

The Power of Forgiveness: A Study Guide

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Preface

Forgiveness resists being turned into a purely academic topic, a behavior to be analyzed like kinship rituals or compulsive gambling. Even the most scrupulous scientist must occasionally drift from data sets to private memories when contemplating it. It just hits too close to home in too many ways. At the same time, forgiveness is an undeniably captivating phenomenon to observe and study. If it frustrates our effort to be coolly objective, it *also* pulls us out of our subjectivity, into the realms of intellect, empathy, morality, and social justice.

By the same token, forgiveness won't be pinned down as personal, familial, local, national, international, or cosmic. It extends from the trivial to the divine, covering everything from office etiquette to the question of human salvation. It hops at will across the disciplines of ethics, theology, philosophy, sociology, history, psychology, and now even biology and physiology.

The Power of Forgiveness explores, by turns, all of these dimensions. Its intent, then, is clearly not to provide answers, solutions, or comprehensive explanations, which would be a mistake to attempt even in fifty volumes. Briggs offers us, rather, eight chapter-length meditations. His goal is to prompt as much questioning, reflection, dialogue, and debate as possible. That's, of course, where you come in.

The bottom line: the more of yourself you bring to reading this material, the more it will yield. (Find a friend or a group to read it with and you'll add yet another degree of depth.) Try to let yourself move as freely as possible between thinking and feeling; the spiritual and the secular; and among your personal and interpersonal and political selves. The book draws no rigid boundaries around these areas of experience and invites you to do the same.

In the book's Introduction (pp. 6-7) you will find a synopsis of these eight chapters:

- I. Religion – Western and Eastern perspectives on faith and mercy, with a focus on Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.
- II. Health – The emerging field of research into the connections between letting go of resentments and improved physical and emotional wellbeing.
- III. Impossible – When forgiveness can't, or shouldn't be granted, with a variety of perspectives on the importance of respecting our states of un-forgiveness.

- IV. Self-Forgiveness – The hard to define task (and harder to accomplish) task of absolving ourselves in the right way and at the appropriate time.
- V. Forgiveness Power – The bright and dark aspects of forgiveness as a force, including its transformative personal power, the question of coerced forgiveness, its use as a means of control, and the challenge of nonviolence.
- VI. The Justice Factor – The complex, often tense relationship between the pursuit of punishment/restitution and the workings of forgiveness.
- VII. The Two-Way Street – When conflicts are ongoing and tangled, the lines of offender and victim go both ways, and neither side is all-right or all-wrong.
- VIII. Repairing Divided Houses – The extraordinarily painful and occasionally miraculous bid for societal survival through truth and reconciliation.

Below, you'll find a series of 4-5 questions for each chapter, designed to focus your thoughts on key themes and some intriguing conundrums, dilemmas, and debates. After the final chapter set are some concluding suggestions for how to continue digesting the material you've read, with an eye toward developing and clarifying your own contribution to this growing conversation.

If you're reading the book on your own, use these study questions as thought experiments – a jumping-off point for your own further reflection. If you're involved with a group, try them out as discussion topics. It might help to read through the questions quickly before you begin the chapter, to have them in the back of your mind while you read, and then return to them afterward.

I Religion

- 1) If you were raised in a religious tradition, what teachings about forgiveness do you remember receiving as a child? Is your adult understanding essentially the same, or different?
- 2) The chapter describes some stances toward forgiveness found in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. How might we understand these viewpoints as complementary? Are there differences you see as fundamental?
- 3) In the Western theistic faiths, God *orders* humanity to forgive, as God forgives humanity. At the same time, many would say that the mystery of genuine forgiveness is possible only through the *gift* of God's grace. Do you consider forgiveness an order, a gift, both, or neither?
- 4) In Hinduism and Buddhism, it is a profound delusion to believe in the existence of any personal "self" that is separate from all of life. A perpetrator and a victim both suffer until they recognize that they are one. In your experience, how does our attachment to our many 'selves' (our identities, egos, preferences, reputations, etc.) impede forgiveness?
- 5) For the Amish, the community is a living, forgiving, spiritual body, without which the individual member cannot exist, much less forgive. The implication is that our decidedly non-communal culture would make the task much harder for us. Given our enormous differences, what practical lessons, if any, do you think we can nevertheless learn from the Amish example?

II Health

- 1) The chapter cites a growing body of evidence suggesting that forgiveness is beneficial to health. Does this ring true? Can you recall any difference in your sense of physical wellbeing, for example, depending on whether you held onto a grudge or let go of it?
- 2) The known health benefits of forgiving may not be quite enough incentive to change old habits yet. But imagine a headline in 2020: Forgive Daily and Live to 110! Would you suddenly turn mellow, smiling at rivals and wishing telemarketers well? Or hold onto those grudges, come hell or high blood pressure?
- 3) Robert Enright, the leading forgiveness researcher, ran into skepticism about his subject. Academic colleagues suspected a sentimental (i.e., non-scientific) agenda. Religious friends wondered about adding health perks to a solemn duty of faith. In your view, does either group have a point? Is Enright helping to bridge the two?
- 4) Briggs notes that the “study of [forgiveness] shot up as its appeal as a real-life option for overcoming hatred and grievance waned.” The new research, he says, offers a scientifically-validated alternative in a culture obsessed with revenge and punishment. If forgiveness is “countercultural,” are research and advocacy the same thing? What other factors might explain the emergence of this new field?

