

Forgiveness & Systems Theory

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In a recent therapy session my client said, "I just can't forgive my father." She was referring to her belief that his treatment of her contributed to her 10 year addiction to cocaine. Now 'clean' for a few years and a member of N.A., she believed that she has to forgive in order to move forward. "What I really feel like doing" she said, "is cutting off from him." This got me thinking about where forgiveness, blame and guilt fit into systems thinking.

The client's angst was arising from a conception of forgiveness that is individual in nature and rather than systemic: a conception that is widely held not only in psychology and N.A., but in religion, politics and rule of law. A systemic conception of forgiveness is different. Here's how I understand it.

Each of us is born into an emotional environment that we must survive. I think of it as the organism being dropped into an 'emotional soup' made up of the complexities of our parents, grandparents, siblings and ancestors. We are all in the soup together. There are other things in the soup too: money, hierarchy, illness, pain, pleasure etc. all flavouring the soup. Guilt, blame and the idea of forgiving, come out of a feeling process that I see as the skim on the surface of the soup. Unfortunately, the skim often drives our behaviour. If I'm 'thinking systems', I'm searching for something bigger, something below the surface feelings that might help me to be more accurate about where I am in the soup, how I influence it and it me. I'm searching too, for a way to stay cool when the temperature is turned up so that I don't contribute to the pot boiling over.

In systems therapy we search out what Bowen called, 'the functioning facts': the who, what, where, when and how of emotional process between people. The client is encouraged to focus on researching the more objective facts of functioning rather than dwelling on his/her own subjective feeling states. Once the emotional process between people is better understood, the client's perspective widens, and feelings are less rigidly held. My effort with my client was to question her belief that her father functioned in isolation of the influence of others in the family. The session was coming to a close so I shared my memory of something I recalled Dr. Papero saying. He said that "forgiveness is for God," that you don't need to forgive your parents, you don't even need to like them, but it's a good exercise to work on being able to sit in the same room with them without being anxious. This was useful to the client and she left the session somewhat relieved. We both knew however, that we would be returning to the soup next time and that getting clarity and holding onto it is 'slow cooking'.