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All That Glitters Is Not Gold: Bad Forgiveness in Counseling and Preaching

John M. Berez¹

A 3 R's of Forgiveness model is presented in which forgiveness is seen as a complex therapeutic process involving both situational and personal variables. Forgivers are seen to utilize the cognitive processes of dialectical reasoning and reframing, modulated by the emotional experiences of empathy, guilt, and shame. Personality style and self-esteem significantly influence the process as well. Distinctions are maintained among various kinds of forgiveness. Divine forgiveness, seen as a partial component of a spiritual encounter with one's God, may be a valid experience for people of faith, but is not something that psychologists are equipped to experimentally analyze. Interpersonal and intrapsychic varieties of forgiveness are more accessible to therapists and deserve empirical investigation. Important differences are highlighted between conjunctive forgiveness (where the third "R" in the forgiveness sequence is reconciliation) and disjunctive forgiveness (where the third "R" is release). Pastors are reminded that, depending on the circumstances, "forgiveness" can be either good or bad.

KEY WORDS: forgiveness; healing; empathy; counseling; reframing.

INTRODUCTION

In several recent books, clinicians have attempted to anchor the concept of forgiveness to other psychological constructs. Although much has been learned much about forgiveness from novelists, philosophers, theologians, historians, and abuse

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survivors, the more that our pastoral and clinical intuitions are confirmed with empirical studies the richer will be our comprehension of forgiveness. Research psychologists are currently attempting to study forgiveness utilizing rigorous experimental techniques in order to develop *repeatable* forgiveness formulas, *reliable* reconciliation protocols, and *consistent* conflict-resolution models.

When psychologists attempt to partition forgiveness into clinically-useful segments they are not trying to destroy the spiritual dimensions of this important process. Rather, like experienced midwives, they are trying to use their theoretical forceps and research rubber gloves to gently extract forgiveness from the spiritual aphorisms, pastoral parables, and philosophical foundations which have given it prenatal life, and deliver it, squalling and scrubbed, to the pastor's counseling office and Sunday pulpit where healing is so desperately needed.

Even the process of investigating forgiveness has had a healing effect, bringing together researchers from such diverse fields as philosophy, theology, education, sociology, and psychology—disciplines which historically have not always maintained the most cordial relationships. Forgiveness has begun to emerge out of this intense research interest and multi-disciplinary cross-fertilization with clearer dimensions and a sharper profile.

Some investigators have studied forgiveness vignettes of HIV-infected persons living in India, while others have suggested various neuropsychological correlates which seem to underlie the process. Still others have investigated forgiveness from a developmental and cognitive perspective, discovering that willingness to forgive seems to increase with age, adults being more likely to forgive than adolescents, and the elderly more likely to forgive than younger adults.

Although some pastors might be troubled by what they view as the secularization of this sacred concept, truth cannot be tarnished by close scrutiny and behavioral scientists have analytic tools to examine forgiveness in ways which will be enriching for therapists, pastors, theologians, and nonprofessionals as well.

THE HEALING POWER OF FORGIVENESS IN PASTORAL COUNSELING

Several recent books have dealt with the topic of forgiveness as it relates to counseling issues (e.g., Berecz, 1998a; Enright & North, 1998; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; Worthington, 1998), and this work is beginning to sharpen our definitions of forgiveness. In daily life, the word "forgiveness" carries nearly as much freight as the word "love." Just as I can love pizza, love my wife, love racquetball, love my dog, love my kids, love my car, love my golf clubs, and love psychology, I can use the word "forgive" when I mean pardon, reconcile, excuse, condone, acquit, exonerate, or vindicate. Clearly with such a myriad

of meanings empirical investigation must begin with an attempt at consensus regarding operational definitions. Some investigators (e.g., McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen) have suggested the following generic definition: forgiveness is an *intraindividual prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context*.

Forgiveness is broadly defined, encompassing both intrapsychic and interpersonal constructs and variables. However, the word *prosocial* seems to suggest that forgiveness generically involves a positive moving *toward* the transgressor. This is not necessary, nor is it always clinically prudent. I will return to this point later, but would suggest here that substituting the word *proactive* for *prosocial* still captures the dynamic, healing quality of forgiveness while leaving the door open for what I will later describe as *disjunctive* forgiveness.

For people of faith, *bad forgiveness* may seem like an oxymoron, but in morals, as in minerals, all that glitters is not gold. Some varieties of “forgiveness” are like fool’s gold, sparkling with promise, but upon closer clinical examination are found to be lacking the golden qualities of authenticity. When, for example, “forgiveness” is motivated by a victim’s codependent insecurity, it is likely to reinforce and maintain dysfunctional psychopathic-masochistic cycles rather than foster healing for victims and responsibility for perpetrators. Experienced pastoral counselors are well aware that although intimate, loving sexuality can be an exquisite interpersonal experience, sex has been misused and distorted in multitudinous and multifarious ways. Rape, pedophilia, pornography, bestiality, prostitution, and marital sexual dysfunction are but a few of the many counterfeits and distortions of what can be a literally breathtakingly splendid experience.

Forgiveness counterfeits do not usually appear as dire as sexual paraphilias or violence on first glance because most efforts to forgive are well-intentioned. People sincerely believe they are doing the right thing. But “bad” forgiveness can lead to further pain and damage, which is why the scientific study of forgiveness is of such importance. Forgiveness researchers can help psychotherapists, pastors, and others in the helping professions to understand and utilize authentic, healing forgiveness while avoiding damaging counterfeits.

DIVINE VS. INTERPERSONAL OR INTRAPSYCHIC FORGIVENESS

As a clinical psychologist, immersed almost daily in the crucible of psychotherapy, I am convinced that forgiveness is close to the core of the healing process—especially if you define forgiveness as I have (Berecz, 1998a): that is, as *letting go of past hurt and bitterness*. A significant portion of our work as clinicians involves helping our clients to let go of past resentments, grudges, and bitterness. But if researchers are to assist in quantifying and clarifying the elusive elixir of forgiveness they will need to maintain a clear distinction between religious concepts of divine forgiveness and the more empirically accessible scientific concepts

of interpersonal forgiveness which are being studied intensely in such practical settings as counseling sessions, AIDS clinics, etc.

The concept of *divine* forgiveness undoubtedly provides a substantial *theological* infrastructure in the minds of religious philosophers, theologians, pastors, and people of faith. But counselors quickly discover that when an angry couple is verbally slugging it out, little healing derives from being reminded that “God is a great forgiver, and we ought also to forgive.”

