

Learning to Forgive

The art of living together is closely related to the ability to ask for forgiveness and to forgive. We are all weak and often make mistakes. So we have to help each other to always get up again. And the best way to do so is often through forgiveness. An article by Jutta Burggraf.

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Introduction

We have all suffered injustice and humiliation at some point in our life. Some people have to endure these daily, not only if they are in prison, but in their own workplace or family environment. For it is true that no one can hurt us as deeply as those who should love us. “The only pain that can do more damage than iron is the injustice that comes from family members,” an Arab saying goes.

How do we react to a wrong that someone has intentionally done to us? Normally, we may spontaneously want to hit back at those who have hit us, or speak ill of those who have spoken ill of us. But this action is like a boomerang: we are the ones it hurts the most. It is sad to waste one’s energies in anger and resentment, holding a grudge. And perhaps it is even sadder when a person has to harden their heart in order not to have to suffer any more.

Only amid forgiveness does new life spring forth. That is why it is so important to teach people the “art” of practicing it.

I. What does it mean “to forgive”?

What am I doing when I tell someone: “I forgive you”? Clearly I am reacting to a wrong that someone has done to me, employing my freedom to do so. I am not simply forgetting about the injustice done to me. I am renouncing revenge and, despite everything, I want what is best for the other person. Let us consider these elements in more detail.

1. Reacting to a wrong

First of all, this must be something that is bad for my life as a whole. If a surgeon removes an arm that is dangerously infected, I may feel pain and sadness. I may even be angry at the doctor. But I don’t have to forgive

him for anything, because he has done me a great good: he has saved my life. Similar situations can occur in raising children. Not everything that seems bad to children is harmful for them. Good parents don't grant their children all the whims they ask for; they train them in fortitude. A teacher once told me: "I don't care what my students think about me today. What matters is what they will think twenty years from now."

Forgiveness only makes sense when someone has received objective harm from another person.

But forgiveness doesn't mean refusing to see the harm that has been done to me, in "sugar-coating" or disguising it. Some people try to pass over the insults inflicted on them by their colleagues or spouse, because they want to avoid any conflict. They seek peace at any price and try to preserve harmony with those around them. It doesn't seem

to matter to them if others fail to tell them the truth, or make use of them to achieve their own selfish ends. They may even try to turn a blind eye to fraud or adultery. But this attitude is dangerous, since it can lead to a complete blindness to all human values. Indignation and even anger are normal and even necessary reactions in certain situations. Those who forgive don't close their eyes to evil; they don't deny that an objective injustice has been done. If they did deny it, they would have nothing to forgive.^[1]

If someone gets used to keeping quiet about everything, perhaps they can enjoy an apparent peace for a time. But they will eventually have to pay a high price for it, for they have renounced their freedom to be themselves. They bury their frustrations deep in their heart, behind a thick protective wall. And often they don't even realize that

their life is no longer authentic. It is normal that an injustice hurts us and leaves a wound. If we refuse to see it, we can never heal it. Then we are permanently running away from our own good, from our true selves; and the pain slowly and irremediably eats away at us. Some try to escape by taking a trip around the world; others change cities. But suffering has to be confronted. All pain whose existence is denied returns through the back door; it festers within as a traumatic experience and can be the cause of lasting wounds. Hidden pain can lead, in certain cases, to a person becoming bitter, obsessive, nervous or insensitive, and make it hard to accept any offer of friendship. It can even lead to long-lasting nightmares. Sooner or later, memories reappear without the person consciously willing it. In the end, many people come to realize that perhaps it would have been better to face the experience of pain directly and

consciously. Confronting suffering in the right way is the key to inner peace.

2. Acting with freedom

The act of forgiving is a free act. It is the conscious refusal to react according to the well-known proverb: “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”^[2] Hate provokes violence, and violence justifies hate. When I forgive, I put an end to this vicious circle. I prevent the chain reaction from running its course, and free the other person from its grasp. But first of all I free myself. I willingly let go of my anger and resentment. Rather than “reacting” automatically, I make a new beginning, also for myself.

Overcoming offenses done to us is extremely important, because hatred and revenge poison a person’s life. The philosopher Max Scheler said that a resentful person “poisons”

himself.^[3] The other person has hurt him, and he refuses to move on from the pain. He secludes himself in it, remaining trapped in the past. And he feeds his resentment by going over again and again in his mind the wrong that has been done to him. And thus he ends up ruining his own life.

