Forgiveness Workbook

A Step by Step Guide

by Eileen Barker

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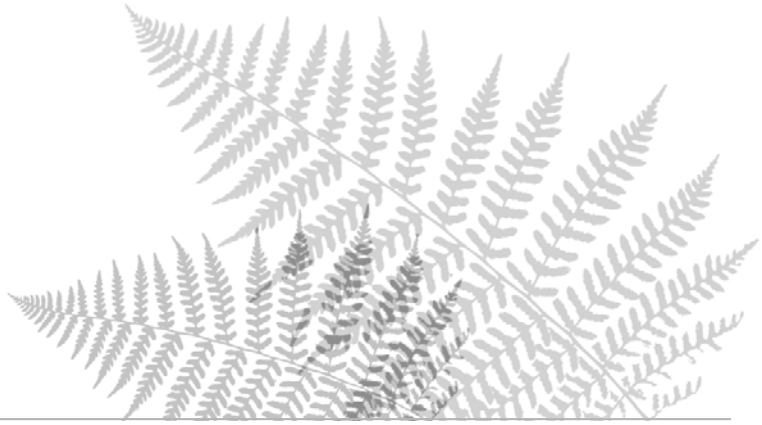
www.ThePathofForgiveness.com



The Forgiveness Workbook

2nd Edition

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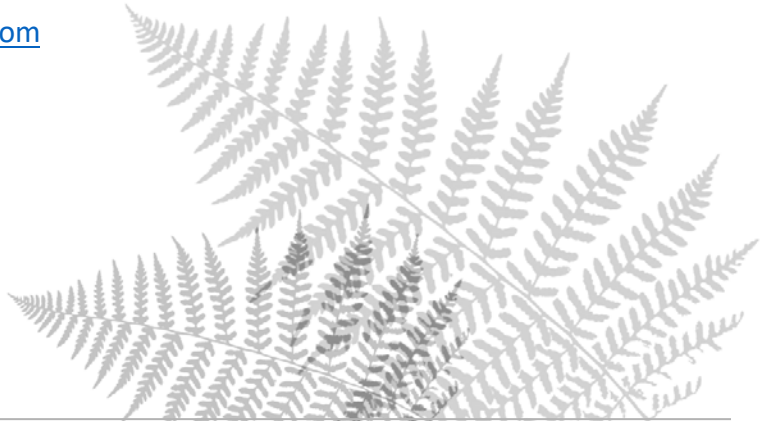
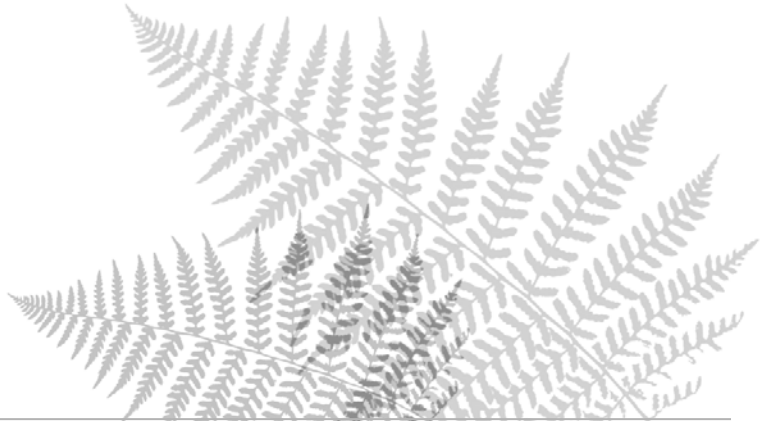


Dedicated to

John Bern Ford,
for leading me to the path of forgiveness,
and
my son, Matthew Ryan Barker,
for reminding me when I need to forgive.

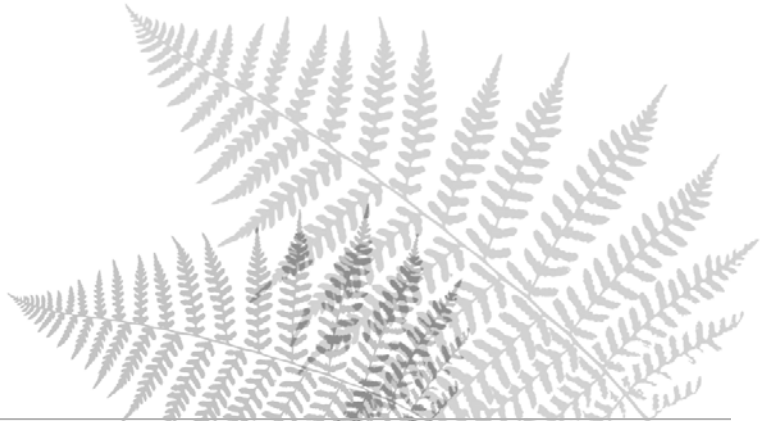


If you let go a little, you will have a little happiness.

If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of happiness.

If you let go completely, you will be free.

Ajahn Chan



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- Dr. Fred Luskin, Founder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, greatly contributed to my understanding of forgiveness and the fact that forgiveness is a learnable skill. His excellent book, *Forgive for Good,* illuminates how grievances are formed and how they can be released, and the process contained in this workbook borrows heavily from it. Fred's passion for forgiveness continues to inspire me. learningtoforgive.com.

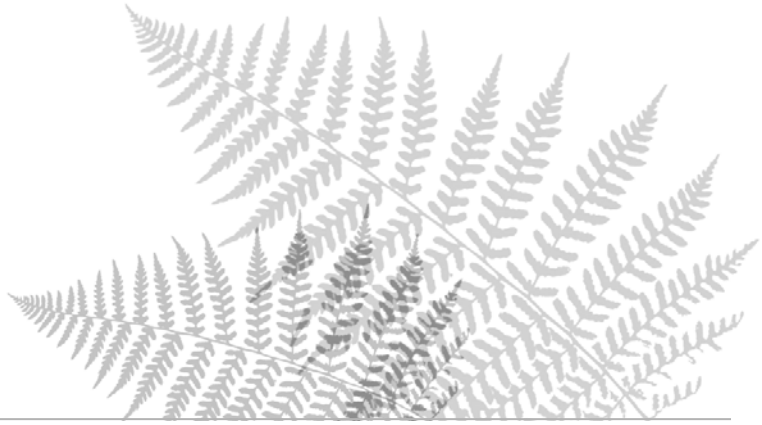
- Kenneth Cloke has been an invaluable teacher, friend and mentor. Reading *Mediating Dangerously* and meeting Ken was a turning point, enabling me to see clearly that conflict can only be fully resolved if there is forgiveness. Ken's observation that "every conflict teaches us what we most need to learn" pointed me to fact that conflict it is a transformational opportunity. KennethCloke.com

- The late Robert W. Plath, founder of the Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance and International Forgiveness Day was tireless in his devotion to promoting forgiveness worldwide. Through him, I met incredible "heroes of forgiveness," people who forgave despite horrendously painful and difficult experiences. Some of their stories are shared in this workbook. ForgivenessDay.org

- Peter Rengel, spiritual teacher, friend and author of *Living Life in Love* and *Seeds of Light,* taught me what it means to live life in love. peterrengel.com

- JoAnne Kellert, a masterful teacher and coach, has supported and encouraged me for many years and insisted that I write this workbook. joannekellert.com

- Michael Gelbart greatly enhanced The Path of Forgiveness by co-leading forgiveness retreats and other events with me. Michael is a therapist with expertise in somatic work, trauma therapy and much more. He has contributed generously to refining the forgiveness process used in our programs and updating this workbook. ShiftInPerspective.com



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Preface

Forgiveness is an extraordinarily powerful healing force and it is always available. This workbook was first published in 2009 to provide a step-by-step guide for those wanting to forgive and wanting to learn how forgiveness works. It contains a comprehensive forgiveness process developed based on extensive research which was tested for several years in courses I taught at Sonoma State University and elsewhere. Once I saw the profound impact of this work, I wanted to make it as widely available as possible. Since then, I have continued to use this process in trainings, retreats and individual coaching. I've also started training other professionals including mediators, therapists, coaches, and lawyers on how to help their clients forgive.

As I continue to teach, I continue to learn. I've learned that each of us has the power to forgive – no matter what – and to achieve a level of healing, transformation and peace previously unimagined. I've discovered forgiveness is always possible, and can be of most help to those who are suffering most. If you do the work, it works. It's as simple as that. Because of the above, my passion for teaching forgiveness has grown exponentially.

This workbook focuses primarily on what I call "unilateral forgiveness." This is forgiveness that is unconditional and internal. It is available to us at any time, regardless of whether the other person apologizes, shows remorse, or is deemed deserving. It is a process done, first and foremost, for one's own benefit, yet there is no doubt that one person's healing benefits everyone around them.

I was blessed in 2015 to be joined in this work by Michael Gelbart, LCSW, as a co-facilitator of forgiveness retreats and other forgiveness programs. Among the many contributions Michael has made to The Path of Forgiveness, is bringing emphasis to the

importance of “bilateral forgiveness.” This type of forgiveness is interpersonal and conditional, such as when forgiveness is given in exchange for an apology or when a process with the other person is needed to resolve grievances.