Faith-based counselors may derive personal strength and spiritual alignment from knowing the *Divine Forgivee*, but their clinical techniques must be informed by the best that science has to offer. Although religious patients might appreciate knowing their brain surgeon prays for guidance before beginning a surgical procedure, they also want to know she has been well trained in medicine and is experienced in the latest techniques. Likewise, although religious counselors must strive to keep their personal faith in good repair, this cannot substitute for staying abreast of the empirical findings in the field of forgiveness research. But this is not an easy task, because forgiveness is a perplexing and intricate phenomenon. Some leading forgiveness researchers have captured the challenge in the following words:

Forgiveness is more dimensional and more complex than we initially imagined. And the richness of the phenomena calls for more refined and more varied concepts, measures, methods, and programs. . . . Ultimately, we believe, the study of forgiveness will require a level of knowledge, experience, and expertise commensurate to that needed to study other key psychological constructs, such as intelligence, morality, psychopathology, and prejudice. (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000, pp. 300, 301)

Although the *empirical* study of forgiveness may never completely capture the essence of the theological concept, in the healing endeavors of pastoral counseling or psychotherapy, much effort is expended in helping clients learn to forgive—although it may not always be talked about in those terms. If forgiveness involves *letting go of past mistakes—your mistakes, the mistakes of others* (Berecz 1998a), I would venture that seventy-five percent of counseling clients are dealing either with shame or guilt about their own behavior or bitterness about someone else’s. Whatever the exact figure, it’s safe to suggest that therapists spend enormous amounts of time assisting their clients in breaking out of such cycles of shame and bitterness.

My understanding of forgiveness grows out of three decades of both academic and clinical experiences and utilizes theoretical constructs from cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal psychology. In my model, forgiveness is contextualized in a philosophical framework known as dialecticism. From interpersonal/relational theories of psychotherapy I emphasize the importance of *empathy*. From the cognitive perspective I stress the significance of *reframing*. And I utilize Hegel’s philosophical notion of dialectic to show that re-framing is merely a picturesque description of Hegel’s insight that all of life involves opposition and conflict (thesis vs. antithesis).

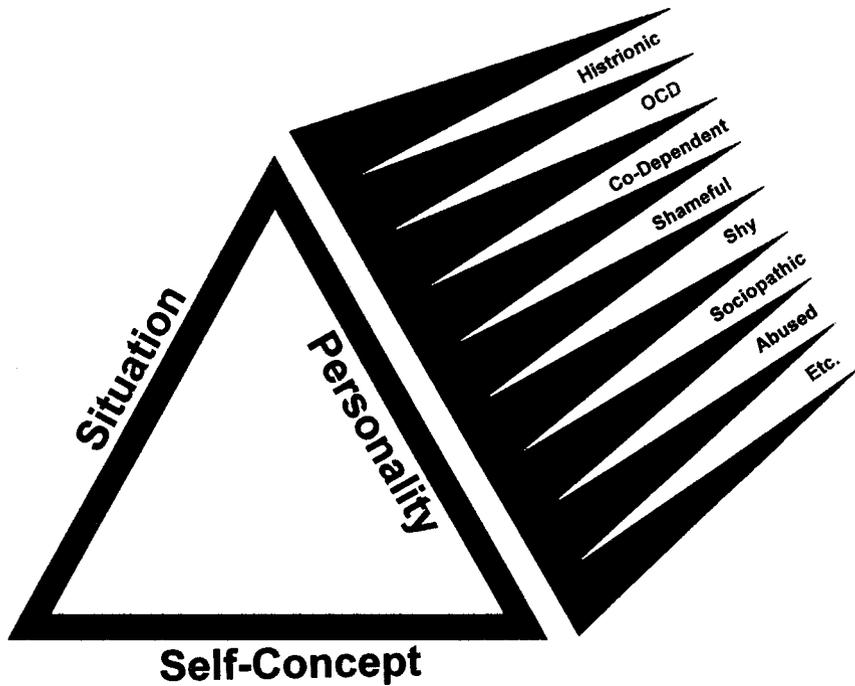


Fig. 1. Three facets of forgiveness.

Recognizing the dialectical nature of everything—including counseling and psychotherapy—we can resolve apparent opposition between thesis and antithesis by moving to a higher-level synthesis. This resolving of opposition is what theologians and pastors have traditionally referred to as *forgiveness* or *reconciliation*. But forgiveness is a process that is crucial not only in the life of faith, but also in the practice of counseling and psychotherapy, so it is appropriate that research psychologists enlarge this valuable process beyond the cloistered domains of philosophy and theology, and bring it into the counseling office.

Forgiveness is a complex process (see Fig. 1), always involving an intricate interaction of *situational* and *personal* variables. Self esteem and personality style are among the most important personal variables, profoundly influencing forgiveness outcomes. Comparing the frothy forgiveness of the histrionic with the reticent moral metrics of the obsessive-compulsive it hardly seems like the same process. The insecurity-based “kiss-up” forgiveness of the co-dependent is in stark contrast to the “kiss-off” withholding of forgiveness by the narcissist.

Experienced therapists know that differences in personality style deeply influence how people behave in the kitchen, at the office, and in the bedroom (Berecz, 1998b). Even such important workplaces as the Oval Office have been profoundly

impacted by the personality styles of the occupants (Berecz, 1999). When we view forgiveness through the prism of personality, we realize that it means profoundly different things to people of differing personality styles. Failing to appreciate those differences increases the chances that we will fall into the proverbial error of comparing “apples and oranges,” increasing the possibilities of clinical confusion and ineffectiveness.

Shame and *guilt* are of almost epidemic proportions in clinical populations. Much shame results from the failure to forgive others for past ridicule, oneself for past mistakes, or one’s parents for not passing on more perfect genes. In counseling as well as in preaching it is crucial that pastors maintain important dynamic distinctions between shame and guilt. It is generally understood (e.g., Berecz, 1998a; Kaufman, 1985; Morrison, 1989) that shame tends to be pervasive, self-incriminating, and clinically nonproductive, whereas guilt—provided it is behaviorally anchored and not excessive—can move a person in the direction of more mature behavior. The absence of guilt, as seen in the psychopath, is one of the most ominous of clinical indicators. Pastors must do all they can to eradicate shame (see Berecz, 1998a) while fostering *appropriate, non-excessive*, guilt in cases of wrong doing (Berecz & Helm, 1998) Repentance and forgiveness—not irresponsible psychopathy—is the healthy remedy for guilt. Changed conduct, not denial, is the appropriate sequel to misbehaving. A clearer understanding of how forgiveness relates to negative emotions like shame and *neurotic* guilt, and positive emotions like empathy and *healthy* guilt, will be of enormous help to psychologists, pastoral counselors and others on the front lines of the helping professions.

AN EMPATHIC, DIALECTICAL, REFRAMING MODEL OF FORGIVENESS

Having briefly reviewed what others have done in this important area, I would like to present a model in which the crucial cognitive processes of *dialectical reasoning* and higher-order *reframing* are modulated by the operating variables of *personality style* and *self esteem*, and the emotional experiences of *shame*, *guilt*, and *empathy*.

