The Real Meaning of the F-Word

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and find out that the prisoner was you.
—Lewis B. Smedes

For some spiritually fragile people, forgiveness is like a dirty word. After being hurt or betrayed, they may actually be offended by the idea of forgiving the person or people responsible for the hit they’ve taken. They have a lot of misconceptions about forgiveness and these prevent them from using its power to help them bounce back from the bullets they take. Spiritually bulletproof people understand the profound power of forgiveness and make a personal commitment to practicing it in their lives. They understand that forgiveness is a gift to themselves because it can free them from the residual anger and pain left by life’s heartbreaking hits. When you understand the real meaning of the “F-Word,” you will send your spiritual resiliency through the roof.

Forgiveness is one of the most misunderstood concepts going, and because of this, it eludes us when we need it most. We’re often told that we should forgive—that it will be good for us—but no one ever tells us exactly how to do it. The good news is that while forgiveness is miraculous, it is not a complete mystery. Although the hits they take may leave them with residual pain, anger, loss, and resentment, spiritually bulletproof people practice forgiveness and see it as the greatest gift they can give themselves.

Forgiveness is actually simple, but it is not easy to do. You may find it hard to do at first because it is counterintuitive. Your logical mind will often resist the idea of forgiveness after you’ve taken a serious blow, but if you want to bounce back better than before, you can’t let your brain boss you around. Albert Einstein was obviously as brainy as they come, but even he acknowledged the limits of the intellect—he thought that it was a useful tool, but warned against letting it lead. When you forgive, you must let your spirit lead. Your spirit is very good at forgiving—though you may not yet realize it—so all you need to do is peel away the layers of resistance that your mind has put between you and forgiveness. When you clear your mind of certain patterns of thinking, forgiveness will rush in like the tide. And when it does, you will find yourself standing on the other side of the hit that’s been hurting you and holding you back from the happiness you deserve.
Indulge in Forgiveness

Don’t choose to forgive because you should or because it is the right thing to do—do it because it is a highly efficient and turbocharged way of connecting with the happiness that lies beyond the heartache you’ve been experiencing. Carrying around pain, anger, and resentment can make you more miserable than the original offenses committed against you. When you forgive, it is so that you can put this burden down. Forgiveness is not a pronouncement you make or an outward gesture of reconciliation—it is simply a transition you make inside of yourself. This transition to forgiveness will benefit the world around you in unexpected and uncountable ways, but learning how to do it is not for or about anyone else. Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself when you’re ready to bounce back from the bullets you’ve taken. Begin to reframe forgiveness as an indulgence you deserve rather than as an obligation to someone or something else.

Even though we forgive for ourselves, our forgiveness does end up impacting other people and the world around us in profound ways. I once heard a story about a man who wanted to keep his small son occupied so that he could get an important project done. The father saw a map of the world in a science magazine and he cut it up into a bunch of pieces and asked his boy to put the puzzle back together again—“That’ll keep him busy for a good, long while,” the father thought to himself. Well, his son returned in five minutes with all of the countries perfectly placed. The father, unable to imagine how the child had been able to complete the task so quickly, asked the boy how he had done it. “It was easy, Dad,” he said. “On the back of each piece was part of a man’s face, and so when I put the man together, the world got put together, too.” When we forgive, we begin to put ourselves back together after being shattered by the hits we’ve taken, and when we put our inner selves back in alignment, the world around us also begins to come together in amazing ways.

Most of us agree that forgiveness is, theoretically, a good thing. The problem with forgiveness is that it is never theoretical—it is always something we have to do in the real world with real people. Real-life forgiveness proves to be much stickier for us, but there is nothing that works as profoundly and miraculously to heal even the worst traumas. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu worked with then-President Nelson Mandela to bring healing to a South Africa divided and ravaged by apartheid, he championed what he called The Third Way—a type of justice that emphasized restoration rather than retribution. Though the atrocities, crimes, and human rights violations that occurred under apartheid seemed completely unforgivable, breaking the cycle of hatred and violence required a new way of thinking. The title of Desmond Tutu’s 1999 book, No Future Without Forgiveness, says it all—without the miracle of
forgiveness, there was no future for the people of South Africa. In recognition of his work in the area of political forgiveness, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. If forgiveness can heal on so dramatic and massive a scale, it can certainly help you come out on top of the hit you’ve taken.
Taking Stock When You’re Stuck

Spiritually bulletproof people use the power of forgiveness to free themselves of the residual pain, anger, and resentment that hits leave in their wake. They refuse to stay “stuck” in bitterness and negativity and realize that forgiveness is their way out. Ask yourself the following questions to see if you’re stuck with feelings that no longer serve your best interests:

- Do you find yourself mentally replaying incidents or conversations or dwelling on past situations?
- Do you have trouble picking out Mother’s or Father’s Day cards because none of the sentiments feel appropriate? Do holidays bring up unsettling feelings?
- Do you feel intense mixed emotions for someone in your life? Do you love someone who drives you crazy?
- Does thinking about or talking about a certain person get you upset? Is it hard for you to be around a particular person?
- Do memories of your childhood or the past interfere with your present life?
- Are you estranged from someone? Have you written someone off or out of your life?
- Is it hard to fully enjoy your life because your past still affects you?
- Do you feel an emptiness or pain in the pit of your stomach when you think about a certain person or situation?
- Do you try to forgive, but it just doesn’t seem to work?
- Are you sick and tired of carrying around the pain that someone else caused you?

