

Four Stages of Forgiveness

Text taken directly from Women Who Run With the Wolves by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Ph.D.

Stuck in Old Rage

If and when rage again becomes a dam to creative thought and action, then it must be softened or changed. For those who have spent considerable time working through a trauma, whether it was caused by someone's cruelty, neglect, lack of respect, recklessness, arrogance, ignorance, or even fate, there comes a time to forgive in order to release the psyche to return to a normal state of calm and peace.

When a woman has trouble letting go of anger or rage, it's often because she's using rage to empower herself. While that may have been wisdom at the beginning, now she must be careful, for ongoing rage is a fire that burns her own primary energy. To be in this state is like speeding through life "pedal to the metal"; trying to live a balanced life with the accelerator pressed all the way to the floor.

Neither is the fieriness of rage to be mistaken as a substitute for a passionate life. It is not life at its best; it is a defense that, once the time of needing it for protection is past, costs plenty to keep. After a time it burns interminably hot, pollutes our ideas with its black smoke, and occludes other ways of seeing and apprehending.

Now I'm not going to tell you a big, fat lie and say you can cleanse all your rage today or next week and it will be gone forever. The angst and torment of times past rise up in the psyche on a cyclical basis. Although a deep purging discharges most of the archaic hurt and rage, the residue can never completely be swept clear. But it should leave a very light ash, not a hungry fire. So the clearing of residual rage must become a periodic hygienic ritual, one that releases us, for to carry old rage beyond the point of its usefulness is to carry a constant, if unconscious, anxiety.

Four Stages of Forgiveness

1. To forego—to leave it alone
2. To forebear—to abstain from punishing
3. To forget—to aver from memory, to refuse to dwell
4. To forgive—to abandon the debt

FOREGO

To begin to forgive, it is good to forego for a while. That is, to take a break from thinking about the person or event for a while. It is not leaving something undone, but rather more like taking a vacation from it. This prevents us from being exhausted, allows us to strengthen in other ways, to have other happiness in our lives.

This is good practice for the final letting go that comes with forgiveness later on. Leave the situation, memory, issue as many times as you need to. The idea is not to overlook but to become agile and strong at detaching from the issue. To forego means to take up that weaving, that writing, to go to that ocean, to do some learning and loving that strengthens you, and to allow the issue to drop away for a time. This is right, good, and healing. The issues of past injury will bedevil a woman far less if she assures the wounded psyche that she will give it healing balms now and deal with the entire issue of who caused what injury later.

FOREBEAR

The second phase is to forebear, particularly in the sense of abstaining from punishing; neither thinking about it nor acting on it in small or large ways. It is extremely useful to practice this kind of containment, for it coalesces the issue into one place instead of allowing it to flow everywhere. This builds focus toward the time when one proceeds to the next steps. This does not mean to go blind or dead and lose self-protective vigilance. It means to give a bit of grace to the situation and see how that assists.

To forebear means to have patience, to bear up against to channel emotion. These are powerful medicines. Do as much as you can. This is a cleansing regime. You need not do all; you can choose one, such as patience, and practice that that. You can refrain from punitive uttering, muttering, from acting resentful, hostile. To refrain from unnecessary punishing strengthens integrity of action and soul. To forebear is to practice generosity, thereby allowing the great compassionate nature to participate in matters that have previously caused emotion ranging all the way from minor irritation to rage.

FORGET

To forget means to aver from memory, to refuse to dwell – in other words, to let go, to loosen one's hold, particularly on memory. To forget does not mean to make yourself brain-dead. Conscious forgetting means letting go of the event, not insisting it stay in the foreground, but rather moving it off a stage, allowing it to be relegated to the background.

We practice conscious forgetting by refusing to summon up the fiery material, we refuse to recollect. To forget is an active, not a passive, endeavor. It means to not haul up certain materials, or turn them over and over, to not work oneself up by repetitive thoughts, pictures or emotions. Conscious forgetting means willfully dropping the practice of obsessing, intentionally outdistancing and losing sight of it, not looking back, thereby living in a new landscape, creating new life and new experiences to think about instead of old ones. This kind of forgetting does not erase memory, it lays the emotion surrounding the memory to rest.

FORGIVE

There are many ways and portions to forgiving a person, a community, a nation for an offense. It is important to remember that a “final” forgiveness is not surrender. It is a conscious decision to cease to harbor resentment, which includes forgiving a debt and giving up one’s resolve to retaliate. You are the one who decides when to forgive and what ritual to use to mark the event. You decide what debt you will now say needs not be paid further.

Some choose blanket pardon: releasing a person from any restitution now or ever. Others choose to call a halt to redress in process, abandoning the debt, saying whatever has been done is done, and the payback is now enough. Another kind of pardon is to release a person without his having made any emotional or other sort of restitution.

To some, a finalizing of forgiving means to regard the other indulgently, and this is easiest with regard to relatively benign offenses. One of the most profound forms of forgiveness is to give compassionate aid to the offending person in one form or another. This does not mean you should stick your head in the snake’s basket, but instead respond from a stance of mercy, security, and preparedness.

Forgiveness is the culmination of all foregoing, forbearing, and forgetting. It does not mean giving up one’s protection, but one’s coldness. One deep form of forgiveness is to cease excluding the other, which includes ceasing to stiff-arm, ignore, or act coldly toward, insisting on being neither patronizing nor phony. It is better for the soul-psyche to closely limit time and repartee with people who are difficult for you than to act like an unfeeling mannequin.

Forgiveness is an act of creation. You can choose from many time honored ways to do it. You can forgive for now, forgive till then, forgive till the next time, forgive but give no more chances—it’s a whole new game if there’s another incident. You can give one more chance, give several more chances, give many chances, give chances only if. You can forgive part, all, or half of an offense. You can devise a blanket forgiveness. You decide.

How does one know if she has forgiven?

You tend to feel sorrow over the circumstance instead of rage, you tend to feel sorry for the person rather than angry with him. You tend to have nothing left to remember to say about it all. You understand the suffering that drove the offense to begin with. You prefer to remain outside the milieu. You are not waiting for anything. You are not wanting anything. There is no lariat snare around your ankle stretching from way back there to here. You are free to go. It may not have turned out to be a happily ever after, but most certainly there is now a fresh Once upon a time waiting for you from this day forward.