

# Making Peace With Parents

Adapted from Heart to Heart by C. Robinson & A. Hawkins

Our relationship with our parents is the "original" relationship of our lives, the template for all other connections.

-Dale Atkins

It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I remember he was.

-Anne Sexton

My mother was dead for five years before I knew that I had loved her very much.

-Lillian Hellman

When the strongest words for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words I remember from my mother's mouth, then I either have to reassess the meaning of everything I have to say now, or re-examine the worth of her old words.

-Audre Lorde

Getting beyond blame does not mean exonerating people from the part they play or played in the creation of a problem. It means seeing the total picture, acquiring a balanced view-not feeling compelled to either approve or disapprove of the nature of one's own and other people's families.

-Murray Bowen and Michael Kerr

## *Consider This:*

One of the most important tasks of adult life is to come to terms with our parents -to appreciate what needs appreciating, understand what needs understanding, and forgive what needs forgiving. This work is sometimes called "self-differentiation." It allows us to see our background with some dispassion, to see our parents as the persons they really are and were, with their gifts and flaws and quirks and love. This in turn allows us to claim what is true to us and leave the rest behind, which strengthens our own sense of self and personal meaning.

Children depend on their parents for their very being, and in their minds, they need much more than any parent can give. As early as age two, they begin to resent their parents' power over them and attempt to assert themselves against it (a process repeated at least twice, during adolescence and young adulthood). Oh, what mixed emotions this struggle leaves us with, even when we were blessed with wise, attentive parents! If our parents were struggling with their own difficulties, we have even more mixed emotions about them. We needed them to be perfect.

*The Whole Picture.* We want to honor our parents, but that's hard for the little child in us to do if that child is struggling with hurts and resentments. Some people have a pervasive belief that they didn't get enough attention or care as children. They may find it helpful to ask themselves what was missing. Did their father hide behind the newspaper every night? Were they not taken to the doctor when they were ill? Did no one come to school plays or ball games? Once the list is made, it's helpful to get a more complete picture. Other family members may have additional memories or information about some of these incidents or behaviors. Conversations and gentle questions that start with the assumption that everyone was doing the best they could often bring healing information to light.

People who learn unexpected facts about their parents not only understand their childhoods better, but gain a wiser perspective on their parents. They are able to see them as ordinary people -flawed, trying, failing, and precious. In addition, many adults have healed their relationships with difficult parents through prayer or meditation. Praying for people, or simply holding their images in your mind while holding love in your heart, are exercises that have remarkable powers to change our perspective and allow us to let go of past hurts.

*A New Reality.* A second aspect of honoring our parents involves looking at our own needs, expectations, and behavior in light of current reality. For many of us, that reality is that our parents now need us, a need that will likely continue to increase as they age. This can be hard to accept. It confronts our inner child's desire for constant parenting from perfect parents, and also confronts our grown-up self with demands to fit more into our already demanding lives. The inner child-who still wants the total care and attention we had as infants (but with all the autonomy and choices we now enjoy as adults)-must find an inner parent who can nurture, soothe, and motivate. The present adult must care for our parents in spite of the reality that those parents can still hurt us.

Honoring our parents, then, is not just a matter of forgiving our parents. It is a matter of getting real with ourselves. It's a matter of walking a mile in our parents' shoes, both retracing their steps in the past and understanding their current path. It is a matter of taking responsibility for our feelings and letting others be who they are.

*Activities:* Before the gathering, reflect by doing one or both of these activities.

*Explore an Early Memory.* Check in with your siblings or extended family about a strong early memory. You may want to jot down your recollections before you contact them.

*Get Answers.* If one or both of your parents are living, call or write to ask a question that has troubled you.

*Write a Letter.* If you have a deceased parent or are estranged from a parent, try writing a letter to him or her (which you don't intend to send). You might express your love, ask questions, or

rant and rave. If there are unresolved issues, you may want to write the letter twice: the first time to express your feelings, and the second time to reflect on the situation more objectively.

*Questions/Sharing Suggestions:*

- What is one endearing memory you have of your parents or parent figures as you were growing up? What is one difficult memory you have?
- If you are a parent, in what ways, if any, has being a parent affected your relationship with your own parents?
- Have you had to become your parents' parent in any way? If not, have you thought about the possibility? How do you feel about it?
- Have you had to forgive a parent, or are in the process of doing so?
- Did you do any of the activities? What did you learn from doing them?

Next meeting: September 12th.