

THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

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As the executive director of A Campaign for Forgiveness Research at Virginia Commonwealth University, Everett Worthington devoted his life to studying and promoting the benefits of forgiveness. In 1995, when his mother was brutally murdered, his philosophy of forgiveness was put to the test. While pacing the room during a sleepless night, he debated with himself the pros and cons of forgiving. On one hand, he was so angry and hurt that he did not want to extend the gift of forgiveness to the young man who senselessly and viciously changed the face of his family forever. Conversely, his research determined that carrying resentment around was like hauling around a “red-hot coal with the intention of one day throwing it back at the one who hurt you” (Worthington, 2001, p. 8). The burden of blame and anger creates pain, heartache, and possible health problems for the person who carries it around (Worthington).

For many people, the red hot coal burns their hands and their hearts. Forgiveness, in some cases, seems impossible. In others, people want to begin their forgiveness work, and simply do not know how to begin. This paper begins with a justification of the topic’s relevance and why further research is important. It begins with a working definition of the term forgiveness and moves forward to explore current research. The process begins with a paradigm shift that attempts to dispel prevalent myths about forgiveness and moves toward a discussion of the relationship between the triad of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. A positive correlation has been made between the benefits of letting go of negative emotions, such as anger and blame, and replacing them with positive ones associated with forgiveness. Additionally, religious beliefs play a part in the ideas that persist about forgiveness, so a discussion of that topic ensues. In an effort to help people who choose forgiveness over unforgiveness, two action models

are presented. Next, the paper examines how mediators can move the disputants down the path toward forgiveness. It concludes with a discussion of the positive and negative aspects of the paper, along with its limitations.

Justification of Topic's Relevance

Forgiveness seems to be the hot topic in the field of interpersonal and international relations. Books, university research projects, and foundations abound. The research work of Richard Enright, at the University of Wisconsin – Madison's International Forgiveness Institute, is deemed as important to the treatment of emotional disorders as the discovery of penicillin was to the treatment of infectious diseases.

Forgiveness is a powerful tool. It can replace anger, fear, blame, and discontent with hope, joy, peace, and contentment. However, even though forgiveness can improve not only individual lives, but also the moral fiber of society, misunderstandings of the concept abound. Researching the topic of forgiveness will help overcome some of these misconceptions that create obstacles on the pathway to empowerment, recognition, and transformation. Robert Enright (2001), a leading forgiveness researcher, says the concept of forgiveness is like limburger cheese in that the thought of it seems so distasteful, people are afraid to try it. Many of the misperceptions revolve around what forgiveness is and what it is not.

Additionally, questions concerning the interconnectness of the triad of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation complicate the issue. What constitutes a sincere apology? Can forgiveness occur without an apology? Should horrid atrocities against humanity be forgiven? In an attempt to answer these questions, current research examines the thesis

that forgiveness benefits the giver more than the receiver. Nevertheless, forgiveness is a choice.

Finally, although deciding to forgive is a major step down the pathway toward transformation, it just the first step. Forgiveness is not simply an act of will; it is an ongoing process. Since the layers of negative emotions did not appear over night, they will not disappear in a vapor. Research that provides clear, objective ways to help people manage anger and distress will not only benefit the individual, but it will also improve society as a whole.

Review of Existing Research

Letting go of anger and resentment paves the way for positive emotions, such as joy, excitement, love, and gratitude. It is a conscious choice to release the value attached to the negative emotions associated with the person, and it requires detachment from past actions. Further, handling anger is a function of forgiveness, and although blame is the path most traveled, moving in a different direction toward releasing anger and embracing forgiveness will improve forgiveness management skills and the resultant positive increase in both positive physical and mental (Thorensen and Luskin).

The journey toward forgiveness is a step in the direction of emotional freedom. In fact, for almost twenty years Robert D. Enright Ph.D. has conducted scientific studies on the healing power of forgiveness. In his book, "Forgiveness is A Choice", he contends that when people get caught in the maelstrom of anger and resentment, self-destructive patterns persist. The goal of his research team's efforts is to help people

break the chains that bondage, anger, and resentment create, and provide insights and a roadmap to guide people who choose to begin this arduous journey (Enright, 2001).

Forgiveness Defined

The first step in understanding the concept of forgiveness, according to Enright's (2001) research team, is defining the word. Coincidentally, and they credit Joanna North with writing a definition that serves as a beacon in their work:

“When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love; as we give these, we as forgivers realize that the offender does not necessarily have a right to such gifts” (p. 25).

