



Walking the Path of Forgiveness

By Eileen Barker

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Introduction

Cleaning Your Brush: First Step to a Great Relationship

Forgiveness in Relationships: Disentangling From Within

Healing Addictions

The First Three Steps

More 12 Steps Wisdom

What Gets In the Way

Living in a Blame Free Zone

Forty Day Forgiveness Prayer

Healing the Mother Wound

Forgiving Fathers

Celebrating Freedom

The Miracle of Forgiveness

Eat Pray Forgive

Forgive for Love

Forgive for Love - In Practice

Gandhi

What Breast Cancer Taught Me About Forgiveness

And I Liked It

Receiving Gifts

Installing Love 1.0*

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Introduction

This book is dedicated to those who seek to walk the path of forgiveness. The path of forgiveness is a way of living. It is an approach to life, and for many, a spiritual path. *Walking* the path of forgiveness is a day to day choice. It means opening one's heart and choosing understanding and compassion in the face of *whatever* life is presenting.

Forgiveness is truly a remarkable thing. It is always available and can be applied to any situation. It restores peace and harmony, expands love and creates healing. It has been described as "miracle medicine" and is completely free. True forgiveness operates on all levels of our being -- physical, mental, emotional and spiritual -- which is why it is so powerful.

At the same time, forgiveness is also very practical in that it helps to ease the flow of life. To that end, the essays contained in this book show how forgiveness can be applied across a number of common situations: romantic relationships, addictions of all types, relationships with mothers and fathers, and illnesses and other losses. I have also included exercises that can be incorporated into one's daily practice. (For information about forgiveness in general, my *Forgiveness Workbook* contains information about what forgiveness is and is not, the benefits of forgiveness, and a step by step forgiveness process that can be applied to any situation in which forgiveness is desired.)

The world seems to be filled with people who are suffering needlessly. Many of us suffer because we are holding on to painful experiences from the past. Forgiveness

gives us a choice. We can hold on to the past – and our fears and judgments -- or we can be free.

The more we practice forgiveness, the easier it gets to choose forgiveness. The easier it gets to release the past and step into the here and now. The more we are able to access forgiveness, the more we free ourselves to receive all that life has to offer us.

What greater gift could there be?

Cleaning Your Brush: First Step to a Great Relationship

Many people are looking for that great relationship. You know, the one that is better than the last one and all the ones before it. The one that will really fill your cup. If you are in this position, I encourage you to do the inner work that will make it possible to have what you desire.

In a book entitled "Triumph," written shortly before she died, my friend, Darlene Diehl, talked about the emotional healing that is needed when a relationship ends:

I've noticed throughout my lifetime that when I have not emotionally cleared a relationship the tendency is to take that muddled energy into the next relationship(s). I call this "painting with a dirty brush." The problem grows and grows. For instance, one might think that one can focus their love on a single person, making that person the center of their universe, while keeping all other unresolved feelings and relationships compartmentalized elsewhere. I have never once seen this work. I have, however, noticed how everything and everyone becomes entangled in the old emotional web until it has been swept clean.

In the same spirit, author John Lee writes: *"The only healthy way to start a love relationship is to be over your former relationships. This takes time and work and pain. And most people are too impatient and needy to wait."* In his wonderful book "Facing the Fire" he says to be ready to love again, you must do the following:

- Grieve out the sadness of your last relationship and any earlier relationships that cling in your memory.
- Discharge the anger you have concerning those relationships.
- Forgive yourself for any “mistakes” you made in those relationships until you realize you didn’t make *any* mistakes given who you were then and what you knew then.
- Forgive the other person. This doesn’t mean you have to see or communicate with him or her. It means that in your own heart and mind you can feel gratitude for the time and love you shared and honestly say: “I thank you. I love you. I forgive you. I wish you the best. I let you go.”

If the present loss is tied to a painful experience from earlier in your life -- which it usually is -- then additional work is needed to emotionally clear the trauma and be ready for a healthy new relationship. Examples of these sorts of issues include childhood abandonment or neglect, childhood loss such as through death or divorce, or a painful rejection earlier in your life.

All this takes time and hard work, but it is well worth it. As you rinse your brushes, and the painful experiences of the past flow down the drain, you are free to begin anew. Finally, you can paint with a clean brush and create the love you desire. Don’t settle for anything less!

Forgiveness in Relationships: Disentangling From Within

Relationships can get entangled over time, especially after many years. The lines and colors begin to blur. A simplified example can be seen in this conversation:

She: I feel shut out. I want to spend more time with you.

He: Well I don't have a lot of time. I'm under a lot of work stress, and it sure would help if you could work more.

She: You wanted me to stay home with the kids, now you want me to work.

He: I always wanted you to work.

She: Well you never said that.

He: That's because I can't tell you anything without you blowing up.

Does this sound familiar? The topic started with one person wanting more connection, and wended its way back through time, through a thicket of emotional landmines, with no clear beginning or end.