As this work continues to unfold and deepen, the impetus arose to update the workbook, the result of which is in your hands. While the framework presented in this workbook remains focused on “unilateral forgiveness,” we have added some materials relevant to “bilateral forgiveness” in the Appendix.

The soul-soothing balm of forgiveness, and the relational healing it allows, is medicine that is greatly needed. May all of us learn how to use the power of forgiveness to remember who we really are and bring more love, peace and compassion into the world.

Eileen Barker

April, 2016

Introduction

My introduction to forgiveness came unexpectedly during a visit to Washington D.C. in 2005. Looking for something to read in the guest room where I was staying, I came across the autobiography of Nelson Mandela, entitled *Long Walk to Freedom*. I started reading it one evening, and found that I simply could not put the book down. In it, Mandela tells the riveting story of his life and of the ending of apartheid in South Africa. Through his eyes, I came to understand more fully the horrors of apartheid, a system of institutionalized racism and white domination, as well as the twenty-seven years of harsh conditions he endured as a political prisoner at Robben Island. When Mandela became President of South Africa, he was urged by many to convene criminal tribunals to hold apartheid leaders accountable and gain retribution for the atrocities committed under the apartheid government. Mandela understood that retribution would only perpetuate the cycle of hatred and violence between the races, which South Africa could ill afford. Instead, Mandela courageously established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a vehicle to promote truth telling, forgiveness and healing.

Realizing the enormity of Mandela's choice was a life changing moment for me. It led me to closely study the incredible life and teachings of Mohandas Gandhi, one of Mandela's role models. It also led me to Archbishop Desmond Tutu's book, *No Future Without Forgiveness,* which further reveals the crimes committed in the name of apartheid and the miraculous examples of forgiveness which emerged from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. One incredibly inspiring story is that of the Biehl family.

Amy Biehl was a Fulbright scholar from California who had been involved in an anti-apartheid student campaign at Stanford University. She was living in South Africa in 1993, working to help disadvantaged youths in the Gugulethu Township. One day, while riding to the township, four young men stoned the car. When Amy got out of the car, she was stoned and stabbed to death. In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu writes:

> *She who was so committed to justice was ironically killed by people whose cause she had espoused . . . Her family was obviously shattered. Yet instead of being embittered and seeking revenge, quite remarkably they did not oppose the amnesty applications of those who had killed their child so brutally. Mr. Peter and Mrs. Linda Biehl attended the amnesty application hearing and said that they supported the entire process of reconciliation and amnesty. They embraced the families of the murderers of their child.*
>
> *But what is more remarkable is that they have established the Amy Biehl Foundation with the objective of uplifting the youth in the very township where their daughter was killed, helping residents who could very well have been involved in Amy's murder. The Biehls return to South Africa regularly to oversee the operations of the foundation and they frequently pass the spot where their child met her gruesome death.*

What a beautiful example of forgiveness in action! Not only that, the spirit of generosity exhibited by the Biehls gave rise to something else even more amazing. Two of the young men who killed Amy later went on to work for the Amy Biehl Foundation established by her parents – they came to adopt Amy's life mission as their own, helping other troubled youth in their township.

These stories and many more like it have inspired me to learn about forgiveness, practice forgiveness in my own life, and teach it to others. The stories of forgiveness speak to the greater possibilities that exist in life, if we are willing to open ourselves to them.

Against this backdrop, I often reflect on the sorts of conflicts that I have encountered over the past 30 years as a lawyer and mediator: conflicts between large and small businesses, corporations, partners, neighbors, employers and employees, doctors and patients, lawyers and clients, coworkers, spouses, and family members. I have observed how consuming and debilitating conflict is for most people. I have watched clients go through years of litigation, only to win a victory that seemed quite hollow compared to the time, money and energy spent in achieving it. This has led me to embrace mediation, which I believe uniquely offers people the opportunity for healing and true resolution of conflict. Yet, even in mediation, I have seen many people settle their legal dispute, only to continue mistrusting and hating those on the other side.

Above all, I have seen how our legal system and popular culture glorify adversity and encourage blame and retribution. Rarely have we considered the price we are paying for those attitudes, or the greater possibilities offered from truth, healing and forgiveness. I hope we will soon find a place in our culture and legal system for embracing forgiveness. It is only through forgiveness that healing and wholeness can occur.

Indeed, one of the most powerful choices we can make is to forgive those we perceive to have injured or wronged us in some way. At its essence, forgiveness is a decision to let go of the past, including our feelings about injury and harm that occurred in the past. It doesn't mean we condone what happened. It means we've decided to move on from it. Forgiveness is choosing to reclaim our life and your energy, so we can live fully and freely in the present moment, and not be dragged down by past memories and emotions.

Life is challenging. We encounter a wide array of difficult experiences in our lives: dishonesty, disappointment, heartbreak, betrayal, job loss, humiliation, financial loss, illness, disability, abuse, violence, war, terrorism, death . . . the list is endless. The pain and suffering are real.

The suffering of life can be enormous, and the pain almost unbearable. As we encounter loss, we often develop strategies and defense mechanisms which enable us to avoid feeling the pain. One of them is to shift, often automatically, into a position of blame. We attempt to displace our pain onto the other person by saying (or thinking), "It's your fault that this has happened" or "I'm right, and you're wrong." We want to hold the other person accountable. In the face of hardship, blame seems to provide psychological relief, and our entire culture not only endorses blame, but in many ways encourages and rewards it.

The problem is, blame doesn't work. It is a dead end. It may provide temporary satisfaction, but it doesn't alleviate the problem. The underlying pain remains, and is actually prolonged. As we attempt to shift pain onto the other person, we reinforce our own. We continue to focus on the painful experience and on the past. We feel angry and hurt. We feel powerless and victimized. We believe we have the right to be angry, seek revenge, and/or feel sorry for ourselves. Over time, we perpetuate our own suffering, but we don't know what else to do.

Forgiveness breaks the cycle. It enables us to let go of our grievances, and the pain associated with past events. Forgiveness can release us from a lifetime of pain and liberate us from continuing to carry the burdens of the past. Forgiveness restores us to peace, freeing us to move forward in our life.

The idea of forgiveness is not new. Most of us learned about forgiveness as children, and depending on our upbringing, received countless messages from parents and religious teachers about the importance of forgiving others. Yet, experience shows that it is difficult to forgive, even if this is something we want, and often the truth is we often don't want to forgive, or don't know how.

Our inability to forgive costs us dearly. As we focus on ways that we believe we have been harmed by others, we remain locked in a prison created by our own making, constructed with negative thoughts and emotions from the past. As we continue to experience blame and resentment, we suffer emotionally and physically. We miss the opportunity of being free and fully alive in the present.

When I started teaching about forgiveness, I noticed that the same sorts of reservations and questions about forgiveness would inevitably crop up: *"If I forgive, wouldn't it mean that I approve of what the other person did? After what was done to me, I'm entitled to feel angry and resentful. Why should I forgive?*" These questions and beliefs can be summarized in four central questions, which will be addressed in Part One of this workbook:

1. What does it mean to forgive?
2. Why should I forgive?
3. Isn't what happened to me unforgivable?
4. How can I learn to forgive?

In the end, what most people really want to know is: “Can *I* do this? Can this be applied to *my* situation?” The short answer is “*Yes.” Anyone can learn to forgive. At any time. In any situation.*

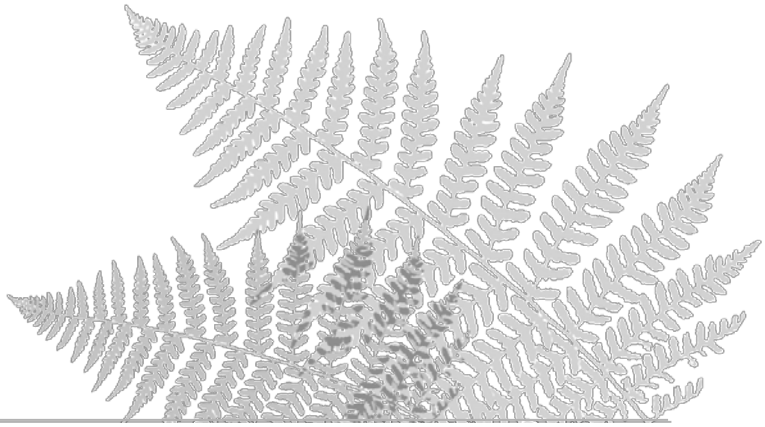
Which brings us to: “*Where do I begin*?” Part Two of this workbook provides the how. It is designed as a self-guided step-by-step process that will enable you to work through any situation or conflict in which there is a desire, willingness and decision to forgive.

