Empathy allows us to "re-perceive" [our] world in a new way and go on.

—MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG, PhD

Getting to Forgiveness

I experienced a lot of physical violence from my dad when I was a kid. I have painful memories of being hit and dragged, of seeing my parents yelling and slapping each other in the face. I often sat at the kitchen counter, trying to make sense of it and feeling scared and confused. For the longest time, I couldn't understand or put into words how I felt about my dad.

I remained angry and hurt for years, and as an adult I began to realize how much these experiences had affected me. I wanted to heal, so I journaled and went to counseling and twelve-step meetings. But I also avoided my dad.

In the space I took for myself, I wrote a lot and practiced self-empathy. It dawned on me that I didn't want to say I was abused, neglected, or misunderstood, because those types of labels kept me feeling stuck and helpless. Instead, I connected to how hurt I felt because I wanted more support and care from my dad. I was angry because my needs for safety and protection were not met on many occasions. I felt disappointed because I wanted respect and consideration, even as a little kid. I was frustrated because I was desperate to be heard and understood. I felt sadness because I needed to know I was valued, celebrated, and loved as a kid.

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I repeated this type of internal dialogue to myself over and again, and as it soaked in over time, I began to open up to forgiveness for my dad. Through reflection and prayer, I saw how my needs had an inherent beauty to them. They pointed to something in my heart, even in the midst of the violence, that spoke of God's love for me.

In his last days, I had an opportunity to talk to him about everything. We had an honest conversation from a place of love and compassion, which was possible because I had already forgiven him in my heart.

Dad had spent the end of his life hospitalized with a lung disease. When I first visited his hospital room, I tried to hide my feelings and act strong, like I thought a man should. I soon realized it was taking too much energy to fake strength, so I decided to be fully present instead. I cried, letting my tears flow when they came. I think this kind of emotional honesty was new for him, but I was relieved to be myself. And it seemed that my father was able to accept me, and my honesty, during our visits. This vulnerability gave us the opportunity to reminisce about the good times we had together and for me to share my gratitude with him for the many ways he'd truly supported me as a kid.

During one of these talks, my dad asked for more oxygen. I paused for a moment and found the courage to say, "Dad, we're giving you all we've got. We can't turn it up any more."

He didn't say anything and neither did I. We knew he was getting close to transitioning.

Later that day, the doctor examined him and said, "If you were meaning to have any conversations, now is the time."

I was the only visitor that afternoon, so I settled in to talk with him, just the two of us. There was one thing I wanted to bring up. I took his hand and said, "Dad, I have some regret about my distance from you after your divorce from Mom. I'm sad that we lost so much time. I was confused and needed space to figure things out."

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"I'm sad about that too," he said. "That was a really difficult time."

He also shared one of his regrets with me, while struggling to breathe. "When you were younger, I wish I had been more loving."

I said, "Dad, I forgive you for all that, I really do."

He nodded, his face pained behind his oxygen mask. I cried while we sat together quietly.

I am grateful to have spent the last two weeks of my dad's life with him. A part of me healed as we talked. I felt torn between the joy of connecting with him and sadness that I had waited so long. I mourn that he is no longer here to talk with me, hang out, and hug.

My experience of forgiving him has given me a sense of peace and calm around our relationship, as if the healing extended into the past, bringing restoration to my heart. I hope he's hearing my words, so he can celebrate how far we came during our time together. Thanks, Dad!

—JAMES PRIETO, www.compassionateconnecting.com

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