When Forgiving is a Tough Journey Worth Taking

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Prologue

Forgiving to me seemed like a generally good idea, but was not a compelling interest for me. I developed an interest in learning to forgive as a necessity. In 1996 I was carjacked. I spent a terrifying 45 minutes driving the man who carjacked me to his destination, hoping to find a way to escape. I did, by rolling out of my car at a stop light. A passing driver saw my escape and took me to the closest police station. The carjacker was captured and spent the next six years in prison. He was free before I was.

In 2001 the missing piece of my life fell into place and I enrolled in theology school. The first class I took was Forgiveness as a Healing Practice. The homework was to forgive someone. I had no illusions about why I had taken that class. My healing to that point had been substantial, but I knew there was more to go. In my view, forgiving was the next part of the journey. The result of that class was not only the gift of being able to forgive, but the tools to offer to others and a desire to making the practice more available.

This article reflects a combination of clinical theory, practical application and a few of the insights I have found powerful in learning to forgive. It examines the meaning and practice of forgiving. It pays particular attention to the yet-unspoken theological and moral constructs that inform and shape our social understanding of what it means to forgive. It is the assumption of this article that failure to consider unidentified theological and moral thinking as an influence on clinical intervention leaves the clinician and client vulnerable to beliefs that may be completely unconscious yet powerfully informative.

Secular approaches to forgiving are considered within a moral philosophical perspective and a value-neutral application of forgiving is also presented. This backdrop provides the basis for the description of the clinical approaches that are offered. It is the hope of this article that well-informed approaches to the understanding and practice of forgiveness will provide increased clarity, knowledge and both personal and clinical wisdom to mindfully engage in this process for ourselves and others. The reader is invited to have in mind an application for this information and to try on conflicting views and the practices they offer to find the best fit.

Naming the Terrain

What exactly is forgiveness and who gets to decide? It is here that the underlying influence of the Judeo-Christian perspective, how it has been understood, misunderstood, and implemented, is influential in ways that are both helpful and harmful. Exploration of that influence means examining beliefs and practices that are relevant to each faith. Unlike Christian doctrine, Judaism does not portray a God who suffered for the sins of humanity. There is no Godly example to be followed of tolerating suffering and then forgiving those who caused it. Moreover, the God of the Judaic tradition is generally more inclined to forgive repentant sinners and not forgive unrepentant ones. Judaism does not see humanity as “fallen.” As a consequence, it is within human capacity to improve and people are expected to take responsibility for their behavior. Repentance is therefore identified as a requirement for forgiveness. This is true of the divine – human relationship and in interpersonal relationships as well. It is not only the sinner who is called upon to change. Judaism also imposes an obligation to forgive the repentant wrongdoer, holding that one who is repentant is not the same person as the one who offended. Anger at this person who, by virtue of having repented, is no longer the same person, is unwarranted.¹

A call to repentance is a theme throughout the prophetic scripture of the Hebrew Bible. People are enjoined to turn from their ungodly actions and behave justly to merit God’s favor. Right action is at the heart of relationship with God and others. In Judaism Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the holiest day of the year. Rabbinic law requires those who have committed an offense against another human being to ask forgiveness. It is thought necessary to approach other humans asking to be forgiven before approaching God. One Rabbinic school of thought argues that forgiveness by God cannot be offered to one who has harmed another, only the one who has been offended can forgive the offender.

Considered in the context of Jewish communal life throughout the ages, the heart of forgiveness was the restoration of relationship.² Forgiving another benefited the community as well as the individual. Absent forgiveness, a person could be excluded from communal activities such as worship.
In a culture surrounded by communities with incompatible practices, such exclusion could be devastating to the individual and diminished the community. Christian scripture includes this understanding as well as departing from it. Jesus tells his disciples “…if your brother… sins against you seven times in the day and he turns to you seven times and says ‘I repent’ you must forgive him.” Here he clearly includes the contingency of repentance for forgiveness. Forgiveness is unlimited but not unconditional. As a Jew who was imbued with cultural mores of his day, Jesus well understood the implication of unforgiveness to an offender as well as to the community. One way of understanding his response is within this context.

How is the modern reader to understand Jesus’ teachings that clearly depart from this framework? One well-known example is the line from Matthew 6:12 commonly known as the Lord’s Prayer… “forgive us our debts as we have forgiven those who debt against us.” There is another passage from Matthew 19:34-35 where the forgiven yet unforgiving servant is punished and those who are hearing the cautionary tale are exhorted to forgive from their heart lest they too be punished. A similar warning is offered in Mark 11:25, “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” Here, while forgiveness is unilateral, it is also transactional. There is a benefit to forgiving and a price for withholding forgiveness. This same instruction is given in Luke 6:37, “…forgive, and you will be forgiven…” There was a very functional reason for most of what Jesus taught about forgiving and his teachings clearly delineate value and benefits for one who forgives.

In addition to these specific teachings, Christians are generally taught to strive to imitate Jesus. One instance named of the unconditional love that Jesus offered is his plea from the cross “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He asserted that only when the offender is regretful about the offense. He insists that repentance is required for forgiveness. His argument rests with it a reflective stance on how to live out the values of that faith.

Some times what is overlooked in the call to imitate Christ is that Jesus did not always forgive. Examples such as Jesus’ tirades against the commerce in the Temple (Jn 2:14-16) or the hypocrisy of the Jewish legal authorities who put the rule of Judaic law before its spirit (Mt 23:28) show a Jesus who demanded righteousness.

Christian theology also offers or imposes a view that forgiveness is a responsibility of people who are forgiven without meriting it, as Christians are said to be as a result of Christ’s death. It is also a Christian perspective that argues that because God reconciled with us through forgiveness that we too should forgive those who have offended us. “Just as God’s forgiveness was freely and unconditionally given, so Christians are enjoined to forgive without recourse to retribution and without waiting for repentance.”

A well-reasoned decision to practice Christianity hopefully brings with it a reflective stance on how to live out the values of that faith. A mindful choice to be guided by these ideals provides an opportunity both to benefit from the act of forgiving as well as to live out a personal value. Without reflection there is danger of an unthinking allegiance to interpretations of the Bible which call for unforeseeable achievements of forgiveness. The vast oversimplification of Christian theology offered here is for the purpose of pointing out that as unexamined individual and social influences, these beliefs can instill guilt, shame or fear in the innocent. Someone may have no interest in forgiving and believe that they should or may hold themselves accountable to the belief that because Jesus immediately forgave they should also be able to. Another roadblock to forgiving is seeing reconciliation as the required endgame, e.g., with a dangerous other. Uncovering and recontextualizing unconscious ideals allows for the possibility of an authentic choice to forgive or an informed choice about the timing or even the desirability of forgiving.

**What Do You Mean, Forgive?**

The basis for forgiving may be secular as well as religious. As pointed out by Carl E. Thoresen, Alex H.S. Harris, and Frederic Luskin, “forgiveness can be conceived as a spiritual or religious principle…or as a secularized, individualized psychosocial construct.” Being a secular construct does not necessarily divorce a values-based rationale for forgiving. For example, Gandhi’s charge that “we must be the change we wish to see in the world” is a non-religious value that argues for forgiving if one wishes to live in a forgiving world. Solomon Schimmel makes the point that one may choose to forgive to foster harmony and reconciliation in society or to encourage the forgiven sinner not to sin again.

Taking resentment to be the appropriate moral response to significant injury, however, philosopher Joram Haber argues that the very question “why should I forgive” presupposes the legitimacy of not forgiving. From his posture that resenting an offense indicates self-respect and recognition of one’s rights as a human being, Haber insists that repentance is required for forgiveness. His argument rests on two understandings of repentance. One is that it is indicative of remorse and the other is that it entails a promise not to repeat the offense. He asserts that only when the offender is regretful about the act and the impact it had on the other is such a promise meaningful. For Haber, beneficial consequences to forgiving are separate from the moral question of forgiving in the absence of repentance.

In stark contrast to Haber are words found in the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp in 1945:

O Lord, Remember not only the men and women of good will, but all those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted upon us; remember the fruits we have bought thanks to this suffering—our comradeship,
our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all of this; and when they come to judgment, let the fruits we have borne be their forgiveness.\textsuperscript{11}

The person who wrote those words was not defined by the cruelty of others. Perhaps it is the final triumph of the human spirit to find what is positive as a result of suffering and to refuse to allow the hatred of others to be one’s final legacy.

