

Must You Forgive?

Sometimes it's healthier not to forgive.

By Jeanne Safer, published July 1, 1999 - last reviewed on June 9, 2016

From the political to the personal, Americans are caught in an orgy of [forgiveness](#). Failure to pardon, we're constantly admonished, will blight our lives. Now a psychotherapist counters that popular claim. You can refuse to absolve your lover, spouse, parent, [sibling](#) or friend, she declares, and still be emotionally healthy.

Flip to any television station these days and chances are we'll be witness to some dramatic episode of forgiveness. We see a mother and daughter estranged for years kiss and make up, a long-feuding couple holding hands and renewing vows, scandal-plagued politicians asking for absolution and granting it to their accusers. Tears flow, hugs proliferate, and the inevitable psychological experts solemnly intone that traditional [psychotherapy](#) has neglected this essential element of cure and that studies show that forgiving alleviates [depression](#) and enhances [self-esteem](#).

What's wrong with this picture? The capacity to forgive is an essential part of an examined life. However, enshrining universal forgiveness as a panacea, a requirement or the only moral choice, is rigid, simplistic and even pernicious. Yet that is exactly what we have done. Today we demonize not forgiving as much as we idealize forgiving. Failure to forgive, therapists caution, is to "doom yourself to be a victim for the rest of your life," while clergy warn that it inexorably leads to a "recycling of evil."

Yet some of the most admirable, sane and emotionally healthy people that I know have not forgiven on occasion. Not forgiving needs to be reconceived. It is not an avoidance of forgiveness or a retreat into [paranoia](#), but a legitimate action in itself, with its own progression, [motivation](#) and justification. There are many circumstances in which it is the proper and most emotionally authentic course of action.

I have found that there are three types of healthy unforgivers. For moral unforgivers, refusing means telling the truth, asserting fundamental rights and opposing injustice. Psychologically detached unforgivers accept the painful reality that they cannot experience the positive internal connection with a betrayer--usually a parent--which forgiving would require. Reformed forgivers have faced conflicts between feelings, [religious](#) principles, [ethics](#) or social responsibilities, and reject the conventional attitudes they once accepted. None of these three types is vindictive or against forgiveness in principle; they share the capacity to forgive but do not exercise it indiscriminately.

MORAL UNFORGIVERS

"In my family, the very act of unforgiveness is an extortion of my soul," declares Sandy Katz, a psychotherapist. "It endorses what they did, which was to deny the truth and pressure me to sacrifice myself. For me not to forgive my brother at my [parents'](#) behest is my self-affirmation."

Sandy's parents had looked the other way when her violent [bully](#) of an older brother thrust a screwdriver up her rectum--even when he set her on fire. "Afterward they didn't leave tools or matches [lying](#) around, but they never acknowledged what he did to me. He continued to behave this way and they continued to insist that I submit; my mother would say, 'He's just trying to get close to you because he doesn't know how to be friends.' She'd confuse me by saying it was all out of [love](#), and I had no recourse."

Parents define a child's world; there is no escape. Unsure of their own reality, children who have no validation and no protection become prisoners mentally as well as physically. Not forgiving is a recourse they can create only as independent adults, a way to free themselves from years of being coerced to agree that hate is really love.

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Under the pressure of promoting family harmony, parents who need to deny one child's viciousness and their own negligence often try to force the victimized child to be "mature" and "rise above it." These more intact, "good" siblings continue to make the same demands of themselves. Their willingness to accept bad treatment, to feel they deserve it, or to define it out of existence then extends beyond their families and damages their later lives. Even those in less extreme circumstances tend to absorb parental values as an unexamined template for their own responses, making it difficult for them to distinguish what they truly feel from what has been imposed upon them.

Ten years ago, at age 35, Sandy finally defied her parents by refusing her brother's phone calls. "I started getting guilt-inducing messages from them saying that I was abandoning him and destroying the family. They became increasingly angry and accusatory, haranguing me to forgive and forget without admitting there was anything to forgive and forget. I wrote him a note detailing what he had done and said I wouldn't speak to him until he was willing to acknowledge it. He sent me back a letter taking the moral high ground: that he was just as hurt as I, that all children fight--as if these were normal [childhood](#) squabbles--and that he was willing to let bygones be bygones. Why couldn't I?"

Sandy hasn't attended a family function with her brother since she received that letter. "I've taken a strong position that he's out of my life, even though my parents still try to bully me into capitulating. I know it's difficult for them to have two separate sets of

holidays, but I forbid them to talk to me about it because their Pollyanna attitude enrages me."

