



# ***New Beginnings***

***Family Ministries Planbook 2000***

***Karen & Ron Flowers***

*with*

*Elaine & Willie Oliver,*

*Waveney Martinborough,*

*Danie Swanepoel, Bernie & Karen Holford,*

*Pleny Camagay and Jo Ann Davidson*

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A Department of Family Ministries publication.

Prepared by Karen and Ron Flowers  
Software formatting by Emmi Bergmann

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12501 Old Columbia Pike  
Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA

# Preface

*there isn't a living being  
who hasn't wished  
he or she could turn back the clock  
to avoid an accident  
to reel in hasty words  
to enjoy a few more moments with a loved  
one . . . .*

*but time plays only forward  
and in its wake  
for those who have made mistakes  
for those who have wounded others  
for those who have been hurt  
there are only possibilities  
for new beginnings  
in Christ*

Karen and Ron Flowers  
Directors  
General Conference Department of Family Ministries

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# If You Don't "Get It," You Don't Get It!

by Karen Flowers

## Theme

Until we understand our complete lostness and God's amazing grace, we can never understand forgiveness. When we do understand, God will enable us to draw on His grace and pass it on.

## Theme Text

Matthew 18:23-27

## Presentation Notes

*(The following is a transcription of a sermon preached at Sligo Church in Takoma Park, Maryland on September 25, 1999 for Family Togetherness Sabbath.)*

I can't help but come to Matthew 18:23-27 with my imagination in gear:

Jon slipped from between the sheets and tiptoed into the living room. He didn't want to awaken Liz, and he knew there would be no more sleep for him tonight. For too many nights he had been dropping into bed like a drugged man. Sleep came quickly at first, but exhaustion could numb his nerves only until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. And once awake, powerful internal stimulants rolled up his eyelids and kicked his brain into frenzied activity. After that there was no peace.

His mind raced as he opened his desk drawer and fingered the envelope. He didn't think Elizabeth had seen it. He didn't want her to see it. It was his worst nightmare. Foreclosure! He had never dreamed it could come to this.

Some nights he beat up on himself. Other nights he forced his mind to play its tapes over and over. He had a paper trail that marked exactly how he had gotten to this point. But *this* was still so incredulous. He was in debt almost as many figures as he had fingers. Five figures, six figures, eight figures, what did it matter any more? But he was no alcoholic. He had not squandered the family food money at the slot machines. He had always paid his bills. He was a respected churchman and citizen.

Hmph. Few knew how close to bankruptcy the family business had been when his father died and left him with the whole mess. He had had to take huge risks to save it. Only time would tell if he could pull it off. Then there had been Liz' accident, and Joe's unexpected acceptance at an ivy league college . . . Oh, never mind, there was no point rehearsing it all again. . . . But someone in government should do something about easy credit. A man can get in over his head without noticing what's happening. There should be a law. . . .

Jon pulled his robe around him and shivered as he threw his bankbook down on the desk. Nothing had changed there that bore reviewing! Now, he could check with his accountant about his accounts

receivable. He knew there were some outstanding invoices. His creditors would just have to pay up. No more extensions. There was nothing to be gained by panicking. He just needed to slow down and take things one step at a time. . . .

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go” (Matt. 18:23-27).

I have chosen to stop at this point in the story on purpose. Of course you know there is more. The narrative as Jesus told it ends eight verses later. But I believe the last eight verses have gotten their share of prime time. So for the most part, I’m going to leave you to think about them for yourselves.

The *whole* story is pretty well encapsulated by an ad for the *Washington Post* newspaper that has run for months now in our city. The slogan is simple, and I’ve borrowed it for a title. “If you don’t get it, you don’t get it.” Now, of course, the ad infers that if you don’t subscribe to the *Washington Post*, you just don’t know what’s going on in the world. I think the message of Matthew 18 can be summed up by the same slogan. If you don’t understand, that is, “get” the first half of the parable, you will probably relate to others just like the debtor Jesus told about. And the story concludes on a very serious note. The king’s forgiveness is ultimately nullified because the debtor, who never understood what the king had done for him, refused to pass on the grace he had received. In the end, then, if you don’t “get it,” *you* don’t get it!

But the bottom line of this sermon takes a positive twist: If we *do* “get it”—if we really understand the message of the first half of Jesus’ story in Matthew 18—it will make all the difference in how the second half of the story plays out. I think this story can be read as one of those interactive dramas where the hearers participate in the development of the plot and in writing the end of the story. Ultimately, you alone will customize your personal ending to this one. I feel comfortable leaving you to respond as you will. For now, I’d like to focus our thoughts on what I believe is the climactic moment of Jesus’ tale.

“The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.”

Hmmm. “If you don’t ‘get it,’ you don’t get it.”

### **I. You don’t “get it” until you figure out who the story is about.**

We have become accustomed to hard luck stories. But most of them happen to somebody else, and we have conditioned ourselves to switch off the emotional impact of these stories with a flick of the TV remote control.



