

FLOURISHING THROUGH HEALING PARENTAL WOUNDS AND CREATING SPACE FOR THE GOD BEYOND

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THE OPPORTUNITY

Most people I know want to flourish. Given the contexts that I work in—a theological college, a church, and a private pastoral counselling practice—it is not surprising that virtually everyone I meet with acknowledges that an authentic connection with God is an essential component of human flourishing.¹ But therein lies the problem. If these folks were to be truthful, if we were to be truthful, large numbers of us would have to admit that we are not flourishing in our relationships with God.

Consider this brief story. Harriet is renowned for her servant heart and hard work at the church that she attends. Everyone who knows her loves her and considers that she is a paragon of faith in action. Nonetheless, Harriet told me that she is reluctant to approach God because she does not know if she is going to encounter an angry God or a kind God.²

This is a sad narrative. It is not an isolated account. Despite the overarching theme of Scripture that identifies God as loving and good,³ numerous persons within and without faith communities struggle to relate with God and talk about God in non-loving and critical terms. I have been in this position myself and so have many of my friends. I repeatedly see this dynamic in my work as a pastoral counsellor. Research confirms this, too. When I developed a God-scale, which is a psychometric instrument that measures people's thoughts, emotions, and activities regarding God, a third of the 266 people who filled in the scale claimed that God was an *Impossible God* who is like a hard-to-please boss and a harsh judge; a *Frightening God* who is to be feared; a *Conditional God* who demands, arbitrarily blesses, snoops, and unnecessarily withholds good; and a *Fickle God* who provokes feelings of anxiety, unhappiness, and insignificance.⁴

This poses the following two questions: Why do we view God in this light? Why do so many of us struggle to perceive and experience God as being loving and good over the years? I have learned that a

¹ For a helpful discussion on what constitutes human flourishing see Andrew Briggs and Michael J. Reiss, *Human Flourishing: Scientific Insights and Spiritual Wisdom in Uncertain Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1-26.

² Harriet is a pseudonym. Ethics approval was sought and obtained from the University of Auckland's Human Participants Ethics Committee to run the forgiveness course/s from which Harriet's story is drawn. This entailed obtaining the participants' consent for their stories to be written up and published. Quotation marks are employed whenever Harriet's exact words are cited.

³ See for example Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 33.

⁴ Philip John Halstead, *"Forgiveness Matters: A Psychometric and Qualitative Study of the Development of a Forgiveness Course for New Zealand Churchgoing Adults Exploring their Parental Relationships"* (PhD diss., University of Auckland, 2009), 391-394.

primary reason for this gloomy scenario is our unprocessed parental wounds.⁵ Naturally, there are other reasons that contribute to the impasse such as the unhelpful teaching we may have received, our own sin, our lack of perseverance, and the inaccurate barometers that we measure God's love and goodness against. But these points do not detract from the reality that unprocessed parental injuries have detrimentally affected uncountable numbers of people's experiences of God.

What, then, is to be done? In this article I explain how parental wounds impair our relationships with God and how engaging with Object Relations Theory (ORT) and forgiveness can heal these wounds. Thus, this article depicts a path from woundedness to health, from imaginary Gods to the good and loving God of Christianity, and from suboptimal living to flourishing. Allow me to explain this further.

OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY

ORT is a psychoanalytic theory that explores the origins and nature "of interpersonal relationships."⁶ It is "based on the belief that all people have within them an internal, often unconscious world of relationships that is different and in many ways more powerful and compelling than what is going on in their external world of interactions with 'real' and present people."⁷

Objects reside in the mind.⁸ They are mental representations primarily of people, but also of things, places, ideas, fantasies, memories, and God.⁹

Object relations is the term used to depict the subconscious dealings that take place amongst a person's objects. That is to say, "object relations are the interactions among one's mental representation of one's self (the object-self, self-representation, or self-object), one's mental representations of another person, thing, idea, and so on (the object-other, the internal object representation, or illusory other), and the 'factual' reality of persons, things, ideas, and so forth external to oneself (the external object)."¹⁰

Object selves emerge out of the early attachment bonds or connections that develop between infants and their parents and/or primary caregivers.¹¹ Simply put, where parent-child bonds are steeped in love, where primary caregivers mostly mirror warmth and value to their offspring, children will usually develop

⁵ See for example Philip J. Halstead, "Have My Parents Sinned Against Me? Exploring the Concept of Sin in the Pastoral Context," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 12:1 (2010): 43-62.

