



The Power of Forgiveness in Action

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The *Power of Forgiveness* offers us a broad view of forgiveness from religious, spiritual and scientific points of view. While we may agree more strongly with some rather than others we are given a potent opportunity to delve deeper and explore our personal views of forgiveness and ultimately open our hearts and minds to a deeper experience of compassion, kindness and unconditional love. And maybe, just maybe by putting forgiveness into action in our own lives we can expand the possibility of peace in the world. We can embody the words of Gandhi and, “*Be the change we wish to see in the world.*”

Before you begin this powerful exploration we want to share another point of view about forgiveness with you. Generally speaking, we could say that forgiveness is the act of pardoning or excusing oneself or someone else without harboring resentment. First and foremost, it is important to understand that *forgiveness* does not mean we are disagreeing that the action in question was hurtful or inappropriate. It is a real challenge to forgive someone for something that we believe is absolutely wrong. But if we view circumstances from the level of consciousness where we are judging beliefs and ideas, forgiveness will never occur. Our world contains over 6.5 billion humans whose minds are filled with different concepts and we are never going to get all of them to agree as to what is right or wrong in any situation.

Instead of looking at what is *right* or *wrong* then, we can simply recognize that an action was taken in ignorance of our true nature and that the action caused pain and suffering. (By ignorance, we mean lack of awareness of our divine nature and oneness.) The true nature of humanity can be described in many ways, depending on one’s spiritual or philosophic tradition. To be as simple and inclusive as possible: When we *experience* the One consciousness or God that exists within all things, we have *realized* our divine nature. With this experience comes the understanding that it is our concepts, ideas and beliefs that create separateness among people. With this in mind ultimately we are forgiving ourselves and others for our concepts and beliefs that nurture our sense of separation. When we transcend the beliefs of our programmed minds and see with our spiritual eyes we see our inter-connectedness and oneness.

View the *Power of Forgiveness* and use the questions below to explore forgiveness in your life. (You may want to stop the video and explore the questions along the way or

watch it in its entirety and then focus on the question.) Become aware of the conditions you place on forgiveness and the imprisoning memories that keep you filled with anger, resentment and the desire for revenge. And most importantly do not judge yourself or others as you become aware of your thoughts. Rather mark this as a starting point, the key to unlock a prison that has been kept alive by your thoughts and point of view.

Thich Nhat Hanh states, “Forgiveness will not be possible until compassion is born in your heart.”

- What is compassion for you, and how do you express it in your life?
- What places in your heart is there a need for compassion: for yourself, for your family, friends, co-workers, community, the world?
- Do you think you can call yourself a compassionate person if you still hold anger towards someone?

Alexandra Asseily says, “But actually, forgiveness allows us to let go of the pain in the memory. And if we let go of the pain in the memory, we can have the memory but it doesn’t control us. And I think it’s the fact that when memory controls us we are puppets of the past.”

- Identify several memories that continue to cause you pain and suffering.
- What people and circumstances have you been unable or reluctant to forgive?
- Consider that it is not true that you cannot help but be upset and hurt about something that has happened in the past. Can you truly be prisoner of a thought unless you consent to be?

John Loughran whose Uncle John was killed in Belfast in 1973 says, “There must be a degree of repentance or acknowledgment before you can forgive. How can you forgive someone when you don’t know who they are?” You can see in this story that the people are still angry even though over 30 years have passed.

- What are the conditions you place on forgiveness?
- Have you been subject to an act of violence in your life? Could you forgive an act of violence if you did not know who the perpetrators were?
- If you have been subject to an act of violence – would it be possible to forgive that person if they never apologize?
- What do you gain for yourself by holding on to your anger? (Possibilities are: you get to be right, you get to make yourself better than the other person, you get to have many people on your side against another, etc) How might these points of view benefit you?
- What would your life be like if the other person never apologizes?

Robert Enright of the International Forgiveness Institute states: “Well, one of the problems with remembering only the injustices of ones culture is that we pass that on to

our children and that the children don't get a chance to see that mercy can be part of their lives in their communities.”

- What injustices exist within your culture?
- Can you see how those injustices have been passed down from generation to generation and the effect they have had on your culture?
- The original idea of passing this information down to our children was to prevent future death through education, but is that the way most cultures use that information – or do they allow themselves to be victimized and angry by perpetuating the injustices of the past?

Robert Enright works with teachers from the Catholic and Protestant Communities in Northern Ireland designing curriculums focused on themes of forgiveness. He states, “About five years ago we began to think that forgiveness, because it is so powerful in reducing anger – why not plant forgiveness within the peace movement? Why not start with children?”

