



Forgiveness

Spring
2023

Forgiveness means different things to different people, which is why we are dedicating this newsletter to exploring a variety of perspectives on what forgiveness is and what it requires.

One perspective is that forgiveness is a personal process. It's how you free yourself from the burden of past pain so you can move forward to a place of healing and wholeness. This process does not require you to allow someone back into your life. It does not mean you have to forget what someone did or that you must go back to how things were. It simply means you are not going to let past pain hold you back from the life you want to live. This process does not happen all at once or on another person's timeline. When you forgive, you set the pace. From this perspective, forgiveness is for your benefit and not for anyone else. His Holiness the Dalai Lama calls it "wise selfishness."

Yet, what benefits you often benefits others because we are all connected. When you release yourself from the burdens of past pain, you become a more open, loving, and available person to others and yourself. Our personal process of forgiveness helps other people—even the person who hurt us, whether we stay in a relationship with them or not. When we let go of past pain, we let go of a desire for vengeance and resentment. This act can take a burden of fear away from the person who hurt us. They might still carry a burden of guilt or remorse—and that's their work, not yours.

Countries with massive human rights abuses have had to look at forgiveness on a communal level. When faced with countless unspeakable acts, like apartheid in South Africa or genocide in Rwanda, how do people move forward amid so much pain? How do people not tear each other apart with anger and vengeance? This is where the Southern and Central African idea of *ubuntu* is helpful.

"*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language," Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote in *No Future Without Forgiveness*. "It speaks of the very essence of being human...It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'A person is a person through other persons...I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.'"

When examined through the lens of our shared humanity, it is easy to see how even an intensely individual process has collective benefits. If we are not just individuals trying to make it on our own, if instead, we all belong to each other, to a community of fellow humans, then when one of us heals, we all do. The healing of one person expands what is possible in the world.



Speaking of Forgiveness

For the past month, we have been discussing what forgiveness means in our weekly mindfulness class at a local prison. Many thanks to all the participants for these deep and meaningful conversations on a difficult topic. Here are some highlights:

"I hurt a lot of people when I was younger. Recently I had the opportunity to speak to someone who was hurt in the same way that I hurt other people. She forgave me for what I had done to others. Her actions made me feel human. That gift is immeasurable."

Forgiveness is the intentional extension of grace from one heart to another, not by omitting the fact that real harm was done, but recognizing the fallibility of humans and our being susceptible to making decisions that sometimes cause harm to others or ourselves.

—Jimmy

Forgiveness is giving something to someone that you would expect from them. To let go of baggage that will hinder you. To apply the ability to love to an unfortunate incident.

—Jamaal

Forgiveness is a process of loosening the bonds of pain, anger, and resentment that hurt us. The loosening of these bonds allows us to make positive connections with people, places, and things that help us. Forgiveness ends the cycle of harm from past hurt that we inflict on others or ourselves.

—Erin

"Forgiveness is not a one and done thing. It requires maintenance. Sometimes you have to keep forgiving people."



Forgiveness means giving more of myself to any situation that may have been compromised with thoughts, words, or actions. [This includes] building an energy that keeps the negative side of the subconscious from diverting back to [negative] thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