The *synthesis of thesis* and *antithesis* is at the core of Hegelian philosophy. Synthesis (see Fig. 2) transcends conflict and sublimates opposites into higher-order truth. This dialectical process is at the core of the present forgiveness model.

RAPPORT—THE FIRST “R”

Although rapport is frequently thought of as mutual emotional attunement, counselors and pastors know that it can be a very unsymmetrical process, with one person—usually the counselor—expending considerable energy attempting to create a shared communicational context. Most clinicians tend to think of

SYNTHESIS:

- 1. **Cancels** conflict between thesis and antithesis.
- 2. **Preserves** the element of truth *within* thesis and antithesis.
- 3. **Transcends** the opposition and *sublimates* conflict into higher-order truth.

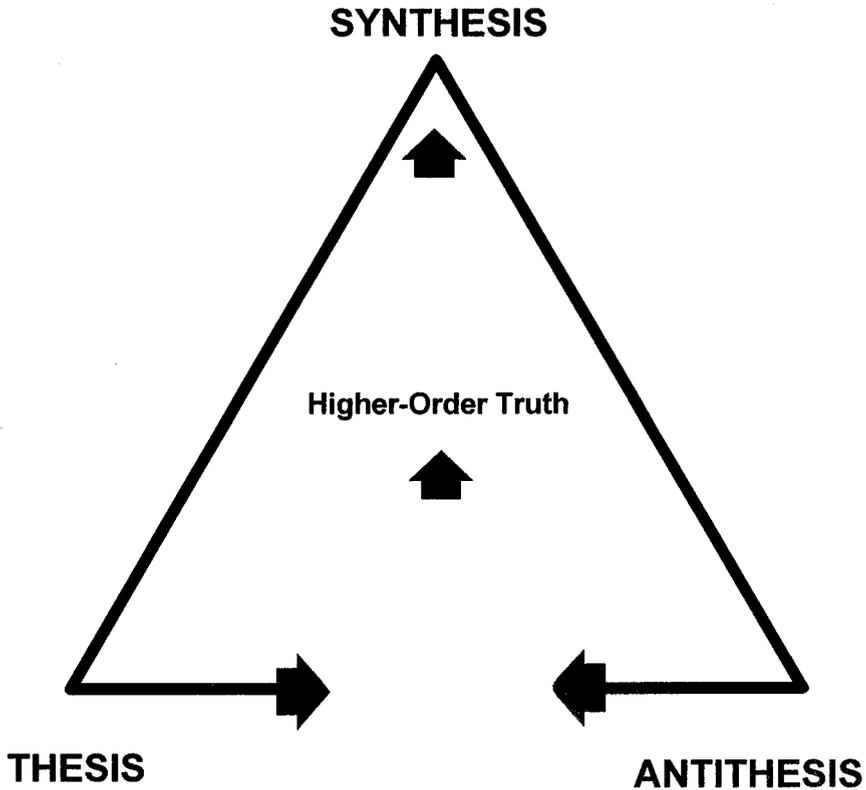


Fig. 2. Dialectical triangle.

empathy as the process of *emotionally* understanding one’s client—“walking two miles in their moccasins”—or as President Clinton has popularized “feeling their pain.” Yet that “warm-fuzzy” definition doesn’t entirely capture the dimensions of empathy.

Jenkins (1998) recently described empathy as “dialectic imagination.” Traditional notions of empathy involve focusing *inward* and using one’s own feelings as an anchor point for understanding what someone else is experiencing. Jenkins (1998), however sees empathy as reaching outward toward the other in what he

terms *imaginative projection*. He describes the empathic process as that of “imaginatively transposing oneself.” This is consistent with Margulies’ definition of empathy as an “active, searching quality of entering the other’s world” (1989, p. 18).

The notions of “imaginatively transposing oneself” and “actively searching” to enter another’s world are consistent with my model of forgiveness, and congruent with my experience in conducting psychotherapy. The processes of psychotherapy and forgiveness seem strikingly similar. Both depend heavily on empathy and both involve reframing. When I am immersed in a psychotherapy session, I attempt to enter my client’s world, while intermittently checking back into my own. What some therapists have called “evenly hovering attention,” should not mean “evenly hovering” only over a client’s variegated clinical presentation. When I am at my best as a therapist, I alternately hover over my client’s dynamics and my own. By intermittently switching perspectives I strive to comprehend my client while simultaneously monitoring my own reactions.

Such a dialectical moving between pastor and parishioner or counselor and client is central to most systems of counseling. Psychoanalysts speak of this in terms of transference-countertransference dynamics and existential therapists term this the “I-Thou encounter.” Rogerians speak of congruence not only between the client’s real self and adapted self, but between the counselor and client. Even behaviorists—not typically given to warm-fuzzy descriptors—recognize the importance of the “working relationship.” Verbal descriptors differ widely according to various schools of thought, but most experienced clinicians see therapist-client interactions taking place along a dimension of empathic, dialectical back-and-forthing. In addition to facilitating the clinician’s understandings, this sort of empathic dialectical interaction provides the client an experiential model for real world relationships as well, one in which people imaginatively alternate between their own world and what they perceive to be the inner worlds of significant others.

Empathic dialectical oscillation is the basis for genuine understanding within psychotherapy sessions and in the world more generally. In counseling and therapy, empathic oscillation provides the clinician with the necessary emotional experiences and cognitive insights to successfully carry out the healing process with sensitivity and accuracy. In a similar way, with authentic forgiveness the for-giver empathically enters—at least partially—into the transgressor’s emotional experience.

I refer to the kind of forgiveness that transcends differences and brings antagonists into a compatible relationship as *Conjunctive Forgiveness* (see Fig. 3). This is the kind of forgiveness most familiar to people of faith—because *reconciliation* is the end result. Notice that, much like Hegel’s generic dialectical process, conjunctive forgiveness resolves conflict between persons by re-framing opposites into a new higher-order synthesis. As I have already pointed out, *empathy* is an important component of this process because it is the bridge which allows the injured person to partially identify with where the offender might have been coming from.

1. **Resolves** conflict between persons A & B.
2. **Preserves** the relationship.
3. **Transcends** opposition and **reframes** conflict into higher-order resolution.

