

Preface

“**F**orgiving is the one and only way to heal your hurts.” Most of us have learned this “fact,” this “unquestioned truth,” from our earliest years on, perhaps from our families, through our experiences in a particular religious tradition, or by what we have read or heard from spiritual teachers and psychological experts. Yet in this book, by suggesting that forgiveness is a myth, we are challenging that which has been considered true for centuries. However, before elaborating, let us clarify our intentions right from the start:

1. We are *not* saying that people should not forgive, because forgiveness is often a noble, worthwhile, and even essential spiritual and psychological practice that has proven invaluable to millions, including both of us.
2. What we *are* saying is that forgiving does not work for all of us all of the time, and to suggest that it is the *only* way to heal is a myth, an untruth, when in fact there are many ways to recover and move on in life.

Sometimes forgiveness is the best way to heal, and at other times, a different approach will work better for you. It could very well be that you have already done something other than forgive to help you move on after some of your hurts, though perhaps

unconsciously. Our goal with this book is to have you consciously choose your best path in each situation, whether forgiveness or one of the many effective alternative routes.

To propose that forgiveness is a myth, though considered the only way to heal and something a hurt person has to do in order to move on, is likely to seem sacrilegious and threatening to some. Yet, we are confident that *The Forgiveness Myth* will affirm for many what they may have already discovered through their own personal experience: forgiving doesn't always work. And rather than feel guilty because forgiving might not be something you want to do in some situations, or remain unhappily stuck in the pain of the past because you can't do it in others, we want to provide you with a variety of alternative ways to help you heal, move on, and be happy again.

If you're the type who can forgive each and every type of hurt you suffer, we encourage you to continue doing so. In your case, we invite you to read this book in order to gain a better understanding of why some people you know—whether a friend, spouse, partner, or coworker—can't always forgive like you can, and what they can do instead to reclaim their peace and happiness.

If, on the other hand, you're like both of us, as well as millions of others, and aren't always able or even willing to forgive, then our desire is that this book will help you realize that you are not spiritually defective or uniquely inept. Rather, forgiving simply isn't the best way for you to heal all of your hurts, just as aspirin isn't the best medicine for all of your ailments.

We hope that people of varying faiths and spiritual paths as well as those whose spiritual path is undefined or in flux will find this book to be a helpful resource along their journey to healing and happiness. Despite our incredibly rich diversity as human beings, one commonality we all share, even with those whose religious beliefs and spiritual practices differ most dramatically from our own, is that hurts hurt, and the desire to heal, move on, and be happy again is truly universal.

We were both raised in the Christian tradition and are well aware of the numerous passages in the Bible that seem to make forgiveness a mandatory exercise: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others . . .” and “. . . If you do not forgive others, neither will [God] forgive your trespasses” are but two.¹ However, if you believe in some type of supreme being or energy, it could very well be that the deepest desire of this ultimate being or force is that we each heal and be happy again; the means, whether forgiving or some alternative method, may be of secondary importance.

Not everything in this book is likely to speak to you. We invite you to take and use what works for you and leave the rest. In fact, instead of automatically reading from front to back, you might choose to consult the chapter titles and subtitles to find the specific sections that may be most relevant and helpful to you and your situation. For example, if you are already quite comfortable with the notion that forgiving is but one way to heal and not the goal itself, you might skim, or skip over, the first three chapters and begin with Chapter Four, which is the first of three consecutive chapters on alternative ways to heal. The first three chapters, on the other hand, are devoted to explaining why forgiveness doesn’t always work and the various situations when setting it aside, either temporarily or permanently, may be wise. The final chapter, Chapter Seven, is intended to help those who can’t seem to forgive themselves, so if you are feeling bad because of how you hurt someone else or yourself, you might start there, and then go back and read earlier portions of the book. However you choose to use this resource, we invite you to do so in a manner that will help you to discover your unique ways to move beyond the specific hurts you have suffered, including the pain of hurting others or yourself.

Our hope for you is that as you free yourself from the pain of the past, you will regain your personal power to steer your life in a new direction of your own choosing, rather than remain a victim of past hurts that can’t be undone. This newfound freedom can be yours

1. Words ascribed to Jesus as recorded in Matthew 6:12,15.

whether you are currently being held captive due to how someone hurt you, or because of how you hurt someone else, or both. As your healing unfolds and as you reach out for and respond to the new and exciting opportunities that await you in life, expect to be surprised in delightful ways. Personified, happiness and inner peace are eager to build a new and wonder-filled home in the deepest regions of your heart.



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Introduction

Heather had given her husband chance after chance to amend his unfaithful ways during the course of their twenty-year marriage.² Finally, after endless broken promises and untold heartache, she divorced him. As is true of so many who go through the painful experience of divorce, she sought out the help of a therapist. During one particular session, her therapist told her that she needed to forgive her former husband or at least feel neutral about him, because it would be best if she sat by him at their son's high school graduation, which was scheduled to take place in about six months. Heather didn't agree, but she kept her mouth shut.

