

Part I

Persistence



Narratives of Forgiveness in Old Age

Helen K. Black

A common assumption about the aging experience is that forgiveness of self or others should or must occur toward the end of life. The end of life is the last opportunity to put negative experiences to rest. Forgiveness is a special challenge to the aged because they are viewed as engaged in life review (Butler and Lewis 1982), which presses elders to supply endings for incomplete or problematic chapters in their lives (Koenig 1994). Notions such as finitude (the sense that human life is limited) and the developmental tasks of aging (attaining ego integrity; demonstrating generativity) have been associated with acts of forgiveness in elders. Perceived nearness to death is considered to invite elders to clean the slate on their own or others' misdeeds in order to achieve peace of mind.

Research, however, shows no evidence that older age in itself demands forgiveness of self or others in order to achieve a sense of equanimity, or even that equanimity is a desired state for elders (Black 2001). Rather, an elder's need to resolve wrongs is mediated by his or her personal past, a cohort history, and the cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious traditions to which the elder adheres (Snowden 2001). Most importantly, the concrete incident or event that raises the issue of forgiveness is central to whether an elder forgives or withholds forgiveness (Calhoun 1992).

The immediate circumstances in which a person finds herself in the later years – such as being impoverished, in good or poor health, being alone or being part of a network of supportive others – also influence the choices she

makes concerning forgiveness (Black and Rubinstein 2000). Some of the choices may be to “hold a grudge, save face, turn the other cheek, ignore or embrace the wrongdoer” (Enright 1996). These choices are based not only on the elder’s belief about what is moral, right, or good, but also on if and how the elder continues to be affected by the perceived wrong, and on whether and in what way the wrongdoer remains in the elder’s life. The overall lesson of this research is that the relation between the present conditions of an older person’s life and her choice to forgive or withhold forgiveness is not fueled by a simple developmental imperative to forgive, but is drawn through forgiveness’s complex social landscape.

The Study

This chapter draws on research conducted with 40 elders, 70 years of age and over, that dealt with the experience of forgiving and being forgiven (Black 1999). Life stories and stories of forgiveness provide the basis for this study. Respondents were recruited in Philadelphia from the Polisher Research Institute’s past and present rosters of community dwelling informants, as well as through senior centers, churches, and synagogues. Respondents were first asked to tell the “story of your life.” Other inquiries requested them to (1) tell a story of forgiveness; (2) engage in a specific discussion of whether anyone could “never” be forgiven and why; and (3) discuss whether religious beliefs act as a motor for forgiveness, including forgiveness of self by God or forgiveness of God. No pre-set definition of forgiveness was offered. Rather, forgiveness was to be defined and determined by respondents in their narratives. A key premise of the study was that the word “forgiveness” has little meaning separate from the experiences with which it is linked (cf. Gubrium 1993).

All interviews were conducted in respondents’ homes, took approximately 2 hours, and were completed in one session. Respondents were offered an honorarium for their time. All told, 20 men and 20 women were interviewed for the project. The average age of the men was 77, the oldest being 88 and the youngest 70. Fourteen of them were Caucasian and 6 were African-American. Their average years of education was 12. Four men defined themselves as upper income, 12 said they were middle income, and 4 defined themselves as lower income. Ten of the men were currently married, 9 were widowed, and one was never-married. The average age of the women was 77, the oldest being 83 and the youngest 72. Thirteen of them were Caucasian and 7 were African-American. Their average years of education was 11. Three women described themselves as upper income, 10 as middle income, 5 as lower income, and 2 said they were poor. Six women were divorced, 8 were currently married, 5 were widowed, and 1 woman never married.

Three case studies are used here to explore how elders' discussion of events or incidents of forgiveness are worked into their life stories, focusing especially on how cultural background, spirituality, the specific events in question, and the social relations surrounding the events figure in forgiveness. Throughout, it is evident that notions of forgiveness relate to an already-fashioned identity that elders continue to refine in later life. The case materials show that elders accommodate stories of forgiveness to the self that they present throughout life and to the themes that knit their life story to the life lived.

The case studies show that narratives of forgiveness do not stand outside the life story. They are embedded in the elder's past, present, and anticipated future, and in the view that the elder holds of herself and the world. The forgiveness story displays patterns of attitudes and behaviors that the elder revealed throughout life. It highlights the same moral tone that the elder uses to judge herself and others as good, bad, right, or wrong, in most life situations. When placed within the context of the entire life story, the story of forgiveness is a thread knotted to the events, perceptions, and hopes of a lifetime.

Mr. Marks

Mr. Marks is a 72-year-old married man who lives with his wife of 51 years in a large home on the outskirts of Philadelphia. Although he recently retired from the food brokerage business, he continues to "buy and sell at home" for longstanding clients. Mr. and Mrs. Marks recently returned from a trip to China that combined business and pleasure. Good health and past success allow them to remain active in retirement. They volunteer at their synagogue and for local social service organizations.

When asked to tell the story of his life, Mr. Marks answered briefly.

I was born and bred in Philadelphia. Went to school here. My father had been a retailer until 1939. Then he went into food services. First, I worked with my father-in-law in the upholstery business but I couldn't stand it. I worked with him four years, two more than I intended. Then my father said, "I'm getting older. It's time you take over." So I left and went with my father. And I did that for 48 years.

Mr. Marks begins his life story with his father's work history and the loyalty he showed to his father-in-law by joining him in a business he "couldn't stand." His opening comments show the salience of work in his life as well as the belief that work is a legacy both to inherit and bequeath.