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The moral unforgiver makes a distinction between the extreme circumstances where a relationship must be severed and other, more commonplace, injuries. "It's not so much what my brother did as a child, but what he continues to be as a man that I find unacceptable," Sandy explained. "He never changed, never grew, and just found new ways to feel entitled. It would only be right to forgive what he did as a child--it would be legitimate and healthy for everybody. But it would be wrong not to hold him responsible for being an undeveloped person now; I would be colluding in creating a false reality, which was what allowed me to be violated in the first place."

Contrary to the conventional [wisdom](#), refusing to forgive or have further contact with an unrepentant, abusive relative is therapeutic. "My lack of forgiveness has not impeded my development or my relationships at all; in fact, it's cured me," she said. "Before I took a stand I was always depressed and acceding to others' needs, always confused about my rights and about what was real." It is commonly believed that forgiving promotes mental [health](#) and alleviates depression. But doing the opposite can express a person's very right to live.

Responsible unforgivers are never antiforgiveness; Sandy regularly forgives outside her family, even when the offender fails to apologize. "In a good relationship--not a perfect relationship--it's different; how bad are the screwups? If the person is still loving enough it comes naturally." By recognizing the distinction between actions worthy and unworthy of tolerance, and upholding her own moral point of view, a child triumphs over the masochistic role her family assigned her. Her insistence on truth and justice, which lead her to refuse to forgive, is the foundation of her sense of self. Says Sandy of her decision: "I've never had a moment's regret."

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Proponents of universal forgiveness refuse to recognize that moral unforgivers exist. They find it inconceivable that unforgiving victims of injustice could be outraged but not obsessed by their injuries, that they could even sympathize or retain conditional connections with those they refuse to pardon.

What about Sandy's relationship to her parents, who at very least share responsibility for her childhood torment? She has not entirely severed her tie to them, though she holds them culpable. "I need some sense of family, as long as they accept my terms," she explains. "And with this huge exception, they have made genuine efforts in my behalf in recent years." Her attitude toward her parents is one of conditional unforgiveness.

So too with Paul Thompson. Paul managed to maintain an uneasy truce with his born-again Christian parents until they announced at a recent press conference, "Our son's homosexuality is worse than a death in the family."

The Thompsons are founding members of Return, Incorporated, an international evangelical organization dedicated to converting gay people to heterosexuality. They insist that they "hate the sin and love the sinner," and claim that they are proud of Paul, even though he is gay, and welcome him as a member of the family.

Yet they want him to gainsay his [identity](#) and accept their condemnation. Fear of the destructive power of his own rage, coupled with an [unconscious](#) belief that they might be right, prevented Paul from having a confrontation with his parents. His implicit acceptance of their terms perpetuated mutual false forgiveness.

"But now," he told me, "they've raised the stakes too high. They actually said that my being gay was a fate worse than death--in essence, that they would rather I had died. When my boyfriend and I broke up and I was devastated, my mother said it was 'an answered prayer.' They deny that what they're doing is personal and that it's damaging to me; this is hatred masked as love. I won't go any further; it's more a process of mourning than of forgiving them."

Paul's parents entrenched, sanctimonious refusal to admit their hostility is a nonnegotiable obstacle to full reconciliation. For them to disapprove of his [sexual orientation](#) is one thing; to wage a conversion campaign while insisting that they are acting out of compassion alone is another.

Without asking his son's permission, Mr. Thompson wrote and self-published *Psalms for Sorrowing Parents*, a book that included intimate letters his son had written to him. "I sobbed when he gave me a copy," Paul said. He refused his father's subsequent request to be pardoned for invading his privacy, the only offense Mr. Thompson would ever admit. "I won't do it because it's just a ritual for him, not blood and guts. Real forgiveness has to be based on working to change; he wants me to forgive him for what he's going to keep doing."

In the complex relations between parents and child, affection and hostility and pride and disappointment always coexist. To label an ongoing transgression unforgivable does not necessarily obliterate all positive ties. "Despite their fanaticism, fundamentally they love me very deeply," Paul acknowledged--and he knows he loves them, too.

Therefore, although he will not underwrite his parents' behavior by forgiving it, neither will he abandon them in retaliation; mature separation is not amputation. He has decided to maintain occasional contact with them, provided Return, Incorporated, is not

mentioned. "Complete detachment isn't any more healthy than fusion--but I won't be careful or quiet any longer."

