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Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the exercise of compassion and is both a process and an attitude. In the process of forgiveness, we convert the suffering created by our own mistakes or as a result of being hurt by others into psychological and spiritual growth. Through the attitude of forgiveness, we attain happiness and serenity by letting go of the ego's incessant need to judge ourselves and others. We will consider forgiveness as a process first, and then discuss it as an attitude later in the chapter. But first I would like to recall a story I told in *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind*, because it demonstrates my belief about forgiveness. The incident involved a young boy of color who leaned out the back window of his family's old car and made a vulgar gesture toward me for no apparent reason. It was easy to see that his behavior had nothing to do with me but must have been caused by pain created by societal or family concerns. Instead of adding to his pain, I mustered up all the love I could and beamed it out to him in a big smile. He suddenly began to smile in return, and we waved at one another until his car was out of sight. Forgiveness is not a self-righteous or Pollyanna-like turning of the other cheek by which we condone another's behavior. But if we can understand the deep pain from which hurtful actions inflicted on us arose, then we have suffered with the other person; we have been compassionate. In that act of compassion, we move out of the role of victim and see beyond their actions to the person who is acting. Forgiveness does not require us to become friends with, for example, an abusive parent, to care for them in their old age, or to do anything in particular. Forgiveness is a state of mind that may give rise to specific actions but is not defined by those actions.

Forgiveness toward ourselves is described beautifully in P.L. Traver's story, excerpted at the beginning of the chapter. It is a seeing beyond our own actions to the person who is acting. It is the acceptance of our shadow so that we can be whole. This requires the long, hard work of psychospiritual integration that we have been discussing in the first two parts of the book. Forgiveness requires awareness – the commitment to self-knowledge. Old hurts cannot be cancelled and undone, but these emotions can become the seeds of transcendence. That allows healing to occur, whether we are the victim or the aggressor.

I have had the pleasure of working with many members of twelve-step programs, which derive considerable power from their emphasis on forgiveness. Many people in programs like Alcoholics Anonymous enter recovery with a heavy burden of healthy guilt for the suffering they have caused themselves and others. I was amazed and delighted to learn how they help one another face their healthy guilt and reach new levels of psychospiritual awareness through forgiveness. Remarkably, steps four through ten – seven of the twelve steps of recovery from addiction – deal directly with facing and growing from healthy guilt. The other five steps set the stage, support the effort, and

encourage the final hero function of sharing one's learning's compassionately with other people in similar circumstances.

Milton, a man in his early sixties, was a new member of Alcoholics Anonymous struggling through the early stages of forgiveness when he came to me for help with angina. As he told me the history of his disease, I could see that he was very much in tune with his thoughts and feelings and their effect on his body. The squeezing chest pain that sent Milton for his nitroglycerine came from two sources: exercise, for which his heart muscle required more blood than his clogged coronary arteries could deliver; and remorse, which gripped his heart just as tightly.

When I asked about his guilt, Milton responded with honesty and insight. "I've got plenty to be guilty about, Joan. Thirty-some years of drinking touches a lot of lives. When I think about what my wife went through – my angry and unpredictable moods, the time I lost my job because of the booze, having to raise the kids pretty much by herself – I was never really there for her. Then there are our two boys, smart kids and didn't even finish college. Do you have any idea what it's like to have a father who's hardly there for you except to criticize?" Milton shook his head and wiped away a tear. "And that's just the beginning. I've made more mistakes than I could tell you about in ten more sessions."

Milton was at the beginning of the forgiveness process – facing the pain that motivates self-knowledge. He took a lot of comfort in the New Testament, particularly the stories about Mary Magdalene, whose great longing from forgiveness awakened her legendary love for Christ.