Added to this is the concept of enmeshment, which is also very common. According to Dr. Drew (David Pinsky):

Enmeshed relationships are very common today: relationships in which there are poor boundaries, where people have difficulty determining what are their feelings and what are the other person's feelings. There's very little independence -- just this overwhelming sense of fusion of the two individuals.

From a forgiveness perspective however, there is a simple and necessary way to cut through all of this. Here is the key: *Whatever you are experiencing in the relationship is yours.* Your thoughts, your feelings, your judgments. *All yours.*

Consider the following:

- This is not about blame. It's about ownership. I'm not saying you are at fault. I'm saying you own the part that lives inside you – your experience - which includes: your thoughts, your feelings, your judgments.
- Even if it appears the problems are the complete fault of your partner, that is never the case. Your feelings, thoughts and judgments are *yours*.
- The fact that your partner matches up with you so perfectly as to be able to seamlessly and masterfully trigger your emotional hot buttons does not change this. They are still *your buttons*.
- Even if all your friends and family agree your partner is a 'fill in the blank' and it's all his/her fault, it doesn't change anything – still *yours*!

Here is the good news: Once you do this, once you assume ownership of your experience, you will have enormous power in your life and your relationship. Until you do, you will have very little.

So, if you find yourself in a tangled relationship web, pull back pull back the strands of yarn that belong to you. This is an essential and very freeing step in the forgiveness process.

Healing Addictions

As a mediator, my work often focuses on external conflicts. Yet, some of life's greatest challenges are presented by our *internal* ones, including our addictions.

An addiction can be any compulsive habit or behavior that we use (unconsciously in most cases) to avoid painful feelings. Addictions take many forms including food, alcohol, drugs, sex, relationship, work, achievement, money and drama, to name but some of the most common ones. Many of our addictions are learned in, and supported by, our families, communities, and culture, like working long hours, having a drink at the end of the day, or using relationships to feel validated.

Often when we are not aware of our addictive pattern, we feel lost in it and stuck. However, addiction can actually provide us with a doorway. *Our addiction can give us the very information we need to heal and, ultimately, return home to our true self, our whole self.*

Inspired by Geneen Roth and her excellent book "*Women, Food and God*," here are some steps that can enable you to find and open that door:

Realize that whatever you are doing, you are doing for very good reasons. People turn to drugs, sex, work, or whatever they turn to in order to protect themselves. Trust that you have very good reasons for your behavior, even if you aren't fully aware of them at this time.

If you have judged yourself harshly in any way, it is time to stop. Self-judgment delivers the message that you shouldn't be where you are, that you are bad and wrong. This sort of thinking creates a mental prison from which there is no escape. *Wherever you are right now is exactly perfect, including any addictive patterns.* Accept this. Trust this. This *the only place* from which you can move forward.

Bring awareness to the pattern, not with judgment, but with curiosity. Approach it with a desire to learn about yourself. Ask these questions: What can this problem teach me? What can I learn?

Become a neutral witness. You have a front row seat. Use it to observe yourself in relation to the addiction. Without any judgment, just observe. Bring greater awareness to the situation. Start to notice the subtle and not so subtle shifts that occur before, during and after you engage in addictive behavior, including any thoughts, feelings and beliefs that arise.

Addictions offer us a profound opportunity for healing. They offer us *a place to begin.*

The First Three Steps

Instead of viewing an addiction as a dead-end, see it as a *doorway* for growth and learning. If you are willing to make this perceptual shift, you may well feel lost at first, as if you are standing in the dark without a clue how to proceed. This makes sense. After all, if you had known what to do (besides your addictive pattern) you would have already done that. So feeling lost and in the dark means you are in the right place to learn something new. Being in “don’t know” is a good place to be.

Once the door for healing and change is open, the 12 Steps, as presented by Alcoholics Anonymous and other derivative programs, offer a good framework. My colleague Lorraine Segal writes: “Although, the word forgiveness isn’t mentioned in the 12 Steps themselves, it *is* an integral part of successfully working the steps. To work the 12 Steps is to walk a path of healing, recovery, and sanity, acknowledging our small but essential part in the Universe and honoring the greater mysteries.”

The preparatory work for forgiveness, and for all of the steps, is contained in the *first three steps*:

Step 1 is to admit we are powerless over our problem and that our lives have become unmanageable. This can be a very large step to take, especially the first time. It requires honesty and humility to admit that we have not been able to correct a problem on our own, and that our standard operating procedures are not working. As Lorraine points out: “This is a huge admission, because we want to believe we can be

in control of ourselves, other people, and life itself! In this step we admit for the first time that our control is an illusion and causes us to mess up royally.”

Step 2 is to acknowledge the existence of a higher power that can restore us to sanity. It doesn't matter who your God is, or what you call this power, only that you believe there *is a power in the universe that is greater than you*. And if you do not believe, can you at least acknowledge the possibility?

Step 3 is to ask that higher power, however you understand it, for help. This is also a huge step for many people because it requires a leap of faith. This is especially so if you either question the existence of a higher power, or doubt there is a power capable and/or willing to help you. It also asks us to do two things that are very difficult for many of us: ask for help and open ourselves to receive it.