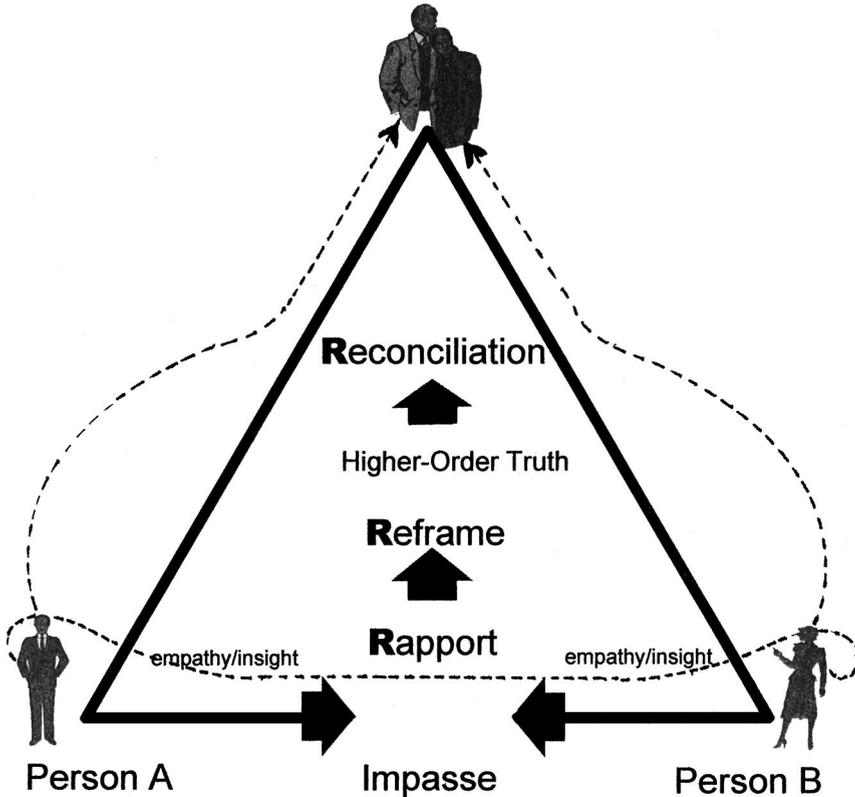


Fig. 3. Conjunctive forgiveness.

In his book *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the author, E. M. Remarque, recounts his World War I experience of being trapped in a shell-hole with an enemy soldier who is dying of the stab wounds the author had inflicted on him during a life- and-death struggle the previous night. As morning breaks the author begins to view his enemy in a new light. He even ministers to the dying man, attempting to bandage his wounds. Finally, when the dead man's wallet falls open and pictures of a woman and a little girl come tumbling out, Remarque is moved to ask forgiveness of his dead enemy:

Comrade, I did not want to kill you. If you jumped in here again, I would not do it . . . I see you are a man like me. [Last night] I thought of your hand- grenades, of your bayonet, of

your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship. Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late (Remarque, 1926, p. 226).

It, perhaps, takes this deep level of empathy in order for one to be able to make sense of Jesus' exhortation "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . ." In fact, it is only when we empathically enter into the soul of another that we can genuinely care about them, and paradoxically, when that occurs they are no longer perceived as "enemies." I have always suspected that empathy is at the heart of forgiveness, and research (Brandma, 1982; Cunningham, 1985; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Hope, 1987; Human Development Study Group, 1991; McCullough, 1997) has confirmed that the capacity for empathy is a crucial element in successful forgiving.

A failure of empathy leads to non-forgiveness. Instead of an empathic bridge between persons A and B, we have an impasse (see Fig. 4). Each individual is narcissistically turned in upon himself or herself. Lacking adequate empathic bridging each is destined to recycle the bitterness, anger, and negative emotions again and

- 1. **Preserves** conflict between persons A & B.
- 2. **Facilitates** isolative cycles of resentment & rage.
- 3. **Locks** participants into mutually-hostile relationships.

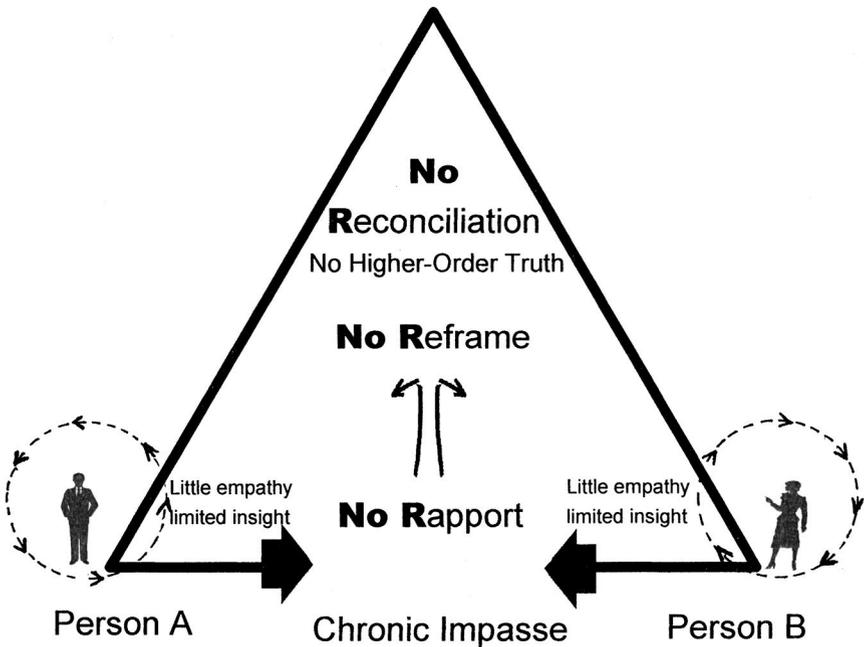


Fig. 4. Non-forgiveness.

again, over and over. There is no reframing, no synthesis, no reconciliation, no moving on, just a chronic recycling of negativity:

“It’s your fault!” “No it’s not, *you* started it!”

Any pastor who has worked with couples in marriage counseling has heard more variations of that theme than he or she cares to remember.

“If you wouldn’t nag me, I wouldn’t drink so much.” “If you wouldn’t drink so much I wouldn’t nag you.”

Such balance and symmetry in dyadic exchanges might have aesthetic appeal for mathematicians or logicians, but to clinicians these recursive dialogues are reminiscent of the movie *Groundhog Day*, in which Bill Murray plays a TV weatherman assigned to cover Groundhog Day ceremonies in a small hamlet in Pennsylvania. The local folk gather each year to observe whether or not Phil, the groundhog, will see his shadow. But this particular year something goes awry and Bill Murray keeps endlessly waking up to Groundhog Day—over and over again—finding himself trapped in the same routines with the same people time after time. Behind this comic theme lies a profound truth—we all need new beginnings.

And therein lies the power of forgiveness, it offers us a way out of what one sociologist termed the “predicament of irreversibility.”

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover. We would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. (Arendt, 1958, p. 237)

Forgiveness is essential to good mental health because it facilitates healthy autonomy and self-actualization. Without forgiveness people remain paradoxically isolated yet connected. They remain wrapped in their own bitterness, yet psychologically connected by an emotional umbilical cord through which flow all manner of negative nutrients such as fantasies of revenge and retaliation; hopes that evil and misfortune will visit the unforgiven frequently and that after a life permeated with pain, distress, and dire diseases, the perpetrator will die a slow, excruciating death before passing on to certain perdition.

