

Conversations About
FORGIVENESS

“Life is an adventure
in forgiveness.”

—Norman Cousins

FACILITATOR GUIDE

FOUR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

FACILITATOR GUIDE

Table of Contents

About This Guide	3
Introducing the Campaign	4
Introducing the Conversations.....	4
Facilitator’s Role	5
Conversation Format.....	6
A Suggested List of Shared Agreements	8
Listening with Focus and Attention	8
Essay: Why Forgive?	9
Conversation One: What Is the Nature of Forgiveness?	14
Conversation Two: Why Forgive?.....	16
Essay: The Journey to Forgiveness	17
Conversation Three: Learning to Forgive.....	21
Essay: Forgiving the Unforgivable.....	23
Conversation Four: Forgiving the Unforgivable ...	25
Endnotes	27
Additional Resources	28
Letter-Writing Tips.....	30

About this Guide

This Facilitator Guide is designed to provide you with information about the Campaign for Love & Forgiveness and suggestions and tools for facilitating conversations about forgiveness in your community, organization, or school. The guide includes background material to assist you in your role as facilitator, three essays that explore why and how to forgive, as well as what some consider to be “unforgivable” acts, suggested video clips from the public television program *The Power of Forgiveness* to use with accompanying discussion questions, ideas for activities, and a Participant Handbook with essays and take-home exercises. **We invite you to use or adapt any of the material included here so that it works best for you and your group.**

We hope that you find this guide useful, and we thank you for your interest in facilitating these important conversations.

Forgiveness is the final form of love.

—Reinhold Niebuhr



FOUR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

FACILITATOR GUIDE (continued)

*Forgiveness will not
be possible until
compassion is born
in your heart.*

— Thich Nhat Hanh
in *The Power
of Forgiveness*

Introducing the Campaign

The Campaign for Love & Forgiveness (www.loveandforgive.org), a project of The Fetzer Institute (www.fetzer.org), is a community engagement initiative that encourages people to bring love and forgiveness into the heart of individual and community life. Through facilitated conversations in six cities, and a robust Web site that offers activities, reflections, and a thoughtful curriculum, the campaign has touched thousands of people since its launch in 2006. The resources at loveandforgive.org are available for anyone to use.

Introducing the Conversations

The goal of the Four Conversations About Forgiveness is to encourage participants to think and talk about forgiveness, with the hope that this will bring about meaningful change in attitudes and behavior. For example, we hope that participants might choose to start practicing “small forgivenesses,” or be inspired to write a letter to someone they love or would like to forgive. Each conversation has a specific focus and uses a clip from the film *The Power of Forgiveness*, a PBS documentary that received major funding from the Fetzer Institute, to spark reflection and dialogue. The Campaign for Love & Forgiveness has a goal of helping participants explore the role of love and forgiveness as tools for transformation.

Ideally, each facilitator will host at least four conversations about forgiveness so that the conversations can deepen over time. **You may choose whether to lead the conversations in the suggested order, depending on the experiences, needs, and desires of your group.** We suggest that the conversations take place over a period of four to 12 weeks, and last at least two hours each. This guide for conversation facilitators offers video clip suggestions, discussion questions, activity ideas, and a suggested structure for the conversations.

The first conversation focuses on the nature of forgiveness, helping participants understand their own attitudes and beliefs and explore what forgiveness is—and is not. The second conversation builds on the initial exploration, looking at the ways in which forgiveness can benefit our health and well-being. Conversation Three takes participants further in their journey to forgiveness, examining the different ways that forgiveness can occur. The final conversation delves deeper into what might be considered unforgivable acts, and to self-forgiveness, something that can be more difficult for some people than forgiving others.

Between conversations, participants will have the opportunity to practice and add to what they are learning via the essays, suggested activities, and journaling pages suggested in the Participant Handbook.

In keeping with the Fetzer Institute’s belief that individual transformation can lead to societal change, we hope that as participants learn about different aspects of forgiveness and practice more forgiveness in their own lives, there will be a ripple effect into communities. For example, some communities have created a Garden of Forgiveness. Perhaps there is a difficult issue in your community where an intentional focus on forgiveness can play a role.

FOUR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

FACILITATOR GUIDE (continued)

Facilitator's Role

As you bring your own style to these conversations, we are also relying on you to lead the conversations, and create a welcoming, safe, and comfortable environment for participants who may—quite possibly—be sharing from their hearts. You may want to recognize the courage it takes to share stories and feelings surrounding the topic of forgiveness, and make participants aware that the subject matter may trigger powerful emotions in them. Ask the group to honor these emotions as they arise (e.g., crying is okay and the group can respectfully hold space for someone's tears without needing to do anything). You can also research additional resources and offer them to those who may wish to more deeply explore personal issues outside the conversations. (Ideas include information about conflict resolution programs and efforts, substance abuse treatment and recovery, programs for families and friends of addicts, programs for those experiencing domestic or other abuse, mental health resources, etc.) You will likely find that by sharing your thoughts and experiences, you will be modeling the kind of sharing and conduct that will keep the conversations respectful, purposeful, and enjoyable.

If extremely powerful emotions or conflict should arise among participants, addressing them in a way that honors both those involved and the group at large will be important. For example, you could take time to have participants explore any internal or external conflicts in a way that models respect for differing opinions and the possibility of “agreeing to disagree.” If a conflict threatens to derail the group in a way that would not illustrate the concepts being discussed, or if the conflict is taking up too much of the group's time, you could ask those involved to set aside some time after the session for further exploration or mediation, and make yourself available for private conversation on the matter as you are able. You will have to use your judgment in these situations. If someone is consistently disrupting the group, you may ask them privately to re-evaluate their reasons for

joining the conversations. Maintaining safety and order for the entire group is most important, of course, even as the constructive exploration of conflict within the group can be beneficial to everyone's learning.

We include in this handbook a suggested list of shared agreements for you and your participants. They could be read at the beginning of each conversation, to set the tone and create a framework for sharing, and they can be amended, expanded, or rewritten by your group, as desired. And since participants will be doing a lot of listening, there's also a page on the nature and value of focused listening. You could read this with participants at the first conversation and briefly discuss how focused listening can in itself be an act of love.

About *The Power of Forgiveness*

The Power of Forgiveness examines the role forgiveness can play in alleviating anger and grief, as well as the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits that come with forgiveness. The documentary combines character-driven stories about the most dramatic transgressions imaginable and stories that feel more familiar to the viewer.

The film is produced by award-winning Journey Films, which brought the feature-length documentary *Bonhoeffer* to theaters nationwide and to PBS.

More information is available at www.thepowerofforgiveness.com.



Muslim men at prayer in The Power of Forgiveness

FOUR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

FACILITATOR GUIDE (continued)

Forgiving is not having to understand. Understanding may come later, in fragments, an insight here and a glimpse there . . .

—Lewis B. Smedes

Conversation Format

As a facilitator, you'll be responsible for making sure that the conversations start and end on time, and following the format and agenda that you've decided upon (allowing for changes and new directions that may arise as the conversations progress). Below is a suggested flow for a two-hour conversation. If you and your participants wish to focus your conversations about forgiveness on a specific topic or issue that may be challenging your community, you might adapt this flow to your own agenda. **You also have the opportunity to make the conversations and the suggested activities suit the particular makeup of your group and tailor them with regard to culture, age, ethnicity, etc.**

1. **Prepare.** Review this guide and familiarize yourself with the concepts. Read the essays and view the clips ahead of time.
2. **On the day of the conversation.** Arrive early enough to make sure that the room is ready for participants (enough chairs, arranged in a circle or around a table for conversation, proper ventilation and temperature, water, flip charts, paper, writing utensils, working video/audio equipment, nametags, signs, etc.). It's important that you feel as relaxed as possible in your role, so give yourself as much time as you need to prepare. You might take a few moments to center yourself before people arrive, and set an intention or hold a vision for how you wish to guide the conversation.
3. **Begin the conversation on time.** This sets a precedent and honors those present.
4. **Officially welcome the group and introduce yourself.** At the first conversation, it's important to acknowledge the courage and goodwill of those who have chosen to participate. You can also read the mood/body language of the group, and acknowledge any nervousness or anxiety that people may feel about joining the conversations and sharing about something as personal as forgiveness. The facilitator acts as a group voice at times like this, and you can

exemplify honest sharing by mentioning any feelings that you may have in this moment about leading the conversations. You might also say something brief about why you chose to facilitate these conversations, and what you hope to achieve.

