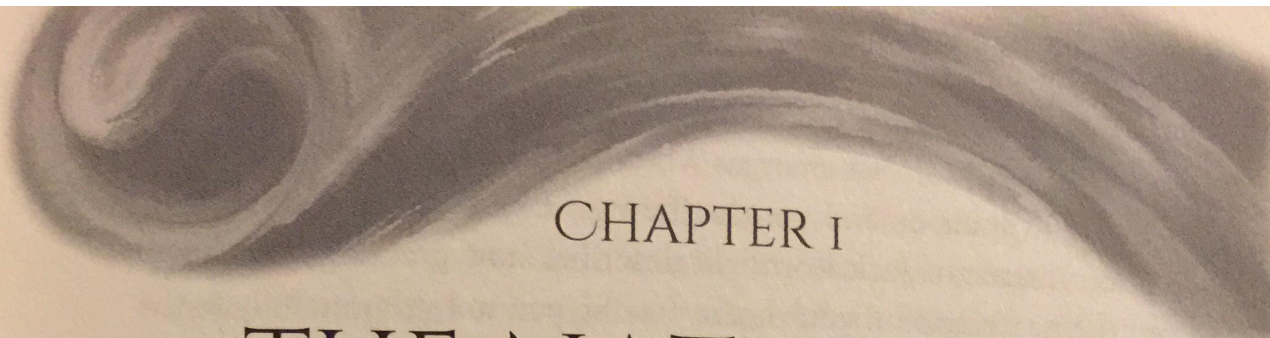




CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF FORGIVENESS

BEGIN WITH A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING

Our task is not to fix the blame for the past,
but to fix the course for the future.

—John F. Kennedy

Forgiveness is fundamental to our emotional health and our ability to create healthy relationships. When you make mistakes and say things you regret, forgiveness can repair what is broken, sometimes within you and at other times between you and others. Unfortunately, most people harbor misconceptions about forgiveness. For example, forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation with someone who has done you harm. It does not mean that there is no longer a need for an apology or assurances that the harm will not occur again. And while you may be willing to forgive others, self-forgiveness may be the hardest task of all.

In this chapter, we explore what forgiveness is and what it is not. We clarify what we mean when we say *forgiveness*, as well as exploring the many perspectives on this complex emotional response.

The Meaning of Forgiveness

Granting true forgiveness involves giving up anger, bitterness, or resentment toward an offender and releasing pent-up negative energy. For some people, this means suspending a long-standing grudge or giving up thoughts of revenge. When the offender is a friend or family member, forgiveness may require letting go of negative feelings that have festered for years.

Stanford psychologist Fred Luskin characterizes granting forgiveness as the feeling of peace that emerges when you take a hurt less personally and choose to limit or end your suffering.¹ Expressing a similar view, meditation instructor Jack Kornfield describes how granting forgiveness releases the past's grip on your heart, freeing you to live more fully in the present.²

In the case of minor offenses, such as when a spouse forgets an anniversary or a friend fails to follow through on a commitment, forgiveness may come quickly and easily. A conscious decision to pardon the offender may be all that is required in these situations. But for more serious offenses, such as infidelity or betrayal, the path to forgiveness may take many years. Psychologist Everett Worthington posits that granting forgiveness takes a change of heart in which sympathy or compassion replaces anger, bitterness, or feelings of revenge.³ Sometimes forgiveness involves changing how you think about another person.

You can also view forgiveness from the perspective of healing. For example, when you have been harmed by someone, you might experience a loss of innocence, self-confidence, your perception of safety,

Forgiveness is the fragrance
the violet sheds on the heel
that has crushed it.

—MARK TWAIN

a spiritual point of view, forgiveness enables you to allow God to heal your emotional wounds.

Many people have trouble with the word *forgiveness*, sometimes so much that it blocks their ability to move past the harm done to them. For these people, it might work better to describe forgiveness as the process of *letting go*. This phrase allows a person to achieve the same outcome without stumbling over the word *forgive*. Letting go releases negative emotions and the power of the past over the present.

Carl grew up in a small town in the Midwest. To the outside world, everything about his home life appeared normal—he had a steady job, a loving wife, and a welcoming home. But for most of his growing-up years, Carl was bullied and abused by his father, and this pain left Carl with festering

your value to others, or love. Emotionally, forgiveness enables you to push the RESET button and reduce the power of the negative emotions affecting your life. Psychologically, forgiveness can free you from negative thinking that preoccupies your mind. From

emotional wounds. Over and over in his mind, he heard his father's brutal words, "You are my bastard child. You were conceived before I married your mother. So in the eyes of God, you are worth nothing."

As the years went by, Carl's relationship with his father became more volatile. During high school, Carl endured both physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his father. The day after he graduated from high school, he left home and moved to another state.

Every few years, Carl returned home to visit his brothers, to whom Carl's father showed more grace and kindness, but Carl rarely spoke to his father. He showed his disdain by sleeping in a camper, rather than in his father's home. In return, his father refused to place Carl's wedding photo on the wall with the other family pictures. The absence of Carl's picture in the family photo gallery served as a constant reminder that he was not loved or valued by his father.

But when Carl reached his sixties, he made a decision. He said, "That's enough. I'm going to let go of the past and I'm going to forgive my father." Although his father was now elderly and in failing health, Carl started making overtures to renew the relationship he had lost.

On one of his trips, he brought his wife, Ann, who was also trying to heal the relationship. During this visit, Ann worked hard at being kind to her father-in-law. When he complained about his aching feet, Ann knelt on the floor in front of him and massaged them. Suddenly, Carl's father looked up at her and said, "There's something missing. We need to have your wedding photo on the wall with my other sons." Within minutes, someone brought out one of Carl's wedding pictures and hung it in the family gallery with the other photos. As the picture went up, Carl hugged his father. In that moment, the display of that single photo symbolized acceptance by Carl's father and Carl was able to forgive him.

