

Smooth Sailing: The Freedom of Forgiveness in this Time of Crisis

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“There must be Ghosts all the country over, as thick as the sand of the sea. And then we are, one and all, so pitifully afraid of the light.”

—Henrik Ibsen

In the book *Forgive For Good: A Proven Prescription For Health and Happiness* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), Stanford Professor Fred Luskin emphasizes a forgiveness methodology based on rigorous research which documents the effects of unresolved grievances on one’s emotional and physical health. After serving as Educational Director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, which emanated from Dr. Luskin’s book and research, I adapted this process using the framework of systemic change in my practice to facilitate those seeking peace and wellness. It is even more relevant given today’s difficult and trying time, as we cope with a pandemic.



“Suffering but Forgiving Buddha” photo by Kenneth Silvestri ©

Forgiveness is not condoning or minimizing a hurt we have suffered.

To begin with, it needs to be understood that **forgiveness is not condoning or minimizing a hurt we have suffered**. This is a major misconception. Forgiveness is first and foremost for oneself — — to choose to live in the present and not allow past grievances or pain to take up unnecessary space in one's head. When a grievance is embedded and shows no resolution, the "fight or flight" part of our nervous system becomes revved up. This part of our nervous system is great for reacting to a life-threatening situation, but injurious to our mental and physical health if over used.

When we have unresolved pain, there is a tendency to act the victim and create demands of others based on past hurts that we cannot change. However, we have a choice to alter our framework and view our present context as simultaneously being part of wider all-encompassing contexts. This allows us to access the parasympathetic nervous system (the "calm down" part.) This can be accomplished by mindfully focusing on being grateful for the good in our world. The first step towards forgiveness is to acknowledge what you feel so you can allow empathy for yourself, allowing you to produce a "non-denial" of feelings. To me, soul sickness is lack of perspective. When you are out of balance from a past grievance it is the time to *widen your lens* and view what is *presently* the "wrong" that hurts you. While doing this you need to simultaneously accentuate your positive persona and avoid having it overtaken by your negative persona, or "shadow side". In this process, forgiveness is for you. **It is a commitment to make peace with yourself, and inevitably with others.** It is not about minimizing your hurt, it is about changing your grievance story.

Forgiveness, from this standpoint, is not for use in reconciling with the person or thing that upset you. Instead, set a goal to let yourself go to a spiritual side that does not blame or hinder your well-being. **It is a way to stop reliving your pain and unnecessary dwelling on the negative.** Grievances usually have a core paradox. Choosing to navigate paradoxes is deciding to be healthy over being a victim. By getting the right perspective on what is happening you will recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset you are suffering now, not what offended or hurt you two minutes or even ten years ago.

Uncomplicated grief is easy to handle, i.e. you missed your movie, or the grocer was out of your favorite food. Complicated grief is when you credit your bitter bank and become a millionaire in bitterness. The tale of woe gets bigger and keeps you connected to

negativity in the past. The gap between what you want and what you got is a paradox but also an important gauge as to your health. Since "life says no" in so many ways, as the late Richard Carlson wisely wrote in *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, (Hyperion: New York, 1997), it is a natural part of nature's inevitable sufferings that we encounter every day. **We need to make peace with the "no."** Again, this is not to minimize your hurt but to realize that the grievance story may not be reality. Otherwise it will produce those infamous double binds. Think of what concerns you, take a deep breath, widen your lens/perspective and create a loving image of your optimistic possibilities. This leads to having positive emotions as you now cope with confidence and allows you to enjoy your relationships in a manner of mutual learning.

During any future moments of feeling upset repeat *widening your lens* and breath softly. I recommend using **Coherent Breathing** developed by Stephen Elliott (<https://CoherentBreathing.com>), where you inhale for six seconds and exhale for six seconds with a positive thought. You can choose any view that you wish to see. **Why not choose the life view that you want to live and share with others?** This allows you to give up expecting things from those who will not give them to you, which only strengthens your being stuck with a grievance. If we cling to our hurts, we will live the pain. We cannot demand a return to desire but we can plan to get it in the present. Let go and soften yourself. You may become more vulnerable, but you will be more human.

Learning to forgive is not always easy because smart people can do stupid things. But good people have good intentions. My friend, John Welshons, writes in *When Prayers Aren't Answered*, (Novato, California: New World Library: 2007) that "The acceptance of things as they are in this context does not imply complacency...the acceptance of things as they are is merely intended to alleviate suffering we habitually create in our minds with the desire to change things we simply cannot change." He is suggesting that we put our energy in a positive place. Have self-compassion. It is what we learn from any suffering we may have had in our lives. It is wise at these moments to embrace your original positive intention, which was regardless yours from the beginning. Things just may have not worked out or the karma was beyond your control.

