

The Slow, Brave Work of Forgiveness



Opening Prayer

Tender and Loving God,

You run to meet us on our road of brokenness and suffering,
to lavish us with Your forgiveness and celebrate our homecoming.
Remind us how to forgive – with openness, vulnerability and generosity.
Be patient with us, as we continue to learn how to welcome
 all who have wounded us, all whom we have scarred,
 and the many, lost and errant parts of ourselves that need a healing embrace.
Transform any residues of bitterness, anger or sorrow into holy gladness.
We ask this, as always, through the Your son and our brother, Jesus,
who also suffered in His relationships yet continued to open His heart in Love,
Amen

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Only forgiveness frees us from injustice.

Forgiveness:

- forgoing what we have “a right to” for what potentially heals us and others
- there are ***different aspects of forgiveness*** and each has its ***own particular challenges and resistances***:
 - being forgiven (belief in worthiness; accepting/receiving gestures or words of forgiveness)
 - forgiving another or a collective
 - asking for forgiveness and making things right/repenting
 - self-forgiveness.
- everyone has a ***forgiveness history***
- is ***mostly hidden, private***
- can be a place of utter ***loneliness and desolation***
- is the place of ***greatest possible consolation, growth, joy: greater intimacy with God***
- the ***most difficult of spiritual disciplines/practices***
- is ***a necessary part of the sp. journey***
- ***is a journey into the unknown***
- in it we ***wrestle with our sense of fairness, God’s sense of justice and mercy***
- is ***unnatural*** to us and ***counterintuitive***
- is a ***gift of freedom we give*** to ourselves ***and*** to the other, as well as the ***larger community***;
- ***cannot be hurried, forced, or mandated***; (but can be inquired about)
- is a ***decision***

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- requires **enormous generosity of heart, humility** and **realization of God's grace and mercy**
- a **decision**
- is **giving up the hope/illusion** that the **past could be different**;
- must set out (**begin the process**) **despite our misgivings** or not feeling fully prepared;
- must be **free of the illusion** that feelings are at the same place as our desire or choice
- is a **spiraling process** of healing that touches into **recurring feelings**
- is mostly a **process of mourning/grief**
- is not a matter of forgetting but of **choosing to "forget" or let go**;
- is **opening to a new identity** beyond defeat or victimhood
- includes **struggling with discernment about reconciliation and inclusion** What is the **appropriate** reconciliation needed in each relationship?
- requires **compassion for self during the process**
- challenges our understanding and **experience of God's unconditional love and mercy**
- is about remembering that **God suffers with us as we struggle to forgive**
- requires an **acceptance of our powerlessness** and a **kenosis** (self- emptying)
- is infused with its **own particular graces**
- is such a **painful process** (and conversion) with **a high cost** (ego/ wrestles with our True/Christ Self for freedom)
- **not forgiving does not protect us**

God never tires of forgiving; it is we who tire of asking for forgiveness.— Pope Francis

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.

- C.S. Lewis



Freedoms of Forgiveness:

Freedom *from*: old life stories, old identities

Freedom *to*: hold new beliefs, create and adopt new attitudes; receive a new identity

Freedom *for*: a new story, deeper capacity and ability to forgive, deeper compassion and vulnerability, greater inner spaciousness and sense of inclusivity and unity in human nature, and greater intimacy with God

Myths about Forgiveness:

- it's for the *freedom and healing of the offended*
- it's *easy*
- *time makes it possible*
- it's possible to *complete during life*
- it's *formulaic*
- *vengeance and retaliation are irrational*
- it's a *one shot deal*
- it's a *matter of will*
- *we should feel guilty* and un-Christian if we struggle to forgive

What we are Called to Forgive:

- to forgive ourselves for what we did or did not know
- to forgive ourselves for what we did or did not do (commission/omission)
- to forgive others for what they did or did not know
- to forgive others for what they did or did not do (commission/omission)

Forgiveness signifies a death. We must undergo various deaths within our lives: death of our youth, wholeness, dreams and fantasies, unconditional love, certain ideas about God and Church.

- Ronald Rolheiser, OMI

Betrayal: a breach of trust; a necessary part of our maturation and growth

- ***all of us will be betrayed:*** by others, institutions, groups or communities, etc.
- ***all of us will betray:*** ourselves, others, our institutions, groups or communities, etc.
- ***it ends our innocence;*** connects us with our humanness, the capacity to do great harm and our individual and collective shadow
- ***all of us will need to forgive:*** ourselves, others, groups or communities, institutions, and God.

Usually the deeper the wound and pain and the harder something is to forgive, the more it is touching into original betrayal wounds.

Where and How We Get Stuck Forgiving (some resistances):

- staying shocked: denying any of the unavoidable "givens" of human existence and reality:
 - *that everything changes and ends*
 - *things do not always go according to plan*
 - *life is not always fair*
 - *pain is a part of life*
 - *people are not loving and loyal all the time**
- confusion about what it is and is not
- lack of imagination
- not realizing it is such important spiritual work
- wanting to deal with it only psychologically
- spiritualizing it
- forgiving too quickly to be over it
- minimizing the hurt and feelings around it to get past it quickly
- expecting the ego or will to do the work
- wanting to carry the burden alone or bringing it to God when "finished"
- fear of re-traumatization or further suffering
- trying to forestall feeling powerless, vulnerable,
- trying to gain control or regain power or go back to Eden and innocence
- clinging to an old identity: not surrendering or letting go
- impatience
- not acknowledging our limitations with forgiving
- equating forgiveness with a type of saintliness