These three steps can quickly take you from being lost in the dark to being embarked upon a well-marked, well-lit, guided path. I encourage anyone who is struggling with any sort of habitual behavior, addiction or problem, to try them.

More 12 Steps Wisdom

So far we've talked about viewing an addiction as a pathway for healing, and how to use the first three of the "12 Steps" to acknowledge the problem and ask for help. Now let's look at what the other steps offer. Although the 12 Steps do not explicitly mention forgiveness, they guide people through a deep process of forgiving anyone we believe to have harmed us, and ourselves.

Steps 4 and 5 ask us to admit our mistakes, to ourselves and to another person. Then, in Steps 6 and 7, we again are required to ask for help in removing our shortcomings. In Steps 8 and 9 we make amends to anyone we have harmed.

Lorraine Segal writes: "In my experience, admitting this to myself instead of avoiding or denying and telling all this to another, who receives it with compassion and understanding, is very healing, and began to teach me how to forgive myself, to see that what I did was not so terrible, but was the mistakes and errors of being human. It helped me see for the first time that my mistakes could be revealed and forgiven."

I found this step amazing and powerful, as well as scary, as I looked to step 9. To acknowledge the harm I did, instead of defending or justifying myself, is what all of us look for in conflict resolution and what this step teaches.

There is a peace and power in looking at my share, cleaning up my side of the street. It is the same way people in a war torn country can come to forgive each other, realizing that we all make mistakes, that we are all doing the best we can, even if it is bad. It is the path to freeing myself from "the wreckage of the past."

Often, what we need to make are what the 12 Step program calls *living amends*, to change our future behavior to that person or to change a bad habit or recurring error.

It takes courage to apologize to others for what we did, and it takes self-restraint to not point out their errors. But the result is freedom from bitterness, resentment, and self-hate.

In Step 10, we continue to take personal inventory and when we are wrong, promptly admit it. We do this frequently, often every day, so we don't have to go through steps 4-9 in a major way again!

This is how I would summarize the message of the 12 Steps: To deal with our addictions, whether physical or emotional, we need to admit we can't handle them ourselves, but need a power greater than ourselves. We need to honestly look at our pasts, our mistakes, attitudes, and flaws which we denied, masked, yet kept as perpetual wounds which we covered with our addictions. We learn to forgive ourselves and others, to take responsibility for our own share, and let others be responsible for their part. We continue to surrender everything but ourselves and our attitudes to a power greater than ourselves. By doing this on a daily basis, we can avoid building up resentments and fear, which inevitably lead to acting out our addictions. Instead we can lead more peaceful, satisfying lives filled with forgiveness to ourselves and others and gratitude for all the blessings we have.

What Gets In the Way

We've reviewed ways to heal addictions that incorporate forgiveness and healing, including those offered by 12 Step programs. The good news is that these steps are *fail-proof*. If you use them, they work! And, they are incredibly liberating. So the question I'm left with is: Why don't we use them more often? *What gets in the way?*

From my own experience, there are a number of things that can keep me stuck. Perhaps some of these will ring true for you:

- *Sometimes I can't see the problem -- it's in my blind spot*
- *Sometimes I lie to myself about the problem and/or the consequences -- I don't want to see it or own up to it*
- *Sometimes I am fully aware of the problem, but have been unable to fix it, and I forget to ask for help*
- *Sometimes I want to be right, and all the variations on this theme: I am stubborn, I want to fix it myself, I want to figure it out, I want to be in control, I don't want to ask for help, etc.*

Until we can take an honest look at ourselves, and in particular, the parts of ourselves that we deny and/or are hardest for us to see – ways that we are arrogant, stubborn, selfish or unkind, mistakes, false beliefs, protective masks, defensive patterns, etc. – we continue to cover over our perceived problems or weaknesses with addictive habits,

patterns and behaviors. And the only reason we do that is an underlying fear that we will not be loved as we are.

Which brings us full circle. As I wrote at the start of this series, our flaws and problems actually provide us with a doorway. *They give us the very information we need to heal and, ultimately, return home to our true, whole self.* My hope is that, knowing this, rather than seek to avoid our areas of difficulty, we will learn to embrace them and learn from them.

Living in a Blame Free Zone

One of the hallmarks of conflict is that we blame someone else for what occurred. Then we focus a great deal of our attention and energy on them. There are some very good reasons we do this:

- *Blame enables us to feel right!* It implies that we are innocent, and have no responsibility in the matter. Therefore, we are shielded from criticism.
- *Blame is a habit.* Growing up, most of us learned to blame from our families and other role models.
- *Blame is culturally encouraged,* including and especially in our legal system.
- *Blame enables us to redirect difficult feelings.* We get to focus our anger on another person, rather than feeling the vulnerability of disappointment, sadness or grief. We believe (unconsciously) that if we can hold someone else responsible for a problem, our pain will be lessened.

Despite these good reasons, one of the most important steps in transforming conflict is to move past blame and release the other person as the “bad guy” in our story and commit to living in a blame-free zone.