Partial nonforgiveness requires a person to bear alone the burden of intense ambivalence and continuing [grief](#). The illusion of family harmony is lost forever, but it is replaced with something limited, painful and real.

DETACHED UNFORGIVERS

Anybody who struggles with intimate betrayal must reengage with the experience, actively choosing to think and to feel what was once unbearable.

But [understanding](#) need not lead to forgiveness. Indeed, it is a major accomplishment for some men and women to temper their hatred and tolerate their indifference. For the sake of their own emotional survival, they can do no more.

Disengaging from a fatally flawed parent or intimate, sometimes seems to come naturally, without anguish. Biochemist Annie Travers remembers never feeling anything but contempt for her father. "He was a selfish brute who considered his children his property. Once when I was a teenager, he said, 'I can do anything I want with you'--and he would have if my uncle hadn't threatened to call the police." Annie's uncle, a blind biologist who lived with the family, was her protector, mentor and soulmate. "He taught me how to think," she said.

Annie discussed what must have been a miserable situation with scientific detachment, and not a hint of recrimination. Throughout our interview, she referred to her father as "this guy," and seemed surprised when I asked what qualities she had inherited from him. "I'm my uncle's daughter," she said. Many children who had a poisonous parent identify someone else as their "real" parent.

Under the right circumstances, a [traumatic](#) past can be left behind without being consciously mourned. Living with a beloved, admirable uncle who shared and validated her feelings--"I always knew we would be better off without my father and my uncle agreed with me," Annie said--made her solution possible.

Still, no daughter is born despising her father; what became of her original love? "You have deep feelings, but they get lost," Annie admitted. "What love there was initially got strangled." As Annie matured, her fear and hatred evolved into indifference, and though she still speaks of her father with distaste, she is not bitter. "People are much too willing to blame others. Since I moved out 30 years ago, my life has been what I make of it--I'm responsible." A self-reliant attitude, the opposite of vengefulness, circumscribes the influence of a bad father.

Annie was away on a fellowship when her father died, and she had no qualms about not coming back for the funeral; in their last conversation he had berated her for not going to medical school. Annie is the first to acknowledge that her father had a negative impact on her life--"It took me a long time to feel men could be trusted," she said but she claims never to have been disturbed by her unwillingness to reconcile with her father. "I never felt the slightest need to do it."

Though friends and therapists have repeatedly warned her that her unforgiving attitude would eventually be her downfall, she isn't afraid they're right. "People try to convince me that because I didn't make peace with him I'd suffer for it down the line; they feel that there hasn't been closure. I think it's more about them and their own fathers. I'm fine. It hasn't been a trauma for me." For others to find Annie wanting because of what she has not done is an imposition of alien values. Annie is a woman at peace, at a price that does not seem excessive.

For many others, however, achieving that sort of detached peace does not come as easily. Jessica Kramer was devastated when a close friend died, but not when her mother expired. "She died of cancer when I was 38 and I was mostly glad to be rid of her," she says.

Jessica's distancing from her mother started at an early age. "She was cold, uninvolved, and rejecting and never interested in me," says Jessica. "By age five, I had given up on her. I was never sure whether she hated me or was just indifferent. I was a burden and a competitor." Her mother was so detached from Jessica that she was surprised to notice that her 28-year old daughter was left-handed, and so mean-spirited that she used the money earmarked for Jessica's [education](#) to speculate in real estate.

Jessica initially blamed herself for her mother's inability to respond and condemned herself for despising her mother. And her lack of grief at her mother's death made her question her own character; what kind of a daughter--what kind of a human being--was she? We are, after all, commanded by scripture to honor our mothers and fathers, even to love them, no matter the transgressions. Not to do so is unnatural, we are led to believe.

"To mourn my friend and not my mother seemed like what a monster feels," recalls Jessica. "It was a shining moment when my analyst said, 'It's okay to love your friend more than your mother.' What had been disturbing me was not so much that she didn't love me but that I didn't love her. Not loving her meant I was like her, a person incapable of love. When I realized that I didn't love her because she didn't love me, I understood that I could still love. I haven't forgiven her, but I'm not angry anymore. She had some nice qualities, like liveliness. But in the most important way, she was never really my mother."