The definition confirms that the injured party has a right to feel anger and pain, in light of unjust treatment. Forgiveness, however, is bestowing the gift of mercy, and letting go of destructive anger, even when the offender does not deserve that gift (Enright, 2001).

It is interesting to note that etymologically speaking, the root of the word forgiveness is derived from the Old English words *for* + *gifan* (to give). Dissecting it even further, *for* is defined as “completely, excessively, or with a destructive or detrimental effect” and *give* means “to make a present of” (Merriam Webster). Therefore, true forgiveness is an act of making a present of or relinquishing and destroying any right to the anger, bitterness, and resentment toward a person who causes pain. Therein lies the paradox. Freedom comes from gifting the offender with forgiveness (Enright, 2001).

Dispelling the myths

Given this deeper understanding about the word itself, researchers attempt to dispel some of the myths about forgiveness. First, forgiveness is not simply accepting what happened. Further, although anger dissipation is a positive consequence of the attitude change forgiveness spawns, ceasing to be angry is not the same as forgiving. Likewise, although one of the benefits of forgiveness is increased emotional well-being and possibly enhanced physical health, and while feeling a need to release the emotional baggage of anger and blame is a starting point down the path of forgiveness; it is not about making oneself feel better (Enright, 2001).

Additionally, many people believe that to forgive is to condone, excuse, or justify atrocious and heinous acts against humanity. Forgiveness is aimed at the person, not the act, and anyone involved in an abusive or destructive relationship should make every effort to leave that relationship. Therefore, although forgiveness and reconciliation are closely related, forgiveness can occur without reconciliation. Finally, while the research is inconclusive, some experts posit that an apology is not a prerequisite to forgiveness and that forgiveness is entirely the responsibility of the injured party because negative feelings, thoughts and behaviors can only be controlled by the person experiencing them. Waiting for an apology may result in getting stuck in the past (Enright, 2001).

The Role of Apology

One element of the triad is apology. While the request for an apology is a sign that the offender regrets the offense, the act of forgiveness does not depend on it.

Apology is a difficult step to take because it requires acknowledging guilt, and its impact depends on several factors. Further, it extends far beyond a simple “I’m sorry”. In fact, Deborah Levi defines four types of apology—tactical, explanation, formalistic, and happy-ending—and explains the motivation and impact of each. A tactical apology is a negotiating ploy to elicit trust or camaraderie. It is generally ineffective, especially when the follow-up phrase is “.....but we/I did nothing wrong”. Second, the explanation apology is a justification for behavior and is often dripping with sarcasm and insincerity. Although the receiver is not deaf to the disingenuous overtones, forgiveness may result because the explanation is accepted (Levi, 1997).

Formalistic apology is the third type Levi identifies, and she describes this as one forced by a hierarchy of power. A powerful third party is demanding the offender apologize to the offended. This is only effective if the perpetrator is sincerely sorry. The fourth category is what Levi terms “happy-ending” or true apology wherein the hearer is convinced that the speaker accepts some responsibility and is genuinely remorseful for the act against the receiver. The happy-ending apology has the power to change the course of the dispute and open the door to accepting mutually beneficial solutions (Levi; Schneider).

Likewise, Carl Schneider identifies three elements of an apology—acknowledgement, affect, and vulnerability. In fact, he says apology is “a ritual” wherein the offender recognizes his/her role in causing the victim injury or harm. Further, the offending party must be visibly affected, feeling a sense of shame and regret for the act. Finally, Schneider realizes that offering an apology makes the offending party vulnerable because there is no guarantee that the other party will accept the apology. Realistically,

an apology is woefully lacking because it cannot undo harm. Paradoxically, however, it has the power to heal the relationship because as Aaron Lazare states it is “an exchange of shame and power between the offender and the offended”. Essentially, an apology balances the power differential by helping both the victim and the offender recapture their needs esteem, respect, and belonging, and this propels them toward the future (Schneider, 2000).

Reconciliation versus Forgiveness

Although forgiveness has the power to transform relationships, reconciliation and forgiveness are different concepts. Forgiveness can occur without reconciliation; however, reconciliation without forgiveness is disingenuous. Reconciliation is “the act of two people coming together following an act of separation” (Enright, 2001, p.31). Conversely, he also defines forgiveness as the “moral action of one individual that starts as a private act, an unseen decision within the heart” (p. 31). Further, reconciliation requires a renewal of trust, and all traces of resentment and anger disappear (Enright, 2001).

