On Helplessness, Contempt, and Forgiveness

Morning Prayers at Memorial Church
Harvard University

Kiyo Morimoto
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**Forward**

Always fascinated by the meanings we make of our experiences, Kiyo Morimoto was a profoundly sympathetic observer of the human condition. Counselor, teacher, sociologist, and Director of the Bureau of Study Counsel from 1958 to 1984, Kiyo was invited to give these three chapel talks on whatever inspired him — given that his own life transcended the differences between East and West and between race and class.

Born in Pocatello, Idaho, of immigrant parents, Kiyo was forced to drop out of school in the eighth grade to work at tenant farming. The bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in 1941 changed the course of his life. To prove his family’s loyalty, Kiyo enlisted in the Army and was sent to Europe to fight with the all Japanese-American 442nd regiment. After the war, a congressional bill supporting education for veterans allowed Kiyo to go back to school and opened up a path toward a future he could not have imagined as a boy. He was profoundly influenced as a social scientist by his participation in early research on LSD as a possible cure for schizophrenia. His job was to listen to the experience of the subjects, and that training in listening led him to an interest in counseling.

Later, Kiyo liked to say that everything he knew he learned from listening to students. His students revered him as a man of extraordinary intuition and empathy, lively and wise as one can only be by being fully present in each moment. Here, in these talks, he reflects on the challenges we face as beings attempting to become more fully human.

M. Suzanne Renna  
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October 10, 2012
Helplessness
December 7, 1982

Helplessness is perhaps one of the most painful experiences in life. We all try to avoid moments or situations that may result in our feeling impotent and limited. But there are such moments that each of us must face.

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor 41 years ago today, it resulted in 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry being evacuated from their homes and placed in so-called Relocation Centers in desolate and remote parts of the country. This was for them a moment of utter helplessness.

The Japanese have a statement which they say to each other in such times. It is “shikata ga nai” which is interpreted as meaning “there’s nothing that can be done.” The root meaning, however, is that “there are no patterns or forms in which to act.” “Shi” comes from the character “suru” meaning “to do or to act”; “kata” means “form or pattern.” “Ga” is a participle that emphasizes the focus and “nai” means “does not exist.” When forms or patterns that legitimize our actions do not exist we are left feeling helpless, disoriented, maybe even lost and fearful.

When we interpret “shikata ga nai” to mean the only alternative is to give up because “there is nothing that can be done,” we passively accept the situation and give ourselves over and surrender to a higher authority. We define ourselves as hopeless victims of circumstance, accept defeat, and let others take care of us. The self as agent is then absolved of all responsibility. All we have left is our deep sense of shame and indignity.

To avoid or counteract such feelings, we say, “Don’t let it or them get you down.” “Resist.” “Push back.” “Fight force with force.” To be passive is to be weak and cowardly. It is better to die fighting than to passively accept our helplessness and our limits, because to be helpless seeks worse than death.

However, when we interpret “shikata ga nai” as meaning there exist no forms or patterns with which to act, it frees us to claim our helplessness and limits as a fact of life in the moment or in the situation. By accepting our helplessness as legitimate and natural, we respect our own and others’ humanity. A consequence accompanying the owning of our limits is a deep feeling of sadness. This sadness is an expression of our grief.

When we cannot or do not have the courage to respect and embrace our limits and to grieve that fact, our energy turns to hatred, self-condemnation, resentment, self pity, and our souls turn rancid.

By accepting “shikata ga nai” in its true meaning as the absence of forms or patterns to act, we locate ourselves within the context of helplessness. As we let go of hope based on trying to overcome and to keep ourselves from feeling impotent and useless, we discover new possibilities and freedoms within the limits of the immediate context, recreating new hopes and meaning. Life is regenerated, dignity is maintained. We begin to live wholly within those limits and are no longer preoccupied with feelings of helplessness that tend to confine, depress and throw us into despair.

The Issei, the pioneers and early Japanese immigrants, by owning and respecting their helplessness, directed their energy within the barrenness of the Relocation Camps, to grow and nurture lovely flowers, an vegetable gardens, to write powerful poetry, and to create exquisite works of art — just as the slave who got up every morning and welcomed the opportunity to work in the cotton fields as a gift of life, for what is more precious than life? It is God’s gift to us, to be cherished and live with dignity and love. When we respect and claim our limits we honor that gift and live more wholly.
Contempt
February 1, 1984

Communication with each other has become more difficult with the immediate access of information of all kinds to all of us through television, the news media and jet travel. We all become “authorities” or “experts” because we are informed and therefore makers of meaning. Our meanings are our biases – our humanity (sense of truth) – our most precious possessions which we, by our very natures, want to share and to have understood by others.

