Forgive and Remember

We have often heard the phrase “forgive and forget.” And we get it. We get that that phrase is intended to reflect some notion that God forgets our sin upon forgiving us; we, therefore, should go and do likewise.

But the reality is that forgiveness requires the very opposite. It necessitates that we remember. So often the very idea of forgiveness is reduced to something we practice as a brief abstract mental function, some 2.5-second sweep of our mind in which we think or utter the words “I forgive you,” and consider that very mental activity to be the equivalent of the act itself. Additionally, we frame forgiveness as something that consists of a single act that happens in a finite (and brief) period of time; once it’s done, it’s done. From the perspective of memory and emotion, much of this is our attempt to reduce as expeditiously as possible the felt pain of the wound we have sustained. It is an attempt to avoid the emotional distress that remembering fosters. But herein lies the need for and freedom in remembering.

To remember is to activate those neural networks associated with a particular event we have experienced. To forgive is not to deny those feelings, images, or thoughts but have them tempered and changed by alternative sensations, feelings, images, and thoughts associated with alternative mental action, and therefore alternative neural networks. This begins with paying attention to what you are paying attention to, and then reflecting on how you are interpreting the focus of your attention.

A way to describe this would be to say that, for example, my seeming inability to forgive someone for mistreating me is as much a function of what my attention is directed at, and my immediate, often automatic, unconscious responses to those attentional targets. Every time I begin to “remember” the mistreatment I experienced, the memory awakens the very responses that only cause further distress. If I continue to pay attention to this, allowing only the same mental reactions, I will only feel more hurt and anger. I find myself trapped in a loop of unsettling mental activity. Therefore, it seems quite logical to avoid recalling the event so as to prevent the reaction within me that is so distressing.

The problem with this is that from a brain standpoint, I eventually learn that these images, feelings, thoughts, and sensations that correlate with that particular memory become neurally reinforced patterns of discomfort that are indefinitely interpreted and anticipated as dangerous. I reinforce the notion that I am not able to revisit this event because the feelings or images will be too much for me to tolerate. In addition, because I refrain from remembering, I prevent myself from eventually remembering additional parts of the story that I have likely thus far, albeit nonconsciously and unintentionally, ignored. For indeed, it is possible that forgiveness requires me to expand my awareness of additional realities that were in play at the time I was wounded. For instance, if I only pay attention to my hurt feelings, I never attune to my adversary’s own layers of brokenness; never consider their deeper story, the cistern of their own fear of their own deep shame from which emerged their hurtful behavior in the first place; the depth to which they “do not know what they are doing…” Through the hard, repeated work of my imagination, my awareness of the larger truths of the life of the one who has mistreated me begins to gradually diffuse the intensity of the emotional content of my anger and resentment.

Furthermore, remembering the hurtful event also often reveals parts of my own story’s unfinished business, older hurts that predate this current event but that resonate with it. It also facilitates the possibility for my mind to imagine the presence of Jesus, what he was doing at the time of the injury, and the role he now plays in the process of healing. I cannot truly know the presence, healing, and regeneration of Jesus if I cannot imagine him being with me in the totality of the event in which I have found myself so hurt. And by imagine, I do not mean “know it as an abstract fact.” I mean to actually imagine, with all the sensations, feelings, thoughts, and bodily behaviors what it would be like for Jesus to be present and active in the remembered event.

This is not to suggest that somehow simply recalling a hurtful event will magically transform our response to it into something more appealing. No, quite the contrary. The work of forgiveness requires the remembering of the event in the context of others who assist you to remember the additional alternative realities that we so often forget. Imagining Jesus being with you in the moment during which and after you were mistreated begins to literally change the nature of those neural networks that represent the fury of the hurt you initially felt. Over time the remembering of the hurtful event alongside the memory of Jesus and others who represent him begin to diffuse the intensity of the electrochemical signals of the hurtful memory, and open up opportunities for you to begin to construct a different possible future between you and the one who has hurt you. We then begin to see that remembering the event is really about the process of remembering it differently. Remembering it in a way that is eventually utterly transformed and transformational. This is one of the obvious reasons the living body of Jesus as present in fellow believers is so crucial. It enables us to do the work that we each must do as individuals, reminding us that we
are not really ever alone.

This takes time, effort, and plenty of help from those with whom you are practicing together to forgive not seven, but seventy times; to forgive, even as your Father in heaven has forgiven you. It also requires the deepening awareness that forgiveness is perhaps not only something we do; it is something we become. And this thing that we become changes not only our brains but also the minds and lives of those around us.

Forgiveness. Who would have thought that there would be so much freedom in remembering? Sounds like something we should never forget.