Forgiveness, acceptance and the matter of expectation

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In this paper, the author argues for a dynamic conceptualization of forgiveness during psychoanalysis. The trauma of failed expectations in intimate relationships is narcissistically dislodging. When legitimate expectations in relationships are not met, forgiveness becomes a challenge for ego to restore the lost narcissistic balance through the resumption of a significant internal bond. The author argues that the ending of any successful analysis is marked by three possibilities regarding the patient’s relationship to significant others and his traumas: in cases where the relationship was marked by minimal expectations, one simply learns to accept the wrongdoer without ever feeling the need for forgiveness; in cases where a relationship was marked by high expectations, the patient can learn to accept the trauma without the will or need to forgive its perpetrator. However, even with the painful frustration of high expectations in an intimate relationship, the patient can come to forgive his wrongdoer if there remains enough of a positive internal bond to be salvaged. The developmental roots of such forgiveness, as well as the addictive characteristics of ‘nursing a grudge’ and the conversion of the qualitative mode of seeking fulfillment into a quantitative one, are further investigated.

Keywords: forgiveness, reconciliation, acceptance, forgiving attitude, expectation, mourning, conversion of quality to quantity, balancing the books, birthright, just world

Traditionally, psychoanalysis has given little attention to affects that are not prominent in neurotic conflicts. The time-honored psychoanalytic focus on ‘unconscious’ processes has discouraged examination of affects that appear to be conscious and easily accessible, especially when they appear in response to external reality. Consideration of guilt, anxiety, depression, jealousy, envy and hatred dates back to Freud and Klein, but studies of shame—which was initially perceived as a conscious affect and only later recognized as the ‘underside of narcissism’ (Morrison, 1989) and so linked to unconscious issues—have a much shorter history. Since Akhtar (2002) introduced forgiveness into the analytic literature as a complex emotion with unconscious as well as conscious roots, the field has become more open to exploring the psychodynamics of such other complex concepts as grievance and complaint (Weintrobe, 2004), vengeance (Rosen, 2007) and reconciliation (Nedelman, 2005).

Still, controversy about these new investigations remains. Are we breaking new ground at the interface of intersubjectivity and metapsychology—that is, are we studying ‘psychology projected into the external world’ (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973)—or is forgiveness simply a conscious response to external conditions, and the outcome of the inner sense of wellbeing that follows good analytic work (Smith, 2005)?
My own view is that forgiveness as encountered in psychoanalysis does indeed have dynamic roots, and that it is a powerful process. I propose that disappointed expectations in significant intimate relationships damage an individual’s narcissistic balance, resulting in a characteristic defensive personality organization that concentrates on quantitative rather than qualitative aspects of experience. When a process of mourning for these losses can be completed, the individual is confronted with a choice regarding the fate of the failed relationship: does he wish to refuse its further intrapsychic significance, or does he wish to reinstate the relationship despite past failures, in the light of his expanded awareness of its limitations?

I hold that it is precisely when the bond is intrapsychically significant that there is a wish to reinstate it and so reconstitute a damaged narcissistic equilibrium. At such times of decision, forgiveness is an unconscious expression of the need for human relationships, and of the preference for quality over quantity in the experience of life. The lessening of anger and the lowering of primitive defenses that follow successful mourning allow for a softening of the superego—this is both a prerequisite and a consequence of forgiveness. Ultimately, forgiveness allows for the renewal of an accepting and potentially more loving relationship with oneself and the world, as well as the other. It is this restitution of the narcissistic balance of personality through the realignment of internal relationships that gives forgiveness its psychodynamic importance and its potential for developmental gain. Thus, forgiveness, by aiming for narcissistic self-stabilization, holds a unique place in the analytical context. It goes beyond acceptance and reconciliation in uniting and binding the self with previously lost or discarded internal objects whose absence or negative presence was disruptive to the sense of self.

Based on this dynamic conceptualization of forgiveness, I conclude that the ending of any successful analysis is marked by three possibilities regarding the patient’s relationship to significant others and his traumas:

1) in cases where an intimate relationship was marked by minimal expectations, one simply learns to ‘accept the wrongdoer’ without ever feeling the need for forgiveness;

2) in cases where a relationship was marked by high expectations, the patient can learn to ‘accept the trauma’ without the will or need to forgive its perpetrator; and

3) even with the painful frustration of high expectations in an intimate relationship, the patient can come to ‘forgive’ his wrongdoer if there remains enough of a positive internal bond to be salvaged.

I propose that these different outcomes, especially the last two, raise important developmental questions at the end of analysis which, if carefully explored, may elevate the role of forgiveness (heretofore, implicit in the working-through phase of analysis) to a more central and perhaps explicit place.

The psychodynamics of forgiveness and the role of expectation

Forgiveness is a complicated concept and overlaps with many related ones. In the recently burgeoning psychoanalytic literature on forgiveness, there has been little careful
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attempt to map the domain of this experience, to determine its borders. Furthermore, little systematic distinction has been made between forgiveness, acceptance and reconciliation. Reconciliation, in my view, is the least dynamically motivated of these three phenomena; it is a pragmatic choice to move on. While this choice is understandably fostered by external recognition of the harm done and some internal healing of the victim, it is still the most deliberate of the three overlapping concepts, a clear act of consciousness. In comparison, acceptance can be a psychologically vs. practically motivated outcome of analysis, one which requires the work of mourning for losses suffered, an overcoming of one’s sense of victimhood, and a coming to terms with one’s lot in the world. Unlike forgiveness, however, the path to acceptance does not involve the re-establishment of an internal bond with the wrongdoing object. In this regard, forgiveness is the only one of these three concepts that entails a significant psychological work with an outcome similar and complementary to the work of mourning.