5. **Invite participants to briefly introduce themselves.** It's best to keep this concise, with participants stating their names, where they live (or work, or go to school, etc., depending on the group's identity), and a sentence about how they are feeling *in the moment* about being part of the conversation. You can say that there will be more time later for actual discussion. This kind of "lightning check-in" at the beginning of each conversation allows people to momentarily release whatever thought or feeling might distract them from being present to the group. An example: "My name is Lily and I live in Springfield. I'm stressed because I had to rush to get here and I'm kind of nervous about being here because I don't know what to expect."
6. **Announce the format.** Give everyone a sense of the conversation's flow and ending time. Remind them where bathrooms are and if there are snacks available, and encourage them to take care of themselves during the conversation (stretch if they need to, get a drink of water, etc.). You may wish to build in a break midway.
7. **Distribute and review handbooks.** At the first conversation, you might choose to give the participants their handbooks, and join them in reading aloud the introductions to the campaign and conversations. You can also review the format of the handbooks and note the suggested home practices.
8. **Read aloud with participants the suggested shared agreements in the handbooks or name your own.** This establishes an identity and code of conduct for the group, and allows everyone to feel responsible for honoring that code. We have provided a suggested list, which you and your participants can amend and/or expand for your particular needs, or use as a reference in creating your own list. It's a good

FOUR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

FACILITATOR GUIDE (continued)

idea to read the shared agreements for at least the first two conversations. After the agreements are read aloud by all who wish to read, you can ask whether anyone has a question or need for clarification, and address any of those needs. You may also wish to take a group vote on the agreements.

9. Center the group. This helps people “land” in the room, and invites calm and focus. Ideas include: a minute of silence with relaxed or closed eyes (not everyone is comfortable closing their eyes among strangers), a brief meditation on breath and body awareness, an invitation to silently pray or set an intention, or your own preferred centering technique. Participants could also meditate on forgiveness itself—where they experience it in the body, how it feels, what images or thoughts come to mind, etc. You could also invite them to think about a time when they were forgiven and how it felt to be forgiven. Afterwards you could verbally end the centering, or ring a soft chime to bring everyone’s attention back to the group. Another idea is to set the tone with a quotation (perhaps from these materials) on the subject of forgiveness. You might offer participants the chance to bring in a quotation of their own for this purpose. If you sense a desire among participants to share about the centering, you can invite them to do so briefly.

10. About the essays. This guide includes three essays: *Why Forgive?*, *The Journey to Forgiveness*, and *Forgiving the Unforgivable*. These provide background and context for the conversations, and include an overview of relevant research. The first essay is suggested in conjunction with Conversations One and Two, the second with Conversation Three, and the third with Conversation Four. We suggest reading the essays out loud, with each person participating. You can also encourage participants to read the essays at home.

11. Lead activities for the conversation. Each conversation includes a clip from *The Power of Forgiveness* DVD available at <http://www.fetzer.org/loveandforgive/take-action/start-conversations#download>. For each clip, this guide includes suggested discussion questions and

activities. Keep in mind that depending on the size of your group, the entire time might be taken up by viewing the clip and having a discussion around the focused questions. You likely also have your own ideas for group activities, depending on your conversation format and the group’s make-up. Have a few alternative exercises in mind for anyone who may need them (e.g., if someone feels uncomfortable about sharing something personal out loud, they could write about the topic instead during the activity), and give participants permission to skip or alter any exercises that make them uncomfortable. You may have to pair with someone during some of the activities, even as you will also be conducting them and keeping an eye on the time.

12. Follow the cues of the group. Forgiveness and its relationship to love is a very rich topic for dialogue. The suggested focus and film clip address only some of the many areas that merit discussion. Your group may wish to explore other directions, and as facilitator, you will decide whether and how to lead them there. Keep in mind that the next series of campaign conversations will focus on those acts that are considered by many to be “unforgivable,” so you may choose to wait to discuss this content area.

13. End activities and move to a moment of silence. This allows everyone to briefly “digest” the conversation and identify their feelings in the moment. Again, verbal instructions and/or a soft chime could mark the start of this closing meditation.

14. Close the conversation with the group. You and the participants can offer brief statements about how you feel at the end of the conversation, and/or what you might take home from the experience. Encourage participants to use their handbooks as a way to keep the conversation alive and expand upon their learning, and invite them to read the essay (included in their handbooks) in preparation for the next session. Remind everyone of the next conversation date, and stay a few extra minutes for any questions/comments that participants may have as they leave.

FOUR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

FACILITATOR GUIDE (continued)

Simply put, there is nothing, nothing in the world, that can take the place of one person intentionally listening or speaking to another.

—Jacob Needleman

A Suggested List of Shared Agreements for Four Conversations About Forgiveness

Shared agreements among group members can help to keep conversations orderly, respectful, and conducive to honest sharing. Your group may amend or customize this list, as needed, or you might choose instead to brainstorm your own set of agreements.

You can vote on your shared agreements at the first conversation, and refer to them as needed throughout the remaining conversations. We invite you to also consider the power of listening with focused attention as a way to support all participants in the conversations.

1. We agree to hold confidential what is shared in this room. If we encounter a conversation partner outside this room, we will respect his or her privacy.
2. We intend to balance sharing and listening, allowing everyone to participate, and we'll pass whenever we wish.
3. When someone is speaking, we'll allow him or her to speak uninterrupted, and refrain from giving unsolicited feedback, advice, or commentary.
4. We commit to using "I" statements as often as possible when we share.
5. We will assume good intentions on everyone's part, agree that we may disagree at times, and learn together about respecting differences.
6. If an exercise makes us uncomfortable, we can skip it or ask the facilitator about an alternative.
7. We intend to arrive on time and attend all four conversations, and strive to begin and end our conversations on time.
8. We will listen with focus and attention.

(Add other agreements unique to our group.)

Listening with Focus and Attention

As a group, you might take a few minutes to discuss the value of listening, and share experiences where you really felt heard or really tuned in to someone who needed to be heard.

A discussion about good listening skills might include these points:

- Listening with an open heart and mind
- Allowing the speaker to finish his or her thoughts and sentences, even when we feel impatient to speak
- Accepting that the speaker feels what he or she feels, no matter what we think, and refraining from "correcting" the speaker's feelings
- Listening with no agenda other than to be a sounding board for someone who needs to speak
- Imagining that we are speaking and listening to ourselves
- Listening without trying to solve or fix a problem, unless feedback or advice is sought
- (Other skills, as suggested by our group)

Why Forgive?

This essay may be used for Conversations One and Two and can be read individually or out loud, as a group.

The concept of forgiveness should come naturally to us. Why? Because we are unique and fallible human beings. Because we make mistakes. We see the world differently. Our preferences, foibles, personalities, and needs differ. Our religions, cultures, and world views differ.

These differences, combined with the daily frustrations, hurts, and injustices we witness and experience throughout our lives, can cause us pain and even inflict deep wounds in our hearts and psyches. For those wounds, forgiveness can be a powerful, self-administered salve. In fact, research has revealed that forgiveness can contribute to our health, happiness, and peace of mind.

For some of us, forgiveness isn't something we think much about. For others, it is a central life practice. For many, it is misunderstood. When you think of forgiveness, what is the first thing that arises? A thought? A feeling? A memory? What does forgiveness mean to you? Whatever you think of when you think of forgiveness, it is a starting point for coming to a common understanding of this timeless and powerful practice. That is where we will begin.

If forgiveness is a hard concept for you to grasp, you aren't alone. It's not an easy practice or process, especially if you're just starting out. The first time forgiveness crosses your mind or lips is just one moment in a process to untangle yourself from the pain and repercussions of experiencing a hurt, transgression, or injustice.

You may be afraid that forgiving an offense will diminish the affront itself. It won't. Forgiveness is not forgetting. It is not accepting or justifying the offense. It is not pardoning, excusing, condoning, or even reconciling. And you don't necessarily have to understand the offender or the offense to forgive.

Forgiveness is a conscious, willful choice to turn away from the pain, hurt, resentment, and wish for revenge that arises from a betrayal, offense, injustice, or deep hurt. Forgiveness involves a willingness to see the transgression and transgressor in a larger context, and to replace negative feelings with compassion and tolerance.

