

# Forgiveness: One Wave Among Many

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“Well, Nancy, it helps me to think of ‘forgiveness’ as ‘letting go.’ Maybe this idea could help you, as well.” Our monthly ACIM class was in full swing in a stately mahogany-paneled living room, filled with deep white sofas. Such a comfortable, calming “nest” I so looked forward to visiting each month for class. But on this particular evening, I was not comfortable, and I would not calm down. The discussion was about forgiveness, and the other members of the class were doing their best to help me understand this cornerstone concept of ACIM. But I was in no mood to forgive. Newly scarred from a recent hysterectomy, I could barely prop myself up on the down-filled sofa without feeling intense pain. I simply didn’t understand why a course that was aimed at promoting inner peace would “foist” a concept like forgiveness on me, especially at this time. I was in too much physical pain. And forgiveness sounded not only like a lot of work, but like a cover for denial.

Like many people, I suppose, I was drawn to ACIM because I had grown weary of needless suffering. I had still not fully come to terms with my childhood, which was filled with physical and emotional abuse. My father beat my mother frequently and often turned his rage on me. My mother was, by turns, emotionally neglectful or cruel. Like many such households, our abuse was never named. Because my parents denied any beatings or other transgressions, I told myself that they acted as they did because I was flawed. I must have done something wrong. Like many children, I took the blame. So while the truth was denied, I was denied, as well. And that denial led to a lifetime of repercussions. I approached daily living with the effort of a salmon swimming upstream, deeply unsure of myself and battling self-hatred, suicidal periods, and physical pain and illnesses since the age of eight.

My fear, now that I was studying ACIM after 25 years in traditional therapy, was that I might latch onto forgiveness too quickly—that I might confuse forgiveness with even more denial. I was convinced that my mid-life health issues were the result of generational trauma passed down to me, and I was not about to sweep this insight under the rug.

I had recently learned from my aunt that my grandfather had been, as she put it, “a beast,” who regularly got drunk and beat my grandmother and terrorized his children. My own father was always in deep denial about this, and he repeated his father’s violent actions, passing his trauma on. As Alice Miller says, there is a “repeated compulsion to abuse children and young people, while repressing the fact that they are . . . protecting their own parents and they have no awareness of the crimes those parents committed on them,” and if they are in such deep denial, they will “ultimately fall ill—unless . . . they leave it to their children to pick up the check by projecting onto them the emotions they cannot admit to themselves.”<sup>1</sup> I couldn’t help thinking that my father, who all his life was filled with rage, and my mother, who was so filled with negative emotions and extreme anxiety, were now both in their late eighties and yet neither had faced any serious medical problems. But I got sick. The generational denial had to go somewhere, and I was left “to pick up the check.” I felt like I had been a shock absorber, a sacrifice. No, I was in no mood to forgive. At least not yet.

Here was what I brought up in ACIM class: You can’t forgive (no matter how you define it) without first bearing witness, returning to “the scene of the crime,” and speaking your truth, *as you understand it*. So you can stop blaming yourself. So you can stop being invisible to yourself. So you can stop feeling crazy. Because under the powerful pull of denial, there is nothing more seductive than saying, “That never *really* happened now, did it?” Bearing witness gives you, simply, permission. Bearing witness, despite the pain of looking abuse straight in the face, gives you room to breathe. But it also can teeter on revenge. I will be the first to admit that there is a very fine line between bearing witness and holding a grievance, and indeed the two might overlap and interweave. But real forgiveness cannot happen without this prior step. If you forgive while repressing anger, rage and grief as accurate responses to violation—if you deny yourself the chance simply to SEE and SPEAK OF what happened to you—then you will gloss over a crucial stage in your healing. You will remain in denial without knowing it. Sure, you might feel relief by “forgiving,” but only for a short time. It will fill you with a sense

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1 Miller, Alice *The Body Never Lies: The Lingering Effects of Hurtful Parenting*, 152, 15.

of calm and rightness for a while. A sense that you are a good person, a bigger person than before. But it is easy to mistake withdrawal and resignation for a false sense of spiritual bliss and “arrival.” And “*the body doesn’t lie.*” You might find yourself sick again. Or back in therapy, wondering why, after your “forgiveness,” you’re still attracting people and situations into your life, which mirror the dynamics of your family of origin.

I had worked on ACIM lessons long enough to experience occasional states of grace as my perceptions shifted and I saw with new and loving eyes. But I had decided that I would forgive only after I felt sure that I would not deny my past or my self. After experiencing pain severe enough to warrant a hysterectomy, I felt I could no longer afford to sink back into a psychic pattern that could physically break me.

