

Forgiving Others

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The definition of forgiveness: “To give up resentment of or claim to requital for; to cease to feel resentment against (an offender); to stop blaming or being angry with (someone) for something they have done.”
Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Some people believe forgiveness is important and others don't. In his book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, author Bill Wilson (the cofounder of AA) discusses forgiveness and says its necessary for sobriety. He calls it “letting go of resentment,” not forgiveness, and says it's not done to please others, but in the interest of self. From the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* . . .

Resentment is the “number one” offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease, for we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick. When the spirituality malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.... It is plain that a life which includes deep resentment leads only to futility and unhappiness.... [T]his business of resentment is infinitely grave. We found that it is fatal.... If we were to live, we had to be free of anger.... They [resentments] may be the dubious luxury of normal men, but for alcoholics these things are poison. (*Alcoholics Anonymous* pp. 64-65)

On the other hand, there are the scientific psychologists (as opposed to the transpersonal therapists), like Susan Forward, in *Toxic Parents*, and Ellen Bass and Laura Davis in *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, who proclaim that forgiveness is not necessarily a part of the process of changing it might even be dangerous. In talking about recovering from an abusive childhood, Susan Forward says this:

You may be asking yourself, “Isn’t the first step to forgive my parents?” My answer is *no*. . . . [It] is not necessary to forgive your parents in order to feel better about yourself and to change your life.... Why in the world should you “Pardon” a father who terrorized and battered you, who made your childhood a living hell? ... Early in my professional career I too believed that to forgive people who had injured you, especially your parents, was an important part of the healing process.... The more I thought about it, the more I realized that this absolution was really another form of denial.... One of the most dangerous things about forgiveness is that it undercuts your ability to let go of your pent-up emotions. How can you acknowledge your anger against a parent whom you’ve already forgiven? (*Toxic Parents* pp. 187-189)

The question is this: Is it possible that Bill Wilson and Susan Forward are both right? Yes. Susan Forward is correct when she says that we must own our anger. Anger is honest. Anger in the right setting is therapeutic. Anger can lead to justice. Anger can free us from tyranny. And by coming out against forgiveness, Forward allows us to take our time without shame. Bill Wilson, in my opinion, is also right. If we stop resenting people, we feel better about ourselves and others. This changes us and our lives.

If you decide that forgiveness is for you, it might be helpful to realize that letting go of anger does not mean you have to like the person who hurt you or continue to let that person persecute you. Actually, you don’t even have to be around people who hurt you if you don’t want to. You can forgive, and even love them, from distance.”

Furthermore, forgiveness is not a constant state. It ebbs and flows like the tide. Sometimes you feel good about those who hurt you, and other times you feel the anger all over again. But this doesn’t mean you have not progressed. I’ve found that, as long as I ask God for the strength to release my anger, or announce it in my support group that I am going to “turn it over,” or tell my therapist I am really tired of these resentments and want them to go away, the anger comes less and less often.

Please note, despite my own personal feelings about the value of forgiveness as a therapeutic and healing device, and the right moral choice for me, I feel strongly that it is a very personal choice and that no one should be told to forgive when they're not ready. They shouldn't be shamed by others, and they should not shame themselves. They should just push themselves gently in the right direction.