⁶ Michael St Clair, *Human Relationships and the Experience of God: Object Relations and Religion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 7.

⁷ Laura Melano Flanagan, "Object Relations Theory," in *Inside Out and Outside In: Psychopathology in Contemporary Multicultural Contexts*, 2nd ed., eds. Joan Berzoff, Laura Melano Flanagan, and Patricia Hertz (Lanham, MA: Jason Aronson, 2008), 121-160, 121-122.

⁸ For Seligman, the mind "is not a Cartesian model of a contained and bounded identity." It includes the body and "a kind of floating array of presences defying the usual 'commonsense' language of inside versus outside, self versus other, and subject versus object." See Stephen Seligman, "Forms in Motion: A Personal View of Object Relations," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The International Journal of Relational Perspectives* 28:1 (2018): 47-58, 53.

⁹ Philip L. Culbertson, *Caring for God's People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2000), 74.

¹⁰ Culbertson, *Caring for God's People*, 75.

¹¹ For the purposes of this article, I use the terms parents and primary caregivers interchangeably.

good object selves. However, if the exchanges between infants and their parents are unpredictable or cold, children often develop bad object selves. This reality underscores the “absolute, primary need for attachment and the harm that can come if that need is not met.”¹²

Young people’s object others are largely built upon what their parents reveal of themselves and how they interpret these revelations. A good object other is an attachment figure “who is conceived as accessible, trustworthy, and ready to help when called upon.”¹³ A bad object other is an attachment figure “to whom are attributed such characteristics as uncertain accessibility, unwillingness to respond helpfully, or perhaps the likelihood of responding hostilely.”¹⁴ As we shall see, this describes Harriet’s experience to the detail.

The comments above spotlight that infants continuously internalise what happens between themselves and others, especially their primary caregivers.¹⁵ What we internalise shapes our intrapsychic lives and over time this internal life is outworked again at both interpersonal and transpersonal levels.

Daniel Stern contends that the object worlds of infants are based upon their subjective interpretations of affectively based interpersonal happenings; they are not based on activities in isolation. To illustrate this, consider the example of a birthday. The primary significance of a birthday from an ORT perspective lies not in the event itself, but rather in the interpersonal interactions—the joy, the warmth, the love—that are associated with the event. It is this positive regard that is internalised, and which shapes one’s intrapsychic world. Relatedly, infants’ object worlds are typically generated from their routine interpersonal experiences such as those focused around feeding and sleeping. The repetitiveness of these interactions assists youngsters to build their object representations. Here again, it is the depth, quality, and meaning of the relational aspects of the activities that is of greater significance than the actual acts of feeding or sleeping.¹⁶

Picking up on Flannigan’s point above, another key principle of ORT is that individuals typically interact more with the mental images they hold of others than they do with the actual persons in front of them.¹⁷ To demonstrate this concept I often draw six stick figures on a whiteboard or the equivalent (see Diagram 1 below).¹⁸ I then warn those present that I am about to ask them a trick question—namely, in ORT-speak, how many people are there in the picture? After some friendly banter, I explain that the correct ORT answer is two. To explain this mystery and deepen folks’ understanding of ORT, I then add the descriptors listed above the figures to the following diagram.

¹² Flanagan, *Object Relations Theory*, 127.

¹³ John Bowlby, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* (London: Routledge, 2005), 140.

¹⁴ Bowlby, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*, 140.

¹⁵ Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People*, 82-83.

¹⁶ Adapted from Daniel N. Stern, *The Motherhood Constellation: A Unified View of Parent-Infant Psychotherapy* (London: Karnac Books, 1995), 80-82.

¹⁷ Flanagan, *Object Relations Theory*, 121-122.

¹⁸ Philip Culbertson introduced me to a form of this diagram in one of his classes at St. John’s College, Auckland, New Zealand in the late 1990s.

