

Forgiveness – recipe for happiness?

Talk by Jim Vashro, Jan 7, 2024

Opening Words: Thoughts by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The following are extracts from a sermon that was delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, at Christmas, 1957. Martin Luther King wrote it while in jail for committing nonviolent civil disobedience during the Montgomery bus boycott.

Since Rev. King is an ordained minister, he makes references to the bible and the words of Jesus. Also, since this letter was written in 1957, equate his use of the terms 'Man' and 'Men' to mean 'Person' and 'People'...

And I quote: "Probably no admonition of Jesus has been more difficult to follow than the command to "love your enemies." Some men have sincerely felt that its actual practice is not possible. It is easy, they say, to love those who love you, but how can one love those who openly and insidiously seek to defeat you?..."

And he continues: "... Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, the command to love one's enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival. Love even for enemies is the key to the solution of the problems of our world...."

He goes on to say:

"How do we love our enemies?"

First, we must develop and maintain the capacity to **forgive**....

... Second, we must recognize that the evil deed of the enemy-neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all that he is. An element of goodness may be found even in our worst enemy...."

... Third, we must not seek to humiliate the enemy but to win his friendship and understanding..."

It is at this point in his letter that Rev. King introduced us to the three Greek concepts of love; Eros, Philia, and Agape. It is this third type of love Rev. King is referring to when he says:

“... At this level, we love men not because we like them, nor because their ways appeal to us, nor even because they possess some type of divine spark; we love every man because God loves him. At this level, we love the person who does an evil deed, although we hate the deed that he does.”

Words for Reflection: at this point I would like to reflect on one of the prime reactions we may have when we are wronged – revenge and retribution. To aide in that reflection here are some thoughts by Frederick Buechner

(Frederick Buechner (pronounced BEEK-ner) is an American writer and theologian.)

Frederick Buechner is quoted as saying:

“Of the seven deadly sins, ANGER is probably the most fun!

To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long-past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king.

The chief drawback is what you are wolfing down is yourself.

The skeleton at the feast is you.

Frederick Buechner

Closing Words: Thich Nhat Hanh on forgiveness

"...in order to **forgive**, you have to see the suffering and the unskillfulness of the other person. The other person may not want to hurt us, to make us suffer, it's just that she or he has a lot of unskillfulness. If they hurt us, we can recognize that this was caused by their unskillfulness, and we will not be angry and can easily forgive them.

And when we see the suffering in that person – which is at the base of all acts and words that cause suffering – we can understand that suffering. When we know that that person is not capable of handling, of taking care of the suffering in him or her, we realize that they have become a victim of the suffering, and that we are only victim number two or three.

When we are able to see the suffering in him or her, and see that that person is a victim of his own suffering, then it's easy to **forgive**."

Today I am going to spend a few minutes talking about 'Forgiveness'.

Forgiveness from the point of view of the person doing the forgiving, not the person being forgiven. I am going to make a case for why it is important to forgive and state some of the benefits in doing so. We won't have time to get into 'how to forgive', instead I will be focusing on 'why would I want to forgive'.

As resources for my talk, I turned to 3 main publications.

1. A letter written by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and presented in a A.J. Muste Memorial Institute Essay Series, letter entitled: "Loving Your Enemies"
2. A few extracts selected from the bible
3. The book, 'Forgive for Good' written by Dr. Fred Luskin, a Stanford professor and Director and Cofounder of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project.

I came to this opportunity to give this talk, not out of any great understanding of the topic, or any significant insight I have obtained, but of a desire to understand what is meant by forgiveness and why do it.

Here is a bit of the backstory – One day I found myself talking with a friend and feeling the great emotional trauma they were describing over a very painful event that had occurred. I remember sensing the great pain they were feeling, and I thought 'you have never forgiven them for their actions...' I may have said "do you believe in forgiveness?" I am not sure why that thought occurred to me... All I knew was they were suffering, and that suffering, that painful memory,

had been held onto for a long time and was very present that very day. I, like most, don't like suffering and my wish for that person was to not have this pain continue.

In my simple way of thinking about it – forgiveness was needed and then move on, move past the suffering, and make a place in the heart for joy so you can get on with life, joyfully! To once again 'smell the roses'.

I saw someone hurting and I wanted to 'make it all better'...

Well... I realized I wasn't dealing with a 4-year-old that scraped their knee, and 'making it all better, it wasn't as simple as putting a band aid on and sending them off to play...

So, I put on my 'adult' hat (you know in life we all get to wear many hats...) so I put on my 'adult' hat and thought: **'forgiveness'** is the answer!

So, after patting myself on the back for a second or two, I then thought "what is forgiveness?" I am not sure I know what forgiveness is. I have heard the imperative "to forgive is divine:" and I sure don't consider myself as divine, so what is this thing that I just recommended? ... and that led to this talk...

Maybe you noticed I said 'talk' and not sermon, and here comes the disclaimer for today; I am not a Theological scholar, or a thoughtful Guru, or a certified Therapist (well I have had a bit of Psychotherapy training, but minimal), Today, I only offer you some things to think about concerning the topic of forgiveness –

take them as they were intended, thoughts on a topic, not commands from 'on high', or a spiritual path to take, or a guarantee to salvation... I only offer my thoughts about the topic and hope that it may help you 'reframe' your thoughts about dealing with your suffering and pain.

Since I only have about 10-15 minutes – let me jump right into the thick of things...

You have been injured, offended, slandered, hurt, put-off, abused, mistreated by someone else – generally, someone has caused you pain. In the words of Thich Nacht Han, a popular Buddhist monk and philosopher, someone's 'unskillfulness' has caused you, or others pain.

What now? What do you do? How should you respond? How can you respond?

