

Why Forgiveness?

by Scott Mabe

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Reading

The Two Wolves Within - A Native American Tale

A young boy came to his Grandfather, filled with anger at another boy who had done him an injustice.

The old Grandfather said to his grandson, "Let me tell you a story. I too, at times, have felt a great hate for those that have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hate

wears you down, and hate does not hurt your enemy. Hate is like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die. I have struggled with these feelings many times."

"It is as if there are two wolves inside me; one wolf is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him and does not take offence when no offence was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way. But the other wolf, is full of anger. The slightest thing will set him into a fit of temper."

"He fights everyone, all the time, for no reason. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, because his anger will change nothing. Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, because both of the wolves try to dominate my spirit."

The boy looked intently into his Grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which wolf will win, Grandfather?"
The Grandfather smiled and said, "The one I feed."

Scott Mabe – Why Forgiveness?

What is forgiveness?

I became interested in this subject after reading a news story about the June 19, 2015 killing of nine black people in Charleston, South Carolina. Within days, the families of the victims addressed the confessed killer in court with messages of grief, anger, love, and forgiveness. This news story, and others, made me question what forgiveness really means.

Psychologically, forgiveness can be defined as a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness.

In the September issue of Psychology Today, psychologist Dr. Andrea Brandt asserts that you should “not attempt to forgive someone before you have identified, fully felt, expressed, and released your anger and pain.”

She says that “forgiveness isn’t something you do for the other person.

Forgiveness doesn't mean you are pardoning or excusing the other person's actions.

Forgiveness doesn't mean you need to tell the person that he or she is forgiven.

Forgiveness does not minimize, justify, or excuse the wrong that was done.

Forgiveness doesn't mean there is nothing further to work out in the relationship or that everything is okay now.

Forgiveness doesn't mean you should forget the incident ever happened.

Forgiveness doesn't mean you have to continue to include the person in your life.

By forgiving, you are accepting the reality of what happened and finding a way to live with it. This can be a gradual process—and it doesn't necessarily have to include the person you are forgiving.”

Forgiveness isn't something you do for the person who hurt you; it's something you do for yourself to heal yourself.

It empowers you to recognize the pain you suffered without letting that pain define you; it enables you to heal and move on with your life.

Why is forgiveness so difficult?

If forgiveness is something you do for yourself and it helps you to heal, why is it so hard?

There are several reasons that forgiveness is difficult. You may have thoughts of retribution or revenge. You don't know how to resolve the situation. You are afraid that by forgiving you have to re-connect—or lose your connection—with the other person.

We also tell ourselves, “I won’t forgive because he/she never accepts responsibility for what he/she does” or “I would be a hypocrite if I forgave because I do not feel like forgiving” or “Forgiving is only for weak people”.

Forgiveness requires a willingness to forgive. Sometimes you won't, because the hurt went too deep, or because the person was too abusive, or expressed no regret. To repeat Dr. Brandt’s assertion, you cannot “forgive someone before you have identified, fully felt, expressed, and released your anger and pain.”

Is forgiveness the same thing as reconciliation?

In her book, *The How of Happiness*, University of California professor Sonja Lyubomirsky, says that forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation is two people coming together in mutual respect. Reconciliation requires both parties working together. Forgiveness is something that is entirely up to you. The person you forgive may be deceased or no longer part of your life.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. “Forgive and forget” are often thought to go together. However, the process of forgiving involves acknowledging to yourself the wrong that was done to you, reflecting on it, and deciding how you want to think about it. Trying to forget a wrong might lead to denying or suppressing feelings about it, which is not the same as forgiveness. And forgiveness does not mean putting yourself in a position to be harmed again. You can forgive someone and still take healthy steps to protect yourself, including choosing not to reconcile.

How do I go about forgiving another person that hurt me?

Think about the incident(s) that angered you. Accept that it happened. Accept how you felt about it and how it made you react. In order to forgive, you need to acknowledge the reality of what occurred and how you were affected.

Now think about the person who hurt you. Why did this person hurt you? Is he or she a bad person? Or maybe he or she is an evil person? That would depend on how you define evil. Certainly, what they did was “bad” hurtful behavior. The most difficult thing that we are faced with is the need to hold on to our belief that people, at the time of the hurting, were equally able to act lovingly or to act hurtfully... and they choose to be deliberately hurtful to us. An example of human flawedness is that of parents who neglected and/or abused their child. Their

child, now an adult, may inadvertently “pass on” that abuse to their own children in spite of vowing to be a more loving parent than were their parents.

The only way out of this dilemma is to accept that the person who hurt us is flawed because all human beings are flawed, including ourselves. How we act each day is probably the best that we can act at that time, whether it is loving or hurtful behavior towards others as well as toward ourselves.

And no, this does not release us from the responsibility to learn from our mistakes, suffer the consequences of our behavior and make amends when we have hurt others. People who are further along in their loving and moral development, give me a glimpse of what I may yet become, in spite of my own fallibility.

Finally, decide whether or not you want to tell the other person that you have forgiven him or her. If you decide not to express forgiveness directly, then do it on your own. You can write a letter, read it out loud and then burn it. This is especially useful if the person, who hurt you, is dead.

Forgiveness puts the final seal on what happened that hurt you. You will still remember what happened, but you will no longer be bound by it. Having worked through the feelings and learned what you need to do to strengthen your boundaries or get your needs met, you are better able to take care of yourself in the future.

How will I know when I have successfully forgiven another and/or myself?

Forgiveness of another has taken place when you can remember the wrong that was done to you without feeling resentment or a desire to pursue revenge.

Forgiveness of yourself has taken place when you have accepted the fact that you, as a flawed human, will make mistakes as long as you live. That is inevitable. But once you see a mistake that you have made, it is necessary to acknowledge that mistake and then forgive yourself for your imperfections. Accept the fact that if you had known or been able to do better at the time, then you would have done better. Your goal in life is not that of perfection nor is it to punish yourself for your mistakes. Your goal is to learn from your mistakes so that you can better yourself and act in more loving ways.

Forgiveness quotes:

“Holding onto resentment is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die”

Buddha

"When you hold resentment toward another, you are bound to that person or condition by an emotional link that is stronger than steel. Forgiveness is the only way to dissolve that link and get free." - Katherine Ponder

“When you forgive, you in no way change the past - but you sure do change the future.” Bernard Meltzer

