



The Sacred Art of Forgiveness by Rabbi Rami
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Lesson One: What is Forgiveness

Some people store grudges the way others store recipes.

My wife's grandmother used to keep little tin file boxes crammed with recipes: some neatly folded and others crushed and bent; some carefully printed out by hand in pen and pencil, others cut from magazines or torn from newspapers that yellowed with age. There seemed to be no order to her collection of recipes, though whenever she needed a specific recipe she knew exactly where to find it. Today's grandmothers may do something similar using a computer or iPad, and while the filing system may have changed, the passion for collecting, stuffing, and storing has not.

It is the same with grudges, slights, past hurts, and painful memories. We don't keep them in tin file card boxes or on digital flash drives, instead we cram them into our memory banks where, like our grandmother's recipes, they are easily retrieved when needed.

And when do we need them? Whenever we want to feel a bit holier-than-thou, cede to ourselves the moral high ground, or justify our recurring anger at one person or another.

Lest you think I'm not talking about you, try this little experiment: take a moment and think back to the earliest memory you have of being hurt by someone you trusted, liked, or loved. If you are like most people, such memories are not difficult to recall.

For example, as soon as I ask myself this question, I remember being continually bullied by two sixth-grade girls when I was a third-grader at George Washington Elementary School in Springfield, Massachusetts. Seeing them knock me down on my way to school in the winter, stuff snow into my Charlie Brown cap with earflaps, and then jam the hat on my head so tightly that my scalp burns with the cold is like watching an old movie. I feel sorry for that kid, and even sorrier for those girls, but I am no longer that little boy, and if those little girls tried to do that to me today I'd scare them away. Assuming, of course, they were still twelve years old and I am my current age of sixty.



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Time has muffled the pain, but the memory is not forgotten. Have I forgiven these tween terrorists? No. I moved past it simply because my dad made more money than their dads, and we found a new house in the safer suburbs. In time I outgrew the Charlie Brown winter headwear, but not the bullying.

I remember a “friend” in the seventh grade who would back me against a wall and wail into my stomach with his fists clenched almost as tightly as his jaw. He was a good twelve inches shorter and nowhere near my weight. I never hit him back, but I would look down on him and say, “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” After throwing a few more punches he would realize that he wasn’t hurting me, and he would stop the pounding. I doubt he had a clue why he exploded this way or why I was his preferred target. I just kept the pounds on to protect myself from the pounding.

Did I forgive him for his brutality? No. One day he and his family just moved away. One less bully in our junior high school, but there were plenty more. I never forgave any of them. In fact, now that I am writing about this, I can’t tell you one person whom I have forgiven. Nor can I explain what forgiving someone actually is.

I know the saying, “forgive and forget,” but clearly I haven’t forgotten and just as clearly I haven’t forgiven. And while I would not be so smug as to claim that these and similar experiences don’t shape the person I am today, I am smug enough to imagine that if they do, they do so only slightly.

So here I am offering this course on forgiveness without the foggiest idea of what forgiveness is or how to go about forgiving people.

What I am good at, however, is asking for forgiveness. I am fairly attuned to the pain I cause others, so I am quick to ask. Yet, if I am honest, I must admit that asking for forgiveness is often a tactic for alleviating the guilt I feel when I cause another to suffer. If I can get you to forgive me, I can move on without carrying the guilt of having caused you unnecessary pain in



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the first place. And, if you are lucky, I may actually learn something from the experience and not cause you pain in the future. At least not the same pain.

I don't want to give you the impression that I'm hard hearted and never forgive people. I do, and I do it all the time. If you hurt me and ask for my forgiveness, I immediately smile, grant your request, and give you a hug. Then, when we part, I make a mental note never to trust you again.

It isn't that I cut off all ties with you. On the contrary, we may have a close and continuing relationship, but I no longer entertain the notion that you won't hurt me. Chances are you will; and chances are I will hurt you as well. So forgiveness, whatever it is, isn't the ending of hurt or the possibility of hurt. It is simply moving on a bit more wisely. Now that is a definition of forgiveness you won't find in any dictionary: "Forgiveness, verb, the act of moving on with your life a bit more wisely."

