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**Forgiveness, a spiritual action, a psychological action**  
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Forgiveness is like love or joy; it exists but is indefinable. Forgiveness cannot be confined to one domain of the human sciences; it spreads across several disciplines. It appears to have belonged to the mono-theistic tradition before becoming more global. What interests me here is the place of forgiveness in psycho-therapy and its effect on the psyche. Trans-cultural psycho-therapy has the special property of making possible an encounter between therapist and patient from different cultures, who sometimes don't even speak the same language. It is made possible by a willing unity between multi-disciplinary therapists and translators. I will approach the subject by means of two clinical scenarios which were all about forgiveness. They raise several questions: what does forgiveness bring to the situation? Can one forgive someone who has died? Can someone dead forgive? Forgiveness as a voluntary act, as an unspoken but forceful word, induces a psychological process, but is not a substitute for it, it can transform ones' thinking, and sometimes it can be the start of a process of mourning. In order to begin to understand forgiveness, we need to bring in the disciplines of philosophy, anthropology and religion. It cannot be confined only to psycho-analysis, hence the emphasis on complementarity: it is this point of contact between the spiritual and the psychological which results in the change, the transformation in thinking and in the psyche.

**A few foundational elements of forgiveness**

What can we derive from forgiveness that might enlighten clinical practice? When we talk of forgiveness, how should we think about it? Should one forgive something, forgive someone, forgive something someone has done? Is revenge the opposite of forgiveness? Is to forgive to be wise, to know all there is to know? But we can say what forgiveness is not: forgetting, cancelling out, not knowing. It is an act, a word. It is also a cultural, anthropological fact which is part of the giving process and part of relationships in general. It is associated with the dialectic of memory and forgetting, and with the grieving process. It is also linked to blame, to sin, to crime, and relates to the notions of absolution, remission of sins, and leniency based on a foundation of penalty exacted, and reparation.

One could define forgiveness as a positive act by which you remember and decide not to hold a grudge against the person who has wronged you (Abécassis 1996 :141). Forgiveness is closely associated with remembering; you cannot have forgiveness where the wrong is not remembered. And yet the concept of forgiveness cannot be confined within one definition; there will be as many descriptions of forgiveness as there are people writing about it, about its significance and its fundamental contribution to life. We could distinguish between individual and collective forgiveness, between ordinary and exceptional forgiveness.

The forgiveness envisaged by psychologist Maryse Vaillant is 'ordinary'; part and parcel of the inter-relationship between parents and children. Forgiveness is part of the script of the

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family story, passed between generations. For her, forgiveness is one of the foundations of family history: we owe our parents a debt, we forgive our parents, and it is part of our path to maturity. To forgive our parents is to acquit them, a task we can only perform as individuals.

Forgiveness brings sense and personal meaning and rebuilds relationships. It cancels the debt. Through its spiritual dimension, man can dominate evil, can transform evil into the promise of life, and allow liberation from the effects of the past, without forgetting. But we don't know why we forgive. Pardon is a gift without recompense. Is to forgive a reply empowered by divine love, or a group instinct for survival? Forgiveness is based on an illusion of restoration which allows one to rise above resentment; you repair something in the other person that you fear you may have destroyed, to redeem what is wrecked in your own life, according to Melanie Klein's theory. It goes hand in hand with Winnicott's ability to care, which facilitates the reconciliation that follows forgiveness; reconciliation with your relative, or with your memory of them. That capacity for compassion means to care for another; it develops in the child's first year where they already know that if they attack their mother they might lose her, then they move on to the stage of anxiety where they develop concern and compassion for their mother.

The concept of forgiveness is an enigma, and much more complex for the philosopher Jacques Derrida (2000), for whom it is a religious heritage in the process of becoming universal. When it contributes to something conclusive (atonement, redemption, reconciliation) or it is trying to restore a norm (social or psychological) by the grief process, some form of therapy, or the ecology of memory, forgiveness is not pure. It shouldn't have to be normal or standard or restoring the norm. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, proof of the impossible, as if it were interrupting the normal course of history (ibid 107). True forgiveness only pardons the unforgiveable. It does not depend on a request for forgiveness. It is unconditional, meted out to the guilty party because they are guilty, without compensation, because otherwise it isn't the guilty person one is forgiving, but someone who has already become better.

