

Forgiving Our Way to Freedom

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Negative feelings are like stray cats.

*The more you feed them,
the more they hang around.*

Ancient Witness: Matthew 18:21-22

Jack Kornfield is a Buddhist teacher and writer, and I found this refreshing account in his book, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*.

In the Babemba tribe of South Africa, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he is placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered. All work ceases, and every man, woman, and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual. Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, each recalling the good things the person in the center of the circle has done in his lifetime. Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy, is recounted. All his positive attributes, good deeds, strengths, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. This tribal ceremony often lasts for several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe.

This is a remarkable example of a community keeping its heart open and loving toward an offender. And in doing this, it colors what it sees in that person—all the good and positive things. The negative, bad actions are not ignored; they are obvious and apparent to all. Rather, they attempt to overcome the darkness not with more darkness, but with light.

Today I want to talk a bit about forgiveness. Most of the time in the Bible forgiveness is about God's limitless, unconditional and absolute forgiveness. But today, I want to talk about human forgiveness—how important it is in our own quest for happiness and peace.

God's peace, of course, is not something that we enter just at the end of our lives. It is something we can enter every day, every moment. May this be the kind of place where we acknowledge this endless internal work and encourage each other to do just that.

My central point is this: *We do not forgive others in order to be forgiven by God. We forgive others in order to forgive ourselves and to free ourselves.*

The problem is not whether God forgives. God is all-forgiving. God's heart is infinitely open and receptive. God recounts every positive attribute and moment in loving detail. God's forgiveness comes to all people without condition. The problem is whether we can forgive ourselves.

Not forgiving ourselves is a huge obstacle to experiencing peace and happiness. It prevents us from feeling that boundless grace and love of God. Not forgiving ourselves prevents the reality and the beauty of The Sacred from sinking in.

There's an old Hasidic story passed along by Parker Palmer that illustrates what I am trying to say:

The pupil comes to the rebbe and asks, "Why does the Torah tell us to 'place these words upon your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?" The rebbe answers, "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So, we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in."

When the heart breaks open, the words fall in. And this, my friends, is precisely what happens when we forgive others—our hearts break open. And when this happens, the reality of God's loving presence falls in, and we are blessed with peace, joy and freedom.

And it is absolutely impossible to truly forgive someone without breaking open your heart. If your heart has not broken open, then you have not really forgiven the other. All you have done is engaged in some kind of mental gymnastics.

Now if you are like me, you might respond to this by saying, "No problem. I have been there, done that. I've forgiven everyone I've needed to, and yet I still don't feel that great joy and peace."

Well, my friends, as they often say in the recovering community, "Denial is not just a river in Egypt!" When it comes to forgiveness, there is always unfinished business. It is never done.

His disciples said, "Jesus, how often do we have to keep forgiving this other person—seven times?" Jesus, my primary teacher, says to them, "Why don't you try 70 times seven!" "Look," he says, "it never ends."

And so here is another central point: *We each have someone(s) to forgive—right now. Always.* And if you think you have already forgiven that person, do it again. Humor me. After all, what is it going to hurt? In fact, go ahead and do it 70 times seven times. Because it's not something we do and then move on. It needs to be done over and over and over.

Someone once said, "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past." We say, "I wish that that never happened." Forgiveness means letting go of changing the past.

Often in our regret and resentment, we hold on to the past. And our hearts are not truly open to the present. Often, our hearts are hard and closed to protect ourselves from being hurt again. This is perfectly understandable. But the pain of the past controls us. It is like we close up the barn, but the horses, you see, have already left. And closing up the barn will not return those horses!

Now at this point I want to mention an important point that Kornfield makes:

Forgiveness does not mean that we have to continue to relate to those who have done us harm.

In some cases the best practice may be to end our connection, to never speak to or be with a harmful person again...

In the end, forgiveness simply means never putting another person out of our heart.

It is all about breaking open our hearts, again and again. Peace is not about being undisturbed and unfazed; it is about being vulnerable. Peace is not being indifferent; it is about living with an open heart. “Withdrawal is not true inner peace,” he writes.

Simple withdrawal and indifference is avoidance. And what is it that we are trying so hard to avoid? We have two basic problems: First, the world is unfair. Sometimes people mistreat us. Sometimes things happen that we cannot control. Second, we blame ourselves for this. Judging and withholding forgiveness of others is mostly a cover-up that we judge ourselves and curse ourselves under our breath.