Robert Enright, PhD, professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, points out that by forgiving “we are acknowledging that the offense was unfair and will always continue to be unfair. Second, we have a moral right to anger; it is fair to cling to our view that people do not have a right to hurt us. We have a right to respect. Third, forgiveness requires giving up something to which we have a right—namely our anger or resentment.”¹

Forgiveness is an opportunity for transformation, both individually and collectively. It not only helps relieve mental and emotional anguish, but it offers the possibility for change, for redemption, for restoration—for hope and even love to blossom from pain and suffering. It can stop a cycle of hurt and create opportunity where there seemed to be none. Most of all, it has the potential to heal and open our hearts to love again and more fully, strengthening and building our capacity for compassion and understanding.

For each person, there is a unique history and set of reasons why we choose to forgive or not to forgive. If you've experienced someone forgiving you, you likely have an idea why this practice is important. If you've forgiven someone who hurt you and you have felt the tension within you begin to ease, you may understand the significance of forgiveness. But there is more.

Forgiveness is both a decision and a real change in emotional experience. That change in emotion is related to better physical and mental health.

—Everett Worthington

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

—Maya Angelou

Why People Forgive

According to Robert Enright, the reasons that people forgive fall into the following eight categories:

1. You forgive to quiet your angry feelings.
2. Forgiveness changes destructive thoughts into quieter, more healthy thoughts.
3. As you forgive, you want to act more civilly toward the one who hurt you.
4. Forgiveness of one person helps you interact better with others. Perhaps your anger with your supervisor has spilled over to your relationship with children. Forgiving your boss would be a gift to your children.
5. Forgiveness can improve your relationship with the one who hurt you.
6. Your forgiveness actually can help the one who hurt you to see his or her unfairness and take steps to stop it. Your forgiving can enhance the character of the one who hurt you.
7. You forgive because God asks you to do so. You forgive as an act of love toward God.
8. Forgiveness, as an act of kindness and love toward the one who hurt you, is a moral good regardless of how the other is responding to you. Loving others, while protecting yourself from harm, is a morally good thing to do.²

Until fairly recently there was little research to substantiate the tangible benefits of forgiveness. In the past decade, however, interest in the topic has exploded both inside and outside academia. Researchers are exploring the role of forgiveness in our health, well-being, and relationships and in healing intergroup conflict. Through their research, they are finding effective ways to bring this practice into many aspects of our lives.

Good evidence associates forgiveness with emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Research has shown that forgiveness can reduce depression and anger, increases hopefulness and self-confidence, and helps improve the health of marriages and families.³ Forgiveness education has also shown promise in preventing crime by reducing vengeful responses that can lead to criminal acts.⁴

In addition, researchers are testing the use of forgiveness training in reducing and healing intergroup conflict such as that experienced by Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland or Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda. In a study conducted by Fred Luskin, PhD, co-director of the Stanford-Northern Ireland HOPE Project, and Reverend Byron Bland, associate director of the Stanford Center on International Conflict and Negotiation, which brought together Protestants and Catholics from Northern Ireland for group forgiveness training, participants who had family members murdered reported less hurt, anger, stress, and depression after the training, as well as improvement in physical vitality and general well-being.⁵ And South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) showed the power of forgiveness to transform a country, help its people heal from their injustices and wounds, and look together toward a brighter future.

Why Forgive? (continued)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chair of the TRC, believes that "... to forgive is indeed the best form of self-interest since anger, resentment, and revenge are corrosive of that *summum bonum*, that greatest good, communal harmony that enhances the humanity and personhood of all in the community."⁶

To forgive is also deeply rooted in many of the world's religious teachings, beliefs, and practices. For many, religious beliefs provide a roadmap and a resource for forgiveness—a touchstone that helps to deal with what otherwise might be too overwhelming.

According to authors Michael McCullough and Everett Worthington, PhD, executive director for A Campaign for Forgiveness Research, "The concept of forgiveness has dual natures: a common one and a transcendent one. In the common, material world, forgiveness is just one more social-psychological phenomenon ... But forgiveness has another nature as well. It is spiritual, transcendent, timeless."⁷

In a study by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, nearly 60 percent of Americans reported they had forgiven themselves for past mistakes, while almost 75 percent said they felt God had forgiven them.⁸ "I think all of us, at one time or another, when we've made the same mistakes over and over again, have felt that we must be a disappointment in God's eyes. Yet there's a remarkably high level of confidence across the country that God forgives us, compared to a much lower level of forgiveness for oneself and others," explained Loren Toussaint, psychologist and author of the study.⁹ Religion and spirituality offer a way to see life's experiences in a larger context. Rituals, traditions, and sacred practices help us navigate the forgiveness process with a greater purpose and, for many, are a divine guide.

As long as we remain imperfect beings, there will be a need to forgive ourselves and others. If forgiveness seems like a faraway concept—too hard to contemplate—take heart in the examples of forgiveness all around us, like the Amish community in Pennsylvania who responded to the shooting of 10 Amish schoolgirls by forgiving the man responsible. Or Heidi Coffee, who, when she lost her husband to a car accident, invited the man allegedly responsible to her husband Gavin's memorial service. According to Heidi, Gavin often invoked the saying, "Holding a grudge is like taking poison and waiting for someone to die."¹⁰

The practice of forgiveness holds hope for transforming not only our individual health and well-being, but also the health of our relationships, schools, workplaces, communities, and beyond. While researchers continue to explore why and how forgiveness works in our lives, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, having witnessed the power of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process, believes simply "there is no future without forgiveness."

Forgiveness is not a single magnanimous gesture in response to an isolated offence; it is part of a continuum of human engagements in healing broken relationships.

—Marina Cantacuzino

When love listens, it listens with an ear and a heart to the unspoken.

—Daphne Rose Kingma

Forgiveness breaks the silos of a disconnected humanity.

—Bonnie Wesorick

Different Beliefs About Forgiveness

“The most basic kind of forgiveness is ‘forgoing the other’s indebtedness’ (*mechilá*). If the offender has done *teshuva* [a process requiring the offender to acknowledge their offence, express remorse, make restitution, and take steps to prevent repeating the behavior], and is sincere in his or her repentance, the offended person should offer *mechila*; that is, the offended person should forgo the debt of the offender, relinquish his or her claim against the offender. This is not a reconciliation of heart or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender no longer owes me anything for whatever it was that he or she did ...

“The second kind of forgiveness is ... *selichá*. It is an act of the heart. It is reaching a deeper understanding of the sinner. It is achieving an empathy for the troubledness of the other. *Selicha*, too, is not a reconciliation or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender, too, is human, frail, and deserving of sympathy. It is closer to an act of mercy ...

“The third kind of forgiveness is ‘atonement’ (*kappará*) or ‘purification’ (*tahorá*). This is a total wiping away of all sinfulness. It is an existential cleansing. *Kappara* is the ultimate form of forgiveness, but it is only granted by God.”¹¹

—Rabbi David Blumenthal

“In the act of forgiveness we are declaring our faith in the future of a relationship and in the capacity of the wrongdoer to make a new beginning on a course that will be different from the one that has caused the wrong. We are saying here is a chance to make a new beginning. It is an act of faith that the wrongdoer can change. According to Jesus [Matthew 18:22], we should be ready to do this not just once, not just seven times, but seventy times seven, without limit—provided, it seems Jesus says, your brother or sister who has wronged you is ready to come and confess the wrong they have committed yet again.”¹²

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu

“Why is compassion so important? Someone must take the initiative to move beyond the cycle of old choices and responses that brings more pain and suffering and recognize the opportunity for a healing response to life itself. This is also true of the forgiveness that results from a compassionate heart. Today we face many problems, and the time has come for us to think on a deeper human level where we understand and respect the humanness of everyone. Though we might regard someone as an enemy, this enemy is also a human being who is trapped by his or her own demons and who has a right to happiness.”¹³

—His Holiness, The Dalai Lama

Why Forgive? (continued)

“To receive forgiveness from God there are three requirements:

1. Recognizing the offense itself and its admission before God.
2. Making a commitment not to repeat the offense.
3. Asking for forgiveness from God.

“If the above three conditions are met in sincerity, forgiveness from God is assured. Sincerity protects a person from repeating the same offense. If a person is sincere he will be helped by God not to repeat; in addition, God will change his punishment for the offense into a reward.”¹⁴

— M. Amir Ali, PhD, founder, Institute of Islamic Information and Education

“The first step towards forgiveness is to understand the negativities that are created by non-forgiveness and become aware of the futility and irrationality of nursing grudges. We need to understand the law of karma and know that the non-forgiveness is against God, and then sincerely decide to forgive. Merely understanding the need to forgive is not enough. It is crucial to take a decision to forgive, because it is only then that the whole process of unraveling begins. Forgiveness is not an action or emotion, it is something much deeper. It is the state of my being. When forgiveness happens there is no need to say anything. It is a state where there is no hatred or sense of revenge that remains.”¹⁵

—Swami Nikhilananda, director, Chinmaya Mission

The giant pine tree grows from a tiny sprout. The journey of a thousand miles starts from beneath your feet.

