

Desmond Tutu: On Why We Forgive by Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu

By letting go of past hurts, we can heal not only ourselves, but our families, our communities, and our world.

There were so many nights when I, as a young boy, had to watch helplessly as my father verbally and physically abused my mother. I can still recall the smell of alcohol, see the fear in my mother's eyes, and feel the hopeless despair that comes when we see people we love hurting each other in incomprehensible ways. If I dwell in those memories, I can feel myself wanting to hurt my father back, in the same ways he hurt my mother, and in ways of which I was incapable as a small boy. I see my mother's face and I see this gentle human being whom I loved so very much and who did nothing to deserve the pain inflicted upon her.

When I recall this story, I realize how difficult the process of forgiving truly is. Intellectually, I know my father caused pain because he was in pain. Spiritually, I know my faith tells me my father deserves to be forgiven as God forgives us all. But it is still difficult. The traumas we have witnessed or experienced live on in our memories. Even years later they can cause us fresh pain each time we recall them.

Are you hurt and suffering? Is the injury new, or is it an old unhealed wound? Know that what was done to you was wrong, unfair, and undeserved. You are right to be outraged. And it is perfectly normal to want to hurt back when you have been hurt. But hurting back rarely satisfies. We think it will, but it doesn't. If I slap you after you slap me, it does not lessen the sting I feel on my own face, nor does it diminish my sadness as to the fact you have struck me. Retaliation gives, at best, only momentary respite from our pain. The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of being at peace.

Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness; that person will be our jailor. When we forgive, we take back control of our own fate and our feelings. We become our own liberators. We don't forgive to help the other person. We don't forgive for others. We forgive for ourselves.

The Science of Forgiveness

During the past decade there has been more and more research into forgiveness. Whereas previously the discussion of forgiveness was left to the religious, it is now

gaining attention as an academic discipline studied not only by philosophers and theologians, but also by psychologists and physician. Even neuroscientists are studying the biology of forgiveness and exploring evolutionary barriers in the brain that hinder the act of forgiving. Some are even looking to see if there might be a forgiveness gene somewhere in our DNA.

As modern forgiveness research evolves, the findings clearly show that forgiving transforms people mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and even physically. In *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*, psychologist Fred Luskin writes, "In careful scientific studies, forgiveness training has been shown to reduce depression, increase hopefulness, decrease anger, improve spiritual connection, [and] increase emotional self confidence." Research also shows that people who are more forgiving report fewer health and mental problems, and fewer physical symptoms of stress.

As more and more scientists document the healing power of forgiveness, they also look at the mentally and physically corrosive effects of not forgiving. Hanging on to anger and resentment, living in a constant state of stress, can damage the heart as well as the soul. In fact, research has shown that failure to forgive may be a risk factor for heart disease, high blood pressure, and a score of other chronic stress-related illnesses. Medical and psychological studies have also shown that a person holding on to anger and resentment is at an increased risk for anxiety, depression, and insomnia, and is more likely to suffer from high blood pressure, ulcers, migraines, backaches, heart attack, and even cancer. The reverse is also true. Genuine forgiveness can transform these ailments.

In the end, science will prove what people have known for millennia: forgiving is good for you. Health benefits are only the beginning. To forgive is also to release yourself from whatever trauma and hardship you have experienced and reclaim your life as your own.

Healing the Whole

When we are uncaring, when we lack compassion, when we are unforgiving, we will always pay the price for it. It is not, however, we alone who suffer. Our whole community suffers, and ultimately our whole world suffers. We are made to exist in a delicate network of interdependence. We are sisters and brothers, whether we like it or not. To treat anyone as if they were less than human, less than a brother or a sister, no matter what they have done, is to contravene the very laws of our humanity.

In my own family, sibling squabbles have spilled into intergenerational alienations. When adult siblings refuse to speak to each other because of some offense, recent or long past, their children and grandchildren can lose out on the joy of strong family relationships. The children and grandchildren may never know what occasioned the freeze. They know only that "We don't visit this aunt" or "We don't really know those cousins." Forgiveness among the members of older generations could open the door to healthy and supportive relationships among younger generations.

If your own well-being—your physical, emotional, and mental health—is not enough, if your life and your future are not enough, then perhaps you will forgive for the benefit of those you love, the family that is precious to you. Anger and bitterness do not just poison you, they poison all your relationships, including those with your children.

Freeing Ourselves

Forgiveness is not dependent on the actions of others. Yes, it is certainly easier to offer

forgiveness when the perpetrator expresses remorse and offers some sort of reparation or restitution. Then, you can feel as if you have been paid back in some way. You can say, “I am willing to forgive you for stealing my pen, and after you give me my pen back, I shall forgive you.” This is the most familiar pattern of forgiveness. In this understanding, forgiveness is something we offer to another, a gift we bestow upon someone, but it is a gift that has strings attached.

The problem is that the strings we attach to the gift of forgiveness become the chains that bind us to the person who harmed us. Those are chains to which the perpetrator holds the key. We may set the conditions for granting our forgiveness, but the person who harmed us decides whether or not the conditions are too onerous to fulfill. We continue to be that person’s victim.