- What were you *taught* as a child about forgiveness as opposed to what you were *shown*? In other words were you taught that to forgive was divine, while at the same time your mother held her anger towards your aunt for years?
- What are you teaching the children in your life about forgiveness?
- Taking a look at your community, what memories of actions and wounds of the past continue to nourish conflict, resentment, and anger?

Robert Enright asks, “Should we put mercy (and forgiveness) on the table for public discussion among educators, among peace workers and among children within a community that has talked mostly justice?”

- How do you define mercy, forgiveness and justice?
- Do you feel that all humans have *inherent worth* regardless of their actions?
- If you do believe this, then can you separate a person's offence or hurtful actions from the person they truly are? If not, why not?
- Do you think you are good at accepting forgiveness? Do you find it a pleasure or a challenge? Do you make yourself available for forgiveness? In other words do you seek it out or make it difficult for the other person to offer their forgiveness to you?

There is often a concern that forgiveness means condoning actions of abuse and violence and that the person offering the forgiveness will open him- or herself up to continued abuse. Jeanette Enright responds to this concern by offering these thoughts: “Through the lessons [with the children] we try very hard to help the children to become *tough-minded but tender-hearted*. So that just through learning to forgive they learn to identify when something is wrong, and they call it wrong, but then they are able to have the internal transformation of letting go of the anger.”

- What anger within you is calling for internal transformation?
- Can you be tough-minded about an injustice in your life – in other words you know the actions were “wrong” from your point of view - yet be tender-hearted enough to say, “I do not want to hold onto that anger any more. It is not serving me or anyone else well by doing so”?
- Are you willing to transform your anger through the action of forgiveness and open your heart and mind to greater kindness, compassion and unconditional love? (Join the WITH *Forgiveness* International Community for exercises to practice forgiveness in your life www.withforgiveness.com.)

Donald B. Kraybill the author of *The Riddle of Amish Culture* tells us that in the Amish community while there isn't a formal curriculum on forgiveness, it is taught to children by the actions of their parents and adults in their community. He goes on to say: “The Lord’s Prayer is one of the first things that an Amish child memorizes and learns to recite. They hear Jesus say forgive 70 times 7 and one Amish man said to me, ‘If there are 490 victims we keep on forgiving.’ (...and forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those who trespass against us.)

On October 6, 2006 five Amish girls were killed and five others wounded in their classroom. Shortly after that, members of the community went to visit the parents of the perpetrator to let them know that they had forgiven them. Their ability to forgive is based on their deep faith and the power of community to support them when faced with devastating challenges. Forgiveness is woven into the fabric of their culture. This does not mean that they do not feel pain, grief and anger. It does mean that each day they practice forgiveness and their anger is not continuously fueled by resentment and the desire for revenge.

- How did you feel about this story?
- Most of us grew up with the same instructions to forgive as the Amish people have. Why is it then that they can forgive the seemingly unforgivable, but many of us cannot?
- Many people feel that retribution is critical in the process of forgiveness – how do you feel about that?
- What are the ways you can put forgiveness into practice in your life today?
- Are you willing to commit to these actions?

Marianne Williamson shares with us: “I think that what we are called upon to do in a time when we see so much evil, is to have the moral grandeur and spiritual audacity to believe in good, to proclaim it, to stand in conviction. To take the people who truly do evil and yes, to hold them accountable in appropriate ways, that goes without saying. But to nevertheless stand for the possibility of human redemption that turns even the hardest hearts.”

- Do you feel that people who commit injustices are redeemable? We have all taken hurtful actions, even in the smallest of ways – just because we caused harm once, does it mean we will do the same again?
- What does “take action towards evil in appropriate ways” mean to you?
- What actions are you willing to take to reflect your spiritual audacity and proclaim your belief in goodness?

Thomas Moore states: “Forgiveness comes in its own time. Forgiveness comes from some other place.... We can create the conditions under which forgiveness will appear, but it will appear in its own time and in its own way.”

- What do you think about this statement?
- What are the conditions that support forgiveness?
- In your own experience, what conditions allowed you to forgive?

Elie Wiesel, a holocaust survivor, speaks of forgiveness based on the Jewish faith. He says: “In the Jewish tradition there are two kinds of forgiveness. One that G-d can give, and the other is that man can give. There are certain things that men do to each other that G-d does not intervene. The one sin he cannot forgive, does not want to forgive, is the one I commit against a fellow human being. Only that fellow human being has the right to forgive me. However it has limitations. If I ask that person three times and that person says no, then the blame is on him or her and then they have to ask for forgiveness for not forgiving.”