—Lao Tzu



CONVERSATION ONE: What Is the Nature of Forgiveness?

It's not a quick fix. We can't give someone a forgiveness pill and then they smile and hug each other.

— Robert Enright in *The Power of Forgiveness*

Since this is likely the first time that your group is meeting, you may want to “take the pulse” of the participants by doing the following activity. Place individual poster-size flip chart sheets around the room. Write one of the following statements on each sheet (or use your own). Draw a horizontal line in the middle of each chart with “agree” on one side and “disagree” on the other. As people arrive in the room, give them stickers or markers and ask them to place a sticker or mark an “x” at the place on the line that represents their view. (This will give everyone a quick visual overview of the “pulse” in the room.)

Statements:

- *There is someone I need to forgive.*
- *Not forgiving someone is adding stress to my life.*
- *I have been hurt, betrayed, and/or let down.*
- *I am carrying a burden of pain because I haven't forgiven someone.*
- *I need to be forgiven for something I did or said.*
- *Justice is more important to me than forgiveness.*

After you have reviewed the shared agreements and other logistical issues and centered the group, you may wish to invite comments on the responses. Then invite participants to read the essay “Why Forgive” out loud, having each person read a paragraph. Allow people to pass. This provides background and context. If you like, you can spend some time discussing people’s reactions and thoughts about the essay. Then play the video clip and follow up with discussion. This can be done as a large group, in pairs, or in small groups. If time permits, you may choose to do one of the suggested activities to further explore the topic.



Video Clip from
The Power of Forgiveness

“The Amish and Forgiveness”

This three-minute clip revisits the October 2006 shooting at Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, and explores why the Amish people there were able to offer forgiveness to the killer’s family. Donald Kraybill, PhD, senior fellow, The Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, explains that the Amish are rooted in the forgiveness called for in the Lord’s Prayer and in accepting the will of God.



Questions for Discussion

Lead a discussion around these or your own questions. Depending on the group size, this discussion can be done in the large group or in pairs or trios of participants, with one member of each team reporting to the larger group any highlights of their discussion.

- How do you feel after seeing the video clip? What is your reaction?
- Kraybill says that Amish children see their parents forgiving or extending forgiveness and that is how they learn about forgiveness. How did you learn about forgiveness? What do you think the children in our community learn about forgiveness? What changes would you want to make?
- According to Kraybill, one element that enables the Amish to forgive is the strength of their community, which, he says, helps them “absorb” hatred and deal with anger, because they don’t need to defend themselves individually. How do you think our community might learn to absorb hatred and anger? How might that help us as individuals?
- What can you learn from the Amish approach to forgiveness? What aspects might you want to include in your own life?

CONVERSATION ONE: What Is the Nature of Forgiveness? (continued)

Group Activities

The following are additional suggested activities for you to use as you see fit.

Heart Versus Mind

Begin by asking the group to show of hands to say how many people think the Amish let their hearts prevail in thinking about forgiveness. Then how many think their minds prevail. Ask the group to talk about what they think the difference between acting from the heart and acting from the mind might be. Invite them to consider how they approach forgiveness in their own lives.

Hand a sheet of paper to each person and ask each to make two columns: one titled “Heart” and the other “Mind.” Now invite them to think about a situation where they need to forgive or be forgiven. (They do not need to share this situation.) Suggest that with that issue in mind, they fill in each column with what their heart says and what their mind says they should do. As a large group, invite participants to talk about how they approach forgiveness and what it would be like to let either the heart or mind prevail.

Close the conversation by going around the room and asking each participant to share something they learned or want to learn more about, allowing people to pass.

Encourage participants to review their Participant Handbook, and remind them of the date of the next conversation.



A typical saying, repeated many times in Amish culture, is “Forgive, forget, and move on.”

—Donald Kraybill,
author of *Amish Grace*

CONVERSATION TWO: Why Forgive?



Lawler Row with patient

Highly forgiving people have lower blood pressure just walking around in the world every day. Forgiving people seem to take better care of themselves. They are less likely to smoke, less likely to drive unsafely, and that has an impact on health.

— Kathleen Lawler Row in
The Power of Forgiveness

After welcoming participants, invite them to share any insights, thoughts, or meaningful experiences about forgiveness that have occurred since the last conversation. To refresh their memories, or if you didn't read the first essay last time, you may wish to begin by having participants read the essay, "Why Forgive." Tell them that this conversation will focus on the benefits of forgiveness. Play the video clip and follow up with discussion. If time permits, you may choose to do the suggested activity to further explore the topic.



Video Clip from
The Power of Forgiveness

"Forgiveness and Biology"

This seven-minute clip begins with Everett Worthington, PhD, lecturing about how the brain's pleasure center is active during thoughts of revenge, and then moves to Kathleen Lawler Row, PhD, professor emerita at the University of Tennessee, who has been researching the benefits of forgiveness and the traits associated with "forgiving personalities." The clip ends with Worthington talking about the relationship between forgiveness and justice.



Questions for Discussion

Lead a discussion around these or your own questions. Depending on the group size, this discussion can be done in the open group or in pairs or trios of participants, with one member of each team reporting to the group any highlights of their discussion.

- How do you feel after seeing the clip? What is your reaction?
- Think about a time when you forgave someone or were forgiven. What were the benefits to you?
- Think about someone you want to forgive or who you want to forgive you. How does not forgiving affect you?

- In her research, Lawler Row has identified characteristics of "forgiving people." She says that they are "a little less aware of being affected." What do you think makes it possible for people to reduce the impact of injustice or injury?
- Lawler Row says in the film, "I don't think the severity [of the offense] determines the health effects. It's really how the person is able to incorporate the experience into their lives." What do you think she means by that statement?
- Worthington says that forgiveness can work hand in hand with justice. What would be a way that this could happen? Choose a situation in your community as an example.

Group Activity

Qualities of a Forgiving Person

If time permits, engage the group in the following activity. Ask each participant to talk with the person beside him or her (you may have to partner with someone) about someone who they think is a "forgiving person." They should describe the qualities or personality characteristics that person has. Tell participants this is an opportunity to practice focused listening. Each person gets two minutes to speak, uninterrupted. When the first speaker's time is up (as indicated by timer or facilitator), the partners pause in silence, and the first speaker becomes the listener for two minutes, repeating the exercise.

Invite participants to share some of the qualities that they described, and encourage discussion about how to cultivate those qualities.

Close the conversation by going around the room and asking each participant to share something they learned or want to learn more about. (Allow people to pass.)

Encourage participants to review their Participant Handbook, and remind them of the date of the next conversation.

The Journey to Forgiveness

This essay may be used for Conversation Three and can be read individually or out loud, as a group.

Imagine meeting a man for coffee to help you prepare for a presentation. You find out that as teenagers you both hung out at the same hamburger stand. Then, as you look into his eyes, it dawns on you—he and his friends beat you unconscious 25 years ago—because you are gay.

What would you do? Could you forgive him?

In this case, Matthew Boger did. Boger, floor manager for the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, inadvertently came face-to-face with his attacker, former skinhead Tim Zaal, a volunteer at the museum, who had since turned his life around. After their first dramatic meeting, the two didn't speak for awhile. Then, Boger said, he realized that forgiveness provided the only way to move forward. Zaal apologized and, over time, the two developed a friendship. They now speak to groups about their experience, both hoping to help end hatred and invoke tolerance.¹⁶

Admittedly this is a dramatic example of forgiveness. Not all of us would forgive such a painful act. As a result of Boger's gesture, however, the two men provide a moving example of the transformative power of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is more difficult for some of us than others. Psychologists who have studied people's tendency to forgive note that there are personality traits—such as being empathic and emotionally engaged with others—that predispose some people to forgiveness. Our genetic makeup, our upbringing, and our personality, all contribute to our proclivity to forgive. Regardless of our starting point, however, we each can learn the steps to forgiveness or how to forgive, and reap the benefits of better physical and emotional health and well-being.

Fred Luskin suggests you start by forgiving small things. "Practicing forgiveness," he writes, "allows us to develop forgiveness muscles in the same way that going to the gym develops physical muscles."¹⁷

Where can you start to incorporate forgiveness in your life? Perhaps you might forgive a friend who didn't keep a confidence, a spouse who did something hurtful, or a stranger who spoke harshly.

