

Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Psychological Healing

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COLUMN ARTICLE

During my doctoral research among the Indigenous Cordillera People in the Philippines, I was invited for a cañao (traditional rituals of prayer and animal butchering, sharing meals and traditional dance). A woman in the neighbourhood was sick; although she went to the hospital for medicines, after elaborate checkups and tests, to her dismay, the doctor declared 'all fine in the body'. The ailing lady recalled her regular misunderstanding with a neighbour and thought that would be the cause. Her indigenous wisdom led her to a mambunong - local traditional priest. As customary, the priest recommended ugali (ritualistic healing) and the family was ready for the traditional healing ceremony. 'This ritual forgives, reconciles and therefore she will be healed' narrated my research assistant.

All indigenous communities have the popular belief that reconciliation is the best healer. This concept originates in the indigenous worldview that whenever there are conflicts between self, others, nature or supernatural powers, people do get sick. As Pungayan, a prolific Ibaloi scholar from the Philippines points out, "The need for living in harmony with nature and others is deeply rooted in the psyche of every indigenous people whether Christianized, educated, or set-

tled in urban areas. Consequently, 'interventions' focus on maintaining harmony with other people, spirits that guard nature, deceased ancestors who guide their life every day and the God who governs life. For the indigenous psyche, illness is the outcome of disturbances or disharmony created by individual's relationships with their ancestors, nature in which they live, relatives and people living in the same community; healing is seen as an act of reconciliation" [1].

Forgiveness and reconciliation

In today's competitive world, in every sphere of human existence people face conflicts. It could arise in families, at workplaces, among friends, neighbours, in communities, and at transnational levels. Psychologists often insist on forgiveness as a means of inner peace. When people are burdened with grudges, hate or hurt, it damages the performance and normal human development. Forgiveness is a handy solution to eliminate the clutches of grudges and the retaliating resentments because it liberates the mind and gives some fresh air to breathe. Some religious practices like confession, penance, and austerity in the name of God, promulgated by different religion are aimed at forgiveness.

It is easy to forgive a deceased person, or whom people do not meet anymore in life; also easy to forgive someone who has no intention of apologizing. If the people concerned

are strangers, forgiveness can be an undemanding remedy; one can easily forgive the perpetrator and forget the situation, not bothering much about the offence. It is because forgiveness is a one-sided effort. Some easy techniques psychologists often suggest in the process of forgiving people is to ignore the issue or person and not to continue to have them in life; remove them by distancing oneself from the perpetrators [2]. This process of forgiveness is simple and one need not see things from the other person's perspective, rather move away from the hurt and pain towards healing. However, situations could become complicated if the victimised person has to live or work with the perpetrator. Here, one needs to go further from forgiveness to reconciliation.

Forgiveness is a private affair that can be achieved, experienced or enacted by the self. Reconciliation, on the other hand, is a two-sided action in which the involved parties need to come together and indulge in some act of repentance, to show remorse to mend the conflict. It is easy if the perceived perpetrator is ready to accept the mistake and shows remorse. In some situations, reconciliation includes some mediators as well; mediation does fail, if a perpetrator is a powerful or influential person, and to please him or her, the victim is asked to accept that s/he is the persecutor who initiated the offence. Forcing the victim to apologise is equal to perpetuating the perpetrator and in such situations reconciliation is not possible; instead, hurt and hatred increase in the mind of the person being victimised.

When people could easily forgive and move on from simple hurtful feelings and situations, it is not so if the episode is traumatic or somehow serious and has done damage to the inner self. Here, the hurt in the inner self will not be healed unless reconciliation takes place. The situation will be more complicated if the perceived offender is a person with whom the victim needs to interact daily (workplace manager, marital partner). The human unconscious mechanism is such that, even after the simple forgive and forget formula of healing, the inner hurt could haunt the individual (because it is still in the unconscious), troubling the victim as well as the perpetrator in their daily affairs and other life situations. Therefore, reconciliation, in the truest sense, is the ultimate psychological healer.

People who can't reconcile

It is a fact that not all people can forgive or reconcile. If a person is an antisocial, borderline or suffering from IED and similar behavioural disorders, it is not possible at all to reconcile. It is because, for a person with behavioural disorders, the act of forgiveness is ritualistic, does not mean anything beyond mere words. For example, look at the following symptoms prescribed by DSM-5 as well as ICD F63.81 for IED: violence and threats of violence, destruction of property due to a failure to resist aggressive impulses, the degree of aggression grossly out of proportion to any psychosocial provocation, disrespect towards clients and customers, inappropriate behaviour between co-workers (yelling, cursing, shoving, or making obscene gestures). Due to the abnormal activity in the frontolimbic region of the brain, a person with IED would blame the victim for starting the problem situation or worsening the psychopathic situation of the perpetrator. Such a person primarily needs psychotherapy (specifically cognitive restructuring) and not capable of any forgiveness or reconciliation; without prior therapeutic assistance and a cure, reconciliation is impossible.

Forgiveness and reconciliation in therapy

Sometimes people may come across situations where forgiveness or face to face reconciliation is not possible due to various reasons. For example, if one of the people involved may be toxic and unrepentant, unwilling to compromise; someone died during the period of estrangement and there is no possibility for reconciliation; a romantic relationship breakup that does not give room for personal reconciliation but the pain and sense of loss linger; a traumatic incident in which the perpetrator is having personality or behavioural disorder. In such situations, there are simple therapy techniques to help victimised individuals.

Worthington in his book *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Application* gives some of the following therapy techniques for reconciliation [3]. Write a letter, poem or an email to express what one wants to convey to the other person; tear it or burn it later on (religiously motivated people can take such writings to a place of worship and then seek

God's blessings before destroying them). Empty chair technique is yet another time-tested gestalt therapy technique by which one can imagine the perpetrator in an empty chair and enact the reconciliation scenario. Talking to friends and ventilating the hurt feeling is yet another therapeutic technique people can easily employ, but seldom consider. There is nothing therapeutic like ventilating talks with friends, near and dear ones that would remove the hurt and scar from the unconscious mind, to move on healthily. There are also creative art therapies like drawing to express freely the inner hurt to facilitate healing.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous communities have developed time-tested reconciliation rituals as a means of psychological healing that is integrated into the worldview and cultural practices. However, today as societies are moving from the traditional cultural way of life towards a modern urbanised lifestyle, forgiveness and reconciliation take new forms. Although forgiveness can heal hurts, pains and interpersonal conflicts, reconciliation is essential to healing inner wounds that affect the unconscious mechanism and the inner dynamism of individuals. Unless the inner hurt or the inner wound is healed, there is no psychological happiness possible. If forgiveness is a noble act of moving towards a psychologically healthy life, reconciliation is a divine act of healing that paves the way for psychological wellbeing.

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