

Forgiveness: Telling the Story

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Genesis 4:1-16

4:1 The man Adam knew his wife Eve intimately. She became pregnant and gave birth to Cain, and said, "I have given life to a man with the Lord's help." **2** She gave birth a second time to Cain's brother Abel. Abel cared for the flocks, and Cain farmed the fertile land.

3 Some time later, Cain presented an offering to the Lord from the land's crops **4** while Abel presented his flock's oldest offspring with their fat. The Lord looked favorably on Abel and his sacrifice **5** but didn't look favorably on Cain and his sacrifice. Cain became very angry and looked resentful. **6** The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why do you look so resentful? **7** If you do the right thing, won't you be accepted? But if you don't do the right thing, sin will be waiting at the door ready to strike! It will entice you, but you must rule over it."

8 Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." When they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

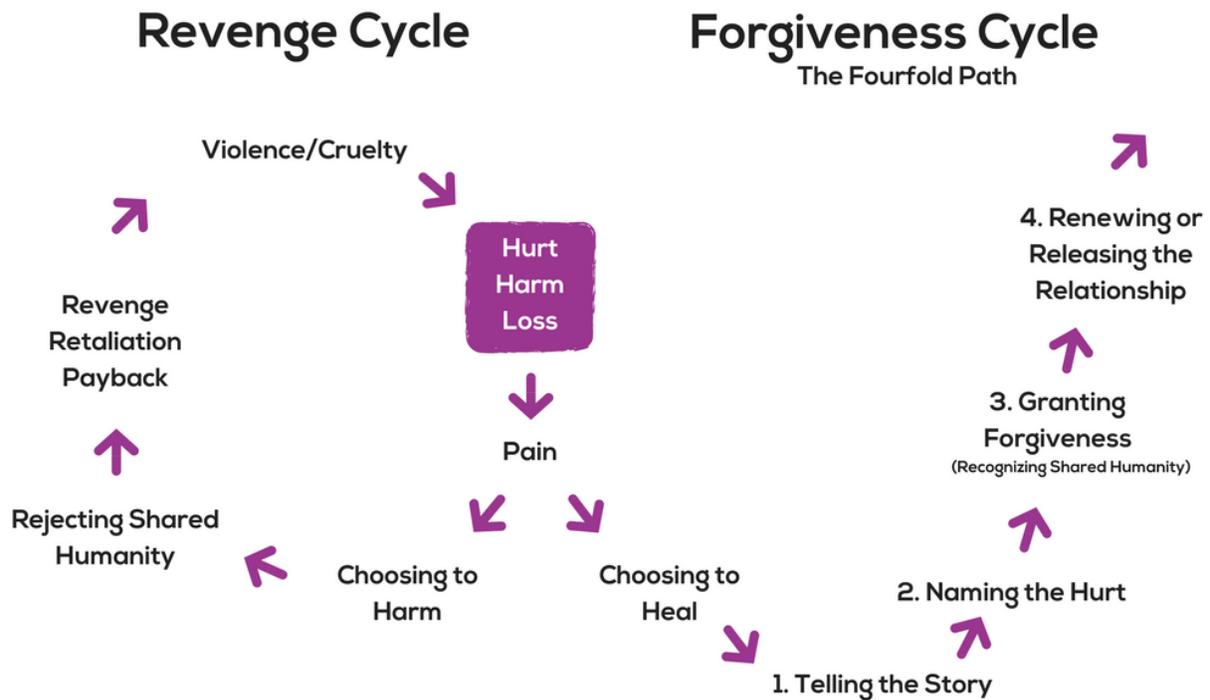
9 The Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain said, "I don't know. Am I my brother's guardian?"

10 The Lord said, "What did you do? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. **11** You are now cursed from the ground that opened its mouth to take your brother's blood from your hand. **12** When you farm the fertile land, it will no longer grow anything for you, and you will become a roving nomad on the earth."

13 Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is more than I can bear. **14** Now that you've driven me away from the fertile land and I am hidden from your presence, I'm about to become a roving nomad on the earth, and anyone who finds me will kill me."