After serving in World War II, Mr. Marks attended and graduated from a local college on the GI Bill. He married a girl from the North Philadelphia

neighborhood where they both grew up. The couple bought a row house in Northeast Philadelphia and had three sons in quick succession. Although he described raising his children as “hectic,” he realizes now that his wife took major responsibility for child rearing and he regrets is that he was “not there more” for his children. However, he believes that because education was stressed in their household, the boys did “very well.” The oldest son became a doctor. The middle son works as a biomedical researcher and is considered “a genius in his field.” Mr. Marks paused before mentioning his youngest son, Jeb.

Jeb was different from his brothers. Others thought that he had given up on his work [in high school] because he said he could never do what his brothers had done. Ted [the oldest son] sat him down and said, “You have traits that we don’t have. You’re nicer. You’re more compassionate. You do things that we don’t do. Don’t you quit. You go to college.”

This foreshadows further talk of Jeb’s “difference.” It also shows the family as a strong unit, and that the older brothers are aware and protective of Jeb’s sensitivity. Jeb eventually attended a small college in the South where he met and married a classmate. Both graduated the next year and had a son a year later. Jeb’s difficulty in finding a job after graduation prompted him to ask his father if he could join the family business. The Marks were delighted that their youngest was “coming home” with a wife and child. Mr. Marks saw Jeb’s return to the area as a gift to himself and his own father. With Jeb, the business would span three generations.

We looked for a house for them and found one a mile away. We got it all painted up and redone before he moved in. And I gave him a good salary; paid all his expenses. Then I gave him 10% of the business and I said, “As we increase the business, you’ll get a bigger percentage.” He was with me for a couple of years before he got sick. That was in December. A bad cold. Then he felt better. In March, he had pain in his muscles. He finally went to a doctor. The doctor said something’s wrong. March 19 they said he had cancer. He only lasted 10 months. [Pause] Ahh, maybe it was better. We had friends who had a daughter with the same cancer and she went through all this radiology – three years of misery. Who knows what’s better?

Mr. Marks displays little emotion while talking about his son’s illness, but he clips his words, breaks off at mid-sentence, looks away from the interviewer, and glances around the bright kitchen. Perhaps he is remembering the first time he heard word of Jeb’s illness, or how often he sat in this kitchen and asked the unanswerable question: Why? After a short silence the following exchange ensues.

Mr. Marks: You know, I don't think I let my mind know it [that Jeb was dying]. My wife did. I kept it out of my mind. I wouldn't believe it.

Interviewer: Were you shocked then, when Jeb died?

Mr. Marks: It still didn't sink in then. It took some time.

Mr. Marks suddenly seems uncomfortable and asks pointedly, "Is this [interview] about forgiveness?" Although he seems to have closed the issue of Jeb's death, it remains open throughout the interview. He remarks that his story of forgiveness concerns someone he "could never forgive" – Jeb's wife, whose name he does not mention in the interview – for what she did after Jeb died.

The ironic thing is he [Jeb] had \$800,000 worth of life insurance which we paid for, every penny. And we didn't want it to come to us, but he [Jeb] did. Now she's [Jeb's wife] suing us for it. It's our money. And well, it's just that I can't forgive her because she's getting worse. She lost a lawsuit against us in one court, now she's in a second court. I mean, how much do I have to take from her?

Lawsuits and court dates kindle Mr. Marks' anger. Anxiety about the court's decision keeps stress ever-present, linking what can't be forgiven to pressing matters. As if to drive home the point, he adds that his daughter-in-law's attempt to "get money" is an almost trivial addition to why he cannot forgive her. She is "unforgivable" because she denied him access to her own memories of Jeb, and to Jeb's only child. She does not allow the Marks's to see their grandchild. To be deprived of this relationship robs Mr. Marks of the company of Jeb's offspring, as well as the sense of legacy and generativity that is significant in his life story. He and his wife are forced to catch sight of their grandson, Tim, "on the sly."

She started right away keeping Tim away from us. We never had him overnight. She brought him at 2 o'clock and came back for him at 6. Everything was set. And we could never pick him up or bring him back. This was her control. The last we saw him was in February [4 months earlier]. We knew he was going to be in a school show. So we got tickets and went to the show. But we didn't talk to him personally. We just saw him in the show. He's got a beautiful voice. He did very well. He's in junior high. We were e-mailing, but he stopped returning. [Pause] It eats at me.

Mr. Marks' comment "It eats at me" is heard repeatedly in elders' stories of forgiveness. Added to this expression of being devoured inwardly is often an

admission, as in the case of Mr. Marks, that he had a painful ulcer, or like other respondents, that they “had lost weight for no reason.” Mr. Marks graphically expresses the physical sign of his inability to forgive. When asked if there was any way to make peace with the situation, he shook his head.

Mr. Marks: I don’t know any way. I don’t know any way. She’s got a mind that’s set and I can’t get into that mind to know what she’s thinking.

Interviewer: Can you imagine her coming to you one day and saying, “I’m sorry,” or even, “Forgive me?”

Mr. Marks: No, I can’t imagine her doing that.

Interviewer: If she did, could you forgive her?

Mr. Marks: That’s a hard one. I don’t expect it to happen. It’s not going to happen. You know, I never hurt anybody, never in my life . . . [Pause] I don’t think I can ever forgive her. No. It’s just beyond . . . See, what makes it unforgivable is well, the loss of your son is one thing, but she compounded it with the loss of a grandchild. So I’m not going to forgive.

Mr. Marks is aware that both cruelty and forgiveness are decisions consciously and willfully made. He perceives his daughter-in-law as having not only the power, but also the motivation, to hurt. The mystery of this motive is part of her wrongdoing – why would she want to hurt him? He cannot forgive his daughter-in-law because he sees her actions as carefully and cruelly planned. Because of the ongoing lawsuits, she remains an active and negative force in his life. Also, he “cannot imagine” her acting differently and, in this way, knows that repentance “will not happen.” He foresees no end to his pain.

When asked to relate “other incidents, events, or stories about forgiveness,” Mr. Marks described his duties at the close of the Second World War as “interesting.”