Given immediate access to information, no one dares to admit ignorance. At one time to be ignorant was OK, and it was considered a common enemy that teachers and students could work together to minimize. We could share our biases openly without shame, because there were people who indeed had more information – hence were more knowledgeable than we and could inform us.

Today with the immediate availability of information, to be ignorant of the world we live in is to be naïve – and to be naïve is a “no, no.” It means you’re just not with it.

We face a different kind of enemy, much more subtle and insidious than ignorance, that stands in the way of open shared communication of our biases. If it’s not ignorance, then what is that enemy that we must learn to work together to eliminate? I think it is the feeling of contempt.

First, given that each person is an “authority” by having direct access to information, any attempt to share our bias or point of view is met with resistance. For example: in discussing politics, poverty, or racism. Others don’t listen and try to understand our biases. They have biases of their own that they want us to hear. We are left feeling somewhat impotent and helpless. Our reaction is to feel contempt for others for not listening.

Second, because we can’t seem to find a way to communicate our biases and ideas in ways that others will hear and respect, we feel contemptuous of ourselves for our inadequacies and frustrations. Who else is there to blame?

Third, feeling contemptuous is not the most pleasant emotion to have, and it’s difficult to make friends easily – people tend to avoid and shy away from contemptuous people – so we feel contemptuous for feeling contemptuous.

Fourth, in the end, we are left feeling trapped and helpless, caught in a vicious circle. We become contemptuous of the very society we live in where it seems that the only way one can maintain one’s integrity is by being contemptuous.

To be understood is to be recognized and included. To be disagreed with without being understood is like being non-existent and annihilated!

The only way I know to break out of the vicious circle of contempt is through listening and respecting each person’s biases, to try to understand each other’s way of trying to make sense as the effort to live with purpose and dignity in our complex world.

To hear and to share does not mean that we must always agree.

To the extent that we are the creators of our world, we have the choice and the ability to create the context for a dialogue of sharing and mutual respect.
Forgiveness
October 15, 1984

A number of years ago, when I was struggling to understand the meaning of grief and grieving, I came up with the definition of bitterness as “un-mourned regrets and disappointments that have turned rancid.” This statement has been gnawing at me lately, and I couldn’t understand why it should come up at this time. I have come to know that we become preoccupied with different concerns at different stages or our lives – and it’s important to pay attention to these feelings.

As I gave it further thought, it occurred to me that it probably had something to do with aging, that is, getting into the later years of life, and it is related to the notion of forgiveness – primarily with the forgiveness of oneself. When we experience regrets or disappointments, there is always an element of failure, and the pain of failure cuts deep into our soul as a sense of shame which can consume us. And shame can cause us to cringe and keep us from being open and wholly present because the urge is to hide or deny that we are imperfect and vulnerable.

I wonder whether the sense of shame that we feel when we think we have failed is what stands in the way of facing and grieving the loss of possibilities and hurt that accompanies failure regardless of the source or fault – whether our own or someone else’s.

To forgive (according to the dictionary) requires one to excuse, to renounce, to give up – a letting go which is extremely difficult to do when our integrity is invested in fostering righteousness and fairness – that is, to set right some imbalance. To forgive then means we run the risk of more suffering and imbalance – and to suffer a sense of further shame and failure in our own internal eyes.

On the other hand, to forgive means to excuse, to renounce, to give up, to accept the imbalance as a fact of life, to grieve the tragedy, that that is just the way it is – period. To feel whole again we must mourn the regrets and disappointments that follow, respect our own and others’ limits, and realize that the sense of shame is not a confirmation of our failure but a reaction to the momentary loss of hope and the nostalgia for unrealizable yearnings that accompany moments of disappointment.

Hope is restored when we can live through moments by learning to comfort ourselves for the pain. To do so, we must greet feelings of shame, no matter how painful, as an opportunity to restore hope and energy to meet the next moment of life, with openness and caring, by living through the pain as a fact of life.
“Reflecting on his experience, Morimoto offers us three delightful and thought provoking meditations on how we might live harmoniously within ourselves and with others.”

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