

Is Forgiveness Possible?

Is forgiveness possible?

Or is it necessary?

Why bother or why worry about it?

I confess that I am not one of those holier than thou people who insists that we should always be able to forgive our enemies. Or forgive those who hurt us or our families and loved ones.

For some, forgiveness is a virtue to be practiced, as a sort of cleansing exercise. That is, “You can forgive the person without excusing the act.”ⁱ

In that process you separate the person from the act, and are thus theoretically able to reconcile or reestablish relationships with someone who has wronged you. This is supposed to be good for your soul, and to make you a better person.

So let’s just suppose that you are the mother of a teenage boy, who gets stopped by a policeman, and your son walks toward the policeman with his hands up, and in the confusion and interactions, the policeman shoots and kills your son. And then let’s suppose that you are

African-American, and so is your son, and that policeman who shot and killed your unarmed African-American son is white. And then imagine what it feel like to have the policeman exonerated, and not indicted, after a grand jury examined all the evidence. That's what happened in Ferguson, Missouri, and there will always be questions about the validity of that grand jury's ruling. Are you up to forgiving that policeman for killing your son? Are you that virtuous? And is it really possible to separate the act of killing your son from the policeman who killed him? Can you forgive the policeman who shot, but not the act of shooting and killing your son?

Then take the case in New York City, where a grand jury also failed to indict a white police office for killing an unarmed black man with his bare hands, assisted by at least four other white police. This killing was ruled a homicide, that's police talk for murder. And then the grand jury failed to indict the policeman even though the entire scene was filmed, with sound, and we have all seen the killing on our television screens, with the African-American man, unarmed, gasping and saying he couldn't breathe. His last words were, "I can't breathe." So just

imagine that you are his wife, or one of his six children. Could you forgive that policeman? For me, that would be a real stretch.

These two recent killings represent not only killing of unarmed black men by armed white police, these two killings represent a flaw in our justice system and its processes. Apparently, our law enforcement officers assume that most African-American men and boys are dangerous, and therefore they use a harsher standard for deciding to stop and question African-American men and boys, than they do for white or non-African-American men and boys.

Now I am going to say something here that is politically incorrect. And I have said it before, and been harshly criticized for it by my ministerial colleagues. There is a reality check that is not pleasant. My home is in Washington DC, and I live in the center of the city. But I live on the west side of the park, Rock Creek Park, that divides the city. I live on the whiter, more affluent side of the park. Most African-Americans live on the east side of the park, where the population is generally much less affluent.

I used to be an elected official in Washington DC, a Neighborhood Commissioner – one step down from a City Council member. There are about 7 Neighborhood Commissioners for every City Council member. We met monthly to recommend or decide on building permits, discuss issues that involve city services, issues between citizens and commercial establishments, and public safety. At every meeting a police officer, Usually African American because most of the police in Washington DC are African-Americans gave us a report on what kind of crimes had been committed, where they had been committed, and filled us in on details of the crimes. Most were muggings and burglaries, some in broad daylight and some at night. In the entire year and a half that I served, every mugging on the street or burglary had reportedly been committed by African-Americans. Sales of drugs drove the crimes, and both individuals and gangs found our neighborhood to be a fruitful area.

Lots of people walk in the neighborhood. Even though the city is not large, the population more than doubles during the working day when commuters stream in and out from Virginia and Maryland. An excellent bus

system and subway system brings commuters in and out. Many residents don't even own cars. They do a lot of walking. Elderly women like me walk to the drug store, the grocery store, the Post Office, the bank, the dry cleaners, the library, to restaurants and to and from the subway station for trips to museums, theaters and doctors' offices. We walk for pleasure, exercise and to shop. Guess who the prime targets and most frequent victims are for street crimes like muggings, robberies and assaults? Short, elderly women. Just like me. The most frequent perpetrators are African-American men. Therefore, in some places, and in some situations, there is reason for caution, and there is good reason for avoiding close proximity to African-American male pedestrians.

So I am a racial pro-filer when I walk in my neighborhood. This is very, very sad. Most of the people in Washington, DC are African-American. Most of the police are African-American and that is wise.

Fifty years after Selma and the voting rights bill, much of our nation is still segregated and divided – racially, practically, and emotionally. Many of us are racial profilers because we are concerned about our

personal safety in public places. Many of us are racial profilers because we are prejudiced and because we stereotype people who are different from us racially, ethnically, or because of fear for our safety. Sometimes, our fears are based in reality, but most of the time our fears are simply stereotypical and founded in prejudice.

For some of us who consider ourselves liberal, who have throughout our lives worked to eliminate public school segregation, red-lining in real estate and banking, and who have supported civil rights and equal opportunity, slow social and economic progress for minorities has been disappointing and frustrating.