Mr. Marks: I was a warden at Nuremberg. The guys we watched, Goering, Hess, and all those bastards. Well, I look back on it, and it was interesting. My friend had been through Burma. He was 19. You know the average age of the soldiers in the Battle of the Bulge was 18.9 years old. We were young kids. I was 18. The responsibility they gave me as an 18-year-old. [Pause] He [commanding officer] handed me the orders and said, “Here’s your orders. Go do it.”

Interviewer: At that time, did you realize the import of what you were doing?

Mr. Marks: No. It didn’t rub in on us. I was a guard. And I don’t think we really . . . We knew what we had to do. We knew we couldn’t let these guys do anything, you know, kill themselves.

Interviewer: What did you feel?

Mr. Marks: [Long pause] Well, when it was over, I just knew I was going to go home. There was no sense of history that I can remember.

Mr. Marks does not use the word forgiveness in this narrative, nor does he say whom he would or would not forgive. He emphasizes the inexperience of youth as well as its unawareness of the larger context of life-altering events as they occur. He also highlights the expectation that the youth of his era would, without question, fight wars, guard dangerous prisoners, obey orders and, he intimates, ultimately be expected to emerge from such trauma unscathed. Lurking between the story's lines is a surprised and troubled wonder about his lack of conscious thought and feeling while in Nuremberg.

It wasn't 'til the end of the trial that we realized what the hell these guys did. [Pause] You know, there was a prison psychologist there who I just didn't like. But he lived with those guys [the prisoners]. He went into the cells every day and talked with them. And I used to think, I can't think of anything more boring than doing that. But he wrote a book on these guys, and I finally read it just a few years ago. When I look back, I see he was right about the insight of what he said about them. I remember a good many of them. It was just like this guy described them. This book, I skipped a lot of pages. Anything that's too descriptive, I can't take, you know. If they were facts, maybe I can . . . [Silence]

Mr. Marks views the prisoners' genocide, the psychiatrist's insight, and the significance of his role at Nuremberg with the vantage of time. Reading the prison psychologist's biographies fifty years later now reminds him not only of the enormity of *his* duties, but that he initially thought that the psychologist's job was "boring." Perhaps for Marks, to attempt to "get into anyone's mind" seems a thankless and mostly unfulfilling task.

It is interesting that earlier in the interview, Mr. Marks admitted his reluctance and inability to "get into his daughter-in-law's mind." One wonders if this expressed incapacity is more an aversion to "see" or "picture" the cruelty inside someone else. However, agreeing with the psychologist's insight shows that he formed deep and lasting perceptions about the prisoners he guarded. Although he believed that the events of the war "didn't rub in on us," his recollection stirs at the links of death, youth and cruelty that came later in life. Still, Mr. Marks had no trouble returning to the site of these horrors.

Mr. Marks: Three years ago my wife and I were on a trip to Europe and we rented a car and went over to Nuremberg. The House of

Justice. And it was kept exactly the same way. In fact they rebuilt part of it because it had been bombed. It's still a courthouse.

Interviewer: Was it painful to go back?

Mr. Marks: No, not at all. You've got to remember, we were the conquerors. We hung them. The night of the hanging, I had to spend the whole night staying up. I was in charge of quarters in case anybody started trouble. It was quite a night. They had built three gallows. That was the night Goering took the cyanide. You know, it was only ten months of my life, but it was very . . . In fact I have a picture of me with Goering. I was behind him. I remember I wanted to take my gun out and point it at his head.

His last comments are powerful, violent, contradictory, and spark within the interviewer a plethora of questions that Mr. Marks cannot or chooses not to answer. Why does he keep a picture of himself with Goering? Is it to help remember or forget the event? Is the horror of war lessened because he is on the side of the "conqueror"? Did those "ten months" of his life come to define his worldview? Some of the interviewer's questions are answered later, when Mr. Marks describes a movie he watched five years after the war ended.

Mr. Marks: This is a strange thing, but after I was married, I guess I was about 24, and we had the first boy. We went to a movie called the *Pawnbroker* with Rod Steiger. He [Rod Steiger's character] had flashbacks of the concentration camps. When the Nazi prisoners were brought in – the SS, the Gestapo – to testify at their trials, one of my jobs was to show them movies that were taken by our Army Signal Corps when we liberated the camps. These [in the movie] were the same pictures. I used to show them once or twice a month [after liberation] and there was no effect [on me] when I showed them. Five years later, sitting in this movie, I couldn't watch it. It started to hit me. I had to leave.

Interviewer: Why do you think that was?

Mr. Marks: [Pause with a shrug] I got older.

Although he had seen these pictures many times, the scenes of the Holocaust, shown within the movie's plot, surprise and horrify him. He is stunned by the larger-than-life panorama that reveals the mass murder of the young, old, and defenseless. Perhaps he can no longer claim ignorance of humans' ability to hate and hurt innocent others. In the context of the interview as a whole, we are being told that no amount of "understanding" can call up forgiveness for horrific acts such as genocide, the premature death of one's own child, and the unprovoked hostility of his wife.

Interviewer: You have experienced one of the hardest things that a person can endure, the loss of a child. Where, if anywhere, is God in this loss? Is that something you've ever wondered about or needed to forgive Him about?

Mr. Marks: I don't have a feeling on that. My wife does. She feels if there was a god, he wouldn't let that happen. And yet we still go to service and support the synagogue. [Pause] But we don't have that feeling that there's a god there or anywhere. See, I can't picture it. I can't see that somebody can talk to God and have an answer from him.

