CHAPTER 1

forgiveness as spiritual liberation

MICHAEL BERNARD BECKWITH

Whatever liberates our spirit without giving us self-control is disastrous.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Michael Bernard Beckwith is the founder of the Agape International Spiritual Center and cofounder of the Association for Global New Thought, and of the Season for Nonviolence. As revealed in this interview, he is deeply committed to helping others break free from the patterns of violence and revenge that we have all inherited and to sparking the belief that people can change, as well as “grow, develop, and unfold.” Real forgiveness, he has said, is “giving up the hope that the past could have been any different.”

At Barack Obama’s inauguration in 2009, he said, and I’m paraphrasing, that in order to move forward, the Israelis are going to have to see things from the Palestinian point of view, and the Palestinians are going to have see things from the Israeli point of view.

This is a page out of Gandhi, and one out of Martin Luther King Jr., on real forgiveness and compassion, which means seeing things from the other person’s perspective. Oftentimes when we forgive, we hold on to our perception, and we forget that someone else has a different perception.

To me real forgiveness takes place not only when amends are made—when that sense of atonement has happened—but when I can see from the other person’s perspective.

When I was a young boy, I became a Boy Scout. One day I was walking home with a friend of mine. Suddenly, we noticed...
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a house on fire. We looked inside and saw a man who was unconscious, lying on his couch. We saw smoke everywhere, but we couldn’t wake him up. We ran down the street trying to knock on people’s doors to say, “We need to use your phone.” But people saw only these little black kids, and they didn’t want us to come into their homes. Finally, somebody said, “Wait here. I’ll call the police, and I’ll call the fire department.” And they did. Soon after, we saw the fire truck coming down the street, so we ran down to meet it. We were standing on the island, pointing to the house. A fireman came out of the truck and said to us, “Get out of the way, you little niggers!”

Just like that.

I was ten or eleven years old at the time. It hit me like a ton of bricks on my chest. We were Boy Scouts. We were wearing our uniforms. We had visions of saving this man and being recognized in some way.

When we heard those words, we were floored. We stuck around long enough to see them break down the door and bring out the man on a stretcher with an oxygen mask on his face. The fire department even saved his dogs.

At the end of the day, no one had died; the firefighters had saved the man. But I especially remember that day, because that day I quit the Boy Scouts. I never went back. I felt a little anger in me and thought that maybe there was something wrong with me. But I began a quest. It was that incident that actually helped set me on my path of deep introspection, and of being somewhat of a revolutionary and taking a stand to change society.

As the years went on, I was called to forgive this fireman. But I didn’t release the angst and the resentment that were in my belly. Then one time when I was doing some forgiveness work, the memory of that fireman “came up” again for some reason. I thought that I had already forgiven him and moved on, but evidently I hadn’t.

Suddenly, I left my body. I rose up, and I entered into the body of the fireman. I saw him, and then I heard him say those
words, “Get out of the way, you little niggers!” Of course, there was ignorance and prejudice in him, but I realized then that what had really been on his mind was, *These kids are in the way*. He was just trying to get to the fire. From his point of view, there were two little niggers, but his more pressing thought was, *I’ve got to get to the fire, and they’re in the way.*

What happened that day when I was doing the forgiveness work was that I suddenly saw something from the fireman’s perspective—and it increased my ability to be forgiving.

**Forgiveness as Practice**

Forgiveness is very powerful, and it’s necessary for our well-being. But other steps must be made, when possible, to make amends. Of course, if persons are dead or you can’t get in touch with them, you still have work to do within your own being.

It’s very powerful when something happens and you are willing to see things from the other person’s point of view, and your perception expands. That’s the birth of compassion: to walk a mile in the other person’s moccasins. But there must be a willingness to do that. Instead, people are often unwilling to do it, saying, “No, I’m right. *This* is what happened; this is my point of view. I’m going to forgive you for what you did.” In fact, you might not share my point of view, my perception, while I assume you do. I think that getting over that misunderstanding is very big in the practice of forgiveness.

Regarding forgiveness becoming a practice, I think that a person needs a practice, period. The ego is so dominant that we are always prone to be right, to understand our side of the equation. We need a spiritual practice that is constantly expanding our paradigm, our point of view, so that we’re not seeing things through the ego but through the heart of compassion, our spiritual perception.