Sometimes hard experiences hit close enough to home to jar us into personal awareness. Once I attended a seminar on death and dying. I went there, I thought, to become more skilled in ministry to families confronting the death of a loved one. I never expected to be shaken to the core by the first activity proposed by the seminar leader. “What I want you to do first,” he said, “is to write your own obituary. Decide how old you would like to be when you die, what you will die from, where you will die, where you will be buried, who will survive you, who will conduct the funeral services. . . .”

Whoa! It took me fifteen minutes just to put my name down on the paper. Things all of a sudden took a great leap from the safety of preparation for ministry to families a-way out there, to real life where I am confronted and scared by my own certain death.

You “get it” in Jesus’ story only when you go nose to nose with the reality that every reader of the story must write in his or her own name for every reference to the man who owed 10,000 talents. Let your own name ring in your ears as you read:

*As the king began to settle accounts with his servants, a woman named Karen who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since she was not able to pay, the master ordered that her husband, Ron, her two sons, Jeff and Jon, and her daughter-in-law, Pam, her house in Takoma Park, her ‘93 Honda Accord, and all her household and personal belongings be sold to repay the debt.*

That we’re the ones in trouble is clear enough in Scripture:

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all human beings, Paul explains in Romans 5:12ff.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “All we like sheep have gone astray” (Is. 53:6).

“For everyone looks out for their own interests” (Phil. 2:21). “There is no one who does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:12), adds Paul.

Jeremiah amplifies: “[For] the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jer. 17:9).

You just don’t get it until you internalize this truth. There is no escaping it. This story is not about some fool who got himself into trouble we never would have gotten ourselves into. It’s not a story coming to us by satellite from some remote region in a snippet on the evening news. *My* name is written into this story in bold letters. Do you see *your* name written there?

You begin to “get it” when you experience a sense of complete lostness in your own merits, not only at the level of your intellect, but of your emotions as well.

## **II. You don’t “get it” until you comprehend the magnitude of the debt.**

Ten thousand talents. \$10,000,000 U. S. dollars. Any good Bible commentary will give you the equivalent, and the math is easy. Hour-time employees may have an easier time “getting it” than the Fortune 500 league who may be tempted to think paying up is at least doable, thank God, due to their

ample resources. But no matter what your net worth, you may not “get it,” if you only make the simple 1:1000 arithmetic conversion. Ten thousand talents was twelve and a half times the annual tax debt of all five Jewish provinces to Rome! (Seamands, 1991, p. 26). An exorbitant tax debt which stirred the hearts of the enslaved to insurrection.

Another way to get a handle on the magnitude of the debt is to think about it in terms of a person's lifetime earning potential. If the man worked at Roman wages for 65 years and applied every cent he earned to his debt, he could pay off one talent in a lifetime. He owed 10,000.

You don't “get it” until it breaks over you that not even Bill Gates or the Sultan of Brunei can pay. The debt is impossible! Jesus deliberately made it astronomical so there would be no excuse for not “getting it”! The king has every right to take everything we have and put us in jail and throw away the key. There is nothing we can do to redeem ourselves! But amazingly, we don't “get it”! As Robert Capon in his profound trilogy on the parables puts it:

From the dim beginnings of our history right up to the present day, there is not a man, woman, or child of us who has ever been immune to the temptation to think that the relationship between God and humanity can be repaired from our side, by our efforts (Capon, 1988, p. 28).

We miss the foundational truth that God will not, in the end, save “some minuscule coterie of good little boys and girls with religious money in their piggy banks, but all the stone-broke, deadbeat, overextended children of this world whom he has set free in the liberation of his death” (Capon, 1988, p. 29).

Only those who feel the desperateness of their situation can really hear the words of the king and unclasp their hands to receive.

### **III. You don't “get it” until you've made eye contact with the King and heard Him speak to you—really heard him.**

Most of us hear, but we don't listen. I do it all the time. I hear you talking to me, but my mind is spinning with a million other things. And if you engage me at all, I'm probably thinking about what I'm going to say in response. Sometimes we even come into a conversation with our minds set. Ron and I have a few “re-run” dialogues that are so predictable we are tempted to number them and call out the numbers whenever the subject comes up. We know we both have our minds made up on these issues. We know exactly what each of us is going to say, and nothing is likely to change. Numbers could save us a lot of time and energy!

This parable may be one of those situations. The man's mind is set when he walks into the throne room. The king, he believes, is a “bean counter,” concerned with rigorous accounting and exacting full payment to the penny. He perceives him as something on the order of Santa Claus who has made his list, checked it twice, and knows the poor sap in front of him is naughty, not nice. The debtor's mind is racing to stay ahead, to organize his thoughts parallel to anything the king comes up with. But everything he hears is filtered through the mind set he brought into the room with him. And he already knows his bottom line. He'll make a persuasive plea for more time.

When you think about it, it's ludicrous! When a lifetime of labor won't touch 1/10,000th of the debt, what difference will time make? Now, whether the debtor is too stupid to have figured that out, or whether he hopes, as Capon puts it, his honest face and earnest pleading will render the king "kindhearted or softheaded or both," we don't know (Capon, 1988, p. 28). But this much is clear. After the debtor unloads his speech, he never hears a word the king said! Tragically, he leaves the presence of the king with the same mind set he brought in. He goes out, thinking to himself, "Whew! He bought my line. Gave me what I asked for. Now I better be about making collections so I can make payments. He'll never fall for this twice!"

