

## The Power of Forgiveness

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When a nation engages in the politics of revenge, it loses direction and sows the seeds of anarchy. The state must, of course, crack down on nihilists bent on tearing its fabric through murder and mayhem but the French Revolution taught us that obsessive yearning for revenge in the name of justice can also lead to anarchy.

Anyone who has been wronged – a spouse, a worker, a relative – has to let go at some point to move on with his or her life. Otherwise the grievance becomes an albatross and makes progress impossible. When an injury is inflicted on us, we never recover until we forgive.

It is the same with nation. A time comes when a leader must say: "Enough! Enough blood has been spilled. Enough hours have been lost. Enough resources have been wasted in the single-minded pursuit of revenge. Now is the time to forgive."

As Desmond Tutu has said, 'Without forgiveness, there is no future.'

Examples of forgiveness and its transformational results abound.

Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 brutal years by the apartheid regime of South Africa. Yet, upon his release in 1990, he forgave his captors and forged reconciliation between blacks and whites in that deeply-divided country.

Gandhi's non-violent resistance that liberated India from British rule was based on forgiveness. It was Gandhi who said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." Martin Luther King, Gandhi's disciple, also used the spirit of forgiveness to break down racial barriers in the United States.

In each case, the victims had the courage and the imagination to take the moral high ground against their oppressors and achieved victories that would have been impossible through revenge and bloodshed.

All the great religions of the world extol the power of forgiveness. Magnanimity brings people and nations closer to one another and to the Creator. Forgiveness is perfectly consistent with justice. It is the antidote to cruelty and blood-thirstiness.

Forgiveness does not come naturally to many of us. If someone commits a wrong against me, I relish nurturing the grievance and plotting a payback. It appeals to our frail nature to embrace the philosophy of an "eye for an eye." But as Gandhi said, "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." Besides, revenge is expensive. You have to deal with the expense of anger, the cost of hate and the waste of the soul. Is it worth it?

Forgiveness must triumph over revenge for the human race to survive. Revenge is short-term while forgiveness is long-term. Revenge may lead to some temporary tactical gains but for permanent, strategic gains, there is nothing like forgiveness. That is why forgiveness is called the noblest revenge.

Dutch botanist Paul Boese said, "Forgiveness does not change the past but it does enlarge the future." The reverse is also true. Revenge constricts the future. When a nation puts its resources and its passion at the service of its revenge-driven agenda, its priorities get scrambled and its future darkens.

The Civil War (1851–1865) was the deadliest war in American history. About 620,000 soldiers lost their lives and an undetermined number of civilians suffered casualties. The Union and the Confederate States were the bitterest of enemies and any reconciliation seemed impossible when the war ended.

President Abraham Lincoln could have taken revenge against the Confederates under the guise of justice. But he would not give in to pettiness. His goal was loftier: Unity and the well-being of all Americans.

In his second inaugural speech on March 4, 1865, in Washington, D.C., Lincoln uttered these immortal words: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan--to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

The spirit of forgiveness was at the root of these words. It inspired a wounded and divided country to bury the past and move forward as one people, one nation.