



What, Me Forgive?

My mother's death on Thanksgiving, 1998, was the day when forgiveness and I went toe-to-toe like boxers in a ring. Prior to my mother's death, forgiveness was an intellectual exercise, one I wasn't very good at. At fifty-two, my unresolved anger at my dad, decades in the making, was already at volcanic proportions. Little did I know that it would spike even further over the next three years.

My parents did not have a marriage made in heaven. They hurt each other. And as death approached my mother, my father's own mortality issues got the best of him. In total denial, he obsessed over his own medical issues.

To say I was furious at him is an understatement. After medical intuitive Caroline Myss, "read" my mother with uncanny accuracy, described my parents' relationship and how it played into my mother's prognosis, Caroline encouraged me to work through the anger I had accumulated over the years, and then have a heartfelt conversation with my Dad.

"Remember Jill, your biography becomes your biology," Caroline cautioned me. "Don't follow in your mother's footsteps." My mother's pent-up anger at my Dad had taken a terrible toll on her health. Years of stomach problems (not being able to *stomach* the way my father treated her, and feeling powerless to do anything about it) culminated in untreatable stage 4-colon cancer that had metastasized to her liver.

Within a week of her death, my father had cleared out all of my mother's belongings from their home. His sense of liberation was palpable. He quickly began dating. Within three months, he met and was smitten with Elaine, who watched and understood football, played golf, and loved convertibles, travel, and entertaining. She was a free spirit, the antithesis of my mother. Filled with the exuberance of an adolescent, my father called me very early the morning after Danny and I first had dinner with the two of them. He couldn't wait to ask what I thought of his girlfriend. Uncharacteristically, he was now walking with a spring in his step. More remarkably, this man who had been habitually late for everything was now arriving on time.

A part of me was furious, though, at the huge disparity between how my father treated Elaine and the way he had been with my mother and me. He was lavishing all the love and attention on Elaine that my mother and I had been denied and we had desperately wanted. He willingly spent money on Elaine, something he rarely did on us. A lifetime of asking for anything was inevitably met with an inquisition.

"Why do you need that?" Like a lawyer arguing a motion, we needed a well-thought out argument to *win*. Regardless, whatever it was, arrived begrudgingly, if at all. Even worse, the ordeal had gutted the enjoyment factor.



Elaine's unexpected death less than a year after they met left my father visibly distraught. At her funeral, his bloodshot eyes and slumped body bore witness to his grief. Vivid images of the love they shared poured forth from the eulogies and tore into my body like vultures. His unconcealed anguish, so unlike his stoicism at my mother's death, almost unhinged me.

I fled the funeral home as soon as was socially acceptable, and managed to hold back my tears until the garage door at home banged down. It took less than five minutes for me to replace my funeral attire with sweats, wash off my makeup, and plant myself on the living room sofa. A quick phone call to my husband declared my firm resolve to ignore the phone until God and I were done with our heart-to-heart.

"I can't live with this anger anymore. It's become a running dialogue in my head."

"Will I see you anytime soon?" Danny chuckled, trying to lift my dark mood a bit.

"Maybe in a week or two," I said, morosely.

"Okay, Punim. Just remember Shivah is at 7:00 tonight."

"Right," I said, already disengaged.

"I'll wait for your call."

"Love you. Bye."

I pushed the "end" button on the phone, turned off the ringer, and dropped the handset on the carpet.

A lifetime of emotional baggage erupted in a torrent of tears. I railed at God.

Gripping a throw pillow as if it were a flotation device, I pleaded, "Help me God. I can't do this anymore. I ... hurt ... so ... bad." And then I wept until I was spent.

An eerie calm preceded the unmistakable voice of God in my head.

"You can't make love happen, Jill. It's either there or it's not. Who are you to *expect* your father to love you the way *you* need to be loved? He can only love you *his* way. Your unrealistic and self-indulgent expectations, not your father, set you up to be disappointed.