One of the seemingly most difficult places to start is with yourself. We are often hardest on ourselves, and that can spill out into how we approach most aspects of our lives and our relationships. According to Luskin, "... forgiveness of self emerges when we understand that even with our own actions we do not have total control. Everybody makes mistakes. We all make bad decisions and act from poor information ... Being human allows us to offer forgiveness to ourselves, never forgetting that we have resources at our disposal to improve ourselves and help others."¹⁸

Researchers have established a variety of effective approaches and specific steps to achieve forgiveness. The bottom line: it begins with and requires a willingness to change. It is important to find the unique approach that best fits you. The good news is that studies have shown that there is more than one road to forgiveness.

Making a Decision to Forgive

Luskin frames it as a choice, a decision to reclaim and reframe your story, moving from the role of victim to the story's hero—a person who, despite suffering, chooses to forgive. You may come to this choice, as Matthew Boger did, because it seems the best option, or to end your own suffering, or for some other reason altogether. Whatever the reason, it marks the start of your journey.

We usually think of people who have hurt us as evil people. We see them in black capes, intent on inflicting pain. In most cases, though, people are simply caught up in the situation.

—Everett Worthington

We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Changing Your Emotions

Everett Worthington encourages forgiveness by getting in touch with emotions and gaining empathy for the person who hurt you. “Forgiveness occurs,” he notes, “by emotional replacement,”¹⁹ substituting the emotions of unforgiveness—anger, bitterness, resentment—with emotions of forgiveness, such as empathy and compassion.

Worthington himself used the process he developed and studied to forgive an overwhelming personal tragedy—his mother’s murder. In his book *Five Steps to Forgiveness*, he explains, “... trauma seems to cause the emotional centers of the brain to become extremely active, and it changes emotional experience strongly. Imagining a traumatic scene and pairing it with the emotion of compassion most likely reprogrammed my emotions of rage and fear.”²⁰

There are common elements to the various approaches to forgiveness that researchers have developed. Clearly, we must acknowledge the transgression, the hurt, anger, and other emotions that arise in response to it. Denying or ignoring any part of our experience inhibits our ability to move beyond the pain of the event itself.

Depending on the magnitude of the transgression, forgiveness frequently requires finding people to support you. Our culture, particularly popular media, often feeds and glorifies the notion of revenge. Family and friends may be overly protective, suffer from hurt and anger for what was done to you, and seek revenge on your behalf. Finding people who can listen without judgment and help you consider forgiveness as an option is important to the process.

Worthington points out that “people who hurt or offend us often do so because they’re conditioned by their past.”²¹ Looking at the offender as a whole person, with a history that led them to behave the way they did and immediate circumstances that may have fueled their behavior, allows a seed of empathy to be planted. When we can see others’ vulnerability, pain, and difficulties, it’s easier to

build a context for their actions and, perhaps, see that all of us are capable and guilty of hurting others in some way at some time. Trying not to judge the other person’s behavior, and recognizing that their primary motivation was likely not to cause you pain, but rather reflects their own issues and needs, can be helpful.

This doesn’t mean that forgiveness supplants justice or condones what was done. Seeking reconciliation and justice are separate choices you can make at any point along the way.

When it comes to reacting to devastating events in our lives, it’s important to be gentle with ourselves. Dark feelings may arise in response to hurt or betrayal, which is perfectly normal. Holding on to or feeding these feelings is what causes us to remain stuck in a pattern of pain and anger. Forgiveness is one of the first steps to our healing as we try to move on with our lives after a painful or traumatic event.

It’s also important to understand that recovering from the pain you experienced takes time. Neither emotional recovery nor forgiveness can be rushed. Sometimes we feel the need to take the high road and put on a strong front, only to find later that the hurt is still there; we just built a moat around it. Instead, the fortification we constructed keeps the hurt inside and, ironically, prevents us from being able to receive support.

If talking about what happened is too difficult, journaling may help. According to studies by psychologist James W. Pennebaker and his colleagues, writing about difficulties in our lives correlates with improved health and mood, even raising immunity.²² Journaling might provide a way to get another perspective on emotions and events.

Whatever road you choose to travel, forgiveness is possible. Find a road map that fits you, and begin. It may be one of the greatest gifts you give yourself. And the results of your efforts may surprise you.

Steps to Forgiveness from Leading Researchers

The following provides a glimpse into the forgiveness processes put forth by experts in the field. We encourage you to consult their books, listed below, for complete details.

Nine Steps to Forgiveness

(From Fred Luskin's, Learning to Forgive Web site, www.learningtoforgive.com. See also *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*.)

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then, tell a trusted couple of people about your experience.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to do what you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation with the person that hurt you, or condoning of their action. What you are after is to find peace. Forgiveness can be defined as the "peace and understanding that come from blaming that which has hurt you less, taking the life experience less personally, and changing your grievance story."
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 what offended you or hurt you two minutes—or 10 years—ago. Forgiveness helps to heal those hurt feelings.
5. At the moment you feel upset, practice a simple stress management technique to soothe your body's flight or fight response.
6. Give up expecting things from other people, or your life, that they do not choose to give you. Recognize the "unenforceable rules" you have for your health or how you or other people must behave. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, peace, and prosperity and work hard to get them.
7. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you. Instead of mentally replaying your hurt, seek out new ways to get what you want.
8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving the person who caused you pain power over you, learn to look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. Forgiveness is about personal power.
9. Amend your grievance story to remind you of the heroic choice to forgive.

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

—Mahatma Gandhi

The Journey to Forgiveness (continued)

Guideposts for Forgiving

(From Robert Enright's *Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*, pp. 78, 79.)

Phase 1: Uncovering your anger.

To forgive, you must be willing to examine how much anger you have as a result of someone else's unfairness toward you.

Phase 2: Deciding to forgive.

Forgiveness requires a decision and a commitment.

Phase 3: Working on forgiveness.

Simply making a decision to forgive isn't enough. People need to take concrete actions to make their forgiveness real. This phase culminates with the giving of a moral gift to the one who hurt you.

Phase 4: Discovery and release from emotional prison.

Unforgiveness, bitterness, resentment, and anger are like the four walls of a prison cell. Forgiveness is the key that opens the door and lets you out of that cell.



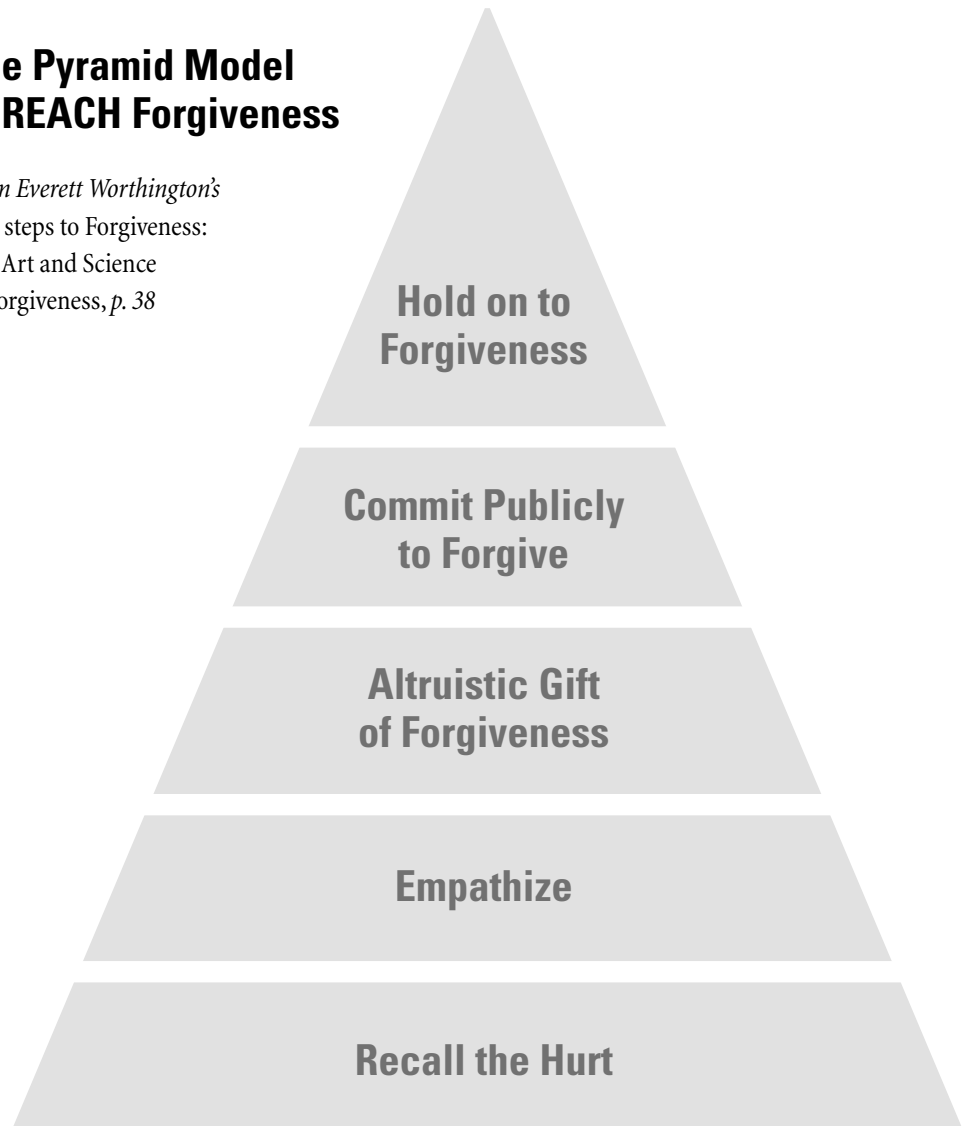
Dr. Worthington conducts two chairs activity with students