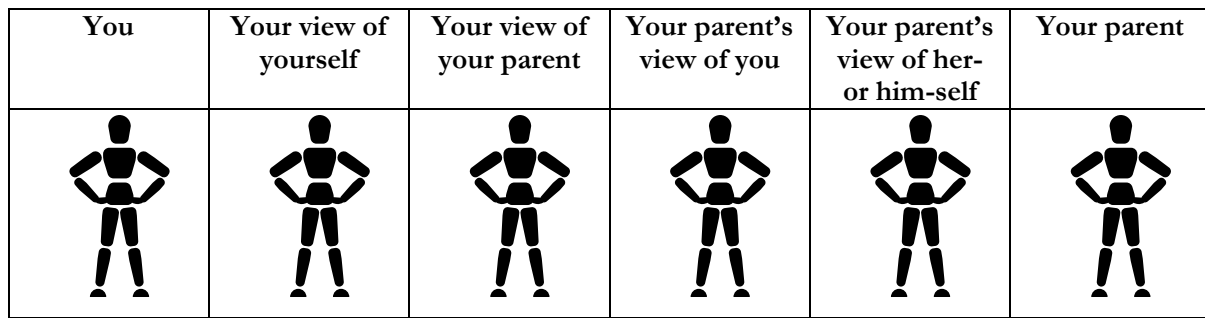


Diagram 1: ORT in Action

This exercise accentuates that there is a great deal of cerebral and emotional static between people. This psychic material and the associated objects constitute the lenses through which we see ourselves, our parents, God, and whomever else we engage with. Clearly, the converse holds true, too. Folks who interact with us do so through the mental representations that they hold of themselves and us. Major breakthroughs in our interpersonal and transpersonal relationships can come about when we understand this reality.

Objects wield an astonishing power over folks. One reason for this is that they stem from our interactions with our all-powerful parents upon whom our very survival depended. A second is that they are “affectively charged”¹⁹ and exist and operate “only within one’s mind.”²⁰ Thus, although objects are real in the sense that memories are real, they are not distinct internal realities that can simply be removed. They can be repressed, suppressed, or integrated, but they cannot ultimately be destroyed. In this way, “object representations take on a life of their own as independent agencies capable of generating their own internal dialogic narrative in a subjective terrain.”²¹

The preceding hypotheses—that we interact with others via our mental representations and that these representations are very powerful—accentuate an important question: How does one actually know what transpires inside the minds of infants?²² One way to respond is to distinguish between observed and clinical infants.²³ Whilst it is true that infants’ unconscious minds cannot literally be observed in the way that one might observe children playing with their parents, we need to remember that numerous realities that are held to be factual, such as gravity and the Trinity, cannot literally be observed either. However, psychoanalysts can and do recreate the life stories of their clients (i.e., clinical infants) via techniques such as transference and countertransference, which are commonly accepted today as being true.²⁴ Let me now link these key ORT tenets to people’s God images.

¹⁹ Stern, *The Motherhood Constellation*, 80.

²⁰ Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People*, 75.

²¹ Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People*, 75.

²² Adapted from Christopher F. Monte, *Beneath the Mask: An Introduction to Theories of Personality* 6th ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), 361.

²³ Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People*, 75.

²⁴ Transference entails folks assigning feelings from a past relationship to a present-day relationship. Countertransference describes the emotional reaction of, say, a therapist to a client’s contribution. See Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People*, 75.

OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY AND GOD IMAGES

When people question the goodness of God or vent their rage at God in my presence, I do not fret too much these days. I justify my equanimity via my belief that these people are not describing the good and loving God of Christianity; more likely, they are referring to and engaging with their own object Gods.²⁵ To illustrate this phenomenon, I wrote a poem called *My Three Gods* some years ago:²⁶

*I am
young, alive, and bemused.
You, God, the three of you, are where?*

*Mother's warmth, father's strength, talk of one of you.
Men in frocks, children in classes, point to another of you.
Crashing waves, divine moments, suggest there is more to you.*

*But this makes me wonder, now that I am older
Which one of you is really the great
I AM?*

The poem's first verse accentuates that each one of us commences life as a dependent human being with little or no knowledge of God. Our perceptions of God develop over time and are therefore subject to change.

