

THE TRAUMA OF VICTIMIZATION AND THE ROLE OF FORGIVENESS IN MITIGATING SUCH FEELINGS

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Abstract:

In the present world, there are rampant acts of violence, hatred and crime which have left a long trail of victims. Victims of crimes and 'acts of God' are traumatized not just by physical injuries but much more by the psychological torture of self-blame and un-forgiveness. To initiate a process of healing, the offender must seek for forgiveness; the victim must forgive as a means of liberating the offender and himself, and the process must entail a structure of restitution, for to forgive without requiring the other to change is not only self-destructive, but ensures that a dysfunctional relationship remains. Hence, a liberating forgiveness, even though it is growing in the act of not holding things over people, must be executed in such a manner that it neither approves, nor excuses the offense as to give the offender the leverage to perpetrate his crime.

Keywords:

victimization • injury • crisis response • compassion • self forgiveness • other forgiveness • receiving forgiveness • forgiving heart

Introduction

The history of humankind is replete with incidences of victimization. In all ages, and at all times, people who live at the fringe of the society have always borne the brunt of the excesses of the mainstream. From the Greco-Roman imperialism of the ancient and medieval ages to the European expansionist programme of the modern times; from unadventurous and crippling communism of the East to the exploitative and crisis-prone capitalism of the West, the contemporary times are not impervious to victimization and the ordeal thereupon. If anything, the incidences of victimization have continued to grow in leaps and bounds by the turn of the days.

One does not need much effort to understand how long and how far humanity has laboured under the pains of ill-treatment. From individual exploitative businesses to outright cheating; from embezzlement of public funds by public office holders to corporate strangulation of an entire nation's economy; from armed robbery, burglary and car-jack to assassination of political opponents, judicial rascality and corruption; from all forms of enslavement (colonial or neo-colonial) to outright cleansing (ethnic or religious); from tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes, floods and other forms of natural disasters, individuals, families and groups have suffered tremendous undeserved hardships. Some, who are lucky, do survive; others who are not so lucky do not make it. The lucky ones, their families and friends, as well as the close associates of the unlucky ones go through trauma rebuilding their lives. Our focus in this paper thus, is to examine the distress victims of crime and disaster undergo, and to see how forgiveness can be a veritable instrument for healing and stability.

What is Victimization?

The term victimization is a noun derivative of its correlate – *victim* which refers to a person or thing killed or injured as a result of another's deed, accident or circumstances.¹ A victim is someone cheated or punished unfairly; it is a person or thing made to suffer by a cause which is stated or implied. And so, victimization is the act or process of meting unfair punishment to someone or thing. In criminal law, a victim of a crime is an identifiable person who has been harmed individually and directly by the perpetrator. It is someone most directly affected by the crime because

it was his body that was hurt or his property that was taken or damaged. This does not in any way derogate from the fact that whole groups could fall victim to a crime or that several individuals (perpetrators) or even the social structure of a society could make a section/class of people easy prey. What it means is that in spite of the population involved, every individual implicated as a victim of a crime is respected in his own rights and must be treated as one who has been unjustly harmed in a situation.

Victimization as a process may entail the harmful act of a superior over an inferior, a more powerful over the less powerful (real or imaginary), the crafty/mischievous over the trusty/pervious, or peers against each other. In this vain, its common manifestation is in bullying whether physical or psychological; or it may just be the consequence of moral or physical evil in the world. In whichever way, becoming a victim is often a harrowing experience for a great many people.

Condition of a Victim

Depending on individuals and on the enormity of a harmful event, experiencing victimization is different for many people. A victim may feel very uncomfortable (literally in a state of crisis) over an event, and may find it difficult to restore a sense of balance (homeostasis) in life. The severity of an event, coupled with his strong feelings about it may entail a lot of work over a long period of time to get back to the point where he can feel comfortable again in life. And when he does establish a new sense of balance, it may be different from the balance he had before: he may now begin to see the world very differently; may become less trusting, impervious, and anxious to do things he normally does, or visit places he usually visits.

