

HOW TO FORGIVE

Adapted from Desmond and Mpho Tutu's, The Book of Forgiving.

Are you hurt and suffering? Is the injury new, or is it an old unhealed wound? Know that what was done to you was wrong, unfair, and undeserved. You are right to be outraged. And it is perfectly normal to want to hurt back when you have been hurt. But hurting back rarely satisfies. We think it will, but it doesn't. If I slap you after you slap me, it does not lessen the sting I feel on my own face, nor does it diminish my sadness as to the fact you have struck me. Retaliation gives, at best, only momentary respite from our pain. The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of being at peace.

Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with

chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness; that person will be our jailer. When we forgive, we take back control of our own fate and our feelings. We become our own liberators. We don't forgive to help the other person. We don't forgive for others. We forgive for ourselves. Forgiveness, in other words, is the best form of self-interest. This is true both spiritually and scientifically.

— WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT —

FORGIVENESS IS NOT EASY

Often when we are suffering from loss or harm of some kind, forgiving can seem too overwhelming, too complicated, to even consider. How do we forgive if there has been no apology or explanation for why someone has hurt us so? How do we think of forgiving when we feel the person has not done anything to “deserve” our forgiveness? Where do we even start?

The work of forgiveness is not easy. Perhaps you have already tried to forgive someone and just couldn't do it. Perhaps you have forgiven and the person did not show remorse or change his or her behavior or own up to his or her offenses—and you find yourself unforgiving all over again.

Forgiveness is not an effortless act for any of us, and it does not serve anyone to minimize the complexity involved in the work of forgiving. It is best to break our forgiving down into bite-size pieces, and begin from wherever we are standing. Tell your story for as long as you need to. Name your hurts until they no longer pierce your heart. Grant forgiveness when you are ready to let go of a past that cannot be

changed. Reconcile or release the relationship as you choose.

Forgiving is not easy, but it is the path to healing. It was not easy for Nelson Mandela to spend twenty-seven years in prison, but it was not a waste. It took twenty-seven years for him to be transformed from an angry, unforgiving young radical into an icon of reconciliation, forgiveness, and honor who could go on to lead a country back from the brink of civil war and self-destruction.

FORGIVENESS IS NOT WEAKNESS

Forgiving does not mean being spineless, nor does it mean one doesn't get angry. It is a remarkable feat to be able to see past the inhumanity of the behavior and recognize the humanity of the person committing the atrocious acts. This is not weakness. This is heroic strength, the noblest strength of the human spirit.

— WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT —

FORGIVENESS IS NOT THE SUBVERSION OF JUSTICE

There are those who believe an injustice can be made right only when someone is made to pay for the harm they have caused. Forgiveness, they say, subverts the course of justice. The truth is that people will always live with the consequences of their actions. In some cases, the forgiveness offered by the injured party comes after the perpetrator has completed his or her penance.

Even the Christian God does not subvert temporal justice to open the door to eternal forgiveness and peace. The thief who hung on the cross next to Jesus was the only person to be promised paradise. He died on a cross for his crimes. He lives in eternity for his repentance.

Often, even after “justice” is served, so many people find that the story hasn’t ended, and no one has found a route to a new beginning. Forgiveness is the only way out of the trap that injury creates.

FORGIVENESS IS NOT FORGETTING

Some find forgiveness difficult because they believe forgiving means forgetting the pain they have suffered. I can say unequivocally that forgiving does not mean forgetting the harm. It does not mean denying the harm. It does not mean pretending the harm did not happen or the injury was not as bad as it really was. Quite the opposite is true. The cycle of forgiveness can be activated and completed only in absolute truth and honesty.

Forgiving requires giving voice to the violations and naming the pains we have suffered. Forgiving does not require that we carry our suffering in silence or be martyrs on a cross of lies. Forgiveness does not mean that we pretend things are anything other than they are. I am hurt, we say. I am betrayed, we announce. I am in pain and grief. I have been treated unfairly. I am feeling ashamed. I am angry this has been done to me. I am sad and I am lost. I may never forget what you have done to me, but I will forgive. I will do everything in my power not to let you harm me again. I will not retaliate against you or against myself.

If there is a pattern of hurt from

— WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT —

the perpetrator, then each instance of harm is not discrete. There is history, and we are not served by forgetting our history. There is always a risk when we forgive that everything will not turn out all right. Just as we take a leap of faith when we make a commitment to love someone and get married, we also take a leap of faith when we commit ourselves to a practice of forgiving. We do not forget or deny that we are always vulnerable to being hurt again, but we leap anyway.

· THE FOUR-FOLD PATH OF FORGIVENESS ·

TELL THE STORY

- Speak the truth.
- Start with the facts.
- Tell your story first to a friend, loved one, or trusted person.
- Consider telling the story to the person who harmed you, or writing a letter.
- Accept that whatever has happened cannot be changed or undone.

NAME THE HURT

- Identify the feelings within the facts.
- Remember, no feeling is wrong, bad, or invalid.
- Recognize the grief that comes from the pain that was inflicted on you.
- Find someone who will acknowledge you and listen to your feelings without trying to fix them.
- Accept your own vulnerability.
- Move forward when you are ready.

GRANT FORGIVENESS

- Forgiveness is a choice.
- We grow through forgiving.

- Forgiving is how we move from victim to hero in our story.
- We know we are healing when we are able to tell a new story.

RENEW OR RELEASE THE RELATIONSHIP

- The preference is always to renew unless there is a question of safety.
- Ask for what you need from the perpetrator in order to renew or release the relationship.
- You may need an apology, an explanation, a tangible object, or to never see that person again.
- Look at your part in any conflict.
- When you renew a relationship, it is stronger for what you have been through, but it is always different.
- By renewing or releasing a relationship you free yourself from victimhood and trauma.



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