Resentment allows wounds to fester within us and exert their devastating influence, creating a general malaise and dissatisfaction. As a result, one doesn't feel comfortable in one's own skin. But if we are not at ease with ourselves, then we are not at ease anywhere. Bitter memories can suddenly rekindle anger and sadness, and lead to depression. A Chinese saying goes, "He who seeks revenge needs to dig two pits."

In her book *My First White Friend*, Patricia Raybon, an Afro-American journalist describes how the

oppression her people have suffered in the United States led her in her youth to hate all white people, "because they have lynched and lied, taken us prisoner, poisoned and eliminated us."^[4] The author confesses that, after some time, she finally came to realize that her hatred, however understandable, was destroying her own identity and dignity. It blinded her, for example, to the offer of friendship from a white girl at school. Gradually she discovered that, instead of expecting whites to apologize for their injustices, she had to apologize for her own hatred and inability to look at a white person as another human being, rather than as a member of a race of oppressors. She found the enemy within herself, formed by the prejudices and rancor that prevented her from being happy.

Unhealed wounds can greatly reduce our freedom. They can give rise to

disproportionate and violent reactions, which catch us by surprise. A wounded person hurts others. And since that person often hides their heart behind a shell, they may often seem hard and inaccessible. In reality, that is not how they are, but they feel forced to defend themselves. They look tough on the outside, but inside they are insecure, tormented by bad experiences in the past.

The solution is to uncover the wound in order to cleanse and heal it. Putting order in one's inner world can be a step towards making forgiving others possible. But this step is extremely difficult, and sometimes we don't manage to take it. We can renounce revenge, but not pain. Hence it is clear that forgiveness, although closely linked to emotional experiences, is not a feeling. It is an act of the will that is

not reduced to our psychic state.^[5]
We can forgive while crying.

When a person undertakes this eminently free act, suffering ordinarily loses its bitterness, and may even disappear over time. “Wounds are transformed into pearls,” Saint Hildegard of Bingen said.

3. Remembering the past

It is a law of nature that time “heals” some wounds. It doesn’t really heal them, but it enables us to forget about them. Some speak about an “expiration date for our emotions.”^[6] There will come a time when a person can no longer cry, no longer feel hurt. This is not a sign that they have forgiven their aggressor, but that they have a strong “will to live.” A specific psychic state – however intense it may be – cannot usually become permanent. This state is followed by a slow process of

detachment, for life goes on. We cannot remain stuck there forever, trapped in the past and prolonging the damage we have suffered. If we remain trapped in pain, we block the natural rhythm of life.

Memory can be a breeding ground for frustrations. Hence the ability to untie oneself from the past and forget what has been done to us is very important for the human being. But this has nothing to do with forgiveness. Forgiveness is not simply a matter of “wiping the slate clean.” It requires recovering the truth about the offense and the injustice committed, which is often camouflaged or distorted. The wrong done needs to be acknowledged and, as far as possible, repaired.

Therefore it is necessary to “purify the memory.” A healthy memory can become a teacher of how to live authentically. If I live in peace with

my past, I can learn a lot from the events I have gone through. I remember past injustices so I can try to prevent them from being repeated, and I remember them as forgiven.

4. Renouncing revenge

Just as forgiveness is an expression of our freedom, it is also possible to deny the other person this gift.

Simon Wiesenthal recounts in one of his books his experience as a Jew in the concentration camps during World War II. One day, a nurse came and asked him to follow her. She led him to a room where a young SS officer was dying. The officer told the Jewish prisoner about his own life; he spoke about his family and upbringing, and how he became a collaborator of Hitler. His conscience was troubled above all by a crime he had taken part in. On one occasion, soldiers under his command had

locked 300 Jews inside a house and burned the house down, killing everyone inside. “I know it was a horrible thing to do,” the officer said. “During the long nights here waiting for my death, I felt the great need to talk to a Jewish person about this and ask for their forgiveness from the bottom of my heart.” Wiesenthal ended his account in this way: “Suddenly I understood, and without saying a single word I left the room.”^[7] Another Jewish person confided, “No, I have not forgiven any of those responsible, nor will I ever willingly forgive them.”^[8]