15 The Lord said to him, "It won't happen; anyone who kills Cain will be paid back seven times." The Lord put a sign on Cain so that no one who found him would assault him. **16** Cain left the Lord's presence, and he settled down in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Revenge Cycle & Forgiveness Cycle



The problem is, there is no way of living with other people without being hurt. Noone makes it to adulthood without hurting others and having been hurt ourselves. That's just life.

You can start anywhere on this cycle of hurt and harm - asking what came first is a chicken and egg kind of question - so let's start with having been hurt.

- You experience hurt, harm or loss...
- and it causes you pain.
- Pain makes us cranky and short sighted, so we just want to make them suffer - we want to choose harm
- But hurting others is not good, so we look for a way to justify our desire to cause harm. So we find a reason why they deserve to be hurt when we didn't - which is just a nicer way of saying that we have chosen to reject our shared humanity
- Now that we have a justification we plot our revenge, retaliation or payback
- Which takes the form of violence or cruelty
- Which causes more hurt, harm or loss
- Which leads to more pain

And round and round and round we go

I think the story of Cain and Abel is meant to be an origin story. An origin story for where the hurt started.

I like to imagine stone aged humans gathered around a fire, because the stories of the book of Genesis are older than the written word.

I like to imagine stone aged humans gathered around a fire, after some act of violence has happened and a small child asks, "Why Grandmother? Why did the people from the land of Nod steal our sheep and kill Shepherd Abel?"

And Grandmother, who is so old and wise that her name has been forgotten and now she is everyone's Grandmother, responds, "Because, hurt people hurt people."

But the child is smart and persistent in a way that always makes Grandmother smile, so the child asks, "But Grandmother, if God is good, then where did the hurt come from?"

So Grandmother tells this story. "You remember Adam and Eve who chose to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil? Well, they had two sons. Cain, the oldest, was a wonderful farmer, like the people of Nod. Everything he planted grew and thrived and his fields fed many people."

"What people?" the smart child asked. "I thought Adam and Eve were the only people in the beginning?"

Grandmother only nodded and continued. "Abel, the second born son, was a shepherd, like us. Abel's sheep provided wool for warm clothing, and meat and cheese, so the people ate well, even in winter when nothing would grow in the ground."

"What people!?!!" the smart child asked. "Did they have sisters? How much food does it take to feed a couple of sisters? My little sister hardly eats anything!"

Grandmother smiled and continued. "Cain and Abel loved God, and wondered if God might be hungry, so they each brought the best of their fields and their flocks to feed to the sacred fire. Cain brought the most beautiful melons. The melons were so sweet, juicy and fragrant that everyone turned their heads and licked their lips as Cain carried them to the sacred fire. Abel brought his best lamb. A large, fat lamb, big enough to feed the whole village."

"What village??!!!" said the child before his father gently covered his mouth.

Cain put his beautiful melons, whole, into the sacred fire, but they did not burn. The melons sizzled, and split, and hissed, but the fire would not consume them.

The smart child pulled his fathers hand from his mouth and said, "Of course the melon's didn't burn! They're full of water!"

Grandmother continued. "Abel butchered his fine, fat lamb and laid it into the sacred fire. At first the fire licked gently at the tasty fat, then, whoosh! The fire gobbled the lamb up!"

"Of course it did," the smart child mumbled through his fathers fingers. "Everyone knows that fat burns and water doesn't!"

Grandmother softly chuckled and continued the story. "Cain could not stop thinking about how God loved Abel's offering, but not his. Day after day, Cain's hurt grew into anger and his anger grew so large that everyone could see it, even God. So God asked Cain, "Why are you angry, and why do you look so resentful? 7 If you do the right thing, won't you be accepted? But if you don't do the right thing, sin will be waiting at the door ready to strike! It will entice you, but you must rule over it."