“Your father loves you. If you stopped feeling sorry for yourself long enough, you’d see that. And while he hasn’t treated you the way you wanted him to, he never abandoned you, and there are times, you know, he could have.”

The truth of God’s words stung me. God had dumped on me, and in a nanosecond, every myth I had ever constructed to justify my anger vaporized. I was suddenly and genuinely happy for my father. At the age of eighty-two he had finally found the kind of love that had been missing from his life. I ached for the emptiness he had lived with for so long.

Elaine hadn’t been an enemy, but that rarest of people, in Buddhist terms, a Noble friend. Some people gently prod us to find our best selves. Others are button-pushing petty tyrants or bullies, who reflect back to us our less than perfect selves. Some, like Elaine, teach us through activating deep wounds for the purpose of healing them.

My father’s relationship with Elaine and her subsequent illness and death had thrust a fresh lens on me that compelled me to re-interpret my parents’ relationship to each other and to me. In death, Elaine had given my father back to me. My later work with Sacred Contracts taught me that all our relationships, even challenging ones, are part of a roadmap our souls have created to enable us to learn lessons we agreed upon before we were born. Elaine’s soul, her higher self, had chosen to enable my father and I to make peace.

Two weeks later, I sat across from my father in the den of the house he had shared with my mother. Heart pounding, I launched into my semi-prepared and oft-rehearsed script.

“You know, Dad, I spent a lot of years pissed-off at you for the way you treated Mom, and for all the times you weren’t who I wanted you to be. It was easier for me to see what you didn’t do for me than what you did do.

“The eulogies at Elaine’s funeral were excruciatingly painful for me to hear. But after I went home, I reflected on what I had heard. It jolted me into some pretty heavy-duty realizations.”

Taking another deep breath, I continued with my life-altering revelations. I had worked hard to put them in a context my pragmatic, Spock-like father could understand.

Leaning forward in his chair, my father was openly anticipating what I had to say.

“I realized, Dad, that I had no right to expect you to be the father I wanted you to be. I judged you based on *my* criteria, what *I* wanted love to look like, *my* needs, and you always came up short. The lack I attributed to you was really in me ... for my misplaced expectations. I concocted an ideal father, a reality you couldn’t possibly have lived up to.



“I am so sorry. Instead of seeing all the ways you *were* there for me, I was too self-absorbed to see that regardless of how I acted or what I did, you never abandoned me.”

Tears filled my eyes. I struggled to maintain my composure, to continue without losing it completely. Looking across at my father, I quickly withdrew my gaze from his wet eyes, lest they utterly undo me.

“You never turned your back on me, Dad, and I know there were times I hurt you deeply. Since I married Danny, I’ve seen fathers walk away from and disown their children for far lesser deeds than mine.

“You were always there for me, and I never saw it before. Please forgive me, Daddy, for not seeing how much you really do love me. I’m so sorry it took me all these years to see and acknowledge it. I love you. I really do, and I’m so sorry for all the pain I have caused you.”

It had been years since I called my father “Daddy.” Using that term used to trigger all my insecurities, leaving me feeling infantilized and disempowered. Now, it felt warm and comforting. I shook my head in amazement.

Both of us were crying now. Tears streamed down his face as he rose from his chair and sat down next to me. We held tight to each other as we wept.

He started to say something. I quickly interrupted. “Please, Dad, let me finish. If I don’t get this all out ... I won’t be able to.”

Pain for all the wasted years of anger mixed with exhilarating relief as I poured out my heartfelt reparations. “I was so angry at you for the way you treated mother. I knew she wasn’t blameless, but I’m ashamed to admit that I blamed you far more than her. I was so wrong.

“Thankfully, I now understand that love is either there or it isn’t. You can’t make a heart connection happen, and I’m not sure you ever had that with mother. So, initially I resented what you had with Elaine. Now I realize that it’s no one’s fault. You’re not solely to blame for the state of yours and Mom’s marriage—how you felt or didn’t feel about Mom. I am truly happy that you finally experienced the joy of love and true companionship with Elaine.”

