

The Keys to Emotional Healing

– Part 2

In [part 1](#), I talked about grieving as a necessary part of emotional healing. The other part is forgiving, separating ourselves emotionally and spiritually from the offense so that we can continue to be healthy toward the offender. As I said last time, forgiving is like pulling out the soul-splinter that is causing pain and the emotional “pus” that accumulates from unresolved pain and anger. (Grieving discharges this emotional pus.) Forgiving releases the person who hurt us into the Lord’s care, for *Him* to deal with.

We see this modeled by the Lord Jesus during the crucifixion process, when He repeated over and over, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). With each fresh offense, He released the offender into His Father’s hands, refusing to succumb to the sin of unforgiveness.

Let’s say you do something to hurt me. It’s like tossing a potato at me. I catch the potato and discover it’s a *hot* potato. I could continue to clutch the potato to my chest, screaming in pain and yelling at how much it hurts and how awful you are to do this to me, going on and on, “IT HURTS! IT HURTS! OHHH THIS IS HORRIBLE, TERRIBLE, AWFUL PAIN! HOW DARE YOU DO THIS TO MEEEEEE!”

Or I could let go and let it drop to the floor.

There is relief in release, to be sure, but the problem with merely letting go is that we can pick it back up again. Biblical forgiveness means “sending away,” with the Old Testament image of a scapegoat to help us understand. Once a year, the priest would place his hands on the head of a goat, symbolically transferring the sins of the entire nation to the goat, send it away into the wilderness, then release it. (Lev.

16:7-10)

We do need to let go of the offense and the offender, but the real power in forgiveness is *sending it away* to Jesus for Him to deal with.

If someone tosses a metaphorical hot potato at us, instead of simply letting it drop to the floor where we could pick it up again, we need to imagine Jesus standing there with His hands outstretched, inviting us to give our "hot potato" to Him. He has asbestos hands!

Forgiveness means we acknowledge the offense against us, and then transfer the offender over to God in our hearts. But for forgiveness to be real and true, we need to face the impact of the other person's sin or hurt against us and *grieve* it before we can truly let go of it and send it away to Jesus. Otherwise, it's like going to the emergency room with a broken bone and telling the doctor, "I want you to fix my bone from the other side of the room without touching me."

In the real world, if I continued to clutch a hot potato to myself, it would cool down and no longer cause pain. But in the emotional realm, if we continue to clutch an offense to our hearts, it hardens into something like cement, and a wall is built between the offender and us. And between us and God. And between us and everyone else. Unforgiveness is spiritually and emotionally dangerous. One of my family members hung on to every offense of her entire life, real or perceived, and never let go. With every year she became more and more bitter, cold and hard-quite unlovely and unlovable, apart from the power of God. She died with a heart so diminished and shriveled that her death was nothing but a relief for the rest of us.

When we forgive the ones who hurt us, we send their offense to Jesus, who already paid the penalty for their sins and woundings against us. The best exercise I've ever encountered to help people forgive is called "the Jesus Jail," which you

can find [here](#) courtesy of my friend Chuck Lynch, author of the book *I Should Forgive, But. . .*

Grieving and forgiving: the two powerful components of emotional healing. May you experience the grace of God in tearing down emotional strongholds (2 Cor. 10:4) to walk in the freedom of healing.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/the_keys_to_emotional_healing_-_part_2_ on April 24, 2012.

The Keys to Emotional Healing – Part 1

After seeing God bring about major transformation of emotional healing in a number of broken people, I asked Him what was happening when He healed people's hearts. I wanted to understand the process. His answer was simple and profound, but never easy: "grieving and forgiving."

Both of these emotional disciplines are necessary to move from the place of sustaining a wound to the soul, to the place where that wound no longer controls and diminishes us—because it has been transformed into a healed scar.

Grieving means moving pain and anger from the inside to the outside. Tears are God's lubricant for that process, and what a gift of grace tears are. They are a physical manifestation of emotional pain, and when we weep—whether silent tears rolling down our cheeks or huge wracking sobs that exhaust us—the pain leaves our soul as it leaves the body.

One of my friends was so deeply wounded as a child by various kinds of abuse that in order to survive, her personality splintered into several "alters." (Multiple personality disorder is now called DID, Dissociative Identity Disorder.) One day in therapy, as she cried while talking about the pain inside, she reached for the box of tissues to blot the tears. Abruptly, she "switched" to another alter who said to the therapist, "Don't let her use the Kleenex. We need to feel the tears rolling down her cheeks. That's what healing feels like." When she told me this, it resonated deeply with me as true, and I started paying attention to how the feeling of tears on my face nourishes my soul, regardless of the reason for them. (Specks of dust under my contacts notwithstanding!)