You all know that observation that when you point your finger at someone, you have three other fingers secretly pointing at yourself. I say that we usually start out with those fingers pointing at ourselves, and we turn one of them on others to distract ourselves from this. But that is all it is—a distraction.

This kind sheds new light on Jesus’ plea, “Do not judge, so that *you* may not be judged.” If I judge others, I cannot deal with my own self-judgment. I am distracted. If I cannot forgive others, how can I expect to forgive myself?

But when I forgive someone, my heart breaks open. I then see the world differently—others and then myself. Jack Kornfield relates the following insight by Alan Wallace:

Imagine walking along a sidewalk with your arms full of groceries, and someone roughly bumps into you so that you fall and your groceries are strewn over the ground. As you rise up for the puddle of broken eggs and tomato juice, you are ready to shout out, “You idiot! What’s wrong with you? Are you blind?” But just before you can catch your breath to speak, you see that the person who bumped into you actually is blind. He, too, is sprawled in the spilled groceries, and your anger vanishes in an instant, to be replaced by sympathetic concern: “Are you hurt? Can I help you up?”

When we forgive someone, our heart breaks open, and God’s words fall in. Compassion and love enter us, and we see the other one differently. We see ourselves differently. We see that it is only our own blindness that causes us to bump into and hurt each other. We see that often “we know not what we do.” We let go of our anger and regret. We are released from our failures.

A few years ago on NPR I heard a remarkable story about healing and forgiveness. In 1984, Jennifer Thompson-Canino was 22 years old and was raped in her college apartment. She later testified that she studied the man’s face and features during that horrible ordeal and that she was positive that the man who did it was Ronald Cotton. Mr. Cotton was then convicted and sent to prison for the crime.

However, advances in DNA testing later proved that Mr. Cotton did not commit the crime, but it was another man who looked like him. And so 11 years later, Ronald Cotton was released from prison. For 11 years he served a sentence for a crime that he did not commit.

Thompson-Cannino and Cotton talked about their experience in an amazing interview:

Jennifer: I picked Ronald out as the man who had raped me, only to learn 11 years later that I had made a mistake. That was unbearable. In my mind Ronald had been a monster. For 365 days for 11 years, I prayed for him to die. Discovering the truth filled me with

overwhelming guilt and shame for mistakenly putting an innocent man in prison. Meanwhile, the guilty person was left to commit further crimes on women. I found it almost impossible to forgive myself.

Ronald: Forgiving Jennifer for picking me out of that lineup as her rapist took less time than people think. I knew she was a victim and was hurting real bad. But I was hurting, too. I missed my family, my girlfriend and my freedom. But I knew who I was, and I was not that monster. I knew who did this to Jennifer, and he would have gone to his grave leaving me to rot in prison without confessing to what he had done. Letting go of my anger toward him was hard, but staying free I my heart was a choice only I could make.

Jennifer: I asked Ron if he could ever forgive me. And with all the mercy in the world he took my hand and with tears in his eyes, he told me he had forgiven me a long time ago. At that moment I began to heal. Ronald taught me how to let go of all that pain; his forgiveness set me free that night. Without Ronald, I would still be shackled to that moment in time, and it would own me forever. I discovered that I could even forgive the man who had raped me—not because he asked me to, nor because he deserved it—but because I did not want to be a prisoner of my own hatred.

Jennifer and Ronald discovered the healing power of forgiveness, not just for the one who is forgiven, but—and this is important—for *the one who does the forgiving*. As Jennifer put it:

I believe in forgiveness—the kind that has the power to release a person from a place of anger and hate, to a place of peace.

And now, remarkably, Ronald and Jennifer have written a book together titled, *Picking Cotton*, and they are friends, frequently speaking together on judicial reform.

And so, friends, do you want peace?
Do you want freedom?
Do you want deep happiness?

Forgive. Be filled with forgiveness.
Forgive them all.
Forgive, finally your life for being what it is, for not being what you want it to be.
Forgive your life for its pain, unfairness and disappointments.
Forgive even God, for not being what you want God to be.
Forgive.

Let your heart be broken open, and then, let go.
Let go of your hope for a better past.
Let go of anger, resentment and regret,

That we may fully and completely love and embrace:
Others, as they are;
Ourselves, as we are; and
Life, as it is. Not as we want it to be.

And with this embrace, we are freed.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online and on CD at the church, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to Commitment: (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.