

How Can I Forgive When My Heart Still Hurts?

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Remember for a moment, back to when you were a child. Let's say you're outside playing with friends. Something happens that hurts your feelings; perhaps a playmate says something rude or you don't get picked to play in the game. You run to your mother or father, perhaps in tears, seeking solace for your suffering. They listen to your tale of woe, then, after giving you a quick hug and a pat on the head, they say, "Ah well, people are like that. Now, you go back out and play."

Flash forward to the present. I'm sure along life's journey from then to now, all of us suffered our share of hurts and injustices of one sort or another. It seems to be part of the human condition. We've all experienced small slights and humiliations. And some of us have experienced truly traumatic wounds and suffering at the hands of others.

I'm also sure that over the years we've lived, all of us have been the source of hurts, slights, and injustices for others. I'm sure many of those actions which resulted in hurting others were unintentional. In the course of doing the best we could at the time, we hurt someone's feelings or stepped on toes. And, all of us being human, I'm guessing that there are even one or two times when we consciously acted in a way that hurt someone else, out of our own pain, fear, or a desire to be avenged.

If we're lucky, as we've grown and matured, we've learned about how to forgive and move on, at least in response to life's little injustices. We've developed the ability to free up and put to good use the energy that might go into holding grudges or nursing our wounds.

Today we're exploring forgiveness, the process we use for addressing the resentment and anger that results from perceived and real offences. Forgiveness is a concept explored by the world's religious traditions; by the world's civil authorities in terms of finding restorative justice for people wronged, and by each of us as individuals as we grapple with what it means to live our lives in relationship with others.

The need to forgive is widely recognized, but we are often at a loss for ways to accomplish it. For example, in a Gallup poll done in 1988, 94% said it was important to forgive, but 85% of those said they needed some outside help to be able to forgive. We know we want to forgive, maybe even know that we need to forgive, but somehow we find it hard to do. Bishop Desmond Tutu tells us that forgiveness "is indeed the best form of self-interest, since anger, resentment, and revenge are corrosive of the "summum bonum" – the greatest good."

Yet, I'm sure we all know people who tightly cling to their hurts. Maybe we even see it in a part of ourselves. When we feel we have been wronged, it can be tempting to hold onto our hurts. But when we can't let go and find a way to forgive, these memories continue to have power over us; taking our energy and coming back to upset and re-wound us on a regular basis.

Years ago, I had a conversation with a woman who hung on tightly to what for her were painful memories of the many times she felt she'd been treated badly by others. Just one example - she and her husband had been fortunate enough to travel the world, and so I asked her about the places she'd been. When she mentioned that they'd gone to China, I asked her about the sights she'd seen.

Have any of you ever been fortunate enough to go to China? What do you remember seeing? - RESPONSES

What this woman chose to remember about her trip to China was an experience she had at one of the dinners included in their tour. It seems that when a platter of duck reached their part of the table, there was no meat left on the dish, just a piece of the oily skin. She was outraged at the injustice of this – at people not leaving enough to make sure she got a serving of meat, of how poorly the hosts had planned for the meal, etc., etc. She spent quite a bit of time rehashing for me her “terrible” experience of China as a result of this one small part of the trip. Her anger still burned in her heart like a live coal; causing her anger and pain over 15 years after that dinner was long gone.

Forgiveness is giving up our hope for ever having a better past. It is turning to the good in the face of wrongdoing. Logically, we know we can’t go back and make things different than they were. Emotionally, however, this is sometimes hard to do and we remain knotted up in the past. Forgiveness allows us to show a generous, compassionate, and merciful restraint from pursuing our emotional reactions of resentment or revenge – even when the one who needs forgiveness is ourselves, even when we feel that the actions of the one who hurt us may not deserve our generosity or mercy.

Forgiveness is not condoning, forgetting, excusing, or denying the hurt that has been suffered. Not a prize to be given cheaply or easily, forgiveness must be earned. I think of the women I used to work who were returning to the workforce after being victims of domestic violence. They often had returned to their abuser several times following beatings. They thought they were supposed to “turn the other cheek” or “forgive and forget.” I think that is a misinterpretation of the Biblical advice to forgive others “seventy times seven times”.