In many cases, grieving also requires getting angry. Anger as a response to a violation of our dignity as people made in God's image, to shaming or disrespect, to neglect or abuse, is a healthy reaction. It says, "You treated me as worthless when I have great value as God's beloved child. You dishonored me AND you dishonored God." We can express anger in constructive and destructive ways, and of course it's always better to choose a constructive expression! We see the Lord Jesus constructively channeling His anger as He fashioned a whip before cleansing the temple (John 2:15). Some people have punched pillows, or hammered nails into pieces of wood, or torn down something slated for demolition. Others have screamed out their anger and grief in a safe place. Punching bags are a helpful place to discharge anger. And one of the most powerful ways to release anger is to create a list of all the ways someone has hurt us, and the impact of their choices and actions on us, and then talk to that person in an empty chair. We say—or yell or scream—the things we would want to say if we could duct-tape the person into the chair so they couldn't leave, if they *had* to listen to us. And we go down the list, one item at a time, telling them everything they need to know about what they did and how it affected us. Often it's unwise, if not impossible, to actually dump all that

anger on the actual person, but it's amazingly healing to speak out the pain and anger with our words. Out loud. Emphasis on LOUD, if need be!

Once we have grieved the hurt, the next step is letting go: forgiving. Forgiving is like pulling out the soul-splinter that is causing pain and the emotional "pus" that accumulates from unresolved pain and anger. (Grieving discharges this emotional pus.) Forgiving releases the person who hurt us into the Lord's care, for *Him* to deal with.

I'll explain more about forgiving in my next blog post, [The Keys to Emotional Healing – Part 2](#).

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/the_keys_to_emotional_healing_part_1 on April 16, 2012.

Forgive Myself?

Have you ever been told how important it is to forgive yourself?

I know Christians who have struggled with doing this, some for several years, unable to get a handle on it. There's good reason for that—scripture never even mentions forgiving ourselves, much less commanding it. I understand the idea of giving oneself forgiveness comes from humanistic psychology; doctors know that experiencing forgiveness is an essential part of mental health, but where do you find forgiveness when God, the source of forgiveness, has been excluded from the big picture?

You forgive yourself. At least, that's the way it should work in principle. When God is "Xed out." But, as many have learned, just deciding to forgive yourself sounds easier than actually doing it. On what basis do you forgive yourself? Just because? How many times do you need to beat yourself up before it's time for forgive yourself? What if you forgive yourself prematurely, before you've beaten yourself up enough?

What a mess.

I've also heard Christians say, "I know God has forgiven me, but I just can't forgive myself." It sounds quite humble, but in reality, this is upside-down pride. The underlying message is, "God may have forgiven me, but my own standards of what constitutes forgiveness are higher than God's, and my standard is what counts."

So what do we do when we're still keeping ourselves on the hook for past sins?

First, by faith receive the forgiveness that God has already granted. This has nothing to do with *feeling* forgiven and everything to do with choosing to trust that God keeps His word: "But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous, forgiving us our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). God has already forgiven every sin we have ever committed and ever will. He waits for us to gratefully choose to receive His amazing grace of forgiveness. *"Lord Jesus, thank You for paying my debt for my sin and restoring me to relationship with the Father. Thank You for forgiving me. By faith, and in Your strength, I receive Your forgiveness and cleansing."*

Second (if necessary), we choose to take ourselves off the hook and release ourselves from being our own prisoners. We remind ourselves that Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free, you will be really free" (John 8:36). We remind ourselves that His last words on the Cross were "It is finished." His work of

freeing us from our sin and making forgiveness possible is finished. Done. Over and out. Which means we can take ourselves off the hook for something Jesus already paid for.

Recently I was teaching on forgiveness and painted a word picture of being handcuffed to the person who had offended us or hurt us. Forgiveness means unlocking the cuff from around our own wrist and snapping it on Jesus' wrist, giving Him custody of our offender, releasing them into His care. Several people told me, "I realized my prisoner was ME! And Jesus was inviting me to take the handcuffs off myself!" They did, and they were free.

I love the sound of chains falling off and people being set free from their strongholds!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/forgive-myself/ on March 13, 2012.

“How Do I Recover From My Husband's Adultery with Prostitutes?”

I have only been married four short years this December. I just learned my husband committed adultery on at least 2 occasions with a prostitute. He says he is sorry and wants to salvage the marriage. I have conflicting emotions from moment to moment. If we as Christians are supposed to forgive others for their sins, why does God allow for divorce when a spouse is unfaithful? I find it hard to believe that a marriage can

survive infidelity and I am wondering how one ever trusts their spouse again after this type of betrayal? We are both Christians. He was saved three years ago, no religious upbringing. We do not have a Church home and share no Christian friends. We sought counsel from a Christian and that counselor told me that I had approximately 30 days from discovery to either remain, forgive and never speak of the adultery again or divorce. He says that the 30 days is biblical. I have never heard of this nor have I read it in the Bible. I think if I choose to stay within the marriage it should be based on my spouses behavior. I appreciate any information you may have and I thank you for your time.