The Pyramid Model of REACH Forgiveness

From Everett Worthington's

Five steps to Forgiveness:

The Art and Science of Forgiveness, p. 38



CONVERSATION THREE: Learning To Forgive

After welcoming participants, invite them to share any insights, thoughts, or meaningful experiences about forgiveness that have occurred since the last conversation. Introduce today's conversation, which focuses on learning to forgive. Read the essay "The Journey to Forgiveness" out loud. The essay includes several researchers' approaches or steps to forgiveness, as a way of showing readers that there is no single "right" way. As you read through the approaches, you might want to encourage participants to engage in the home practices that build on the essay. Play the video clip and follow up with discussion. If time permits, you may choose to do the suggested activity to further explore the topic.



Video Clip from
The Power of Forgiveness

"Practicing Forgiveness"

In this six-minute clip, Everett Worthington describes how his mother was murdered and how he and his siblings were able to forgive the murderer. The clip then shows Worthington helping a student whose friend committed suicide see the situation from his friend's perspective.



Questions for Discussion

Lead a discussion around these or your own questions. Depending on the group size, this discussion can be done in the open group or in pairs or trios of participants, with one member of each team reporting to the group any highlights of their discussions.

- How do you feel after seeing the video clip? What is your reaction?
- Worthington describes how he had been studying forgiveness as a researcher and practicing as a therapist for many years before his mother's murder. He says: "when the moment came where I needed to put that into practice, the gift was already there." What do you think about his statement? Could it apply to you?
- Worthington says in the clip that he and his siblings were all able to forgive the murderer, and they felt that in so doing, they were honoring their mother and providing a testament to what their parents taught them about forgiveness. How do you feel about this statement? How does his statement connect love and forgiveness?
- In the "two chairs" activity that we saw in the clip, the student has to speak from the perspective of his friend who committed suicide, as well as from his own perspective. What insights did the student gain from the exercise? How helpful do you think the activity was in taking him toward forgiving his friend?

*One forgives to
the degree that
one loves.*

—Francois de La
Rochefoucauld

CONVERSATION THREE: Learning To Forgive

Within six months of her murder all three of us children said that we forgave the person who did this. This is a testament to my mom and dad and to the teaching that they successfully conveyed. Forgiving was honoring to her.

—Everett Worthington
in *The Power of Forgiveness*

Group Activities

The following are additional suggested activities for you to use as you see fit.

You may want to do the first at the beginning of the conversation and the second following the discussion questions.

How Many F's?

Write the following statement on a flip chart. Ask participants to silently count the number of “f’s” in the following sentence. *Forgiving oneself is often one of the most difficult things for average folk to do.*

(Note: There are eight letter f’s, but it is extremely rare for everyone in a group to see all eight. Ask by show of hands how many of the letter “f” people saw.) Start by asking how many saw four, then five, six, seven, and eight.

Use this exercise to help people understand that there is often more to a story than what you think you see, and that different people see different things. Discuss how this applies to forgiveness and/or do the “two chairs” activity.

Two Chairs

Invite participants to practice the “two chairs” activity demonstrated in the video clip. Place two chairs side by side. Ask for a volunteer who is willing to share a situation requiring forgiveness. Invite the volunteer to sit in one of the chairs and tell the story from the point of view of the person asking for forgiveness. Now ask the person to switch chairs and tell the story from the point of view of the person being asked for forgiveness. Afterward, discuss the ways in which the stories are the same and/or different, and the implications for offering or receiving forgiveness.

Close the conversation by going around the room and asking each participant to use one word to say how they are feeling. (Allow people to pass.) Encourage participants to review the Participant Handbook, and to engage in some of the home practices. You may want to ask them to notice small acts of forgiveness that they engage in until the next conversation, and remind them of the date of the next conversation.

Forgiving the Unforgivable

Sometimes the enormity and brutality of an offense overwhelm us, and we deem such acts unforgivable. Events such as the Holocaust, 9/11, or the Rwandan massacres spill out and touch many lives beyond those directly affected. The pain and repercussions of even the most personal transgressions often cannot be contained. Perhaps it is because we are so interconnected that we consider the merit in forgiving the “unforgivable.”

In Simon Wiesenthal’s now-classic book *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, he shares his experience as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp when a dying SS soldier, guilty of a horrific war crime, asked Wiesenthal for forgiveness. Wiesenthal asks religious leaders, scholars, and other distinguished thinkers to mentally put themselves in his place and answer the question, “What would I have done?”²³

The question of whether to forgive atrocities, institutionalized injustice, murder, and other horrific acts triggers strong emotions, controversy, deep discussions, and collective soul searching. The carefully thought out and complex responses to Wiesenthal’s question explore whether and/or when it’s appropriate to offer forgiveness, whether it can be offered on others’ behalf, and whether atrocities of the magnitude of the Holocaust should be forgiven at all.

Are there actions that are unforgivable under any circumstances? If not, are there any limits to forgiveness? If so, is there redemption from the darkest part of our souls?

In his response to Wiesenthal’s challenge, Hans Habe, writer, reporter, and news editor, wrote, “One of the worst crimes of the Nazist (sic) regime was that it made it so hard for us to forgive. It led us into the labyrinth of our souls. We must find a way out of the labyrinth—not for the murderers’ sake, but for our own.”²⁴

What, if anything, does forgiving horrific, murderous acts or injustices offer us? Can such blights on our humanity as slavery, apartheid, the Holocaust,

atrocities of Cambodia, Rwanda, 9/11, rape, murder, or even the Enron debacle be forgiven? Should they? What would forgiveness accomplish in such situations?

In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes about “ubuntu”—an African worldview of interconnectedness—and its role in the development of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). “A person with ubuntu,” Tutu writes, “. . . has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.”²⁵

South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided a forum for people’s experiences of the horrors and injustices of apartheid to be heard and, ostensibly, for the seeds of national unity and reconciliation to be planted. In that forum some spoke eloquently—in words and actions—of forgiveness. Offers of forgiveness have arisen, too, from where some of the most hideous reflections of human failings have been played out. Sometimes these gestures are met with awe and sometimes with anger and disbelief.

One such story is that of Beth Savage, who survived a deadly grenade attack by the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA), the armed wing of one of South Africa’s liberation movements, the Pan Africanist Congress. Badly injured in 1992, she endured months in intensive care and a difficult recovery. Four years later her father died from what she believes was a broken heart. Still, she said the experience had enriched her life. And when asked how she felt about amnesty for a member of the APLA, Savage said, “It’s not important to me, but . . . what I would really, really like is . . . to meet that man that threw that grenade in an attitude of forgiveness and hope that he could forgive me too for whatever reason.”²⁶

. . . almost never do we hear public leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can bring people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing.

—Robert D. Enright and Joanna North

Forgiving the Unforgivable (continued)

Many may find that story hard to believe. How could she ask the perpetrator to forgive her? Why does she think she needs to be forgiven? It is easy to stand in judgment. Especially when it comes to others' travesties. And when we are injured, or someone we love is injured, we are often blinded by our pain and outrage. Part of our judgment may be a wish to separate ourselves from those who are capable of horrific transgressions. That is human. Yet how many of us are immune to our shadow side? In the heat of the moment, do we know what we would do? Living in an unsafe, unjust, or violent environment, do we know what we would do?