In what follows, I will argue that there are two decisive variables in the choice between forgiveness and acceptance. One is the severity of the trauma; some wrongs seem to preclude the possibility of forgiveness. More important, however, is the nature of the bond with the wrongdoer. Betrayal in a distant relationship is not as weighty as betrayal by an intimate other because expectations in a distant relationship are not as great. In a less intimate relationship, therefore, there is both less hurt and less motivation to forgive and re-establish the lost bond. Finally, I want to make a subtle but significant distinction between letting go of a grudge (the operational aspect of forgiveness) and forgiveness as a means of narcissistic self-regulation. The process of forgiveness includes psychological changes that permit the emergence of what I will call a ‘forgiving attitude’—a coming to terms with the general randomness and unfairness of the world as it is, and the consequent ability to relinquish angry demands about how the world should be.

Psychoanalysis, unlike religion, does not require forgiveness, but it offers a more subtle incentive in the form of a wish to forgive (as opposed to an external command) that serves both the hurt individual and the one to be forgiven. In psychoanalysis, the wish to forgive is motivated by a healthy unconscious narcissistic need—a need of the ego, not the superego—to reconstitute the personality by re-establishing the lost bond with a person whose impact on one’s life has been felt as an impoverishment or diminishment of one’s own self (Siassi, 2004). Thus, the dominant psychodynamic of true forgiveness is as much about letting go of the grudge as it is about re-establishing a lost bond. In mourning, one comes to terms with the loss, whereas in forgiveness one reclaims the lost object (including the partial loss of oneself). The regaining of a bond serves a healthy narcissistic need to resurrect the good inner objects who confirm one’s lovability through their unconscious positive mirroring effect and, thus, communicate and safeguard one’s special place in the world. For instance, it is not uncommon in analysis for the patient to find a mother, father or sibling he had for many years disavowed.

Expectation, disappointment and the psychodynamics of forgiveness

All people harbor the legitimate narcissistic expectation that they will be loved by a father, a mother, and to some extent by others in the hierarchy of kinship and
friendship; that is, each of these relationships comes with a corresponding degree of ‘expectation’. The development of a belief in one’s lovability depends on one’s conviction of parental love, and to a lesser degree on the conviction of the love of other intimates. When the child’s expectation of love from his parents or others in intimate relationships is not met, his narcissistic balance is disrupted because the failed expectations resonate with a sense of being deprived of one’s birthright. The extent of the expectation determines the degree of the narcissistic hurt and, in the aftermath of the disappointment of an essential relational need, the subsequent inner vacuum or defective bond may feel unbearable. It is the wish to repair this narcissistic blow—to undo the sense of having been robbed of one’s birthright—that motivates a person, rightly or wrongly, realistically or unrealistically, to forgive the intimate other.

However, the timetable of what we frequently encounter with our patients goes back to childhood, where there is no reciprocity on the level of expectations. It is within this one-way relationship that the whole issue of birthright becomes prominent and the rage of having been robbed of an ‘average expectable environment’ (Hartman, 1939) becomes the most narcissistically rage-evoking state of unforgiveness, as aptly perceived by Oscar Wilde: ‘Children begin by loving their parents; after a time they judge them; rarely, if ever, do they forgive them’ (2004, p. 43). In this situation, the loss of meaningfulness and basic trust are compounded by the shame of insignificance, imprinted in the child’s mind by the traumatic unavailability of the other that the child needed for his emotional survival. Nonetheless, the shame associated with this state of unforgiveness is secondary to the trauma and legitimate rage of losing one’s birthright. Certainly, giving up defenses against shame is not tantamount to forgiveness.

What happens later in life in the context of adult reciprocal relationships can be explored in part via Lansky’s (2001) analysis of Prospero’s motives in *The tempest* (1994) for forgiving his brother’s betrayal. Lansky focuses on Prospero’s shame of being duped and the defenses against that shame, which feed into his state of unforgiveness. Lansky’s cogent analysis, however, does not go far enough. I feel that, by putting too much emphasis on the shame of being betrayed, the rage-evoking trauma of failed expectation is overlooked. As such, Lansky privileges the intrapsychic (shame dynamics) at the expense of the interpersonal (the shock of fraternal betrayal). As an addendum to his analysis, I would like to highlight the legitimacy of Prospero’s state of unforgiveness regarding his brother’s betrayal, irrespective of his shame over the flaws, shortcomings, dependencies and naivety that had contributed to his being duped. It is only after the shock of failed expectations subsides that self-blame (the retrospective sense of ‘what a fool I was’) sets in and, with it, all the shame dynamics Lansky discusses.

Hence, the trauma of failed expectations independently shatters one’s narcissistic balance irrespective of any subsequent awareness of his role in bringing about, or preparing the ground for, the traumatic event itself. Whereas Lansky focuses on the shame dynamics involved in such self-blame, I would emphasize the aspect of external reality that has been overlooked: that is, when expectations that are supposed to be taken for granted in intimate relationships go unfulfilled, basic trust
in the world is shaken and, with it, hope for the future. The loss of the heretofore imagined loving presence of the other is a painful narcissistic blow, and is reflected in a defective and painful bond with the inner object.

If such a psychodynamic, based on the narcissistic injury of failed expectations, feeds into Prospero’s state of unforgiveness, how then can we explain his motives in eventually forgiving his brother? Lansky rightly argues that Prospero’s identification with the loving aspects of his daughter, Miranda, make this type of forgiveness possible. I would add that Prospero is motivated to forgive by an unconscious wish to re-establish the ruptured bond with his kinsman, and to come out of his isolation from the island of his vengeful wrath. The wish to repair a damaged bond through forgiveness is also a wish to reconstitute the personality by regaining the ruptured narcissistic balance, and to restore the damaged trust, meaning and hope in relationships, a loss even more significant than that of an important object.