The second stanza draws attention to the three Gods of psychoanalytic theory—namely, object Gods, subject Gods, and the God Beyond.²⁷ *Mother's warmth* and *father's strength* point to *object-Gods*. Object-Gods equate to the mental images of God we carry in response to our experiences with our parents and/or primary caregivers. *Men in frocks* and *children in classes* portray *subject-Gods*. Subject Gods are talked about and dissected in Sunday School, church, seminaries, and the like. *Crashing waves* and *divine moments* allude to the God who is infinitely larger and more magnificent than we can imagine. In ORT, this God is often called the God Beyond. In more common vernacular, the God Beyond can be likened to the good and loving God of Christianity.

²⁵ Since people's images of God are often highly cherished, sacrosanct, and stabilising, pastoral wisdom dictates that persons need to be informed before any discussion of object Gods that some individuals may find the explorations unsettling. Thus, some folks may choose to enlist the support of trusted others to accompany them throughout the investigations. Others may decide to remove themselves from the investigations altogether.

²⁶ Philip J. Halstead and Michael Hautus, "Defending the God Beyond: The Development of the A God-scale—A New Instrument for the Assessment of People's Perceptions, Experiences, and Activities in Relationship to God—and its Initial Use in a Forgiveness Study," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 15:3 (2013): 160-185, 161-162.

²⁷ Culbertson, *Caring for God's People*, 101.

The poem's final clause ends with the heart-cry: *Which one of you is really the great I AM?* This is a *very* important question to consider. For some people the thought that the God they have been relating to, the God that resides within their heads, might be different from the God Beyond is completely new. This realisation can give rise to hope.²⁸ Change thus becomes viable since object-Gods and subject-Gods can be amended. Psychic space can be created that enables fresh encounters and connections to be made with the God Beyond who remains the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).²⁹

Of course, the journey towards the God Beyond is not straightforward. It involves moving successfully through several developmental stages. Should folks fail to complete this path adequately, their images of God will invariably be damaged, at least from a psychological point of view,³⁰ and thus their growth and flourishing will be impaired.

Leroy Howe provides a helpful overview of this journey. The context of his argument is love. As Christians, we know that we are supposed to love God above all else (Mt. 22:36-40); yet we also accept that before we can love we must first be loved by God (1 Jn. 4:19). This idea raises a decisive question—namely, how does anyone *initially* fathom that God loved them first? For Howe, the answer rests in the faces, hands, attitudes, and actions of parents. In keeping with this logic, one could say, God placed the capacity to love within people and God purposed that parents should stimulate this faculty into action. The path that leads to the God of love is supposed to *begin* in the embrace of one's parents, pass beyond one's object-Gods and subject-Gods, and end in the embrace of the God Beyond.³¹ The simplicity, logic, and inclusivity of this route to the God Beyond is for many people astonishing, revolutionary, and refreshingly enticing.

HARRIET'S JOURNEY

Harriet's parents tragically lost a young son a few months prior to her conception. In their grief, they longed for a "replacement son" which meant that they began to create an object-infant and a corresponding script for their *imaginary* child that clearly had nothing to do with Harriet! Some scholars argue that the pressure and stress emanating from Harriet's parents' expectations and actions may explain why she was overdue and stayed for nearly 11 months in her mother's womb.³²

A few days after Harriet was born, her mother had a mental breakdown and as a result was hospitalised. Shortly after she was discharged, she had a relapse and was readmitted to hospital for a longer period. Consequently, Harriet spent limited time with her mother in the first year of her life and when she did, she

²⁸ Plainly, for someone to realise that they have not been relating to the God Beyond can also give rise to panic and despair. This calls for pastoral sensitivity. See footnote 24.

²⁹ Adapted from Halstead and Hautus, "*Defending the God Beyond*," 162.

³⁰ Adapted from St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 32-33.

³¹ Adapted from Leroy T. Howe, *The Image of God: A Theology for Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 82-91.

³² See for example Mark Wolynn, *It Didn't Start With You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End The Cycle* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 26-29.

experienced a drained and capricious mother who wanted a boy. Unsurprisingly, Harriet was unable to form a secure attachment with her mother. Her relationship to her father, however, was different. He fell in love with Harriet at her birth and instantly abandoned his fantasy of her being a “replacement son.”

