

## Forgiveness: Who Is It For?

I've bitten off more than I can chew. Forgiveness is a topic much bigger than a few minutes of reflections can do justice. I hope today to at least invite some questions and further inquiry on your part. The spiritual practice of forgiveness, I've found, is filled with failure, murky choices, and unsolvable moral problems. In other words, it's like lots of great and worthy undertakings. It is not an easy practice. If it were easy, more people would be good at it. I'm not particularly good at it myself, but I've thought a lot about it, and maybe by sharing some of my thoughts, we might collectively explore this and improve.

Ours is a time when public shows of forgiveness is in short supply. Maybe it has always been. And because there is so little of it, a little forgiveness goes a long way. I'm suggesting a dual focus here: It's good to give attention to the big societal problems, and I think we can also focus on the people we encounter directly in our lives.

WHAT is forgiveness for? Why bother with it?

My short answer is that no conflict can end without it, whether it's interpersonal, familial, community-level, national, or global. Without forgiveness, everyone has a reason to keep fighting, resenting, even hating each other.

Forgiveness allows us to not assume malice in others. And that's a good thing, even when they are in fact malicious. I learned this as a high school teacher. If you assume malice behind bad behavior, a kid can only keep behaving badly, because you're treating them as a bad kid. Once you assume someone is evil, then any good they do will be dismissed, and they will have no opportunity to turn to good.

If you treat someone as good - even when they are not - and invite the best from them, you give them the opportunity to do something different, and something good. I will not always work. No, it doesn't even work all that often. Failure is always part of it. But when it works, it's extraordinary. If you haven't already, watch the Netflix movie "The Best of Enemies." It's based on the true story of how Ann Atwater, an African-American civil rights activist, and C.P. Ellis, the head of the Ku Klux Klan in Durham NC, co-chaired a commission that was deciding whether to desegregate schools in Durham (in the early 1970's). After being treated with compassion and respect by the black members of the commission, Ellis came to see that he could not anymore defend white supremacy and the hatred intrinsic to it. He publicly tore up his KKK membership card and supported desegregation. Atwater and Ellis became decades-long friends. Ellis moved and improved because Atwater gave him a chance to.

WHO is forgiveness for?

My father was a stiff-necked German-American from Iowa, and an alcoholic. Defensive as a fortress, he never accepted being called to account for injuries or misjudgments he made. In my late thirties, I forgave him for not being the father he should have been. It took a long time for me to see that he did the best he could. When it came to his emotional toolkit, it was nearly empty. And at that, he was still a real improvement over his own father, whose unkindness had shaped my father into the defensive and lonely

man he was. But I never could tell my father I forgave him, because he would have heard it as an accusation. Did I do it for my dad? No, I forgave him for me, so that I could put down the burden of being angry with him. When I began to see my dad with some compassion, I saw what he'd missed in life, and saw that how he treated us was a sign of how he'd been mistreated growing up.

In my opinion, forgiveness is NOT for the person being forgiven. If you're waiting for people to show you gratitude because you forgave them, I don't think that's an approach that results in actual forgiveness. I strongly believe that true forgiveness is not, and cannot be, transactional. You don't forgive in order to get something.

If we forgive even the most terrible injuries done to us, we do it for ourselves, so that resentment doesn't eat us alive, and destroy our ability to go on living. Most often the worst crimes are done by people unrepentant and undeserving of forgiveness. We don't forgive them for their sake. We forgive them for our own sake, so that we are not consumed by hatred and resentment. The opposite of hatred, it turns out, isn't love - because those two things can turn one to the other in an instant. No, the polar opposite, the thing furthest from hatred, the thing that banishes it, is forgiveness. Nelson Mandela famously said "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." He also said, "Forgiveness liberates the soul, it removes fear. That's why it's such a powerful weapon."

The New Testament has a lot to say about forgiveness. In Luke 6:37: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Again, I don't think Luke is talking about something transactional here. He's not saying "Do not judge, *so that* you will not be judged." I think he's talking about the impact we have on others, and about the kind of world we create with how we treat others, which eventually rebounds into how we are treated ourselves.

Luke's advice begs our next question: Where do we start, with forgiveness?

It's a particularly daunting question in the face of the evils of the world, present and historical.

I think there is such a thing as evil. But the common mistake people make when they use that word, is that they think it only applies to someone besides themselves. Here's the thing, though: If other people are capable of evil, I'm capable of it myself. Whether it's through malice, resentment, defensiveness, callous indifference, or carelessness, I'm capable of doing injury to others also.

And therein lies the basis for forgiveness: if I can fall short, if I'm capable of evil and causing terrible injury to others, then I have no grounds to be self-righteous in the face of others' evil. As the cartoon character Pogo famously misquoted naval commander Oliver Perry, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." Becoming aware of one's shortcomings requires humility. We are ALL made of the same flawed, unstable, perishable material. We all deserve compassion (along with accountability).

Where do we start with forgiveness? With ourselves. I began to see my way clear to forgiving my father, when I began to see his shortcomings in myself. I have many of his same fears, and many of his same destructive impulses. I have learned to deal with them differently - but not always, and not always well. Find out and let in where you've fallen short. Let in not just the pain of the injuries done to you, but also the pain you may have caused others. Forgive yourself, so you can forgive others. It starts with the person in the mirror.

I'll close with a Buddhist prayer of forgiveness:

If I have harmed anyone in any way, either knowingly or unknowingly through my own confusions, I ask forgiveness.

If anyone has harmed me in any way, either knowingly or unknowingly, through their own confusions, I forgive them.

And if there is a situation I am not ready to forgive, I forgive myself for that.

For all ways I harm myself, negate, doubt or belittle myself, judge or am unkind to myself, through my own confusions, I forgive myself.