

There once was a man, according to 16th century Swiss church board minutes, that pretended that he could not remember the Lord's Prayer because he knew that if he said it he would have to forgive the merchant who had cheated him and that was something he had no intention of doing.

As witness of the pain of the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1991), Alexandra Asseily decided to explore her own responsibility for war and peace and became a psychotherapist. In 1997, Alexandra had a life changing experience that inspired her to begin the Garden of Forgiveness (Hadiquat as Samah) in Beirut, a project to create a garden in the heart of the City to facilitate forgiveness. Over the years, in spite of ongoing challenges of civil unrest, religious conflicts, and the recent devastating explosion at the Beirut port, the garden continues to be a place of hope and healing. In 2005, family members of Sept 11 victims visited the garden. They planted an olive tree and, under it, buried photos of loved ones who were killed in the attacks. In 2008, a garden of forgiveness was dedicated just minutes from Ground Zero in New York City.

In today's scripture reading, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him. My hunch is that Peter is feeling pretty generous with seven times. Jesus has other ideas. He tells Peter to forgive seventy seven times. Wow!

You see forgiveness is not as simple as just saying, "I'm sorry." You've probably had someone tell you they were sorry but didn't seem very sorry. Maybe you've said "sorry" that way. Jesus wants us to work on forgiveness—even if it takes seventy-seven tries. Why? Because forgiveness is all about freedom! To forgive is to release the power a wrong has over you. It also frees the other person from guilt and shame. Sometimes we are hurt so badly that it seems impossible to forget the hurt and forgive the one who hurt you. That's okay. Some hurts take time to heal. Some hurts may never be forgotten, but the slow, steady work of forgiveness can take away the sharp edges and some of the pain.

Fred Luskin is the author of *Forgive for Good* and one of the leading researchers and teachers on the subject of forgiveness. Through his work, he has developed 9 steps that you and I can take to let go of a grudge and grievance and move toward increased hopefulness and healing.

However, before I share these steps with you I want to remind you that forgiveness does not mean we excuse hurtful acts perpetrated against us. Forgiveness does not mean that we can't or shouldn't defend ourselves. Forgiveness does not mean that we condone destructive behavior. Forgiveness does not even mean that we must reconcile ourselves with the perpetrator. Forgiveness means that we take stock of what has happened, we grieve our losses, and we deliberately make the world a better place by not repaying hurtful acts with hurtful acts.

So here are Luskin's nine steps. You don't have to start with 1 then 2 then 3. The process, not the order, is important. And, like most things in life, forgiveness takes constant practice. Sometimes it will feel like 3 steps forward and 2 steps back.

1. First, be aware of your feelings

Know exactly how you feel about what happened; be able to articulate what, in particular, was not OK about the situation in which you feel you were wronged. You may want to tell a few trusted people about your experience.

2. Know that forgiveness is for your own sake

Make a commitment to yourself to do what you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you, not for anyone else.

3. Do not expect reconciliation

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation with the person who hurt you, or condoning of their action. What you're looking for is a sense of peace and closure.

4. Recognize how the event is affecting you in the present

Recognize that your primary distress is coming from hurt feelings, thoughts and physical upset you are suffering *now*, not what offended or deeply hurt you two minutes—or 10 years—ago. Forgiveness helps to heal those hurt feelings.

5. Learn to activate the relaxation response

At the moment you feel upset, practice a simple stress management technique of deep breathing to soothe your body's flight or fight response. Focus on your breathing and try to bring your mind back to a peaceful state.

6. Concentrate on what you can control

Give up expecting things from other people, or your life, that they do not choose to give you. Remember that you can only control your own thoughts and actions, not anyone else's.

7. Move on

Instead of mentally replaying your hurt over and over, stop ruminating and seek out new friends and new situations that can give you positive situations instead.

8. Be the agent of change in your life

Remember that a life well lived is the best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving power to the person who hurt you, learn to look for the love, beauty and kindness around you.

9. Change the story

Amend your grievance story with a new ending: Your heroic choice to forgive.

Forgiveness is rarely easy, almost never instantaneous, and is essential for our spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing. Let us pray:

Almighty God, You have listened patiently to my concerns and consoled me in times of hardship. Let me remember Your presence and love for me when I am called upon to forgive another person for an unkind word or action. You have shown me how to act, what to say, what to do, and yet I sometimes react in anger and find it difficult to forgive others as You so often have forgiven me. Grant I may remember the teachings of Jesus whenever I have need of a forgiving spirit. Amen.