

Five Keys to Forgiveness and Freedom

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I was fourteen years old when Bruce started molesting me. He was twenty-five, a husband, the father of two children, and my swimming coach. The abuse lasted for three years until my family happened to move across the country. The impact of the abuse lasted for more than two decades. He was not a clergy person, but a coach. He was not a "reverend," but he was a father figure to me since my own father was emotionally and often physically absent in my life, as many fathers were in the 60s. And, he was not a representative of God, but as a young girl he looked a lot like God to me. He was handsome and witty and charming. He talked to me, he teased me, he listened to me, and he supported my passion for sports in an era when very few men were appreciating and supporting women's interest in sports.

Three years ago Bruce called me up and asked me to forgive him. By this point I had realized that what happened then, in the late 60s and early 70s, was not an affair—which is how he had characterized it—but in fact was statutory rape. By this time I had realized also that he had not only molested me, but, after I moved away at sixteen, molested my two best friends. So when he called me and asked me to forgive him, I said no. I was angry. I was wary. I thought, forgiveness is on his agenda, not mine. A few weeks after I hung up the phone I turned forty years old. And it occurred to me that I might go through the next forty years of my life still being angry and bitter over something that had happened in my teens. And I thought, something has to give and maybe that something is me. So I called him back, and we talked for an hour. What I said was, I am willing to consider talking with you about possibly getting somewhere close to forgiving you, but I doubt if it will ever happen. But that began a six-month odyssey, which I came to think of as my year of "forgiving dangerously" in which Bruce again listened to me, absorbed a lot of my rage, answered my questions about who else he had molested, and why; answered my questions about what had been going on with him at that time in his life; and wrote me letters. I wrote him letters, too, and we met in person twice. Ultimately I did forgive him.

I now feel like a different person. What I realized is that forgiveness is not just about letting go of anger at one particular person from the past. I use the word "freedom" to indicate that, after forgiveness, there is freedom not only from the past, but freedom from being so easily wounded, and injured, and angry now, in the present. That is what I am here to talk to you about today. It is not so much sexual abuse, as the forgiveness and freedom that can come to people after sexual abuse. And now that I've written a book about it, my friends call me a professional forgiver! Which is really a wonderful position to be in. If you are a professional

forgiver—or as one minister said, in the forgiveness business—then people will look to you to see how to forgive. How are you doing it on a daily basis?

Maybe, just maybe, there is somebody in your life whom you haven't forgiven. Maybe there are many people. I would like to have you choose one of these people, if you would, as I talk about myself, my research, and my own experiences. Think about one person in your life, if there is such a person whom you have not forgiven, and just see what happens in your relationship with that person throughout this hour, and see if it changes at all as I talk.

I will be talking about myself and my own experiences, some of my research, and mostly I will be sharing five keys to forgiveness and freedom. My promise is that forgiveness heals the forgiver. It is not necessarily something that you will share with the person who offended you in whatever way. But if you forgive, your heart will open, and then you will have an open heart.

As you know, all religions advocate forgiveness—Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam. All of them say things like: pray for your enemies; pray for your persecutors; love your enemies. All of them do, and yet we struggle. There is even some impressive psychological research showing that people who forgive are less likely to feel anxious and depressed and more likely to feel hopeful and have a higher self-esteem. There is general consensus that forgiveness is good—there are not too many people who argue against it—and yet few of us really understand how it happens.

I know that I had a lot of misconceptions when it occurred to me to consider forgiving Bruce. I went about it in a lot of the wrong ways, for instance, expecting him to do certain things that would earn my forgiveness. He did do many things that helped me, although he didn't jump through all the hoops I wanted him to. Like I wanted him to come out as a former sexual abuser and appear on platforms like this with me. He refused—understandably. Not too many people are doing that. However, I hope that he might someday, and that some other former abusers might someday. But I forgave him for that too, for not jumping through all of my hoops and never explaining fully what was going on with him then that would justify or explain the abuse. There was never any simple reason—like he had been abused when he was young, and then he became an abuser. If that was true, he wasn't aware of it or wasn't sharing it with me. But I eventually realized that I needed to forgive for myself regardless of his behavior.