Michael St Clair asserts that people’s God representations reflect and parallel “the development of human relationships.”³³ These patterns may reflect direct continuity (e.g., God is mean because one’s parents were mean), opposite dispositions (e.g., God is kind because one’s parents were punitive), or some nuanced grouping of these factors. Adding import to this dynamic is the reality that the “characteristics of the God representation form at the key developmental moments when the child is forming basic object representations.”³⁴ Consequently, God representations are deeply embedded in people’s psyches and can be extremely difficult to change.

St Clair’s schema starts at birth. Ideally, new-borns (0 to 6 months) would experience a perceptible sense of love, acceptance, welcome, and approval from their parents throughout this time, which leads to the building up of good representations. The obverse holds, too. Where parents fail to extend love to their offspring, or where infants fail to register their parents’ love, bad objects may form.³⁵

Harriet’s early parental experiences appear in her God representation. She reported that God is sometimes aloof and angry, and at other times kind. She sometimes feels a physical constriction when she approaches God and at other times feels welcomed. It is important to keep in mind, of course, that Harriet is referring to an object-God and not the God Beyond in her descriptions.³⁶

St Clair explains that adult modes of experiencing God that stem from the first six months of children’s lives are frequently enigmatic. On the one side, these people’s experiences may seem somewhat primitive in psychological terms, as they reflect the merged relationships that existed between themselves and their parents. Such non-self-states may translate to hallucinatory religious experiences and/or psychoses. On other occasions, these same adults may have mystical, merged-like experiences with God that one might attribute to the spiritually mature.³⁷ Pastoral caregivers need to tread extremely carefully in instances like these because these dear souls frequently do not have the psychological stability or spaciousness to tolerate uncertainty and bad objects.

The next stage of St Clair’s model (6 to 36 months) marks the “psychological birth” of young children as individuals. This stage commences when infants begin to perceive themselves as being distinct from their primary caregivers. “The stage ends with the integration of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ self-representations into an integrated self-concept, and the integration of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ object-representations into whole object-

³³ St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 34.

³⁴ St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 34.

³⁵ St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 35.

³⁶ This claim is verified by observing the parallels between St. Clair’s schema and Harriet’s life, and by recreating aspects of Harriet’s story via transference and countertransference. See Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People*, 75.

³⁷ St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 37-38.

relations.”³⁸ As you can imagine, there is much psychological ground to traverse between these two markers.

Harriet’s knowledge of not being wanted by her mother deepened during this period. When she looked into her mother’s face she saw, felt, and internalised her mother’s negative regard. To survive, Harriet split off some of the toxic feelings that she could not tolerate. Splitting is a defensive process that individuals use to make sense of their disordered worlds and keep discordant feelings apart from themselves.³⁹ While splitting may enable survival in the short term, which is clearly good, the practice creates longer-term problems as split off emotions contaminate the present and the future.

Harriet’s father was a source of strength for her in these early years. Her feelings towards him are summed up in the phrase “my father was like gold to me.” Whilst some of this positive regard may have been to compensate for her mother’s remoteness, there is no doubt in Harriet that his love was genuine.

Once again, there is an observable continuity between Harriet’s parental experiences and her God images: God is scary and powerful, yet also tender and kind. The challenge for Harriet and others in such positions is to synthesise their good and bad objects into more realistic whole representations.

St Clair’s Stage Three (approx. 4-6 years) focuses on the consolidation of the self. This work involves children integrating their good and bad self- and other- representations into more realistic ones that contain both “good and bad qualities.”⁴⁰ Stage Four runs through to puberty. It extends the work of stage three and entails solidifying one’s self-concept and ego identity. One way that this restructuring can take place is by persons interacting with *real* people, which helps folks to make decisions for themselves and to view their parents in more realistic terms.⁴¹

I had trouble distinguishing between St Clair’s third and fourth stage in Harriet’s journey. Still, Harriet knew throughout her school years that she “never measured up” to her mother’s demands. She “failed” on account of her being female instead of male and because her performance at school did not reach her mother’s standards. She suffered further because her mother was “the disciplinarian in the family.” As is often the case, these realities did not deter Harriet from *idealising* her mother,⁴² and repeatedly seeking her approval. This tension is reflected in comments like “I never reached my mother;” “I have had a struggle with giving myself value;” and “I look to others who know me for honest appraisal.”