In order for reconciliation to occur, a paradigm shift from an attitude of individualism to a relational one is necessary. Further, a positive view of the future is necessary), so reconciliation involves an encounter between individuals or groups to address the past, share their trauma, grief, anger and getting past the past. It is a process of knowing, acknowledging and validating the experiences of others (Moore, 2003). John Paul Lederach succinctly sums it up when he says “Reconciliation involves identifying and acknowledging what happened (truth), an effort to right the wrongs

(justice), and forgiveness for the perpetrators (forgiveness)”. As such both parties realize that the symbiotic relationship is valuable, and a search for common interests entails. Since trust is essential for reconciliation, dialogue serves as a conduit breaks down past negative beliefs and emotions and enables the parties to let go and move forward in a constructive manner (Bland, 2002).

Benefits of Forgiving

The benefits of forgiveness are twofold—physical and psychological. Choosing not to forgive is deciding to go through life carrying a hot coal of bitterness, resentment, blame, and anger, just waiting to throw it at those who offend us. While we are holding onto it, our own hands get burned and scarred...much like our hearts and bodies. In fact, Richard Holloway contends that “the real beauty and power forgiveness is that true forgiveness” gives us back our future (Holloway, 2002, p. 12).

The unforgiving mind hoards fear, misery, pain, suffering, despair, weariness, and doubt—all which can produce toxic side effects of physical problems, including headaches, back aches, stomachaches and ulcers, depression, lack of energy, anxiety, irritability, tenseness, insomnia, unhappiness, and free floating fear (not attached to anything) (Jampolsky, 1999). A study at Stanford University determined that when people chose to forgive they enjoyed enhanced peace of mind, improved relationships, and better physical health (Thoresen et al).

Additionally, although some researchers contend that people who forgive too easily suffer from diminished self-respect (Novitz, 1998), others posit that people who forgave enjoyed increased self-respect. In fact, Holmgren theorizes that only a person

with high self-esteem can work through the process of forgiveness. Further, her work reinforces other bodies of research that postulate releasing the chokehold of anger and resentment (the basis for genuine forgiveness) makes room for joy, excitement, love, and gratitude. These positive emotions help empower the forgiver and reward him/her with increased self-respect (Holmgren).

A Choice or a Moral Obligation

Forgiveness is the foundation of all major religions, and based on the Hebrew, Christian, Islamic, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions, forgiveness can be recapitalized as a moral response to injustice and an merciful act of goodwill wherein the offended restrains from pursuing resentment or revenge and generously offers good thoughts and actions to the offender (McCulloch & Worthington, 1999). Conversely, Enright posits that people are under no moral obligation to forgive; the only moral obligations refrain from injustice and injuring others. However, if religious beliefs stipulate forgiveness as a condition of salvation, understanding the underlying moral principles that precipitate that thought help create a spirit of privilege to forgive, rather than duty (Enright, 2001).

A study conducted by McCullough and Worthington carries that premise a step further. They contend that since forgiveness has deep religious roots, linking a person's propensity for forgiveness to their religious background and beliefs will help determine how those values influence thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. One religious aspect is that since God commands forgiveness of other's in orders for one's own sins to be forgiven, and forgiving makes the forgiver more God-like, deeply religious people have a greater tendency to forgive than those without religious beliefs. While more research is needed

to determine the link between a forgiving spirit and religious beliefs, McCullough and Worthington posit that this is an area that has been neglected during the past several years, and it is fertile ground for future study (McCulloch & Worthington, 1999).

Likewise, one train of thought posits that by making forgiveness a moral issue, forgivers are idealized and unforgivers are demonized. Jeanne Safer, in an article written for *Psychology Today* posits that practicing unforgiveness is psychologically healthier when people choose that route in three identifiable instances. First “moral unforgivers” tell the truth about injustice (such as atrocious abuse or neglect) and assert their fundamental rights for respect and dignity. The second example is termed “detached unforgivers”. They accept that they cannot make an internal connection with their betrayer or offender. The final category Safer identifies is the “reformed forgiver”—people who have previously forgiven out of moral duty or obligation (Safer, 1999). Although Safer categorizes these situations as forgiveness, previous research determines it is more akin to reconciliation (Enright; Worthington).