With or without repentance, what does it mean to forgive? Initial consideration of what forgiveness is begins with what it is not. Lewis B. Smedes distinguishes what forgiveness does not mean: tolerating what was wrong, forgetting what happened, excusing the person, diminishing the evil of what was done, surrendering our right to justice, or inviting someone to hurt us again. He respectfully disagrees with those who argue that the unrepentant should not be forgiven, citing both multiple benefits to one who forgives, and recognizing that forgiveness does not require providing an opportunity for the one who has caused pain to cause pain again.\textsuperscript{12} John Patton, citing Sidney and Suzanne Simon, in Forgiveness: How to Make Peace with Your Parents and Get On with Your Life, points out that forgiveness is not forgetting, excusing, condoning, minimizing or absolving.\textsuperscript{13}

An exploration of any dictionary will provide numerous distinctions between these terms and the word “forgive.” “Forgive” is defined as “to cease to feel resentment against an offender.” “Forgetting” is “to lose the remembrance of.” “Excusing” is “to try to remove blame from.” “Condoning” is overlooking voluntarily. Minimizing is “to reduce.” “Absolving” is “to set free… from the consequences of guilt.”\textsuperscript{14} Recognizing that these concepts do not mean forgiving leaves the injured person free to restore intra-psychic wholeness, and possibly interpersonal wholeness, without abandoning the value system which recognizes injustice.

Patton recognizes the problem of forgiveness as an imposed behavior: “Much of the literature on abuse makes it clear how the demands for forgiveness from those who have been victimized by family members are abuse.” While his point is well taken, he illustrates it with an article by Olio which perpetuates a misinterpretation about the task of forgiving. He quotes her argument that “those who already must struggle with the feelings of self-blame caused by the abuse, should not have to take on the further blame of not being able to forgive.”\textsuperscript{15} They are joined in this thinking by Clendenen and Martin who see unilateral forgiveness as an unfair imposition on the offended party which frees the offender from any obligation and imposes a burden on the already-injured person. For them, the prospect of forgiving without repentance is a guarantee of revictimization of one who has already been hurt.

In their concern for protection of one who is already suffering and in standing against this cost to a survivor of injustice these authors are correct. The problem comes in the assumption that forgiving unilaterally is experienced as an obligation, that the inability to forgive is a problem and that the benefit of forgiveness is only for the one who is forgiven. To understand the value of forgiveness as being only to the offender is to overlook the power of forgiving to heal the one who does it. It also is empowering to proactively engage in a self-selected task after an event which most likely entailed loss of control. This is not an argument in favor of a premature effort to forgive! To disregard the impact of an offense is a defensive strategy which an injured person may justify by pointing to an internalized but potentially harmful value system.

Underlying the inability to forgive there is a wish, a value or a demand to forgive. Absent such an expectation there is no basis for evaluating anyone relative to the capacity to forgive. It is the task of the therapist to guide the process of untangling motives and support an exploration of the needs and wishes of the client. If there is an internalized demand to forgive, exploration may facilitate its recognition and release. For such a client there may also be self-attribute of responsibility for the offending violation. Once free from unconscious demands, a wish to forgive may remain. If this is the case then grounding this wish in authentic motivation may provide an anchor for the process. Forgiving is valuable as an option, not as an imposition.

Another fallacy noted above is the assumption that unconditional forgiveness is inherently at the expense of the one who has already been injured. As an expectation it is indeed unfair and potentially harmful. Forgiving unconditionally as a healing practice or as an expression of values for one who has been injured, however, is a possibility that can lead to wholeness, restoration and empowerment.

From this perspective, the wish to feel better may also motivate forgiving. Robert Enright identifies research confirming that forgiveness lessens anxiety and depression.\textsuperscript{16} Other health and personal benefits as a result of forgiving have been established beyond dispute. “In a series of studies, McCraty, Atkinson, Tiller and Watkins demonstrated that increasing positive emotional states, compared to negative emotions (e.g., depression, anger, fear), produces improved immune competence and reduced heart rate, blood pressure, and respiratory vulnerability.”\textsuperscript{17} In addition, the self-respect that may accrue to one who has lived out a challenging personal value can lead to a significant gain in self-esteem.

Having considered what forgiveness is not, we now turn to the first of several definitions of what forgiveness is and what it entails. In writing his book, Forgiveness is a Choice, Robert Enright, relying on the thinking of Joanna North of Great Britain, offered the following definition:

\begin{quote}
When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love; as we give these, we as forgivers realize that the offender does not necessarily have a right to such gifts.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

It is this definition that is the subject of responses by other authors cited in this article. A more recent incarnation of Enright’s definition can be found on the website of his International Forgiveness Foundation: “Interpersonal forgiveness is a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who has unjustly hurt us,
Enright’s perspective is grounded in forgiveness as an act of love and allows forgiveness to be not only unconditional but also unilateral. It is in keeping with the Christian understanding of forgiveness cited previously. The clarity of the definition invites a reflective stance toward its suitability for an individual. This definition may replicate an imposed standard which has heretofore been unexamined or it may express a heartfelt intentionally held value. It makes no demand on the offender. Forgiving unconditionally is an act of personal agency. It is reliant only on the freedom of the forgiver to forgive. Forgiving unconditionally is uncontingent. Mercy cannot be earned. If it is earned it is justice.

As an unconditional choice, forgiveness is empowering to the individual who follows this path. The hazard of this definition is to the person who is misguided into denial or suppression of resentment rather than its resolution. This risk is most commonly attributed to religious professionals who are untrained as pastoral counselors. Such well-intended individuals may improperly assign an obligation to forgive to the one who is injured and compound it with an assumption that forgiving entails reconciling. To do this is an inappropriate imposition of a legitimate religious value. The outcome is the frustrating and painful effort that Patton, Olio, Clendenen and Martin warn against.

There is also in any large urban community a myriad of compassionate and well-trained religious professionals who can be valuable partners in the process of facilitating forgiveness and/or healing. The impact of childhood religion rarely ends with childhood. Many people have religiously instilled values that are locked in place, which demand adherence to beliefs and values that are impossible to live up to. Here the authority held, imbued or imputed to a minister or priest can be a source of authoritative permission to reconsider such beliefs.

Clendenen and Martin argue against use of Enright’s definition of forgiveness. They note that the International Forgiveness Institute identifies forgiveness as an interpersonal process. They then find that the role of the offender as a passive recipient of forgiveness without a requirement for a direct encounter between offender and offended places it outside the scope of the interpersonal. They designate Enright’s definition and approach to forgiveness as intrapsychic. For them: “(t)he assumption that forgiveness can occur within one’s internal feelings and attitudes alone, however, ignores the social dimensions in which forgiveness occurs within the Christian community” which allows for interpersonal as well as individual healing.

Two ironies are evident in their critique. The first is because the process they recommend for interpersonal forgiveness entails an encounter between the offender and the offended, one that is most often initiated by the injured party at the “appropriate time.” The purpose of this encounter is to face the hurt together in hopes of experiencing genuine repentance, shared forgiveness and the restoration of shared well-being. The supposition that this encounter is necessary for forgiveness risks exactly what they admonish against in opposing unilateral forgiveness. Indeed, it goes beyond the risk they warn against and directly into an encounter with hurt for the hope of a desired-yet-uncontrollable response from the offender. This approach seems to be rife with the potential for dashed hopes and the possibility of re-traumatization.

The second irony is their assertion that the Christian Gospel requires this encounter. The first element of this irony is seen in the prior Scriptural quotation that recommends forgiving before God alone. The second is that as much as the Gospels define Christianity by community, so too do they recognize the unity in the spirit of that community. It can therefore be equally argued that, from a Christian perspective, an encounter in the spirit it is just as plausible as one in the flesh with equivalent results. While this may be a fruitless point for those outside the tradition, for someone within it who wishes to forgive yet is unable or unwilling to meet with the offender, it offers a theologically supported position.

If maintaining that authentic or interpersonal forgiving requires a personal encounter, it must also be noted that the validity of anger against one who has been hurtful is not dismissed as inauthentic because it is not expressed directly to the offender. Indeed, such anger is normalized. Uncovering and expressing anger may be part of a treatment plan. A legitimate assessment is made that hurt and/or fear beget anger and that ownership and expression of anger foster healing. The same assumption is not made about forgiving. As object seeking beings that need optimal attachment, it is no less likely that we heal by owning and expressing our compassion.

Another view on forgiveness that contrasts with Enright’s is provided by Janice Abram Springs, the author of How Can I Forgive You?: The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not To. Springs does not argue from within a religious perspective, although she acknowledges distinctions between what is typically thought of as Christian forgiveness with its emphasis on empathy, humility, gratitude, and mercy as well as a Jewish understanding which focuses on justice, repentance and atonement. While both traditions embrace all of these values, it has been argued that repentance and justice are emphasized more in Judaism and forgiveness in Christianity. Springs’ approach is more consistent with the Jewish understanding she describes, with a demand for justice as a central element of forgiveness. She challenges the standard of granting unearned forgiveness as an abstract concept of saintliness that has been promulgated by forgiveness literature; one which many people feel pressured to accept despite its high cost.

