

The Book of Forgiving

Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu

This book is about understanding, embracing, and practicing forgiveness. Forgiveness seems to be a simple and straightforward process, but reading this book brings light to the richness, complexity, and depth of choosing to live a life of forgiveness. The authors begin with some challenging propositions; that nothing is unforgivable and there is no one who is beyond redemption. “We are not created to live in suffering and isolation. We are created to live in love and connection with one another. When there is a break in that connection, we must have a method of repair”.

The authors have great credibility in the subject of forgiveness. Desmond Tutu is a priest in South Africa and was intimately involved in the struggle to break free from apartheid, and also grew up witnessing domestic violence in his home. His daughter Mpho is also a priest in South Africa and lived through the murder in her own home of her beloved housekeeper. What follows is an overview of the process of forgiveness they have described and key excerpts that explain how to walk the path of forgiveness in your own life.

The authors offer a method which they call the Fourfold Path.

1. Telling the story
2. Naming the hurt
3. Granting forgiveness
4. Renewing or releasing the relationship

Whenever we are injured, we face the choice to retaliate and seek revenge, or to forgive and reconnect. When we practice the law of an eye for an eye, we all end up blind. There are certain predictable responses that **trap us into a cycle of revenge**. The affront is so painful, so intolerable, that we cannot accept it, and instead of weeping for what we have lost, we point our fingers or shake our fists at the one who harmed us. Instead of embracing our sadness, we stoke our anger. Then we feel compelled to restore our dignity by rejecting our pain and denying our grief.

When we cannot admit our own woundedness, we cannot see the other as a wounded person who has harmed us out of his or her own ignorance, pain, or brokenness. We move along the Revenge Cycle to rejecting our shared humanity, and the bond between us frays and the social fabric tears. From there it is a short step to demanding revenge. To buy back our dignity we retaliate. Retaliation, in turn, leads to more hurt, more harm, and more loss, which keeps the Revenge Cycle going without end. It is not hard to find evidence of this in our own lives, our families, and our societies.

While revenge may be a natural impulse, there is another way, which they call the **Forgiveness Cycle**. Instead of rejection, in the Forgiveness Cycle we accept our pain and grief. If the hurt is small this might be the end of it and we can quite quickly forgive. However, if we have been hurt deeply or have lost someone or something that is precious to us, this part of the Forgiveness Cycle may be intense and long. When the wound is deep, we must travel through the stages of grief before we come to full acceptance. When we accept our pain, we start to recognize that we don't have to stay stuck in our story.

It is helpful to recognize that the person who injured us also has a story and they acted out of their own pain, shame, or ignorance. They have ignored our shared humanity. When we see pain in this way we are able to see our common bond, which may allow us to have empathy and compassion for the perpetrator. We can begin to let go of our identity as a victim and their identity as a perpetrator.

When we can accept both our humanity and the perpetrator's, we can begin to write a new story in which we are no longer a victim but a survivor or perhaps even a hero. In this new story, we are able to learn and grow from what has happened to us. We may even be able to use our pain as motivation to reduce the pain and suffering of others. Healing does not mean we can reverse what happened or that what happened to us will never cause us hurt again. It does not mean we will no longer miss those who have been lost to us or that which was taken from us. Healing means that our dignity is restored and we are able to move forward in our lives.

As you walk the path of forgiveness you will come to understand more deeply the gift you are asking of and bestowing upon another when you ask a person to forgive what you have done. The power of this path and the practice of forgiveness, is that we heal both as we forgive and as we are forgiven. We heal as we forgive others and as we forgive ourselves.

We can choose to harm or to heal. It does not matter how long or how briefly we have carried our suffering. It does not matter if the other person is contrite or remorseless. It does not matter if the one who harmed us does not acknowledge the harm or apologize. It does not matter if we believe that person has not paid for his or her crimes against us, because forgiveness is not a choice you make for someone else; **it is a choice you make for yourself.**

Walking the Fourfold Path

Telling the story: Experiencing pain is an inescapable part of being human. Hurt, insult, harm, and loss are inevitable parts of our lives. Yet, it is not the experience itself that defines us, **it is the meaning we make of our experiences** that defines both who we are and who we ultimately become.

Telling the story is how we get back our dignity after we have been harmed. It is how we begin to take back what was taken from us, and how we begin to understand and make meaning out of our hurting. When we know our stories and make sense of what has happened, we get connected to the larger story of our lives and its meaning. We become more resilient, we are able to handle stress, and we heal.

To tell your story start with the truth, letting the truth be heard in all its rawness, in all its ugliness and messiness. In the beginning, your memories and your facts, depending on what the trauma is and when it happened, may be fragmented and hard to articulate. They may not follow a chronological order or be told in a linear fashion. That is okay. What matters is telling the story and acknowledging what happened.

Ideally you can tell your story to the person who caused you harm. There is a profound reclaiming of dignity and strength when you are able to stand in front of your abuser, stand in your truth, and speak of how that person hurt you. It is not, however, always possible or even practical. **To work, the perpetrator has to be receptive, and will not cause you more harm.** Ideally, they have shown remorse, are asking for your forgiveness, and are willing to witness the pain they have caused by listening to your story. If this is not possible or if you are not ready to face your abuser, choose someone you trust like a good friend, a therapist, or your religious leader. What is important is to simply tell your story and acknowledge what happened to you. You may find just telling your story relieves a burden you have carried. You may need to tell your story many times over, to different people, in different ways before you are ready to move forward in the forgiveness process.