REFRAMING—THE SECOND “R”

If people are ever to break out of such endless oscillatory cycles, at least one of them must attempt to enter the world of the other (rapport) and seek to resolve their differences into a solution which synthesizes both of their concerns under a higher rubric. In the case of a married couple, for example, at least one of them must be willing to try to understand where the other is coming from, and suggest a higher-order *reframe*:

“I know how you feel, Honey, but *for the sake of the kids*, can we quit beating each other up about this and try to get along?”

When you move back and forth in a dialectical way with another person, you may not always come out with a warm, cozy kind of empathy, even if you understand them well. Sometimes it is precisely *because* you understand them so well that you do *not* want to continue interacting with them. But if you accurately *understand* the other person, it will at least facilitate your moving toward rapport.

RELEASE—THE THIRD “R”

For counselors and clients of faith, this is perhaps the most important—and misunderstood—“R.” Frequently in religious communities the three “Rs” of forgiveness have been Rapport, Reframing and Reconciliation. But forgiveness *without* reconciliation is just as authentic as those varieties of forgiveness which result in bringing bring people back together into harmonious relationships. Understanding the differences between *conjunctive* and *disjunctive* forgiveness is one of the most crucial concepts for clinicians to grasp. We have already seen how in conjunctive forgiveness “imaginative projection” leads to empathic identification. By “walking in their moccasins” you get a new appreciation for their predicament, allowing you to establish rapport. Then like the soldier in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, you are able to *reframe* your enemy as your brother. In *conjunctive* forgiveness the two R’s of rapport and reframing lead to the third R (reconciliation), as in the Old Testament story of Joseph forgiving his brothers or the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son, where reconciliation is the high point of the story.

But in clinical work reconciliation is frequently not a possible or even a desirable outcome. In clinical situations the third R in the forgiveness formula frequently becomes Release *not* Reconciliation. *Disjunctive* forgiveness does *not* lead to reconciliation (re-establishment of a relationship similar to that which existed prior to the transgression) because in many clinical instances people need to separate and move apart emotionally or geographically. But as long as *bitterness is left behind*, disjunctive forgiveness is just as authentic as conjunctive forgiveness, and in many clinical cases much more therapeutic. Sometimes when pastors and counselors nudge their clients toward reconciliation it can be emotionally harmful—what I term “bad forgiveness.” Although reconciliation is not intrinsically “bad,” it can be psychologically maladaptive in specific circumstances.

In cases of sexual abuse, physical abuse, chronic marital infidelity, or other persistent problems such as alcoholism, it may not be wise to encourage reconciliation (*conjunctive* forgiveness). Pastors might serve such clients better by helping them to achieve emotional or geographic separation without bitterness (*disjunctive* forgiveness). By helping such clients build enough rapport to at least reframe the perpetrator as a “sick person” instead of a “monster,” or a “genetically challenged” drinker instead of a “rotten drunk” victims of habitually hurtful relationships can

be encouraged to disjunctively forgive and move on. This allows them to be *released from* (instead of *reconciled to*) the bitterness and resentment that frequently consume so much energy in the lives of clients who become chronic conciliators (neurotic complements to persistently-transgressing partners).

Disjunctive forgiveness must be a clinical alternative for clients who have suffered childhood sexual abuse, for example, because perpetrators frequently deny wrongdoing. Forgiveness must be *disjunctive* in such cases, allowing the victim to emotionally *disconnect*, and sometimes to follow this up with geographic distancing as well. It is usually desirable that the victim *not* remain geographically close to the perpetrator, so reconciliatory (*conjunctive*) forgiveness is not desirable. In general, therapists should not nudge their clients in the direction of *chronic* perpetrators—whatever the exact nature of the case. Sometimes, even in cases where confession and repentance occurs, it is not clinically advisable for the victim to remain emotionally or physically close to the transgressor, but this is a complex judgement requiring much experience and clinical wisdom.

Pastoral counselors and psychotherapists of religious conviction need to be especially careful that they not rush their clients to reconciliation. Such restoration—if it can be achieved—ought to be carried out with much careful thought and planning. If physical distancing is not possible by moving out of the home, emotional distancing with strong boundaries may be possible. Reconciliation, like frosting on the forgiveness cake, is great if you can have it, but not always achievable or clinically desirable.

Disjunctive forgiveness comes in two varieties: *singular disjunctive* and *mutual disjunctive*. In singular disjunctive forgiveness (see Fig. 5) person B is able to forgive the perpetrator and move away to other relationships. This can occur even if the offender continues to deny his transgression. Singular disjunctive forgiveness has the potential to offer clients a lot of emotional release and freedom, but it is frequently discounted, by people of faith, as not *truly* forgiving. Many pastoral counselors and religious clinicians have been so steeped in the teaching that reconciliation is the only authentic product of forgiveness that they view anything else as less than genuinely “forgiving.” This is tragic. We need to remind ourselves and our clients—especially if we belong to communities of faith—that genuine forgiveness need not end in *conjunctive* relationships commonly known as reconciliation.

In disjunctive forgiveness, just as we have seen in conjunctive forgiveness, empathy and insight may facilitate the process of understanding the offending person, but the essential difference is that in disjunctive forgiveness the injured person *need not reconcile* in order to forgive. If you *understand* that the stepfather who sexually abused you suffered from various emotional problems, it may help you to let go of your bitterness and get on with your life (to *disjunctively forgive* him) but you may want nothing to do with him in the future. *Disjunctive singular* forgiveness is possible even when the offender refuses to repent. It is clinically essential that disjunctively-forgiving clients *not* collude with unrepentant perpetrators in maintaining the illusion of innocence.

- 1. **Resolves** conflict between persons A & B.
- 2. **Dissolves** the relationship.
- 3. **Transcends** and **reframes** conflict or abuse into higher-order truth.