One reason that people don't forgive, I learned, is that they don't know how to. They have misconceptions about what needs to happen in order for them to forgive, which is why I came up with my five keys to forgiveness and freedom. A lot of people in religious institutions, or people who have been raised in a community of faith, and women in particular, resist forgiveness because they have been told that God says they should forgive. Jesus commanded us to forgive. Or women are told sometimes in the police station, after reporting rape, oh, will you forgive that guy? So we are told to forgive without having our own feelings and our own process and our own rage acknowledged.

I was speaking to a group of teenagers in New Mexico awhile back, and one of the teachers in the back of the room raised her hand afterward and said very angrily: "My father molested me and I will never forgive him and I resent your telling me I should." So I just nodded, not knowing what else to do. I wanted to acknowledge her feelings without arguing with her, but then a teenager in the front row stood up and turned around and faced her teacher and said: "She's not telling you that you should forgive—she's just saying if you forgive your heart will open and you will have an open heart." It was interesting to me that the young person got it, and the person who had probably been scorned by being told she should forgive couldn't quite hear my message—was clear, at least, to the young people.

The apology is a real hang up for a lot of people. I get asked, how can I possibly forgive if he won't apologize? It is certainly easier if someone comes to you and apologizes, repeatedly, with sufficient contrition. But if you think about it, the person who is insensitive enough to wound you in the first place is unlikely to turn around and become a very compassionate, kind, considerate person all of a sudden. In my case, it took Bruce more than twenty years and lots of confrontation by me before he did take full responsibility and before he did apologize. So I feel fortunate in a sense that he helped me through this process. I actually feel grateful to him for that. But it was also clear to me that I couldn't wait for his apology; I couldn't wait for him to do the thing I wanted him to do, and I have experimented now with forgiving other people who have not apologized to me. I found that it still works—and it's still important to do.

How to Forgive: [1] Awareness

Let me shift now to how to forgive. The first step that I came up with is awareness. Remember who hurt you and how. This sounds obvious. Those who say "I don't forgive," usually have in mind someone that hurt them. But what I mean is a deeper awareness of exactly what did they do, and what impact did that have on you. There might be a neighbor who annoys half the street and is best friends with the other half of the street. Not everyone is offended by the same behaviors. What was it about the behavior in particular that wounded you? I think this is why, in part, some people don't forgive: because it is painful to remember the details. If it is a big deep hurt, like sexual abuse, we don't want to think about it. In my case, I never forgot what happened. But we know from other women's experiences that often the pain is so great that they repress it all together until later in their lives.

When I was talking with Bruce on the phone, and open to moving toward some sort of peace between us, we agreed that it might be useful to meet in person at some point. Sometimes the way I get up my courage to do things is not to think, just dive in. Which is what I did in this case—I was giving a speech in the town that Bruce lives in and found myself with a few hours with nothing to do before the speech. So I called him and said, "I happened to be in your town, we have talked about getting together, I do have to give a speech soon, but maybe we could just see each other for a few minutes." I know—it's crazy! But that is just how I do things.

I asked, "Can I come over to your office?" And he said, "Yes." I appreciated that "Yes." It sounded like somebody who was ready to jump out of an airplane. It was clearly a risk on his

part as well. So I pulled up into the parking lot of his place of work, and he came out of the building, and we walked across the parking lot to each other very slowly, not having seen each other for twenty-five years. But I did open my arms and gave him a hug, which I had planned in all of my visions of how we might meet again; I had thought that I would offer this gesture of openness. So I did that, and then was overwhelmed by the scent of him. He smelled like the exact same combination of cologne and shampoo and chewing gum as he had when I was fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen. It sent me back to those memories of the locker room and the swimming pool and the car—all the places he molested me. Again I felt overwhelmed and ashamed and guilty and scared and flattered, as I had felt as a child.

Over the next several weeks I had an emotional breakdown. I was crying incessantly and extremely angry and physically ill, remembering in great detail much of what had happened. I did get through that, obviously, and I guess it was an important part of my process. But now I see, oh, this is why people don't want to go there. People don't want to vividly remember old, deep pain because there is often a sense of reliving it. But that is the first key—awareness. Remember who hurt you and how.