PART ONE

Understanding Forgiveness

Without forgiveness there is no future.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu



CHAPTER 1
An Overview: Three Levels of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is not an occasional act. It is a permanent attitude.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

When most people think of forgiveness, they focus on focus on forgiveness of others. However, there are, in fact, three distinct levels of forgiveness: (1) forgiveness of others, (2) forgiveness of self, and (3) the realization that there is nothing to forgive.

Level One – Forgiveness of Others

The first level is forgiveness of others. Often when we speak of forgiveness, it is assumed that we mean forgiveness of another person. This level seems to be the one on which most people focus.

"The Sunflowers" by Simon Wiesenthal is a poignant book about forgiveness of another person. Wiesenthal was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. After the war, he became a prosecutor of war crimes. The book is about something extraordinary that happened to Wiesenthal when he was in the camp. One day, as part of his work duty, he was taken to a nearby village and brought to the hospital room of a Nazi officer. He was told by a nurse that the Nazi officer was on his deathbed and had asked to talk to a Jewish person before he died. Wiesenthal was brought to the bedside to fulfill this request, and the Nazi officer proceeded to make a confession that went on for several hours during which he confessed to the many horrific things he had done to Jews during the war. At the end of this confession, the Nazi officer asked Simon Wiesenthal for his forgiveness. Wiesenthal was dumbfounded. Eventually, he got up and left the room without saying anything.

Thirty years later, Wiesenthal wrote about this experience and he posed a simple question to thirty theologians from around the world, including the Dalai Lama and

Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He asked each of them: "What would you have done?" "The Sunflower" is a fascinating compilation of the essays written by these theologians. The perspectives shared are extremely thoughtful, heartfelt, well written -- and all over the map. Interestingly, one writer noted that the Christian writers tended to be in favor of forgiveness, based on the clear teachings of Christ, whereas the Jewish respondents were equally adamant that it was not appropriate to forgive in this situation. This underscores that how we feel about forgiveness is largely based on what we have been taught and our belief system.

Interestingly, all of the essays focused solely on whether one person should or could forgive another. None explored the question of self-forgiveness. Yet, what struck me was that even if Wiesenthal had forgiven him, the Nazi officer would still have been left with his own substantial shame and remorse. The deepest layers of suffering stem from self-judgment about the ways we have fallen short.

At the level of forgiving others, there is another type of forgiveness that is very important. This is forgiveness for impersonal acts, acts that are not attributable to any one individual, but that nevertheless can have a profound impact on our lives. This could include forgiveness of mankind for destroying the health of the environment, forgiveness of God for allowing so much suffering to occur, forgiveness of "the system" or the government for being inefficient and corrupt, and forgiveness of society for being unwise and unfair. There are many ways in which the collective conduct of these types of entities has a huge impact on our lives and can leave us feeling powerless. In the face of this, forgiveness is a very important and powerful way to reclaim our power and find peace.

Level Two – Self-Forgiveness

For closure to occur, there has to be both forgiveness of the other person and forgiveness of ourselves. Even in situations in which we perceive ourselves to be the victim, eventually we must forgive ourselves for any way in which we have contributed to our suffering, or the suffering of another.

Because we usually start out feeling victimized by another person, it may be difficult to see how or why we would need to forgive ourselves. However, as we move past our anger and blame, there is often a realization that we too had a part in creating the situation. At the very least, we created our story about the situation, and kept replaying it in our minds, which caused us to suffer. It may well have caused others to suffer as well. Ken Cloke takes this a step further, making the point that the true source of every conflict is within our own minds:

> *Most conflicts are triggered by external experiences and information regarding them is conveyed to us by sensory inputs that have been gathered from our environment. Our conflicts therefore seem to us to take place externally, yet everything we understand about the meaning of what happened, and all of our responses to the actions of other are initiated and coordinated internally by our brains.*

Once we make the leap of understanding that it is the meaning we attach to events that have caused our pain and suffering, rather than the external events themselves, the need for self-forgiveness becomes apparent. The realization that we have created the very problem for which we were accusing another can be humbling to say the least, and liberating, because now we have the power to end it.

Jaimee Karroll, who was designated a “Hero of Forgiveness” by the Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance, forgave the men who kidnapped her as a child and sexually abused and tortured her. She came to the realization that she also needed to forgive herself:

> *I had no idea how my life would be reshaped when I was finally able to consider the possibility of trying to forgive myself. I began to realize that I would have to look at how my rage and despair had resulted in hurt to those who loved me the most: my husband, family members and friends. From there, it was not difficult to recognize that if I was going to forgive myself for hurting others, then I ought to consider forgiving those who had hurt me. Forgiveness was not achieved in a single moment, but has unfolded over two decades.*

Thus, although Karroll was clearly a victim of a terrible crime, she bravely came to see that she herself had also caused suffering. More importantly, she realized that while she could do nothing to undo past events, she alone could stop the suffering that she was perpetuating. This became the basis of her self-forgiveness.

Without self-forgiveness, we continue to inflict emotional pain on ourselves and those around us. We may harbor harsh judgments against our self. In the early stages, if we are focused on blaming the other person, these self -judgments, may be subtle or even unconscious. However, they will eventually surface, and take their toll, eroding one’s sense of well-being. The only release is through self-forgiveness.

Level Three – There Is Nothing To Forgive

The third level of forgiveness is the most controversial. It is the realization that, at the deepest level of understanding, there is nothing to forgive. It asks us to consider the possibility that at some level everything is exactly as it is intended to be, even though we may not like or understand it. It challenges us to let go of our notions of right and wrong, and

the belief that we know how life is supposed to be, and how people should or should not behave. It challenges us to humbly admit that we do not know the meaning of life or the bigger picture of what is occurring in any given situation. If we can shift our perspective to see that life is occurring exactly as it is meant to occur, then there is nothing to forgive.

Along these lines, teacher and author Byron Katie says our suffering is caused by our unexamined judgments and, specifically, the belief that someone has done something 'wrong.' She urges us to move beyond our preconceptions, rather than accept them automatically as true, and in so doing embrace the freedom of not knowing:

> *Until you can see that there is nothing to forgive, you haven't really forgiven. No one has ever hurt anyone. No one has ever done anything terrible. There's nothing terrible except your uninvestigated thoughts about what happened. So whenever you suffer, inquire. Look at the thoughts you're thinking, and set yourself free. Be a child. Start from the mind that knows nothing. Take your ignorance all the way to freedom.*

Similarly, in Power v. Force, author David Hawkins notes: "All pain and suffering arise solely from the ego." Hawkins cautions that our egoic thoughts are not trustworthy. Nevertheless, we are easily beguiled by them. Hawkins beckons us to a level of self-awareness that can perceive the egoic thoughts without being pulled along in their wake: "The great tragedy of human life has always been that the psyche is so easily deceived."

As we develop the ability to unhook ourselves from our ego, it becomes possible to embrace a profound acceptance of life as it unfolds. A wonderful example of this is Julie Chimes, who was also honored as a "Hero of Forgiveness" by the Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance. One day, a woman visiting Julie's home suddenly took a carving knife from Chime's kitchen and began a frenzied attack, stabbing Julie and leaving her close to death. Chimes

later reported that in the moment when she was been attacked, a part of her was witnessing all that was occurring and had compassion for the woman attacking her:

> *I am neither christened nor religious but Christ's words about "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" is the closest way to describe how I felt. As I blamed no one, there was nothing to forgive, but there was still a lot for me to learn and understand. . . . I now know when there is understanding there can be compassion. When compassion arises there can be forgiveness. Where there is forgiveness there is peace.*

It is possible even in the midst of great trauma to accept what is, realize that no one is to blame, and see there is nothing to forgive. This requires us to transcend our personal plight. It requires us to identify with a part of our self that is bigger than our ego, our fear, or our pain. If we are able to achieve this, the rewards are profound. As we accept life, as it is, we are free to flow with the current, rather than against it. Inevitably, we find life's greatest treasures in the midst of what may have at first appeared to be a tragic situation.

CHAPTER 2
What it Means to Forgive

Forgiveness means letting go of the hope of ever having a better past.

A Course in Miracles

In the first level of forgiveness, the forgiving of another person, people often get stuck in misunderstandings about what it means to forgive. It is important to clarify what forgiveness is, and what it is not.

Forgiveness is a decision not to pursue resentment or revenge. It means letting go of our claim of wrongdoing, the desire to blame, and the need to be right. It means letting go of the past and seeing oneself as a victim. Forgiveness means creating a new story about what occurred which is both peaceful and self-empowering. Correctly understood, forgiveness means putting your attention back on yourself rather than on the other person, and reclaiming a sense of inner peace and love.

One of the greatest myths about forgiveness is that it is done for the benefit of the other person. Forgiveness is not for the other person's benefit. It is for your own benefit. To understand this fully, you must realize how much you hurt yourself by not forgiving. Then, you can appreciate that forgiveness is one of the most divinely selfish actions a person can ever take.

Fred Luskin, author of Forgive for Good and Forgive for Love, is one of the world's leading researchers and teachers on the subject of forgiveness, and the director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, which conducts research on forgiveness methods.

Luskin provides the following distinctions (partial list):

What Forgiveness Is:

• Forgiveness is taking back your power.