One of the fruits of forgiveness is a ‘forgiving attitude’ (which is also a developmental accomplishment allowing some people to be more forgiving than others) vis-à-vis oneself and the rest of the world. As the process of mourning carries a person from anger to sadness, the superego softens. The work of forgiveness further continues this softening as the residual narcissistic anger in the relationship gives way to understanding and a longing for rapprochement—to make good the lost relationship. The resolution of pathological grief is one cornerstone of a forward movement in analysis, and forgiveness may sometimes be another. Though such forgiveness may not be a deliberate act, it does express an unconscious wish and psychological readiness for an intrapsychic and interpersonal reorganization of the personality with a more realistic appraisal of oneself in the world.

One long-recognized requisite for forgiveness is a belief in the wrongdoer’s capacity for remorse, regret and apology. The subtlest identification with the humility of the wrongdoer allows the victim to come to terms with his own shortcomings. It is also an invitation for the victim to give up the self-righteous, omnipotent part of himself that clings to the victim identity. The knowledge or fantasy that the hurtful other wishes to be forgiven begins a process of empowerment, as the erstwhile victim ponders the choice between empowering himself through the exercise of (pseudo-)control by not forgiving, and the wish to empower himself through empathy and love.

When the extent of trauma is not so great as to preclude the possibility of forgiveness, either choice can be legitimately justified. However, in such cases, opting for forgiveness puts an end to the vicious cycle whereby the victim can re-empower himself only by ‘acting out’ his anger. In coming to empathize with the wrongdoer or to imagine his remorse, the erstwhile victim is empowered in a real way. The balance that is re-established in the relationship as a result of this reversal becomes narcissistically fulfilling at another level because it creates the kind of tit-for-tat situation that appeals to the unconscious and archaic mind. As an act of transcendence, forgiveness replaces judgment with understanding, the quest for power with a quest for love; in enabling the healing of a ruptured bond, it further promotes the psychological wellbeing of victim and wrongdoer alike. Most importantly, as the following case demonstrates, once forgiveness is bestowed on the wrongdoer a new
challenge, that is coming to terms with the narcissistic injury of having been the victim of a cruel fate, faces the individual. Thus, to become resigned to the painful events of the past, following forgiveness of the wrongdoer, is another step that leads to the acceptance of the many grey shades of oneself and the world.

The path from forgiveness to acceptance of trauma: The case of Dr. D

Dr. D, a 70 year-old male patient in his fifth year of analysis, starts a session wanting to remember a dream of the night before, about his mother, and fails. He becomes so frustrated that he can’t go further with his associations, and snaps in a sharp tone, ‘Since you didn’t ask me to write it down, I didn’t—and now I’m stuck and can’t remember!’

I am taken aback, not only by the suddenly accusatory tone, but also by the fact that, after all these years of instruction-free dream analysis, he suddenly criticizes me for not having given him directions about how to remember his dreams. I detect in his frustration a child’s accusation to an authority, probably a parent, who has failed to anticipate his needs and so has set him up for failure. I say, ‘It sounds like you feel that by not giving you directions I failed you. And now you’re angry at me.’

He corroborates this, and continues to berate me for my lack of professionalism in never going through the ‘dream-remembering protocol’ with him.

I empathize with him and comment that perhaps he felt that I had not given him what he needed: that he had done his share by bringing in the dream, while I had failed to do mine, and tell him to write down his dreams. This elicits a notable shift in his attitude. Now his tone softens: ‘Yes, like the good, dutiful boy that I’ve always been. Tell me what to do, in fact, tell me what you want and I’ll deliver. I have to put the blame on you. I got furious that you were nonchalant, especially since I felt I was getting old and not remembering. Had you told me to write down my dream, I would have done so and could avoid facing my failing memory. Now I see. I expected you to protect me from the anxiety of aging and you failed to do so.’

This theme of expectation was the focus of the following sessions. Dr. D related a number of failed expectations of his childhood: that his father would be there for him (in fact, his father had died when the patient was 8 months old); that his mother would attend to his needs and not require his attention to hers (in fact, his mother was extremely seductive towards him). He had ostensibly mourned these failures and forgiven his parents for their shortcomings, but it became clear to us, in fact, that he had not forgiven the failed expectations of childhood, but displaced them into the transference. He entertained an unconscious (and unrealizable) expectation that I would be a caregiver of Godlike perfection who could protect him from all potential harms. This wish for perfection was proportional in intensity to his sense of childhood deprivation by both parents; in trying to protect himself from disappointment, he continued to delay his acceptance of the world as it was rather than as how he wished it to be (as manifested in the transference). And, while his wish to please had helped him hang on to the expectation that a Godlike ‘super-savior’ would be available to him, it had also discouraged his own capacity for self-determination. Even though he had ‘forgiven’ his parents as individuals with shortcomings, he had not come to terms with the impact of his childhood deprivation on his psyche.
Now he could see that his continuing focus on disappointment and deprivation was a perpetuation of an unforgiving attitude. He could begin to distinguish between reasonable expectations, such as the failed ones of his childhood, and the ‘unreasonable’ ones of perfect protection that were the defensive residue of his past trauma. These insights allowed him the possibility of accepting me and himself without bitterness, and opened up a world whose former extremes of black and white now gave way to shades of gray. With this new acceptance, for every memory of deprivation and mishap in his life, for the first time, he could conceive of the possibility that far worse things might have happened; and, with this new perspective, he was able to see himself as a fortunate man, and not a shortchanged one.

Two months later, Dr. D brought in a dream: the face of Dick Cheney (the object of his deepest contempt in real life) had become fatherly and benign, and looked like the author of Positive thinking. Dr. D’s association revealed that the face of Dick Cheney was emblematic of ‘Corporate America’ at its worst, the system that he felt had shortchanged him and his family throughout his childhood in a variety of ways. Simultaneously, he felt like a hypocrite for having taken advantage of the same system to be where he was at this juncture in his life. He came to realize that the dream was a way of dealing with this dissonance, an attempt to ease up on the extreme polarization of his world that was responsible for a harsh verdict of hypocrisy on himself. He acknowledged that he was the one with positive thoughts. His beatification of the Vice-President illustrated that he had less need to hate; he could look for goodness even in unlikely places. As such, following this pivotal dream, there was a significant diminution of guilt and splitting as well as a burgeoning sense of gratitude for where he was in life considering where he had come from.