I am so very, very sorry for the pain you are experiencing. Your conflicting emotions are totally normal and to be expected.

The biggest thing you need to know is that there is a difference between forgiving someone and trusting him again. They are not the same. When we forgive, we release the other person from our desire to exact revenge on them for hurting us. We let go of their sin against us into God's hands so that He can deal with them. But broken trust is another matter; it needs to be earned back, and that takes time. A good amount of time, consisting of one faithful, responsible, caring choice after another.

In order to understand God's allowance for divorce, consider what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 19:8—"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning." The Lord allows for divorce as a matter of love and grace for the one being hurt by a hard-hearted spouse. In the case of infidelity, when a spouse is repentant and truly wants to mend the marriage, God's desire is that He glorify Himself in the marriage by demonstrating His power and grace in the relationship.

There are many spouses who will attest to the fact that there

is indeed trust after betrayal if the unfaithful one truly repents and commits to faithfulness. But it takes time, like I said. Probably close to a year minimum.

I disagree with the 30-day ultimatum. I see nothing in the Bible that says that. I do agree that if you choose to stay in the marriage it would depend on whether your husband shows remorse, demonstrates repentance, seeks accountability and is willing for his whereabouts to be checked on at all times. People who are hiding nothing have nothing to fear from accountability.

Here is a link to the Midlife Dimensions website, which offers help and resources for dealing with an affair: www.midlife.com/html/resources/articles/category_affairs.htm. I am concerned that you two are not plugged into a church home and therefore do not have any support system. This is going to make recovery unnecessarily difficult. I would hope that one way your husband could show you he's serious about mending your marriage is to find a church home and get connected to other people who will help support your marriage. God never intended for us to be "Lone Ranger Christians." His intent is for us to be knitted into the body of Christ for support and as a way to receive His various kinds of grace. You are cheating yourself and yourselves to not be connected to an important source of life and strength. I want to strongly suggest that you make this a priority.

I hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

P.S. You might also poke around the New Life website (www.newlife.com) and educate yourself on sex addiction. If it were me, I would want to know what drove my husband to a prostitute. I would also want to know if my actions played any part in it. (For example, this is one reason the apostle Paul tells married people not to deprive each other sexually.) It

sounds like you have an opportunity to each look at your own “stuff” and see what you can both do to build the marriage, as long as he’s serious about it.

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“Mistakes Were Made”

If you’re the nation’s top cop, you know it’s a bad day when pundits compare you to Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake.

Under fire from solons of both parties for the controversial dismissal of eight US attorneys, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales met the press. Were the dismissals politically motivated? Who suggested them and why? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

Gonzales assured his critics he would get to the bottom of this. Mistakes were made, he explained.

Admitting mistakes can be constructive. The problem, of course, was Gonzales’ ambiguous undertone. Was it honest confession or artful sidestep?

Confession or Sidestep?

Maybe mistakes were made means, Somebody messed up royally. We’re investigating thoroughly, so please sit tight. We’ll name names soon.

Or it could mean, I know who botched this. But I don’t want to point the finger directly at me or my colleagues, so I’ll throw up a vague camouflage.

Maybe Gonzales meant the former. Critics cried foul. *The New York Times* called it an “astonishingly

maladroit...Nixonian...dodge.”[{1}](#) Administration inconsistencies about who-did-or-knew-what-when did not help quiet skeptics. Who would take responsibility? Ghosts of Janet, Justin and the 2004 Super Bowl reappeared.

Timberlake’s press agent announced back then, “I am sorry if anyone was offended by the wardrobe malfunction during the halftime performance.”[{2}](#) Jackson told a press conference, “If I offended anybody, that was truly not my intention.”[{3}](#) William Safire has identified a special verb tense for similar nonconfession confessions: “the past exonerative.”[{4}](#)

True Confessions

What did Gonzales mean? I don’t know; I’m still watching. But the “mistakes were made” flap illustrates the need for guidelines for fessing up when warranted.

How about, I was wrong; I’m sorry; please forgive me?

That’s seldom easy. Its risky. Makes you vulnerable to your enemies.

Duke political science professor Michael Munger observes that many politicians seem reluctant to admit faults: “I wonder if some capacity for self-delusion is a requirement for being a politician.”[{5}](#) Munger also notes that business star Henry Ford was reputed to have exemplified the doctrine, “Never apologize, never explain.”[{6}](#) Literary giant Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed, “No sensible person ever made an apology.”[{7}](#)

Reminds me of the editor who, when asked by an exasperated reporter if he’d ever been wrong, replied, Yes. Once I thought I was wrong, but I wasn’t.”