In general, there are three categories of victims of crime: the primary victims; the secondary victims; and the related victims. *Primary victims* are persons who are injured as a direct result of an event or act of violence being committed; *secondary victims* could be parents who are injured as a result of an act of violence directed against their child, or witnesses who are injured as a direct result of witnessing an act of violence against someone. Finally, the *related victims* include all persons who are close family members, or dependants, of a primary victim who has died as a direct result of acts of violence committed.² The experiencing of

stressful events by any victim often leads to crisis which might be caused by an *acute* (one-time) event or *chronic* (repeated) events. A victim thus, is in a constant battle with stressors or injuries which could be categorized into: physical, emotional, financial and social.

A physical injury entails damage to the body of a victim. It may be in form of minor scratches, or moderate bruises / broken bones, or severe stabbing or gunshot wounds. Some physical injuries are visible while others are not. As it may not be possible to see a brain injury or injuries caused by a sexual assault, it is very risky to assume that someone is not injured simply because the injury is not visible. Such an assumption has often led to more injuries and death. Victims of crime may also experience other health-related problems like stomach aches, headaches, numbness at some parts of the body or pain/discomfort for some time even after the physical wounds had been healed.

For many, the emotional injuries of being the victim of a crime is more intense, long-lasting and much more difficult to manage than any other injuries. These injuries could range from insomnia, anxiety, depression and irritability, to low self-worth / low self-esteem, and even to other symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. Victims of crimes are often trapped in a psychological feeling of helplessness, and out of control over their feelings and the environment. If they realize the agent of the crime is in control of their lives and circumstances, their feelings of self-efficacy would plummet.

Furthermore, being a victim ultimately entails some financial loss. Even though not all injuries are quantifiable in terms of monetary value, virtually every form of injury has some financial implications directly or indirectly. This may include loss of money or possession, or damage to properties that have to be repaired or replaced; expenses for medical care, transportation, legal proceedings, etc, or the crime may lead to a total financial collapse of an entire family when the victim of homicide happens to be their bread-winner. In the event of structural crime/conflict however, an entire section of the population may be in grave danger of losing a battle for economic survival as a result of being disenfranchised from their normal means of livelihood. Thus, for many victims with limited resources, these financial damages are very traumatic.

On the other hand, the injuries a victim suffers as a result of

mistrust, mishandling, and lack of sympathy arising from people within the social milieu constitute the social injuries. Social injuries thus pertain to those caused by the society; it involves the emotional pains a victim undergoes when treated with insensitivity, or is not able to get help that he needs. Sometimes, victims of a crime like rape are blamed by friends or family members for their susceptibility, or are constrained to be silent because of the bad image its publicity could bring. At other times, a law enforcement officer, a prosecutor or a service provider may not believe the victim who reports a crime, may not help the victim or may not treat the victim with dignity, compassion and respect³. All these would make it more difficult for the victim to deal with immediate and long-time crisis reactions, and ultimately, would make his reactions worse.

The Immediate Crisis Response

In human nature, there is a state in which organisms would be in balance or equilibrium. At this state, living organisms would be in homeostasis, and their functionality in terms of attending to everyday needs would be optimal. Different organisms have different states of balance, and even in humans, every individual has their sense of balance often hinged on a certain understanding of how things are *supposed to be* in the world. What crimes or stressful events do is to move someone out of his state of balance or *comfort zone*, and so set up a lacuna that must be filled in for normal functionality. The steps which the individual takes instantaneously to get back in balance where he can feel comfortable again are called the immediate crisis response.

Crimes elicit crisis situation / disequilibrium in an individual and every individual has an inbuilt crisis-response mechanism which automatically triggers on a wide range of activities within the first few minutes, hours and days after the crime. Some of these reactions are physical, while others are emotional, even though they are not practically mutually exclusive.

