Throughout Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s childhood, his father physically and verbally abused his mother, leaving a painful scar on his childhood memories.

Decades later, the archbishop’s social activism in opposition to South Africa’s inhuman policy of apartheid and the brutal violence it engendered earned him death threats and an arrest record.

The response the archbishop chose in each of these horrific situations was identical: forgiveness. Remarkably, he forgave his father, even though the elder Tutu is no longer living to explain himself or make amends. Similarly, following the abolition of apartheid, the archbishop headed South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which focused on transitioning to a true democracy and bringing healing for victims and perpetrators alike—driven in large part by the healing power of forgiveness.

This year, the archbishop teamed up with his youngest daughter, Rev. Mpho Tutu, in a multimedia campaign designed to spark a global forgiveness movement. In March, the father-daughter team published *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (excerpted on page 23). Although the archbishop has often spoken publicly about forgiveness (including most famously in his 1999 book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*), in their new book, the Tutus expand on the process. Instead of merely focusing on why forgiveness is important, the book moves to the more practical matter of how to forgive—offering guided meditations, journal exercises, prayers, and even rituals.

Yet the book is just part of their effort. The pair simultaneously launched the Tutu Global Forgiveness Challenge, an online, 30-day journey combining brief daily exercises, interviews, art, and stories all aimed at helping people incorporate forgiveness into their lives. Entrepreneur Sir Richard Branson (founder of Virgin Atlantic, among numerous other companies), best-selling author and lecturer Deepak Chopra, M.D., *Huffington Post* founder Arianna Huffington, and Grammy Award-winning singer/songwriter Alanis Morissette have all partnered with the Tutus to support the global challenge by offering content for the free online program. So far, participants from more than 160 countries have signed up.

**Walking the Fourfold Path**

With this new tandem initiative, the Tutus are striving to make the concept of forgiveness both more accessible and more applicable to most people—not only those who want to forgive, but also those who seek forgiveness from others as well as those who need to forgive themselves. The Tutus’ Fourfold Path of Forgiveness includes *Telling the Story* (sharing an honest account of what happened, first with someone you trust and then, possibly with the perpetrator), *Naming the Hurt* (identifying the feelings the incident
brought up in you and working with them until they no longer sting), *Granting Forgiveness* (enabling you to retell the story from the vantage point of a hero instead of a victim), and *Renewing or Releasing the Relationship* (deciding if the relationship is one you would like to continue, keeping in mind that releasing a relationship should not be considered a failure).

Rev. Tutu equates this process to the stages of grief, and, just as with that process, assures that “you don’t go through [the steps] sequentially, nor do you necessarily go through them in a single short time frame.” New information, a change in the situation, or even just a shift in your feeling about an event can move you either forward or backward on the path.

Even so, how far along on the path you are isn’t necessarily what’s most important, the Tutus stress; rather, it’s the fact that you have made the all-important decision to work toward forgiveness in the first place.

“Ultimately, forgiveness is a grace and a goodness we offer to ourselves,” Rev. Tutu explains—not a gift we give someone else. Understanding this insight is vital to navigating the path the Tutus outline. Forgiveness is possible, they maintain, whether or not the other person feels remorse, offers an apology or explanation, or even acknowledges that they’ve done something hurtful.

The Tutus see forgiveness as an act of empowerment, not of weakness or vulnerability. “Without forgiveness,” the archbishop writes, “we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us they will hold the keys to our happiness, they will be our jailor.” The book gives evidence that forgiving heals us not only spiritually, but also physically, emotionally, and mentally.

The Tutus speak of forgiveness as a *choice* (one that can profoundly transform lives), rather than a state we may or may not be capable of achieving, depending on what it is we are forgiving. If the goal of forgiveness is to heal ourselves, rather than to comfort the offender, the archbishop makes the powerful point that there’s then no crime that cannot be forgiven.

