

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Overseers, Ministry and Counsel,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends meetings*

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The Burr of Forgiveness

by Lynne Phillips

No relationship exists long without tensions. No community continues long without conflicts. No human interaction occurs without the risk of pain, injury, suffering, and alienation. Our meetings are no exception.

Without forgiveness, community is only possible where people are safely and cautiously superficial. Sometimes our relationships with meeting members occur on this cautious, superficial level: we worship together in silence, we exchange pleasantries at rise of meeting, and we strive mightily to avoid conflict. But this level of interaction does not satisfy our yearnings for genuine community. We long to go deeper.

To do that, we need to accept the inevitability of conflict, to expect and prepare for it, and to learn and practice forgiving. Those charged with pastoral care of the meeting can help to create an atmosphere in which conflict and interpersonal injuries are accepted as inevitable and to create mechanisms to aid in their resolution. Rather than avoiding conflict, pastoral caregivers can encourage and support gentle and open confrontation, working through, repentance, and resolution for change. In that kind of environment, Friends can meet and interact authentically and risk being fully present with each other. This atmosphere nurtures the deeper spiritual connections that make our meetings genuine communities.

Writing this article has felt like a burr in the hand. The closer my grip

on it, the more it hurts. It may be inevitable that when we seriously consider the topic of forgiveness, it stirs our memories of past injuries and our own failures to make amends. So, as we walk the path of forgiveness, be prepared for discomfort and challenge. But while the way may be painful, forgiveness offers substantial rewards: individual peace, reconciliation with one another and/or the group, and restoration of trust, love, and joy within the group at a deeper level of understanding and respect, leading to strengthening and celebration of the community.

Forgiveness within a Friends Meeting

This article does not attempt to cover all of the many aspects of forgiveness. It is written for those charged with the pastoral care of Friends meetings to address situations where individuals have felt slighted, injured, or misunderstood in the meeting or by the meeting. It focuses on the dynamics of forgiveness in face-to-face interactions by Friends and on how those charged with pastoral care can assist in the process. The steps towards forgiveness in this context assume the following:

- all parties regard the meeting community as sacramental;
- the parties sincerely desire reconciliation and restoration;
- they are willing to “sit in the fire” for a reasonable length of time;
- they have no hidden agendas; and



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- they can open themselves to God for guidance, love, and energy.

In considering forgiveness in this context, I am reminded of a book on racism by Lena Williams, *It's the Little Things: Everyday Interactions That Anger, Annoy, and Divide the Races*. Often Friends fail to address the hurts they experience. Perhaps these small wounds feel too trivial, or too overwhelming, or too embarrassing. They are rarely brought to the attention of Ministry and Counsel or the Pastoral Care Committees of the meeting. Yet, they niggle like a fine sliver that prickles your finger every time you use it. Even when these hurts interfere with our ability to center in meeting or keep us from enjoying our interactions with Friends, we may think, "Why bother with confrontation and working through? Isn't it better just to forgive and forget?" If only we could! And sometimes we do.

Where the hurt remains and is not addressed, the suppressed sense of injury diminishes love and communication among members. Even if people are not aware of the cause, the unspoken feelings are communicated. The injured party conveys non-verbal messages of coolness and reserve, which generate feelings of unease, a need to be careful, a sense of unspecified danger.

Pseudo-forgiveness: What forgiveness is not

Because forgiving involves the pain of dealing with the burr, sometimes we would rather toss it than grip it. Instead of risking further pain by inviting a dialogue about our injury, we engage in acts of pseudo-forgiveness. Our social training has given us a number of models of pseudo-forgiveness which have the superficial comfort gained by peeing in your snowsuit as a child. It gave relief but...

Pseudo-forgiveness comes in many forms. *God-like pseudo-forgiveness* is granted magnanimously from a position of presumed superiority. It seeks to deny the wound by diminishing the injuring party. An example: "You

ignored my weighty contribution to the discussion, but I forgive you because you haven't had the advantage of my education and experience." Spoken, this form of pseudo-forgiveness looks more like revenge.

Pseudo-forgiveness can also wear the mask of *loving submission*. We might think, "I know you didn't mean to insult me by asking me where I came from, just because my skin color and my accent are different from yours, when in fact I was born in this city. I forgive you because the Bible tells us to turn the other cheek." When we simply absorb the pain and reconcile ourselves to an injustice, we foreclose the

possibility of opening a dialogue that could heal us and enlighten other Friends. By opening the dialogue we might also reduce the likelihood that others will be wounded by a thoughtless remark or other insensitive conduct.