Contradiction and awareness of contradiction abound in this comment. Mr. Marks sees a discrepancy between going to service and not believing in God. Yet, attending service is a public display and social support of Jewish identity, which, for the Marks's, is something separate from belief in God. For them, a "god" would not have let their son die or have allowed millions of Jews to perish. He cannot "picture" God's existence, and therefore God need not be forgiven because God does not exist. Throughout the interview, Mr. Marks uses phrases such as "I can't see that" and "I can't picture it." Perhaps to imagine the existence of God is similar to "seeing" his daughter-in-law saying, "I'm sorry," or "picturing" a close relationship with his grandson. Imagined "pictures" have never come easily to Mr. Marks. When asked if it was easier to forgive in old age, Mr. Marks considered:

No, I think it gets harder because life gets harder as you get older. So it's really . . . it's really tougher to forgive. Maybe you remember back things people shouldn't have done, so it's tougher now to forgive. Of course, we as Jews don't want to forgive. [Pause] But I don't have anything to repent for. I don't think I'm a saint. But I just can't picture that I've done something so terrible.

For Mr. Marks, older age does not alter his beliefs about who should be forgiven or why, which for him is mediated by his Jewishness and the historical events that lead him to declare that "we as Jews don't want to forgive." Nor does old age appreciably change his view of himself. If anything, his self and worldview are cemented by the accumulated wrongs he experienced throughout his life. Indeed, Mr. Marks was an active player in the horrific events of a particular historic era – he stood close enough to "aim a bullet" at a Nazi war criminal. He endured severe personal grief – losing a child to illness and a grandson to a "forced" estrangement. In various ways, his description of forgiveness is rooted in these concrete and profound experiences of his life, and in his personal inability to "see"

or “picture” a reason or resolution for these realities. His definition of forgiveness reiterates his continuing questions about the horrors and injustices of life: “Let bygones be bygones. But don’t forgive. I mean, how can you? You can’t obliterate your memories. They’re real. How do you forgive?”

Mrs. Hesh

Mrs. Hesh is a 76-year-old Caucasian divorcee who lives in the second floor apartment of the three-story building she owns. Her front door opens onto a large living room. A narrow path, defined by baskets, boxes, old holiday cards, and a cat shuttle and litter pan, leads into a small kitchen. Before things began, she brought a stool for the interviewer to sit next to her at the tiny wood table. She looked around her apartment and waved, “It’s cluttered, but it’s clean.” Newspapers, magazines and foodstuff cover every available surface in the living room and kitchen. Seed packet pictures form a collage on the back of the living room door and on the refrigerator. She pointed to the colored-water filled bottles set on the wide windowsills. “My permanent rainbow,” she announced proudly.

Mrs. Hesh begins her life story by relating her parents’ ongoing battle over the education of their only child.

He [father] used to say to my mother, “Why do you send her to school? I quit when I was nine years old. I had to go to work. Why doesn’t she?” My mother fought that tooth-and-nail. She was an ignorant peasant woman born in the old country. But she recognized that the best thing I could do was to get a good education. And she encouraged me in a lot of good things. She would steal a few pennies from her household money to send me to dancing school.

Mrs. Hesh describes her father, a hardware store owner, as “nasty and mean. He ridiculed me and ridiculed her [mother].” She says little more about her childhood except that it was painful. She quickly jumps to the next stage of her life, her mid-teen years, when she “quit regular [high] school,” enrolled in a vocational school for office practice, and graduated at the top of her class. Her mother suffered a stroke and was hospitalized on the last day of classes.

She signed herself out of the hospital to come to my graduation. And then she had a second stroke and a third [crying]. I think life was too much for her. In 1940, she died and I was not yet 17 years old. My father didn’t want anything to do with me after her death. He disclaimed me as his child. And I look like him.

Mrs. Hesh stayed “temporarily” with an aunt and uncle, until they found a social service agency that rented rooms to single working girls. She was not surprised that her aunt and uncle would not keep her. They disapproved of her self-described characteristics – “I was a smarty, smart beyond my years” – and believed she would be a bad influence their own children. She dismisses any sadness this rejection caused and focuses instead on the uncommon drive she showed as an adolescent.

I worked at Sears Roebuck in the comptometer [precursor of the calculator] department. We would sit there for 8 hours a day. They’d give us a list of numbers and we’d punch them in and add up columns of figures. Deadly, boring, gut wrenching, disgusting work. The greatest amount of money I earned was \$6 a month.

Even “gut wrenching” work could not keep her from the prize of earning enough money to become “independent.” When asked if she felt lonely as a 17-year-old living on her own, she shrugged.

I just knew I had to survive. That was the basic instinct, survival. And I would do whatever it took – that was legitimate – to keep my head above water. I would volunteer to do kitchen duty at the home. Then women in the neighborhood would call the home for babysitters. I’d baby-sit. And at holiday time I got a job at Gimbels, cashiering and wrapping. I lied about my age. You were supposed to be 18.

Mrs. Hesh considered her drive to succeed and high energy to be a legacy of her “hated” father. Although he disclaimed her, he could not erase his own dark looks from her face, nor could he deny how like him she was in talent and motivation.

My father was a very good businessman. He was very talented. He really could do any kind of work. Also, he was the one who exposed me to dance. Now my mom was a meek little nebbish and he took advantage of her.

Mrs. Hesh saw her father only once again, more than 15 years later, and by chance, on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. Although they “looked at each” other, she is not sure if he recognized her. They did not speak. She reminds herself that it was her mother who “saved pennies” to educate her, and she cries when she thinks of her mother’s sacrifices to better her. However, she believes that it was her father who taught her the “finer, more interesting” things about life. In other words, she seems to identify more strongly with her “hated” but “talented” father than with her “nebbish” mother who

“got taken advantage of” and succumbed, at an early age, to the hardness of life.

Mrs. Hesh paints a picture of herself in young adulthood as an ambitious, energetic survivor, ever driven to acquire more money. This is her father’s legacy, not only the benchmark of security and success, but also of survival. When asked how she saw herself when she was a working teen, she answers thoughtfully.