In the New Testament, there is a beautiful story about Mary Magdalene in the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Simon, one of the Pharisees, invites Jesus for supper. Mary Magdalene also comes, and Simon thinks to himself that Jesus couldn't possibly be a man of God or he would know what kind of despicable woman she was. Reading his thought, Jesus responds to Simon with a parable, asking him a question. "There was a certain creditor that had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me, then, which of them will love him most?" Simon, of course, answered that the one with the biggest debt would be most grateful. Jesus responded that Mary Magdalene's sins, which were many, were forgiven because "she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little."

The Two Sides of Forgiveness

In the equation of error, we're either debtors or creditors, the 'mistaker' or the 'mistaken', the aggressor or the victim. Like any pair of opposites, there are two sides of one coin. They need one another in order to exist and to allow forgiveness to manifest. There's a Buddhist idea, in fact, that suffering exists specifically to teach us compassion. This idea has helped me face my actions so that I could go on to forgive myself for the hurts I've caused other people and give them for the hurts they've caused me. We are all teachers to one another. Without error on someone's part, none of us would learn the lesson of compassion that forgiveness is.

As long as we continue to identify with one side of the coin exclusively – debtor or creditor- we remain psychologically one-up or one-down on the other person. Forgiveness requires us to give up our ideas of better and worse and to finally see ourselves as equals and co learners. This is a hard lesson when we've been hurt and our debtor seems unrepentant, but regardless of what they learn or don't learn in the process or how fast or slow they are at it, forgiveness is up to us. Forgiveness is not conditional on someone else's behavior. If we insist that it is, we cannot move out of the victim position. Holding onto being the victim is the surest way of staying stuck and blocking our healing.

The steps to forgiving ourselves and others are parallel six-step processes that may take quite some time to complete. If we manage to do it in a lifetime, in fact, and reach the state of enlightenment that is the final outcome of the process, we are much blessed. The object is not to hurry but to let things unfold, as they will, from your own intention to forgive.

The Steps to Forgiving Ourselves

The steps are:

1. Take responsibility for what you did.
2. Confess the nature of your wrongs to God, yourself, and other human beings.
3. Look for your good points.
4. Be willing to make amends where possible, as long as you can do this without harm to yourself or other people.
5. Look to Good for help.
6. Inquire about what you have learned.

Step One: Taking Responsibility

The first step in the forgiveness process – taking responsibility – might be illustrated by a story that took place when I was sixteen years old and taking the family car out for only the third time. It was out of gas, so I pulled into a station. They must have been used to reckless drivers there because I promptly crunched a barricade they had in front of the gas pump with my left rear fender. My mouth turned dry as dust, my palms poured sweat, and I was sure that my beating heart could be heard for blocks. What to do? I was afraid that if I told the truth I'd never get the car again, but, on the other hand, I didn't want to lie. I settled anxiously for the middle ground. Playing dumb. Maybe no one would notice, at least for a while.

I went to my room, where I obsessed endlessly over all the bad things that would certainly happen to me when my parents found out. That night I barely slept. Bright and early the next morning, my mother discovered the dent and asked me what I knew about it. I couldn't bear to admit the truth, so I lied. "Maybe someone backed into the car in the parking lot." That seemed to get me off the hook outwardly, but inwardly I felt worse than ever. Now I had two guilts to bear – the guilt of the accident and the guilt of hiding it.

It wasn't until years later, when it no longer seemed to matter, that I finally confessed to my father. The irony was that he had known all along. After all, he bought his gas at the same garage! Since he had already forgiven me, understanding both the problems of new drivers and the fear I had of confessing, he had let the episode pass. I was the one who was holding on, fearful of admitting my mistake. Many times the fear of punishment, or just looking bad, keeps us stuck in guilt the way I was. We know what we've done, but we don't acknowledge it.