And, by the way, the mistreatment can run the gamut all the way from a physical assault, yes and even death, to a subtle emotional snub – too small to even mention, however, causing pain and suffering.

In thinking about what to do, one can imagine any number of responses; you can yell, hit, ignore, run, hide, stand there and take some more...any number of responses. What do you want to do? What do you do?....

Let's spend a moment thinking about ones motivations at this point. You or someone's been hurt and what do you want to do?

- Do you want revenge?

- Do you want the offender punished?
- Do you want to take steps to make sure this never happens again?
- I mentioned revenge, do you want to retaliate to mete out justice?
- Do you want to hide from the embarrassment and shame from being offended?
- Do you want what happened to just 'all go away'?
- Do you want to prove that you are big enough and strong enough to not be hurt by the offense?
- Or do you just want to be left alone in your pain? To lick your wounds? To 'turn the other cheek'?

The answer as to how you respond is a personal one and I am not here to tell you what to do or how to respond. I do however suggest you take a moment, if you can, and examine your motive, that is, what you are trying to accomplish by your response or your reaction to the offense?

By being clearer about your motivation, I believe you will select a better response.

So why am I talking about **forgiveness**? How will forgiveness answer any of these motivations? Will forgiveness take care of the drive for revenge and retaliation? Will forgiveness make sure the perpetrator is punished? Will forgiveness ensure the act will not be done again? Will forgiveness bring about justice to the

wrongdoing? Will forgiveness shield you from embarrassment, will it erase the pain that was caused?

I think not, so just what will Forgiveness do?....

Let's go back a bit and start with a definition of forgiveness:

The [Oxford Dictionary](#) defines forgiveness as:

1. the action or process of [forgiving](#) or being [forgiven](#).

Hmmm, I never liked definitions that used the same word to describe itself...

So how about this:

Forgiveness means different things to different people. But in general, it involves **an intentional decision to let go of resentment and anger**. (The act that hurt or offended you might always be with you. But working on forgiveness can lessen that act's grip on you.) This wisdom comes from the staff at the Mayo Clinic..

Or finally this definition: The Bible teaches that **unselfish love** is the basis for true forgiveness, since "it (that being unselfish love) keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5). Forgiving others means letting go of resentment and giving up any claim to be compensated for the hurt or loss we have suffered.

How does that feel? Does it appeal to the senses? Satisfy your hunger for an answer? “Forgiving others means letting go of resentment and giving up any claim to be compensated for the hurt or loss we have suffered.”

I like that definition or explanation of Forgiveness...

In his book, ‘Forgive for Good’, Dr. Fred Luskin’s basic message is: “Take control of your emotions and stop expending your personal energy on trying to make something done in the past – somehow better”...

That is what I believe **forgiveness** is, stop expending your personal energy on trying to make something done in the past – somehow better”...

Dr. Luskin goes on in his book to say, “...forgiveness is not the same as approving of unkindness. Forgiveness does not mean you have to reconcile with someone who mistreated you. You do not have to forget what happened. Forgiveness does not mean you lie down and become a doormat when you are hurt.

Forgiveness **means** we find peace, even though we were in pain and mistreated. Forgiveness means we **move on in our life** after an abandonment of an affair. It means we become **responsible** for how we feel. Forgiveness means we learn to take painful events less **personally**. Forgiveness means we reconnect

with **positive intention**. Forgiveness means we **change** our grievance story ('grievance story' is a term Dr. Luskin uses to identify that baggage we carry from a painful event). Forgiveness means that we **do not** stop smelling the roses simply because we are hurt. Forgiveness means we make better decisions **guiding** our lives and forgiveness means we **feel better**."

Forgiveness can improve your life! Scientific research has documented the healing power of forgiveness. In his book, Dr. Luskin states:

"Forgiveness has been shown to reduce depression, increase hopefulness, decrease anger, improve spiritual connection, increase emotional self-confidence, and help heal relationships."

Dr. Luskin goes on to state that studies reveal:

- People who are more forgiving report **fewer health** problems
- Forgiveness leads to **less stress**
- Forgiveness leads to **fewer** physical symptoms of stress
- Failure to forgive may be **more important** than 'hostility' as a risk factor for heart disease
- People who blame other people for their troubles have **higher incidence of illness** such as cardiovascular disease and cancers
- People who imagine **not** forgiving some show **negative changes** in blood pressure, muscular tension, and immune response
- People who imagine forgiving their offender note **immediate improvement** in their cardiovascular, muscular, and nervous systems
- Even people with devastating losses can learn to forgive and feel **better** psychologically and emotionally

Ok, so possibly at this point you may be feeling more motivated to offer 'forgiveness', at least as Dr. Luskin has defined it. But how do I offer forgiveness? How do I 'ease my soul' so to speak, how do I move on and bring joy back into my life – to 'smell the roses...'?

Well, unfortunately that may be the subject for another talk, my hope for today was to introduce you to the scientifically proven fact that the act of forgiving is a **more healthy** and **helpful way** to deal with the pain and suffering of being wronged. Hopefully I have given you a little insight into forgiveness.

For those of you wanting to dig deeper and do some work, Dr. Luskin in his book offers several "steps to forgiveness". Steps that will take one closer to peace and personal comfort.

In closing, I leave you with these words that I found on Facebook, in a list of 'advice from an **old** farmer' he says:

"Forgive your enemies; it messes up their heads."

Thanks for listening...

Dr. Luskin's steps:

Step 1: **Prepare** for forgiving (Chapter 6)

- Examine and 'know' how you feel (define it)

- know what was wrong

- tell a few trusted friends what happened

Step 2: PERT 'Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique' (pg 119)

Step 3: Go from 'believing in **unenforceable rules** to Wishes & hopes' rules like:...
page 135

Step 4: HEAL Method – **H**ope, **E**ducate, **A**ffirm, **L**ong Term