Unconditional forgiveness is a different model of forgiveness than the gift with strings. This is forgiveness as a grace, a free gift freely given. In this model, forgiveness frees the person who inflicted the harm from the weight of the victim’s whim—what the victim may demand in order to grant forgiveness—and the victim’s threat of vengeance. But it also frees the one who forgives. The one who offers forgiveness as a grace is immediately untethered from the yoke that bound him or her to the person who caused the harm. When you forgive, you are free to move on in life, to grow, to no longer be a victim. When you forgive, you slip the yoke, and your future is unshackled from your past.

Our Shared Humanity

Ultimately, forgiveness is a choice we make, and the ability to forgive others comes from the recognition that we are all flawed and all human. We all have made mistakes and harmed others. We will again. We find it easier to practice forgiveness when we can recognize that the roles could have been reversed. Each of us could have been the perpetrator rather than the victim. Each of us has the capacity to commit the wrongs against others that were committed against us. Although I might say, “I would never . . .” genuine humility will answer, “Never say never.” Rather say, “I hope that, given the same set of circumstances, I would not . . .” But can we ever really know?

Truthfully, this is not a dichotomy. No person will always stand in the camp of the perpetrator. No person will always be the one who is the victim. In some situations we have been harmed, and in others we have harmed. And sometimes we straddle both camps, as when, in the heat of a marital spat, we trade hurts with our partners. Not all harms are equivalent, but this is really not the issue. Those who wish to compare how much they have wronged to how much they have been wronged will find themselves drowning in a whirlpool of victimization and denial. Those who think they are beyond reproach have not taken an honest look in the mirror.

People are not born hating each other and wishing to cause harm. It is a learned condition. Children do not dream of growing up to be rapists or murderers, and yet every rapist and every murderer was once a child. And there are times when I look at some of those who are described as “monsters” and I honestly believe that there, but for the grace of God, go I. I do not say this because I am some singular saint. I say this because I have sat with condemned men on death row, I have spoken with former police officers who have admitted inflicting the cruelest torture, I have visited child soldiers who have committed acts of nauseating depravity, and I have recognized in each of them a depth of humanity that was a mirror of my own.

Forgiveness is truly the grace by which we enable another person to get up, and get up

with dignity, to begin anew.

The Invitation to Forgive

The invitation to forgive is not an invitation to forget. Nor is it an invitation to claim that an injury is less hurtful than it really is. Nor is it a request to paper over the fissure in a relationship, to say it's okay when it's not. It's not okay to be injured. It's not okay to be abused. It's not okay to be violated. It's not okay to be betrayed.

The invitation to forgive is an invitation to find healing and peace. In my native language, Xhosa, one asks forgiveness by saying, Ndicel' uxolo—"I ask for peace." Forgiveness opens the door to peace between people and opens the space for peace within each person. The victim cannot have peace without forgiving. The perpetrator will not have genuine peace while unforgiven. There cannot be peace between victim and perpetrator while the injury lies between them. The invitation to forgive is an invitation to search out the perpetrator's humanity. When we forgive, we recognize the reality that there, but for the grace of God, go I.

If I traded lives with my father, if I had experienced the stresses and pressures my father faced, if I had to bear the burdens he bore, would I have behaved as he did? I do not know. I hope I would have been different, but I do not know.

My father has long since died, but if I could speak to him today, I would want to tell him that I had forgiven him. What would I say to him? I would begin by thanking him for all the wonderful things he did for me as my father, but then I would tell him that there was this one thing that hurt me very much. I would tell him how what he did to my mother affected me, how it pained me.

Perhaps he would hear me out; perhaps he would not. But still I would forgive him. Since I cannot speak to him, I have had to forgive him in my heart. If my father were here today, whether he asked for forgiveness or not, and even if he refused to admit that what he had done was wrong or could not explain why he had done what he did, I would still forgive him. Why? Because I know it is the only way to heal the pain in my boyhood heart. Forgiving my father frees me. When I no longer hold his offenses against him, my memory of him no longer exerts any control over my moods or my disposition. His violence and my inability to protect my mother no longer define me. I am not the small boy cowering in fear of his drunken rage. I have a new and different story. Forgiveness has liberated both of us. We are free.

Meditation: Opening to the Light

1. Close your eyes and follow your breath.
2. When you feel centered, imagine yourself in a safe place.
3. In the center of your safe space is a box with many drawers.
4. The drawers are labeled. The inscriptions show hurts you have yet to forgive.
5. Choose a drawer and open it. Rolled or folded or crumpled up inside it are all the thoughts and feelings the incident evokes.
6. You can choose to empty out this drawer.
7. Bring your hurt into the light and examine it.
8. Unfold the resentment you have felt and set it aside.
9. Smooth out the ache and let it drift up into the sunlight and disappear.
10. If any feeling seems too big or too unbearable, set it aside to look at later.
11. When the drawer is empty, sit for a moment with it on your lap.

12. Then remove the label from this drawer.

13. As the label comes off, you will see the drawer turn to sand. The wind will sweep it away. You don't need it anymore.

14. There will be no space left for that hurt in the box. That space is not needed anymore.

15. If there are more drawers still to be emptied, you can repeat this meditation now or later.

Acknowledging the Harm

Listen.

Do not try to fix the pain.

Do not minimize the loss.

Do not offer advice.

Do not respond with your own loss or grief.

Keep confidentiality.

Offer your love and your caring.

Empathize and offer comfort