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The Art of Forgiveness:  
Differentiating  
Transformational Leaders

# **The Art of Forgiveness: Differentiating Transformational Leaders**

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## Abstract

This article explores the subject of forgiveness and its importance in the context of leadership. Forgiveness is one of the factors that differentiates exceptional from mediocre or ineffective leadership. When leaders forgive, they dissipate built-up anger, bitterness and the animosity that can color individual, team, and organizational functioning. Forgiveness offers people the chance to take risks, to be creative, to learn and to grow in their own leadership. Individuals, organizations, institutions, and societies can progress when people are not preoccupied by past hurts.

After taking Nelson Mandela as an example of a leader who practiced forgiveness on a transformational scale, a “forgiveness questionnaire” helps readers to assess their own ability and inclination to forgive. The *Lex Talionis* or law of retribution, emerges, however, as an essential part of the human condition. To understand forgiveness dynamics, its meaning is deconstructed; the forgiving personality is analyzed, and forgiving and unforgiving leaders are compared using traditional conceptual frameworks and a psychodynamic lens. The journey toward forgiveness and its various stages is explored, and pseudo-forgiveness described, with a warning that forgiving doesn’t imply merely forgetting. The mental and physical costs of a non-forgiving *Weltanschauung* are discussed, and suggestions are made for how to become more forgiving, a process wherein self-reflection, self-understanding, and self-expression take a central position.

KEY WORDS: Forgiving; leadership; *Lex Talionis*; forgiving personality; stages of forgiving; psychodynamic; authentizotic organization; psychotherapy.

*'He insulted me, he hurt me, he defeated me, and he deprived me.' Those who do not harbor such thoughts will be free from hatred.*

—Buddha, The Dhammapada

*Show no pity. Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*

—Deuteronomy 19:21

*Forgiveness allows us to let go of the pain in the memory and if we let go of the pain in the memory we can have the memory but it does not control us. When memory controls us we are then the puppets of the past.*

—Alexandra Asseily

*An-eye-for-an-eye-for-an-eye-for-an-eye... ends in making everybody blind.*

—Mahatma Gandhi

## **Introduction**

Individuals, teams, organizations, institutions, and societies can only move forward when people aren't preoccupied by past hurts. Therefore, one of the factors that differentiates truly transformational from more run-of-the mill leaders is the ability to turn feelings of resentment, bitterness, and blame into something constructive and reparative. When leaders forgive, they dissipate built-up anger, bitterness and animosity, releasing an enormous amount of pent up energy that can be used in much more constructive ways. Forgiveness offers people the chance to take risks, to be creative, to learn and to grow their own leadership capabilities. Through forgiveness, truly transformational leaders instill a sense of pride, respect and trust, thus creating heightened levels of commitment, self-sacrifice, motivation, and performance in followers.

Forgiving means accepting the fallibility of the human condition. It demonstrates courage, vulnerability, integrity and trust, all constructive ways to build

collaboration and connections. Forgiveness fosters healing, restitution, and restoration in both giver and receiver. It facilitates excellence and improvement. But what it does not mean is forgetting—forgiveness does not mean condoning whatever hurt may have been caused. On the contrary, remembrance is important because without it, there is always the likelihood that past hurts will be repeated. Forgiving thus means taking the sting out of a memory that otherwise threatens to poison our existence.

### **Forgiveness sets us free**

The case of Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa, is a remarkable illustration of forgiveness. This transformational political leader captured the imagination of people around the world. His dignity, humility and courage have been a role model to all of us. Who can forget seeing him standing on the balcony of Cape Town's city hall on February 11, 1990, his arms outstretched, greeting the thousands of people eager to see him after his long imprisonment on Robben Island? As he said in a speech broadcast around the globe, "I greet you all in the name of peace, democracy and freedom for all."

In Clint Eastwood's 2009 film, *Invictus* (meaning unconquerable, invincible or undefeated in Latin) Nelson Mandela's philosophy of leadership is brought to life. The film is based on John Carlin's book, *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that changed a Nation* (2008), and examines the relationship between Mandela (played by Morgan Freeman) and François Pienaar, the captain of the Springboks, South Africa's national rugby team (played by Matt Damon). At the time, rugby represented the game of the oppressors.

The 1995 World Rugby Cup was going to be held in South Africa, a time when the political situation in the country was explosive. Many blacks, having been humiliated and mistreated by years of apartheid, were demanding revenge, while the white minority was extremely anxious about how South Africa was going to look under Mandela's leadership. Was it going to be a rainbow nation, or a nation divided? Mandela saw what could have been a very violent situation as an opportunity for healing. He recognized that rugby had a deeper meaning off

the field, and that the World Cup had the potential to become a great symbolic opportunity for reconciliation and forgiveness. Shortly before the championships began, Mandela invited Pienaar to his official residence for tea.

Mandela knew that the Springboks were expected to lose in the first rounds of the game, but he had other ideas. The meeting with Pienaar gave Mandela the opportunity to discuss leadership strategy—to explain to him how important it was to have the team help him to heal the nation—and to ask Pienaar to inspire and lead his team of underdogs to victory. Later, he gave Pienaar a copy of the William Ernest Henley poem “Invictus,” saying that it had helped him when the future looked very bleak. (This poem famously ends: “I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul.”)

Here it is important to remember that, in spite of fierce opposition by most members of the African National Congress, Mandela was reaching out to his former enemies. For President Mandela, the past was past; the future was what mattered. He had come to realize that a life lived without forgiveness would put him (and others) in another kind of prison. Even though most members of his party thought Mandela was going too far, he was prepared to prove them wrong. He lectured his party members on the strength in forgiveness. To use his words: “Forgiveness liberates the soul, it removes fear. That’s why it’s such a powerful weapon.” He made very clear that only through forgiveness would they be able to build a unified nation, and create a shared future; the alternative would be continued strife and chaos.

