

## Mourning, Forgiveness and Revenge in the Context of Unconscious Longings



That's me in the photo, hat in hand, taking a back seat to my daughter and her friend. The hat is from an AAP Summer Workshop. Writing this article pulled me inside myself in a way that was interesting and a little frightening. I wrote without first making an outline, and surprised myself quite a bit.

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Psychotherapy is a culture-specific compensation for the cognitive and affective blind spots of a given culture. As such it is intrinsically antinomian, and is based on the assumption that human development throughout the life cycle, and perhaps human evolution over a larger time frame, is driven by an instinct toward deeper and broader awareness. This instinctual impulse toward wholeness or completion requires an ever-increasing experiential capacity for all manner of thoughts and feelings. Usually a given culture will only provide explicit support for a certain limited range of cognitive and affective experience and will not support, or will even suppress, thoughts and feelings outside that range. Psychotherapy attempts to compensate for such cultural blind spots by providing support for the experiences outside the culture's range. Freud's support for certain experiences of a sexual nature in a culture which did not support them is a prime example.

Meditation and related ancient practices meant to enhance human development and evolution are older means of attempting to address the same problems for which psychotherapy has more recently arisen. Although psychotherapy has been a little slow in acknowledging the spiritual nature of the enterprise, it is certainly responding to the same need that its ancestors did and still do.

The cognitive range of human beings appears to be virtually limitless. Every one of us seems to be able to think in idiosyncratic ways, coming up with thoughts that are just a bit different from those of any other person. However, in spite of all this cognitive diversity, there seems to be general agreement that the affective substructure of these unique patterns of thought is much more limited and is universal. Humans are hardwired for only a certain limited number of emotions, and these are the same for all humans, regardless of culture. Estimates range from two basic emotions, usually love and fear, to about ten or twelve. Manfred Clynes has attempted to answer this question with his creative research on what he calls "sentic states," and makes a good case that the number is seven. Whatever the number, it is clear that humans are capable of only a limited number of emotions and a virtually

unlimited number of thoughts. Therefore a person's success in gaining access to a single affect, which could represent more than ten percent of the total human potential affective repertoire, can be expected in general to have much greater impact than would be the case with gaining access to a single thought, which might represent a minuscule percentage of total potential cognitive repertoire. Hence psychotherapy's compensatory efforts are primarily directed at supporting the experiencing of the affects that the culture does not support. Affects can reasonably be presumed to be the subjective matrix within which thought occurs, and the combination of affect and cognition creates the supportive matrix from which behavior arises.

Forgiveness, revenge, and mourning are behaviors which are shaped by, and even defined by, their cultural context. Using the framework presented in the paragraphs above, I would like to examine these behaviors in terms of the thoughts and feelings involved, as well as psychotherapy's role in facilitating a person's experience of a deeper and broader range of these thoughts and feelings. I assume that thoughts generally occur in an affective context, so I will simply use the term "experiential states" to refer to the combination of thought and affect.

In the cultural milieu in which I currently find myself, roughly the same one in which psychotherapy has made its mark, I believe there are three experiential states toward which instinct propels us and for which the culture provides limited support: *awe/reverence*, *transcendence/interconnectedness*, and *purposefulness/meaning*. Awe and reverence are the natural (i.e., hardwired) responses to the felt presence of the sacred, so this experiential state could also be described in terms of a longing to feel oneself in the presence of the sacred. Frank Haronian identified the cultural norm about 30 years ago when he wrote about "the repression of the sublime." A similar longing, the longing to feel harmoniously connected to everything and everyone, would be the motivational element that seeks satisfaction in the experience of transcendence/interconnectedness. In this case the experience of being connected to the web of life, what I am calling "interconnectedness," carries with it the experience of transcending one's usual sense of being separate or alone. Hence interconnectedness is one side of the coin of this instinctual longing, and transcendence is the other. Of course the desire to experience purposefulness/meaning may in a generic sense be partially satisfied by the intentional pursuit of the other two states being considered. In a more specific sense however, it refers to the way in which a given individual experiences his or her life as having a unique purpose that gives it meaning. This unique purpose becomes a mechanism by which interconnectedness can occur with all other beings.

Psychotherapy's role in facilitating these three experiential states is not limited to the consulting room. Although encounters with these states may take place while in the direct presence of the therapist, they may also take place elsewhere as a result of the work that is done in the therapy. Therapy can help lower resistance to such experiences so that they are more likely to

occur spontaneously, or reach consciousness, at any time. One way that such resistance is lowered is through the therapist's demonstration of his or her own ability and willingness to experience such states in the developing intimacy of the therapy relationship. Therapy can also support the intentional seeking of such experiences by reducing resistance to engaging in new activities, such as meditation, practices meant to invite visions, and deeper intimacy of all types outside the consulting room.

The extent to which individuals are able to access these three experiential states is directly related to mourning, revenge and forgiveness.

