



## The path to forgiveness

by Rick Belden

Forgiveness is a complex, dynamic, and very personal experience, and one that is all too often misrepresented and oversimplified, to everyone's detriment. Adult survivors of childhood abuse are especially vulnerable to family and societal pressure to "forgive and forget" trauma they've never really been allowed a safe opportunity to feel, know, understand, own, and release. People who tend to avoid their own difficult feelings and those haven't done their own work for whatever reason (fear, family and social conditioning, etc.) are often among the most likely to try to rush others to "heal".

Well-intentioned or not, this sort of pressure is very misguided and can be incredibly damaging, particularly when it comes from someone perceived and/or represented as being in a position of authority and influence in one's life. The confusion felt when someone you trust (and someone you feel you need) pushes you to "finish" something you haven't even begun to fully understand can be great impediment to the real work of healing.

TV and movies often show us forgiveness as high drama: a climactic, cathartic once-in-a-lifetime event filled with tears, hugging, and very often reconciliation of a relationship in which that possibility had previously seemed hopeless. In reality, forgiveness is more of a process than an event, a series of many small steps, experiences, and decisions that often do not end in dramatic tearful reconciliation, but in a far more subtle coming to terms within oneself that may never be known to the other at all.

This is a much better, more realistic, more productive, and more attainable model for forgiveness than what we typically see in TV and movies, and what we are all too often prompted and pressured to achieve from others.

Regardless of anyone else's expectations, forgiveness, particularly of severe wrongdoing against oneself, is a choice (and a highly personal one), and one that we are all entitled to accept or refuse as we see fit. A forgiveness born of obligation is not a true forgiveness; a forgiveness granted in response to demands is a hollow prize for both parties.

Forgiveness may not be the right choice for everyone in every situation. Sometimes more time is needed. Sometimes time is not the issue at all (more on this below). No one should be pressured to forgive, and in truth, no one can be forced to do so because true forgiveness can only happen from the inside out, not from the outside in.

For those who choose to explore the path to forgiveness, even if only tentatively, here are some observations from my own experience that may prove helpful.

***Expectations of forgiveness are unreasonable when harm is ongoing***

One of the worst double binds that abuse and trauma survivors face is the expectation that they should forgive someone, often a family member, who continues to treat them badly. Often the nature of the maltreatment has changed from childhood to adulthood. For example, someone who was physically abused as a child by a parent may instead be subjected to what often seem to be regarded as more civilized and acceptable forms of psychologically abusive behavior as an adult. But the original underlying pattern of disrespectful, abusive behavior has never stopped. It is still ongoing.

How can anyone be expected to forgive hurtful behavior that is still ongoing? This is a common and very difficult problem for many adult survivors of childhood abuse. They feel forced to choose between looking after their own well-being and maintaining a relationship with one or more family members (oftentimes an entire family system) continuing to perpetuate the same sort of abusive, wounding treatment that hurt them as children.

***Forgiveness requires an end to the cycle of wounding***

Sometimes the only viable path to forgiveness is to remove ourselves from those who continue to cause us harm despite our best efforts to communicate our needs clearly and maintain healthy boundaries. By taking care of ourselves and ending the cycle of wounding, we can establish a safe distance from those who have injured us, allowing ourselves to move through the old hurts and toward greater understanding and forgiveness without constantly being re-injured by new hurts that feel just like the old ones.

### ***Forgiveness is an iterative process***

In my experience, forgiveness, as it relates to healing the effects of abuse and trauma, is not a one-time event. It's an iterative, multi-layered process that, with committed awareness of oneself and one's history, unfolds over time. For many survivors, abuse and trauma were not experienced as a one-time event either, but iteratively, in layers, over time. In that context, it seems very unreasonable to me to expect that forgiveness will come as the result of simply deciding to "move on," "turn the page," "get over it," or whatever other subtly coercive euphemism might be used to put pressure on someone who's not healing fast enough to meet someone else's requirements.

### ***Forgiveness is an active process***

Forgiveness of the sort of deep, longstanding wounds that result from abuse, neglect, and trauma is anything but a passive "love and light," "warm and fuzzy," "time heals all wounds" kind of process. Every wound has its own story and its own life, and many wounds are not healed simply by waiting and thinking happy thoughts. They have to be faced, entered, lived in, listened to, understood. They have to be cleansed with tears and shouting and shaking and all the other ways that the human body expresses and discharges the stored energies of fear and pain and grief. They have to be allowed to speak, to tell their stories in their own way and their own time. They have to be met and seen, acknowledged and accepted in all their painful glory as the wild, primal things they are.

### ***Forgiveness is a sacred process***

The place within us where we meet our wounds and do the work they call us to do is holy ground. It is ancient and eternal, beyond time, expectations, and schedules. It is the place where we keep our secrets, and where our secrets keep us. It is dark, messy, vital, and beautiful. It knows what we need to know, and it will tell us, if we're brave enough to listen and to feel our way through to the light that knowledge carries for us. Battleground and sanctuary, it is that sacred space within each of us where we encounter grief, wisdom, and hope, and where, I believe, the path to true forgiveness begins.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [\*Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood\*](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [\*Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within\*](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).