

CHAPTER 3

3. RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL, MORAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF FORGIVENESS AND SELF-FORGIVENESS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Hanna Arendt (1958), rates the concept of forgiveness as one of the two most original ideas in world civilization (cited in Bauer et al., 1992). This concept, which is deeply imbedded in the Judaic/Christian religions, has largely been dealt with in the world of theology and religion. Although there has been an increased interest in this topic in the last two decades, this phenomenon has hitherto been neglected in the psychological literature and research, especially regarding the experience of forgiveness in everyday life and how the individual integrates this experience into her view of herself and the world.

Previous research has shown that ‘not only forgiving another, but the experience of forgiving oneself is common, profound and vital to one’s sense of health, human growth and psychological wholeness’ (Bauer et al., 1992, pp.149 & 150). As a conceptual problem, forgiveness has roots in theology, philosophy and psychology, because forgiveness is an interdisciplinary issue and philosophers and theologians often base their interpretations on observations of specific human behaviour (Rowe, et al., 1989). Enright & Fitzgibbons (2000) state that one needs to be an interdisciplinary scholar in order to ‘understand the multifaceted nature and deeper meaning of forgiveness’ (ibid, 2000, p.321).

In this chapter, the focus will be on dealing with the religious, cultural, political, moral and philosophical backgrounds against which forgiveness and self-forgiveness take place and which are significant in contextualizing and enhancing the understanding of these phenomena. In addition, discussing the phenomena of forgiveness and self-forgiveness within the socio-cultural, political, religious, moral and philosophical contexts may help to explain why these phenomena have become foreign, incomprehensible and often disturbing and abstract concepts, rather than being seen as concepts which are pivotal and critical to one’s experience. From a personal perspective within the South African context, (culturally, socially and politically), we seem to have come full circle. In the past there was confusion regarding the experience of forgiveness because our previously held contemporary and cultural values ran contrary to the attitudes necessary for forgiveness. At present, the experience of the socio-cultural and political values in South Africa seem to have become more synonymous with the experience of forgiveness and self-forgiveness, i.e. ‘an openness to oneself and

others, to the metaphorical or mysterious in living and to mercy' (Bauer et al., 1992, p.151).

3.2 RELIGIOUS CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING FORGIVENESS

Literature from the ancient world, especially from Hebrew, Christian, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist viewpoints, illustrates that forgiveness occurs within the context of moral right and wrong involving reduced resentment and increased compassion and moral love, culminating in transformation (Enright and Fitzgibbons, 2000).

The Jewish/Christian religions focus on the need for forgiveness because of sin and wrongdoing. The Old Testament deals with this concept in describing the myth of the Garden of Eden - Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge in direct contravention of God's command and in so doing, are expelled from the garden 'estranged from God, themselves and one another' 'and they realized they were naked' (Genesis 3:7 cited in Bauer et al. 1992). God seeks to be reconciled with humankind and in order to achieve this reconciliation, mankind is required to acknowledge their wrongdoing, embrace their sinfulness, repent, open themselves and seek God's forgiveness. Repentance and the acknowledgement of wrongdoing are based on the desire to reconcile with God and others. There is recognition also that there is a dependence on God's will for this to occur. Part of the religious teachings is that the ability and willingness to forgive others is also crucial to being forgiven. This is based on the assumption that in order to be pardoned and experience forgiveness oneself, one has to accept the fallibility and humanness of others, e.g. asking God to 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them who trespass against us' (The Lord's Prayer). The process of forgiving others and being forgiven, results in a sense of community and becoming aware of the similarities between mankind: 'one recognises one's similarity and takes one's place in the human community' (Bauer et al., 1992, p.150).

In South Africa particularly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of 1996-1998, clearly showed the aim of the biblical tradition of forgiveness in maintaining the integrity of community. The TRC (led by the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who fought the evils of racism during the apartheid years) sought to listen to the stories of both the perpetrators and victims of crimes against humanity during the apartheid era, and to reconcile and integrate these stories into the psyche of the South African nation as a whole. The commission represented and mirrored the religious teaching of calling us to confront our sinfulness, to be accountable before God and others, and to be merciful toward humankind. Forgiveness also allows us a future that is not determined by the past, and as Archbishop Tutu (1998) stated, 'humankind is freed to imagine and move into new possibilities'. He

further warned, that ‘without forgiveness, there can be no future’ (cited in Enright & North, 1998, p.xiii).