Complicating matters further for Harriet was the fact that her father seemed to disappear from the family as the years rolled on. He was 20 years older than his wife and reading between the lines I think his absence meant that he somewhat kowtowed to his wife who *needed* silence and peace.

³⁸ St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 38.

³⁹ Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People*, 84-87.

⁴⁰ St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 42.

⁴¹ St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 42-46.

⁴² Idealisation helps to keep problematic feelings out of consciousness. See Flanagan, *Object Relations Theory*, 148.

During St Clair's third stage children continue to view God "in terms of the most formidable human beings" they know—namely, their parents.⁴³ In Stage Four, persons slowly learn to view God in less anthropomorphic terms and gradually view God in more spiritual terms. Yet, this does not always transpire. If anything, Harriet's God representation increasingly mirrored her mother's behaviour throughout this season with God becoming more vindictive. The subject-God that Harriet's church purportedly promoted seemed to verify her belief that God was to be feared and not enjoyed.

St Clair's final stage (adolescence and young adulthood) in the development of object relations and God representations links with parents in a unique way. Each challenge young adults face, each time an object-parent is exposed, the opportunity arises for folks to revise their God representations. Sadly, not everyone seizes this chance. This means that some adults live their lives under the control of object Gods;⁴⁴ unless, that is, the adults participate in a helpful intervention.

Harriet's mid to late teenage years were notable for several reasons. She married *very* young. A year later her first child was born. She started to attend a new church and as was her custom immediately rolled up her sleeves and served wherever she could.

I met Harriet approximately a decade later. I had visited her church to advertise a forgiveness course for adults who would like to explore their relationships with their parents. Harriet spoke with me post-service, asked a few questions, and within days had signed up for the course. This was the start of her forgiveness journey, which in turn contributed to her flourishing.

FORGIVENESS

Jesus calls people to forgive from their hearts (Mt. 18: 21-35). The heart in biblical times refers to one's thoughts, volition, understanding, and emotions.⁴⁵ Dallas Willard states that "the human heart, will, or spirit is the executive center of human life. The heart is where decisions and choices are made for the whole person. That is its function."⁴⁶ It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that effective forgiveness of deep issues requires cognitive and affective engagement.

The HEART forgiveness model builds on these ideas. The model is a verified process of forgiveness that assists people who have been deeply hurt by their parents (and others) to forgive effectually. The concepts associated with the acronym HEART provide the framework for the model—namely, to *heed* your parental wounds; *explore* why your parents injured you; *acknowledge* key Christian traditions that inform

⁴³ St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 42.

⁴⁴ St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 46-48.

⁴⁵ See for example L. William Countryman, *Forgiven and Forgiving* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998), 53.

⁴⁶ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), 30.

your understanding of forgiveness; *review* your forgiveness related dilemmas; and *target* strategies to further your forgiveness.⁴⁷

H: Heed Your Parental Wounds: The task of the first stage of the HEART forgiveness model is for persons to comprehend more accurately the nature of their parents' offences, the effects of these injuries, and, if helpful, the attitudes that motivated the wrongdoings. Effective ways of doing this work include talking about your parents' offences in safe places, listening to others' tales of being harmed by their parents, and writing about your parental wounds for twenty minutes per day, for four days in a row.⁴⁸ The goal of these activities is to assist folks to engage with their wounds at a cognitive and emotional level and thereby commence the process of forgiving from their hearts.

Interestingly, Harriet was silent during the first three weeks of the forgiveness course because she needed this time to discern if it was safe to share in her group. By the fourth week she determined it was and began to talk about her mother's offences. Around this time, she also started to express her pain through a series of drawings that were for her eyes only. An offence that particularly galled Harriet was that her mother had repeatedly blocked her from pursuing a career as a biologist. The reason her mother gave was that Harriet was "not intelligent enough to be a scientist." Harriet interpreted these rebuttals as her mother smothering the little joy that she had in her life and possibly thwarting her destiny.

