

## Forgiving for the Future

### OBJECTIVES

- To explore the meaning and power of forgiveness.
- To explore the relationship between justice and forgiveness.
- To explore whether forgiveness can pave the way for peace and love.

### IN THIS SESSION

Forgiving is an activity that is meant to address, even repair, the past while the force of its impact is wholly directed towards the future. For human rights advocates, forgiveness may feel like a practice out of time—something that happens too late to make a difference in our work. We like to think of ourselves as the surgeons, our entire focus on removing the cancer. But forgiveness can be just as important for saving the patient. Long after the ‘surgery’ a person can suffer, a community can falter, a country can decline. Indeed, the satirical expression, “the operation was successful, but the patient died,” may too frequently be applicable to some international human rights advocacy efforts.<sup>37</sup> Forgiveness is not an alternative to just laws and justice for victims, but an additional—much needed—salve for the deep wounds inflicted by human rights offenders.

In this session, we will read several descriptions of forgiveness by proponents and skeptics and explore its potential role in human rights work. Complicating the practice of forgiveness, particularly for human rights advocates, is our central desire for justice for victims. We will consider whether there is any meaning in forgiveness when justice is not served, or in some cases never even sought. Next, we will read and discuss one man’s story of a terrible crime, and his family’s struggle to forgive the perpetrator, although he escaped prosecution.

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37. For instance, this criticism has been lobbed at the International Criminal Court (ICC), which after decades of human rights advocacy for its establishment (in 2002), has had just two successful convictions, both of Congolese warlords. The court has 34 judges, over 700 staff, and an annual budget of \$166 million. *Forbes*, March 12, 2014.

In the final reading selections and exercise, we will examine the power and limits of reconciliation. In a speech, former First Lady of South Africa, Graça Machel, expresses her gratitude for South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in moving the country past violent recriminations and vigilante justice. At the same time, she describes a country that has not healed from its past and is struggling economically, socially, and spiritually. We will examine how forgiveness can transform individuals and society in some situations, sometimes even paving the way for peace and love.

اعف عما أغضبك لما أَرْضَاكَ أَعْقَلُ النَّاسِ  
أَعْدَرُهُمْ لِلنَّاسِ

**The wisest is the one who can  
forgive.**

—Arabic Proverb

## READING ASSIGNMENT

*When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence.*

—Frederick Buechner<sup>38</sup>

## Know What Forgiveness Is and Why It Matters

Robert Enright<sup>39</sup>

*Excerpts*

Forgiveness is about goodness, about extending mercy to those who've harmed us, even if they don't "deserve" it. It is not about finding excuses for the offending person's behavior or pretending it didn't happen. Nor is there a quick formula you can follow. Forgiveness is a process with many steps that often proceeds in a non-linear fashion. But it's well worth the effort. Working on forgiveness can help us increase our self-esteem and give us a sense of inner strength and safety. It can reverse the lies that we often tell ourselves when someone has hurt us deeply—lies like, I am defeated or I'm not worthy. Forgiveness can heal us and allow us to move on in life with meaning and purpose. Forgiveness matters, and we will be its primary beneficiary. Studies have shown that forgiving others produces strong psychological benefits for the one who forgives. It has been shown to decrease depression, anxiety, unhealthy anger, and the symptoms of PTSD.<sup>40</sup> But we don't just forgive to help ourselves. Forgiveness can lead to psychological healing, yes; but, in its essence, it is not something

38. Carl Frederick Buechner is an American writer, theologian, and ordained Presbyterian minister.

39. Robert Enright, a pioneer in the scientific study of forgiveness, is a professor at the School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is widely published on the subject.

40. PTSD is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a mental health condition that is triggered by witnessing or experiencing a horrifying event.

about you or done for you. It is something you extend toward another person, because you recognize, over time, that it is the best response to the situation.<sup>41</sup>

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***I've never been entirely comfortable with the concept of forgiveness.***

Leon F. Seltzer<sup>42</sup>

I've never been entirely comfortable with the concept of forgiveness. Sure, if you're truly to get over being wronged or abused, you'll need to forgive the person responsible for hurting you. Yet to me there can be something uncomfortably condescending about forgiving another. It's almost as though you're saying, "I'm better than you, 'cause *I* never would have done what you did to me... but because of my charitable ideals, I'm going to forgive you anyway." And it's this regrettable link between forgiveness and the presumption of superiority that makes me a little uneasy about the whole concept.<sup>43</sup>

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## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- What is your definition of forgiveness?
- What happens to you emotionally when you forgive someone?
- What happens to you emotionally when you are forgiven?
- Is there anything about forgiveness that makes you uncomfortable? What is it?
- Do you believe forgiving should be contingent on anything? If so, what? Justice being served? An apology or other act of contrition? A passage of time? A recognition of mutual suffering? A recognition of mutual humanity?
- Do you believe any action is eligible for forgiveness? Why or why not?