Naming the Hurt: Once we are done telling our story, the details of who, when, where, and what was done to us - we must name the hurt. Giving the emotion a name is the way we come to understand how what happened affected us. **We must face and feel our feelings.** We are each hurt in our own unique ways, and when we give voice to this pain, we begin to heal it. While we may be reluctant to face the truth of our feelings or the depth of our pain, it is the only way to heal and move forward.

A harm felt but denied will always find a way to express itself. When we bury hurt in shame and silence, it begins to fester from the inside out. When we ignore the pain, it grows bigger and bigger, and like an abscess that is never drained, eventually it will rupture. We are not responsible for what breaks us, but we can be responsible for what puts us back together again. Naming the hurts is how we begin to repair our broken parts.

Granting forgiveness: We choose forgiveness because it is how we find freedom and keep from remaining trapped in an endless loop of telling our stories and naming our hurts. It is how we move from victim to hero. Heroes are people who determine their own fate and their own future.

When our trauma is great, forgiveness requires a deep level of acceptance of what has occurred. This does not mean agreement with or any kind of pardoning or condoning of the action that hurt us. It simply means acceptance of the reality of the situation and letting go of the incident, which cannot be changed. Acceptance can bring an inner peace which cannot be shattered. **Forgiveness allows us to keep our hearts open and soft.** Choosing not to forgive will keep us closed and hardened inside.

We are able to forgive because we are able to recognize our shared humanity. We are able to recognize that we are all fragile, vulnerable, flawed human beings capable of thoughtlessness and cruelty. We discover our shared humanity by seeing our connection rather than our separation. If we look at any perpetrator, we can discover a story that tells us something about what led up to that person causing harm. It doesn't justify the person's actions, but it does provide context and perspective.

It is possible to say the words – I forgive you – with the intent of leaping over our suffering in pursuit of inner peace or because we think it is the right thing to do, yet not really mean it. Without allowing ourselves to walk through the Forgiveness Cycle the reality of forgiveness may not take root in our hearts and lives. True forgiveness means surrendering the desire for payback or the demand that the other person must change. **You know you have truly forgiven when you experience freedom from resentment, bitterness, and demand for justice or revenge.**

The guarantee in life is that we will suffer. What is not guaranteed is how we respond, whether we will let this suffering embitter us or ennoble us. Our suffering can ennoble us when we make meaning out of it, and allow it to change us into richer, deeper, more empathic people. We have the ability to write a new story and move forward more whole and free.

Renew or release the relationship: Forgiveness is not the end of the Fourfold Path, because the granting of forgiveness is not the end of the process of healing. Once you have been able to forgive, the final step is to either renew or release the relationship with the one who has harmed you. Even if you never speak to the person again, even if the person is no longer alive, they still live on in ways that can affect your life profoundly. **To finish the journey and create the wholeness and peace you crave, you must choose whether to renew or release the relationship.** After this final step, you wipe the slate clean of all that caused a breach in the past. No more debts are owed. No more resentments fester. Only when you complete this step can you have a future unfettered by the past.

You may not think you have a relationship with the stranger who harmed you or the person you haven't seen for years, but a relationship is created and maintained by the very act of harm that stands between you. This relationship, like every relationship that calls for forgiveness, must be either renewed or released. This decision is a personal choice only you can make.

The choice to release a relationship is a valid choice but should not be taken lightly. When we release a relationship, that person walks off with a piece of our hearts and a piece of our history. On the other hand, renewing our relationships is how we harvest the fruits that forgiveness has planted. The relationship will not be the same as it was before the hurt or insult. Renewing a relationship is a creative act. We make a new relationship.

Renewing relationships is how we turn our curses into blessings and continue to grow through our forgiving. It is how we make restitution for what was taken and set right what was made wrong. Even if the relationship was injurious or hurtful, it is still a piece of shared history. Enemies can become friends, and perpetrators can recover their lost humanity.

There are times when renewing a relationship is not possible, such as when renewing the relationship might harm you further, or you don't know who harmed you, or the person has died and is not someone you carry in your heart. Releasing a relationship is how you free yourself from victimhood and trauma. You can choose to not have someone in your life anymore, but you have released the relationship only when you have truly chosen that path without wishing that person ill. Releasing is refusing to let an experience or a person occupy space in your head or heart any longer. **It is releasing not only the relationship but your old story of the relationship.**

Renew your relationships when you can and release them when you can't. When we practice this last step of the Fourfold Path, we keep anger, resentment, hatred, and despair from ever having the last word. The Fourfold Path also applies when you are the one in need of forgiveness for something you have done. You can listen to the person's story, allow him or her to name the hurts you caused, you can ask for forgiveness, and seek to renew the relationship. This requires sincere remorse and apology and you must respect that the one whose forgiveness you seek must make his or her own journey on the Fourfold Path.