To forgive means to renounce revenge and hatred. In contrast, some people never seem to feel hurt. It is not that they don’t want to see evil and repress their pain. Quite the contrary: they perceive injustices objectively, with utmost clarity, but they don’t let themselves be bothered by them. “Even if they kill us, they

can do us no real harm,” said the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who was a slave. Such people have achieved an iron grip on their emotions, and observe everything that happens with a cold irony. They feel themselves superior to other men and inwardly maintain so great a distance from others that no one can touch their hearts. Since nothing affects them, they have nothing to reproach their oppressors for. What does it matter to the moon when a dog barks at it? This is the attitude of the stoics and perhaps also of some Asian “gurus” who live isolated in their own “magnanimity.” They don’t even deign to look at those whom they so easily “absolve.”

The problem is that, in this case, in the effort to avoid suffering, one ends up renouncing love. A person who loves is always small and vulnerable. It is much more human to love and suffer greatly in life than

to adopt a distant and superior attitude to others. When someone claims to never be hurt by the actions of others, forgiveness is superfluous.

5. Recognizing the personal dignity of the aggressor

Forgiveness begins when, thanks to a new strength, a person rejects any kind of revenge. He or she does not speak about another person in a way that reflects their own painful experiences, and avoids judging and devaluing them, being ready to listen with an open heart.

The secret consists in not identifying the aggressor with what they have done.^[9] Every human being is greater than his or her own guilt. An eloquent example is given by Albert Camus, who addressed a public letter to the Nazis about the crimes they had committed in France: “Despite all that you have done, I will

continue to call you men. We strive to respect in you what you did not respect in others.”^[10] Each person is more valuable than their worst mistakes.

An anecdote about a 19th century general is relevant here. When he was on his deathbed, a priest asked him if he had forgiven his enemies. “It’s impossible,” the general replied. “I have had them all executed.”^[11]

The forgiveness we are talking about here does not consist in settling accounts with someone, but above all it involves an interior attitude. It means living in peace with one’s memories and not losing esteem for any person. We can also look upon a deceased person in his or her personal dignity. No one is totally corrupt; there is some light in everyone.

In forgiving, we are telling someone, “No, you are not like that. I know

who you really are! You are actually much better.” We want all the good possible for the other person, their full development, their deep joy, and we strive to love them from the bottom of our heart, with great sincerity.

II. What attitudes help us to forgive?

After this broad discussion of what forgiveness means of, let us turn to some attitudes that help us to decide to act in a way that frees us and also frees others.

1. Love

To forgive is to love intensely. The Latin verb “per-donare” expresses this very clearly: the prefix “per” intensifies the verb that accompanies it, “donare.” It means to give abundantly, to give oneself to the utmost. The poet Werner Bergengruen said that love is proved

in fidelity, and made complete in forgiveness.

But when someone has seriously offended us, love seems hardly possible. Then, as a first step, we need to separate ourselves in some way from the aggressor, even if only inwardly. As long as the knife is in the wound, the wound will never close. We need to extract the knife, to open up a space from the other person; only then can we see their face. A certain detachment is a precondition for being able to forgive wholeheartedly, and to give the other person the love he or she needs.

A person can only live and develop in a healthy way when he or she is accepted as they are, when someone truly loves them and says: “It is good that you exist.”^[12] Each person needs to be confirmed in their being in order to feel at home in the world, in order to acquire a certain self-esteem

and be able to relate to others in friendship. In this sense it has been said that love continues and perfects the work of creation.^[13]

To love a person means to make that person aware of their own value, their own beauty. A person who is loved is a person who is approved, who can tell the other person in all truth: “I need you to be myself.”

If I refuse to forgive the other person, I somehow take away the space needed for them to live and develop in a healthy way. In a spiritual sense, I “kill” that person. One can really kill a person with unjust and harsh words, with evil thoughts or simply by refusing to forgive. The other person may then become sad, passive and bitter. Kierkegaard speaks of the “despair of one who desperately wants to be himself” and who finds it impossible to do so

because others are preventing him.

[14]

When, in contrast, we grant forgiveness, we help the other person to recover their own identity, to live with a new freedom and a deeper happiness.