Forgiveness won't erase the past, but it just might free you from it; it won't save you from suffering, but it just might help you realize that suffering is simply part of the human condition, and thus allow you to suffer without the added element of surprise. Maybe forgiveness is simply the stripping away of illusion so that you can navigate your way through life with more clarity and less bruising.

I don't know, but I will take the notion that forgiveness is about living life more wisely as our operational definition for this course. If we discover it is something else along the way, all well and good. But I suspect we will refine rather than replace our definition.

So let's be clear: this is a guide to forgiveness by a fellow whose definition of forgiveness differs from almost everyone else's, and who isn't in any way a master of the practice of forgiveness at all. So why should you take this course? Here are the three reasons for doing so.

First, most courses and books on forgiveness assume forgiveness is a skill you can learn and use whenever you wish. I disagree. Forgiveness isn't a skill, but a level of understanding of the nature of life and how best to live it. It isn't something you can use the way you might use an



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umbrella or a fork, it is an attitude toward self and others and life in general that can be cultivated but never mastered.

Second, most courses and books on forgiveness suggest that forgiveness is a way of escaping suffering; this one doesn't. Forgiveness isn't a tactic you can employ to make your life less stressful and more joyous. Forgiveness isn't something you can deploy to end suffering. Suffering is a part of life; the Buddha went so far as to say that suffering is life, or at least life is suffering when you continue to live it in a manner rooted in craving and grasping, and the anger, arrogance, and jealousy that erupts when you do live this way.

I don't think you can escape suffering, nor should you want to. Life is what it is: a blend of joy and sorrow, happiness and horror. Forgiveness won't change that. But it can free you from dragging the sorrow into your moments of joy, and the allowing the horror to corrode your moments of happiness, and that is no small thing at all.

Third, most courses and books on forgiveness offer you practical steps to achieve forgiveness; this one doesn't. While I would like to offer you a method, I can't find one that works for me, so I have none to offer you. Forgiveness just isn't that easy.

What we can do, and what we will do in this brief guide to forgiveness, is understand more deeply what forgiveness is and how forgiveness works. But more importantly, we will focus on who you are, who the people you hurt are, and who the people who hurt you are. We will delve into the nature of self and see that you aren't who you think you are, and when you stop thinking you are who you are not, forgiveness happens: no method, no steps, no willful thinking or feeling one way or another; just a freeing of Self from the confines of self and realizing that freedom from self manifests as forgiveness.

Of course there is more to this than playing with lower and uppercase *S*'s, and we will learn ways of shifting from self to Self and allowing forgiveness to arise of its own accord, but you will not be a master of forgiveness after taking this course. You'll thank me later.



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The Necessity of Conflict

Your life is a story you tell yourself and others. Notice how you respond the next time someone asks you, “How’d your day go?” Chances are you don’t pull out a PowerPoint presentation with the highlights of your day laid out in bullet-points. Most likely you open with something catchy, either positive or negative, but in either case designed to rev you up to tell the story of your day and get your audience primed to listen.

You talk about the people you encountered, what they said, what you said in response to what they said, how they reacted to what you said in response to what they said, and on and on and on. You’re telling a story. It may be a drama, a comedy, a tragedy, or a blend of all three. There are characters in your story, and plot twists, and sometimes flashbacks. Your life is no less compelling than any life portrayed on The Biography Channel™, and you use the same tools screenwriters and film directors use to tell those stories. And because your life is a story, it needs conflict.

A story without conflict is boring. If there is no danger and nothing to overcome, if the characters have no stake in the play and its outcome, no one cares to listen and you probably don’t care to tell it. In fact, you probably don’t much care about living it. Life without conflict is no life at all.

What causes conflict? It’s simple: you have a plan and nothing goes according to it. Now what do you do? You are dating the partner of a lifetime, only to find out you’ve been double-timed. You land the job of your dreams and your boss turns out to be an abusive SOB. Or your best friend gets cancer and dies. Or your parents abandon you. Or your sibling commits suicide. Or any number of horrible things that can happen to people happens to you. Now what do you do?

We imagine that we would prefer a life without conflict. But the fact is without conflict we can’t grow or develop character; without conflict we would find life meaningless.



