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Transformative Forgiveness Following Severe Trauma

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1. ABSTRACT

How did some individuals forgive that which was seemingly unforgivable? This was the main research question in this study concerned with the investigation of the self-transforming nature of becoming forgiving following traumatic events. The dynamics of transformative forgiveness were studied mainly at the individual intrapsychic level, in order to understand how it developed, along with its facilitators, inhibitors, concomitants, and aftereffects. Thirteen individuals from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, who have forgiven following severe trauma and were transformed in the process, were selected as participants. Among them were a Holocaust survivor and the father of a 9/11 flight attendant. In a qualitative heuristic research design, data collection was accomplished through a questionnaire, a narrative session, and 2 in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Results have shown that transformative forgiveness develops across the prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal/spiritual levels of being. The process was initiated by the intention to change which replaced anger as motivator. Cathartic processing ensued followed by the development of empathy and compassion. The transpersonal concomitants present in the experience of every participant were particularly important for their immediate therapeutic properties. The tension between the given and the transcendent, resulted in the new emergents of consciousness, such as generalized compassion and the resolution of forgiving. The impact of being forgiving was significant, positively influencing particularly the psychological, spiritual, and social domains. Becoming forgiving had a transformative effect upon the self and through the self in the world.

It was concluded from the qualitative analysis that transformative forgiveness is an intrapsychic process, self-directed, and unconditional of a transpersonal nature. It is essentially a process of healing and expansion of consciousness. Based on these results a new integrative definition was introduced. Forgiveness was defined as an evolutionary process of transformation of consciousness, transpersonal in nature, developing in the interpersonal context, but primarily intrapsychic.

2. INTRODUCTION

The same word – forgiveness - is used in literature across a whole range of transgressions, from minor ones to those of a particularly vicious nature. Jacques Derrida

(2001) however argued that genuine forgiveness is only forgiving the unforgivable, because forgiving the forgivable is actually calculative reasoning. Following Derrida's philosophical argument, the author explored in this research study, in a qualitative heuristic design the self-transforming nature of becoming forgiving following traumatic events. This particular form of forgiveness is deeply transformative precisely because it is not based on a rational calculation of gains, but it is rooted in transpersonal awareness, that noological or spiritual dimension, the realm beyond ego. The shift created in one's way of being entails no claim of possession. Forgiving is not something one has and could distribute left and right, it is who one is and has become after a long and arduous process of change.

3. PARTICIPANTS

The sample selected consisted of 13 participants, nine women and four men, ranging in age from 38 to 75, who have forgiven seemingly unforgivable offenses. The education level was high, nine of them holding Master's degrees or higher. Because of the need in the research field to study forgiveness in different religions, an effort was made to select participants from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. Four were involved in spiritual communities with Christian Unitarian beliefs, two were Buddhist, one was Taoist, one was Jewish, one was a Vedanta teacher, one a Sufi/Muslim, one Native American, and two claimed no religious or spiritual affiliation. Five of the 13 participants forgave the murderer of a very close family member, among them the father of a 9/11 flight attendant, and the sister of a victim of the horrific West crimes in Great Britain. The other participants included survivors of the Holocaust, severe childhood abuse, a horrific childhood rape, a husband's suicide, and domestic abuse, all of whom forgave the offender and were profoundly transformed in the process.

4. PROCEDURE

The dynamics of being forgiving were studied mainly at the individual intrapsychic level. The selection procedure consisted of completing a questionnaire that measured the extent of self-reported transformation and a screening interview. Subsequent data collection was accomplished through a narrative session followed by two in-depth semistructured interviews designed to uncover the nature, meaning, and impact of becoming forgiving following traumatic events. A study of journals, books, or other creative materials where participants expressed their lived experience of forgiveness constituted another data dimension.

5. METHOD

The heuristic design is a qualitative research method developed by Moustakas (1990) consisting of a subjective journey of the researcher and participants attempting, through successive steps, to reach the essence of the experience. Accumulated data were analyzed through thematic content analysis of interview transcripts, and repeatedly in successive heuristic cycles. The heuristic research cycles are: (a) immersion, in which the topic becomes the focus of one's existence; (b) incubation - a state of temporary retreat

from the intensity of the search; (c) explication - explaining the insights; (d) illumination - new understandings, revelations, and disclosure of hidden meanings; and finally (e) culmination in a creative synthesis, a meaningful description of the inner process of transformative forgiveness. Clusters of themes were revealed, meanings examined, and essential themes extracted. In qualitative research the researcher is the main instrument. The data were filtered through the internal search process of the primary researcher and supplemented by the study of her revealed meanings, insights, and intuitions.

