

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

The Art of Forgiveness

By: Steve Barrett, LCSW, BCD

When I decided to write this article on forgiveness (the other *F* word), I didn't realize the enormity of the task in a personal sense because I have been struggling with forgiveness for a long time. As I continue to work on forgiving, please do as I write and 'not as I do'. There is no doubt that forgiveness is one of the best gifts to give to self. The act of forgiving oneself or others releases a burden from our soul. On the other hand, when you withhold forgiveness, you choose to remain a victim to this burden.

What does it mean to forgive? In general terms, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. Forgiveness does not mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act. You have heard the expression: *forgive* and *forget*. Is this possible? Forgive – Yes! You forgive because it is the first step toward healing. Time can dull the vividness of the memory of the hurt, and the emotional component of the memory will fade. Forget – Maybe Not! You may always remember.

A recent study out of the Durham, North Carolina VA, studied combat veterans and forgiveness. The study showed something important: that veterans who had difficulty forgiving others and difficulty forgiving themselves had greater levels of depression and more intense Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms. Difficulty in forgiving was also related to more anxiety in general. Another study found that unforgiving thoughts prompted more aversive emotions, and significantly higher physiological responses – like increased blood pressure and heart rate – while 'forgiving' thoughts prompted greater perceived control and comparatively lower physiological stress responses.

Most of us have probably heard about or seen the effect of forgiveness. Let me share two such examples, which I classify as *miracles*. Dr. R.L. Coberly was a psychologist who worked at the Atlanta VA tirelessly for approximately 25 years. After a long, painful illness, he died in 2004. At his memorial at the VA, Chaplin Mozley stated that Dr. Coberly had requested his help to develop a prayer forgiving those who attacked us on 11 September 2001. When I heard that, I was floored! Another example of someone who endured so much but was still able to forgive is Lt. Louis Zamperini, a bombardier on a B-24 during World War II. Laura Hillenbrand captured his experiences as a Japanese POW in her book, Unbroken. Lt. Zamperini was captured and tortured by the Japanese on a regular basis. Several years after the war was over, he went to a Billy Graham revival, and made the decision to return to Japan to forgive those who tortured him during the war. Ms. Hillenbrand wrote about Louie confronting the guards who severely abused him in 1950: "At that moment, something shifted sweetly inside him. It was forgiveness, beautiful and effortless and complete. For Louie Zamperini, the war was over."

As exemplified by the previous examples of forgiveness, it takes spiritual and emotional strength to forgive others. The first step down this road is to forgive oneself. In doing so, you develop the strength to forgive others. This concept is brought to focus in "Pardon Me While I be Myself" by Laura Travis:

I OWE ME AN APOLOGY.

I owe me an apology for the emotional abuse I've allowed me to suffer.

I owe me an apology for believing in someone more than I did me.

I owe me in apology for not listening to me.

I owe me in apology for ignoring my needs.

I owe me in apology for hurting my feelings by sometimes not wanting to be me.

I owe me in apology for denying my body nourishment as I overwhelmed my mind with mental anguish.

I owe me in apology for the embarrassment I have caused myself.

I apologize for all these wrongs I have inflicted on me and ask myself to recognize my shortcomings.

To understand and forgive me for the long-suffering and pain I never meant to let me hurt.

I APOLOGIZE.

Embarking on a path of forgiveness involves a commitment to a process of change. To start this journey, consider the value of forgiveness and its importance in your life at a given time. Reflect on the facts of the situation - how you've reacted; and how this combination has affected your life, health, and well-being. When you are ready, actively choose to forgive the person/situation who has offended you. Write a forgiveness letter to the offender. It does not matter what you do with it. You can choose to mail it, or you can choose to make a ceremony out of it. Burn the letter, and bury the ashes; while saying a silent forgiveness prayer to you. It is important to move away from your role as a victim, and release the control and power the offending person and situation have had in your life. When you do this, you will no longer define your life by how you have been hurt - you might even find compassion and understanding. Being a *survivor* is a lot healthier than being a *victim*. Letting go of grudges and bitterness can make way for kindness and peace. Forgiveness can lead to healthy relationships; greater spiritual and psychological well-being; less anxiety, stress, and hostility; lower blood pressure; and fewer symptoms of depression.

Remember, I initially said 'do as I write – not as I do'. For me, my journey toward forgiveness started when I read Unbroken. I have a long way to go, but, since we are all fallible human beings, and there is no perfection; I guess I will keep working on this *F* word. In closing, let us keep in mind the words of Mahatma Gandhi: "the weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong."