Forgiveness

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# Forgiveness and Our Better Self

If forgiveness means saying, “That’s OK” to things that aren’t OK then none of us should forgive. Forgiveness is not about pushing ourselves to the limit of what we can tolerate. Susan Shapiro[[1]](#endnote-1) in the Washington Post *Eight times it might be healthier not to forgive* makes the point that whenever forgiveness begins to sound like “you have no reason to still be upset” it shifts the pathology from offender to the person harmed. Forgiveness is not about saying “that’s OK” about things that are not OK.

Fr. Ubald Rugirangoga survived the Rwandan genocide. More than fifty of his family members were killed, including his mother. I met him when we were both consulting on the documentary *Forgiveness the Secret of Peace[[2]](#endnote-2)* chronicling his experience rebuilding his community after the genocide. Fr. Ubald forgave Straton, the man who ordered the killing of Ubald’s mother. Ubald paid for Straton’s son’s education while his father was in prison for his crimes. Ubald was passionate about his emotional freedom though forgiveness without minimizing the murders. He also thought forgiveness prevented evil from spreading.

As Fr. Ubald and I were making breakfast he made it clear that forgiveness was a response to immense wrongs. Far from being overlooked, or OK or even something that could be tolerated, forgiveness was a response to damage that could neither be undone or repaid. Forgiveness freed him from actively carrying his misery forward and passing it to another generation. No one could ever pay the debt or make it right. It could only be forgiven.

Forgiveness is an economic concept about debts that are impossible to pay. When Jesus tells a parable about forgiveness, the man owes 200,000 years worth of wages.[[3]](#endnote-3) Forgiveness was the alternative to the man being sold (along with his wife, children and possession). Being sold would not pay even a slight amount of the debt but would insure the debtor and family would be miserable for several lifetimes. Debtor’s prisons also kept debtors miserable.

While the main point of the parable was not to expect forgiveness if we don’t forgive others, the two story illustrates the two responses to debts that cannot be paid – forgive or make people miserable. Are we people who force misery on others or do we give people a chance to be a better self? The purpose of forgiveness is to give offenders and debtors another chance to be their better selves.

If someone owes me a government sized debt of fifteen trillion dollars the idea of a repayment plan makes no sense. What is left to decide is whether I will let them start over or make the rest of their life miserable because they cannot repay the debt. Do I cause further misery or forgive? What I do will reveal my character and establish my impact on the world.

Forgiveness is the generous option. Forgiveness is 100% about the character and generosity of the forgiver and not how deserving the debtor might be. Generosity is about the identity and character of the giver.

Most major religions presume that people are not always their best selves. The spiritual value of forgiveness hinges on our finding a better self than the one that was displayed. Everything that needs forgiveness began when people were not their best selves. Forgiveness means, “I see room for you (and me) to be someone better.”

Forgiving is the desire to see our better selves have another chance. After all, nothing can be done to repay the debt. That is impossible. With no repayment plan possible, can we forgive debts and give others another chance to be a better self? In Fr. Ubald’s community the expectations for this better self were clear. Since your worse self took away someone’s family, your better self will confess and become their replacement family. Under the supervision of his parish community the results were remarkable as can be seen in the documentary.

Things that cannot be repaid

Since forgiveness is for debts that cannot be repaid, what are those debts? The main category people identity is anything that takes someone’s life. But killing someone is not the only way to take a life or part of it. Damage to the quality and security of life is also unrepayable because as each second ticks into the past the harm done to that part of a life cannot be undone. Betrayal of responsibility and relationships is high on the list because these relationships are central to life. Cruelty also damages life in ways that cannot be undone.

A chance to be a better self is not permission to repeat offenses

Shapiro makes the point that not forgiving may be healthier if forgiveness gives offenders the green light to continue offending. Are we talking about allowing or even helping offenders escape consequences? That would be injustice, aiding and abetting crimes.

Forgiveness is not incompatible with consequences. Forgiveness is not codependency that removes the natural consequences of other’s actions. Fr. Ubald brought people to justice. Forgiveness never helps evil but does cancel any personal consequences I might invent. We release our personal agenda to make them miserable. We will not become sources of misery like they have been. Ubald would pick someone up, carry them on his back and say, “I don’t want to carry what others have done. Forgiveness sets me free!” He would set the person down and smile.

Deserving forgiveness

Shapiro suggests in her article that people need to reach the point where they feel the one who wronged them deserves forgiveness. Forgiveness is offering the offender a chance to find a better self and this is not something that can be deserved. Forgiveness is entirely about the character of the one forgiving and not about the worthiness of offender.

It is really hard to believe that some people might have a better self. We mentally calculate the probability that they would be interested in becoming a better self. We see a bad prognosis. Usually the situation feels hopeless. We do not want to tether ourselves to their bad prognosis. Why should we forgive if they will not be grateful, think they won and squander the opportunity? We may well be forgiving an ungrateful, unrepentant and wicked person. We are simply setting ourselves free from going to their level. After all nothing will repay the debt they owe.