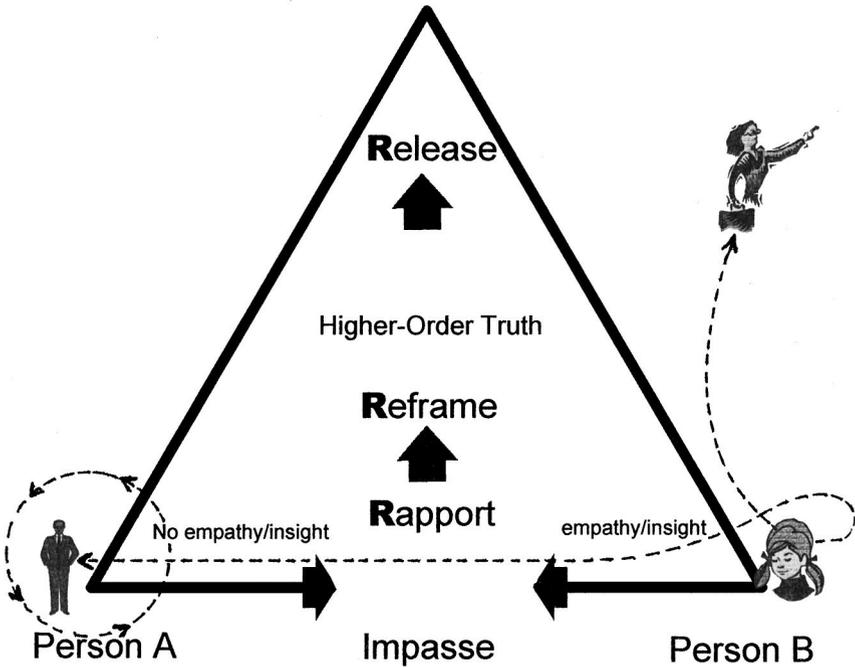


Fig. 5. Disjunctive singular forgiveness.

But neither is it healthy to remain locked into the cycles of bitterness which characterize unforgiveness. This is why I objected earlier to McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen’s (2000) generic definition of forgiveness as *prosocial* change toward a transgressor. This sounds too much like reconciliation or conjunctive forgiveness. If we define forgiveness as involving *proactive* change toward a transgressor, it encompasses both conjunctive and disjunctive forgiveness. The disjunctive forgiver must be the proactive initiator of resolution. If the offender fails to repent, clinging instead to illusions of innocence, the disjunctive forgiver is free to emotionally move on. This kind of non-mutual, disjunctive forgiveness is absolutely essential in clinical work and it is *not* an inferior product. It is just as truly forgiving as when conciliatory outcomes occur, even though it does not have the “they-all-lived-happily-ever-after” ending.

Unlike *singular* disjunctive forgiveness, which is psychologically necessitated by the incessant duplicity or poor impulse control of repeat offenders, *mutual*

1. **Resolves** conflict between persons A & B.
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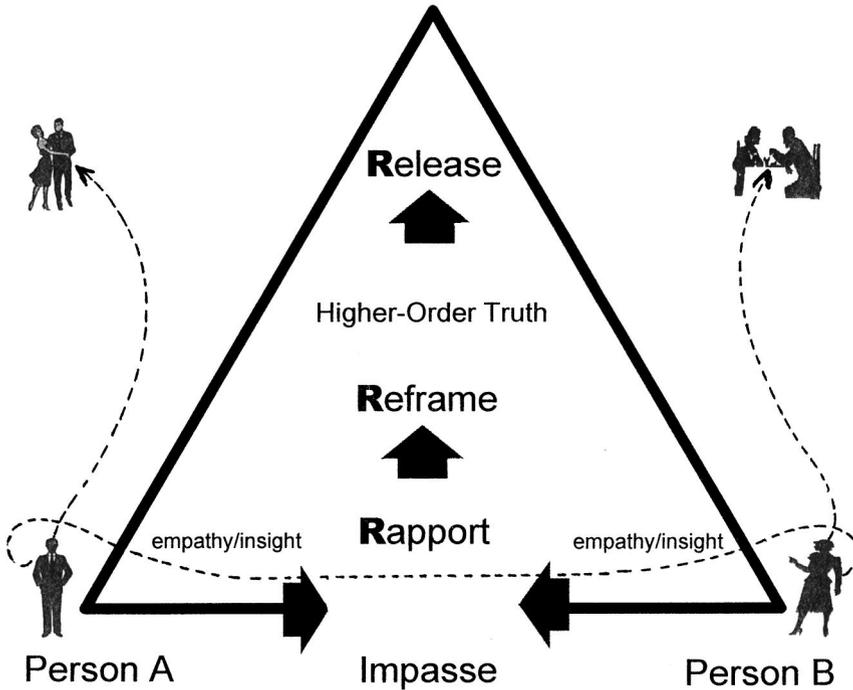


Fig. 6. Disjunctive mutual forgiveness.

disjunctive forgiveness can occur when each person recognizes empathically or insightfully where the other is coming from and concludes: “This isn’t working.” Sometimes such insights and intuitions can lead to higher-order syntheses that allow partners to resume a close relationship (conjunctive forgiveness), but frequently people realize they cannot remain in a close relationship without destroying one another, so they mutually decide to go their separate ways. This is best illustrated in cases of amicable divorce, where destructive conflicts are resolved by dissolving the relationship. When impasses are bridged with insight and understanding, this can result in higher-order reframing which may involve moving away and moving on, this can still be an authentic forgiving experience.

A marriage that ends with *mutual disjunctive forgiveness* is not a *failed* marriage, it is a successful family reconfiguration. My wife is a family law attorney who devotes much of her time to helping couples *mediate* instead of *litigate* their divorces. She knows that a mediated divorce can be a gift to the children because

it facilitates good relations—instead of chronic squabbling—between previously married parents.

Similarly, in other close relationships which are not working (whether they involve peer relationships such as playmates, friends or work associates or relationships with power differences such as between parent and child, teacher and student, boss and employee) through the psychotherapy or counseling process, the participants may come to realize that they cannot satisfactorily mend the relationship. Sometimes in such cases the best outcome is for both partners to disjunctively forgive—to let go of bitterness—and to get on with their lives.

Such outcomes are *not* failures and it is high time that we began labeling them as disjunctive forgiveness rather than treating them like emotional miscarriages or psychological murder. In fetal miscarriages life fails to fully bloom and in murder life is terminated, but after such painful disappointments as academic failure, job loss, divorce, delinquency or incarceration, life goes on. The real issue at stake in such painful passages is *quality* of life. Sadly, clinicians and pastors have sometimes added to the crushing sense of defeat by conspiring with their clients to view such re-configuring life events as “failures.”

Mutual disjunctive forgiveness allows people to pass through wrenching emotional experiences with their confidence tattered but intact. They are able to exit the relationship with an attitude embodied in the Transactional-Analysis slogan “I’m OK, You’re OK.” Events such as a job loss can be genuinely reframed to mean “The fit between job and employee here was not good—we’ll all be better off moving on.” Even such crushing consequences as incarceration can be reframed into new opportunities (Watergate conspirator Chuck Colson’s incarceration and subsequent prison ministry come to mind).