In truth, *blame is a dead-end.* It sends us on a wild goose chase and prolongs the conflict. It never gets us what we really want. Blame focuses on the past and on other people, distracting our attention away from the real issues, from our essential needs,

and from learning constructive problem solving. When we blame others, we betray and dis-empower ourselves by choosing to see ourselves as powerless.

I invite you to start living in a blame-free zone! Break the habit. Start noticing when your mind leaps towards blame. Notice the subliminal fear underneath the blaming thought. And then, notice that you have a choice!

Forty Day Forgiveness Prayer

If you have been feeling stuck in a difficult relationship or situation that you want to release -- especially if you feel you have tried everything under the sun and nothing has worked -- this forty day prayer is for you!

Dear _____,

Please forgive me for anything I have ever done to you.

Thank you for everything you have ever given to me.

I am sorry

I love you.

Start today, and see what happens!

Healing the Mother Wound

The maternal relationship influences one's life as no other. Starting in the womb, we are connected to our mother, not just physically, but spiritually, emotionally, and mentally as well. During childhood, diminishment of the maternal bond is inevitable and desirable. However, if a *traumatic disruption* occurs, and it often does, it can create what has been termed a "mother wound."

Our connection with our mother represents, both symbolically and literally, our connection to life itself. If we experience deprivation of our mother's love -- such as through death, separation, neglect, abuse, or other circumstances -- we are likely to form a defensive pattern, which operates as a coping mechanism. Later, as adults, this unconscious pattern impairs our ability to achieve healthy, lasting love relationships.

There are two common defensive patterns that arise from a mother wound:

- **Emotional detachment:** The loss of the mother's love (real or perceived) causes a detachment from the mother, leaving the child hungering for love. Unable to secure the love he legitimately needs, the child shuts down. As an adult, he remains detached. Fearing the pain of deep loss, he avoids the vulnerability of emotional attachment.
- **Emotional dependency:** Here, the wound results in low self-esteem, lack of confidence, fear and insecurity. The child tries to fill the void by accommodating and pleasing others as a strategy to gain love and approval. As an adult, she will

continue this pattern, feeling emotionally dependent on others, and lacking in a strong sense of self and self-worth.

While there are many approaches to healing the mother wound, forgiveness is an important step. If you have issues in this area, try the following visualization for healing and forgiveness.

Healing the Mother Wound – Forgiveness Visualization*

1. Picture yourself standing face to face with your mother. Notice any chords, ropes or chains that attach the two of you. Notice any barriers between you.
2. Invoke the energy of total unconditional love. Imagine the two of you – you and your mother -- surrounded by total love. [Another way to do this is to invite a wise, holy Being to join the two of you, one that represents total love for you, such as Christ, Buddha or Higher Power. As you go through steps 3-5 below, you can ask the Being or Higher Power to dissolve the chords and bridge the gap for you.]
3. Draw on the energy of total unconditional love to dissolve any chords of attachment and any barriers between your mother and yourself. Continue until you can see that you are now each standing free of one another.

4. Draw on the energy of total love to *bridge the gap between the love you needed and the love you got*. Allow yourself to fully receive this love. Continue this until you can see that you are filled with all the love you need. (If there is any resistance or additional need, this step should be repeated daily for 30 days.)

5. Draw on the energy of total love to *bridge the gap between the love your mother needed and the love she got*. Continue this until you can see that your mother is filled with all the love she needs.

6. Visualize you and your mother holding hands. Looking into her eyes, see that your mother gave what she could. See the perfection in what she gave you. See the perfection in what you received. Convey to your mother the forgiveness in your heart.

7. Visualize you and your mother in a beautiful nature setting. Visualize the two of you embracing, so that total unconditional love radiates through both of you. Give thanks for any healing you received in this process.

*Adapted from a Forgiveness Process used at the Center for Attitudinal Healing in Sausalito, CA, © 2003, based on the work of Ruth Carter Stapleton.

Forgiving Fathers

Relationships with fathers can be complex, as I'm sure you've noticed. Long ago, I learned to accept my father as he was/is, but I've come to realize that this is not the same as forgiving him. Deep down, I've continued to carry a story in which he is the bad guy, and I the innocent victim. Given the enormous role a father plays in our life, both positive and negative, there is probably no relationship in which forgiveness can offer us more freedom and empowerment.

No father is perfect. As we grow up, we realize the very notion of a "perfect father" must join the ranks with other great illusions such as the "perfect mate" or "perfect child." Of course fathers are not perfect. They are human. They have strengths and weaknesses, just like all of us. Yet, we seemed wired as infants and small children to need, or at least want, perfection in our parents, and to be deeply wounded, scarred and/or traumatized when we receive less.

This entire system seems seriously flawed! Why can't parents simply and naturally meet the needs and expectations of their children? Is it a 'design flaw' that prevents parents from delivering perfect love all the time? As I ponder this question, I flash on the intricate perfection of nature, and the complexity of the human body. Yes, surely the system *could* have been set up that way, but it seems it was not. Maybe, just maybe, it is "perfect" just as it is. Even if we don't understand how or why. If we're willing to look into the situation more deeply, perhaps we can discover greater levels of "perfection" and acceptance of "what is." This is, after all, the essence of forgiveness.