But stop! Really listen:

"The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."

Do you "get it"?

#### **IV. You don't "get it" until you know how much cancellation cost the King.**

When we think of the meaning of Christ's sacrifice for us, some of us think with John and Paul of the sacrifice He made to become human, to step out of the circle of the Godhead and become flesh and live among us. From our limited human understanding, I've heard it likened to a prince being willing to be kissed and become a frog rather than the other way around. To be sure, joining the human race *was* a huge step down! An incredible sacrifice!

Christ Jesus, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and . . . humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6-8)

And for what! Only to be ridiculed, rejected, and murdered by His own. But this perspective alone does not fully comprehend the nature of His sacrifice.

Sometimes we focus on the gruesomeness and anguish of the crucifixion. It *was* a horrifying way to die! But neither does this awareness create the complete picture of the sacrifice Jesus made. Christ's accusers were after more than a horrible death when they shouted "Crucify Him!" And they knew exactly what they were asking for. In Deut. 21:22-23, the Scripture gives us insight into what they were really after.

"Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse."

This verse is picked up by Paul in Galatians 3. In his discourse on the mess the human race is in and what has been accomplished for us in Christ, Paul writes:

"Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law. . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Gal. 3:10, 13).

In Isaiah 53, the prophet uses phrases like,

“The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all” (vs. 6).

“The Lord made his life a guilt offering” (vs. 10).

“He poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors” (vs. 12).

The implications of all this are further spelled out by Paul in Hebrews 2:9.

“He suffered death so . . . he might taste death for everyone.”

Christ was willing to be eternally separated from His Father, to die forever, to reconcile the human family to God. This was the supreme sacrifice He believed He had made when He cried out in His humanness, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” Yet his declaration, “It is finished,” marks willful assent to His own eternal death, that we might choose life.

No, you don't “get it” until it breaks over you what debt cancellation has cost the King!

#### **V. Until you “get it,” you're in no shape to be about in the world.**

Until you “get it,” you'll surely go about wrecking havoc in people's lives, and there will certainly be nothing winsome about your witness. Ultimately, you're the one who will reap the biggest consequences. If you don't “get it,” *you* don't get it. That's the end of the story.

It is a sad fate for those who choose it. But don't miss this. The good news of the story is that it doesn't need to be your fate. It doesn't need to be anybody's fate. From the day Jesus offered up His perfect life in death and was raised to heavenly places by His Father, no one goes unforgiven because their debt is impossible. Everyone's is. That's a given. But the debt is paid in full. God, in Christ, has provided exact change! The only ones who go unforgiven are those who can't bring themselves to unclasp their hands and receive God's incredible forgiveness and let the good news transform their relationships with Him and everyone else.

Hear it one more time. Give yourself over to it. Let your heart sing. The good news is that in Christ the impossible debt, which hangs like a millstone about each of our necks, has been forgiven! Canceled! Obliterated! Swallowed by the ocean floor!

“. . . at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. . . . While we were still sinners, Christ died for us . . . . When we were enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:6, 8, 10).

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

Shout it from the mountaintops! Sing and clap your hands and awake the world with your cymbals and tambourines! The good news of Jesus' story is that, in Himself, we have been set free for new beginnings, with God and with one another! And the rewriting of the end of the story in our lives and in our families and in our congregations can begin—all because WE “GET IT”! Praise be to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

**References**

Capon, R. F. (1988). *The parables of grace*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Seamands, D. A. (1991). *Healing for damaged emotions*. Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing.

# Brother Beloved

by Karen and Ron Flowers

## Theme

The gospel offers new beginnings for estranged relationships.

## Theme Texts

John 15:12; Philemon 15, 16

## Supplementary Reading

Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 456-460.

## Presentation Notes

The notes presented in this section do not constitute a prepared sermon script. The following helps are designed to offer a framework, supportive resources, and illustrations toward the development of a sermon or sermons on a stated theme. You will want to shape these ideas in your own style, drawing upon your own study and experience to meet the particular needs of your congregation. Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses <sup>(1),(2),(3)</sup> will indicate illustrations, quotations and other material that may be helpful in your sermon development and delivery. These helps can be found in the **Sermon Illumination** section.

## Introduction

In the collection of writings we call the New Testament, there is a small letter—we might even call it a “postcard”—with a big, big message. It is the letter of Paul to Philemon. It is the shortest of all his epistles (only 334 words in the Greek text), but it is among his most profound. Its message is about reconciliation, about the bringing back together again of individuals estranged from each other. It is about offering forgiveness and a new beginning to someone whom the law condemned as deserving severe punishment, perhaps even death.