• Forgiveness is taking responsibility for how you feel.

• Forgiveness is for you and not the offender.

• Forgiveness is about your healing and not about the people who hurt you.

• Forgiveness is a trainable skill.

• Forgiveness is becoming a hero instead of a victim.

• Forgiveness is a choice.

The last point is most significant: forgiveness is a choice. Every one of us has the power to forgive and can exercise that power as we see fit. Forgiveness does not depend on what anyone else does. It's something we do for our own benefit, not for anyone else. We can choose to forgive, or choose not to forgive, and we alone must choose the timing. It is essential that each person's choices be completely honored.

As Holocaust survivor Viktor E. Frankl points out, no one can force another person to forgive, nor can anyone stop us from forgiving.

> *We who lived in the concentration camps can remember those who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread . . . They may have been few in number but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from us but the last of human freedoms . . . the freedom to choose our spirit in any circumstance.*

What deters many people from pursuing forgiveness is the mistaken idea that by forgiving, they will somehow be condoning or approving conduct which they perceive to be wrongful. According to Luskin:

What Forgiveness Is Not:

- Forgiveness is not condoning unkindness.
- Forgiveness is not forgetting that something painful happened.
- Forgiveness is not excusing poor behavior.
- Forgiveness does not have to be an otherworldly or religious experience.
- Forgiveness is not denying or minimizing your hurt.
- Forgiveness does not mean reconciling with the offender.
- Forgiveness does not mean you give up having feelings about what occurred.

What is most important to understand is that forgiveness is not forgetting, condoning, excusing, or saying that hurtful conduct is okay. And it is essential that forgiveness not be seen as obligatory. Rather, it is a choice.

One further note: forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation means forming a new relationship with the other person. Forgiveness is a necessary precursor to reconciliation: without forgiveness true reconciliation cannot occur. Yet, it is possible to forgive without reconciling. Remember, forgiveness has nothing to do with the other person. You can forgive someone who has been dead for many years. You can forgive someone, yet chose to have no further contact with them.

CHAPTER 3

Why Should I Forgive?

Because out of forgiveness comes love.

Tom Mingle

In the face of stressful situations or relationships, we often seek to avoid the other person involved. Or we settle for an unspoken truce. The conflict is no longer openly expressed, but the tension remains. Family members stop talking to each other. Friends distance themselves. Co-workers avoid contact. The problem remains under the surface, waiting for the next opportunity to erupt. Even if the conflict does not reemerge openly, we pay a price for the unspoken tension.

Until we forgive, part of our attention is held in place by what we perceive to be the problem. Some amount of our life energy is expended on it. A portion of our life energy is taken up with the problem, and is therefore not available to us for other, more positive and creative endeavors.

The benefits of letting go of difficult experiences from the past seem apparent. Why then, can it be so hard to forgive? According to Luskin, the primary issue is one of habit and motivation: "The hesitancy to forgive is principally a question of motivation . . . and our tendency to continue reacting to hurt in ways that do not work."

Our habits keep us stuck in certain patterns. Some people will develop negative thought patterns, obsessing about the other person and what occurred. Others will have habitual emotional responses, which may include long periods of depression. Some will develop feelings of hopelessness about the situation, and perhaps life in general.

Holding onto grievances is also physically debilitating. The research of Luskin and others has demonstrated convincingly that conflict is hazardous to one's health:

- Even thinking about an unresolved conflict causes the body to release stress chemicals and respond in measurable, harmful ways.
- Simply recalling an event which triggers feelings of anger or resentment increases one's heart rate and blood pressure.
- People who are chronically angry are at higher risk for heart attacks and other cardiovascular disease, as well as immunological weakness.
- Conversely, learning to forgive can lower one's blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart disease, and strengthen the immune system.

If we pay attention to the body, we can begin to notice where we feel tension when we are in conflict. Some will experience tightening in the jaw or abdomen, others may feel jittery. Stress takes its toll on the body over time, raising the likelihood of a wide- range of diseases. Each of the following conditions has been attributed to the carrying of grudges and anger:

- Heart attacks
- Cardiovascular disease
- High blood pressure
- Decreased lung function
- Muscle tension
- Stress
- Depression
- Weight gain
- Cancer

The good news is that learning to forgive can ameliorate these conditions and has been linked to the following:

- Improved cardiovascular functioning
- Improved lung function
- Improved functioning of nervous system
- Improved functioning of immune system
- Increased ability to think clearly and creatively
- Lower blood pressure
- Lower heart rate
- Less muscle tension
- Increased hope, caring, trust, happiness, gratitude and faith

In sum, we pay dearly for stress and conflict. It is easy to lose sight of this when we are in the throes of anger, or feeling that we have been the victim of unfair conduct or circumstances. We can so easily justify carrying anger and resentment, vowing to never speak to the other person again. Remember, next time you are tempted to hold a grudge against another person, that forgiveness is vital to your own well-being.

Mediator Cate Griffith, astutely points out that our culture equates strength with anger, fighting and revenge, and condemns forgiveness and vulnerability as weak. Our culture lies to us about what is true, but our bodies do not lie. Revenge and lack of forgiveness cause dis-ease, while forgiveness promotes health and wholeness of body and spirit. Forgiveness is an act of courage, (from the Latin Root *cor* meaning 'heart') a response of compassion and loving kindness for ourselves and others that requires a willingness to be vulnerable.

Forgiveness is essential in breaking the chains of violence, fear and hatred born from the surplus of injustice that now infuses the world. Forgiveness has broad implications not only for our personal lives, but also for large institutions such as the military, courts, prisons and politics. If these institutions were evaluated in terms of their effectiveness at remedying the problems they were designed to address, it would quickly become apparent that they are failing miserably, at least in the United States.

The moment we are triggered and prone to seek revenge and retribution, forgiveness challenges us to see the humanity behind brutal and destructive actions. Forgiveness opens us to compassion and empathy for the humanity of others, especially those we perceive to have offended or hurt us. This involves deconstructing inter-generational narratives about injustice, inequality, blame and fault that are deeply embedded in our individual and collective psyches. As we liberate ourselves from old, outdated narratives, we discover forgiveness is a powerful instrument of social change, a way to balance and remedy punitive and retaliatory impulses in our families, institutions and societies. As Michael Gelbart, LCSW, says: "Forgiveness is an act of the heart."

CHAPTER 4

Is It Possible to Forgive in *This* Situation?

If it were not possible to free the heart from entanglement in greed, hate, and fear, I would not teach you to do so.

The Buddha

People often resist forgiveness on the grounds that what happened to them is too horrible to be forgiven. They don't know how to process their pain in a way that permits them to make sense of, or find meaning in, the situation. The pain is so great, that forgiveness seems impossible. The question inevitably arises: Are some things in fact unforgivable? Much ink has been poured on this controversial topic. Luskin writes persuasively that the answer is no, it is always possible to forgive, based on the fact that in any given situation there are people who have chosen to forgive:

> *The first [obstacle to forgiveness] is our tendency to confuse an unforgivable offense with an inability to forgive . . . Our major obstacles is not the offenses themselves but the lack of tools with which to work . We only imagine it is the nature of the offense that is unforgivable. However, if any of us look around we will find people who have forgiven the very same offense . . . No offense is unforgivable to everyone. If you look you can always find someone who has forgiven in a similar situation . . .*

Therefore, while some conduct might be difficult to forgive, it cannot be said that anything is *per se* unforgivable. Rather, what is needed is the motivation to forgive, as well as the tools to forgive, such as are contained in *Forgive for Good* and this workbook. For most people, motivation comes when the pain of continuing to carry a grievance becomes unbearable.

Holocaust survivor Eva Kor has been honored as a “Hero of Forgiveness” by the Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance. After a lifetime of seeing herself as a victim, Kor decided to forgive the Nazis and war criminal Josef Mengele who conducted inhuman medical experiments upon Eva and her twin sister and killed all of the other members of her family. Kor bravely realized that continuing to hate the Nazis was ruining her life:

> *At first I was adamant that I could never forgive Dr. Mengele but then I realized I had the power . . . the power to forgive. It was my right to use it. No one could take it away . . . It became a gift to myself as well, because I realized that I was NOT a hopeless, powerless victim. . . Forgiveness is really nothing more than an act of self-healing and self-empowerment. I call it a miracle medicine. It is free; it works and has no side effects.*

There are countless examples around us of people who have forgiven under extremely difficult circumstances. If we allow it, they can inspire us to apply forgiveness in the face of whatever challenges we face in our lives.

CHAPTER 5

How Do I Learn to Forgive?

He who refuses to forgive breaks the bridge
over which he too must cross.

Confucius

The primary reason people do not forgive is that they do not know how to forgive. They lack the tools. The good news is that forgiveness is a learnable skill, like learning to play a musical instrument or speak a new language. The skill comes by learning the basic steps, and then practicing them. At first it may require steps that are unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable. However, like all skills, ability comes with practice.