I was always aloof with the other girls [at the home]. I was careful. And whatever they told me to do, I did it, and I earned the maximum amount of money I could. And I was never a spendthrift. I made do with what I had. Instead of throwing away socks I would darn them. Instead of taking a dress to a tailor I learned how to do it myself. And I didn’t make emotional ties. I was stingy with my money, and I was stingy with my feelings. You had to be careful with both.

Mrs. Hesh recognizes that her frugality was both emotional and monetary. The feelings her childhood evokes are anger and resentment because of her father’s abandonment, and pride because of the ambition she believes she inherited from him. However, the memory of her youth elicits sadness despite her drive and perceived success. She cries as she remembers her late adolescence and young adulthood, perhaps weeping for the “emotionally careful” woman she became.

She lived at the home for over three years and “stashed away” as much money as possible. Proficient as a bookkeeper, she had several lucrative job offers after the War broke out. When she was 20 years old, she left the home for a better job in Atlantic City, lived as a boarder with a “nice old lady,” and was making “sometimes \$75 a week, with overtime.” This was in the early 1940s.

Mrs. Hesh: I bought war bonds. And I liked to work. To me it was productive. It was a means of providing money legitimately, ’cause I could very well have gone the other way. But I was determined I was going to have a home of my own one day with or without a partner.

Interviewer: Were you interested in marriage and children?

Mrs. Hesh: I don’t know. There were a lot of guys, but mostly they were interested in the sex.

Mrs. Hesh acknowledges that she knew ways to make money legitimately and otherwise. She repeats that there was no parent or guardian to guide her along the right path. However, she decided to pursue her dream without guidance, and with a single-minded focus – to own the home that she never had as a child, as well as the security that she believed a home

supplied. Although marriage had little part in her dream, fate intervened. To be close to a better job, she moved to another rooming house in southern New Jersey. A new tenant moved in shortly thereafter whom she describes as “a Latino type.” She explains that “good sense” had nothing to do with allowing him to be part of her dream.

You know, the dark eyes and dark hair and you know, he had the line of – if you’ll excuse the expression – bullshit. You could hang clothes on his line, you know. He was charming; he was good-looking. I was 24 and all my girlfriends were getting married. And he was very pleasant to me at that time.

Mrs. Hesh reports that her marriage was good “in the beginning.” She gave birth to a son two years after their marriage. Shortly thereafter, her husband’s abusiveness, infidelity, and lack of ambition and desire to work led to physical violence. Although her husband “took advantage” of her role as primary breadwinner, she believes that it also added to his resentment toward her.

I set him up in business [as a barber]. I bought all the equipment, the barber chairs, the mirrors. He liked barbering. He liked people. He was a real, like I said before, bullshit artist. Everybody thought he was the cream of the crop. They got one vowel wrong. He was cream of the crap.

When Mrs. Hesh left her husband after five years of marriage, she also left their three-year-old son with his father. She lists the reasons.

He had been abusive to me physically. He broke my nose. Besides that he was chasing skirts. One time I walked in on a little scene between him and the baby sitter. So I moved out. And he took the baby with him because I had nobody to help me and he had his mother and his mother worshipped that baby. She just adored him. It was the only alternative I had.

Mrs. Hesh looks at the interviewer closely, trying to gauge whether any judgment lurks within the quiet listening. Although she reiterates that leaving her son was her “only alternative,” she realizes she continues to pay a heavy price for making this choice over 45 years ago. When asked whether anyone was unable to forgive her for a real or imagined wrong, she admits that her son never forgave her for leaving him despite her generosity to him in other ways.

He [son] has a shop in Wildwood, which I financed. I’ve always been the banker. I think he sort of thought he had it coming to him. I don’t

know [crying]. And if he's grateful, he has a very odd way of showing it, because he's disrespectful. My son's a very strong-willed kid. And he knows how to push buttons. Man, can he turn my buttons. I guess what surprises me is how long children keep that anger up. He's 50 years old.

Mrs. Hesh notes the irony in her words and laughs.

I'm always forgiving. There's a certain kind of forgiveness. You know, all this hostility that I had toward my father. It's gone. It's done. It's forgotten. What's the point of hanging onto it? And my ex-husband, he's out of my life. And whatever his problems are, they're his, not mine.

With this comment, Mrs. Hesh captures an important component of forgiveness. She no longer sees her father or ex-husband; they no longer affect her life. Although she does not forget their abuse and abandonment, she believes that she has "moved on." However, when asked if there was any event, incident or person in her life that could not be forgiven, she answered,

Mrs. Hesh: Oh, yes. The one I can't forgive is Joseph, this gentleman friend of mine that I've been going with for 34 years. It was 34 years this past November. I had no interest in seeing anybody else or going with anybody else.

Interviewer: Why can't you forgive him?

Mrs. Hesh: [Adamantly] His laziness. His negligence. His irresponsibility. No ambition.

At this point in the interview Mrs. Hesh breaks down. She cannot speak because of her emotion. Although the interviewer suggests ending the interview or moving on to another topic, Mrs. Hesh shakes her head and continues.

Mrs. Hesh: He got himself into a situation where he's hopeless. He has Alzheimer's disease. I told him three years ago to go to a decent doctor and get himself evaluated. I can't forgive him for not taking care of himself, for not being responsible for himself and for putting me in a position of having to be responsible. I just can't forgive that he was that stupid. I'm full of anger. [Shakes her head and closes her eyes]

Interviewer: Do you know why?

Mrs. Hesh: [Crying] Because I thought in our old age we would have each other. I figured we would have some degree of comfort. But I should have known. He never had any money either. He never saved.

