



“Holding On” and “Letting Go”: The Dynamics of Forgiveness

BRAD A. BINAU

A tremendous upsurge of interest in forgiveness has marked the past two decades. A good bit of this interest was theological, but by no means all of it. Emerging from this reflection is a considerable agreement that forgiveness is more a *process* of discovery than a once-and-for-all *decision*. The most convincing exponent of this position has been John Patton, whose book *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?*¹ charted the direction for much of the ensuing conversation about forgiveness. What remains is the struggle to understand and explain how the process of forgiveness actually works. What are the “dynamics of forgiveness”?

I propose that the fundamental dynamics of forgiveness are best represented by the polarity of “holding on” and “letting go.” The questions to be asked whenever forgiveness seems to be the answer are, “How should a grievance be held and for how long?” and, “How should the grievance be released and when?” To address these questions I will draw upon the life cycle theory of Erik Erikson. In particular I will focus on the polar modalities of “holding on” and “letting go” that Erikson suggests are crucial to stage two (autonomy vs. shame and self-doubt).

¹John Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible? A Pastoral Care Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

Living as one who can forgive and be forgiven involves a healthy balance of “holding on” and “letting go” in an appropriate balance of “autonomy” and “shame.” Forgiveness finally is about freedom, the freedom to “hold on” and “let go” at will.

ERIKSON'S THEORY

The healthy personality, as Erikson carefully points out, does not emerge as the result of the elimination of the negative poles engaged at each stage of his theory. For Erikson, wholeness is about balance. What we need to acquire at any given stage is, as he put it, “a certain *ratio* between the positive and the negative.”²

Thus we need to develop trust—but not to the exclusion of mistrust in stage one; initiative—but not to the exclusion of appropriate guilt in stage three; intimacy—but not to the exclusion of a capacity for isolation in stage six, etc. Focusing on stage two (approximately one to three years of age), Erikson does not equate emotional health with the establishment of autonomy and the elimination of all shame. Wholeness involves a balance of autonomy and shame, or more precisely a favorable ratio of autonomy to shame that allows for the virtue of will to emerge.

During the toddler years that comprise Erikson's stage two, our muscles begin to develop such that it is now possible to “hold on” and “let go” of things. The connections with the development of sphincter control are obvious. But Erikson suggests that the capacity to “hold on” and “let go” has emotional as well as physical dimensions. One's holding on can be “destructive and cruel”—a restraint. Or it can be a “pattern of care”—“to have and to hold.” Letting go can mean lashing out destructively and it can also be a more healing kind of release—to let things pass and let them be.³ In this stage, and ever after, choice becomes part of our lives. We begin to decide what we want to be part of us and what we want to eliminate from ourselves.

To become an overly forceful presence, one who “holds on” and “lets go” only in the negative ways just mentioned is certainly not healthy. What is desirable is the development of autonomy that is able to hold on for the sake of care and let go for the sake of charity.

To choose, however, is inevitably to displease some of those affected by our choices. Parents of children in stage two, suggests Erikson, must be firm but also tolerant. None of us really wants to be allowed to do what is overtly harmful. Yet all of us, especially children, need a great deal of latitude in the exercise of choices between “holding on” and “letting go” so that these actions become truly our own. In other words, some admonishment regarding our autonomy is warranted. In this regard shame can play a positive role in terms of either disgrace or discretion. Too much admonishment/shame will bind us with a sense of shame that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to be ourselves.

Writing in defense of the negative polarities in her husband's theory, Joan Erikson notes that it has somehow never quite been understood or appreciated that human wholeness depends on the positive and negative polarities working in tandem.⁴ A creative energy is generated, she suggests, when the two poles are allowed

²Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: Norton, 1980) 181.

³Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963) 251.

⁴Joan M. Erikson, *Wisdom and the Senses: The Way of Creativity* (New York: Norton, 1988) 113.

to influence one another, which is why she and her husband preferred to talk about one pole *versus* another.

