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On Forgiveness

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Abstract

"On Forgiveness" is a young woman's thoughts on forgiveness - of the self and of others - based on several key moments in her life. Told through a series of memories, the essay wrestles with the power of forgiveness and how it can be misunderstood in difficult moments.

Keywords

forgiveness, meditation, anxiety

Comments

Written for English 306: Writing the Memoir.

On Forgiveness

Kathleen Bolger

Entry from my journal, September 2, 2016:

I think I've been lying (or maybe didn't realize)—I do have regrets. Many of them. Admitting I was wrong fills me with shame. I have to convince myself nobody thinks less of me.

When I was eight years old, I had a choice, one of the first real ones in my life. My parents asked my sister and me to have a seat on the itchy couch in our hotel room in Richmond, Virginia. This city was our stopping point between home – New Jersey – and vacation – the Outer Banks, North Carolina. Erin and I sat close enough that we could feel the heat of one another, but we didn't make contact or hold hands; to have done so would have been out of character for anyone with the last name Bolger. Instead, I focused on the knobiness of my knees because it was easier than looking into my mother's face, which was sad and serious, making me feel like I was in trouble even though I knew I wasn't.

"We're letting you girls decide what you want to do," my dad said. "You can either come home with me and Mommy and Brian, or you can continue on to the beach with Uncle Bo and Aunt Laura."

I gave Erin a sideways glance. As with most things—what movie we were going to watch, which Barbie dolls we wanted, who got to play the princess and who would be the frog—I deferred to her judgment as the older sister. Instead of a quick response, all I saw was her blank gaze fixed upon the floor.

“Grandmère would want you girls to go ahead with vacation,” my dad offered, hoping to move our decision-making process along.

Well, that’s what I want to do, too, I thought to myself. What little kid wants to miss out on their summer vacation to go visit their sick grandmother in yet another hospital for the hundredth time since she fell in her house on Father’s Day of the previous year?

I don’t remember my parents getting in the car with my baby brother and turning back towards New Jersey, but that’s what they did. I do remember folding myself into the back of my uncle’s Mercedes, tucked in amidst blankets and pillows and snacks and luggage and my cool older cousin and her cooler best friend. We kept the windows open and felt the rush of air at eighty miles an hour, and I forgot I was supposed to feel guilty about being excited. It was the summer of Ashlee Simpson’s “Pieces of Me,” and I learned more and more of the lyrics every time the song appeared on a new radio station, even as my uncle turned the dial in an attempt to get away from it.

Uncle Bo was my dad’s cousin. His own mother, Grandmère’s sister, had died almost two years earlier while my family was on vacation. The Bolgers and Kennys were accustomed to death: my paternal grandfather and Uncle Bo’s father had been dead for years, and the widowed sisters had taken comfort in one another’s homes, raising their children more like siblings than cousins. My dad and my uncle had been to enough funerals; missing one occasionally wasn’t a big deal anymore, so my family hadn’t felt the need to rush home from vacation to be with the Kennys in their time of grief. After all, there would always be another.

The following year, my family had spent three months living in my grandmother’s house while our kitchen underwent renovation. They were blurry months punctuated by episodes of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, boiled raviolis, and Brian’s first steps. I resented having to share a

bed with my sister, but Grandmère loved having us there. She loved board games, and she took the rules *very* seriously. She loved that I loved to read.

I would read plenty at the beach. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* was packed into my suitcase, and we could go see the next movie with Grandmère when it came out in the fall, just like we had for all the others in the series. I let the thought comfort me, pulling a blanket over my spindly legs to fend off the chill of the car's air conditioning. My heart was light as we sped down the highway because I was eight and this was vacation. We were going "away," a place where nothing that happened back in New Jersey mattered because we spent all day diving in and out of the waves.

Two days later, I pressed my aunt's cell phone to my sunburned cheek, still lined by the sheets of our rental home's twin bed.

"Are you standing on the deck?" my dad asked me gently. I nodded before remembering he couldn't see me. I swallowed a wet glob of tears.

"Yes."

"Look out at the ocean," he coaxed me.

