



EXPLORATION

Forgiveness

Readings

Forgiveness says
you are given
another chance
to make
a new beginning.
Desmond Tutu



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1. *Forgiveness & Building Beloved Community*

Beloved Community cannot exist without forgiveness. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber is credited with stating that humans are the “promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing” creatures. Forgiveness lies in the chasm between promise breaking and promise renewing. Without forgiveness, we can never come back into right relationship with a person who we have harmed by breaking a promise. Beloved Community begins with the promise of creating it and then working to make a reality. Since there is no easy roadmap to the destination, the path forward will be blocked with broken promises. These can only be removed through forgiveness. Otherwise we will never reach the promised land.

Source: Touchstones

2. *Anger and Forgiveness*

In her book, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (2016), classical philosopher Martha Nussbaum takes a close look at anger and forgiveness. One reviewer writes, “Anger is not just ubiquitous, it is also popular. Many people think it is impossible to care sufficiently for justice without anger at injustice. Many believe that it is impossible for individuals to vindicate their own self-respect or to move beyond an injury without anger. To not feel anger in those cases would be considered suspect. Is this how we should think about

anger, or is anger above all a disease, deforming both the personal and the political?”

While “transformative anger” is rooted in a theory of public good and social welfare, Nussbaum concludes that such anger played a very limited role in the revolutionary movements led by Gandhi, King, and Mandela as they pursued social goods. Dennis Dalton writes that Nussbaum “reveals how these leaders of mass movements diagnosed the roots of anger and violence in fear and then actualized prescriptions of forgiveness.” Albie Sachs, notes that in South Africa, payback was not productive. Instead, the sword of apartheid was converted into the ploughshare of constitutional democracy through a lengthy, formal process of truth and reconciliation that pursued restorative justice in a way that allowed the country to move forward rather than being stuck in the past.

Nussbaum argues that anger is often conceptually confused, normatively pernicious, infantile, and harmful. Well-grounded anger puts itself out of business in its healthier form, becoming “compassionate hope.” For Nussbaum, this is the “Transition” that moves beyond payback to pursue justice.

Is forgiveness the best way of transcending anger? It depends on what kind of forgiveness is being considered. Another reviewer adds, “Nussbaum examines different conceptions of the much-sentimentalized notion [of forgiveness], both in the Jewish and Christian traditions and in secular morality. Some forms of forgiveness are ethically promising, ...but others are subtle allies of retribution: those that exact a performance of contrition and abasement as a condition of waiving angry feelings. In general, she argues, a spirit of generosity ...is the best way to respond to injury.”

Nussbaum examines transactional forgiveness in personal, social, and polit-

ical realms and concludes that the transactional path is not the one that leads in the end toward generosity, justice, and truth. For her, forgiveness must move from being transactional to being unconditional. This can only happen when forgiveness is grounded in generosity and unconditional love.

Source: Touchstones

3. *Revenge and Forgiveness*

by Michael McCullough

...One of the things that got me writing *Beyond Revenge* ...was the dissatisfaction with the kind of boxes that we all tend to put ...revenge and forgiveness in as human dispositions. ...It seems to me revenge is ...deeply etched into the human mind....

...We’re left thinking about revenge and forgiveness as — in the case of revenge, something gone wrong in humanity and forgiveness being the thing we have to learn to do because we don’t know how to do it naturally.

...[Revenge] is literally a craving. What you see is high activation in the brain’s reward system. So, the desire for revenge does not come from some sick, dark part of how our minds operate. It is a craving to solve a problem and accomplish a goal.

...[And] in daily life, forgiveness is more often like a Band-Aid on a scrape and at first glance perhaps only slightly more interesting. But, of course, uninteresting doesn’t mean unimportant.

...Human beings are naturally prone to forgive individuals that they feel safe around. So, if we have an offender that is apologizing in a way that seems heart-



Photo by Aaron Blanco Tejedor on Unsplash



public enemy, Mark Littleman, November 19, 2016, (CC BY 2.0)
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/marklittleman/30303004834>

felt and convincing and has really convinced us that they can't and won't harm us in the same way again, OK, that's a point on the forgiveness side. The human mind evolved for forgiveness to be something worth its while....