With reference to shame, both Eriksons allow that far too much is visited far too soon on children by adults. “[T]here is a limit,” writes Erik Erikson, “to a child’s and an adult’s endurance in the face of demands to consider himself, his body, and his wishes as evil and dirty, and to his belief in the infallibility of those who pass such judgment.”⁵ Joan Erikson cautions elsewhere, however, against dismissing shame as always negative: “Granted that we begin with this much too early, that we’re quite unrealistic about our expectations of toddlers and short tempered and unreasonable and all that, but isn’t there a legitimate place for shame?”⁶

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She suggests that the origins of shame relate to human beings first standing erect with their vulnerable parts exposed to the world. To “cover” themselves, animal skins and feathers and the like were appropriated from other creatures. An awareness of such vulnerability is surely the motivation for Adam and Eve’s use of fig leaves in Gen 3. The awareness that we are not all-powerful, that our autonomy is not without limits, is a good thing. “This awareness,” says Joan Erikson, “shames us and serves to generate the necessary humility to keep us human.”⁷

When, according to Erik Erikson, we are allowed to develop our autonomy in an atmosphere of sufficient toleration so that we come to own our own choices—checked, to be sure, by a firm hand that uses shame judiciously—the result is the virtue he calls *will*. By “will” Erikson does not mean to imply “willfulness.” Rather, for Erikson, the virtue of will represents a consistent, even courageous,⁸ determination to choose to do or not do what a situation calls for so as to keep our sense of dignity and self-worth intact. And this will, Erikson points out, is exercised “*in spite of the unavoidable experience of shame and doubt....*”⁹

Shame, then, is experienced in a variety of ways. Some are healthy and many are not. In tension with autonomy, healthy shame plays a vital role in shaping human personality. A “favorable ratio” of autonomy over shame gives us the capacity to “hold on” and “let go” appropriately, and it is these dynamics that are the essence of forgiveness.

⁵E. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 253.

⁶J. Erikson, *Wisdom and the Senses*, 117.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Donald Capps, *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000) 81–84. “Courage” is Capps’s term.

⁹E. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytical Insight* (New York: Norton, 1964) 119.

ENGAGING PATTON'S AND SUCHOCKI'S PERSPECTIVES ON FORGIVENESS

So much has been written about forgiveness, with new books and articles of high quality appearing all the time, that it can be difficult to know where and how to enter the discussion. Since I cannot engage all points of view, I am choosing, I believe instructively, to consider primarily the work of John Patton on forgiveness and to place it in conversation with not only Erikson's thinking but also that of theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki.

As one of the most significant contributors to our current understanding of what forgiveness involves, John Patton has asserted two things, primarily: (1) that forgiveness is more a discovery than an act or an attitude, and (2) that it is a by-product of the healing process. I want to suggest that the autonomy vs. shame struggle, as Erikson describes it, is a model for this healing process. And I want to suggest that the virtue of "will" that results from it is what makes forgiveness possible—not only as a discovery, but to some extent as both act and attitude as well. In this regard, Suchocki's definition of forgiveness as the ability "to will the well-being of [both] the victim and the violator"¹⁰ will come into play. It is not my intent, therefore, to offer a repudiation of Patton's work but rather an elaboration on it, with the conviction that examining forgiveness through these additional lenses can bring it into still sharper focus.¹¹

In his book, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?*, Patton discusses the case of "Emmie." It is a classic study of the dynamics of forgiveness. Though arguably less intense than a case involving, say, physical violence or sexual abuse, it may for that very reason prove to be more accessible to the majority of us and in the long run be more than adequate for helping us understand the dynamics of forgiveness. After briefly rehearsing the case and noting the treatment Patton gives it, I want to consider it in light of Erikson's theory and Suchocki's theology.

THE CASE OF EMMIE

At age fifty, Emmie's husband, Elmer, left her and moved in with another woman. After thirty years of marriage Emmie was abandoned by her husband and left with a nest emptied by grown children. On a referral from her pastor, Emmie began a process of pastoral counseling with Patton that lasted for two years. He reports the development of a close and trusting relationship in which Emmie gradually disclosed more and more of her rage toward Elmer. As a faithful church member she gave some signs that she understood the importance of forgiveness. But at the same time she demonstrated no willingness to let go of, indeed she demonstrated a great need to hold on to, her status as someone grievously wronged.

¹⁰Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "Reflections on Forgiveness as Transformation," *dialog* 35/2 (1996) 100.

