

Heal, heal, bless,
Three days of rain,
Three days of sunshine,
It doesn't hurt anymore

About Healing

Bernhard Meissner

When we were little, the world seemed to be fine, if no big or small catastrophes had just befallen us. We had seen the light of this world with pain and suffering, also cries of protest, but then we were cared for, were preserved, could call attention to our needs with cries and felt safe. Gradually we realized that we were not one with all that was around us and the mother and father, the other people, the things and beings. Finally, we realized that we could also do something for ourselves by doing something ourselves, not only by using others for us. The latter was also already successful self-efficacy. Thus, we gradually lost the childish existence paradise of the unconscious, of being taken for granted.

There is no return to this kind of life. Can we create such deep security for ourselves? Can we create an order in this existence in which we are secure? If this is possible, how does it work?

Not to be a victim!

In Spring of 2005 I read an article in the SZ about Eva Kor, who had been deported from Hungary to Auschwitz in the fall of 1944 with her twin sister and was subjected to Mengele's experiments. Both survived and emigrated to the USA. Eva devoted her life to finding Mengele, collaborators of him, and the background of his experiments. The latter is a long story of its own. Only so much about it here: She was convinced that the results of his experiments were not worthless but were used by both the Americans and her own countrymen.

The article in the SZ described something else, namely her visit to Mengele's hometown, Lauingen. It described how she was attacked by individuals in the local assembly for portraying an "honorable man" as evil. What touched me deeply, above all, was the fact that she forgave the Nazi henchmen who had worked at Auschwitz. It came about this way: She had found a collaborating doctor of Mengele in Munich, with whom she had talked about his experiences in Auschwitz and finally won him over to sign a document on the 50th anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation that described and confirmed the monstrosity of the organized extermination of human beings that became reality there. She was grateful for it, and for a while after her return to the U.S. she struggled with the question of how to express her gratitude for it. Finally, it was clear to her: I am also signing a document in which I forgive the people who participated in this machinery of destruction. This impressed me tremendously. How could one do such a thing, how did someone come to do it? What it had to do with me, that this magnanimity impressed me so much, was still far from clear to me.

When I was in the USA in 2005/06, I visited Eva Kor in Terre Haute, where she had opened her own small Holocaust museum.

She had to deal with the fact that many Jews attacked her for the act of forgiveness, saying that such a monstrosity could not be forgiven. Of course, one cannot, on the contrary one must condemn and remember these acts, she said. The acts should always be condemned, but the people should be forgiven in order to become free yourself.

Since she had forgiven publicly, she said, she had been freed from victimhood. Free from feelings of revenge, of constantly brooding over it, of sadness, of disgust ... I could well imagine it. But how did one come to this conviction, to the point of being able to do such a thing? What did I have to forgive, to whom?

Forgiveness is self-healing

This was the title of an interview by Sara Peschke with Doris Wolf on the subject of forgiveness that appeared in the SZ magazine. She makes clear what forgiveness does for people by freeing them from the role of victim. One can forgive everything, no matter how severe the injury one has suffered. Forgiveness makes one healthier and more content. That's why it doesn't matter whether the person who hurt me regrets it. He does not even have to participate in the process of forgiving himself. Whether the perpetrator is still alive or not is not important. Forgiveness is an act that depends solely on me, a process that I go through, my overcoming. A prerequisite for the possibility to forgive, however, is the right understanding of it. It is not a matter of thinking that what someone has done to me is right, but of forgiving the person in his weakness, his particular situation, his egoism, his defectiveness.

The process of forgiveness, according to Robert Enright, the director of the International Forgiveness Institute in Wisconsin, USA, consists of four steps. The first phase is the "uncovering phase", the analysis of what happened. This involves taking a close look at what was done to me, what it triggered in me and what consequences it had for me. It is about looking as clearly as possible and with an overview at all the components of what happened and its consequences. It is an in-depth examination of one's own person with its interests, perspectives and developmental phases. Feelings. One should be clear about the scope of the event and how significant the decision to forgive will be, if one decides to do so.