Forgiveness is best seen and used as a tool of daily living, not something to be saved for rare, once in a lifetime, occurrences. Daily life provides ample opportunity to practice forgiveness! Start with the small insults of daily living — inconsiderate drivers, poor restaurant service, and the like. Then graduate to working on minor offenses committed by family members and friends. Practicing over time will strengthen your forgiveness muscles and fluency. When major loss occurs, you will still have to pull deep from within, but you will have the skills needed to meet the challenge.

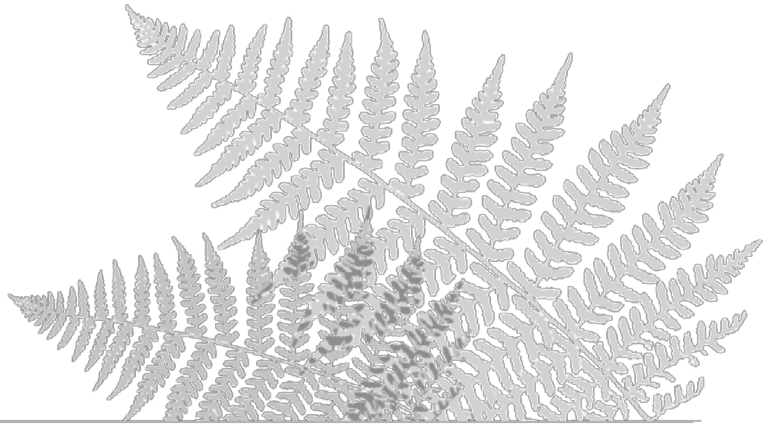
The process that follows in Part Two of this workbook provides a step by step process for releasing the past and restoring peace. It can be used in any situation in which forgiveness is desired.

PART TWO

The Forgiveness Process

I have asked you to forgive and reconcile.
How can I ask that if I'm not ready to do so myself.

Nelson Mandela



Step 1
Preparation

The weak can never forgive.
Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.

Mohandas Gandhi

Before starting the Forgiveness Process, the following steps are suggested:

1. Set aside plenty of time for the process. Don't rush yourself through it.
2. Create support. This could be a counselor or trusted friend with whom you can talk as you go through the process.
3. Do the process with a friend or support group. Meet periodically to talk about your progress, questions, and challenges.
4. Do the steps in order, especially the first time through.
5. Get clear on who it is you want to forgive. The Forgiveness Inventory which follows will help you identify relationships and issues from which you can choose.
6. If your situation involves an ongoing conflict, do what you can to put external events "on hold" while doing your forgiveness work. For instance, you might write a letter to those involved letting them know you need time to work through things before communicating further.

Please note — The forgiveness process is not psychotherapy. It can be used to complement, not replace, any counseling or other treatment you may be receiving. If you are receiving counseling or other treatment by any mental health or other professional, please consult with your therapist or other professional before beginning this process.

Forgiveness Inventory

Scan over the various areas of your life and list all of the people you need to forgive, including yourself. Indicate what you need to forgive them for. Where are you holding grudges or grievances? Where are you feeling wounded and offended? What resentments and disappointments have you been unable to release? Use additional paper as needed.

Parents:

Siblings:

Other Family Members:

Spouse/Significant Other:

Former Spouse/Significant Other:

Child:

Yourself:

Your Body:

Friends:

Neighbor:

Business Partner/Colleague:

Employer/Employee:

The Government:

Politicians

Corporations:

Life:

God:

Step 2

Describe Your Grievance

Holding a grudge is like drinking poison,
and expecting the other person to die.

Anonymous

It's important to select one person, problem or situation to focus on at a time. From the list you generated in Step 1, which is the one you most want to resolve at this time? Describe the problem in detail, including who is involved, what occurred, and your thoughts and feelings about it. Use as much paper as you need to write everything you feel is important about the situation. Be as truthful and complete as you can in expressing how you see this and how it has caused you to suffer. Don't hold back. Don't censor yourself.

Describe Your Grievance

Describe Your Grievance

Step 3

Deconstruct Your Story

Forgiveness is the art of discerning what's ours and what's not.

Michael Gelbart

When we are hurt or offended, we create a story about what occurred. This is normal. We are all creating stories all the time. Stories give us a way to relate to the world around us and interpret and make sense of what we are experiencing. For the most part we do this unconsciously and we honestly believe our story is entirely factual. However, this is rarely the case, because we are actually very selective about which facts we include and which facts we omit in our stories.

Stories are powerful. *Most suffering is not caused by what happened to us but rather, by the story we tell ourselves about what happened.* Therefore, it's essential to step back from the narrative of your grievance and recognize that you have created a story. It's important to see that what you wrote in response to Step 2 of this process is in fact your story.

In *Forgive for Good*, Luskin writes about "grievance stories" and points out that there are three universal elements in a grievance story:

1. We create a story in which we are the victim.
2. We blame the other person for how we feel.
3. We interpret an event in a personal way.

The next step of the process invites you to look at each of these elements in your story. Answer each of the three questions, and then on the following page, consider whether your story has indeed become a "grievance story."

1. In what ways have you seen yourself as a victim?

2. In what ways have you blamed someone else for how you feel? Who have you blamed and for what?

3. What aspects of the situation have you taken personally?

Have You Created A Grievance Story?

These questions, based on Luskin's work, can help you determine whether your story is a grievance story:

- Are you taking events that occurred personally?
- Does it sometimes feel like you are the only person who has had this experience?
- Do you find yourself thinking this experience occurred because of a shortcoming on your part?
- Do you blame the other person for how you feel?
- Have you told your story more than twice to the same person?
- Do you replay the events that happened more than two times a day?
- Do you find yourself speaking to the person who hurt you even when that person is not there?
- Is the person who hurt you the central character of your story?
- When you tell this story, does it remind you of other painful things?
- Does your story focus primarily on your pain and what you have lost?
- Is there a villain?
- Has your story stayed the same over time?
- Have you checked the details of your story for accuracy?
- Have you made a commitment to yourself not to tell the story again and then broken it?

Recognizing that one has formed a grievance story is a powerful step. If you concluded that you have formed a grievance story (most people do), do not feel discouraged. The good news is that once you become aware of your grievance story, you have the ability to change it. You can create a new story, which is the essence of forgiveness.

Luskin points out that the elements of the grievance story provide the roadmap for one's work:

1) Change the story so that you no longer see yourself as a victim.
2) Take responsibility for your feelings.
3) Learn not to take things personally.

Each of these elements is incorporated into later steps of the Forgiveness Progress.

From this point on, you are encouraged to think of your grievance story as your "old story." The more you dismantle your old story and create a new one, the more you will free yourself from the imprisonment and suffering of the past.

Step 4

Consider the Impact

Hatred is an infectious disease.

Eva Kor

Once you have identified and deconstructed your story, the next step is to consider the impact of your story. How does it shape and influence various aspects of your life experience? What is it costing you? It's important to take stock of how the story impacts you on all levels -- mental, emotional, spiritual and physical.

Before writing, take a moment to close your eyes. As you reflect on your story, notice the impact it has on your physical body. Notice any feelings that arise, including any places in your body that become tense or constricted. Start with your jaw and neck, scanning your entire body, including the chest and abdomen.

1. Where in your body do you feel the grievance?

2. How has the grievance impacted your life so far, including: health, work, intimacy, family, other relationships, finances and general well-being?

3. How will it impact you in the future if it continues?

4. What do you gain from keeping your grievance story as it is? What parts of you benefit from holding on to it? What would you lose if it were resolved? What bad thing would happen if this were healed?

5. What are your motives and intentions for releasing your grievance? What parts of you want to resolve it?

Step 5

Heal the Emotional Wound

Forgiveness is the decision to never put another human being out of your heart.

Jack Kornfield

Emotions are the glue that bind us to a situation. If you have strong feelings, they cannot be sidestepped. They must be addressed if we are to forgive fully. Often, the greatest shift occurs when we delve deeper into the emotional truth of our experience. This includes bringing awareness to feelings, sensations in the body, and emotions. Tragically, many of us were taught that emotions are not okay, and that we should hide our true feelings. Or perhaps we were told that some feelings are okay, but not others. The opposite is true.

As I was growing up, I had very little understanding of emotions. I learned to hide, or at least try to hide, my emotions. Yet, over time, anger would inevitably erupt, or I would break down crying. Starting in 1989, I was fortunate to attend a series of workshops offered by the Human Awareness Institute, hai.org. There, for the first time I experienced people being emotionally open and honest. I learned to value and express the full spectrum of my feelings. I discovered that this is not only safe, but extremely beneficial.

Emotions are part of our humanity, and vitally important to our well-being. They give us important feedback about what is happening in our life. It is essential that we learn to feel our feelings and stay connected to them. It's essential to realize that feeling painful emotions, such as grief, is a natural and vital part of being alive, of being human.

In the *Presence Process*, Michael Brown offers a powerful tool for working with painful and difficult emotions, which is to distinguish between the “messenger” and the “message.” Messengers come to us throughout our lives and can take any number of forms. With respect to your grievance, the “messenger” the specific person, situation or event that has triggered your upset.