The immediate physical or bodily reaction to crisis includes physical shock, disorientation, and numbness. Walter Cannon beautifully describes how the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) of an organism is aroused to attack or flee from perceived threat to physical or emotional security. This is termed the *fight-or-flight* phenomenon. When an organism

perceives a threat (is under crisis), the Sympathetic Nervous System is aroused. This arousal involves the following ingredients which prepare the body physiologically either to take a stand and fight off the attacker, or to flee from it:

- a. There is increase in heart rate and blood pressure.
- b. The neck and shoulder muscles will tense.
- c. The person will breathe faster, sweat more, and find it difficult to concentrate.
- d. The five external experiences of seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting and touching will become more acute.
- e. Head will ache, stomach will churn, and the person may throw up, have a bowel movement or urinate.
- f. Hands and feet get cold, because blood is directed away from the extremities to the large muscles in order to prepare for fighting or fleeing.⁴

Now, if the crisis diminishes, the body functions return to normal, allowing the body to focus on healing and growth once more. But if the crisis persists, the arousal of the Sympathetic Nervous System is never *turned off*, the immune system would be compromised, and the person would be vulnerable than usual to immune system-related infections and allergies.

Conversely, the immediate emotional or psychological reaction to crisis is that of disbelief, and/or denial. Some victims may assume the crime happened in a dream they need to wake up from urgently; others may live in the denial that the crime ever happened, or in disbelief that they are victims of such a crime. Berglas' article "Why Did This Happen to Me"⁵ epitomizes the victim's emotional reaction to crisis. This experience of denial/disbelief may last for a few moments, or it may go on for months and years. However it lasts, its significance is to act as a shock-absorber to the immediate devastating effect of being plunged impetuously into crisis situation. Even though the victim might appear to be living in *fool's paradise*, such a denial could be palliative and sometimes needful before proper care is administered.

Long-Term Crisis Response

The long-term response of victims to crisis is much more psy-

chological than physical. Even though some stressors that impinge on physical health may elicit long-term physical reactions especially when the damage (like bodily injury) takes a long time to heal (i.e. if it is repairable), the emotional effects and reactions often last longer and sometimes stay with the victim for life. Some of these reactions may include:

- a. Difficulty in concentration.
- b. Getting angry over trivial issues, and
- c. Dwelling on unpleasant thoughts, however much one tries to avoid them.

These responses persist until the victim is able to reconstruct a new balance after a crime. To attain a new balance is often an arduous task full of ups and downs, which for many victims, can take a very long time. But with sheer determination and expert help of caregivers, victims would eventually establish a new balance different from their old ones; their perception of people and things around them would never be the same; and every subsequent injury has the tendency to renew the emotional hurt of the previous one.

The Nature of Forgiveness

Until recently, the components of the nature of forgiveness were almost entirely left at the discretion of various faith communities and religious groups. As expected, the subsequent philosophical and/or psychological understandings evolving thereof have deep religious undertone. Most religions of the world have standardized their teaching regarding forgiveness, albeit their practice or processes of administration do vary across times. While some religious doctrines emphasize on the need for human beings to seek for divine forgiveness in times of transgression, others place more emphasis on the need for humans to forgive each other their offenses; and for others too, both divine and human forgiveness are part of the continuum that brings restoration and wellbeing. Hence, forgiveness is a complex religio-psychological phenomenon encompassing divine and human actions.

Perhaps, this complexity explains why it is difficult to find a consensus psychological definition of forgiveness in research literature. In general, most creative writings are apt to describe rather than define the concept, and in this sense, they see forgiveness as a process with vary-

ing models. As a process, forgiveness is understood as the method of concluding resentment, indignation or anger as a result of a perceived offense, difference or mistake, or ceasing to demand punishment or restitution.⁶ According to Webster's New World, it means "to pardon; to give up resentment of; to cease to feel resentment against".⁷ For the Oxford English Dictionary, it is 'to grant free pardon and to give up all claim on account of an offense or debt'. The words – "to give up resentment of"; "to grant free pardon", etc, may be relatively easy to come by, but it is the actual actions of 'granting free pardon', or 'giving up resentment' that is very difficult for most people.

