Exploring Self-Forgiveness

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ABSTRACT: This article presents the results of a phenomenological study of the experience of self-forgiveness. On the basis of in-depth interviews with seven subjects, self-forgiveness is described not as an achievement but rather as a gift where one moves from estrangement and "brokenness" to a sense of at-homeness.

Introduction

The concept of forgiveness is deeply rooted in the Jewish/Christian tradition, and, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out, it is one of the two most original ideas in Western civilization. Its importance as a theological concept would thus seem clear. But what about its role in everyday life? How do people experience forgiveness and how do they integrate that experience into their view of themselves and the world? How can one describe the process of forgiveness, not only as a fundamental idea, but as it is actually lived out in people’s lives? Psychological literature is curiously silent in response to these questions. As Joseph Canale points out, this is a regrettable omission considering the critical role that forgiveness can play in psychotherapy. There are very few empirical studies on this experience which is so central to human growth and psychological wholeness. This raises yet another question: Why is forgiveness a neglected topic?

In setting out to answer the first question, the authors of this study came face-to-face with the latter. While people were willing to share their experience of self-forgiveness on deep and personal levels, difficulties arose because of the pain recalled in these experiences, and also because of cultural shifts that have removed forgiveness as a topic of common dialogue. It is clear that,
although one may not always label one's experience as "self-forgiveness," the process discovered in this research is common, profound, and vital to one's sense of health and wholeness.

The term self-forgiveness implies that this is a solitary act completed in isolation from others. On the contrary, the process described in this research is a long one, not entirely of one's own doing, which involves a radical shift in one's way of moving in the world. The initial experience is an emerging awareness that something is fundamentally wrong about one's life, and a feeling of estrangement from self and others. As forgiveness is gradually embodied, one moves toward feeling at home in the world. Before turning to a detailed description of the process of self-forgiveness, we will explore the cultural and religious backdrop against which this research was conducted, and give a brief description of the method used.

**Biblical and cultural considerations**

Within the Jewish/Christian tradition, people are understood to be in need of forgiveness because of sinfulness; this is assumed to be part of the human condition, both collectively and individually. In the Old Testament, this is made clear in the myth of the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they sin by disobeying God and are expelled from the garden, estranged from God, themselves, and one another: "and they realized that they were naked" (Genesis 3:7). According to the Old and New Testaments, God seeks to be reconciled with humankind, to bring humankind back into the fold of community. This reconciliation comes when people are able to acknowledge and embrace their sinfulness and open themselves to the forgiveness of God. Thus, forgiveness and reconciliation involve the desire to be brought back into relationship with God and others while at the same time acknowledging one's dependence on God for this to occur.

Willingness to forgive others is also crucial to being forgiven. The author of Ecclesiastes wrote, "Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray" (28:2). This assumption that experiencing forgiveness requires accepting the humanness of others is also evident throughout the New Testament. For example, in the Lord's Prayer we ask God to "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It is in this process of forgiving and being forgiven that one recognizes one's humanity and takes one's place in the human community. Patton describes forgiveness as "... discovering something... that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them."

In the biblical tradition forgiveness serves to maintain the integrity of community. It calls us to confront our sinfulness, to be accountable before God and others, and to be merciful toward humankind. Forgiveness also allows for a future that is not determined by the past; humankind is freed to imagine