Once you’ve identified the messenger, the next step is to decipher the “message.” The “message” is what you took away from the messenger (not what the messenger said to you). The message contains your interpretation of what occurred. It is what you internalized from the triggering event, *what you told yourself it meant about you*.

Once you are able to distinguish the message from the messenger, it is essential to take your attention off the “messenger,” and focus on the “message.” This requires you to shift your focus away from the other person and away from external events. By placing your attention on yourself as fully as possible, you have the opportunity to find out what is really going on inside of you. This is essential to healing and forgiveness. Anything less than this will divert your attention away from where it needs to be.

Brown offers this example: When the post office delivers my credit card bill, I may be unhappy. But, I am unhappy with the bill, not the person who delivered it. In this case, the bill is the “message.” The letter carrier is the “messenger.” It should be clear that directing anger or unhappiness to the letter carrier would be a complete waste of time.

This distinction can be applied to any situation in which we are emotionally triggered. For instance, I may become upset if I have plans to meet a friend and the friend fails to show up. Here, my friend is the messenger. I need to discover the message. What is the reason I am offended? If I feel hurt and it brings up a core belief that I’m not important or worthy, this is the message.

While it might be tempting to blame my friend, it is far more beneficial to "dismiss the messenger," and focus on what's beneath the surface. Brown notes: "We do not blame the mirror for anything we do not like about our appearance."

Brown also emphasizes the importance of looking at how the message connects to our past. *"Whenever anything happens that upsets us emotionally, whether it appears to us as an event or as another person's behavior, we are seeing a reflection of our past …. [what we are experiencing is] a reoccurring effect of belief systems that are generated by the unintegrated experiences of our childhood."*

At this stage in the forgiveness process we are invited to delve into the message and discover our core wounds and beliefs formed long ago. We look for the "emotional signature" of our grievance story which consists of the unique combination of the feelings we experience in connection with our message. Once we identify the emotional signature, we can trace it back to previous times we have experienced the same feelings and beliefs. This enables us to see the lineage of the message and core wounding. By tracing the repeating pattern back to its origin, we can bring awareness to the root of the problem.

> *"[Our core beliefs and wounds were] imprinted into our emotional body before our awareness consciously entered the mental realm, so they are not located within us as thoughts, words, and concepts, but as feelings."*
>
> Michael Brown

Any triggering event can be traced back to its roots in this manner, enabling us to focus our attention on our core wounding, rather than the messenger. A tool for this, called the Trigger Worksheet, is included in the Appendix.

Once core wounding is uncovered, the next step is to allow ourselves to fully feel our feelings, only now with access to resources that enable us tend to and repair the wound that we didn't previously have. A variety of therapeutic resources can be used to facilitate healing, depending on the needs of each person and situation. There is no one formula for this. However, in all cases it is helpful to realize two things. First, that core wounding (and any way you've identified with it) is just one part of you, it's not the totality of who you are. Second, most emotional wounds are based on false beliefs, beliefs you adopted because you didn't know how else to interpret what was occurring (such as "there must be something wrong with me if my spouse/parent/caregiver is neglecting me.") When these beliefs are held up to the light of day, their falseness becomes apparent. You then have the opportunity to form new patterns of thought and feeling based on the truth, based on who you really are. This is the moment of liberation and the transformational promise of forgiveness.

1. When you think about your grievance story, what do you feel in your body? Where in your body do you feel it?

2. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being least possible and 10 being most possible), how much do you experience each of the following in connection with your story?

Anger	_____	Anxiety	_____
Hate	_____	Rage	_____
Resentment	_____	Confusion	_____
Blame	_____	Disappointment	_____
Hurt	_____	Frustration	_____
Sadness	_____	Betrayal	_____
Grief	_____	Shame	_____
Fear	_____	Guilt	_____
Despair	_____	Worthless	_____
Mistrust	_____	Hopeless	_____
Loneliness	_____	Powerless	_____

3. Distinguish between the messenger and the message in your story:

   Part 1: Identity the messenger in your story.

   Part 2: Identify the message. What did you feel in your body as a result of the triggering event? What did you tell yourself this meant about you?

Part 3: Dismiss the messenger. Are you willing take your focus off of the other person, and focus on how you were impacted, i.e., the message?

4. What core wounds are embedded in the message? Examples of core wounds are given in the Appendix, page 69, and include beliefs such as: “I’m not good enough,” “I’m not important,” “I’m not lovable.” (You may have already identified the core wounds in answer to the preceding question. But, if not, identify them here.)

5. Identify the emotional signature of your story, i.e., the unique combination of feelings you experience in connection with your core wounds.

6. Where in your body do you feel the emotional signature? Notice any sensations, impulses, breathing patterns, postural holding, tightness, heaviness and the like that are connected to it.

7. How has this emotional signature been part of a repeating pattern in your life? When else have you experienced this or something very similar? What is the earliest experience of this you remember?

8. Can you let yourself drop into the feelings connected to your core wounding? As feelings arise, can you find compassion for yourself? If you are not able to access your feelings, are you aware of anything that blocks you?

Step 6
Shift Perspective: Finding the Gift

Conflict is an external drama that reflects one's internal state.
Once the message is understood, the external conflict is no longer needed.

In *Radical Forgiveness*, Colin Tipping offers the view that our life is unfolding perfectly and that if we could see the big picture, we would recognize this and be grateful for each and every experience. Tipping illuminates the realization that the true path of forgiveness is understanding the gift of every life experience. From this perspective, forgiveness is a powerful shift in perspective, a realization that there is nothing to forgive because every situation has perfectly unfolded exactly as it was meant to unfold. By no longer seeing ourselves as victims, and by aligning ourselves with the perfection of life, we open ourselves to experience great love and joy. Tipping calls this "making room for the miracle!"

This view is often controversial, especially for people who have experienced great trauma or suffering. They wonder, "how can suffering be perfect?" Indeed, it may be hard to understand because we cannot see the big picture. Nevertheless, it behooves us to explore conflict and difficult situations for whatever healing and personal growth the situation may offer.

The following story, as told by Ram Dass, illustrates this point:

The Story of the Man Whose Horse Escaped

Once upon a time, there was a man who lived in a small European village. He had a wife and seven children. His only asset of any value was a cart. One day, he swapped his cart for a horse. "Oh how stupid!" all the other villagers said. "Why get a horse if you have no cart for the horse to pull? What a stupid thing." "Hmm," said the man softly, "You never know."

The next day, the man woke up and looked out of his bedroom window. Disaster! The horse had escaped from his stable. Now the man had nothing and a hungry family to feed. "Oh how stupid!" all the villagers said. "We told you that you shouldn't have swapped that cart for a horse. Look at the disaster which has happened as a result!" "Hmm," said the man sadly, "You never know."

A week later, the man was sitting at the kitchen table in despair, wondering what he was going to do. He didn't have any money left. He rested his head on the kitchen table…then he heard a noise. Parrupety, parrupety, parrupety… That noise sounded like the hooves of a horse. He looked out of the kitchen window and saw not only his own horse, but nine other horses with his horse. The horse had been lonely and had gone and found his brothers and sisters so that they could come to live with him. Suddenly, with ten horses, the man was the richest man in the village. "Oh, how amazing!" all the villagers said. "It seems like getting that horse was a great idea after all! How lucky you are!" "Hmm," said the man pensively, "You never know."

A few weeks later, the man's eldest son, who was 15 years old, was out riding the horse. The horse shied and threw the son onto the ground. The son's ankle was badly broken. He would not be able to walk for months. "Oh how terrible!" all the villagers said. "We told you from the very beginning that the horse was a bad idea, and look what's happened now!" "Hmm," said the man calmly, "You never know."

Shortly afterwards, the local ruler declared war on the next country. All the young men of the village were rounded up and conscripted, except for the man's son, because he was still unable to walk on his broken ankle. "Oh, how lucky! !" all the villagers said. "What a good thing that horse was! Now your son will be safe." "Hmm," said the man. "You never know."

1. How has your grievance provided you with a growth opportunity? What have you learned from it so far?

2. Thinking back to the emotional signature, why do you imagine this pattern keeps repeating in your life? What might be its purpose?

3. What have you learned so far about your core wounds?

4. Imagine you are at the end of your life, looking back. How was this grievance an important part of your path? In what way was it exactly what needed to occur?

5. What gifts have you received from this situation that you might not otherwise have received?

In one way, having an enemy is very bad. It disturbs our mental peace and destroys some of our good things. But if we look at it from another angle, only an enemy gives us an opportunity to practice patience. No one else provides us with the opportunity for tolerance. Since we do not know the majority of the five billion human beings on this earth, therefore the majority of people do not give us an opportunity to show tolerance or patience either. Only those people whom we know and who create problems for us really provide us with a good opportunity to practice tolerance and patience.

Shantideva says that it is the very intention of harming us which makes the enemy very special. If the enemy had no intention of harming us, then we would not classify that person as an enemy, therefore our attitude would be completely different. It is his or her very intention of harming us which makes that person an enemy and because of that the enemy provides us with an opportunity to practice tolerance and patience. Therefore, an enemy is indeed a precious teacher. By thinking along these lines, you can eventually reduce the negative mental emotions, particularly hatred.