Forgiveness requires us to traverse mental, emotional, ethical, and, for many, spiritual territory. It cannot stand apart from the need for justice, grieving, emotional healing, and, in some cases, reconciliation and restitution. And it does not and should not trivialize, condone, or absolve the wrongdoing. Whether it can help heal the pain, anger, hatred, and destruction left in its wake is, however, an important question to ponder.

The experience of South Africa's TRC, many believe, did help begin the process of healing. "We have survived the ordeal and we are realizing that we can indeed transcend the conflicts of the past, we can hold hands as we realize our common humanity . . ." Tutu wrote. "The generosity of spirit will be full to overflowing when it meets a like generosity. Forgiveness will follow confession and healing will happen, and so contribute to national unity and reconciliation."²⁷ South Africa's example allowed a peaceful transition to a democratic state while acknowledging and providing a forum for its citizens to express their pain, hurt, and forgiveness for the injustices of the past. While not all agree with Tutu or the success of the TRC in achieving reconciliation, he held and still holds a vision of hope and healing.

For Immaculée Ilibagiza, a Tutsi survivor of the Rwandan genocide, forgiveness grew from a deep faith. Her father, mother and two brothers were

killed by Hutus while she and seven other women hid, crammed in a tiny bathroom in the home of an Episcopal priest. For three months she survived in that bathroom, hearing murderous Hutu gangs threatening to kill her. While on the floor of the bathroom, she fought feelings of hatred and prayed for forgiveness.

According to Ilibagiza, "The people who'd hurt my family had hurt themselves even more and they deserved my pity. There was no doubt that they had to be punished for their crimes against humanity and against God . . . But I prayed for compassion as well. I asked God for the forgiveness that would end the cycle of hatred—hatred that was always dangerously close to the surface."²⁸ Even while fleeing machete-wielding Hutus after leaving the priest's home, Ilibagiza prayed for God to forgive her stalkers. And when, after his capture, she came face to face with the man who killed her mother and brother and would likely have killed her, she offered forgiveness.²⁹

Forgiving horrific acts does not require religious faith, nor is it just for the saints among us. For some, however, it has been too trivialized in a culture that popularizes and commodifies even the most personal and sacred. For some it seems to demean the victim and downplay the crime.

What role could forgiveness play in stopping present-day horrors such as Darfur? State-sponsored torture or terrorism? Entrenched conflicts such as those between Palestinians and Israelis? Indians and Pakistanis? How could forgiveness help people affected, either directly or indirectly, by acts of terror or injustice? Forgiveness for the unforgivable? It's a question that deserves contemplation.

CONVERSATION FOUR: Forgiving the Unforgivable

After leading the official welcome and other “housekeeping” items, you might begin Conversation Four by inviting participants to share some of the “small forgivenesses” they have practiced since the last conversation. Then, if desired, read the essay “Forgiving the Unforgivable” together, and tell people you will be focusing this conversation on self-forgiveness.



Video Clip from
The Power of Forgiveness

“Garden of Forgiveness”

This 14-minute clip begins by showing plans for a Garden of Forgiveness at Ground Zero, based on one in Beirut, Lebanon. Psychotherapist Alexandra Asseily talks about the relationship between forgiving oneself and others. We see three American survivors of 9/11 victims planting a tree in Beirut’s Garden of Forgiveness. They reflect on their loved ones’ remains and talk about how difficult it is to forgive. The American women meet with Lebanese women who also lost loved ones to acts of terrorism. Finally one person talks about the need for a Garden of Forgiveness in New York City.



Questions for Discussion

Lead a discussion around these or your own questions. Depending on the group size, this discussion can be done in the open group or in pairs or trios of participants, with one member of each team reporting to the group any highlights of their discussion.

- How do you feel after seeing the clip? What is your reaction?
- Do you consider the events of 9/11 to be unforgivable? Why?
- Lyndon Harris says, “What we hope to do is create a meditation garden where people can come and at least reflect on the possibility of forgiveness. We want to help people decide intentionally to opt out of that cycle of violence and revenge.” What do you think about the idea of a Garden of Forgiveness?
- Fred Luskin suggests that through the garden, “You reflect on ways to keep yourselves safe without having to be as hate-filled and as vengeance-minded as the people who did this to us.” What do you think about his statement?
- The remains of the loved ones of the three women in the clip were sent to a landfill. Rose Foti says: “I want him out, and now I’m mad and now I’m not going to forgive anybody.” She also supports the idea of a Garden of Forgiveness. What do you think of this apparent contradiction?
- Diane Horning says in the film, “I’m learning more and more that forgiveness is something you do for yourself. You don’t do it for some one else. If I learn to forgive myself, I will be unburdened.” What is your reaction to her statement?
- Lynn McGuinn, whose husband died in the 9/11 attacks, says in the film, “It is a big step for me to be able to forgive myself, to say, you know what . . . I should have gone down there and found him.” How might self-forgiveness help her move on with her life?
- Alexandra Asseily talks about the Garden of Forgiveness as being a way toward peace, saying, “If we’re going to go down a road to peace, we do have to cross that bridge. We do have to take the bridge of forgiveness.” Do you agree?
- Alexandra Asseily says, “If we forgive ourselves, it’s a wonderful beginning to forgiveness . . . it’s our lack of compassion for ourselves that makes us so upset with others.” What is the relationship between self-forgiveness and love?



9/11 family member places prayer card in Beirut forgiveness garden

CONVERSATION FOUR: Forgiving the Unforgivable (continued)

Actually if we really forgave ourselves for all the wickedness that we think we have inside—all the things that we think are wrong with ourselves . . . we would then be so much more compassionate with others—probably it's our lack of compassion for ourselves that makes us so upset with others.

—Alexandra Asseily in
The Power of Forgiveness

Group Activities

The following are additional suggested activities for you to use as you see fit.

Spreading the Word

Invite the group to break up into small groups, and ask them to create an advertisement for forgiveness. It can be designed for a magazine, newspaper, radio, the Web, or television. Provide paper and pens. If they are designing a print version, they should write the copy and/or draw the illustration; if they are designing an audio or video version, they should write the script and/or perform it for the group.

Garden of Forgiveness

Discuss with the group whether they would like to create a garden or other place of forgiveness in their home or community. What would it take to make it happen? If there is interest in a community garden of forgiveness, help the group decide what the next steps should be and who will follow through.

Unforgivable Acts

In pairs or triads, invite participants to share what they consider to be unforgivable acts and why. What would be necessary to turn an unforgivable act into one that could be forgiven? Direct participants to the questions in the Participant Handbook to further consider this issue after they leave.

Forgiving Myself

Pair participants up and ask them to share with each other something about their life that they need to forgive themselves for. What is holding them back? What is one step they could take toward self-forgiveness? How would that help them? When you reconvene the group, invite comments about the exercise.

Forgiveness Stories

Invite individuals to share a story of a time when they felt they had “successfully” forgiven themselves, been forgiven, or forgiven someone else. What were the important elements? Did it feel different for them to forgive themselves or someone else?

Finally, lead a discussion among participants about how the four conversations have affected them—asking about any shifts in their awareness of the power of love and forgiveness to transform their lives and any commitments they are making about practicing forgiveness. Thank them for taking the time to participate in the conversations, and let them know they can learn more about the Campaign for Love & Forgiveness at www.loveandforgive.org.

Endnotes

- 1 Enright, Robert D., *Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 25.
- 2 Ibid, 45, 46.
- 3 Worthington, Everett L., ed. *A Handbook of Forgiveness* (New York: Brunner-Routledge 2005).
- 4 "Research Into the Strength of Forgiveness," <http://www.forgiving.org/Campaign/harness.asp>.
- 5 Luskin, Frederic and Byron Bland, "Stanford-Northern Ireland Hope 2 Project," February 2001, <http://www.learningtoforgive.com/researchfiles/hope2.htm>.
- 6 Tutu, Desmond, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 35.
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What we hope to do is to present a meditation garden where people can come and at least reflect on the possibility of forgiveness. And by that we don't mean ... that we in any way excuse horrific acts by evil people. We don't in any way condone acts of violence or terrorism. What we want to do is, we want to invite people to decide intentionally ... to opt out of that cycle of violence and revenge.

—Lyndon Harris in
A Handbook of Forgiveness

Additional Resources

We are grateful for the many organizations and resources that promote love, forgiveness, and compassion. We invite you to explore the list below and to add your own to the pages that follow.

