

THE ON —ING SERIES



On Forgiving

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*To Bibiana — for teaching me
that sometimes other people
make mistakes, and that it
isn't ours to carry. Our only job
is not to judge them. That's the
whole lesson.*

*And to all four of my parents,
biological and marital — for
making certain I entered the
world as someone who would
never bring physical harm to
another person. A lesson some of
us never learn in a lifetime.*

One of the hardest parts of finally letting go of the ego is looking back at every mistake you've made, and at the lessons that came after them. It's like putting the quantum lens on your own life — turning the framework I've been building inward — and seeing, at last, the real impact you had on other human beings.

I'm no saint. I've made my share of mistakes, some of them ugly by any social standard. But I need to say one thing plainly: some force I can't name always kept me from bringing physical harm to another person. I'll always credit that to the lessons my stepfather taught me. Emotional harm is a different story. That, I inflicted — in every sense of the words, more times than I'd like to count. An intelligent mind is a victim of its own design. It's almost as if I never understood the power I had to bend my own reality. My jays were pointed in every direction at once: money, pride, lust, to name a few. None of them toward the conclusions I've reached of late.

So I have to sit with this: there's a real chance that someone I've harmed will read these words someday. If your eyes are crossing them now, I want to offer you a truth. If I've left a timeless imprint long enough for this to reach you, my contact information is attached. I'm sorry for whatever I did, no matter how dark, and I'm willing to come completely clean if you ask. There's no reason to hide who I used to be, and no reason for you to think any less of me for it. I'll never ask for your forgiveness. Just know that I knew not what I was doing¹ — and yes, I mean that the way it's been meant before. I only ask that we do it face to face. There's no coherence in electronic communication.

Maimonides understood this better than anyone. In his *Laws of Repentance*,² he draws a hard line: a wrong done to God can be settled with God, but a wrong done to a *person* cannot. No prayer, no priest, no ritual clears it. Only the one you harmed can release you, and only

if you stand in front of them and ask. Self-forgiveness is not absolution. But the design of life doesn't ask it to be.

That's the strangest part of forgiveness for me, as a human being. Sometimes we feel chained to the mistakes we've made. Part of that is looking back through the quantum lens and only seeing half of the truth — the harm — while missing the other half entirely: the lessons you taught.

I think about people I stole from, who never trusted me near them again. And in the very same breath, I notice that I don't let people like *that* into my own home. But then I remember something my cousin Bibiana told me when I was young. We were on the beach in Portland, and a stranger took her camera case. He set the memory cards down where the case had been, and we walked up on him mid-act. We both saw exactly what was happening — we weren't blind to it. But she didn't react. She was so resolute that I realized later it was a decision: this was a moment to teach me something. She looked right at me, taking in the whole reality of it, and said, "That's okay, look. He left the pictures, and that's what's important. Maybe he needed the camera case more than we did."

That philosophy stuck to me for the rest of my life. And of course it would — Bibiana has spent years in Vipassana practice and the Mahayana tradition, and what she handed me on that beach was the heart of both. The Buddhists call it *upekkhā*, equanimity:³ the camera case was already impermanent, already on its way to being lost; the only thing the thief disturbed was my reaction, and she refused to give it to him. But there's a deeper move underneath, and it's the one this whole essay turns on. Shantideva, in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,⁴ makes the strange and beautiful argument that the person who wrongs you is your teacher — that without someone to test it on,

patience is just an idea you've never had to practice. The thief on that beach wasn't an obstacle to Bibiana's compassion. He was the occasion for it. He needed the case more than we did, and in needing it, he taught me.

The same instinct runs all through history, in every direction you point it. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount: if a man takes your coat, give him your cloak as well (Matthew 5:40)⁵ — the same gesture as leaving the thief the memory cards. Marcus Aurelius, writing to himself at night: people wrong you because they cannot tell good from evil, and so you forgive them the way you'd forgive someone acting in the dark.⁶ Even Lao Tzu, in the *Tao Tè Ching*, says to answer injury with virtue — though Confucius pushed back hard on that line, asking what, then, is left to answer kindness with.⁷ The argument has been going on for a very long time. I'm just adding my voice to it from a beach in Portland.

Now hold my hand and walk with me in thought for a moment. We'll start at the ground floor and zoom all the way out to "Heaven."