## Historical Background of the Letter

The Epistle to Philemon is one of the four Prison Epistles, which also include Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. The letters to the Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon were written around 62 A.D. by the apostle Paul from his place of imprisonment in Rome. They were hand-carried by Tychicus, a companion of Paul, on a journey to the churches of Ephesus and Colossae in Asia. The epistle to Philemon is a personal epistle written to Philemon, a Christian in Colossae. Philemon was a convert of Paul (Philem.19), perhaps through an encounter of the two men in Ephesus during Paul’s third missionary journey (54-57 A.D.). Philemon owned a house large enough for a meeting place for the church. In fact, the “church in your house” (Philem. 2) is addressed in the salutation of the letter, along with Philemon’s wife, Apphia, and his grown son, Archippus, who evidently held a position of ministry in the church (Col. 4:1).

Like many other wealthy citizens in Colossae, including Christian believers, Philemon was a slaveholder. <sup>(1,2)</sup> Since Paul acknowledges the good which Philemon has done among the believers (many

of whom were probably slaves) (Philem. 5-7), it is likely that, among Christian slaveholders, the plight of slaves was better than in the society at large. However, the system of slavery as a whole was “hopelessly degrading” (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 459).

With full control over the souls and bodies of these helpless beings, he [the slave owner] could inflict upon them any suffering he chose. If one of them in retaliation or self-defense ventured to raise a hand against his owner, the whole family of the offender might be inhumanly sacrificed. The slightest mistake, accident, or carelessness was often punished without mercy (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 459).

We might be tempted to wonder why such inhumane practices were not condemned outrightly in the New Testament. The answer lies in the “wise as serpents, harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16) philosophy which both Christ and the apostles employed as they went about their mission. Paul did not assault the social structure of his day directly, but he presented viewpoints and perspectives that would alter human hearts and reshape relationships from inside families and the community of faith. He was confident that Christian believers, under the guidance of the Spirit, would steadily grow into conformity to the will of God.<sup>(3,4)</sup>

### **The Story Behind the Letter**

Onesimus, a slave from Philemon’s household, had robbed or in some other way wronged his master and had escaped. Like many such slave runaways, he had found his way to the sprawling capital city of Rome, hoping to lose himself amid the masses. Just how he encountered Paul there is uncertain. He may have been destitute and looked for Christians, whom he understood to be kind and helpful. He may have been driven by guilt and seeking some inner peace in the Christian community. Or he may have looked for Paul directly, no doubt having heard Philemon speak of him. Onesimus may even have known of Paul’s imprisonment in Rome.

The encounter with Paul was life-changing for Onesimus, for as he listened to the words of life from the aging prisoner for Christ, he confessed his sins and was converted. Onesimus became involved in caring for Paul and helping to spread the gospel. His conscience was awakened to his responsibility to repent and make as much restitution as he could to Philemon for the wrongs he had done. Paul would have liked to have retained Onesimus in his service, but both knew he was a fugitive felon under Roman law and liable for severe punishment, perhaps even death, if caught. It became increasingly clear he could not continue to work for Christ until his debt back in Colossae was cared for. He must return to Philemon. Paul counseled him to do so without delay, to make his apology in the hope that things could be set right.

What we have in our Bibles is the note of recommendation which Paul prepared to accompany Onesimus as he went back to Philemon. Having also written letters for the Ephesian and Colossian churches, the apostle entrusted them, and Onesimus, to Tychicus. The two then set out on the journey to Asia Minor. “It was a severe test for this servant thus to deliver himself up to the master he had wronged; but he had been truly converted, and he did not turn aside from this duty” (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 456).

### **Christian Diplomacy**

The letter has been hailed as masterful in its tact, its sensitivity and its skillful handling of a difficult situation. Ellen White notes that Paul knew “that Philemon was greatly incensed because of the conduct of his servant” (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 457, 458). Paul mentions that he has heard of Philemon’s service to the church and his witnessing (vss. 5, 6). Did he also hear of Philemon’s displeasure at the runaway

Onesimus? Or did Paul simply know intuitively that anyone who had been thus wronged would be angry? There is no way to know for certain. In any case, Paul is very courteous in this letter. He shows loving concern for both Philemon and Onesimus. For those of us helping restore estranged relationships in the family, there are many lessons in this letter about the delicate work of what we might call “Christian diplomacy.”

**Expressing respect, love and affection.** To Paul, Philemon is “beloved,” a “fellow worker” (vs. 1). Paul has prayed for Philemon, thanking God for him (vs. 4, 5) and asking God that Philemon’s faith will grow and that his witnessing will be effective (vs. 6). They are bonded together in Christ. Philemon is a “brother” (vs. 7, 20).

**Giving genuine affirmation and appreciation.** Philemon is widely known for his magnanimity and general helpfulness. Paul’s affirmation and appreciation for Philemon is real. Philemon’s devoted Christian faith and service has been inspirational, a source of encouragement and joy to Paul (vs. 7).