Quality, quantity and the developmental roots of forgiveness

I start with an original perspective on the developmental roots of forgiveness—and, by extension, of the refusal to forgive. Freud’s (1895) incorporation of Marx’s dictum (Suchting, 1983, pp. 184–5) that quantity after a while changes into quality is now an accepted psychoanalytic notion.1 In what follows, however, I examine the other side of the coin: namely, that, in certain perverse relational configurations, attention to quality can deteriorate into a preoccupation with quantity. When the ability to take in the good, to appreciate the ‘quality’, of a relationship is compromised, the resulting experience of insatiability sets off a preoccupation with ‘quantity’, one frequent manifestation of which is greed. The concepts of the ‘good breast’ and the ‘bad breast’ are a useful metaphorical foundation for later forgiving or unforgiving attitudes.

When a child’s bond with the maternal object is ‘good enough’, he can let go of the ‘bad breast’—that is, forgive it for its unavailability on command and so avoid a sadomasochistic engagement with it. This allows the child to recognize

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1An example of this conversion: a person preoccupied with accumulating certain things in enough ‘quantity’ eventually transfers a new meaning, or ‘quality’, to his activity—he is identified as a hoarder. This idiosyncratic identity excludes people who do the same thing but in no quantitatively significant way.
the satisfactory qualities of the metaphorical milk, be grateful for them and make reparation for his destructive wishes at moments of frustration or disappointment. As reparation and gratitude (Klein, 1957) become familiar modes of interaction with the world, hope that quality can indeed be found in relationships is increasingly engendered. Thus, the root of the depressive position, whose outcome is gratitude, is forgiveness.

In this context, the child can recognize that neither reality nor his projections will result in retaliation or abandonment by the forgiving caretaker, the model from whom the developing child learns to metabolize his anger. He is not, in fact, at the whim of an omnipotent object, with whom he must identify lest he be victimized. He can instead come to flexible terms with a caretaker who is trying, albeit imperfectly, to protect him. This awareness makes the caregiver’s failures forgivable, and the caregiver human. The nurturing milk survives the destructive projections of the forgiving child, who can appreciate its overall goodness. This is an important step towards acceptance of the reality principle—that the world is as it is, and not as one would wish it to be.

The alternative to this developmental accomplishment is to ‘nurse’, as Weintrobe (2004) calls it, a grudge or grievance. When the child’s attachment to the object is not good enough, when the world feels fundamentally hostile, frustration may be experienced as unbearable (Ferenczi, 1926). Under these circumstances, the child experiences the milk at best as without nurturance—at worst, as poisonous. The child retains the insatiable appetite engendered by past deprivation, yet feels that his only available nourishment is poison. In the absence of quality, the wish to feel satisfied is transformed into the wish to satisfy the greed. The greed engenders a demand for endless ‘quantity’. But no quantity of bad milk can satisfy the real desire, which is for good milk—a ‘good-enough’ nurturing relationship.

Nursing a grudge is an attachment to painful affect—in this case, to the bad breast, which never becomes humanized into the maternal presence. The attachment is so deep that it informs the subject’s identity; the painful affect must be constantly renewed. In the defensive splitting of this primitive personality organization, a dichotomy of ‘innocent me’ and ‘guilty other’ is created. So, paradoxically, the angry fixation upon the bad breast destroys any sense that there is any good milk to be had—it becomes impossible to take in the very desideratum that is so longed for. The pain of frustration and emptiness may be further idealized in a reaction formation whereby pleasure is derived from the refusal to forgive.

The child who takes in only milk experienced as metaphorically poisonous in time and out of identification begins to feel poisonous himself. Trapped in his venomous feelings towards an all-bad object, with no recourse but to project them outwards, the child cannot forgive. His identity is so enmeshed with the sense of suffering and victimhood, of having been shortchanged (a quantitative concept), that a relentless collecting of injustices is enlisted in order to sustain it.

Childhood experiences of nursing and relinquishing grudges in different circumstances and different combinations shape later attitudes about reality. At one end of the spectrum, the ‘good-enoughness’ of the ‘quality’ of the bond with the object facilitates a taste for the world with all its imperfections; at the other end, the absence of such a bond, and the bitterness that results, encourages a continuous
sense of dissatisfaction, of grievance and frustrated omnipotence that—failing any faith in a qualitative repair—show in a paradoxical alienation from the world at the same time as claims are made upon the world and the people in it. Relentless demands for compensation can never be met because the need, in fact, is not for greater ‘quantity’ of interaction, but for better ‘quality’.

The case of Mr. E
In the fourth year of analysis, a middle-aged male patient’s fear of death took center stage. Mr. E was the only surviving child of his parents, who had lost two other sons shortly before he was born: one stillborn, the other through an accident soon after his birth. His mother was frequently absent, but also narcissistically invested in Mr. E. As her sole surviving child, she told him, he was destined for greatness, a continuous refrain that he eagerly embraced, along with the conviction that her losses would be compensated through his future achievements. And Mr. E did accomplish quite a lot, but not surprisingly he was left with a sense of inadequacy—his achievements did not match the unrealistic greatness required by his mother and his own grandiose self-image.

Throughout the analysis, I had been impressed by Mr. E’s ability to keep track of dates and days. As far back as he could remember, he asserted, he had always had an affinity for numbers; keeping track of time was a pastime, and he thought of events in quantitative terms. He always knew how many hours of analysis he had behind him and when we reached certain milestones he would announce them: ‘Today we’ve reached the 300th hour of analysis.’ But, now that his youth was behind him, this preoccupation with numbers had taken an ominous turn. He found himself obsessed with the obituary pages of the newspapers, and would scrutinize the notices to see who had been younger than he was when they died, and who had been older. The former circumstance gave him great pleasure; he gloated over having survived the deceased by so many years, feeling as though he had been chosen over the other. But this sense of specialness quickly gave way to a sense of guilt and anxiety, and a preoccupation with his own death. And, if the deceased were older than he was, he would count up the difference in years and worry about how nearly he was approaching that age.