We need a prayer practice, and we need a meditation practice. We need to practice philanthropy, generosity. We need
to practice. These things have to become a practice until they become a way of life.

**At-One-Ment**

The act of atonement, the experience of *at-one-ment*, allows you to be conscious that you’ve never really been cut off, that you’ve always been one with the only power there is. Unfortunately, though, there is a perception and an experience of being cut off from the whole, based on slights that have been done, and on the lack of making amends. This is “unforgiveness.” But when we begin doing the inner work of making amends, of self-forgiveness, and of forgiveness of others, we have the realization that *we are at one* with something that we can never really be cut off from, except in our perception.

We can think of it this way: there’s a perception that the sun sets. But actually the earth just turns on its axis; it’s only a perception that the sun is gone. In reality, it is shining on another part of the earth. It’s *all perception*.

The pain and the suffering is the story we tell ourselves. I ask people, “What is the story you are telling yourselves?” With unforgiveness the story we are telling ourselves is that we are lacking something because of something someone did or did not do. We are missing something—a story that explains the truth of who we really are and goes beyond mere perception to the truth. In reality we are always connected, even when my perception is telling me that because you did something to me, I am missing something if I am disconnected. That’s my perception; that’s my experience.

In fact, you cannot determine my destiny; only my perception can determine my destiny. When I forgive you, I take my power back. When I give you back affirmative energy for something you may have done, I own my power—and now I own my destiny. My destiny is not in the hands of what you did or did not do to me. If we accept responsibility for our actions, we
emerge out of being a victim. I’m not denying that somebody did something bad. I’m not sweeping it under the rug. I’m not letting them off the hook in any way, shape, or form. But I am allowing a bigger destiny in me to unfold. I am not a victim of what somebody did to me, or what they’ve said about me, or called me. I’m not victimized by any of that. I forgive it. I own my own power. And I move forward on my journey.

The Giving Within For-Give-Ness

To use a Christian analogy, people say that Jesus taught, “You should turn the cheek if someone smites you; you should turn the other cheek if they wrong you.” Many people interpret this as saying that if someone hits you, you should turn the other cheek and let them hit you again. I don’t think he meant that. I think he meant that you are supposed to give back a different form of energy. If you are given hate or indifference, you are to give back love, patience, and compassion. Turning the other cheek means you’re giving back another energy. If someone gives you negative energy, you give back positive, affirmative energy—such as forgiveness. If someone has done something wrong or destructive to you, you give another energy back. Instead of “giving as good as you get,” you give back a higher form of energy.

This is the giving within for-give-ness.

You should disengage then from the ego’s point of view, which is always saying that you’re right, and that as you’ve been given negative energy, so you should double it back on the other person.

This is oftentimes where nations live: in revenge.

But the practice of forgiveness is a higher state of consciousness because you’re acknowledging that someone may have done something wrong, destructive, or not life-enhancing, but you are still going to give back an affirmative energy in their direction. That is really a state of consciousness that the reptilian brain is not going to relate to!
Collective Forgiveness, Collective Atonement

I look at collective atonement from two perspectives. One is from the individual who has been victimized. For instance, when I speak to African Americans about the evils that have been heaped upon us as a race, I speak about not using that history as an excuse to not move forward. I speak about forgiveness. I speak about not severing ourselves from the energy of what has been done for us. And I speak about not looking for someone outside of ourselves to just give us something.

When I speak to the larger population, I talk about compassion, about what happened, about what can be done in the service of forgiveness—making atonement, moving forward—whether that’s affirmative action or reparations.

I have two perceptions then for two different groups of people. It’s not a blanket situation. I’ll say to myself, Don’t look for anything from anybody. This is the hand you’ve been dealt. This is what’s happened. There are glass ceilings. There is racism, bigotry, prejudice. Move forward as best you can. Take what you have and go forward, forgiving. And then to people in so-called power I say, “You have to understand what has happened, and then you have to find a way to move from the consciousness of compassion to make amends.” In other words, I don’t lump it all together.

I invite my congregation to practice forgiveness before they go to bed at night. That is, I invite them not to wait until the day they die to judge their entire life. I invite them to look at themselves on a daily basis and ask: “What mistakes did I make? Are there amends that need to be made? Did someone do me wrong? Is there some forgiveness that needs to happen?” Then, forgive themselves. That way, they’re going to bed free, clean, and clear. Unforgiveness is not piling up and creating static that prevents one from hearing the voice of God. Forgiveness becomes a way of living.