A Jewish perspective and reinterpretation and understanding of guilt and forgiveness is given by Rabbi Harold Kushner (1996). He looks at the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the concept of original sin, where we are left with the notion that we are supposed to be perfect and that we expect others to be perfect, because we need them to be. This leaves us feeling constantly guilty and perpetually disappointed. Kushner, states that when religion teaches us that one mistake is enough to define us as sinners and puts us at risk of losing God’s love (as happened to Adam and Eve in the traditional understanding of the story), and that even angry and hurtful thoughts are sinful, then we all think of ourselves as sinners. This defines every one of us as doing something wrong daily. He further states that, ‘if nothing short of being perfect will permit us to stand before God, then none of us will, because none of us is perfect’ (p.39). Our lives will thus be dominated by guilt and fear of having made, and of making, mistakes.

Instead, his reinterpretation of the story of original sin focuses on religion teaching us that God loves the wounded soul that has learned something of its own fallibility and its own limitations; that being human is a complicated challenge and we all make mistakes in the learning process. It is this recognition of our human fallibility and humanness which could result in a perception of our mistakes not rendering us unworthy, but as experiences we can gain and learn from. Kushner states that in changing this perception, we will be brave enough to try something without being afraid of getting it wrong, our sense of shame will be the result of humility in recognizing our limits and learning, rather than wanting to hide from something because of our wrongdoing. Our religion sets standards and ideals and can therefore make us feel guilty, but in addition, religion can welcome us in our imperfection (ibid, 1996).

According to Kushner, we have the power to choose happiness over righteousness and righteousness means remembering every time someone hurts us or disappoints us, and never letting them forget it. It also means that we will see that others will remember every time we hurt them or let them down and that they will constantly remind us of it. Happiness means giving people the right to be human, weak and selfish, and occasionally forgetful and realizing that we have no alternative to living with imperfect people, ‘because imperfect people are the only kind we will ever find’ (ibid, 1996, p.111). Thus the reinterpretation of our inheritance from Adam and Eve is not sin and punishment, but the burden and challenge of being truly human. On eating the fruit of the tree, we gained the knowledge that some things are good, others are evil and we learned how painfully complex life could be (ibid, 1996).

Another significant Jewish perspective regarding intrapersonal and interpersonal relational components as well as insight in the experience of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others, is discussed by Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1968) in the translation of his original lectures entitled *Nine Talmudic Readings* (1990). Here texts and thoughts from the Talmud (the code of Jewish and religious civil law) are translated 'into the language of modern times' (Aronowicz, 1990, p. ix). Levinas states that according to Jewish law, the instrument for forgiveness is in the individual's own hands and that appeasing the wronged Other should take place before the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) - the day of fasting and the holiest day in the Jewish calendar - in order to be forgiven by God, 'the other, *par excellence*' (Levinas, 1990, p.16) (italics in original). According to the Talmud, one is obliged to ask forgiveness of the wronged other not more than three times. 'An evil requires a healing of the self by the self and the moral conscience must establish itself as a moral conscience' (p.16). Teshuvah or Return/Repentance is simultaneously 'the relation with God (the Other) and an absolutely internal event' (p.16). Thus, on the one hand, one is solitary and in the most severe position of isolation; asking for, and obtaining, forgiveness from God on the Day of Atonement. On the other hand, 'one must rely on the objective order of the (Synagogue) community to obtain this intimacy of deliverance'. Levinas states that it is 'a set day in the calendar and all the ceremonial of solemnity of Yom Kippur are needed for the 'damaged' moral conscience to reach its intimacy and reconquer the integrity that no one can reconquer for it' (p.17). This dialectic of the collective and the intimate is of great significance in the experience of forgiveness and self-forgiveness, 'the power to purify guilty souls, so important within Jewish thought, is the communal basis of inner rebirth' (p.17).