**Making an appeal rather than giving an order.** Paul makes his apostolic authority clear (see 1 Cor. 9; 2 Cor. 10, 11). With Philemon, however, he deliberately chooses not to use apostolic authority to command, but rather to make an appeal on the basis of love (vss. 8, 9). Paul’s appeal respects Philemon’s will and power of choice. Such an appeal is more likely to enlist Philemon’s cooperation than would a direct order. Without freedom of choice, Philemon’s response would not have been voluntary.<sup>(5)</sup> A similar idea is expressed later in the letter when Paul says, “I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced” (vs. 14). An appeal also recognizes that the individual who has been wronged feels hurt, injured, used. In response to an appeal, the feelings of someone like Philemon are more likely to be processed in a positive way. With a command, resistance is more likely.

### Reflections of the Great Intercessor

Paul does not compare his intercession for Onesimus with that of Christ for sinners. But in this letter we can see his efforts in the arena of human relationships as a type of Christ’s work as mediator between God and humankind (1 Tim. 2:5). Paul’s work as an intercessor also shows us how God uses people as His helpers to bring about the reconciliation of one human being to another, a restoration of relationships made possible because of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross (Gal. 2:28; Eph. 2:13-19).

**He serves as an advocate.** The word *appeal* (vss. 9, 10) comes from the same Greek root word as the names given to the Holy Spirit (John 14:26) and to Jesus (1 John 2:1), i.e., “one called alongside another to help,” “to comfort,” “to be an advocate.” Paul is an advocate for Onesimus.

**He offers himself to the one wronged as surety for the wrongdoer.** “If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back . . .” (vss. 18, 19).<sup>(6)</sup>

How fitting an illustration of the love of Christ for the repentant sinner! The servant who had defrauded his master had nothing with which to make restitution. The sinner who has robbed God of years of service has no means of canceling the debt. Jesus interposes between the sinner and God, saying, I will pay the debt. Let the sinner be spared; I will suffer in his stead (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 458).



**He is close to both sides.** Onesimus he calls “my son” (vs. 10), “my very heart” (vs. 12). Philemon he calls “fellow worker” (vs. 1), “brother” (vs. 7, 20), and “partner” (vs. 17). “So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me” (vs. 17). This is the climax of his advocacy, his mediation, his substitution and intercession for Onesimus. His close relationship with them both is what he trusts will make possible a restored relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. “From the standpoint of his legal rights Philemon could proceed with other action than that which Paul suggests. But Paul rises above mere justice and rests his case on the summit of love” (*SDA Bible Commentary, Vol. 7, p. 383*).

**He presents each to the other as worthy of trust.** Trust erodes between individuals when wrongs are done. The restoration of trust is a necessary part of reconciliation. Paul acknowledges that Onesimus, whose name means “useful,” has not formerly lived up to his name. But he declares that he has changed and become truly useful (vs. 11), so useful that he would liked to have retained him as a personal attendant in Rome (vs. 13). Paul has already acknowledged many positive qualities about Philemon. These he must have likewise impressed upon Onesimus. That he inspired Onesimus’ heart with hope and trust in Philemon is shown in part by the renegade slave’s willingness to return to his master. If he had not, Onesimus might have asked to remain in Rome until Tychicus had delivered Paul’s letter and some word had come back from Philemon to Paul.

### **Toward Reconciliation**

The first good news of the gospel is that *God has already brought about perfect reconciliation between Himself and the human race.* “God . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ . . .” (2 Cor. 5:18). But the gospel also contains the truth that *members of the human race, estranged by sin, have been brought together in Christ.* The human to human reconciliation and unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17:11), was also accomplished in His body on the cross (Eph. 2:13-19). “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). These are valid spiritual realities, accomplished by God Himself apart from any human doing, which await our acceptance.

**Objective reconciliation: Brothers in Christ.** In this epistle, Paul addresses two very complex levels of human reconciliation. The first is what we can call *objective* reconciliation. It deals with a reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus which is outside their personal experience. It is something Christ has accomplished already. All believers are brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul must help Philemon to see that because of Christ, he and Onesimus are *already* reconciled; they are Christian brothers.<sup>(7,8)</sup> Paul reveals this truth when he indicates that Onesimus is coming back, *no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother*” (v15, 16). The words “better than” (vs. 16) are from the same Greek word which is translated “above” in Luke 6:40 (“*above* his teacher”) and Phil. 2:9 (“*above* every name”). In other words, Onesimus is *above* a slave. What Paul is saying is that, in Christ, believers have a new status, an elevated status. They are “brothers” and “sisters” in the family of God. Fellow believers see each other through new glasses, as it were, and love each other as members of one family. Paul builds on the thought that he expressed in another letter carried by Tychicus, the letter to the Ephesians, a church where there were also slaveholders. There he points out that with God there is no partiality between those who are called masters and slaves in earthly society (Eph. 6:9). Paul is presenting to Philemon a radical reconciliation, that of finding in Onesimus a beloved brother.