The symbolic image of Mandela striding onto the rugby field at Ellis Park Stadium wearing the jersey of the team captain became a catalyst for reconciliation, restoring dignity to the black majority while reassuring white South Africans that they need not expect hatred and revenge. By concentrating on forgiveness, Mandela became the most admired and revered political leader in the world. In forgiving, he showed how different he was. He demonstrated to the world that it takes more courage, more stamina, and more humanity, to forgive than to take revenge. His act was a profound lesson in leadership,

demonstrating that forgiveness is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and hatred.

It is quite an eye-opener to compare Nelson Mandela's philosophy of leadership and forgiveness with that of Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe. Mugabe seems to have a completely different *Weltanschauung*. Instead of generosity, restraint and forgiveness, Mugabe opted for bitterness, vindictiveness, anger, and hatred. He decided to be vindictive not only to the country's whites, but also to huge segments of his black compatriots who held opposing views. In 2000, Mugabe encouraged his most militant supporters (many of them veterans of the civil war of the 1970s), with the help of armed gangs and, frequently, Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front officials, to begin forcibly occupying the country's 5,000 white-owned commercial farms. Subsequently, Zimbabwe became a land with a ruined economy, populated by citizens living miserable and fearful lives under the threat of terrible human rights abuses.

### **What about you?**

How do you react when someone hurts you? Do you have a strong urge to get even—to hurt the other person in return? Is turning the other cheek not really your thing? Are you going to hold a grudge against that person for the rest of your life? When you take a long, hard look at yourself, are you more like a Mandela or a Mugabe?

### ***The Forgiveness Questionnaire***

**The “How forgiving are you?” questionnaire is designed to help you to make a quick assessment of the role of forgiveness in your life and your capacity to forgive. In addition, the questionnaire will provide insights into the nature of your interpersonal relationships.**

**Please answer the following questions as honestly as you can. Rate each**

item on a scale of 1 to 5 and circle the appropriate number.

**1 = Strongly disagree**

**2 = Disagree**

**3 = Neutral**

**4 = Agree**

**5 = Strongly agree**

*1. I continue to behave negatively toward a person who has done something that I think is wrong.*

1 2 3 4 5

*2. If someone does something bad to me, I will retaliate.*

1 2 3 4 5

*3. I continue to be unpleasant towards others who have hurt me.*

1 2 3 4 5

*4. I find it very difficult to overcome bad situations in my life.*

1 2 3 4 5

*5. If others mistreat me, I will think poorly of them.*

1 2 3 4 5

*6. I hold on to grudges and negative feelings over perceived wrongdoings.*

1 2 3 4 5

*7. I don't need much provocation to get back at another person.*

1 2 3 4 5

*8. I continue to feel resentful even if the offender has asked for forgiveness.*

1 2 3 4 5



9. *I am not really the forgiving type.*

1 2 3 4 5

10. *I find it difficult to accept any remorse and sorrow expressed by others for their actions or words that have hurt or disappointed me.*

1 2 3 4 5

11. *I often feel that I have had a rough deal in life.*

1 2 3 4 5

12. *I strongly believe that if someone makes mistakes, or acts wrongly, there should be consequences.*

1 2 3 4 5

13. *I seem to get into arguments more often than other people.*

1 2 3 4 5

14. *I often feel very resentful about things.*

1 2 3 4 5

15. *I find it very hard to let go of grievances.*

1 2 3 4 5

16. *I am always on my guard against people who may hurt me.*

1 2 3 4 5

17. *It would be very difficult for me to forgive my partner if I thought that he/she had betrayed me.*

1 2 3 4 5

18. *I would find it hard to forgive a colleague if he/she took advantage of me.*

1 2 3 4 5

19. *I find it very difficult to let go of anger and hatred.*

1 2 3 4 5

20. *I don't have the kind of worldview that welcomes forgiveness.*

1 2 3 4 5

**Look at your ratings. Add up the points. If you arrive at a score of 40 or less, you belong to the group of people who are truly forgiving. If you score 80 or above, forgiving is something that doesn't come naturally to you. You will be a happier person, however, if you work on the forgiveness equation. If you score between 40 and 80, you belong to the group of people who are able to forgive, but not without difficulties.**

If all your answers to these questions are affirmative, you are not alone; most people are reluctant to turn the other cheek. While forgiveness is never easy, bitterness seems to be easier—as is hatred. But what about the people who are prepared to forgive?

### **The forgiving leader**

We all know that lives are not calm flowing rivers. Relating to others, whether friends, strangers, or family members, is always accompanied by the risk of being hurt, and such hurts happen all the time. Our parents may have been too tough on us; our teachers at school or university may have been unpleasant, a colleague may have sabotaged a project we were working on, or our life partner might have had an affair. Getting hurt is part and parcel of the human condition. The most logical reaction to being hurt is to get angry, to want to get back at the transgressor(s). We want to hurt them the way they've hurt us. We want them to feel our pain. Unfortunately, many of us have been in this dark place.

As a leader, the vicissitudes of the human condition become even more magnified. Leadership never takes place in a vacuum. Leading people and

organizations means dealing with a maelstrom of relationships, which implies an enormous amount of emotional management. Leaders operate in settings in which strife is rife, and if left unresolved, will become a festering drag on effectiveness. Such conflicts need to be dealt with to allow organizations to move forward.

Truly transformational leaders are acutely aware of the cost of bearing grudges. They recognize the havoc that can be created by an unforgiving attitude. Exceptional, transformational leaders recognize that holding grudges is a form of arrested development; it holds people back. Like Mugabe, they will get stuck—along with everybody else; in the case of Mugabe, a whole country has become stuck. In contrast, as Mandela has demonstrated, forgiveness by a leader is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. “Forgiveness,” according to the former president of India, Indira Gandhi, “is a virtue of the brave.”

