For the past 20 years, as a counselor, I have worked with survivors of all kinds of violence. I have listened to brutal details of atrocities that happen daily in the war zones that are too often people’s homes and lives. What strikes me over and over again are the troubling polarities that are often imposed on victims about forgiveness:

• That forgiveness is the obligation of the victim, and the perpetrator has no obligation to make restitution or amends.
• That forgiveness is gentle, and, therefore, anger is its opposite.
• That forgiveness reconciles the relationship, so estrangement is its destructive opposite.
• That forgiveness grants the offender a future washed clean of the offense, and it is the victim’s sole responsibility to deal with the wreckage left in its wake.

Demands for forgiveness are all too often heaped upon victims’ already broken backs. Judgements against victims’ righteous rage become the fuel for self-hatred. But rage is necessary to mobilize victims to protect themselves. The desire for retaliation is normal, even inevitable, and is a healthy part of the healing process.

It has become my conviction that the only forgiveness necessary for the violated survivor to heal is forgiving themselves for being vulnerable, and then doing the extremely hard work of healing — cleaning up the wreckage that they did not create.

With their pain in mind, this is my reflection on forgiveness today. I recognize and honor that it is but one response among many, and that each survivor has the right to determine what forgiveness means, and does not mean, within their own unique healing process.

FORGIVENESS AS AN ACT OF DEFIANCE
by Reverend Lynn James, LMHC
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An Act of Defiance
I believe that forgiveness is an act of defiance, for the benefit of the victim, not the offender.

• Forgiveness says to the offender: “You sowed hate, and I refuse to be its carrier. Hatred is a parasite. Violence is its symptom. And you will not use my body or my heart as its host.”
• Forgiveness tells the offender: “You have evoked within me the urge to destroy, the impulse to seek revenge. But I will resist your effect upon my feelings. I will not permit you to degrade my true self by being crushed by your hand into a bitter or cruel person. I will not be desecrated by you.”
• Forgiveness insists: “I am not a perfect person. But I am a kind person, a compassionate person, and I will never become one of you. Even to punish you I will not align myself with your vile and violent energy, your foul and defiling focus. I will not allow you to dictate my reaction to you. My response is my own. My response reflects ME, and who I am. My response will not be determined by who you are, or by any wish that you may have that I become contaminated by you, and, therefore, become one of you. I will not be a receptacle for the poison that is within you. My protest, my ultimate resistance, my action against your action, is my refusal to bow, or even bend, toward your pull upon my life. I oppose all that your actions have stirred within me.”
• “I feel hatred’s magnetic urge, as if you have placed within my very core an electric force that pulses with negative charge, a loaded bomb that reacts to the slightest quiver of movement, ready to explode. However, I refuse to hate you in return. I will dismantle this bomb. I will not allow the sordidness that you have driven like a sword into
me to dictate who I will be and how I will live. This bundle of nerves that will not cease fire, like a machine gun firing automatic shots in my brain, that you have strained into such a frenzy that it is almost broken, that struggles to find any peace. I will disarm, I will quell, I will soothe. I will bring serenity to my own body and mind.”

• “You may not fight your war here. I will not allow you to turn my body into a battle field, my mind into a mine field. I will defy you and I will recover. I will not abandon the wreckage that remains. I will demolish your destruction by repairing what you have ravaged. Your mark will not stand as a monument to what used to be. I will build that monument. It is mine to determine what remains, and it will bear no resemblance to how you left it.”

• “What you debased, I will exalt.”

• “What you poisoned, I will purify.”

• “What you diminished, I will amplify.”

• “Where you soiled, I will plant gardens.”

• “Where you spit, I will build a fire and burn there all remnants of your contempt. And upon its embers I will place a cauldron and cook a soup. Then I will feed the hungry from its warmth.”

• “What you have left in pieces, I will fasten together to form a mosaic that tells the story of never-the-less.”

• “What you have torn apart, I will sew with needle and thread, and offer as comforters for the cold and the lonely.”

