

by Sandy Brewer, PhD

I shouldn't have lived. The odds were against it. But I did. I shouldn't have ultimately learned how to thrive and live a successful life. Those odds were even slimmer.

It began so early in my life. Like the time when I was 2 ½ and found myself flying through the air on the way to hit a wall. My mother was the thrower and I was that which had been thrown. This was white, suburban America in the 1940's, where the "rule" was that child abuse didn't happen. It did, of course. I'm living proof of that. It happened everywhere. It still does.

Life for me went down-hill from that first airborne incident. By the time I was ten I had been raped and tortured by my father countless times, with my mother's knowledge. It wasn't that she was cowed by him or too frightened to step in. She was actually the ruler of the house. Very twisted. Very cruel and painful for a little girl to endure. Ten was also the year they tried to kill me. I had heard them planning it. I sat on my bed, stunned, yet somehow ready, more tired than I had ever been in my life. Perhaps, I thought to myself, ten years and seven months had been long enough...

My mother had orchestrated the plan; my father had been instructed to execute it. He had placed the cold metal barrel of a pistol against the side of my forehead and instructed me to drink the deadly barbiturate laced orange soda he had placed on the table next to me. It all seemed so surreal and yet it all felt so unimportant. I tried to drink it. I really did. But as I touched the rim of the glass to my lips, something erupted in my brain, crashing through the barren emptiness I had been in. A primitive yowl came out of my mouth and I violently threw the glass in his face.

On his second try whatever lightning rod of survival that had made itself known a few minutes earlier was long gone. I submitted and drank. But on my father's second try, he didn't have quite enough toxins available to totally destroy my body, and through an extraordinary stroke of luck or the grace of God – in my mind it's definitely the latter – I survived, but just barely.

There were worse things yet to come, many more experiences of extreme trauma and pain and another close encounter with death. As a child, I never thought I'd live to be eighteen. Once I got there the only vow I made was that I would not repeat the abuse. It would end with me. Other than that, my best hope for my life was that I would be able to maintain my cover story – the appearance of okayness. I certainly never thought I would live to be a truly successful, well-adjusted woman with a loving husband and beautiful children and grandchildren of my own.

So, how did I get from there to here? How do any of us get out of the darkness of pain and suffering into the light of all that we might be? I've been a counselor for over thirty-five years, and through my own healing and then the privilege of helping others, it became so clear that the details of our stories, harsh

as they might be, are not really important. I know that doesn't sound fair, but life is not about fair. It's about change and empowerment. Reality is not carved in stone; it's based on a point of view. And my point of view is I'm only a victim if I give some one or some thing else my mind. My parents can't have it, and neither can anyone else. It's mine to own, to cherish and to heal.

We all have stories, but they are just back-stories. Back-stories can control and ruin our lives if we don't learn how to let them go. We are not our experiences; we are not the places through which we have traveled; and we are definitely not the result of some else's ignorance and depravity. Unless we say so. Whatever one's life journey has been, we have the power within us to choose the challenges as stumbling blocks or stepping stones.

So, here's where forgiveness comes in, because no one can thrive as a victim. If we want freedom, joy and laughter, if we want to create loving, caring relationships, if we want to know the parts of life we haven't yet known, then forgiveness – letting go of our attachment to our stories – is required. No healing, empowerment or forward progress can happen without it.

It takes courage to choose something greater than a wound, but we all have the power to do so. It is innate within us. So I chose that I was not a victim of the world around me or within me. I chose that I didn't have to stay afraid of what I had experienced. And I chose that I didn't have to sanitize it – to cover it with a pretty yellow ribbon or an endless shroud of grief. That would simply have kept me in fear of it and the frequency or energy that it represented. We do not change our lives or our world by sanitizing the harsh things we see or have seen. We create change by gaining strength, courage, wisdom and conviction through looking the situation/energy of it in the eye and insisting that it does not name us. That falls under our jurisdiction!

Forgiveness is about letting go in peace, whether we are forgiving ourselves or others. It does not mean you are a dirty, rotten excuse for a human being and I forgive you anyway--even if the other person has behaved like a dirty rotten excuse for a human being... Forgiveness is about compassion and release. It's about knowing that it takes two for war and one for peace. And in the end, forgiveness is understanding that from a Spiritual point of view there is nothing to forgive

I was thirty-nine when true forgiveness was brought home to me. I was in a deep meditation, not in any way focusing on my parents, when I suddenly "saw" them in my inner senses sitting around me forming a small circle. I had estranged myself from them for the sake of my children when I was twenty-three and had not seen them since that day. But there I was, deep within myself, witnessing my father sitting on my left and my mother sitting on my right. And that's when all the practice of learning how to stay in charge of the focus of my mind and heal my heart paid off. That's when the miracle of forgiveness happened. I reached out with each of my hands to touch my mother and father. Prior to that moment, I would have rather put my naked hand into road kill – and that from someone who is seriously squeamish! But instead, with my mind's eye, I touched each of them. Then the words came. "Whatever the two of you still need to finish with each other," I said, "that is between the two of you. But between thee and me now, there is peace."

And in a nutshell that's my freedom song, for the art of forgiveness is, at its core, a release. It's the release of identifying oneself based on old stories; it's the cracking open of a once wounded heart, the expansion of love. Each of us has the ability to discover the light and the promise of a new day if we will just let go of the idea that our identities have to be seeded in yesterday and willingly practice the healing art of forgiveness. That is how we create a today different than yesterday, for with each new dawn comes the light of a healed heart.

Inner peace – or inner war...which will you choose today?