In *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind*, I discussed other ways that we fail to take responsibility for our actions and feelings. Denial is a common one. What me? Anxious, angry, jealous, an addict of some sort? Never. I am beyond reproach (at least in that regard). Hiding from ourselves, pushing away the shadow and keeping it repressed in the unconscious, keeps us fragmented and fearful, afraid of the part of ourselves that we don't know. But until we've recognized our own hidden parts, how can we reown them and become whole again? Rationalization is another very common means of disowning responsibility. Why should I pay my fair share of the income taxes? After all, they are only going to make bombs with it. Or why should I put in all this effort at work when other people goof off?

Taking responsibility for our actions and our mistakes is a necessary step toward self-knowledge because it leads to the inevitable question *Why*. Why did I do what I did? If we take the *why* behind intentional acts far enough, we will almost always meet fear – the devil that made us do it! With awareness of our fear, we become freer to make more loving choices in the future.

Step Two: Confession

Confession and forgiveness are a common ground where mind, body, and spirit meet. Holding onto dark, guilty secrets is similar to repressing trauma – it takes physiological work that leads to increased stress and illness. I was at a conference once where Dr. James Pennebaker presented studies on the health benefits of confession. His interest was first piqued by lie detector technicians who told him about all the birthday and Christmas cards they get from grateful prisoners who still remember the vast relief of confessing their crimes!

Pennebaker recounted the story of a man who had embezzled money from the bank where he worked. He was miserable, tormented by his guilt for six months, during which time he had a steady stream of colds, flus, and other illnesses. When he was finally called in for a lie detector test, he was naturally stressed out and anxious. But, as soon as he confessed, his body went into a profound state of relaxation even though he had entered the test a free man and completed it a confessed embezzler who would go to jail.

Jung believed that confession was part of the deep religious longing of each person to reunite with the Source, and that it was a major contributor to the effectiveness of psychotherapy. Unless we belong to a church where the sacrament of confession is practiced, or to a twelve-step program where we can count on the love and support of others while we confess our addiction and the hurts it created, the therapist is often the first one to hear the dark secrets of our hearts.

Step Three: Overcoming Depression by Looking for the Good

Confession to ourselves, to another human being and to God in heartfelt prayer is a major step toward forgiveness. But there is a pitfall in confession. Serious depression can result from acknowledging the depth of problems caused by our own denial, greed, hatred, self-righteousness, or anger. We may catch a glimpse of the shadow and become terrified by it, immobilized by the fear that we are indeed great sinners, temporarily forgetting all our good points. But if we fall into the pit of depression, we won't be able to move forward. Rabbi Nachman, a Jewish tzaddik, or enlightened wiseman, who lived in the late 1700s and early 1800s, wrote of this in a wonder treatise on forgiveness recently published with the title *Restore My Soul*:

The essence is to remove from yourself every hint of the bitter blackness of depression. The fundamental reason why people are far from God is because of depression. They lose their morale, they come to despise themselves because they see the blemishes within themselves and the great damage which they do. In secret each one knows the soreness of his own heart and his private pain (p.26.)

Step Four: Making Amends

Some mistakes are relatively easy to correct. A shoplifter who is seized with remorse can mail the money for the goods back to the store. But when a person rather than an institution has been hurt by our actions, we often need to communicate with him as part of making our amends. This means apologizing. A person who was overcome with anxiety when his friend got cancer and found himself unable to communicate and offer support can write a note, phone or visit, and apologize for the way that his fear blocked the expression of love. In facing the other person and letting them know that we understand what we did, we're sorry for it, and we hope that they can forgive us, we are repenting.

There are, however, instances where making amends creates fresh damage. If an old boyfriend who left you in the lurch suddenly showed up on your doorstep during the first years of your marriage, his attempts to release the old pain might create new problems for you. So, before making amends, think through the possible repercussions. If it is not possible to communicate with the person you hurt directly, do it as a part of a meditation. After you calm yourself down, imagine that you are in a safe and familiar place. Then imagine inviting the person you have hurt into that place and have a conversation. Tell them that you are sorry, and explain what happened. Listen to their reply. And then ask them to forgive you. End by forgiving yourself.