—Vernon

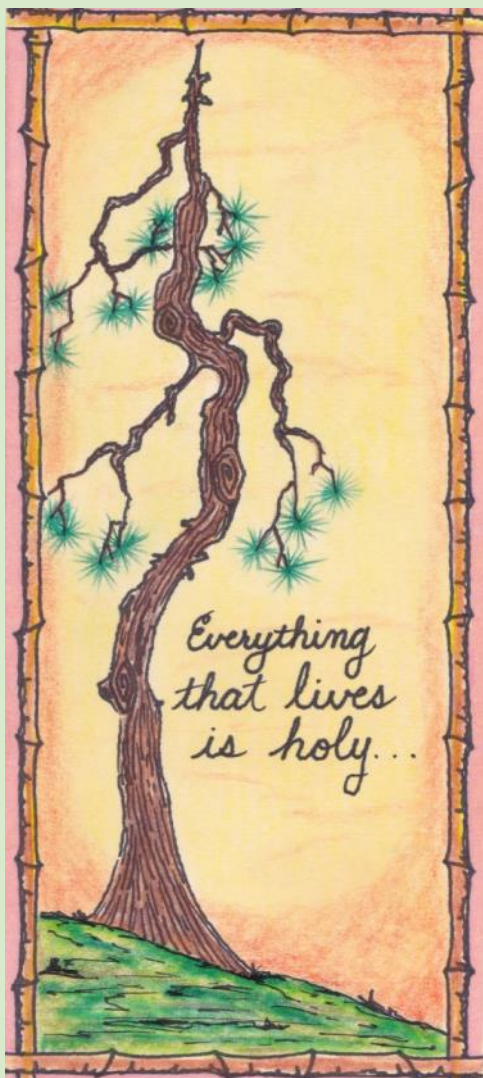
Does anything change in you when you forgive someone? Yes. First it's a burden off your shoulders, the animosity or hate you carry is lifted off you. Holding hard feelings toward someone is a hard burden to carry. Forgiveness unloads that burden.

—Major

Practice: The Prayer of Saint Francis

We love Saint Francis. Born to wealthy parents in northern Italy in the late 1100s, Francis loved the finer things in life. Everything changed, however, when he went to war and was taken prisoner when he was 21. During his year in prison, his spiritual life developed and deepened. When he was released, he set about to find his purpose in life, renouncing his wealth and dedicating his life to God. His model of simplicity, service, and spirituality as well as his love for all living beings are guiding principles for our work.

Inspiration can be found for almost anything in the Prayer of Saint Francis, including forgiveness. Perhaps that's why world-renowned meditation teacher Eknath Easwaran described it as "a perfect prayer." Next time you meditate, try saying it slowly and thoughtfully to yourself, reflecting on each line. Say the prayer as many times as you'd like. Notice if the meaning of a line changes or if any line stands out. We hope you enjoy spending some time with one of our favorite prayers!



*Drawing designed by Tall Tom
Dodson, artist unknown*

**Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.**

**O divine Master, grant that I may not
so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that
we are born to eternal life.**

Amen.

Sita's News, Notes, and Offerings

Legacy of Letters

This year is the 50th anniversary of the Prison-Ashram Project! The project started simply, with me and Bo answering letters we received from prisons and jails. Many of these letters are in our books and newsletters, and we know how much they have meant to our readers.

Was there a letter you read when you were incarcerated that meant a lot to you? If so, please write to tell us about it. What book or newsletter was it in, where were you when you read it, and what did the letter mean to you?

Please address your response to "Legacy of Letters, Human Kindness Foundation, PO Box 61619, Durham, NC 27715." Thanks for all you do to make Human Kindness Foundation the organization it is today!



Drawing by Elbert Richardson, La Mesa TX

Welcome Home, Chris Canfield

We first met Chris when he was leading a prison meditation class. We invited him to our board of directors soon after that and felt honored to have him as our board chairperson for years. Board members are required to take a break when their term expires, so we've missed having him as part of our board in 2022. However, he has agreed to rejoin us this year, and we are so grateful! Some of you may be familiar with his book on the Enneagram called *Nine Paths to Forgiveness*. If you haven't received it yet, you can still request a copy by writing us at PO Box 61619, Durham, NC 27715. We all look forward to working with you again, Chris—welcome home!