Springs approaches forgiveness in a manner that is in some ways opposite to that presented above. She opposes the notions that forgiving is necessary for healing, that forgiving is the only morally and spiritually sound approach to harm done, that there are only two choices, forgive or don’t, that the responsibility to forgive is with the person who was offended, that forgiveness need not be earned, that it is natural to forgive and that people know...
how to do it. She also argues strongly that forgiveness is a joint venture between a repentant offender and the offended; it is neither unilateral nor unconditional.  

From within her framework of forgiveness as an activity between two people, Springs is particularly concerned with any effort to reconcile that does not make adequate demands on the offending party. Her term for this is “cheap forgiveness.” She offers as a definition that “It’s a compulsive, unconditional, unilateral attempt at peacemaking for which you ask nothing in return.” Additional aspects of cheap forgiveness that she names are dismissing an injury to avoid conflict, fear of retaliation, rejection or harming the offender, silencing your own voice, subjugating your needs, pretending all is well-then punishing the offender. She suggests that the person who practices this type of forgiveness is a self-sacrificer who authentically puts others first, but risks automaticity, martyrdom, and emptiness.  

The warnings Springs offers against calling this behavior “forgiveness” are well-taken. The repentance she asserts must be forthcoming from the offender frames a process that safeguards against a person engaging in self-destructive efforts to restore an equilibrium that may not have been equal to begin with. Another term for the behavior she cautions against might be appeasement. Appeasement is an attempt of one with less power to placate one with more power. It is not about balance or the restoration of justice, it is about safety. Springs’ approach is clearly preferable for the individual who has a value system that requires repentance for forgiveness. She also offers a vocabulary that may be particularly helpful for someone who does not distinguish between forgiving and trusting, ignoring, reconciling, self-sacrificing, minimizing, excusing, etc. She encourages people to heal without forgiving, heal in preparation for forgiving or use her recommendations as part of the process of forgiving. Springs provides a rich resource for the process.

**Honoring the Impact. Healing Includes Justice.**

The first step she proposes in this process is honoring the emotions resulting from the offense. This entails allowing the full impact of the event to be experienced. She names the issue of loss, of one’s sense of self, of the offender, or perhaps of a view of the world, and specifies the need to grieve for what has been lost. The relationship between mourning and forgiving is explored in depth by Karen. Karen posits that it is the effort to avoid mourning that interferes with much healing as it pertains to forgiving. The process of acceptance that Springs advocates parallels this perspective.

Recognizing the impact of anger is part of acceptance, seeing that anger may provide comfortable feelings of safety and righteousness. Enright discusses defenses that impair access to anger such as denial, suppression, regression, displacement and identification with the aggressor. Enright and Springs join together in recognizing the need to face the pain, accept it and grieve the loss.

The distinction between vengeance and justice is crucial. Springs argues that healing requires giving up the need for revenge while continuing to seek justice. She identifies the goal of revenge as seeking to crucify the offender. At a behavioral level this is true. At a motivational level there is another dynamic in play. Injury brings with it disempowerment, the loss of power. With a serious injury the sense of disempowerment is magnified. Revenge requires feeling justified in one’s anger. It acts out the emotion one legitimately feels at being hurt. As long as we feel justified in our anger then imagining actually venting it on the one who caused the pain is satisfying. It may seem that this satisfaction would be the wholeness that we seek. If this were so, then vengeance would be healing. Vengeance may sometimes be satisfying, but it can never replace what was lost hence is necessarily unsuccessful as a means of healing. What is more powerful then extracting revenge is healing the hurt that motivates it. Whether this is through a process that is called acceptance or a process that is called forgiveness, it is based on the agency of the individual. It is therefore lasting and immeasurably more empowering then revenge which relies on the capacity to harm another.

The distinction between vengeance and justice is particularly important for the person who has forgiving mixed with foregoing justice. Justice is accountability to a moral standard of behavior, usually embodied in the law. It may call for restitution as is available in civil court, or it may require that a penalty be paid with a fine or time in prison. The penalty however, is about the standard of justice that was violated. It is not about the expression of anger. It’s not personal. If justice isn’t about something bigger then ourselves, we lose the values justice represents. It is then about ourselves and our hurts. Then justice is lost in vengeance. Forgiving means foregoing vengeance, it does not mean foregoing justice. Distinguishing forgiveness from foregoing justice leaves intact the value system by which we condemn certain actions as inexcusably wrong, while leaving us free to seek healing, wholeness and possibly reconciliation.

Forgiving is also not about a lack of accountability for one’s behavior. I forgave the man who offended against me; I did not petition for his early release. Within the context of acceptance which Springs advocates, she makes the same point - acceptance does not require relinquishing justice or just punishment. Her thrust is that whether one’s personal need is to seek justice and restitution or not, acceptance requires neither; it is about freedom and well-being.

A concept similar to vengeance that may masquerade as justice is retaliation. Retaliation may be understood as inflicting harm comparable to what was inflicted to prevent the recurrence of an offence or to restore a sense of balance, power or control. Legitimate needs for safety are not met when retaliation is substituted for justice. As pointed out by Enright, retaliation may cause a greater harm then what incited it. Springs identifies it as a voice for pain that may lead to a fruitless cycle of repri-
sals and counter reprisals. It cannot bring peace or resolution. As do proponents of forgiveness as a healing process such as Luskin and Smeades, Springs cautions her reader to beware of the cost of over-investing in anger and revenge.

In her recommendation to stop obsessing about the injury and reengage with life, Springs is joined by Frederick Luskin. Luskin’s focus is on forgiveness as a road to personal peace. He describes forgiveness as:

…. the feeling of peace that emerges as you take your hurt less personally, take responsibility for how you feel, and become a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell. Forgiveness is the experience of peacefulness in the present moment. Forgiveness does not change the past, but it changes the present. Forgiveness means that even though you were wounded you chose to hurt and suffer less. Forgiveness means you become part of the solution. Forgiveness understands that hurt is a normal part of life. Forgiveness is for you and no one else. You can forgive and rejoin a relationship or forgive and never speak to that person again.

In studies designed to teach forgiveness and measure its impact, Luskin found robust results. His work was noticed by an area minister who was engaged in peacekeeping work in Northern Ireland. At his request, Luskin provided training to mothers of Northern Ireland who had lost sons to murder. The results were dramatic. Scores on how they measured their pain fell from 8.5 to about 3.5. A six month follow-up showed scores remained below 4. Depression scores also improved markedly and maintained significant improvement at 6 months.

Comparing the human mind to a television, Luskin identifies the channels we turn to all too often. Favorites include “I had Rotten Parents,” My Life was Unfair, and “My Parents Mistreated Me.” While not diminishing the magnitude of painful events, he points out that responsibility we have is in our choice of how to respond. He challenges his reader to change to a different channel. He describes the gratitude, beauty, love and forgiveness channels and offers guidance to find them.

The program Luskin offers is based on his understanding of what constitutes a grievance. The three factors are “the exaggerated taking of personal offense, the blaming of the offender for how you feel, and the creation of a grievance story.”

A grievance is created when something undesired happens to someone or something desired does not occur and the person keeps thinking about it. A grievance story is thus created. Elements of a grievance story include repetition (verbally and internally), focusing on the pain and cost of the event, including a villain, and being unable to tell the story without becoming upset. Luskin also makes the point that most of the hurts people inflict on others have nothing to do with the person on whom they are inflicted. That is, the hurtful behavior is done without the intent to hurt. It arises out of the individual causing the pain. Additionally, most forms of hurt have also been experienced by other people. Seeing the hurt as impersonally caused although personally experienced is a step in dismantling the grievance. It is not done to minimize the impact of the hurtful behavior or to dismiss the responsibility of the one who committed it.

Another tool Luskin offers is the recognition and relaxing of unenforceable rules. His focus is not on whether the rule is reasonable, it is on whether it is enforceable. Rules prescribing what other people think, do, or say are generally unenforceable. A rule may be understood as an expectation of another or of a situation. Expectation may be a prelude to blame. If an expectation is not understood as an expectation it means that a person or situation other than oneself is held responsible for the outcome. When the expectation is not met, it is not uncommon that one will attribute one’s response to the person or situation that failed to meet one’s unamed expectations. This may be seen as blaming. The other is responsible for how I feel. The legitimacy of the expectation is not at issue. Failure to meet one’s own expectations, conscious or not, realistic or not, may lead to self-blame. Social, family and personal expectations imposed during the uncritical thinking of early childhood imbues all of us with unconsidered expectations. Some are useful as part of our social fabric, others are the tools of injustice and oppression. Some expectations, for better or worse, are part of our family dynamic. Others are part of our self-understanding, governing our adaptive and maladaptive choices. Regardless, expectations leave one’s feelings at the mercy of the one upon whom they are imposed.