Pseudo-forgiveness reveals itself as *avoidance* when we seek a private release for ourselves. We rationalize, "That's not worth making a fuss in the meeting. He didn't mean to imply I was stupid when he brushed aside my suggestion. I'll talk to the committee later." Perhaps shrugging off a perceived injury is helpful when dealing with strangers, but it is not the best strategy for dealing with the burr in ongoing relationships.

Pseudo-forgiveness as *denial* can be dangerous to our health when we try to suppress or minimize the force of the emotions that well up: anger, dismay, inferiority, confusion, feeling misunderstood or misrepresented. When we pretend that "it's nothing," we bury the emotions in our bodies, generating physical tension and stress. This can leave us poised to react to unrelated situations with belligerence or wariness, fueled by suppressed anger or generalized anxiety.

Pseudo-forgiveness leaves people hurt, concealing their feelings of anger, suspicion, or fear and being cautious about speaking or committing to action. We may be gathered in our worship, but we are diminished in our love and our confidence for joyful interaction and meaningful work on spiritual and practical issues.

Fruits of forgiveness

- *individual release*
- *reconciliation*
- *restoration*
- *celebration of intimacy and community*

What Forgiveness Is . . .

The four fruits of forgiveness (individual release, reconciliation, restoration, and celebration of intimacy and community) can be attained by taking the six steps described below. Although these steps are described in an order, in practice they occur together, intertwining and supporting one another.

Individual release: When we are conscious of injuring another or of being injured, we feel a spectrum of negative emotions: anxiety, discomfort, anger, fear, suspicion, mistrust, loneliness, alienation. These emotions can be burdensome if we nurse them, but they can also act as energizers, motivating us to engage in a mutual process leading to forgiveness, and hence are not to be ignored or suppressed.

There is also a cognitive part of forgiveness: fair and just demands that deserve recognition and negotiation; the need for change in attitudes, behaviours, and circumstances.

We need to acknowledge the energy of negative emotions and use their transformation as signals that we are making progress in releasing ourselves from the injury. We need to work with the issues so that we feel we are coming to new understandings and new behaviors that signal growth in competence, both personally and corporately. When we succeed at these tasks, we feel released.

Reconciliation and Restoration: Many people recognize that nursing a grudge or harboring anger against another actually poisons the self. Hence, many believe that individual release from our own woundedness is the point of forgiveness. Where we seek to sustain and strengthen our faith community, however, release is only part of the story. We want to reconcile estranged Friends so that they can worship and work together in harmony. Reconciliation implies that damaged relationships are repaired.

Beyond reconciliation of the parties, we also seek restoration of our community that can be wounded by the rift. Restoration is subtly different

from reconciliation. Reconciliation means that we can get along. It has the aura of negotiated settlements and compromises. Restoration has the feeling of coming to a "place just right," which may, in fact, be a breakthrough to a stronger and more loving community. We cannot erase the injury, so in some sense, we cannot return to the situation as it was before. But one of the miracles of God's love is that forgiveness can bring the parties and the supportive community to a higher level of awareness and mutual understanding. We are open to one another in trust and love but carry the wisdom contained in the words of Captain San Juan De Fuca, a 16th century explorer, "We sailed on regardless, taking fresh troubles for granted."

Celebration: A loving and energetic community is the result of engaging in forgiveness. When we commit ourselves to a community such as a meeting, we are committing ourselves to a continuous, dynamic process of community maintenance. Forgiveness is one of our maintenance tools – not an end in itself, but a means to strengthen our corporate worship, our experience of the Divine, spiritual practices, emotional and practical care and support, companionship, fun, and service to causes such as peace and social justice.

Six Steps of Forgiveness

I believe that there are six steps in forgiveness, three involving inner work, and three others to be taken in conjunction with other people. The petition in the Lord's Prayer – "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" – might suggest that forgiving is a single step, a one-sentence event. However, it is a more complex and challenging process. It is natural to want to resolve the hurt by giving a single unconditional absolution to the perpetrator of our hurt. "Forgive and forget." But we can't leap over the problem or bull our way through it. We need to proceed thoughtfully step by step, guarded with love and optimism.

