

# FORGIVING OUR PARENTS

By Fred Luskin, Ph.D., Jed Rosen, M.S.W. and Ken Silvestri, Ed.D.

Many of us baby boomers were born into the age of therapy. We learned to be well versed and articulate about our thoughts and feelings. Prior generations might have repressed the disagreeable feelings they had about themselves and their families. The consequence of this repression was a lingering estrangement from our own experience. Part of what we baby boomers learned was to distinguish ourselves from our parents by learning about and expressing our anger instead of hiding these feelings. By consciously differentiating ourselves from our parents we aspired for greater freedom and this freedom became a hallmark of our generation.

Now that the baby boomers are aging they face the old age and ultimate death of their parents. This painful time reminds us that our parents, like our planet, are not inexhaustible resources. We need to come to grips with our parents, their good and bad aspects. When I discussed forgiveness of parents with my acupuncturist, he said that if you don't forgive your parents you don't forgive yourself. Each parent, he said, is fifty percent of you.

The problem is most of us do not know how to forgive. We have ideas about what forgiveness means that we have taken from religion or the guidance from our early socialization period. A small group of researchers and psychotherapists have studied forgiveness based on The Stanford Forgiveness Project and have worked with Dr. Luskin to adapt this work into a "Forgiveness Therapy." This approach we have applied to help people deal with aging parents and others who may have hurt us.

Frank is a case example of how a man mired in a painful grievance was able to learn to forgive. Frank, a baby boomer, had severed all contact with his widowed mother for at least ten years. Frank had declined all of his mother's entreaties and demands over most of his adult life because he felt his mother was so toxic that he feared he would risk everything he had worked for (his marriage and career) if he interacted with her. Frank recalled a childhood in which his mother and her depression and suicidal attempts all but engulfed his sense of self. Frank felt as if he could drown in his mother's needs. "I'm not sure many people could understand it but I stayed away from my mother to protect my relationships with my wife and children. I actually feared that if I had a relationship with my mother I would endanger my relationship

with my immediate family,” Frank recounted in one of our earlier sessions. Frank remembers losing all of his self-confidence when he spoke with his mother, as if his sense of self would simply dissipate as he related to her. Despite his successful life, Frank wasn’t comfortable avoiding his mother. He dreaded how he would react when he learned of a serious illness or her death. One time Frank said “I knew deep inside that when my mother died I would feel upset that I let her slip away, like I wasted an important relationship, but I didn’t know what else I could do.” Like many of Frank’s baby boomer colleagues, Frank had learned in his previous therapy about his anger, upset, insecurity as a youngster growing up with a mentally ill mother. Frank was articulate and well versed in his thoughts and feelings. Yet he had to admit that in all of his years with the most noted therapists, Frank had not learned of any way to forgive his mother. Frank had no idea how, but he asked for help with teaching him how to forgive.

Frank was very busy in his early adult-hood trying to not be his mother. “I remember freaking out if I noticed that I laughed in a way that reminded me of my mother. Any subtle attribute that bore her influence threatened me,” Frank said. In trying to excise his mother from his life he not only rid himself of the negative traits of his mother, he also rid himself of many of the positive aspects of his mother and as a result he remembered feeling a deep level of emptiness in the midst of his success. The scary truth was that as difficult as Frank’s mother was, on a deep level he knew that she loved him and that he loved her. This was difficult to reconcile with how toxic he found her. Frank remembers being confused when he would accomplish something in his life and find that he was imagining how proud his mother would be if she only knew.

Frank needed to access the positive feelings he had for his mother without causing him to deny his negative feelings. Frank also needed to be supported in his need for safety which is what his physical detachment from his mother had provided him. To help him Frank was asked to take some deep breaths into and out of his belly. As he inhaled he allowed his belly to expand. On the exhale, he consciously relaxed his belly so that it stayed soft. After two or three of these deep breaths Frank thought of an image that brought him nothing but pure love and joy. This image could be a person, a pet or a beautiful scene from nature that filled him with awe and wonder. He was asked to bring this loving image into his heart and then begin breathing into his heart. He observed how he now felt which was considerably more relaxed and peaceful.

From this relaxed place, Frank could widen and gentle his perspective. Frank pictured his mother as a young child so he could see her in a vulnerable state. He held the struggles she had with her parents, siblings, peers and with life. He pictured his mother dealing with her mother’s repeated violence towards her. He saw his mother struggling with illness and periods of poverty. He imagined his mother frightened and lonely, not comfortable in her family or with her peer group. Frank was able to see what she was up against in her life, the considerable hardships and fears that burdened her. Frank also imagined that underneath all the pain and struggle was a person whose deepest positive and loving hopes were the same as his: to be happy and to be loved.

Frank softened from the practice of this kind of guided imagery. Although still wary of the traumatic memories or of trusting her he started to make contact with other memories. He remembered watching movies with her as a child or laughing with her when life seemed funny. Frank had memories of his mother's generosity when she was feeling secure and happy. Frank remembered, "My mother had a softness and sweetness when she was feeling good that I enjoyed. I used to like just chatting with her or sometimes watching movies on the TV in the evenings when I was a teenager. I had all but blotted out these memories in my attempts to protect myself from her crazy periods."

Frank was still not ready to resume contact with his mother because he feared their relationship would revive and that he would not be able to handle the regressive pull it would exert on them. But, something had changed. Frank wanted to forgive his mother. He wrote several letters to her that he did not send. In these letters, Frank expressed his sorrow that he had to sever the way they did. He affirmed his love for her and he sincerely wished her well. Although Frank felt badly that he didn't feel up to contacting his mother, he was relieved to be able to wish her well. He was beginning to forgive.

Six months later Frank received a call from his aunt saying that his mother was quite ill and that she had suffered greatly in the past year. His aunt felt Frank had a right to know. Frank was jolted in a way that was completely different than what he expected. Rather than dread or fear contact with his mother, Frank felt a deep, compelling need to help his mother in her suffering. He found to his surprise what he wanted was for her to be at peace. Frank's wish for his mother to not suffer exceeded the anxiety and dread that he thought was his truth. Frank called his mother who promptly answered. His mother sounded weak but she was joyous at hearing from him. She told him that she felt nothing but love and gratitude to receive his call. She added that she had waited for this day and that she had never given up on him. Frank, quite moved, thanked his

mother for hanging in there and said he wanted to ease her suffering. Frank felt as if a hundred pound weight had been lifted and that he might live an extra ten years. Several months later Frank's mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. While the blow was immense, both Frank and his mother expressed gratitude for their opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation. "Frank's mother, after learning of her terminal diagnoses, said to Frank, "I know this is bad Frank but can you imagine how bad it would have been if we never got to speak to each other again?" Frank was moved and Frank was healed.

Forgiveness is the true resolution of the grief process. Grief begins with pain and ends in peace. We all need to learn how to be our full adult selves. In order to do this, we need to differentiate from our parents. It is necessary to acknowledge our upset at the failings of our parents in order to see them clearly. If we fail to see our parent's flaws we will remain stunted in our growth and may not realize our potential. The problem is that too many of us stay reactive to our parent's flaws. The process of becoming who we fully are begins when we see the flaws of our parents but is not completed until we forgive them for those flaws.

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