Could big egos that drive success be rendering some folks relationally and ethically flawed?

Plastic Buckets

My second year in university, I swiped a plastic bucket from behind the lectern in the psychology lecture hall. It had been there every day during the semester. No one wants it, I convinced myself. It deserves to be taken. I used it to wash my car.

Two years later, I considered a biblical perspective: If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to ... [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. {8}

That bucket kept coming to mind. I needed to admit my theft to God and make restitution.

My booty long since lost, I purchased a new bucket and carried it sheepishly across campus one afternoon. Finding no one in the psychology building to confess to, I left the bucket in a broom closet with a note of explanation. Maybe a janitor read it. My conscience was clear.

We all probably have some plastic buckets in our lives, observed an associate. If you do, may I recommend honesty for easier sleeping? Oh, and if you happened to be the owner of that bucket I stole, I was wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

Notes

1. "Politics, Pure and Cynical," (Editorial), *The New York Times*, March 14, 2007; <http://tinyurl.com/yvnjyd>, accessed March 18, 2007.
2. John M. Broder, "Familiar Fallback for Officials: 'Mistakes Were Made'," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2007; <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/washington/14mistakes.html>, accessed March 18, 2007.
3. Robert J. Bliwise, "We Apologize: The Sorry State of Remorse," *Duke Magazine* 90:3 May-June 2004; <http://www.dukemagazine.duke.edu/dukemag/issues/050604/apologi>

[zel.html](#), accessed March 18, 2007.

4. Diane Hartman, "Watching My Language" (Book Review of William Safire's *Watching My Language*), *Denver Post Online*, "September 14" (no year given);

<http://extras.denverpost.com/books/book23.htm>, accessed March 18, 2007.

5. Bliwise, loc. cit.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid. It is unclear from the text whether Munger or Bliwise supplied the Emerson quotation.

8. 1 John 1:8-9 NLT.

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"Will Jesus Still Forgive Me?" – Did My Sin Re-crucify Christ?

Please help—I'm really worried Jesus won't forgive me. I regressed and viewed a pornographic image. While praying for forgiveness a voice in my mind said it hurt like nails and that I had re-crucified Christ and that there was no sacrifice left for me. I'd heard of this verse but now I'm really worried is there any hope of forgiveness for me. Please, I'm worried really bad.

Sounds to me like you were hearing from a demon who was sending what scripture calls a "fiery dart" at you. Yes, your sin hurt the Lord. (Sometimes the Enemy throws some truth into the midst of his lies.) No, you did not crucify Christ because if you recall, His last words on the cross before He died were "it is finished," or actually more accurately, "it is paid in

full." Lord Jesus fully paid for your sin of looking at porn 2000 years ago.

And no, it is not true that there is no sacrifice left for you. The verse you are thinking of is Hebrews 10:26, "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left." But consider that equally true is the promise of 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

When a born-again Christian sins, God promises to forgive us. What you are exhibiting is the regret and remorse that shows God is continuing to give you the grace of repentance. The people Jesus doesn't forgive are the hard-hearted ones who refuse to ask for it.

Concerning Hebrews 10:26, listen to what theologian Dr. Wayne Grudem says about this verse:

"A person who rejects Christ's salvation and 'has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him' (Hebrews 10:29) deserves eternal punishment. This again is a strong warning against falling away, but it should not be taken as proof that someone who has truly been born again can lose his or her salvation. When the author talks about the blood of the covenant 'that sanctified him, 'the word sanctified is used simply to refer to 'external sanctification, like that of the ancient Israelites, by outward connection with God's people.' The passage does not talk about someone who is genuinely saved, but someone who has received some beneficial moral influence through contact with the church." (Bible Doctrine, p 343.)

Be encouraged, brother. Receive God's forgiveness and cleansing according to the riches in Christ, which he has lavished on you (Eph. 1:8).

Blessings, Sue

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Can You Forgive Michael Vick?

Public reaction to football star Michael Vick's confession and apology for dog fighting has been passionate and polarized. Was he sincere? Or was it just a last resort when cornered by the law, a PR move to help rehabilitate his image and financial future?

The crimes were abhorrent. Underperforming canines were executed by hanging and drowning. This sickening stuff hits many folks in their guts, hard and deep.

He faces legal consequences. But should you and I forgive him?

Genuine Contrition?

Vick says, "Dog fighting is a terrible thing, and I did reject it. I'm upset with myself through this situation I found Jesus and asked him for forgiveness and turned my life over to God."[\[1\]](#)

Smooth but not convincing, cry some. It's just a show. He's a disgusting person and a terrible role model. Off with his head! Others quote English poet Alexander Pope, "To err is human, to forgive divine."

Perhaps time will tell how sincere he was. Some wonder, Michael Vick didn't do anything to me, so *for what* could I forgive him? True, he may not have harmed you personally. But he did violate society's laws and many people's sense of decency. Public figures' actions can have wide social impact.