6. RESULTS

Qualities of Transformative Forgiveness

- **Intrapsychic process** - Transformative forgiveness is not solely a change in the emotional content related to the perpetrator, but an evolutionary whole person transformation.
- **Unconditional** - Forgiving is not conditioned by the perpetrator's actions or attitudes.
- **Self-directed** - "Forgiveness is not about getting the other person to do right so you can forgive them, forgiveness is about you", declared one participant. Therefore reversing the expectation of change from the perpetrator to oneself is a major, initial facilitator of becoming forgiving.
- **Forgiveness cannot be controlled** – Because as one participant explained it, forgiving is preparation plus grace.
- **Transpersonal nature** - "The core of it is that it is a mystery that puts me in touch with a reality that, when my world is out of the way, I can experience more of Thy world" (Marian). Being forgiving was felt as an embodiment of the sacred in and through the forgiver, as a divine gift.
- **Healing** - Transformative forgiveness is fundamentally healing. A participant emphasized that "Forgiveness heals, cures, is forever. The murderer now has a safe passage through my mind". The negative emotions were replaced by peace, freedom, love, and compassion. The forgiver does not return to baseline, but thrives, grows, there is an addition of positive emotions, most evident in the love/compassion one discovers. Therefore transformative forgiveness is also fundamentally unconditional love: "Love guided by wisdom is the only solution. If I continue to grow my love and understanding, I can affect things in a very positive way. That's a major factor in my own forgiveness", John said.

Dynamics of Transformation in Becoming Forgiving

- **Intention for change necessary** – Based on awareness of alternative states of being and realization of choice appears an intention for change, either for healing or forgiveness that initiates the process. The intention for change replaces anger as motivator.
- **Cathartic processing** – In the realization of the necessity for self-transformation there is a fundamental steering within to confront the pain. The trauma and the past are revisited and relived repeatedly. In addition, the unconscious is

processed, the shadow confronted and integrated. “I got to know myself, facing the parts of myself that I would rather throw away or deny, so it was very much a process of purification” (Marian).

- **Development of empathy** – In confronting one’s own shadow, one confronts one’s own potential for harm and propensity toward evil; integrating this shadow part results in accepting human fallibility. Thus the humanness of the offender becomes apparent and empathy is born.
- **A movement from passion to compassion** - Perceiving the underlying suffering that pervades life and connects us all gives rise to compassion for all suffering human beings. The father of the 9/11 flight attendant related how he “could feel the pain and suffering of the people in Afghanistan”. This realization of common human suffering pulls one out of self-centeredness and ignorance, into compassion and wider perspectives. Compassion for the perpetrator and complete forgiveness develop out of this generalized compassionate state of being.
- **Therapeutic practices** – Meditation, practiced by the majority of participants, was considered particularly helpful. Writing and journaling also proved therapeutic.
- **Transpersonal concomitants** – Transpersonal concomitants that determined, influenced, or completed forgiveness were present in the experience of every participant: six mystical unitary experiences, two healing dreams, and five psychic experiences. Particularly important because of their immediate, therapeutic effect, they were perceived as life-changing. The individual came to feel through these numinous glimpses an otherworldly peace in the midst of desperation and an otherworldly certainty that life made sense despite the darkness. The tension of these polarities, the tension between the given and the transcendent, resulted in new emergents of consciousness, such as compassion and the resolution of forgiving.
- **Interconnectedness** (9) - A noetic attribute of these experiences was discovering a participatory understanding of all life’s interconnectedness and interdependence. Together with compassion with which it is intimately linked, interconnectedness was considered the source of forgiveness: “While I was experiencing this compassion, my isolated pain was transformed into a feeling of spacious ease that connected me with all forms of life. Yes, in that moment forgiveness was spontaneous” (Marian).
- **Transcendent meaning** - “I ask myself, was this event a tragedy or was it mystically meaningful? I can see now that both are true”, the father of a murdered son realized. One realizes how the trauma was the seed of the better self of today and gratitude is felt. The descending into the bottom of pain was an ascending into peace and forgiving. The transcendence of the perception of oneself as victim is attained in this realization of the redemptive value of trauma. Susana, the victim of a childhood rape, enthusiastically expressed her new found meaning:

Forgiving the rapist made me feel alive and beautiful (inside and out) and that I have a purpose on this planet. These experiences have not taken away from me, but have added so much. So I’m thankful that these things have happened to me. I would not go back and change it, and that allows

me to live, or fly, or soar, the feeling that everything that happened is exactly the way it had to happen.