Step Five: Looking to God for Help

He who approaches near to Me one span, I will approach to him one cubit; and he who approaches near to Me one cubit, I will approach near to him one fathom, and whoever approaches me walking, I will come to him running, and he who meets Me with sins equivalent to the whole world, I will greet him with forgiveness equal to it. From the *Mishkat al-masabih*

Pain yearns for comfort when we recognize how far we are from God, like the Prodigal Son we yearn to go home, When we are absolutely miserable, prayer is no longer a dry rote repetition. It becomes a living and vibrant cry for help. It becomes authentic. In pain we forget the thee's and thou's that keep us separated from God, and reach a new state of intimacy that come from talking to God in our own way, saying what's in our hearts. Some of the most magnificent prayers ever written in fact, came from the pain of facing guilt and the intimacy with the Divine that it creates. This is what motivated King David to write the Psalms.

The story of David's grievous sin and subsequent repentance is the subject of the eleventh chapter of the Second book of Samuel in the Old Testament, and it's quite a story. Late at night, David got out of bed and went up on the roof for some air. While there, he happened to see the beautiful Bathsheba washing herself and was overcome with desire. He dispatched a servant to fetch her, and they made love. Bathsheba became pregnant with his child, and when she told him, David lost his judgment entirely. He shipped her husband, a loyal soldier name Uriah, off to the thick of battle, hoping he'd be killed at the front, which he was. When the mourning period was over, David and Bathsheba married. God the sent the prophet Nathan to David who helped him face the enormity of what he had done. Shortly thereafter, when the son of the illicit liaison died in infancy, David's already trouble heart was broken.

David's guilt, heartache, and subsequent longing for reunion with God were the impetus he felt to write the Psalms, a moving compendium of many different types of prayer. The Psalms encompass all the motions that come up in the long process of forgiveness – outpourings of pain, confession and repentance. Prayers for strength and courage like the Twenty-third Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd...,” are celebratory prayers of God's love, compassion, and the goodness of life. Reading the Psalms is a great guide to forgiveness and a tremendous comfort when we realize that Jesus, the very embodiment of the teaching of forgiveness, ultimately arose from the House of David.

Later, David and Bathsheba had another son, who was King Solomon, reputedly the wisest man of all time. It is said that Solomon had a ring inscribed with the most important advice for human beings to remember. It said, “This too shall pass.” These are good words to bear in mind during the time when one's inner pain is very great.

Step Six: Reflection: What Have I Learned?

Each time we hurt someone, admit it, and go through the steps for self-forgiveness, we learn something about ourselves that will help us function with more clarity and make better choices in the future. After all, we can't exercise free will when our vision is clouded with ghosts from the past that prevent us from seeing the present. The realization that our wrongs stemmed from fear, that they were in some way the action of a frightened child, teaches us to be compassionate toward ourselves and spurs us on to heal the inner wounded child. And when we see that our own hurtful actions spring from fear, we can better understand that the actions of people who hurt us also spring from

fear. This compassionate vantage point makes it easier to release ourselves from the chains of anger and resentment that can weight on us so heavily when we are unable to forgive others.

The Steps to Forgiving Others

Psychotherapist Robin Casarjian reads the following excerpt from a Time magazine article at her forgiveness workshops:

The psychological case for forgiveness is overwhelmingly persuasive. Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past, by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business. Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another's control. If one does not forgive, then one is controlled by the other's initiatives, and is locked into a sequence of action, a response of outrage and revenge. The present is overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Those who do not forgive are those who are least capable of changing the circumstances of their lives. In this sense, forgiveness is a shrewd and practical strategy for a person or a nation to pursue, for forgiveness frees the forgiver.

