

Memory, Forgetting, Apology and Forgiveness in Reconciliation

It is a sad truth that human beings have great capacities for violence and harm towards one another. Throughout history, people have committed unimaginable crimes against others. However, humans also have the capacity to feel regret and remorse for those unimaginable acts and have the capacity for forgiveness. It is because of that capacity for regret and remorse and the capacity for forgiveness that there can be reconciliation between people for horrible wrongdoings. Reconciliation, between two people or between groups, for an action or a series of actions that have caused harm to a person or group, usually requires the perpetrator to show true regret and remorse for their actions and genuinely apologize for causing the harm; it requires the victim to accept the apology and realize that the perpetrator is regretful and remorseful and be able to forgive them for the harm they did. At this point, the perpetrator and victim can move on, and put the hurt behind them, not necessarily forget it, but not let it affect their daily lives. Memory (and along with memory, forgetting), apology, and forgiveness each play an important role in the process of reconciliation among people.

Memory is a key factor in the reconciliation process; it is a precondition. If neither victim nor perpetrator can remember the act that caused the harm, then there can be no reconciliation because there can be no apology for something one or both parties has no memory of. Forgotten, suppressed or disassociated traumatic memories due to violence between two people that already have some type of relationship can leave something left unsaid or undone, can leave the relationship cracked and leave a feeling of something wrong. This is was the case for Bettina Aptheker and her father, who molested her from the time she was a young child to when she was

13. Both Aptheker and her father had no memory of the molestation until years after it happened. The memory had been suppressed in Aptheker's mind, but she was left with some uncomfortable feelings regarding her parents, particularly her father. In her memoir, she addresses these feelings. "I didn't like being alone with my father at home, at night. I was on edge when Mom was away that my grades in school plummeted" (12). As she got older, she often felt despair. "I knew the feeling [despair] without knowing its cause. I knew it was connected to my parents, but I didn't know how" (28). Aptheker had no memories of the molestation but she always had a feeling that made her uncomfortable around her father. She still loved him, she just could not figure out why she had those feelings about him. That would have put some tension into their relationship, a tension that is seen at lunch with Aptheker and her parents. During the meal, she said that her father snapped at her about her job, children, and various other things, and she just tuned it out like she usually did. That is not to say that they did not love each other, but it does show that there is something off in their relationship; that neither had a memory of the sexual abuse but there was a feeling of something being wrong.

Carl Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology. In his work, he developed the idea of the shadow, which is the unknown dark side that every person has. It is unknown because it is part of the unconscious and it is irrational. Forgotten or suppressed memories are linked to the shadow. In Bettina Aptheker's case, her suppressed memories did affect her life because they gave her those feelings of discomfort and despair around her father. Those feelings from those forgotten memories became part of her shadow and lead her to have an impulse to violence which she turned inward by doing self-harm. She also projected that aspect of her shadow on those around her, when she would have outbursts around

her family, that had nothing to do with what her family was doing. It was the boiling over of feelings from a suppressed/ forgotten memory.

It was not until both Aptheker and her father had memory (or partial memory) of what had happened that they could even begin the process of reconciliation. When she remembered but he did not, she found herself getting angry and yelling at her father for no big thing in particular. “Underneath it, all was my fury at the incest, which I had remembered five years earlier, but I didn’t think I ever would confront him about it” (522). She had her memories of what happened, and he did not, and they could not be reconciled because of it. That did affect their relationship because she was not always able to control her anger at him; she was projecting her shadow onto him. Only after her father asked her if he had ever hurt her and sexually abused her, were they able to start reconciliation. While he claimed he had no memories, never remembered what he did, and he never acknowledged it, some part of him did know that it did happen. When he first found out he said “How can I apologize to you? There are no words that are adequate. What can I say? How can you forgive me?” (524) While that is not exactly an apology it was enough for Aptheker to tell him that she had already forgiven him and really mean it. From then, they did continue their relationship and were able to be together without it coming up and affecting every moment they spent together. However, they were not fully reconciled because her father did not necessarily remember it; he could never fully admit that it happened and maybe that is why their reconciliation was never full.

In Bettina Aptheker’s story, it can be seen that memory can serve as a tool but overall it is more of an obstacle for forgiveness and reconciliation. It serves as a tool in that a memory of the event is needed for there to even be a chance at reconciliation. Aptheker’s story shows that without the memory because it has been repressed, forgotten or disassociated something in a

relationship can be off, but once the memory is there, there can be an apology, forgiveness, and at least partial reconciliation. The memory serves as a painful reminder, for the victim and the perpetrator, which can push people towards reconciliation. In that way, it is a tool needed for forgiveness and reconciliation. However, it can also be an even bigger obstacle. Many events that lead to a need for forgiveness and reconciliation are because there has been some trauma. Traumatic memory can be a huge obstacle for forgiveness because of how it is processed and stored in the brain. It is not like normal memories and often because of the hormones that are produced during a traumatic event, the memory is not recorded by the brain in the same way. It can be sent to a different part of the brain and not stored with other memories that can be recalled easily or it can be fragmented. When this happens, or when memories become suppressed or disassociated they pose an obstacle to forgiveness because as talked about before, memory is a necessary precondition to having forgiveness.

Another way that memory can serve as an obstacle for forgiveness is a memory could be so traumatic or so strong and painful that it makes the victim feel that it is impossible for them to forgive the perpetrator. In the documentary *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*, many of the former Mengele twins feel that way. What Mengele and the Nazis did to them still haunts them, continually or at least enough, that the memory is too strong for them to be able to even comprehend how Eva Kor could have forgiven the Nazis.