The fact that lots of kids looked up to him compounds the anger many feel when they indicate they could never accept his apology or forgive him for the harm he's done.

Indeed, negative feelings expressed toward Vick sometimes sound visceral, as if the speakers themselves had been injured. Frederic Luskin, former director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, says, "Our bodies react as if we're in real danger right now to a story of how someone hurt us seven years ago. You're feeling anger, your heart rhythm changes breathing, gets shallow."[\[2\]](#)

Can you and I forgive Michael Vick?

Consider a wise woman who wrestled with similar feelings. Corrie ten Boom and her Dutch family hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. For this she endured Ravensbruck, a concentration camp. Her inspiring story became a famous book and film, *The Hiding Place*.

Chilling Memories

In 1947 in a Munich church, she told a German audience that God forgives.[\[3\]](#) When we confess our sins, she explained, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. After her presentation, she recognized a man approaching her, a guard from Ravensbruck, before whom she had had to walk naked. Chilling memories flooded back.

A fine message, *Fraulein!* said the man. How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea! He extended his hand in greeting.

Corrie recalled, "I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me. . . But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze."

The man continued: "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk.... I was a guard there. But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well, *Fraulein*." He extended his hand again. "Will you forgive me?"

Forgive Him?

Corrie stood there, unable to forgive. As anger and vengeful thoughts raged inside her, she remembered Jesus' death for this man. Of His executioners He said, "Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing." [\[4\]](#)

How could she refuse? But she lacked the strength. She silently asked God to forgive her and help her forgive him. As she took his hand, she felt a healing warmth flooding her body. "I forgive you, brother!" she cried, "With all my heart."

And so, Corrie later recalled, "I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on [God's]. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."

If Corrie could forgive one who did her such harm, should we be willing to consider forgiving a public figure whose actions harm society? Could what Corrie found in faith help manage overwhelming anger and rage?

Will you and I forgive Michael Vick?

Notes

1. Text of Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick's statement, USA Today, August 27, 2007, www.usatoday.com/sports/football/2007-08-27-2672656486_x.htm
2. "Peace Work," Stanford Magazine, Joan O'C. Hamilton, 2001, <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2001/mayjun/featur>

es/forgiveness.html.

3. Corrie ten Boom, "Death Camp Revisited," Worldwide Challenge, July/August 1994, 35-36.

4. [Luke 23:34](#) NLT.

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Forgiveness Can Be Good for Your Health

Have you ever been cheated or mistreated? Got any lingering grudges you're holding onto? Is there any "unclear air" between you and a family member, neighbor, or coworker regarding a dispute, a slight, an offense? Could those situations use some forgiveness?

More and more medical doctors and social scientists are extolling the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation, benefits both to individuals and to society. This article examines some of these benefits and presents several inspiring case studies, stories of forgiveness in action.

Would you believe that forgiveness can be good for your health? Lingering anger, stress, or high blood pressure could indicate that you need to forgive someone (or to be forgiven yourself). Many religions—including, of course, the Christian faith—have long held that forgiveness is an important component of a fruitful life. Now secular research supports its value.^{1}

In the early 1980s, Kansas psychologist Dr. Glenn Mack Harnden

searched in vain to find studies on forgiveness in the academic digest *Psychological Abstracts*. Today there exist an International Forgiveness Institute and a ten-million-dollar “Campaign for Forgiveness Research” (Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu have been among the ringleaders). The John Templeton Foundation awards grants in the field.

Harnden says forgiveness “releases the offender from prolonged anger, rage, and stress that have been linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, hypertension, cancer, and other psychosomatic illnesses.”[{2}](#)

He’s big on this theme. When I ran into him in Washington, DC, a while back, he spoke enthusiastically about attending an international gathering in Jordan that saw forgiveness between traditional individual enemies like Northern Irish and Irish Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians.

George Washington University medical professor Christina Puchalski cites forgiveness benefits supported by research studies. Writing in *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, she says, “The act of forgiveness can result in less anxiety and depression, better health outcomes, increased coping with stress, and increased closeness to God and others.” [{3}](#)

Daily life brings many sources of conflict: spouses, parents, children, employers, former employers, bullies, enemies. If offense leads to resentment and bitterness, then anger, explosion, and violence can result. If parties forgive each other, then healing, reconciliation, and restoration can follow.

Startling Contrition

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and president of the

International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that despite society's conflicts, "almost never do we hear public leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can bring people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing." {4}

The year 2006 brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister under South Africa's apartheid regime. During the 1980s, racial conflict there boiled.

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that ten years earlier in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing "Cry Freedom," an anti-apartheid film. {5} I had tickets to see "Cry Freedom" in Pretoria the night it opened, but the screening was cancelled. The next morning, a bomb was discovered in the theater I would have attended.