...[The conclusion] I've come to is ...if you want forgiveness, if you want to forgive or if you want to be forgiven, you need to go out there and get it for yourself. And the way you go out and get it for yourself is by trying to have the kind of conversation with the person you hurt that you want to have.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/programs/michael-mccullough-getting-revenge-and-forgiveness/>

4. *Be Cool to the Pizza Dude*

by Sarah Adams

If I have one operating philosophy about life it is this: "Be cool to the pizza delivery dude; it's good luck." Four principles guide the pizza dude philosophy.

Principle 1: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in humility and forgiveness. I let him cut me off in traffic.... After all, the dude is delivering pizza to young and old, families and singletons, gays and straights, blacks, whites and browns, rich and poor, vegetarians and meat lovers alike. ...

Principle 2: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in empathy. Let's face it: We've all taken jobs just to have a job because some money is better than none. ...

Principle 3: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in honor and it reminds me to honor honest work. ... [Pizza] dudes sleep the sleep of the just.

Principle 4: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in equality. My measurement as a human being, my worth, is the pride I take in performing my job — any job — and the respect with which I treat others. ...I am the equal to all I meet because of the kindness in my heart. And it all starts here — with the pizza delivery dude. Tip him

well, friends and brethren, for that which you bestow freely and willingly will bring you all the happy luck that a grateful universe knows how to return.

Source: <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=2137>

5. *Forgiveness & Your Life's Unfinished Business*

by Stephen Levine

...Many coming upon long unresolved issues and old holdings, find it difficult to simply let go. ...But forgiveness acts almost as a kind of lubricant to allow the yet held to slip lightly away.

...It may well be necessary to deepen the practice of forgiveness—to actualize the potential for letting go that the open-handed acceptance of forgiveness offers upon meeting the gravel-fisted judgment of the ...unkind mind. [...]

The practice of forgiveness opens the mind to the natural compassion of the heart. Practiced daily, it allows ancient clinging to dissolve. But in the beginning, forgiveness may have something of an odd quality about it. One needs first to recognize that guilt arises uninvited. It is important to use forgiveness not as a means of squashing guilt, ...but as a means of dissolving obstructions. At first one may feel they did nothing wrong, so why ask for or send forgiveness. But emotions are not so rational; they have a life of their own. We ask for forgiveness and offer forgiveness not because of some imagined wrongdoing, but because we no longer wish to carry the load of our resentments and guilts. To allow the mind to sink into the heart. To let go and get on with it. [...]

Forgiveness benefits oneself, not just another. Although we may open our hearts to another, it is a means of letting our self ...into our own heart. ... Forgiveness finishes business by letting go of the armoring which separates one heart from another. As one teacher said, "As long as there are two there is unfinished business. When the two become one, the heart whispers to itself in every direction."

Source: <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=681>

6. *Ask for Forgiveness*

by Elie Wiesel

...I had never before considered that

it could be as painful to be the children of those who ran the camps as to be the child of those who died in them.

I have students from Germany and you cannot imagine the affection I have for them, the empathy I have for them. I want to help them. They need help. One of them said to me, even in Berlin then, said, you know, "I just discovered a few weeks ago that..." He discovered that his father was an S.S. officer. He said, "What should I do? What Hitler has done, he destroyed so many lives that had not been born yet. His people."

...I took him aside and we spoke, and we spoke, and we spoke. And I simply said, "Look, he's your father. Talk first. First let him talk to you, and you talk to him. And then you decide what to do."

...I went back to Berlin for the last time in the year 2000, January 27. The Bundestag, which is the parliament, came to Berlin for the first time. They had a session, the parliament, in the Reichstag in Berlin, and they invited me to speak. ...At the end of my speech, I turned to the president, who was there, and the entire government and diplomatic corps. I said, "Mr. President, why not ask the Jewish people for forgiveness? I'm not sure the Jewish people can accept, but why not ask?" A week later, he went to Israel, to Jerusalem. He went to the parliament and he asked for forgiveness.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/programs/evil-forgiveness-prayer-elie-wiesel-2/>

7. *The Difficult Path of Forgiveness*

by Kent Nerburn
 This is the dilemma that faces us all when we decide to walk the difficult path of forgiveness. Are we complicit in wrongdoing if we do not challenge those who wrong us? Or are we contributing to the darkness in the world if we get caught up in the web of heartlessness and cruelty that gave birth to the injustice?