As Harriet processed her wounds within the larger context of forgiveness, she unwittingly began to tend to her object world. Up until this point, her quest for a good maternal object had ostensibly silenced all contrary voices. When Harriet started to process the reality and effects of her mother's remoteness, distain, and antagonism, she simultaneously began to incorporate some of these features into her mother representation and God representation. Thus, a greater congruency was realised.

E: Explore Why Your Parents Injured You: In this optional stage of the HEART forgiveness model wounded persons are invited to investigate the factors that might have influenced their parents to harm them. An advantage of these explorations is that they can unearth information that allay people's nagging *Why Questions*. For example, a response to the question "why did my parents abandon me?" could be because they had to work seven days a week to put food on the table for their eight children. Insights of this nature can engender understanding, compassion, and empathy within the hurting and these qualities in turn may serve as launching pads towards forgiveness. A potential disadvantage of these considerations is that the newly gained insights may entice persons to excuse their parents for their offences and abandon their forgiveness work. The better option is to process the injuries that do exist, even if the motives behind

⁴⁷ Philip John Halstead, "The Forgiveness Matters Course: A Theologically and Psychologically Integrated Approach to help Churchgoing Adults Process Their Parental Wounds." *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 14:2 (2012): 85-110.

⁴⁸ See James W. Pennebaker, *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval* (Oakland, CA: Harbinger, 2004), 25-26.

them are unclear. Another reason why some folks choose not to explore the motive behind their parents' offences is that to enter their parents' mindsets would be to incur further damage.⁴⁹

In Harriet's case, it dawned on her mid-course that her mother had suffered the crushing loss of a young child immediately prior to her conception. Harriet also recognised that her mother struggled with post-natal depression and other mental health challenges. This knowledge did not invalidate or paint over the very real injuries that Harriet had sustained at the hand and absence of her mother. Rather, the understanding assisted her to view her mother with a little more compassion, which, in turn, affected her object relations and forgiveness.

A: Acknowledge Key Christian Traditions That Inform Your Understanding of Forgiveness. Here, persons are encouraged to work through the interconnected notions of transpersonal, self, intrapersonal, and interpersonal forgiveness. Transpersonal forgiveness bids folks to seek divine forgiveness for their sins. This call resonated with Harriet. She was quick to identify her wrongs and felt compelled to repent of her judgments regarding her mother, her sinful reactions to her mother's offences, and her numerous God-directed outbursts.⁵⁰ Life-giving as the actions of identification and repentance can be, Harriet still found it nearly impossible to believe, yet alone feel, that God had forgiven her.⁵¹

Self-forgiveness involves persons forgiving themselves for their own sins. One way to experience authentic self-forgiveness is to abandon "self-resentment in the face of one's acknowledged wrong, whilst fostering compassion, generosity, and love towards oneself."⁵² Another is to process your own offences through the HEART forgiveness model. A third path is to repent and make restitution where appropriate. And a fourth is to solicit the prayers of others to assist you to appropriate God's forgiveness, because to know God's forgiveness experientially is for many individuals to dispel self-forgiveness conundrums.

It is noteworthy that some individuals who have grown up under the relentless gaze of a critical parent develop superegos that are particularly resistant to change. Superegos represent the part of the psyche that functions as a conscience. This helps to explain why the likes of Harriet can resist God's forgiveness and battle to forgive themselves.⁵³

Intrapersonal forgiveness entails persons forgiving their violators internally. It does not necessitate that the forgivers communicate directly with those who hurt them. In the case of smaller offences, intrapersonal forgiveness may mean forgiving a parent via prayer (Mk. 11:25) or covering over a parent's offence with love (1 Pet. 4:8). For deeper offences, folks may need to enlist the aid of another and to process their own wrongdoing through the stages of the HEART forgiveness model described to this point.

⁴⁹ Adapted from Philip Halstead, "Journeying Through Forgiveness When It Really Hurts," in *The Art of Forgiveness*, eds. Philip Halstead and Myk Habets (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018), 269-291, 276-277.

⁵⁰ Harriet's speed to seek forgiveness may have reflected her intrapsychic desire to be at peace with her mother.

