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part one

A Radical Healing

1 Jill's Story

Author's Note: To give you, the reader, an understanding of what I call Radical Forgiveness, I have presented the following true account of how this process saved my sister's marriage and changed her life. Since that time, Radical Forgiveness has positively impacted the lives of countless others, for not long after this episode with my sister, I realized that the process could be used as a form of help quite different from traditional psychotherapy and relationship counseling. — C.T.

AS SOON AS I saw my sister, Jill, emerge into the lobby of Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport, I knew something was wrong. She had never hidden her feelings well, and it was apparent to me that she was in emotional pain.

Jill had flown from England to the United States with my brother, John, whom I had not seen for sixteen

years. He had emigrated from England to Australia in 1972 and I to America in 1984—thus Jill was, and still is, the only one of the three siblings living in England. John had made a trip home, and this trip to Atlanta represented the last leg of his return journey. Jill accompanied him to Atlanta so she could visit me and my wife, JoAnn, for a couple of weeks and see him off to Australia from there.

After the initial hugging and kissing and a certain amount of awkwardness, we set out for the hotel. I had arranged rooms for one night so JoAnn and I could show them Atlanta the next day before driving north to our home.

As soon as the first opportunity for serious discussion presented itself, Jill said, “Colin, things are not good at home. Jeff and I might be splitting up.”

Despite the fact that I had noticed something wrong with my sister, this announcement surprised me. I had always thought she and Jeff were happy in their six-year marriage. Both had been married before, but this relationship had seemed strong. Jeff had three kids with his previous wife, while Jill had four. Her youngest son, Paul, was the only one still living at home.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Well, it’s all quite bizarre, and I don’t quite know where to begin,” she replied. “Jeff is acting really

strange, and I can't stand much more of it. We've gotten to the point where we can't talk to each other anymore. It's killing me. He has totally turned away from me and says that it's all my fault."

"Tell me about it," I said, glancing at John, who responded by rolling his eyes. He'd stayed at their house for a week prior to flying to Atlanta, and I guessed by his demeanor that he'd heard enough of this subject to last him a while.

"Do you remember Jeff's eldest daughter, Lorraine?" Jill asked. I nodded. "Well, her husband got killed in a car crash about a year ago. Ever since then, she and Jeff have developed this really weird relationship. Any time she calls, he fawns over her, calling her 'Love' and spending hours talking to her in hushed tones. You'd think they were lovers, not father and daughter. If he's in the middle of something and she calls, he drops everything to talk with her. If she comes to our home, he acts just the same—if not worse. They huddle together in this deep and hushed conversation that excludes everyone else, especially me. I can hardly stand it. I feel like she has become the center of his life, and I hardly figure in it at all. I feel totally shut out and ignored."

She went on and on, offering more details of the strange family dynamic that had developed. JoAnn

and I listened attentively. We wondered aloud about the cause of Jeff's behavior and were generally sympathetic. We made suggestions as to how she might talk to him about his behavior and generally struggled to find a way to fix things, as would any concerned brother and sister-in-law. John was supportive and offered his perspective on the situation as well.

What seemed strange and suspicious to me was the uncharacteristic nature of Jeff's behavior. The Jeff I knew was affectionate with his daughters and certainly codependent enough to badly need their approval and love, but I had never seen him behave in the manner Jill described. I had always known him as caring and affectionate toward Jill. In fact, I found it hard to believe that he would treat her quite so cruelly. It was easy to understand why this situation made Jill unhappy and how Jeff's insistence that she was imagining it all, and making herself mentally ill over it, made it all so much worse for her.

The conversation continued all the next day. I began to get a picture of what might be going on between Jill and Jeff from a Radical Forgiveness standpoint but decided not to mention it—at least not right away. She was too caught up in the drama of the situation and wouldn't have been able to hear and understand what I had to say. Radical Forgiveness is based on a very

broad spiritual perspective that was not our shared reality when we were all still living in England. Feeling certain that both she and John were unaware of my beliefs underlying Radical Forgiveness, I felt that the time had not yet arrived to introduce so challenging a thought as “this is perfect just the way it is—and an opportunity to heal.”

After the second day of verbally going round and round the problem, I decided the time was near for me to try the Radical Forgiveness approach. This would require that my sister open up to the possibility that something beyond the obvious was happening—something that was purposeful, divinely guided, and intended for her highest good. Yet she was so committed to being the victim in the situation, that I wasn't sure I could get her to hear an interpretation of Jeff's behavior that would take her out of that role. Still, just as my sister began yet another repetition of what she had said the day before, I decided to intervene. Tentatively, I said, “Jill, are you willing to look at this situation differently? Would you be open to me giving you a quite different interpretation of what is happening?”

She looked at me quizzically, as if she were wondering, How can there possibly be another interpretation? It is how it is! I had a certain track record with Jill, though, because I had helped her solve a relationship

problem before, so she trusted me enough to say, “Well, I guess so. What do you have in mind?”

This was the opening I was waiting for. “What I’m going to say may sound strange, but try not to question it until I’ve finished. Just stay open to the possibility that what I’m saying is true, and see whether or not what I say makes sense to you in any way at all.”

Until this time, John had done his best to stay attentive to Jill, but the constant repetitive conversation about Jeff had begun to bore him tremendously. In fact, he had largely tuned her out. Now I was acutely aware that my interjection had caused John to perk up and begin listening again.

“What you have described to us, Jill, certainly represents the truth as you see it,” I began. “I have not the slightest doubt in my mind that this is occurring just as you say it is. Besides, John has witnessed much of the situation over the last three weeks and confirms your story—right, John?” I queried, turning toward my brother.