A critical appraisal reduces Contemporary Models of Forgiveness into two broad categories, namely: the *psychological models* which are generally individualistic in nature and are concerned with the psychological wellbeing of the victims, and the *theological models* which, underline the significance of interpersonal forgiveness as a Christian witness in the imitation of God's forgiveness. Both models could operate at the individual as well as the communal platforms. While the individual platform could function with or without a third-party intervention, the communal is often nurtured and mediated through a reconciliation committee (as in the Truth and Reconciliation Committee headed by Desmond Tutu of South Africa), or through the community of faith (as is practised by many local Christian communities).

Forgiveness may be considered simply in terms of the person who forgives including forgiving oneself (self-forgiveness), and forgiving others (other forgiveness) or in terms of the person forgiven (as in receiving forgiveness) which will certainly chart the course of relationship between the forgiver and the person forgiven. In some situations, forgiveness may be granted without the offender offering any form of apology or restitution. But in most cases, to ask for forgiveness often serves as a psychological boost to the victim struggling to come to terms with injuries and the need to forgive.

Self Forgiveness

Forgiveness begins with forgiving oneself. Sometimes, it is possible to hear a victim exclaim: 'I could never forgive myself'. This so often happens when a victim begins to acknowledge his part/role in a crime,

seeing himself powerless in the face of the event, blaming himself for not knowing better, or for his lack of awareness, or for his wish to have handled the situation differently. This posture of self-blame causes eternal heartbreak, and consequently inflames constantly the psychological trauma of victimization. To begin the process of healing, one must first of all, forgive oneself for one's inadequacies, acknowledging human limitations and the fact that one cannot possibly pre-empt every criminal scheme of the aggressors. An understanding that in practical living, the world is populated with some people with criminal intent, who could unleash terror without provocation, could be therapeutic to those labouring under self-blame / self-pity.

At the theological realm, the statement: 'I could never forgive myself' could be the posture of a sinner who feels that he does not deserve forgiveness. It is as if to say, 'my sin is so bad that even God cannot forgive me, and so I cannot forgive myself'. Again, this inability to forgive oneself creates un-openness in the consideration of God's truth on the matter: when we refuse to forgive ourselves, we can never be able to seek for God's / neighbour's forgiveness. When we do wrong, we undoubtedly deserve the worst. But if our saviour died in our stead to help us, then we have no right to call ourselves to judgement. The best way to deal with deep wounds about our failures is to find in God's forgiveness the power to forgive ourselves, make due apologies and restitution, and commit ourselves to living rightly. God is bigger than all our problems. If we learn to trust more on him, and less on our powers, in our troubles and mistakes in life, we shall find some peace which arises not from judging ourselves too harshly, but from humble acknowledgment of our limitations.

Other Forgiveness

On the other hand, one of the most difficult things to do in life is to forgive someone else (other forgiveness), especially an unjust aggressor. The human mind is structured to function in balanced pathways agreeable to some basic rights and responsibilities derivable from human nature. When any of these rights is violated whether by an individual or group of individuals (as in the bombing of the finish line at Boston marathon), or simply by the social structure of a society, the balance in human functioning would be disrupted. The immediate response would be to engage in

activities that can restore balance, chief amongst which is by bringing the perpetrator(s) to justice. If we take forgiveness in its simplistic meaning as 'to pardon' or 'cease to demand punishment / restitution', it may imply we do not hold unjust aggressors, like the bombers at Boston marathon, accountable. It may mean setting someone that disrupted our balance in nature free, which in itself can be construed as lending tacit approval to violence. This obviously is why forgiveness is often a difficult task.

