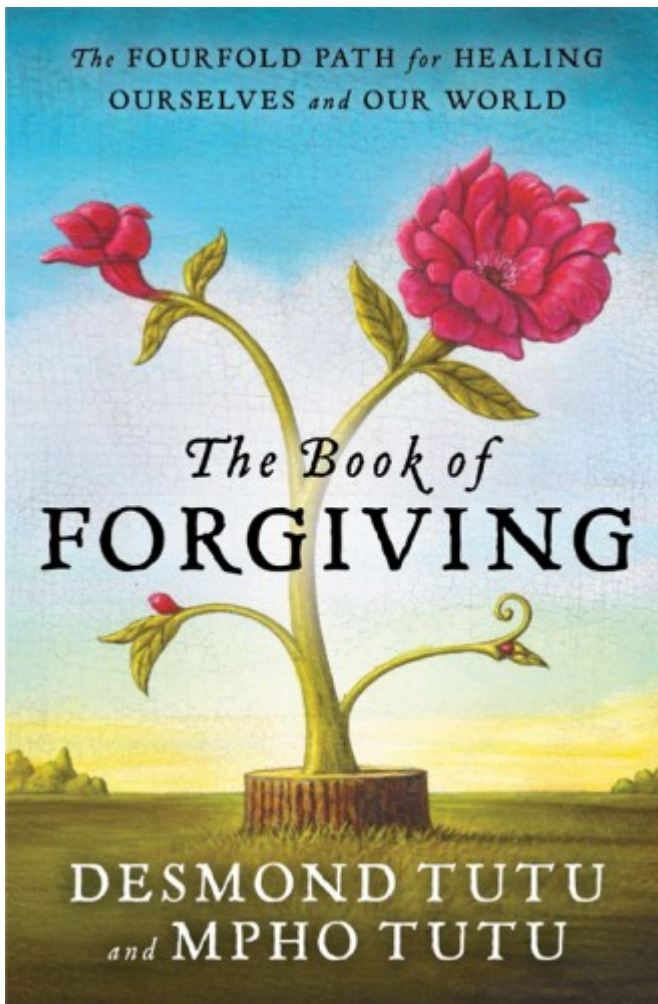


The Book of Forgiving, by Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu

reviewed by [Arianne Braithwaite Lehn](#) in the [Oct 01, 2014](#) issue

In Review



The Book of Forgiving

By Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu
HarperOne

When Dan and Lynn Wagner received the parole officer's letter, they had a critical decision to make. Lisa, the woman who had killed their two daughters in an accident while driving drunk and high, was about to be released from prison. In order to

continue their own healing and bring closure, the Wagners decided to meet with Lisa. They fully expected to release the relationship and move on, but a completely unexpected thing happened. “When we walked into the meeting room and laid our eyes on Lisa for the first time, we both hugged her,” Dan said. “I don’t know why, but it suddenly seemed as if we had all been through this war together. In that hug and in my heart I felt a sense of relief. We walked into that building in fear, thinking we were finally going to have an end. But it turned out to be a beginning.” Following that meeting, Lynn and Lisa traveled to jails, churches, and universities across the United States to share their story—to be living examples of how forgiveness transforms one’s pain.

The Wagners’ story is but one powerful testimony to the healing power of forgiveness and to our capacity to forgive. Through stories like these, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Anglican priest Mpho Tutu, equip us to answer some of our deepest questions: How can I forgive? How can I become a whole person once again, freed from the harm I experienced or inflicted? How can I live into a new story for my life? Both authors in this dynamic and compelling team bring testimony to heinous crimes they’ve witnessed and experienced in South Africa and across the globe.

There are scads of books on forgiveness, and this is not Desmond Tutu’s first on the topic. In *No Future Without Forgiveness* (2000), he highlights his iconic work as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa. But *The Book of Forgiving* is markedly different. Rather than a memoir or reflection, it is a useful how-to handbook that helps us wade through a profoundly complex topic. The book is a tool for applying forgiveness in daily life.

Interspersing their recommendations with personal narratives, the Tutus move us through a fourfold path that’s universal and practical: tell the story, name the hurt, grant forgiveness, and renew or release the relationship. At the end of each chapter they present numerous tangible opportunities for application, from prayer and guided meditation to journaling and conducting rituals with a stone. Believing that we cannot let go of feelings we don’t claim, the Tutus create a safe space to enter into and face our rawest emotions.

The basic truths undergirding the forgiveness model are simple but extremely challenging: there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of or beyond forgiveness. In spite of Mpho’s horrific memory of seeing

her murdered housekeeper's body, and in spite of the barrage of violence her father has faced in his lifetime, they both assert that there are no monsters, only monstrous acts. We are human beings, intimately connected with one another, who became separated from our goodness. We need a process of forgiveness that returns us to our core. "Our nature is goodness," they write. "If it were not, then we would not be shocked and dismayed when we harm one another."

One of the biggest strengths of the book, in addition to its practicality, is its holistic approach. While forgiveness is a central practice in many faith traditions—and the Tutus point to Christ on the cross as their model—the authors push us beyond spiritual motivations to forgive to physical, moral, and relational reasons. Equally important is the Tutus' effort to dispel the myths of forgiveness. It is not a subversion of justice, a denial of the harm, or a forgetting of the event. It is not an airy-fairy act of the saintly, but a matter of gritty reality.

While the Tutus' presentation of the four steps encompass the majority of the book, later chapters are just as significant. They focus on how to use the model when you are the one asking forgiveness and when you must forgive yourself—both relevant for freeing yourself from a fruitless endeavor to change the past.

Many of the book's true stories are extraordinary—the family who reconciles with the drunk driver who killed two of their children, a mother who meets with the terrorists in Mumbai who killed her daughter and husband, and forgiveness of hate crimes following South Africa's apartheid. With such remarkable examples, it can be difficult to think of the small, daily acts of forgiveness we need, and yet that's where the rubber meets the road for most of us. I want to know how to forgive the coworker I struggle to trust and my spouse when he disappoints me, or how to ask forgiveness of the friend I slighted many years ago but will never see again. These are seemingly small interactions, but ones that make up our lives. Although the Tutus do not put everyday examples front and center, they do occasionally lift them up, particularly those related to raising children, which the archbishop likens to "training for a forgiveness marathon." End-of-chapter exercises are critical, providing space for readers to reflect on their own lives.

I appreciate the book's nuance and openness. A four-step model initially sounded too clear-cut, but the Tutus acknowledge that forgiveness is not a simple and streamlined process. There is no timetable, and one can travel the forgiveness cycle multiple times. They nod to Nelson Mandela, who they say needed 27 years to be

transformed from an angry, unforgiving person into the model of reconciliation and forgiveness he became. And just as the process is not tidy, neither is the outcome. Forgiveness is always a venture into unknown territory.

Although we cannot know the end result in advance, entering into the forgiveness journey is always worth it. The person who wounded us may never repent, and the person we harmed might never forgive us, yet that's not necessary for our healing. We forgive for ourselves, regardless of how those around us respond. The book lists apology websites (www.perfectapology.com and www.joeapology.com) where one can write an anonymous letter to a victim or perpetrator, as well as the Apology Line phone number in the United States (347-201-2446). When we grant or ask forgiveness, we take back ownership of our fate and feelings, freeing ourselves from an endless, binding cycle of bitterness. It is a deeply empowering thing for broken and beautiful people—all of us.

The Tutus remind us that we *can* forgive and that it's the greatest gift we can give ourselves. We are more than the sum of our hurts, and in healing our own lives we will heal our world. We hold the keys to our own freedom; this book shows us how to use them.