If we really are one consciousness joined together, then treating another human being as yourself should be second nature. For most of us, it clearly isn't. Why?

Are we jealous of the person in front of us? Or does the ego stand between us and them, deciding they're lesser because we've found success in some direction they haven't? What does the "most important man in the world" think of a monk in Tibet who has dissolved into the universe? He probably thinks it's foolish — to sit on a mountain, to boast about nothing, to be unplugged from the whole network of society.

And what does the monk think? He probably doesn't know the important man exists. He's thinking about what he'll eat next, because he wants to walk through the forest later.

Does the monk forgive the man for looking down on him? Of course. The monk understands that the other man's jays are misaligned. The monk doesn't even know what a jay is — the monk has never met me, or this paper.

Does going to a priest and confessing your sins generate forgiveness? Not on its own. What it does is place the reality of your harm into another mind, and in doing so it widens the reality of the fault rather than dissolving it. That's no small weight to hand someone. The traditions that understood this best looked for forgiveness somewhere else entirely — not granted from outside, but uncovered within.

Christianity has always carried this quieter stream alongside the louder one. *The kingdom of God is within you* (Luke 17:21).⁸ Meister Eckhart spoke of the ground of the soul, where the real work happens inwardly and can't be transacted at a counter.⁹ Judaism calls it *teshuvah* — not “confession” but *return*, a turning back toward who you were meant to be.¹⁰ The Sufis call the dissolving of the false self *fana*, and al-Ghazali built a whole practice of *muhasaba*, daily self-examination, out of it.¹¹ The Advaita tradition compresses the entire thing into three words — *tat tvam asi*, “thou art that” — the recognition that the person across from you is not, in fact, other than you. Schopenhauer, reading that line, built his entire ethics of compassion on it.¹² And Jung gave it a modern name: forgiveness as the slow work of integrating the shadow, of holding the *coincidentia oppositorum* — the opposites that turn out to be one thing — without flinching.¹³

Even the scientists arrive here. Tesla wrote in 1900 that we are held together like the stars, by ties we can't see but can feel — *we are all one*.¹⁴ Einstein went one step further and named the cost of forgetting it. In a letter near the end of his life, he called our sense of being separate selves *an optical delusion of consciousness*, a kind of prison, and said the task of a human life is *widening our circle of compassion* to take in every living thing.¹⁵ Two men of fact, controversy and all, pointing at the same place the monk is already sitting.

So when we argue with our life partner, who are we really arguing with? Ourselves. My wife helped me see this. Every word out of her mouth was a lesson I needed to learn to keep her happy — no matter how illogical it seemed to me in the moment. *Happy wife, happy life*, as it goes. I had no idea how literally true that was.

She forgives me daily. But think of the partners who likely never will — the ones I brought emotional harm to, through thought or action. Lessons were learned on both sides. I rarely made the same mistake twice; I could always look back and see clearly what the last wound had cost. That isn't to say I didn't hurt myself plenty along the way. Hallucinogenic drugs played their part in how I came to understand my own point in time, years ago. We don't need to go there. Just know that I'm sober and clear-minded as I write this, and that I've forgiven myself for the harm I did to myself. That much is finished.

Now my parents. I've been terrible to them, and they have no reason to forgive me. But they do, because they love me. Forgiveness is an inherent trait of love. So consider the shortcut: love every human being, and watch how fast you can forgive them.

There was a small point in time, right after I made my discovery, when it occurred to me that someone I'd shared it with might have

taken it before I timestamped my own work. My very first thought was, *That's okay — they have the resources to heal people, and I don't. They needed it more than I did.* Peace was restored instantly, and I went back to writing. You'll notice that's Bibiana's sentence, word for word, twenty-some years later. The beach taught well.

The reality is this: if I'm right, the world will heal in time. My jays have already aligned, and I'll be timeless. That part isn't mine to worry about, if it's to be. All I have to do is pay the world back for the harm I caused, make my family comfortable, and send the rest where it's needed. There's no success in mortal gains — but there's deep peace in suspecting I might have some small part in moving them to where they belong. I joked with my wife that one day I'd pay off the utility company's shut-off list every morning, because I've had my own lights cut off a couple of times in forty-two years, and I never want another human being to sit in that dark.