At some point, if we want to free ourselves from old resentments about ‘what my father should have done,’ and live our lives to the fullest, we must forgive our fathers. Of course, not just biological fathers, but also step-fathers, grandfathers, and any other father figures in our life. And, there is much to forgive your father for:

- For all the ways he wasn't there for you, which might have been not being there at all or not being there enough
- For not being more loving and affirming
- For not really seeing you
- For not fully guiding and supporting you
- For unloving physical contact such as hitting, spanking, beating
- For any incest or sexual abuse
- For any put-downs, criticism and/or verbal abuse
- For his addictions
- For not being a better partner to your mother or other parent
- For not being smarter, richer, more successful, more sensitive, more fun, better looking, more enlightened . . .

As you read this list, if you noticed any feelings surfacing, tightening, contraction, or other reaction within yourself, chances are you have some unfinished business. Doing the work needed to forgive your father – to release any resentments, grievances or other issues – is a gift you can give to yourself.

Forgiving Fathers – Forgiveness Visualization*

1. Picture yourself standing face to face with your father. Notice any chords, ropes or chains that attach the two of you. Notice any barriers between you.
2. Invoke the energy of total unconditional love. Imagine the two of you – you and your father -- surrounded by total love. [Another way to do this is to invite a wise, holy Being to join the two of you, one that represents total love for you, such as Christ, Buddha or Higher Power. As you go through steps 3-5 below, you can ask the Being or Higher Power to dissolve the chords and bridge the gap for you.]
3. Draw on the energy of total unconditional love to dissolve any chords of attachment and any barriers between your mother and yourself. Continue until you can see that you are now each standing free of one another.
4. Draw on the energy of total love to *bridge the gap between the love you needed and the love you got*. Allow yourself to fully receive this love. Continue this until you can see that you are filled with all the love you need. (If there is any resistance or additional need, this step should be repeated daily for 30 days.)
5. Draw on the energy of total love to *bridge the gap between the love your father needed and the love he got*. Continue this until you can see that your father is filled with all the love he needs.

6. Visualize you and your father holding hands. Looking into his eyes, see that your father gave what he could. See the perfection in what he gave you. See the perfection in what you received. Convey to your father the forgiveness in your heart.

7. Visualize you and your father in a beautiful nature setting. Visualize the two of you embracing, so that total unconditional love radiates through both of you. Give thanks for any healing you received in this process.

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Celebrating Freedom

One of the best things about forgiveness is that it *creates freedom*. When we are in conflict, we are anything but free. Conflict has a way of taking over our thoughts during the day, and then keeping us awake at night. Conflict dominates our feelings too. We may feel angry at someone, angry at ourselves, fearful about what will happen, or some combination of all of the above. Before we know it, we are gnarled up in a ball of difficult emotions, consumed by stress.

The problem is this: as soon as we are triggered or upset by something, a torrent of emotional energy is unleashed. Instead of experiencing the event for what it is and responding accordingly, we filter it through our past experiences. We instantly recall *interpretations and assumptions* we previously formed, often as children who felt helpless and vulnerable. We may or may not remember the past events, but some part of us definitely remembers the *feelings* connected to those events and the overriding sense of powerlessness we had when we first experienced them. Soon we are engulfed by strong feelings. All of this occurs quite unconsciously, until something brings it forward in our awareness.

For example: I'm on a car trip with a close friend. It's a beautiful day and we're anticipating a wonderful journey. I'm having one of those "life is good" moments. Then, my friend takes out her cell and decides to call another friend. Within a short time, I'm knee-deep in strong feelings -- jealousy, fear, resentment, and anger. Of course, I don't want to admit any of this. I want to pretend nothing is wrong. In fact, I try to ignore my feelings. It works for about 15 seconds. My feelings rear up, demanding

expression. I try to find a way to express them that is not 'about me.' (*"Did you have to make that call right now?"*)

Of course, the obvious thing would be to forgive my friend for interrupting our time together with a phone call. But I know the reason I'm upset is not really about my friend and her phone call. I know this because rather than feeling mildly annoyed, I have been hit by a tsunami wave of painful emotions. This is always a good clue that something else is going on!

Forgiving my friend would be a fine starting point, but it's a bit like pulling out a weed, without getting the roots. You know it will grow back; it's only a matter of time. If you want to be free of the problem, you have to go to the roots.

In this case, I flash back on a million moments with my mother whose time was often spread thin. I remember how painful it would sometimes be when she would get on the phone with one of her friends, while I was sitting there, craving her time and attention.

Once I make this connection, I am no longer powerless. Now I have the possibility, the choice, of forgiving my mother, and myself. I have the opportunity to heal these old wounds and be free of them. However, until I forgive at root level, I will continue to be an unwitting prisoner to a cluster of emotional memories that operate in me like land mines . . . exploding in my face when someone steps on one of them.