In Forgive for Good, Luskin teaches his reader to identify, relinquish and reconstruct rules. It is one of the skills that is at the heart of Luskin’s approach to learning to forgive. Another key skill is the positive emotion refocusing technique, a combination of breathing, redirecting focus, and from within a place of created peace, engaging in problem solving. Other practices include the breath of thanks and heart focus. Comparable heart-centered practices also demonstrate clear benefits to cognitive functioning, physical health and emotional balance.

In a parallel to extending undeserved compassion which Enright identified as a key element of forgiveness, Luskin sees development of a positive intention story as central to forgiving. Connecting or reconnecting to the positive intention one has for one’s life is a self-affirming act of power. It may entail becoming more consciously aware of one’s dreams in order to intentionally focus on moving toward them. It may mean crediting others with the positive actions they took relative to what happened. It can also include becoming the hero instead of the victim in one’s own story, telling of obstacles that were overcome and difficult choices that were made. Developing a positive intention story puts control of the narrative of one’s life back in the hands of the person who was thrown off track by a hurt.

Interpretations & Misinterpretations

As others have done, Luskin too distinguishes between forgiving and condoning unkind acts, forgetting what happened, reconciling, or giving up claims to justice or compensation. Suing and forgiving someone are contradictory unless these distinctions are made. Yet assigning responsibility for damage and blaming another person for how one experiences life are two
different things. The wrecked car still needs to be replaced, uncovered medical expenses still need to be recovered. Being angry or punitive is not required to justify suing.55

The benefits of forgiving Luskin cites are freedom from the past, being able to offer help to others by modeling forgiving, and an increased ability to accept and offer love as well as a range of other positive and beneficial emotions. Luskin also identifies a medical benefit to forgiving grudges, citing research that confirms the negative impact to the nervous system of holding a grudge and the beneficial impact to the nervous system of letting go of a grudge.56

More than the other authors cited in this article, Luskin uses a multi-faceted approach to forgiving. By including cognitive, emotional and physiological techniques, he integrates these facets of human experience into a unified process for forgiving and healing. Luskin’s value system is grounded in the well-being of the one who has been hurt by carrying a grievance. Unlike the other authors cited in this article, he does not grapple with issues such as justice or mercy. For him, forgiving is its own good.

Where Luskin’s primary concern in forgiving is healing and the well-being of the injured person, Springs provides an approach of acceptance as the road to healing. She remains committed to an understanding of forgiveness as more then personal healing. It is grounded in justice. Springs equates the cost of obsessing with many of the same costs that are elsewhere identified as the consequences of not forgiving, e.g., increased blood pressure, heart rate, anxiety, anger and depression. In this discussion her assertion is contextualized that forgiving is not necessary for emotional well-being nor for the physical benefits identified with forgiving. Working through an obsession with another person is healing, it is not forgiving.

Acceptance without forgiving includes self-protection. It is here that freedom from forgiving may be critical for someone in an abusive relationship who believes forgiving requires reconciliation. Until a distinction between forgiving and reconciling is accepted, a survivor is ill-advised to forgive unconditionally. This point is also made by Luskin who cautions against seeing forgiveness as a precursor to repairing or returning to a relationship. Returning to a relationship requires the rebuilding of trust. Trusting and forgiving are not the same thing. One of the hurdles in my process of forgiving struck me as I was reading a book for my forgiveness class. I suddenly realized that I had trusting collapsed with forgiving. In that light bulb moment of clarity I realized that I did not have to trust. To do so would have been foolish. One more door opened for me on the path of forgiving.

An influence from Christianity or its representatives, whether explicit or unspoken, informs this collapse of the meaning of forgiving with the meaning of reconciling or a suggestion of trusting. It is a distortion of Christian theology to assert that “forgiving as Christ did” requires returning to an abusive situation. That is a human version of what it means to reconcile and ignores the dangers faced by a woman who returns to an abuser. For the one facing this instilled belief, it may be pointed out that after being crucified Christ was removed from the cross, not returned to it.

While traditional Christian theology may argue that through Christ we are reconciled unconditionally to a forgiving God, it can also be argued that the God with whom we are reconciled is trustworthy, an abuser is not. While theologically we may be called on to imitate Christ and forgive, we are not called upon to make of ourselves another sacrifice.

Whether “gaining perspective” in the process of forgiving as named by Enright60 or seen as recognizing the context of the offender’s behavior in terms of his/her personal struggles in the acceptance process, seeing the offender apart from the offense is part of the journey toward restoration. In addition to humanizing the offender it may provide relief for feelings of shame and guilt that often accompany becoming a target. In seeing the other person on her/his own terms it becomes clear that the behavior was not personal, it was motivated independently of the victim. Neither shame nor guilt is warranted.61

It Isn’t Easy and You Don’t Have to Like It

Enright calls on us to widen our lens to see the offender beyond the offense. We widen our lens first to include the other person if we have had all of our focus on ourselves. More importantly, we widen it to see the humanity of the other. We first see the other person as bigger than the offense she or he committed. That can be an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. If our only experience of the other person is what they did to us, like with a stranger rape or other violent crime, we have nothing to go on about them. We know only what they did to us. We have to extrapolate from what we know about human beings.

What does that cost us? It costs us being the sole focus of our attention with regard to the hurt. It takes giving up defining ourselves exclusively in the victim role with that person. It takes giving up being “right” about that person. It moves them into position to be forgiven by seeing something about them other than the hurtfulness. Perhaps they are forgivable. That is a shift in our perception. It moves us, in our perception of ourselves, to being a person who is able to relinquish seeing only ourselves as the sufferer, to looking at someone else as human. It has nothing to do with whether the offending party deserves this. We may see ourselves as stronger because we could make this shift. We may appreciate ourselves for the willingness and work it took to do it.

We then expand the lens again. We expand it to see the other person as a product of their environment and we get specific. What was life like for that person? Again, we are not about excusing or minimizing the action. We are about seeing the person as whole, seeing who they are beyond their offense. The other person becomes more than their action. If we already knew them, this process may allow us to enter into their point of view. When we get bigger than our own point of view we can see ourselves in more complete ways. Seeing from the other’s point of view is not about excusing or justifying, it is about understanding.63

Factors that inhibit the path of human development may result in a person who is traumatizing as well as traumatized. Such ele-
ments include abandonment, mistrust, abuse, emotional deprivation, disapproval, censure and reproach leading to a feeling of personal defectiveness and social exclusion. Given the human experience, identification with an aspect of the offender’s experience may facilitate seeing that person as more human then monster. For that very reason some people may be disinclined to consider the life of the transgressor. Seeing a person only through the lens of their harmful behavior makes it easy to be dismissive, to remain self-righteous and distant.

Seeing a complex human being, one who has been hurt as well as hurtful, challenges dichotomous thinking. It requires holding both the victim and the perpetrator within the same person. To do so will challenge the defenses of an individual who has trouble owning their own aggressive impulses. It is easier to feel compassion or to forgive a human being, one who may be seen as capable of doing good as well as harm, than it is to forgive a monster who is capable of only being hurtful. As noted by Springs, “You can know with certainty that what he did to you was wrong, yet be touched by whatever hardships he has personally endured.”

What happens in the process of humanizing is that the person gets separated from the behavior. The person is forgivable, the action is not acceptable. The action for which the person needs to be forgiven is over. The impact it had takes time to get over, but the action itself does not persist in time, it ended when it ended. It is the person who persists in time and is responsible for the action. An action doesn’t have responsibility for itself; the person who did it has responsibility. There has to be responsibility for there to be a subject for forgiveness. There has to be a choice. We don’t forgive volcanoes for exploding and we don’t forgive floods for the damage they cause. They have neither choice nor responsibility. In forgiving, the unacceptable action remains what it was; we change our story about the person responsible for the action.\(^6\)

Seeing the other as human, and as not so “other” is the work I found most disturbing in my process of forgiving. It called on me to give up being right, being better than the carjacker was. It meant I had to see him as fully human. I did it both because I wanted to forgive for moral reasons and because I wanted the benefit of healing. It was a difficult task to give up judging. I was aided in this process by my clinical training. I knew that to judge I had to hold an internal construct of the person I knew only through the pain he had caused me. This was counterproductive to my dual commitment to forgive and to heal. The price of freedom was giving up the judgment that held the construct in place.