III Impossible

- 1) The chapter describes three basic ways we might think about the proper place of un-forgiveness: (1) it is always a stage on the way to the goal of forgiveness; (2) it is sometimes a justifiable end-point in itself; and (3) it is forever bound to mature forgiveness, to be embraced, not rejected. Where do you come down on this?
- 2) Many theistic traditions divide eternity in two camps: forgiven and un-forgiven. Some picture God weighing our every deed on judgment day. Others say each soul has its destination sealed in advance. Either way, it's not quite a picture of forgiveness. If we are made in God's image and likeness, what are we to make of this? Is our forgiveness expected to exceed God's own?
- 3) Briggs describes our knack for turning previously "forgiven" offenses into freshly un-forgiven grievances – as in a spousal duel, when suddenly something isn't so "forgotten" after all. Can you think of a time you un-forgave? What became of the original forgiveness? Is there anything that *can't* be un-forgotten or un-forgiven?
- 4) If "God the Father" is often depicted in poses of judgment, "Mother Earth" is the endless forgiver. As Briggs notes, however, the planet may not be able to forgive too much more. How might our treatment of the environment reflect our cultural attitudes about fathers, mothers, forgiveness and un-forgiveness?
- 5) "The unforgiving," says Thomas Moore in the chapter's concluding interview, "is as important as forgiveness." He calls on us to be "big enough" to contain our own contradictory feelings of love and hate, forswearing final resolution. Do you agree that anger and hate sometimes can – or must – coexist with forgiveness?

IV Forgiveness Power

- 1) Briggs writes that “forgiveness lifts a curtain on hope and possibility only barely envisioned beforehand.” Have you experienced this kind of shift of perspective as a result of forgiving or being forgiven? What impact did it have, immediately and over the longer term, on you and the other person/people involved?
- 2) Fred Keene points out how often the powerless are coerced into forgiving the powerful. No one has the right, Keene says, to ask victims to absolve their tormentors before they are safe and free and justice is done. Most Americans would probably agree. Would Jesus? Thich Nhat Hanh? How about you?
- 3) Sometimes forgiveness is actually a loan disguised as a gift – a means to control through guilt. Depending on the severity of the offense, payment plans vary from a matter of minutes to the interpersonal version of indentured servitude. When have you found yourself as the creditor in this kind of transaction? The debtor?
- 4) The nonviolent resister has no defense but a naked faith in forgiveness. Gandhi called this power Satyagraha. It is the heart of Christ’s Passion. Dr. King and the Dalai Lama have taught it. Yet most people argue that war is the bottom line if the innocent are to be safe. Nonviolence tends to get a person crucified, they point out. Whose side do you come down on? When, if ever, is violence justified?

V. Forgiving the Self

- 1) Few would question the importance of self-forgiveness, but it's less clear how the process actually works. An internal courtroom of the mind, maybe? If so, would you call yourself... a tough prosecutor? Defiant defendant? Hung jury? All of the above, all at once? Do you cop a plea and do your time? Look for a technicality?
- 2) The path of self-forgiveness has pitfalls on both sides. As we read in the comments of Dr. Tangney in Ch. 2, wanton self-forgivers are often narcissistic jerks. At the other edge are people needlessly tormented by self-loathing and guilt. What are your personal guidelines for staying in the healthy medium?
- 3) For Prof. Robin Dillon, redemption involves fully acknowledging our harmful deeds and working to repair our damaged self-respect. Imagine a friend tells you she got caught embezzling. She's totally paralyzed by guilt and self-disgust. How might you help her regain enough self-respect to function and make reparation?
- 4) Some people forgive themselves even though their victim hasn't forgiven them. Others can't let it go even when they've been totally absolved. What rights do you think the offended party should have in this internal drama? Should anyone else, victim included, have a say in the private workings of the soul?

VI. The Justice Factor

- 1) Some say premature forgiveness is the enemy of justice, weakening the drive for restitution and punishment. Others, like Rev. David Tinney, say it can begin even as we fight to make things right. What do you think? Does forgiveness undermine the work of justice? Or can mercy and righteous anger co-exist?
- 2) When we read about Jesus forgiving sins, most of us identify with the relief and gratitude of the stunned sinner – and miss the scandal. Imagine somebody beats you up and steals your donkey. Later that day, the guy stumbles upon Jesus, who promptly forgives him. Where are you in all this? The donkey? Where is justice?
- 3) Judaism is unrivaled in its nuanced appreciation of the tensions of justice and forgiveness. One tradition requires an offended party is obliged to grant forgiveness after three sincere requests. Have you ever apologized, only to have a door repeatedly slammed in your face? When is it unjust *not* to forgive?
- 4) Advocates for “restorative justice” point to its many practical benefits and a potential for genuine healing. But Jeffrie Murphy warns that when leniency is contingent on forgiveness, remorse becomes a con game. Is forgiveness the missing factor in our criminal justice system, or would both suffer in a merger?
- 5) In both Eastern and Western religious wisdom, justice and forgiveness are mysteries far greater than the human mind can fathom. Jonah and Job, at one time so certain of their theories, both learned this lesson the hard way – yet it’s mostly lost on us. What might they warn us about thinking we understand what we don’t?

