

Re-thinking deathbed forgiveness rituals
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In this article, I want to question how forgiveness has been described in recent medical models of death and bereavement. I believe that these models have at times promoted unnecessary deathbed conversations in which awkward attempts to rush the process of forgiveness may serve only to further distance us from our connections with our deceased loved ones. I also want to offer some alternatives to commonly held assumptions in the discourse of forgiveness. To begin though, I will consider some of the common modernist understandings of forgiveness that influence work with people who are dying.

Modernist understandings of forgiveness and death

Within the field of grief and bereavement, there is a commonly accepted notion that forgiveness is an essential cornerstone of the dying process (Attig, 1996, 2000; Levine, 1982, 1997). Encouraged by well-intentioned people in the helping professions, it has become routinely believed that if forgiveness is performed properly and according to prescribed formula, the person can have a 'good death' (Bertman, 1998; Lynn & Harrold 1999; Leichtentritt & Rettig, 2000). Ironically, this construction of a 'good death' (ibid) has become the ideal to measure all deaths against.

In a 'good death' a person dies having completed the necessary pre-requisites with 'acceptance' (as opposed to denial). They make an apology to all possibly harmed in the process of living, they forgive those who had committed wrongs against them, and they make peace with their God (whatever that might mean to each of them). A 'good death' then enables a departure without physical or emotional distress or struggle. With these steps completed, the family can find 'closure' and move forward in life feeling as though death was a good experience for everyone. (Worden 1991).

In these modernist approaches, forgiveness is promoted as a single individual act. It is often encouraged as a death-bed (or at least post-terminal diagnosis) conversation to get one's affairs in order to have a peaceful death. Even if the person was notoriously tyrannical, this act of forgiveness is encouraged to restore wrongs and be the healing salve that repairs a broken relationship. It is expected to be a cathartic expression that potentially grants a clean slate and a renewed access to a positive afterlife for their pre-death admission. These descriptions of forgiveness have, I believe, over-simplified the meaning and act of apology and acceptance to assume that people will synchronize their watches and magically appear at the apology/forgiveness intersection simultaneously.

This discourse did not grow up as an orphan separate from its cultural parentage. We needn't look far to find discourse that supports these perspectives and many arenas in which a simplified, essentialized meaning of forgiveness dominates. The promotion of

apology/forgiveness rituals can be found in self help articles, professional journals, popular song lyrics, television talk shows, religious services and twelve step programs. Western culture has formed numerous rules and protocols for guilt, repentance, apology and forgiveness.

Judeo-Christian beliefs have sanctioned these rituals and made them central features of religious thought. The Lord's Prayer, a recitation that is often a child's first memorization and ritual in Christianity, encourages us to 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' Modern medicine and psychology has readily adopted forgiveness as part of the dying and grief process. The connection between religious practices of confession and final absolution and secular medical encouragement towards cathartic deathbed confessions that seek psychological absolution appears very strong. Both promise the hope of a better after-life and the possibility of being spared from the consequences of wrongdoing.

Practices that emphasize forgiveness and let bygones go by have been inserted into the discourse of death. Ira Byock, best selling author of *Dying Well*, is only one proponent of the secular version of this discourse. He encourages people to perform five steps in order to have the right kind of death. He suggests that people say, 'Forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you. Goodbye.' These five simple statements are claimed to ease the suffering of people facing life's end. They are about cleaning up and 'becoming current' in our relationships with the people in our lives 'who matter most.' (Dyingwell.com: 2002).

In my experience, these practices of forgiveness support an artificial ending to the life of stories and silence other possibilities from emerging. Relationships that could develop rich and intricate knowledges in their connections with deceased loved ones are robbed by premature practices that support forgiveness, acceptance, letting go and moving forward, as if these are once and forever acts. I am interested in questioning these essentialized ideas of forgiveness and instead exploring alternatives.

Revising the 'membership' of our lives

One alternative to these notions of forgiveness involves engaging with re-membering conversations (White 1989, 1997). The term re-membering was coined by Barbara Myerhoff (1982) in relation to thinking about a person's life as a club with members. When we think about all those we are associated with in the course of our daily lives, we could consider them as members of our 'club of life'.

This way of conceiving our lives, offers the possibility of repeatedly revising the membership status of those who appear in our 'clubs of life'. We are able to revise our relationships with all the members, and these revisions can continue well beyond the physical reality of death. Understood in this context, the generosity of forgiveness is one possible revision among many other story versions that might change over time.

These revisions involve the transformation and re-writing of stories of relationship. Through the re-authoring of stories we can choose to revise our relationships with those by whom we have been wronged. In this process, the emphasis is not on forgiveness being a transformative act, so much as on the construction of a transformative story of relationship, in which various acts of forgiveness, apology, and story revision might take place.

The connection between forgiveness and membership status

I would venture that when there is a desire for forgiveness in a connection, that somewhere along the way the individuals involved had a change in membership status. Forgiveness does not just happen in a relational vacuum. The story in which it features is more important than any single magical act. I am using this term, membership, specifically here as a statement of privilege that changes over time. Membership status is not a biological birth right. Rather, it is a living connection that grows and shapes and changes over time. When intimacy is nurtured, membered status can grow more important. Conversely, when harm is created, membered status can be downgraded or severed.