Together-Apart

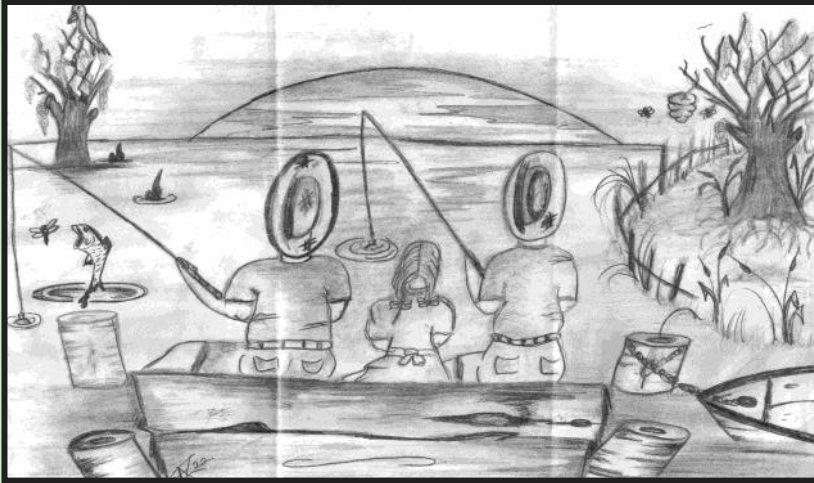
My dear friends, please continue to sit with us on Wednesday evenings from 7 to 8pm (or any time on Wednesdays that might be more convenient for you) as we send love, prayers, and blessings to the many suffering beings in the world. Use whatever practice is meaningful to you, beloveds. "See" you all on Wednesdays!

Love, Sita



Letters

In this issue, we decided to do something a little differently in the Letters section. We have devoted the entire section to a single letter and included responses from an HKF volunteer as well as three participants in our weekly mindfulness class at a local prison. Each response offers a different, valuable, perspective on the questions of when and how to forgive, and why forgiveness is so important.



Dear Sita & HKF family,

I want to start my letter by expressing my extreme gratitude for your love and support for myself and all those incarcerated. May your cups overflow with blessings and experiences that help you grow. Thank you for the books and newsletters—they are invaluable during these times of endless quarantines.

Forgiveness has been on my mind a lot lately. Do you think it is a quality

of character that is easier for some people inherently? Can we learn to be more willing to offer sincere forgiveness? Why is it so much easier to forgive someone else than it is to forgive ourselves most times? Are there acts that are unforgivable? I'm realizing you can't coerce anyone into forgiving you. What can you do but continue to hope that someone's heart softens? I appreciate your time and attention. May my letter bring a bright spot to your day.

Love & Light, Jimi

Dear Jimi,

I believe the power to forgive and to be forgiven is inherent. I believe we can love others and ourselves after unfortunate incidents. We can learn to harness and properly use this power. The power to forgive is fueled through pain. A slight or abuse leads to one of two doors—hate or love. Those doors are selected by choice. We know if we are sincere or not. When we are sincere, we should be open and willing to forgive ourselves.

Yes, there are unforgivable acts. Forgiveness does not lessen the punishment. Some acts deserve punishment. But the true way to deter an act is a combination of punishment and forgiveness. Forgiveness comes from a source of strength. A person who forgives gains confidence and hope that they can go on. It doesn't lessen the act, nor does it make light of it.

My ability to forgive is based on the amount of forgiveness I need in my life. I did a lot of negative things in my past and need a lot of forgiveness. I feel I need to be more forgiving than most because I caused a lot of pain to others. To balance my life, I must be forgiving and understanding [of everything], no matter how trivial. —Jamaal

Please note HKF may anonymously publish letters you write to us in our newsletters or other publications. We may also publish artwork sent to us with attribution whenever possible. Please let us know if you do NOT want your work published. Thanks for filling our publications with your spirit and wisdom!

Letters

Dear Jimi,

I am assuming the reason you have been mulling over forgiveness is you either want forgiveness or you're having trouble deciding whether or not to give it. If you are seeking forgiveness, then I commend you. That means you have registered in your mind and heart that you have harmed someone. I must caution you: just because you've come to terms with the harm done doesn't mean you "deserve" to be forgiven. Furthermore, you could actually re-victimize a person by asking for it. In doing so, you take away the person's power to make that decision independent of your influence, especially if it is someone who cares about you.

To your question of forgiveness being "easier for some inherently," it could be argued either way, but I say no. It often depends on the level of harm and the person who caused it. But practicing the release of anger and bitterness caused by "micro-aggressions" or acts that cause minimal harm, can make us more compassionate and empathetic to the human condition, thereby increasing our power to forgive.