If we allow hurt and pain to pile up, we know metaphysically, from the mind-body connection, that we will be dealing
with a lack of creativity, a lack of energy, and disease, and all because we’re allowing this filter we look through to become more and more clouded.

There are many times during the year, in the Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist traditions, when you do your forgiveness through special rituals, but I think it’s very powerful to practice forgiveness and self-forgiveness every night.

**On the Journey**

When we’re stuck on our journey, lost in the forest, or trapped in the labyrinth, it’s because, generally speaking, we have done something wrong and we’re covering it up. It’s like what happens when something toxic is in our body. The body has a protective mechanism; it creates a cyst. Within the cyst is mercury or some other toxic substance that the body does not want in the bloodstream. The average person says, “I have a cyst. That’s a bad thing.” Actually a cyst is nature’s way of keeping us safe. Psychologically, we develop defensive and compulsive behaviors, coping mechanisms that keep a deep hurt from being totally felt. That way we can function, somewhat.

When we begin to develop a spiritual practice, we become stronger and stronger in the awareness that we live in a friendly universe, that God is for us and not against us. When that becomes more real to us, we start to dissolve the cyst; in other words, we start to dispel the coping and defense mechanisms, the compulsive behaviors that are sapping the energy from our natural creativity, our loving and giving selves.

The way we function in the world when we have a spiritual practice of affirmative prayer, meditation, contemplation, introspection, study, fellowship, or sacred service, is that we start to unravel our stories about being a victim, being powerless, being separated. The cysts or coping mechanisms are then no longer necessary. We become a more fully enfranchised expression of
the infinite. We have more power. We are no longer separated: we achieve at-one-ment.

**The Real Work**

The most important work we do is not the formal prayers, the meditation time. These are important, but the real work happens during the rest of the day. This is when you contemplate the content of your awareness, when you actually look at the thoughts that are emerging. You notice that very often the thoughts you have are a reflection of the everyday. But that world is an illusion; it has all kinds of decadent values, and is oftentimes a reflection of the mass ego, which is full of fear, doubt, worry, and separation.

If you are able to look at those “worldly” thoughts as they’re emerging, and you’re not resisting them, not trying to make them go away, and not getting attached to them, then you can slowly disempower them. As they lose their power, you begin to be aware of another world—a spiritual world.

If I could wax spiritual for a moment, this is the world that God sees, a world of beauty, a world of harmony.

**The Long View**

If you then step back for a moment, you find that God is still God; apple trees are still doing apples; peach trees are still doing peaches. Nothing has really changed in the world. The only thing that has changed is your perception, which has been limited. The economic system is immature, and at best it does not reflect the plenitude of the universe. You can try to bail out that system as much as you want, but it’s always going to have a hole in it, at least until it comes into harmony with the spiritual system, which we are far from at the moment.

If we look at our thoughts on a regular basis, we will see which thoughts are reflecting the worldly—and which thoughts
are reflecting our soul. When we begin to participate in the more soulful thoughts, our life begins to change. We give birth to creativity, to compassion, to patience, to love. And we give birth to forgiveness. Now these are not emotions; these are nondual qualities that are of the presence of God that is within us. So I teach people to have a definite formal time for practice, because what we do during the rest of the day is where the rubber meets the road.

The Death of the Ego

The ego doesn’t know the difference between spiritual growth and annihilation. When we have a moment of atonement, it’s like a little death. We’re actually dying to a perception that we’ve been holding on to. If we then say, “I forgive,” it really means, “I’m changing.” *I’m* changing—not the other person. The other person may have done a dastardly thing, but if I am willing to go deep within my soul to forgive that individual, then *I am changing*, not him. But we are afraid of change, afraid of transformation, because of that little death, which is really the death of our ego, our perception, and our perspective.

There’s a forgiveness story that I heard originally from the great Howard Thurman. The way I tell it and share it means it is now my story.

A man wants to forgive someone who has done him wrong. But he is having difficulty doing so—at least, he is aware of this—so before he goes to bed, he says a sincere prayer and asks for assistance with forgiveness. As the man falls asleep, he is visited by an angel. While he’s in the lucid dream state, the angel teaches him that all forgiveness is really *self*-forgiveness. He learns that forgiveness releases toxins, poison; it releases the resentment within you. When you forgive someone else, he learns, you’re really doing yourself a service.

