

. . . to forgive, divine.

“The most melancholy thing about human nature, is, that a man may guide others into the path of salvation, without walking in it himself; that he may be a pilot, and yet a castaway.” — Augustus William Hare and Julius Charles Hare, *Guesses at Truth by Two Brothers*, 1827.

I think it was P.G. Wodehouse who said — and let’s face it, there isn’t any way on this good green earth that I’m going to haul myself up the long stairs to examine my concordances on the matter, if I had any concordances on the works of Pelhman Granville W., which I’m very sure I do not — but as I was saying, I think it was P.G. Wodehouse who said, or wrote rather, that one should never apologize: the right sort of people never require apologies, and the wrong sort of people take mean advantage of them. I was thinking of this little quotation the other day as I was ruminating on the end of *The Tempest*, one of my favorite plays of all time.

And I ruminated because I’ve always been perplexed by the play’s ending, in which Prospero, our hero, forgives his evil brother for his wrongdoings and wraps up the proceedings on a lovely note of hope and reconciliation. For those of you new to the story, we meet Prospero in Act I, after he and his daughter have been living on an enchanted desert island for ten or fifteen years. We discover that Prospero had been the Duke of Milan, and that his brother, Antonio, plotted against him to take over the throne. After ousting the rightful Duke, Antonio sent him, with his infant daughter in tow, off in a boat to die a miserable death on the lowland sea. With a little luck (and some assistance from a loyal counsellor), father and daughter arrived safely on the shore of an island with qualities not unlike those of the island at the center of the television series, *Lost*.

So that’s the history. As the play opens, Prospero’s despicable brother happens to be sailing by the island on a ship, not knowing that his older brother is alive and living in a cave, praying for an opportunity for revenge. Prospero (who is a magician, a wizard of sorts, more on this in a later post) conjures up a ferocious storm, a tempest, to upset the ship and land his brother and the poor crew on the island.

Well, it’s Shakespeare, so much plot-twisting ensues, but just as Prospero gets his conniving brother right where he wants him, he opens his heart, forgives his aggressor, and offers grace and good fortune to everyone in sight.

The trouble is, Prospero’s brother — the fellow who, years before, had usurped Prospero’s dukedom and cast him and his infant daughter off in a boat to be swallowed by the sea — this snake-in-the-grass, this wolf-in-lamb’s-clothing, this Cain-against-Abel, says *nothing*. Absolutely *nothing* about his misdeeds. Offers no apology, no explanation, no excuse, proffers nary a word to hang one’s forgiveness upon. Stone-faced and marble-breasted, Antonio gives playgoers no glimpse of remorse or contrition to make us believe he’s worthy of being pardoned.

But you see, that's just the thing: does forgiveness mend the soul of the forgiven, or does it rather heal the one who forgives? "To err is human, to forgive, divine," said Pope, and I think he may have been on to something. Prospero spent so much of his life feeling the righteous indignation of the downtrodden that the idea of giving merciful amnesty to his enemies never entered his mind. But somewhere in the play, he finds his own humanity, seeks grace rather than revenge, and becomes the pilot of his own salvation. And while apologies and excuses might make for good daytime courtroom television, they really don't matter that much when it comes right down to it. As Sarah Paddison once wrote, *"Sincere forgiveness isn't colored with expectations that the other person apologize or change. Don't worry whether or not they finally understand you. Love them and release them. Life feeds back truth to people in its own way and time."*

Or, if you don't buy all the touchy-feely stuff, go with Oscar Wilde on the subject: *"Always forgive your enemies — nothing annoys them so much."*