

# The Gift of Forgiveness

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The monks had been at it for days.

Painstakingly using tiny crystals of sand  
to create a circular mandala, a “spiritual rendering of the cosmos.”

In his book *Callings*, Gregg Levoy recounts  
visiting an exhibit of sacred art from Tibet,  
where a group of monks travelling with the Dalai Lama  
were creating the elaborate mandala  
out of “coloured sand, ground from gemstones.”

“For nearly a month, they [had] worked silently,  
bent over the low platform that cradled the growing sacrament.

“They [had lain] out their intricate geometry of devotion by hand,  
surrounded constantly by onlookers,  
who stood sometimes for hours. . . , simply watching:  
[their] busy lives. . . uncharacteristically forgotten.

As a spectacular lesson on the Buddhist teaching of non-attachment,  
“the monks intended from the very start to dismantle [the mandala]  
after a few months on exhibit and to scatter its remains in the sea.”

“On the day before the final ritual celebrating its completion,  
just as the monks were putting the finishing touches on the mandala,  
a woman jumped over the velvet ropes,  
climbed onto the platform, and trampled it with her feet,  
screaming something about “Buddhist death cults.”

When Levoy, sitting in his kitchen,  
read about this attack on the mandala he had witnessed being made,  
his “head filled with images of frontier justice.”

But his rage turned to disbelief when he read of the monks’ response.

“We don’t feel any negativity,” one of them said.  
“We don’t know how to judge her motivations.

We are praying for her [to find] love and compassion.”

Levoy confesses that “coming from a long line of avengers—people who have demanded eyes for eyes and teeth for teeth—[he had] always had a difficult time with forgiveness.”

[He had] hung on to certain betrayals all [his] life, refusing to let go of things [he had] long ago lost forever.

Still, he was aghast when he learned that the museum was considering pressing charges against the woman.

To do so, he thought, “would be a dishonour to the monks’ gesture of absolution, an act that greatly defused the situation, drained much of the bitterness from it, and set a very hard example [for the rest of us] to follow.”

This morning, I want to explore this example that they set.

I want to explore together how forgiveness can heal our lives and our world, whether we are the one giving it, or the one getting it.

Now, it’s important to say right upfront that I think our culture has a deeply mistaken notion that an offender is the *only one* in need of forgiveness.

We seem to believe a person being forgiven is somehow receiving a gift, or a reprieve, if you will, from the one who has been hurt or offended.

While this is certainly a part of the equation, I believe that forgiveness is as much, and maybe even more, about the person *doing* the forgiving as it is about the one receiving it.

Forgiveness, in my book, is about finding the courage of will within us to move towards healing, and to free ourselves from the hurts in which our lives and the lives of others have become entangled.

This is, to me, the most basic work of the world, because as Norman Cousins has put it: human life itself is “an adventure in forgiveness.”

And so it is.

Yet, for all the opportunity we have to practise at it,  
to hone our skills in this sacred craft,  
it seems we still have an awful lot to learn.

I know I do.

And that's why I am always looking for teachers—  
for people who have found within their hearts  
an uncommon capacity to forgive, against all odds,  
in defiance of reason or the desire for revenge—  
people who remain true only to the uncanny logic  
of a heart deeply grounded in the ways of compassion.

There is, for me, something about forgiveness that says: “yes!”  
Something that is profoundly life-affirming—and astonishingly real.  
Something that says, “This is right.”  
That, “this is how the world works when it works best.”

It is that something that I saw in the story of the monks.

On one hand, it would be easy for us to take their response for granted,  
given that they're monks and all.  
I mean, isn't that exactly how you would expect them to behave?!

But, in light of such a powerful story, I can't help but wonder  
what it would mean if we were to forgive in such a radical manner?

I wonder what it would mean, when we most need it,  
to be forgiven in this way?

And I wonder what our world—and our lives within it—  
might look like if such extraordinary acts of forgiveness and compassion  
were more the rule than the notable exception?

These are more than theoretical questions, of course,  
since, on this great human adventure in forgiveness,  
we, just like those monks,  
make up our responses from the very stuff of our lives,  
with our thoughts, our words, and our deeds.

It's worth remembering, then, that,

even at the most painful points in our lives,  
when filled with anger or righteous rage,  
we always possess the power to forgive—  
to decide just how it is that we will respond  
to having been wronged in some way.

Now, I suspect I know what you're thinking.

That, yes, there is a long list of atrocities in human history  
that come to mind as being simply unforgivable.

That our planet is littered with killing fields from Cambodia to Rwanda;  
and that for good reason, names like Dachau and Auschwitz  
will go down in infamy.

That Hitler, Pol Pot, and their ilk  
are people seemingly beyond the reach of all redemption.

Even still, in all these circumstances,  
I still believe that forgiveness is not only possible,  
but a necessary part of healing the injuries in our lives  
and the deep wounds of this world.

Now, this, I realize, is a bold thing to say.

And I know you may well disagree with me.

We need not look to far-flung places or to the extremes of history,  
but often only to the immediate circle of our own lives  
to find people whom we simply cannot imagine forgiving.

For some of us,  
there are hurts that seem beyond all hope of healing  
and people in our lives whose behaviour  
falls far beyond the bounds of forgiveness.

And, if this is as true for you, as it certainly has been for me—  
if you can't fathom  
forgiving someone in your life who has done you great harm—  
I would simply ask just how well that stance is serving you?

And, then I'd tell you about Hela Ehrlich,  
who grew up in Nazi Germany and managed to escape the death camps  
by emigrating to England just before the outbreak of World War II.

Even so, she knew tremendous suffering in her life.

Her father, her grandparents and all of her childhood friends died in the Holocaust.