After attending one of our workshops on alternative ways to heal, she remarked, "I'll be damned if I am going to make a sandwich of my ex-husband at my son's graduation, with me on one side and his new girlfriend on the other!" Agreeing with her sentiments and intuitive sense, we recommended another therapist to her.

Conventional religious, spiritual, cultural, and even therapeutic wisdom says that you have to forgive if you want to fully recover from how you've been hurt. Even if you feel bad for harming or neglecting someone else or yourself, again, the predominant sentiment is that you must either forgive yourself or stay stuck in

2. The names and identifying circumstances of individuals whose stories are included in this book have been changed in order to protect their anonymity.

endless self-recrimination, guilt, and possibly even shame. This book, in a nutshell, refutes that age-old, deeply-entrenched and unexamined notion, and suggests instead that forgiving, whether forgiving yourself or someone who has hurt you, is always a flexible option at your disposal and not a rigid, set-in-stone obligation.³

Forgiving is one way to heal your hurts but *only* one; there are a variety of other ways that many of us employ quite frequently, usually without being aware of doing so. These alternatives, such as “making a fresh start,” “cutting your losses,” “releasing the hurt to God or your higher power or the universe,” or “coming to terms with this hurt as best you can” are waiting to be named and claimed in a conscious, deliberate manner as viable options in your internal medicine chest.⁴

None of the alternatives we explore in this book will require you to forgive if you don’t want to. Why? Because you have already suffered the injustice of being hurt or wrongly treated, and that may be more than enough for you to deal with, without also having to summon up goodwill or forgiveness for the person who caused you to suffer in the first place. What’s more, your offender might not even be sorry for having hurt you. Yes, at some point you might choose to forgive if that is your desire, or you might consider an alternative approach that is often more effective than forgiving, so that the hurt does not rob you of your potential to be happy and at peace one minute longer than necessary.

Traditionally, forgiveness has been declared the only way to heal and recover from our hurts, yet this “only way” hasn’t always worked for millions, regardless of their spiritual or religious orientation.

3. While the rest of the Introduction is written from the perspective of being hurt by others, we realize that many have an even greater struggle to forgive themselves. We explore ways to transcend guilt and shame in Chapter Seven.

4. We have elected to capitalize “God” and not to capitalize “higher power.” Our reasoning is that “God,” for most people, refers to a uniquely supreme or divine being, whereas the understanding of one’s “higher power,” especially among many people in recovery, may be either theistic or non-theistic. Examples of the latter include a twelve-step support group, nature, or one’s true self.

Untold numbers of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, twelve-steppers, and eclectic spiritual practitioners, as well as atheists and agnostics, struggle with this thing called forgiving for a variety of reasons. Perhaps a common denominator is the fact that forgiving has indeed been presented, often in a nearly dogmatic manner, as the only way to heal or as something we absolutely must do.

As adults, we treasure having options, which are available in just about every area of life that readily comes to mind. Even spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation, or how any of us chooses to love our neighbor or practice loving-kindness, abound with options and are wide open to personal interpretation, preference, and subsequent practice. Yet when it comes to addressing hurts, options are nowhere to be found; instead, individually and collectively, the majority of us have been locked into an either-or mindset: either forgive or stay stuck in anger, bitterness, and resentment. *And very few people have questioned why this is so, or even if it is so.*

To advocate that forgiving is the only “medicine” a person can take in response to being hurt is a little bit like proposing that aspirin is the only medicine available for any and all ailments. Got a headache? Take aspirin. Suffering from asthma? Take aspirin. Struggling with depression? Take aspirin. Having surgery? Take aspirin. Sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? Taking aspirin in these situations ranges from being potentially effective when it comes to remedying a headache to ineffective when treating asthma or depression to grossly inappropriate—if not criminal—were an anesthesiologist to offer you aspirin as the surgeon reached for the scalpel. Can you imagine being asked if you would prefer regular or extra strength?

So, too, there are times when forgiving is indeed highly effective, for instance in committed or endearing relationships, and when the hurts involved are neither too painful nor too repetitive. Take for example the common scenario in which one member of a household says something in a harsh manner to another, and a short time later says, “I’m sorry I snapped at you.” Many times, the person who was hurt is able to respond, quite naturally and easily, with

something like, “That’s okay.” In these types of situations, the parties involved are usually able to quickly put the hurt behind them and move on without getting bogged down. And in many cases, neither the “hurter” nor the “hurtee” finds it necessary to even ask for or offer forgiveness; it just happens in a natural and almost effortless manner.