¹¹Having shared some of my previously unpublished reflections on the case of Emmie with Patton, I am gratified by his affirmation of my approach. See John Patton, "Forgiveness in Pastoral Care and Counseling," in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen (New York: Guilford, 2000) 291–293.

Though healing did not occur with regard to her divorce, Patton reports that Emmie’s life improved in many ways: she got a job, grew closer to her siblings and children, and came to terms with her mother’s death. And then something else happened: she fell in love with a married man whom she had met at work. Around this time Patton noticed a slight change in her attitude toward Elmer, precipitated

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by the fact that Elmer had lost his job and was temporarily unable to make alimony payments. Emmie, though financially strapped, surprised Patton by her ability to write a letter to Elmer communicating her honest anger about his lack of support but also her concern about Elmer’s loss of employment. With admirable restraint Patton resisted the temptation to instruct Emmie to forgive, which would have treated forgiveness as an “act,” and he resisted the temptation overtly to interpret her letter as a change of “attitude.” He does report the following exchange from the session when he learned of her compassionate response to Elmer:

Pastor: Elmer sounds almost human!

Emmie: What?

Pastor: I never had thought of him as an ordinary human being before, but listening to you then, the thought did occur to me. You sounded as if you were concerned about his predicament.

Emmie: Well, he got himself into it.

Pastor: I know. I was just noticing how you sounded. For the first time I can remember, he didn’t sound like the enemy—just an ordinary human being. [I sighed and commented that it felt good. Emmie remained silent.]¹²

Not long after this Emmie terminated the counseling relationship, claiming that it was interfering with her new relationship with her now-divorced friend.

In the end we are left to wonder about the extent to which Emmie did in fact “discover” forgiveness. She did experience some healing and she did express the ability to care about Elmer in a new way. But as the door closes behind Emmie after her last session and we are given the privilege of peering over Patton’s shoulder, we cannot help but wonder: Could more have happened? Could a greater sense of release have been articulated and embraced? In short, could Emmie have experienced the power of forgiveness any more profoundly?

RECONSIDERING THE CASE OF EMMIE

Without trying to second-guess Patton (the care he provided was by all standards exemplary), I do want to suggest that more can be learned both about Em-

¹²Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* 140.

mie and about forgiveness. I propose to pursue this learning by considering how autonomy, shame, and “will” factor into this case, particularly “will” understood in light of Suchocki’s concept of “will[ing] the well-being of the victim and violator.”

To begin with, if we consider Emmie’s struggle to forgive in terms of Erikson’s theory, we note that her “holding on” was excessive and her “letting go” minimal regarding her grievance with Elmer. That is not to blame her for these behaviors, but only to notice how she was restricted in her growth toward wholeness. Thinking of it this way should make us curious as to what in Emmie’s history made this kind of “holding on” so necessary and “letting go” so difficult.

Near the end of his book Patton shares some information that sheds light on these questions. As it turns out, Emmie had struggled throughout her life to get her mother’s approval. One wonders about ways in which the excessive presence of unhealthy shame made it difficult for Emmie to express herself autonomously and to develop a sense of will that Erikson characterizes as “*the unbroken determination to exercise free choice as well as self-restraint, in spite of the unavoidable experience of shame....*”¹³ “We must learn to will what can be, [and] to renounce as not worth willing what cannot be,” says Erikson.¹⁴ One would certainly think that toxic shame had compromised Emmie on this front at some point. Another comment by Patton makes us wonder if Emmie was ever able to have a will of her own. It was also the case, he tells us, that Emmie had “feelings of being contingent on everyone else’s wishes.”¹⁵ This carried over into her marriage where she “continued to try to please Elmer as she had learned to try to please others.”¹⁶

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into ‘warm feelings toward whoever has violated us’”*

As we consider again Emmie’s struggle to forgive, it is helpful to remember Marjorie Suchocki’s assertion that forgiveness is easily trivialized in our time. She argues that we have allowed forgiveness to deteriorate too readily into “warm feelings toward whoever has violated us....”¹⁷ While this conception of forgiveness may be adequate for minor offenses like a hurtful comment or a missed appointment, she notes, it can hardly address what she calls “deep wrong.”¹⁸ As an alternative, she proposes an understanding of forgiveness that is more related to will than to emotion. As such, hers is an argument that moves us back toward viewing forgiveness as an act or attitude and away from Patton’s firmer insistence on forgiveness as a “discovery.” Without denying a role to emotion—indeed she acknowledges that

¹³E. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility*, 119.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁵Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* 167.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁷Suchocki, “Reflections on Forgiveness,” 95.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 96.

this is where evil hurts us the most—Suchocki suggests that forgiveness must transcend emotion.

