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Forgiveness: Healing Old Wounds

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Abstract

Because life in community will sometimes involve harmful words and actions, forgiveness may be one of the most important processes to heal and restore relationships. The ability to forgive involves healing in some combination of mind, heart and spirit and each of the dimensions may affect the others. This article explores the behaviors that must be present for genuine forgiveness to occur including the role of apology, and how these behaviors contribute to transforming broken spirits and restoring relationships.

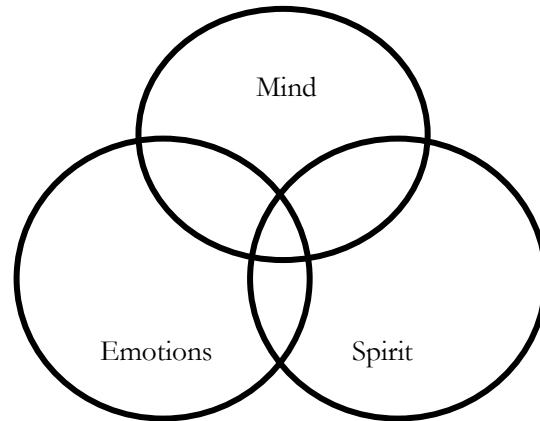
John, who describes himself as highly principled, tells us that he quit speaking to his brother 50 years ago because the brother took John's girlfriend to the prom. A staunch thinking German farmer tells us about how he quit speaking to his brother 25 years ago because of disparaging remarks the brother made about one of the farmer's children. In another situation, Kevin borrowed a lawnmower from Tom, his friend, who lived next door. During the time Kevin had the mower, the blade broke. He gave the mower back, saying "it was defective when I received it." Tom didn't think so and said that Kevin should fix it. Kevin became defensive and repeated his statement that the mower was defective. They haven't spoken to each other since that day.

When people believe they have been wronged by another, forgiveness is often not a natural response. Forgiveness may not be built into the human psyche like empathy or compassion. Often,¹ for the good of a relationship or well-being of a community, someone will say, "That's okay, no harm," or "I won't hold it against you." But saying "I forgive" may not necessarily mean that forgiveness has occurred. Genuine forgiveness requires a transformation within

people that goes beyond saying the words, "I forgive you." Forgiveness involves overcoming a host of collateral feelings, such as resentment, anger, bitterness, distrust, or revenge, all emotions that reflect emotional wounds. The inability to forgive reflects emotional wounds created by disappointment, broken relationships, and acts of injustice.

We receive many cultural admonitions to forgive. For example, many of us grow up with the axiom "To error is human, to forgive is divine." Bishop Desmond Tutu focused on breaking the cycle of harm by defining forgiveness as waiving one's right to revenge.¹ After 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela was able to say, "Courageous people do not fear forgiving, for the sake of peace."² Jesus admonishes his followers not to forgive seven times, but seven times seventy (Mt 18:23). Inspiring as these words are, we've all observed long-held grudges and resentment in people who might prefer to get over the harm done, but find it difficult to let go. They experience greater need to hold on to toxic feelings than to get over them.

We argue that forgiveness is not a natural process for the human spirit and that healing involves changes to mind, emotions, and spirit.



In this discussion of healing promoted by forgiveness, we will begin with definitions of forgiveness and explore the barriers that prevent forgiveness. Finally, we will provide some thinking about the role of apology and reconciliation that may help heal old wounds in relationships and community.

Forgiveness is...

