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By Betsey Beckman

Let's say you have a son who, in an adolescent display of prowess, demands his inheritance before you have even turned fifty.

With a pound of money and without an ounce of sense, he heads off to the big city and you are left at the brink of a widening canyon between you and your disappearing child. Can you consider wading through the river of your disappointment and worry, righteous anger and rejection, to arrive at *his* side of the ravine?

Or suppose you are the son (or daughter) and in the midst of your new-found prodigality you wake up one morning penniless and hungry. What are the stepping stones back across the gulf you have created?

How do we as Christians build the bridge of forgiveness?

Or even closer to home: suppose your husband has decided to divorce you or your DRE quit his job yesterday. Maybe your father sexually abused you as a child or your mother was an alcoholic. Perhaps in your relationship to the church you find yourself a "battered woman," used and abused for your willingness to serve — or a "battered priest," as-

saulted by the congregation and staff for being inadequate. Where do you go with the outrage at being violated, wounded, taken advantage of? Is forgiveness even an option? Or is forgiveness a stance that perpetuates disempowerment?

We all know we are *supposed* to forgive, but the question is: how? There is a difference between mouthing words of forgiveness because we know we should and actually shifting our inner attitude from anger to love and acceptance. When, as liturgymakers, we have an experience of this shift within ourselves, we are then more able to create liturgy that facilitates a change of heart for others. So, here are a few blueprints for the bridge.

The first step across the water is the recognition that whether you are the prodigal or the parent, *you* are the one to take the step. As a matter of fact, you do not even need the other person's consent in order to build the bridge; it is up to *you*. If you find yourself waiting around for the other person to change, you will probably be stuck with a half a bridge for decades! The construction begins with your decision to set foot on the path of opening your heart.

The next step consists of emptying yourself, clearing away all the sticks and stones and broken bones that lie heaped in your heart as unexpressed feelings. (Unexpressed because you knew you were not supposed to be feeling them, so you tried to pretend

they were not there. Now they are likely to have amassed themselves into a veritable waste repository in your body. They may even be manifesting themselves in some form of physical illness in order to get your attention!)

Dennis and Matthew Linn, SJ, have spent their lives creating footpaths to forgiveness and have written numerous books describing their discoveries. In *Healing Life's Hurts: Healing Memories through the Five Stages of Forgiveness* (Paulist Press, 1978), they suggest that getting to forgiveness is, in a sense, like dying. We go through the same five stages discovered by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Each stage is important and healthy as long as we continue to work toward acceptance where we are then freed to recognize the grace and the gifts springing from the wound itself.

So, it is completely appropriate for you to feel angry when you have been violated or defeated and depressed when you recognize the hurt caused by your own anger. Allowing the healthy expression of these feelings (whether in prayer or to one another) can provide the fuel you need to make changes in the world or in yourself. However, a problem develops when you discover a feeling and hold on to

bridge across forgiveness

it for dear life. Whether the feeling is a resentment toward another or guilt toward oneself, it obstructs forgiveness. At this point, the Linn brothers suggest we need to learn to hate the sin but love the sinner. Again, how?

The key to letting go of the obstruction lies in the emptying, the confession that we have identified as the second step, which may last anywhere from minutes to months.

This makes way for the third step by creating an openness in yourself that can be filled in a new way, a recognition of your humanity and your need for a source of healing that is greater than yourself.

In the third step you open your heart to receive God's love. "My dear people, let us love one another, since love comes from God. This is the love I mean; not our love for God, but God's love for us" (1 Jn 4:7). The Linn's call this "soaking prayer" — soaking in God's love until our hearts are brimming over. This is the source of the love we extend to others. We can never coerce ourselves into forgiveness by simply making light of the fact we were hurt or pretending we were not hurt at all so as not to burden others. The heart responds to the gentle stroking of love, whereby it opens to receive the love it needs for healing. Only when we have been touched by the source of all forgiveness can we accept our weakness and ask to be forgiven or accept another's weakness and reach out to forgive.

As the source, God is the love that bridges the space between our heart and another's. Even though the other may be reluctant to greet us on the bridge, our own hearts have softened in acceptance — and the relationship becomes new. This kind of healing is possible even with those who are

deceased or otherwise departed from our lives. In her collaboration with the Linn brothers, Sheila Fabricant tells a story about seven retreatants who prayed to forgive their ex-spouses with whom they had had no contact for ten years. As it turned out, five of the seven ex-spouses contacted the retreatants within a few weeks of being forgiven! (*Healing the Greatest Hurt* by Matthew and Dennis Linn, Paulist Press, 1978). With these reflections on the liberating power of forgiveness, how do we awaken the healing potential that often lies dormant in our liturgies? One way is simply to be creative with the possibilities for healing within the prayers, readings, and rites of the Eucharist, our primary sacrament of reconciliation. For example, the penitential rite can become a healing meditation (to be read slowly):

PRESIDER: Let us prepare to celebrate this Eucharist by inviting the Lord's healing presence into our hearts. Begin by breathing deeply and slowly. As you inhale, invite the Lord's great light to enter into your heart. Let the breath of light fill the darkened corners of your lungs and abdomen, heart and soul. Gently exhale all shadows of fear and inner hiding. As you continue to take in the Lord's light, let come into your mind's eye the image of a person that has hurt you and is in need of your forgiveness. See the person's face in front of you and notice what feelings are rising in your heart as you look into his or her eyes. Notice if you feel anger, frustration, pain, sorrow. As you exhale, breathe each feeling into the Lord. Give every complaint and inner cry into the Lord's

heart. Breathe all your outrage or need into God's hands. After a few cycles of breath: now as you inhale begin to fill your heart with God's love. Breathe in deeply God's acceptance of you just as you are in this moment. Breathe in forgiveness until it spills out of your heart and begins to pour into the heart of the person with whom you are in need of reconciliation. Continue to breathe in acceptance until the two of you are connected and surrounded by the loving light of the Lord. When you are ready, open your eyes. (Pause). We come before you broken, O Lord.

ASSEMBLY: Lord, have mercy.

P: We open our own wounded hearts and ask to be filled with your love.

A: Christ, have mercy.

P: Lord, grant us your forgiveness.

A: Lord, have mercy.

The possibilities for healing stretch endlessly, especially in viewing the sacraments and sacramental preparation as opportunities for the community to support members moving through the stages of healing. Any groundwork done on individual inner healing paves the way for public acts of reconciliation between larger groups within our communities.

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