It is impossible for most of us to even begin to understand the senseless genocide in Rwanda, the relentless persecution of apartheid, or the deep desperation of extreme poverty. Brutal murders, maiming, rape are all experiences beyond our comprehension.

How, we wonder, could a Rwandan woman who witnessed the savage killing of her husband and four children be expected to pardon the man who murdered her entire family and stole her life? Surely, there’s a limit to what even the most spiritual of us is expected to forgive.

Few of us can relate to such extreme scenarios. We anguish over a slight by a coworker, an unfaithful spouse or cruel words from a friend. It is hard to imagine having to forgive something so excruciating, something so “un-forgivable.”

Yet, Desmond Tutu, the Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa, told an entire continent that they had no choice. Forgiveness was not an option, he said, it was a mandatory step toward healing and positive change.

In partnership with his daughter Mpho, Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu has released an unassuming little book that packs a powerful punch. It is called simply, “The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World.” Now 83, he is sharing his work with his youngest child, a fellow Episcopal priest and an eloquent speaker of his truth.

The Path to Forgiveness

A Conversation with Mpho Tutu

LINDA M. POTTER

I want to be willing to forgive. But I dare not ask for the will to forgive,
In case you give it to me and I am not yet ready.
I am not yet ready for my heart to soften.
I am not yet ready to be vulnerable again.
Not yet ready to see that there is humanity in my tormentor’s eyes.
Or that the one who hurt me may also have cried.

I am not yet ready for the journey.
I am not yet interested in the path.
I am at the prayer before the prayer of forgiveness.
Grant me the will to want to forgive.
Grant it to me not yet, but soon …
No one ever said it was easy

For forgiveness isn’t easy work. Mpho understands that as well as anyone. Not only can she recount a seemingly endless number of stories of pain and injustice that came out of Africa’s violent history, but three years ago, it became personal. In April 2012, she returned home to find her housekeeper, Angela, brutally murdered, lying on the floor of her daughter’s room in a pool of blood.

Desmond Tutu writes, “There are times when Mpho cannot imagine ever forgiving the person who brought such horror into her home... even for people of faith, who believe in unconditional forgiveness, even for people like Mpho and me — people who dare to write books about forgiveness — forgiveness is not easy.”

Their co-authored book offers the comfort, guidance and practical steps needed to begin this important work. Mpho explains, “Both of us are ministers in the Christian church where we’re often exhorting people to forgive, which is very well and good, but the question that comes back to us is, Ok, I know I’m supposed to do it, but how? How do I get from the place of anger or anguish or hurt that I’m standing in now to a place where I’m able to really forgive?”

No matter how horrific the circumstances, you can get there, Mpho insists. We can draw inspiration from the Rwandan woman whose family was murdered in front of her, she offers. “What she told me was, ‘I really loved my husband and I really loved my children, and to honor that love I have to find it in me to turn love into forgiveness and not into an act of hate.’ ”

Few of us are dealing with the kinds of horrific circumstances that become lead stories for the evening news. But it doesn’t make our forgiveness work any easier or any less important. It isn’t always the magnitude of the act that determines the level of pain; it’s the depth of the wound.

In Mpho’s personal experience, she has found that acts involving a betrayal have left the deepest wounds, while more seemingly difficult situations have been easier to work through.

In these instances, she explains, “It’s almost as though we had an agreement, spoken or unspoken, around how we were conducting ourselves in regards to each other. And you [the offending party] stepped out of that agreement. Whether the betrayal is part of a friendship or something else, it’s still the same. When some sort of a contract has been betrayed, then the forgiveness or healing is harder to come by.”

Why we need to forgive

Although I knew Mpho would laugh just a little, I had to ask the obvious question: Forgiveness certainly sounds like a lot of work — do we have to do it? Wouldn’t it be easier to just hold on to resentment?

“Actually, it’s not,” she offered gently. “In the sense of not having to feel your way forward it is, but it’s not easier in the sense of your life being light. That anger and resentment — even the grief of holding a hurt — eats away at us. It eats away at joy. It’s a thief. Forgiveness comes bearing all kinds of unexpected gifts.”

It is important to Mpho and her father that readers understand that the book is meant for everyone, regardless of what kind of forgiveness work you’re dealing with.

“One of the things about the book is the people whose stories we get to recount are not just people who are from places of huge inhumanity, but also people who live in the U.S. and could be neighbors of yours. It doesn’t matter what the injury is — whether it is a husband who’s not paying child support or the person who murdered your children — it’s still the same process you need to engage in in order to forgive.”
The Fourfold Path

Desmond and Mpho Tutu offer a simple, yet powerful, four-step forgiveness process that allows us to free ourselves from the cycle of hurt and retribution:

Telling the Story

It’s important to tell the story, to get it out. In doing so, we can reclaim our dignity after we’ve been harmed. This doesn’t mean, however, that we get to dwell on it, the book cautions. Telling the story allows us to begin to process what has happened and then integrate it. In time, it enables us to become more resilient.

Naming the Hurt

Sad? Angry? Afraid? When we’ve been harmed, we feel it in our hearts. It’s important to name that feeling.

“We give voice to our hurts not to be victims or martyrs, but to find freedom from the resentment, anger, shame or self-loathing that can fester and build inside us when we do not touch our pain and learn to forgive,” the authors write.

Granting Forgiveness

Forgiveness must be, above all, sincere.

“Many people, even very spiritual people, try to leap over their suffering in pursuit of their inner peace or their sense of what is the right thing to do. The words of forgiveness are said, but the reality of forgiveness has not taken root in their hearts and lives,” the Tutus explain. How do we know when we’ve truly forgiven? It differs for each of us. For some, it’s like a huge weight being lifted. For others, it’s a feeling of peace, or getting to that place where you can sincerely wish the other person well (or at least no longer wish them harm). Ultimately, it is a feeling of freedom.

Renewing or Releasing the Relationship

We can always choose to release a relationship once the forgiveness work is done. But the more complex option is renewing that relationship and reconnecting with that person. “Renewing a relationship is not restoring a relationship. We do not go back to where we were before the hurt happened and pretend it never happened. We create a new relationship out of our suffering, one that is often stronger for what we have experienced together,” Mpho says.

Each chapter in the book ends with a poem followed by a meditation, an experiential exercise with a “ritual stone,” and a journaling opportunity — powerful inspirational strategies that can breathe new life into our daily spiritual practice.

What is the most important takeaway for people who read the book? Mpho says, “I want them to have a sense of hope, even if whatever hurt it is they’re carrying they haven’t yet been able to forgive. That they can see that, ‘Oh yeah, there’s a path; there’s a way I can go about achieving forgiveness. There’s a way for me to get to that place where I am free.’”

For more details, visit Tutu.org.za.