For some of us, not forgetting (and sometimes not forgiving) serves a purpose -- if we remember whatever it is that happened and how we were affected by it, we can hold onto that memory so that we can ensure that we won't allow the incidents to be repeated. There are those among us who would use the Holocaust as an example of this concept, at least for the "never forget" part. Often are the times I have I heard a speech or read an article where the pledge or task is for us to never forget that incident in world history. Though there are people who want to believe the Holocaust never happened, thankfully there are even more people who take responsibility for keeping the memories alive through documentation in the hope that never again will such an event occur.

I think it makes sense to look at the concept of forgiving and forgetting (or not) on a more personal and immediate level. To begin with, we can go back to our childhoods, where the concept itself is taught to us by our families, our schools, our religions, our peers -- it's a societal concept. But think of how many of us have difficulty embracing it and/or living it! Have we been challenged with an impossible task? Not really, but I think it's more selective than some people would like to believe. I am sure there are those among us who think of themselves as being able to "get past things that hurt them in life." I buy that up to a point. I have met people who have an enormous capacity for adapting to being hurt and being able to move on from there and go forward. I have admiration for this ability, and certainly have this capacity within myself. But let's talk about the forgetting part of things for just a brief moment. Going back to what I said earlier about the Holocaust, I contend that sometimes we need to "never forget," in that through remembrance we are a little wary of something the next time around, we can tap into our own histories of experience and keep a closer watch in the hopes of avoiding that which created an incident warranting forgiveness in the first place.

I hear so many stories from clients, students, acquaintances, friends and others about times in their lives when they were hurt. In the act of sharing the stories, I know right away there is no forgetting, especially when I hear the stories in the greatest of details. There is a reason why we remember harm done to us. And yet I hear stories from the

same people about times in their lives when they were hurt by others in some way, who then choose to maintain contact with those who hurt them. No matter the reason, right there is an example of a forgiving quality these people have in that they will continue the association with someone with whom they have a history of being hurt. Someone asked me recently if I believe in “giving people second chances.” I replied that I’m not usually about second chances, though I know in my life there are people with whom I maintain contact in spite of a history of past hurts. Perhaps in an unspoken way that speaks to the concept of forgiveness, if we need to believe in such a concept.

I prefer to embrace the concept of acceptance rather than the concept of forgiveness. The reality is that people do hurtful things to other people, sometimes intentionally, other times not. I spend my life examining the behaviors of others, not only in my work but also in my personal relationships. If someone has hurt me, I try to understand if there is a deliberate intention or not. Sometimes I am able to figure that out, but not always. In either scenario, I now have a choice to make – do I continue to allow this person to hurt me by keeping the relationship as status quo, or do I walk away from the relationship altogether, or do I maintain a relationship with this person but with more caution in an effort or attempt to guard against possible future hurt? That’s entirely up to me. Once we realize we have options such as the ones above, how much easier it is to put the whole concept of forgiveness to the side completely, because now it’s no longer about what has been done to us by someone else, but rather how we choose to deal with the situation going forward.

We don’t live on islands by ourselves – we live in a world of people, and sometimes people have conflicting agendas or misunderstandings, or breakdown in communication or a thousand other situations which may cause hurt. I try to keep in mind that the only person I can change is me. I know I have the capacity for change around many aspects of my life, and certainly choosing a way of processing and dealing with hurt from others is one of those aspects. Most importantly, each experience with hurt is a chance for us to grow, to learn about ourselves in how we were open to that hurt. If there is anyone to forgive, perhaps it is ourselves for not being more self-protective. Of course it’s impossible to be self-protective, maintain an openness to new possibilities in life and avoid hurt all at the same time. But we can think of ourselves as “works in progress,” continuing to strive for self-acceptance as we move forward with our lives. We can accept the reality that there will be hurt caused to us by others. We can improve our coping strategies for responding to that hurt, shape our behaviors as we need to for adjusting to that chapter in our history, and then label the information file in our heads and hearts under the heading: “Remember with acceptance.”