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Forgiveness
and the Legacy
of Abuse

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Forgiveness and the Legacy of Abuse

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INTRODUCTION

There is no let-up in reports of the historical abuse of children linked to Church bodies and wider entities, this despite Church and State efforts to establish remedial and preventative structures to address wrongs. The recurrent surge of wrongdoing in Ireland reminds us/society much work remains to be done in dealing with this legacy of trauma. Wrongdoing always finds expression, one way or another, and efforts to respond are always fraught with difficulty - stretched between *limitation* and *possibility* of the human condition.

Survivors of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, etc.) are shifting from a position of mute helplessness to voice acts of protest, anger, or even despair. Persons feeling robbed of their potential keep returning to remind society of a *debt*. Liaising with other survivors has had a cathartic effect, releasing a collective urgency for restitution. In this respect, moves to establish formal remembrance memorials in Ireland are understandable.

Despite on-going incremental actions in response, such as vigilant safeguarding programmes, new statutory legislation, redress schemes etc. embedded discontent persists. Action responses go some way to reconcile past wrongs but are rarely sufficient in themselves; all wrongs cannot be put right, yet forgiveness, reconciliation, and possible closure play an important role were society to move beyond *limitation*. The poignant Eastertide metaphor of unbinding, the tombstone removed, new life erupting from that which is dead, embodies a sense of hope. (cf. John 20:1).

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IDENTITY

Survivors often speak of a haunting shadow cast over their adult lives that lingers, with no end point. Some survivors go on to describe the act of abuse as *pure evil, shrouded in darkness*, the offender an *evil person*. Personal identity is affected all through life; the continuity and flow of life compromised, whether they be patterns of industry, trust, loving, or belief/faith.

Over time, a very long time for some, psychic capacity strengthens enough to force action. Being proactive is neither easy nor straightforward, tends to be gradual, varying from one person to another. Years of suffering in silence leave its mark, speaking out a major step in (re)claiming personal dignity. There are also contradictions to be wrestled with: *the offender was my teacher, did these gross acts, then gave me money ... but kind to my family*. The intensity of pain of self-blame can silence survivors, but sometimes also they are silenced by cultural mores, be that institutional or family, etc. Many questions previously muffled now surface: *Am I the only one? Why me? Did anyone know?* The complex emotional trauma- bond between survivor and offender can be difficult to unfetter, hard to betray. A prolonged tug-of-war between rational and emotional intelligence, inevitably unlocks. Thereafter, the survivor moves on to name the experienced wrong and voice the tragic sequelae.

MEMORY

Remembered past events recorded in the present do not necessarily represent how things happened. Memories can be selective and reconstruction of past events can, on occasion, be false. Like an oil painting, memory is something that is constructed layer by layer. In the process, images are drawn which can be overlain with others, driven by emotion and by subjective perspective. The final product, in some instances, may not resemble the original sketches. The natural process of forgetting may take its toll, memories can fade or become distorted. Although people may not knowingly be lying – this can happen also. An added factor is that sustaining a traumatic matter can become emotionally intolerable urging premature ‘settlement’ to bring necessary relief.

Jean Piaget¹ provides a provocative example of memory. He sets out a graphic vignette of a recollection of his attempted kidnapping incident when he was two years old. He recalled sitting in a pram with his nurse in a park when a man tried to kidnap him. His nurse

1 Piaget, Jean. *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 1952. p. 188.

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bravely tried to fight off assailants His parents often spoke to him of this event. Ten years later the nurse wrote to Piaget's parents saying she had fabricated the story! Even after this disclosure – he found it difficult to discount that the event had not happened. Somehow the story with its vivid imagery had become etched into his episodic memory.

Nonetheless, all things considered, survivors come forward to tell their stories, striving to recall in a way that is true to their memory, with a sense of expectancy that they would be believed.

RESPONSE

Because recollections are known to vary, questions around proof of evidence can arise. Legal justice seeks to apply the 'Statute of Limitations' to safeguard against contestable evidence that may have deteriorated over time. However, in some instances, when survivors do eventually come forward, often after protracted and agonising processes, the statute barred provision can dishearten. This set back to a survivor's search for justice may act as a catalyst for more extreme actions to resolve the perceived debt owed to them. On balance, it is requisite that dedicated Church authorities toil with the dilemma of moral justice, in remaining open to engage with survivors, in the hope of finding fair and equitable resolution for all involved.

The human mind can barely grasp the power of evil actions. But we instinctively know that such wrongdoing must be confronted. The testimonies of survivors remind society of the need to hold those deemed responsible accountable. Such calls are interlaced with a need for apology and restitution, often financial, compensation for a debt impossible to quantify, or even insolvent in cases. Demands for patent measures to prevent the same crime from reoccurring usually run in tandem. With these measures reasonably in place, a foundation may be laid to begin to forge a tentative track towards forgiveness.

What follows is an attempt to explore the foregoing process. Unique and universal patterns of survivors' experiences are appraised, gleaned from real-time professional encounters. It is hoped to amplify a creative space whereby *forgiveness* may enter the *real* conversations among those in relevant ministries with survivors, offenders, and the on-going work of reconciliation.

COMPREHENDING NARRATIVES

Narratives are central to enabling both survivor and offender/representative to understand and acknowledge each other's experience. The act of storytelling helps survivors to re-connect to

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parts of self previously alienated. Without the human (and humane) encounter, there is a risk of the reported experience becoming an abstract spectacle or a repository of dead facts. To this end, survivors often share a victim impact statement, a testimony in the form of a figurative presence that makes immediate the reality of the trauma suffered, and cumulative loss incurred.