In addition, insight is a significant constituent of forgiveness and self-forgiveness in Levinas' analysis of anecdotal texts. In his commentary, he states that there are two conditions for forgiveness: the goodwill of the offended party, and the full awareness of the offender (ibid, 1990, p.17). However, he explains that the offender is in essence unaware, and that the aggressiveness of the offender is perhaps his very unconsciousness: 'aggression is the lack of attention *par excellence*' (p.25)(italics in original). Thus, according to this interpretation, without the development of insight and taking responsibility for one's own actions, accomplishing genuine forgiveness and self-forgiveness would be impossible.

3.3 CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING FORGIVENESS

In researching forgiveness, there is no doubt that this concept is central to Western civilization and is

significant for one's general feeling of well being and need for peaceful existence. However, the difficulty in researching forgiveness thus far suggests to Bauer et al. (1992), that this phenomenon has become alien, disturbing and generally not understood. Significantly, these phenomenological researchers state that the concept has been discussed in abstract terms rather than as central to people's experience, and the confusion regarding the experience of forgiveness may be because of contemporary cultural values, which are not representative of the attitudes necessary for forgiveness: 'openness to oneself and others, to the metaphorical, or the mysteries in living, and to mercy. Instead, justice has become synonymous with punishment, mercy with weakness, strength with power over others' (p.151). This has had a significant impact on the human psyche, resulting in disease, and feelings of chronic guilt, isolation, loneliness and estrangement.

There is a growing awareness in the new millennium that despite major advances in science and technology and the availability of consumer products, expectations of success, happiness and personal empowerment have not materialised. The Western world has seen the rise of individualism, self-sufficiency and egocentricism as well as a lack of sense of community (Bellah, 1986 cited in Bauer et al. 1992). Wachtel (1989) states that this lack of a sense of community is partly responsible for an increasing preoccupation with growth and acquisition and that these pursuits can be seen as unsatisfactory attempts to compensate for the lack of community and human interrelating in Western industrial democracies (Wachtel, 1989 cited in Bauer et al., 1992).

In psychology (and other social sciences) this trend is reflected in the focus on scientific, quantitative and statistical investigation, as well as the overriding belief in rationality and technology: and that through this, the world can be shaped according to our own desires and plans. Unfortunately, that all this progress and advance has been at the expense of, and disregard for, the experience and suffering of human beings, is patently obvious. In the face of the idea that ever increasing control results in progress, there has also been a gradual increase in the movement towards an awakening of the spiritual and transcendent aspects of existence and an acceptance and valuing of abstract analysis in experiential studies.

The aim of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher and the primary proponent of phenomenology, was 'the rigorous and unbiased study of things as *they appear*' in order to understand human consciousness and experience (cited in Valle, King & Halling, 1989, p.6). Husserl's focus (1970) was not on a world interpreted and created by scientific fact and theory. His concern, was the world immediately experienced and directly expressed in everyday language to get 'back to the things

themselves' (ibid, 1989, p.9) i.e. the world, prior to reflective interpretation and scientific and technological views of life. In other words the world being 'given directly and immediately in human experience' the world of '*Lebenswelt*' or '*life world*' is the starting point or ground for the existential – phenomenological psychologist' (ibid, 1989, p.9).

Kruger (1986) states that in our western culture 'psychotherapists are tempted to look for shortcuts that really work, to develop 'psychotechnologies' which are generally applicable and which avoid the slow, often painful, work of psychotherapy'. (p.193) Kruger suggests, that the psychotherapist should have the ability to understand the origin and describe phenomena, characteristic of modern man, which are critical to contemporary existence. The author warns that the psychotherapist 'should be able to look critically at the culture in which he lives and to understand how the culture itself alienates man from his body and fellowman' (ibid, 1986, p.195). He continues that 'without this broad perspective, there is always a possibility that psychotherapy will degenerate into a set of techniques' (ibid, 1986, p.193). Without this insight, the lived experiences of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others in psychotherapy may be unattainable. These existential-phenomenological views of psychology and psychotherapy, are as pertinent today, as they were in the past.

