

Forgiving Parents: Breaking the Chain of Anger, Resentment and Pain

By Tian Dayton PhD, TEP

Many of us who grew up with alcoholic parents struggled through childhood and adolescence trying to paste together some sense of “normal” while daily warding off a variety of assaults on our self esteem, peace of mind and sense of comfort and safety. Many of us also found ourselves moving into adult roles carrying huge burdens from the past that we a) don’t know exactly what to do with and b) get us into trouble in our current relationships and/or work lives. And to make matters even more challenging, the parents who hurt us may have improved through recovery, therapy or have just grown somehow nicer as their lives became less stressed and more manageable. We struggle with issues of forgiveness, we want to let go of a past that’s dogging our trail and undermining our lives. Or, our parent may have come to their senses and actually done a ninth step asking for our forgiveness and we find ourselves locked in an even deeper struggle. Do we forgive these people who broke our hearts, who let us down in thousands of tiny and big ways that added up to our life or do we risk feeling like bad children all over again and tell them we simply can’t. Because forgiveness isn’t an act of will. It’s a *process* not an *event*.

Growing up with an addicted parent is an experience that shapes who we become as we develop into adulthood. Along with our parents proclivity for tennis, love of cooking and blue eyes or dark hair we take their other qualities as well, both on a genetic level and what we internalize in the atmosphere of the family. Research today reveals that it’s not nature vs nurture but nature *and* nurture that shapes our being. Each tiny interaction, for example, between a parent and child, alters the wiring of the growing child, laying down neural pathways that become hardwiring. This hardwiring evolves into a neural map followed by the adolescent or the adult as they enter their own life and cultivate their own relationships. Rather than a static picture of development this paints a picture of a dynamic process that is constantly building upon itself. This also means that those of us who grew up in addicted, chaotic and abusive homes (because it’s rare that they don’t all go hand-in-hand) are wired for this type of relating. We may become hypervigilant, constantly scanning the environment for signs of danger, black and white in our thinking, feeling and behavior as a result from alternating patterns between shutting down and intense feeling that are part of the response to trauma and mistrustful in our relationships. We also may be unusually inventive, developing qualities such as doggedness, humor, creativity and determination in order to cope and thrive in painful and confusing circumstances. These are likely the qualities we take with us into adulthood, they follow us into our adult relationships, the workplace and our own parenting. Pretending they aren’t there is like pretending we have a different color hair than the color we have. Denying their presence within us only means that we pass our pain onto yet another generation, even if we don’t drink or drug the emotional and psychological patterns persist unless we get the help we need to rewire ourselves for new kinds of behaviors. Neural wiring doesn’t necessarily change by reading an article or through insight. Altering deep emotional patterns is slow and painstaking work. Limbic bonds imprint themselves onto our emotional systems. The limbic system “sets the mind’s emotional tone, filters external events through internal states (creates emotional coloring), tags events as internally important, stores highly charged emotional memories, modulates motivation, controls appetite and sleep cycles, promotes bonding and directly processes the sense of smell and modulates libido,” (Amen

199___). Our neural networks are not easily altered, “early emotional experiences knit long-lasting patterns into the very fabric of the brain’s neural networks,” (Lewis20___) “changing that matrix calls for a different kind of medicine all together.” Our emotional life is physical, it imprints itself on our bodies. When we have problems in our deep limbic system they can manifest in “moodiness, irritability, clinical depression, increased negative thinking, negative perceptions of events, decreased motivation, floods of negative emotion, appetite and sleep problems, decreased or increased sexual responsiveness or social isolation,”(Amen199___). Our neural system carries with it our emotional sense memories from childhood. Familiar smells, sounds or places can send a cascade of memories flooding through us that either wrap us up in their warmth, or challenge us to maintain our composure. Along with the memories, comes the cognitive sense we made of what happened at the time. When the memories are wonderful, this is a great boon in life, our child selves color our current experience with innocence and gaiety. When the memories are painful, they can color our current experience in darker hues. For children of addiction this flood of memories can make us want to lash out at our own spouses and children, give up on relationships all together or find our own substance or behavior to medicate our pain.