It is important not to misinterpret this shift in perspective as meaning that the action of the other became excusable or justified. I make no such claim, quite the opposite. What can be excused or justified need not be forgiven. To see the humanness of the other meant for me seeing more about him than the pain he had caused me. It meant considering him as a product of his circumstances, how he may have become who he was. In this too I was aided by my understanding of human development, how neglect and abuse beget the distortion of humanity that makes it possible to see another person only as an object. It required a shift of my attention from myself and the suffering he had caused me to him and the suffering he endured that led to him being a person who could intentionally commit serious harm. I had to get bigger than my judgment, bigger than how right I was about what he had done to me. I had to see him in a way that he had been unable to see me.

As Enright describes, this was the point when I gave up seeing only “the offender” and started seeing another human being. I separated the offense from the offender. That was, for me, the beginning of the possibility of compassion. Just as I no longer defined myself as his victim, I no longer defined him by his behavior. I saw a human being with a serious problem who inflicted that on others. Judging him no longer occurs to me. I do not wish to invest my energy there. I can judge his behavior without judging him.

Recognizing that an offender may have endured abuse can engange compassion for the child who became the offender. It was not, however, the child who committed the offense. It was the adult who committed the harm, regardless of the nature of childhood experience. It is impossible to calculate the number of people who experienced terrible childhood abuse without becoming abusers or offenders. The distinction between excusing and forgiving, as discussed previously, become important here. Excuses are not a substitute for accountability.

The Power Of Your Story

In Springs’ schema the intermediate steps to acceptance identified above call for the injured party to look at their own responsibility in being hurt and to challenge false assumptions about what actually happened. Honest self-examination may require stripping away protective layers of self-righteousness or imagined virtue, recognizing that being angry does not mean being wronged. Springs challenges her reader to look at their own behaviors, distortions, personality, vulnerabilities, and circumstances that may lead to erroneous blaming or an exaggerated sense of injury.\(^6\)

She also reminds us that we each have some choice and responsibility in the story we tell about ourselves, our lives, the offender and the offense. Beginning with an invitation to re-write one’s “I am an abused person story,” Springs recognizes the predilection toward seeing and proclaiming our own innocence and status as a victim. Explaining rather then excusing this tendency, Springs notes those who too easily remember hurts, and exploitive, disappointing relationships and people. Whether born of negativity, passivity, cognition, or personal experiences, it is a way of living or viewing life with a price. It also, however, has a payoff. It allows a distorted perception of self as only a good and innocent victim, justified in blaming others.\(^7\) In her challenge to the temptation to see oneself only as a victim she is identical to Luskin. His approach to deconstructing the grievance story described previously entails taking oneself out of the victim role. He points out the multiple cognitive errors contribute to the difficulty of accepting, healing or forgiving. The dichotomous thinking referenced above, personalizing the impersonal, and false attribution of meaning are among the habits that slow down the process.

Springs offers more of a description of forgiveness then a definition. Her term is “Genuine Forgiveness.” Springs believes that the essence of forgiveness is relational; it cannot be accomplished in isolation. It is a joint venture between the offender and the offended, one that is conditional and contingent on the offender repenting, making restitution for harm done. The of-
The picture is of a small child running down already forgiven what another person calls unforgivable. It is not about the offense or even the offender owns the transgression and will not repeat it; the offender lets it go.72

For the person who embraces unconditional forgiving as a moral, religious, spiritual or personal ideal, or who wishes to forgive without an encounter with the offender, Springs’ “Genuine Forgiveness” approach will be incomplete. Care to distinguish forgiving from trusting, forgetting, reconciling, minimizing etc. will still be necessary. The steps she offers for acceptance remain a valuable resource.

The distinction between an externally imposed moral value demanding forgiveness and a possibility for healing, empowerment and an authentic living out of deeply held values is critical. As one who has been injured, I am free to seek to forgive for faith-based reasons, for secular values-based reason, or because I wish to increase my well-being. That is mine to choose. With my choice comes the result of the path I have taken.

Looking at the relationship between choice and forgiveness, Patton cites Simons arguing that: “…..Failure to forgive is not a failure of will. Instead, people are unable to forgive because wounds have not yet healed. Forgiveness is not something done (i.e., a behavior)” (emphasis mine).73 To assert that healing may need to come first artificially separates forgiveness from healing when in fact the two may co-exist and indeed facilitate each other. It also assumes that forgiveness is a prematurely imposed or accepted burden, which is contradictory to both forgiving and healing. When the care or well-being of an individual is sacrificed in the name of an ideal, that is not forgiveness, it is abuse.

To assert that forgiveness is not a behavior is another form of disempowerment to the one who has been injured. It denies the agency of that person to intentionally engage in the process of forgiving, increasing the powerlessness of one who has already experienced disempowerment. Empowerment also demands that the choice to forgive belongs with the injured party. Of equal importance is that the choice not to forgive also belongs with the injured party. An imposed value that mandates forgiving is a violation. A freely chosen value to be forgiving provides inspiration, encouragement and courage to live out that value. It becomes the role of the clinician to assist in negotiating the sometimes-treacherous waters of distinguishing between the two.

Unforgivable?

Some offenses are so horrific as to raise questions about whether they can be forgiven. To this legitimate concern two responses are offered. The first is a distinction between the offender and the offense. This difference is discussed previously and will not be repeated here. The other response is that the desire or willingness of a person to forgive is not the measure of whether a person is forgivable. Confusion of an unforgivable offense with the inability to forgive is a common tendency. It is not about the offense or even the offender. It is about a lack of motivation to forgive. It is also possible that people call an offense “unforgivable” because they don’t know how to forgive. Someone with the same experience has already forgiven what another person calls unforgivable.74 As discussed above, there are many reasons it may be easier to say that an offense or person is unforgivable than to face the pain of giving up defenses.

The passionate blaming anger of one who has been grievously hurt is not a standard of who can and cannot be forgiven. It is a measure of that person’s readiness or willingness to consider forgiveness. Unwillingness to forgive is not an indicator of whether redemption is possible for another human being. Choices to forgive made by survivors of atrocities of the concentration camps and Nelson Mandela’s choice to forgive after years of imprisonment argue that forgiveness may be possible in the worst of circumstances. There are other arguments to be made as well.

One notable story of forgiveness in the face of atrocity is of the subject of one of the most horrifying photographs to come out of the war in Vietnam. Robert Karen tells this story in his book, The Forgiving Self: The picture is of a small child running down a road naked after a napalm bomb was dropped on her village. Her clothes were burned off, her body scorched, and her face was filled with terror and pain. Twenty-four years later that girl, Pham Thi Kim Phuc, stood on a stage as a speaker at a Veteran’s Day observance. Her audience included John Plummer, the pilot who had dropped that bomb. He saw her picture in Stars and Stripes the day after the raid. The reality of what he had done tormented him for many years. Plummer had heard that Kim would be speaking that day, not far from where he lived. He stood in the audience and heard her say, “If I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him we cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present…”

Plummer sent her a note telling her “I am that man.” He pushed his way to her and she opened her arms to him. He fell sobbing into her arms, able to say only “I am sorry, I am just so sorry.” Kim’s immediate response was “It’s all right. I forgive. I forgive.” Karen followed up several years later and found Kim had just been to visit Plummer.75 How then does one determine what “unforgivable” means? Perhaps it is not about the offense or even the offender. Perhaps it is about the one who is called upon to forgive.

McCullough, Sandage, and Worthington describe Simon Wiesenthal’s book, Sunflower, in which he tells the painful and powerful story of a dying Nazi who asks Wiesenthal to forgive him for his atrocity against other Jews so he can die in peace. Wiesenthal wrestled with himself and left without forgiving. What he did do years later was ask thirty-two men and women from the arenas of law, religion, literature and diplomacy what they thought of the dying request of the Nazi and his own moral dilemma. The responses he received were mixed. He received affirmation that he had made the only choice open to him and he received letters saying that it would have been the right thing to do to forgive.76

Contrast this with the story of Corrie ten Boom. Corrie, with her sister, was a concentration camp prisoner during WWII. One of the guards from that very camp heard Corrie preach about God’s forgiveness in a German church after the war was over. He approached her and asked her for forgiveness on behalf of all those whom he had hurt in that camp. Corrie was loath to forgive. She
did not feel able, she did not want to. Yet she did forgive him. Acting on pure faith, she extended her hand to him. In that moment she felt a rush of energy radiating down her arm and she burst out “I forgive you, brother! I forgive you with all my heart.” What had happened that transformed her response from an inner “no” to a heartfelt “yes!”? Corrie had recognized her own need for forgiveness. She did not measure the magnitude of her offenses against his. She found the common ground and standing in that place of shared humanity, she forgave. Was she wrong? Who has the authority to say so? Certainly not someone who has never been confronted with the magnitude of atrocity she experienced. Just as Wiesenthal decided he had no right to forgive for anyone else, so it seems parallel to suggest that no one has the right to tell someone else they cannot forgive for others if they have shared common suffering.