To anyone who has been wronged, there is certainly an element of psychological repair. When you speak with people who believe that they've been wronged, you hear words such as betrayed, abandoned, rejected, taken advantage of, abused, and disappointed. Psychological perspectives emphasize changes that occur within the individual, which may also benefit the relationship. For example, psychologists Simon and Simon describe forgiveness as an internal healing process in which parties let go of incidents from the past and recognize that grudges and punishing actions will not provide healing.³ From this perspective, forgiveness involves making peace with one's past in order to live more comfortably in the present. Stanford psychologist Fred Luskin argues that being able to forgive enables us to take both past offenses and ourselves less seriously so that we can focus more energy on the present.⁴ Psychologist Robert Karen adds that forgiveness serves as "a bridge back from alienation and a liberation from guilt, shame and victimhood."⁵

Philosophy provides a second language about forgiveness. Beginning with Aristotle,

forgiveness is grounded in the expression and development of character in community. Kant argues that goodwill to others provides the foundation for a society of moral beings.⁶ You become what you practice and the practice of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness supports the development of character. Beyond improving our life with others, we contribute to a culture of apology and forgiveness.⁷

Philosophy professor Jeffrie Murphy describes forgiveness as a healing virtue, freeing us from unhealthy anger, which opens the door to restoring repairable relationships.⁸ Boston University philosophy professor Charles Griswold contends that the goal of forgiveness is more than helping someone feel better.⁹ Assuming that an offense is forgivable and that the offender expresses regret, forgiveness demonstrates mercy and compassion. Forgiveness is the right thing to do for the right reasons.

The philosophical perspective contends that forgiveness serves as a virtuous act to reconcile relationships, support friendship, and function effectively in community. This is a point shared by both philosophy and psychology. Diemer and Seligman find that positive relationships are linked to perceptions of quality of life. Forgiveness serves the greater good for self, other, and community.¹⁰

A spiritual perspective provides a third view of understanding forgiveness. Columbia Theological Seminary professor John Patton explains that forgiveness is "not doing something but discovering something – that I

am more like those who have hurt us than different from them.”¹¹ It is with this theme in mind that Jesus asks accusers of a woman caught in adultery to give up their vengeance and have mercy on the woman (John 8). Appealing to the spirit, we hear axioms such as: love is more powerful than hate; forgiveness is an expression of grace, or we forgive because we have first been forgiven.

Thomas Aquinas distinguishes two types of forgiveness: forgiving others because they ask us to forgive and forgiving others because it is for their own good.¹² In this sense, forgiveness serves a redemptive purpose, redeeming both the offended from bitter feelings and the offender who committed the injustice. Cantens adds that forgiveness “is a moral duty. Christians are obliged to forgive those who have seriously injured them, regardless of whether the act produces any psychological benefits for them.”¹³ Healing of relationships between individuals, in communities, and with God are central tenets of the spiritual perspective. This suggests mercy is connected to a religious “duty,” a principle difficult for Humanists to embrace.

A significant part of healing the spirit involves the role of self-forgiveness and how it relates to forgiving others. In this sense, Fincham et al. describe forgiveness as much a process of self-repair as a process to repair relationships.¹⁴ For example, a woman who is a victim of a harmful action, may be upset with herself because she was not stronger in a situation. She may be uncomfortable with her vulnerability. To work through her self-forgiveness, she will need to accept herself with limitations, with new awareness about what she can and cannot do, or patience with her personal failure. A painful memory will not go away, but she limits its impact through grace for herself. As she becomes more accepting of herself, she will have greater energy to devote to evaluating or restoring relationship.

It could be said to achieve forgiveness is similar to working through the stages of grief. It is a journey. Overcoming grief can take months and sometimes years. It ebbs and

flows in intensity, and as time passes, we learn we can survive grief, so too forgiveness. The intensity of a harm caused by disappointment diminishes over time. It runs its natural course. However, the difference between healing grief and healing emotional wounds is that we can confront the harm done, the unfairness, or the injustice through actions of apology and forgiveness.

For example, Dave and Marsha began a journey that they did not expect when their 5 year old daughter was diagnosed with cancer. Over a year, they tried many forms of treatment but eventually the doctor gave them the bad news that the child would die. Both parents grieved, blamed God for not healing their child, blamed each other for decisions, and blamed themselves for letting this tragedy happen. Many times, each said “I’m sorry” for not being a better parent to the child or for not being there for each other, but all the apologies could not close the gap created by grief. Each of the parents needed healing from their grief, beginning with forgiveness of themselves, between each other, and with God.