You can imagine my interest when BBC television told of Vlok's 2006 attempt to reconcile personally with Rev. Frank Chikane, former head of the South African Council of Churches, the group whose headquarters Vlok had bombed. Chikane, now director general of the South African president's office, reports that Vlok visited his office and gave him a Bible with these words inscribed: "I have sinned against the Lord and against you, please forgive me (John 13:15)." That biblical reference is Jesus' Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another's feet.

Chikane tells what Vlok did next: "He picked up a glass of water, opened his bag, pulled out a bowl, put the water in the bowl, took out the towel, said 'you must allow me to do this' and washed my feet in my office." Chikane gratefully accepted the gesture. {6}

Vlok, a born-again Christian, later told BBC television it was time “to go to my neighbor, to the person that I’ve wronged.” He says he and his compatriots should “climb down from the throne on which we have been sitting and say to people, ‘Look, I’m sorry. I regarded myself as better than you are. I think it is time to get rid of my egoism . . . my sense of importance, my sense of superiority.’”[{7}](#)

Startling contrition, indeed.

Strength to Forgive

Have you ever unexpectedly encountered someone who has wronged you? There you are, suddenly face-to-face with your nemesis. How do you feel? Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, says, “Our bodies react as if we’re in real danger right now to a story of how someone hurt us seven years ago. . . . You’re feeling anger, your heart rhythm changes . . . breathing gets shallow.”[{8}](#)

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crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze.”

The man continued: “You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk. . . . I was a guard there. . . . But since that time . . . I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well, *Fraulein*.” He extended his hand again. “Will you forgive me?”

Corrie stood there, unable to forgive. As anger and vengeance raged inside her, she remembered Jesus’ death for this man. How could she refuse? But she lacked the strength. She silently asked God to forgive her and help her forgive him. As she took his hand, she felt a “healing warmth” flooding her body. “I forgive you, brother!” she cried, “With all my heart.”

“And so,” Corrie later recalled, “I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on [God’s]. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”

“My Father, the Town Alcoholic”

When Stanford education and psychology professor Carl Thoresen and his colleagues began recruiting adult subjects for the Stanford Forgiveness Project, they had trouble signing up males. When they started using the terms “grudge” and “grudge management” in the recruiting, the men came. Thoresen thinks some men felt “forgiveness” was a feminine activity, but a “grudge” was something they probably should deal with.[{10}](#)

Consider a guy who had a longstanding grudge involving a family member. And aren’t family conflicts often causes of intense stress?

As a teenager on the family farm, Josh McDowell loved his

mother but despised his father “more than anyone else in the world.”[{11}](#) His friends would joke about his dad being drunk. It tore him up inside. “I hated my father for the embarrassment and shame his alcoholism caused my family,” McDowell relates. “I also resented what it caused him to do to my mother. I’d go out in the barn and see my mother beaten so badly she couldn’t get up, lying in the manure behind the cows.” Eventually his mother lost the will to live and died, Josh says, “of a broken heart.”

In college, Josh met some followers of Jesus whom he liked. Skeptical about Christianity’s validity, he accepted their challenge to examine evidence regarding Jesus’ claims and found it convincing.[{12}](#) He thanked Jesus for dying for him, admitted his flaws to God, and asked Christ to enter his life and take over. Soon he realized he no longer hated his father.

Josh says, “I had confessed to God my feelings for my dad, asked God to forgive me, and prayed that I could forgive. And it happened as quickly as I asked. No longer was my dad a drunk to be hated. Now I saw him as a man who had helped give me life. I called him and told him two things I had never told him before: ‘Dad, I’ve become a Christian and . . . I love you.’”

“But how . . . how can you love a father like me?” Josh’s dad asked on another occasion. Josh explained how to place his faith in Christ and his father made that decision, too. About fourteen months later, his alcohol-ravaged body gave out and he died. But the changed life of the town alcoholic influenced scores of people to place their lives in God’s hands. “My dad’s life was brand new those last 14 months,” recalls Josh. “His relationship with me and with God were both reconciled. Jesus Christ is a peacemaker.”

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Secular research supports the value of forgiveness, a concept

at the core of Christian faith. You might wonder, "How does all this relate to me personally?" May I offer some suggestions?

As a starting point, *become forgiven yourself*. The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes wrote, "Forgiving comes naturally to the forgiven."^{13} Josh McDowell says once he was forgiven by God, he could forgive his alcoholic father. If you've never known for sure that God is your friend, I encourage you to ask Him to forgive you. You might say something like this to Him right now:

Jesus, I need you. Thanks for dying for my flaws and rising again. I ask you to forgive me and enter my life. Please help me to become good friends with you.