[2] Validation

The second point is validation. Talk to someone who cares. Find a sympathetic listener. And again, this is something people often don't do because they are ashamed. I had felt like an adulteress. I had felt that this was my fault when I was young. And he had told me, as most molesters do, "Don't tell anyone or I will go to prison." So I hadn't told anyone. Talking about it was difficult and extremely helpful. Matthew Fox, the theologian, says, "Liberation begins when pain is allowed to be pain." The validation step is about allowing pain to be pain rather than trying to push through to forgiveness. Just allowing pain to be pain. I found a very good therapist, and she said, "I can see how much that hurt you. You were very hurt by this process. Of course, you were hurt." Things like that made me feel validated. Of course I was hurt. Just having another human being say that really helped and, as it turned out, Bruce said it too. He did acknowledge how hurt I had been, and that too was very helpful. Validation is about allowing pain to be pain.

A funny thing happened when I was writing the book. I interviewed many people who were struggling with forgiveness, who could not forgive. Some of these people started out very angrily telling me why they could never possibly forgive some person. They offered a litany of awful things that this person had done to them, asserting that they definitely could not forgive. Yet at the end of a forty-five-minute conversation, they would thank me for helping them forgive. I was not trying to be a therapist. I was just listening. Yet they thanked me for helping them forgive. That experience helped me appreciate the power of listening.

[3] Compassion

Awareness is about yourself, what happened to you. Validation is about sharing that personal pain with somebody else. At that point you have been taken care of to some extent, which is

the first priority—to take care of the victim. The third step is to take a tremendous leap over to the other person and imagine what might have been going on with him or her. That's compassion. Seeking the humanity in others. There is an African word that came up in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings that means "seeking the humanity in others." Which is a really interesting phrase because we know we are human—right? We know everybody is human, but what does that mean to seek the humanity in others? To look for compassion.

One thing I realized is that when people hurt other people, they are not full of love and joy themselves, right? When people hurt other people they are not happy. They are not feeling loved and loving; if they were, they wouldn't be cruel and insensitive to you. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, "If we could read the secret history of our enemies we would find in each person's life enough sorrow and suffering to disarm all hostility." There is a shorter way to say this, which is, behind every jerk there is a sad story! Compassion is about looking for that sad story—or imaging that sad story—or remembering that there must be a sad story there somewhere; or they would not have done what they did. I would like to read you a little passage from the book in the compassion chapter:

When I told my friend Nancy about my conversations with Bruce she said, 'That sounds like very important work.' Child molesters are people too. We have done lots for victims and lots for sex offenders, but not in terms of creating dialogue and understanding between the two. If we are going to get beyond this problem, people are going to have to try to understand each other. The fact that some of Bruce's justifications were still valid to him two decades later infuriated me. Though I gradually broke through some of his defenses, Bruce also annoyed me by lapsing into self-pity, complaining about how difficult his life was now. He acted victimized by the fact that I had, in effect, forced him to come out as a child molester to his family, boss, and colleagues, as if the pain he experienced in those relationships were somehow my fault.

I wrote a book entitled, *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football*, with a chapter called "My Coach Says He Loves Me." I wrote in that book about coach/athlete abuse because I realized that I was not alone. It is very, very prevalent. Usually it is a male coach and a female athlete, but it can go in all combinations of gender. People who read the book started asking me to speak about it. I had not identified Bruce in the book. Someone raised a hand in the back of the room one day after my talk and asked why I was still protecting this man. I thought—good question, so I started using his full name. And, believe it or not, I was not consciously vengeful at the time, though certainly one could interpret it as vengeance. It only took four times of doing that before someone in the audience recognized his name and reported him to his supervisor.

That was the point at which he called me and asked if I would please forgive him. So of course I didn't trust him! His job was at stake. He had been sent to a psychiatrist. Ultimately I accepted that he had mixed motivations for having me forgive him. Of course, he did want me to stop naming him and, at the same time, I did ultimately believe that he had a sincere desire to heal

things between us and to make up in some sense for what he had done to me as a child. Not all child molesters are that generous. In some sense, as I said, I was lucky.

But along this bumpy route I noticed something that fascinated me. You can't feel critical and compassionate at the same time. You might be angry and then have a glimpse of compassion and then go back to being angry, but in that one moment when your heart opens, you can't be angry too. Understanding a crime or misdemeanor or simply thoughtless remark does not mean that we cannot disapprove of the offending behavior or hold the person responsible or swear that we will never do it ourselves. It does, however, soften the condemnation.