Leaders are responsible for creating a culture of forgiveness (Fehr and Gelfand, 2012), and creating such a culture has many advantages. To begin with, forgiveness builds loyalty and good citizenship. In organizations with a forgiveness culture, people are more likely to make an extra effort, which has important consequences for the bottom line. If people feel that they will not be forgiven for the mistakes they make, they are not going to be at their most productive; they will not take risks and will waste energy worrying about past transgressions. Forgiveness also helps transgressors to have a more positive outlook on the future. People are more likely to be open, and less likely to hide mistakes, transgressions and wrongdoings, when they operate in a forgiving environment. They will be more likely to create a coaching culture, a way of interacting that will positively affect the bottom line. Forgiveness helps create authentic organizations, places of work where people feel at their best (Kets de Vries, 2001).

To energize their people, truly effective leaders need to be at peace with themselves and past and present events in their life, which includes forgiving others for transgressions, and not bearing grudges. When we let go of our

grudges, we build collaboration, reduce conflict and release a lot of pent-up energy that can be used to move countries, institutions, organizations, teams, and individuals forward. True forgiveness supports the retention of valued employees, allows greater creativity and innovation, leads to increased profitability, and generates greater openness to change.

### **An eye for an eye**

Unfortunately, the default model of too many people in leadership positions, when they feel wronged, is righteous indignation, the urge for revenge and/or avoidance behavior toward the transgressor. This behavior is a legacy of our prehistoric past; vengeance warns the boundary violator to stay away and not cross the boundary again, or risk escalation and more negative consequences.

From an evolutionary point of view, this response may have served a critical purpose in the genesis of social and cooperative systems. A strong reaction to fairness or unfairness may have been programmed into our brain, making us “hard-wired” to retaliate when other people do us harm (Ehrenreich, 1997; Enright and North, 1998; Exline, Worthington, Hill, and McCullough, 2003; Tabibnia, Satpute, and Lieberman, 2008). Vengeance or a preference for negative reciprocity has always been an important part of *Homo sapiens*’ (and our predecessors’ emotional repertoire (De Waal, 1996). It is our way of protecting ourselves—to keep offenders at bay.

Anyone who has ever been victimized—and that includes survivors of crime, accidents, childhood abuse, political imprisonment, and warfare, as well as lesser evils—must decide whether or not to forgive the perpetrator. There can be no middle ground in this decision: either we decide to forgive the person who has hurt us, or we hold on to bitterness and anger. Unfortunately, holding on to grudges (in spite of a temporary satisfactory feeling) it can be very costly to our mental and physical health.

The law of “an eye for an eye” has existed under many different names for a very long time, as the law of retribution, the *Lex Talionis*, or the law of equivalency.

The first written record of this law can be found in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (named after the King of Babylon who ruled ca. 1792–1750 BCE). The Code of Hammurabi subscribed to the “eye for an eye” theory of punishment, but was intended to be humanitarian, in that the punishment had to fit the crime. To enable societies to function smoothly, boundaries had to be established concerning types and severity of retribution. Over time, the *Lex Talionis* became a powerful weapon for motivating, creating, sustaining, and regulating the cooperative behavior required of humankind, and, as we have found out for ourselves, it doesn’t come easily to respond otherwise.

Although taking revenge can be viewed as part of our evolutionary inheritance as *Homo sapiens*, we are not completely on automatic pilot when we are wronged. If we choose to do so, we can act differently. Humankind could not have survived without the option of a different kind of behavior. We have a choice in how we deal with people who hurt us. Granted, taking revenge may make us feel righteous, but at the same time, it is one of the more primitive reactions in our emotional repertoire. It also, dangerously, leads to counter-reaction: revenge tends to invite more revenge, and so on, leading to a further deterioration in relationships. This is the major reason why most societies warn their citizens not to take justice into their own hands, insisting that the state alone has the duty and the right to punish wrongdoers.

In spite of the danger of entering a downward spiral, humankind seems to find it easier to hate than to forgive. To absolve someone who has wronged us appears to be difficult, since it may appear that the transgressor isn’t suffering any consequences for his or her hurtful behavior, and others may interpret the apparent non-reaction as a sign of weakness. What makes such a situation even messier is that there are some people who may be attracted to the victim role, and continuing to feel angry and resentful reinforces the feeling of being the victim. Given all these opposing forces, it makes forgiving an activity that requires a lot of effort and courage.

### **Revenge is neither sweet nor satisfying**

Being stuck in a non-forgiving mindset is not a very good position to occupy. Revenge is neither sweet nor gratifying. When we are preoccupied by anger, there is very little room for other emotions. It takes an enormous amount of energy to hate, and to maintain hatred. When we cannot forgive the people who have hurt us, these feelings can become a mental poison, an insidious drug that only hurts ourselves. Ironically, the people who have hurt us—the people we would prefer to forget—keep on haunting us. And instead of being able to move on, these people remain part of our lives. When we let go of our hatred, however, we feel much better. We should remind ourselves that forgiving is not something we do for other people; it is something we do for ourselves. Forgiving is about letting go and moving on with our lives, creating greater freedom.

Feelings of hatred, spite, bitterness, and vindictiveness are demanding taskmasters: revenge is a multi-headed monster that is never satisfied. As soon as one head is cut off, another pops up in its place. Revenge is so consuming that pretty soon hatred takes over from all other emotions, creating a life governed by endless cycles of resentment and retaliation—not exactly a prescription for peace of mind. Numerous studies have shown that bitterness and hate create a fertile ground for stress disorders, causing a range of symptoms that negatively affect the immune system (Witvliet et al., 2001; Worthington and Scherer, 2003; Worthington et al, 2007). In addition, an unforgiving attitude is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, hostility, and neuroticism (Lyubomirsky, 2008), and also with premature death (Witvliet et al., 2001).

In comparison, taking the high road of forgiveness contributes to greater spiritual and psychological well being, lower anxiety levels, less stress, fewer hostile feelings, lower blood pressure, fewer symptoms of depression, and lower risk of alcohol and substance abuse. People who forgive more readily also tend to have fewer coronary health problems (Batson, 1990; Witvliet, et al., 2001; Mullet, Neto, and Riviere, 2005; Lyubomirsky, 2008). Consequently, we can look at the willingness to forgive as a sign of spiritual and emotional maturity (Luskin, 2002).