I consider hatred to be the ultimate enemy.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Step 7

Are You Ready to Forgive?

Forgiveness requires that we let go of our need to be pitied, our need to be right, and our need to feel an intense connection with our tormentor through anger.

Matt Kramer

Occasionally, forgiveness is experienced as a moment of grace in which a heavy burden is instantly lifted from us. However, for most people in most situations, forgiveness is a process that unfolds over time.

The issue of timing is important, and very individualized. It is not helpful to push yourself towards forgiveness before you are ready. Notice if you feel you "should" forgive, but don't really want to forgive. Notice if you feel you "should" be ready, but don't really feel you are ready. Notice if you feel any resistance to the idea of forgiveness. If so, do not try to ignore or override it. I've never, ever seen that work. The best thing you can do is give yourself permission to be exactly where you are.

1. Are you ready to let go of your “old story” and forgive the other person (your messenger(s)? On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being not ready at all, and 10 being completely ready), how ready are you?

   a. If you are not completely ready to forgive the other person, describe any resistance or reluctance. Notice any impulses, feelings or sensations in your body, as well as any images or associations that may arise.

   b. If there is resistance or reluctance to forgiving the other person, what is it telling you? If you could give it a voice, what would it say? What is needed in order for you to be ready to forgive?

2. Are you ready forgive yourself? On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being not ready at all, and 10 being completely ready), how ready are you?

   a. If you are not completely ready to forgive yourself, describe any resistance or reluctance. Again, notice any impulses, feelings or sensations in your body, as well as any images or associations that may arise.

   b. If there is resistance or reluctance to forgiving yourself, what is it telling you? If you could give it a voice, what would it say? What is needed in order for you to be ready to forgive?

Step 8

Look for Positive Intention

Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds
on the heel that has crushed it.

Mark Twain

One of the keys to forgiveness (of self and others) is to look at each person's positive intention. Luskin defines positive intent as the *strongest positive reason we had for being in the situation in the first place*. Luskin uses the example of a man setting out on a trip, to drive from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Along the way, he gets a flat tire. He could just sit by the side of the road and be angry at his circumstances. However, recalling his intent to go to Los Angeles, his better option would be to fix the tire and get back on the road.

The same is true in other situations. Let's say you've been in a difficult relationship for many years. You feel angry and blaming towards the other person. You are also angry with yourself for staying in the relationship so long. There is no denying that the relationship did not turn out the way you had hoped. Yet, you can come back yet your positive intention, the reason you were in the situation in the first place. Your positive intention was most likely to have a loving relationship. You can sit on the side of the road and feel victimized by this relationship, or you can get back on the road by realigning with your positive intention of forming a loving relationship, if need be with a new partner. This is an important step of self-forgiveness. Similarly, identifying the other person's positive intent, which here, was probably also to be in a loving relationship, is also an important part of humanizing the other person, empathizing with them, and making peace with the situation.

1. What was your positive intention in your old story? What is your positive intention now?

2. What might have been the positive intention of the other person in your grievance? Without excusing or condoning what they did, are you able to humanize them? Can you imagine that they too may have been suffering? Can you empathize with their wounding and suffering?

Step 9

Forgive Yourself

Forgiveness requires the ability to forgive yourself
for the failure of your own false expectations.

Kenneth Cloke

Forgiveness is not complete without self-forgiveness, and this is often the most difficult step because most of us are much harder on ourselves than we are on others.

If we have caused harmed. self-forgiveness can heal feelings of regret, remorse, guilt and shame, but it is not a ”free pass.” As Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu explain in *The Book of Forgiveness: “To truly forgive ourselves, we cannot skip over an honest attempt to admit our wrongs, confront the consequences of our hurtful actions, apologize, ask for forgiveness, and make amends.”* Only when we take responsibility for our actions and hold ourselves accountable can self-forgiveness be authentic.

On the other hand, when we have been hurt by another, it can be difficult to understand why we need to forgive ourselves at all. The self-awareness necessary to see this may not occur until later, well after we have forgiven the other person involved. Eventually we may realize that we too played a part in creating the situation and, at the very least, created a story which caused us suffer. It may well have caused others to suffer as well. Without self-forgiveness, we might create a new grievance story about how we created this additional suffering!

Instead, it is important to revisit each of the steps of the forgiveness with self-forgiveness in mind. Realize that as you were going through the situation, you didn’t have the perspective you now have. See yourself with compassion, doing the best you could at the time. Remember, life is about learning from our experiences.

1. What do you need to forgive yourself for? What is your grievance against yourself? Include any recurring negative beliefs about yourself, self-judgments, and anything else you hold against yourself. How have you not lived up to your own expectations? How are you disappointed in yourself?

2. How has it impacted you to carry negative stories about yourself? How has this impacted your life? How has it created suffering for others?

3. What supports you in forgiving yourself? What supports you in having self-compassion and self-acceptance? What works against you?

4. What resistance do you have to forgiving yourself?

5. Is there anything you need to do before you can forgive yourself? Do you need to apologize or make amends for anything?

6. If you've had a grievance against yourself, what have you learned from it? What is the gift in this? What is the growth opportunity?

Step 10

Rewrite the Story

Are you capable of forgiving and loving the people around you,
even if they have hurt you and let you down by not being perfect

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner

The essence of forgiveness is creating a new story about what occurred. *Creating a new story does not mean creating a make-believe version of your life.* It means telling the story of what actually occurred from a different perspective. As Luskin points out, it is shifting from seeing yourself as a victim to seeing yourself as a hero. A victim is someone who is acted upon and feels helpless to respond or take control. A hero is someone who shows great courage and has overcome adversity.

Forgiveness is a hero's journey. It is a journey of moving from telling the story as a victim, to telling the story as a hero. As Luskin says, it means your story changes so that you, and not the situation, are in control.

The culminating step in the forgiveness process is to rewrite your story. This is an opportunity to empower yourself to be the author of your new life. Retell the story such that you are not taking things personally, not blaming anyone else for how you feel, and such that you are in no way a victim. Be sure to include:

- **Positive intentions.** Include the positive intention of each person involved.
- **Self-forgiveness.** Write a new story about your own choices, beliefs and actions. Do so with compassion, and with *no judgment*.
- **Gratitude.** Express any gratitude you now feel for the situation and those involved.

Rewrite your story. *This does not mean creating a fairy tale version of your life. It means telling the story of what actually occurred from a different perspective.* Use as much paper as you need. It may be necessary to work on the story over time, with multiple rewrites, to completely make the shift. It is well worth the time and effort.

It can be extremely helpful to have outside help with this step. Because we are so familiar with our own story, it is often difficult for us to hear or see the ways we are still holding ourselves as victims. Ask someone to hear your story, a person who can be objective and give you honest feedback if they hear traces of victimhood, and any ideas they have for how the new story could be even more empowering.

Template for Rewriting the Story

In writing your new story, you may find it helpful to use some or all of this template:

1. Start with a *brief* description of what happened and what you experienced that was difficult. (Don't retell the entire old story.). Then answer the following prompts.
2. What I have now learned from this is …..
3. I now realize that …..
4. This experience has enabled me to …..
5. Some of the good things that have come out of this situation are ….
6. Some of the gifts I have received as a result of this situation are ….
7. I have forgiven X for ….
8. I have forgiven myself for ….
9. I acknowledge myself for ….
10. I am grateful for ….

Rewrite the Story

Rewrite the Story

Step 11

Integration

Forgiveness is the key to happiness.

Gerald Jampolsky

For the new story to take root, it must be integrated and anchored in your body, mind and emotions. It takes approximately 30 days for the brain to be rewired and for new habits to take hold. Therefore, for best results, these steps are recommended for at least 30-days:

1. Find a quiet time to reread your new story once a day. Each time you reread your new story, take time to envision yourself in the story feeling peaceful and filled with love. Allow yourself to feel these feelings in your body and body posture. Connect to the new story using all your senses. Continue this until you feel you have fully integrated the new story.

2. Create a visual anchor such as a drawing or collage of your new story. Put it on your altar or somewhere else where you will see it every day. Express your new story in poetry. Sing it. Dance it. Be creative!

3. Tell your new story to others who you can count on to be supportive.

4. If there are people in your life who are invested in the old story, let them know you are releasing the old story and ask them to support you in this.

5. If appropriate, establish new boundaries and agreements with others involved in your story. Because this might require a “difficult conversation” a guide to approaching such conversations successfully is included in the Appendix.

6. If you purchased the Forgiveness Meditation CD with this workbook, listen to it, at least once. Some people find it helpful to listen to it once a week or even once a day. The CD guides you to release the old story and let go of places where your energy has been blocked. It includes steps which will help you connect your new story on a bodily-felt level, which is essential for integration. (The CD can also be purchased here: http://www.thepathofforgiveness.com/tools/)

7. Create a ritual of completion as described in Step 12.

8. Invoke the ancient Hawaiian practice of Ho'oponopono which is both very simple and very powerful. It consists of chanting or repeating this prayer with reference to what it is you want to heal:

   I'm sorry

   Please forgive me

   Thank you

   I love you.