***The pursuit of happiness and the ability to participate in one's community are human rights. Healing from the pain of another's act is essential to being able to be happy and to function again in the world.***

— Kent Davis-Packard  
WLP Co-Executive Director

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41. From *Eight Keys to Forgiveness*, by Robert Enright, October 15, 2015.[http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/eight\\_keys\\_to\\_forgiveness](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/eight_keys_to_forgiveness).

42. Leon F. Seltzer, PhD, is the author of *The Vision of Melville and Conrad* and numerous articles in the fields of literature and psychology.

43. From Can Compassion Transcend Forgiveness? By Leon F. Seltzer, August 27, 2009.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/200908/can-compassion-transcend-forgiveness>.

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## | PARTNER EXERCISE

Ask the group to brainstorm what types of actions or injuries would be the most difficult to ever forgive. Record their ideas on a board or large piece of paper.

When the list is complete, invite participants to consider items on the list they *might* consider forgiving under the right circumstances. Ask volunteers to explain under what circumstances they could imagine forgiving any of the injuries/crimes/violations listed on the board.

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## | QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- What were the common themes among the circumstances that participants could imagine forgiving?
- What were the common themes among the circumstances that participants found unforgiveable?

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## | GROUP EXERCISE

In their book, *The Book of Forgiving*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Reverend Mpho Tutu, wrote:

*Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us... Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, they will hold the keys to our happiness, they will be our jailor.<sup>44</sup>*

Ask the group to consider the quote, and then respond to the following questions:

- What are the Tutus saying? Can you explain what they mean in your own words?
- Do you agree with the Tutus? Why or why not?

***The weak can never forgive.  
Forgiveness is the attribute of the  
strong.***

— Mahatma Gandhi

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## | TEAM EXERCISE

Divide the group into pairs. Ask each pair to review the nine steps to forgiveness described below by Fred Luskin. Ask the pairs to discuss each step—how it might feel to apply it, how relevant is it, how valuable it is, what might be the result/s (positive and negative)? When the group reconvenes, ask the partners to share their thoughts about the ‘nine steps.’

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44. From *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, by Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, HarperOne, 2014.

# Nine Steps to Forgiveness

Fred Luskin<sup>45</sup>

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then, tell a couple of trusted people about your experience.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and no one else.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the person who upset you or condoning the action. In forgiveness you seek the peace and understanding that come from blaming people less after they offend you and taking those offenses less personally.
4. Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset you are suffering now, not from what offended you or hurt you two minutes—or 10 years—ago.
5. At the moment you feel upset, practice stress management to soothe your body's fight or flight response.
6. Give up expecting things from your life or from other people that they do not choose to give you. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, friendship, and prosperity, and work hard to get them. However, these are “unenforceable rules:” You will suffer when you demand that these things occur, since you do not have the power to make them happen.
7. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you.
8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving power over you to the person who caused you pain, learn to look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. Put more energy into appreciating what you have rather than attending to what you do not have.
9. Amend the way you look at your past so you remind yourself of your heroic choice to forgive.<sup>46</sup>

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## | QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Which steps did you find most practical?
- Were there steps you did not like or felt were not helpful?
- Do you agree with the maxim, ‘a life well lived is your best revenge’? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that forgiving is part of a ‘life well lived’?

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45. Fred Luskin, PhD, is the director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Projects, a senior consultant in health promotion at Stanford University, in Palo Alto, California, and a professor at the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology.

46. September 1, 2004 [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/nine\\_steps\\_to\\_forgiveness#](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/nine_steps_to_forgiveness#).

## Forgiveness Is Not Justice

Sonja Lybomirsky<sup>47</sup>

It is certainly easier to forgive someone who sincerely apologizes and makes amends. However, justice—which may include acknowledgment of the wrong, apologies, punishment, restitution, or compensation—is separate from forgiveness. You may pursue your rights for justice with or without forgiving someone. And if justice is denied, you can still choose whether or not to forgive.

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## Forgiveness and Justice

Everett L. Worthington Jr.<sup>48</sup>

*Excerpts*

On New Year's Eve 1995, my mother was murdered. Someone broke into her house in search of hidden treasure. When she awakened, she was bludgeoned repeatedly with a crowbar.

The police were vigilant. Soon a youthful suspect confessed to the crime. But later, when the police found that the physical evidence was contaminated, the youth recanted his confession and walked away freely.

My brother Mike had discovered Mama's body when he and his son visited on New Year's morning. The sight of the house in shambles was devastating. As he walked into the house, he first saw the blood-splattered walls, then my mother's body in a pool of blood.

