



# The Art of Forgiveness and Healing

*Forgiveness- an intentional and voluntary process by which a victim undergoes a change in feelings and attitudes regarding an offense, lets go of negative emotions such as vengefulness; with an increased ability to wish the offender well.*

We've all heard about the benefits associated with forgiveness - everything from lowered blood pressure, reduced levels of stress hormones in the blood, a boost to immune system, even a reduction in physical pain and digestive issues. Given the benefits, why is forgiving so very hard to do?

## **What Makes Forgiving So Hard**

Theologian and author C.S. Lewis has said, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive." Isn't that the truth? Once an offense becomes personal, when we're the aggrieved party, we tend to feel that our particular hurt is the exception to the rule. Being hurt kicks up all of our EGO defenses - our instinct toward self-preservation, survival, and security. And, it doesn't help that we live in a culture whose incessant message is that someone always needs to pay for wronging us. We feel justified in our anger, we wear our hurt on our sleeves as a way of striking back in righteous indignation toward the perpetrator, and often badmouth the other for their offense.

Or, we might forgive in a qualified or conditional way, grudgingly, always waiting for the perpetrator to step a single millimeter out of line and POW! The whole cycle begins again. The problem is that these negative responses do nothing to heal the wound, mend the relationship, or bring us closer to God or anyone else. If left unhealed the wound will fester and infect not only our worldview, but all of our relationships. As Fr. Richard Rohr says, "Wounds not transformed are transmitted." In other words, we'll inadvertently pass the pain and negativity on to others. In



light of all this, it's clear that forgiveness is in everyone's best interest.

## **A Process for Forgiving and Healing**

The following process shares the same roots as all mature spiritual practice - it requires a disposition of surrender, a willingness to embrace the self-emptying necessary to create a space for God to work. This is a critical piece, as forgiveness

on our own steam is destined to fail. It also needs to include AWARENESS and INTENTION. We need to acknowledge that forgiveness is something we desire and that we can't do it alone. And then we need to make an *intentional* commitment to the process.

Here are some helpful steps for beginning the lengthy process of forgiveness:

**1.) Name the Hurt:** Hint - stick to your feelings rather than what you see as the other's fault or transgression. The very process of choosing the words to best describe your hurt can be clarifying. An interesting question to consider is whether or not you've felt this kind of hurt before, and if so, in what circumstance. Recognizing this can reveal whether your feelings might actually be cumulative, in response to not just what happened now, but to a previous unhealed wound.

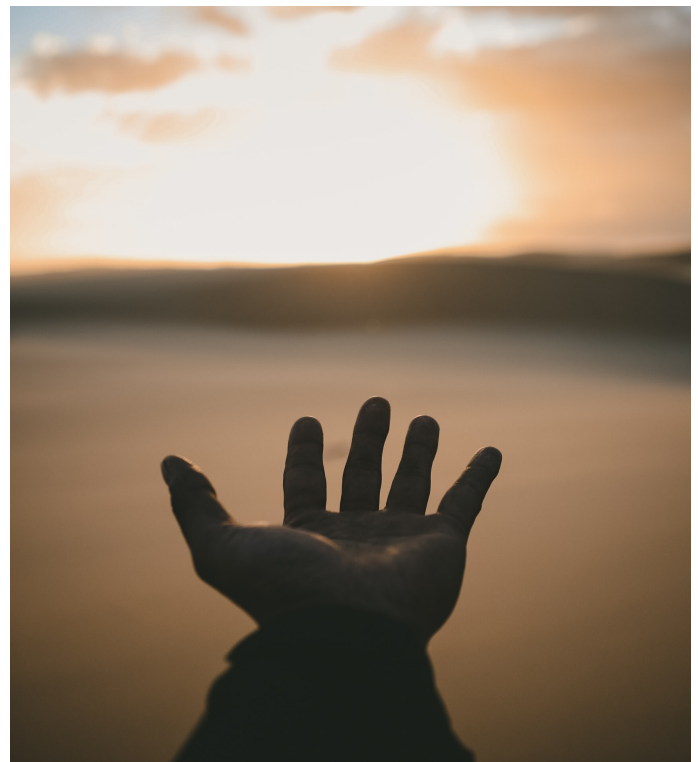
**2.) Assume the Best:** Remember - people hurt us out of their own woundedness. What they said or did to you is likely a result of acting out of their own pain. Recognizing this can soften the blow. Also, acknowledging that, as much as we hate to admit it, we might have misunderstood or exaggerated the event in the replaying of it. What if we gave the other the benefit of the doubt? What's the worst that could happen? Also ask ourselves - how might I have inadvertently contributed to events that led up to this hurt? Hurts and misunderstandings are rarely completely one-sided. Owning a bit of responsibility for the incident might be in order.

**3.) Suspend the Impulse to Retaliate:** We begin by admitting to ourselves and to God that we'd really like to

make the other person pay. Then we need to accept that we're powerless over these feelings. Surrender them. Invite God in. Strive to see the other person through God's eyes. Repeat each time we feel the need for vindication and revenge.

**4.) Ask for Healing:** Here's where we ask God for perseverance as we pray the following each day:

*Lord, I believe that you're healing this hurt. Help me in my unbelief. As we say it, everything inside of us may resist. That's okay. We may not really believe it. Yet. That's why what we're doing is called a leap of faith. It requires the suspension of disbelief.*



**5.) This one's tough - Pray for the good of the other.** Be honest with God about it. You might preface your prayer with: *Lord, I want to be able to do this, but right now I'm not feeling it. Help me to genuinely pray for \_\_\_\_\_, for her/his good and well-being.* Gradually your awareness and intention will free you from whatever's holding you back.

## Then What?

Be gentle with yourself. The process is a recursive one. We make the effort. We backslide. We start again. Just remain faithful to the process. Like any wound, it will take time to heal, from the inside out. **How do you know healing's taking place?** Gradually you'll notice you're spending less time reliving or ruminating on the hurt. Less negative self-talk. Your emotional "hot spots" start to cool down, allowing you to thoughtfully respond rather than react to others. You become more aware of God's mercy toward you and become less defensive. You'll feel a little freer, lighter, more aware of the working of God in your life. There will be setbacks, and when there are, begin the process all over again.

**What about Reconciliation?** Reconciling with the person who hurt you is separate from forgiveness. It's important to understand that it's impossible to go back to exactly the way things were before. Should you decide to approach the person for reconciliation, be sure to express your forgiveness without rehashing the event. It also helps to acknowledge any responsibility you may have had in the situation, allowing the other to save face, at least a little. Also realize that the other person may respond negatively, and you might be hurt again. In still other cases, maintaining a healthy boundary may be the most loving and life-giving thing you can do. Determining whether or how to approach a reconciliation, and setting realistic expectations will take time and a good dose of discernment. Be sure to invite God into this process as well!

## Recommended Resources

[After the Diagnosis...A Guide for Living](#) - by Reverend Thomas F. Lynch and Barbara Mariconda

Chapter 21 - Forgiveness and Healing

[The Book of Forgiving - The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World](#) - Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu



Barbara Mariconda

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