Forgiveness is a true path to freedom because it allows us to shift our relationship to past events. Life events can, of course, be very painful. But it is generally not the events themselves that are the source of our problem. The source of the problem is our *interpretation* of the events, the meaning we give the events, the story we tell. This is what causes our suffering long after the event itself has ended.

The path of forgiveness gives us the chance to see the situation differently and heal the emotional wound from the past. Forgiveness frees us so that we can experience life fully in the present. *That* is true freedom.

The Miracle of Forgiveness

In honor of International Forgiveness Day (the first Sunday of August), I invite all of us to celebrate the miracle of forgiveness. Here is some of what I've learned so far about forgiveness . . .

Forgiveness is a bridge. It takes us beyond “thinking,” to a much deeper part of ourselves, from a room filled with darkness to one filled with light. It enables us to move from experiencing intense fear, anger and pain, to seeing life through the eyes of love.

Forgiveness is a transformational journey from wherever we are, to love. The miracle of forgiveness is that when you forgive, the world around you changes too. But it starts with you. It begins inside of us first.

The ability to forgive truly is one of the greatest gifts we've been given. You can begin the journey of forgiveness from wherever you are. When it comes to forgiveness, I like to say: ***The best place to start is “here.” And the best time to start is “now.”***

Eat Pray Forgive

While I loved the book *Eat Pray Love*, when I saw the movie version, in an unexpected way, it brought me back to the magic of forgiveness.

The story chronicles the journey of Elizabeth Gilbert (played by Julia Roberts) as she rebuilds her life after a divorce and post-marriage affair. We follow the heroine to Italy, where she fills herself with pasta and pizza, then to India, where she fills herself with spirit and service, and ultimately to Indonesia (Bali), where she finds balance and true love.

The turning point in the story occurs in India when her compatriot entreats Elizabeth to forgive the past. And, me movie reviewers write the film off as “wish fulfillment,” (she does admittedly sail off into the sunset with Javier Bardem at the end of the movie), from a forgiveness perspective the sequencing of the story is spot on.

In the face of loss and confusion, where do we turn first? First we *eat*. We look to our drug of choice, be it food, work, sex, drink or drug, *something outside ourselves* that we use in an attempt to numb the pain. Eventually we realize this strategy is a dead end. It doesn't work. The pain is still there. So then, often in great despair, we *pray*, looking to a power greater than ourselves for true healing. An essential part of this healing process is, of course, forgiveness. Forgiveness brings us back into oneness, and it is only from this place of wholeness that we can truly get what we want, which is *love*.

So, I say: *Eat Pray Forgive* . . . and then, *Love*. The best way to create a healthy relationship is to take the time to reconnect with yourself first, and really heal from the past.

Forgive for Love

As a divorce mediator, I often wonder what makes it possible for some couples to weather the storms of life together, while others find it necessary to part ways. Of course, there are hundreds of theories, not to mention thousands of books, about the essential ingredients for a successful relationship, but one that is not often discussed is forgiveness.

In *Forgive for Love*, Dr. Fred Luskin asserts that forgiveness is *the* cornerstone of a healthy, lasting relationship. While the importance of forgiveness is not made explicit in marriage vows, how else, he asks, could people fulfill the vow, 'to love one another through richer and poorer, in sickness and in health, for better and for worse until death,' if not by practicing forgiveness?

Luskin points out research showing that the ability to forgive in a romantic relationship is directly related to the level of satisfaction and commitment each person feels. Conversely, those who have difficulty forgiving, find it harder to maintain close relationships.

So, how can we become more forgiving towards our partners? *Forgive for Love* offers many valuable insights into how to practice forgiveness in a relationship. The first step is to understand the four stages of forgiveness:

Stage One: You feel justified, by something your partner has done or not done, in feeling angry and hurt.

Stage Two: You realize that the anger and hurt are not helping you. You want to mend the relationship, or at least, to move on with less bitterness.

Stage Three: You remember the positive feelings generated by forgiveness. You focus on the fact that forgiveness helps you to feel better and move forward.

Stage Four: You make the decision to *make forgiveness a habit* in some or all of the following ways:

- You make a conscious choice to be forgiving when your partner does something hurtful.
- You decide to have thicker skin and take things that occur in the relationship less personally.
- You work on taking responsibility for your feelings.
- You realize that we are all flawed, and focus on each person's good intentions.
- You realize that your partner will hurt you occasionally, so it is no surprise when it happens.

Forgive for Love - In Practice

In *Forgive for Love*, Dr. Fred Luskin writes that one's goal should be to become a more forgiving partner, and focuses the book on the question of "how?" *How* can we become more forgiving? How do we make forgiveness a habit?

A powerful starting point is to acknowledge within ourselves what Luskin calls the three "inconvenient truths" about relationships:

Every relationship carries risk of hurt and disappointment.

Every relationship will end, either by death or dissolution.

We cannot change nor control our partner's actions.

If we choose to be in a relationship then, by definition, we are choosing to assume these risks. By coming to terms with the inevitable risks of being in a relationship, Luskin argues we are better able to accept losses, disappointments, betrayals, and even death when these events occur. This does not mean we have to stay stuck in bad situations. To the contrary, taking ownership of our choice to form a relationship in the first place, with all the inherent risks this entails, enables us to move forward and make new choices.