What Forgiveness Is Not

Most pastors and psychologists agree that genuine forgiveness goes beyond simply "forgiving and forgetting." You don't need to repress or condone painful experiences to move toward forgiveness. In fact, the old adage "forgive and forget" may do more harm than good. Recent neuroscience research conducted by University of St. Andrews researchers suggests that forgetting rarely promotes forgiveness. However, in many cases,

forgiveness may promote forgetting.⁴ In other words, if you want to get over something, forgiveness is a good start.

Forgiveness does not mean condoning harmful actions, forgetting painful experiences, or justifying bad behavior. But, in some cases, reflecting on harmful experiences can offer insights into people and situations. For example, recalling details of a harmful experience may show you how to avoid being victimized again. Or perhaps steering clear of people who make you feel vulnerable can prevent you from falling into harmful patterns. This was true for John, who had a rocky relationship with his mother.

Every time I went home, I came back with severe anxiety, created by my mother's criticism. She didn't like my job, the person I married, or the other life choices I'd made. When I chose to forgive her for her behavior, I began to reflect on how disappointed she was with her own choices in life and how she was taking it out on me. Once I got that, I changed my thinking about her and about her critical comments. Our relationship improved and so did my anxiety level when I went to visit her.

Of course, true forgiveness does not mean excusing bad behavior. No one has a right to harm you. When you choose to forgive, you do not give up the right to feel that an offense was unfair. At the same time, you are

As long as you don't forgive, who and whatever it is will occupy a rent-free space in your mind.

—ISABELLE HOLLAND

not required to give the offender a get-out-of-jail-free card for actions that have harmed you. Pope Benedict XVI maintained that forgiveness does not replace a need for justice.⁵ There is a clear distinction between forgiveness and amnesty, which grants a general pardon without requiring offenders to repent, apologize, or compensate for wrongs committed. Even though you may choose to forgive someone, you can still require her to face the consequences of harming you. These consequences might include something as drastic as a prison term, financial restitution, or even accepting the end of a personal or professional relationship.

Embracing forgiveness does not mean allowing yourself to be hurt without reaction. The Jesuit writers Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn make

the point in *Don't Forgive Too Soon* that "turning the other cheek" does not mean acceding to poor treatment by others.⁶ The authors give many examples of how this may be done. Our favorite involves the rabbi who discovered that his synagogue had been defaced by graffiti, including swastikas. The police identified a group of male college students who admitted responsibility. Before the judge could sentence them, the rabbi intervened to ask that they be released to study Judaism with him. In this way, the young men were spared a police record and developed an appreciation for the Jewish faith. We see this as a creative solution that both rejects the harm and rehabilitates those who committed it.

In addition, repetitive harm does not call for repetitive forgiveness. When a friend, colleague, or loved one continues to harm you, despite understanding your feelings, forgiveness may not be what the situation requires. Instead, you may need to negotiate an agreement about boundaries in the relationship and be willing to enforce whatever consequences are associated with crossing those boundaries. If this does not work, you may have to decide whether to leave the relationship or to stay because of the relationship's value to you. For example, a woman who is physically or emotionally abused by her husband may forgive him, but she might also choose to leave the marriage if he does not agree to stop the abusive behavior. A woman may feel verbally demeaned each time she visits her parents' home. She can explain that if they continue this behavior, she may still love them and even forgive them, but to protect herself she will limit her interaction with them to occasional phone calls.

When you grant forgiveness, that does not give people permission to continually invade your emotional boundaries. Rather, forgiveness frees you from the power someone might appear to have over you. You can say two things simultaneously: "I forgive you, because it is good for me, but, at the same time, I will not allow you to harm me again."

Mary's father repeatedly criticized her approach to raising her children. Her children's problem behavior was particularly likely to occur at holiday gatherings in front of extended family and guests. For example, when Mary's youngest child refused to eat any vegetables, it confirmed her father's belief that her parenting style was entirely too permissive.

Forgiveness is like faith.
You have to keep reviving it.

—MASON COOLEY

This situation is not about forgiveness as much as redefining relationship issues. Assuming she has previously raised this issue with her father, Mary has several options. She can leave the table when he criticizes her. She might agree to come to holiday dinners only if he stops being so critical. Or she may even decide that the family relationships are too valuable to make a fuss and choose to ignore him. This last approach is not forgiveness; it is simply choosing to "live with it."

Who are we to judge?

—POPE FRANCIS

In our experience, authentic forgiveness cannot be required, meaning one person cannot demand it from another. For example, as children, many of us were told by adults, "Say you're sorry." This can lead to a superficial apology, in which we say, "I'm sorry" because it is expected, not because it is true. While that parental practice may be justified in the name of instilling good habits, it does not necessarily lead to an authentic process of forgiveness.

When you've endured serious harm, you need to consider the level of pain caused by the offense, the value of the relationship, and whether the act was intentional or not. You may struggle with these issues for days, months, even years before you are ready to move toward forgiveness. You cannot will yourself to "just do it" and expect to wake up the next morning relieved of your anger or resentment. Forgiveness requires patience as well as time for healing.

Questions

1. Based on your experiences, how would you define *forgiveness*?
2. Describe times when you have had difficulty letting go of negative feelings associated with particular experiences. What made letting go difficult?
3. If someone has wronged you, what do you require of the wrongdoer in order for you to release bad feelings you may harbor?