Through the distortion of my tear-filled eyes, I watched my father’s shoulders sag. His defenses dissolved as I acknowledged and validated him. All the armor he had erected to deflect my episodic attacks evaporated as I opened my heart to him. A lifetime of distance disappeared in a flash. It really was miraculous.

Only inches separated us, psychically and physically.



"I'm almost done, Dad. I saved the hardest for last, knowing it would be the toughest for me to get out." Tears streamed down my face and I blubbered, "I'm so sorry I disappointed you. Please forgive me ... for not being the daughter you wanted me to be."

Removing my hands that I had, unconsciously, placed over my face to cover my shame, he tearfully looked me in the eyes. "Oh, sweetie, I just wanted you to be successful," he said honestly, his red-rimmed eyes overflowing.

"But, Dad, you wanted me to do it on your terms. And because I could never live up to your expectations, I always felt like a failure in your eyes. I tried so hard to be what you wanted me to be, and then I just gave up. Shame turned to resentment, which Mom encouraged ... but, I don't want to go *there* now. That's a conversation for another time ... it's not why I'm here.

Both of us wanted this moment to last, as if by holding tight to each other, we could reclaim those lost years.

"I love you Daddy," I said, still sobbing.

"I love you, too, sweetie. I always have, and I'm so happy that you finally know that.

At last, I understood why my mother had died first. Only with hindsight was I able to see the hand of God in this. It's always there, but blinded as we are, we can't see beyond our own wounds. We assume we know better than God. This rapprochement could have never occurred had my mother been alive. Her role as a victim and a martyr never would have allowed it. I tipped my hat to the mysterious wisdom of the universe, resolved not to second-guess God again, though I still fail miserably at times.

In the past, when faced with an opportunity to forgive, I vigorously resisted, unwilling to give up my righteous indignation. We humans are addicted to blame. It's culturally hardwired, the default response when anything goes wrong. *Someone* must be to blame. *My* pain, *my* humiliation, *my* being wronged, *my* experience of injustice must not have its origins within me. I must condemn it or accept my worthlessness. If I forgive what *they* have done to me, then I condone it and concede that I deserved what befell me. Viewing any painful experience as an opportunity to let go of deeply ingrained patterns of self-sabotage is instrumental in reducing self-judgment. The more I relinquished blame and victimhood, the less I felt a lack in me was responsible for the way my parents treated me. It was never about me.

Previously, I had wanted recompense for my wounds, wanted to hold tightly to my catalogue of injustices. But what if those experiences were nothing more than my soul's attempts to highlight my childhood wounds— not feeling good enough or feeling unlovable and superfluous—to enable me to heal them.



When I felt betrayed and hurt in the past, I reacted with the same anger I felt as a child when I didn't feel seen or understood by my parents. All those years of feeling like Cinderella before the ball rose up to inflame me.

My conversation with God after Elaine's funeral was the catalyst to realizing that we recreate our original wound again and again under different circumstances until we behold that it is God's way of shining a light on the places inside us that need healing. Forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves, one that bestows self-acceptance and heals a lifetime of resentments. Until that truth sinks in, we will continue to resist it.

Making peace with my father revealed yet another truth, one at odds with my upbringing that forced me to reexamine my childhood assumptions of justice. According to my mother, God punished and rewarded. To her, anything "bad" that happened to me was a punishment from God, and reinforced my lack of self-worth. It took me decades to realize God doesn't punish. We punish/sabotage ourselves to learn to become conscious of what we're doing and to stop it.

Ever since I wrestled with God, forgiveness is much easier. It doesn't mean, however, that I want to spend time with those I have forgiven. I don't want most of them in my life. They've been great teachers, and I am forever grateful for what they've taught me about myself. I also see that people who challenge us to forgive are like movie screens upon which we project our insecurities and our perceived inadequacies.

Being human, I also accept that there are people I am not ready to forgive, and I forgive myself for that. It's okay.