

Coming in Peace, 2017 by Tracy Cochran

Why not start the New Year granting ourselves the blessing of being forgiven—free of any trace of the wounds and limitations we are all trailing due to what we been through and what we did and left undone? This may feel counter-intuitive, given all that has happened in 2016. But forgiveness, like gratitude, is a practice that can ground us and connect us to a deeper source of strength and fresh inspiration. We start by forgiving ourselves for all we have manifested or not, for all we have put ourselves and others through this year and for many years. We can stay here as long as we like.

We can start small, sitting quietly at a quiet time of day or in a quiet place. We can practice saying “forgiven” like a mantra or prayer. We can do this when a memory of old bad behavior or harsh speech arises, or when we are gripped by tension or a rush of anxiety or the vague, uneasy sense that we are controlled by our conditioning. For a moment or two as we practice this, we can emerge from the cage of our thinking into a warmer, lighter awareness, an awareness that can welcome all of us, scars and bad memories and our beautiful, tender wish to be part of life.

Throughout the ages, people have called this greater benevolent consciousness God. But you don’t need to worry about whether there is a God or not to practice saying or thinking “forgiven.” We don’t even need to think about having an awareness that is not thinking. We just need to practice recognizing and accepting our own humanity. One moment at a time, we can practice act of opening to life, just that, opening to the reality that we are more than our own conditioning, our own past lives, our own opinions and views. This act of opening does not depend on belief or views of any kind.

Years ago in Parabola, we shared an article about the theory that the brain is not the sole creator of consciousness. Instead of being a virtual reality machine inside our own skull it may be a receiver that is also capable of receiving a frequency beyond the default network offerings, those reality shows featuring each of us and other known characters. When we sit quietly and bring our attention to our present moment experience, the receiver of the brain may open to a greater awareness, a consciousness that is above us and around us and also in us. To receive it, even for a moment, is to be forgiven.

Not surprisingly, the word “forgive” comes from a word that means to give. To forgive a debt is giving solvency to another—absolving them, pulling them out of debtor’s prison and back into the light of the living. We can also free ourselves from debtors prison. Why not do this? As Charles Dickens tells us, no one ever paid their debts while locked away in debtors prison. We can practice tuning into a frequency outside the prison of the self. We can practice saying “forgiven.”

Months after the death of his beloved wife Joy, C.S. Lewis had a vivid sense of her as he took his morning bath. Up until then, he seemed always to be thinking of her absence, of

the vast hole her absence left in the world. Real, living people have a presence that is so much bigger than what we can see and name. It is so subtle and particular and alive, it slips right through the net of words. After the death of his Joy, Lewis realized that if we are to be as fully alive, we have to let go of our attachment to our cramped and dark little thoughts and images and “stretch out the arms and hands of love.” We have to embrace the mystery of the unknown. Practicing forgiveness, asking and granting forgiveness, is practicing stretching out the arms and hands of love to life.

Like many men of his generation, my father was a veteran of World War II. At the conclusion of his funeral a few years ago, an honor guard fired a twenty-one gun salute. This ritual came from the custom of ships firing off all their guns to show that they came in peace. With no time to reload before they were in range of the shore, the ship was voluntarily defenseless. To ask for and offer forgiveness is to put down arms, daring to show ourselves as we are without defenses. This New Year, may we all dare to put down our guns—to take off all our armor, even the subtle forms. May we all sail into the New Year disarmed, daring to stretch out the arms and hands of love to the unknown. The unknown is our own greater potential. Daring to embrace to the mystery of life is a way to gather strength and inspiration and confidence for what is to come. It is a way to begin again.