VII. The Two-Way Street

- 1) A frustrated parent will often tell fighting kids to just quit it and say sorry. They object: What about fairness? Don't facts count? "I don't care *who* started it," comes the reply. "Just say you're sorry and don't do it again." Think about your last grown-up squabble. Would this technique have worked? Made things worse?
- 2) The chapter explores how locating "evil" outside of ourselves (in a bad guy, a religion, or even a virus) helps us avoid awareness of our *own* darker motives. But there's a price. It also makes two-way forgiveness impossible and turns most of the world into a threat. Why is denying our moral ambiguity worth so much to us?
- 3) A big obstacle to mutual forgiveness is the riskiness of apologizing first. If all goes well, your contrition yields forgiveness and quick reciprocation. If it doesn't, you wind up feeling foolish and vulnerable – dodging traffic alone on that two-way street. If you don't try at all, a hurtful fight continues. What's your strategy?
- 4) Briggs describes "conversions" that "remove the fierce determination to see the other as the cause of our misery." Paradoxically, accepting our guilt, painful as this is, opens us to new possibilities. With nothing left to defend, we are freed for forgiveness. Have you ever been "converted" this way? How? What changed?
- 5) Buddhist mindfulness training shows us that our thoughts and all the "problems" we turn them into are unreal. Zen masters will do almost anything to get this point across. Imagine you and a friend are in a heated argument. Suddenly a shout stops you cold: "WHERE IS THIS CONFLICT? POINT TO IT!" Your response?

VIII Repairing Divided Houses

- 1) Forgiveness and reconciliation are intertwined but distinct events, potentially related in many ways. One might follow the other, they could happen together, or only one might be possible. What's your personal definition of these terms? Can you find examples from the book of the various ways they combine or don't?
- 2) In Ch. 4, we asked whether forgiveness was possible before power is equalized. Consider the same question now in terms of reconciliation. If a country has not yet achieved racial equality (recall the chapter's discussion of race in America), what is possible? Can the oppressed forgive but not reconcile? Both? Neither?
- 3) Thinking of Ch. 7, we might extend the two-way street concept to include the two-way reconciliation underway in Northern Ireland. South Africa, by contrast, would conform more closely (though not perfectly) to the one-way idea. If the analogy is valid, what does it suggest about how their challenges differ?
- 4) Reconciliation workers universally cite *truth* as their bedrock. Michael Ignatieff says the TRC's biggest contribution was to prevent certain lies from ever being told. But reliving the past is excruciating, as Archbishop Tutu tells us. So why don't these victims just try to forget? Why is the truth worth such agony to them?

Concluding reading suggestions

Like the Buddha's wordless teachings or a strange Gospel parable, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's concluding gesture of forgiving her husband's murderer makes no worldly sense. Its meanings and implications are both maddeningly elusive and an explosion of moral paradox. Try to "understand" it and we wind up shaking our heads with Job and Jonah. It is beyond reason, sublime, divine.

But we're human, so we talk about things that can't be said, study things that can't be known. And it's a good thing we do – since we'd never know Ms. Gobodo-Madikizela's story if we didn't. We also wouldn't have Martin Doblmeier's film, Ken Briggs's book, Everett Worthington's and Robert Enright's research, or some of the best art, literature and music the world has produced.

As you finish the book, consider your own contribution to this big conversation.

Recall if you can some of the important experiences of forgiveness or un-forgiveness in your own life, in any and all roles you've played: forgiver, forgiven, un-forgiver, un-forgiven, two-way street forgiver or un-forgiver, self-forgiver, self-un-forgiver, and so on. Pay particular attention to those memories – joyful or miserable, proud or not – that you *can't* understand. See what connections you notice between those memories and other important events and themes in your life and in the world. See if any narrative threads start to pop out at you that you hadn't noticed before. Let it sit, read some more, and come back to it later. If you can do any of this with a partner or in a group, all the better.

When you begin to find something coming together – a new story you've discovered within the familiar events of your own past, an insight that has crystallized in your mind, a poem, a song, an image – tell a friend about it. Watch what new themes, structures, ideas or details take shape in the telling. Go back to the book, and to the film, and see whether you find new or different resonances. If you tend to be a "macro" thinker (sociology, politics, history), try finding some "micro" associations (psychology, relationships, spirituality), and vice versa. Talk to that friend again. See what's new.

Out of this process, meanings will emerge in tandem with your capacity to communicate them in your own idiom and medium. The words, images, or sounds will come. You'll be right there in the motley choir of forgiveness, singing what can't be sung.