Conversation Resources

Conversation Cards

www.fetzer.org/resources

Each of the 52 cards provides a quote to ponder, questions to discuss, and a suggested action for incorporating more love, forgiveness, and compassion in your life. The deck can be used for personal inspiration; to spark conversations among family, friends, or colleagues; for book discussion or support groups; and/or to challenge you to be more loving, forgiving, and compassionate. Free from the link above while supplies last.

Conversation Facilitators Share Tips via Podcast

www.fetzer.org/resources

Two seasoned conversation facilitators share tips on how to lead conversations on love and forgiveness, including how to manage group dynamics, creating a safe space for sharing, using the conversation cards mentioned above, and how young people respond to the conversations.

Forgiveness Experts via Podcast

www.fetzer.org/resources

In separate podcasts, forgiveness experts share research, experience, and thoughts on the power of forgiveness. The podcasts feature Frederic Luskin, PhD, author of *Forgive for Good* and director of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects, and Everett Worthington, Jr., PhD, author of *Five Steps to Forgiveness: The Art and Science of Forgiving*. Dr. Worthington is a licensed clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Let's Talk About It: Love and Forgiveness

www.programminglibrarian.org/ltai/discussion-themes.html

This program from the American Library Association examines contemporary life and

culture through literature, offering selections from our culture's most outstanding works. Be sure to check out the full list of themes and corresponding resources, including these three that were developed with the Fetzer Institute in support of conversations about love, compassion, and forgiveness.

- Love and Forgiveness in the Light of Death
- Love and Forgiveness in the Presence of the Enemy
- Love, Forgiveness, and Wisdom

Love, Forgiveness, and Compassion Conversation Guides

www.fetzer.org/resources

These guides are designed to help group facilitators and individuals explore the power of love, forgiveness, and compassion. Each resource includes suggested questions, essays, videos, home practices, and resources for further exploration.

Media

Forgiveness: A Time to Love and a Time to Hate

www.helenwhitney.com

Scheduled to air on PBS in 2011, this documentary's dramatic and moving stories introduce real people who have faced a horrific tragedy and have struggled in their hearts to forgive. Produced by Paul Dietrich and award-winning producer, director, and writer Helen Whitney, with major funding provided by the Fetzer Institute.

Krista Tippett On Being (previously *Speaking of Faith with Krista Tippett*)

www.onbeing.org

On Being is a new kind of conversation about religion, spirituality, and large questions of meaning in every aspect of life. Hosted by Krista Tippett on public radio, this weekly show is also available by podcast.

The Mystery of Love

www.themysteryoflove.org

A documentary exploring love in marriage, family, community, science, forgiveness, the search for the divine, friendship, even war. Actor, playwright, and author Anna Deavere Smith hosts this two-hour special produced by the Independent Production Fund, with major funding provided by the Fetzer Institute.

Additional Resources

The Power of Forgiveness

www.journeyfilms.com

This documentary examines the power of forgiveness in alleviating anger and grief caused by the most dramatic transgressions imaginable and those that are more commonplace. Among its subjects the film features families of victims from the tragedy of 9/11 and forgiveness education in Northern Ireland, where forgiveness has been a way of life for generations. Produced by Journey Films, with major funding provided by the Fetzer Institute.

Websites

Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education

www.ccare.stanford.edu

This center, housed at Stanford University, undertakes rigorous scientific study of the neural, mental, and social bases of compassion and altruistic behavior. It draws from a wide spectrum of disciplines, especially neuroscience, psychology, economics, and contemplative traditions.

Center for Investigating Healthy Minds

www.investigatinghealthyminds.org

Located at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the center conducts rigorous interdisciplinary research on healthy qualities of mind such as kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and mindfulness. The CIHM engages in research and outreach with the goal of cultivating healthy qualities of the mind at the individual, community, and global levels.

Charter for Compassion

www.charterforcompassion.org

Using her TED Prize, author Karen Armstrong is making her wish to help create, launch, and propagate a Charter for Compassion come true. This website is one of the tools that is bringing that wish to fruition.

Fetzer Institute

www.fetzer.org

The Fetzer Institute engages with people and projects around the world to help bring the power of love, forgiveness, and compassion to the center of individual and community life. Find project information, resources, videos, news, and upcoming events on this site.

Forgive for Good

www.learningtoforgive.com

The website of Dr. Fred Luskin, director of Stanford's Forgiveness Projects, provides information and resources on the benefits of forgiveness.

Greater Good Science Center

www.greatergood.berkeley.edu

Based at the University of California, Berkeley, the center studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being and teaches skills that foster a thriving, resilient, and compassionate society. This site highlights groundbreaking scientific research on compassion and altruism.

The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love

www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org

The Institute focuses on the science and spirituality of the unselfish love that shapes the lives of people who find energy and joy in the compassionate service of others. Information about the institute's activities, publications, and funding is available on this site.

Self-Compassion: A Healthier Way of Relating to Yourself

www.self-compassion.org

This site, developed by Dr. Kristin Neff, associate professor of human development and culture at the University of Texas, Austin, provides information and resources on self-compassion, including exercises, meditations, and research.

Spirituality & Practice

www.spiritualityandpractice.com

This site shares ways to practice spirituality in everyday life and includes book, audio, and film reviews; ideas and links for 37 essential practices; and e-courses for spiritual growth and self-improvement. Spiritualityandpractice.com offers resources from multiple faiths and belief systems.

Tips for Writing Loving and Beautiful Letters

Tips for Writing Loving and Beautiful Letters

We encourage you to take a pause from e-mails, voice mails, and phone calls to write a note to someone you care about. Express your thanks for a kindness, share how you miss them, or recall a memory or story. A hand-written note, no matter the length, may deepen, renew, or mend relationships . . . and maybe even make someone's day! A letter written from the heart can be a thoughtful practice capable of making a difference to friends, family, even your community.

When writing your letter, consider these tips from Lilia Fallgatter, author of *The Most Important Letter You Will Ever Write*, and the people at Paper Source:

- Before you even pick up a pen, create surroundings that will evoke the inspiration to write.
- Make a deliberate effort to clear and quiet your mind, and focus on the person to whom you are writing.
- Create a list of words or phrases that describe the person to whom you are writing.
- Create a list of memories or significant occasions and events you have shared with this person.
- Using the lists you've created, write the first draft of the letter. Review and edit the first draft; then re-write the letter with the changes you made.
- Write from the heart, tell a story, remind them of your history together, a favorite time. Share one thing about that person that you admire—everyone loves a compliment.
- Hand write your letters. Your penmanship, no matter how eccentric, is a piece of you. Hand writing your letters and notes gives the recipient something special.
- E-mail has made it easy to jot down a few words, spell check, and hit "Send." But when hand writing a special note, use a scratch pad and draft your letter first. Check spelling and grammar. Save your good stationery or a handmade card until you have a clean draft to copy.
- Choose beautiful paper to write on and a pen you enjoy writing with. Embellish with ribbons, snaps, brads, glitter, or hole punches—the possibilities are endless. Coordinate your postage stamp with your envelope color or the theme of your letter. If you can draw, sketch, or doodle, add something from yourself.
- Enhance your letters and notes by including a favorite poem, a beautiful prayer, song lyrics, personal mementos, or keepsakes. Consider sharing a photo your recipient might have forgotten about or never seen, a ticket stub from the play you saw together (special original material can be photocopied, rather than sending the original), or a leaf you picked up while walking together. Line your envelope with giftwrap from the present you are thanking them for.
- Encourage a response by sending a pre-stamped card.
- Don't let any of the above frighten you—the most important thing of all is to just do it.



Forgiveness Letters

Writing a Letter of Forgiveness

If you want to forgive someone or ask for forgiveness, putting your thoughts in writing can be a good place to start. It will give you the opportunity to thoughtfully consider what you want to say, why, and how to say it. And the recipient will have time to absorb the contents of your letter before responding.

When **asking for forgiveness**, some things you might want to put in writing are:

- What your intention was (most people don't set out deliberately to hurt others)
- How you are feeling about what happened
- Why you want to be forgiven
- What, if anything, you are willing to do to apologize and/or make restitution
- What you have learned from what happened and how that might affect your future relationship with this person

When **offering forgiveness**, consider letting the person know:

- Your reason for offering forgiveness
- Your feelings toward the person, as opposed to the action he or she took
- What, if anything, you would like the person to do to make restitution
- What you hope will happen (or not happen) in your future relationship with this person



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