**Compassionate Consequences**

Also central to the Tutus’ take on forgiveness is *ubuntu*, a Bantu term that’s loosely defined as “humanity,” or, as the archbishop further explains, “the understanding that we are who we are through one another.”

The concept articulates the belief that any pain, any grief, affects us all—and that it’s preferable to focus on the ways in which we’re all alike, rather than highlighting how we are different, because ultimately we are more alike than we are different. While a crime committed against you will hurt you as well as the wrongdoer, forgiving those who have wronged you will bring peace not only to them but also to yourself. We are all connected, and so we share both our pain and our healing. As the archbishop writes, “Forgiveness is nothing less than how we bring peace to ourselves and our world.”

When asked about the large-scale consequences of forgiveness, Rev. Tutu points to a real-time example: the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. An estimated 500,000 to 1 million Rwandans were murdered during this period, including about 70 percent of the Tutsi population. Yet since then, she adds, “the effort to engage in a process of forgiveness by the Rwandans has resulted in a country in which people are able to live together, to look at each other, to be one community, and one single nation.”

Closer to home for the Tutus, of course, is the story of how South Africa eventually overturned its decades-long apartheid system—which had created a nation filled with hostility, injustice, and violent oppression—to finally achieve peace. Poignantly, many offenders ended up taking responsibility for their cruelty, seeking forgiveness from those they abused.

If entire countries can move past their pain and heal, then surely we, too, can make our own personal progress toward forgiveness—a practice the archbishop calls “our greatest gift and only hope.”

FORGIVENESS IS NOT EASY
By Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu

Often when we are suffering from loss or harm of some kind, forgiving can seem too overwhelming, too complicated, to even consider. How do we forgive if there has been no apology or explanation for why someone has hurt us so? How do we think of forgiving when we feel the person has not done anything to “deserve” our forgiveness? Where do we even start?

The work of forgiveness is not easy. Perhaps you have already tried to forgive someone and just couldn’t do it. Perhaps you have forgiven and the person did not show remorse or change his or her behavior or own up to his or her offenses—and you find yourself unforgiving all over again.

Forgiveness is not an effortless act for any of us, and it does not serve anyone to minimize the complexity involved in the work of forgiving. It is best to break our forgiving down into bite-size pieces, and begin from wherever we are standing. Tell your story for as long as you need to. Name your hurts until they no longer pierce your heart. Grant forgiveness when you are ready to let go of a past that cannot be changed. Reconcile or release the relationship as you choose.

Forgiving is not easy, but it is the path to healing. It was not easy for Nelson Mandela to spend twenty-seven years in prison, but when people say to me what a waste it was, I say no, it was not a waste. It took twenty-seven years for him to be transformed from an angry, unforgiving young radical into an icon of reconciliation, forgiveness, and honor who could go on to lead a country back from the brink of civil war and self-destruction.

Our suffering, our pain, and our losses have the power to transform us. It does not always feel just, nor is it easy, but we have seen that, with time, great good can come from great sorrow.

God forgives unconditionally
So can we
The thief on the cross still dies on his cross
But forgiveness will set his spirit free
And what of you and me standing on the ground with our piles
of hurts mounting so high
Will we die a thousand deaths before we die?
Yearning for revenge, will we die of that thirst?
Will the rage that fills us be the stake on which we burn?
Will we stumble over every resistance placed in our way?
And stay stuck in the misery of it all?
Or will we take the chance that we might break free
by following
this path where it leads
Past the whys and lies about how it cannot be
Here is our chance
Take this chance
Break free

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT

- Forgiveness is not easy—it requires hard work and a consistent willingness.
- Forgiveness is not weakness—it requires courage and strength.
- Forgiveness does not subvert justice—it creates space for justice to be enacted with a purity of purpose that does not include revenge.
- Forgiveness is not forgetting—it requires a fearless remembering of hurt.
- Forgiveness is not quick—it can take several journeys through the cycles of remembering and grief before one can truly forgive and be free.