



FORGIVENESS

STEPHEN MARMER

Anyone familiar with Italian opera or the plays of Shakespeare knows the terrible price paid for grudges, vendetta, and revenge. Under the sway of these emotions painful incidents linger in the mind, sapping our ability to find peace and happiness. The 18th century English poet, Alexander Pope, gave us the antidote: “to err is human, to forgive divine.” But finding a way to forgive without giving up our principles is often no easy task. In this course, I am going to address what forgiveness is and how to implement it.

I’ll be speaking here about forgiveness where it most often is needed – in the context of your every day personal life with family members, friends, co-workers, and business associates.

One of our challenges in understanding this process is that the word – forgiveness – is inadequate to explain a very complex concept. Forgiveness actually embodies three different things, each of which applies to different situations and provides different results.

The three types of forgiveness are: exoneration, forbearance and release.

Let’s take each in turn.

Exoneration is the closest to what we usually think of when we say “forgiveness”. Exoneration is wiping the slate entirely clean and restoring a relationship to the full state of innocence it had before the harmful actions took place. There are three common situations in which exoneration applies.

The first takes place when you realize that the harmful action was a genuine accident for which no fault can be assigned.

The second is when the offender is a child or someone else who, for whatever reason, simply didn’t understand the hurt they were inflicting, and toward whom you have loving feelings.

The third situation occurs when the person who hurt you is truly sorry, takes full responsibility (without excuses) for what they did, asks forgiveness, and gives you confidence that they will not knowingly repeat their bad action in the future.

In all such situations it is essential to accept their apology and offer them the complete forgiveness of exoneration. You’ll feel better and so will the person who hurt you. In fact, not to offer forgiveness in these circumstances would be harmful to your own well-being. It might even suggest that there is something more wrong with you than with the person who caused you pain.

The second type of forgiveness I call “forbearance.” And here things get a little more complicated.

Forbearance applies when the offender makes a partial apology or mingles their expression of sorrow with blame that you somehow caused them to behave badly. An apology is offered but it’s not what you had hoped for and may not even be fully authentic. While you should always reflect on whether there was a provocation on your part, even when you bear no responsibility you should exercise forbearance if the relationship matters to you. Cease dwelling on the particular offense, do away with grudges and fantasies of revenge, but retain a degree of watchfulness. This is similar to “forgive but not forget” or “trust but verify.” By using forbearance you are able to maintain ties to people who, while far from perfect, are still important to you.

Furthermore, in some cases after a sufficient period of good behavior, forbearance can rise to exoneration and full forgiveness.

But what do you do when the person who hurt you doesn’t even acknowledge that they’ve done anything wrong or gives an obviously insincere apology, making no reparations whatsoever? These are the cases of forgiveness that are the most challenging. In my practice, I find this in such examples as adult survivors of child abuse, business people who have been cheated by their partners, or friends or relatives who have betrayed one another. Still, even here there still is a solution. I call it “release” – the third type of forgiveness.

Release does not exonerate the offender. Nor does it require forbearance. It doesn’t even demand that you continue the relationship. But it does ask that instead of continuing to define much of your life in terms of the hurt done, you release your bad feelings and your preoccupation with the negative things that have happened to you. Release does something that is critically important: it allows you to let go of the burden, the “silent tax” that is weighing you down and eating away at your chance for happiness. If you do not release the pain and anger and move past dwelling on old hurts and betrayals, you will be allowing the ones who hurt you to live, rent free, in your mind, reliving forever the persecution that the original incident started.

Whether you get there through your own efforts, through psychotherapy, through religion or some other method, release liberates you from the tyranny of living in the traumatic past even when the other forms of forgiveness, exoneration and forbearance, are not possible.

Exoneration, Forbearance, Release.

To forgive may be divine, but when we understand its dimensions we find that it is within our ability to do it.

I’m Dr. Stephen Marmar of UCLA Medical School, for Prager University.