

# TO LOVE IS TO FORGIVE

*Desmond O'Donnell*

There is no communication or interaction between friends, acquaintances or strangers that does not at some time result in occasional annoyances and hurts. There are endless occasions when we need to be forgiven and forgive. Forgiveness is a part of life and loving. Constantly repeated decisions to forgive can be exhausting. For this reason, it is more ideal that forgiveness becomes an attitude, a readiness – not always instant, to pardon or to overlook. Growth in this readiness to forgive begins with a decision to cultivate it and to practise it as often as possible. Repeated actions will gradually form an attitude which will enable us to deflect words or actions which might otherwise stay within our subconscious.

In this process it is helpful to realise that feelings do not forgive. The best we can hope for is that they will gradually fade unless we keep recalling them. It is in our feelings that we experience the pain and all feelings have a separate existence from our thoughts and desires. Forgiveness is not a feeling; like all loving, it is a choice, a decision. Both pleasant and unpleasant feelings have a very strong memory, deeply embedded within us and it takes time for them to fade or disappear. Do not expect forgiveness in the feelings which remain after a hurt. Feelings do not forgive

While we cannot dictate to our feelings, we can train them to have less power over us. By looking sympathetically at human weakness, we are less inclined to cling to the hurts received and can begin to develop a fairly permanent forgiving stance. Most unkind words and actions have their deeper origin in unconscious hurt simmering since childhood. When we recognise the pain that lies beneath them we can learn to suffer with them rather than condemn them. That is compassion.

Talking about positive or negative feelings can increase them and replaying joyful ones is always a good idea. Deliberately looking back at negative feelings is unwise and unhelpful. When we do not forgive, the person who has hurt us has taken possession of part of us, leaving us less than a fully free person. By not forgetting the past, we are carrying the burden of the past in the limited space of our memories and run the risk of beginning to see ourselves more readily as a victim. A state of unforgiveness gnaws away at the inside of the resentful one, like an acid eating away at their peace of mind. Occasional conscious recall of a hurt is to be expected, but it can be managed unless we continue to recall it and even indulge in it. As long as we keep a person down, some part of us has to be down there holding them.

Unwillingness to forgive can show itself in a refusal to meet or talk to another or to ignore them in some way. To spend a few moments like this is understandable and may not damage real friendship but a continuation of this stance hurts both the offender and the offended. Continuing to harp on about another's failure only increases the hurt for both people. Real hurt should be named to the person who caused it at a later date when both are relaxed and introduced in a positive way rather than in an accusing way.

A forgiving attitude, a tendency to forgive, is more important than individual acts of forgiveness. An offence given does not have to be an offence taken. Developing a forgiving attitude helps us to deflect words or actions that might otherwise sink into us and stay within us. Our readiness to forgive is often a test of our maturity. It may also be useful to identify what upsets us in others since we may have, perhaps subconsciously, the same trait. We dislike in others what we are inclined to hide in ourselves. To be aware of this may help us to make real progress.