Models for Achieving Forgiveness

Although all major religions extol the virtues of forgiveness, the research on how to forgive is limited. However, two researchers, Everett Worthington and Robert Enright, offer two models to help people. Forgiveness is not an act of will that can be accomplished through sheer determination. Although the desire to forgive is the vehicle that drives the act, a transformation process that replaces the negative emotions with positive ones is imperative. One model, presented by Everett Worthington in his book

“Five Steps to Forgiveness: The art and science of forgiving” (2001), is the Pyramid Model to REACH Forgiveness (p. 38). The acronym REACH stands for

- ◆ **Recall** the hurt (R)
- ◆ **Empathize** (E)
- ◆ Offer the **altruistic** gift of forgiveness (A)
- ◆ **Commit** publicly to forgive (C)
- ◆ **Hold** on to forgiveness (H)

Likewise, Robert Enright (2001), in his Process Model of Forgiving, contends that there are four distinct phases of the process, which are not rigid and some individuals will experience all or only some of the steps. These stages include:

- ◆ Uncovering
- ◆ Decision
- ◆ Work
- ◆ Outcome/Deepening

As is the case in many journeys, the first step is often the most agonizing. According to Worthington, injustice, violations, and pain manifest themselves in either a “fight or flight” reaction, and neither is productive. Therefore, the first step in the healing process requires acknowledging the hurt and anger (Worthington, 2001). Uncovering and acknowledging the pain and emotional distress caused by the injustice and violation is vital because healing cannot begin until the negative emotions have been processed and worked through. In fact, if these emotions are ignored or denied, they will manifest themselves in a continuous state of victimization. The initial important first step has been taken toward forgiveness and healing when feelings of anger and blame begin to

dissipate. At this point, the decision to move forward has been made and is the impetus that drives the process to the next phase (Enright, 2001).

According to Worthington (2001), the next step on the journey is empathy. Likewise, Enright (2001) posits that this is where the real work begins since it requires putting on glasses that help the forgiver see the world through the offender's lens—a paradigm shift towards a “quest for good accompanied by a heart primed for forgiveness” (p. XX). Additionally, Worthington suggests that empathy requires connecting with the offender by attempting to identify with his/her feelings, emotions, and motives. Admittedly, this is not an easy task. In part, uncovering the interconnectedness of the two parties is a key to empathizing because it is the conduit that uncovers commonalities, strengths, and interests (Worthington). Enright suggests separating the person from the problem or offense and realizing that all the facts about the offender's childhood or pressures at the time of the offense are unknown.

The next step in Worthington's model is offering the altruistic gift of forgiveness (Worthington, 2001), and this step directly correlates with Robert Enright's definition of forgiveness. It is a gift with no strings attached (Enright, 2001), and Worthington postulates that the benefits of forgiveness are only realized when it is given freely and unconditionally. In fact, Enright postulates that the only person who changes during the forgiveness process is the forgiver. Clearly, this step is at the very heart of the forgiveness process. However, unselfishly forgiving is an acquired skill that comes to fruition through empowerment, recognition, and empathy (Enright; Worthington).

The act of publicly committing to forgive brings the act to a higher level. To be human is to doubt the decision to forgive is a correct one. Therefore, at this stage the

forgiver may find himself/herself repeating one or more of the previous steps.

Worthington (2001) contends that people are “hard-wired to remember” (p. XX), so if remnants of anger blame persists, remember that they are natural reactions. Moreover, telling someone (a counselor, relative, or the offender) about the decision to forgive gives it credence and solidifies it in the forgiver’s mind (Worthington).

The final step in both Worthington’s (2001 and Enright’s (2001) models of forgiveness is holding on to forgiveness which manifests itself in a changed attitude.. At this stage, the forgiving individual begins to realize that he or she is gaining emotional relief from the process of forgiving the offender. He/she may discover that the meaning behind the suffering is an increased capacity for compassion or new purpose in life. This is the paradox of forgiveness—giving the gifts of mercy, generosity and moral love are given, the forgiver is healed (Enright).

Critical Examination of Mediation

Forgiveness holds great promise as one approach to conflict resolution and violence cessation (Stanford), and mediation is the quintessential arena for promoting not only apology, but also forgiveness and reconciliation. It is underutilized in mediation because it is viewed as an irrational, moral issue that does not result in monetary damages. However, because it deals with reality of human interactions, it can be the magic bullet that helps amicably resolve disputes (Levi, 1997).

Through constructive dialogue, effective listening, and establishing a safe environment, the mediator can help uncover mutual interests that move the parties away

from anger and blame toward psychological closure. In this case, a mediator utilizes his/her communication skills and intuitive abilities to help the parties let go of the blame and anger. Additionally, the process helps the parties mend, redefine, or end their relationships, while they maintain their emotional balance, self-respect, dignity, and feelings of worth (Moore, 2003).

