

Legacy Tips & Tools

From Betrayal to Forgiveness:

A Legacy Process

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No one wants to pass on a legacy of hurt, disappointment or pain, yet many of us live wounded with painful legacies from those who came before. We seem unable to get free ourselves so we won't pass it on to those we love.

I recently heard Helen Hunt on NPR talking about her new film, "Then She Found Me." It's about an adopted child whose birth mother comes to connect with her 25 years later. Hunt held the story for ten years explaining that she didn't get the underlying theme until she read James Hillman's essay about betrayal.

In it Hillman posits that betrayal is inevitable in human relationships: broken promises, family secrets, refusal to help, deception in love.

According to Hillman, the betrayed ultimately "betrays oneself by [the] lack of courage to be [one's self]."

People get stuck in the story they tell themselves about why they were betrayed. With each repetition, the story gains power over them. To protect themselves from further hurt, they craft a protective system of revenge, denial, cynicism, or paranoia. But, Hillman says, there is a way out:

"Just as trust had within it the seed of betrayal, so betrayal has within it the seed of forgiveness." - James Hillman

As my own mother experienced being betrayed by her mother, she told herself a story that she believed all her life. As Hillman suggests, my mother never forgave her mother for her emotional abandonment. (This may have been caused by grief of losing another of her children in the influenza epidemic of 1918.) The estrangement between my mother and hers deprived my sister and me of a relationship with our grandmother. Perhaps more significant was that our mother, so wounded and so stuck in her story, unwittingly passed on a legacy of distrust, bitterness and unexpressed rage and disappointment in life to my sister and me.



"...memories in themselves are not a problem....It is only when memories...take you over completely that they turn into a burden, turn problematic, and become part of your sense of self....almost everyone carries in his or her energy field an accumulation of old emotional pain, which I call 'the pain-body.'" - Eckhart Tolle

After reading Hillman and Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth* about carrying the emotional "pain-body" of our parents, I had a huge "aha" -- that my mother's pain was not my pain: that she wounded me was inevitable but not purposeful. For the first time, though I had forgiven her intellectually, I experienced a powerful wave of compassion and forgiveness for her, almost immediately followed by a lightness and a new freedom to be me.

Reflection, Writing & Practice: Exploring betrayal, pain-bodies and forgiveness:

1. Reflect and journal about "your story" to recognize ways that you may be carrying others' pain-bodies, believing them to be your own. Consider ways you have been betrayed and ways that you have betrayed others.
2. Use any insights your journaling provides to experience yourself as more than and other than "your story." Consider ways that believing the story you have told yourself affects the legacies you live and write to your loved ones.
3. Continue to reflect and journal throughout the month. In September Legacy Tips&Tools will focus on writing legacy letters about forgiveness.

May your reflections and writings this month be the foundation of a new freedom, and compassion for yourself and those you love.

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REGISTER for a February 2009 Temecula, California Introductory Legacy Writing Retreat and for those who've experienced the Introductory, an Advanced Legacy Writing Retreat
www.WomensLegacies.com/programs.htm