

A FORGIVENESS TRILOGY

By Richard Simonelli



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I–Self-Forgiveness

Far away in the city neighborhood an English sparrow is singing. Almost lost in the street noise, the automobiles, the hum of machinery, its brave little song comes in through an open window. A tentative che-eep, che-eep comes straight into prayer and meditation and suddenly it is all right. The difficult places, the sorrow and confusion, the visionless spaces that make up the mind and heart are suddenly illuminated and put to rest. Che-eep, che-eep—a message from the spirit world, the natural world, cuts through. That little bird’s song carries vision and delight.

It is important to forgive ourselves for our own confusion and unhappiness. It’s important to forgive ourselves for our own failures and *stuckness*—for the dreams, desires and visions that did not come true. If it seems that we may go unfulfilled in the ways we expected or strived for, we must be especially kind to ourselves in self-forgiveness. It is also important to forgive ourselves for the wounds we carry and the harm we caused others. Through the medium of prayer or meditation, or perhaps just letting a note of birdsong cut through, we can find compassion for ourselves in the midst of insufficiency.

Self-forgiveness is ultimate friendliness to oneself. And it’s also one of the most difficult courtesies to extend inwardly. If someone else hurts us in some way it is often easier to accept their apology and to forgive *him or her* than it is to forgive ourselves for the same infraction. Self-forgiveness is part of the climate of kindness that arises when the heart begins to open. Kindness cuts through perfectionism and judgementalness. It’s not that we become so lax that we fail to do good work or to hold just standards; but co-existing with precision and rigor, both kindness and forgiveness must be very close at hand. Otherwise our social systems quickly fall out of balance.

We are living in a time of high-performance, breakneck accomplishment. As a culture, we pride ourselves in achievement after achievement. The wondrous breakthroughs of contemporary culture often come at the expense of a competition or achievement habit. Competition is healthy and growth-oriented up to a point. But after a certain degree of striving, competition turns cancerous to individuals and the culture alike. Competition is one of the great harms of contemporary culture. Competition, done with poor spirit and intent, is just a nasty argument with life. But competition has an antidote. The healing aspect of deadly competition is cooperation. Cooperating with ourselves, rather than constant inner struggle and striving, is self-forgiveness.

Self-forgiveness is compassion turned inward. We feel for ourselves. We care for ourselves. We feel for our finite, vulnerable and all-too-human traits and abilities. Insufficiencies, character defects, and habit patterns must first be forgiven in ourselves or we will just project them on others. When individuals begin to find and operate out of a climate of compassion and self-forgiveness, relationships will automatically change for the better. And they will begin to improve without all the relationship therapy that assaults us today from every direction.

Relationship healing begins in the discovery of self-forgiveness and compassion to ourselves. When I forgive me for the confusion and darkness in my own life, suddenly, miracles are possible

between you and me, and between me and the world at large. The seed for being able to forgive the unforgivable things that have been done to individuals, families, communities and nations is personal self-forgiveness.

Self-forgiveness leads to the forgiveness of other people and the hurtful parts of institutions, worldviews and mindsets. But forgiveness must not be a license to continue harming others through our actions or our value systems. The forgiveness transaction means that the perpetrator must cease doing harm—otherwise forgiveness becomes a nasty political, psychological or religious game. Forgiving the unforgivable in ourselves or others is a radical act, paving the way for peace and non-violence in our suffering contemporary culture.

The English house sparrow is the loyal friend of city neighborhoods. She infiltrates the densest city living with reminders of the natural world. Che-eep, che-eep on a morning when the inner climate is bleak and hard. Che-eep, che-eep, lighting up prayer and meditation.

Only by re-entering the natural world can we really find deep healing. Only when we have re-activated membership in the family of birds and plants, rocks and trees, will some of the deepest causes of human suffering be removed. When we have balanced our urban tendencies and brilliant intellectual abilities with the stuff of the land, healing will be ours. Then the human gift of creativity and quest will come into balance. Then we will live sustainably as a society.

My intent is to forgive myself and to live humbly in compassion within my limitations and capabilities. To live from an open heart.