Once we seek and find others' humanity, it's impossible to judge them quite so harshly. Justice and forgiveness are two separate issues. You can forgive and get divorced. You can forgive and change the locks. You can forgive and testify against somebody and believe that the best place for them is in prison. But you are imprisoned if you remain angry at them forever. That's what compassion is about.

[4] Humility

The fourth key is humility. After looking at yourself and working at taking care of those wounded feelings, and after looking at the other person and seeking his or her humanity, I recommend that you come back to yourself and remember your own faults and failings. After all, we are not just victims in this world. Probably all of us, if we think hard enough, can remember at least one person we have hurt in our lives—through our own thoughtlessness, through our own anger. And I know that is true for me. Fortunately, I did not become a child molester myself. I have not committed any felony crimes, but I've made many mistakes. So looking at yourself honestly and remembering your own faults and failings can be very helpful in leveling the playing field. They are not all bad, and you are not all good.

Kabir, a favorite poet of mine, puts it this way: "We are all struggling. None of us has gone far. Let your arrogance go and take a look inside." Jesus puts it this way, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not see the log that is in your own eye?" Many of us who are victims may want to overlook this and miss an essential aspect of recovering, and get stuck in blaming.

A lot of women feel inferior. Research shows us that women often have low self-esteem. Girls feel pretty good about themselves and are outspoken, and then when they are about thirteen their self-esteem plummets. Many of us go back and forth between feeling inferior and feeling superior. I have struggled more with the superior part, looking down on people. Maybe, since I'm six-two, anatomy is destiny here! I have felt critical and blaming and judgmental of other people. It is very easy for me to see what is wrong with other people and then pick at that little speck in their eye. It is just as lonely and alienating and uncomfortable to be in that position as it is to feel inferior. And I do know because I have done both.

But humility is about remembering that we are all in this together. None of us has gone far. W. H. Auden said, "Love your crooked neighbor with your crooked heart." Isn't that wonderful? You know, it's really different from just loving your neighbor. You can love your neighbor and be mad at them, or love them and feel critical of them, or love them from this very superior position because you should love your neighbor. But to love your crooked neighbor with your own crooked heart, that really brings you all into the same human condition.

[5] Self-Forgiveness

The last point is self-forgiveness—which may be the most important and, for some of us, the most difficult. Self-forgiveness might be necessary because you put yourself in the situation in which you got wounded. Or it might be for something else you have done. I made a commitment to love myself, no matter what. It sounds simple but isn't always easy or even possible. Yet what a gift to myself! Now I know somebody is going to do it! Somebody is going to love me no matter what. That's great.

I practice self-forgiveness constantly. It has cut way down on my insomnia. In the past, I would often stay awake at night regretting something I said, or didn't say, or did, or didn't do during the day. I also have a better sense of humor now about myself. I am more able to laugh at myself when I do make a mistake. I am more able to apologize, because I am not so defensive. I am not walking around trying to be perfect. I recommend you try the same.

There is an irony to this story. The irony is that my interactions with Bruce brought me to the Church. I was not raised in a religious environment. We were what I thought of as token Presbyterians. Which means my parents took us to Church a few times to introduce us to it, but it didn't have any meaning for me or them. So I did not grow up really thinking of myself as a Christian other than to distinguish from being Jewish. Then I discovered Zen Buddhism about fifteen years ago. The way I understand that path is that it is about being in the moment and about wisdom, love, and compassion. It's a wonderful path and there is nothing about that now that I reject. But Bruce, who is now a Christian also, got me interested in Christianity. He was not when he was molesting me. In our conversations over those six months, he brought that up and he actually sent me some things to read about forgiveness from a Christian point of view—which I resisted, believe me. When we met for the second time, with my therapist, I had suggested that we pray or meditate together, and he thought that was a very good idea too. So we opened the session with a combination of prayer and meditation, and it really helped me trust him now, in the moment, to hear how he prayed and to see that sincerity. After I forgave him, I read a lot of the Bible for the first time. I am still working my way through it. But I read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and was really shocked and impressed and moved by Jesus' teachings.

Then I started going to Church.

So the people who are or were your enemy, if you open your heart to them, might lead you somewhere really positive.

Forgiveness is not about waiting for the other person to apologize. It's not about being better than people who don't forgive. It's just something right to do for yourself. It's a process that can take a long time. You might need to forgive over and over again for the same offense. But if you forgive, your heart will open. Then you will have an open heart. MBM