This news that Christ has reconciled estranged human beings directs the thoughts of one who has been wounded heavenward. Christ our Savior has felt our sorrow. He recognizes the need for justice, and He has personally taken upon Himself the punishment due the wrongdoer. He “carried our sorrows . . . He

was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:4, 5). “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). That good news alone can begin the stirring in our hearts that is necessary for us to reach out to one another. “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

This truth is one which must echo beyond the walls of Philemon’s home. The acceptance of this radical reconciliation will bring to an end all use of power that would enslave or subjugate people wherever they are found. It heralds the end of patriarchy, of benevolent autocracy and other seemingly benign leadership forms that nevertheless insinuate that others are inferior. Because of Christ, a fellowship now exists that knows no such distinctions. Christ has forever banished the barriers of ethnicity, social and economic class, and gender stratification (Gal. 3:28). Today, the message of Christ has reached into many parts of the world and slavery as an institution is officially banned. However, the desire to control others still exists in hearts that have not yielded to Christ. These verses of Philemon tell us that there must be a radical change in the conduct of Christian companies and business owners toward their employees. People must always be placed above profit. Also to come under scrutiny in the light of these verses are those social forces—whether religious, political, domestic, or commercial—that dominate and repress women, children, the poor and disadvantaged, and that grind down certain people groups.

**Subjective reconciliation: Choosing to restore a damaged relationship.** The second level of reconciliation we might call *subjective* reconciliation. It deals with the personal, subjective experience of coming back into relationship with someone who has wronged you. That wrong might be any one of a number of things—physical or emotional wounding or the inflicting of damage, loss or hurt to one’s family or to the things one holds dear. Reconciliation must address the hurt and broken trust, the sense of violation of the promises which bind us together.

Already we have seen how the awareness of Christ’s bearing the punishment for transgressions against us can help to bring a sense of justice and prepare our hearts for healing the wounded relationship. The letter to Philemon also shows us that this work of reconciliation in human hearts is not one to be commanded. It must be the voluntary choice of the one who has been deeply hurt. Nor is it a process to be rushed. Christian counselor Gary Rosberg says, “Conflict settlement needs to follow a process, and it often takes time” (1992, p. 232).

When an offense occurs, it hurts. Hurt is often followed by anger. Rosberg describes such experiences as profoundly affecting the relationship “loop” between the two persons involved. In a close relationship, their “relationship loop” which binds them together would be kept intact, with communication and love flowing freely between them. But because of the hurtful offence, the “loop” that has held them together in relationship has suffered a breach; it has been torn open.

At this point the individuals are faced with a choice. They may choose to sustain the break and keep the loop open. In this case, the problem which resulted in the breach in their relationships may never be addressed or resolved. Choosing to keep the loop open may be necessary to provide opportunity for the one who has been hurt deeply to make a decision about the level of relationship they are able or that it safe to sustain with the other person for the future. On the other hand, the persons involved may wish to repair the breach and close the loop, whatever it takes. To close the loop and restore a relationship that has sustained damage requires a process with a number of steps:

- **Choosing to love again.** Before the breach can be repaired, the persons involved must reaffirm their commitment to the relationship and to God and choose to enter into the process of reconciliation, trusting God for help in resolving the problem.
- **Preparing the heart.** Preparation of the hearts of each individual is important before entering into dialogue with one another. This is a time for meditation, Bible study and prayer. A time for confession of one's own personal need of grace. It is a time for introspection and consideration of the underlying causes of the problem to which each individual may be contributing. It is a time for deciding the relationship takes priority over conflict issues.
- **Communicating.** For conflicts to be resolved, the persons involved must talk. Both must make a commitment to listening and understanding, to really hearing the other person. The thoughts and feelings and needs of both must be expressed.
- **Loving confrontation.** When approaching the other person, it is important to be sensitive to the pressures they may be feeling and to request a time to talk about the problem together. Choosing an unhurried time and setting, avoiding exaggerated accusations such as those using words like "never" and "always"—and shifting the approach from "you" to "I"—that is, from blaming the other person to sharing one's own feelings—set the stage for understanding and resolution to the problem. Sometimes communication and loving confrontation are all that are necessary. Sometimes there is a need to explore alternatives for resolving the problem in a way that meets the needs of both. It is important to take the time to generate options until an alternative can be found that is satisfying to each. If this alternative turns out not to be as acceptable as anticipated, both must remain open to adjustments. This process can be very difficult for the two persons most closely involved in a conflict to follow without assistance from someone like a pastor or counselor who has the ability to help them hear and understand one another and to generate and choose among options. God has given gifts and opportunities for professional training to members of the body of Christ. They can offer their counsel and support to those seeking reconciliation.
- **Forgiving one another.** Forgiveness cannot come until hurt has been validated. It is necessary to move beyond denial and acknowledge the depth of the pain. Validation prepares the way for the person who has been hurt to turn from revenge, retribution and resentment and make the choice to forgive. Validation opens the way for the offender to enter into the pain that he or she has brought into the life of the person they have wounded. It prepares the way for the full repentance of the wrongdoer. This repentance includes accepting responsibility for the pain that has been caused, saying, "I was wrong; I am sorry. I don't ever want to hurt you in this way again." Such repentance also involves making restitution in every way possible, changing in behavior, and seeking the help of others to avoid inflicting such hurt in the future. Genuine repentance and forgiveness in response provides both giver and receiver with emotional relief.<sup>(9)</sup>
- **Rebuilding trust.** For true restoration to occur, there must be a work of rebuilding trust. The passing of time alone is not enough, but positive experiences and perseverance in restoring the relationship over time can eventually result in trust regained. God does not leave us to walk this path alone. He is the God of restoration and reconciliation.