When the man wakes up the next day, he’s more prone to forgive the man who had done him wrong. But that night when
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he’s about to go to sleep, he realizes there is still rancor in his heart. He hasn’t quite gotten there. So he prays again, “Please, Lord, I really want to know how to forgive.”

As he falls asleep, he’s visited again by the angel. This time the angel takes him out of his body and brings him to the very moment of conception of the man who had done him wrong. The angel takes him through the time line of the man’s life and shows him the conditions the man was raised under, the teachers he had, the things that happened to him, all the way up to the moment when the infraction occurred. Then the angel shows him that what this man did—the wrong he committed—was the highest and best thing he could have done. Moreover, the angel shows him that if the man could have known better, he would have done better. This was the best that he could do in that moment. Forgive him.

When the man wakes up, he realizes, “Wow—that was the best he could do. Even though it was bad. Even though he hurt people. Even though he caused me suffering. Based on his limited perception, his limited point of view, that was the best he had to offer.”

But the next night the man still has an inkling of unforgiveness lurking in him. So he gets down on his knees, and he really goes at it: “God, I really want to be released from this unforgiveness. Help me.”

Praying, he falls asleep. The angel comes for the third time and again takes him out of his body. This time the angel parts the veil of eternity, separates the veil of time and space, so that the man can see the moment when God is actually creating a soul. Then he gasps, because he sees that that man who is being created, the man who wronged him, is himself.

Behind the veil, the man can finally see that we’re all one. And so he is able to come back to the waking world with the awareness that the man who wronged him is him. All forgiveness is self-forgiveness. Finally, he is able to release the rancor, the animosity, the anger, and the resentment that were in his own heart.
The Moment of Moments
At moments, you know you are more than your biological imperatives, more than your DNA, more than what you inherited from your culture. Something about you is eternal. You begin to have that spiritual epiphany, that Aha! When that realization takes over, it can be said that you are coming into your spiritual maturity. And it is in that spiritual maturity that forgiveness has its beginnings.

Look at Rwanda. You now have people whose families were slaughtered living next door to the people who did the slaughtering. They have entered into a forgiveness pact, and they are working side by side.

We can go through the whole civil rights movement, and through the many experiences of the Dalai Lama. If one individual can rise above the limited perception of unforgiveness, it means that deep within us we all have the capacity to touch the essence of forgiveness.

The Roots of Atonement
In South Africa, Nelson Mandela invited to sit with him at a banquet a man who had urinated on him when he was in prison on Robben Island, off the coast of Cape Town. Mandela also hired his ex-jailers to act as tour guides and serve as ferry operators to and from Robben Island. With these acts he was granting forgiveness and inviting atonement. He was turning the other cheek, giving one form of energy for another.

No one would have thought it out of sorts if Mandela and others had slapped those ex-guards around the prison, or embarrassed them, or staged a war tribunal. But by forgiving them and by actually committing a positive act, he was displaying a very high state of consciousness. Likewise, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in the 1960s, kept individuals from shooting and sniping, saying, “We’re going to give love for hate. Know that our cause
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is just. We’re going to forgive and we’re going to continue to withstand the blows, and continue to love our enemy until we convert the enemy to a friend.”

In contrast, look at what happened after 9/11, at a time when everyone was showering the United States with such compassion. The president said, “We’re going to hunt them down and kill them.” Then he said, “Now go shopping.” He proffered consumerism and unforgiveness in the same breath. It was a throwback to the old cowboy movies: “We’ll circle the wagons and kill everybody.”

The high states of consciousness shown by Dr. King and Nelson Mandela raise the question of whether it helps inspire the general population when a public figure behaves in such exemplary ways. I think it’s actually a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it gives us a tremendous example; on the other, people sometimes confer a kind of specialness on these figures. They forget that they were ordinary people, too. Gandhi was an attorney; King was a twenty-six-year-old Baptist minister; Mandela, in jail for twenty-seven years, had very little education but for the books he read there. These weren’t specially anointed people. These were people who dug deep within themselves and discovered that ineffable, timeless dimension of reality, and gave it permission to come forward.

I always say then that “if they can do it, we can do it. Don’t put them way up there. Definitely acknowledge them, praise them, have a holiday.” But we lose the significance of their actions if we make them too special. What they are examples of is the possibility of forgiveness—and of atonement, because they allowed those who had mistreated them to make things right, to make some form of restitution.

