Forgiving Yourself

your life is absolutely going to change

I was in a supermarket and a black boy around age seven was struggling to get a bottle of soda off the shelf. He dropped it and it exploded all over the floor. His brown eyes of terror looked up at me. I, at 22 years old, stood frozen. I didn't move. It wasn't that I didn't care; I just didn't do anything.

Now, when I remember that moment, I realize that I maintained my boundary: you're not my responsibility though my heart goes out to you. If I could, without hesitation, I would transport myself back to that moment. I would kneel down at eye level and tell him, "It's fine—hey, I've done that too," and then help him negotiate with the supermarket manager. If needed, I would give him money if they held him accountable.

After that experience, I knew I would never response in that insensitive way. I wonder, why does that moment repeat itself in my memory? Is it because we locked eyes? I see those brown eyes and worry about what I taught him. It could have been a moment of connection, contributing something significant to another person. But instead, I was paralyzed, making an exit rather than my entrance. Those eyes asked for help, and I fear that his memory will be my back walking away. It was, and still is, indigestible to my system.

For most, forgiveness involves someone who has hurt us in small or serious ways. And though forgiveness does not exonerate the trespasser, or the act, it does bestow mercy—a realization of their limitations, their hurts, their unhealed nature, and their arrogance. It is a noble and generous gesture, and also a pragmatic one. It is hard to carry hatred for a lifetime. It numbs and hardens us. Forgive before you die.

More importantly, is forgiving ourselves. We may blame ourselves for our faults, our mistakes, and our unskilled behaviors that have inflicted pain on others, not realizing that most often, we hurt others and ourselves due to our lack of skill, maturity and wisdom. Extending mercy, understanding and forgiveness to our self, is a great act. We are released from the unforgiving prison of a closed heart.

I often do what I call "mirror work." It is based on the "I" and "Thou" concept of philosopher Martin Buber who believed in the "dyadic" of our nature, that is, we both experience and respond to our experiences and thoughts. We are in a relationship with ourselves. For instance, when you think, you are essentially talking to yourself, and then you respond. It is a twofold process. Your self-critical thoughts almost always respond with bodily tension and hurt feelings. With positive thoughts, you feel alive and joyous. You sparkle and smile. You are both the giver and the receiver of your own dialogue.

Mirror Work:
• Look into a mirror at your own face. Look into your own eyes.
• Say your own name out loud. Keep saying it.
• For example, "Mariah, I forgive you," and perhaps list what you forgive yourself for.
• And now, receive what you have given. Inhale. Receive. And thank yourself.

Is speaking to yourself with kindness and forgiveness a new experience? If so, intimacy is missing. As you do this, your life is, with excitement, absolutely going to change.

I encourage you, take an inventory of your unfinished hurts and resentments of yourself and others, and do the work required to fully express and move through them. Then shorten your list. Move toward forgiveness, even if it is inch by inch, until you reach a capacity to forgive the unforgivable. It will thaw the ice of bitterness and allow you to breathe your deepest breath.

By Mariah Fenton Gladis. About the author: Aside from her work as a psychotherapist and trainer, Mariah continues to be a wonderful wife, a mother to two grown sons, a motivational speaker, community leader and author. She has recently published her first book, Tales of a Wounded Healer. For more information on Mariah and her work, go to www.gestaltcenter.com.