Mourning is a reaction to the disruption of one's sense of interconnectedness. It is a process through and during which one reconfigures the web of connections. If one's sense of interconnectedness is limited to a very small number of objects, then the loss of one of these objects disrupts a large percentage of one's experience in this domain and mourning will take a long time to complete its work, or may even fail. A newly-widowed person with strong connections to children, grandchildren, friends, pets, work, a cause, nature, and God can be expected to pass through a period of mourning more quickly and effectively than one without these connections. It may be said that a greater sense of transcendence is present, reflected in the ability to transcend the physical loss of the spouse, and the previous configuration of the web of connectedness, in which physical contact with the spouse was included. The new configuration may include a stronger sense of connection with the spouse's soul.

Forgiveness seems easiest for me to understand when I think of its opposite: unforgiveness. I am in a state of unforgiveness when I believe that another person or group has caused me an injury such that I am not able to experience the inner peace (whether it "*passeth understanding*" or not) that flows from being able to enter all three of the experiential states herein considered. Experienced together, these three states constitute a profound existential/experiential triad. If I forgive the person who appears to have injured me, I thereby surrender the claim that his or her act has impaired my ability to experience reverence/awe, connectedness/transcendence, and purposefulness/meaning in my life and I thereby gain access to this triad. Inner peace is a result of experiencing this triad, and experience which also carries with it a deep sense of compassion for all beings.

If instead I dwell on unforgiveness, all sorts of complicated dynamics ensue, with impulses and actions toward revenge being a central part of the picture. However, before revenge actually enters the picture, a certain manipulative accounting ledger is established. In this ledger I assert a claim that something is owed to me, either by the party that injured me or by God for having failed to prevent it. That such a ledger is essentially manipulative in nature is reflected in the fact that balancing of the ledger is not possible: nothing God nor anyone else does will bring me peace, so the debt remains permanent and becomes an opportunity for me to claim a right to all kinds of compensation forever. It is like having a financial endowment large enough

to live very well from the interest for the rest of my life. Such a deal!

Ultimately, unforgiveness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If I cling to it, I truly will prevent myself from being able to experience the triad of peace. This does not mean that the instinctual longings for the three experiential states will go away; they will simply be frustrated and ultimately sublimated.

It is interesting to notice that forgiveness is increasingly being studied by a variety of mainstream scientists. One of the findings that such research seems to confirm fairly regularly is a positive association between forgiveness and health, both mental and physical. The desire for revenge and its psychological metabolism are complex. The sublimation of the longing for deeper meaning can emerge as the pseudo meaning one might feel by pursuing revenge. A quick look at the plot of many works of fiction, as well as many real-world international and interethnic tragedies, reveals how powerful and organizing a principle for a life the pursuit of revenge can be. The fact that the experience of purpose or meaning achieved is a result of a sublimation of a drive for a deeper experience of these states is not obvious to one in the middle of it.

The sublimation of the longing to experience interconnectedness and transcendence can also be directed toward revenge. Certainly a sense of being connected to the object of one's desired revenge is common, often to the extent that one thinks about little else. If the revenge is based on intergroup dynamics, then a very strong connection with one's comrades-in-arms in one's own reference group becomes particularly potent, so that a certain transcendence of one's individual identity can occur. Martyrs for any particular cause are a good example of achieving such a sense of transcendence based on the sublimated drive for a larger transcendence.

Another sublimated form of the longing for interconnectedness/transcendence occurs within the sexual domain. The unconscious longing for the larger experience of interconnectedness/transcendence, which actually can sometimes be experienced while making love, is sublimated and experienced instead as mere physical intensity in the sexual act.

Finally, awe and reverence, the sought-after response to the felt presence of the sacred, can find a partial expression when the drive for such experience is sublimated into a crusade for revenge. The history of humankind is littered with the mutilated bodies of various types of infidels who were killed, often in painful ways, by those who felt certain they were doing God's will. If one does not have access to a more direct experience of the sacred, then acting in vengeful ways toward those whom one has determined are God's enemies provides a partial satisfaction of the sublimated wish for more profound awe and reverence. Such activities also provide a partial satisfaction of the sublimated drive for purpose and meaning.

Whether sublimated or not, these three experiential states interact a great deal with one another. A sense of purposefulness/meaning contributes to the experience of interconnectedness, the seeking of experiences of awe/reverence can be experienced as part of one's purpose, and so on. More important

than trying to keep these three states distinct from one another is noticing that they all converge on the experience of inner peace and compassion. Perhaps it is this constellation for which we have the deepest instinctual longing and striving. We may not require a conscious wish in order to more successfully mourn, forgive, and release the desire for revenge. Perhaps such success comes as a byproduct of surrendering to our longing for inner peace and compassion. Knowing some of the steps on the path may also help, especially in the company of a psychotherapist who is walking his or her own path in this direction.

#### REFERENCES

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