I did. The sun had been up for less than an hour, the bottom rim of that flaming sphere still kissing the horizon. Down at the shore, I could see two skinny fishing poles jutting out of the sand alongside the two thicker figures of my uncle and cousin. The sunlight danced from crest to crest of the waves, a million sparkling warnings of the ocean's vastness.

My dad's voice came to me again: "That's where Grandmère is now. You're closer to her there at the beach than any of us."

I wanted to believe him, tried to see her smile in the curve of the wave rushing over the shore, expected her face to appear on the surface of the sun. Or maybe I hoped to see a grandmother-shaped soul rising up in the space where the ocean met the sky. Maybe, I thought, that's where she'll meet God. And He'll let her right into Heaven because He knows she's suffered enough, and her strength—derived from faith—never wavered. She was *good*, and now she was His. I didn't see any of that, and as disappointment washed over me, I realized I'd never see my grandmother again, and it was my own fault.

“Okay, Dad,” I responded before putting the phone into my sister's outstretched hand.

I first began to apply the word “anxious” to myself when I was sixteen, a junior in high school. I rarely fell asleep before 3:30 am, and I'd wake up at 7 to restart my days of schoolsoccerpracticerehearsalhomeworkhomeworkhomework. My body was always exhausted but my mind ran never-ending laps around unimportant details of today and worries of tomorrow. My peers would casually talk about their therapists at school, but I never considered it an option for myself. My mom didn't need to pay \$200 so an old man in a cardigan could listen to another teenage girl complain about homework and the high standards she set for herself while trying to fit in at the private school that was the reason her parents couldn't afford to send her to therapy.

That year, I was taking an elective class called “Digital Media,” and we'd been assigned a project in which we would audio record ourselves reading a poem and then create a corresponding video. I came across Wendell Berry's “The Peace of Wild Things” and began reading it aloud, testing the way my voice sounded wrapped around its syllables in the silence of my home after midnight: “When despair for the world grows in me / and I wake in the night at

the least sound / in fear of what my life and my children's lives might be..." Something in me cracked open, a cavern in my chest revealing to me how deeply unhappy I had become in the space of a few short months.

I cried, homework scattered in front of me on the kitchen table, a steaming cup of tea reminding me I'd never fall asleep, and the clock creeping closer and closer toward sunrise. Then I pulled myself together and worked quickly, filming small scenes and then patching them together on the computer, laying my deceptively steady voice over the images. I sat down to watch my finished product: "For a time / I rest in the grace of the world, and am free." A stack of my textbooks dominated the frame. On the word "free," my own hands suddenly appeared, knocking the books over. I was proud of what I'd created and sad at the feelings of immense loneliness and anxiety that had allowed me to make it. As the conflicting emotions wrestled, I closed my laptop and went up to bed.

Having grown up Catholic, I've been taught much on the topic of forgiveness and its importance in our lives as both givers and receivers. The Book of Ephesians says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

The morning after my first boyfriend and I broke up, June after our sophomore year of college, I went to Sunday mass looking very much like someone who had stayed up late negotiating a breakup: my wet hair hung lank around my bare face, and I had thrown on jeans and a black t-shirt that I would wear to waitress later that day. I just wanted to be able to say a few prayers and leave, unnoticed by anyone for an hour. But as the priest made his way down the

aisle, he was conspicuously alone, unaccompanied by altar servers or lectors. And when the congregation sat down after the opening blessing, the pulpit remained awkwardly empty.

“May I ask for a volunteer to do our readings today?” the priest’s voice drifted weakly through the empty air, bounding off the high ceilings. Nobody stirred.

“Kate, *go*,” my mother insisted. So I went.

After doing the reading, I took a seat, now prominently displayed on the altar, and decided the timing was no coincidence; in twenty years, I had never arrived to a mass that lacked a lector. I thanked God for giving me an exit from a decidedly bad relationship that I had permitted to go on too long, and I saw my newfound untethered existence as an opportunity to grow closer to Him. The first step in rejuvenating my relationship with God would be closing the chapter on the boyfriend who had kept me so far from Him for two years.