**The journey of repentance.** The journey from Rome to Colossae in Paul's day was a long and

difficult journey. Paul sent Tychicus as a companion for Onesimus (Col. 4:7-9). One commentator notes that there were bounty hunters looking for renegade slaves, and travel would be safer if Onesimus were not alone. There may be another reason Paul sent Onesimus with a companion. He may have been concerned that Onesimus might need support, lest he become faint of spirit, for the long journey of Onesimus is nothing less than the journey of the repentant. It is like the journey of the prodigal son back home, with those desperate words on his lips, "I have sinned against heaven and in your sight and am no longer worthy to be called your son." What can he, a runaway slave, ever say to Philemon? What can he do but offer his repentance? Will the note be received? These thoughts must have played over and over in his mind as he trudged forward during the long days and wakeful nights of the journey home. But in those moments, in our mind's eye, we can see him put his hand tenderly into the pocket where the note, the precious note of intercession, was kept. In this act, we can imagine he turned again and again for reassurance to Paul, the trusted friend of both himself and his owner.

### **Conclusion**

Here in our Bibles we have the very message sent by Paul in the hand of Onesimus to Philemon. Did Onesimus complete the journey from Rome back to Philemon? Did he deliver the letter? Did Philemon respond as Paul requested? The answers must be yes. We do not know what the reunion was like, or by what personal process Philemon and Onesimus were reconciled. But the fact that this tiny letter exists at all is the greatest testimony that what Paul appealed for on the basis of the gospel actually came to pass.

Today, we are all, in one way or another, wrapped up in the drama of this little letter. In so far as it symbolizes our standing before God, we can rejoice at the really good news that we have been welcomed home! No longer as slaves, but as adopted members of the family. God accepts us in His Beloved Son (Eph. 1:6). In another sense, we play out these characters in our families and other relationships. Some of us are like Paul, trying very hard to mediate the difficulties between people we love. We feel frustrated, confused or disappointed by our lack of results sometimes. Perhaps the most important things for us to remember from the letter to Philemon are that we can keep on loving both sides and we can continue to *appeal* for peace. In the realm of relationships we cannot force or coerce, we must leave the choice to reconcile with the individuals themselves.

Some may be like Onesimus, perhaps still running, feeling guilty, longing to repent and be reconciled. The experience of Onesimus can fortify us with courage to confess our wrongs and seek reconciliation with our God in heaven and with those whom we have wronged in our families and elsewhere.

Some of us may be in Philemon's position today. We have been wronged. The hurt runs deep. No offense is ever minor, but perhaps the damage has been very extensive. You may feel angry, even punitive. There may have been gestures of repentance from the offender, maybe not. Perhaps the repentance seemed insincere. You don't know what to do, but the situation is eating you alive.

Today the God of Paul, Onesimus and Philemon understands. Through Christ He has entered the human arena and become familiar with our pain. Because of Christ He has committed Himself to the process of restoring damaged relationships. We can trust in the surety of the reconciliation between earth and heaven, between ourselves and Him. As we put our earthly human relationships in His hands, He will surely lead us to know more fully the freeing experience of forgiveness and, if it is at all possible, the renewal of reconciliation.

### Sermon Illumination

1. Slave-holding was an established institution throughout the Roman Empire, and both masters and slaves were found in most of the churches for which Paul labored. In the cities, where slaves often greatly outnumbered the free population, laws of terrible severity were regarded as necessary to keep them in subjection. A wealthy Roman often owned hundreds of slaves, of every rank, of every nation, and of every accomplishment. (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 459).

2. Without an understanding of the slave problem as it existed in the Roman Empire of Paul's day, the Epistle to Philemon cannot be fully appreciated. Slaves were a recognized part of the social structure and were considered members of their master's household. Between the years 146 B.C. and A.D. 235 the proportion of slaves to freemen is said to have been three to one. Pliny says that in the time of Augustus a freeman by the name of Caecilius held 4,116 slaves. (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7, p. 376).

3. It was not the apostle's work to overturn arbitrarily or suddenly the established order of society. To attempt this would be to prevent the success of the gospel. But he taught principles which struck at the very foundation of slavery and which, if carried into effect, would surely undermine the whole system. (*Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 459, 460).

4. The trenchant social inequalities of the culture surrounding the New Testament church were thus undermined and transformed by the grace and calling of Christ. Inequality and subordination based on race, class, and sex were undermined in principle and subverted in practice. The gospel called neither for a social revolution nor for a passive acceptance of the status quo. Rather, it initiated a transformation of social relations toward equality, mutuality, and positive interdependence. (Van Leeuwen, 1993, pp. 8, 11).

