

Forgiveness is no longer wanting to punish those who hurt us. Forgiveness means that we no longer want to get even, or spend time dreaming of how we will make them suffer for what they have done to us. It is realizing that we may never be able to "even the score" and that even if we did that, nothing we do to punish them will help to heal us. It is discovering the inner peace that we feel when we just let go of the past and forget thoughts of vengeance.

Forgiveness is moving on. Forgiveness is recognizing all that we have lost because of our refusal to forgive. It's realizing that the energy that we spent hanging on to the past is better spent on improving our present lives and our future. It's letting go of the past so that we can move on.

### CONCLUSION

We all have painful incidents from our past. And at one time or another we have all made the mistake of trying to run away from our past. The problem is that no matter how fast we run, or how far we run, the past has a way of always catching up to us. Forgiveness is a way of dealing with our past so that we no longer have to run. It allows us to deal honestly with our past and allows us to heal the pain. It helps us to find the true inner peace that can only come from changing ourselves and our attitudes.

As Dr. Sidney Simon wrote in *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace With Your Past and Get On With Your Life*: "And that is what forgiveness is all about — working through the unfinished business, letting go of the pain and moving on for your sake. You forgive so that you can finally get rid of the excess baggage that has been weighing you down and holding you back; so that you can be free to do and be whatever you decide instead of stumbling along according to the script painful past experiences wrote for you."

I have forgiven my mother and moved beyond my past. It wasn't easy and took a lot of time, but I believe that it was well worth the effort. Perhaps you should give it a try. □

## FIRST YOU JUMP

Donna Schafer

You probably don't know my rabbits.

They moved here from Vermont in a box last July. Some boy was handing them out on the street and all three of my children sat down in front of the box as we walked by. The sign said "free rabbits." The kids said "sit-down strike."

I thought it was fine to have rabbits outdoors in the summer, but I was scared about the winter. I didn't want them in the house. Then somebody told me about the way rabbits grow fur. They grow it as the temperature demands. This no doubt is yet another piece of the majesty of God, putting fasteners on the seas, morning lights in the sky, fur on the rabbits.

Take a family that gets into crisis: a child fails to thrive or goes on drugs. The day the tragedy announces itself, the family does not have what they need to cope. When they tell you they don't know how they are going to cope, you have to agree. They don't know. Yet, their fur hasn't grown. But what we see — in the parents' support groups of a thousand hospitals — is fur growing, capacity increasing. Our strength is made manifest in struggle. Our growth occurs because of the struggle. The fur grows in response to winter slowly and surely. The bread comes to us day by day.

I see this in my personal life all the time. I'll say: enough! I'll shout: too much! God won't say much back. And then I'll find a new opening at the bottom of my well. A new capacity to take risks. A renewed capacity to love and forgive. A crevice when I thought there were no more places to go to feed on the tree.

I have often heard it said: "First you jump. Then you get your wings." In the deep of winter our fur grows. Our capacity to handle trouble grows with the trouble. □

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Mildred B. Rose

## WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT

Forgiveness is not forgetting. We are taught from an early age to "forgive and forget." However, this is often not realistic and is not valuable. It would be nice to be able to turn back the clock and erase the unpleasantness of our past, but it just isn't possible. The real trick isn't to forget the past, but to learn from the past, and try to use the past to help yourself and others both now and in the future.

Forgiveness is not condoning. Forgiving doesn't mean that the past was okay or not so bad. We were hurt, it was painful, and it affected our lives. Forgiveness allows us to deal with the past in a more effective manner that doesn't minimize the past, but rather minimizes the effects of that painful past on the present and our future. It in no way denies, justifies, or condones the original harm done to us in the past.

Forgiveness is not absolution. Forgiveness does not absolve the perpetrators of responsibility for their actions. It doesn't "let them off the hook." The reality is that we cannot grant absolution even if we wanted to — that is the sole responsibility of God. And while only God can grant absolution, only the perpetrator can seek it. They are ultimately responsible for their own actions and must make peace with their own past, just as we must make peace with our past. We don't forgive for their sake. We forgive for our own sake, and for our own peace of mind.

Forgiveness is not a form of self-sacrifice. Forgiveness is not pretending that everything is just fine when you feel it isn't. This is perhaps the most difficult concept of forgiveness to understand, because sometimes the distinction between being truly forgiving and simply denying or repressing anger and pain can be deceptive and confusing. Plastering a smile on your face and "making nice" is not forgiving. Either we forgive, or we do not — there is no halfway. And we must be careful to be honest with ourselves if we are not ready to forgive, because in the long run it is better to admit to and deal with our inability to forgive than to just pretend to forgive.

Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness. Far from weakness, forgiveness is a sign of true inner strength. When we forgive we understand that we don't need our anger and hatred to protect ourselves. We don't need the pain as a crutch anymore. Forgiveness doesn't depend upon who hurt us, what they did, or whether or not they are sorry for their actions. We don't forgive out of our weakness toward the perpetrator, but out of our own internal strength. Forgiveness is something that we do for ourselves.

Now that we understand some of the common misconceptions of forgiveness, let's try to understand what forgiveness truly is.

## WHAT FORGIVENESS IS

Forgiveness is a form of realism. Forgiveness allows us to see our lives as they really are, probably for the first time. It doesn't deny, minimize, or justify what others have done to us, or the pain that we have suffered. It does, however, allow us to look squarely at old wounds and scars and see them for what they are. And it allows us to see how much energy we have wasted and how much we have damaged ourselves by not forgiving.

Forgiveness is a sign of positive self-esteem. Forgiveness allows us to put the past into its proper perspective. We no longer identify ourselves by our past injuries and injustices. We are no longer victims. We claim the right to stop hurting when we say: "I'm tired of the pain, and I want to be healed." At that moment, forgiveness becomes a possibility — although it may take time and much hard work before it is finally achieved.

Forgiveness is letting go of the past. Forgiveness doesn't erase what happened, but it does allow you to lessen and hopefully eliminate the pain of the past. And more importantly, the pain from our past no longer dictates how we live in the present and can no longer determine our future.