2. Understanding

It is important to realize that everyone needs more love than he or she “deserves.” Everyone is more vulnerable than they seem; we are all weak and can make mistakes when we are tired. To forgive is to have the firm conviction that in each person, behind everything bad, there is a vulnerable human being capable of changing. It means believing in the possibility of transformation and growth in others.

If a person finds it hard to forgive, it may be that they are taking others too seriously, and demanding too

much of them. The philosopher Robert Spaemann warns: “taking a man too seriously means destroying him.”^[15] We are all weak and can often fail others. And we are often unaware of the consequences of our actions: “we don’t really know what we are doing.”^[16] For example, when someone is angry, they can say things that, deep down, they don’t think or mean. If I take everything completely seriously, every minute of the day, and I start “analyzing” what someone said when they were angry, I can cause endless conflicts. If we were to keep track of every fault we see in someone, we would end up turning even the most charming person into a monster.

We have to believe in the other person’s capabilities and let them realize this. Sometimes we can be amazed at how much a person changes if we give them confidence, treating them in accord with what

we see they are capable of. Many people have the ability to encourage others to be better. They communicate to them the assurance that, despite all their mistakes and falls, they have much that is good and beautiful inside. As the wise maxim says: “If you want the other person to be good, treat them as if they already were.”

3. Generosity

Forgiveness requires a merciful and generous heart. It means going beyond justice. Some situations are so complex that mere justice is impossible. If something has been stolen, it can be returned; if it has been broken, it can be fixed or replaced. But if someone loses an eye, a relative or a good friend? It is impossible to restore this with justice alone. It is precisely then, when punishment cannot cover the loss, that forgiveness is needed.

Forgiveness does not cancel what justice and the law demand, but infinitely exceeds it. Since it is a free gift of love, a gift that is always undeserved, forgiveness is unconditional. This means that the one who forgives does not demand anything from the aggressor, not even that they are sorry for what they have done. Even before the aggressor seeks reconciliation, the one who loves has already forgiven the offense.

Repentance on the part of the other person is not a necessary condition for forgiveness, although it is desirable. It is certainly much easier to forgive when someone asks for forgiveness. But sometimes we need to realize that those who harm us have blind spots, which prevent them from seeing and admitting their guilt.

It is also possible to forgive in an “impure” way,^[17] when it is done with personal calculations and goals: “I forgive you so that you will realize the evil you have done.” “I forgive you so that you will be better in the future.” These may be laudable pedagogical aims, but in this case it is not true forgiveness, which needs to be granted without any conditions, just like genuine love: “I forgive you because I love you – in spite of everything.”

I can forgive the other person even without their realizing it. It is a gift I can give even when the other person doesn’t know about it, or doesn’t know why I need to forgive.

4. Humility

Prudence and refinement are needed in forgiving another person. Sometimes it is not advisable to make our forgiveness known right away, when the other person is still

agitated. For it could seem like a sublime revenge to them, or humiliate and anger them even more. Indeed, the offer of reconciliation can at times seem like an accusation. A self-righteous attitude can lurk under it: the desire to prove that I am right and show how generous I am. What prevents us from bringing about peace is not the obstinacy of the other person, but our own arrogance.

Moreover, it is always a risk to offer forgiveness, because there is no guarantee that our offer won't upset the aggressor and make the situation worse. "When we forgive, we abandon ourselves to the other person; we expose ourselves to what they might unpredictably do and give them the freedom to offend and hurt us again."^[18] Hence we see that humility is needed when trying to seek reconciliation.

When the right circumstances arise (perhaps after quite some time has gone by), we can try to have a calm conversation with the other person. Then we can make known our own motives and reasons, and listen attentively to the other person's point of view. It is important to listen carefully, and strive to catch even the words that the other person doesn't say out loud. It is good from time to time to "put ourselves in the other person's shoes," and try to see the situation from their perspective.

Forgiveness is an act that requires inner strength. But it also needs to be humble and respectful of the other person, and not seek to dominate or humiliate them. To be true and "pure," our granting of forgiveness must shun even the slightest sign of "moral superiority" – which, in principle, doesn't exist; at least we are not the ones who can or should judge what is hidden in the heart of

the other person. It is also important to avoid accusing the offender again and again in our conversations.

Whoever makes a show of their own blamelessness is not really offering forgiveness. Becoming angry about the guilt of another person can very easily become a way to cover over our own guilt. We need to forgive as the sinners that we are, not as the righteous. So forgiveness is more about sharing than granting others something.

