

# Jane Engle: Spiritual Surgery by Forgiving Others

Sermon by Jane Engle

## Spiritual Surgery by Forgiving Others

Those are angry, cruel words, words spoken by the Israelites in Jerusalem remembering the time when Babylon had captured Jerusalem and had taken the Israelites in captivity. While in exile the captors taunted the captives with the words, "sing the songs of Zion." The captors and the captives alike knew these were not words about music, but words about faith, as if to say, "Where is your God now." The Israelites, humiliated by these taunting words, wanted retribution; they wanted the books of history balanced.

As Deborah has explained to me, there are no strong tenets in Jewish theology about forgiveness. The emphasis is rather on remembering, as in the Holocaust museum. In Christianity, however, forgiveness is rooted deeply both in scripture and in our confessions.

How is it that we deal with the people who have wronged us? I made this mixed media about some of the ills in our history and current social structure: the friends and community of Jesus who asked that he be murdered (and I hope that doesn't make me an anti-Semite), the Kosovars who were murdered by the thousands and who then became the murderers, the icons of sexy women who incite violence against women, the lack of fidelity in families, and the glass that I used when I couldn't accept that my parents had caused me such pain as a child. How do we handle forgiveness?

It is very complex, much too complex to handle in 10-15 minutes that I have in today's sermon. So I am narrowing it down to just two issues: the choice that is involved and the Magic Eyes.

Not to forgive leaves open, weeping sores. The longer time passes, the harder it is to forgive. It is as if you hang on to the hurt. As Ann Lamont says in *Traveling Mercies* "Not to forgive is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat inside to die." This week, after reading that, I remembered that as a child I did drink rat poison. I do not remember the context, but I did not drink the soap or the silver polish or any of the household cleaners in the cupboard under the sink, but the rat poison. My parents found out and rushed me to the ER and I had my stomach pumped, which was probably as awful as waiting for the rat inside to die. Nevertheless, I have not made the choice to forgive my parents. The memories continue to emerge, as this one, and my parents are both dead, so it is hard to deal with them. I pray someday I will make that choice to forgive and that I will be given the Magic Eyes.

*In Faken in Northern Friesland, there lived a man named Fouke. He was tall and thin and had a long and thin chin and a long and thin nose. He was very righteous, so righteous that people did not like him very much. He was married to Hilda. Hilda was short and round. She had round arms, a round face, round arms, round bosom, and round behind. Everyone loved Hilda. She seemed to invite everyone into her heart.*

*Hilda loved Fouk, but she wanted more than righteousness. Therefore, she invited another man into her bed. Fouk came home from working in the bakery one day (he was a baker), and found her in the act of adultery. It became the scandal of the town and everyone assumed Fouk, being so righteous, would throw Hilda out of his home. However, Fouk decided he would not, but he hated Hilda for the shame she brought on him. Therefore, every time he looked at her, he hated her.*

*This did not sit well in heaven. Therefore, every time Fouk looked at Hilda with hate in his eyes, an angel would drop a pebble in Fouke's heart. As time passed more and more pebbles were dropped, and Fouke's chest became so heavy, he could not lift his head and his whole body began to hurt. The angel came to him one night and told him how to remedy his situation—he would need the miracle of magic eyes, eyes that could back at the past and see Hilda not as the wife who betrayed him, but as a hurt woman who needed him.*

*Fouk protested, "I can't change the past." The angel responded, "That's right. However, you can heal the hurt that comes to you from the past. And you can do this only with the Magic Eyes." Moreover, all you have to do is ask and the Magic Eyes will be given to you.*

*Fouk did not ask at once, for he had grown very used to his hatred of Hilda. However, his own pain grew so big that he finally asked for the Magic Eyes, and slowly the pebbles in his heart were lifted as he saw Hilda, not as the woman who betrayed him, but as the needy woman who loved him.*

While Ken and I were on vacation in Sanibel and ran into some real difficulties in our relationship, Ken decided he could not keep his commitment to me. I was deeply hurt, angry and devastated and did not speak with him for several weeks. Then I made the conscious choice that I wanted to forgive him. It was not a difficult choice. It became quite clear to me that while he broke his commitment to me, I had not broken my commitment to him and that my commitment included forgiving him. In addition, I was mysteriously given the Magic Eyes and I saw him not as someone who had deliberately hurt me, but as someone who was hurt and needy.

I asked Ken to come over for a ritual I designed. I got out a plate, which I use at Thanksgiving; so it was not too serious, it had a picture of a turkey on it. I washed his feet, put oil

on them, and forgave him and wrapped a stole around his feet. I had found a picture that I had taken when we were at Rehoboth when there was a hurricane. However, I had not before seen until that day a very faint rainbow in the background. I showed him the picture as a symbol of our love, very turbulent with some hope, and I put it in this urn, with this stole over it.

I knew I was performing spiritual surgery on myself. I knew that the surgery was possibly only on me. Ken may not have given a fig for me. Forgiving is a new vision and a new feeling given to the person who forgives.