### **Forgiving, not forgetting**

But forgiveness is very different from condoning a transgression. It is not a matter of excusing whatever unacceptable behavior has occurred—realistic forgiveness is about healing the memory of the harm, not erasing it. Forgiving means no longer being a prisoner of the past, but creating a new way of remembering. Truly transformational leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Aung San Suu Kyi seemed to have figured this out. They refused to rehearse past hurts; instead, they chose serenity and happiness over righteous anger, realizing that holding on to resentment, bitterness, and spite is not what transformational leadership is all about. When we forgive, we do not change the past, but we can change the future.

### **What is forgiveness all about?**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines forgiveness as “to grant free pardon and to give up all claim on account of an offense or debt.” In other words, forgiveness is the renunciation or cessation of resentment, indignation, or anger due to a perceived offense, disagreement, or mistake. It means ceasing to demand punishment or restitution; it concerns the reestablishment of an interpersonal relationship that has been disrupted through some kind of transgression.

Forgiveness can be perceived in many ways, however. It can be described as an emotion, a decision, a behavior, or an attitude change (McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, 2000). It can also be seen as a motivational phenomenon that has affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. In particular, however, forgiving can be viewed as an interactive *process* that includes the person who forgives (and who must in the process forgive themselves), the person forgiven, and the relationship between the two. Forgiving means acting constructively in response to the hurtful actions of someone with whom we have some kind of relationship, and controlling the impulse to act destructively (Roberts, 1995; Worthington, 2005, 2006; Griswold, 2007; Konstan, 2010). In most contexts, this kind of

forgiveness must be granted without any expectation of restorative justice, and without necessarily expecting a response by the offender (who may even be dead). It helps, however, if the transgressor can and does offer some form of acknowledgment, some kind of apology, or even just asks for forgiveness.

Generally speaking, forgiving is a process whereby negative emotions are transformed into positive ones for the purpose of bringing emotional normalcy back to a relationship. In order to achieve such a transformation, the offended person must forgo retribution and claims for retribution, but this is not the same as excusing or condoning. Forgiveness doesn't mean that what happened was OK, and it doesn't mean that the person who caused the hurt is necessarily still welcome in our life. It just means that we have made peace with the pain, and we are ready to let it go.

Forgiveness is also a concept with deep religious roots. Most religious traditions include teachings on the nature of forgiveness (Griswold, 2007). Many of these have provided an basis for a variety of contemporary practices of forgiveness. Some religious doctrines or philosophies emphasize the need for people to seek divine forgiveness for their own shortcomings; others emphasize the need for people to practice forgiveness of one another; yet others make little or no distinction between human and divine forgiveness.

### **The forgiving individual**

Are some people more likely to forgive than others? Is there something that differentiates them from those who remain vindictive, vengeful, and bitter? In short, what makes leaders behave like a Mandela?

Research on personality traits has shown that people high on the forgiveness scale tend to be more emotionally stable, thrive in the interpersonal realm and experience fewer interpersonal conflicts (Ashton, Paunonen, Helmes, and Jackson, 1998; Emmons, 2000; Brown, 2003; Berry et al., 2001; McCullough and Hoyt, 2002; Younger et al, 2004; Lawler-Row and Piferi, 2006; Maltby et al, 2008). Forgiving people are also more open to cooperation, compassion, and



social harmony. Such people welcome a transgressor's repentance, as well as any excuse that may plausibly reduce the severity of the transgression. Due to such a *Weltanschauung*, they are more prepared to take the road of reconciliation (Komorita, Hilty, and Parks, 1991; McCullough, Exline, and Banmeister, 1998).

The relationship between forgiveness and personality has generally been explored within the taxonomy of the five-factor trait models of personality (Costa and McCrae, 1992). Taking this conceptual model as a base, the most consistent, and often most statistically significant finding across a number of these studies is that higher levels of forgiveness are predicted by lower levels of "neuroticism." People scoring high on "neuroticism"—more specifically angry hostility—are more likely to engage in revenge and avoidance motivation. Higher levels of "extraversion" and "conscientiousness" have sometimes been found to correlate significantly with higher levels of forgiveness, and people scoring higher on the "agreeableness" dimension of the Big Five personality traits are likely to be more forgiving. No statistically significant relationship has been reported, however, between forgiveness and the "openness to change" personality factor (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Conner, and Wade, 2001; Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, and Ross, 2005; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, and Johnson, 2001; McCullough and Hoyt, 2002; Walker and Gorsuch, 2002).

Chronological age also correlates positively with forgiveness: it appears with age, we tend to become more forgiving (McCullough and Witvliet, 2002). Those who forgive more also tend to be more religious or spiritual (Gorsuch and Hao, 1993; McCullough and Worthington, 1999; McCullough, 2001; Griswold, 2007).

### **A psychodynamic lens**

Helpful as the five-factor theory may be in understanding the forgiving personality, this framework can be expanded by applying a psychodynamic lens, assessing how factors such as reality testing, affect management, defensive structure, sense of identity, and the nature of object relations play a role in the forgiveness equation (Acklin, 1992, 1993, 1994; Waldron et al, 2011). Taking these psychodynamics factors into consideration in my work with leaders, I have

found that certain dynamics appear to differentiate the more forgiving from the less forgiving leaders.

*Degree of obsessional (shameful) rumination:* A major component of the ability (or inability) to forgive is the degree and intensity of obsessional rumination. Here, rumination is a term used to describe behavior that involves “chewing over” something in our minds. It alludes to those endless internal dialogues and fearful obsessive thoughts that spin around, clogging our minds, making day-to-day living frightening, intolerable and emotionally draining.

