

THE 3 STAGES OF FORGIVING

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Editorial Board Member



1a: to give up resentment of or claim to requital for <forgive an insult>

1b: to grant relief from payment of <forgive a debt>

2: to cease to feel resentment against (an offender) or pardon <forgive one's enemies>

My early impression of Mdm Chua Tua Moy was negative. A woman in her mid-60s, she often brought her three year-old grandson to the neighbourhood 7-11 store. Their presence was always noticed from the drama created by the boy demanding to buy a toy or a snack. Mdm Chua would refuse initially, chide him aloud but invariably he got what he demanded. A classic case of indulgence,

I thought to myself every time. We ran into one another often because that was also the most convenient store for me to get my isotonic drinks after my runs.

I was told that first impressions are seldom accurate. This dictum turned out to be true for Mdm Chua Tua Moy. Recently she came to consult me for an intense chest pain. She was not a likely candidate for coronary artery disease – she had no significant atherosclerosis risk factors. Her description of her chest pain, however, was worrying. Tight, compressive pain that came suddenly and was often associated with shortness of breath. Before I embarked on a path to investigate, I pressed her for some background information to ascertain if there were stress factors that could have contributed to her symptom. As always, I was glad I had asked.

A tragic tale of immense suffering unfolded as I opened the proverbial can of worms. Mdm Chua married a man in a marriage that was arranged by her parents. Any notion of a happy marriage was destroyed when her husband turned out to be a compulsive gambler. He was never around and he never brought money home. Mdm Chua became pregnant almost immediately after their wedding and gave birth to a daughter. She realised then she had to bring this child up on her own.

“Luckily for me, I was smart enough to decide that I would not have another child with this horrible and irresponsible man.”

Being illiterate, she had to work two jobs in order to make ends meet. Rising at 4am everyday, she would be at a coffeeshop serving drinks, collecting crockery and washing cups. When she got home at 9pm, she would begin her second job of doing laundry for some customers. She hardly had time for herself or her daughter.

In the early years, Mdm Chua had her parents to look after her daughter. Things deteriorated after her husband started borrowing money from her side of the family. As expected, he lost all his money gambling. Instead of repaying his debt, he pestered his in-laws for more loans. As a result, her daughter Ai Ling had to be left by herself most of the time – a latchkey kid by the age of six!

“My heart breaks whenever I think of my daughter all by herself at home. God is kind to me. Ai Ling has always been a very obedient and independent child. She was always reassuring me: “Mommy, you don’t have to worry about me. I can take care of myself.”

Having to pay her husband’s gambling debts and the household bills left her with little cash. Mdm Chua related how she had to bear the shame of accepting leftover food from her neighbours and applying for bursaries for Ai Ling as long as she could remember.

“The worst shame came one day when Ai Ling had begged me to buy her *char siew* rice. She was probably in kindergarten and had been craving for *char siew* for many days. I had to bring her to my elder brother in Ghim Moh to beg him to spare a couple of dollars so that my daughter could have her *char siew*.”

“Dr Tan, can you imagine that one has to beg for money to buy *char siew* rice for her own daughter?”

Fast forward three decades and life has changed tremendously. Ai Ling supported herself by working part-time all through her school years and has become a graduate. She is married to an engineer and has given birth to a cute son. Working in the IT sector as a high-flying executive, she gives a generous portion of her salary to her mother. Life has transformed from deprivation to material comfort.

It is not quite a happy ending for Mdm Chua Tua Moy. Her husband began exhibiting signs of dementia two years ago. Deterioration happened at an alarming rate and now he is but an empty shell, incapable of self-care. He would wander out of the house in the middle of the night and not know how to return. He would turn on the gas stove and leave the faucet running. To top it off, he has also become incontinent – both urinary and faecal. Although affording adult diapers is not a problem, on some of his most deranged days, he would strip himself of the diaper and walk around

dropping his faeces in many parts of the house.

“He drives me really mad. There are some days I imagine myself overdosing him with his medications to end my misery.”

“What have I done to deserve this? I slogged my entire life because of his gambling and now I have to wash and feed him!”

