

Forgiveness

The Path to Inner Freedom

by Michael B. Ross

"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your father will not forgive the wrongs you have done." Matthew 6:14,15 (Today's English Version Bible).

My mother and I have been estranged for more than 15 years now. As someone who was physically and emotionally abused as a child, I have been carrying around a lot of anger and bad feelings toward her. I came slowly to the point in my life when I realized that the anger that I continued to harbor toward my mother was eating away at me; destroying my soul.

A close friend of mine sent me several books on forgiveness that I found very enlightening. In one book, *Forgiveness: A Bold Choice for a Peaceful Heart*, the author, Robin Casarjian wrote: "Resentment has been compared to holding on to a burning ember with the intention of throwing it at another, all the while burning yourself. When we feel resentful, we feel strongly the pain of the past again and again. Not only does this take an obvious and dramatic toll on our emotional well-being, it can powerfully and negatively impact our physical well-being as well."

I understood her words well, for they seemed so clear to me; the anger and pain that I had hidden deep within myself for so many years was destroying me. I had developed a mental illness, the roots of which, my psychiatrists believed, were embedded in the abuse that I had received as a child. My world was falling apart. And it was all because I was unable to put the past behind me.

I wanted to change; I *had* to change, but I didn't know how. I so badly wanted the promise that Casarjian wrote about in her book: "Forgiveness holds the promise that we will find the peace that we all really want. It promises our release from the hold that another's attitudes and actions have over us. It awakens us to the truth of our own goodness and loveliness. It holds the sure promise that we will be able to increasingly unburden ourselves from the emotional turmoil and move on to feeling better about ourselves and life.

Sounds good, doesn't it? Who wouldn't want that promised peace of mind? I did, and I started to work toward that goal. I wish that I could tell you that the process was easy, that all I had to do was say and believe that "I want to forgive" and magically I would be able to forgive. But the truth is that it took me a very long time — years in fact — before I was able to honestly say "I forgive you, Mother" and wholeheartedly mean it.

It was a difficult time for me. It was a period of great anguish, despair, and pain, in which I spent many months soul searching, both alone and with close friends. Facing your past, especially a painful past, is never easy. But in time I began to understand one of life's greatest and most elusive truths: That true inner peace is only found when you realize that you must change yourself, *not* the people who have hurt you.

I would like to share some of what I have learned about forgiveness. First I would like to expose the myths of forgiveness — that is, what forgiveness is not. Then I would like to move on to what forgiveness truly is. Once we understand these two sides of the coin, we can start to make true progress in forgiving.

What Forgiveness Is Not

Forgiveness is not forgetting. We are taught from an early age to "forgive and forget." However, this is often not realistic and is not valuable. It would be nice to be able to turn back the clock and erase the unpleasantness of our past, but it just isn't possible. The real trick isn't to forget the past, but to learn from the past and try to use it to help yourself and others both now and in the future.

Forgiveness is not condoning. Forgiving doesn't mean that the past was okay or not so bad. We were hurt; it was painful; and it affected our lives. Forgiveness allows us to deal with the past in a more effective manner that doesn't minimize the past, but rather minimizes the effects of that painful past on the present and our future. It in no way denies, justifies, or condones the original harm done to us in the past.

Forgiveness is not absolution. Forgiveness does not absolve the perpetrator of responsibility for their actions. It doesn't let them off the hook. The reality is that we cannot grant absolution even if we wanted to — that is the sole responsibility of God. And while only God can grant absolution, only the perpetrator can seek it. They are ultimately responsible for their own actions and must make peace with their own past, just as we must make peace with our past. We don't forgive others for their sake. We forgive for our own sake, and for our own peace of mind.

Forgiveness is not a form of self-sacrifice. Forgiveness is not pretending that everything is just fine when you feel it isn't. This is perhaps the most difficult concept of forgiveness to understand because sometimes the distinction between being truly forgiving and simply denying or repressing anger and pain can be deceptive and confusing. Plastering a smile on your face and "making nice" is not forgiving. Either we forgive, or we do not — there is no halfway. And we must be careful to be honest with ourselves if we are not ready to forgive, because in the long run it is better to admit to and deal with our inability to forgive than just to pretend to forgive.

Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness. Far from weakness, forgiveness is a sign of true inner strength. When we forgive we understand that we don't need our anger and hatred to protect ourselves. We don't need the pain as a crutch anymore. Forgiveness doesn't depend upon who hurt us, what they did, or whether or not they are sorry for their actions. We don't forgive out of our weakness toward the perpetrator, but out of our own internal strength. Forgiveness is something that we do for ourselves.

What Forgiveness Is

Forgiveness is a form of realism. It allows us to see our lives as they really are, probably for the first time. It doesn't deny, minimize, or justify what others have done to us, or the pain that we have suffered. It does, however, allow us to look squarely at old wounds and scars and see them for what they are. And it allows us to see how much energy we have wasted and how much we have damaged ourselves by not forgiving.

Forgiveness is a sign of positive self-esteem. It allows us to put the past into its proper perspective. We no longer identify ourselves by our past injuries and injustices. We are no longer victims. We claim the right to stop hurting when we say: "I'm tired of the pain, and I want to be healed." At that moment, forgiveness becomes a possibility — although it may take time and much hard work before it is finally achieved.

Forgiveness is letting go of the past. Forgiveness doesn't erase what happened, but it does allow you to lessen and hopefully eliminate the pain of the past. And more importantly, the pain from our past no longer dictates how we live in the present and can no longer determine our future.

Forgiveness is no longer wanting to punish those who hurt us. It means that we no longer want to get even, or spend time dreaming of how we will make them suffer for what they have done to us. It is realizing that we may never be able to "even the score" and that even if we did that nothing we do to punish them will help to heal us.

It is discovering the inner peace that we feel when we just let go of the past and forget thoughts of vengeance.

Forgiveness is moving on. Forgiveness is in recognizing all that we have lost because of our refusal to forgive. It's in realizing that the energy that we spent hanging on to the past is better spent on improving our present lives and our future. It's letting go of the past so that we can move on.

A Happier Ending

We all have painful incidents from our past. And at one time or another we have all made the mistake of trying to run away from the past. The problem is that no matter how fast you run, or how far you run, the past has a way of always catching up to you. Forgiveness is a way of dealing with the past so that we no longer have to run. It allows us to deal honestly with our past and allows us to heal the pain. It helps us to find the inner peace that can come only from changing ourselves and our attitudes.

As Dr. Sidney Simon wrote in *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace With Your Past and Get On With Your Life*, "that is what forgiveness is all about — working through the unfinished business, letting go of the pain and moving on for *your sake*. You forgive so that you can finally get rid of the excess baggage that has been weighing you down and holding you back; so that you can be free to do and be whatever you decide instead of stumbling along according to the script painful past experiences wrote for you."

I have forgiven my mother and moved beyond my past. It wasn't easy and it took a lot of time, but I believe that the rewards I experienced were well worth the effort. Perhaps you should give it a try.

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