

No One Is Coming to Forgive You

“No one is coming to save you.”

In *Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, Nathaniel Branden penned this line to remind his readers of their self-responsibility. While many of us imagine that we'll be swept away from our miseries and weaknesses by some great outside force, true rescue happens only rarely. And no rescue is effective if we are not willing to stop doing wrong and start doing right.

This sort of thing is easy for a person like me to accept – a no-brainer, even. I believe in working hard and taking responsibility. So it's no problem for me to accept that I'm responsible for my own life. But I (and other people like me) do hold on to the myth of “someone coming to save me” in other ways.

I sometimes think that someone must be coming to forgive me.

See, if you're like me, you strive for excellence – even perfection. And you're very hard on yourself when I fail. You notice the failures no one else does. You hold on to them, and you keep them as scars and reminders of imperfection. They add up like train cars, and you pull them around with you as invisible weights.

And all that time you're hoping that someone will pardon you. You hope that someone – parents, friends, coworkers, authority figures – will see the innocence and goodness in you and tell you. But if your problem is self-judgment, even a thousand pardons from elsewhere won't be enough (not that you should expect them). You have to be able to forgive yourself.

People like us don't have a hard time with self-responsibility. But we do have a hard time with self-forgiveness. How can “forgiving yourself” count? Isn't that just cheating?

The problem with this view is that no one else will probably ever know or even realize the ways you have failed. They probably wouldn't even hold against you the things you hold against yourself. No one is so invested in your life that they would think enough of your innocence or guilt to be able to forgive you. No one is omniscient enough to know all the ways you have failed (or all the ways you have tried to correct those failures). No one is going to hear your case – and even if they did, who's to say they're qualified to render a verdict?

You're certainly not omniscient, but you probably know enough about your own shortcomings to be a somewhat passable self-judge. But if you're going to be that judge, you must be able to not just pass sentence but also to pardon. What kind of legal system leaves debts and transgressions on the books forever? If you want to progress in goodness,

you have something like a duty to forgive yourself – **not simply for your emotional health but *so that* you can go on to do better things in the world.*** Dead weight guilt at some point becomes an enemy to goodness.

You must forgive yourself. And if you like, that may look very much like accepting forgiveness from somewhere else: reality (redemption is built into the nature of life itself) or God. But regardless of the language we use or **what** inspires forgiveness, you are the **who** that is responsible for accepting or self-giving that forgiveness.

Don't hold on to guilt until you're perfectly absolved by someone else. No one is coming to forgive you. It has to be you.

** A helpful and comparable idea that helped to inspire this post is psychologist Jordan Peterson's dictum to "treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping." If this holds true, you're responsible for caring for yourself in all ways a parent would care for a child – including in the case of forgiveness.*