Does forgiveness help offenders escape?

Offenders usually try to get away with the damage they have done. They hide and minimize wrongs they get caught doing.

You aren’t that hurt.

You concerns and pain aren’t that important.

The debt isn’t that big.

It’s no big deal. You are too sensitive.

Your injuries are your own fault.

Minimizing the debt isn’t forgiveness. Accepting minimizing justifications is the opposite of forgiving. Justifications create an illusion that the debt is smaller than it really is. If that were true, repayment not forgiveness is needed. Minimizing is denial.

The sociopathic mind

To a sociopath, and many offenders are, the goal is winning. Nothing else matters provided they win. Thus, the sociopathic mind will always see being forgiven as a win rather than a chance to be someone better. Sociopathic thinking is hard to forgive. They will gloat privately or publicly about getting away with their crime. Pain helps them win. A sociopathic mind does not share the pain others feel although the sociopath may be indifferently aware or even enjoy causing pain. The same is true for strongly narcissistic personalities. Without love and attachment, they only want to win.

While there are life-long sociopaths, a sociopathic mind is one we can all fall into at times. In those moments we do not not care or fear how much pain we cause. All we want to do is win, be right, prove others wrong and use their weaknesses to get our way. A “you have it coming” pattern for treating others lowers us to the same low form of self others show us. We become like the worst selves all around us. After these sociopathic moments toward our family and friends we later want a chance to be our better selves. They may now be doubting we have a better self.

Jesus refers to sociopathic thinking as “ungrateful and wicked”[[4]](#endnote-4) while pointing out that God is kind even then. While that compassion is not easily achieved, there is an obvious need for the ungrateful and wicked to become their better selves. They have no escape. For them to make a change they would need the kindness of forgiveness. Jesus presents compassion for such people as one of the highest forms of spiritual expression. Few will ever change but the ones who change are a great relief to us all. Saul of Tarsus (later known as Paul) is one Bible example.

More power makes people more sociopathic. Although we are prone to believe that if we gain power we will only make things right, power deadens compassion in everyone. If we remember that forgiveness is needed only when there are debts and offenses that cannot be repaid nothing we do with our power will pay the debt. Nothing we do with our power will make things right.

What we can do with our power is create suffering for the offenders. How much suffering would it take pay back irreparable damage? Power offers no solution but easily creates the next round of oppressors. Forgiveness is the refusal to become oppressors who enforce misery. Forgiveness allows the wicked to find their better self from now on. While very few will, we have saved ourselves from living at their level.

Jubilee thinking

Every fifty years or so in God’s economy there was a massive and universal forgiving of all debts. Lost properties reverted to their owners and the entire community had a new economic start following mass forgiveness. Jesus was a proponent of this Jubilee perspective. Forgiveness was aimed at giving people themselves back with another chance to be their best selves. To participate the offender “repented,” that is, got a new perspective on what they have done. Repenters would realize they have not been their better selves. Without this realization, being forgiven would mean nothing to them. Any options to help them be a better self would be limited.

Giving people a chance to be their better selves does not put us in control of their lives. Making room for another chance does not saddle us with the responsibility of making sure offenders do better next time. However, not forgiving others will tether us to trouble. We want them punished and our minds and feeling become subject to whatever is happening to the offender. We continue to feel our lives are tied to what happens to the offenders. We are attached to them and their fate. We are limited by escapes. We are miserable if they are not suffering. Our freedom gets wrapped around the perpetrator. We become agents of misery. If we get revenge we become the source of misery. Is that the effect we want to have on the world around us?

You may of heard the story of Jonah and the whale (or big fish.) The Assyrian empire had conquered Jonah’s land and people. That empire was well known for its cruelty. Assyrians invented crucifixion to torture and punish any resistance. Jonah is asked to give the Assyrians a chance to find their better selves. Jonah wants no part of giving them a way out of what they deserve. He does not want to forgive. Jonah is living his life by the Assyrian standard. The real story is about how Jonah learns compassion.

Forgiveness is compassion that refuses to become the next offender and start another cycle of misery. Forgiveness means refusing to become the next oppressor when we gain power. Forgiveness means I will not become the enforcer of misery for those who have harmed me. We find this theme repeated between Jesus and the disciple he called “Son of Jonah – both of whom were crucified by the way.

When the offense continues

Forgiveness is about giving people room to be their better self next time. For that reason, forgiveness does not help any offense continue. Forgiveness has an active interest in their finding a better self. To do so, the one who forgives will make sure that any natural and legal consequences for the offense are found. Forgiving will involve being a truthful witness to the crimes committed. Forgiving will mean escaping and avoiding all possible reenactments of the offense as that would be an expression of the offender’s toxic self. Some people continue offending because each offense is a win for them. They have no interest in a better self. Forgiveness is all about giving their better self a chance and not about giving their lower self another shot.