We all need forgiveness, because we all hurt others, although sometimes we may not realize it. We need forgiveness to undo the knots of the past and start anew. It is important for each of us to recognize our own weaknesses, our own failures (which may have led the other person to act in a mistaken way) and not hesitate to ask for forgiveness in turn.

III. Final Reflections

Forgiveness requires great effort in order to be authentic. We cannot deny that the demand for forgiveness in certain cases reaches the limits of our own strength. Can we forgive when the aggressor shows no sign of repenting, and even insults us and thinks they have acted correctly? Can a mother ever forgive the murderer of her child? Can we forgive a person who has made a complete fool of us in front of others, who has taken away our freedom or dignity, who has deceived us, defamed us or destroyed something that was very important to us? Perhaps it will never be possible to forgive wholeheartedly, at least if we count only on our own strength. But a Christian can also count on God's unfailing help. "With my God, I can leap over the walls," the psalmist exalts. These can also be the walls that we have in our heart. With the help of good friends and, above all, with God's grace, it is possible to

accomplish this extremely difficult work and free ourselves. Forgiveness is an act of spiritual strength, and a great relief. It means opting for life and acting creatively.

But we shouldn't try to force someone to forgive. People should be allowed as much time as they need to reach the decision to forgive the harm done to them. If we were to accuse them of being spiteful or vindictive for refusing to forgive right away, we would only deepen the wound. It can be hard at first to accept something that has deeply hurt us. First of all, we need to calm down, and accept the fact that we find it hard to forgive, that we need time. Following the rhythm of our nature can help us a lot. We cannot be surprised in the face of such difficulties, whether they are our own or those of others.

If we contribute to creating a culture of forgiveness, we can build up together a more human world. To conclude, some wise words can help us: “Do you want to be happy for a moment? Take revenge. Do you want to be happy always? Forgive.”^[19]

Jutta Burggraf, a German theologian who died in 2010, wrote this article for *Retos de futuro en educación* (Ed. by O.F. Otero. Madrid 2004). *In memoriam* (1952-2010)

^[1] Pope John Paul II pointed out that justice, together with truth, is required for authentic forgiveness. Cf. *Message for the World Day of Peace*, “Offer Forgiveness, Receive Peace,” January 1, 1997.

^[2] *Mt 5:38.*

^[3] Max Scheler, *Das Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen*, in *Vom Umsturz der Werte*, Bern 51972, pp. 36ff.

^[4] Patricia Raybon, *My First White Friend*, New York 1996, p. 4ff.

^[5] Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Moralia*, Werke IX, Regensburg 1980, p. 338.

^[6] Aurel Kolnai, *Forgiveness*, in B. Williams, D. Wiggins (eds.), *Ethics, Value and Reality. Selected Papers of Aurel Kolnai*, Indianapolis 1978, p. 95.

^[7] Cf. Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower. On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, New York 1998.

^[8] P. Levi, *Sí, esto es un hombre*, Barcelona 1987, p.186. Cf. Idem, *Los hundidos y los salvados*, Barcelona 1995, p. 117.

^[9] Hatred should not be directed at persons, but at deeds. Cf. *Rom 12:9, Rev 2:6*.

[¹⁰] Albert Camus, *Letter to a German Friend*, p. 58.

[¹¹] Cf. M. Crespo, *Das Verzeihen. Eine philosophische Untersuchung*, Heidelberg 2002, p. 96.

[¹²] Joseph Pieper, *Über die Liebe*, München 1972, p. 38ff.

[¹³] Cf. Ibid., p. 47.

[¹⁴] Soren Kierkegaard, *Die Krankheit zum Tode*, Munich 1976, p. 99.

[¹⁵] Robert Spaemann, *Felicidad y benevolencia*, Madrid 1991, p. 273.

[¹⁶] But there can also be an unwillingness to see, a willful blindness. Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Sittlichkeit und ethische Werterkenntnis. Eine Untersuchung über ethische Strukturprobleme*, Vallendar 1982, p. 49.

[¹⁷] Cf. V. Jankelevitch, *El perdón*, Barcelona 1999, p.144.

[18] Amedeo Cencini, *Vivir en paz*, Bilbao 1997, p. 96.

[19] Enrique Domingo Lacordaire, O.P.

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