As she spoke, her rage became more palpable. White hot anger brought bitter tears down her face as she shook her fists.

“Many times, I have shouted at him: *Ah Lao*, I will never forgive you. You will burn in hell. The only reason I am taking care of you is because your kind-hearted daughter has begged me not to exact vengeance on you!”

She stopped and became silent. Then she looked up and asked, “How can I ever forgive this wretched man? Why would I forgive him?”

I wished wisdom had prevailed that day and that I had something really comforting to offer in response, but I had none. I could only arrange for a cardiology referral and prescribe her a combination of analgesics and isosorbide dinitrates. Her questions, however, continued to haunt me. How can I help to relieve her pain?

I turned to a book that was given to me in 1999 after I was humiliated by someone in a way that changed my life irreversibly. The book, *The Art of Forgiving* (1996, Ballantine Publishing Group, New York) was written by Lewis B. Smedes (1921 – 2002), Professor of Integrative Studies in the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. Reading through a book that I had refused to read a decade ago because I was struggling with the same furor gave me some insights to forgive when I was not able to.

The first thing I realised was that I had refused to read the book because I had refused to forgive. I had refused to forgive because of a few pre-suppositions. With wisdom and

gentleness, Lewis Smedes removed these mistaken conceptions of what forgiving is about. In their place, he granted me new understanding through a few simple statements of what forgiving is not:

Forgiving someone who did us wrong does not mean that we tolerate the wrong he did.

Forgiving does not mean we want to forget what happened.

Forgiving does not mean we excuse the person who did it.

Forgiving does not mean we take the edge off the evil of what was done to us.

Forgiving does not mean we surrender our right to justice.

Forgiving does not mean we invite someone who hurt us once to hurt us again.

It felt like having huge boulders excised from my soul. It gave me permission to consider forgiving as a viable option once I could see forgiving for what it really is.

One thing is for sure – I cannot change what happened. There is no delete button for the past; I am stuck with it. I cannot forget what happened. I cannot erase it from my mind. It is like a video compact disc sewn inside my head. And every time it plays its rerun, I feel the pain all over again.

Now I have to make the hard decision. Do I want to spend the rest of my life with a pain that I did not deserve in the first place? Or do I want to be rid of it, healed, freed from it, so that I can go on with my life without that painful memory shadowing me?

I sense a movement towards the edge of the cliff. I know that I need to take that leap if I desire to be rid of this burden of my heart.

How do I forgive?

Forgiving, it seems, is a remedy for pain, but not anybody else's pain. Just my own. I begin my journey towards forgiving by owning the pain I want to heal. I need to be conscious of it, take it on and admit to myself. I need to identify it for what it is and what it is not. I need to honestly evaluate if the pain I feel matches the wrong that I was done. And, finally, I need to take responsibility for the pain I feel: decide what I am going to do with it.

Lewis Smedes taught that there are three stages of forgiving.

Stage One: We rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us.

Stage Two: We surrender our right to get even.

Stage Three: We revise our feelings toward the person we forgive.

I prayed for courage to walk through all three stages. I am amazed at what I learnt about my own heart and the new ways to see the wrong that was done to me ten years ago.

Stage One: As I start on the miracle of forgiving, I begin to see my enemy through a cleaner lens, less smudged by hate. He is not entirely composed of evil. I see him as a hodgepodge of meanness and decency, good and evil, not very different from myself.

Stage Two: I used to fantasise about really bad things happening to my enemy. As I move one or two steps along the path of forgiving, I hold the right to vengeance in my two hands, take one last look at it, and let it spill to the ground like a handful of water.

Stage Three: What I felt before was simple hate. Once I have rediscovered my offender's humanity and given up my right to get even, I experience the tentative birth of goodwill. There are stirrings of benevolence inside me, that it is

alright with me if any good should happen to the one I used to despise.

It has been a reluctant and very difficult journey towards healing and therefore forgiving. I am convinced, though, that it is the definitive treatment for the cancer of hate resulting from terrible wrongs done to me that I did not deserve. Many people call forgiving a miracle and that is what it really is. Because when we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is ourselves. **SMA**



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