These persistent, irrepressible memories are one of the reasons some people get stuck—why they cannot move on in their life. In most instances, such obsessive worries have to do with the security of a current relationship (at work or at home)—worries disconnected from the demands placed on the individual by the environment. As is to be expected, the common trigger for such obsessional rumination is a personal transgression, and the more offensive the transgression, the angrier the emotional reaction will be, and the stronger the vengeful thoughts will be in the rumination process. People who exhibit this kind of behavior seem to go around in circles. They remain stuck on the transgression, trapped in a regressive way of looking at things that becomes overarching and overwhelming.

When applied to emotions, shameful rumination usually involves the belief that, somehow, if we think about something long enough, if we try to understand the emotions involved, we might be able to control these internal processes. Although this may very well be true, finding the root cause is not easy. For some people, this kind of self-talk becomes so all-consuming, and takes on such a self-destructive bent, that normal functioning becomes extremely difficult. Naturally, the content of rumination (determined by the scope of the transgression and individual differences in emotional reactions) will be an important factor in shaping subsequent affects, motivations, and behavior following the transgression. But whatever the case, the intensity of rumination (and its content) becomes important in predicting the intensity of vengeful behavior

(Berry et al, 2005).

Individuals characterized by obsessive or shameful rumination respond to injustice quite differently from individuals who do not have this characteristic. If rumination is broadly understood to mean increased effortful mental work following a negative event, forgiving individuals tend to engage in a very different form of rumination following transgressions, compared to unforgiving individuals. In the more forgiving, the rumination is not centered on revenge imagery, but more aimed at thwarting the development of hostile and cold attitudes, and also at trying to reestablish or maintain positive and loving attitudes toward the transgressor(s).

The inner voices that make up these rumination processes are not necessarily under the control of an individual's conscious mind. They operate under a very different set of rules. Therefore, to overcome obsessive rumination, the individual needs to explore what these internalized rules are—a process that requires a considerable degree of self-awareness. Although acquiring the necessary self-awareness is difficult, it is only by understanding our inner landscape that it is possible to take back control and stop this destructive rumination process.

To deconstruct the destructive rumination process, we need to look at the scripts of our inner theater and how these are formed by events that take place during our childhood and schooling. Some of us may have internalized very harsh rules set by our parents and other authority figures; others may have been more fortunate in acquiring a more benign, forgiving inner landscape or superego. The superego comprises the organized part of our personality structure—mainly but not entirely unconscious—that provides the moral, ethical standards by which we deal with life.

The superego's criticisms, prohibitions, and inhibitions become internalized in our brain, and form our conscience, and its positive aspirations and ideals represent our idealized self-image, or ego ideal (Freud, 1923). Failures in healthy

development may lead to a failure to successfully construct a personal system of justice that is fair, meaningful and satisfying. Children who have suffered developmentally destructive experiences in their early years may be more predisposed to react violently when provoked, because such experiences prevent the development of healthy notions of reciprocal behavior, and can contribute to psychopathological behavior and destructive relationships. The experiences affect the way these children (and, later, adults) deal with shame, empathy, rage and aggression. In particular, people who have been subjected to rigid, autocratic, and unfair standards of child rearing, or to childhood abuse, seem to be more likely to seek to exact revenge for past injuries and injustices. Shame seems to play a vital role—the more individuals feel shame, the more likely they are to become angry, hold malevolent intentions, and incline towards revenge (Bloom, 2001).

*Degree of empathy:* Empathy can be defined as a vicarious emotion that is congruent with, but not necessarily identical to, the emotion of another person (Batson and Shaw, 1991). According to some evolutionary psychologists, empathy is the evolutionary mechanism that motivates altruistic and pro-social behaviors (Toi and Batson, 1982; de Waal, 2008). Empathy has both emotional and cognitive components—emotionally it means the vicarious experiencing of another’s emotional state, while cognitively it concerns the ability to imagine another person’s experience accurately.

Empathy also pertains to the internalization of rules about the protection of others. It is the mechanism that motivates the desire to help others, even at a cost to ourselves. Consequently, it plays an important role in how individuals becomes socially competent people with meaningful social relationships. Imagining and feeling what another individual experiences makes empathy one of the most important determinants of our ability to forgive (McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal, 1997; McCullough, Sandage and Worthington, 1997). A variety of pro-social phenomena, such as conflict resolution, cooperation, altruism, and the inhibition of aggression, become easier where there is empathy for the other person.

In the case of forgiveness, being empathic involves considering all the other factors that may have influenced the behavior of the transgressor, as well as considering the transgressor's humanity. For example, the offended individual may imagine how the transgressor experiences guilt and distress over how his or her actions have caused hurt and damaged the relationship. Consequently, being empathic may cause the offended party to worry that the transgressor feels isolated or lonely due to their estranged relationship. Finally, and perhaps most directly, empathy for the transgressor may simply entice the offended party to make efforts to restore the relationship. In other words, empathy may lead to a yearning for restored positive contact with the transgressor. In this way, experiencing empathic reactions toward the transgressor reduces the damage done by the transgressor's hurtful actions, and by extension reduces the desire for revenge or continuing estrangement. The hurt person will be more likely to pursue conciliatory courses of action toward the transgressor to relieve the latter's distress, and perhaps to contribute to the restoration of the relationship.

Transgressors who experience empathy toward the person they have hurt are more likely to apologize out of a sense of guilt, or perhaps due to their own concerns about the loss of a valued relationship (Baumeister, Exline, and Sommer, 1998; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, and Barlow, 1996). Victims are more likely to develop empathy for transgressors when their relationship has been close, committed, and satisfactory; thus, pre-offense closeness, apology, empathy, and forgiveness are highly interrelated. The wish to forgive can be viewed as a sign that the person who has transgressed means more to the offended person than the wrong they have committed. Often, we forgive people because we still want them in our lives.

