

It is difficult to forgive



Sometimes forgiveness can be difficult. It is not always easy to forgive someone for doing something wrong. There may be times where the transgression is so severe that it causes a person to think differently about someone, never being able to forget what they did to them. The Sunflower is a book about the possibilities and limits of forgiveness. Simon Wiesenthal, a Jewish prisoner, is called to the bedside of a dying Nazi soldier and is faced with the dilemma of being asked for forgiveness for the soldier's horrible atrocities he had committed during the war. The Jewish boy is unsure of what he should do or say. As he sits by the dying man listening to his story and comforting him for his last few minutes on Earth, he cannot bring himself to respond in any way. The boy sits in silence and does not grant nor deny the dying Nazi's request for forgiveness.

There are many terms for being forgiven. One cannot simply go through life doing whatever they please to anyone and expecting an apology will suffice afterwards. "One cannot, and should not, go around happily killing and torturing and then, when the moment has come, simply ask, and receive, forgiveness," says Herbert Marcuse (Marcuse 208). A person may offend someone and feel guilty about it and then seek forgiveness from the person so that they may be on good terms with each other again after. Usually, after a transgression has occurred, the person who has been wronged may be upset or angry. They may not be able to offer forgiveness right away. The perpetrator must respect their need for time and understand that what they have done offended them. "The recognition, if nothing else, is an important first step," says Sven Alkalaj (Alkalaj 103).

Forgiveness cannot just be requested from anyone. In order for someone to give forgiveness they need to be involved in the actions committed by the individual. If someone greatly offends you and then asks another person for forgiveness and they say yes does that really mean they are forgiven for their actions? Simon was not able to forgive this man on behalf of the victims who were so maliciously murdered. Alan L. Berger says, “ I may forgive one who has sinned against me. I may not forgive one who has taken the life of another,” (Berger 118). Does Simon really think that if he could contact the dead victims that they would want to offer this man forgiveness? Absolutely not. The Holocaust itself was a massive massacre. Literally millions of innocent people were brutally murdered just for not meeting the requirements of the “ perfect race”. Anyone and everyone involved besides the victims do not deserve any forgiveness for such a horrible event. Even Franklin H. Littell says that, “ The problem of the dying perpetrator was the fact that the only human persons who could have forgiven him were dead” (Littell 197). Families and children were murdered in front of one another for no reason. How can a monster be given forgiveness for these actions even on his death bed?

A misconception about forgiveness comes when it is confused with condoning or pardoning the offensive behavior. Forgiveness is not the same thing as forgetting, condoning, or pardoning. In today’s modern times it seems that the typical behavior is to “ forgive and forget”. Just because we forgive does not mean that we do not seek justice, speak out against the offender, or seek restitution. These things are all distinct from the act of forgiveness. The dying soldier may have truly been sorry for the things he

had done. He may have actually deserved the chance to be forgiven, but even then the things he did would not just disappear.

The crimes committed by this dying soldier and all the other soldiers are not simply something that can go away upon forgiveness. The soldier seeking forgiveness was lucky to be dying before facing any real consequences of his actions. What these men were doing was extremely illegal and morally wrong. There is no way to replace a little boy's murdered parents and siblings. After the Holocaust, trials were held to condemn the men responsible for these atrocities. Most of the men who were convicted were sentenced to death. The law offers no forgiveness.

Another common misconception about forgiveness is that it makes the offended seem weak by accepting an apology and simply forgiving. It is never easy to forgive someone who has wronged you in some way. It is especially hard to forgive someone if what they have done has extremely hurt you emotionally and even physically in this case.

There are many other people who actually think that the soldier could have deserved forgiveness (Wells). He could have been truly sorry for his actions. Some of the Holocaust survivors choose to forgive the soldiers that did these things because otherwise they would be angry and vengeful. They realize they were put through horrible unnecessary torture, but they need to move on with their lives in order to achieve a healthy life. Just as a victim of any other type of attack needs to often go to therapy sessions to try and overcome that obstacle in their life. It is all about allowing time to heal the

wounds since the event. It is normal to be upset for more than a day for some things.

Eva Fleischner talks about how the dying Nazi soldier is actually still at fault with his attempt at seeking forgiveness. The dying man simply wants any Jew to come to his bedside to listen to his plea. Yet, the man is oblivious to the ongoing pain and suffering of the Jews even after this man's passing. Viewing Simon as a representative of his people, he seeks to absolve himself and ease his insistent conscience through confessing and expressing his regret to him. He begs for a response, for confirmation that his remorse is accepted. He desperately awaits the comforting words that might provide him a peaceful death. Simon, torn and confused, himself still captive in a living hell manned by this man's comrades, holds his silence. That silence will forever trouble him, tugging at his conscience till his last day. This dying man represents each and every one of the murdering Nazi soldiers. Even after he is dead there will continue to be more deaths of Jews. Fleischner considers the possibility that if maybe the dying man would have summoned another Nazi guard, that he could have given a more genuine apology (Fleischner 143).

Another thing that is sometimes thought about forgiveness that is not true is the idea that refusing to forgive is a fitting way to punish the offender. In the story the dying soldier made a deathbed wish; to confess his crimes to a Jew and to have that person forgive him. Some people believe that forgiving him would have given him exactly what he wanted. And withholding that forgiveness would have punished him, quite justly, for his heinous acts. I do not think that this was Simon's intentions at all. He did not have any thought

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of trying to punish the soldier more than the anguish he was already in. More often than not, it is the one who refuses to forgive who suffers more. In this case that is true. Because of Simon's own silence he is devastated of whether or not he made the right choice.

The act of forgiving is something that we carry with us throughout our entire lives. The fact that we do not truly forget what has happened once we forgive means that there will always be the thought of that event in the back of our minds. If a sibling hurts you, but then apologizes, each time you see them there will be that memory and you will silently forgive them again for their regretful actions. This happens with everything that you offer forgiveness for. It would not make sense to forgive someone and then when you think of the event you get upset. In that case, that would mean that your forgiveness was not truly meant and you still resented them for doing what they did.

Simon is still haunted by this experience years after it occurred. He ponders whether or not he made the right decision. He truly felt that this dying man's apology was sincere, and that he may have been truly resentful for his sins. Still Simon remained silent and offered no reconciliation to this man. He held his hand through the whole story and even swatted away flies that bothered the dying soldier. It was simply not his position to be able to offer forgiveness for this man's sins. Since the victims are dead, God is the only one who can offer him any peace of mind. Simon cannot offer a response that might not be what the victims would want. I am sure the victims would much rather have been alive then cruelly murdered. Forgiveness is not for the weak or timid. It is not the same as condoning a behavior. Withholding

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forgiveness leads to more suffering for us than the offender, and the practice of forgiveness is not a one-shot deal; it is a life-long discipline.