• “What the force of your destruction has split apart and scattered across the landscape, I will gather into my arms. Then with hammer and nails and these pieces I will construct a shelter for those who have no home.”

• “What you have twisted, I will turn and turn, like a potter turning clay, so that what you left misshapen will become a cup for the thirsty to drink from.”

• “Know this: I will not be your mirror. When you look to me, you will not see your hatred reflected back at you. You will not recognize your eyes in mine. You will not watch your ripples be carried upon my waters, within my tears. I will cry for you, too, not just for what you have done to me, but for what you have done to yourself. I will cry for the child you once were, for the person you might have been.

• I will cry so that you will not be able to harden my heart as yours has been hardened. I will cry for all those who have become what you are.

• “I will cry also for those who have been wounded by you and by those like you. I will reach out to these others and together we will survey the devastation before us. Together we will raise our voices in songs of protest, in outcries of caring. We will not sound the battle call as you have done. We will not answer your call to arms. We will use our arms for binding up wounds and for encircling the vulnerable so that they will be held safely in our embrace, and so that they will not have to know what we know, to feel what we have had feel.”

• “Every night I will count the stars. Every day I will name the beauty that surrounds me. When I cannot see it clearly, I will remember the true color of the fields and the sky. I will remind myself that they are not gray. I will recall color even when it has been washed from my eyes. I will relearn its subtlety and its power, and I will carefully color in the spaces that you have turned to ash.”

• “I will paint the laughter of children, of the gentleness of the parents who carry them singing, nose to nose, their eyes that pour love, pure and passionate, ready-to-die-for-them love. I will mix these with the holiness of a baby’s first smile and an old person’s last breath and paint the world with them. I will gather goodness like shells on the beach, and I will make necklaces from them, to ward off your evils. And I will teach others how to make them, too.”

• “I will count the moments of mercy that fall into my life everyday — an “excuse me” on the sidewalk, a moment of civility in the checkout line, a Meals-On-Wheels delivery down the street, a donation made to a cause that fights against you, a gift to a battered women’s shelter, toys for children in foster care, peanut butter each week to the food pantry.”
• “Where you have taught me to hate, I will rebel by loving.”
• “Here is my prayer: I will turn your presence, invasive and destructive, over to God, so that you do not remain within me, within my spirit, contaminating my life and my soul. I banish you from me. You belong to God, and may God have mercy upon your soul. I will pray for your transformation. I will pray for the goodness and gifts that you were born with, that were part of your original blessing. I pray for all those who have loved you, those who continue to care about the parts of you that may yet be redeemed, that their love might work its way into your hatred and turn your heart around.”
• “I pray for my own hatred toward you, that it be on fire in the furnace of God’s warmth, God’s love, God’s power; that it be a crucible, an alchemy, so that it no longer will be what it is — seething, hurting, horrified, hateful, hungry for revenge, consumed by the pain of what you have done. I pray that from this crucible might emerge something stronger still, some form created from terror’s transformation, some structure that is stronger than any weapon.”
• “You laid across my life curses upon curses, but I choose to give to you blessings upon blessings. I find no pleasure in adding to the agonies of hell, either on earth or after death. There is already too much hell, too many who are tormented. I wish for you what you do not deserve: Life. Not merely survival, but fullness of life.”

• “May compassion be carved into the core of your being. May the pain that will come with knowing fully what you have done, be a cleansing and healing suffering — growing pains that announce authentic change. May you find the courage to see yourself as you are and as you have been. May you find the strength to look beyond all that, and see who you could yet become.”
• “May the harm done to you that has made you what you are be transformed and healed with each of the amends that you make. May you experience God’s complete knowledge of you and love for you, and from that may you learn to care for yourself and for others. May you develop the potential that is uniquely yours, and may you find deep joy as you discover your true purpose. The meaning of any life is always holy, sacred, and of benefit, not only to you but to the needs of the world. Offering it is an ultimate amend.”
• “I have no more time to give to you, either in hatred or in striving toward forgiveness. I have much work to do, and in doing my work, I am unbinding you from me and from the havoc you have done. The rest is between you and the One who holds your soul. Amen.”

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