Only when I am completely clear about the fact that it would be good for me to forgive or to renounce, because I gain more from it than I lose, forgiveness makes sense, as well as e.g. renunciation. If this conviction is not strong enough, if it is based on persuasion from others or on general conventions or commandments, then both forgiveness or renunciation are difficult. The process then started half-heartedly, often one falls back into the old habit. To whom renunciation of travel in the pandemic is only deprivation of freedom and not freedom for a higher good, serving one's own or others' health, will only renounce it with a heavy heart and immediately resume the old habit, if it is possible. The fact that, especially in the case of air travel, another ecological good is endangered may not be thoroughly considered and weighed.

Then follows the phase of free decision for forgiveness, as an independent action fully corresponding to one's own conviction. This could be the consequence of being fed up with constantly, or at least repeatedly, hanging on to the unresolved situation. It is not settled. This decision could also be the result of the firm conviction that forgiveness is an expression of love and love is the strongest force, the opposite of hatred and urge to destruct.

After the decision, the implementation phase begins. The perpetrator is recognized in his background from the mind, his motives, goals, motives. Just as one has scrutinized oneself, one looks at the perpetrator. He is no longer seen only as the one who was in my way, took something I wanted, insulted me to get revenge for something or for his benefit, maybe even just for his pleasure. This allows the aggressor to appear in a new light, to be seen from outside my own interests, so to speak. On this perspective, a new kind of empathy towards him can build up, which is finally followed by the final act of magnanimous forgiveness. From insight comes forbearance and confidence for oneself.

In the deepening phase, the forgiver finds meaning in what insight grew for him from the injury and made maturation possible. The realization may come that inability to forgive leads to anger, bitterness, hardening in one's psyche. All of this does one no good. Suffering and pain experienced in the injury can become meaningful in one's life as a result of this realization. Making oneself independent of the hurt becomes an act of sovereignty, forgiving an act of free choice. One makes oneself independent of the other and shows him kindness.

(Practical steps of the process follow Sara Peschke's interview with Doris Wolf and an article by Philip M. Sutton, The Enright Process Model of Psychological Forgiveness).

Mother Theresa says: If we really want to love, we must learn to forgive. And with apostle Paul I am convinced: Without love everything is nothing.

To be able to love also means to love oneself. If we cannot do that, how can we love others "as ourselves"? From this follows: If one cannot forgive oneself, how should one be able to forgive others? I would like to give examples from my own experience, also from the conviction that only what I have experienced myself is valid for myself.

My grandfather

He was the most important person in my first six years. My mother and I lived with him most of the time in the house in Saubsdorf, since my mother did his book-keeping. We had our house only a few kilometers away in the neighbouring village of Groß-Kunzendorf.

He was the only man around me, all the other men were in the war, mother's brothers, uncles, my father. All the men were home only for short vacations. My grandfather gave me peace and security, while my mother was worried about her husband, who was reported missing in 1943. As a symbol of security and faith in an ultimately meaningful existence, I became attached to the song grandfather once sang to me in the face of a wonderful starry sky. Do you know how many little stars there are in the blue sky? We lay in his bed in the attic and looked up through a skylight into the sparkling splendor. God, the loving Father and Lord of all, has all the little stars in view, as well as the smallest gnat and every little fish, and of course even more so you, the little child whom he loves. The closing line is repeated emphatically: (He) also knows you and loves you, also knows you and loves you. I still feel the confidence in this view that gripped me then.

My grandfather was the guarantor of an ultimately meaningful world for me, and this was reinforced by an experience in the winter of 1945/46. After the invasion of the Russian army and its departure, the Czechs took power. There were many acts of revenge, cruel retribution for the injustice suffered by Nazis and Germans. My grandfather had been a bitter opponent of Hitler, whom he had said from the beginning, according to my mother, would only bring war. My father, on the other hand, was a Nazi, joined the SS and helped prepare the invasion of the Sudetenland by the German Wehrmacht in 1938. My mother did not tell me how my grandfather and my father got along, nor how she dealt with it. In any case, she did not join the Nazi party and did not become a leader of the Nazi women's group in Groß-Kunzendorf, which was common when the husband was a local group leader. The Czechs, however, assumed that she had been. A house search was to clarify this. My mother had obviously been arrested. I do not remember this, only that I stood frozen on a table in the room. In the next room I heard sounds of Czech policemen or soldiers. How long I stood there, I don't know. At some point my grandfather came, who had probably been told what had happened. He hugged me and said, "Don't be afraid Berntla, I am with you." He lifted me from the table and we went together to Saubsdorf.