The mediator's role in assisting the parties is to look for opportunities that open the door to apology and/or forgiveness. However, the power of forgiveness belongs to the offended, so the mediator should only work toward forgiveness if the offended party wants it. Otherwise, the mediator violates an ethical precept of mediation—the process belongs to the parties. Therefore, they can open the door, but refrain from shoving either party through it. Nevertheless, when an opportunity presents itself, the mediator can explore conditions that might lend themselves to consideration for forgiveness and educate the parties about value of forgiveness (Moore, 2003).

Additionally, Moore posits that forgiveness should only be considered when it is deserved, and actions that merit that consideration include acknowledging and owning the offense, issuing a direct apology, and offering to make restitution. As such, the offender must be willing to accept any consequences the other party imposes. Although the offender places himself/herself in a vulnerable position when an apology is offered, the mediator can soften the situation by helping the offender put the apology into words (Moore, 2003).

In the transformative model of mediation, empowerment and recognition are the goals that culminate in the transformation of individuals and society. Forgiveness is a transformer of human relationships. However, true forgiveness requires donning special

glasses that the wearer to separate the person from the offense. Again, mediation is the consummate vehicle for beginning the journey toward forgiveness. It provides an opportunity to construct ideologies and frameworks people can use to view, interpret, and judge their surroundings, while presenting opportunities for human growth and transformation. (Bush et al, 1994).

The world consists of individuals who are interconnected and unified, and developing this conscious awareness moves the disputants' mindsets from an individualistic to a relational view of the world—from a lower to a higher state of being. This journey is fueled by replacing fear, anger, grief, and bitterness with self-awareness, growth, and a commitment to change. The first step in the transformation process is acknowledging emotions. The mediator can help the disputants recognize and exploit opportunities for moral growth inherently presented by conflict (Bush and Folger, 1994).

Empowerment paves way for recognition, and when the parties understand their own needs better, they often appreciate other's situations. Empowered people understand they are in control of their own destiny; they have options and choices. Likewise, recognition can be given in thought words, or actions. It may take the form of adjusting the lens through which they view the world, openly acknowledging and understanding of the other's perspective, or altering their own conduct. The mediator's role is to help the parties focus on the future by discussing the past and helping them glean a better understanding of the present situation (Bush and Folger, 1994).

Limitations, Strengths and Weaknesses

In many ways, one of the paradoxes of this forgiveness research is that so many variables impact the triad of apology, forgiveness, reconciliation, and while they are all interconnected, and must be discussed, none were thoroughly developed given the time and space constraints. For example, even though the concept of forgiveness is deeply rooted in religious doctrine, an entire paper could be devoted to the connection between forgiveness and moral obligations. Likewise, with the relationship of forgiveness and reconciliation, even though the concepts are frequently confused. In some cases, research is plentiful; in others it is scarce. For example, society often links apology to forgiveness, saying that without an apology, forgiveness is impossible. However, while some researchers, such as Enright and Worthington, do not believe this is true, it is a field rich with research opportunities.

In addition to some areas being underreported, others were completely eliminated from this paper. Occasionally, this was due to a lack of space and time, but frequently, it was a result of limited research. One such area is culture. The Stanford Research Project determined that Americans suffer from lack of forgiveness, even though it is a valuable skill to learn. Children model behavior, and when they are taught that apologizing or forgiving is a sign of weakness, they do not learn positive transformation skills (Thorensen, et al.). Other areas ripe for discovery are the link between the positive aspects of releasing aspect and physical benefits. Although much of the research suggests a positive correlation, it is not definitive.

Further research is also warranted in the area of gender and forgiveness. Interestingly, when the Stanford Research Project advertised for participants, women flocked to be part of the group. However, men were not responding. When asked why,

they said forgiveness was too “soft”. When the brochures were recreated to use the word “grudge” rather than forgiveness, men started volunteering.

The golden thread running through most of the research is that anger, blame, and resentment are psychologically (if not physically) detrimental. Therefore, releasing them and replacing them with more positive emotions is fundamental to the transformation of individuals and society. In part, this journey begins with a paradigm shift away from the myths about forgiveness, such as it is a sign of cowardice, condoning, or accepting unjust hurts and offenses. Additionally, research on specific ways and methods to help people move past the negative emotions offers a pathway to healing.

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