I cannot begin to imagine what it must feel like to be African-American and to live in poverty in the United States. I cannot imagine what it feels like to venture out every day onto streets where elderly white women walk across the street to avoid me. Where people suspect me of criminal intent or potentially violent behavior simply because of my appearance. I cannot imagine what it must feel like to face rejection in the job market because of the color of my skin. I cannot imagine what it must feel like to live in neighborhoods where it is not safe for children to

go out of the house alone, or where children come home from school – if they even go to school – to an empty house or apartment, where a working parent has ordered me to stay inside until she comes home from work. Or where the only adult at home during the day is an elderly grandmother or an unemployed person who is trapped in the welfare system and has little education, few employable skills, and no hope for a better future. I cannot imagine what it must be like to hear the pop pop pop of gunfire in my neighborhood nearly every day and nearly ever night. I cannot imagine what it must feel like to be a child who has had friends recruited to work for drug gangs, killed by random gunfire, or who has herself been solicited for prostitution by a neighbor. I cannot imagine. Can you?

I cannot imagine what it must feel like to have to keep the shades and the curtains closed, to be afraid to look out, or to fear someone looking in. I cannot imagine what it must feel like to have triple locks on every door, and bars on every window. I cannot imagine what it must feel like to grow up in prison, at home. Can you?

I can imagine what it is like to live simply out of necessity, because I have always done that. But my parents were white, and they never faced discrimination because of their skin color or their language. My brother and I worked hard, but we had genuine opportunity, went to decent public schools that didn't have armed guards, and where we studied music and art and had sports and physical education nearly every day at school. Even in small-town Texas, where the football coaches have always been paid far more than the school principals.

I have always been privileged, even when I did not recognize my privileged status. I have been privileged to have white skin and to be able to walk around in shops and stores and into banks without being suspected of being a criminal, simply because of my skin color, my appearance.

What must it be like to grow up surrounded by fear? What must it be like to grow up with many of your male relatives in and out of jail. What must it be like to grow up without a father because he has been murdered or incarcerated, or simply has given up and left because he cannot get a job, and because the schools he was supposed

to go to did not teach him to read or do arithmetic, or prepare him for the simplest kind of work? What must it be like to grow up without hope? And what must it be like to work your fingers to the bone and to watch your children grow up without hope, without the possibility of earning a living wage, or being able to go to a doctor except at an emergency room, or to watch your children grow up without dental care or eye care? What must it be like to see the son you worked hard to raise drop out of school, turn to crime, and come home wearing fancy sneakers, and stolen jackets, and expensive jewelry you know he didn't come by honestly?

Could you forgive? Could you forgive the politicians who tried to keep you out of a decent public school, and a system that operated in a never-ending circle of poverty, racism, segregation, violent crime, unemployment, welfare, for generation after generation. Could you forgive the politicians who still try to rig the election process with rules that make it difficult for African-Americans, Hispanic immigrants, and people of color to vote? Could you forgive that?

Could you forgive a system so broken that it supports an upper middle class neighborhood in the nation's capital where elderly white women are afraid to meet you on the street, and who cross to the other side of the street to avoid you and your husbands and children, because of skin color, and because the system is so broken that most of the crimes are committed by people of color, people just like you, people who have no hope?

Most religions advise us to forgive.

"In the Jewish tradition, one who harms another must apologize and ask forgiveness from the other person. In fact a person should apologize sincerely three times to fulfill her obligation to seek forgiveness from the other person. 'The reward for forgiving others is not God's forgiveness for wrongs done to others, but rather help *in obtaining forgiveness from the other person*...it is not that God forgives, while human beings do not. To the contrary... just as only God can forgive sins against God, so only human beings can forgive sins against human beings."ⁱⁱ Jews observe Yom Kippur, or a Day of Atonement on the day before God makes decisions regarding what will happen during the coming year. Just

prior to Yom Kippur, Jews will ask forgiveness of those they have wronged during the prior year (if they have not already done so). During Yom Kippur itself, Jews fast and pray for God's forgiveness for the transgressions they have made against God in the prior year.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“The Christian faith tradition recommends forgiveness and stresses the importance of showing mercy toward others. ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.’”^{iv}

“Islam recommends forgiveness between believers, because Allah values forgiveness. There are numerous verses in Quran and the Hadiths recommending forgiveness. However, Islam also allows revenge to the extent harm done, but forgiveness between believers is encouraged, with a promise of reward from Allah.”^v

“In Hinduism, forgiveness is considered one of the six cardinal virtues.”