If you asked Jesus to forgive you and enter your life, He did. Tell another believer about your decision. Contact this radio station or the Web site Probe.org and ask how you can grow in your faith.

If you've already come to faith in Christ, *keep short accounts with God*. One early follower of Jesus wrote, "If we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong."^{14} The proverbial country preacher said, "I 'fesses 'em as I does 'em."

Ask God to give you the strength to forgive others and love them as He does. Lewis Smedes mentions three components of forgiving others: "First, we surrender our right to get even. . . . Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer . . . that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us. . . . And third, we wish our wrongdoer well."

Contact the person you've wronged—or who has wronged you—and seek to make peace if appropriate and possible. The biblical prescription is that the offender and the offended

should run into each other as each is en route to contact the other.^{15} Of course, not everyone will want to reconcile, but you can try.

Realize that forgiving may take time. Shortly before his death, Oxford and Cambridge scholar C. S. Lewis wrote, "I think I have *at last* forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I had done it many times before, but this time I think I have really done it."^{16}

Forgiveness and reconciliation can be contagious. They can make an important difference in families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and nations. A good relationship takes two good forgivers.

Is there anyone with whom you need to reconcile?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," *Christianity Today*, January 10, 2000, 38-45.
2. *Ibid.*, 38.
3. Christina M. Puchalski, M.D., "Forgiveness: Spiritual and Medical Implications," *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, September 17, 2002; <http://tinyurl.com/yw45eo>; accessed January 27, 2007.
4. Thomas, *loc. cit.*
5. "Botha implicated in Church bombing," BBC News online, July 21, 1998; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm>; accessed September 3, 2006.
6. "Feet washed in apartheid apology," BBC News online, 28 August 2006; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm>; accessed September 3, 2006.
7. "Minister atones for race sins," BBC News video, 3 September 2006; <http://tinyurl.com/2ruu2l>; accessed October 4, 2006.
8. Joan O'C. Hamilton, "Peace Work," *Stanford Magazine*, May/June 2001, 78;

<http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2001/mayjun/features/forgiveness.html>.

9. Corrie ten Boom, "Death Camp Revisited," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 35-36. Quotations from and details of this encounter as related in this section are from this source.

10. Hamilton, loc. cit., 77.

11. Josh McDowell, "Forgiving My Father," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 37-38. Quotations from and details of McDowell's story as related in this section are from this source.

12. To examine some of the evidence for Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-really.com and www.probe.org.

13. Lewis B. Smedes, "Keys to Forgiving," *Christianity Today*, December 3, 2001, 73;

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html>.

Quotations and concepts from Smedes cited in this section are from this source.

14. 1 John 1:9 NLT.

15. Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17.

16. Smedes, loc. cit.; emphasis in the quotation is without attribution.

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A Little Kramer in All of Us?

Comedian Michael Richards—"Kramer" on TV's *Seinfeld*—saw his racist tirade at African-American hecklers ignite a firestorm. Mel Gibson, whose earlier anti-Semitic rant made headlines, said he felt compassion for Richards.^{1}

Lots of people have dark sides. Maybe everyone. Maybe you.

I do.

Remember Susan Hawk? Her infamous diatribe against [another CBS Survivor contestant](#) declared if she found her “laying there dying of thirst, I would not give you a drink of water. I would let the vultures take you and do whatever they want with you.”[{2}](#)

Richards–like Gibson–apologized profusely. Prominent African-American comic Paul Mooney says [Richards told him privately](#), “He didn’t know he had that ugliness in him.”[{3}](#)

I can identify with Richards’ surprise at his darker inner impulses. My own failing was private rather than public, differing in degree but not in kind. It taught me valuable lessons.

Growing up in the US South, I learned from my parents and educators to be tolerant and accepting in a culture that often was not. Racism still makes my blood boil. I’ve [sought to promote racial sensitivity](#).

One summer during university, I joined several hundred students—most of us Caucasian—for a South Central Los Angeles outreach project. We spent a weekend living in local residents’ homes, attending their churches, and meeting people in the community.

A friend and I enjoyed wonderful hospitality from a lovely couple. Sunday morning, their breakfast table displayed a mountain of delicious food. Our gracious hostess wanted to make sure our appetites were completely satisfied. It was then, eying that bountiful spread, that it hit me.

I realized that for the first time in my life, I was living in Black persons’ home, sitting at “their” table, eating “their” food, using “their” utensils. Something inside me reacted negatively. The strange feeling was not anger or hatred, more like mild aversion. Not powerful, not dramatic, certainly not

expressed. But neither was it rational or pleasant or honorable or at all appropriate. It horrified and shamed me, especially since I had recently become a follower of Jesus.