Granted, a part of me knew that this period of bearing witness with its attendant feelings of outrage would not last. I only knew that I needed it. It was a matter of fully healing body, mind, and spirit. In order to jump start my will to go on, I needed a bit of piss and vinegar. The question was, for how long?

About three weeks after that ACIM class, the recovery from the hysterectomy was coming along nicely. I was starting to feel a wonderful sense of lightness. I had begun making plans for the future, with an urge to embrace life. I had plans to write. To travel. To teach in new venues. I had a new, more lucid and authoritative voice both when I wrote and when I spoke. A sense of personal sovereignty and newfound assurance. The days of pain and trauma seemed behind me. One evening I even went out dancing for hours, feeling young. Feeling free. I was happy. Happy at last.

But then something happened. Something bad.

The day after my night of dancing, the pain that had initially spurred the hysterectomy returned. It was a complete replay, blow by blow, of the gathering storm of my earlier illness. Scratching with the force of knives, the pain ensnared my abdomen, causing me to buckle in two, writhing like a feral animal trapped in a cage. I needed to go to the hospital. Again.

The severe pain lingered for two days. Feeling like its prisoner, I began to weep. My weeping grew. This was not depression. This was clarity. A form of anguish. And deeply human. I cried out, “Why? Why? Why this AGAIN? Why am I still sick after all my trials? Why, God?? GOD!! WHY??”

And right then, a quiet voice in my head said, “You know why.” Despite my distress, I was immediately thrust into a meditative space—the mental/spiritual place that engulfs me when I meditate on ACIM Lessons. This answer, “You know why,” was a prayer answered. Pure and true. I felt, “Yes, I *do* know.”

The voice then said, “You’re still sick because you’re not finished yet. You’re still learning.”

I felt this was so, but I didn’t know what, precisely, I was learning. The voice continued: “You’re still angry at your parents. You lay all the blame for your pain on what they did to you and to each other when you were a child a long time ago. But they were just two broken little people.

“You need to see that your pain and sickness is the end-result of a far larger dynamic. What about your grandfather? The one your aunt called a ‘beast’? How did he get that way? That violence and cruelty and fear and rage? Where did he learn to be that way?”

I then recalled an earlier story I’d heard about my grandfather: When he was a boy he was put in an orphanage, and he ran away from there to become a logger in the Adirondacks. A young boy as a logger! What had he run away from? What was so bad at the orphanage that even the extremely dangerous, grueling work of logging seemed a better option? And where did those who “raised” him learn to do things to children, which forced little boys to run into forests, roofless and homeless?

And then I thought of my mother. Why was she so lacking in self-esteem, so lacking in selfhood that she had lived a life of total sacrifice—a life in which she stayed for over sixty years with a man who regularly beat her? My mother and father, two sad people who could only connect with one another through violent physical force, who could only connect with me like they were children, themselves: Could I really blame them for all my ills?

According to Gabor Maté, M.D., “Parents, too, [suffer and carry] the burden of generations. There is no one to blame, but there are generations on generations who had lived to bear a part in the genesis of [a daughter’s]

illness.”<sup>2</sup> The suffering I had absorbed as a child, and which had lodged deep in my core and become disease and physical pain later in life, was part of a pain much deeper than my two parents could possibly generate on their own. It was the pain of generations going back so far they were like ocean waves before they recede back into the depths, out of sight. What I was feeling was not a personal grievance. I was feeling human suffering. The human condition. A massive karmic pile-up.

When I envisioned these generational ripples, I began to calm down, feel a sense of ease and release. Yes, I was still in physical pain, but there was relief to be had. I had pain; I had stillness, too.

I suppose I had been pretty stubborn to have needed to get as sick as I did in order to hear this lesson. And I think what I was learning about in this moment was . . . forgiveness.

Since then, I have had some health breakthroughs but some setbacks, as well. So I know that the lesson is still trying to assert itself, as the ego asserts back. Sometimes when the physical pain returns the hardest, I wonder if I am close to a spiritual breakthrough that I’m still not quite developed enough to accept.

But I still believe this: In order to experience the ongoing miracle of forgiveness, I need to bear witness to my life. In order to release the ego with its grievances and enter humanity’s ocean as one tiny wave among millions, I need first to feel my selfhood, my autonomy. I need to say, “This is who I am; this is my story.” Then, with good faith, I might allow the ego to dissolve “like the faintest ripple on the surface of the ocean,”<sup>3</sup> an ocean not just of human suffering but of healing, as well. An ocean where all selves become one.

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<sup>2</sup> Mate, Gabor. *When the Body Says No: Exploring the Stress-Disease Connection*, 83.

<sup>3</sup> A Course in Miracles, T-18. VIII.3.