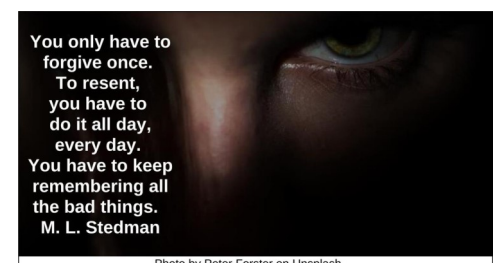
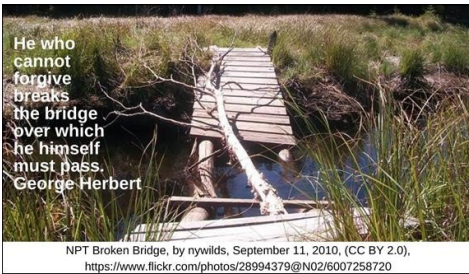


Photo by Peter Forster on Unsplash



Wisdom Story

May All of Your Deepest Desires be Satisfied

by Elisa Pearmain

Once upon a time, in a land to the east, a Holy man and his student were walking from one village to the next. Suddenly they saw a great huge cloud of dust rising in the distance. They stood and stared at a grand carriage, pulled by six horses approaching at a full gallop. Riding on top were two men dressed in red, each holding a rein. The Holy man and the young student soon realized that the carriage was not going to slow down, let alone veer to the side to avoid hitting them. The carriage was coming at such a speed that they had to throw themselves from the road and jump into a ditch to save themselves. Covered with dirt and grass, the two got up. They looked after the carriage as it sped away into the distance.

The student was first to respond. He began to call out and curse the drivers. But the teacher ran ahead, cupped his hands over the student's mouth, and called to the carriage: "May all of your deepest desires be satisfied!"

The student stared at the teacher and asked, "Why would you wish that their deepest desires be satisfied? They nearly killed us!"

The old man replied, "Do you think all their deepest desires are satisfied? If they were happy, would they be so thoughtless and cruel as to nearly run down an old man and a student?"

The young student had no answer for this gesture of forgiveness.... And so, in silence, the two continued their journey down the dusty road.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/loveguide/session13/dervish-ditch>

"We are all guilty. Most of the crimes we commit are not horrid, simply human—crimes punishable only by conscience. Our consciences sometimes fall asleep or are lulled or drugged, and we do bad things we don't notice, at least for the time being. We also manage to blame others for our own actions or rationalize our behavior through some convenient trick of mind. But more often, we convict ourselves in the tribunal of conscience. Every day we find reasons to judge and then punish ourselves for what we do or fail to do. Some of this punishment is justified. Much is not." *Rev. Dr. Forrest Church*

"Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to a single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice, who lacked the magic formula to break the spell."

Hannah Arendt

"Forgiveness does not mean that we suppress anger; forgiveness means that we have asked for a miracle: the ability to see through mistakes that someone has made to the truth that lies in all of our hearts. Forgiveness is not always easy. At times, it feels more painful than the wound we suffered, to forgive the one that inflicted it. And yet, there is no peace without forgiveness."

Marianne Williamson

"Forgiveness is not a single action, but a process. This is not to say that forgiveness is easy. It cannot be rushed or engineered, but it may arrive over time. Forgiveness can be bittersweet. It contains the sweetness of the release of a memory that has caused you so much suffering, but it is also a poignant recog-

I don't know. And yet I must know. Somehow, I, you, each of us, must find a way to respond to the cruelty and injustice in the world in a way that doesn't empower those who harm others. At the same time, we must avoid becoming ensnared by their anger and heartlessness.

One of the great human wagers is whether we best achieve this by shining a light of pure absolution into the darkness, trusting that the light will draw others toward it, or whether we stand against the darkness with equal force, and then try to flood the world with light once the darkness is held at bay.