Implications for the Process of Forgiveness:

If you apply your original desire and intent in a non-demanding way, you will create a positive supportive environment. If your grievance is with another, then the only way that you can move on is with an honest win-win volley that Nora Bateson describes as

“Symmathesy, mutual learning contexts through the process of interaction between multiple variables in a living entity.” Accepting who you are is essential in this process and respecting your evolving context and growth is to love yourself. We are all fallible. But we have choices, and in most cases, they are based on good intentions. Remember that **a life well lived is your best choice.**

Nelson Mandela said that **if you are bent on revenge you are basically digging two graves, one of which is your own.** Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving the person or the situation that hurt you power over you, learn to look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. When you look inside your enemies you see their pain. When there is no revenge you are forgiving. It is your decision not to be defined by others who have hurt you and to remind yourself of your original desires.

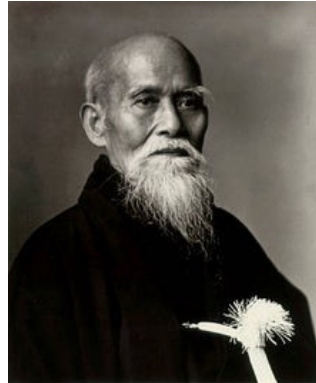
Don Miguel Ruiz in his book ***The Four Agreements***, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1997), clearly puts this in perspective. He encourages us to be impeccable by speaking with integrity, not to take others or their words personally, nor make assumptions that promote self-doubt or end up with you blaming others. If you take things personally you are judged. **Without assumptions you can become impeccable.** Lastly, he urges us to do our best by loving ourselves, by being what you will be.

* The above is revised, updated and adapted from my book ***“A Wider Lens: How to See Your Life Differently.”***

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Aikido is now practiced throughout the world and its lessons are applicable to all who seek better relationships.

In the opinion of many, he was the greatest martial artist who ever lived. His life was a dedicated journey in matters of spirit. Like so many other mind/body methods, Aikido uses one's Ki — or universal energy — to blend with others and to mitigate the never-ending injurious interactions in our life.



Morihei Ueshiba (free image)

○ Sensei or “Great Teacher”

○ Sensei or “Great Teacher,” as he was fondly called by his students, was a devotee of *Kotodama*, which respected the sounds of the universe, Shinto Buddhism with its focus on nature and poetry, and Omoto-Kyo which focused on the spirit of resolving conflict through harmonious blending of the energy of an attack. The belief of *Kotodama* is that the universe has an enormous dense energetic vibration, called *Su*. Like the Zero-Point Energy expressed in Quantum Physics, the theory of *Su* is that untapped energy exists in the vacuum of space and is available to us in the form of Ki or Chi. The vibrations of *Kotodama* are represented by various sounds that are believed to be the foundations of the universe.

In Aikido there are infinite ways to receive an attack, which necessitates being open to many options when practicing. This leads to what are called “lifetime techniques,” illustrating the many and never-ending learning possibilities that we are offered in life. When confronted by another, be it a physical or verbal attack, one who is trained in Aikido gathers the universal *Ki* that is accessible to us all and waits in a meditative action state right up to the last instant. It is then that they gracefully step off the line of attack (sensing the perspective of the attacker's viewpoint to attain a position to protect,) and reconcile or even enlighten the attacker. As Lao-tzu the Chinese poet said, “The way lies in not doing, yet nothing is left undone” (from *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Ralph Alan Dale, New York: Barnes and Noble, 2002).



Sensei Greg O'Connor, Courtesy of Aikido Centers of New Jersey

Pushing back when one is pushed is a western cultural habit; however, this stops us from recognizing different means to resolve situations.

Harmony can be attained from weathering opposing views. It is an expression of our faith in humanity, to embrace even the most powerful of attacks and find a space to connect with it and produce a unifying result.

Aikido provides many segues to finding one's "self" and transforming one's life. Practicing Aikido prepares one to deal with aspects of conflict and communication skills, not only on the mat but in everyday life, as demonstrated by the writings of Terry Dobson, George Leonard, Wendy Palmer, John Stevens, Foster Gamble and my sensei, Greg O'Connor, to mention a few. Being prepared to blend, as George Leonard remarks in his *The Way of Aikido* (New York: Penguin, 2000), that **mutual learning does not mean one has to censor or weaken their true self**. He continues by stating "To begin experiencing the self and the universe as one, we must learn to sit, stand, move, speak, feel, think, create, and love as if the impetus for each of these activities arises in our center, a point in the middle of the abdomen an inch or so beneath the navel." (p.33)



Courtesy of Aikido Centers of New Jersey

The Power of Centering

Here is an exercise that I use to demonstrate the power of centering which enables you to withstand moving when being pushed. Try sitting in a chair, hands on your lap with a friend behind you. Now begin practicing standing up from this sitting position without using your hands. Have your friend then put her hand on your shoulders pressing down gently and firmly. Notice how much effort you are expending. Try again, but this time relax your breathing, place your energy an inch below your navel, and with your friend pushing on your shoulders again raise yourself from your center. What difference did you experience? **Try moving through your day with an awareness of your breath and having your energy emanate from your center.** At the end of the day make a note of any differences you encountered. Being centered is the affirmation of life.