COUNTERFEITS AND OTHER ROADBLOCKS TO AUTHENTIC FORGIVENESS

Authentic forgiveness is always therapeutic, but its counterfeits are not. Well-intentioned but inappropriate efforts to move clients toward conjunctive rather than disjunctive varieties of forgiveness can be psychologically harmful. In addition to the ubiquitous forgiveness counterfeits, numerous other factors also conspire to make forgiving difficult to carry out in real life. The following is an illustrative but certainly not complete listing:

Forgiveness is not fair. This is particularly difficult for some people to accept, especially if their personality style tends toward obsessive-compulsive. Such people long to live in a world that is orderly, punctual, clean, safe, and, above all else, *fair*. But seeking equity is frequently disappointing because judging the world to be fair is an illusion. Nowhere—not even in scripture—are we promised that fairness is obtainable on this planet. One of the essential preconditions of a

forgiving attitude is the recognition that *unfairness* is an integral part of reality, that forgiveness might be *unfair*, yet highly desirable.

Forgiveness is not appeasement or submission. This is especially crucial for persons who “forgive” out of insecurity—out of fear that they cannot get along without their abusive spouses, or their alcoholic bosses. As clinicians we must be particularly diligent in helping our dependent, shame-based, or codependent clients understand the distinction between forgiveness and submission. As has already been stated, when it comes to forgiveness, “all that glitters is not gold.” Pastoral counselors and psychotherapists working in communities of faith, must be especially vigilant in protecting religious clients from the well-intentioned but misguided teaching that they must *always* forgive—“seventy times seven.” A careful exegesis of scripture will show that this advice was given to the obsessive-compulsive, bean-counting Pharisees who were stingily trying to dole out forgiveness like food rations to a starving family. The moral metrics of Jesus were in sharp contrast, essentially saying that forgiveness must be an open-ended, attitudinal shift, not an exercise in moral record keeping. This in no way implies that a victim is morally obliged to remain in a relationship with a chronic perpetrator—be it a sexually-abusing parent, a chronically-assaulting spouse, or a verbally-abusive boss.

This is where *disjunctive forgiveness* is so important, and where clinicians who are well versed in the faith of their clients can offer logical alternatives. The religiously informed psychologist can, for example, remind his Christian client that the same Jesus who advised the Pharisees to forgive “seventy times seven,” sent his own disciples out to evangelize with the instruction that if they were rejected in one town, they should “shake the dust off their sandals” (which sounds like disjunctive forgiveness to me) and move on to the next village.

Forgiveness is not necessarily pardon. To pardon means to excuse an offense without penalty. The emphasis is on the elimination of punishment. Certainly there are times when forgiveness may include pardoning, but frequently it does not and should not. Parents, for example, ought to maintain a *forgiving* attitude toward their children (not harboring resentment or bitterness) but they should seldom pardon (bypass consequences). One can forgive one’s little daughter for messing up the living room *and* insist that she clean up the clutter (helping her if necessary).

SUMMARY

A model has been presented in which forgiveness is seen as a dialectical process which resolves the antithetical animosities of hurtful interpersonal encounters into healing, higher-order syntheses. When forgiveness results in reconciliation between the transgressor and the victim, it is known as *conjunctive* forgiveness. When

the process ends with participants moving apart emotionally or geographically—but without chronic bitterness—it is known as *disjunctive* forgiveness.

Whether conjunctive or disjunctive, forgiveness is born of two midwives: *Rapport* and *Reframing*. *Rapport* is the emotional foundation of forgiveness, reframing is the cognitive component, and they lead to the third “R,” emotional *Release*. This is true even in cases of conjunctive forgiveness, because although participants remain in the relationship, they must renegotiate their relationship. Through rapport and reframing they must endeavor to resolve the pain the transgression has inflicted, and when this is accomplished they frequently experience emotional release—release from the obsession for revenge, release of bitterness, anger, rancor, and other negative emotions.

Disjunctive forgiveness does not achieve the same kind of emotional closeness found in reconciliation, but it allows participants to move beyond bitterness. An amicable divorce is one such example. Another is the daughter who recognizes her father is a sick man, disjunctively forgives him for sexually abusing her, but subsequently moves out of the house, minimizing further interactions with him.

Empathy, self-actualization, cognitive reframing, and various other constructs have a respected place in the theoretical workshop of counseling and psychotherapy. It is time to add forgiveness in several varieties—like different sized wrenches—to the pastoral counselor’s tool box. Conjunctive forgiveness—long a staple item in communities of faith—needs to be complemented with *disjunctive* varieties of forgiveness as well. Distinctions between shame and guilt need to be carefully maintained. Guilt, in appropriate circumstances and reasonable portions, is part of the healthy personality, but shame is the HIV of the soul, sapping emotional strength and reducing resilience to depression and temptations. Finally, even busy clinicians ought to stay abreast of some of the research developments in the psychology of forgiveness, attempting to integrate such data into their clinical work in ways which will free their clients to move beyond the hurts and mistakes of the past and reframe their present and futures in forgiving colors.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM LIFE: TOM SAWYER, JESUS CHRIST, AND MUGSY

If you have grown tired of this academic and clinical theorizing you might welcome a few “where-the-rubber-meets-the-road” examples. Even if you agree that disconnecting from past failures and hurts and letting go of fantasies of retaliation and revenge is desirable, you might still find yourself thinking: “It sounds good, but exactly how can I do that?”

The answer is surprisingly simple: by reframing. Reframing is the cognitive engine of the forgiveness process, while empathy is the emotional heart. Empathy provides victims a basis for wanting to forgive, but reframing supplies the cognitive

tools to implement forgiveness with less effort. In simplest terms, reframing means *to see something in a new light*.

Tom Sawyer famously reframed punishment into play in the famous incident which began when Aunt Polly caught him sneaking in a window late one night and decided to punish him by turning his Saturday into “hard labor” by requiring him to whitewash the fence.

After unsuccessfully trying to talk one of his friends into helping him, Tom’s energy began to lag. As he thought of all the fun he had planned for the day and all the excitement his friends would be experiencing while he worked on the fence, Tom decided to change his tactics, successfully reframing the task for his next encounter:

He took up his brush and went tranquilly to work. Ben Rogers hove in sight presently—the very boy, of all boys, whose ridicule he had been dreading. Ben’s gait was hop-skip-and-jump—proof enough that his heart was light and his anticipations high. Ben stared a moment and then said: “Hello, old chap, you got to work hey?”

Tom wheeled suddenly and said: “Why it’s you, Ben! I warn’t noticing.”

“Say—I’m going in a-swimming, I am. Don’t you wish you could? But of course you’d druther work—wouldn’t you? ’Course you would!”

Tom contemplated the boy a bit, and said “What do you call work?” “Why ain’t that work?”

Tom resumed his whitewashing, and answered carelessly: “Well, maybe it is, and maybe it ain’t. All I know is, it suits Tom Sawyer.”

“Oh com, now, you don’t mean to let on that you like it?”

The brush continued to move. “Like it? Well I don’t see why I oughtn’t to like it, Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?”