1. Reflection: The first step is for the injured party to feel the feelings that arise as a result of the wounding, to hold them in the Light, to stay with them and to learn from them. Before the injured party can sit in the fire with the offending person, he or she must sit in the fire individually, experiencing and examining the emotions that have

been triggered. For some this may entail solitary self-examination, meditation, journaling, and prayer—holding the situation in the Light.

However, this reflective process need not be undertaken alone. Pastoral caregivers may help the injured person to understand and articulate the

Those charged with pastoral care can let it be known that they are available to help.

dimensions of the injury, to look at the wound in a larger context of the person's life experiences and the offending

behavior in the larger context of the meeting. The pastoral care committee may also help the person who has given offense realize that he or she has wounded another Friend. By deep listening and with clarifying questions, pastoral caregivers can help each of the parties to an injury come to their own understanding of the event. Careful and thoughtful probing can also help each see the situation from the perspective of the other as an initial step toward forgiveness.

Those charged with pastoral care can offer to assist in the process and let it be known that they are available to help Friends in this way, as well as in the later stages of interpersonal reconciliation. Friends can also be encouraged to solicit help from a group of trusted Friends or from a clearness committee to test their own experiences and to aid in seeing the way forward.

In addition to assisting the parties to examine and more deeply understand their conduct and feelings, there may be times when the Pastoral Care Committee may need to name a festering or unacknowledged conflict that Friends are avoiding facing directly, but which is adversely affecting the life of the meeting.

2. *Seeing that of God in the Other:* Before interpersonal reconciliation can take place, the injured party must be able to see that of God in the person who gave offense. The Friend who caused the injury also may need support to feel that he or she is loved and forgiven by God and worthy of being forgiven within the community. This prerequisite of forgiving gives value to others and value to the community. They and the community are "worth" the pain, risk and effort to forgive.

3. *Considering Forgiveness:* With the help of a pastoral caregiver or the committee, the injured party may take the next step of entertaining the possibility that the offending party might be restored to one's loving regard as a friend. The injured Friend can be encouraged to separate the doer from the deed, believing that the person can be forgiven even though the deed that caused the injury cannot be condoned. Helping the Friend to place the person in a holy spot and experience that person as precious in God's sight may enable the Friend to take the third forgiving step — recognizing that the past cannot be changed, that the injury (which may be lasting) and the pain are part of the reality that must be worked through.

4. *Seeking and affirming trust among the parties:* Each of the parties must be willing to hear and acknowledge expressions of pain and anger and to come to some understanding of how and why the injury occurred. One or more of the parties may ask the Pastoral Care Committee to serve a mediating role in bringing all of the parties to a place where each can speak and be heard. Where face-to-face reconciliation is possible, the offending person must be willing to examine his/her conduct, to understand and acknowledge how it contributed to the injury, and to restore the relationship by changing behavior. Repentance must both be genuine and be perceived as genuine.

5. *Acknowledging that we are imperfect and cannot expect perfect behavior:* Ideally, in reconciling, the parties express their genuine intention to help each other avoid future offense, but reinjury remains a possibility. Still, the Friends have been strengthened by the knowledge that they have grown in love and wisdom, so that in the future their spontaneous, free behavior will be shaped by it. They are also liberated by the knowledge that when they fall again, they will be upheld by the meeting's processes and the loving and capable hands of pastoral caregivers.

6. *Celebration of our free and open acknowledgment of renewed bonds:* right relationships have been restored; we are carrying no secrets; we are nursing no grudges. God's Spirit gives us these rewards: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and

self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) Perhaps this is the step where we have finally peeled away the burr, pulled all of the prickles out of our fingers, and can relish the seed within.