The question of purpose poses a problem; should one only forgive that which can be put right? Does one forgive a *thing*: a crime, a mistake, an act without mitigating circumstances, or does one forgive the *person*. Should one ask forgiveness of the victim or of a witness, namely God, the same God who requires us to forgive before we can in turn be forgiven? *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

There is an ambiguity in this tradition; either God forgives without condition or exchange or He requires the sinner to repent and be transformed (Ibid 119). Forgiveness has therefore two opposite poles, one unconditional and one conditional. The unconditional is different from the conditional (repentance, transformation) but this quality allows it to influence history, the law, politics, our very existence and, I would add, our psychological work. These two poles are irreconcilable but inseparable. Forgiveness is unconditional and it impacts on the ecology of history; amnesty, forgetting, acquittal, grieving..... It is thus an insoluble contradiction.

Forgiveness between two people pre-supposes that they do not necessarily agree on what it is that needs to be pardoned. It does away with comprehension or reconciliation. It goes beyond all institutions, all power, all politico-legal examples because it is heterogeneous when looked at from the political or the legal point of view (Ibid 114). It is not a negotiation or a calculated transaction. The State or another institution cannot forgive, it is the victim alone who can forgive. Could someone take the place of the victim if, say, they had died? Who can forgive in the name of people who have disappeared? Forgiveness arises from the secret, the inaccessible, the incomprehensible. (Ibid. 129)

Ricoeur's concept of forgiveness has links with the self: 'love' belongs to the same family as forgiveness. How does forgiveness link in with idea of reciprocity? According to its Christian dimension where we are asked to love our enemies, to forgive them, we must not

expect anything in return. To love one's enemies breaks the circle of reciprocity. But love is transformational; we would like our enemy to become our friend. The idea is no longer to give and pay back, but to give and receive. That is reciprocity. Ricoeur joins Derrida in the concept of individual forgiveness, in relationship to another: it is not the same as amnesty or reconciliation and it is apolitical. According to the symbolism of '*untying-tying*' (a symbolism we find again in psycho-analysis in the link between compulsions), forgiveness unties, in contrast to the promise which ties (an idea borrowed from Hanna Arendt). That ability to forgive has as foundation, conversation and the presence of another. The act of forgiveness is a miracle, in the same way as an action can innovate. Forgiveness can open the possibility of untying; separating the perpetrator from their action. The word of forgiveness has as a sub-text; "you are worth more than your actions".

In spite of the complexity of forgiveness, we can still understand from it that it is a way of interacting between two individuals, which does not *necessarily* lead to reciprocity or reconciliation, but which transforms the person who forgives. Its strength lies in the fact that it frees you from the act and propels you towards life. Forgiveness is free, costs nothing and transcends all institutional politics.

In the clinical situations I describe, forgiveness arrived as a development, either invoked by the patient or introduced by the therapist in response to an offence. The first situation concerns a woman in exile, traumatised, who watched her relationship with her new-born being 'poisoned' by her former relationship with her mother. Her mother had abandoned her when she was little. She forgave her mother in Nigeria from a distance, before her mother died. Would she be able to find the peace of a completed grief process? The second situation concerns a disturbed young man, from a chaotic background, orphaned young, who revealed to his therapist that, during the Burundi genocide from which he escaped, he was forced to kill his mother as a child soldier. He was able to develop the idea that his deceased mother had forgiven him.

## Clinical Situations

### 'Bijou (Jewel), the baby who cried the tears of her mother'

The first is about 'Bijou (Jewel), the baby who cried the tears of her mother'.<sup>2</sup> Espérance (Hope) and her child Bijou were referred as an emergency to the trans-cultural services, by a reception centre for asylum seekers (CADA) because of growing worries of the social worker who accompanies them: nothing will console the baby and the young woman cannot communicate her distress since she speaks no French.