–1995

2–The Forgiveness Wheel

Five Directions of Forgiveness

Introduction

It has been my honor and privilege to be part of the Wellbriety Movement among Native Americans for many years. I've personally benefited from the Wellbriety approach to addictions recovery through American Indian and Alaska Native cultures so much more than I can say. As a non-Native person, I am endlessly grateful for the recovery gifts that have come to me through my Native friends and their traditions. One of those gifts is that of forgiveness, a healing strength carried by the Sacred Hoop.

The Sacred 100 Eagle Feather Hoop is a powerful healing element of the Wellbriety Movement ⁽¹⁾. The Sacred Hoop carries the four gifts of Healing, Hope, Unity and the Power to Forgive the Unforgivable. I've prayed at the Hoop many times, but it's taken a long time for me to actually begin to take those gifts inside for the wellness that grows out of recovery.

Each person will understand the four gifts in his or her own unique way. Here are some thoughts about my own experience of *forgiveness*, and especially, about forgiving the unforgivable.

Part 1

Can we forgive? Do we forgive? Is forgiveness a principle guiding your own life and a value you live in the world? Reflecting on five aspects or *directions* of forgiving may help the healing energy of forgiveness become a regular part of our lives for the benefit of all.

Forgiveness is one of the great teachings of Christianity through the consciousness of Jesus Christ in the world. It is also one of the four great gifts of the Native American Sacred Hoop of 100 Eagle Feathers that travels the North American continent today with its gifts of Healing, Hope, Unity and the Power to Forgive the Unforgivable. But what is forgiveness? Why do some forgive while others steadfastly refuse? If we forgive, do we turn our backs on justice or integrity? Or is true justice only possible when we can forgive? Are healing, hope and unity only possible when we cultivate the heart of forgiveness?

Forgiveness means an ending to chronic anger and resentment in a person's life. It is freedom from an attitude or condition of hostility in our hearts and minds. It is release from an interior climate of grudge or revenge, but it is not an abandonment of our clarity and critical intelligence, which are special gifts we have as human beings. Forgiveness can heal anger existing within an individual, between individuals, or in the world at large. Forgiveness especially helps *the forgiver* because holding resentment or carrying a grudge saps and drains a person's creative energy and the ability to love. Forgiveness can repair relationships and begin reconciliation. It can restore harmony. Forgiveness is the doorway to healing, hope and unity in our lives as individuals, in our families, communities and nations. But forgiveness is certainly not "forgive and forget" because a forgiving person is also intelligent and

aware of him or herself, as well as the world at large. We don't forget, but what happened no longer has power over us.

Some people are blessed to live in a *state* or *condition* of forgiveness requiring little or no process in order to forgive when a hurtful situation comes into their lives. They have the gift of instant forgiveness. But most of us must undergo a *process* of forgiveness when we experience hurt. Process always requires time. Most of us must "go through" something in order to forgive harm perpetrated against us. Sometimes we must seek forgiveness with a person, social group, or other form of life. But there are two things true about the forgiveness process. First, there can never be forgiveness if we don't want it. And second, no matter how involved the process we go through in our hearts and minds, the final step to forgiveness is one outside of ego-control. The ability to forgive is ultimately an aspect of divine grace or the will of God, Creator, Higher Power or in whatever terms we may understand those notions.

The four aspects of a thorough forgiveness process include Willingness, Self-forgiveness, Understanding, and Awareness. But the element allowing forgiveness to take place is not part of process at all. It is a gift or blessing of Grace. Amazing Grace.

Part 2

East: Willingness

We must want to forgive. There can't be forgiveness unless there is an interior desire and intent to pardon or release the hurt we are feeling from whatever happened. We have to be oriented towards forgiveness or have accepted the notion that it is good to let go of the harm we have experienced in the name of healing and further development for all involved. We "gotta wanna," or forgiveness can't take place. If we hold a belief system that values revenge, retribution, resentment, anger, feeling "right," or holding onto the past as primary stances of relating to the world, there can be no forgiveness.

Forgiveness releases energy and allows healing to take place because those involved will have to "go through" a releasing experience within themselves in order to express forgiveness outwardly in the situation. Signs of justice that are only external, such as court sentences, jail time or fines will never bring healing unless they are coupled with real inner breakthroughs in individuals. But at the same time, forgiveness may include the need for outer, material forms of justice or reconciliation. Knowing that forgiveness includes justice, provided the forgiving experience takes place inside an individual, can help a person be willing to forgive.