Soul Force

In Gandhi’s writings, ahimsa, literally, “the avoidance of violence,” refers to a life of causing no harm, and it is the best path for learning forgiveness. It is a kind of soul force. If you
go back to New Testament scriptures, Jesus says, “Pray for those who curse you. Do good to those who spitefully use you.” He’s saying that if somebody does you wrong, do something good for that person. That is what activates your soul force. It also requires a high state of consciousness, because when somebody does you wrong you want to get them back! But that only increases the cycle of violence and the disenfranchisement from the divine source. If you can rise up then and actually forgive, you’re stepping into real spiritual power.

When enough individuals do this, the collective begins to shift. After 9/11, the president had the opportunity to lift the consciousness of the planet—and he blew his moment on stage, and as a politician, by asking for revenge. He reflected the lowest common denominator of society, which is hate, the desire to go out and get them. These may be very normal ways of being in the world, and our spiritual leaders ask us to go to a level that may not be the norm—but this higher state of forgiveness is supremely natural from a spiritual point of view.

One time when I was with James Lawson, the civil rights activist, he told me a story. He had been with Dr. King at a function, and as they were about to sit down, a man walked up and asked, “Are you Dr. King Jr.?” King answered, “Yes, I am.” And the man spat on him. Dr. King stopped, pulled out a handkerchief and wiped off the spittle, folded the handkerchief neatly, and handed it to the man saying, “I think this belongs to you.” His expanded awareness of love allowed him to choose. If he had had a limited perception, he might have struck the man—and everyone would have said, “Well, what did the guy expect? He spit on him!” But King’s expanded awareness of love, of peace, of forgiveness gave him more options. And by contrast, he showed that if you have limited awareness, you have fewer options.

The president, after 9/11, had limited perception and limited options, and so did the people he was representing. Other questions could have been asked: “Who did this? Why was this done?”
Of course, we still have to defend ourselves. No one is denying that. But we went into the wrong country! The people who attacked us came from Afghanistan, but we said, “Let’s go into Iraq!”

Forgiveness in Our Communities

Community is very important. It offers us a way to be reminded, a way to practice these spiritual principles. You take what you learn in the community and then go out into the larger world. Often the community teaches you that it’s easier to forgive somebody you don’t know than somebody you run into all the time. You’ll hold a grudge against your best friend, but a stranger you’ll forgive, for you equate what your best friend did as betrayal. In community, we’re given a wonderful opportunity to practice forgiveness. Pretty soon we’re able to say, “The world is my community.” I love what Dr. Thurman said: “It’s impossible to love humanity in general; you can only love humanity in particular.” It’s abstract to say you love humanity when you can’t love the person right next to you, or forgive the person who cut you off on the freeway. You love, in particular, the people you see every day. That’s how you love humanity: by forgiving and loving the people that you bump up against every day. It’s the friction that causes you to grow.

The Spiritual Challenge

Challenges are our spiritual liberators. They make you strong; they activate qualities in you that were lying dormant, like certain seeds in the forest that will never germinate unless there’s a fire. The shell is so hard that only the intensity of fire will break it open. There are qualities that lie dormant in us until there’s a challenge big enough to break them open. Beyond the reasons for the challenge, then, there is a redeeming value to certain challenges that make us go within.
I remember years ago speaking at a spiritual community where the congregation actually wanted me to be their minister. There was a small group, however, that didn’t want to have an African American in that position, and they demonized me, and said all manner of things that had no reality at all. They talked about race and how property values were going to go down; they said, “those people park their cars on the sidewalk.” They threw the book at me. The experience was a challenge that forced me to go down to a level of myself that I never would have plumbed if everything had been hunky-dory. What they said about me forced me to go to a level of forgiveness that made me really fall in love with these people who were calling me bad names.

Over the years, many of these people have come to me in the spirit of atonement, wanting to make amends. I had to allow them to atone for what they had said and done. In turn, I have spoken in public about the depth of love I wouldn’t have gotten to if they had first said, “Oh, we love you, Michael. Come on in.” Because of the things they said about me, the hard shell covering up the seed of forgiveness cracked in the fire, and I found depths of love in me that I never knew existed.

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Phil Cousineau conducted this interview with Michael Bernard Beckwith in Culver City, California, on January 23, 2009.