“Absolutely,” he said. “I saw it going on a lot, just as Jill says. I thought it was pretty strange and, quite honestly, much of the time I felt awkward being there.”

“I’m not surprised,” I said. “Anyway, Jill, I want you to know that nothing I am going to say negates what you have said or invalidates your story. I believe

that it happened the way you said it happened. Let me, however, give you a hint of what might be going on underneath this situation.”

“What do you mean, underneath the situation?” Jill asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

“It’s perfectly natural to think that everything ‘out there’ is all there is to reality,” I explained. “But maybe there’s a whole lot more happening beneath that reality. We don’t perceive anything else going on because our five senses are inadequate to the task. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t occurring.

“Take your situation. You and Jeff have this drama going on. That much is clear. What if, beneath the drama, something of a more spiritual nature was happening—same people and same events, but a totally different meaning? What if your two souls were doing the same dance but to a wholly different tune? What if the dance was about you healing? What if you could see this as an opportunity to heal and grow? That would be a very different interpretation, would it not?”

Both she and John looked at me as if I were now speaking a foreign language. I decided to back off from the explanation and go directly for the experience.

“Looking back over the last three months or so, Jill,” I went on, “what did you mostly feel when you saw Jeff behaving so lovingly toward his daughter Lorraine?”

“Anger mostly,” she said, but continued thinking about it. “Frustration,” she added. Then, after a long pause, “And sadness. I really feel sad.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “I feel so alone and unloved,” she said and began sobbing quietly. “It wouldn’t be so bad if I thought he couldn’t show love, but he can and he does—with *her!*”

She spat the last few words out with vehemence and rage and began to sob uncontrollably for the first time since her arrival. She’d shed a few tears prior to this, but she hadn’t really let herself cry. Now, at last, she was letting go. I was pleased that Jill had been able to get in touch with her emotions that quickly.

A full ten minutes went by before her crying subsided and I felt she could talk. At that point I asked, “Jill, can you ever remember feeling this same way when you were a little girl?” Without the slightest hesitation, she said, “Yes.” She was not immediately forthcoming about when, so I asked her to explain. It took her a while to respond.

“Dad wouldn’t love me either!” she finally blurted out, and she began to sob again. “I wanted him to love me, but he wouldn’t. I thought he couldn’t love anyone! Then your daughter came along, Colin. He loved her, all right. So why couldn’t he love me, goddammit?” She banged her fist hard on the table as she

shouted the words and dissolved into more uncontrollable tears.

Jill's reference was to my eldest daughter, Lorraine. Coincidentally, or rather, synchronistically, she and Jeff's eldest daughter have the same name.

Crying felt really good to Jill. Her tears served as a powerful release and possibly a turning point for her. A real breakthrough might not be far away, I thought. I needed to keep nudging her forward.

"Tell me about the incident with my daughter Lorraine, and Dad," I said.

"Well," Jill said, while composing herself. "I always felt unloved by Dad and really craved his love. He didn't hold my hand or sit me on his lap much. I always felt there must be something wrong with me. When I was older, Mum told me she didn't think Dad was capable of loving anyone, not even her. At that time I had more or less made peace with that. I rationalized that if he wasn't really capable of loving anyone, it wasn't my fault that he didn't love me. He really didn't love anyone. He hardly ever made a fuss about my kids—his own grandchildren—much less people or kids not his own. He was not a bad father. He just couldn't love. I felt sorry for him."

She cried some more, taking her time now. I knew what she meant about our father. He was a kind and

gentle man but very quiet and withdrawn. For the most part, he certainly had seemed emotionally unavailable to anyone.

As Jill became more composed once again, she continued, “I remember a particular day at your house. Lorraine was probably about four or five years old. Mum and Dad were visiting from Leicester, and we all came to your house. I saw your Lorraine take Dad’s hand. She said, “Come on, Granddad. Let me show you the garden and all my flowers.” He was like putty in her hands. She led him everywhere and talked and talked and talked, showing him all the flowers. She enchanted him. I watched them through the window the whole time. When they came back in, he put her on his lap and was as playful and joyful as I had ever seen him.

“I was devastated. So he is able to love after all, I thought. If he can love Lorraine, then why not me?” The last few words came out as a whisper followed by deep tears of grief and sadness, tears held in for all those years.

I figured we had done enough for the time being and suggested we make tea. (Well, we’re English! We always make tea, no matter what.)

Interpreting Jill’s story from a Radical Forgiveness standpoint, I easily saw that Jeff’s outwardly strange behavior was unconsciously designed to support Jill

in healing her unresolved relationship with her father. If she could see this and recognize the perfection in Jeff's behavior, she could heal her pain and Jeff's behavior would almost certainly stop. However, I wasn't sure how to explain this to Jill in a way she could understand at that point in time. Luckily, I didn't have to try. She stumbled on the obvious connection by herself.

Later that day she asked me, "Colin, don't you think it's odd that Jeff's daughter and your daughter both have the same name? Come to think of it, both of them are blonde and firstborn. Isn't that a strange coincidence! Do you think there's a connection?"

I laughed and replied, "Absolutely. It's the key to understanding this whole situation."

She looked at me long and hard. "What do you mean?"

"Work it out for yourself," I replied. "What other similarities do you see between that situation with Dad and my Lorraine and your current situation?"

"Well, let's see. Both girls have the same name. Both of them were getting what I don't seem to be able to get from the men in my life."

"And what is that?" I inquired.

"Love," she said in a whisper.

"Go on," I urged gently.