Mr. E took great care of his health through exercise and dietary supplements—another obsession that made him feel superior to others and in control over the possibility of death. In fact, one of the realizations of his analysis was his unconscious belief that death was going to make an exception for him. When a mild physical ailment exacerbated Mr. E’s fear of death, however, a dream helped him become aware that he experienced life as a contest, an uphill battle, in which he constantly had to invent strategies to survive everyone else in the struggle to reach the top. This contest was a variant on a familiar set of fantasies that he entertained—that he had eliminated his brothers, and that he had to remain invincible. To die meant the loss of this victory and punishment for his rivalrous desire to surpass significant others: in other words, death was payback time for his murderous wishes.

Mr. E did not yet realize, however, how his anxiety about not surviving the next rival, his vigilant preoccupation with the number of days and years remaining
to him, was keeping him from enjoying the quality of his everyday life. In fact, it perpetuated his existential angst by reminding him that he wasn’t invincible. Gradually, he began to realize that his constant vigilance, his endless preoccupation with dodging death, were millstones around his neck. His worry about the quantity of his years had ironically left him incapable of appreciating the quality of the life he was so busy prolonging.

The turning point came for Mr. E as he became able to grieve the true losses of his childhood. He was recounting a newly available childhood fantasy of playing ‘three musketeers’ with his brothers, taking advantage of their perfect number, when tears came to his eyes. This was the beginning of a process of mourning for the lost brothers who might have loved him and protected him from being the sole repository of his mother’s narcissism. Now his ‘King of the Hill’ fantasy was juxtaposed with a longing for the real quality relationships that had so far escaped him. Ruefully, Mr. E acknowledged that his refusal to accept the losses of his childhood and the inevitability of his own death was a doomed fight against destiny, and one that was destroying his life. His fantasy of murdering his brothers was a way to bypass his grief and anger at having been abandoned by them to a very lonely childhood that he could not forgive. We recognized that, in his denial of loss and refusal to forgive his brothers and his painful childhood, he had tried to compensate for the lack of quality in his life by demanding endless quantity, but the quantity that he had sought to assure himself had not lessened his sense of deprivation. As he mourned for the brothers he had longed for in reality and murdered in fantasy, he worked through these themes, gradually overcoming his preoccupying fear of death.

Balancing the books, or the neurotic quest for a ‘just’ world:
The irresistible motives underlying the state of unforgiveness

Rageful fantasies of revenge are pleasurable because they re-empower the victim through his fantasies of balancing the books, or getting even. So far, the analytic literature has considered only one set of motives of the force behind the state of unforgiveness. These are the primitive defenses such as splitting, omnipotent control, projective identification, etc. against the unbearable shame of being wronged (Lansky, 2001, 2005). I propose that there is another motive that actively feeds into the holding of grudges, one which is a further manifestation of the quantitative frame of mind. Often, the grudge-bearer is preoccupied with fantasies of getting even with anyone perceived to do him wrong, and most often with authority figures reminiscent of the significant traumatizing figure of his past. Yet this hyper-vigilance about getting ‘revenge’ or exacting ‘justice’ paradoxically precludes the possibility of ridding oneself of one’s sense of victimhood and of coming to terms with ordinary frustrations of the world. In short, what is acted out is never understood.

A patient of mine who had a long history of power struggles with his father sometimes felt compelled to steal from his workplace—this, he felt, made up for what he perceived to be an inadequate salary and mistreatment by his superiors. After his thefts, he felt relieved for a while—he was not a passive victim of the giant paternal entity of his employer, but a vigilante, working for justice. He could well
have changed his work, but this to him was irrelevant. He was absolutely certain
that he would never be equitably treated by impersonal agencies unattuned to his
unique needs. What mattered to him, therefore, was to remain in his infuriating situ-
ation, and relentlessly apply his own set of rules to bring about a sense of temporary
vindication. His investment was not in pursuing true justice, but in taking action
against a perceived injustice; his acts of lawless book-balancing left him feeling
high on pseudo-empowerment.

These vengeful fantasies of balancing the books, by virtue of the fact that they
are often acted out, play a role in the refusal to forgive. In getting even, the self is
fighting for its right to regain some authority of the self, but the fight is carried out
archaically and out of anger rather than in any considered or constructive way. We
often hear our patients explicitly demand retribution or payback from perceived
wrongdoers of the past. When by chance the wrongdoer is punished or, alternatively,
if luck should offer the victim a windfall, the victim’s vengefulness attenuates, as
do his grudge and his demands for retribution, as though he has been partially
vindicated.

There is a significant libidinal gratification, conscious and unconscious, in wit-
nessing the downfall of a perceived usurper or other underminer of justice. This
false sense of conviction that ‘what goes around comes around’ plays into the wish
for protection against life’s unpredictability. It reflects a refusal to accept the world
as it is and, in more extreme cases, a fantasy of being made an exception to the ran-
doness of the world or of being favored by fate in its balancing of the books. It
thus provides a degree of narcissistic gratification, albeit one based on a false sense
of security.

If all the above is only a limited and temporary strategy for coming to terms
with the world and regaining some sense of the self’s authority, how can one come
to the ‘higher level ego-functioning’ [Schafer’s ‘waiving of forgiveness’ (2005,
p. 389)] that would let one deal with a narcissistic injury without succumbing to
the urge to act out/balance the books? The example of Cordelia in Shakespeare’s
King Lear (1998) gives us some clues about the conditions that could make this
possible. In this narcissistically as well as oedipally charged play, a tyrannical
father, Lear, invites his three daughters to exaggerate their love for him, essentially
bribing them with promises of inheritance in exchange for their lies. The favorite
daughter, Cordelia, defies her father’s seduction, provokes his wrath and is cast off
by him. Later, faced with her fallen father’s remorse and his request for forgiveness,
Cordelia, in a curious response (‘No cause, no cause’), waives her victimhood, and
with it the right to forgive.