"But Cain was so overcome by his anger that he invited his brother Abel to walk with him in the fields and killed him. Abel's blood cried out to God, so God spoke with Cain, hoping that Cain would remember that Abel was his brother. But Cain refused to remember his love for his brother, Abel, but God still loved Cain. So God banished Cain to the land of Nod. Where Cain found a wife and so the people of Nod have ever forgotten that they are our brothers."

"But, how did Cain find a wife?" asked the smart child. " Did God make extra people after Adam and Eve? And why doesn't God like melons? Everybody likes melons! And that was like, forever ago! Are the people of Nod still mad that melons don't burn? How is that our fault? Grandmother, it doesn't make any sense!"

Grandmother smiled and said, "And what can we learn about hurt and revenge and violence from this story?"

There's a reason the bible has so many stories in it, instead of just lists of rules. Stories allow us to make meaning in a way that simple data and statistics do not. Stories help us process what happened and how it happened and help us find our why.

Why did this happen?
Why does it hurt so much?
Why did they do this to me?

Yet, we live in a culture that tells us to forgive and forget.
We live in a culture that is deeply uncomfortable with vulnerability.
A culture that would really like us to just move on and get over it.
Because telling the story brings up the hurt all over again and we in this culture, spend a whole lot of time, money and energy avoiding pain.

But pain is literally the crossroads between continuing the harm of the revenge cycle and choosing the path of healing.

Grandmother's question is a good one: What can we learn from the story of Cain and Abel. Something that interests me is how we can change our stories by making different choices.

What if Cain had chosen healing instead of harm? If Cain had chosen healing the first step would have been to tell his story as honestly as possible. So what is Cain's story?

Well, Cain loved God and brought his offering of fresh produce from his field and it didn't burn. So Cain, being a very pre-scientific human, thinks that God has rejected his sacrifice, even though, I think, even a caveman would understand that fat burns and water doesn't!

But anyway, Cain feels rejected by God because his offering wouldn't burn.

If Cain had taken the time to tell his story he might have understood why he was feeling so hurt. If you look at Cain's story a few things become obvious.

Perhaps most obvious is that Abel didn't cause Cain's offering to not burn!

Abel didn't hurt Cain at all! Cain is jealous of Abel, because Cain feels rejected by God. So Cain's anger at Abel is misdirected. Probably nobody thought that Abel was better than Cain, except for Cain! Probably not even God.

Imagine how Cain's life could have been different if Cain had chosen the path of healing?

What if Cain had chosen to feel his pain as pain, rather than trying to avoid the pain with anger and blame?

What if Cain had told his story as honestly as possible, even just to himself?

Maybe Cain could have realized that he felt rejected by God and if he was going to be angry Cain should be angry at God, not Abel!

And if Cain had taken his anger to God, God would have told him, as God did tell him, that Cain had done the acceptable thing, it's just that melons don't burn as well as fatty lamb chops.

And perhaps God could have told Cain that the reason his produce didn't burn was because God wasn't hungry and God wants people to eat the food, not give burnt offerings - which is eventually what happened to the produce offerings in Temple Judaism - the food was used to feed the poor, not just go up in smoke.

If Cain had been willing to sit in his pain long enough to find the truth Abel would have lived and maybe Cain would have been known as the one who heard from God that God is pleased when we feed the hungry, not when we feed the fire.

What if we're all Cain?

What if we're all insecure and pain avoidant?

Now, imagine how our lives could be different if we chose the path of healing?

If when we experience pain, we take a deep breath and ask ourselves, what's the story?

What's the real story of what happened here?

For today's Stone Ritual we're going to whisper our stories to our stones.

Because sometimes we're not ready to tell anybody our story and sometimes it feels silly to talk to ourselves, so we're going to talk to our stones. And if it helps you, you can get your rock some googly eyes and draw some ears on it!

Stone Ritual: Whispering to the Stone

Pick up your stone and whisper, or just think inside your head - tell the stone your story of hurt. Speak the truth, as much of it as you can remember.

Then later today, maybe write your story down.

Then if you can, share it with someone you trust. Maybe they will hear a truth you hadn't recognized yet.