Espérance's story is striking because she has undergone repeated traumas in a very short time period. Espérance was 25 years old, her baby girl 4 months. She was originally from Nigeria and speaks pidgin English; an interpreter was with us throughout the consultation. The emotion, but also the suffering and the chaos made the first meeting very taxing. The young woman told her story while her baby daughter cried and cried, inconsolable by either the therapists or by her mother.

In Nigeria, Espérance was married and was a hairdresser. She came from the Delta region. One day, her husband, whose actions she claimed to know nothing about, decided he had to leave without delay: he was under threat of death. Because the context of his departure remained vague, Espérance had to hypothesise that her husband, an educated man, must

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<sup>2</sup> This study has been the object of an analysis which is shortly to be published by Yoram Mouchenik at the *Pensee Sauvage*. The therapy group consisted of two clinical psychologists Estelle Gioan and Bérénise Quattoni. Names have been changed. The therapy continues at the time of writing.

have been part of a local village resistance movement<sup>3</sup>. Espérance was pregnant when they left. When they arrived at Paris airport, he disappeared. She found herself alone on the streets and was raped while 6 months pregnant. She arrived in Bordeaux in a state of flux; “When I arrived in France I felt I was nothing, empty”. It is in this traumatic context that she gave birth to her child; “I was alone in the hospital with all the pain that I was experiencing”.

From the start, there were worrying signs in this first consultation; the baby that would not stop crying, passed from person to person without success, the inappropriate actions of the mother who alternated between abandoning her baby and shaking her. An atmosphere of panic descended on the group. The mother seemed exhausted. The nights were a trial and she was not sleeping. She had hallucinations and could not distinguish memories from nightmares. Because of the scale of the distress of these two people, we immediately organised admission to a mother and baby unit. We felt that there was a high risk of this progressing to harmful actions. Starting treatment and following her closely would reduce her anguish and propensity to act rashly. At the same time we organized regular follow-up at the trans-cultural centre. We would thus be able to explore the threatening circumstances surrounding the coming of Bijou, but also the mixed messages which she is receiving.

Espérance, having become a mother in a strange country, with a language she doesn't understand, is alone and very isolated. The baby must be the bearer of ambivalent signals: her name Bijou represents *'all that remains to me that is precious'* whilst at the same time she is in the midst of *'despair'*. The interaction between mother and child is marked by a poorly disguised violence: the mother tries to explain the constant crying of her daughter “I can't explain what she is feeling but I know that she is angry”. And responding to the baby's behaviour, she says “When she cries a lot I get beside myself”. That abandonment by her husband, his disappearance and her particular situation will awaken with anxiety and force the image of the bad mother, incarnate in her own mother, who left the family to live with her new husband when Espérance was 2 years old. She stayed with her father while her brother and sister who were older were sent elsewhere. She hasn't seen them since. At the age of 12, when her father died, she went to live with her maternal aunt, who raised her until she was 19, when she herself married.

At the point where Espérance became a mother, maternal images imposed themselves on her in the shape of thoughts which plagued her until she thought her own mother was seeking to harm her: “I dreamt that my mother wanted to kill my baby and that she told me to kill my baby”, and she had hallucinations where her mother was threatening her and her baby. These accusations were based on a very disturbed relationship with her mother. So Espérance renewed contact with her mother by telephone. But her mother was of the opinion that Espérance's difficulties were all the result of her own folly. We thus learn that Espérance married against the advice of her mother: “You are as mad as your father”, “You are a bad mother”, her mother told her.

That mother-daughter persecution played out again in the relationship between Espérance and Bijou: Bijou cried and persecuted her mother, already ill-treated by her own mother. At the end of all this, it was Espérance who was struggling with the feeling that she was a bad mother. Bijou started waking suddenly from sleep. Her mother said it is “as if she is frightened” - she seemed terrified when her mother went away. Espérance could only identify with the mother of her childhood, wicked and persecuting, and not with her baby's distress. Espérance, paradoxically, thought there could be only one outcome - wanting to hand her daughter over to other people, and this was accompanied by words and gestures that worried those looking after her. Did it mean that she wanted to abandon her baby?