To my mind, there is an alternative mode of looking at Cordelia’s motives for the
waiver of forgiveness. First, there is the fact that Fate, independently, has balanced
the books for Cordelia; there is not much left for her to forgive. Cordelia herself,
through her marriage to the King of France, has been spared the dire consequences
of her banishment, and a reversal of fortune has turned the tables on her manipulative
father. With his downfall, the egregiousness of his actions has become transparent
and no longer needs recognition. Second, there is the unconscious meaning of these
unforeseen developments for Cordelia: that is, the reversal of her father’s fortune
means vindication of the incorruptible daughter, with subsequent reinforcement of her narcissistic high-mindedness to justify the oedipal victory over her corrupt sisters.

This second motive for Cordelia’s waiver of forgiveness—namely, the narcissistic gratification of being on a higher moral plane than all those around her—is evident from the very beginning of the play in Cordelia’s steadfast resistance to the father’s enticing pressure. Had Cordelia entered into the hypocrisy contest, she would have given up her moral high ground, and with it her status of the special daughter. Of course, Cordelia did have an element of choice, which greatly mitigated her sense of victimhood. More importantly, destiny rewards her for this choice as her fortunes prosper even as her father’s fade. Having been proven right and righteous by the turn of events and endowed with her rightful place as the best daughter, what is left for Cordelia to forgive vis-à-vis her broken, crushed father? She had managed to achieve both an oedipal victory and the moral high ground, and her narcissism required that she claim it, even after her father was no longer her primary object.

Consequently, the waiving of forgiveness is a form of acceptance when one puts herself to a higher code of conduct and morality, whereby even legitimate expectations from significant others are minimized and turned upon oneself in order to maintain one’s narcissistically charged status of ‘holier than thou’. As such, Cordelia expects herself to live up to the high standards from which others are seemingly exempt. Could this be a narcissistic solution to pre-empt the guilt of scoring an oedipal victory by justifying it through abiding such high moral standards that others cannot live up to? Once more, we are witnessing the significant role of expectation as a protagonist in the dynamic of forgiveness: namely, how turning expectations from others to oneself (in this case for oedipal reasons) can set the person in the position of waiving forgiveness from others no matter how brutally one is treated.

The role of the offending party and the fate of forgiveness

So far, my case presentations have dealt with the role of forgiveness in relation to fantasies of remorse and regret of the wrongdoers of the past. As analysts, we also witness our patients being confronted with intimate offenders who carry on knowing full well that the nature of the bond predicates forgiveness. The choice between forgiveness as a way of not losing the bond and severing ties is an agonizing and a complicated one in that, more often than not, for tough love to become genuine, the patient’s sadomasochistic ties with the abuser need to be analyzed.

An elderly male patient of mine had spent the last 15 years of his life trying to rescue his younger daughter from drug addiction, prison and prostitution. He was furious that he was caught in this ‘no-choice situation’. Soon, the analysis revealed my patient’s guilt over his sexually tainted narcissistic attachment to this beautiful blonde and blue-eyed ‘trophy’ daughter. He had spoiled her and had spared her the discipline that he had exerted on his other children. Now, he felt responsible for her current problems and, as a way of assuaging his guilt over the seduction, would accept her apologies whenever she got in trouble and begrudgingly bail her out without any consequence for her actions. He was simultaneously aware of the
seductive behavior of his own mother and saw his adolescent masturbatory fantasy of a tormenting queen (the mother he could not have sexually) playing out in the relationship with his daughter. Each time she got into trouble and turned to him to bail her out, she would become his tormentor and with her explicit sexual misbehaviors would assume the lead role. By bailing her out without any consequence, he was inviting her to do more of the same. In working through the maternal ties that were projected on to this relationship, my patient saw his daughter’s final offense as the last straw. Ruefully, he declared, ‘Something has snapped in me and I no longer feel any tie or bond.’ With these words, my patient was also expressing his renunciation of the sadomasochistic ties with his mother (the tormenting queen projected on to his daughter). He realized that his daughter had been lost to him for many years, and that the connection he now had with her was not that of a paternal bond, but rather a form of bondage. Interestingly, some two years later when the daughter reappeared, drug-free, engaged to an affluent gentleman and wanting to resume the relationship, my patient remained for the most part unmoved. He was cordial with her but maintained his emotional distance by keeping the relationship minimal and formal. A year later when he heard that his daughter had a terminal illness, he felt awful but at the same time his sadness was not that of a father. The bond was definitively broken and could not be repaired.

Analytic outcomes: Forgiveness or acceptance?

Unlike forgiveness, which has a short history in the psychoanalytic literature, acceptance, a closely related topic, has long been a subject of psychoanalytic discussion. It is most familiar in the context of the reality principle, as a stepping-stone to the resolution of neurotic affictions. But a less recognized, yet potently analytic, implication of the concept lies in its juxtaposition with forgiveness in the object-relational field.

As anger and grief emerge simultaneously in the course of an analysis, the patient learns to establish a new context for his traumas and more empathy towards the wrongdoers (usually the parents). He must then make certain psychological choices about the characters in his history. Some, by virtue of their particular place in his object-relational field (such as parents), must—if he is to safeguard the fundamental wish to hang on to his birthright—be forgiven: this is the ideal. Others, however significant the places they hold in his life, have failed him so badly that the patient is unable to find any vestige of a loving interaction to provide him with a loving, soothing, gratifying inner presence: in this case, forgiveness becomes irrelevant. And yet still there are those who, despite their important place, leave the patient with no desire or need to forgive their gross disappointing failures because his expectations of them were much less crucial. The way a patient comes to terms with his trauma of failed expectation in each of these situations raises important developmental questions.