In the conventional view, the decision to forgive must not be based on whether the perpetrator deserves it; only then can the independent will of the victim be guaranteed. In fact, refusing to forgive a heartless mother or other betrayer expresses a person's right to his or her own feelings. Recognizing that you are under no obligation to profess love you do not feel is a hard-won freedom.

REFORMED FORGIVERS

We tend to think of forgiveness as the best, healthiest way to resolve an intimate injury, and of learning to forgive as one of life's greatest lessons. Sometimes the opposite is true. Learning not to forgive, after a life in which forgiveness has been compulsive, imposed or unconsidered, is an impressive achievement.

Daily life provides many circumstances where offensive and unchangeable behavior should not be excused and where forgiving is confused with submerging normal reactions to mistreatment. Yet even when the culprit is a peer and not a parent, and the injury is mundane, it can take years for a person to stop extending second chances.

Rita Bergman reversed her lifelong tendency to do what she was told when she turned 75. "As I've grown older I've begun to think more about what I need. Screw it, I don't have to forgive anymore," she exclaimed. The object of Rita's newfound insight was an old friend who had become so obnoxious and critical that she was offending everyone she knew. "I felt terribly sorry for her. She hasn't been the same person since she lost her husband and son a few years ago, and she's all alone."

Repeated infuriating lunches, in which every aspect of her appearance was scrutinized and found wanting, made Rita vow to sever the tie, but she always ended up reconsidering for old times' sake. Only after Rita's closest friend refused to see her if this woman accompanied them did Rita realize enough was enough, stopped making the dates she had come to dread, and ended the relationship.

As with more serious injustices, understanding the source of someone's inexcusable behavior--even feeling sympathy for her plight--does not justify endless exposure to it; there is a fine line between compassion and compliance. "I don't believe in carrying grudges at this point in my life," Rita said, "but how long could I continue to ignore my own feelings? I was always very timid and never opened my mouth, but now that has changed." Rita's refusal to overlook her unfortunate friend's hostility any longer is an act of self-respect that took a lifetime to attain.

Forgiving without reconciling is acceptable; why not reconciling without forgiving? People often wound one another in the name of truth; a person has a right to employ judicial dishonesty to protect him- or herself against being wounded by others.

Sarah Goodman recently reversed her pattern of placating her older sister Wendy. Stricken with a rare cancer in childhood, married to a repugnant layabout, Wendy has lived a life of bad luck and bad judgment. Sarah's duties as the "good" daughter included overlooking Wendy's rages and insults in childhood, and not objecting when as an adult Wendy refused to help care for their dying father.

"I was the one who was always pressured to do the right thing," Sarah said. "That was my script. I'd give in to keep the peace, but I can't and won't do it anymore; her problems are not my fault, and the way she vanished when our father got sick was inexcusable. I used to cry and curse her; now I'm civil. I'm no longer capable of forgiving her, whether she deserves it or not."

Sarah's cordiality toward her sister, which she maintains for her mother's sake, is a conscious pretense on her part and her best defense; she has decided that confrontation is too costly. "It never worked in the past, and now if I tell her how I feel I'll be punished. I don't wish her harm, but I want nothing to do with her on an emotional level."

Sarah frankly admits she derives secret pleasure in the privacy of her own heart from no longer turning the other cheek. Her customized solution involves a measure of hypocrisy, without self-delusion.

Unforgiving reconciliation is an ethical form of retribution. Like other responsible types of unforgiveness, it provides relief, closure and insight. "At my father's funeral I saw what a miserable person she was, a tormented soul who hasn't connected to anybody," Sarah recalled with more sadness than satisfaction. "I feel that really wonderful sense of indifference you have when you break up with somebody and you think you'll never get over the pain, and then one day you bump into each other on the street and wonder how you ever felt that way." Refusing to be what a priest might call "the bigger person" freed Sarah to be her own person.

Forgiveness and unforgiveness are not polar opposites but points on a continuum. The same internal processes can lead to emotionally authentic resolutions in either direction. Anyone who has gone through the profound and punishing process of conscious forgiving or not forgiving emerges more self-aware, more related to others, and less burdened by the past.

When it is genuine, forgiveness is a capacity, not a compulsion; this is why the same person can grant it or withhold it, depending on the circumstances. The ability to discriminate signifies maturity and freedom.

Madame de Stael was wrong. Understanding need not lead to forgiveness--but it can lead to wisdom.

Adapted from *Forgiving & Not Forgiving: A New Approach to Resolving Intimate Betrayal* by Jeanne Safer, Ph.D. (Avon Books, August 1999).