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<sup>3</sup> For a long time, the region of the Delta has been afflicted by conflict between the locals and the multinationals; the oil which provides 90% of national income is only found in the Delta from which it is exported, but the inhabitants of the region live below the African bread line.

The outpatient sessions needed various components: first to provide a framework that could carry<sup>4</sup> Espérance and allow her to “*penser – think*” and to “*panser – bind up*” the wounds of Espérance – baby, little girl, wife and mother. Then to provide the potential to modify maternal images, to move on from an aggressive mother to a weak mother who didn’t have any choice but to abandon her child?

Espérance found herself alone in her exile, facing a new challenge: learning of the serious illness of her mother. At that point, Espérance experienced an urgent need to be reconciled with her mother, no doubt because of her psycho-therapy, but also influenced by a tradition that encourages making your peace with relatives before they die. Espérance therefore telephoned her mother and announced to us that she has forgiven her all the harm done to her, love enabling her to overcome the resentment and the overwhelming feeling of being hated by her own mother. Her therapy is not over and our clinical focus will now be on enabling Espérance to be at peace after her loss.

### Christian, a child soldier who had no memory

The second clinical situation concerns Christian, a child soldier who had no memory. This young man was referred after an attempted suicide by hanging.<sup>5</sup> Reconstructing his memories was very difficult as his statements and his thinking were often very confused. He had left Burundi when he was very young (he didn’t know exactly when), while the war was going on, during which his mother was killed. He fled with his father to Ghana, where, apparently, his father was from originally. His father loved his wife very much and died “of sorrow”. His father was a farmer. He could not remember his mother but still remembered his father from their time together. After his death, he found himself on the streets, foraging through dustbins to find something to eat, but he could not remember that period in his life: his forehead would crease and his gaze would become distant. He saw his mother and his father in dreams, his mother telling him to join her, so that, he said “I won’t suffer any more”.

Christian started to come to the trans-cultural therapy centre, first in the group therapy and then seeing me on his own. For a long time, he would keep saying the same thing: “I have lots of problems, I don’t know where to go, I have no parents, I have no country, I don’t know anyone.....” Bit by bit Christian started to piece together his memories, images, things his parents had said which resonated with him: he reminisced about his father picking him up from school, then they would go and work in the fields together. He also recalled a saying of his mother “you must be patient”. But his suffering worsened; by day he saw two of himself and by night the dead all robed in white arrived saying to him “come with us”. It reminded me of the hallucinations of genocide escapees who have their reality invaded by images of the dead.

Christian clung to us for help and was equally keen to take any medication which would lessen the agonising hallucinations. He had come by boat from Africa in order to live, and now he had the feeling that we were refusing him life by not allowing him any legal status. Nonetheless, he did enter into social intercourse by signing up for a French course. In any case, his therapy sessions happened in French, since he refused to speak English. Gradually, he was able to piece together his life after the death of his father, as a young adolescent. After his father disappeared he found himself alone without future or context and he couldn’t pay the rent on the house on his own. It was then that he started to go mad and that he started to hallucinate:

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<sup>4</sup> The group consists exclusively of women who can relate to each other, but we should also take note of the considerable support given by the interpreter who, as well as giving linguistic support, may also represent a mother figure who they can confide in and call on for help.

<sup>5</sup> This is a situation that I am currently dealing with.

to see the dead and also demons as well. He went to live on the street, eating from the dustbins of a restaurant and sleeping next to it. People laughed at him. Other children slept out with him. On Sundays, men of the church gave him a meal. This lasted several years and then he started to look for work: a man engaged him as his assistant and he lived in the lorry. When he was arrested for arms trafficking, listening to the sentence he was likely to get, he felt like committing suicide, but the police inspector helped him in return for money. He took a boat without knowing its destination. Telling his story may seem simple but it took years for Christian to put together his story.

The therapy continued at Christian's pace and he came to see me from time to time: his life continued to be hard for he was a loner; sometimes he would have attacks of violence or he would threaten his friends when he stopped taking his medication, for a voice told him to hit people. He found work to support himself, though it was sometimes physically demanding. An inexorable sadness filled him: he would well up with bitterness when he saw a woman carrying a child. I am sure he thought of his mother; sometimes, at night, she visited him in his dreams.