- What are your thoughts on this point of view about forgiveness?
- If you believe in God or a higher power, what do you believe God’s point of view about forgiveness is?

He goes on to say that: “Some persons do not deserve forgiveness and those are really the people who went beyond the capacity for evil. To be forgiven the culprit must confess ... and ask for forgiveness.”

- These are conditions for forgiveness. Do you adhere to these conditions?
- After many years Wiesel encouraged the German government to apologize to the Jewish people in Israel, which they did. Many people in the Israeli government refused to be present for the apology which was made in person. Do you think those people should have refused the apology?
- Have you ever asked for forgiveness from someone?
- What was the impact of that for you?

Elie Wiesel continues to struggle with understanding the holocaust and urges us not to forget. Yet even with the ravages of the concentration camps of World War II and the lessons learned, genocide continues today in Dafur and recently in Sierra Leone and Rwanda.

In the book *WITH Forgiveness – Are you Ready?* it states: “Human holocausts and genocides are by far the most devastating results of the expression of the human ego-mind. These are the ultimate manifestations of all human fear-based lies, the most destructive one being, *They are not me, and they are not Divine.*” All justifications and rationalizations for war, and ethnic and racial cleansings start from this one belief. Once we make that agreement, we feel empowered to attack those we perceive to be *other* because they are *dangerous*. It does not matter what concept we use as the basis for our justifications. *All* justifications for the torture, enslavement or death of another race, ethnic or religious group are based in fear.”

- Is it possible to ever forgive genocide?
- Do you know people who have?
- What has enabled them to forgive? (Two powerful memoirs to read are: *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* by Immaculee Ilibagiza and *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah.)

Rev. James Forbes speaks eloquently about the notion that: “At some point there has to be the movement beyond the fixation that by my holding this [act of violence, abuse, slavery, genocide...] in my mind in some way I am going to improve the situation or reverse the situation or show adequate atonement for the situation. These offenses can never be adequately atoned even if we stayed up all night saying, *I hate ‘em, I hate ‘em, I hate ‘em...* and then get another group to pick up where you left off. It is not possible to achieve by vigilance in anger and revenge what the soul is longing for. What the soul wishes peace.”

- Some people believe that if they stop feeling anger towards the person/people who hurt them this makes them not responsible for their crimes. Is this true?
- How do your thoughts about these situations impact your health, relationships and desire for peace?
- The concept of atonement is a powerful one. What does it mean for you and what does a person have to do to achieve atonement (a life jail sentence, the death penalty, etc)?
- Forgiveness is the thing that happens when justice is achieved – is it or isn’t it?
- What is altruism for you, and how far does your altruism extend?

Scientists around the world are now looking at the relationship between forgiveness and well-being. Research has shown that forgiving people are less aware of being offended and hurt by others and have lower blood pressure. When people are asked to recall a situation where they experienced a sense of betrayal, their blood pressure increases. For those who hold grudges, their blood pressure remains elevated for quite a while after they had the painful thought.

- What are your reactions to this research?

- If holding on to resentment causes harmful internal effects to your physical body, do you think it wise to use the actions of others to hurt yourself physically? How does that resolve the pain of their actions for you?
- Is it worth using these old stories to make yourself sick in the present when the injustice is no longer happening now?

New Yorkers are divided on whether or not there should be a Garden of Forgiveness in New York City on or near Ground Zero. The concept of such a garden was put forth by Rev. Lyndon Harris from St. Paul's Chapel located next to Ground Zero. He shared: "What we hope to do is present a meditation garden where people can come and at least reflect on the possibility of forgiveness. By that we don't mean that we in any way excuse horrific acts by evil people. We don't in any way condone acts of violence or terrorism. What we want to do is invite people to decide intentionally to opt out of that cycle of violence and revenge."

- Some say that if we do not forgive and take revenge that we are not any better than the terrorists. How do you feel about that statement?
- Others people feel that it is possible to feel safe, protect our country, forgive, and have compassion – that it is not necessary to cultivate prejudice, hate and anger to do so. Can you consider this thought as a new way of dealing with global terrorism?

Has your desire for retribution, revenge, or an apology become a crusade in your life? Consider that the Christian Crusades were considered righteous, death dealt in the name of God. Do you think that such a crusade is justified? For example, it can be said that Osama bin Laden also feels he is on a religious crusade that justifies his actions. Is any crusade justified, including your own?

- If most religious traditions teach forgiveness and unconditional love, why do you feel our religious traditions are creating war between themselves, along with intolerance, judgment and anger?