Tragically, it seems to have taken the September 11th terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the U.S.A. – 'prime symbols of America's economic, cultural and military hegemony' (Sparks, 2003, in Cape Times, p.9) - to have resulted in a sense of community, interrelatedness and pulling together of the American nation as a whole. Western capitalism, democracy and technical advancement have resulted in an increase in international trade and communication; reshaping the world in both productive and disruptive ways (ibid, 2003). The impact of globalization is not only economic, but political and cultural as well. We live in a divided world where globalization 'has impacted on traditional ways of life and culture' and 'here lies the battleground of the 21st Century' (ibid, 2003, p.9). This divisiveness and attempting to understand the causes of terror, have mystified and overwhelmed the Western world. Sparks further states that globalization and a religious and ethnic fundamentalist reaction against it, defines the world in which we live and the underlying conflict of our times. The fundamentalists find these developments disturbing and dangerous and take refuge in a new and purified tradition, tending towards lashing out in violent retaliation. Generally it is important to understand that 'distributive justice' and 'righting the wrongs of gross economic inequalities', need to be redressed, and equally important is to understand 'the underlying cultural issues involved' (p.9). Also, significant for psychotherapists involved in dealing with the individual's emotional, social, and cultural world, is a greater understanding of these socio-cultural issues.

In the last decade, our South African cultural experience has indicated that terrorism, driven by deep cultural grievances, cannot be overcome by military means alone. We have realized in South Africa that revenge or turning a blind eye are no longer options if we are to co-exist in a diverse socio-economic and cultural climate. The answer to our problem has been transformation and it is within psychotherapy and dealing with issues such as the experience of self-forgiveness and forgiving others, and experiencing the full impact of one's humanness within 'the fragmentation and alienation of modern life' (Bauer et al., 1992, p.160), that this transformation has been possible. The solution was to deal with core issues which involved a proper understanding of the underlying cultural and social issues involved. Within our African culture, the word '*ubuntu*' (which is difficult to translate in Western languages), essentially speaks about the essence of being human, that 'my humanity is caught up in your humanity because we say a person is a person through other persons. I am a person because I belong. The same is true for you' (Tutu, 1998, cited in Enright and North, 1998, p.xiii). It has taken the tragedy of the apartheid era in South Africa and its impact on the South African psyche to return us once more to the idea of '*ubuntu*' and the African understanding and importance of communal peace and harmony. However, health, social, political, economic and educational issues, like violence and crime for example, remain a complex problem and an ongoing threat and challenge to '*ubuntu*' in a democratic South Africa. Tutu (1998) claims that anything that subverts this harmony is injurious, not just to the community, but to all of us and therefore, forgiveness is an absolute necessity for continued human existence. According to Tutu, forgiveness means facing the reality, 'the ghastliness of what has happened and giving the other person the opportunity of coming out of that ghastly situation' (ibid, 1998, p.xiv). Forgiveness also means calling into question the authenticity of your contrition. As part of the process of reconciliation, of forgiving, of healing and the willingness to make good, it is essential that restitution is appropriated. Forgiveness does not mean amnesia or a blanket condoning, which would be dangerous to a community at a national or international level; nor does it mean ever forgetting the atrocities of the past, in order that these atrocities are never repeated. 'If we don't deal with our past adequately, it will return to haunt us' (ibid, 1998, p.xiv). Thus forgiveness has ramifications for personal, communal and national life.

In dialoguing with fellow psychologists while researching the topic of the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy, Nelson Mandela's name surfaced repeatedly as an example of a forgiveness which has had an enormous impact on all our lives in South Africa and the world as a whole. South Africa was fortunate to have President Nelson Mandela at the helm in its transition to democracy. Mandela was incarcerated for 27 years for so-called political crimes, armed struggle and terrorist activities against the then South African government. His release from prison in February 1990

marked a turning point in South African history and had a marked effect on the 'rainbow nation' (a term later coined by Archbishop Tutu to describe the diversity and hope in the 'new South Africa'). Mandela's magnanimous and magnificent gesture of humility, asking for forgiveness and offering forgiveness to members of the former regime, his wardens and whomever he came into contact with, whether Percy Yutar (State Prosecutor - Rivonia Trials) or Betsy Verwoerd (wife of the architect of apartheid), earned him the deepest respect worldwide. Mandela became President and led South Africa out of what could have potentially been a civil war and political wilderness to the country's first national, non-racial, one person, one vote election in April 1994. There is the recognition also, that deep within this man, there is a spiritual quality in the way he has forgiven others. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), Mandela pays tribute to President F.W. de Klerk, the then President of apartheid South Africa, who made a genuine and indispensable contribution to the peace process. Mandela's words, 'to make peace with an enemy, one must work with that enemy and that enemy becomes your partner', refer to his relationship with President de Klerk and forgiveness of the other (Mandela, 1994, p.735).