Forgiveness does not involve putting yourself in danger over and over, physically, mentally, or emotionally. Offering forgiveness without some concrete evidence that the person who hurt you has sincerely and consistently changed their behavior is self-destructive. Forgiveness does not compel you to accept abuse on an on-going basis. The Rev. Gordon Atkinson says, “Forgiveness does not always lead to a healed relationship. Some people are not capable of love, and it might be wise to let them go along with your anger. Wish them well, and let them go their way.”

Forgiveness is the healing of wounds, wounds done to you or that you’ve inflicted on another. Much of it is an inside job. You choose to let go of a past wrong and no longer be hurt by it. You choose to acknowledge a wrong you have done and to make amends. You choose to learn from what you’ve done, and determine to make different choices in the future. As Gandhi said, “forgiveness is the attribute of the strong. The weak can never forgive.”

But it isn’t done in a simple formula or through an act of magic – it’s a process. The Institute for Forgiveness Studies in Madison, Wisconsin, has determined that forgiveness is four-phase process, which I’d like to share with you today.

The first is the “Uncovering Phase.” Here we encounter the true pain that has resulted from being hurt, injured, or slighted by another. We confront our emotions – anger, hatred, disappointment, distress. It can be hard, but it’s the start of our healing process. As author Cherie Carter-Scott has written, “Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness forces you to grow beyond what you were.”

(Cherie Carter-Scott, "If Love Is a Game, These Are the Rules")

The second phase is the “Decision Phase.” You may have heard this story: One day an old Native American grandfather is talking to his grandson. He says, "I feel there are two wolves fighting inside of me - the wolf of fear and hate, and the wolf of love and peace."

The grandson listens, then looks up at his grandfather and asks, "Which one will win?" The grandfather replies, "The one I feed."

In this phase, we realize that continuing to focus on our wounds and feed our anger is causing us unnecessary suffering. We decide to consider how to forgive ourselves and others to ease this suffering. Instead of rekindling our anger, fear, and pain, we turn our attention to healing, love, and peace.

Sometimes, forgiving others is easier than forgiving ourselves. We acknowledge that others are “only human” and that mistakes happen. But, forgive ourselves for being human, for behaving in a way that is less than our ideal? Not so easy. Sometimes, we expect so much of ourselves. I’m not saying we should give up on being good people, I’m suggesting that we remember that even good people make mistakes once in awhile, and that we give ourselves a break – the same break we give others. What I can tell you, from my personal experience, is that when I finally decided to let myself admit to myself that I was human, my life got a lot easier. I could own my boo-boos and missteps, apologize and ask for forgiveness sooner, and move on with my life. I also sleep a lot better.

We enter into phase three – the “Work Phase.” We strive to find new ways to understand our situation; alternative perspectives that help us make sense out of what we have experienced. Again, this isn’t about condoning, excusing, or minimizing the wrongs that may have been done to us, but rather a means to engage our compassion and empathy, to allow ourselves to see the human being behind the pain that has been caused – even if the human causing the pain is us. Whether or not this results in reconciliation, it allows us as individuals to grow in understanding and compassion.

Lastly, we begin “Deepening” – the fourth phase in this process. Now we start to realize we are gaining emotional relief from forgiving ourselves and choosing to forgive others. We may start to discern meaning from the experience we’ve gone through, a renewed sense of purpose and energy as we let go of our fear, anger, hatred, or recrimination. We may experience the paradox of forgiveness – that as we give to others the gifts of mercy, generosity, and love, we ourselves are healed.

As we move through September, fall is right around the corner and the end of the year is in sight. The days continue to shorten and a nip is in the air. This time of year often prompts us to times of reflection and introspection, a consideration of our lives, and some of the ways we might consider changing.

I ask you to give yourself permission to forgive something within yourself that you are now ready and willing to let go of. I ask you to consider offering forgiveness to someone in your life, to free you from your anger and make space in your life for more joy, more happiness, and more love.

I want to share with you this forgiveness prayer from the Buddhist tradition:

"If I have harmed anyone in any way either knowingly or unknowingly through my own confusions, I ask their 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 yet ready to forgive,
I forgive myself for that.

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

<http://coyoteprime-runningcauseicantfly.blogspot.com/2008/09/buddhist-prayer-of-forgiveness.html>

In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies. We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. [The one] who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love." May we continue to grow in our power to forgive and, by that, grow in our power to love one another, bringing out the best in each one of us.

Blessed be.

With thanks to Rev. John Millspaugh for inspiration on this sermon.