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Decades ago I was talking with my friend and spiritual mentor Father Thomas Keating. I was asking him about his years as a Trappist monk before Vatican II, when the monks lived in silence. At the time, I romanticized silence.

Growing up in a traditional Jewish home, silence was anathema: “What? You’re not talking? You’re too important to say hello to your mother?” Even when our prayer books instructed us to pray silently, we were taught to mumble the prayers aloud. Being raised in a world of babble, I assumed silence would allow us to move deeply inward, to cleanse ourselves of shallow desires and ego-centrism. I longed to go on silent retreats and imagined that a life of silence would be a life of bliss.

Father Thomas taught me otherwise. The monks would hang chalkboards on cords around their necks so they could write to one another. “You would be amazed,” Father Tom said to me, “just how much jealousy and anger one learns to cram into one of those tiny slates.”

Conflict doesn’t require verbal speech. Conflict only requires other people. Perhaps the best way to avoid conflict, and hence the need to forgive and be forgiven, would be to avoid other people. I’ve tried it. It doesn’t work.

I have gone on solitary retreats, living alone for periods of time in small cells in monasteries and ashrams and in tiny huts in the mountains. I have meditated, chanted, and walked silently for hours all by myself, but as long as there is a self there is conflict as well.

It turns out that I am never really solitary because I am not really singular. My mind is filled with differing voices and personalities arguing with one another over who I am and what I am to do and how I am to do it. There is as much potential for conflict within my own mind as there is between my mind and your mind. It turns out we don’t need anyone to make us miserable or anxious or angry or fearful—we are capable of generating all the conflict we need to fuel all the stories we will ever tell all by ourselves.

Years ago I was a student of Psychosynthesis, a school of psychology created by Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974). I was taught that I am a composite being made up of a variety



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of conflicting subpersonalities—aspects of myself that seem to have a life of their own, who battle with other aspects of myself to define just who I am and what I am to do with my life. Whenever you find yourself arguing with yourself, you’re dealing with subpersonalities.

Part of my training was learning how to work with these subpersonalities in a way that allowed each to have a vote but none to have a veto when it comes to who I am and how I am to live. I learned to convene a board meeting of the key subpersonalities that comprised my psyche: the CEO, CFO, Secretary, Father, Son, Brother, Husband, Teacher, Rabbi, etc. While each subpersonality is an aspect of myself, I consciously played the role of the CEO, convening the meeting, setting the agenda, and then asking each attendee to give his particular take on the issue. As I made room for each voice, I discovered that I was conflicted on many of the challenges I was facing. There was no one right way for me to respond; and the idea of being true to my self really meant listening to multiple selves and then negotiating among them to come up with some plan of action. While there is much more to Psychosynthesis than this, I continue to find this exercise helpful, especially when it comes to matters of conflict.

Exercise: Come to Meeting

Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Imagine you are in a boardroom, sitting at the head of a formal meeting table. Joining you for this meeting are five others (if there are more, fine, but keep the number manageable), each representing one key role you play in life. Invite each attendee to introduce herself and briefly articulate her function: parent, partner, spouse, child, etc.

Now explain the situation you are wrestling with and ask each representative to share her understanding of the situation and how best to handle it. Don’t interrupt or allow others to interrupt. Just listen to each respondent and become aware of the inner



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conflict you may have around this issue. If you wish to negotiate a settlement, listen to conflicting voices and seek common ground and compromise. Agree to disagree on those issues upon which you cannot find common ground, and then make a decision as CEO, assuring all in attendance that you will convene another meeting after the decision has been implemented to see how things are going.

For the purposes of this course, the point of this exercise is simply to realize that conflict is natural to life and that imagining you can escape from it into some interior perfection is nonsense. Nor is it wise to pretend that conflict is the fault of others. Rather conflict is systemic to life, which means that hurting and being hurt are also part of the way things are, and no amount of forgiveness will erase this. Forgiveness is not a one-time act, but an ongoing attitude rooted in the realization that conflict is as natural to living as breathing.