As someone approaches death, I am interested in knowing who makes up their communities; who will carry their stories and legacies following death. Where membership has been injured, for whatever reason, encouraging a reflexive stance to review and possibly repair membership may be appropriate. There also may be times where it is inappropriate to reinstate former membership status. A person's behaviors could have been so abhorrent that to restore membered status on more than a provisional basis could actually be harmful to the development of positive stories and strength. In such contexts, it may be better to allocate only a more distant membership status rather than assuming that forgiveness means resuming privileged intimate membership status.

In my experience, it is of equal importance to examine, reinstate and renegotiate membership after a person has died. There are occasions when this involves many on-going conversations rather than one singular conversation when the door to forgive is opened. In approaching death in this fashion, the tremendous pressure to have "the right conversations" prior to dying dissolves.

Considerations of power

I also believe it is important to consider issues of power when working in areas of forgiveness. We must note who speaks, who assesses wrong-doings, and who grants the forgiveness are inextricably interwoven with power relations. Without taking such power relations into account it is possible for acts of apology and forgiveness to perpetuate such relations of power. Some stories of abuse can be overlooked in the rush to perform the forgiveness ritual. Similarly, voices of protest can be silenced or rendered illegitimate by premature acts of apology if the person speaking the apology has been historically membered or positioned in more powerful ways. For example, in the case of a parent who physically intruded upon a child, premature apology could silence and potentially sacrifice alternative stories being developed.

One woman told me how at the time of her father-in-law's death, his six sons had little positive to say about him. She was somewhat taken aback by their harsh stories of this man's tyranny and abrasive parenting style. Even at his funeral there was little kindness that was mentioned. There were stories about how he was irascible and grumpy that only slightly erased the sting and the anger that his sons knew in their relationship with their father. Had I encouraged an admission of wrong-doing, apology, and forgiveness, I am doubtful that it would have been well-received. The sons needed time for relational restoration, for new stories to begin to spring forward. Premature insistence on apology or closure may even have been harmful in squashing the possibility of new stories emerging.

Over the years after his death, the daughter-in-law told of remarkable events. She spoke about how, when this man's sons would gather, they would speak about the meanness and difficulties they had experienced at this man's hands as a parent. At the time of the funeral, initially they had little to say that was appreciative of their connections with him. Slowly, though she began to hear new stories pop through alongside the well-rehearsed ones. 'Yeah, he was a mean father, but do you remember the time we all went fishing?' Or, 'He sure could yell a lot, but I also remember how he taught me to stand up for myself'. Stories also began to take emerge about how the six brothers had looked after one another when their father had been drunk.

Their stories began to take shape in new ways that allowed the membership of this man to be re-included. A story of forgiveness was performed over time and in relationship to one another. Had this dying man offered a singular moment of apology, I doubt whether his sons would have been in a position to immediately form a new understanding of their connection. Such an act may have even shut down the possibilities for the alternative stories that came to be shaped over time and in connection with one another.

Interestingly enough, one of the sons lived further away and wasn't able to participate in regular family gatherings. After the father's death, he returned to his distant home and was not privy to the birthing of these new stories. Years later, when he did return to the town of his childhood, he gathered with his brothers. When the siblings shared their new versions alongside the old, the youngest brother corrected them. 'What do you mean that he taught you about fishing?' In an almost indignant way, he insisted that they had gotten the stories wrong because he had not been given a chance to participate in the conversations that had occurred since the funeral.

Stories that re-member relationships need to take shape in relation to one another. In this example, stories that allowed for these sons to create a forgiving version of their father, needed to be grown ever so slowly and communally. Even after death our relationships change and evolve. These sons may continue to develop further versions of how they understand their relationships with their father five, ten, twenty, or even fifty years following his death.

Last words?

When I sit with a family before or after a family member's death, I often do not mention the term forgiveness. I certainly would not be the person to suggest this topic as necessary to create positive meanings of death. Nor would I be the person to assess the amount of potential wrongdoing that may have been done or if there is a need for forgiveness. Rather, I am interested in knowing how relationships have been constructed. I inquire about who makes are the significant memberships of the dying person's life and how have these memberships may have changed over time. I want to open topics of conversation that allow the dying person to reflect on where the connection, or membered status, may have been harmed or cut off. I want to know if the person who is dying would like to see the connection restored and restoried - even if this is likely to occur only after their death. I am curious about how can we create conversations that support a re-membering and reinclusion of relationship both before death as well as long after a person has died.

My work is not anti-apology or anti-forgiveness. I do however wish to question the ways

in which apology and forgiveness are commonly encouraged as a singular ritual performed by people on their deathbeds, or towards them. Conventional thought is that forgiveness ends a journey rather than opens a door to something new. Rather than being fashioned as a single transformative utterance, I would hope that forgiveness can be a chapter in an ongoing story development.

What is more, revisions of membership can occur long after a person's death. If we stop thinking of death as the final chapter in a story, then the urgency for the 'last chance to forgive' disappears and we can contemplate the cultivation of a much stronger process of re-storying than any single ritual act at a stipulated time might allow.

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