What is the difference between the course taken by Wiesenthal and ten Boom? Perhaps it is simply that each person was true to him/herself, to the value system each embraced. As noted by Springs, the justice that informed Wiesenthal’s choice not to forgive on behalf of others is more within a Jewish framework. The unmerited forgiveness extended by ten Boom is more in keeping with her Christian belief system. Could they both be right?

Forgiving Inherited and Systematic Atrocities

What about forgiving those who caused inherited hurts? Do the offspring of the survivors of Hitler’s Germany have the moral standing to forgive those who harmed their parents and grandparents? The phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of trauma would suggest that there is plenty to forgive from one who was not a direct victim of the Nazis.

Who might be forgiven? Unknown guards? Nazis in general? The amorphous mass of German people? Transgressors are not thought of individually, nor is it a single individual that they harmed. If trauma can be experienced as an indirect impact of atrocity, what of forgiveness as a secondary process as well? What about forgiving the successive generations of those who caused devastating harm? Do those generations who did nothing stand in need of forgiveness? What of the pain they unjustly bear? Might not forgiveness heal the innocent inheritors of the story? The process of secondary forgiveness speaks to these questions: Being part of a community that was harmed may confer the right to forgive, just as being part of a community that did harm may confer the standing to confess and atone.

“Those who want to go forward together need to walk through their histories together.” Perhaps nowhere has this principle been as powerfully implemented as by the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. Escaping vengeance after the end of apartheid, Nelson Mandela led his party, the African National Congress, to negotiate with the National Party rather than perpetuate violence. The National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would listen to the truth, honor the victims, and grant amnesty to those who committed grave human rights violations, including murder, kidnapping and torture, provided that such acts were politically motivated and the perpetrators told the complete truth surrounding the acts.

Much controversy surrounds the work of the TRC. One criticism was that it was the dominating presence of Archbishop Desmond Tutu that impelled the seemingly spontaneous expressions of forgiveness. Some felt there should have been far more recognition of the anger of victims and their families. Others felt there was pressure on victims to forgive without parallel pressure on perpetrators to make statements of contrition. What is not questioned is the impact of public testimony of victims and survivors. Denial could not withstand the enormity of truth telling. Parallel to the distinction made between interpersonal forgiveness and relinquishing justice was the feeling among many South Africans that punishment and amnesty were not mutually exclusive. Mercy need not eliminate consequences.

Is there a price to not forgiving? In addressing this question Springs again challenges her readers to look at their side of the street. Springs identifies two primary forms of refusing to forgive. The first is aggression, which she describes in terms that echo the description of retaliation offered above. It entails making the offender the object of one’s righteous rage, inflicting punishment and restoring balance. The other form is detachment with its contemptuous indifference. Anger is not negotiable either way.

She unpacks the reasons people do not forgive, distinguishing between a short-term reaction, a personality characteristic and a learned behavior. A long term pattern may be based on a personality trait, on a negative view of forgiveness or could be a learned behavior. Springs points out two personality types who are disinclined to forgive, the narcissist and the type A personality. Feeling wronged, the narcissist sees no alternative to shoring up precarious and contingent self-esteem except retribution. The choices of acceptance and forgiveness are not on the radar screen. A person with type A personality is inclined, among other things, toward blaming, defensiveness and hostility. There is a lack of the self-reflection that allows consideration of one’s own role in a situation or recognition of honest regret on the part of the offending party.

There are three payoffs and three costs Springs identifies to not forgiving. The payoffs are feelings of invulnerability, justification in one’s mind for blaming the other and feelings of aliveness and elation. These advantages might be sweeter if it were not for the costs that come with them: cutting off dialogue and the possibility of resolution, cutting off the opportunity for growth that comes from replacing blame with self-examination and the emotional, relational and physical price of anger and blame. Increased blood pressure, a compromised immune system, and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease are among the consequences she points out for refusing to forgive. Springs advocates the harder but healthier alternative of making peace with one’s self and fully engaging in the joy of living.
Relational Forgiveness: Framing the Process

Enright and Springs share common ground in seeing forgiveness as a relational activity. Unlike Springs, however, Enright does not demand repentance from the offender nor a personal encounter between the two. He does insist that while forgiving results in benefit for the forgiver, it is at its heart a relational activity and must have the offender as its object. Without this it loses its moral component, which is based in good intentions toward others, and includes mercy as a moral stance. Forgiveness is more than giving up anger at the other. That can be done without forgiving. Forgiveness extends something to the other person. It is grounded in a moral value, and it has personal benefits.87

Enright believes development of compassion for the offender is a necessary component of forgiveness to insure one has protection from anger or blame after one has moved beyond them in the healing process.88 I diverge slightly from Enright in my thinking about what is extended to the person who is forgiven. Extending compassion or goodwill as an endpoint may be applicable where there is a beneficial relationship outside of the offense. This may not lead to reconciliation, but it may leave a feeling of wholeness with the other. Where the hurt was inflicted by a stranger, or the hurt is the dominating factor in the relationship, then simply recognizing the humanity of the other with understanding strikes me as forgiving. More than healing has occurred, the humanity of the other is rehabilitated in the eyes of the one who was hurt.

It is here that arguments made above about the viability of intrapsychic forgiveness with an interpersonal direction are salient. As has been evident, my bias is in favor of the legitimacy of unconditional and unilateral forgiving. It is an unfair imposition to assert that one has not forgiven unless there has been an encounter and repentance. Ultimately, only the one forgiving can know whether compassion or an extension of good will toward another has been offered.

A morally grounded, psychologically savvy process of forgiving is provided in Enright’s book, Forgiveness is a Choice. Enright describes a four phase process for forgiving. The phases are uncovering, decision, work and release.89 The first phase involves counting the cost of the harm that was done. The starting point is to recognize what happened and the impact it’s had. What are we forgiving? It is not just a person that we’re forgiving, it is the consequences of that person’s act. What was the cost? Looking at the impact of the event means we are the focus of our attention, and our perspective is that we are the injured party. It’s an important experience, time for recognizing what was done to us. It’s essential to the process of forgiveness. It’s quite the opposite of suppression or ignoring the wrong that was done us. If we have any attention on the offender, it’s to see what she or he did to us.

With its attention to the impact of the harm done, Enright’s model contains parallels to Karen’s insights about the necessity of mourning in order to forgive. For some people mourning is an accepted practice. It may have been normalized by the culture or community of youth. In this country, synagogue or church may have been that culture. As the prominence of organized religion has receded over the last several decades, the resources for mourning provided by such communities have been diminished.

Professional psychotherapists have been said to serve as replacements for what was once provided by family, friends and community, including that of synagogue and church. The secularization of healing has unfortunately brought with it a loss of resources originating with religion. One such resource is the Psalms of lament. Religious faith is not required to appreciate poetry of religious origin, although for someone who embraces Judaism or Christianity these Psalms may be familiar and possibly comforting.

A worthy guide to this approach to mourning is Rachel’s Cry. Authors Billman and Migliore confirm the need to fully express the cost, the grief, the rage, the pain of that which gives rise to the lament. They offer lament as a legitimate expression of human suffering and as an expression of or avenue toward hope. Billman and Migliore validate Enright’s process in recognizing the need for an expression of the emotional impact of an event before one can consider forgiving, pointing out that short-circuiting the process may be harmful rather than hastening its completion.88 Both books include in their descriptive subtitles a key concept for both forgiveness and lament, the restoration or rebirth of hope.

