

# Oh what a lovely ball of wool that is...

Subtitled: Forgiveness – what’s in it for me?

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In the closing days of the war, Simon Wiesenthal found himself working in, or near a hospital. Still a prisoner, he had endured several brutal concentration camps and had been forced to carry out unspeakable tasks.

Wiesenthal was summoned to the bedside of a dying soldier. The soldier wanted to make his confession and die in peace. He did not call for a priest but rather a Jewish prisoner, *any* Jewish prisoner.

Wiesenthal was ordered to the hospital room. He had no choice but to obey. He sat with the man and heard his story. The story of a Nazi, a soldier and a man swept up in the times. The soldier poured it all out. And then he asked Wiesenthal to forgive him.

“For what?” Simon responds with something like, “I don’t know you?” “You have done nothing to me.”

The soldier wanted to be forgiven for all the atrocities committed against the Jewish people. Simon did not feel authorised by *all the Jewish people*, alive and the millions already dead, to absolve him.

For Grace? Wiesenthal was not a rabbi or a priest– Under the Old Testament, he was not anointed to absolve on behalf of God. A God he was no longer sure he believed in.

He did not pardon the young man and he died.

But it bothered him. It haunted him. He was never sure he had done the right thing.

Many years after the war, he published *The Sunflower*. In this book, he tells the soldier story and asks the Socratic question, What should one do? He invited great minds to contribute essays on how and why they would have responded. Did they forgive? Some did, some didn’t.

The more I wrestle with forgiveness, the more I see a vision of a kitten, tumbling and rolling in a ball of wool.

Forgiveness,

not so simple. It unravels all sorts of things.

If it was easy, we wouldn’t ask for it everyday in the Lord’s prayer.

Forgiveness is messy.– you can’t talk about it without talking about justice, mercy and love.

I have about 10 minutes. David Augsberger has written 3 books on forgiveness and he says he’s not finished. In his last book he quoted the ancient philosophers who said there were only 7 truths and everything else is an elaboration. (Actually, I think Socrates or Aristotle

only had 4 and Plato added a fifth...anyway, he said, in the tenants for living a good life ... forgiveness wasn't listed. Perhaps because it embraces and enables – Justice, prudence, temperance and above all charity which were the original ones. Collectively perhaps, independently, probably not.

It's fine and dandy to talk about justice, mercy, love and forgiveness but it is the specifics that trip us up. One size does not fit all. There is a continuum and there are different ideas of what we are talking about.

For example, what does 'forgiveness' mean to the individuals involved? There should be a scale – like the earthquake Richter Scale that sets forgiveness on a ruler marking levels of pain? Not returning my call would be at one end and forgiving a person for an atrocity on the other?

There are also stages – like the stages of grief. Gomes called forgiveness a 5-act play. It includes steps such as: acknowledgement; giving; receiving, true sorrowfulness and reconciliation.

Just like there is a vast difference between tolerance and inclusiveness – there are depths of forgiveness. We can fool ourselves at any stage that the work is done. "I'm not going to give you air in my life" is a long way from the *Radical Forgiveness* that Colin Tipping writes about.

And there are impediments...psychological, moral, philosophical, cultural and more.

Often, a person cannot forgive another because they cannot forgive themselves. Voices that whisper, 'I could have done more, maybe it *was* my fault, I should have been there to protect him/her/the dog.' And more, I could have loved you better, I was lazy so I didn't ...whatever'. ...or shifting surreptitiously to sharing blame – 'if they hadn't done X, then the car wouldn't have been where it was. I wouldn't have done y...and so ZZY wouldn't have ...(fill in the blanks)

Depressed and confused yet?

I'll have another go.

Tolerance is not forgiving; deciding not to let something rule your life is not forgiving; grudgingly bestowing 'forgiveness' on someone is a power-play, not forgiving. Forgetting is not forgiving. And my legal brain makes me ask, who has the standing? Who has the authority? Is it my job to forgive?

But! We are saved – and I am not saying that with my tongue in my cheek.

Real forgiveness comes from the heart, is truly divine, is usually based on engagement, understanding, letting go (and a lot of hard work) and is truly, absolutely freeing. Tipping (see the bestselling book *Radical Forgiveness*) offers a 16-step program like AA. It takes a

person through a process of investigation, understanding, acceptance and ritual that creates not only a safe space but a distance between the event, the alleged perpetrator, and the 'victim'. A space that allows miracles to happen.

The Bible offers a simpler version. Our two readings today.

First to Matthew 18:21....

The first part tries to make Peter see the absurdity of making forgiveness transactional. The idea of a price or a limit is so ridiculous that Jesus picks a number beyond our mental arithmetic. Forgiveness is not a commodity. It cannot be quantified. Numbers have no meaning.

Peter's suggestion only speaks to his own idea of grandness and ego. "I forgive you because I am more righteous and powerful" doesn't cut it, nor does, let me see what's left in the forgiveness bank. OOPs sorry, I gave out the last one yesterday.

The idea that it has a mathematical value is again illustrated in the unreasonable difference between the amount owed to the King (read God) and that owed to the servant. The king's ransom represents more wages than a slave could earn in 150,000 years. (apparently someone did the maths) So how pathetic was his bargaining? He'll pay it back? Phufft! Once forgiven, Does he rejoice? No, he sees forgiveness as a power game, a poker chip. Either he won and the king lost or his bargaining with the king was a point of justice – He thought he was deserving. What he got was not justice. It was mercy but he didn't recognise it.

The only transaction implied is the one between us and God. The last lines of the parable basically say forgiveness is God's to give and if you can't, he won't. (Lyle Lovett song?)

The passage tells us plainly that our reconciliation with God is based on our ability to act out *His* will – that is the reconciliation of all things. We have a part to play and the last two lines of this reading say they are not negotiable.

Forgiveness is a matter of the heart. It requires a transformation of the inner disposition of both the giver and the recipient – something the first servant did not discover.<sup>1</sup>

How does this happen? Ahh, the 2nd Reading –at last...

Judgment has to be replaced with something else. Mercy? Love? Understanding? Grace? Potato soup – judgement has to fall out of the picture. That is not to say, we forget right from wrong. What I'm saying is it steps to the side of the human before us.

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<sup>1</sup> Bureggemann, Cousar et al *Texts for Preaching*

The capacity to understand the pain inflicted on another is the movement towards transformation.

So who or what shall be forgiven at my hands? – so asks Gomes in *The Good Life*. “Since it is divine to forgive and sense it is the highest example of forgiveness is the forgiveness of God to his fallible creatures, all who forgive see themselves in the God role.” God showed us in the unique, counter-intuitive; counter-cultural Jesus. Sent not as a slap in the face but as a divine lesson. Watch and learn.

World I have forgiven the soldier? Probably. Would you?

I would have tried. Because although his actions still spoke of his ignorance, his inner awareness that wrongs had been done was the beginning of transformation. Would I have done it out of mercy? I could hate the symbols. The collective sin but what lay before me was a man...also made by God.

If I was Godless, could/would I do it? Probably, out of compassion and healing for humankind. The new beginning had to start somewhere. Surely part of my own healing would be tied up in his death.

But I am not Godless. I know that the soldier will answer to God. “For it is written as I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, And every tongue shall give praise to God So then each of us will be accountable to God.”

The soldier I imagine before me is not mine to judge. He was mine to forgive.

*I Pray: Loving God: I will never have the patience of Job or the fortitude for forgiveness that Jesus showed but I can try. I can choose to stop and think. I can choose to open my heart. I can choose to begin the process of forgiveness – if I remember you are near me. With Jesus in my heart, Amen.*