But there are two ways in which offenses continue. One is through indifference of the offender as we have seen, the other is a learning curve while someone is trying to become a better self. We give endless chances to try again for those who are working to learn. At the same time, we will take care that we don’t allow them to cause any preventable damage.

Can everyone forgive?

It takes some maturity to forgive. Maturity provides the developed sense of a self that is worth protecting. Someone who does not understand their own worth hears forgiveness as “they are worth more than I am.” Thus, until we develop a moderately robust sense of our worthwhile self, forgiveness is not an understandable option.

Childhood abuse can block maturity. Childhood neglect will always produce a self that feels “I lack value.” Without a clear sense of identity and worth forgiveness feels like others matter and it is OK to hurt me. That is not forgiveness.

Forgiveness involves a second understanding about ourselves. We need to understand that we can be less than our best. When our identities are strong enough to know that sometimes our better selves fail and want another chance, we begin understanding forgiveness. Forgiveness is my best self giving your best self room to come back. Until I understand my better self can fail I cannot make any sense of forgiving.

Our lesser and better selves

By eighteen months of age, babies have discovered that they sometimes get better results by faking what they feel. A baby’s brain has developed a “simulator” in the right dorsomedial prefrontal cortex. This simulator helps the baby predict outcomes for the baby’s responses. These predictions about others helps the baby select options. Not all options will actually work and even fewer are authentic.

The brain’s simulator remains somewhat disconnected from present feelings and reality. It is a fantasy world where imaginary scenarios try out what might happen. Other people’s feelings and reactions are studied but not felt personally. The simulator can see and guess what others will feel but not actually feel the feelings. The simulator is eventually able to perform “as if” human interactions without being connected to others. If the simulator takes over our lives it will go for the “win.” We have already noticed that sociopaths operate this way. Life becomes a performance with winning as the goal.

This avitar-like false-self may be a crowd pleaser at times but is never our best self. This performance self can actively run our lives but lacks compassion and keeps an emotional distance. People who are dealing with enemies do much the same.[[5]](#endnote-5) We will go for the win. We will be less than our best selves.

We can try to force a better performance from ourselves through self-criticism and toxic shame. We can produce a better looking performance and fool most of the people most of the time but inside we think, “If they really knew they would not like me.” Forcing children to forgive before they have developed a strong self leads to a performance by their false self. None of this is forgiveness.

We wish for our best selves after seeing how our performance-self has hurt others on the way to a win. We are not pleased with how we acted. We can see that our first reactions were not our better self. We hope no one recorded us on their cell phones. We do not want to be remembered that way. We discover (usually with the help of someone who forgives us) that we have a better self. Forgiveness makes room for this better self to grow. We now experience forgiving ourselves. Forgiveness gains value as we experience repeated chances for our better selves to be found.

Now we can understand why we like to see others find their better selves. The worse they are the more we want them to find someone better inside. Maybe it will be a self that has never had a chance to grow until now.

Looking for ways to help people find their better selves offers another protection. There are times when there was no offense. We simply took something the wrong way. We didn’t understand what was really happening. We didn’t have the whole picture at first. These corrections are not about forgiveness. We are simply updating our perspective with new understanding. Since we were looking for ways everyone to express their better selves we have also achieved what we wanted without hurting others over offenses that never took place.

Some things that are hard to forgive and give others another chance?

There are a number of characteristics we judge in others that makes it hard to forgive them. Sometimes we want them to be miserable. Yet, forgiveness is how we release ourselves from becoming people who make others miserable. No amount of misery will pay for the damage they have done anyway.

I asked a group of my friends, all who believe they have spiritual lives, to tell me what they found hard to forgive. I asked them to notice the kinds of judgments that lingered in their minds. Here is their list.

People who hurt me and don’t apologize.

Being wrongfully or falsely accused.

Those who hurt someone I love.

Family members who steal and betray trust.

Being betrayed and abandoned by family.

Predators, particularly leaders, who hurt vulnerable people.

Destroyers of beauty.

People who won’t own their stuff and lie about it.

People who try to control me.

I don’t think this list is unusual. Here lies another way that forgiveness sets us free. These emotionally charged standards we impose on others as unforgivable impact us as well. The same standards we us for others reflect on us. What we do not forgive in others we should not expect others to forgive in us. People around us will notice our standards and apply the same measures to us. Jesus taught that whatever we find unforgiveable will become the exception to God’s forgiveness toward us.

What sort of people shall we be? Shall we spread as much misery as we receive? Shall we look for our better selves when we forget? Forgiveness makes room for us all to start again with a better version of who we are.

1. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2024/07/29/not-forgive-danger-pain-apologies/> Eight times it might be healthier not to forgive By Susan Shapiro July 29, 2024 at 7:00 a.m. EDT [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [Forgiveness The Secret of Peace (English Version)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKKHrMkvj44) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKKHrMkvj44 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 18:24 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Luke 6:35-36 The New English Bible. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Wilder and Woolridge, *Escaping Enemy Mode*, (Chicago, IL: Northfield, 2022) p. 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)