“The theological basis for forgiveness in Hinduism is that a person who does not forgive carries a baggage of memories of the wrong, of negative feelings, of anger and unresolved emotions that affect his or her present as well as future. In Hinduism, not only should one forgive

others, but one must also seek forgiveness if one has wronged someone else.^[46] Forgiveness is to be sought from the individual wronged, as well as society at large, by acts of charity, purification, fasting, rituals and meditative introspection.”^{vi}

“Forgiveness can be understood as a spiritual practice and has been taught as such by Jesus, the Buddha, and many other spiritual teachers. Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines forgiveness in this manner: "To cease to feel resentment against (someone) on account of a wrong committed." This definition is poignantly illustrated in a well-known Tibetan Buddhist story about two monks who encounter each other some years after being released from prison where they had been tortured by their captors. "Have you forgiven them?" asks the first. "I will never forgive them! Never!" replies the second. "Well, I guess they still have you in prison, don't they?" the first says.”

“Forgiveness practice is about liberating your own feelings and finding meaning in the worst of life's events. You practice forgiveness to be free of the inner violence of your rage, and you do not abandon the pursuit of right

action. In fact, you gain clear seeing that allows you to use skillful means in bringing sustainable peace.”

“So you practice forgiveness for your own sake, so that you not locked in anger, fear, and resentment. Resentment, whether cold fury or smoldering rage, hardens your emotions, narrows your options in responding to life, clouds your judgment, locks you out of experiencing the flow of life, shifts your attention from those who matter to you to those whom you disdain, and deadens your spirit. Why would you choose to live in this manner? When you choose not to forgive, you give those who wronged you an even greater victory than their original act.”

“A person may also embrace forgiveness as an act of selflessness, something that you can do to stop the seemingly endless cycle of hatred in the world. The Buddha said, ‘Hate never yet dispelled hate. Only love dispels hate.’”^{vii}

“By holding the truth of our interdependency and refusing to participate in this endless cycle of hatred, you can help to heal the wound of the world. Jesus said, ‘If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even

sinners love those who love them. But if you love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back, then your reward will be great." - See more at:

<http://dharma-wisdom.org/teachings/articles/forgiving-unforgivable#sthash.bTJQPGGq.dpuf>

"No one can accuse Jesus or Buddha of being cowards in the face of injustice; their teachings are about how to hold difficult questions in the heart. You have to decide if you share their beliefs, and if so, you practice living in this manner as a reflection of your deepest values. For some, practicing forgiveness is a proactive, courageous way to live. This does not mean responding passively when you encounter wrong action, for you should always act to stop those who harm others."

See more at:

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What forgiveness does mean is letting go of angry feelings and emotions.

Anger is one of the most destructive of all human emotions. Anger is an emotion that produces hydrochloric acid in our digestive systems. Anger gives us indigestion, makes our stomachs growl, and makes us burp! Anger distracts us from daily tasks. Anger robs us of productivity. Anger makes it difficult to smile. Angry actions by one person produce angry reactions by other people. Nobody likes to be around angry people. Angry people are not pleasant. Anger slows us down. Anger prevents us from seeing the good in other people. Anger produces violence. Anger isolates us because when we are angry people avoid us. And emotional isolation is not healthy. Anger is not healthy. Anger simply takes up too much time and too much energy. Anger may motivate us to change ourselves, or to change the system. But most of the time, anger is simply a waste of time. Anger is a big waste of time.

Forgiving a person is one thing. Forgiving an individual person is fairly simple to understand, and the concept is one we can grasp, whether or not we choose to forgive another person.

But forgiving a system that promotes and sustains prejudice, hatred, injustice and condones violence is quite another matter. Perhaps we should think about letting go of anger, and figuring out better ways to change the system.

Forgiveness may be possible. But forgiveness is not enough. Forgiveness is **not enough**. Letting go of anger, redistributing the energy we lose to anger, just letting go may serve us better. I'm pretty sure all the time I have spent stomping around the house, making angry speeches to people who couldn't hear me even if they were listening, might not have been better used. My stomach wouldn't be upset. People wouldn't ask me why I look unhappy. I might get more done. I might have more fun. Maybe all of us and I do mean ALL of us would enjoy life more, if we simply **let go of anger**, and redirect our hurts to thoughts and actions that build community, change the systems, and promote love, rather than revenge. I don't know whether it is possible to forgive, but I do know that it is possible to let go of anger, and to replace anger with positive feelings and constructive action. We don't have time to be angry. We don't have

time to seek revenge. We do have time to love. We have work to do.

Amen

ⁱ <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/adult-health/in-depth/forgiveness/art-20047692>

ⁱⁱ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forgiveness#Abrahamic>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forgiveness#Abrahamic>

^{iv} Matthew 5:7

^v Mohammad Hassan Khalil (2012), *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question*, Oxford University Press, pp 65-94, [in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forgiveness#Abrahamic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forgiveness#Abrahamic)

^{vi} Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, Carl E. Thoresen (2001), Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice, The Guilford Press, ISBN 978-1572307117, pp 21-39. In

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forgiveness#Abrahamic>

^{vii} <http://dharma-wisdom.org/teachings/articles/forgiving-unforgivable>