The second phase of Enright’s approach is the decision phase. Like Springs assertion above that refusing to forgive entails a cost, Enright sees the cost of continued focus on the injury or the offender as perpetuating suffering. The value of forgiving as a means to heal is recognized, and the individual makes a decision to forgive. The cognitive aspect of this process is giving up vengeful feeling, thoughts or intentions. The third phase, work, has been discussed in part previously as looking beyond the offense to the offender. There is another critical element to this phase. It is accepting the pain that resulted from the actions of the offended. It was unjust, unwarranted, and is no longer blamed on the one who caused it.90 91

This phase calls for some of the healing behaviors identified by Springs as part of acceptance. It means giving up being right about what the offender did and how badly you were hurt. It means giving up the story of abuse, giving up righteousness, justification for feelings, etc. What happened, happened. It is here that bumper sticker wisdom begins: “Forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past.” The assumption that undoing the past would give rise to a better present is traded in for the recognition that railing against what happened will not undo it and that hope lies in accepting and rising above it. A vital future cannot be created on complaints about the past, however justified. The first step is to give up the investment in it. Give up the feelings of invulnerability, aliveness, elation and the justification in one’s own mind for blaming the other.92

Distinguishing what forgiveness is and what it is not and deciding to forgive is part of the second step for Enright.94 It may be impossible to forgive if forgiveness seems to mean trusting, excusing, foregoing justice, or putting oneself in a position to be hurt again. Finding out what forgiveness
means to the client may open the door to healing for that person. It behooves us as therapists to clarify not only what our own beliefs are about forgiveness, but how we use specific terms and how they may be understood or misinterpreted by others. To be aware of our own use of language allows us to clarify meanings with our client. For example, to me, reconciliation is a powerfully positive word. To my client it means letting her abusive husband have a second chance to kill her. I need to find out what a word means to my client before I introduce a term that she will hear through the filter her life has taught her to have.

The final phase of Enright’s process is in gaining relief from the process of forgiving. It may entail finding meaning in the suffering one has experienced, in an increase of compassion for oneself and others, to a new purpose in life. It is here that the paradox of forgiving is found, that in giving the gifts of mercy, generosity and moral love, that healing occurs. Healing is not separated from the offering of these gifts.

Another religiously oriented approach to healing is lectio divina, meditating on sacred Scripture. This is a four step practice. The first is reading Scripture with the eyes of the heart. Second is meditating on a verse or section that resonates as holding something. Next is allowing oneself to be open to and touched by the presence of the divine. Last is contemplation, resting in the divine presence. This specifically Christian practice lends itself to other spiritual paths as well. Father Thomas Keating is a contemporary proponent of this practice. He elaborates on it poetically on his website http://centeringprayer.com/lectio.htm.

The skill of re-regulation can be developed and practiced by anyone seeking to forgive and/or heal. They can be employed as an alternative to moments of distress or proactively to diminish the long term effect of chronic stress. Several of the activities described above are definitively linked to both emotional and physiological benefits; a few others shall be briefly presented here. The first one that comes to mind is the relaxation response identified by Dr. Herbert Benson, now of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. The essence of the relaxation response is to keep relaxed attention focused on a word or phrase while breathing. This technique can be adapted to the religious, spiritual and cultural preferences of the individual as well as being used in a secular manner. Physiological benefits such as a decrease in high blood pressure are well established. For elaboration, see Benson’s book, The Relaxation Response or go to the website of the Institute at http://www.mbmi.org/basics/whatis_response_elicitation.asp.

If physiological arousal is caused by an event being considered for forgiveness, practices which diminish the effect of the event, such as the relaxation response, facilitate healing. As arousal associated with the event diminishes, so too may the effort involved in forgiving. For clients with an expressly religious or spiritual orientation, the practice of centering prayer may be of interest. Essentially, the practice calls for sitting quietly with one’s attention inward. A word or phrase of a suitable religious or spiritual nature is selected. This then becomes the touch point to use in re-centering oneself when the attention wanders. The idea is to journey deeper inside to the divine presence.

Another simple exercise is simply breathing in and out through the “heart space.” This practice improves heart rate variance, an attribute of health heart functioning. For purposes of forgiving, it enhances the functioning of multiple systems which may have been stressed by prolonged arousal. The impact of music on the brain and the impact on the brain of entraining brainwave frequencies have been studied over the last ten to fifteen years. Just as two tuning forks will resonate together when only one has been tapped, so too will the human brain respond to the frequencies it is exposed to. The implication of this for the work of forgiveness is the potential for the brain to be invited into a state of deep relaxation with no effort on the part of the listener. This fosters de-escalation of the nervous system. A website with detailed explanations and resources is www.brainsync.com. For a description of the impact of music on the brain and similar benefits of “brainwave coherence” the reader is invited to look at www.hemisync.com. As with any intervention that impacts the brain, e.g., EMDR, caution must be exercised to respect neurological implications for any client.

Another established practice for emotional well-being is mindfulness, popularized by John Cabbott Zinn’s book Full Catastrophe Living and explored within a Buddhist framework by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Thich Nhat Hanh describes the practice of mindfulness as being “alive and present.” As a practice that calls for full attention in the present moment, mindfulness disrupts the mental process of a grievance story. The effectiveness of mindfulness to emotional healing was described by an experienced out-patient social worker at a local hospital. Describing her patient as having suffered significantly due to severe abuse, she was not hopeful that significant relief was possible for chronic symptoms. This clinician was surprised and delighted when her client demonstrated substantial improvement after participation in a mindfulness training program. Additional benefits of mindfulness for the therapeutic process are identified by psychologist David Wallin.

The significance of an approach that addresses the physiological, psychological and spiritual consequences of trauma is presented by...
psychoneuroimmunologist Judith Swack in her model of treatment called Healing from the Body Level Up. She uses this approach, which includes energy psychology, to respond to the totality of the individual’s experience:

“It’s impossible to completely forgive someone who has traumatized you without using the appropriate techniques for healing trauma at the body level, the unconscious level, the conscious level, and the soul level. Forgiveness of yourself, others, and God requires that you clear all negative emotions and limiting beliefs associated with every trauma including the feelings, “It’s my fault because...”, “It’s other people’s fault because...”, and “It’s God’s fault because...”… When the trauma imprint is completely healed, people experience true forgiveness, signaling that the healing is complete.”

Thus far, attention in this article has been on the implicit and explicit influence of Judeo-Christian beliefs and values in understanding forgiveness. There are certainly understandings in other world religions to inform our thinking about forgiveness. The prevalent value in the Hinduism practiced by Gandhi is ahamsha, literally, non-injury. In practice this extends to the non-injury of the human spirit and may be understood as including forgiveness.

Buddhism is imbued with the same emphasis on peaceful living. Thich Nhat Hanh, who founded the contemporary Engaged Buddhism movement, is grounded in fundamental Buddhist values such as compassion and nonviolence. Perhaps the most prominent contemporary practitioner of Buddhism, the Dalai Lama spoke these words in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace prize: “…I believe the prize is a recognition of the true value of altruism, love, compassion, and nonviolence which I try to practice, in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha….”

Islam speaks about two aspects of forgiveness, Allah’s forgiveness, and human forgiveness. Multiple names in the Qur’an highlight the forgiving nature of Allah. Allah subhanahu wa ta’ala is the most Forgiving. Al-Tawwab is the Acceptor of Repentance. The word “tawwab” gives the sense of “oft-returning” which means that Allah again and again accepts the repentance. The Qur’an also teaches that it is necessary to base human relations on forgiveness. Believers are identified as “those who avoid major sins and acts of indecencies and when they are angry they forgive” (al-Shura 42:37). In one of the prayers that the Mohammad taught, he said, “O Allah, You are most Forgiving One, You love to forgive, so forgive me” (reported by al-Trimiudhi and Ibn Majah). Islam emphasizes mercy, kindness and love. Justice, law and order are necessary for the maintenance of a social order, but there is also a need for forgiveness to heal the wounds and to restore good relations between the people.

The Afro-Caribbean religion of Lukumi/Yoruba considers forgiveness to be necessary for one’s own well-being. Understanding that being negative attracts negative energy, Ola mi odo, a priest of the Lukumi/Yoruba, recommends forgiving to avoid being trapped in a circle of anger and hate. A benefit to global consciousness is loosely recognized as a worthwhile outcome but is not a compelling reason to forgive. These teachings offer encouragement to an adherent of any of the above paths to engage in the practice of forgiveness.

At this point, the work of self-forgiveness may overlap with that of the person who is motivated by a desire to feel better, to restore a sense of inner wholeness. Either may encounter feelings of shame, guilt, unworthiness, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and the like. Identifying specific issues allows them to be addressed directly. Defensive strategies such as denial may come into play. The role of the therapist may be to see the person separate from the offense, especially if it has become self-defining. It is as easy to develop a story about what a terrible person one is as it is to develop a story about oneself as a victim. It may be that a story about how awful one is can be deconstructed just as a story about oneself as victim can be. Other interventions identified above also have application. For a thorough treatment of the issues of repentance and forgiveness the reader is referred to On Apology by Aaron Lazar and Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness by Solomon Schimmel. Both of these books do justice to a topic barely touched upon here.
While many writers offer strongly held and well-reasoned positions about the issues identified above, the reality is that every one makes a choice, with varying degrees of freedom, reflection, and information, about what it means to forgive. What may be a more useful frame for thinking about forgiveness then the definition is whether the consciously considered value system of the one forgiving has been satisfied.