Empathy is a skill that we learn in early childhood. Naturally, the most effective teachers of that skill are our parents. Mother-infant synchrony as expressed in the interactions in the first years of life is directly associated with levels of empathy in childhood and beyond (Feldman, 2007). Attachment security facilitates the development of empathy, so parents who provide a warm, positive

environment for their children, and demonstrate sensitivity to their needs and emotions through synchronous interactions (and talking about emotions with their children), are likely to have more empathic children (Bowlby, 1968, 1973, 1980). This is due to the nature of their parent-child interchanges, which help the child's brain to develop the necessary inhibitory mechanisms for self-regulation of aggressive and impulsive behavior (Calkings, 1994; Rosario Rueda, Posner, and Rothbart, 2005). The outcome becomes self-evident: children who are more empathic tend to do better at school, in social situations, and in their adult careers. They are also more likely to assume leadership positions. In contrast, children who are raised in situations of disrupted attachment relationships and exposed to aggressive (and even abusive) models of parenting, will not develop the proper intra-psychic structures necessary to adequately modulate affective arousal, which includes feelings of shame, vindictiveness, and revenge. For these people, the default model is not going to be a forgiving nature.

Although empathic leaders can become quite angry with people who have hurt them, they will still care deeply about their relationships with such individuals. Generally, they are moved by the suffering and repentance of those who offend. They are eager to know what mitigates their offenses; and they are keenly aware of their own moral failings. In contrast, a mark of deeply unforgiving people (and leaders) is that being angry about what happened makes them willing to abandon the relationship—to start thinking the transgressor is not worth having as a colleague, subordinate or friend, or to start talking about divorce, or to seriously consider disowning a son or a daughter.

#### *Degree of emotional self-control*

Forgiving leaders are not so caught up in the perceived injustices in their life that they can't find a way past them. Unforgiving leaders tend to become caught up in negative emotional spirals and are more inclined to focus on what they do not have, and how they may have failed. Unsurprisingly, power motivation, authority issues, and the desire for status are more important to them (Prince, 2009). Given the dynamics of power, such leaders are also more likely to have a distorted idea of how others perceive them. They waste time and effort in

comparing themselves to others, comparisons that do nothing for their sense of self-worth. These people are haunted by feelings of envy, bitterness, vindictiveness, and spitefulness towards the achievements of others. Their dark thoughts immobilize them and prevent them from moving forward in their own lives. Much of their energy is channeled toward undermining people for whom they have negative feelings.

These dark thoughts can result in an extremely emotionally debilitating condition that, when unresolved, can have a range of negative consequences. Outbursts of rage are frequently a feature of their behavior. Such leaders will be touchy and edgy when thinking about the person they resent, yet may deny their anger or hatred for that person. When these negative feelings gain the upper hand, the more long-term consequences can be a hostile, cynical, sarcastic *Weltanschauung* that becomes a barrier to healthy relationships and prevents personal and emotional growth. This will contribute to difficulties in self-disclosure, trouble in trusting others, and very precarious self-confidence. Such feelings often turn into a downward spiral, cutting off communication or creating miscommunication.

Generally, this type of negative emotional spiral is brought on by the realization of some lack, deficiency, or inadequacy, and envy becomes a “dark” emotion that motivates the individual to spoil things for others. Truly envious people falsely assume that self-worth can be only be attained through possessions or achievements. Such leaders feel the pain of deprivation even when they are not actually deprived. Inevitably, they always compare themselves unfavorably to others: to their success, their reputation, their possessions, their luck, or their qualities. As they believe that they don’t have these characteristics themselves, they experience a loss of self-worth, and a wish that the envied person loses the things they desire in the delusionary hope that it will restore their own self-esteem. Due to their conflicts with self-esteem or self-limitations, they enter a vicious, negative cycle; and their unhappiness causes them to further envy those who are happy. When people are haunted by such feelings, they create a self-imposed purgatory.

The saying, “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family,” rings very true for people who are victims of this kind of emotional turmoil. Negative feelings may start early in life; when sibling rivalry rules, and parents are unable (or unwilling) to modify such behavior, envy will rear its ugly head. These people (as children and later adults) have been unable to develop adequate impulse control, making the acting out of revengeful actions more likely. Thus the people we envy and the possessions or advantages for which they are envied tell us much about ourselves, about our values, our aspirations, and our negative self-concept.

### **The art of forgiving**

Mahatma Gandhi warned that, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” We cannot change what has happened to us, there is no delete button for the past. Whatever the transgression may have been, it is something that is going to be with us forever, so the crucial questions are how we choose to deal with transgressions and how we metabolize the feelings. For some people, the memories of being hurt become like permanent videotapes implanted in their heads, and every time these tapes are played, they feel the pain all over again. Others may have better coping mechanisms—they find ways to stop the tapes. What determines an “ending” is whether the hurt party is prepared to look for a forgiving resolution. Individuals need to ask themselves whether they want to spend the rest of their lives with a pain that they (most likely) were not responsible for. The alternative is to do something about it.

### **The case of John**

A CEO in one of my leadership programs, let’s name him John, presented a problem he had with his chairman, and mentioned as an aside that he often had debilitating headaches. These headaches would become so painful that he was unable to function. When questioned, he said that he was at a loss why he had them. Despite a battery of tests, doctors had been unable to find anything the matter with him. I asked John whether he could recall any specific situations



when these headaches occurred. After some thought, he said that there might be a pattern. The headaches would start suddenly every time he found himself in conflict with an authority figure. I asked whether the headaches were recent, or whether they had a much longer history. He replied that he had had them for as long as he could remember, and that they had started when he was quite young. In response to further prompting, John revealed that as a child he had frequent disagreements with his father, a man with an explosive character who would sometimes beat him. John recalled how he deeply resented his father's actions, but felt totally helpless. He told me that he was not on speaking terms with his father—something that upset the other members of his family, particularly his mother. As might be expected, family gatherings were extremely difficult, if not impossible, and John had not seen his parents for a very long time. I asked John if he was ready to forgive his father, since these incidents had happened so long ago. But when I asked this question, his body language made it quite clear that forgiving was something he had never considered.