As noted, Suchocki defines forgiveness as willing the well-being of both victim and violator. This does not mean we condone what has been done. It does mean that we will that the violator stop violating. “To will the well-being of the sinner, then, is to will conversion from continuance in the sin, and this one can surely do,” she suggests.¹⁹ Those of us sensitized to the important role of emotions in our overall health and wholeness may balk at this notion, but on reflection I think we will have to concede that Suchocki’s proposal has merit insofar as it helps us take responsibility for what we can do in the process of forgiveness.

Suchocki further elaborates on her definition of forgiveness by stating that “[i]t involves the harshness of knowing as fully as possible the extent of the evil” caused by the wrong that was done.²⁰ This “knowing,” we might say, involves “holding on” to the grievance long enough to comprehend its magnitude so that we might gain adequate appreciation for the damage done. Sometimes it means that we “hold on” long enough for the law to intervene and ensure that help comes to both the victim and the victimizer. Our “holding on” can also help us to grow in awareness that we are not alone in our suffering. Support groups, Suchocki notes, are often important because they sustain us with a spirit of solidarity in suffering. Our “holding on” can be an important acknowledgment that the way to health is *through* our pain, not *around* it. As psychiatrist R. D. Laing is reported to have said: “There is a great deal of pain in life and perhaps the only pain that can be avoided is the pain that comes from trying to avoid the pain.”²¹

Yet to “hold on” too long is to allow the wrong done to repeat itself again and again. While it is true that we cannot really let go of something we have not meaningfully grasped, it is equally true that once we have grasped the essential significance of a wrong done to us it is both possible and advantageous to release it. We may resist “letting go” because this feels as if we are condoning the wrong. But Suchocki has in mind something deeper: the willing of “a reality-based flourishing that trusts God to deal with both sinner and self.”²²

Indeed, there came a decided moment of hopefulness in Emmie’s therapy when she seemed to experience at least the beginnings of the capacity to “let go” of the ill will she harbored toward Elmer. Her own affair with a married man seems to have humanized her, gotten her in touch with how she was more like Elmer than different from him. Clearly, she had trouble making the connection that this might be the beginning of forgiveness since shortly thereafter she ended her therapy. It is possible to interpret Emmie’s moment of humanity as a moment when a healthy sense of shame permitted her a glimpse of who she truly was. Shame was nudging

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹The quotation is widely reported in writing and online, although without further attribution.

²²Suchocki, “Reflections on Forgiveness,” 97.

her unbalanced sense of autonomy, given as it was to “holding on” so tightly, back toward a balanced center where she could more freely choose to “let go” of a grievance she no longer needed as a part of her identity.

Throughout their therapy together Patton felt he could not and should not raise the issue of forgiveness directly with Emmie, and his instincts were most likely correct. The dilemma of the pastoral counselor, as he puts it, is that “he or she is limited to asking, ‘Do you see the good news?’ rather than announcing it as a fact.”²³ To confuse counseling with proclamation often only enhances the shame and inadequacy of counselees by forcing them to wonder why they could not have come to the same conclusion on their own. It overlooks Erikson’s insight that one’s will cannot be manipulated or coerced.

Suchocki, however, offers us another theological entrée. She lifts up prayer as playing a key role in the process of forgiveness. As we pray for the conformity of our will to God’s will we can begin to experience the shift from “holding on” to “letting go.” We might describe this movement as one of releasing our hold on the grievance and tightening our hold on God. Though worthy of more careful examination, I believe this notion is consistent with one advanced by Donald Capps, who argues that prayer is not a matter of changing God’s *will* through argumentation, but rather a matter of experiencing what he calls *coorientation* through communication with God.²⁴