Forgiveness is not...

While it’s important to describe what forgiveness is, it is also important to describe what it is not. For example, it is not absolving another of responsibility for behaviors that have been committed. It is not overlooking the wrong just to promote harmony or offering clemency. The offended does not give up the right to believe that the offense was unfair or unjustified. It is not forgetting or excusing past behavior. Additionally, though forgiveness may occur and a relationship may be repaired, memory of a harmful event may not go away. It may last for decades or, in some cases, the life of a relationship.

Emotional change for the offended may or may not accompany words of forgiveness. However, words may be a good start. Rebuilding trust involves creating assurance of safety. Healing involves repairing confidence in relationship. The passage of time can

relieve the emotional wound, but it may also make it harder to speak words of apology or forgiveness. Sometimes, it's difficult to revisit old memories, even though it may be the most direct path to healing.

Barriers to forgiveness

If forgiveness was natural to the human condition, it would be much easier to achieve. There might be fewer broken relationships, fewer wars, and fewer visits to counselors. Our resistance to forgiveness comes as a defense mechanism, and is thus difficult to overcome. There are many factors that inhibit the ability to forgive. For example:

- Fear of appearing weak or giving in or being taken advantage of a second time
- Holding onto to what is perceived as righteous anger and unwilling to give it up
- Unwillingness to forgive until the other person demonstrates sufficient suffering
- Resistance to forgive until the other person compensates for what has been done
- Unwillingness to give up the role of victim
- Family history that lacks modeling of forgiveness as an option
- Denial that the offender's action had a lasting effect, though the relationship demonstrates brokenness
- An inability to allow for weakness and failure in others

In a two year study involving more than 200 survey participants, ranging from ages 20-80, Isenhardt and Spangle found that emotional harm and violation of trust were the two most important factors that made forgiveness difficult.¹⁵ In terms of "what is unforgivable?" these same two factors are common to the events cited: adultery, sexual abuse, domestic violence, abandonment, and emotional abuse. Adding to the personal relevance of the offenses, 52% occurred with family members.

One of the psychological barriers to forgiveness as an option is a perception that forgiveness opposes justice. It is difficult to offer mercy, compassion, or forgiveness to someone who has committed a heinous crime.

For example, with anger in her voice, a colleague of ours recently said, "How can I forgive the pastor who sexually molested my niece?" For her, forgiveness is closely linked to justice. However, legal justice does not occur in many of life's situations. It will be difficult for victims to achieve freedom from toxic emotions if, on a personal level, justice and mercy cannot be separated.

The role of apology

Though forgiveness often occurs without an apology, the apology, if perceived as sincere, can transform harms that have been inflicted. For most situations, "I'm sorry," by itself, may create a temporary truce, but is inadequate for long-term repair of a relationship. There must be more.

Psychiatrist Aaron Lazare argues that for apologies to be effective, they require that the offender acknowledge the offense, admit responsibility for the offense, and provide assurance that the offense will not be repeated.¹⁶ The second step might include explanation about what motivated the offense. This step might also be enhanced with remorse. A third requirement might be what the offender will do to guarantee that the offense will not occur again. A fourth requirement we would add is a demonstration of repentance, a change of behavior. This requirement is difficult to measure, as individuals we express remorse in a variety of ways, none of which are usually sufficient or timely enough for the victim.

