

Book Review:

Forgiveness In Intimate Relationships – A Psychoanalytic Perspective.

Shahrzad Siassi. Karnac pp165. 2013.

Psychoanalysis is, in its practice, pervasively paradoxical. Analysts have no goals for patients yet a patient should be able to experience love and the competency of work when formal therapy is behind them. Having undergone analysis a person should be deeply self-aware, yet ideally, self-forgetful – how else does one love and work? To love, to work, to be able to reach and value one's fellow human beings – to forgive and thereby find a new beginning - are basic to a well-wrought analysis.

Shahrzad Siassi, in this her first book, has done a successful job of placing the experience of forgiveness solidly in the arena of a maturational experience – clarifying its therapeutic importance and distinguishing it from any religious experience. In this well researched text, the author primarily employs classical Freudian and Kleinian concepts as she conveys the resolution of trauma, disappointment, anger and/or hate in individuals working through such feelings. Distinguishing a psychoanalytic resolution in contradistinction to religious mandates, the author conveys how individuals

achieve developmental integration so that without whitewashing one's feelings a person is able to resolve superego severity; – an essential developmental stage if one wishes to reconnect with a person who has had a toxic effect on one's life. Resolving the depressive position makes the experience of forgiveness possible and promotes a new integrated beginning. Siassi provides a number of comprehensive and interesting case studies showing the progression to such an experience of forgiveness. Although necessarily synoptic, the case studies chronicle such resolution of hate, rage and anger as well as the deep desire to resurrect and live peacefully with the injuring party. The author notes, correctly I believe, “The *wish* to forgive that arises in analysis is an experience very different from the *will* to forgive, which may be predicated upon superego injunctions or pragmatic necessity.”

(p.57)

When Siassi states that such a wish is a result of the exclusive work of psychoanalysis, she is, as I read her, limiting an appreciation of the many life tributaries that lead to forgiveness. She writes, “Genuine forgiveness, emanating from superego alteration and extended to significant others, belongs only to psychoanalysis.” (p.37). While I am not questioning the intrapsychic and interpersonal transformative work that clinical psychoanalysis can achieve, I would also note that a deep and lasting love

relationship can be foundational for such a mode of forgiveness. The self-affirming and the self-forgetfulness of a mature love mirrors a level of maturation, acceptance and understanding which indicates superego modification and a deep “wish” to resume a relationship with an injuring party [frequently a parent] via forgiveness. The experience of mature love can enable an individual to bring such resolution not only to the loved person, to oneself, but also to an injuring other. Her position is ambiguous here and needs clarification.

Siassi’s capacity to recount the progression of therapy is impressive; her description of the intrapsychic processes negotiated is clarifying and grounded. Her style of writing is deceptively relaxed yet informative. Following the thought of Kristeva (2002), whom she quotes frequently, she notes, “The act of listening, understanding, witnessing, and co-creating meanings, that is, the whole process of psychoanalysis, becomes an act of forgiveness.”(P.144). Implicit in such an approach is that the injured party is able to eventually bring a similar level of understanding to the injuring person’s actions and history— all of which is, obviously, necessary for the experience of forgiveness to occur. I am sure the author would agree here, but the text would have benefitted by a more explicit description of this process. Obviously recognizing what an injuring party experienced in his/her

lives enables a capacity for cross identification, or minimally, for an appreciation of where such behavior originated.

Individuals come to therapy/analysis in search of themselves, in search of internal meaning, in search of what is real for them. Within such a context one of the promising possibilities and outcomes of analysis is forgiveness; a continued and paradoxically new beginning with the injuring person. Siassi writes “The most salient aspect of this kind of forgiveness is not letting go of the grudge but resuming the ruptured bond, which I consider the unique dynamic of forgiveness absent in acceptance and all the other related concepts.” (p.78) Her operative clinical models are closer to classical technique than this reviewer follows; she uses such models, however, with enough *relational* flexibility to be clearly beneficial. Ultimately, of course, models are models and it is how they are used that delimits their productive usefulness or their replicating religious rigidity.

The second section of this short text is entitled “Self-Forgiveness In Art”. In this section the author discusses, in detail, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* as well two movies of Woody Allen: *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point*. These chapters almost defy summary. Both chapters are a commentary of the presence of guilt, the resolution of inner conflicts and the developmental alternatives. This positive outcome to inner conflict and the

experience of self-forgiveness is particularly noted in her extended discussion of *Crime and Punishment*. Woody Allen's two films are likewise given a sensitive reading. Both movies are categorized under the subtitle of "*an existential flight from guilt and forgiveness*" consequent when individuals/societies no longer believe in anything transcendent i.e., God. After a detailed study of the main characters and how they handle guilt and their flawed capacity for empathy – with all its consequences - the author notes: "After repudiating the last argument for making a case that meaningful life can exist in an absurd universe, Allen turns the widely accepted tenet that our emotions are the axioms of our philosophy on its head and suggest that one's philosophy is the axiom of one's emotions."(p.142.). She is sensitive to Allen's overall thesis that we are all in this together, and once we realistically recognize that, we don't have to experience life as a sinking ship, but rather as an opportunity to help each other - in psychoanalytic terms - to experience cross-identification.

Summarizing her discussion Siassi notes: "If there is a reward at the end of this [psychoanalytic] work, it is not vouchsafed by a deity, an approving society, or even the analyst. It is the gain of the positive introject in the service of psychic enrichment and improved self-regulation." (p.150) With this relatively short work Siassi has opened, for deeper discussion, the topic

of forgiveness within the psychoanalytic discourse. The text is not reductionistic in its goals of showing the import of such an experience; rather it is a call for additional study. As such it is more than welcome, it is a rewarding read.

Reference:

Kristeva.J. (2002). Forgiveness: An Interview. *Publication of the Modern Language Association*. 117(2):278-295.

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