I am an adjunct professor of religious studies at Middle Tennessee State University. My students and I often get into deep philosophical discussions on the nature of God, and one of the most common beliefs people seem to have is that God is all-knowing. God knows exactly what you will do from the moment you gasp your first breath until the moment you sigh your last. It isn't that God predetermines what you will do (though some of my students believe that as well); but being omniscient, God knows the future.

Many students find this belief comforting. While it is often my business (as well as my pleasure) to discomfit my students, when this particular subject comes up I shift the conversation to what it must be like to be all-knowing. I can't help but feel sorry for an omniscient God.

An all-knowing God lives in a world of endless reruns. Since everything that will happen is already known, there is no surprise. God watches your life unfold without much interest



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because God already knows how it will unfold. Not only does God know the big things, but the minute ones as well.

When I watch *The Mentalist*, one of my favorite television shows, I know that the crime will be solved and lots of soap will be sold in just under an hour. But I take delight in what the characters say and how the plot twists one way or another, and I love trying to figure out who did it before the characters tell me who the murderer is. But if I knew the dialogue by heart, if I knew every twist and counter twist before it even happens, the show would hold no interest for me. In fact, I wouldn't pay any attention to it.

So now imagine God—the all-knowing, never to be surprised God—spending eternity watching shows committed to memory eons before they ever see the light of day. Boring. If God is dead, as some philosophers insist, I suspect God died of boredom.

What God wants is what we want: surprise. Things shouldn't go as planned. That is when things get interesting. That is when things become fun. And that is when conflict enters the picture.

The best kind of conflict for us humans is human conflict. While it is true that I enjoy playing Scrabble™ against the computer on my iPad, I never begrudge the program when it takes advantage of my mistakes. Nor do I get much pleasure in beating the computer, which I do more often than not. (I avoid the *Hard* setting). It never occurs to me to challenge a word the computer chooses or to stick my face close to the screen and yell, "Gotcha!" when I manage to use all of my letters to form a single word.

But when I play with a human partner, watch out.

Conflict is natural and to be welcomed. Yes, without conflict we would never have to forgive or be forgiven, but we would hardly be alive. Forgiveness matters because conflict happens. And real conflict happens when the people you love the most treat you like crap, and vice versa.



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The first thing you need to know about forgiveness is that it depends upon conflict, and conflict is what makes life worth living, so not only might you consider forgiving those who hurt you, but you might also consider thanking them for doing so. Otherwise you'd have no story, and without a story you have no life.

Exercise: Thank the Bastards

Make a list of everyone who has hurt you: really, everyone. Think back as far as you can remember in your life, and make a list.

Write down their names, what they did, and how it has impacted you. When you have completed your list, imagine what your life would have been like if none of these things ever happened to you. Don't focus on just the terrible horrors—abuse, rape, murder of a loved one—we could all do without these. But imagine if nothing hurtful ever happened to you. What would you be like? Write a thank you note to each of the people on your list. Let them know what you learned from their behavior and how you have grown from the hurt they caused you. Try not to be sarcastic. Living well is the best revenge.

It may well be that you just can't bring yourself to write a thank-you note to some of the people on your list. Don't worry about it; skip them. You needn't mail these notes anyway. The act of writing them is what matters, for doing so will help you realize that you have grown from all these sorrows, and that is the point.

Character is built through adversity. As the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in his book *Twilight of the Idols*, "What does not kill me, makes me stronger." Like any other muscle, the muscle of character is developed through resistance.



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A few years ago I wrote a book on how to use “The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous” as a general spiritual practice. This “Thank the Bastards” exercise is the opposite of Step 8. In Step 8 we make “a list of all people we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.” In this forgiveness exercise the list is reversed. This is a list of people you imagine *owe you* an apology, not the other way around.

When I made my list of people who have hurt me I discovered something interesting. The people who hurt me the most were people I love the most. I’m not saying that these were people I loved in the past and whom I ceased to love when they caused me pain. I’m saying that the people who caused me pain in the past are often people I still love in the present.

I don’t love them because they caused me pain; I’m not a masochist. Nor do I love them in spite of their causing me pain; I’m not a saint. I just still love them. And when I think about those moments when they hurt me, I discover through that love something else: they didn’t have a choice.