One evening in December 2008, he arrived, and after giving me a few bits of news, said he has something to tell me. From the look on his face I can tell it is serious, and as if to mitigate the shock, he took his note-book and started to write it down for me. Words rained down in French, chaotic but the meaning was clear. He was telling me about the death of his mother: "I am thinking about my mother....it's me who killed my mother, it's not my fault...". He told the story of the civil war, the kidnapping of children, the forced taking of drugs, the blindfold and the order to open fire.... And then, "each time I remember..." Yes, they took him away...He told of the murder of one of his parents' friends, the rape of his mother, the release of his father who was Ghanaian, the training, then, with the blindfold on, the order to open fire. They took off his blindfold and it was his mother lying there with a gag in her mouth. Each child, only 7 years old, had killed his mother<sup>6</sup>. His father found him and they left for Ghana. It was the first time he was telling anyone about this, his father had never known anything about it. I asked him if he dreamed about his mother. Yes, he did dream about her and in his dreams she forgives him. I took up this idea I focussed on this interpretation of the dream: the mother forgiving her son. But through it all I asked myself: can anything other than madness result from this story? What grief? What forgiveness? What future for this young man?

### **Forgiveness as a bargain with the dead?**

The way in which you regard those who have died relies on the process of grieving, both psychologically as well as culturally, and is filled through and through with the emotions that link us to the deceased. The more ambivalent<sup>7</sup> your feelings for someone, the more you will struggle with your feelings for them once they are dead. When your thoughts about the dead are culturally determined, that is to say, the dead go to another world: paradise or hell, the world of the ancestors or that of the spirits, your ambivalent feelings will assume the mask of evil; a ghost, spirit possession...

We know through Freud that ambivalent feelings for the dead result in a pathological grieving process. Freud tried to illustrate this clinical observation in 1933 by analysing the

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<sup>6</sup> I would remind you that Burundi had a civil war in 1993, after a military coup responsible for the assassination of the hutu president Melchior Ndadaye and his close associates. This was followed by a tutsi genocide and whole-sale murder of hutus opposed to their ideology. Whole regions, including Bujumbura, witnessed this ethnic cleansing.

<sup>7</sup> Ambivalence is the presence of opposing but simultaneous opinions, attitudes and feelings for one person characterised both by love and by hatred.

symptoms manifest by the painter Christophe Haitzman in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century who underwent a “demonic neurosis” after the death of his father. The painter was said to have yielded to the Devil’s temptations after the loss of his father and he entered into a written agreement with him that he would belong to him body and soul. The painter repented and was convinced that only the mercy of Mother Mary would save him by forcing the Evil One to return the written pact. To develop my thoughts, what I find interesting here is how his illness started: the melancholy after the loss of his father. Freud interprets the actions of the grieving painter as a pathological reaction to loss: through the pact, the Devil *promised* the painter that he would replace his dead father, which also signifies that the painter hoped (subconsciously, of course) to “recover his loss”. The melancholy therefore took the form of a pathological manifestation of grief. The father was loved but also an object of ambivalent feelings. (This ambivalence will have been the consequence of love and hatred, the latter possibly experienced if the father forbade his son to paint). The Devil bore in his person the evidence of the complexity of feelings that the painter felt for his father: the son was waiting for him to do something unspeakable but also had maternal feelings for him. He achieved repentance by undergoing a series of exorcisms which allowed him to break free of his pact with the Devil, and not without difficulty he started to head down the religious route towards the taking of holy orders. According to psychoanalytic theory, the person of the Devil took the place of his deceased father, and exchanged a series of pacts and agreements with the son that could only be stopped thanks to the effect of repeated exorcisms. The grieving process finally resolved itself in entrance to holy orders, which was the only way of finding again a sense of security and of renewed love.