Within a month, Mike, my sister Kathy, and I independently forgave the murderer. Furthermore, in honor of Mama's memory, we wanted to do what she had taught us—to honor life rather than dishonor it. Independently, each of us decided that if evidence could be uncovered so that the youth could be prosecuted, we would not advocate the death penalty.

This crime had a profound impact on me. I had studied forgiveness scientifically since 1990. The crime focused my attention more on how to balance justice against forgiveness and how to help people who are experiencing deep wounds to forgive. The crime and its aftermath literally gave me a new mission in life—to promote forgiveness in every willing heart, home, and homeland.

Mike was also profoundly affected by the murder. He couldn't get those scenes of violence, bloody walls, and Mama's broken body out of his mind. He had flashbacks and recurring depression. In

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47. From: *The How of Happiness*, by Sonja Lybomirsky, 2007.  
<http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/forgiveness/understanding-forgiveness>.

48. Everett L. Worthington, Jr., PhD, is a Professor of Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. He has written more than 30 books on forgiveness of others, self-forgiveness, character strength, religion, and psychology.

summer 2005, Mike ended his life, unleashing a new wave of suffering in our family. We grieved for his loss, which trickled down like spreading blood from the act of violence perpetrated by a youth in search of quick cash.

Besides suffering and coping with the loss of loved ones, our family has had to deal with profound questions.

By forgiving, did we lessen our drive for justice?

Does forgiveness work against justice, or can forgiveness ever work alongside of justice?

Forgiving changed our emotional experience, but it did not affect our desire for seeing the perpetrator caught and brought to trial. Justice often actually works to promote, not undermine forgiveness. Isn't it easier to forgive a convicted and punished criminal than someone who gets off scot-free? When we are harmed, we experience a sense of injustice. This is called the "injustice gap." The bigger the injustice gap, the harder an offense is to forgive, and the stronger the negative emotions are. If the offender does anything to help balance the books, the injustice gap is narrower and forgiveness is easier.

Did forgiving shorten our grief?

Forgiving probably doesn't shorten grieving. But part of grieving is telling a story repeatedly about the loss. If the story is spiced by bitterness, resentment, and rage, the griever makes his or her self-image more negative. But if the griever can rise above the suffering to forgive he or she sees the self as a stronger person. Grief will not be shortened but one's sense of self will be different.<sup>49</sup>

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***[T]he most dangerous thing in life is to let people become convinced that truth has just one face...***

Khaled al-Berry<sup>50</sup>

I used to think there was only one way to know truth—the divine way, the infallible way. But now I believe that the most dangerous thing in life is to let people become convinced that truth has just one face. At the root of forgiveness and tolerance is the belief that truth has MANY different faces and that the face you see of truth is not in any way of better value than the faces others see.<sup>51</sup>

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49. <http://www.thepowerofforgiveness.com/pdf/Worthingoton.pdf>.

50. As a teenager Khaled al-Berry belonged to the radical Egyptian Islamist group, el-Gama'a al-Islamiya. A former BBC journalist, he is now editor-in-chief of dotMSR, a multimedia website. In 2009 Khaled published his book, *Life Is More Beautiful than Paradise: A Jibadist's Own Story*.

51. From <http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/khaled-al-berry-egypt/>.

## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- How might forgiveness promote human rights and contribute to lasting peace?
- Do you think that you could forgive someone for committing a terrible act even if he or she was never legally held accountable for it?
- Some people believe in divine justice, that God is the supreme arbiter of justice. Does the thought of God's justice enable you to forgive someone for a terrible transgression? Why or why not?
- What does 'justice' mean for you? Public exposure of the crimes and people responsible? Prosecution? Jail time? Corporal punishment? Acts of atonement?
- Do you believe that there always needs to be some kind of justice before forgiveness?

***Without justice and love, peace will  
always be the great illusion.***

**—Archbishop Hélder Pessoa Câmara**

***We need a vision of how to build a healthy society...***

Graça Machel<sup>52</sup>

*Excerpts*

... South Africa has not even begun to understand the deepest social crisis, which has been structured, engineered, crafted and systematically implemented along decades and decades by the apartheid system precisely to break the social fabric of this nation, so as to oppress and control the majority of the people.

I don't believe that in 18 years of freedom, this nation took the time to seriously revisit what kind of psychological and emotional damage has been inflicted on men and women in this society. Let's remember families have been torn apart for at least three generations. A significant number of parents in their 40s and 50s today, they grew up in torn, disrupted and dysfunctional families. They carry with them the emotional mutilations. They are trying hard to mould their children around a concept of a family, which they didn't have, and they didn't enjoy.