There is a common notion that reconciliation means forgive and forget. However, that is not always the case. There are some situations where it is okay to forgive and forget, but those are usually more minor events (i.e. breaking something that belonged to a friend), but even then, it is situational because different things have different meanings to different people. Reconciliation may seem easier for people if the event is forgiven and forgotten, but there are some things that

cannot be forgotten. Major world atrocities such as genocides or the horrible treatment of native peoples by colonial powers, and other crimes between one person to another or among smaller groups, such as acts of sexual violence or murder, should also not be forgotten. When a victim extends forgiveness after the perpetrator has apologized it is not a signal that they will forget. It signals that all parties can move forward, but the memory should remain. Hopefully, it will be less painful for the victim and serve as a reminder for the perpetrator of how not to act in the future, but it should not be forgotten. This idea of forgiving and forgetting is another reason why some of the former Mengele twins were so upset that Eva had forgiven the Nazis. They did not want the world to see they had forgiven then have the world forget the horrors of what had happened. The memory will always be there and in many cases, should not be forgotten, forgiveness can just be a way for the victim to move on.

Apology is a necessary part of reconciliation. There can be no true and full reconciliation if the perpetrator has not apologized or at least shown some acknowledgment of regret and wrongdoing. There are various definitions for apology and the definitions have changed over time and it changes over cultures. A modern western definition of apology is “to acknowledge and express regret for a fault without defense, by way of reparations to the feelings of the person affected” (Tavuchis, 16). When an apology happens, it should be a voluntary declaration, that does not include any excuse for why the action (or inaction) that hurt another happened, it should just be the declaration that the perpetrator feels shame, regret, and/or remorse for the event (17). Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology to the Stolen Generations of Australia’s aboriginal people is a pretty good example of an almost perfect apology. He makes no excuses on behalf of the past governments and parliaments for what they did, and he does not try to just put the blame on those past governments.

The 1970s is not exactly a point in remote antiquity. There are still serving members of this parliament who were first elected to this place in the early 1970s. It is well within the adult memory span of many of us. The uncomfortable truth for us is that all the parliaments of the nation, individually and collectively, enacted statutes and delegated authority under those statutes that made the forced removal of children on racial grounds fully lawful” (Rudd, 4).

Prime Minister Rudd offers the aboriginals an unqualified apology, that asks for forgiveness but does not expect it, an apology that does not offer any excuses and that does not put the blame on those of the past, but explicitly states everything that had been done and apologies for those actions.

A true and genuine apology is difficult. In general, people do not like to be wrong, and when they are wrong, they do not like to admit it. An apology is admitting, to the person one has wronged, that they were wrong. Apology can be an incredibly powerful gesture because “they are difficult and potentially humiliating; there is a tendency to resist apologizing” (9), and so when a person voluntarily and sincerely apologizes, it may mean that the hurt they did is eating them alive and they want badly enough to be forgiven or want reconciliation, that they say “I’m sorry” which is a potentially humiliating position. A person could not accept their apology or not forgive them, and they are left in the uncomfortable position of having admitted to wrongdoing without being responded to. It is important for reconciliation because it shows that perpetrator cares enough to apologize and shows they want to make a real effort at reconciliation. “An apology requires not detachment, but acknowledgment and painful embrace of our deeds coupled with a declaration of regret. Thus, the commonplace phrase “I am sorry”, conveys a simple description of one’s own condition—a condition that, if accepted as authentic, would then warrant forgiveness by the other” (19). The action of a true apology is the first step of the perpetrator in the process of reconciliation. It is then up to the victim to accept the apology and grant forgiveness.

Forgiveness, however, can be granted without an apology because forgiveness is an internal process for the victim to become the survivor. “Forgiving is not something we do for another person... Forgiving happens inside us. It represents a letting go of the sense of grievance, and perhaps most importantly a letting go of the role of victim” (The Sunflower, 186). This is exactly why Eva Kor forgave the Nazis. She did not want to live the rest of her life as their victim because it still allowed them to have power over her. She was not saying she understood why the Nazis did what they did but she was saying “I refuse to give you the power to define me as a victim” (The Sunflower, 186). It was a way of helping her move on with her life and live without the pain of the past.

This type of forgiveness is not forgiveness for the purpose of reconciliation. Reconciliation usually (though not always) requires there to have been a previous relationship between the victim and the perpetrator that is in need of repair. In the case of major atrocities, like the Holocaust, one person (one Jewish victim) saying to all the perpetrators (all the Nazis) “I forgive you” is not an effort at reconciliation; it is an internal decision for the victim to make for themselves to feel free of the past. The perpetrator, the Nazi in this case, still has to live with their past because they may not have apologized and because they likely hurt more than that one Jew who granted forgiveness. In larger conflicts and atrocities if the perpetrator is making an effort to reconcile, from the full group of perpetrators to the full group of victims, then there needs to be an apology, like Prime Minister Rudd’s apology.

Memory, forgetting, apology, and forgiveness are all important concepts when it comes to the process of reconciliation among people. Memory is a prerequisite to even start the process of reconciliation. Without the memory of the harmful event, there is not an understanding between the victim and the perpetrator that there needs to be reconciliation. There can be a feeling of

something off in the relationship, reflected in a person's shadow, but until the memory is remembered by both parties, reconciliation cannot happen. Forgetting's role in reconciliation is just that, in most cases, forgive and forget is not an appropriate way to reconcile. Some things are too important and have too many implications to be forgotten. Apology is the first true step in reconciliation. An apology is not necessarily required for forgiveness because forgiveness is an internal process for the victim; they can forgive the perpetrator without first having an apology because forgiveness allows them to move on and stop being defined as the victim. Apology is, however, a necessary action for reconciliation because the perpetrator must acknowledge their fault and regret before a relationship can begin to be repaired.