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When we have learned what we can learn by “holding on” and resisting the urge to forgive prematurely, we must not suppose we can ever learn everything. Suchocki points out that only God knows the full effect of the wrong, for us or the one who perpetrated it, and only God knows the full extent of what “well-being” means for each of us. “Letting go” finally, does not mean letting go of reality. It does mean that, through prayer, we let ourselves go into the arms of God whose knowledge is superior but whose ability to will the well-being of all involved is greater as well. In those arms we are held—not to be carried away from our pain, but to be carried through it. Just as the resurrected Jesus bore the marks of the nail prints, so, Suchocki suggests, “the future made possible for us through forgiveness is not ‘as if the sin never happened,’ but a future marked precisely in and through the scars of our experiences.”²⁵ One does wonder if Patton and Emmie ever discussed her prayer life and if so whether that conversation might have been shaped by the dynamics of “holding on” and “letting go.”

²³Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* 168.

²⁴Donald Capps, “The Psychology of Petitionary Prayer,” *Theology Today* 39/2 (1982) 130–141.

²⁵Suchocki, “Reflections on Forgiveness,” 100.

We will never know, of course, but I suggest it might have been more possible for Patton to confront Emmie with her need to forgive had he utilized the concepts of “holding on” and “letting go” (and perhaps the related vocabulary of autonomy, shame, will, etc.). While rightly wanting to stay away from the theologically loaded term “forgiveness,” might the recovery of this other language and the possible exploration of Emmie’s prayer life have created more opportunity for dialogue about the meaning of Emmie’s letter to Elmer?

FORGIVENESS AND FREEDOM

Patton has suggested that a characteristic element of pastoral theology is the recovering of “a dimension of an important human problem that has been lost or insufficiently emphasized in contemporary theology.”²⁶ That has been my point throughout—to recover that dimension of forgiveness that has to do with “holding on” and “letting go.”

In the end, thinking specifically of Emmie, we have reason to hope because, according to Erikson, all the issues of all the stages are always present and available to be reworked should the need arise. It is never too late for Emmie to seek a more favorable ratio of autonomy and shame and never too late for her to experience “holding on” and “letting go” in more appropriate ways. Said more theologically, it is never too late for her to begin to will the well-being of both Elmer and herself.

Finally forgiveness is about freedom—the freedom to “hold on” and “let go” at will. To the extent that, this side of the fully realized reign of God, there is no upper limit on our freedom, Emmie and all the rest of us can only be helped by every new insight brought to bear on the admittedly complex dynamics of forgiveness. ⊕

BRAD A. BINAU is professor of pastoral theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, where he teaches a course entitled “Shame and Christian Ministry.” He is currently working on a book about the theological importance of shame and its implications for ministry.

²⁶John H. Patton, “Forgiveness, Lost Contracts, and Pastoral Theology,” in *The Treasure of Earthen Vessels: Explorations in Theological Anthropology in Honor of James N. Lapsley*, ed. Brian H. Childs and David W. Waanders (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 194.

We want to let go of our resentments and connect with people genuinely. We want to feel happy and contented, full of love for ourselves and those around us. We want to run, carefree, through the fields in a pretty cotton dress, not sit around in our pajamas, twisted with bitterness. But how do you experience genuine forgiveness and stop feeling resentful? Because it's one thing to know it intellectually but another to actually feel it. Like, in your bones. . Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one getting burned. Buddha. How to let go and forgive. Forgiveness is the single most important step towards healing. It will also allow you to let go of anger and inner turmoil that you feel within. Even more important, it helps you to let go of the pain. But how do you forgive?Â However, the person that is able to take up the strength to forgive will discover the true power of forgiveness: it empowers you to let go and to release the suffering. #4 Realize the drawbacks of not forgiving. Again, people have a problematic relationship with forgiving, as they believe that forgiveness only sets the other part free. Once again, this isn't the whole truth, as forgiveness will first and foremost set YOU free. The ability to achieve forgiveness and let go of past hurts is one of the most critical challenges many of us face on the road to attaining personal peace and happiness. While it certainly isn't easy, it is absolutely necessary for long-term mental and emotional health.Â Their studies have shown that serious mental, emotional and physical consequences can result from holding on to grudges and bitterness. Consequences such as depression, anxiety and the feeling that your life lacks meaning and purpose, as well as the loss of valuable connectedness with family and friends become high prices to pay for holding on to resentment. â€” Get Professional Help If You Need It.Â The Benefits of Forgiveness and Letting Go.