A Reflection offered by Terry Miller

“Forgiveness is an action that occurs after you committed an act or omission that impedes your relationship with God, self, others or nature. For me forgiveness requires an embrace that makes right the wrong committed or the omission made. Here is the story why I believe forgiveness requires “un abrazo.”

During the early 1990's I worked as a human rights attorney in Linares, Chile. In January 1990 the first act of the newly elected democratic president was to set up a Commission of Truth and Reconciliation, to investigate and document the disappearances and executions during the seventeen years of the Pinochet military dictatorship. Witnesses began to filter in to the local diocesan Catholic Charities office where I worked with a Chilean colleague to begin documenting the atrocities. We were told to visit Melozal, a village of 100 farmers about half hour outside of Linares.

We arrived in Melozal and were invited into one of the homes for tea. We learned from Maria that her husband was taken in the first week after the military coup by the local policeman. In 17 years she had never heard a word about him. She still had hope he was alive and would return now that Chile had a democratically elected government. She told us to talk with her neighbor whose 22 year old son was taken on the very same evening as her husband. The neighbor, Cecilia, told us that after searching for some days four bodies were found on the shore of the local river including her son's. She went to the next village's mayor and requested to retrieve the body of her son which she did. Cecilia did not have the legal permission to retrieve the other three bodies so they washed down the river. For 17 years Cecilia was never able to tell her neighbor Maria that her husband had been shot and thrown over the bridge into the river. The policeman who arrested the four men was at this time still the only police officer in Melozal.

My colleague and I brought Cecilia with us when we had to confront Maria with the truth of what happened to her husband. Not an easy thing to do in a culture that honors the dead and their graves. Instead of hostility or malice Maria tearfully embraced Cecilia both understanding what fear and terror can do to neighbors. In that moment I realize that although violence and the inability to share the events of the execution ripped both of their lives apart forever the strength of that healing, forgiving embrace was more powerful than any bullet. While due to an amnesty law that police officer never saw justice, both women came and gave testimony
before the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation and all four victims were entered into the official record as "executed under the military regime."

How have you embraced others in forgiveness? How have others embraced you in forgiveness? While frequently we wrap the concept of forgiveness in acts committed, what omissions have you made that may require you to reach out to someone and give them a “forgiveness embrace”?

_Terry Miller is the Director of the Office of International Education_

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_A Reflection offered by Anonymous_

Forgiveness –

1. In my mind forgiveness is a transformational process of letting go of the anger and moving forward to a healthier state of well being.

2. I can think of one situation in the past where someone withheld information that could have possibly changed the outcome of an incident. The overall results affected many people and could have been avoided. I was very angry about this situation to the point that the resentment was controlling my happiness. After many months I realized I needed to regroup and begin the process of healing and letting go of the past. It was time to stop telling my sad story and start heading down a new path with confidence and peace of mind.

3. I focused way too much time on the negative parts hanging on to resentment and letting the anger control me. I know I learned a lot about myself and realized that I can never let that type of hurt take over my life again. I need to empower myself to forgive and move forward.

4. How can you support someone who is struggling with a difficult situation and allowing the resentment and anger to take over their life? How can you assist a person through the steps of forgiveness?

_Anonymous_
A Reflection offered by Dr. James South

Forgiveness appears to me primarily to be a matter of mourning, of working through a loss so that one can proceed with living. A relationship has been ruptured, an attunement broken. In such interpersonal relationships, forgiveness for me is primarily a matter of accepting--of accepting the harm done to me and the intention of the other so that I can let go of the perceived slights and the direct provocations. Of course it can work the other way and I can ask that people accept the slights, provocations, broken promises, and the like that I inflict on them. Let's face it; no one gets through a day with bruising (intentionally or unintentionally) occurring. This understanding of forgiveness implies a radical notion of hope. That people are willing and able to accept the harm and move forward. A close examination of my conscience shows how hard that is for me, and in my interactions with others who think I've harmed them, I feel the ways in which we can still be out of attunement with each other even when forgiveness has been asked of them. Holding on that bruising does neither party any good, of course, but the world and the people in it are broken and that's a simple fact of life--itself to be accepted, mourned, and worked through, with the hope that we can soften the bruising we do and have have done to us.

Such an understanding of forgiveness, though, is interpersonal. One of the things I've come to acknowledge and yet not accept is systemic harm. While it's hard work to forgive an individual, it's nonetheless possible. But how does one one accept systemic harm? Here the most complex example that comes to mind most intensely for me is what we as humans do to non-human animals for our personal, unnecessary pleasures. Our complicity in non-human animal suffering, whether caused by ecological harm based on systemic avoidance of recognizing the consequences of our actions, or the horror of the slaughterhouse (or the laboratory, or the zoo, or the seapark, is too complex for forgiveness. Whom could we forgive? To whom could we ask for forgiveness? And yet I feel the need to ask forgiveness (on behalf of whom?) for suffering on that scale, but find I cannot accept suffering on that scale. So, at the end of this all too brief reflection, I close with questions. Who can forgive us for the harm we do to other animals? Why are we so ready to forgive ourselves for these horrors (if we even think to accept them)? What does this say about the animal we call 'the human?' What kind of presumption does it take to forgive human animals for our individual harms and ask forgiveness when we harm other human animals, when we cannot (or willingly do not) recognize the cries of suffering from non-human animals? I find myself when faced with these questions in the mood of Ezekiel: "And you, son of man, will you judge, will you judge the bloody city? Then declare to her all her abominations. You shall say, Thus says the Lord God: A city that sheds blood in her midst, so that her time may come, and that makes idols to defile herself! You have become guilty by the blood that you have shed, and defiled by the idols that you have made, and you have brought your days near, the appointed time of your years has come."

How is forgiveness for that possible? Do we simply await our judgment?
Dr. James South is the Associate Dean in the College of Arts and Sciences