It may sound presumptuous, but I have observed as a South African and also as a Mozambican, that we in this country, we have a huge difficulties in communicating in a smooth, peaceful and accommodating manner. We hold a lot of anger, a lot of aggressiveness in communication. Our societal interactions are in many cases that of accusing one another, blaming one another. It is

52. Graça Machel is an internationally renowned advocate for women's rights. She is the widow of Nelson Mandela and of Mozambican president Samora Machel. On October 2, 2012, she gave this address at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Desmond Tutu Peace Lecture. For the full text of her comments, go to: <http://www.tutu.org.za/graca-machel-addresses-the-2nd-annual-desmond-tutu-international-peace-lecture-2-october-2012>.



almost as if it is the responsibility of somebody else within our society, all the ills we face.

I sincerely think we are in pain, we are hurting, we are bleeding. We are harming one another because we cannot control our pain. I'm not talking of the strikes, I'm talking of society in normal relations. Those who go as far as raping women, children and the elderly are an expression of self-hate. They hate themselves so deep that they feel the need to inflict, and sometimes in a very sophisticated way, to inflict pain and hurt to others. And of course in that, they become hollow of their own sense of humanity and they are trying to destroy the humanity in their victims.

I think we need a vision of how to build a healthy society; how to heal the character of the sons and daughters of this beautiful nation. This vision should help us to get ourselves free from anger, free from fear, free from accumulated frustrations, which inhibit us, or make us unable to touch others in a loving manner.

...We need to have a comprehensive and coherent understanding of what has happened to our feelings, to our emotions, to our social relations, to the way we communicate with one another, to be able then to put this social fabric together.

This vision should help us to get ourselves free from anger, free from fear, free from accumulated frustrations, which inhibit us, or make us unable to touch others in a loving manner.

[Archbishop Desmond Tutu], you led us to confront our demons with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It sounded like it would have been an impossible job, but perpetrators and victims were able to look into the eyes of each other, of one another. They faced the truth, painful as it was and they ended up accepting one another, accepting the past and to join hands and say yes, let's build the present and future together. I think we need something like, but as a movement, not only as a group of people who have happened to have perpetrated some atrocities. We need to do this with the consciousness that as a society we are in pain, we are hurting, and we are bleeding.

**This vision should help us get ourselves free from anger, free from fear, free from accumulated frustrations, which inhibit us...**

... I chose not to speak of this problem as a women's problem, but I know that women are the rock. I want to present women tonight as agents of change with the strength and resilience they have, not as victims as many times are being portrayed. If they can bring up their children alone its because they have resourcefulness and they have the capacity to go beyond themselves and to embrace and love. Women will have to join this, and why not, even to lead the way, in the way they educate their children, men and women, boys and girls to know how to accept one another, to protect one another, to love one another and to make of our societies and our family happy ones...

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## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Graça Machel describes the enormous contribution that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made to facilitating South Africa's acceptance of its past, and to helping former foes to work together for South Africa's future. But she also describes a South Africa that is still largely unhealed, and in particular she cites the family unit as being threatened and even damaged by the country's oppressive and violent history.

- What are some of the societal problems she mentions that are holding South Africans back?
- What does she think the country needs in order to heal?
- Which people does she think may be in the best position to hasten the healing—those she describes as knowing “how to accept one another, to protect one another, to love one another”?
- What role has forgiveness played in helping South Africa move forward from its oppressive and criminal past? What else does society need?

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## TEAM EXERCISE

Divide the group into teams of three or four participants. Ask the teams to consider the following quote:

*When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it—always.*

— Mahatma Gandhi

Ask each team to consider a human rights violation that is of concern to them. Have the team draft a request for forgiveness from the human rights perpetrator that they believe might significantly move the victim or victims to consider forgiving the perpetrator. They will need to imagine the offenses from the perspective of the offender, but also to consider the injuries and continuing harm suffered by the victim. It does not matter if the team does not believe that the perpetrator would, in reality, ever make such a request. The purpose of this exercise is to explore what a request for forgiveness would need to include to have an impact on the victim. The requests for forgiveness should be four to eight sentences in length. When the teams are finished, have a volunteer from each team read their request to the group.

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## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Did you find any of the requests for forgiveness moving? Why or why not?
- Listening to the requests, was it possible to imagine in any of the situations that the victims would be able to one day forgive the perpetrators? If so, which ones?
- Were the requests for forgiveness simply apologies, or something more? If they were more, describe the difference.
- Have you ever considered forgiving a human rights offender? If so, what were the circumstances?
- How would relations change in your community if the perpetrators of discrimination, corruption, and violence asked for forgiveness for their actions? Is it even possible to imagine?
- Do you believe that real rapprochements are possible between victims and perpetrators? Can victims and perpetrators find a way to work together for a better future? Can victims and perpetrators ever heal their divide so well that one day they *might* love each other? If your answer is yes, describe how you imagine that might happen.
- The American theologian and political commentator Reinhold Niebuhr once said, “Forgiveness is the final form of love.” What do you think he meant? Do you agree with him?