We cannot deny the yin/yang of life with its many ways of saying "no" and "yes," but we can continue to interact in a calm relaxed way, choosing when to blend by actualizing our *Ki*, whether it be from Aikido, Yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong, Centering etc. **Who can doubt the need today to take care of each other?**

In an article "Aikido and Psychotherapy" by Patrick Faggianelli and David Lukoff (*The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 2007, vol. 38, no. 2), the authors presented their

finding that the practice of Aikido can provide a mind/body unification that is healing. They also stated that Aikido's centering skills produce the same effect as being "present" in therapy. Also, "getting off the line" (blending, and extending one's energy via Aikido) is applicable to use in Psychotherapy. They believe that Aikido "can be described as moving meditation" because it requires stilling of the mind even as the body is in action. As with meditation, "the practice of Aikido induces a harmony of spirit that can be described as flow, higher state of consciousness, and peak experience."

Implications of Being in Harmony:

George Leonard, who was a former president of the Association of Humanistic Psychology and an Aikido teacher, recommended a simple process when you are taking a hit in life.

Firstly, he suggested that we experience and acknowledge what it is that we are feeling. Secondly, to ground yourself and breathe deeply as you bring your attention to that place right below your navel. Thirdly, become aware of the additional energy/ *Ki* that you now have available due to the circumstances of taking a hit. Lastly, think of all your newly assembled energy as part of the universal *Ki* and how to use it wisely.

There are many options in life to deal with the ongoing opposing forces and energy that come our way. The Buddhist doctrine of "suffering" exemplifies a perspective that the world does not always work the way we would want it to. **The ever present need to cope with injurious patterns is a given.** If two people are walking toward each other on a narrow sidewalk, one must give way to make room to pass the other. It usually is the least hassle way that prevails. Blending our energies in harmony is, according to Morihei Ueshiba, "a way to reconcile the world."

In his book *Aikido in Everyday Life* (Berkeley California: North Atlantic Books, 1993) Terry Dobson, who was one of the first Americans to study in Japan with Morihei Ueshiba, describes different responses to conflict. We can fight back, withdraw, parley, do nothing or use deception. The problem, according to him, is that **we must manage our feelings to make a good choice.** Here is where widening one's lens helps us to perceive all elements of the situation. Success "will lie in your ability to find your center and retain it or regain it if it gets lost." (p.76)

Terry wrote a wonderful essay that was republished in the original *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Edited by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor, 1993) where he describes being on a tram in Japan and seeing a man bullying others and throwing kisses at him. His first reaction was to get ready to use his martial art skills to subdue this fellow. However, as he started to approach the agitator, an elderly man sitting in the tram yelled for the bully to come over to him. When the elderly man asks what is bothering him the bully begins to cry, explaining that his wife had just died and he lost his job. Terry leaves the bus seeing the old man hugging and comforting this fellow and begins to contemplate the many options to merge and blend with others.



"Harmony in Motion," photo by Caroline Silvestri ©

When techniques are taught in Aikido, it takes two or more to resolve a conflict, underscoring what Gregory Bateson pointed out that "it takes two to know one." Aikido is more than a metaphor for blending and mutually learning. It is not only a way to harmony; **it is a means to celebrate our interdependency.** The result is the wisdom of understanding that conflict is neither good nor bad, rather it is knowing how we are interconnected through the grist of creativity. I believe this is our aesthetic potential that gets us as close as we can to experiencing nature. **In everyday life there is an edge which**

we seldom utilize, that liminal moment when we can take advantage of the opportunity to improvise and explore infinite possibilities. We can better evolve in our many contexts if we simultaneously feel and see the wider manifestations that await us. There will be inevitable paradoxes and seemingly unresolvable contradictions, however with the peripheral lens of mutuality and harmony, we can avoid stifling double binds and have the chance to enjoy the messy yet amazing patterns of nature where there are no opposites, only a unity.

Here are a few inductions to ponder the above:

Have you ever been in a conflict situation where the outcome could have been less injurious had you considered other options?

What sensations do you exhibit when you are in a conflict situation?

How would creating win-win alternatives influence your day-to-day interactions?

In what ways would viewing conflict as a means to harmony influence your daily life?

How can you transform being victorious from a personal accomplishment to being beneficial for everyone in your life?

What modalities make you feel better or worse in a situation where you are uncomfortable?

*This article was adapted from my book, *A Wider Lens: How to See Your Life Differently*