

Remember – and then Forgive!

“Forgive and forget!” It’s a common saying, assumed wisdom. But is it really possible, or even wise?

Some deeds are so monstrous, how can one forget them, let alone forgive them? Might it even be foolish and dangerous to forget certain cruelties, abuses, injustices, and misdeeds?

Some weeks ago I was privileged to hear Holocaust survivor Eva Kor speak about forgiveness. Ms. Kor and her twin sister were subjects of experimentation by Dr. Josef Mengele at Auschwitz. They both survived, but the rest of their family members died in the concentration camp. Yet she insists upon the power of forgiveness.

It is clear, however, that she has not trivialized the act of forgiveness. To forgive is not to say that whatever was done didn’t matter, or amounted to nothing. Quite the contrary. To forgive is an extraordinarily momentous act. Kor’s counsel is not to *forgive and forget*, but (as I observed and she agreed), to *remember and forgive* – to remember the act or acts of cruelty, the offense, the abuse, the violation, and to hold the other accountable. But then to forgive, and even to articulate that remembrance and forgiveness in words written or spoken to the other.

As Kor points out, only in this way can one regain possession and control of oneself, no longer at the mercy of the hurt, anger, and debilitation that result from great injury inflicted upon oneself. To repress the memory of the violation, or to let fester all the raw emotions that it evokes, is to remain a victim. Kor discovered from personal experience the great empowerment and subsequent joy of living that followed from her own first act of forgiveness for what was done to her at Auschwitz. She found herself again in control of her life. And it has proved to be a remarkable and inspiring life.

Must the person being forgiven acknowledge wrong? No, Kor insists. If one must wait for the other to acknowledge wrong-doing, then one is still at the mercy of the other. Yes, the wrong-doer has a moral obligation to acknowledge and seek forgiveness for wrong-doing, but that is a separate matter, not under the control of the person who has suffered harm. Whether there is acknowledgment of guilt and wrong-doing or not, Kor rightly maintains, the person who has been harmed should not be prevented from re-asserting control over his/her life by acts of forgiveness!

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