I decided to forgive my ex-boyfriend for hurting me because I never had to see him again after our relationship ended, given he didn’t return to Gettysburg in the fall. And at the point of the breakup—when “we” became “him” and “me” once more—the pain was self-explanatory: it hurt because it was over.

It was only in the days after we broke up that I realized it hurt more because he didn’t know he was supposed to be sorry. And I would never tell him because I was afraid of what would happen if we ever spoke again—how easily would “I forgive you” turn into “I love you”? I would never hear an apology (or read one over text message). I felt distant from the word “closure,” which I’d always heard people toss out when talking about breakups. Nothing was closed; the wounds felt gaping. It was tempting to grasp tightly onto the rage I felt at the way he’d treated me—forgotten my birthday, met my parents hungover, made me cry—but I didn’t want to use anger as my source of healing. I wanted to forget.

It was easier for me to take the moral high ground because that was what God expected of me. I told myself I didn't need to hear "I'm sorry" in order to forgive. It became my mantra whenever I wanted to evict my ex-boyfriend and the pain he had caused from my thoughts: *I forgive him, I forgive him, I forgive him*. But can ignorance *be* forgiven? If he didn't know that the way he'd dated me was wrong—and who could really define that sort of thing anyway?—because I'd never told him how painfully raw he'd made me feel, could I really forgive him? If there's no call, can there be a response? Or do I just end up standing with my toes curled over the edge of a canyon, conversing with my echo? *I forgive him, I forgive him, I forgive him*. I don't know if the mantra would be the same if he wasn't just an echo, a memory I forced into the distance.

I came to realize that I forgave my ex-boyfriend not as a seal on my renewed commitment to Catholicism, but rather because it made me feel powerful, in control, probably for the first time since we'd begun dating. I could point to specific times *he'd* messed up, and I could forgive his transgressions easily because of the assurance they wouldn't happen anymore. I couldn't forgive my own mistakes in our relationship because they were far more difficult to admit: I'd been foolish enough to give someone complete power over how I would feel each morning when I woke up and each night when I went to sleep; I'd allowed him to put distance between me and my friends, my family, my faith. Admitting I'd been wrong filled me with shame. Forgiving him made me feel better about myself; the thought of acknowledging I'd done anything requiring forgiveness was unbearable.

It is hard to forgive myself when I've made a mistake because then I have to go to bed that night. I go to bed, and I'm still standing at the edge of the canyon, but the space below is

filled with the echoes of every time my foot slipped, every time I fell down, down, down to the bottom. My own voice calls up to me from that cavernous space and dominates the air surrounding my twin-sized mattress when I'm alone and supposed to be sleeping and "despair for the world grows in me." Past Me likes to remind Me Me of every foolish thing I've ever done in my life: when I was seven and keeping an eye on my baby brother while Mommy went to the bathroom, I got caught up watching the TV and let him roll off the couch; when I was 12, I said the word "bitch," causing my classmates to go silent and letting the word echo off the walls of my Catholic elementary school; in high school, my parents told me our minivan had become too dangerous to drive any longer, and I called them stupid, and they grounded me; all the times I drank too much, slept too little; all the days I believed him when he said he loved me; every point I've ever lost on a test; all the words that have sat unsaid at the back of my throat, when I would clench my teeth to prevent them from escaping; every time I was selfish, I was reckless, I was naïve, I was scared, I was cruel. (*I forgive you, I forgive you, I forgive you.*)

When I was eight years old, I had a choice, one of the first real ones in my life, and I decided to go on vacation instead of going home. I never saw my grandmother again.

In October of 1959, the Bolger family had just finished welcoming new life—my father, born in July—into their household when the fall rolled around, and they were forced to plan a funeral. I don't know who was taking care of my dad that day, but I can't imagine the arms of his mother were strong enough to hold one child while burying another.

Danny Bolger was the oldest of five siblings. He was nine years old when he was hit by a train. He and his friends had been playing down by the tracks and then... I don't really know. He was there and then not.

The conductor of the train attended the wake, but everyone there was a stranger to him. He didn't recognize Grandmère as the dead boy's mother, so he didn't know she was within earshot when he asked, "Why wasn't his mother looking after him?"