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Questions for Reflection

1. Do pastoral caregivers nourish an environment in the meeting where Friends treat each other honestly, tenderly, and compassionately?
2. Are members of the pastoral care committee and others in the meeting trained in listening and conflict resolution?
3. Does the pastoral care committee let Friends know that its members are available to listen to Friends and to help them reconcile their differences?
4. Do members of the pastoral care committee offer regular opportunities, such as after meeting for worship, to meet privately with and listen to any Friends in the meeting who may be carrying a care or concern?
5. How do pastoral caregivers encourage Friends to deal openly and tenderly with conflict and discourage pseudo-forgiveness?
6. Recognizing that Friends can be wounded by others, do I encourage Friends to face and address these wounds openly and to seek and offer forgiveness? Do I make myself available to listen to Friends express their hurts, pray with them, and prepare them to offer forgiveness?
7. Am I attentive to the unspoken messages that may indicate unacknowledged or unresolved brokenness in relationships in the meeting and seek opportunities to use my listening skills to help Friends restore their relationships?
8. How do pastoral caregivers encourage Friends to deal openly and tenderly with conflict and discourage pseudo-forgiveness, conflict avoidance, and hardness of heart among the injured?

One Meeting's Experience: A Case of Forgiveness

I remember an experience I had in my home meeting with an esteemed, long time member, an elder in all the senses of the word. Our meeting was engaged in a difficult conversation about a pressing issue. This particular Friend and I found ourselves locked in polar opposite positions. I found myself highly irritated that this Friend was so rigid, so stubborn about her position, and not open to change. I felt so clear about the "rightness" of my position. I found myself so hurt, so angry that I went over a year without speaking to this Friend, whom I saw every Sunday.

Then a Divine hand threw us together in the menial task of decorating the meetinghouse for a holiday craft fair. We were civil, pleasant with each other. In an unexpected moment of openness, I asked her to talk to me about her closely held reasons for her position. Which she did, and I listened. I then offered my reasons in return. Neither of us changed our views in that exchange, but I came to see that our separate and opposing reasons came from a shared value. Both of us considered that the clear and truthful use of words was a necessity for our integrity.

She then explained how for the last year, she had prayed every day over this issue. I was incredibly humbled. I hadn't done that. I hadn't opened myself up in that manner to Spirit's movements. We ended with a hug and a verbal understanding that even though she stood firmly here, and I stood firmly there, that we could still be Friends.

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Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand.

-- Isaac Pennington, Letters, 1667

Resources for Forgiveness Work

Books:

Arnold, Johann. *Seventy Times Seven: The Power of Forgiveness*. Plough Publishing House. 1997.

Augsburger, David. *Caring Enough to Forgive True Forgiveness; Caring Enough to Not Forgive False Forgiveness*. Herald Press, Kitchener, ON. N2G 4M5. 1981. Rich advice with examples from contemporary life and from the Bible. Written for faith communities.

Casarjian, Ronald. *Forgiveness: A Bold Choice for the Peaceful Heart*. Bantam. 1992.

Linn, Dennis et al. *Don't Forgive Too Soon: Extending the Two hands that Heal*. Paulist Press. 1997. Useful. Cartoon illustrations. Process taught through everyday examples. Especially good for families.

McBee, Patricia, ed. *Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meeting*. Quaker Press of FGC. 2002. Several essays with detailed advice on resolving conflicts in Quaker meetings with case studies.

Miller, D. Patrick. *The Little Book of Forgiveness*. Fearless Books. 2000. Practical "how to" book. The concepts are simple, direct, and understandable. Helps us see areas where we have hidden resentments and things needing our forgiveness.

Muller, Wayne. *Legacy of the Heart: The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood*. Simon & Schuster Inc. 1993. Buddhist orientation. Help for adults who need to forgive their family of origin. Exercise and meditations. Chapter 1 has a powerful meditation: "Letting Go of Family Sorrow".

Telushkin, Joseph (Rabbi). *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well*. William Morrow Co. 1996. Teaches us to avoid the need for forgiving by careful attention to what we say. Many important topics with advice: ethical speech, lure of gossip, lying, how to criticize, how to accept rebukes and more.

Articles:

Cameron, Dee Birch. "Why Quakers Should Learn to Apologize," *Friends Journal*, February 2003, p. 14. (Apologizing is akin to peacemaking..)

Cronk, Sandra L. *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet #297 (1991).

Downey, Mary Ann. "Building the Beloved Community," *Friends Journal*, October 2005, p. 6. (Being a true community means going beyond being nice.)

Friends of Portland (Maine) Monthly Meeting. "One Meeting's Response to Conflict and Abuse." *Pastoral Care Newsletter*, Vol. 6, No. 2.

Kelly, Arlene. "Dealing with Difficult Situations," *Pastoral Care Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 1.

We Shall All Be Changed:



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