Psychotherapy, treatment and twelve step work are some ways of repatterning our limbic systems, along with other healing relationships of all kinds. Because “Describing good relatedness to someone, no matter how precisely or how often, does not *inscribe* it into the neural networks that inspire love or other feelings,” (Lewis 20___). “The limbic system is associated with our emotions and the neocortex is associated with critical thinking. Both are operative in processing emotions.” While the neocortex can collect facts quickly, the limbic brain does not. Physical mechanisms are what produce our experience of the world and we need new sets of physical impressions to change or alter those impressions. Healing relationships have the effect, over time, of reregulating our limbic systems. Slowly we lay down new neural wiring and that new wiring manifests in our lives spontaneously, we have a different response to the same life situation because we’re different inside. The program wisdom that says just get your “soles” into the room (the bottoms of your feet) and the rest of you will eventually follow is typical of the experience, strength and hope so beautifully laced through Twelve Step programs. It is very difficult and perhaps impossible to rewire our neural systems without logging the necessary hours in program, group or individual therapy as well as other healing relationships such as a good marriage, raising our own children and doing it differently or healing or spiritual communities. It takes the time it takes; no short cuts. But for those of us who have given it this time there are great rewards, a design for living, good orderly direction, a spiritual path that is relatively free of dogma and well grounded in life and the incredible joy of discovering that relationships can be a consistent and abiding source of love and support. We may also develop an ability to forgive others for being sick, or human, or overwhelmed and taking a bad way out. And, in addition, to forgive ourselves. It is the rare ACOA who does not also blame themselves in secret corners of our hearts. “Maybe if I had been somehow better, cuter, smarter, nicer, meaner, spoken up or kept my silence, maybe if I’d done something differently things could have been different. And I wouldn’t still be carrying such pain and anger and even hate ...and such unrequited love. I wouldn’t hurt so much.”

Working through these emotions toward resolution allows us some healthy emotional distance from what hurt us, it gets worked through and put back into memory storage in a more resolved

way, a way that creates less inner conflict. Because distance through anger is really no distance at all. It's a constant, pain-filled connection. Considering forgiveness motivates us to honestly confront and work through the anger, resentment and hurt we're carrying that block our ability to forgive. This is its great benefit, not only the freedom of forgiveness but the freedom that comes when we process our pain and get through it so that we don't live in it all the time or pass it along to yet another unsuspecting generation. The grudges that have been nursed from childhood may have been all we had to hold onto that felt like our own. And even when we've peeled back the layers of the onion and worked through the pain, hate, grief and loss, there may still be that wish of the child that the parent we longed for would somehow emerge through the ether and grant us absolution by finally seeing us in the way we needed to be seen, by holding us in the way we yearned to be held. This wish, too, needs to be understood, then laid to rest. We may come to understand that even if that perfect parent fought her or his way back through time, sailed somehow on angel wings toward us, it would still not be enough. Getting what we think we wanted may feel good for a moment, but it is a wish that belongs to another place and time. Getting now what we didn't get then would feel, over time, infantilizing and invasive. We have fought our way through life without what we felt this desperate need for, compensated for its absence in a thousand ways that are now a part of who we are, and getting it now would require that we somehow put all that aside. It could feel that the parent's narcissism has finally won, that again we're doing it for them, not us. In this way, taking forgiveness into our own hands leaves us with our dignity. We're not postponing living and loving again until such time when our parents finally take responsibility for the hurt they've caused us and turn around and see us. We're seeing ourselves. The best defense is a good offense. We're accepting responsibility for our own state of wholeness, which, at the end of the day, any sage will tell you is the quickest way to enlightenment.

This is the spiritual paradox wherein a kind of personal transformation takes place. We learn that, in giving up our attachment to something, we experience a kind of freedom, and our souls grow larger and stronger as we gain another piece of wisdom. So we are forgiving not to be the good guy or to let someone off the hook. We're forgiving to free ourselves, to lay down a burden, to get over the fear of rigorous self honesty as we confront the painful emotions that block our forgiveness. Then forgiveness becomes simply a by-product of this process in which we come to value our own peace of mind more than holding a grudge.

The Legacy of Significant Trauma

The reason that triggered pain is so confusing to decode and deal with is that our emotional responses to trauma are recorded primarily by the parts of the brain that were developed early in our evolution, often referred to as the "reptilian" or "old" brain. The cortex, which is where we do much of our critical thinking and meaning making, where we *think* about what we're *feeling* and make sense of it, was an evolutionary afterthought. Consequently, when we were deeply hurt, say as children, we may have been too scared or frozen to process what was happening around us. The cortex did not get a chance to modulate the memory, reflect upon, think about, quantify and categorize particular painful events, so that they could be worked through and integrated along with a rational read on the situation. We may have been left to make sense of it our own with only the powers of reason and the emotional maturity and capability for insight available to us at the time. The adults in the situation may have been too preoccupied with their

own problems to take time out to help us understand what was happening around us. As a result, when these fragments of unprocessed memory get *triggered* in the present they have no context, they're all out of order and can get mindlessly blasted onto the surface of our current lives. We feel like we felt when the original events happened: defenseless and vulnerable, with whoever hurt us having all the power. All this intense feeling that seems to relate only to the current situation but, in truth, has many of its origins in the past, gets interpreted as if it belongs exclusively to the present, and we may try to make sense of an adult situation through our child mind.

