

Self Care and Spiritual Forgiveness

Patricia Gianotti, Psy. D.

For the past several years I have been conducting seminars and retreats on the topic of spiritual forgiveness as it relates to self care. Although there is an abundance of material that has been written in both psychological and spiritual venues stressing the importance of forgiving others, there is far less information devoted to the equally important task of learning to become more gentle and forgiving of ourselves.

When I speak with my own clients and various members of established spiritual groups, churches, and synagogues about the topic of self-forgiveness, invariably I get the same response. “Self-forgiveness? I don’t need a workshop on self-forgiveness. There are too many people that let themselves off the hook already.” However, when I ask the question, “How well do you take care of yourself?” often I hear the following responses:

- “Well, now that you mention it, I do always seem to put myself last. It’s true, I am exhausted all of the time.”
- “I don’t have time to take better care of myself. I’ve got too many obligations, and I don’t want to let anyone down.”
- “Of course I hold higher standards for myself than I do for other people. Isn’t that normal?”
- “Yes, I am terribly afraid of making mistakes, and I push myself pretty hard to be the best I can be. So when I make a mistake, I do feel stupid and worthless, like a complete failure, actually. But, this is how I’ve become as successful as I am, driving myself to go that extra mile.”

Success is not inextricably linked with a performance drive that reaches the point of self-recrimination. When people lose their perspective in terms of giving themselves permission to take a break, or to say I’ve done enough, or when they forget that rest is a spiritual value, they are in a dangerous place in terms of physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

Medical research has shown that chronic periods of stress increase cortisol levels, which over time tax our immune systems. Psychological research has shown that people who drive themselves too hard eventually show symptoms of irritability, problems with sleep, decreases in energy, concentration, enthusiasm, optimism, and creativity. Spiritual literature points to the necessity/commandment of taking time for rest. Without rest the soul cannot be refreshed. Furthermore, from the spiritual perspective the ability to say, “I can’t do it all” is the first step toward humility. Unfortunately, the secular community seems to have lost its bearing in terms of understanding the difference between humiliation and humility. Regardless of belief, many of us could benefit from being reminded of the fundamental difference between these two states of mind.

Harsh, critical standards come from somewhere. Perhaps, it was a parent who was never quite pleased enough with your accomplishments; or perhaps, there was a complete lack of parental interest or encouragement for any of your true interests. Perhaps, you were told to put other people first and that taking time for yourself was selfish. Whatever the message, the real danger lays in not questioning these influences. Part of adult development requires us to reflect upon the values and standards we live by, to assess whether the way we are managing our lives is more of a cost than a benefit to our well-being.

This article may run counter to what many believe is a dangerous and growing trend toward too much self-absorption, too much of “The Me Generation” gone amuck. Although it is true that we have seen evidence of an increase in self-centeredness and a decrease in generosity, I find that this is only half of the story. What is equally true is that we have seen an increase in the pressure to perform both in adults and in children. We work longer, have less free time to relax, the pace of life has increased, and we have an inflated, even grandiose expectation of what it means to be successful.

What would happen if an internal shift began to occur? What would it feel like to hold ourselves with a gentle hand? What if we were able to tell ourselves that rest isn't something that has to be earned? What if we began thinking about self care as a spiritual responsibility? What if we thought about any decision we made by asking ourselves whether this is helping us take better care of our souls?

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