Step 12

Completion

Forgiveness cannot change the past but it can enlarge the future.

Gerald Jampolsky

While forgiveness is often an ongoing process that occurs in phases, it is valuable to mark stages of completion. If you have experienced a significant release or shift in your experience of a painful situation, it is important to acknowledge this, either as a point of total completion of the issue for you or, at the very least, a significant milestone along the way.

Completion can take many forms. You may feel complete from the foregoing process without the need to do anything more than the writing and integration. If not, consider what you would need to achieve closure. Is there anything you need or would like to say, hear or do? For example, sometimes it is helpful to have a conversation with someone, write a letter (which can be sent or not) or engage in a forgiveness ritual.

Rituals play a powerful and important role in our lives, including in ending conflict and making change. As you complete your forgiveness process, consider using ritual to consecrate your experience. You can use one or more of the following rituals, or create your own.

Fire Ritual

Create a tangible expression of your conflict on a piece of paper, such as a written description or a drawing. Affirm your intention to completely release the conflict, anyone else involved, and yourself, from your life forever. When you are ready to completely release the conflict forever, set fire to the paper and allow it to burn completely. Then affirm what it is you are claiming for yourself.

Tree Ritual

This ritual is from The Four Fold Way by Angeles Arrien. Arrien writes that many indigenous cultures refer to trees as "the medicine people of the plant kingdom." They recognize that trees are important to the survival of all living creatures, and so regard them as having big medicine. Identify your wound – the story you always share about yourself that is tied to some traumatic event. Offer this wound to a special tree, and never speak of this wound again. Some indigenous cultures use this practice as a way of making a commitment to healing the wounded part of ourselves.

Water Ritual

Another ancient ritual is to purify and cleanse oneself in water. This can be done in the ocean or other natural body of water. It can also be created with a ceremonial bath in your home, undertaken with intention of purification. You might include anything that enhances the intention for you, such as candles, sage or music.

Sweat Lodge

Rituals tied to the sweating the body are common to many ethnic cultures found in North and South America, Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, and Africa. American Indians use sweat lodges to create a place of purification, spiritual refuge and mental and physical healing, as well as a place to get answers and guidance by asking the Creator and Mother Earth for the needed wisdom and power. A similar ritual can be adapted using a sweat bath or sauna, undertaken with sacred intention.

1. Is there anything you need to say or do to gain closure?

2. If so, what do you see as your next step(s)?

3. Create a plan for the next 30 days. What specific steps will you commit to do, and when will you do them? If you are planning to do a ritual, include this in your plan.

Appendix

Examples of Core Wounds

I'm bad

I don't belong

I'm broken

I'm a burden

I'm crazy

I'm damaged

I don't deserve

I'm different

I'm not enough

I'm a failure

I'm not important

I'm inferior

I'm invisible

I'm not lovable

I don't matter

I'm powerless

I'm not safe

I'm too much

I'm unworthy

I'm not wanted

I'm worthless

I'm wrong

Seven Keys to Success in Difficult Conversations

1. Prepare! Think about the challenges you anticipate. Completing the accompanying Difficult Conversation Worksheet is a good place to start.

2. Set the Table. Invite the other person to have a conversation with you, and agree on a mutually convenient time. For example, "There is something important I would like to discuss with you. Is this a good time? If not, when would be a good time for you?"

3. Find a Neutral Way to Frame the Topic. From the start, name the issue without embedding any right/wrong judgments. Instead of "I want to talk about how disrespectful you've been to me," try "I want to talk about our relationship."

4. Invite the Other Person to Speak First. This is often the hardest part and also the most important – the most effective way to begin a difficult conversation is to invite the other person to go first. Take whatever time is needed to prepare yourself so you can hear whatever they have to say without interrupting them, arguing or getting triggered. It's helpful to *be curious* about what their truth is. If you do get triggered, ask to slow down or take a break if you need one.

Often the other person will insist that you go first and in this case, it's fine to go first but don't be surprised if they interrupt you and start arguing. If they do, let them. Return to your goal of letting them be heard. The reason for this is simple. They will not be able to hear what you have to say until they have a chance to "empty out."

When the other person speaks, reflect back what you heard, focusing on their needs and feelings. For instance, "I'm hearing that you were very angry about what happened and need to feel respected, is that right?" If the other person then wants to clarify or add something, stay with them. Continue to listen to them and reflect back until they feel completely heard. Remember: Don't take anything personally. Stay curious, seek to understand. It is fine to establish boundaries if needed. ("I want to understand you, but please don't raise your voice.")

If you are unable to hear the other person without getting defensive, *it's best not to proceed* because the conversation will probably not go well. Instead, do your own forgiveness work. Clear out the emotional charge you are holding before engaging in the conversation. If necessary, bring in a neutral mediator to help you.

5. Tell Your Story. Once the other person feels heard, it's time for you to have your say, using these guidelines:

- Focus on your needs and feelings
- Use I statements
- Avoid blame, judgments, accusations, criticism, etc.
- Put skin in the game, be willing to be vulnerable

When you are done, ask the other person to reflect back to you what they heard you say. If you aren't feeling heard, let the person know and try again.

6. Work Out a Solution Together. Once you both feel heard - and not before - you can make requests or propose a solution. However, if you have a preset agenda of what the outcome should be, it may backfire. Better to be unattached. Leave room so you can work together to find a mutually agreeable solution. It is often better than what you had in mind.

7. Practice! Rehearse the conversation with a friend who is neutral and uninvolved in the situation. Take turns in each role. Anticipate challenges. Think about the possible dynamics that might arise and how you will handle them, including:

- Anger or aggressive energy coming at you
- Other person withholding or minimizing the problem
- Judgments, projections, accusations, interpretations coming at you
- Other person starts crying
- One or both of you feeling mistrustful, defensive, resistant, retaliatory

*Adapted from Difficult Conversations by Stone, Patton and Heen

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Difficult Conversation Worksheet

1. Describe a difficult conversation that you need or want to have. What is the situation? What is your goal for having the conversation?

2. What are your primary needs in this situation?

3. What do you imagine is the other person's primary need?

4. What are your fears about having this conversation?

5. What are your fears about hearing the other person's grievance?

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Common Barriers to Communication

1. Defensiveness
2. Conflict avoidance
3. Anxiety/insecurity
4. Insisting that what the other person says make sense logically
5. Thinking the other person's grievance means there is something wrong with you
6. Thinking the other person is intentionally trying to hurt you
7. Interrupting
8. Taking the other person's viewpoint, actions and words personally
9. Trying to make rational sense of the hurt and fit it neatly into your story
10. Thinking it should feel more fair
11. Focusing on how offended you feel
12. Underestimating the importance of the other person being heard
13. Collapsing in guilt and shame
14. Retaliating with blame (tit for tat)
15. Speaking to the differences before speaking to the similarities

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Trigger Worksheet

1. Describe the triggering event. What happened?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Part 1 – Message and Messenger

2. Can you view the other person as your Messenger?

_____

3. What Message did you receive – in other words, what did you tell yourself the triggering event meant *about you?*

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Are you willing to dismiss the Messenger and focus on the Message?

_____

_____

Part 2 – Emotional Signature

5. What feelings are most triggered for you in this situation?

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. What is the emotional signature? (The emotional signature is the combination of the message you received combined with the feelings that were triggered. For example, an emotional signature might be the message "I'm not good enough" combined with the feelings of sadness and anger.

)_____

_____

_____

_____

6. Trace the emotional signature back as far as you can by identifying other times when you have experienced the same message and feelings. What is the earliest memory you have of this pattern?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Once you trace the emotional signature back to its origin, you have the opportunity to address the root of the problem and heal the entire pattern.

Recommended Reading

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About the Author

Eileen Barker is a forgiveness teacher and a leader in bringing emotional healing into conflict resolution. She is the author of the *Forgiveness Workbook* and *Healing Conflict Through Forgiveness,* scheduled for publication in 2027. After practicing law for many years, Eileen became a professional mediator, helping thousands of clients resolve business and family disputes. This work led her into a deep exploration of forgiveness, how it relates to resolving conflict and making peace, both with others and with oneself. After years of research and study, she developed the process contained in this workbook. Eileen founded The Path of Forgiveness in 2007 to teach people how to forgive. She has led forgiveness retreats, trainings, and workshops internationally, and provides forgiveness coaching to individuals and organizations. She also offers the Forgiveness Leadership Program for lawyers, mediators, therapists, coaches, and others who want to help their clients forgive. In 2016, Eileen received the Champion of Forgiveness Award from the Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance, alongside Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

For personal forgiveness, including classes, retreats, private coaching, and forgiveness tools, visit www.ThePathofForgiveness.com

For information about the Forgiveness Leadership Program, visit www.ForgivenessTrainingInstitute.com

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