A few days later - how long after that I don't know - my grandma wasn't there. A cousin was ironing laundry in the kitchen. That was a room on the second floor, with my grandfather's bedchamber adjoining it on one side. On the other side there was a door leading to an attic, from which a staircase led to a so-called upper attic, a very low room under the roof. I must have heard a noise coming from that direction, anyway I went down the stairs to the attic and started climbing the stairs to the upper attic. There I saw shoe soles turned towards me. Then I froze, seeing my grandfather sitting, strangled, staring at me with a gruesome grimace. I immediately forgot this image, ran back to the kitchen in panic. Then I don't remember what happened.

My certainty of life had totally crumbled into nothingness. I don't remember anything being explained to me. I remember a funeral on a cold day, a process incomprehensible to me with many flowers at a hole in the ground by a gravestone on the inside of the cemetery wall. My mother arrived at the cemetery on foot as we were leaving. She had her wrists bandaged. She had been released from prison in the district town of Freiwaldau and had walked home approximately 8 - 10 kilometres.

Later I put together what had happened. My grandfather had had to hand over the business to a Czech worker who was then his boss. He had learned that we would be resettled. He had learned that his daughter, his favourite, was in prison, perhaps that she had cut her wrists. Did he know if she had survived? He came from a distinguished family that traced its pedigree, back to the immigration era in the 16th century, and had always played a role in local politics. There were too many blows. He could not cope with them.

So within a few days I lost the foundations of my confidence in life. My mother didn't talk to me about it, but after she survived her suicide attempt, she grabbed hold of her life, probably especially for me. I felt terribly abandoned by my grandfather, not worthy of continuing to live for.

And yet, what was loving, meaningful from him, to which I clung, had not been lost. And in the course of my life I became more and more aware of how this dichotomy almost forced me to choose my profession, which made sense to help children in fears, to make the best of their lives by standing by them as a teacher and psychologist. Finally, I rounded out my life in this regard by working to support schools where suicide or death and illness, accidental or man-made, affect children and young people.

In recent years, I could forgive my grandfather for leaving me, see less what his horrible death had done to me, ultimately lead me to a meaningful life. I could feel infinite pity for him, who had been so desperate to inflict such a horrible death on himself. I imagine him now, how I take him off the rope, lay his head in my lap and very gently stroke the grimace out of his face. That feels so good. A friend said: the Pieta, a mercy seat.

My mother

My story with her follows and can be told more briefly, although it is no less important to me. She lived for me, no longer had any other relationship with a man. She lived all her life on her honeymoon without ever having her beloved with her again. She had married in May 1939, in September her husband went to war, nine months after the wedding I was born in February 1940. Nothing should happen to me, she did not want to lose me as well. So she guarded me like the apple of her eye, which almost forced me to make violent attempts at liberation during puberty. The first friendship with a girl led to a real fight with her. So I increasingly experienced in the foreground this side, the holding me, restricting me to our relationship and not the caring, her efficiency. Already in 1952 she succeeded in building a settler's house in Würzburg. She made it possible for me to go to school, graduate from high school, and study, including a stay abroad. What I owe to her remained in

the background during the liberation struggles for me. I only became aware of this imbalance after her death, which occurred at an early age due to a traffic accident with her bicycle.

Today I am ashamed to have never repaid her for all the good she did me. So it is up to me to forgive myself for what I did wrong, for what I did not give her back in love, for what she had deserved. Admittedly, it would not have been easy to jump over my shadow then. I can understand what made it so impossible for me to forgive her, what she had also done wrong to me with the endless will to achieve, without asking if one could not also be there for a happy life. And yet I have to make amends and tell her what I thank her for with all my heart and feel the affection she deserves.