South: Self-Forgiveness

Forgiveness in a situation becomes possible when a person has had the experience of forgiving him or herself for something that he or she might have done in some other life experience. All forgiveness has roots in self-forgiveness. Suppose we ourselves are the creators of harm or of a condition or situation that results in suffering. It is OK to *attribute* the situation to our own thoughts, feelings, or actions—that's just fact. But to *blame* ourselves in a way that is frozen and unchanging is unhealthy for ourselves and for all those around us. Blaming denies reality because everything is always in flux.

Everything is always changing and causes are always shared events. Seeing clearly what happened in a situation, and *attributing* it to ourselves, rather than *blaming* ourselves, is healthy because we can then move through a situation. Blaming is not healthy, but accepting accountability is.

Self forgiveness means to release ourselves from the blame or guilt of a situation. It does not mean to duck accountability for what happened. Self forgiveness is not to condemn or judge ourselves “bad” for actions we might have done. It is to find a stance or an inner attitude of self-love towards ourselves no matter what we have done. This self-love is not narcissism or egotism. It is a feeling or sense of ultimate kindness and compassion to ourselves because it is unconditional. It is an inner “gentling” of ourselves to ourselves that results in self-forgiveness. But once again, it does not deny accountability for harmful situations we may have caused.

Self-forgiveness and accepting accountability may well make us more capable of finding solutions or offering compensation to the situation because we will act from clarity and love rather than from confusion and fear. Until we have gone through a process of forgiving ourselves for something major in our lives, it may be very difficult to truly forgive another person or a condition of life for the harm that others may cause.

West: **Understanding**

Resilient, robust forgiveness is not only a kind, well-meaning act. It must contain understanding. Intelligent forgiveness includes a mental understanding of what happened. For example, it may be necessary to reflect on the situation at hand and list all the aspects involved in the harm that is felt. It may be necessary to discuss the situation with others to get their perspective. It may help to use cognitive awareness tools, such as mind maps, to develop a mental picture of the situation at hand. Such understanding may take some time, but it is time well spent because a well-considered forgiveness can help in a person’s overall inner journey of inner growth as a human being. The need to forgive can provide a boost for a person’s own commitment to self-development because it causes us to take a long, deep look at ourselves.

North: **Awareness**

A condition of wider awareness is also needed for the best kind of forgiveness. It is important to understand what happened surrounding the incident that created harm. What is the situation that helped create the immediate situation that concerns us? For example, if we feel that we had inadequate parenting for some reason or another, that may well be true. But what was our parent’s reality that led to such inadequate parenting? And why were they not able to develop themselves as people? Awareness of the wider situation is not to deny, dismiss or excuse it. It is simply to see it.

Cultivating wider awareness can also help the dawning of compassion in ourselves. Compassion means to walk in someone else’s shoes by simply seeing the world from their perspective. It is to feel for the greater situation because we are always connected to the greater situation. We never live or function in isolation. There is always a *unity of interconnectedness* of which we are a part. Wider awareness can

arise by taking quiet time to reflect on the situation for which forgiveness is desired. We can do a forgiveness retreat to feel out the entire situation. Such a retreat can be done alone or in a group context. We can carry our special forgiveness question or topic with us into contemplative situations, “working it” on a daily basis. Living with our forgiveness question for a period of time can help cultivate the awareness that makes an even more resilient forgiveness possible.

Center: **Grace**

But finally, no acts of self-will, no intentional process, no amount of hard work or effort can really lead to the moment when you know, *I have forgiven...*

Some might say that it takes the infinite love, mercy, favor, and goodwill shown to humankind by God before a real forgiveness takes place.

Others might say that it takes a condition of true egolessness in an individual in order to make forgiveness real. The ego, or the separate, individual self, can't really forgive.