As this article states so clearly, one of the greatest causes of physical and emotional suffering is holding onto pain, refusing to let go because of our hurt. This was the sad case of George, a man who came to me for help with bleeding ulcers that kept recurring despite his medications. George was a tall man, pale and thin. His curly hair was already gray, but bushy dark eyebrows framed his lonely, water-blue eyes. As he shuffled slowly past me to take a chair, he looked much older than his fifty-five years, as if he were carrying the weight of the whole world on his shoulders.

Settling back against the chair, looking helpless and exhausted, George began to tell the story of his ulcers, weight loss, and sleeplessness. When I asked what was going on in his life when the ulcers started, a sudden fire blazed in his tired eyes, and he leaned forward with clenched fists. His beautiful daughter, Rachel, "the light of his life" had married a gentile rather than a Jew. And he could not forgive her. George's wife went to the wedding, but he stayed home. Two years had passed, and he would not speak to his child, he had 'cut her out' of his life. While George could acknowledge that his anger and hurt were literally eating his insides out, he insisted that he couldn't and wouldn't let go.

But what did George gain by holding on? When I asked him, all he could say was that his daughter would have to live her life in full knowledge of the pain her betrayal had caused. I asked him, "What about the pain your attitude is causing, George?" "I have a right," was the self-righteous reply, "but she had no right. She let down her people, and she let down her parents".

The Buddha compared this kind of self-righteous anger to a hot coal that we pick up to throw at someone else, only to be burned ourselves. In George's case, his anger was also burning the rest of his family, who were eager to welcome Rachel back, even if they didn't agree with her choice of mate. For seven weeks of the Mind/Body program, George meditated. For seven weeks, he observed the flow of his thoughts, what occupied his mind. Rachel, Rachel, Rachel. The very thing he wanted most to cut out of his life was hanging in there most tightly. The message that 'what we resist persists' got clearer and

clearer. When we got to week eight, the subject of which was forgiveness, George finally said, "I'm ready to forgive because I'm tired of being the prisoner of my own anger".

As with forgiving ourselves, the process of forgiving others begins with the recognition that we are holding onto something and that, despite any other person's role in creating the situation, we are the one responsible for what we do with our hurt. If our peace of mind is dependent on what other people do or do not do, we will never have any peace, particularly when, as is often the case, the person that we are holding the grudge against is dead. Taking responsibility for forgiveness is very powerful because it moves us out of the role of helpless victim that fuels our continued anger.

The steps in forgiving others parallel those of forgiving ourselves:

1. Recognizing that we are responsible for what we are holding onto.
2. Confessing our story to ourselves, another person, and God.
3. Looking for the good points in ourselves and the other person.
4. Considering whether any specific action needs to be taken.
5. Looking to God for help.
6. Reflecting on what we have learned.

Step One: Taking Responsibility for What We Are Holding Onto

As long as George insisted on blaming Rachel for what she'd done, he couldn't take responsibility for his part of the drama. If it is all the other person's fault, then we stay stuck in our self-righteous pride and can't move toward forgiveness. The position of being one-up means that the other person has to be one-down, and there is no way to forgive one another except as equals. We may not care for the other person's behavior, but condemning them as a person is the way we hold onto blame and block the road to forgiveness. George's statement, "I'm ready to forgive because I'm tired of being the prisoner of my own anger," was taking responsibility for his own role in things – it had nothing to do with what the other person did or didn't do. It was between George and himself.

Steps Two: Confessing Our Story

Part of any healing is being listened to by a neutral party who will not judge. In that heat of our rage, indignation, and hurt, neutrality is not what we are usually looking for. We are more likely to look for support in staying angry. Naturally, it is very easy to find people who will identify with our rage over being victimized. This is a great disservice. We need someone to listen to us without agreeing or disagreeing, which creates the space for us to see things as they are. Some of us are fortunate in having wise friends who can be neutral listeners. Others of us may know wise clergy. Often the neutral listener is a psychotherapist whom we have consulted when, as with George, the pain has become too much to bear. Seeking therapy in such situations, by the way, is never a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength.