But when we view forgiveness from the perspective outlined by Kendall, we shall see that forgiveness is neither approval nor excuse of what aggressors did; it does not justify what they did or refuse to take the wrong seriously; forgiveness is not a show of pretence that the victim is not hurt, or a pardon of what the aggressors did (in terms of releasing them from consequences); it neither entails a reconciliation with them (as they may be unwilling or unsafe), nor a denial to blind ourselves to what happened, nor to forget what happened (as this may be practically impossible).⁸ Instead, 'other forgiveness' is growing in the act of not holding things over people – of yielding one's right to hurt (or punish) the other in return for what they did to us. It entails the ability to work past your hurt and find the compassion in your heart to let go of the pain someone else has caused so as not to harbour hard feelings toward the wrongdoer.⁹

Being a victim in itself, is a source of great distress, but to underestimate the significance of forgiving those who cause us pain will be running a high risk of added psychological trauma. Frequently, people hold on to their hurt, anger, disappointment, and/or mistrust of others long after they have been hurt, betrayed or offended. These feelings will often meddle with interactions, not just with the victim, but with 'innocent' people who happen to come in contact with the victim as well. This means that if you were the injured party and the event that hurt you is over, you are still carrying the scars and the burdens of the injury. In other words, you continue to suffer, and as such, you are not free long after the injury.¹⁰

Harbouring resentment, hurt and anger often can have adverse mental, physical and spiritual implications. Unresolved resentments prolong the long-term psychological crisis response of victims: the mind is constantly distracted by negative feelings and emotions, and it becomes increasingly difficult for the individual to concentrate and perform daily tasks. There is also the danger that physical health may suffer, as the vic-

tim would be more susceptible to stress related ailments like headaches, fatigue, lethargy, high blood pressure, heart attack and various other immune system-related diseases as a result of prolonged activation of the Sympathetic Nervous System. Finally, anyone who finds it difficult to forgive hurts will likely become stagnant spiritually, because he will not be able to ascend the realm of purity with the debilitating baggage of anger and resentment.

Thus, as long as one is unable to forgive, one holds oneself and the aggressor in bondage. One cannot be completely happy or free until one can let go of hurt and anger otherwise it will continue to fester and consume the individual like a disease. The only way, it would seem, to receive healing and growth at all levels is to forgive those who have wronged us. All too often we want to know that whoever caused us pain feels sorry for what they did; we want them to acknowledge that their wrongdoing has hurt us before we can forgive. It is, of course, therapeutic when an offender acknowledges his wrong-doing, but to wait for the offender to apologise before forgiving, would mean to mortgage our wellbeing and happiness on another's whims. Even when the offender does apologise, the victim still has to deal with the pain that was inflicted. Hence, letting go of this pain whether the aggressor shows remorse or not is where true forgiveness resides.

As a process, forgiveness is not automatic, especially when the hurt is deep enough. It can be a gradual process in which the victim has to work through the pains to get to the point where forgiveness is possible. Victims who want to achieve this must be patient with their emotional highs and lows, honestly acknowledging and accepting their feelings rather than denying them. For those who believe in God, prayer and contemplation can help them reach that goal. Forgiveness is not about forgetting. Letting go means that you can remember the offense, but it no longer stirs great emotion within you; it is about moving forward in your life without being burdened by your past; it is about learning and growing.¹¹ Forgiving others heals your spirit and sets your mind and heart free. It is, as Zagata noted, a necessary component to living a healthy life.

Receiving Forgiveness

It is much easier to receive than to gift forgiveness. For harmo-

nious living and a chance to rebuild relationships, one must receive forgiveness with proper attitude and dispositions. In practical terms, asking for forgiveness or simply offering some form of apology, or acknowledgment of guilt, or being made to render restitution often softens the hearts of grieving victims, and in consequence predispose them for forgiveness. However, the mere rendering of apology in itself does not remove the pains inflicted by the injury, and as such does not guarantee forgiveness. Victims have a choice to let go or not. And even when they decide to let go, there is no guarantee that normal relationships (if it ever existed) would resume since injuries often lead victims to a new state of balance in life. Asking for forgiveness therefore, lives the offender in an *obediencial* capacity whereby the victim more or less sets the standard of relationship.