In many situations, such as work settings, direct apologies as described above may be less common. In these situations, indirect apologies, which involve words of contrition or changes of behavior substitute for the more direct appeal. Unfortunately, apologies, direct or indirect, do not guarantee a change of heart. Younger et al. points out from their study that 47% of people they surveyed admitted holding grudges even after an apology.¹⁷

For example, a father is angry with his adult son. The son continues to disappoint him,

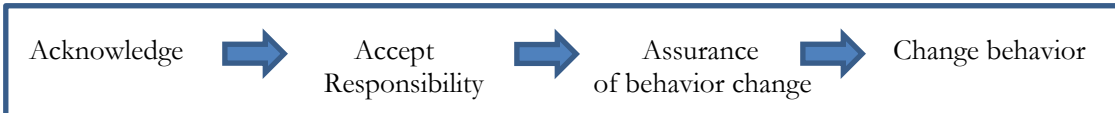
beginning with two failed marriages, trouble with the law, and recently a problem with alcohol. The father finally announces “That’s enough” to the son, vowing that he will no longer help the son financially or emotionally. The relationship between the two ended. Contact between the two was minimal for several years. The father expected an apology with behavioral changes. The son expected both acceptance and forgiveness. For both, repair to the relationship may depend on how important the relationship is to them. Disappointment and loss may heal over time, but without investment the relationship may have ended.

Lazare identifies how apologies promote healing in broken relationships:

- Restores self-respect and dignity of the victim
- Provides assurance of shared values
- Assures the victim that the offense was not their fault

- Assures the victim of safety in the relationship
- Allows the victim to see the offender suffer a little
- Reparations satisfies the victim’s need for justice
- Provides an opportunity for meaningful dialogue¹⁸

Apologies may be ineffective if they offer vague descriptions about the offense, include conditional acknowledgements or minimize the offense. Lazare describes statements of this kind as botched apologies. For example, responding to allegations that he had harassed a dozen women, former Senator Robert Packwood offered the following botched apology, “I’m apologizing for the conduct that it was alleged that I did.” The apology fails the tests of clear acknowledgement of the offense, admitting responsibility, and commitment to a change of behavior.



Reconciliation

Apology and forgiveness are not necessary for reconciliation, but without them relationships remain fragile. A single word at the wrong time can resurrect old emotions. An action misinterpreted can reintroduce fear and doubt. Reinforced with contrition and new assurances, forgiveness restores a moral balance grounded in norms for right behavior.

The parable of the Prodigal Son an interesting example of what reconciliation can look like. The son who has wasted a great deal of his life humbles himself by returning home. There are no words of contrition, but his actions announce it just the same. Just as the son humbles himself by returning home, so does the father by running to his son to welcome him home. If there was resentment, the father doesn’t show it. The father welcomes his son back into his home, joyfully,

with no intent of making him suffer further. This is certainly a parable displaying the nature of God’s forgiveness, but it can also serve as a metaphor for the power of forgiveness to heal broken relationships. Both parties with humility can promote healing in the other, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Healing primarily focuses on transformation of individuals and reconciliation focuses on relationships. Each of the processes may occur without the other. For example, a victim may forgive an offender, but the emotional wound may be serious enough that the offended no longer wants the relationship. At other times, reconciliation can occur without forgiveness, a process familiar to neighbors who choose to relate for the good of the community, political candidates who choose to relate when the nation faces a national threat, or corporate leaders who

choose to work together for the good of the business. Reconciliation without credible remorse, repentance and forgiveness is fragile and might be best expressed as peaceful co-existence.

Govier explains that in the aftermath of conflict or harmful actions, “for reconciliation to be lasting, some kind of trust must be built, and for that to happen, attitudes must change – hence the relevance of forgiveness.”¹⁹

Rebuilding trust requires words of acknowledgement that harm has been committed, credible remorse, and commitment to healing actions. There must be compassion and understanding for the offender. This is difficult, but necessary for true forgiveness to occur. At times, this re-bridging of relationship may also involve concessionary words of the offended about his/her contributions to the offense committed. For example, “I wasn’t there for you,” “I didn’t listen,” or “I didn’t know how to say no.”

