

The Freedom of Forgiveness

And the Prison of Hate

By Dan Ofstedal – October 8, 2025 ¹

“I think it’s about

Forgiveness, forgiveness — Don Henley, “The Heart of the Matter”

The Example

A man recently drove his pickup truck into a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Grand Blanc, Michigan during services. He opened fire with an assault weapon and set the church ablaze. Four congregants died. Eight others were injured.

Within days, members of the same church—along with others—raised nearly \$300,000 for the shooter’s family.

One donor explained: “What was done cannot be undone. The only choice we have now is to forgive and lift up.”

For most people, this seems impossible. Insane, even. The conventional view is that forgiveness equals surrender, weakness—letting someone off the hook, failing to hold them accountable. And many who were raised in religious traditions were taught to forgive only in a transactional way: forgive others so God will forgive you. A quid pro quo, earning your way into heaven through the right behavior.

Both of these views miss the point entirely.

The Ego

In Georgia, a man fell asleep driving after a 24-hour shift at the fire department. He crashed into another vehicle, killing pregnant mother June Fitzgerald and her unborn son. Her 19-month-old daughter was seriously injured but survived.

June’s husband, Erik Fitzgerald, a pastor, asked the court for a reduced sentence for Swartzell. Then he began meeting with him regularly for coffee and conversation.

“You forgive as you’ve been forgiven,” Fitzgerald said. The two men remain close friends and travel together sharing their story.

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Jesus emphasized forgiveness more than any other spiritual teacher. When Peter asked if forgiving someone seven times was sufficient, Jesus replied: “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven”— essentially infinite times. Yet despite living in a largely Christian nation, we don’t commonly practice forgiveness. If anything, the trend is accelerating in the opposite direction.

Why? Because feeling resentment and holding grudges is what the unexamined ego wants to do. It’s the default state for humans.

Holding a grudge is easy. It requires no courage, no self-awareness, no growth. The ego loves its victim story — it provides identity and purpose. You know who you are: you’re the person who was wronged. You know what you must do: nurse your resentment, plot your retribution.

People are tribal by nature. We sort ourselves by race, gender, nationality, religion, politics, favorite sports team. Tribal resentments are the norm. For example, political resentment fuels social media engagement and cable news ratings. The very suggestion that we might forgive those on “the other side” for their perceived transgressions would be met with outrage. After all, they’re not just wrong — they’re dangerous, destructive, evil.

Just keep in mind that Jesus taught precisely the opposite.

If you think you’re good at practicing forgiveness, check your thoughts. Are you still angry about anything? Anyone? Do you have enemies — people whose names trigger immediate contempt or outrage? If so, you’re not practicing forgiveness, no matter what you tell yourself.

Resentments and grudges are even handed down from generation to generation. That’s the tenacity of the ego.

Breaking free from this pattern requires exactly what the ego resists: letting go of your victim story.

Obligation

A man entered an Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. He sent the boys and adults outside, lined up ten girls against the blackboard, and shot them execution-style. Five died.

The Amish community forgave the shooter immediately. They attended his funeral. They embraced his widow and parents. They set up a charitable fund for his family.

Many people try to forgive because religious or moral authority says they should. When this framework is deeply internalized — when it becomes part of who you are rather than just something you’ve been told — it can work powerfully. After all, Jesus said “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

The Amish chose not to become like the one who harmed them. They chose to remain who they were—a community defined by forgiveness and peace, not by hatred and revenge.

Does this approach work? Yes — when genuine. The limitation is that without understanding *why* forgiveness matters, it can devolve into spiritual bypassing or empty ritual. You go through the motions because you're supposed to, not because you understand the truth behind the teaching. And so the resentment and anger come back.

But when it's real, when it comes from deep conviction, this kind of forgiveness demonstrates profound courage and strength.

It takes strength to forgive. Holding a grudge is the path of weakness, the path of least resistance. The ego wants you to stay angry. Anger feels righteous. Anger feels like power. But it's the illusion of power, not the real thing.

Self-Interest

NYPD officer Steven McDonald, age 29, was shot three times by a teenager in Central Park. The shooting left him paralyzed from the neck down, requiring a ventilator to breathe for the rest of his life.

"I forgave him," McDonald wrote, "because I believe the only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart."

McDonald corresponded with the shooter during his prison sentence, and spent the rest of his life traveling the world delivering his message of forgiveness.

At this level, people realize something crucial: we forgive for ourselves, not for the other person.

