

So on an So today I'm going to talk about a very serious subject but I thought I would lighten the mood or at least my own mood by wearing my favorite t-shirt And it is I'll show you it refers to a tradition in Chicago in the winter called dibs And those of you who know Chicago will know what that is And those of you who don't could look it up It's a very interesting I think quirky for me charming tradition Other people would I think disagree Anyway today I'm going to talk about a notion that I think is increasingly popular in our culture New age gurus and writers talk about forgiveness If you enter forgiveness into the search bar in Amazon you get over twenty thousand hits And we're told by gurus and writers in popular culture that it's healthier to forgive somebody who's hurt us than it is to hold on to the sense of victimization or vengeful grievance And this is thought to be true for people in everyday social life for sure but also especially true when it comes to families So in this context we're supposed to understand that look our parents were flawed They had their own issues And so we're supposed to come to a point of forgiving them for whatever abuse or harm we may have suffered at their hands Now I want to be clear When I talk about abuse we're talking about a range of emotional injuries that span a spectrum from parental indifference and neglect to all sorts of self-centered emotional manipulation and narcissism all the way to overt physical and verbal attacks Regardless of how we've been treated we're supposed to come to a sense of resolution that always involves forgiveness of the perpetrators Otherwise the story goes we hurt ourselves The metaphor is used it's actually I like the metaphor although not in this context the metaphor is used that it's like drinking poison and hoping the other person will die But see I want to argue that this insistence on the importance of forgiveness is well to use a technical term it's a bullshit And it's bullshit in a way that I think is harmful to those people who think that they should work on forgiving the people who have hurt them especially parents Here's the problem with forgiveness it too often reinforces what I will call a kind of toxic compliance Compliance is what happens let's say in an ordinary child-rearing context and family life Children comply with their parents abusive and painful treatment They pretty much have to because parents have an awesome authority as we know to define reality and morality for children and the child will adapt to the reality that the parents create by internalizing and psychically agreeing with the parents definition of who the child is So when parents mistreat a child the child's likely to believe that he or she deserves that mistreatment That the parent was right to act in ways So you see I'm saying children exonerate and in a sense forgive their parents all the time This exoneration and forgiveness is hardwired into I think the nature of childhood and so much it's not even conscious most of the time A famous psychoanalyst named Ronald Fairbairn once said he said a child would rather be a sinner in heaven than a saint in hell And he meant that children would rather blame themselves and forgive and even idealize parents who mistreated them rather than feel and believe that they the children are innocent and therefore that the parent was bad or had malevolent motives or otherwise was unable or unwilling to take care of the child Because children need to idealize their parents and believe that their parents were good and therefore right children in their treatment of the child So on an unconscious level at the very least we're already inclined to forgive our parents and those who mistreat us We internalize the messages that important people in our environment give us about who we are about our value whether or not we're even deserving of love and care And when love and care are not available or when the child is instead injured in some way the child believes that he or she is deserving of that as well This is what we mean by compliance and this is what the concept of forgiveness

unfortunately all too often reinforces Now I know the situation is a bit more complicated than this in that we might argue and think something like the following That mental health involves acquiring the capacity to resist internalizing negative parental messages A capacity to separate psychically as difficult as this is from abusers and be able to see clearly that the abuse is undeserved that we're basically innocent and that the badness resides in the other not in the self The process of separation and individuation and the capacity to see that the problem may well often be in the other and not in the self is part of healthy mental functioning Some people call this process forgiveness but I think that's a misnomer Understanding that the abuse comes from a problem in the other a problem that does not implicate us is healthy but it's different than forgiving the abuser Forgiving the abuser risks letting the abuser off the hook a hook of having acted in extremely harmful ways that well themselves are frankly unforgivable So let's stop forgiving those who have hurt us those who have aggrieved us in some way whether as children or adults It's often the case I know that maintaining a sense of grievance and victimization while it can be pathological can also be healthy in the sense that it's a form of fighting back against compliance By this I mean that having a clear sense of who hurt us even backing up such a sense with anger at times can be a way of counteracting our universal tendency to internalize and blame ourselves In other words sometimes feeling aggrieved and victimized is an attempt to fight back against self-blame But yes it can go too far and victimization can be used for bad purposes but it's not universally a negative trait or effort So in many ways in other words the forgiveness that we're all supposed to aspire to can be the poison that will eventually kill you