

Forgiving Those Who Hurt You

By Susan Gammage ¹

The House of Justice tells us that to nurse a grievance or hatred towards anyone else is spiritually poisonous:

To nurse a grievance or hatred against another soul is spiritually poisonous to the soul which nurses it. (Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 5 January 1992)

The antidote is to see the person who hurt you as a child of God, and attempt to overlook his sins, if we want to remove bitterness from our soul:

To strive to see another person as a child of God and, however heinous his deeds, to attempt to overlook his sins for the sake of God, removes bitterness from the soul and both ennobles and strengthens it. (Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 5 January 1992)

We learn how to separate the sin from the sinner by seeing our oppressors as captives of their lower nature, whose actions only lead them deeper into unhappiness and separation from God:

As a devoted believer you are urged to strive to develop forgiveness in your heart toward your parents who have abused you in so disgraceful a manner, and to attain a level of insight which sees them as captives of their lower nature, whose actions can only lead them deeper into unhappiness and separation from God. (The Universal House of Justice, 1985 Dec 02, Child Abuse, Psychology and Knowledge of Self)

It's not enough to forgive someone once, or even a few times. The Baha'i standard is to forgive someone a hundred thousand times:

. . . that if a person falls into errors for a hundred-thousand times he may yet turn his face to you, hopeful that you will forgive his sins; for he must not become hopeless, neither grieved nor despondent. This is the conduct and the manner of the people of Baha'. This is the foundation of the most high pathway! ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 373)

Sometimes our need to forgive others can come to us in unexpected ways, as this story illustrates:

Why have you imprisoned my son? You only have three days to release him and ask for his forgiveness.

A Bahá'í who just returned from Iran told me the following story which apparently happened very recently in the city of Kerman (probably around March 1996). I am sure that someone

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will eventually record it properly and publish it along with other great stories from Iran . I have written it exactly as I heard it. The story really moved me and I hope that it will uplift everyone else as well. Feel free to distribute it to the friends. Warm Regards. Nili Moghaddam

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One of the young Bahá'í of the city of Kerman in Iran had just started his mandatory military service in his town when one day he was approached by one of the mullás (priests) who are resident at Military Garrisons and provide "spiritual guidance" to the soldiers.. This mullá was referred to as Hájí and when he found out that this young man was a Bahá'í, he approached him and instructed him to publicly announce at next morning's prayer assembly that he is a Bahá'í so that everyone would know. The young Bahá'í obeyed and agreed to comply with this instruction.. So the next morning when all the soldiers assembled for morning prayers and received the day's instructions the young Bahá'í went in front of the crowd and he announced that he has been instructed by Hájí to tell everyone that he is a Bahá'í in case anyone would wish not to associate with him because of being a Bahá'í.

When he returned back to his duties, the Hájí approached him again and with great anger said, "I told you to only say that you are a Bahá'í. I didn't ask you to give a lecture and tell them why, and now you have to be punished."

So the Hájí instructed the other men to throw the young Bahá'í into a toilet room and keep him locked there until further instructions. So they locked up the young Bahá'í in a washroom and except for giving him a little food every day, kept him locked up. Almost two weeks had passed from his detention when one night this young Bahá'í soldier had a dream of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

In the dream 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed him with these words: "You have passed your test very well."

The next morning, some soldiers opened the door and in great hurry took him to meet the Hájí. When they entered the room, the Hájí seemed very shaken and upset and with a trembling voice said: "The reason I released you from detention is that last night I had a very vivid dream in which a turbaned Siyyid (a descendent of Muhammad) addressed me and said: 'Why have you imprisoned my son? You only have three days to release him and ask for his forgiveness.' "So I am releasing you," the Hájí said, "and I am begging for your forgiveness and will not go until you have forgiven me."

The young Bahá'í soldier said that he has forgiven him.

Exactly three days later the Hájí died and just before he died he had told the story to his wife and children and had said to them, "Follow the way and example of this youth for the rest of your lives."

My Story

I've gone through several stages in my understanding of if or why or how to forgive my abusers. In the early days, I found a quote which I assumed was the Bahá'í standard:

If someone commits an error and wrong toward you, you must instantly forgive him. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 453)

I certainly wasn't in a position to do that, but I sincerely wanted to be obedient, so my prayers in those days were: "OK God, I can't forgive them, but You can, so please do!"

Then in one of my letters from the House of Justice, they told me:

As a devoted believer you are urged to strive to develop forgiveness in your heart toward your parents who have abused you in so disgraceful a manner, and to attain a level of insight which sees them as captives of their lower nature, whose actions can only lead them deeper into unhappiness and separation from God. (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to this author, 9 September, 1992)

This was totally liberating! I loved their string of verbs "strive to develop", which suggested that it could take a lifetime, and even if I never got there, as long as I was striving to develop, that was OK with God.

Secondly, I had to develop forgiveness "in my heart", not between us! So if I was never able to spend time with them again, it was enough to develop it in my heart, between God and I.

Finally, they wanted me to separate my parents from their sin – a concept I've just learned recently, but when I come back to this quote now, I can see what this means "to attain a level of insight which sees them as captives of their lower nature". By refusing to forgive them, I was not honouring the perfect beings that God created, I was only seeing the monsters of their lower natures. That truly was liberating!

I thought that forgiving my parents would be the hardest thing, but once I understood this quote, it became easier:

To forgive him will not be easy, and this is not something to which either you or the members of your family can force yourselves. Nevertheless, you should know that forgiveness is the standard which individual Baha'is are called upon to attain. It is an essential part of the spiritual growth of a person who has been wronged. To nurse a grievance or hatred against another soul is spiritually poisonous to the soul which nurses it, but to strive to see another person as a child of God and, however heinous his deeds, to attempt to overlook his sins for the sake of God, removes bitterness from the soul and both ennobles and strengthens it. (Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 5 January 1992)

I found it comforting that the House of Justice understood how difficult it would be to forgive, yet they still upheld the standard to reach for.

It helped to understand that nursing a grievance is spiritually poisonous; and that by separating the person from the sin, not only would I remove the bitterness, but strengthen and ennoble my soul as well.

The key to being able to forgive was the compassion of the Institutions; understanding the law; and being given a concrete tool (separating the person from their lower nature etc) and how to use it.

Contact with Those Who Hurt Us

Having forgiven someone, you might still wonder how much contact to have with those who hurt you. The House of Justice offered me the following three steps, which you might find helpful:

Such an attitude [forgiveness] does not preclude your being prudent in deciding upon the appropriate amount of contact with your parents. In reaching your decision you should be guided by such factors as their degree of remorse over what they inflicted on you in the past, the extent of their present involvement in practices which are so contrary to Bahá'í Teachings, and the level of vulnerability you perceive within yourself to being influenced adversely by them. In the process of reaching a decision, you may well find it useful to seek the advice of experts such as your therapist. (Universal House of Justice, to the author, 9 September 1992)

The steps to take include:

- Be prudent (careful, cautious, practical, sensible, wise) in deciding upon the amount of contact you want to have
- Determine their degree of remorse over what they did
- Determine the extent of their present involvement in practices contrary to Bahá'í Teachings
- Assess your level of vulnerability to being influenced adversely by them
- Seek the advice of experts such as a therapist.