3.4 MORAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING FORGIVENESS AND SELF-FORGIVENESS

Enright & Fitzgibbons (2000), maintain that forgiveness is centred in morality, which is concerned with the quest for good. When people seek the good, they do so in relation to others. Thus morality has interpersonal qualities, which are not self-satisfying nor hedonistic, and being moral implies good intentions towards other people. This does not mean that one ignores goodness towards the self, 'on the contrary, when morality is centred in relationships, the self is included' (p.23). Altruism, in which one gives up one's rights in order to help others, would be an exception. Two aspects of human goodness which are connected with forgiveness are justice and mercy. At times, these ancient forms of morality seem to be in conflict with one another. The *lex talionis* (eye for an eye) of Hebrew society is contrasted with 'love thy neighbour'. In Islam, Allah is seen as both just (which includes punishing) and forgiving (which implies mercy). The philosopher Gouldner (1973, cited in Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), contrasted reciprocity (giving back in proportion to what is given) and beneficence (giving something for nothing) as principles in tension within society. One would assume that a person who forgives has been treated unjustly by another person, or group of people. Forgiveness is the merciful response to this injustice (ibid, 2000). In other words, the person who forgives has a clear sense of right and wrong, concludes the other acted wrongly, and offers mercy. Merciful implies giving good things to others which they don't deserve, and refraining from the punishment stance they may deserve. Forgiveness may not be uppermost in the forgiver's desire for good towards someone who has unfairly

treated her. It could be centred on peace of mind and letting go, forgetting and reconciling, or a letting go of the negative energy without necessarily wishing the other good. In other words, justice can co-exist with forgiveness.

Another important moral aspect of forgiveness is that it implies transformation. With transformation, there may be a qualitative alteration in a number of areas. Firstly, the forgiver may change previous responses toward an offender; secondly the forgiver's emotional state may change for the better and thirdly, relationships may improve. 'Forgiveness is a developmental variable that shifts perspectives, feelings, attitudes, behaviours and interactions' (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p.24). Murphy (1988) states that forgiveness of a wrongdoing involves a change of heart towards the other (i.e. the overcoming of resentment towards her). However, the 'change of heart' is not necessarily a change in one's views on how the wrongdoer should be treated. Restitution, repentance and compensation is required. 'Condonation is not forgiveness' (Hampton, 1988, p.40). The theory of human worth, i.e. maintaining one's self-respect and worth, and/or being worthy of being accorded better treatment is, according to Hampton, of the utmost significance when dealing with forgiveness and overcoming resentment and hatred. According to Kant (1964), by virtue of having the property of rationality, we are intrinsically valuable as ends-in-ourselves, so that we are all equal in worth and have the same rank, relative to one another (cited in Hampton, 1988).

Enright & Fitzgibbons (2000) state that forgiveness has the combined attributes of a skill, a coping strategy and a commitment. If the practice of a moral virtue says something about one's character, then forgiveness, at least in part, is a quality somehow connected to oneself. In psychological terms, the act of forgiving may form a part of the person's identity as she practises forgiveness, knows it is good and realizes that forgiveness is not some quality that exists independently of the self or even outside the self but is part of who one is. 'At this point, forgiveness ceases to be only an act that one performs and becomes part of the moral self' (Lapsley, 1996, cited in Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p.256). These researchers state that if this is true, then forgiveness and self-forgiveness in therapy, at least in part, is a deliberate attempt to transform character and identity in the client by expressing goodness towards an offending person or people and/or towards the self (ibid, 2000).

