

FORGIVENESS IS OVERRATED

It seems that to be really mentally healthy, we're supposed to forgive those people who have harmed us; ESPECIALLY OUR PARENTS.

We're not supposed to carry grudges.

You know, when I entered the word "forgiveness" in the Amazon search bar, I got over 14,000 "results." There is a veritable self-help industry urging us to forgive those we resent or those who have hurt us.

We are encouraged over and over again to "let go" of these grievances, to-instead- take responsibility for *our* part in their creation, and cultivate instead feelings of compassion instead of anger.

Whether grounded in Christian, Jewish, or Buddhist teachings, the importance of forgiveness is promoted everywhere in our culture today. We're supposed to recognize that feeling aggrieved and victimized hurts *us* more than others ---YOU KNOW THE OLD SAYING:

Resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

---And we're reminded that while our parents might have done us wrong, they also likely were doing the best they could, the best they knew how, given their own backgrounds.

In my clinical experience, forgiveness is overrated, especially when it comes to our relationship with our parents. After all, these are parents who may have —to a greater or lesser degree-- neglected, rejected, failed to understand, exploited or otherwise abused their children.

Too often, forgiveness is a rationalization for compliance, guilt, and self-blame.

Let me explain what I mean. Take the notion that the ideal end point of the process of working through the conflicts of their childhood is some form of reconciliation with PARENTS. It's apparently o.k. to be angry with our parents —maybe even not to like them or like being around them very much-- but a healthy person is apparently supposed to grow up, let go of these resentments, and find a way back to some kind of equanimity and forgiveness.

The problem with forgiveness is that it inadvertently echoes a destructive tendency in childhood--a childhood injunction a destructive tendency in childhood—an injunction *against* really facing up to the damage that parental mistreatment and abuse can inflict.

And, you know, unfortunately, if truth be known, such mistreatment is pretty ubiquitous. Our parents, after all, are flawed, but parents—and these flaws--have an awesome and terrifying power to shape children. Parents' anger, self-centeredness, neglect, neediness, rejection...all have a larger than life effect on a helpless, unformed, and defenseless child.

But here's what we know about what makes children tick—the child is ALWAYS highly motivated to *adapt* to the parents harmful behavior. They *have to* in order to maintain some kind of relationship because—as we know-- it's a universal fact of human attachment that some relationship, even a bad one, is better than no relationship at all.

So how do kids adapt? Well, one common way is that children will usually take on responsibility and take on blame for the pain they feel—pain that is the result of the harmful actions of their parents. By taking on the responsibility, the guilt, the child can remain safely attached to his or her parents. And, in addition, keep hope alive that love will eventually come their way.

So, think about this: Kids are already—TO THEIR DETRIMENT-- primed to forgive their parents for their parents' abusive treatment. Forgiveness becomes a child's way of not confronting the ways that a beloved caretaker really might NOT have had that child's best interests at

heart. The child COMPLIES with bad caretaking and grows up--believing secretly that he or she is a bad or undeserving person.

This is so much the case that therapists end up spending a lot of time helping patients see that they were actually innocent as children and that it was their parents "fault" that they suffered growing up.

But this is hard to do and meets with a lot of resistance in patients, patients who aren't too quick to blame others, but are, if anything, too quick to blame themselves and exonerate others.

There's a saying that says, "A CHILD WOULD RATHER BE A SINNER IN HEAVEN THAN A SAINT IN HELL"

This means that KIDS have a universal need to believe in the ultimate goodness of their parents and a GREAT aversion of seeing them as bad. And, as we've seen, most children accomplish this is by taking responsibility for their own suffering, thereby exonerating parents and keeping alive the wishful fantasy that the parents are really good or could become good if only their children were different, or better.

Anger and resentment, then, are often the child's *defenses against internalizing blame*. These feelings *counteract* the ubiquitous tendency to deny a painful emotional reality.

Instead these feelings of anger and resentment keep this painful reality—a reality created by the failures of the parents-- squarely in the person's crosshairs. It's a way of pushing back against compliance. And regaining a legitimate feeling of innocence.

Now, in the big picture, forgiveness and reconciliation *can* be good things. Understanding that our parents were likely victims themselves and might, therefore, have been doing the best they can is sometimes a positive outcome of separating from them. And, as a result, it can sometimes bring a certain peace to one's heart and soul. But facing the reality of the damage that these same parents inflicted can also bring peace, the peace that comes with coming to terms with reality. Moreover, such a process can open the door to self-forgiveness and self-compassion, feelings whose importance cannot be overrated.

So—paradoxically:--- Blaming others does not have to be toxic. It can, in fact, be a belated attempt to fight against guilt and self-blame. It can be a part of leaving one's victimizers behind.