In order to make forgiveness a habit, Luskin suggests cultivating thoughts that engender forgiveness, excerpted and paraphrased here:

- I want to waste as little of my life as possible in the pain caused by anger and hurt.
- I want to react well when things do not go the way I want in my relationship.
- Love comes with positive and negative experiences. I can't expect to have only good things come my way.
- I know my partner will do things I do not like or understand.
- I do not want to see myself as a helpless victim.
- It hurts when my partner does not forgive me. I do not want to hurt my partner in this way.
- I am not perfect. How can I expect my partner to be?
- My partner does the best he/she can. When he/she makes a mistake, the best way to help is by offering understanding. The first step in this process is to forgive whatever he/she did that was wrong.
- Dealing with relationships is a challenge. Each hurtful situation challenges my determination to live as fully and lovingly as possible. I accept the challenges that life sends my way.

Gandhi

One of the great masters of forgiveness was Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi is well-known for his activism and leadership to fight racial oppression in South Africa, and then to end Great Britain's rule over India. What is less well-known is that Gandhi's entire life's work flowed from a staunch core belief in the power of love, truth, and nonviolence, all of which he believed to be synonymous with each other, and synonymous with God. Gandhi devoted his life to put these simple beliefs into practice.

Forgiveness was but a natural extension of Gandhi's values. His commitment was to love every person, including his enemies and those who harmed him. Consider the following:

In South Africa, Gandhi was viciously beaten when he disembarked in Durban Harbour, yet he refused to press charges. He told the police chief: *"They acted out of anger and ignorance, and if I do not forgive them, I will be as guilty of perpetuating hatred as they are."*

Later in Johannesburg, Gandhi's political enemies attacked him mercilessly, and again he refused retaliation. As told by his grandson, Arun Gandhi, *"The effects of unconditional forgiveness transformed his assailants. They realized their folly and all three showed their repentance by appointing themselves as Grandfather's bodyguards. They also became lifelong friends and followers."*

These poignant incidents can inspire us to remember not only our innate ability to forgive, but also the transformative power of forgiveness. Gandhi rarely spoke directly

of forgiveness, but he powerfully demonstrated, as few others have, how to put forgiveness into practice. As he once famously said: “*My life is my message.*”

Still, the power of his words lives on:

- *An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.*
- *What is true of individuals is true of nations. One cannot forgive too much. The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.*
- *There is no path to peace. Peace is the path.*
- *I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith.*

What Breast Cancer Taught Me About Forgiveness

This past year I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I recently completed treatment and, fortunately, my prognosis is good. This has no doubt been an intense and at times frightening period for me. But, it has also helped me appreciate that sometimes, when we are up against something very difficult, the forgiveness that is needed is to forgive life itself.

Nothing really prepares us for how hard life can be. I imagine all of us have faced, or may now be facing major life challenges. Illness. Injury. Conflict. Divorce. Financial Loss. Death. How do we make peace with these sorts of events? How do we forgive *life* for hardships that are extremely painful and seemingly unfair?

A key part of any forgiveness process is to look at the story you tell about what occurred, and to question it:

- Do you see yourself as a victim? (I certainly have at times.)
- Do you take what occurred personally? (Guilty again. Yet, over 200,000 other woman were diagnosed with breast cancer last year in the U.S. alone.)
- What are the gifts in the situation? Can you create a story that embraces the positive aspects? (More on this below.)

In my case, I was "forced" to ask for help and let my family and friends support me. This wasn't easy, but in the process I received love as never before. I also learned there is a vast difference between 'knowing' someone cares, and 'feeling' the love, and really letting it in.

This experience has reaffirmed for me that *everything* in life gives us an opportunity to heal and receive more love. Life gives us *an opportunity*. How we respond is up to us. Where do we place our focus? What story do we create for ourselves? Are we willing to see the silver lining(s)? These choices are how we can make peace with our experience, and 'forgive life' in the process.

And I Liked It

Lilou Mace is the author of *I Lost My Job and I Liked It* and has just written a sequel, *I Had No Money and I Liked It*. Lilou's titles make me laugh, but it occurs to me that she has hit upon something very powerful.

In the forgiveness process, we talk about learning to accept and learn from difficult experiences. “And I Liked It” leapfrogs over all of that. It takes us directly to “what was actually good about this situation.” This can be very challenging, but it is also liberating. It confronts our old story. It forces us to realize there is or was something beneficial in *every* circumstance. In the moment that we even begin to sense the benefit, a piece of our suffering dissolves.

I invite you to think of some of the hardest things that have happened to you, and try it. Especially if you are looking for a shortcut to healing. If you’ve ever right-clicked to “create shortcut,” embracing the phrase “and I liked it” might just be the forgiveness equivalent!

Receiving Gifts

Each December, millions of us take part in an annual gift giving ritual, investing enormous amounts of energy, creativity, and even angst into gift giving. However, as we know, giving is just part of the equation. The other part, that we tend to focus on less, is *receiving*. Yet it is equally important, and maybe more so. Because the way we receive *anything* is the way we receive *everything*. And, the way life is wired, requires us to receive *first*, before we can truly give.