Mrs. Hesh's comments reveal not only her disappointment with Joseph but with herself for not remembering to be emotionally frugal and to trust no one. She has finally learned that Joseph is simply another man in the parade of those who have abused, betrayed, or disappointed her. She is, however, willing to share part of the blame for her disappointment. She "should have known" to be as stingy with her emotions in older age as she was when younger.

Joseph's belongings remain in her hallway, sad mementos of the time they once shared this apartment. They are also a reminder that her dreams of love and companionship are dying. She can no longer bear either to see Joseph or speak with him.

He has called me a couple of times and I've told him, "Don't bother me any more. I wish you would die. If you would die, you would put yourself out of your agony and you'd put me out of my agony."
[Crying]

The despair in Mrs. Hesh's words is painful to hear. Like Mr. Marks and his daughter-in-law, there is an ever-present possibility that Joseph will call and reopen Mrs. Hesh's wounds. Only Joseph's death might presage the beginning of a resolution. As Joseph becomes more cognitively impaired, his capacity to know that she suffers because of him diminishes. This is also unforgivable to her – to suffer and not to have the one who causes it care that he does so.

Unlike Mr. Marks, when Mrs. Hesh was asked whether she had ever done anything that required forgiveness from another, she began to cry again, this time more quietly, and with more sorrow than anger.

I took my temper out on the cat. This poor little guy, he's having a hard time. He's sick. He poops all over the place. I just got so frustrated with the situation with Joseph. He would call me nine times a day. And there's no conversation. He'd interrupt what I was doing. I'd say, "What do you want?" "I just want to know if you're all right?" I said, "Yes, I'm fine. Now leave me alone." And the cat would poop right in the middle of the living room floor and I'd have to clean it up, or throw up. And I kicked him with my bare foot, not my shoe. And I hollered at him. Then I said, "Please God, forgive me." I shouldn't have done that. [Sobbing]

Her pet is old and sick and becomes a target for her resentment against Joseph. Yet, she strongly identifies with the "poor little guy" and feels a powerful guilt for her unkindness. Her need to tell stories that disclose the positive as well as the negative aspects of her personality is greater than her need to hide from the interviewer a glimpse into the dark corners of her life. Her story greatly moves the interviewer.

Mrs. Hesh's way of forgiving is her way of aging – with great reluctance to let go of the dreams and desires that remain unfulfilled. Yet she remembers, with honesty and self-insight, that she is the one who can both be wronged and do wrong. Although her ability to forgive Joseph collapses along with her hope in him, she acknowledges that she also, in a moment of anger and weakness, betrayed a trust. The meaning of forgiveness for Mrs. Hesh, as it is for others, is linked with the past and the ongoing desires, hopes, and resentments of her life. These, not the last years of life in their own right, serve to articulate whether or not she is ready to forgive.

Miss Mel

Miss Mel, as she prefers to be called, is an 80-year-old African-American woman who lives in her own home in North Philadelphia. She keeps her front door unlocked for regular visitors, such as her nephew, niece, social service workers, and Meals-on-Wheels because she has difficulty walking. Neighbors on each side watched as the interviewer knocked on her door, showing their concern for her.

The interior of Miss Mel's home seems dilapidated because it needs painting and repairs, but it is filled with comfortable furniture, knick-knacks, family portraits drawn by her nephew, and pictures of her family of origin and their children.

When asked to tell the story of her life, Miss Mel replied,

Most of my life I worked at a hotel. One of the best here in Philadelphia was the Bellevue Stratford. Then I went back to school and got a course in nursing. I did that up until the time of my retirement in 1978.

In her brief opening comments, Miss Mel leaves out all of her early life and most of her life in general. Only through the interviewer's prompts does she answer questions about her childhood and young adulthood. She was born and raised in southern Florida, the seventh child in a "happy home with a very good mother." When asked how she remembered her early years in the South, she said,

Well, I've had some bad times. They're not forgotten. But they become good memories of how I come this far through a whole lot of stormy, stormy years. Those I will keep to myself because God has given me a peace of mind and there is no need in hashing things over.

The remark is an example of Miss Mel's reluctance to dwell on the unpleasant aspects of her past. It also exemplifies her ability to transform

negative situations by her perception of them as instructional or useful. This skill becomes a theme throughout her interview. Bad times become good memories if she has learned something from them, and especially if they have been overcome.

Miss Mel was married twice, both marriages ending in divorce. Of her first marriage, she says simply, "We had two boys." Her first ex-husband resides in Florida and "never sees the boys." When asked if her children live nearby, she answered,

It was a murder committed. He [the older son] was there. They were supposed to go to a party. When they got there, the boy my son was with started a robbery. My son left before the actual killing. This is what the lawyer has proven. But one of the boys my son was with had been a close friend – or so he thought he was a close friend. He testified against him.

In teasing out what is left unsaid in this dense remark, the interviewer learns that Miss Mel's older son has been in prison for murder since 1972. She does not entertain the possibility that her son is guilty. She believes that the scales of justice were weighed against him as soon as he stepped in the courtroom.

Justice is not equal. Don't you see the scale of justice? It's always uneven. And see the one that's in prison is dark like I am; it would all be different if he wasn't so black. Because my younger son was a drug addict and now he's studying for the ministry. He could get a job anywhere. He's accepted anywhere. But not the dark one.

In this passage, Miss Mel succinctly describes the paths each of her sons took toward his middle age. She is aware of the cultural realities that make social equality improbable if not impossible for her older son. However, she makes it clear that there is a higher justice in which she places her trust. Indeed, since her younger son's life was transformed from drug addict to ministry student, there is no reason to doubt that God has the same conversion in mind for her older child. In fact, he is scheduled to come before a parole board later this month. Despite feeling that his very "blackness" makes him appear guilty to a jury, she explains that she is concerned but not worried about the outcome of the parole board's decision: "I'm 80 years old now and I've come a long, long way through a lot of trials. I seen a lot. With God – all things, not some – all things are possible. And this is what I depend on."