In either case, though, one thing is certain: Forgiveness cannot be a disengaged, pastel emotion. It is demanded in the bloodiest of human circumstances, and it must stand against the strongest winds of human rage and hate. To be a real virtue, engaged with the world around us, it must be muscular, alive, and able to withstand the outrages and inequities of inhuman and inhumane acts. It must be able to face the dark side of the human condition.

How we shape such forgiveness is one of the most crucial questions in our lives. And, it is not easy. Sometimes we get so frustrated that we don't think we can take it anymore.

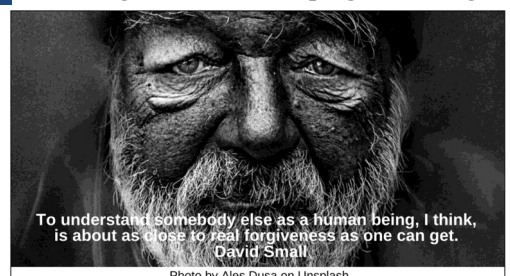
But we can and we must; it is our human responsibility. Even though we know that forgiveness, misused, or misunderstood, can become a tacit partner in the wrongs around us, we also know that, properly applied, it is the glue that holds the human family together. It is the way to bridge the loneliness that too often surrounds us. We must find a way to build that bridge, even if our hands are clumsy and the materials at our command are flawed."

Source: *Calm Surrender: Walking the Path of Forgiveness* by Kent Nerburn

Snippets

"Forgiveness doesn't come out of a command. I can be commanded to sweep the floor, but I can't really be commanded to forgive. Forgiveness is something that comes from the depths of the soul or it doesn't come at all."

Miroslav Volf



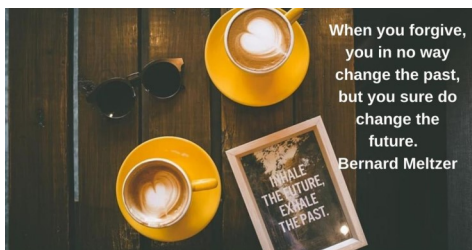


Photo by Toa Heftiba on Unsplash

When you forgive, you in no way change the past, but you sure do change the future.

Bernard Meltzer

“I don’t know if I continue, even today, always liking myself. But what I learned to do many years ago was to forgive myself. It is very important for every human being to forgive herself or himself because if you live, you will make mistakes—it is inevitable. But once you do and you see the mistake, then you forgive yourself and say, ‘Well, if I’d known better, I’d have done better,’ that’s all. So, you say to people who you think you may have injured, ‘I’m sorry,’ and then you say to yourself, ‘I’m sorry.’ If we all hold on to the mistake, we can’t see our own glory in the mirror because we have the mistake between our faces and the mirror; we can’t see what we’re capable of being.”

Maya Angelou

“Forgiveness is not about forgetting. It is about letting go of another person’s throat. Forgiveness does not create a relationship. Unless people speak the truth about what they have done and change their mind and behavior, a relationship of trust is not possible. When you forgive someone you certainly release them from judgment, but without true change, no real relationship can be established. Forgiveness in no way requires that you trust the one you forgive. But should they finally confess and repent, you will discover a miracle in your own heart that allows you to reach out and begin to build between you a bridge of reconciliation.”

William P. Young

“Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.” *Henri J.M. Nouwen*

“For there are two kinds of forgiveness in the world: the one you practice because everything really is all right, and what went before is mended. The other kind of forgiveness you practice because someone needs desperately to be forgiven, or because you need just as badly to forgive them, for a heart can grab hold of old wounds and go sour as milk over them.” *Catherynne M. Valente*

“It’s forgiveness that makes us what we are. Without forgiveness, our species would’ve annihilated itself in endless retributions. Without forgiveness, there would be no history. Without that hope, there would be no art, for every work of art is in some way an act of forgiveness. Without that dream, there would be no love, for every act of love is in some way a promise to forgive. We live on because we can love, and we love because we can forgive.”