When both offended and offender are able to share words that need to be spoken, the next phase may be to make some conscious decisions about what to do with harmful events of the past. It is here that the offended will have to evaluate the potential for reoccurrence of unwelcome actions, the severity of the issue, and the value of the relationship. The offended must take a good hard look at the situation to decide if he/she can honestly and completely forgive. For it to be effective, forgiveness must be unconditional. The choices of actions include:


- Forget or ignore the issue
- Choose to not hold the harmful action against the offender
- Agree on reparations commensurate with justice
- Create trust-building measures that demonstrate commitment to the relationship
- Create conditions that prevent the harm from reoccurring

Reconciliation of a broken relationship involves creating a new story for the relationship. The story accepts the possibility

of failure but also of rebirth based on new learning about the kinds of actions that harm. Spiritual concepts of grace and forgiveness are woven into agreements about how to live safely in relationship. Healing begins when the victim lets go of thinking about the pain of the past, the offender lets go of any more thinking about harm, and both think about repair. Each of the parties demonstrates concern for the welfare of the other.

Our ability or inability to overcome conflict with others has a direct correlation to our spiritual, psychological and mental health. There has to be a motivational readiness and thought process associated with forgiveness. To do this one has to revisit the wounds and the emotions associated with it. Healing begins when we let go of having to fix the past, allowing others to begin again equipped with new learning, and each party takes the risk to reestablish relationship. It is with this expectation that most people turn to God; they expect to begin again, in spite of past failures. It is this same reconciliation that we can expect of ourselves and the relationships that are important to us.

Conclusion

Pulling together threads from the three different perspectives, we propose a framework for understanding forgiveness. Forgiveness may be perceived as a virtue of good character, a bridge to heal alienation in relationships, a process to calm negative emotions within us, or a gift of grace that overcomes injustice. The healing process accomplished through apology and forgiveness transforms both offenders and offended as it restores a natural balance in relationship. Because the human condition is fraught with failures, without forgiveness, it is difficult to sustain both lasting relationships and lasting communities. Though apology and forgiveness follow events of emotional harm, they provide important opportunities to make things new and transform us into something more than we were. 

Notes

- ¹ Desmond Tutu, PBS interview with Bill Moyer, April 27, 1999.
- ² Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 523.
- ³ Sidney Simon and Suzanne Simon, *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace with Your Past and Get on with Your Life* (New York: Grand Central, 1990).
- ⁴ Fred Luskin, *Forgive for Good* (San Francisco: Harper, 2002).
- ⁵ Robert Karen, *The Forgiving Self: The Road from Resentment to Connection* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 5.
- ⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, eds. Jerome Schneewind and Peter Heath (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- ⁷ Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007).
- ⁸ Jeffrie Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*. (New York: Oxford, 2003).
- ⁹ Griswold, *Forgiveness*.
- ¹⁰ Ed Diemer and Martin Seligman, "Very Happy People," *Psychological Science*, 13 (2002): 81-84.
- ¹¹ John Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 16.
- ¹² Thomas Aquinas, *The Three Greatest Prayers* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1956).
- ¹³ Bernardo Cantens, Why Forgive? A Christian response," *American Catholic Philosophical Association: Proceedings of the ACPA* 82 (2009), 217.
- ¹⁴ Frank Fincham, Scott Stanley, and Steven Beach, "Transformational Process in Marriage: An Analysis of Emerging Trends," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69 (2007), 275-292.
- ¹⁵ Myra Isenhardt and Michael Spangle, "Facilitating Forgiveness: Implications for Practitioners." Workshop presented at the 2013 Annual Conference of the Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution, Baltimore, Maryland, June 13-14, 2013.
- ¹⁶ Aaron Lazare, *On Apology* (New York: Oxford, 2004).
- ¹⁷ Jerred Younger, Rachel Piferi, Rebecca Jobe, and Kathelen Lawler, "Dimensions of Forgiveness: The Views of Laypersons," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 21 (2004): 837-855.
- ¹⁸ Lazare, *On Apology*.

- ¹⁹ Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge* (NY: Routledge, 2002): 144.

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