The feeling only lasted a few moments. But it taught me important lessons about prejudice. Much as I might wish to deny it, I had inner emotions that, if expressed, could cause terrible pain. I who prided myself on racial openness had to deal with inner bigotry. How intense must such impulses be in those who are less accepting? Maybe similar inner battles—large or small—go on inside many people. I became deeply impressed that efforts at social harmony should not neglect the importance of changing human hearts.

Holocaust survivor Yehiel Dinur testified during the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi leader responsible for killing millions of Jews. When he saw Eichmann in the courtroom, he sobbed and collapsed to the floor. Dinur later explained, “I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. . . . Exactly like he. . . . Eichmann is in all of us.”[\[4\]](#)

Jeremiah, an ancient Jewish sage, wrote, “The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?”[\[5\]](#) A prescription from one of Jesus’ friends helped me overcome my inner struggles that morning in South Central: “If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.”[\[6\]](#)

Notes

1. “Mel Gibson Feels Michael Richards’ Pain,” Associated Press, November 29, 2006; AOL Entertainment News: <http://tinyurl.com/vh2nf>, accessed December 3, 2006.

2. Tim Cuprisin, “Susan Hawk stays afloat on ‘Survivor’ celebrity,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 23, 2001; <http://www2.jsonline.com/enter/tvradio/jan01/survive23012201.a>

[sp](#), accessed December 3, 2006.

3. "Paul Mooney Cites Richards in N-Word Ban," Associated Press November 29, 2006, <http://tinyurl.com/5pxnxy>, accessed December 3, 2006.

4. Charles W. Colson, "The Enduring Revolution," excerpts of his 1993 Templeton Address; <http://www.gcts.edu/communications/contact/fall04/article03.php>, accessed December 3, 2006.

5. Jeremiah 17:9 NLT.

6. 1 John 1:8-9 NLT.

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South African Apartheid Leaders Apology for Racial Sins

Could the world use a bit more contrition, forgiveness and reconciliation?

Recent international news reports brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister under South Africa's apartheid regime.

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and president of the International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that despite society's conflicts, "almost never do we hear public

leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can bring people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing.” {1}

Here’s an exception.

During the 1980s, conflict raged between South Africa’s white minority Afrikaner government and the black majority opposition. One former African National Congress operative—now a government official—told me over breakfast in Cape Town that his responsibilities back then had been “to create chaos.” Mutual hostility and animosity often reigned.

Bombing Campaign

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission that in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing “Cry Freedom,” an anti-apartheid film. {2}

I had tickets to see “Cry Freedom” in Pretoria for opening night, but the screening was cancelled. The next morning, a bomb was discovered in the theater I would have attended.

You might imagine my interest when BBC television told of Vlok’s recent attempt to reconcile personally with Rev. Frank Chikane, former head of the South African Council of Churches, the group whose headquarters Vlok had bombed. Chikane, now director general of the South African president’s office, reports that Vlok visited his office and gave him a Bible with these words inscribed: “I have sinned against the Lord and against you, please forgive me (John 13:15).”

An Example to Follow?

That biblical reference is Jesus’ Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another’s feet.

The inscription's words echo those of the Prodigal Son who in the famous biblical story returns home after squandering his inheritance, hopes his father will accept him as a hired hand, and says, "I have sinned against heaven and against you." {3} The father rejoices over his return, warmly receives him as son, and throws a welcome celebration.

Chikane tells what Vlok did next: "He picked up a glass of water, opened his bag, pulled out a bowl, put the water in the bowl, took out the towel, said 'you must allow me to do this' and washed my feet in my office." Chikane gratefully accepted the gesture. {4}

Vlok, a born-again Christian, later told BBC television it was time "to go to my neighbor, to the person that I've wronged." He says he and his compatriots should "climb down from the throne on which we have been sitting and say to people, 'Look, I'm sorry. I regarded myself as better than you are. I think it is time to get rid of my egoism my sense of importance, my sense of superiority.'" {5}

Startling contrition, indeed.

Forgiveness Components

The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes stressed three components of forgiving others: "First, we surrender our right to get even... Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer...that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us... And third, we wish our wrongdoer well." {6}

Former U.S. Senator Alan Simpson has quipped that those in Washington, DC traveling "the high road of humility" won't encounter "heavy traffic." {7} Too often the same holds in workplaces, neighborhoods and families. Could Vlok's example inspire some changes?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," Christianity Today, January 10, 2000, 38.
2. "Botha implicated in Church bombing," BBC News online, July 21, 1998; news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
3. Luke 15:21 NIV.
4. "Feet washed in apartheid apology," BBC News online, 28 August 2006; news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
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7. Harry Kreisler, "Let 'er Rip! Reflections of a Rocky Mountain Senator: Conversation with Alan K. Simpson, Former U.S. Senator, Wyoming," Conversations with History, Institute of International Studies, University of California-Berkeley, September 17, 1997; globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Simpson/simpson1.html; accessed October 2, 2006.

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