Gregory David Roberts

Questions

1. The first reading begins, “Beloved Community cannot exist without forgiveness.” How, over time, has forgiveness or its absence affected your congregation?
2. In the second reading, Martha Nussbaum critiques anger and finds it wanting. What are the negative consequences of anger? What constructive role, if any, does anger play?
3. Nussbaum also finds the traditional understanding of forgiveness problematic because it often demands retribution. Do you agree? Why or why not? Nussbaum proposes replacing “transactional forgiveness” with “unconditional forgiveness” informed by generosity and unconditional love. Do you agree with

4. this? Why or why not? What problems might this approach lead to?
4. Reading three explores revenge and forgiveness. Does revenge have any constructive role? If yes, what? If no, why not? Michael McCullough refers to forgiveness as being as ordinary as a Band-Aid on a scrape. Do you agree with this? Why or why not? What circumstances can make forgiveness more daunting? Have there been instances when you have asked for forgiveness? What was the experience like?
5. The fourth reading by Sarah Adams involves principles about how to treat the pizza delivery dude, who we could regard as the stand-in for the common man or woman. Which principles resonate with you? Why?
6. In the fifth reading, Stephen Levine invokes forgiveness as a means of addressing unfinished business in life. What are some unfinished things in your life that you want to attend to? What role could forgiveness play in addressing these?
7. In the sixth reading, Elie Wiesel suggested that the President of Germany ask the Parliament of Israel for forgiveness for German war crimes, which he did. What gets in the way of asking for forgiveness? Have you ever asked for forgiveness? What was the experience like? How did/would you react if you asked for forgiveness and your request was refused? In Judaism, if a person asks someone for forgiveness three times and is refused each time, they have wronged/harmed the person asking and must ask that other person for forgiveness. What are the benefits and liabilities of this novel approach?
8. In the seventh reading, Kent Nerburn writes that forgiveness can be extremely difficult. He suggests that

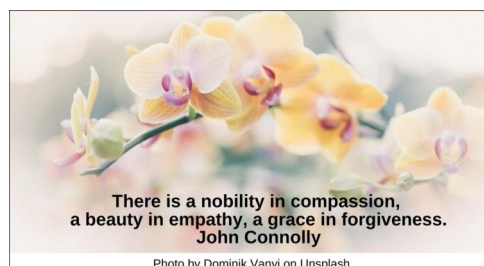


Photo by Dominik Vanyi on Unsplash



forgiveness can become a tacit partner in wrongdoing or the glue that holds the human family together. How can ill-conceived forgiveness make things worse in society? How can responsible forgiveness make things better?

9. While some suggest that we should forgive and forget, others suggest that we should forgive and remember. Which makes more sense to you? Why?
10. In the wisdom story, the Holy man is motivated by forgiveness, informed by empathy. Would you react more like the Holy man or the student? Why?

The following questions are related to the Readings from the Common Bowl.

11. Miroslav Volf states that forgiveness comes “from the depth of the soul or it doesn’t come at all.” What are the deep things that prompt forgiveness?
12. Rev. Dr. Forrest Church suggests that sometimes we are too hard on ourselves. Do you agree? How can self-forgiveness help mitigate such judgements?
13. Hannah Arendt writes that when we are unforgiven it is like being condemned to a prison with no possibility of release. Do you agree? Why or why not?
14. Do you agree with Marianne Williamson that “there is no peace without forgiveness?” How does this play out on the world stage? In intimate relationships?
15. Sharon Salzberg writes about the complexity of forgiveness. What did you find most helpful in what she wrote?
16. Maya Angelou stresses the power of saying, “I’m sorry?” What is the impact of remaining unforgiven by the other person or by yourself?
17. William Young describes a process

of forgiveness. How can true forgiveness, both requested and given, lead to reconciliation? What are some of the challenges that can derail reconciliation?

18. Henri J.M. Nouwen says that we need to forgive and be forgiven because we “love poorly.” What do you think he means by this? How is forgiveness, in the end, an act of love?
19. Catherynne Valente writes about two kinds of forgiveness. The first is relatively easy because of the nature of the relationship. The second is driven by desperation where the challenge and the stakes are much higher. When have you experienced the latter? She suggests that failure to act in the latter case can have terrible consequences. Do you agree? Why or why not?
20. Gregory David Roberts writes, “we love because we can forgive.” What role in history, culture, and intimate relationships has forgiveness played?