Alexandra Asseily suggests that "people have their own journey to make... I think the Garden of Forgiveness may act as a trigger or reminder that if we're going to go a road to peace, we do have to cross that bridge. We do have to take the bridge to forgiveness."

- It is said that we don't forgive others easily we cause we don't forgive ourselves easily. Do you find it easy to forgive yourself for your own transgressions?
- How can we have compassion for others when we don't even have compassion for ourselves? Do you act with compassion towards yourself – like allowing yourself rest when you need it, for example? Or do you work yourself to exhaustion?
- How can we stop judging others when we are so judgmental and harsh with ourselves? Do you find that you are very harsh with yourself in life?

- How can we find unconditional love for others when we cannot give ourselves forgiveness – the most loving act of all? Can you see forgiveness as an act of self love? Is it not an act of self love to let the very thing that is causing deep pain within you go free?

Everett Worthington and his siblings were able to forgive the violent murder of their mother, yet the police captain who investigated the case felt she could never find that kind of forgiveness. Dr. Worthington now teaches forgiveness to college students and shares techniques for healing the pain inside of them.

- What is the fundamental difference between Dr. Worthington and the police chief in your eyes?
- Can you imagine how you would have been in that situation and how you would have reacted?

Azim Khamisa mentions that humanity needs to start vibrating at a higher frequency and that forgiveness, love, compassion and empathy are emotions that represent a higher frequency than revenge and hatred.

- What do you think about his point of view and how does his comment relate to you?

Thich Nhat Hahn says: “If you are filled with anger, what you do, what you say, you create more suffering for yourself and the other person. It is why those who are wise don’t want to say anything. I do not want to do anything, while anger is still in him or her. And when you are calm and you are lucid, you will see that the other person is the victim of confusion, of hate, of violence, transmitted by society, by parents, by friends, by environment. And when you are able to see that, your anger is no longer there and you can look at him or her with compassion.”

- It is said that the truth will set you free. Thich Nhat Hahn is asking us to see the truth, rather than to see circumstances through the filter of our judgment. He refers to the fact that people take hurtful actions in ignorance empowered by false beliefs. Can you take one situation you are still angry about and see the truth without imposing your judgment?

Rose Foti was angry with her son due to a particular point of view and judgment she was holding towards him. As a result she refused to go to his wedding. Her actions caused deep discord between her son and herself for several years. Then he was killed in the tragedy at the Twin Towers. As a result, she has regrets about how she hurt her son. Many times we hold on to our point of view and self righteousness – then the other person passes away making it impossible to ask for their forgiveness. As a result we feel deep guilt and shame.

- Can you resonate with Rose’s story? Do you have a person in your family that passed away before you could make amends? How did it make you

feel? Can you forgive yourself for any guilt that you have as a result of not taking action?

Azim Khamisa and Ples Felix are working hard to teach children that there is an alternative to revenge and hate. Ples's grandson Tony murdered Azim's son. Because of Azim's forgiveness, Tony has been able to share the benefits of forgiveness – starting with himself for the murder he committed. If Azim did not forgive Tony, Tony might not have been able to forgive himself and the many people in his life that contributed to his feeling unloved and disrespected – the very things that compelled him to take drugs and kill Azim's son in the first place.

Although we forgive to unburden ourselves from the deep pain within us, forgiveness does more than that. As long as we hold anger towards another, this causes an energetic link binding both people together, keeping them in bondage. Once you forgive another it makes space for that person to apologize to you. However, most of the time we are looking for the opposite to happen – we are looking for the other person to apologize first so that we can forgive. This is our self importance in action.

- Azim and Ples are two normal people who are demonstrating what a miracle and blessing looks like. How did you feel while listening to their story?
- Can you see the benefits of forgiveness which go beyond what we normally allow ourselves to see?
- Can you make a list of all the good that resulted from this murder?
- Although one person has been murdered, how many do you think have been saved by Azim and Ples's actions?
- Is it possible that, by on focusing on what we deem to be “evil,” we miss all that can be good?

Our new century has been filled with a focus on terror and revenge. And yet the lessons of history demonstrate that war has never led to a lasting peace – whether the war is fought within our consciousness or on the battlefield. Forgiveness offers us a path to peace. We encourage you to be brave and go beyond what you feel is possible for yourself. Are you ready to forgive?

This article was developed for community conversations around *The POWER of FORGIVENESS* by Journey Films.
More material available at www.journeyfilms.com.

Funding provided by The John Templeton Foundation, Supporting Science, Investing in the Big Questions, and Fetzer Institute, as part of their Campaign for Love and Forgiveness.