There are other times, however, when forgiving is prone to being ineffective, especially when remorse and a relational investment with the person who hurt you is lacking. Imagine a scenario in which a rather volatile boss or co-worker snaps at you or treats you in a manner that you deem to be unfair or disrespectful. In this case you would likely feel some anger, stew a bit, and then sooner or later refocus your energies elsewhere, *even though you might not have forgiven*. In situations like these, many of us are able to move on with our lives while learning how to set some boundaries in order to protect ourselves, neither of which is dependent upon forgiving.

And then there are still other times when suggesting that someone forgive their offender runs the risk of being insensitive, even inappropriate. For instance, the person who is coming out of a marriage that was broken by habitual infidelity, as was the case with Heather, has her hands full just trying to restart her life and establish herself in the world. Devoting any effort toward forgiving her “Ex” when she is still reeling from a host of accumulated hurts may end up depleting her much-needed energy to rebuild. Trying to forgive may inadvertently sabotage rather than facilitate her ability to heal. The same is true for those who suffered some type of abuse as children. Many may find it easier to move on and reclaim their power as adults by exploring one of the alternatives to forgiving, rather than remain bound by the unexamined conventional myth which says that forgiving is the only way to break free from their painful legacy.

There are of course people who can and do forgive the most heinous of hurts, hurts that most of us could not, or would not, forgive. For example, you may have heard or read stories about surviving family members who forgave the murderer of their loved

one, or an abuse victim who forgave his abuser, or a sexual assault victim who forgave her attacker. These people are truly amazing. Perhaps they have been blessed with an extraordinary ability to forgive the unforgivable, or maybe they would say that they had to work incredibly hard to get to a point where they could finally forgive. Their stories and paths to healing, like those of all of us, are unique and probably quite diverse, as is their understanding of what they mean when they say they have forgiven those who have caused them to suffer so deeply.⁵

This book, however, is for those who, like us, would not be prone to forgiving in the situations above, or in situations when other types of serious hurts are involved. It is also for those who are unwilling—or unable—to forgive certain hurts that are of a less serious nature. The common ground that all hurts share, major or minor, is that they hurt, just like a slight burn or paper cut hurts, though not nearly as much as more serious burns and cuts. So it matters not how your hurt compares to someone else's, whether it is larger or smaller, more serious or less serious, and so on. All that matters is that you choose the easiest, most effective healing strategy for *you*, so that you can overcome the hurt and reclaim your personal power to move on in life with a healthy measure of peace and happiness.

As the authors, we have no personal investment in whether you decide to forgive or choose to employ an alternative healing strategy in response to one or more of your hurts. We wrote this book in the hope that you will . . .

5. One of the first issues addressed in this book is the fact that there is no universally accepted definition or understanding of what it means to forgive. So when someone says they have forgiven, even something of a horrendous nature, none of us knows what their understanding of forgiveness is. How another person understands forgiveness, even if they had the misfortune of suffering a similar catastrophic hurt, can differ in significant or subtle ways. We can only hope that those who say they have forgiven the most severe hurts imaginable are truly able to experience some degree of peace and consolation. Our hearts go out to them.

1. Know that forgiving is not the only way to recover from being hurt, nor is it necessarily the primary or most effective way to heal.
2. Understand why forgiving doesn't always work, and it's not because you are somehow defective as a human being or lacking spiritually.
3. Become familiar with some of the alternatives to forgiving, and the situations in which they are likely to be both easier and more effective than forgiving.
4. Alleviate any feelings of guilt or sense of spiritual defectiveness that you may be wrestling with because you haven't been able or willing to forgive in past or current situations.
5. Heal as fully and expeditiously as possible regardless of what recovery strategy you choose to employ.
6. Learn how to make peace with your past if you are unable to forgive yourself.

In short, we are going to counter the myth that forgiving is the only medicine in town. Like aspirin, it is a wonderful remedy for some of life's hurts, especially those that are, generally speaking, neither too painful nor too chronic. It is also a beautiful and oftentimes quite doable undertaking when the person who did the hurting not only takes ownership of their behavior, but is someone you care about and want to continue being in some type of relationship with. However when these factors are not present, we intend to build a case for considering one or more of the alternatives to forgiving. Of course, you are still free to forgive in response to every single hurt you suffer, if you so choose. But maybe it will be reassuring for you to know that there are alternative ways to heal should you set out to forgive, but at some point along the way discover that you aren't willing or able to pull it off as you had hoped.

Once again, when you have been hurt, the goal is to recover, heal, and move on with the rest of your life as quickly and effectively as you can, whether via the traditional path of forgiving, or through a non-traditional, alternative way. To paraphrase the well-known passage from Ecclesiastes that begins with “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven . . . a time to live and a time to die . . .,” we believe that there are times to forgive *and* times to employ alternatives to forgiving.⁶ We are strong advocates of both; however, our focus in this book is to explain why forgiving doesn’t always work in response to every type of hurt we human beings suffer, and when that is the case, what other approaches can be taken in order to heal, move on, and be happy again.



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6. See Ecclesiastes 3:1–8.