I believe self-forgiveness is harder because we too often define ourselves by our actions of the past, present, and future as if we were on a continuum. So trying to forgive ourselves seems as if we are releasing a part of ourselves. Recognition of harm to someone is often accompanied by guilt and sadness. We then attach a negative stigma to ourselves and hold on to those negative emotions. If we attempt to forgive ourselves without releasing the underlying emotions, the forgiveness will not set in, and we will continue to beat ourselves up.

When we identify the negative story that we have created about ourselves and rewrite it to include our positive attributes and disconnect from our limiting beliefs and emotions, we will find that self-forgiveness is possible. Sadly, most of us don't trust or love ourselves enough. We tend to criticize ourselves much more than we do others.



So, can any act be forgiven? Yes. It can be hard depending on the degree of harm, the heart and mind of the person harmed, and the degree of remorse shown by the transgressor, if that can ever be seen. Personally, I believe that genuine self-forgiveness is more important than forgiveness from someone else. Yes, forgiveness from those we harm is important, but it is more important for one doing the forgiving.

Our personal growth and overall spiritual and mental health depend on how we treat ourselves. Self-forgiveness restores our moral worth and dignity even having made significant mistakes causing harm to others or yourself. Any hope for forgiveness hinges on acknowledging what you have done, repairing it to the extent possible and as circumstances allow, and then committing to doing better. Sincerely,
Jimmy



Letters

Dear Reader,

I'm no expert on forgiveness but hopefully my perspective will provide some insight. I think forgiveness is a learned quality; it is an antidote to the attachment of the feeling that "I" was treated wrongly. It may appear forgiveness is easier for some people; however, I believe the person that makes forgiveness look easy had to learn the process of forgiveness. They had to learn to exercise their knowledge and then they sow the results. Practice in this manner may habituate the mind to forgive rather than cling to an event in the past that may disrupt the present or even the future. Through this practice we may learn to be more willing to forgive.

Forgiving ourselves may seem harder than forgiving others. I believe this view stems from not seeing how we are holding ourselves back, creating our own suffering. To forgive ourselves we must realize this "I" which was wrong does not exist inherently. This "I" is a mental construct we have created.

There is no act that is unforgivable. When we speak about forgiving others, one party must express sorrow. If sorrow is not present the conditions for forgiveness have not been reached. We need not coerce others or ask for forgiveness, we must simply develop sorrow; when the proper conditions are met, forgiveness may follow. – D

Dear Jimi,

Thank you for your letter. It sometimes does feel harder to forgive ourselves than to forgive others, but both can be both challenging and liberating. As far as others forgiving you, that has to fall under the category of "their work" and not yours. You can do your best to explain why you did what you did, and you can try to be sincere and contrite as you can be, but ultimately it is up to the other person to find it within him/herself to forgive. As far as forgiving yourself is concerned, that is your work. There are many levels to true forgiveness, and it goes so much deeper than most of us know, but I can assure you one thing, it starts with radical honesty.

We hear from so many people who think they are forgiving themselves and taking responsibility for their actions with a lot of excuses woven into their statements. We don't get to the promised land of a truly forgiven life with excuses. Some people will say it's not easy, but a life filled with being captive to grievances is truly much harder. What you are tossing in the river now—poison or rose petals—will be what becomes your experience down the way. We are here for you J. Love,
Donna (HKF)



Many thanks to our artists: Page 1: Frank Gonzalez, San Diego, CA; Page 2: Jason Bruni, Madison, FL; Page 3: design by Tall Tom Dodson, TX, artist unknown; Page 4: portrait by Elbert Richardson, La Mesa, TX; birds by Joe Swainston, Gatesville, TX; Page 5: Tonya Housend, Livingston, LA; Page 6 bottom art by Jesus Luis Ruiz, Milton, FL; Page 6 top art & page 7 by Nancy Martinez, Bonham, TX; Page 8: artist unknown



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*“There is no passion
to be found playing
small – in settling
for a life that is less
than the one you
are capable of
living.”*

–Nelson Mandela

