Forgiveness: An Introduction
Forgiveness appears in stories of spiritual resilience.
Resilient stories are complex, but they all speak of the ability to bounce back.
Forgiveness, like other aspects of resiliency, includes resistance, recovery and repair.
Forgiveness reflects all three aspects of resilient balance.
Hope within a landscape of reality
Empathy but also uniqueness

"I know exactly how you feel."
Roots but the ability to change
The first step in pastoral care is to understand forgiveness as a complex, difficult process—in context.
That understanding must include reflecting on our own history of brokenness.
Forgiveness...

- Stirs up emotions in everyone
- Is multifaceted and highly complex.
- **Always occurs within a relationship (other person, self, or God)**
- Is a captivating, dangerous, and provocative topic
- Remains the most difficult yet important work we do
- Is increasingly the focus of research and writing, but remains partially understood
Forgiveness: Why do we resist it?

- Don’t want to lament, mourn
- A past that cannot be changed
- A future that is largely unknown
- Our intentions and commitments fluctuate
- Complex and interwoven with rest of life
- Imperfect and incomplete results
- Direct “truth” is unavailable (need metaphors, stories and pictures)
We might visualize forgiveness in legal terms (forensic)
or primarily as a healing process...
or as redemption, being set free.
Often it is viewed as giving up the desire for revenge.
For women, it frequently means a move—victimhood to increased agency.
Forgiveness is always a gift, and leads to more, not less, responsibility—both for the forgiver and the forgiven.
Since forgiveness is a gift, so is the responsibility it creates—thus “gifted responsibility.”
Forgiveness is not cheap; it cost a man his life.
And those who forgive, also suffer.
My definition (with Lois Malcolm)

• *Forgiveness is the process of discerning how best to respond to brokenness in human relationships in the light of gifted responsibility. It involves a move from the passive suffering of victimhood to the active suffering of moving on.*
Forgiveness can be intrapersonal
familial
communal
national
international
spiritual
traditional
Yet it is always unique
Forgiveness and hospice care: A particular context for forgiveness
Guilt, following tough decisions, may play a role in relationships.
Relationships are also complicated by dementia
by role changes and dependencies
and certainly by the approach of death
Since forgiveness is a process, time can be an enemy.
While not everyone has dramatic unfinished business, some do.
Facilitating forgiveness conversations is part of our call, as caregivers.
since the gift of forgiveness brings joy and peace to each day.
One reason forgiveness is so tough is that it means being a “grown up” in our faith beliefs, as well as psychologically.

- Research confirms a complicated link between spiritual and psychological maturity.

- How we picture God impacts our ideas of forgiveness (gracious vs. punitive).
Religion

• Different understandings within and between faith groups (e.g. Jews and Christians on repentance)
• Compassion, peace, moral reasoning, community—part of all religions, although vary in emphasis
• All faith groups have traditional narratives of forgiveness and reconciliation—but also histories of intolerance and revenge.
We read our sacred texts differently, even within the same tradition.
It is certainly possible to be “religious” and seek revenge.
Yet forgiveness is at the heart of Christian theology.
Understanding forgiveness includes asking:

- Does this person belong to a cultural group that has a more collective (communal) or a more individual worldview? (e.g. African vs. Western)
- What “scripts” about forgiveness exist in this group?
  - Saving face vs. making peace
  - Harmony vs. revenge
  - Exclusion vs. embrace
We must also deal with a central Christian paradox

- Human reality: we are alienated from each other and hurt each other daily

- Divine reality: We are called to live in peace and can do so with God’s help; in fact, we already have all that we need in order to forgive
Only faith in God’s promises makes it possible to go on, to forgive.
Obstacles to forgiveness: The big three

• Fear
• Shame
• Narcissism
We fear that we will be hurt again, physically or emotionally, if we forgive.
We have been told we are weak and foolish if we forgive.
Or, as narcissists, we lack empathy for those we injure.
Other obstacles include:

- Memory ("never forget" is two-edged sword)
- Resistance (esp. to the pain of mourning)
- Denial (as self-protection)
- Guilt (neurotic vs. appropriate)
- Rumination (leads to deeper "grooves" for our victim story)
- Labeling (vs. true knowing)
- Unhealthy learned attitudes and behaviors
Those unhealthy attitudes and behaviors are learned early on.
Aides to forgiveness

- **Empathy**—begins in infancy with a sense of self. The primary aide to forgiveness
- Positive models—for example, wise older adults
- Realistic yet hopeful visions
- **Spiritual community**—if it embodies healthy beliefs and practices that balance responsibility and grace
- Self esteem & security, healthy differentiation
- The gift of time and space (forgiveness is a process)
- Confidence that God is working to redeem our lives.
What forgiveness is not

- Accepting, condoning or excusing
- Reconciliation (this may or may not happen)
- Forgetting and failing to protect the vulnerable
- A sign of personal weakness
- A sign of wanting to be hurt again
- A single act, done on command
- An easy, one-time decision
Why is forgiveness necessary? Because human beings suffer!
And because unforgiveness makes us sick, spiritually, psychologically, and physically.

UNFORGIVENESS is like TAKING POISON and hoping the OTHER Guy DIES!

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We cannot change the past. Forgiveness is our only hope!