

# The Power of Forgiveness

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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.

"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."

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?" (pp. 187)

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. For years I attended a church where another member absolutely hated me. I loved to talk about my involvement in 12-step programs and she was so narrow-minded that she spoke up against me. "I am tired of hearing about those steps," she used to say.

One day she berated me at a committee meeting and I quietly left. I went home and wrote a letter to the pastor tending my resignation on the committee. I ended the letter with the lines, "You know, Christ asks us to love our neighbors and our enemies alike, but some people you just have to love from a 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.

### **How Has Forgiveness Changed My Life?**

Years ago, I wrote my mother a letter offering her my forgiveness. When she received the letter she cried (since I had asked her not to call me, my sister phoned to tell me). It was almost six months later that my mother went into the hospital for emergency surgery. As I sat by her bed in the recovery room she reached out and took my hand. Tears started streaming down her face and she said, "Susie, you will never know how much your letter meant to me. I love you so much." I started crying too and we just sat there in silence the wounds healing and the peace settling into our hearts. This was the beginning of my life-long attempt to let go of the past and forgive all the people who had harmed me. After mom, everyone else was a piece of cake. Interestingly enough, after forgiving my mom for her shortcomings, I also found it easier to forgive myself for the mistakes I had made with my own children.

## Forgiving Yourself

As I mentioned earlier, there's another obstacle to change that most people don't think about the guilt and shame we feel for hurting others. We get so caught up in these feelings that we lack the motivation to move on. Many people can't even get started because of this burden. Fortunately, there is a solution to this age-old problem forgiving ourselves. To begin forgiving yourself, it's important to accept the fact that you're not perfect. Embrace your humanity and the fact that you make mistakes. The resulting humility is necessary for change. Another way to forgive yourself is the time-honored ritual of making amends. In 12-step programs this process is involved in both the eighth and ninth steps. I had a really difficult time forgiving myself for neglecting my son Karl and my daughter Kathy. Even as I write this I feel a lot of guilt.

However, since recognizing what I did to them I have apologized and made what they call in 12-step programs a "living amends." This means doing now what you would have done then if you could go back in time. With my daughter Kathy this process took on new meaning when she decided to have children, and little did I know when she got pregnant that I would soon have an opportunity to make a significant amends to her and begin to forgive myself.

In 1994, Kathy got pregnant. I was ecstatic. I wanted very much to be a grandmother and have a second chance at parenting. I knew Kathy and her husband Monty would make good parents and that the cycle of dysfunction would be broken by them. Early in June, three months before she was due, Kathy went into labor and did not even know it. She thought she was having a backache. By the time Monty rushed her to the hospital the baby's little foot had started to come out. The doctor said that if the delivery could be delayed just two weeks the baby would have a chance. We prayed. We begged God. Monty even dreamed the baby would wait.

On June 16, 1994, at 11:04 p.m., Jasmyne Marie Snyder was born. She weighed one and one-half pounds. Monty was too nervous to be in the operating room (Kathy had a cesarian) so I was there when little Jasmyne came out. She was perfect. We watched over Jasmyne for fourteen days while she struggled to hang on. During this time, my heart ached for my daughter. The pain was as sharp as a knife. I had to ask God, "Why are you doing this? Kathy does not deserve this. Punish me. I am the one who failed at parenting. Give Kathy a chance to be a mother." The waiting made me sick. Jasmyne sucked in the air of her ventilator.

Her little swollen hand reached out to me. When she grabbed my hand it was as if she was pulling out a plug and tears came rushing out of me. Jasmyne passed away on June 29, 1994. They took her off the ventilator and we all rushed down to the hospital chapel. Kathy couldn't bear to be there and asked me if I would stand in for her. I was afraid, but I had to do this for my daughter. The doctor, pastor, nurse, Monty, and I all sat side-by-side.

We each held her in turn. A moment after she was placed in my arms she stopped breathing. I was the last one to be with her on this earth. Later, Kathy told me how grateful she was. It was at that moment that I felt I had finally made my amends to her and for the first time I could really begin to forgive myself. Please note that making amends means more than just an apology. If you're rude to someone in the grocery store, maybe saying you're sorry is enough, but if you are rude to a friend all the time, making amends means offering your friend a new relationship—one in which she or he is no longer being hurt. If you have some serious amends to make, for what 12-step programs call "wreckage of the past," making them will be harder than you think and won't always take the course you want or expect. Still, it must be done if you are to change.

### Where Love Abides

The smell of jasmine is in the air,  
And I think of my precious grandchild,  
Who will live in my heart forever,  
Whose memory blows over me at will,  
Like a warm summer's breeze.  
And I know not whence it comes  
Or whither it goes.  
But I suppose It goes where love abides.

*Dedicated to Jasmyne Marie Snyder, June 16, 1994 - June 29, 1994*

*and*

*Kathleen M. Snyder. January 12, 1969 - June 2, 2010*

*For more about Kathy and Jasmyne see my book, Where Love Abides.*

