

## On forgiving your parents

A group of ten year olds share what most makes them cross about their parents. The top five are: They talk about me to my friends parents; they make me go shopping with them; they tell me to do several things at once and expect me to do it all at the same time; they are often too busy to listen to me when I want to talk and they always interrupt me while I am trying to explain. These are small grievances but they can shape our impatience and irritability with our parents feeding into family rows and feuds.

Two children of elderly parents are refusing to pay their fees for a care home. In our conversation they are not able to make the connection between the need of the parents and their anger at the perception that as children there was little love in the home. The Son remembers how irritable his father was and how he felt that his father was always disappointed in him. His wife never felt accepted by her mother in law. The memory of her criticism of the wedding dress remains as fresh as the day it was made on that special day nearly forty years ago. Why should they care now when care was so absent all those years ago?

'You are so like your father' says a friend. We both know that and react against it. We are unique shaped as we are by a story different from our ancestors. Parents can be complex people for children to know. Sometimes our parents can remain both a baffling and overwhelming presence in our lives. We can feel that we never live up to their expectations of us. There is both an economic and emotional indebtedness of children to parents and parents to children. In our relating the nature of memory and love is both complex and mysterious. Perhaps we wonder how our parents can be both so like and so completely foreign to us. When faced with trying to understand our parents we can feel anger, disappointment, frustration and sheer confusion. It is as if we store up those many small causes of irritability to feed into a picture of resentment and even neglect. Some children have some reason to feel neglect when the causes of pain may be physical or extreme emotional abuse.

If we feel hurt by our parents then what are we to do about that? Forgiveness does not come easy for most of us. Our natural instinct is to recoil in self-protection when we've been injured especially from those who are supposed to love us. We don't naturally overflow with mercy, grace and forgiveness. Parents don't always do what is best for their children. They can hurt them. We need to learn to forgive our parents. Some people do not want to forgive their parents. They carry resentment, bitterness and pain for their whole lives. They continue the pain of their childhood forever. In this they can hurt themselves.

None of us have or had perfect parents- and very few of us were easy, complete, problem free children! Forgiveness is only going to work if your parents are willing to accept responsibility for what it is that you think they did or didn't do. This may not happen because parents frequently have an entirely different view of how they raised

their children than their children have. Acceptance is a radical and life changing stance. Your parents may have done the very best they could within the limited range of their capabilities.

This kind of acceptance might enable a healthier and happier life. This acceptance will mean some acknowledgement of the impossibility of a tidy set of relationships. There are always loose ends. Forgiving our parents is a core task of adulthood, and one of the most crucial kinds of forgiveness. We see our parents, in our friends, in our bosses, even in our children. For example when we've felt rejected by a parent and have remained in that state, we will inevitably feel rejected by these important others as well.

Unless we forgive our parents, we can never fully grow up: we might behave still like children victimized by the 'big people'. This profound dislocation can be projected onto all kinds of authority. And because, like children, we have underlying resentment of our parents, we can't be wise in rearing our own children. We relate to our own children in reaction to our parents. How much freedom to give to children, how to exercise authority, in what way to chastise and correct are all part of the perilous geography we have to negotiate in our loving.

We will know the work of forgiveness is complete when we experience the freedom that comes as a result. Most times, however, forgiveness is a slow journey. We must continue forgiving until the matter is settled in our heart.

So how might we do that? First we need to name and resolve resentment. Unless we do then we can get stuck there, too, forever the child, the victim, the have-not in the realm of love. Strange as it may seem, a grudge is a kind of clinging and a way of not separating. The result is that we can stay locked into the badness and we don't grow up.

Secondly, we should develop realistic expectations. We expect the world of them, and we do not wish to lower our expectations. But let us acknowledge that nobody is perfect. Our parents are products of their environment. Sometimes people just don't know any better. We cannot always know that what we do is damaging. Christians might look for the good in them. Look for anything that could be considered a redeeming quality. A more realistic estimation of parents and the tasks of parenting might make it easier to forgive them for their mistakes. I believe that most people in most circumstances do their best!

Thirdly, we can try to Hold on to the good. Most parents love their children, with surprisingly few exceptions. If we're lucky, our parents were good enough for us to be able to hold on to the knowledge of their love for us and our love for them, even in the face of the things they did that hurt us. Remember the happy moments – the times of laughter and care.

Fourthly we should foster true separation. To forgive is not to condone the bad things our parents have done. It's not to deny their selfishness, their rejections, their meanness, their brutality, or any of the other misdeeds, character flaws, or limitations that may attach to them. It is important to separate from our parents—which is to

stop seeing ourselves as children who depend on them for our emotional well-being, to stop being their victims, to recognize that we are adults with some capacity to shape our own lives and the responsibility to do so.

Fifthly, we need to be easier and kinder on one another and accept. Let your parents back into your heart. - and learn to forgive them and their humanness and failings - in the hope that we can nurture places where our failures are embraced with grace and patience.

All this is hard work and a journey that perhaps never ends! Getting to a forgiving place, finding the forgiving self inside us, is a complicated journey. Along the way, we may have to express our protest, we may have to be angry and resentful, and we may even have to punish our parents by holding a grudge.

Perhaps it may be possible to begin to understand the circumstances and limitations they laboured under recognize the goodness in them that our pain has pushed aside, feel some compassion perhaps, not only for the hard journey they had but also for the pain we have caused them.