North's study (1998) on the 'ideal' of forgiveness is influenced by thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and philosophers of the Rationalistic school. North's view of the individual in dealing with forgiveness (when describing acceptance of forgiveness and offering forgiveness) is that of a cognitive, rational being, capable of thought, self-reflection and exercising some control over emotional responses to given

situations. However, she does assert that there is not a complete split between the cognitive and emotional sides of our nature; that there is also a 'spiritual' component. Her belief is 'that human beings have a spiritual side in which yearnings, hopes and fears are expressed and experienced' (p.17). Forgiveness, she states, 'is closely allied to this spiritual component of our nature and thus transcends the narrowly religious or denominational beliefs of individual religions' (p.17).

In addition, North believes that this spiritual side is connected in a complex way to our capacity for morally significant feelings and actions. Thus she states that forgiveness is of profound spiritual and moral relevance to us all, regardless of whether we hold more specifically religious beliefs. This view of the person would have a significant influence on Western philosophical thought, as well as important implications for psychology and psychotherapy, particularly in the realm of transpersonal psychotherapy. Here clients may come to recognize a profound truth, that no matter what has been accomplished in their lives true fulfilment escapes them and 'their attention turns to spiritual questions', more universal, moral and transpersonal issues and the experience of 'transcendent love and unity' (Wittine, 1989, pp.274 & 276). Paradoxically clients become more compassionate towards the suffering of others which results in responding more compassionately to themselves and their own suffering (ibid, 1989). These are core issues which are applicable when dealing with the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy.

North, (1998) describes the processes of acceptance of forgiveness and offering forgiveness as 'ideal in two ways. Firstly, these processes are described as 'ideal' in that 'they are ideal archetypes, generalized patterns, which describe typical stages that occur in most situations where forgiveness is offered and accepted' (ibid, 1998, p.34). Secondly, these two processes are 'ideal' as goals towards which the author believes, we should strive. The author states that the process of forgiveness encompasses and includes common human values and virtues. 'Restoring affection and regard, overcoming estrangement and alienation, accepting and welcoming others', are general moral values and principles which North prescribes in our interpersonal actions (p.34). In forgiving another, being forgiven by another, or forgiving ourselves, the author states, 'we experience and put into practice the moral virtues of trust, compassion, and sympathy which are the fundamental bonds of unity between all human individuals' (p.34).

However, the psychotherapist is not value-free and each client's experience is unique. Thus whilst one may agree in principle with North's insights on the 'ideal' of forgiveness, non-forgiveness without vengeance and forgiving without condoning or forgetting, may be morally and emotionally appropriate for the client in dealing with the lived experiences of forgiveness and self-forgiveness in psychotherapy.

(These different viewpoints are discussed in the Theory and Literature Survey in Chapter 4, and the Discussion Chapter of the phenomenon in Chapter 7). As Smedes so aptly puts it, ‘the act of forgiving , by itself, is a wonderfully simple act, but it always happens inside a storm of complex emotions. It is the hardest trick in the whole bag of personal relationships’ (Smedes, 1984, p.2).

3.5 CONCLUSION

From a personal point of view, especially in the South African context, one notes that forgiveness and self-forgiveness serve to assist us in altering the significance of past deeds in order to help integrate this experience in our present everyday lives, view ourselves and the world differently and hopefully face the future with more optimism, less despair and estrangement and a general feeling of ‘being at home’ in the world. Researchers have shown that the experience of self-forgiveness is not a solitary act which one fulfils in isolation, but one which depends on a long process ‘not entirely of one’s own doing, which involves a radical shift in one’s way of moving in the world’ (Bauer et al., 1992, p150). This phenomenon is multifaceted and has far-reaching implications, both at intrapersonal, interpersonal and socio-cultural, political and religious levels.

Rethinking our spiritual, cultural and moral values will hopefully result in an increased openness and acceptance of ourselves and others. From a professional point of view, our values as psychotherapists have been shaken by events and trends which have stretched our conceptual foundations. This researcher’s basic training in personality theory has been extended through spiritual and moral factors which have opened up as a result of the shift in theoretical structure through this study. As Bergin (1988), states, ‘this does not mean abandoning the form or structure but building upon it and adding another cornerstone’ (p.22). For the researcher, this research on the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy meant adding a spiritual keystone to the building blocks already provided by the behavioural, psychodynamic, cognitive, developmental and humanistic approaches.