I therefore conclude that ambivalence in one’s feelings for a loved one puts one at risk of experiencing a disturbed grief process, whether expressed by dreams, or menacing or persecutory hallucinations, all necessarily conditioned by one’s cultural background. In Freud’s story, the grief reaction turned the father into a menacing, hostile and dangerous person, expressed as the Christian character of the Devil. For Espérance, how could her grief progress while she had such mixed feelings for her mother? In effect, when her daughter was born, our patient experienced a resurgence of mixed emotions for her mother which flooded out in her relationship with her little daughter. The immediacy of her mother’s forthcoming disappearance forced her to revisit her relationship with her mother. We must ask ourselves whether Esperance will be able to work through her grief in such a way that, forgiving her mother, she can be more at peace in her memories of her. In other words, when the living forgive the dead, *can that act of forgiveness towards the dead reduce the ambivalence of their feelings for them?* In loosening the connection between the deceased and their hostile actions in the mind of the person grieving, can forgiveness allow the deceased to remain at peace with the living? Alternatively, if forgiveness transforms one’s feelings of ambivalence towards loved ones that one has lost, might it allow the deceased to be no longer a hostile figure in one’s memory, but a figure associated with calm and peaceful memories?

### **Forgiveness and transference**

Conversely, can the dead forgive the living? In ‘animistic’ cultures, where the dead pass through death into a parallel world, a hostile dead person is feared, appearing in the dreams of the living (or in visions) as someone dangerous and menacing. This is interpreted as the deceased having a grudge against the living. They must be appeased by certain gestures and rituals to ward off the vengeance of the dead.

For Julia Kristeva, the monotheistic religions have found the antidote to hatred, in forgiveness, which does away with the time for revenge. Forgiveness does not do away with hatred, but

prevents it from resulting in a vengeful action, because we suspend judgement and give ourselves up to God's will (2005:370). This psycho-analyst makes of analysis a request for forgiveness, in the sense of renewal that is both physical and psychological. In so doing, she puts the emphasis on the mechanism of transformation of the psyche and the body by forgiveness: "It is this potential for new beginnings made possible by transference<sup>8</sup> and interpretation, which I have called 'par-don' (*lit.* through the gift): to gift and to give oneself a new opportunity, a new self, unexpected relationships" (2007:60). This analyst describes a modern forgiveness, a "post-modern" variant of forgiveness, by an interpretation that allows one to make sense of the illogicality of hatred (2005:372). It allows for a psychological new birth by means of the therapeutic relationship. Forgiveness confronts hatred, alongside love.

As far as I am concerned, it is through forgiveness, made possible through the game of transference and counter-transference, that the possibility of transformation and freeing arise, in the sense of separating a man from his actions. This is why I maintain that forgiveness exists in the psycho-therapy of certain patients. It is not the therapist who forgives, for in whose name could they forgive? How could they take on that power or that capacity? *Nonetheless, the therapist is there in the place of another, as a witness, entangled in the transference process and as object of transference, allowing man to be untied and to be freed from his actions, also signifying "you are worth more than your actions"*.

And so, Christians' dead mother, killed by him, can forgive him because of this transference, thanks to the status conferred by his culture to the deceased as a being who is to be protected.

## Conclusion

We have seen in the dramatic examples I have described that forgiveness is not important in the sense of forgiving the torturer, Espérance forgiving her persecutors, Christian forgiving those committing genocide. That dimension could feature in a therapeutic relationship, I suppose. We hear more often individuals talking about their hatred and their desire for revenge and doubtless it is the constant mobility of people that prevents this collective aspect of forgiveness from developing.

We have seen forgiveness as a change of thought (or spoken word) which allows a transformation of relationship with someone close, in this case, a parent. The parent was deceased and the forgiveness took place in the context of a relationship coloured by their cultural background and played back through the therapeutic relationship. Forgiveness happened in both directions. Made possible by the psycho-therapeutic process, it changes the psychological dynamic and it plays a part in the healing or restoration which occurs in the course of the treatment. Nonetheless it remains mysterious in its origins and its effects.

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<sup>8</sup> "a descriptive term in psychoanalysis, whereby unconscious feelings become identified with certain objects in the context of a relationship established with them, particularly in the course of the analytical process" (Laplanche et Pontalis 1967:492)



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