Receiving forgiveness may be fraught with problems similar to those attendant to people at the fringe of the society, such as dishonour and vulnerability. Needless to say that in anger, victims often revile offenders spitting back at them how despicable and vile their personalities are, and how cruel and hurtful their actions have been. At other times, they may simply be laid to receive whatever dehumanizing treatment the victims might deem fit. But in all, there is a chance, that after the pent-up anger and resentment are punctured through victim's recriminations, grieving hearts will soften and the possibilities of granting and receiving forgiveness are set under way. Offenders seeking for forgiveness therefore, should in humble acceptance of whatever brings restorative justice, seek to assuage victim's psychological wounds by not engaging them in verbal fisticuffs. Even though dehumanizing treatments are unacceptable civil behaviour, keeping some measure of calmness in the face of 'provocations' when asking for forgiveness, is always helpful.

Barriers to People's Ability to Forgive Transgressions

Experience has shown that just as nature and nurture come into play in determining the individual's personality, so do they play key roles in shaping his behaviour. Thus, an individual's predisposition for forgiveness must be found within his gene composition and/or his social environment. Some researches that focused on what kind of person is more likely to be forgiving show that people who are generally angry, hostile and/or neurotic are less likely to forgive even after a long time had passed.¹² In

their findings, Maltby and his group discovered that these people were more likely to still avoid their transgressors and want to enact revenge upon them two and a half years after the transgression. Again people who are self-righteous, perfectionists and those who lack a sense of self-worth also find it difficult to forgive.

Anger is an emotion related to one's psychological interpretation of having been offended, wronged, or denied and a tendency to react through retaliation. Its physical manifestations might include a raised heart rate, blood pressure, and levels of adrenaline and noradrenaline.¹³ As these are effects of the activation of the Sympathetic Nervous System, it is believed that anger is part of the fight or flight brain response to the perceived threat of harm.¹⁴ For as long as the threat is perceived to exist, so would the response (anger) persist, and no one under such a persistent activation could function *normally*, let alone to think of forgiveness. Rather, the situation often leads to hostility which is a form of emotionally-charged angry behaviour.

As a personality trait, neuroticism is characterized by anxiety, moodiness, worry, envy and jealousy (Thompson, 2008).¹⁵ People who score high in neuroticism (neurotics) are more likely than the average to experience such feelings as anxiety, anger, envy, guilt and depressed mood; they respond more poorly to environmental stress, and are more likely to interpret ordinary situations as threatening, and minor frustrations as hopelessly difficult.¹⁶ Being constantly haunted by their own ghosts and eternally bedevilled by the looming presence of an imaginary aggressor, neurotics are in no physical or psychological mood to think of forgiveness.

Another barrier to responding to the need for forgiveness is the self-righteous / perfectionist attitude. As fallible beings, we humans at one time or the other may have done things that were hurtful to others, not out of maliciousness, but as a result of carelessness or accident. When you realize that you have done something to hurt someone, do you feel ashamed, remorseful, or do you feel angry, resentful and judge the other as being too sensitive and over reacting? A self-righteous / perfectionist would see the victim as too sensitive and vulnerable and as such deserves no apologies. But when he does show some sympathy, it is often to minimize his own bad feelings rather than to minimize the pains of the victim. Self-righteousness / perfectionism therefore, puts the individual in

an arrogant pedestal that views seeking for forgiveness as condescending, while ironically seeing an offense as a calculated aggression that needs to be revenged.

Furthermore, a lack of a sense of self-worth (self-efficacy) or a negative sense of worth makes a person attribute his actions to luck, task difficulty, and surrounding environment (external locus of control) rather than to his ability or personal efforts. Such a person floats with the current, and lacks every incentive to impart on the environment since everything seems to be predestined. He easily slips into depression and sucks about his worthlessness. Such a sense of unworthiness brings with it certain un-openness to receiving forgiveness and to new vistas that could usher in a fresh lease of life; it creates a sense of self-rejection. Importantly, we should not forget that it is more difficult to forgive others if we cannot forgive ourselves. This is why those who lack self-worth, those who find it difficult to accept responsibilities in their failures and seek for help, find it harder than normal to forgive.