How well do you receive the gifts given to you by others? The sweaters, iPods, espresso machines, books and what have you. And, how well do you receive the gifts offered by life? And, what does all this have to do with forgiveness?

One of my definitions of forgiveness is "*letting go of the stories we tell about the past.*" Our stories, no matter how compelling they are to us or our friends and family, create filters that block our vision and predispose us to interpret things a certain way. These same stories, including the beliefs and judgments embedded within them, prevent us from being fully available in the present time, because part of our attention is still glued to the past. *How can we fully receive in the present moment, when we are not even fully there?*

Forgiveness is a great tool for releasing parts of the past that are still clinging to our ankles and weighing on our hearts. By making peace with the past -- whatever its content may be -- we can bring our full awareness into now, the present moment we

keep hearing so much about! And then, we have the profound opportunity to fully receive the gifts that are presented to us.

For those of you who want to dig into this a little deeper, check out the questions below.

How Do You Receive Gifts?

Think of a recent time when you received a gift. Which of these best describes your experience?

- a. It was a negative experience
- b. I was disappointed
- c. I moved on fairly quickly to something else
- d. I took my time to enjoy receiving the gift
- e. I appreciated the gift
- f. It was a positive experience

Now think of something very challenging in your life, such as the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, a health problem or a difficult conflict, consider which of these best describe your experience:

- a. It is a negative experience
- b. I am disappointed
- c. I prefer to focus on something else
- d. I've taken time to consider what the gift is in this situation
- e. I recognize the value in what this situation offers me
- f. I appreciate the gift

Notice any differences or similarities in how you respond to gifts that come wrapped in paper and ribbons, and intangible ones that are presented by life.

Resist the temptation to pass judgment on yourself. Simply notice!

Installing Love 1.0*

Tech Support: Yes Ma'am... how can I help you?

Customer: Well, after much consideration, I've decided to install Love. Can you guide me through the process?

Tech Support: Yes. I can help you. Are you ready to proceed?

Customer: Well, I'm not very technical, but I think I'm ready. What do I do first?

Tech Support: The first step is to open your Heart. Have you located your Heart?

Customer: Yes, but there are several other programs running now. Is it okay to install Love while they are running?

Tech Support: What programs are running ma'am?

Customer: Let's see, I have Past Hurt, Low Self-Esteem, Grudge and Resentment running right now.

Tech Support: No problem. Love will gradually erase Past Hurt from your operating system. It may remain in your permanent memory, but it will no longer disrupt other programs. Love will eventually override Low Self-Esteem with a module of its own called High Self-Esteem. However, you have to completely turn off Grudge and Resentment. Those programs prevent Love from being properly installed. Can you turn those off ma'am?

Customer: I don't know how to turn them off. Can you tell me how?

Tech Support: With pleasure. Go to your start menu and invoke Forgiveness. Do this as many times as necessary until Grudge and Resentment have completely erased.

Customer: Okay, done! Love has started installing itself. Is that normal?

Tech Support: Yes, but remember that you have only the base program. You need to begin connecting to other Hearts in order to get the upgrades.

Customer: Oops! I have an error message already. It says, "Error - program not running on external components." What should I do?

Tech Support: Don't worry ma'am. It means that the Love program is set up to run on Internal Hearts, but has not yet been run on your Heart. In non-technical terms, it simply means you have to Love yourself before you can Love others.

Customer: So, what should I do?

Tech Support: Can you pull down Self-Acceptance? Then click on the following files: Forgive-Self; Realize Your Worth; and Acknowledge your Limitations.

Customer: Okay, done.

Tech Support: Now, copy them to the "My Heart" directory. The system will overwrite any conflicting files and begin patching faulty programming. Also, you need to delete Verbose Self-Criticism from all directories and empty your Recycle Bin to make sure it is completely gone and never comes back.

Customer: Got it. Hey!!! My heart is filling up with new files. Smile is playing on my monitor and Peace and Contentment are copying themselves all over My Heart. Is this normal?

Tech Support: Sometimes. For others it takes a while, but eventually everything gets it at the proper time. So Love is installed and running.

One more thing before we hang up. Love is Freeware. Be sure to give it and its various modules to everyone you meet. They will in turn share it with others and return some cool modules back to you.

Customer: I promise to do just that.

* *Author unknown.*

Author

Eileen Barker is a leader in the movement to integrate emotional healing and forgiveness in conflict resolution. She has led numerous trainings on forgiveness both for individuals and organizations and is the author of the *Forgiveness Workbook and Forgiveness Meditation CD*. Drawing on her background as a lawyer turned mediator, Eileen has helped thousands of people resolve disputes involving business, probate, family enterprises, employment, and divorce. She has taught classes on mediation, conflict resolution and forgiveness at UC Berkeley School of Law, Sonoma State University, JFK University and elsewhere.

For further information about trainings, consultation, and forgiveness books and CDs, visit thepathofforgiveness.com.