*All of us have these little people inside. It helps if we're on speaking terms with that part of us, so that when the child self gets scared and wants to hide or hit or cry or yell, our adult self recognizes what's going on and extends a secure hand to their small fingers. This is how we grow and this is also how we can keep the innocence, talent, spontaneity and creativity that is also part of this side of us, and still function as reasonably healthy adults. You notice I say *reasonably*. I think psychology has unwittingly put forward some unattainable idea of the "model" person that is about as far flung from the actual norm as a size four is for the average American woman. It just isn't what's out there, and if we hold ourselves to that standard we'll only feel bad. We're all only human, why should we kill ourselves trying to be perfect?*

Think of trauma in evolutionary terms. Early woman had a lot to worry about. So nature, in its infinite wisdom, built a protective apparatus into her. When she sensed that she was in danger, she went into the protective modes that nature encoded into her. Extreme states of fear cause the body to spurt chemicals like epinephrine and norepinephrine, both of which are associated with standing and fighting or fleeing for safety, commonly known as the fight-or-flight response. In women, however, more recent research reveals that oxytocin is also released. According to a recent UCLA study by Drs. Klein and Taylor, women even "respond to stress with a cascade of brain chemicals that cause us to make and maintain friendships with other women." In other words, our survival mode is connect and nurture, not only fight or flight. This "touch" chemical encourages women to bond with other women, and to take care of children and get them to safety.

Integrating Love and Hate

Good and bad are both a part of life, and so are love and hate. We need to accept both so that we can integrate them. It is possible to have feelings of both love and hate toward our parents, our spouses . . . those whom we are closest to. Great love gives rise to great hate. Think about it. When we love someone deeply we're vulnerable: "I have spread my dreams beneath your feet," said W. B. Yeats, "tread softly, because you tread on my dreams." Our hearts are open when we love; in fact, we can't really love through a closed heart, we only go through the motions of love or play out a fantasy of what we think it should look like. Cultivating forgiveness as part of our relationship skill set can allow us to keep our hearts open in our close relationships.

But in order to do this, we have to live with knowing how hurt and angry we are if we feel we have been wronged. We have to hold our own broken heart in our own hands. We have to feel the power of our conflicting feelings so that we can integrate them along with insight and new meaning. We have to accept and integrate these powerful, conflicting emotions with some of the

power gone out of them, so that they don't create unconscious conflicts that get played out in our lives. Most of us don't like to acknowledge the depth and intensity of these contradictory feelings. That's why we have complicated defense systems like denial, minimization, repression, idealization and dissociation, to name a few. They keep us from knowing how hurt we really are and how crazy we feel when we can't make sense of a situation. These defenses also allow us to stay connected in our meaningful relationships. When we're deeply hurt, our instinct is to run, to freeze up or to retaliate. Rare is the person who stands in his or her own tears and converts his or her hurt feelings into words on the spot. And when the hurt is from childhood, we can't really run—where would we go? If our parents are perpetrating the hurt, as with abuse, we're stuck with them so our emotions have to do some fancy footwork to figure out a way to keep breathing. We may cajole, please, try to be perfect, forgive before we are ready then stuff the resentment, or give up, or we may become the acting-out child whose reenacted pain becomes a personality style that we take into our world. In fact, all these methods of coping become personality styles that we take into our relationships, our schools, our work lives and every other place we go.

Jean Houston further confirms that as women perform these activities, they release more oxytocin, which strengthens them, as well as the *connect-and-nurture* response, and serves to buffer the stress, or the fight-or-flight response (in men, testosterone undercuts the oxytocin). These responses were encoded into the brain of early women and were meant to keep us all alive. So when threatened by a large bear, the cavewoman who bonded with other females and got the children to safety was selected by evolution to be our foremother. Nature favored her over the one who didn't (for obvious reasons).

Traumas in today's world are met with more or less the same equipment. But, as we've discussed, at the time that nature devised these defensive strategies the brain had not yet evolved enough to have a fully developed cortex. The frontal cortex is where we do our critical thinking and long-range planning. Fight, flight or freeze, along with what I'm calling *connect-and-nurture*, are a part of the old brain, whereas critical thinking is part of the more recently evolved brain, the cortex. This means that, even today, when we're scared stiff, struck dumb or in a rage, we're in our old brain. We're reacting in order to stay safe. We're not using deductive reasoning or reflective thinking (cortex functions) to sort out a situation. We're frozen, fleeing, fighting or running around nurturing like crazy. These feelings that we experience while being traumatized don't get thought about and put into context. Instead we hide them, deny them, repress them or split them off, out of consciousness. Then, later in life when they get triggered and reemerge, they seem impervious to reason. They splatter themselves on the scenes of the present, and they splatter in their original form because, most likely, they were never processed with the skills of reasoning; they didn't get thought about and categorized in a reasonable manner.
