

“Forgiving Ourselves and Each Other”

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Ten years ago, South Africa was just beginning to recover from the nightmare of apartheid.

I know most of you remember the horror of those days, when you could be thrown in prison for speaking out against the racist system—you could be murdered for refusing to knuckle under, or even for just being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

You may be familiar with the name of Eugene De Kock, a white South African who led a secret government-authorized hit squad. His specialty was assassinating people with bombs—bombs in letters, in stereo headphones, in pens, in cars.¹ In South Africa people called him “Prime Evil.”

Back in 1989 four black men, all of them anti-apartheid activists, had been killed. A group of three black policemen were threatening to expose some of their white colleagues for being involved in the murders. So their boss came to De Kock and asked him to “make a plan” to shut them up. De Kock planted a remote-control car bomb in a squad car and got the black policemen sent off on a phony mission. Right on schedule, the bomb was exploded. It killed the three policemen and a friend who had been in the car with them.²

Eight years later, the country had changed dramatically. Nelson Mandela was president,

¹ Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), p. 37.

² Gobodo-Madikizela, pp. 13–14.

and the great Archbishop Desmond Tutu had convened the body known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC had a simple and profound goal: to give *all* South Africans, both victims and perpetrators, a chance to tell the truth about what had happened during the long years of apartheid.

In this new environment,
Eugene De Kock came forward and asked to confess his crimes.
No one knows exactly why.
But eventually he testified at great length about his role in the many murders his death squad committed.
In his first appearance before the TRC, he confessed that he had led the plot that killed the black policemen.
And then he did something extraordinary.
This man known as “Prime Evil,”
this man who had ruthlessly and pitilessly assassinated so many people,
asked to apologize.
In front of the whole Truth and Reconciliation Commission,
he appealed to the widows of the three black policemen he had killed.
He asked them to meet with him
so that he could apologize to them personally.³
Can you imagine how you would feel in their shoes?
Could you have accepted that meeting?

That really cuts to the heart of repentance and forgiveness.
Is it possible for someone who has done such terrible things
to change, to begin again, to repent sincerely?
Is it possible for someone who has been hurt so terribly to forgive?
How can this be, and not be a travesty of the justice we crave?

We are wrestling with these questions today
along with our Jewish neighbors.
Tonight is the beginning of Yom Kippur, which in the Jewish tradition
is a time set apart for repentance and forgiveness.

³ Gobodo-Madikizela, pp. 13–14.

Each year, in the days leading up to Yom Kippur, Jewish people are called to search their hearts and remember all the ways they've hurt others, intentionally or not, over the past year. More than that, they're called to reach out to the people they've hurt and apologize sincerely, and to make amends where they can. It's a time to confess and make things right.

In that spirit, I want us to try to think and feel our way into what needs to happen so that repentance and forgiveness are real and healing.

Let me tell you a story from my own experience.

When I was a little girl, nine years old or so,
I kept a diary.

I was very quiet at that time,
and I poured out my heart in that diary.

At that time I was reading C. S. Lewis's Narnia books
and I was just in love with Aslan the lion-god.

I wanted so badly for him to be real,
and I wrote a little prayer to him in my diary
asking him to be real.

That was a secret

I never meant anyone else to know.

My family wasn't religious at all,
and I knew they wouldn't understand.

So it was my secret.

But one day my sister started teasing me about believing in Aslan,
and it was like a stab through the heart:

she had read my diary
and discovered the deepest secret of my spiritual life
and she was making *fun* of it.

Oh, I shrunk.

That really hurt.

It was a long time before I dared to tell anyone how I really felt about religion after that.

But that was a long time ago,
and I've long since forgiven my sister,
who I love very much and never stopped loving.
It seems to me today that two things helped me forgive her for
something that really did hurt me.
One thing was in her.
Years ago she apologized for reading my diary and teasing me about it.
She told me she felt bad right after she did it,
but she couldn't find the words to say so.
She never did it again;
I don't think she's ever violated my trust since then.
So there was a quality of repentance in her
that I know was genuine.

But I have to say, I don't think I truly forgave her
until I was able to let go of my own shame.
I never told anyone about my prayer to Aslan
until a few years ago, when I started going to church
and becoming much more open about my religious life
in all sorts of ways.
It wasn't until I had forgiven *myself*
for just believing and yearning for what I did at that time—
it wasn't until then that I could truly forgive my sister
for exposing me before I was ready to be seen.
And that makes me see
she was never really the one I had to forgive in the first place.
It was me.