Step Three: Looking for the Good Points

Sometimes in telling our story to a neutral observer, we see things about ourselves that were hidden before. In George's case, he saw his rigidity, his anger, and his self-righteousness which, after some reflection, he decided had probably played a part in Rachel's distance from him as she was growing up. Sometimes, when this happens, we experience a strange reversal. Instead of blaming the other person, we begin to blame ourselves instead, which is no better. The way to move through both types of blame is to look for the good points in both parties. With a little help, George could appreciate the good aspects of his fathering and remember the love he felt for Rachel. And in remembering Rachel's good points, her father began to feel how much he missed her.

Step Four: Considering What Actions Need to Be Taken

Sometimes forgiveness is largely a mental and spiritual event, but at other times specific actions are required. In George's case, he needed to talk to his child and make peace. Although there was the possibility that Rachel would reject his overtures out of her own hurt, nonetheless George could be responsible only for his own actions. If she rebuffed him, the forgiveness would have to start anew from the event.

Whenever forgiveness requires that we communicate to the other person our feelings, which usually include anger and hurt, it is imperative to avoid acting out of anger. While expressing feelings is important, it's good counsel to 'count to ten first' and calm down a little. If you have gone through steps one to three, it is a good bet that you will be able to communicate with the other person, rather than try to annihilate them. Things said in anger cannot later be retracted and are often very hurtful. They have great potential for escalating the cycle of blame, rather than ending it, because, when we hurt other people out of our anger, we must then go through the process of forgiving ourselves and being forgiven by them. And, make no mistake about it, anger can be a lethal weapon that destroys another person's self-esteem and peace of mind. People are afraid of it for very good reason.

Step Five: Looking to God

Forgiveness is ultimately a gift of grace. We can neither forgive other people nor ourselves entirely out of our own volition. Despite going through all the above steps, our hurt and hatred may still burn on. But what counts most is our desire, our intent, to let it go. If we communicate this desire in heartfelt prayer, we attract grace. Ask God for help in forgiving. Ask to be released from your anger and your hurt.

There's a Buddhist meditation practice called metta, or loving-kindness. After feeling loving-kindness toward yourself, you visualize your loved ones and feel loving-kindness toward them. Then you extend the practice to anyone you regard as your enemy. I have found it helpful to imagine such people surrounded by a loving light, and to stay with it until my anger disappears on each occasion. Each time you do it, it gets a little easier to see and send comfort to the wounded child in the other person that was responsible for their lack of judgment.

Step Six: What Have I Learned

Anthropologist and author Carlos Castaneda tell a story about how our persecutors can turn out to be our teachers. Don Juan was a man of wisdom, a Mexican brujo, who was Castaneda's teacher. When he was young, Don Juan's own spiritual teacher indentured him to work for an abusive, dangerous madman who was the foreman of a ranch. He finally escaped and returned to his teacher, incredulous that the teacher would have placed him in such a terrible situation. But the teacher was firm and clear: He knew what Don Juan needed to learn, and he had put him in exactly the right relationship to learn it! Don Juan was sent back to the 'petty tyrant' and told to stay centered, no matter what the foreman did to provoke him. After a few years of this, Don Juan had indeed learned the warrior's skill of patience and the ability to keep his center, no matter what the provocation.

Not all of us need to learn Don Juan's lesson of patience. For some of us, the same petty tyrant would be a good teacher of assertiveness who forced us to become more adept to leaving abusive relationships. Or perhaps we would discover a hidden talent for healing that would transform our miserable oppressor into a kindly helpmate. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we have to like our petty tyrants, by the way, although we can certainly learn to appreciate their good point. Forgiveness happens when we can let go of our grudges by learning something and practicing compassion. Then we will no longer need that relationship or others like it as teachers. With this perspective, we can carry on the process of forgiveness with the trust and faith that God – no less than Don Juan's mentor – provides just the right opportunities for our growth.