That put the thing in a new light. Ben stopped nibbling his apple. Tom swept his brush daintily back and forth—stepped back to note the effect—added a touch here and there—criticised the effect again—Ben watching every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Presently he said: “Say, Tom, let me whitewash a little.” (Twain, 1982, pp. 12–14, emphasis added.)

Mark Twain’s timeless Tom Sawyer here illustrates *reframing* as a process that allowed him to creatively escape the confines of Aunt Polly’s penalty. By reframing, Tom transformed work into play, punishment into profit. Reframing allows us to escape the confines of dichotomous dilemmas by creatively escaping to higher-order solutions. Without reframing we become mired in the illusion that we must choose *one of only two* possibilities. Like the hapless witness in the courtroom wishing to elaborate on an answer and being instructed by the prosecuting attorney to “Just answer ‘Yes’ or ‘No,’” people mistakenly believe they must choose between only two options. We are too easily trapped by the apparent dichotomies which seem to surround us: work vs. play, right vs. wrong, thoughts vs. behavior, freedom vs. determinism. Too frequently we fail to reframe and creatively search for higher-order solutions.

Forgiveness is the quintessential reframer not only of moral dilemmas but also of life itself. Jesus Christ constantly escaped the dichotomous moral traps of the scribes and Pharisees by reframing. In the most famous of New Testament *forgiveness-by-reframing* stories, the people’s professor, Jesus Christ, was

teaching in the temple when the lawyers and theologians interrupted his lecture and tried to entrap him in one of their typical Sophie's-choice dilemmas. But Jesus outmaneuvered them by reframing to a higher level of analysis:

At dawn he [Jesus] appeared again in the temple courts where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:2–11 NIV)

Even more profound than the Master's reframing from verbal communication to writing in the sand, was His reframing of their binary moral trap: "Is she guilty or innocent?" Shall we stone her or disobey Moses? Jesus nimbly reframed the discussion to a higher level—a Hegelian moral synthesis: Who is perfect? Who is prepared to throw the first stone?

The gospels are permeated with narratives of Jesus creatively reframing the dead-end dichotomies of the Pharisees. For example, when a lawyer asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus suggested that loving God, oneself, and one's neighbor encompassed all the essentials of Jewish theology. The lawyer feigned puzzlement, as if he couldn't determine precisely who his neighbor was. Jesus then exploded the discussion into the parable of The Good Samaritan, focusing on helping those in need. Jesus challenged his challenger:

Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:30–37)

Not only did the parable point out the hypocrisy of the religious establishment—priest and Levite pass by—it cut to the core of Jewish nationalism, racism, and other boundaries of exclusivity which divide God's children into us-or-them camps. In replying to Jesus, the lawyer was so prejudiced that he couldn't even get himself to say the "S word," substituting "the one who had mercy on him," instead of saying "Samaritan."

Reframing is the very heart of forgiving, allowing victims to *disconnect* from past pain and creatively move to *higher-order* possibilities. We've seen how dialectical reframing was creatively used by Tom Sawyer and Jesus Christ, and I hope you will use reframing in your counseling practice to make forgiveness more accessible to your clients. Finally, I hope you will "forgive" me a dog story:

FORGIVING MUGSY

Mugsy is not a bad dog. He is not guilty of the usual dog offenses: he does not do his business in my yard, chase my cat, or pick fights with my German Shepherd. He does not bite and he stays on his side of the street. He is friendly, and he loves children. Mugsy has only one failing—Mugsy barks. Yes, I know, that is not unusual behavior for dogs, but Mugsy barks unnecessarily, incessantly, or so it seemed to me. I had moved to the country to escape the noise of traffic and other city sounds. Everything seemed perfect. Hardly a car passed our house after dark, and I often fell asleep to the sound of frogs croaking their twangy, rubber-band serenades in the marsh that borders our property. All in all a bucolic setting with great potential for tranquillity—until Mugsy moved in across the street.

Frequently, I found myself sneaking out my back door, trying to avoid Mugsy's vigilant eyes when I picked up my evening paper, because even the slightest movement in my yard would set Mugsy barking for twenty minutes at a time. Mugsy has a very low barking threshold and a wide variety of seemingly innocuous stimuli can trigger his vocal cords: movement, noise, shadows, or even familiar figures like the paper boy delivering the evening news or me taking it out of the box. I fantasized about long-distance surgery on Mugsy's vocal cords—perhaps operating with a radio-controlled laser. But my son Michael, a fourth-year vet student, assured me that even in a high-tech Veterinary School like Michigan State, he had not heard of equipment that made it possible to perform laser surgery on a dog without the dog's knowledge or the owner's consent. There would be no vocal cordectomy. Mugsy's barking equipment would remain intact.

So what is the point of the story? The point is that I have learned to forgive Mugsy for barking, and it's made an amazing difference in my sense of tranquillity. Here is how it happened.

One evening as I tried to sneak past Mugsy's watchful eyes, I thought I had been successful in carefully removing my paper—not a sound spoiled the serenity of the evening. But as I turned and began stealthily softstepping back toward my house the cycle started: his barking, my anger.

But then suddenly, somehow, a new thought hit me: *Mugsy is the best burglar alarm system in the neighborhood! No one will ever walk up my driveway or enter my yard undetected as long as Mugsy lives nearby.* That put the thing in a new light, that *reframed* Mugsy. I had previously worried about such things, especially when riding my bike past homes prominently displaying signs that warned: "Protected by Sentry Security," or "Under Twenty-Four Hour Surveillance." I had never signed up for such services, because they seemed prohibitively costly when viewed in light of my college professor's salary. But I had worried. Now, suddenly, I found myself smiling and mumbling to Mugsy "You go boy!" I did not need a \$10,000 security system. I had something far more efficient, I had Mugsy.

As I walked slowly up my driveway, accompanied each step of the way by Mugsy's music, I reveled in the thought of my superior security system. Mugsy was far better than motion-detection cameras (which might electronically fail) or flashing lights (which could burn out). I had the finest security system one could hope for and the cost was absolutely free!

Seen in a new light, Mugsy suddenly became my friend. No more thoughts about laser surgery, no more wishing he would run in front of a passing cement truck, and no more hoping his owners would forget to give him his heart worm medicine. In that single moment, in the darkness of my driveway, I forgave Mugsy. And it was not a teethgritting, gut wrenching act of will power, it was easy—easy as reframing.

As we enter the new millennium, forgiveness by reframing can facilitate new beginnings for therapists and clients. The next time you find yourself bogged down in a case of marital conflict where each person seems determined to fight to the death, try invigorating your creativity by re-reading Tom Sawyer or taking a fresh look at how Jesus reframed issues. And once in awhile, on a dark night when you hear a distant dog barking, remember Mugsy.

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