I chose our reading from Psalm 32 today about confession
because it surprised me.
I read the words, and what leaped out at me
was simply the great relief in being honest about what *is* and who you
are.
The psalmist writes:

“While I kept silence, my body wasted away...
my strength was dried up....
Then I acknowledged my sin to you”
(but you could just as easily say “I acknowledged *myself*”)
“...and you forgave the guilt of my sin...
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.”

And there’s something going on here that spoke to me.
When we try to keep quiet and hide ourselves,
when we try to put on a good face for the world
we have no strength.

But when we are honest about what is,
what we have done with our lives,
who we are,
it’s like an inner revolution.
We are strong and solid,
and things that used to hurt us
just don’t any more.

So often people hurt us not because they really mean to,
or expect to—
people hurt us because we have tender spots that are easily hurt.
There are places in us that we feel ashamed of,
or embarrassed about.
And you know how when you get a really bad bruise,
it hurts if you push on it even just a little bit?
I think we have bruises on our souls like that,
all of us, in different places,
and sometimes it feels like we are all going through life
bumping into each other, mostly by accident,
saying, “ow, ow, ow!” to each other,
in a kind of a clumsy, tragic, comic dance.

The Buddhist tradition speaks very well to that,

and that's why I chose our second reading from the *Bodhicaryavatara*.
The author, Santideva, says, look,
whatever people do wrong,
they do because everything in their life,
all their history,
their parents' history, and their parents',
and their society's—
everything in their life has fed into them
and led up to that moment
so that it's impossible for them to do anything else.
It's a deterministic way of looking at the world,
which you may or may not find helpful.

But what I get out of it is this:
Why be angry at people who do bad things, because they're just living
out the consequence of all the events and emotions they've inherited?
Why waste your time being angry at them?
Why not feel compassion for them and try to help them?
Santideva teaches that people are doing the best they can
with the circumstances they inherited.
Sometimes they do things that are very wrong and hurtful—
but they are doing the best they can.
So where is the need for forgiveness?
It's almost beside the point—
how can you forgive someone for doing the best they can?
I find this profoundly helpful in any kind of close relationship.
When we hurt each other,
we have to find ways of forgiving each other and moving on—
ways of beginning again in love.

And yet it also raises serious questions.
In our Western culture, we're used to thinking of people
as individuals who are responsible for their own actions.
But what if what we do and how we think
are determined largely by circumstances beyond our control?

When someone does something wrong,
maybe something small,
or maybe something very, very serious,
what made them do it?
Could they have chosen differently?
Is it their fault?
Can we hold them responsible?

Here I should say, as I've said before, that practicing compassion doesn't mean letting people do whatever they want. Just because we have a compassionate understanding of why someone is doing what they're doing, it doesn't mean we have to let people walk all over us. We have the right to set limits on people's behavior.

The real challenge is letting go of our own need to blame and judge. The real challenge is letting go of finger-pointing and saying "This person is bad," or "That person is evil," and replacing those attitudes with compassion for the other person, and with hope and desire that the other person will find a better way for themselves.

This is very difficult.
What about Eugene De Kock,
otherwise known as "Prime Evil"?
He murdered a great many people, deliberately.
He meant to do it;
he knew what he was doing.
Years later something had changed within him.
He wanted to apologize for what he had done.
He wanted to confess and try to make things right,
though of course some things can never be made right.
When he met with those women,
whose husbands he had murdered,
how could they ever forgive him?
How could their forgiveness be anything but obscene?

Elizabeth Faku had been married to one of the policemen killed by De Kock.

She and another one of the widows accepted De Kock's request to meet with them.

After she met with him,

Mrs. Faku said,

"I was profoundly touched by him."

She said he had acknowledged the pain he had caused her, and she believed he was truly sorry.

She said, "I couldn't control my tears.

I could hear him, but I was overwhelmed by emotion, and I was just nodding,

as a way of saying, yes, I forgive you.

I hope that when he sees our tears,

he knows that they are not only tears for our husbands, but tears for him as well....

I would like to hold him by the hand,

and show him that there is a future,

and that he can still change."⁴

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible,
for each time we have struck out in anger without just cause,
for each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others,
for the selfishness that set us apart and alone,
for falling short of the admonitions of the spirit,
for losing sight of our unity,
for those and for so many acts both evident and subtle
which have fueled the illusion of separateness,
we forgive ourselves and each other;
we begin again in love.⁵

May it be so.

Amen and blessed be.

⁴ Gobodo-Madikizela, p. 15.

⁵ From Robert Eller Isaacs, "A Litany of Atonement" (*Singing the Living Tradition* #637).