

Moving Beyond "I'm Sorry": Forgiveness and Recovering from Betrayal

Many years ago someone told me that the Chinese character for crisis is composed of the characters representing danger and opportunity. I don't know if this is actually the case, but I do know that it expresses a truth. Crisis offers the opportunity to change course, to come to consciousness, to grow from the shattering of illusion. It also presents the danger of destruction or even death. It is hard to believe, in the pain suffered after a betrayal, that anything good can come of it. But even the most painful betrayal brings the possibility for growth and positive change as well as the dangers we are all so familiar with. The dangers -- revenge, denial, cynicism, self-betrayal -- are all possible outcomes of a betrayal but so is the opportunity which lies in forgiveness

To forgive is to give future to a relationship, to be willing to continue in relationship with the betrayer. But before this can happen, if it can happen at all, we must first feel the betrayal deeply and fully, allowing in all the pain and hurt and humiliation. Often we desire to preserve the relationship, avoid the pain, and jump quickly to a hasty demand for apology and then to offer forgiveness. Doing this saves both parties from the searing pain of grappling deeply with what happened and what it means. The process of grappling with betrayal can become quite ugly and nasty and painful, something many couples seek to avoid. It is far easier to put a band-aid over the wound and preserve the safety we find in the relationship. The path to honest forgiveness is far more complex.

Forgiveness cannot be willed. It does not come without both parties, the betrayer and the betrayed, engaging in the process. Whatever the relationship was before -- friends, siblings, partners, spouses -- it now becomes that of betrayer to betrayed, an uneasy, uncomfortable and unstable state. Feeling the betrayal deeply, speaking of it and then being confronted with denial or rationalization from your betrayer continues the betrayal. In fact, it becomes fiercer for the lack of acknowledgment of what has happened.

If the betrayer will not do this work with you, then you must do it alone in order to be able to move on. We do not have a term for this kind of one-sided forgiveness. But if it does not occur, and you carry the burden of the remembered and unresolved betrayal with you, you remain in relationship with your betrayer, even if you never see or speak to him or her again. You remain bound in the betrayal and that makes you less than fully free to form a new relationship. So even if the relationship that was is dead, you must do this work in order to be fully free and open to another.

What does it mean to fully acknowledge a betrayal? Think of it as *re-mem-bering*, not just mentally, but holding in memory the depth and breadth of the experience for both parties.

Deep forgiveness requires that the betrayer carry his or her own sin. Which means feeling how deeply we have hurt the one we care about and also feeling our own shame and sorrow at having done what we did. And doing so without excuses. Then, after that, forgiveness requires atonement. The gift of flowers, a piece of jewelry, a new car – a material gift simply will not do the job. Atonement requires carrying internally the full awareness of what we have done and bearing the guilt and suffering that comes with recognition of the weight of the betrayal. And it requires acknowledging to the other the shame and sorrow for what has happened.

When your betrayer engages in atonement, there is new contact between you. It falls to you to decide if you are willing to continue in the relationship or if it is better ended. If the decision is to continue, both of you know that you are in a new relationship with each other, without any fantasy you had that it gave you protection from the pain of abandonment or suffering. If you decide to end, after doing this work, you are each able to move forward into new relationships without the burden of unresolved pain. If you do this work for and by yourself, you will be able to move on, no longer bound in pain to what was/