I can't forgive myself for the foolish mistakes I make every day, so I can't imagine Grandmère forgiving herself for letting Danny slip beneath the wheels of a train, even though she had four other children to take care of. I don't know what kind of conversation she had with God that night or the next morning or the following year when she gave birth to a still-born baby or the day her husband died after being confined to the house by a stroke for a decade. But I know that, by the time I came around, a new Bolger to replace all the ones she had buried, she didn't carry any bitterness in her heart. She never spoke anything but kindness.

I have anxiety from the amount of pressure I've put on myself, pressure to not mess up as badly as I did when I was eight. My dad framed that vacation in the Outer Banks as a personal choice, I think to give me some sense of agency as a young girl, but I know now he wouldn't have let me come home even if I had said that was what I truly wanted to do. The adults knew what I didn't: Grandmère wasn't just very sick, she was dying. My dad and Uncle Bo had been to so many funerals already, and, if family history meant anything about the future, they could guess I'd attend many as well. Maybe this didn't have to be one of them.

I told myself everything would be fine while we were at the beach, and two days later my grandmother slipped away from this world's grasp. And I was eight, and now I'm twenty-two, and I still don't know what it means to stand near the front of the funeral home and have people tell me they're sorry for something they had no part in bringing about, a call that warrants no

response, but maybe it's nice to hear their apologies anyway. Maybe the "I'm sorrys" in funeral homes are meant to make up for all the ones we never hear when we actually deserve them.

I feel that loss in my bones. I've never hurt myself so deeply as I did then, and I'm sorry to my dad and I'm sorry to my grandmother. And I can hear their voices—*we forgive you, we forgive you, we forgive you*—because they don't even think I did something wrong. I tell people it's the only regret I have. I tell people I don't believe in regrets anymore. I lie.

As a result of missing my grandmother's funeral, I don't think I've ever learned to say "goodbye." Maybe "goodbye" is just another way of saying "I forgive you for leaving me." And so I pretend to forgive people all the time—that's what I said on the phone when my relationship ended, "goodbye," but I've replaced it in my mind with "I forgive you." But he doesn't have my mental glossary and so he doesn't know that's what it meant, and he didn't think he did anything calling for forgiveness in the first place. And when I say "goodbye" as a stand-in for "I forgive you," it's not the same; I don't really mean it, and I have given up trying to.

My best friend is crying into the phone, fall of our junior year of college and three weeks after her first breakup.

"I just don't understand how he can seem so fine when I'm falling apart!" She is frustrated by her ex-boyfriend's apparent lack of emotion over the end of their relationship, his inability to say more than "hi" when they ran into one another on campus. I am reminded of the privilege I have enjoyed, never having to see my own ex again. "Why can't he just apologize? I don't think he knows what this did to my self-esteem."

I stand in front of my open window, a cool breeze fighting against the stifling air of my dorm room. "I know it's hard, Ang, but... I just think at some point you'll have to accept that

you won't get the apology you deserve. People don't always say they're sorry when they're supposed to. Sometimes they don't even know we're waiting for it."

She continues to cry, and I continue to stand still, both of us waiting.

"Maybe you'll just have to forgive him anyway."

Our phone call ends, and suddenly it's 3:30 in the morning. I've tucked myself into bed, and the waves of anxiety rush over me in the same flood I've experienced almost every night since I've been back at school. I try praying, but the blood rushes in my ears too loudly, and there's no way God could comprehend the words wrapped around dry sobs and gasping breaths. I don't care if He forgives me—that sacred Catholic doctrine, that He will *always* forgive me—I just can't seem to get rid of the bitterness I harbor within. I'm alone once again in my dorm room, and I'm standing on the edge of this cliff and at the bottom are all those things I've done wrong, which I've allowed to carve hollows into my heart and take up residence there, causing it to beat far more quickly than it should as it tries to provide life to mere echoes. I don't know if I'll ever find the forgiveness I'm searching for, but I am tired of staring into the darkness and listening to echoes. If I could only take a step backward from the edge, if I could just tell myself to turn around, I'd realize I'd rather seek forgiveness in the safety of solid ground.