Being wronged is just not something we act against but is also something experienced as an intrinsic blighting of one's essential nature, an aspect often overlooked. Evil tends to be associated with darkness/dark acts, a preference for darkness to light (cf. John 3:19). An element of self-estrangement almost always attaches to the absence of light in the form of a blind spot or denial or disassociation; a mental shutdown of sorts. This buffer can provide a measure of psychic protection, particularly with severe trauma as in illness, catastrophe, or intolerable guilt and horror. To overlook this 'shutdown', is to ignore how shockingly strange the experience impacts on a person, and its power to render them blank. Any form of abuse of a child is a horror we can never sufficiently comprehend, the nature of which is both illusive and elusive.

Practical understanding begs the question *how* one is to act against evil, if one cannot recognise it? – may well warrant the need to pray for an understanding mind to discern between good and evil. Such understanding may effect a change of heart and compel one to assess the ethical aspects of their behaviour and align such to the happiness or misfortune of others. In doing so, the call to act with integrity and justice may arise. Survivors that come forward are a reminder to society of this moral duty.

CATHARSIS OF MOURNING

Integral to the ongoing narrative of a survivor is the working through of grief. Not unlike the loss of a loved one, the pattern of grief is *not* linear, but sways back and forth between phases, gradually dissipating. However, in the case of survivors, anger towards oneself and others may be heightened and accompanied by an internalised sense of it being one's fault. Resolve to speak out tends to be delayed. In some cases, mood slides; laments of blaming others, the system etc. enter to intercept loss of self, meaning or absolute despair in this low time. For some, where jeremiads allow expression of in-most thoughts without limits, existential meaning and purpose may come within reach as experienced by Job. (cf. Job 3). Survivors do move onwards, but ruminations of loss return from time to time through life.

In the case of survivors, mourning may be characterised by patterns of obsessional repetitions of laments or disabling repression

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of events. The reality of the pain of loss suffered may not emerge until long after the abuse experience. Uprooting from the quagmire of grief with resolution to take action, can run through different spin cycles. For example, a survivor may take on the persona of an expiatory victim ‘offering’ their suffering as a sacrifice or atonement for the collective suffering of fellow victims. Likewise, where process of resolution is truncated prematurely, a false sense of empowerment may impel survivors towards vicarious advocacy interests. Those seeking help may be overwhelmed by the emotive impact of otherwise well-meaning third-party advocates.

FORGIVENESS

There are more questions than answers to the enigmatic nature of forgiveness. Has the offender to ask for forgiveness? Should the offender be forgiven? Is there such a thing as forgiving oneself? What part does the sorrow, remediation, and reparation of the offender play? How can we forgive if we cannot identify what we are forgiving? Survivors say that their decision to forgive mirrors a determination to put revenge and bitterness behind, an important step in reclaiming their life. Undoubtedly, the power to forgive seems more often in the hands of the one-wronged. Where there is synchronicity between the longing of the one-wronged to bestow forgiveness, and the offender’s desire to seek such, the process can be less awkward, as in the story of the Prodigal Son. (cf. Luke 15: 11-32).

Forgiveness is the threadbare bridge between the survivor and the offender/representative. There are necessary pre-conditions to crossing that bridge. Ideally, the offender first recognises and acknowledges the wrongdoing, taking responsibility for their actions, matched with corresponding sorrow. Survivors can be locked into a need for retribution, but a time may also come about where there is a felt need to let go. The genuine efforts of offender to reform plays an important part in the ongoing process. Therein lies the possibility to identify - albeit in a tentative way – what to forgive, or what is asked to be forgiven.

There is no science of forgiveness, neither is it accomplished in one magical moment, but tends to start with a shallow initiative and consolidates over time. By means of patient listening and working through of the narrative, minds may open to a deeper understanding. Wisdom bestowed, and forgiveness *possible*. Such forgiveness surpasses the limits of rational calculation and explanation, eliciting the *marvel of once again!*² In Pascal’s terms,

2 Kearney, Richard. “On the hermeneutics of Evil.” *Reading Ricoeur*. Edited by David M Kaplan. Albany: State University of New York Press. 2008. p. 85.

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the heart has its reasons, which reason knows nothing of³
Then again, there is a limit to forgiveness. There are evil crimes that are insurmountably inexcusable at a human level. If pardon is beyond reason, it is never completely blind, and if it is stirred by the gratuitousness of love, it presupposes a disposition of surplus or excess. This is not to deny the injury, the wrong or pretend nothing happened, but in a lavish moment, to sidestep one's personal harm to love the offender - in spite of the appalling act. That there is more to the offender than the act. ... it is that *more* that summons the *marvel of the once again*, marking a second chance for both survivor and offender to *begin again*.

Perhaps only a divinity could forgive indiscriminately, as exemplified by Christ, as man, asking his Father to forgive his crucifiers. (cf. Mark 10:27). One can argue that in the Christian tradition, humans are scarred by original sinfulness, prone to fault or compromised by evil. As such, forgiveness directed to the unforgiveable, when given freely, subverts our reason in a way that we hardly comprehend.

In the marvel of the moment, perception shifts, unsurmountables to forgiveness are sufficiently sidestepped making possible tentative steps towards reconciliation. Reconciliation attempts to leave behind the traumatic legacy of the past - to make possible a new and different future. Forgiveness is a sort of healing of memory, once described by Dag Hammarskjöld as *the answer to a child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again...*⁴

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness is a precursor to reconciliation. Forgiveness is never amnesia, but also about anamnesis - remembering the legacy of victims in order to *signify* the debt owed to them, in the hope that what happened yesterday can never repeat tomorrow. That through the prism of remorseful contemplation of the past a hopeful anticipation of a different future is *possible*.

3 *Pensées* (1670, ed. L. Brunschvicg, 1909) sect. 4, no. 277.

4 Hammarskjöld, Dag. *Markings*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1964. p.110