If you answered “yes” to one or more of these questions, you are stuck in an emotional prison. Forgiveness offers you a way out of being stuck with emotions that are keeping you from bouncing back. Start to think about forgiveness as your own personal “get-out-of-jail-free card.”

Forgiveness Fallacies

It is very normal to feel a lot of resistance to the idea of forgiving the people or situation that hurt you. We have worked with lots of people over the years who had lots of objections that they had to work through before they could forgive. We’d like to clear up a few common fallacies about forgiveness that are at the heart of many of those objections:

- When you forgive, you are not forgetting or repressing your feelings—you are making a
When you make the decision to forgive, you take a big step toward coming out on top of the hit you’ve taken, but when you’ve been hurt and can’t forgive, you experience chronic reinjury. One woman we worked with jokingly called this phenomenon “the gift that keeps on giving.” When she got sick enough of receiving it, she finally made the decision to begin healing herself through the power of forgiveness. If you’re sick of hanging on to pain you no longer need, open your mind and heart to the possibilities that forgiveness offers.

**Hanging Your Heart on a Hook**

Many times during a workshop, a participant will ask something like “Why should I let someone off the hook so easily?” and we understand why this is so common a concern. We may think that there’s virtue in not letting someone “get away with” an offense, but who can be truly happy while holding someone hostage on a hook? More important, the person we’re really keeping “on the hook” is the one we see in the mirror. When we refuse to forgive, we hang our own hearts on this hook. A hook is a terrible place to be hanging around and the suffering we inflict upon ourselves there is completely avoidable if we are willing to look at forgiveness in a different way.

Remember that when you forgive, you are not forgetting—you are consciously choosing to remember in a different kind of way. This different way of looking at things will help you bounce back from the hit you’ve taken and protect you from more harm. Forgiveness offers you a refuge, a protection, and a safe haven from the insidious damage that unresolved anger and pain create in your body, mind, and soul. Forgiveness is not an event or even a feeling—it is a process. While forgiveness actually happens in an instant, the process of preparing for that moment happens over time. Azim often says that *forgiveness occurs when preparation meets grace.* Part of your preparation is learning a new way of remembering. At first, this new way of remembering will feel strange and counterintuitive to you, and it is natural for you to feel some resistance.

When this happens, pause and remember how many of the things that are now easy for you felt difficult or
uncomfortable at first. Remind yourself that just because something is uncomfortable at first doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it. You don’t need to commit to a lifetime of forgiveness right now—just be willing to try a new way and see what unfolds. Don’t worry if you don’t know how to forgive at this point—just make a commitment to doing it. The next couple of chapters will show you exactly what to do. All you need at this moment is the willingness to free yourself through the power of forgiveness. Start by making it your intention to forgive. The profound power of intention cannot be overstated—it sends a signal inward to the deepest, wisest part of yourself and outward into a universe waiting to assist you.

Bounce Back Boot Camp

Here are some suggestions for getting more comfortable with the “F-Word:”

- All you need to start is a willingness to forgive. Begin by stating that it is your intention to forgive. Write your intention down on a few Post-its and place them where you will see them as you go about your daily routine. The bathroom mirror, your bedside table, and the dashboard of your car are usually good spots. Every time you reread your new intention, feel your readiness to forgive increase.
- Begin to think about forgiveness as a kind of shelter that you can go to as an escape from the pain and loss you’ve been carrying around. Since shells are one of nature’s perfect shelters, find a shell that you like and see it as a symbol for your new intention to forgive. Keep it on or near you as much as possible and let it remind you that forgiveness offers you a way to escape the pain your hit left in your heart and in your life.
- Visualize a beautiful place of shelter where you can retreat from all feelings of pain, resentment, or anger. Picture yourself in a large, white tent with billowing fabric and Persian rugs on the floor or imagine yourself in a rustic tree house, surrounded by towering pines and filled with dappled sunlight. Make your imaginary shelter your perfect refuge—give it as much detail as you can and bring it into perfect focus in your mind. Visit this shelter before you fall asleep at night and remind yourself that this is a place of total forgiveness.

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