Psychological State of a Forgiving Heart

By forgiving a person, we are not saying that the individual's action is good, or that we refuse to take the wrong seriously, or that we excuse what he did, or that no harm came. We are merely saying that we are not going to hold it personally against him; that we relieve him of that debt. And such a release brings peace of mind healthy growth of the body.

As we noted earlier, every injury imparts adversely both on the body and the mind. This is why crises situations are often accompanied by bodily and psychological/emotional response of the victims. The bodily reactions could be acute or chronic depending on the severity of the injury. But in general, their effects are relatively shorter than the psychological reactions. When the bodily injury heals and the individual has not yet forgiven the offender, the psychological hurt will always resurface when he remembers the offense. Letting go means that you can remember the offense, but it no longer stirs great emotions within you. It is the difference between relating a story and reliving a story. 'As long as you relive the story, your entire system still carries the emotional burdens of the event, and this will wreak havoc upon your overall emotional, mental and physical well-being'.¹⁷ But when you forgive, the weight of the burden is

removed from your heart, there is mental and emotional happiness, and the incident is now related as an occasion for learning and growth.

As long as you are unable to forgive, you hold yourself and the person who wronged you in bondage. Your mind will constantly be distracted by negative feelings and emotions, and your work, relationships, and physical health will suffer. You cannot be completely happy or free until you can let go of your hurt and anger. Recent researches have corroborated these positions. Sarinopoulos' study at the University of Wisconsin found that the more forgiving people were, the less they suffered from a wide range of illnesses; but the less forgiving they were, the greater the number of health problems reported.¹⁸ In their study, Oyen and his colleagues while looking at how forgiveness improves physical health, discovered that when people think about forgiving an offender, it leads to improved functioning in their cardiovascular and nervous systems.¹⁹ In three separate studies, Dr. Luskin found that people who were taught how to forgive became less angry, felt less hurt, were more optimistic, became more forgiving in a variety of situations, became more compassionate and self-confident, had a reduction in experience of stress, and an increase in vitality.²⁰ A forgiving heart therefore, is a peaceful chamber virile for growth and happiness.

Conclusion

Victimization is a recurrent decimal in our world today. From the high streets to the lowest part of the globe; from secular to religious organizations, people are exploited, marginalized and victimized by individuals, groups, social structures and even natural disasters. The harrowing experience of being made a victim has sometimes led to fatalities or permanent disabilities. People's hopes have been shattered, expectations quashed, and dreams truncated either by the wilful acts of their fellow human beings, or by accidents. Some are living corpses because their psyche – the centre of human gravity and stability, has been broken. Many in our world today are reeling under the trauma of victimization.

Even though some societies have been able to evolve a judicious system of restorative justice, what restitution, apology, or enactment of revenge can do at best, is to mitigate the pains of the crime by psychologically reassuring victims of possessing some power of control. But they do

not remove the pains victims undergo. The burden of victimization can only be meaningfully lifted through a process of forgiveness: forgiveness of self perhaps, for not acting otherwise and so got trapped in a mess; forgiveness of the other who wilfully or inadvertently hurts us; and asking for forgiveness when we do offend others as a means of soothing their pains and calming their nerves. Forgiveness heals the spirit and sets one's mind and heart free. It is a necessary ingredient to living a healthy life.

Unfortunately, the precept of forgiveness embedded in the teachings of the great religions of the world has sometimes been misconstrued as a license for impunity. In their analyses, Kramer and Alstad x-rayed how unconditional love and the associated concept of forgiveness are used as foundations for authoritarian control. Concluding from their survey of a number of religions in the world, they noted that the imperative of forgiveness is often used by leaders to perpetrate cycles of on-going abuse. For them, to forgive without requiring the other to change is not only self-destructive, but ensures a dysfunctional relationship will remain as it is, by continually rewarding mistreatment.²¹ Thus, total forgiveness, even though it is growing in the act of not holding things over people, must be executed, as Kendall would say, in such a manner that it neither approves, nor excuses the offense as to give the offender the leverage to perpetrate his crime.

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