

Work in Progress

Published monthly by Michele Crawford

Work in Progress is an electronic newsletter intended to assist individuals seeking optimum well-being.

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Work in Progress January 2007 Volume II Issue I

Feature Article: Forgiveness: Choosing Happiness over Righteousness  
Part One

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1) Note from Michele

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Dear Reader

Seventeen years ago, I read about a research project that examined the concept of forgiveness. Participants in the study were 100 women who had been sexually abused by male relatives and self-reported continued suffering as well as health, relationship, career and personal problems that had been unrelenting since the abuse.

The women were divided into two groups of 50 participants and both were pre-tested for emotional health and possible difficulties in their life situation. The first group was the control group and basically nothing happened with them.

The second group attended an intensive weekend forgiveness workshop. After the workshop, virtually every person decided in her own way to forgive her abuser, regardless of whether the violators participated in this process or not.

One year later, the researchers revisited both groups to post-test each woman for possible changes in their lives. The results were astounding!

The group who did not partake in the forgiveness workshop had no changes to report and many of them had experienced even more setbacks. The forgiveness group reported significant positive changes in their health, emotional wellbeing, career paths, relationships and enjoyment of life.

This was my first exposure to the healing concept of forgiveness and it enhanced my interest in the power of forgiveness to transform lives. Soon afterwards, forgiveness received noteworthy attention from therapists and the general public alike.

Seventeen years ago, forgiveness as a model had been virtually ignored. Over time, it became more of a requirement whenever a violation occurred.

Whenever the pendulum swings into extremes there are going to be problematic outcomes.

Part one of this series introduces the concept of forgiveness and some of the responses the victim of transgression may take. Part Two outlines the necessary semantics of forgiveness and focuses on other options for forgiveness. Part Three accommodates the transgressor's role.

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2) Feature Article: Forgiveness: Choosing Happiness over Righteousness Part One

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There are lessons that challenge us in life and some of them are terrible: random acts of violence and crime; accidents that maim and kill; betrayals of the heart; or even when our trust is insulted. People do terrible things to each other, often with a spirit of meanness and contempt; and it's always worse when we love the transgressor.

When awful things happen to us, we are strongly encouraged to forgive the transgression because that is what good people do. We are told it is a panacea for healing. To hold onto anger is to invite emotional poison into our life while demonstrating a lack of moral character. And recently, the spotlight also appears to be on the victim's need to forgive rather than on the transgressor's requirement to earn forgiveness.

When there is a transgression against us, we have choices. A victim's choice may be to fall under the pressure to forgive as an automatic reaction of religious charity or desire to move on as quickly as possible and forget it ever happened. And sometimes this takes place because of fear of the transgressor's anger or rejection.

However, this superficial forgiveness occurs too quickly, before the impact of the violation can be processed or before considering what the future holds. This translates into the victim continuing to be damaged from the violation long after the event is over.

Superficial forgiveness is defined as a compulsive, unconditional attempt at peacemaking for which nothing is asked in return. Often, what is at stake is our own integrity and safety. An illusion of closeness is created when nothing has been faced or resolved. This failure to acknowledge the pain or concentrate on a healing period perpetrates the damage inflicted on us.

One of the leading causes of depression and serious health-related problems is a tendency to ignore one's own needs at the expense of accommodating others' needs. A little piece of our self dies whenever we jump into a cheap forgiveness without carefully processing the spectrum of damage from the violation and acknowledging our personal experience and needs. True healing can only then take place.

Finally, when forgiveness is grasped without careful reflection and due process, then it is simply a platitude. By definition, a platitude is a "commonplace or trite gesture." In the long run, it is hollow and meaningless, without restorative powers or the essence of closure.

Instant forgiveness may allow a victim of a wrongdoing to feel superior but any future closeness and emotional intimacy is seriously compromised. The question that needs to be asked is whether this quick act of forgiveness is truly heartfelt and humble or is it a gesture of smug manipulation to gain power over the now contrite transgressor?

Another choice is to refuse to forgive. Although an all too common choice, it is the general consensus of both health practitioners as well as the populace, that the choice of not forgiving and letting go keeps us trapped in bitterness, anger, hate, revenge fantasies, spite and health problems.

The unyielding refusal to forgive is a black and white reaction to a complex multi-dimensional world. This is a rigid response of either overt aggression or detaching with studied indifference, silence and contempt. Either way, the message is to continue to despise and condemn the transgressor, leaving no opportunity for pardon, remorse or redemption.

This choice cannot recognize that some transgressors are human and make mistakes, even terrible mistakes. Others learn valuable life-changing lessons only after the offense and its aftermath. And others begin a path of commitment to change and good works for the rest of their lives.

Like superficial forgiveness, the denial of forgiveness invokes many serious health symptoms and illness. Holding rage and spite may seem appropriate but it is nether healthy or peaceful.

True forgiveness occurs when you stop wishing the past should have been different.

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3) About Michele  
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Michele Crawford is a therapist who assists individuals who are struggling with trauma, anxiety or depression. Her passion for her work remains embedded in being able to connect with you in your suffering, helping you find real solutions no matter how complex the issue may be.

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4) Counselling Services  
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Are you prepared to live with more happiness, optimism, confidence, self-worth and hope? If your answer is "yes," then your next step is to contact me for a free 20-minute phone consultation. We can then discuss how I might best help you resolve your problems of Trauma, Depression and Anxiety.

The benefits of counselling with Michele include: significantly reduced stress levels, an optimistic outlook in life, increased confidence and hope.

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I want to reassure you that your e-mail address will never be shared or sold to anyone else.

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