Buddha taught: "Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else — you are the one who gets burned." McDonald understood this. He could spend the rest of his life — confined to a wheelchair, dependent on a ventilator—consumed by rage at the teenager who shot him. Or he could let it go.

Holding resentment takes a physical toll. Chronic anger and unforgiveness manifest in the body — stress hormones flooding your system, inflammation becoming chronic, your immune system weakening. Studies link persistent resentment to heart disease, high blood pressure, chronic pain.

And the mental drain—how much energy goes into rehearsing your grievances? Replaying the scene in your mind? Imagining what you should have said, what you'll say next time, how you'll make them understand what they did to you? You're carrying that hot coal around, and it's burning you, not them.

At this level, forgiveness is self-interest, rightly understood. You forgive to free yourself from the weight. And it can work.

Understanding

During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, Hutus murdered approximately 800,000 Tutsis in 100 days. Neighbors killed neighbors. Friends murdered friends. Entire families were wiped out.

In the years since, Rwanda created “reconciliation villages” where perpetrators who confessed live alongside the families of their victims. Forgiveness made this possible. The killer and the family of the person they killed now farm together, raise children in the same community, share meals.

Jesus spoke these words while being crucified: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Even in his agony, even as he was being executed, he saw that his persecutors were acting from ignorance. They didn’t understand what they were doing. They were caught in their conditioning, their limited perspective, their inability to see clearly.

This is the highest level of forgiveness — seeing that people don’t know what they’re doing.¹ They’re running on autopilot, driven by forces they don’t understand, wounds they haven’t healed, programming they haven’t questioned. This is the default ego state, as prevalent today as ever.

For Rwandans to live together as they do now, both perpetrators and survivors had to recognize this truth: the killers were swept up in tribal conditioning, propaganda, and mob psychology. Given their history, their wounds, their state of consciousness at that moment — they couldn’t have done differently. This doesn’t condone or excuse what happened. It doesn’t remove consequences for the perpetrators. But it allows for understanding. It allows for healing.

When you truly understand this, forgiveness arises naturally. You might even feel compassion for the person trapped in that conditioning, unable to see another way, just like the people who crucified Jesus were.

From this higher place in consciousness, any feeling of victimhood dissolves. You can’t feel like a victim when you understand that nothing was aimed at you in the first place.²

It is critical to note that this understanding doesn’t make you passive. You can still set boundaries, protect yourself, work for justice. But you do it from a place of clarity rather than reactivity. From wisdom rather than wounds. Your response will be more effective.

And here is the even deeper spiritual insight — level of understanding—that transforms everything: the self that feels victimized and feels offended is not your true self. Whether you understand yourself to be a child of God, one with the universe, or as pure awareness, your true nature transcends the self or sense of identity that can be hurt. The true, authentic Self cannot be diminished by the words or deeds of others.³

Freedom

A teenager shot and killed Mary Johnson’s only son at a party in Minneapolis. Johnson carried hatred for 12 years. Then she decided to visit the killer in prison.

“I began to feel this movement in my feet,” Johnson said. “It moved up my legs, and it just moved up my body. When I felt it leave me, I instantly knew that all that anger and hatred and animosity I had in my heart for 12 years was over. I had totally forgiven.”

After the shooter’s release, Johnson helped him find housing. They became neighbors. They traveled the country together sharing their story of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Those church members weren’t weak. The Charleston families weren’t naive. Mary Johnson wasn’t foolish. They had understanding, and the strength and courage that flows from it. And this higher level of consciousness is the only way to true freedom.

This understanding also puts an end to the endless back-and-forth of reactivity — in all kinds of relationships, communities, nations. When one person forgives from understanding, the cycle breaks. The pattern that has repeated for years, generations, even centuries, can finally end.

Many roads can lead to genuine forgiveness. But the highest level — understanding — is where you’re truly free — because you’ve recognized that what happened was never about you in the first place. And from this understanding, forgiveness becomes a gift to yourself, and your gift to the world.

1 - This higher state of forgiveness is part and parcel of acceptance. If forgiveness is defined broadly, the two are synonyms.

2 - It’s interesting to note that forgiveness and not taking things personally are the same truth — two sides of the same coin. Both flow from a single realization: what others think, do, and say has nothing to do with you. They are running their own conditioning, their own programming, their own wounds. So don’t take it personally, and forgive. See my essay “Sticks and Stones, the Freedom of Not Taking Things Personally.”

3 - See my essay “On Becoming a Mystic.”