⁵¹ Adapted from Halstead, "Journeying Through Forgiveness," 277-278.

⁵² Robert D. Enright and The Human Development Study Group, "Counseling Within the Forgiveness Triad: On Forgiving, Receiving Forgiveness, and Self-forgiveness," *Counseling and Values* 40:2 (1996): 107-126, 114.

⁵³ St Clair, *Human Relationships*, 42.

One of the many benefits of intrapersonal forgiveness is that it occurs within people's evolving object worlds, which means effective forgiveness is not dependent on a precise recollection of sins. A further advantage is that it protects wounded persons from the risks of directly spoken forgiveness where powerful parents may twist their children's words and damage them further. This is not to say that face-to-face forgiveness should always be avoided; rather, it is to suggest that no strategy is appropriate in every circumstance.⁵⁴

Interpersonal forgiveness involves forgiving others directly. A key reason for delaying our conversation about face-to-face forgiveness until this point is that when people work through the preceding material *before* they communicate with their parents, the likelihood of them having a beneficial dialogue is greatly increased. This is because engagement with the prior material helps to bring about change in people's attitudes and object relations.⁵⁵

R: Review Your Forgiveness Related Dilemmas. Persons regularly encounter questions and challenges on their forgiveness journeys that can stall or derail their progress if they are not faced. One example is where family members pressure individuals not to uncover the past, due to their shame and penchant for homeostasis. Harriet encountered another obstacle. She needed to find a way to keep herself safe from her mother's demands, critique, and spontaneous visits. Harriet achieved this by establishing some boundaries that specified when her mother could and could not call or visit. Unsurprisingly, Harriet's real mother and no doubt her object mother at first resisted these changes.

T: Target Strategies to Further Your Forgiveness. It usually takes considerable time to work through and effectively forgive deep parental wounds. Hence, this final stage of the HEART forgiveness model urges persons to target one or two practices to further their forgiveness post-course. Harriet chose to walk around a local park once per week with the purpose of thanking God for forgiving her and releasing her mother to God. She also started to see a licenced counsellor to continue her forgiveness explorations.⁵⁶ In these and other ways she embodied Jones' belief that forgiveness ought to become "an embodied way of life."⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

As I reflect on Harriet's journey, I can clearly see that a miracle occurred. Before she was conceived her parents were busy crafting a narrative for a "replacement son." When she was born, she encountered the jadedness, disappointment, and disdain of her mother because of her gender and her mother's mental health struggles. She grew up under this heavy cloud. She tried extremely hard to please her mother, but despite all her efforts, this never happened. When I first met Harriet, she was reluctant to approach God because

⁵⁴ Halstead, "Journeying Through Forgiveness," 279.

⁵⁵ Halstead, "Journeying Through Forgiveness," 280-281.

⁵⁶ Adapted from Halstead, "Journeying Through Forgiveness," 280-281.

⁵⁷ L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1995), xii.

she did not know if she was going to encounter an angry or kind God. She worked incessantly to win God's favour. Exhaustion was her lot. Yet, just two months after she had finished the forgiveness course that I hosted at her church, Harriet wrote to me and expressed that her relationship with God was improving. Her exact words were, "I'm getting there. Slowly. I'm hoping that soon I will be able to feel his love for me; I was pretty close to it last week." Harriet also mentioned that she feels somewhat better towards herself and her mother. This is a sign that Harriet's forgiveness efforts were helping to change her object self and object mother. It also denotes that the good and loving God Beyond was and is at work.

Harriet's journey of continuing transformation supports the thesis of this article. Unprocessed parental wounds defile people's relationships with God. ORT explains how this corruption occurs and engaging with an evidence-based forgiveness process leads to the healing of parental wounds, the positive modifications of people's God images and object relations, and ultimately, to more meaningful relationships with the God Beyond.

When we are deeply connected and in right relationship with the great *I Am*, it is akin to a tree that is planted by streams of water. We will yield our fruit in season. Our leaves will not wither. We will prosper. Healing our parental wounds will positively influence our relationships with God, others, and ourselves. We will feel interconnected and be in a place where we can receive and give love. This truly is a flourishing life. The glory of God is a human being who is in relationship with God, a person who leads a life that flourishes.