Analysts may witness prolonged periods of oscillation between the wish to hang on to a grudge and the wish to let go of it. Some resolution of this wavering in the direction of a forgiving attitude with the help of mutative interpretations (Strachey,
is an essential aspect of every successful analysis, after which a tolerance may develop for flaws in the self, in others and in the imperfect world. More often than not in the course of analysis, the patient forgives without explicitly knowing that he has done so. The only manifestation of this is a shift in the appraisal of the offender, who gradually becomes a loving and lovable internal presence, which leads to a narcissistic balance of the personality.

However, in cases of extreme trauma and failed expectations whereby the reprehensible acts committed by certain parents, siblings, etc. cause the total balance of love/hate relationship to weigh on the side of hatred, the affective pathways informed by vestiges of the unconscious memories lack any degree of warmth and potency to encourage the wish to forgive and regain a relationship. In such cases, the working-through phase stays in line with the reality principle and primarily involves letting go of the grudge and coming to terms with the violations that deprived the person of his birthright. That is, mourning paves the way for ‘acceptance of events’ without the impetus to forgive the protagonists. An example of this instance of acceptance was provided by Smith (2005) at the panel on ‘Forgiveness’ in Seattle in which his patient—despite mourning the traumatic events of his childhood and making major repairs in his internal world and in relationship to himself—neither forgave his parents nor sought reparation of the actual relationship with them. Since the case was presented to challenge the significance and dynamics of forgiveness in the course of analysis, I use it only to demonstrate my agreement with Smith that there are analyses in which forgiveness does not play a significant role.

And yet, what are the developmental outcomes in such situations where forgiveness is impossible? Failed expectations of one’s birthright are tantamount to catastrophic trauma. Even when the patient comes to full understanding of the limitations of the caretaker and reaches a point of wanting to forgive, he is faced with a dilemma. What is there to forgive when the outcome of forgiveness does not provide him with any positive bond precisely because the bond never existed? Such a patient does not feel the necessity to forgive, and realistically chooses to accept the events without an internal bond with actual ‘good-enough’ parents. As such, would the positive bond and internalization of the analyst make up for this vacuum, and engender enough structure to make up for the structural gains of forgiveness? Or should we expect that such a patient will be more vulnerable than a patient who is able to forgive his wrongdoer; that, like a mended vase, he will be much more susceptible to future blows? Could one conclude that the patient who can forgive and gain an inner ‘good-enough’ mother or father comes out of analysis more whole? Making these developmental distinctions is important not only in terms of the limitations of the healing power of psychoanalysis vis-à-vis major trauma, but also regarding the significance of the healing power of forgiveness (if appropriate) in the course of analysis.

Occasionally, it is possible that the increased understanding of the caregiver’s gross psychological disturbance, which the patient gains in analysis, brings about a ‘diminished expectation’. In that case, forgiveness, perhaps never before contemplated, may become an option, albeit with a much paler and more muted dynamic. Still the question remains: in the absence of any viable positive bond, how does the
patient internalize, through forgiveness, a ‘good-enough’ parent that never existed? Often, in my practice, I have noticed that, once the absence of malice is established, the wish to salvage any aspect of one’s birthright is so strong that the patient hangs on to a positive fantasy of how things could have been had the parent not been disturbed. Thus, the degree of accountability of the intimate other on the basis of his reality testing and psychological health also plays a role in one’s ability to forgive.

Finally, there are those cases in which the patient does not even consider forgiving the hurt and disappointment caused by a significant influential figure because the patient’s ‘expectation’ was not set so high as to cause unbearable disappointment in the relationship. One male patient of mine, who was consumed with resentment over the inadequacies of his parents and other close relatives, never felt bitter about the significant shortcomings of a stepfather who showed up in his life when he was 9. The stepfather was emotionally inexpressive and resisted adopting my patient until he was 18 (presumably because he did not want to be legally responsible for his expenses). Yet my patient, despite feeling hurt, harbored no resentment towards him, either in childhood or in later life. He had no major expectations of this man whom he felt saved him from a fatherless childhood even though he was not bound to him by blood, and took everything he received from this perfect stranger as a bonus. The flaws and inadequacies of this benign but limited figure were easily tolerated and accepted as the patient’s focus was not on what he did not receive emotionally from this man, but on how this latter’s presence enriched his life intellectually.

Thus, to sum up, the ending of any successful analysis is marked by three possibilities: ‘acceptance of the wrongdoer’ without the need to forgive (previous case presentation); ‘acceptance of events’ without forgiveness of the protagonists (Smith, 2005); and ‘forgiveness’, examples of which are in recent literature (Akhtar, 2002; Siassi, 2004).

Concluding remarks

I have argued for a dynamic conceptualization of forgiveness strictly during psychoanalysis. When legitimate expectations of intimate relationships are not met, forgiveness becomes a challenge for ego to restore the lost narcissistic balance—not only through a ‘letting-go’ of the grudge and its corresponding primitive defenses (which happens even when the patient does not forgive and simply accepts his traumatic childhood), but also through the resumption, external or internal, of a significant bond, and thus the recapturing of something lost within oneself. To forgive, therefore, reveals and supports newfound strength and a willingness to take the risk of intimacy. The roots of forgiveness developmentally underlie and precede the timetable of the Kleinian concepts of gratitude and reparation: this timeline was explored and the addictive characteristics of the state of unforgiveness—of nursing a grudge and transformation of qualitative into quantitative mode of seeking fulfillment—investigated. Distinguishing forgiveness as a dynamic concept from other related concepts leads to the following conclusions.

First and foremost, while ‘acceptance’ may occur in a neutral zone (that is, within relationships without significant bond strength, or where the bond is unworthy of
resumption), dynamically conceived forgiveness always occurs in the charged zone of a relationship filled with expectations. ‘Non-dynamic’ forgiveness—such as ‘I forgive you, stranger, for stepping on my toe, or for screwing up my car-insurance application’—is not really forgiveness at all, but the word is used as part of a social formula of reconciliation and getting on. It honors the deed, makes it public and moves on.