When I saw John again at the next module in the program, three months later, he appeared much more at peace with himself, much less tense. I asked him whether anything significant had happened during the interval. It turned out that, after mulling over the idea of forgiving, he had taken the initiative and sent a “forgiveness email” to his father. The latter had immediately responded in a, to John, surprisingly receptive way. Given the response, John decided to visit his parents to have a talk with his father. This talk became the beginning of a series of conversations that helped him see his father in a very different light. John said that he was not condoning his father's behavior toward him when he was growing up—it was not the way to rear children—but he had become more aware of how irritating some of his actions must have been to the whole family and that his parents, at times, must have been at their wits' end. More important to him, however, was that by reaching out, he had become part of the family again. Apart from his joy at rebuilding the family connection, there had been a remarkable decline in his headaches, and he realized that dealing with authority issues at work had become less conflict-ridden. He had become less prickly, more understanding—and more forgiving.

### **A journey not an event**

In deconstructing what forgiveness is about, we need to realize that it is not a one-off event or decision, it is a process. Just saying sorry will not suffice. Forgiving is a journey—an undertaking that takes time, determination, and persistence. Whatever is needed for healing, it is a learning process that takes place at the boundaries of the conscious and unconscious regions of our inner theater. Like separation and other forms of mourning, it has a specific pattern. The work of Bowlby and Parkes (Bowlby, 1968, 1973, 1980; Bowlby and Parkes, 1970) based on child observation studies is very helpful in understanding the kind of grieving process that forgiving is all about.

When a transgression occurs, there will initially be an experience of numbness, shock and denial—mental states that may cause an individual to feel a sense of unreality. This mental state will be followed by a phase of yearning and protest in which grief may come in waves of crying and diffuse anxiety. The third phase may be a state of disorganization, a low mood and a sense of hopelessness. Finally, in the case of forgiveness, the person engages in a form of reorganization, involving letting go of the attachment and looking at future possibilities.

This stage model is not necessarily linear. While we go through the forgiving process, our reactions may move backwards and forwards, and what happens doesn't necessarily follow a consciously planned scenario—while being on the journey, forgiveness occurs while we are walking, playing, sleeping, and dreaming.

The link between reconciliation and forgiveness also involves exploring two dimensions of forgiveness at the boundaries between conscious and unconscious behavior: the intrapsychic and the interpersonal. The intrapsychic dimension relates to the cognitive and affective processes and interpretations associated with a transgression (i.e. internal state), whereas interpersonal forgiveness addresses the ongoing relationships between the people involved in a transgression. Complete forgiveness will only be possible if these two

components are in sync; otherwise, we may only be dealing with forms of pseudo-forgiveness.

### **Self-reflection, self-understanding, and self-expression**

The first step on the forgiveness journey is to remind ourselves how the energy required to keep a grudge alive will ultimately drain our strength; how a desire for revenge may defile us, and may even unconsciously make us into as hurtful a person as the one who has hurt us. We need to acknowledge that forgiveness is a much better option for our mental and physical health than carrying old wounds, which become a burden that steals pleasure from the life we have now. Thus the capability of *self-reflection* is important for promoting positive behaviors toward others and facilitating social interactions and relationships.

Second, while going through this self-reflection process, it is important to understand why the transgression happened in the first place. Again, for reasons of mental health, we need to find explanations. Here the capacity to be truly empathic comes into play. The ability to put ourselves in the transgressor's shoes will be a sine qua non to understanding what has really happened. While doing so, we will most probably not agree with the rationale, but we need some kind of *self-understanding* that explains why whatever happened occurred.

Third, it will be necessary to *express the emotions* attached to the hurt. Without doing this, it will be very difficult to let go. If the transgression elicits anger or sadness or hurt, these feelings need to be deeply felt and expressed. Naturally, the best option is to express these feelings toward our transgressors, particularly as they may not even be aware of the hurt they have caused. If we want to maintain a relationship with the person we are trying to forgive, we need to find ways to communicate why we are angry and what needs to be done to find a resolution. Whatever the transgression may have been, the forgiver needs to fully express how it made him or her feel. It is not enough simply to try to forget, because merely bypassing the emotion doesn't make for true forgiveness.

Fourth, for true forgiveness to occur, the forgiver needs to feel a reasonable

amount of assurance that the transgression will not happen again. Whether it comes in the form of a sincere apology from the transgressor or another form of explanation, a modicum of trust needs to be re-established. But such trust may only go so far, as it is questionable whether the person who has been hurt will ever feel truly safe.

Finally, the step that ends the forgiveness cycle is letting go, and this may be the most difficult step to take. It is never easy to promise not to hold a grudge—letting go of a grudge means ending the rumination process, stopping oneself from dwelling on the injustice, and affirming that the transgression will not be referred to in the future. Being able to do this, however, also means letting go of a position of power; only when forgivers surrender the dominant role, can they and their transgressors relate to one other again on an equal basis. For many people, this final step is what makes forgiveness such a challenge.

The road to forgiveness is not easy to take. Too many get stuck on the journey, finding it hard to let go of negative rumination and their bitterness. But these people should be reminded that they have a choice. They can choose to carry on regretting things, or consider that things have happened for a reason; that they may benefit from learning from the experience. Such understanding will tell them what they could have done differently to prevent the transgression in the first place. They also need to realize that life isn't only about learning to forgive those who have hurt us. It's also about the recognition that all of us are human, and that all humans make mistakes. It is essential to realize that forgiveness is ultimately a gift to ourselves. Only through forgiveness can wounds heal. And as we let go of grudges, we no longer define our life by how we have been hurt.

### **Pseudo-forgiveness**

While true forgiveness is hard, pretending to forgive is easy. Saying “sorry” is merely a temporary measure that never really erases the permanent scar underneath. Unfortunately, too many people get caught up in pseudo-forgiveness because it means they don't have to cope with unpleasant emotions. Such people refuse to deal with the fact that unconscious resentments do not respond to

traditional logic and reason. In spite of expressions of forgiveness, whatever happened continues to cause discomfort although, on the surface at least, everything seems to be all right.