- **Complete forgiveness/Closure** - When forgiving was completed in a powerful, often mystical experience, as it occurred for 8 participants, there was an indubitable stamp of closure, a felt finality of complete liberation and powerful healing. It felt as if that specific trauma has been wiped out, indeed a miracle. The proof of closure was complete absence of emotion on exposure either physically or in imagination to the traumatic context, which previously triggered disintegration. “Now I can go into the camp, I can touch the barbed wire, and it is no longer going to kill me. So I am now a free human being”, declared Eva, the Holocaust survivor.
- **Impact** - In a descending order from the highest positive impact to the least impact was noticed in: Psychological/emotional positive changes (13) - Spirituality changes (11) - Development of wisdom / Increased meaning in life (10) - Better coping mechanisms (8) – Better relationships (8) - Better creativity (7) - Better body health (5). All participants have noticed that they have become more loving, more compassionate, and less judgmental. There was a general change of perception and attitude toward good, more positive perceptions of self, the world, and life in general. Therefore an important consequence of being forgiving was self-empowerment. John summarized the holistic impact very well:
 Forgiveness has great power in it. I feel “lighter”, spiritually uplifted. I feel deeply connected with all of life and have a greater compassion for those who are suffering. Every positive feeling is enhanced, such as joyousness, love, compassion, and I savor the fullness of these more than before. I am more attuned to inner events and changes and very sensitive to these in my loved ones as well.
- **Expansion of meaning: from self-healing to others-healing** - Being forgiving was felt not only as a blessing, but as an obligation to engage in action for the good of others as well. There was a movement from self-centered values to global values and the forgiver became a catalyst for transformation in others. Eleven out of the 13 participants have expanded their new meaning, wisdom, and healing, through books, workshops, and social activism for causes such as forgiveness, peace, restorative justice, and education against violence.

7. CONCLUSION

Becoming forgiving following severe trauma has a far reaching transformative effect upon the self and through the self in the world. Forgiving brings with it the realization of one’s participatory role in the creation of self, reality, and the world. The transformational dynamics through the prepersonal level of reliving the trauma, the extensive psychological work on the personal level, and the transpersonal experiences constitute a process of evolution of consciousness. The forgiver now knows herself or himself as more than ego. The extensive impact is another indicator of expansion of consciousness. Thus by engaging and committing to a conscious evolutionary process, a process of healing and growth either psychological or spiritual, one engages the self-

transforming dynamics of forgiving. John, the father of the 9/11 flight attendant, reflected on the profound meaning of forgiving:

You can say “I forgive you”, you can start to own that at a superficial level, but I think it goes deeper and deeper and affects us all the way to our soul and beyond, and the beyond is really the mystery of how that affects others, how it interrelates with other humans and with God. As you start working through the layers of forgiveness, you begin to understand from a different place, you feel your life and your perceptions changing. Is not a linear process is an opening up in a very profound way. There is a mystical process in forgiveness, a freeing of the soul, an opening of the heart, and a return of peace and joyousness.

The nexus of influential definitions is that forgiveness is a moral gift to the offender. Transformative forgiveness is viewed not as giving or receiving, but primarily as a profound, meaningful personal transformation into self-transcendence. I argue therefore that the nature of forgiveness is essentially transpersonal, encompassing both psychological and spiritual constituents, developing in the interpersonal context, but primarily intrapsychic. I define forgiveness as an evolutionary process of transformation from constricted states of being characterized by a preoccupation with the past, the offender, and the negative consequences of the injury, which create the perception of victim, towards an expanded consciousness, reflected in a liberating reorientation of being in time, emotional pacification, and discovery of new meaning and wisdom.

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