Myself

The model of my mother, in some respects - as has become clear - not my role model, has taught me, though only in my old age, to look at myself critically. I have always questioned myself critically, but in retrospect I have only recently come to recognize some things more precisely and, above all, more deeply. I believed that I would not attach much importance to external recognition, but that I would champion causes for the sake of themselves, such as championing a school that was as humane as possible, that everyone in the school community would want to support the others above all else. And yet it's so hard not to fall for recognition requests over and over again. In good projects, it's hard to distinguish what you're doing for selfish motives and what you're doing for the sake of the project's goals. But sometimes it becomes quite clear which is which.

Recently, I led a conversation in a group after a crisis event, through which xenophobia became increasingly evident. The purpose of the discussion group was to share with young people who had been exposed to such attacks how they could best deal with such incidents. On such occasions, it is asked that they tell what happened to them, how they felt about it, and how they helped themselves to cope well with the attacks. Everyone is allowed to tell and report as much and as little as they want. From one participant I knew what had happened to him that was particularly bad. He spoke of minor incidents, not of what had been worse. At that moment I thought I could do something particularly good for him and also useful for the group by asking if he wanted to talk about it. I shouldn't have done that. He hadn't wanted to talk about it on his own. Why did I break the rule? Because I wanted to bring something particularly important into the conversation. It was to serve my goals with the group, and maybe ultimately his, but that doesn't count in this case. I had given priority to my goals. That shadow is always there, as a statement by C.G. Jung has made me think for some time: Our shadow is as evil as we are good or want to be good. It is an important realization to always be aware that if I want to put myself in the right(?) light, then I do not above all offer this shadow the possibility to become effective.

On the other hand, to forgive myself again by finding it good to have concretely recognized myself with light and shadow, feels good in the hope that this experience again increases the probability, in a possible next time, to notice the shadow faster and not to leave the field to it unrecognized.

From the whole

Forgiving myself with the help of mediation, by getting into conversation with the different sides of myself, is one way of dealing with myself in this regard. Reflection, feedback from others, and sharing is another. Finally, mindfulness and silence are a good way to open up to self-knowledge.

Richard Rohr in his present analysis "Hope and Mindfulness" assumes that every world view, every religion, every holistic world view includes me, but is not complete without having brought into the larger contexts of communities and societies. Finally of the whole of existence needs to be connected with my individual being, not taken over as a good guide in tradition, but made to my own.

There is the idea from the New Age movement that the same happens in the big as in the small.

What has been presented so far can be placed in broader contexts. With Mother Theresa's saying that love is not possible without forgiveness, we are of course immediately at the commandment of loving one's enemies, which Jesus elaborates in detail in the Sermon on the Mount. Salvation should look like this, the kingdom of God should be founded like this. This is paradise in freedom, beginning in self-knowledge, ending in all-embracing affection.

Epicurus speaks of the fact that it is the aspiration of man to be happy and that he should and may also seek this, but responsibly, towards himself and others. Responsibly, however, one can be only, if one meets in love oneself and other. The main commandment implements: You shall love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This God is love, which means as a consequence: Whoever can live in the way described by the commandment is in the redeeming and redeemed life. This is not a frozen state, but always in the flow of loving and not loving. One cannot live without the other. As described with forgiveness, this is a process of self-conviction, of translating daily into practical behaviour, of succeeding and not succeeding. On this guideline hangs the happiness of each one, which he makes his own through his action, regardless of what we call success or the vicissitudes of life. We redeem ourselves by following this guideline in awareness that we also fail again and again because of ourselves, because of our inability to be perfect, because we can only ever approach the ideal.

And yet we are then someone who strives and can thus be redeemed.

A redemptive laughter can rise up and happen.

Opposites then cancel each other out, the poles, which constantly produce change, become alive in the flow of life, in the constant back and forth. They are to be perceived and kept in balance. By the fact that the evil, the shadow can nevertheless nothing else than bring forth the good. The suffering leads to insights and thus to the affirmation. Thus also this pole of the life contributes to the fact that a whole develops in balance. Only in the death no more balance is needed.

Letting go of these earthly circumstances can finally lead on to self-surrender. The consequence of this thought is inevitable. The affirmation of life, this basic pillar of life, becomes love of life, to which death belongs as the last act. It is the transition to a being, which we have not experienced, which we can only open up to us as meaningful from the experienced life, and thus, it is blissful: life, love and death become one.

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