Ego is the strongest drug I've ever done. It kept me chained to the belief that even when I thought I was “doing right” by myself, I was only damaging myself and everyone near me. Lesson after lesson after lesson. We're never going in circles, though — it's more of a spiral staircase. Just remember that *up* is relative. (That's the view *sub specie aeternitatis* I wrote toward in *On Seeing* — the whole staircase seen at once, *totum simul*, with no single step mistaken for the top.)

I've had to ask myself: if my past is one day dragged out in front of me, am I really ready to answer for it?

Yes. Unfortunately, yes. I am.

I know I taught lessons, even when I was the wound. Taught them, and taught myself. Made the world a little better by making a single moment very bad — and letting the butterfly effect from that moment run for hours, days, and in plenty of cases, years.

I was not a great person. I was a good person. But I was a person.

Now that I more or less consider myself part of the greater person, there's no more *I*. The Sufis would recognize that sentence; so would Advaita. So now that I've removed myself from my own equation, let's pull the lens back one more notch.

Let's really start to forgive our neighbor.

Let's understand that every human being alive is just another version of ourselves, here to teach each other how to be good — or how to be evil. Duality in the design.

Can you forgive your worst enemy?

Sounds simple. Someone wronged you; you let it go. But how *fast* can you let it go, and what conditions did you quietly attach?

Oh — there's fine print?

Did you just hand yourself limits on how forgivable *you'll* turn out to be, on the other side of reality?

Sit with that one.

Imagine, by the design of some greater power, that you arrive at the threshold of Heaven — and the person standing at the front desk, the one with the authority to wave you through, is the very one who persecuted you most in life. The one who hunted what you loved, who made it their work to break you. Redeemed now. Welcoming you in.

How fast could you accept that as the plan, and walk through the door?

Even a flicker of doubt — even a half-second of *not them* — could send you spiraling somewhere you don't want to go. Not because the gate was closed to you, but because you closed it yourself, on the way in.

That might be too far to reach. Let's zoom all the way back.

Back to you.

Who do you need to forgive today?

Yourself? Your partner? Your fellow human?

Start anywhere you like. Just don't stop until we reach the stars. I promise you, there's something out there. The key to getting there is inside you and me both. So let's put our minds together and stop worrying about the past.

Forgive and forget?

No — that's impossible. You can never forget.

But you can always forgive.

That's the part worth remembering.

Notes

1. I knew not what I was doing — the cadence of Luke 23:34, “forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
2. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Repentance” (Hilkhot Teshuvah) 2:9: a wrong against another person is not forgiven by God until pardon is sought directly from the one wronged.
3. *Upekkhā* — equanimity, the fourth of the Buddhist *brahmavihāras*; central to Vipassanā (insight) practice and its seeing of impermanence (*anicca*).
4. Shāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (“The Way of the Bodhisattva”), ch. VI: the one who harms us is the rare condition that makes the practice of patience (*kṣāntī*) possible.
5. Matthew 5:40, the Sermon on the Mount.
6. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (II.1; IX.42): others act wrongly through ignorance of good and evil.
7. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* 63 (answer injury with virtue); Confucius’ rejoinder, *Analects* 14:34 (repay injury with justice, kindness with kindness).
8. Luke 17:21.
9. Meister Eckhart, on the *grunt* — the ground of the soul, where it meets God inwardly.
10. *Teshuvah* — Hebrew for “return”; repentance understood as turning back rather than as confession.
11. *Fanā’* — the Sufi annihilation of the false self in God; al-Ghazālī’s *muḥāsaba*, daily self-examination, in the *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*.
12. *Tat tvam asi*, “thou art that” — *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7; Schopenhauer founded his ethics of compassion on this recognition (*On the Basis of Morality*).
13. C. G. Jung, *coincidentia oppositorum*, the union of opposites (*Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 1955–56); forgiveness as integration of the shadow.
14. Nikola Tesla, “The Problem of Increasing Human Energy,” *The Century Magazine* (June 1900): we are held together like the stars — “we are all one.”
15. Albert Einstein, letter of 1950 (quoted in *The New York Times*, 1972): the separate self is “an optical delusion of consciousness,” and our task is “widening our circle of compassion.”

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