Miss Mel notes that she is "poor and housebound" and therefore unable to physically "be there and fight" for her son at his hearing. However, because her strength and her wealth are spiritual and she has joyfully shared

her largesse with others, she believes she will be rewarded with an affirmative answer to her prayer about her son's release. Indeed, she relates with pride that most people in her neighborhood describe her as the "praying lady." People of all ages call or come to her home to ask her to "pray with them," for reasons ranging from hoping to become pregnant or not to be pregnant, to finding a job.

After discussing some of the infirmities that keep her housebound, Miss Mel showed that she paints her self-rated health with a broad brush. When asked about her "day to day" health, she replied, "Physically it's not good but it's what the Lord allows. Mentally I think from my thinking I'm very alert, very good. Spiritually [points to the ceiling and smiles] the sky."

While this answer may be construed as compartmentalizing different aspects of herself, it may also be that Miss Mel holds an all-encompassing view when she assesses "how she feels." She believes that the spiritual aspect of her life is both the most treasured and the most salutary. Because it is the repository for her talents and her riches, her spirituality becomes the instrument by which she interprets herself and the world.

Miss Mel seemed eager to talk about the subject of the interview – forgiveness. When asked if she ever had reason to forgive someone, she answered,

My husband was a very handsome man. He was a very good provider. Well, this woman belonged to our church and she kept on and kept on with him until he began a relationship with her. It went on for years and years and years and I left the church. Because I would go [to church] with a heavy heart because I knew she [the other woman] was going to say some smart thing. Anyway, she said she had a child from my husband. It was a pathetic thing with sickle cell anemia. My husband's side of the family never had it, but my husband's friend [gentleman from the same church] had it [sickle cell anemia]. This left us in the clear.

It is not clear whom Miss Mel forgives in this passage. Her comments intertwine the "wrongdoers." Did she forgive her husband, to whom she gave great love and devotion, the other woman, or the baby that *might* have resulted from their affair? Since sickle cell anemia was not passed down from her husband's family, her remarks might be taken to mean that she disbelieved that her husband had an affair. However, when the interviewer posed this possibility, Miss Mel shook her head and replied that she knew all about his infidelities. Indeed, he had been consistently unfaithful throughout their marriage, and it was neither the first nor the last time his philandering made her suffer.

It was a crying time because all you can do in a situation like that when you don't want to be in trouble is to cry and hope and pray that it will

end. I had to lift myself out of hatred. It was dark and ugly. Revenge is dark and ugly. See, we had an altercation and she [the other woman] had me locked up.

Her comment might suggest that she needed to forgive the other woman for pressing charges against her, although she does not detail the nature of their altercation. Perhaps her husband's infidelity stands out because it was carried on with a church member which made this affair more memorable, painful, and needful of forgiveness. Her remark could also be taken to mean that it was her own unnamed act of revenge for which she needed to forgive herself. Finally, she explains that it *was* she who needed to be lifted out of the "darkness and ugliness" of hatred. When asked how this was accomplished, she answered:

I told Belle [the other woman], "Go ahead. We'll just have my husband together." [Pause] That was a terrible, terrible thing! I was letting myself down to no esteem whatsoever. Because I knew it was wrong for me to share my husband and to take abuse from an outside woman. I was letting her do it to me. I sat there and I said, "Mel, you're a nothing." When you can analyze yourself this way, then you realize that you've got to come up. You cannot stay down below the line of self-respect. I had lost that. "Mel, you're a nothing."

Miss Mel's manner of telling her forgiveness story is powerful because of its meandering, yet deliberate route toward a mysterious and powerful climax. In suggesting to her husband's mistress that they "share him," she realized how "low" she had sunken. She berated herself for becoming a "nothing" in her own view. Interestingly, she does not blame her husband, but targets Belle with the worst of her anger and resentment. When the interviewer mentioned her leniency with her husband, Miss Mel answered adamantly,

A man cannot go any farther than a woman lets him. See, she [Belle] could have stopped it. But some women enjoy conquest and especially with a married man. Yes, I blame the woman. Because it was a weakness on his part. God said, "Man is a dog; he'll do anything."

But the bright side came through, too. Miss Mel explains that her transformation from a "nothing" to regaining self-respect had to go through several stages to be accomplished.

Well, I went back to the church and I became the president of the church club. And I just trusted in God. I appointed Belle as the secretary. It took one year and then I woke up one morning and

I didn't hate nobody. And I called her and I said, "Belle, how you feeling this morning?" She said, "All right." I said, "I want to tell you something. I don't hate you no more. I love you." She said, "I never did hate you." I said, "Well, I sure hated you."

Miss Mel calls anger a "burden," and connects her resentment with "being down low and heavy." She links forgiveness to acknowledging her hatred and apologizing to the "hated" party even if that person is the perpetrator of a wrong. Ultimately, she connects forgiveness with high self-esteem. In fact, as she encouraged church members to be kind to Belle, she believes she was lifted to a "sacred place" where she could "forgive anybody anything."

I would look at her [Belle] and I would feel so sorry for her. "Stop being standoffish to her, stop saying those sly things," I would tell them [other church members]. [Pause] See, she was a big woman, and she would sit down sometime and her dress would come way up around here [points to thigh] and I went to her and I pulled it down. She looked at me with the most . . . I don't know what kind of smile it was. [Pause] It was a Mona Lisa smile.

This poignant passage shows the core of forgiveness in Miss Mel's mind – recognizing another human being's frailty, witnessing an incident that would shame her, and quietly giving her back her dignity. For Miss Mel, forgiveness is as all-encompassing as her worldview; it is physical, mental and spiritual.