* See: Richo, David. *The Five Things We Cannot Change: And the Happiness We Find by Embracing Them*

Self - Forgiveness Requires

- a willingness to be as compassionate to ourselves as we would be to another
- facing that we can't turn back the clock or get back what is no more
- accepting God's infinite mercy and deep desire for us to feel we are *the beloved*, still and always



Not Forgiving Ourselves

- is self-punitive/self-betrayal
- often assumes we knew better, when we did not or we have the freedom or wisdom we have today
- imprisons us in old patterns of shame, guilt, and self-retribution
- is usually deflated ego driven
- is often an old pattern that invites surrendering
- can create a distraction of false suffering (the wrong cross)
- keeps us stuck and not able to experience the depth and fullness of betrayal and to move through and out of it
- keeps us from taking action where we might
- a type of resistance: denies our deepest sorrow and delays our grief work
- denies us our heart's true desire, the freedom of new life

Healing often comes through the repeated and demonstrated acceptance of another – being an icon of the living God.

As Spiritual Directors:

- listen for what they grieve, through what they are suffering
- notice instances of betrayal and help them name them
- do not be reluctant to bring up the forgiveness process or its pieces
- help them to name and stay connected to their desires for freedom and healing, as well as the freedom of the other
- encourage directees to pray ... for their own willingness to forgive; to stay with their desire to forgive; for the grace to enter the process and stay steady throughout; to have enough strength to surrender – over and over; to be with and tend all their feelings: anger, ambivalence, grief, and to bring them to God
- help them to remember that they can only go as fast as the slowest part of them can go
- encourage them to see God as the healing partner in the process (to be open to God's graces - for God to do God's part)
- remind them to pray for particular graces to begin, continue and finish the process;
- explore their image of God; encourage them in the image of God as comforter and compassionate one - help them in their attempts to know the God who suffers with
- remind them of how Christ forgave while standing steady in his power
- encourage the desire and willingness; celebrate movement
- remind them of the scope of their forgiveness journey and history and how far they've come
- do your own forgiveness work – bring your processes to spiritual direction and, as needed, to supervision

Practices and Rituals of Forgiveness

Setting an Intention

Have them ask God to soften their hearts and allow forgiveness to happen through them (then leave it; don't push it, coerce it, etc.). Encourage them to tend the desire and the intention by being faithful to it.

Bringing the Other into the Light

Spend time in prayer bringing the offender into the Light. Picture the person clearly. Notice and tend all feelings as they observe the person. Allow Jesus to enter the scene with the person. Observe how Jesus is with the person. Hear what He says to both parties. Does he embrace both at the end?

Tending Their Own Sorrowful Mysteries or Stations of the Cross

With God, review their life to see their own sorrowful mysteries (events of pain, longing, suffering, sorrow). Pray them as they might pray the rosary: meditating on each. Do the same for the stations of the cross, naming times of suffering and eventual crucifixion. Who tried to help them along the way? Who stood at their cross? How many times did they fall? How can they unite your suffering with the passion of Christ?

Forgive Themselves

Encourage them to sit and just receive God's love and mercy, God's gaze: to bask in it, enjoy it, embrace it. Ask God for healing and a compassionate heart. Can they gently allow themselves to hear God telling them that they are totally forgiven for all that they have done around a particular incident or in their lifetime? Encourage them to respond to God as they wish.

Doing a Life Examen

In God's gracious presence, have them review their life with great honesty. Encourage them to say aloud: *"I never thought I would be the kind of person who..."* then list on paper all the hurts they have caused others. Keep writing, over days if necessary. Then hold that list in prayer, seeing fully what they have been capable of doing and harboring in their heart. Own all of it.. Encourage them to make an act of deep contrition and make any amends that might be appropriate, asking for God's mercy and forgiveness. When finished, lay the paper to rest, knowing they have been forgiven: burn or bury it or create another appropriate ritual, thanking God for their new freedom.

Ritualize Letting Go

If or when appropriate, help the person to formalize their letting go through a ritual they devise (burying, letting fly away or freeing, artistic expression, visiting a grave etc.)

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Remember Where Jesus Stood on Power and Forgiveness

- He ***never gave his power away***; he always ***remained in his power***
- He was ***often frustrated and frequently disappointed***
- because He was in relationships, ***He necessarily struggled with forgiveness***
- He ***always held people responsible for their actions by naming their injustices or when they were out of line; He named what needed naming*** without condemning them
- He ***longed for others to grow and consistently called others to go beyond where they were***
- though he ***constantly challenged***, He ***always extended an invitation***
- He ***did not enable*** and was ***not co-dependent***
- He was ***always more interested in the spirit of the law than the letter***
- He ***asked people to give up their attachments***
- He ***invited people to give up their childishness*** (immaturity) in order to become childlike
- He ***invited people to give up their faith as they knew it***, to risk a deeper faith
- He ***showed that redemptive suffering is always part of the process of growth***



Jesus, like the ultimate cleansing filter, purifies life itself:

He takes in hatred, holds it, transforms it and gives back love;

*He takes in bitterness, holds it, transforms it, and gives back
graciousness;*

*He takes in curses, holds them, transforms them, and gives back
blessings;*

He takes in chaos, holds it, transforms it, and gives back order;

He takes in fear, holds it, transforms it, and gives back freedom;

*He takes in jealousy, holds it, transforms it, and gives back
affirmation;*

He takes in betrayal, holds it, transforms it and gives back forgiveness; and

He takes in evil, holds it, transforms it and gives back God.

- Adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, OMI

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