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Forgiveness – Pros and Cons

The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness was a book written by holocaust survivor, Simon Wiesenthal, some years after the end of World War II. It is his personal reflection on an incident that occurred when he was imprisoned by the Nazis in Poland.

Wiesenthal had one day been summoned away from his work detail outside the concentration camp by a nurse from a nearby hospital. She asked him to come with her to the room of a German soldier. The soldier lay dying, and had requested to talk to a Jew. A nurse led the reluctant Wiesenthal into the room, and then left him alone with a figure wrapped almost entirely in white bandages. With a weak voice, the German made a kind of confession to Wiesenthal. He told about the brutal measures his S.S. unit had taken against Jews and all the terrible atrocities that he himself had committed.

Although Wiesenthal wanted nothing more than to leave the room, the wounded man repeatedly begged him to stay. Finally the soldier revealed why he had summoned Wiesenthal. He said, "I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you. But without your answer I cannot die in peace." He asked for forgiveness from Wiesenthal for all the Jews he had killed.

Could this wounded and tormented soldier possibly understand to whom he spoke and what he asked? Wiesenthal had lost eighty-nine dear relatives to the holocaust. How could he forgive someone who participated in such shocking and heartless events?

Wiesenthal sat in silence for some time. He stared at the man's bandaged face. Finally, he stood up and left the room without saying a word. At the conclusion of *The Sunflower* Wiesenthal asks us, his readers, to put ourselves in his place. What would we have done? Would we have offered forgiveness?

While Wiesenthal's dilemma might at first seem extreme, perhaps the scenario is not entirely foreign to us. Many of us have caught ourselves wondering about the possibility of forgiveness in our lives. Should the one who has wronged us be forgiven? Is the guilty party worthy of that sort of generosity from us?

Wiesenthal's story is provocative and wise. Because while we may enter Wiesenthal's' debate about forgiveness by evaluating the worthiness of the soldier who asked for it, we must conclude the analysis by looking at Wiesenthal himself – and finally at ourselves. What and who will we be if we forgive? What and who will we be if we do not? An unwillingness to forgive will have consequences.

A wise counselor once noted that being unwilling to forgive was akin to damaging yourself from the inside out. It was like swallowing poison and waiting for the person you can't forgive to suffer. Perhaps if we will not or cannot forgive, the people most injured will be us. Bitterness can poison life.

So let's return to Wiesenthal's penetrating question and apply it to our own lives. Can we forgive?