Grace is a mysterious gift that allows us to walk through a doorway into the condition of forgiveness. Grace is a blessing that happens when we are not looking, in the sense that our self-conscious intention, or self-will, can't make it happen. Grace is the condition of surrender. Every incident of grace is truly an amazing grace because in some way we probably feel we didn't deserve the cleansing gift or blessing that did take place. Our only role at this point is to allow our ego-self to get out of the way and to accept. To let it happen.

Part 3

Reflecting on Forgiveness

For most of us, forgiveness is a process taking time and consisting perhaps of Willingness, Self-Forgiveness, Understanding, and Awareness. But it is also possible to live in a *state of forgiveness* in which resentment falls away from us like water off a duck's back. Some can go instantly to the Grace of forgiveness when wrongs occur. This makes them so much more effective in peacemaking activities for the situation at hand. To live in a state of forgiveness means the abilities of willingness, self-forgiveness, understanding and awareness are stronger than ever.

Yet forgiveness does not mean that we remain open as a target for perpetrators who are intent on harming. Forgiveness is first and foremost to clear the way for ourselves—so that we are not carrying the baggage of hurt, revenge or rage. It is quite possible to remain in a state of forgiveness to an active perpetrator while protecting ourselves and others from a stream of ongoing harm. In some cases it might not be possible to avoid the perpetrator.

For example, today's life is a source of growing harm. Without denying the good in contemporary life, it is clear that the conditions of everyday life are worsening worldwide. The materialistic and consumer way of life is growing stronger at the same time that polarizing

fundamentalism of all sorts is strengthening throughout the world. So many people are motivated by fear and anger. We might like to think that this is not true, but it is. We can adopt a stance of dislike against modern life. Or we can forgive it, even as it rains down harm and hurt. This kind of forgiveness does not mean that we continue to be victimized by an individual, a situation, or by today's conditions. We'll discover that forgiveness is a source of inner strength. We'll discover that living through forgiveness creates inner protection from every cause of harm.

Today's difficulties are a cyclic phenomenon. They will change. But indwelling forgiveness cuts deeper than situations, seasons or cycles. Situations occur and it is up to us to problem-solve, take action, shape or manage them so that harm is minimized to both humans and to the natural environment. We are not absolved from responding to the natural law of the everyday world. Therefore we can't just wish things away through sentimental optimism or wishful thinking. There are consequences to living in the progress addiction of today's value systems. We can minimize harm if we live in a state of spiritual forgiveness because then we don't have to deal with our own legacy of judgment and remembrances that weigh us down and make it harder to relate with the never-ending consequences of cause and effect.

Living in a condition of forgiveness means that we live with self-forgiveness and self-love. Even if I can't forgive something that happened because there is too much emotional stress, I can forgive myself for my own non-forgiveness. I can also forgive myself for my own non-willingness to forgive. This strange, indirect power of forgiveness will let us forgive what we might consider unforgivable. The logical, rational mind might think this is impossible, fanciful or ineffective—but a greater mind knows more. Forgiving myself for non-forgiveness, who knows what miracles might come?

The vision of the Sacred 100 Eagle Feather Hoop allows Healing, Hope, Unity, and the Power to Forgive the Unforgivable to take place in us if we let it. The Hoop has been carried across Turtle Island, the Native name for North America, since 1995 on journeys to help awaken our own vitality and compassion, as well as to create community healing ⁽²⁾. We can forgive the unforgivable with Creator's help.

Forgiveness begins with willingness and self-forgiveness. If I am truly willing to find peace and healing in a situation, help will become available to me as soon as I enter these eastern and southern doors of the forgiveness wheel. The western and northern doors will open up when we carry the desire for forgiveness deep in our hearts. And Great Spirit at the Center holds us always, in the unseen world of love.

—2003-2007

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3—Forgive the Unforgivable

In my generation, many of the important institutions of mainstream society broke down and were not able to nurture us as we grew up and became adults. So even though I was raised in the Christian faith I was not able to draw upon my own Judeo-Christian traditions when I most needed help. But I consider myself lucky having come to the Buddhist tradition as a young man. I was lucky to have studied and practiced for many years with Japanese, British and Tibetan Buddhist teachers. That's why, when I heard the phrase *Forgive the Unforgivable*, I was stopped in my tracks.