The enormity of her pain led her to a long struggle with bitterness. She was unable and unwilling to forgive.

But, after wrestling for decades with a hatred of the Nazis, she came to realize that she, too, possessed the all-too-human capacity to cause harm.

She wrote:

it dawned on me that if I looked into my own heart  
I could find [the] seeds of hatred there, too. . .  
Arrogant thoughts, feelings of irritation toward others,  
coldness, anger, envy, even indifference—  
[all these things] the roots of what happened in Nazi Germany.

I recognized more clearly than ever before  
that I myself stood in desperate need of forgiveness,  
and [when I did, she said, I] finally felt completely free.<sup>1</sup>

Forgiveness is an exacting journey that begins  
with our willingness to choose a different response  
to our experience of suffering some injustice.

It involves a deliberate shift away from resentment and revenge,  
even though and even when we may be completely entitled to those feelings.

And it is an intentional decision to give the person who has wronged us  
*not* what they might well deserve,  
but what we alone can provide:  
the unmerited gifts of forgiveness and compassion  
that are fitting people of inherent worth and dignity.

Now, let me be clear.

Forgiveness is not about glossing over the pain we feel,  
nor is it about condoning destructive or abusive behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold, Johann Christoph. "Jews who Forgive the Nazis: Breaking the Cycle of Hatred."

To forgive does not mean to excuse anyone from taking responsibility for their actions or the consequences that they unleash.

Instead, it is a willful decision to see the one who has wronged us as being more than a perpetrator, more than a villain, as more than whatever it is that they have done.

And, so, it is a commitment to strive to become our best and highest self.

We convey worth and dignity to others by being worthy and dignified ourselves.

The Dalai Lama tells the story of a remarkable conversation he had many years ago with another Tibetan monk, who had come to see him after spending eighteen years in a Chinese prison.

The Dalai Lama, who had last seen him in 1959, says that, at the time:

“Labeling the Chinese as our enemies, we could self-righteously condemn them for their brutality and dismiss them as unworthy of further thought or consideration...”

In meeting with the monk, the Dalai Lama asked him “what he felt was the biggest threat or danger while he was in prison.”

The Dalai Lama “was amazed by his answer.”

He says, “It was extraordinary and inspiring. I was expecting him to say something else; [and] instead he said that what he most feared was losing his compassion for the Chinese.”<sup>2</sup>

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Friends, the power is always ours.

The choice, to decide what to do when we’ve been wronged, the ability to harness our emotions and order our thoughts, belongs to each of us—and, very often,

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<sup>2</sup> Words of the Dalai Lama in *The Sunflower* by Simon Wiesenthal.

as was the case for this imprisoned monk,  
it can be the one and only thing we can control.

To be sure, there is much that is not within our control.

On our own adventure in forgiveness,  
we may desire, and even deserve,  
an apology, a confession, or a request for forgiveness.

Yet very often, these things may simply not be possible.

There may be no chance of reconciliation,  
and no way that a broken relationship will ever be restored.

But even those obstacles can't take away our ability  
to forgive and to respond with compassion.

Because while *reconciling* with someone who has wronged us  
requires their active involvement, forgiveness does not;  
*forgiveness* is about us,  
about how **we** choose to frame our feelings and our actions.

Admittedly, this is more of a Buddhist-Christian approach  
than what is taught in the Jewish tradition, which requires  
that one must show remorse and repent in order to be forgiven.

The caveat, though, even there, is that once this has been done,  
the person who has been wronged is obligated to forgive.

While I'm a big fan of 'fessing up,  
and do believe it is good for the soul,  
I'm not willing to put my own spiritual and mental health on hold,  
awaiting an apology that may never come.

Which has brought me back time and again to the Buddhist practice of  
Metta, or Loving-Kindness Meditation.

This practice, which I have shared with you so often,  
is a tool for developing compassion  
that involves repeating phrases such as:

May I live in safety.

May I be happy.

May I be healthy.

May I live in peace.

You begin by prayerfully uttering these words for yourself.

Next you move to someone, usually an elder,  
for whom you feel great loving-kindness,  
such as a parent, a grandparent, or a teacher.

The phrases are then offered for a close friend,  
followed by someone toward whom your feelings are neutral.

And, then comes the hard part:  
taking someone toward whom you feel hostile or don't like at all,  
and you offer the words:

May you live in safety.  
May you be happy.  
May you be healthy.  
May you live in peace.

The practice ends by directing these phrases towards all living beings.

It's not as easy as it might seem.

Seeking to cultivate compassion toward those who've wronged us  
may seem too much to bear.

It may take a very long time.

And the words may repeatedly get stuck in our throats—  
*but better there* than in a hardened heart.

There is a reason why these things are called *practices*;  
to bear fruit, they must be repeated,  
their wisdom inculcated in our souls,  
their truth imprinted upon our hearts.

And, when that work's been done, like with those monks,  
it's possible to feel compassion for one's captors,  
or for those who thoughtlessly damage or destroy in an instant  
the work of our hands, and the labour of our lives.

Some have called this cheap forgiveness, but I don't buy it;  
because the cost of hanging on to bitterness and resentment



is just too high a price to pay.

While not cheap, forgiveness is something of a bargain—  
a sacred, life-giving bargain that makes our entangled lives  
on this little planet possible.

For we all, at some point in our lives,  
may find ourselves in need of forgiveness,  
in need of compassion when we've done nothing to deserve it.

In her poem, "Because We Spill Not Only Milk,"  
Nancy Schaffer writes that,

Because we are imperfect and love so  
Deeply we will never have enough days,  
We need the gift of starting over, beginning  
Again: just this constant good, this  
Saving hope.

And so we do.

Amen.