Second, the recontextualization of the memory of harm following the willingness to forgive by virtue of softening the superego allows access to heretofore repressed or suppressed memories, leading to a realignment of the internal-object world; this is a *sine qua non* of the reality principle, thus further enhancing the psychological gains of forgiveness.

Third, the forgiving attitude that is the by-product of self-forgiveness and works against the use of primitive splitting and projective defenses supports a kinder superego and upholds the narcissistic balance.

Fourth, following acceptance and also following forgiveness, when it is forthcoming, the person is gradually able to make a shift from focusing on the wrongdoer to the wrong, from the criminal to the crime. This is due to the diminution of the narcissistic injury of feeling singled out, targeted and damaged, which modulates the quest for a just world and allows for the dawn of a philosophical outlook on the world.

Fifth, the lost narcissistic balance of the personality following a betrayal is disruptive to one’s sense of confidence in the world. The failure of legitimate expectations ruptures basic trust (Erickson, 1959). The wish to restore that trust is another driving force towards forgiveness.

Finally, forgiveness becomes a salient psychoanalytic construct in those analyses where patients unconsciously decide that the overall balance of a damaged or ruptured relationship is worth salvaging. This observation echoes Kohut’s (1971) description of the restoration of the ruptured analytic bond after inevitable misattunements. Kohut’s emphasis on the healing quality in the re-establishment of the analytic bond is also a central issue for the dynamics of forgiveness.

Translations of summary

Perdón, aceptación y el asunto de las expectativas. En este artículo pretende elaborar una conceptualización dinámica del perdón durante el análisis. El trauma del fracaso de expectativas en las relaciones íntimas es vivido como un rechazo a nivel narcisista. Cuando las expectativas legítimas en las relaciones no se cumplen, el perdón se vuelve un desafío para el yo a fin de restaurar el equilibrio narcisista perdido a través de la reanudación de un vínculo interno significativo. La autora sostiene que el final de muchos análisis exitosos está marcado por tres posibilidades en función de la relación del paciente con sus traumas y con las personas significativas para él: en los casos en los cuales la relación estuvo marcada por expectativas mínimas, el sujeto aprende simplemente a aceptar el daño que se le ha hecho sin sentir especialmente la necesidad de perdonar. En casos donde la relación estuvo marcada por grandes expectativas, el paciente puede aprender a aceptar el trauma sin el deseo o la necesidad de perdonar al autor. Sin embargo, incluso ante la frustración dolorosa de grandes expectativas en una relación íntima, el paciente puede llegar a perdonar al otro si subsisten vínculos internos positivos suficientemente fuertes susceptibles de ser preservados. Se investigan las raíces evolutivas de este tipo de perdón al nivel del desarrollo, como también las características adictivas de la actitud que consiste en ‘alimentar un rencor’ y la conversión de la investigación de la satisfacción de una modalidad cuantitativa a una cualidad cualitativa.

Le pardon, l’acceptation et l’enjeu de l’attente. Dans cet article, l’auteur développe une conceptualisation dynamique du pardon au cours de l’analyse. Le traumatisme des attentes déçues dans les relations intimes est narcissiquement destabilisant. Lorsque les attentes légitimes dans les relations ne sont pas remplies, le pardon devient un enjeu pour le moi dans le but de restaurer l’équilibre narcissique perdu à travers la reprise d’un lien interne significatif. L’auteur considère que l’aboutissement de toute analyse réussie est marqué par trois possibilités en fonction de la relation du patient à ses traumatismes et aux personnes significatives pour lui. Dans les cas où la relation était marquée par des attentes minimales, le sujet apprend simplement à accepter le mal qui lui a été fait sans éprouver particulièrement le besoin de pardonner. Dans les cas où la relation était marquée par de grandes attentes, le patient peut apprendre à accepter le traumatisme sans le désir ou le besoin de pardonner à celui qui l’a déçu. Cependant, même avec la frustration douloureuse des grandes attentes dans une relation intime, le patient peut en arriver à pardonner l’autre, s’il subsiste suffisamment de liens internes positifs susceptibles d’être préservés. Les racines développementales de ce type de pardon, tout comme les caractéristiques adictives de l’attitude qui consiste à « soigner sa rancune » et la conversion du mode qualitatif de recherche de la satisfaction en mode quantitatif sont approfondies.

Perdonare, accettare e livello di aspettative nel rapporto. Questo lavoro è volto a elaborare una conceptualizzazione dinamica del perdono in psicoanalisi. Il trauma di aspettative deluse nel rapportarsi a oggetti significativi viene vissuto a livello narcisistico come destabilizzante. Quando le legittime aspettative in un rapporto non vengono soddisfatte, il perdono diventa una sfida alla capacità dell’Io di reinstallare l’equilibrio narcissistico perduto mediante il ripristino di un legame interno significativo. Avanzo l’ipotesi che ogni esito positivo di analisi sia caratterizzato da tre possibili configurazioni concernenti il rapporto del paziente con persone significative e i suoi traumi. Nei casi in cui il rapporto sia stato caratterizzato da aspettative minime, il soggetto impara semplicemente ad accettare la persona da cui ha subito il torto senza che nemmeno emerga il bisogno di perdonarla. Nei casi in cui un rapporto sia stato caratterizzato da un grado elevato di aspettative, il paziente può imparare ad accettare il trauma senza la volontà o il bisogno di perdonare il fautore del torto. Tuttavia, anche nel caso della dolorosa frustrazione dovuta a un grado elevato di aspettative, il paziente può riuscire a perdonare se resta un legame interiore positivo sufficientemente forte. Si esplorano inoltre le origini di questo tipo di perdono a livello dello sviluppo, l’investimento emotivo nel risentimento e la conversione della ricerca di appagamento da un modo qualitativo a uno quantitativo.

References