In some schools of the Zen Buddhist tradition students are given mind puzzles or mental riddles by the teacher to accompany them in their sitting meditation. “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” is one of the more famous riddles. “What is your face before your mother and father were born?” goes another. Or how about this: “Climb up a hundred foot pole and take one step out.” In the Rinzai Zen Buddhist tradition of Japan these puzzles are called *Koans*. Students who work with them are seeking to cut through the endless internal self-talk which we all experience and which keeps us from the simple truth of what's happening right now. The moment I heard “Forgive the unforgivable” I knew it was a personal Koan meant for me.

I knew I had fallen out with certain friends, that long-term friendships had given way to grudges, smoldering anger, or outright hostility. For others, I could see that divorce produced sparks of hatred between the one-time couple, continuing to harm the children long after separation and the settlement were final. For many of us, a work-related or group process situation was the source of unresolved conflict or hurt. I could see that old associates avoided each other on the street and those who were once involved with one another became strangers again. On and on it goes. Every unforgiven old wound is like a black cloud covering the sun. Every *unforgiven* saps our energy and makes it harder to share love with colleagues, family or friends in this present moment.

But how can I forgive the unforgivable? After all, the hurt I'm carrying is *unforgivable*. It's too big, and too ugly for forgiveness. I can forgive the little things—like a neglected birthday or an anniversary—but what about the big ones. Like sexual abuse, or severe verbal punishment? Or battering? What about genocide and the suppression of whole cultures of people?

For me, forgiving the unforgivable can never only be a sentimental, “well-meaning” gesture. I must understand how I hurt you before I can really accept your forgiveness. That understanding takes hard inner work. Hard work often takes the form of personal reflection, discussions with others, new learning situations or prayer and meditation. And it may take time. I find that a certain amount of time must go by before my friend and I are ready to forgive each other.

Forgiving the unforgivable is also connected with what has been called a state of grace. Self-will, *my* will, can't forgive the unforgivable. Something much bigger has to be present.

To forgive the unforgivable, first I have to be willing to forgive myself for the many mistakes I've made in my own life. Mistakes in parenting, the inability to love, and sticking with forms of livelihood which were not good for me are things that I forgive in myself daily. But forgiving the unforgivable is not really a step-by-step process. Even though I have to prepare myself with reflection, heart and time, finally, I just have to take a chance. I just have to let go of the past. I have to step out from the top of the 100-foot pole with courage, vulnerability and good will as my only companions.

But before I step out, I seek help to prepare. I often fall back on steps 8-10 of the Twelve Step Tradition when seeking forgiveness, because even after I've forgiven, sometimes the shadow of old habits, patterns, and beliefs drifts across the sun. That's when Step 10 comes through: *Continued to take personal inventory and when wrong, promptly admitted it.* Steps 8-10 are the forgiveness steps. As soon as I sense that I caused an inadvertent hurt, the magical words, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me," become available as an on-the-spot healing prayer.

Forgiving the unforgivable may be the most important thing we can do for and with each other in order to rebuild community. But I need to be ready, willing and able to open up to the differences between me and my friend in order to achieve a robust forgiveness. And my friend must do likewise. When we see, voice, value and honor our *differences*, then the things we have in common become a strong foundation on which to build friendships, families and communities.

To be willing to forgive the unforgivable is the greatest gift I can give myself. It is only from a state of forgiveness that the doors of healing, hope and unity truly open up for me. If I am not willing to forgive, these doors are forever shut. If I am willing to forgive, but can't, these doors may still open. Forgiveness is first and foremost healing for me. When *I* am in healing, then the great suffering and crimes of the world at large may find relief. Wishing won't make it so—but the personal healing journey will.

"How can I forgive the unforgivable," asks the self-talk within my head. "How?" it demands. "It's just too hard, and besides, it wasn't my fault anyway," it reasons on. Enough time had passed. I took a deep breath and phoned my friend. We got together and talked about the usual things. I sensed that he, too, was waiting for an opening. We looked into each other's eyes. "Please forgive me," I said. There was a pause. "I do," he said. Another pause. "Please forgive me, too," he requested.

I do.

Oh Great Mystery, the thinking mind and the emotions help me prepare, but their doorway never brings forgiveness. Please help the heart to open; please help me to release.

–1997