

The 19th century German poet Heinrich Heine wrote,
 “My needs are few and my desires but these—
 A woodland house, the best of simple food
 And just outside my door, if God is good,
 Some six or seven of my enemies,
 Strung up so as to make my heart swell full.
 Before they died, I would forgive them all
 The wrongs they’d done me—grant them absolution.
 For to do on earth as it is in heaven,
 I know one’s enemies must be forgiven,
 But not before they’re brought to execution.” Mark Jarman “translation”

I can’t sympathize with Heine. Seeing my enemies strung up would not make my heart swell, but neither do I have any inclination to love them. I think the command to love my enemies is sufficient proof that religion, at least the religion of Jesus, is anything but the opiate of the people.

One observer of the human condition lists the qualities of a true enemy:

- knows you personally and doesn’t care if you live or die
- talks harshly about you behind your back
- sees you as a symbol rather than as a person
- wants more from you than wants a fair exchange between you
- exaggerates your flaws in order to get others to hate you
- wishes you ill in work and home life
- has the desire for something you have
- has contempt for your intelligence and too much belief in his own

Heine’s prescription for dealing with enemies is more viscerally satisfying than Jesus’. If someone is your enemy you can decide to be enemies of each other, hate each other without guilt, and then kill what you hate. The lovers on the sidelines will have to avenge each one of you and turn their grief to hate.

In the 1990s in Belfast, people murmured about how the children were becoming monsters. Children are very susceptible to hate, yet in them it burns away quickly. It is only later that it organizes itself into a system, a way of life.

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, Longfellow believed, we should find in each one’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility. I wonder. Longfellow assumes a capacity for compassion, for caring about the suffering of another, for, at least, sympathy. Hate destroys such a capacity when it organizes itself into a system, a way of life.

Is it possible to break out of this cycle of destruction and death? We can’t change the past. Whatever has created the rift between us and our enemies is forever part of our history. We can nurture the hurt; we can deepen the divide by dehumanizing, demonizing the other until it seems perfectly reasonable to string them up.

More often, I suspect, we shun an all consuming hatred that only creates hell for everyone concerned, yet cannot bring ourselves to do the work love requires if heaven's peace is to be restored. We are more likely to repress our hatreds *and* reject love's demands, discontentedly pitching our tents in purgatory.

The past cannot be abandoned; but neither can the past remain simply the past as we imagine we know it, unless we want to foreclose on the promise of the future. *Love is the will to let the past be reborn in the present as more than what until now had been known, and the will to let the present be shaped by a future yet to be revealed.*

Joseph's brothers, jealous of their father's love for him and disturbed by his creepy prophetic dreams, sold him into Egyptian slavery as a child. They killed a goat, poured its blood onto his beautiful coat of many colors, and showed it to their father, Jacob, as proof that his most beloved son had been killed by wild beasts.

Joseph ended up in Pharaoh's court and because of his prophetic dreams slowly rose to be the powerful food czar in the court. He saved Egypt and the surrounding countries from famine. His brothers, starving in nearby Canaan, came to Egypt seeking food, and when it was their turn to petition Joseph, they didn't recognize him.

He recognized them and was very harsh at first, until they spoke of his father and youngest brother, Benjamin. Then his heart softened. First he forgave them, and then he gave them a future.

They had made him homeless, but he gave them a home, near him, in Pharaoh's favor. They went back to Canaan for Jacob and Benjamin, and the family was made whole again.

Joseph was in tears of grief and love at the end of the story, with the men who destroyed his life and his father's. Forgiveness and mercy mean that, bit by bit, you begin to outshine the resentment. You open the drawer that was shut and you take out the precious treasures that you hid there so long ago.

We are the brothers and we are Joseph. We have wounded others and we have been wounded. That is life. Maybe we temporarily wanted people who hurt us to be punished, but do we want to be punished for the wounds we have inflicted?

Why does Jesus command us to love our enemies, other than he expects us to act like God? Because if we allow the past to limit the present and foreclose on the future, we have predestined ourselves to perdition.

To love our enemies is the hardest work we can do and the greatest gift we can give, for it is to give as God gives. How does God give? God always works for the good. The greater the evil the harder it is to work for the good, but God always works for the good however great the evil.

Joseph allowed the past to be reborn in the present as more than what had been known. What Joseph's brother intended for evil, what Joseph experienced as evil, was used to save the lives of many.

If we, like Joseph, can allow the past to be reborn in the present as more than until now was known, we may discover the mercy that frees the present from the chains of the past and keeps the future open.