

## Six interwoven inspirations received while reading *The Book of Forgiving*

**1. Jars of jam versus knots in a fish net.** Each of the big important ideas about human life, such as forgiveness, is connected to all the other big important ideas about human life. So as we try to understand forgiveness, we will slowly be drawn to wrestle with ideas about justice, mercy, God, the meaning of life, the soul, human development, freedom and dignity. That suggests to me that our understanding of forgiveness will always be a journey, that we will never come to a fixed and final understanding of forgiveness.

**2. Forgiveness as the public face of the grieving process.** For centuries forgiveness has been a topic unto itself. What has changed in the past 50 years is that many psychologists and psychiatrists have been studying the grieving process. So it is now possible to look at forgiveness as the public face of the grieving process, and that gives us a wider context in which to understand forgiveness, and many creative suggestions about how to nurture forgiveness.

**3. More than an act of will: Watering the roots versus coercing the fruits.** Although we inherit a tradition in which we are commanded to forgive, as one gets older, one realizes that the bringing out the best in people can't be commanded. It can only be inspired. Sometimes it seems that we want to force ourselves to forgive quickly, in order to avoid the sorrow of what we have lost. Forgiveness it seems to me to be both an act of the will and the grace of the heart. By honoring the stages of grief in our lives, we can make a place for that grace to emerge.

**4. Injury and tragedy as invitations to become deeper people.** When we suffer a giant loss or betrayal, it is not only our feelings they get hurt. Our story about our life journey can also be shattered by the injuries we receive. Ordinarily we are not very aware of the story that guides our lives, because we are inside of that story. A lot of current psychological thinking suggests that story-making is the main way that human beings make sense out of their lives. Tragedy confronts us with the need to consciously make a new story, rather than being somewhat of a passive passenger inside our old story. This is what the Tutus mean when they speak of going from being a victim of the injury to being a heroic survivor or overcomer of the injury.

**5. The stories we use to make sense of God.** Our relationship to God is woven out of many story strands. One of the most prominent of those story strands is expressed in the phrase "God will protect us." When we experience an overwhelming loss or injury, our spiritual

story can also be shattered. My experience has been that people will wear out several God stories in the course of a lifetime, in much the same way that a growing child outgrows one wonderful set of clothing after another. None of the earlier sets of clothes were wrong or bad. They were perfect in their season. People who have experienced a lot of tragedy and maintain their religious faith often appear to me to have made a shift from "God is the power who will preserve me from all harm" to "God is my inner companion who gives me the strength to bear all things, no matter how terrible." This certainly appears to have been the case with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Archbishop Romero of El Salvador.

**6. Making one's heart large enough to hold both joy and sorrow.** A good life can include both joy and sorrow, in fact I would say must necessarily include both joy and sorrow. Our relationship and our expectations about joy and sorrow are shaped both by cultural myths (such as the Prince and Princess living happily ever after) and also by our early childhood experience of frustration and fulfillment. Under ideal circumstances of development we develop the understanding that the very same human beings can have both strengths and weaknesses, and that every life will include some successes, some failures, and a lot of muddling through.

But the circumstances of our development as persons are often far from ideal, leaving us vulnerable not only to black-or-white thinking, but its emotional twin: black-or-white feeling. In that emotional frame of reference I may alternate between feeling like a wonderful success and feeling like a total failure. When a few things go right, I can be on top of the world. When a few things go wrong, I am suddenly in hell. When abuse or tragedy come my way, I may try to salvage the world by sacrificing myself: I may say to myself, the world is not totally screwed up (which would be terrifying); I am just all bad and uniquely unworthy of God's love and protection (which is more manageable).

The Christian faith tries to help people with this issue by having crucifixion and resurrection be part of the same story, and by insisting that Jesus was both completely human (vulnerable to suffering), and completely divine (transcending all suffering). According to Sam Keen, Native American religions reflect a lot about the cycle of the seasons and how the cycle of the seasons including both summer and winter reflect the cycle of human life that includes both joy and sorrow, success and disappointment. This is an ongoing topic that I am working in my own life.

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