



Foregiveness vs. Release

By Wendy Marks
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The act of forgiveness can be a wonderful and mutually rewarding experience for both forgiver and forgiven. In the best of all possible circumstances, we can potentially take a negative experience, or a lifetime of negative experiences, and in a few moments transform them into a new peaceful, understanding relationship.

If we have been selfish, or unforgiving, or acted out of fear and done something that truly hurt someone, forgiveness can be life-changing. The act of asking for forgiveness can provide us with a meaningful way out of our guilt or shame and even possibly provide a cathartic experience. This reparative process can work wonders and heal deep wounds. If we are the forgiver, it is possible that a sense of release and closure might occur, and with it a renewal of a relationship.

The idea of "turning the other cheek" is a central concept in Christian belief. But what does that really mean? Does it mean to walk away from a confrontation, or injury? Or does it mean that one is required to forgive. They are clearly very different things. It can be interpreted as being asked to not respond in kind (as in the classic eye-for-an-eye scenario), or to completely release the other party from responsibility for the pain they have caused us, possibly acting as if it had not happened or had little meaning...

My belief about the process of forgiveness begins with a construct requiring both parties to agree about the nature and impact of the act and its consequences.

Therefore, forgiveness requires discussion and understanding of the issues and a mutual agreement that there will be a safe relationship stemming from this discussion going forward. I don't know about you, but I don't think that a blank check of forgiveness is always the best idea, especially in a situation where we have been harmed.

Is anything unforgivable? Are there acts so hurtful that forgiveness is not within reach, or even appropriate? I would argue, yes. Child abuse, for example, in any form takes advantage of the dependency and weakness of a child and the damage is very difficult, if even possible, to heal. I cannot see a path to forgiveness that does not somehow negate the experience of the injured party— unless there are circumstances where true repentance can be demonstrated.

I knew a woman born into a very abusive family. She had suffered sexual abuse and physical abuse by her father over the course of her childhood. She had many long-term effects, and had spent many years in therapy trying to repair fundamentally damaged concepts of relationships and family, not to mention safety. She had moved on fairly well and had learned to create a family of her own from friends and a few relatives who understood. She had little or no relationship with either of her parents from the time she left home.

So here's the twist: Her father was injured in a car accident and required extensive help and rehabilitation. Her parents and siblings asked her to take off from work, fly cross-country, and help take care of him for several months. It would have been a significant hardship financially, and certainly emotionally, to do so. There been no offers of repair nor reconciliation at this point. In fact, there had been no communication for several years. It was expected she would feel obligated and get on the next plane. But she felt very conflicted.

She was in therapy and asked her therapist what her thoughts were. The therapist said, "Why would you even consider such a thing?" But she was unsure. Wasn't she meant to forgive regardless of the severity of the acts? Isn't that what a good person would do? So being a researcher by nature, she sought to find what religions historically had said about forgiveness. She found that in many religions other than Christianity there were rules for receiving forgiveness. Sephardic Jewish tradition, for example, stipulates a specific protocol for serious acts requiring forgiveness. The person petitioning forgiveness must come three times with a witness and ask forgiveness, detailing their offense. If then forgiveness is not given, the sin goes upon the injured. The key here is the witness— asking with a witness validates and acknowledges the harmful acts and shows true repentance.

Back to my friend. She did not go. She felt she was allowing her life's experience to be unacknowledged if she went. More about her later. . .

So where do we go from here? I would suggest that we consider an alternative that brings peace, but allows for the more common experience of injured parties: Release. . . Speaking your truth to those who are significant in your life, working to repair the damage, and then letting go. Not forgetting nor forgiving, but just deciding not to allow it to define nor control your life. Meditation, prayer, and

moving forward. There is an old Buddhist saying: "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional." We must move on and do constructive acts.

My friend became a suicide hotline volunteer. She said she could help change in small ways, one person at a time.

So aside from the personal, should we not look at the world as we know it now, in distress, conflict and peril— and move our trauma to usefulness? Haven't we all been injured by living in such an unkind and violent world? Is it not traumatic to view day after day violent scenes, threats of extinction in the plant and animal world, and climate change ignorance? I know that even watching the PBS Newshour with its careful warnings about awful topics, I end that hour wondering if humans can or should survive. I would argue we all need to somehow forgive ourselves and others for endangering our futures and decide to release and move forward.

Call yourself to action about things that harm you. Let go of acknowledging blame, and move to change via release and positive actions.

Namaste,

Wendy