Clearly, I have biases. The first is that it is the prerogative of the individual to determine if forgiveness can or should be done unilaterally, unconditionally or at all. Ideally such a choice is based on freedom and reflection. A second bias is inherent in the first, that it does not require repentance or interaction for a legitimate act of forgiveness to be realized. I rely here on the agency of the individual and that individual’s right to make this determination, as well as on the idea that forgiveness is as valid as anger is whether or not they are expressed to their subject. A third bias, perhaps less explicit, is also held. It is that forgiving is a values-based activity. It includes a posture toward the offender of relinquishing anger, blame and judgment without relinquishing justice, accountability or responsibility. It may also include a stance of compassion. It may be based in a religious value or a secular morally grounded value.

Forgiving for the sole purpose of healing is a legitimate reason to engage in the work. It is not however a relational activity and must ultimately be joined by the posture above to be other then healing. Healing is a moral good. It allows the full re-engagement of an injured individual with life and brings with it the capacity to participate in activities that benefit others and therefore the whole of humanity.

Each of the books I have cited in this article is a valuable resource for learning about and practicing forgiveness. The professional version of Enright’s book with Richard Fitzgibbon’s is Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope. The book Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope, cited most often in the article, is designed for the lay public and is very accessible. For the person who approaches forgiving as an ethical issue, or simply needs a place to start, it is an excellent book. The in-depth analysis of the forgiving or non-forgetting self offered by Janice Abram Springs provides a rich resource that supports and challenges her reader. Her option to accept and heal without forgiving also makes this an important book for anyone not interested in or ready to consider forgiving. Regardless of one’s moral stance about forgiving, How Can I Forgive You?: The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not To is valuable. Frederick Luskin offers a compendium of healing techniques far richer then could be presented in this article. His chapter on how to become a more forgiving person has not even been touched on here. The documented effectiveness of his approach in Forgiving for Good: A PROVEN Prescription for Health and Happiness speaks for itself. Some of the techniques he presents for forgiving have implications for well-being far beyond those directly associated with it.

Four websites that I commend to your exploration are the International Forgiveness Institute at http://www.forgiveness-institute.org/index.htm, The Institute of HeartMath® at http://www.heartmath.org/, The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society at http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree.html, and Healing from the Body Level Up website is the site of the paper from which the synopsis of the impact of prolonged stress on the nervous was derived. The paper can be found at http://www.jaswack.com/Biochemistry.php.

It is possible that positions or views presented in this article were not to the liking of some readers. Some information may not have seemed sensitive. Other material may have downright grated. Where that is the case, I invite you to use the information in this article to engage in an exercise about forgiving (or not). You might explore the values that inform your approach to forgiving, and whether you would wish to forgive, why or why not. You might look at beliefs you have that were not upheld here, your posture with regard to accepting or forgiving (or not), whether there is any investment in a way of seeing things that supports your point of view, and, if you find this to be a useful exercise, what activities you might engage in toward your preferred outcome. If nothing was disagreeable to you, consider practicing on a relatively minor issue before moving on to one with greater significance.

We sometimes simply favor a position, call it right, and then supply a rationale for that position. The rationale is generally more sophisticated than “I just like it” or “it resonates with me.” When there are multiple conflicting arguments from highly regarded authoritative sources we can
be left uncertain. It is here that our obligation as clinicians enters in. Only in becoming reflective and self-aware can we identify the biases, both conscious and unconscious, that inform our work. Our responsibility is to then use that understanding in a manner that facilitates the client’s own understanding and healing, and maybe then, the healing of the world.

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**Endnotes**

9. This article relies on the translation “debts” rather than the more popular “trespasses” because it is closer to the Greek that was initially used in the writing of the Gospels. (Personal conversation with Matthew Boulton, Professor of Preaching, Andover Newton Theology School, 2002)
10. NRSV Lk 17:3-4.
11. NRSV Lk 17:3-4.
18. Ibid., p56.
20. Ibid., p15.
22. Ibid., p35.
23. Ibid., p56.
25. Ibid., p16.
31. Ibid., p16.
32. Ibid., p56.
35. Ibid., p21.
36. Ibid., p16.
37. Ibid., p56.
38. Ibid., p56.
Endnotes continued

40 Ibid., p58.
43 Ibid., p94-100.
44 Ibid., p112.
46 Ibid., pxi.
48 Ibid., p13,17,19.
49 Ibid., p48-50.
50 Ibid., p58-59.
51 Ibid., p116-117, 120.
53 Ibid., p141.
54 Ibid., p145.
55 Ibid., p75.
56 Ibid., p78.
58 Ibid., p65.
63 Ibid., p151.
65 Ibid., p72.
66 Ibid., p72.
70 Ibid., p77.
80 Michael E. McCullough, Steven Sandage, Everett L. Worthington, To Forgive is Human: How to Put Your Past In the Past (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1997) 221-223.
82 Ibid., p.87-88.
86 Ibid., p49.
88 Ibid., p.83.
89 Ibid., p78.
90 Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel Migliore, Rachel’s Cry: Prayers of Lament and Rebirth of Hope (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999), 80, 2, 84, 83,89, 14, 20, 77-78, 80, 135.
**Endnotes continued**


95 Ibid., p167.


101 Personal conversation.


103 Personal communication, January 12, 2008.

104 http://www.dlsdq.org/teachings/ahimsa.htm

105 (http://www.spiritual-endeavors.org/peace/dalilama.htm

106 Condensed from “Summary of a Friday Khutbah,” 14th April 2000 http://www.islamawareness.net/Salvation/forgiveness.html

107 Personal conversation, January 10, 2008.


### Bibliography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Title</th>
<th>Edition/Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Augsburger, D</td>
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<tr>
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</table>
Circle all correct answers. Some questions have more than one correct answer.

1. Haber’s argument that repentance is required for forgiveness is based on
   a. A promise not to repeat the offense
   b. An indication of remorse
   c. How recently the offense occurred
   d. None of the above

2. Within the context of Jewish communal life, forgiving another benefited the community as well as the individual.
   T___ F____

3. Benefits to forgiving can include:
   a. Decreased blood pressure
   b. Reduction in anxiety and depression
   c. De-escalation of a traumatized nervous system
   d. All of the above

4. Retaliation may be understood as…
   a. Inflicting harm to restore a sense of balance
   b. A healing process
   c. A way to bring peace or resolution
   d. A way to create safety

5. Clenessen, Martin and Enright agree on the definition of forgiveness.
   T____ F___

6. According to Luskin, which factor does not constitute a grievance?
   a. The exaggerated taking of personal offense
   b. The blaming of the offender for how you feel
   c. The creation of a grievance story
   d. A feeling of guilt

7. According to Luskin, assigning responsibility for damage and blaming another person for how one experiences life are the same.
   T___ F____

8. Which of the following may be motivations for forgiveness?
   a. The wish to feel better
   b. Lessening of anxiety and depression
   c. Positive emotional states
   d. All of the above

9. Which is not a payoff for not forgiving, according to Springs?
   a. Feelings of invulnerability
   b. Depression & anxiety
   c. Justification in one’s mind for blaming the other
   d. Feelings of aliveness & elation

10. Justice is accountability to a moral standard of behavior, usually embodied in the law.
    T___ F____

11. According to Enright, development of which of the following is a necessary component of forgiveness to insure one has protection from anger or blame after one has moved beyond them in the healing process?
    a. love for one another
    b. compassion for the offender
    c. faith in a divine being
    d. a strong backbone

12. Which of the following techniques may decrease systemic arousal thereby facilitating forgiveness?
    a. Breathing in and out through your “heart space”
    b. The Relaxation Response
    c. Mourning
    d. A and B

13. Which of the following are impacts of “fight or flight”?
    a. Decrease in immune and digestive functions
    b. An inability to respond to the stressors of daily life
    c. Systemic over-arousal
    d. None of the above

14. The Afro-Caribbean religion of Lukumi/Yoruba considers forgiveness to be necessary for one’s own well-being.
    T___ F____

15. The following religious practices may facilitate forgiving
    a. Centering prayer
    b. Lectio divina
    c. Heart Math
    d. All of the above

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Continued on page 19
Please indicate whether the following learning objectives were achieved:

1. To be able to name two significant ethical approaches to forgiveness  
   Achieved in full  5  4  3  2  1  Not Achieved

2. To be able to identify benefits to forgiving.  
   Achieved in full  5  4  3  2  1  Not Achieved

3. To be able to identify 5 techniques that foster forgiving.  
   Achieved in full  5  4  3  2  1  Not Achieved

4. Please provide comments on current course and suggestions for future courses.

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