For example, we may refuse to admit that we are angry with someone close to us, which results in our unconsciously hiding our anger from ourselves in a desperate attempt to “protect” our relationship with that person. But this self-deception means we keep the resentment alive; we are not really protecting the relationship, we are slowly chipping away at it. And as long as the hurt is left to brew secretly in the unconscious, genuine forgiveness remains impossible. When something is merely repressed, it lingers in the dark shadows of the unconscious along with all the emotions associated with it.

Although forgetting through repression of the problem is not the answer, the process of forgetting may have a function, thus there is a paradox: we should not forget, but we have to forget. On both an emotional and a spiritual level, forgetting is a natural part of the human experience and a natural function of the human brain (Anderson et al, 2004). Part of the function of memory is to forget in order to prevent unhelpful information from being encoded, as it can distract our focus from what really matters—forgetting is necessary to prevent our brains from becoming jammed with trivial information. Thus the relationship between forgiving and forgetting becomes clouded by the idea that it is part of our evolutionary development for time to quell the longings of vengeance and hush the promptings of rage and aversion. Thus even when it may be hard for us to forgive, due to the way our brain is programmed, paradoxically without conscious awareness, we may be on a subliminal forgiveness journey.

### **Professional help**

If the road to forgiveness appears to be halted, however, or if the transgression has had such a devastating effect that it is impossible to move on, the time has come to seek professional help (Fincham, 2000; Karen, 2003; Wade and Worthington, 2005; Wade, Worthington, and Haake, 2009). Arriving at forgiveness has always been an integral part of the psychotherapy process, as we

need to deal with aspects of our inner theater with which we are unhappy. The “scripts” in that inner theater have to do with people, and we may have to come to terms with some self-destructive elements of our personality. We may come face-to-face with the unforgiving parts of ourselves; we may need to develop a less severe *Weltanschauung*. Since the pain of not forgiving someone or oneself may take an emotional and physical toll on us, various forms of psychotherapy may help in treating the symptoms of not forgiving, and facilitating the forgiveness process. Psychotherapy may need to be complemented by medication, such as antidepressants or anti-anxiety treatments, if there are associated somatic problems.

From a therapeutic perspective, forgiving is made more difficult by the various defense mechanisms (denial, repression, displacement, and particularly projection) that come into play, hampering a deeper understanding of the problem and blocking a resolution. For example, the projection of “sins” onto others is a common, human process, because this frees us from having to confront and deal with these issues ourselves.

While in therapy, we need to keep in mind that we have no control over the thoughts and feelings of the people who have done us wrong. It is not helpful to say that these people need to change. Focusing all the attention of the forgiveness journey on the other, who may admit no wrong and seek no forgiveness, diminishes our personal, internal power. If we struggle with the question of forgiveness, it is only by acquiring an attitude of compassion for others’ weaknesses, realizing our human limitations, and being aware that true power only comes from within, that we can be helped. But to arrive at such a place requires an intense journey into our inner world. It requires letting go of negative thoughts of vengeance or victimization, and refocusing on the positive attributes we find in ourselves and others. People struggling with forgiveness need to accept that life is a series of learning experiences and that all life’s encounters can make us wiser. Letting go of anger, spite, vindictiveness and resentment is what personal growth is all about.

### ***Homo homini lupus***

Is man really a wolf to his fellow man? Perhaps there is an element of truth in this expression; we all have a darker side. Few of us are candidates for sainthood—in many instances, sainthood may be a cover for rigidity, inflexibility, harshness, and doctrinarian behavior. Someone who looks for growth and personal development cannot be defined by a spotless life of constant kindness, smiles, and an even temperament. People who are prepared to learn from their mistakes, who know how to make amends, and choose not to repeat whatever has happened are much more realistic. These are the kinds of people who move society, institutions, organizations, and individuals forward.

Retaliatory and conciliatory behavior appears to be a fundamental part of our social and evolutionary makeup as *Homo sapiens*. Our tit-for-tat mindset implies that human relationships require balance and reciprocity. A built-in sense of fair play is part of the human condition, and we are easily outraged when the rules of fair play are broken. We go to great lengths to maintain a balance between the carrot of forgiveness and the stick of retaliation. Faced with transgressions, revenge appears to be our default position, but vengeful acting out is not the way to effective institution building.

However, the history of *Homo sapiens* has taught us that vengeance breeds more vengeance, creating endless vendettas and escalation of conflicts. History has also taught us that we have always needed various forms of social control in the form of restorative justice to manage the expression of revenge. Individual and social healing, not punishment, may be what is more needed in society.

Forgiveness can change the way society, institutions, organizations, teams, and individuals operate. Forgiveness is what brings transformational change, a quality recognized by truly transformational leaders. Such leaders appreciate what the human condition is all about—they recognize its frailty and vulnerability. Because error is human, forgiveness enables mistakes, failures,

flaws and breakdowns to become opportunities to awaken greater wisdom, compassion and capability toward the people we deal with and ourselves. Without a context of forgiveness, life in any setting (society, institution, or organization) will become difficult.

Truly transformational leaders can create greater internal harmony and a sense of reparation by practicing the art of forgiveness, by using failures and unwanted situations to develop a culture of compassion and understanding, where people feel safe to express themselves. Forgiveness enables the creation of authentic organizations, because it offers people the chance to take risks, learn and grow their own leadership abilities within the organization. And forgiveness is not only for others, but also for ourselves—leaders, too, must have the hope of forgiveness.

The psychiatrist Thomas Szasz once said, “The stupid neither forgive nor forget; the naïve forgive and forget; the wise forgive but do not forget.” As I have indicated, forgiveness is a rebirth of hope. Once forgiving begins, dreams can be rebuilt because forgiveness is the key to freedom, the way out of an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation. Although forgiving doesn’t change the past, it permits the building of a new future.



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