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**Nelson Mandela and the Power of Forgiveness**

I study the Psychological Process of Interpersonal Forgiveness and Nelson Mandela, as you have heard today, exemplifies what it means to be a forgiving person. He has been called an Icon of Hope and Healing because of the compassion and forgiveness he illustrated after being released from prison. We talk about forgiveness in the context of deep, personal and unfair hurt. Mandela definitely experienced deep hurt when he was sentenced and spent 27 years of his life behind bars on Robben Island. He spent day after day doing hard labor and because he was in the sun so long without any protective eyewear, he destroyed his tear ducts and for a long time lost his ability to cry. He also developed tuberculosis in prison, which caused many lung infections and was related to his eventual death. Mandela certainly suffered deep, personal and unfair hurts. No one expected Mandela to ever be free and when he was released most expected him to be full of rage and a desire for retribution. This would be understandable and would probably be the feelings and actions of most of us. Before going into prison Mandela was planning to counteract violence with violence. However, Nelson Mandela was not full of rage and violence when released. He developed a vision while in prison, a vision that we are all in this together and that violence is not the solution. He showed the people in his country and
the world that revenge is not the answer to years of injustice and mistreatment. He showed generosity and mercy when he could have shown revenge and bitterness. He decided not to avenge himself on those who treated him with such cruelty. He transformed in prison and realized the humanity in all people, even those he fought against. He stood against apartheid and managed to change a nation without violence and hatred. His actions demonstrated unwavering vision and amazing courage. He was able to sit down with his enemies and plan a better future for South Africa. He is said to have saved South Africa from civil war and lead a nation to democracy. Nelson Mandela’s actions showed his people that forgiveness was the way back for South Africa and as a result, gave the people in South Africa hope for a better future. Mandela asked his people to rethink their thoughts and actions of violence and to resist their first impulse. He told his people,

"Please do not be defined by the prejudices of your enemies. You don’t want to live burnt by fear and hatred like they do. The real freedom is to escape from the cycle of violence and war and all the games of power that will destroy you”.

Mandela was able to end white minority rule peacefully by having discussions and making compromises with Mr. de Klerk. He showed how nations divided by ethnic, racial and religious violence and hate may begin to come together and heal. As an example of his forgiveness, Mandela invited his jailer to an honored place for the Presidential Inaugural Address. People listened to him as the acts of reprisals against apartheid decreased after he was elected.
Forgiveness can be defined as, “A willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and negative behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and sometimes even love toward him or her (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991; North, 1987). Notice in the definition that one has a "right" to feel resentment and that the offender does not "deserve" our compassion and generosity based on his or her actions. Mandela definitely had a right to feel resentment and hatred for those who tortured him. His offenders did not deserve his compassion and good will but he gave it anyway. He viewed his offenders with compassion and as human beings who deserved to be treated with respect because of their humanity. As illustrated by his words in a letter to General Du Preez, commissioner of prisons, written on Robben Island, Cape Town, July 12, 1976:

“I have never regarded any man as my superior, either in my life outside or inside prison”.

At his Inaugural address on May 9, 1994, Mandela stated,

“Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another”.

If a man tortured and imprisoned for nearly three decades could find in himself forgiveness, what lessons might we take from him on how to respond to acts of deep, personal and unfair hurt in our own lives? In honor of Nelson Mandela, let us each find one small place in our hearts to extend mercy, compassion and forgiveness to our offenders. Let’s try to see the humanity and imperfections of all people while realizing that bitterness and hatred are not the answer and ultimately
do not lead to peace. Let’s all be positive role models of healing for future generations. As stated by Mandela in Johannesburg on May 18, 2002,

“What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead”.