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Reasons to love the F-word

Simon Baron-Cohen reviews a graphic offering on forgiveness by Masi Noor & Marina Cantacuzino; art by Sophie Standing (Singing Dragon; Hb £9.99).



This very slim cartoon book comes from one of my favourite charities, the Forgiveness Project. As it sounds, this charity works to promote the revolutionary concept of forgiveness. The word 'revolutionary' is my choice here, not a word authors Noor and Cantacuzino would necessarily use. Let me give you a few brief examples of the work they do, illustrated in this beautiful comic book, which is smaller than your hand and will take you just 20 minutes to read, cover to cover.

Can you imagine a rape victim forgiving her rapist? Or the parent of a murdered child forgiving the murderer? Or the victim of a violent armed robbery forgiving the burglar? Or a member of an ethnic minority who was attacked forgiving their racist attacker? For most of us, the F-word (forgiveness) would be the last thing on our mind in these scenarios; instead the more obvious emotions we might imagine a victim feeling towards the perpetrator would be extremes of anger, hate or revenge.



What I take from Noor and Cantacuzino's book, and the ethos of their charity, is that we have evolved to feel anger, hate and revenge as an automatic reflex set of negative emotions to kick-start the fight-back circuit in our brains, to ensure we are not doormats for further attacks, and to make us hypervigilant to threat. But these negative emotions aren't necessarily in our, or our society's, best interests in the long term.

Sure, feeling these negative emotions in the short term may be unavoidable reflexes, as these neurophysiological algorithms have kept primate species alive for millions of years. But for me, the take home messages from Noor and Cantacuzino's highly readable little book is there are at least six reasons not to get stuck at the stage of feeling these negative emotions.

First, anger, hate and revenge don't allow for any empathic perspective-taking (why did the perpetrator do what he did?), which is necessary to understand the perpetrator's motives and to take a compassionate view of them. As we know from every good movie or novel, the perpetrator has their own back-story and likely didn't start out in life as a violent person. In all likelihood he or she was also a victim of some kind of neglect or abuse.

Second, anger, hate and revenge can contribute to our own empathy erosion. The anger circuit is an antagonist of the empathy circuit. And when our own empathy – even as victims – is blocked, we become capable of hurting others just as brutally as we ourselves were hurt. And that just perpetuates cycles of violence.

Third, if the victim lives with anger, hate and revenge this may be bad for the victim's own mental health, and may spill over into angry outbursts in their other relationships (with their partner, children, work colleagues, other drivers on the road, etc.).

Fourth, anger, hate and revenge don't lead us to any deeper understanding of how such acts of violence could be prevented in the future. The negative emotions may just lead to the rapid conclusion: lock the guy up and throw away the key. Instead, by using empathic perspective-taking, and opening the door to emotions like forgiveness, we have a better chance of creating a world where we understand and can identify the risk indicators for such crimes, to reduce the likelihood of future crimes.

Fifth, choosing to explore the emotion of forgiveness instead of being stuck with the negative emotions enables the perpetrator to change and be humanised, so reducing and probably completely eliminating the risk of his or her re-offending.

And finally, choosing to explore forgiveness as an alternative to the reflex negative emotions befits our species. We are not just social primates but are a unique species in being able to override our evolved reflexes and design a culture that is as ethical as possible. Arguably, forgiveness is not just an emotion but an ethical position.

So how is forgiveness possible? Well, it helps if the perpetrator is willing to come to listen to the victim, to discover the pain he has caused (in case he hasn't had the imagination to realise this alone). And it helps if, after hearing or seeing the victim's pain, the perpetrator expresses remorse and realises what hurt they have done. Even better, it helps if they have even asked for forgiveness, perhaps because they want the chance to be a better person. And it may even help if the victim is willing to hear the perpetrator's back-story, to see how he or she too may have suffered in their past. But even if the perpetrator is unable to recognise the hurt they have caused, perhaps because of their own neuropsychological limitations, the victim may decide to forgive him or her anyway, out of pity for the perpetrator's 'disability'.

Forgiveness of course doesn't mean circumventing or shortening a prison sentence, but it does mean giving the perpetrator a chance to change and grow into a better person, and to have a second chance in life. Forgiveness may not be feasible for everyone – imagine if you're the parent of the Indian schoolgirl who was raped and her body burnt – and we should respect that. Perhaps we should think of forgiveness as representing an ethical ideal that is not always attainable but something we should all aim for.

This book is well worth a read, it will challenge your own ethical position, and make a terrific basis for a classroom, workshop or seminar discussion. Now do you see why I think that the F-word is revolutionary?

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