Miss Mel describes her second husband as a "stranger," and thinks of him "in the past." Ultimately, she divorced him not because of his philanthropy, nor because she had "sunk down low" due to his infidelities, but because his gambling jeopardized the security of her home.

I realized that if we had not been divorced he [husband] would try to come back. I had worked so hard for this [home] and my son, too. I was determined nobody was going to get between my children, myself, and my home. It is the only thing I have and it belongs to me as long as I have breath in my body.

Miss Mel's home is a symbol of achievement in the face of adversity. It also represents her older son's "legitimacy" in society. While serving in Vietnam, he sent Miss Mel money each month to buy the home. It is therefore the haven to which she believes her son will return. Indeed, Miss Mel cannot bear imagining that she will never see him again. However, she focuses on how his character has improved during his prison stay. This focus is consistent with her desire to transform negative situations into learning experiences, for herself and others.

See, I look at it this way. Had he been out here, he would be running with the same crowd that I didn't want him to be with. He would have been dead. But he still has a chance to rectify himself into society. And he has learned patience. If you're not patient, you will flare up at somebody saying something to you in the wrong tone of voice. He's well respected in there [prison]. Had he not been in prison, he would not be alive, so I have something to thank God for.

Miss Mel reasons that life in prison is better than death because "life means hope" and "death is not temporary." She underscores her logic by telling a story about a neighbor's son. The thirty-something year old man was killed on a street corner in a drug war. His mother did not learn of his death for days, and is now "crazy with grief." In comparison, Miss Mel sees her son as "safe." Oddly enough, in this context, prison is a blessing.

Miss Mel believes that her capacity to forgive enlarged with age. "Younger peoples" are hampered by "more thoughts, more energy, and more anger" when someone wrongs them. Miss Mel's way of forgiving seems, to the interviewer, as complex and circuitous as her self-described way of aging, and indeed, her way of living. Her way of forgiving is embedded in cultural and racial traditions concerning appropriate behaviors for men and women, and in the belief that a personal spirituality is transformative.

Miss Mel finished the interview by pointedly sharing an aspect of her active, worldly spirituality with the interviewer. She suggested that the interviewer's "work" and "work relationships" are the forums in which the interviewer is tested for "righteousness in the Lord's eyes."

Miss Mel: When you go back to your office, if there is somebody younger than you, or lesser than you, you take this person, you reach back and put them next to you. Reach back every time. And you help them. If you see them getting ahead of you give them a push. Let them go farther ahead. Will you do that?

Interviewer: I will.

Miss Mel: Good [joyfully]! Because I want you to shine.

Conclusion

Elders' stories of forgiveness are soldered to their life stories like links in a chain. They elaborate the self by recalling events or incidents when the act of forgiveness, or not forgiving, was appropriate. Elders' stories show how they resolved past or present wrongs, or why no resolution is or was possible. Acts of forgiveness or statements about their inability to forgive

join other links – already in place – of a personal and communal history, and the historical social era in which the elder grew and developed.

Mr. Marks connects an unforgivable experience that “eats at him” – the control and greed of his daughter-in-law – with the historical events of the Holocaust. This is articulated in relation to unforgivable acts of intentional cruelty, and his inability or unwillingness to “get into the mind” of people who perpetrate such acts. Mr. Marks cannot forgive his daughter-in-law because she remains in his life as a stressful reminder of the loss of his son, his grandson, and the “unimaginable” satisfaction that she and others gain from their inhumanity.

Mrs. Hesh is unable to forgive her friend Joseph for not taking care of himself, and therefore for not being able to take care of her. Her sadness takes the shape of mourning, perhaps for the dream that she would finally, in old age, enjoy the companionship of a man who would neither use nor betray her. Her anger with Joseph intensifies as his symptoms worsen and the death of her dream closes in.

Throughout her interview, Miss Mel said, “God don’t like ugly,” a phrase used often by the sample of African-American women. She connects a lack of forgiveness with a lack of self-esteem, a poor self-view, and ultimately, with internal and external ugliness. For Miss Mel, forgiveness is also linked to spiritual power, both her own and God’s. If God is to forgive whatever part she believes she played in her son’s misdeeds, she must forgive all who have wronged her. It is through her own and God’s forgiveness that her prayer – the release of her son from prison – will come to pass.

The women interviewed more easily discussed the nuances of relationships within their stories of forgiveness. For example, both Mrs. Hesh and Miss Mel spoke easily about their negative relationships with men. Although men’s stories of forgiveness were also about relationships, they were often about the nuances of power differentials in a relationship and who should not be forgiven due to an abuse of power. For example, Mr. Marks told the interviewer that he could not forgive his daughter-in-law because of her desire to “control” the situations in which they came together. In fact, the Caucasian men in the sample especially viewed forgiveness as weakness.

A salient feature of elders’ stories of forgiveness is that the subject of forgiveness itself is a problematic topic for them (Enright 1996; Fow 1996), perhaps because it presupposes that the respondent did something wrong and needs to be forgiven or a wrong was committed against him or her. These admissions call into question issues of having “bad” relationships with others or being a “good” person, both of which are significant to individuals’ esteem and identity (Blazer 1991).

Following from this, another salient aspect of elders’ stories of forgiveness is the cognitive route respondents took in telling their tales. Stories

of forgiveness were as unpredictable as mystery stories. Like a mystery, the actors were apparent but the actual wrong, the wrongdoer's motive, or the reason why the narrator could not forgive was not always clear to the interviewer, at least until the end of the story.

Taken together, the interview narratives show that there is no one way for elders to forgive, just as there is no one way for old people to live or to age. Nor, for that matter, is forgiveness an imperative of aging. Rather, a forgiveness is something constructed out of lifelong constellations of meaning. These, in turn, are understood in relation to particular beliefs about what is right or wrong, but also to hopes, to dreams, and to cultural or spiritual legacies.

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