5. Of the importance of choice, E. G. White expresses the following regarding the choice given to humankind at the beginning:

Without freedom of choice, his obedience would not have been voluntary, but forced. There could have been no development of character. Such a course would have been contrary to God's plan in dealing with the inhabitants of other worlds. It would have been unworthy of man as an intelligent being, and would have sustained Satan's charge of God's arbitrary rule. (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 49).

6. Christ, like Paul, was willing to pay another's debt so that the sinner may be received by all as though he had committed no wrong. Therefore, when the repentant servant returned, Philemon was not to see Onesimus and his debt, but Paul and his promise of repayment. (*SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7, p. 383).

7. "Picture a large circle, from the edge of which are many lines all running to the center. The nearer these lines approach the center, the nearer they are to one another. Thus it is in the Christian life. The closer we come to Christ, the nearer we shall be to one another" (Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, 179).

8. “In the most intimate relationships of life, in our kinship with father and mother, brothers and sisters, in married love, and in our duty to the community, direct relationships are impossible. Since the coming of Christ, his followers have no more immediate realities of their own, not in their family relationships. . . nor in the relationships formed in the process of living. Between father and son, husband and wife . . . stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognize him or not. We cannot establish direct contact outside ourselves except through him, through his word, and through our following of him.

The same mediator who makes us individuals is also the founder of a new fellowship. He stands in the centre between my neighbor and myself. He divides, but he also unites. Thus although the direct way to our neighbor is barred, we now find the new and only real way to him—the way which passes through the Mediator” (Bonhoeffer, 1959, p. 86).

9. Gary Rosberg (*Choosing to Love Again*, 1992, pp. 223-232) reminds us that, contrary to popular myth:

- God has the power to forget; we don’t. We cannot make ourselves forget something that has deeply hurt us. We can ask God to ease our adjustment to the pain and our subsequent memories.
- Forgiveness is not impossible. Even when we don’t feel like forgiving, we can choose to offer it anyway, drawing upon God’s strength.
- Even if the other person doesn’t respond, we are responsible for ourselves. We can try to close the loop, but we can’t control the other person’s response. Sometimes humbly taking the first step can start the process.
- Forgiveness does not mean nothing happened. Forgiveness is a gift, freely bestowed. Trust needs to be earned.
- Forgiveness takes time. If the offense was minor, the process may be shorter. If the offense was major, we need to be prepared for a long process. We err only if we refuse to enter the process.

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# The God of the Second Time

## *Another look at the Jonah story*

by Jo Ann Davidson

### **Theme**

The God who called Jonah again, despite his deliberate disobedience, is still the God of second chances.

### **Theme Text**

“Now the Word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time . . .” (Jonah 3:1).

### **Introduction**

My teenage son Jonathan has been patiently fine-tuning my knowledge of sports. I never was interested before, but recently Jonathan paid me the supreme compliment that now I know more than the moms of most of his friends! For instance, when it comes to baseball, I now realize that, though the game can be played either with a soft ball or a hard ball, both types of ball are HARD on the head! Jonathan has also informed me about the differences in batting with a metal bat or a wooden bat.

In baseball, there are also MAJOR and MINOR leagues. The MAJOR league players earn huge salaries and are considered to have made it to the top of their profession. MINOR league players have achieved in the sport, but on a lesser scale. Their hopes are still set on one day playing on a MAJOR league team.

The words MAJOR and MINOR are similarly used in education. A college student MAJORS in a certain subject or subjects, and MINORS in others. That means a person’s MAJOR receives the most attention and the most hours in class. The MINOR takes less work and less hours in class. Thus MAJOR and MINOR generally comes to mean the difference between the more important and the less important.

### **Biblical Prophets are All Major**

However, one must be careful NOT to use that customary understanding when studying the Bible. For instance, in the Old Testament, there are the MAJOR prophets and the MINOR prophets. A person might have the understandable tendency to conclude that the twelve MINOR prophets aren’t quite as important as the big MAJOR prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. It is at this point that our understanding of MAJOR and MINOR must take a different nuance.

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An analogy might be found in music. If you have had some music lessons you remember that there are MAJOR scales and MINOR scales. But this designation in music has nothing to do with their value or importance. The two types of scales are just structured differently and can be conveniently classified this way. Just so in the Bible, the minor prophets are no less important than the major prophets. The books are just generally shorter.

Let us look at one of the “minor” prophets. Before long we will be reminded that this book is definitely not in the minor leagues! The book of Jonah contains a major message of major importance. And its themes still remain very contemporary. Let’s start at the beginning.

### **Certainty of Jonah’s Book**

Jonah 1:1 “NOW THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO JONAH . . .” The book begins with the identical formula with which many of the other prophetic books commence. See how Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Zephaniah and Jonah all open with, “THE WORD OF THE LORD THAT CAME UNTO \_\_\_\_\_.” Thus we are assured that the book of Jonah is a genuine biblical record. We are not dealing with fairy tales or legends. We are hearing the word of the Lord.

This “formula” also immediately authenticates that the following account does not originate with Jonah, but comes from God himself—“THE WORD OF THE LORD.” This is a holy introduction and should remind us each time we read it in Scripture that we need bow before the God of Heaven with a prayer for the Holy Spirit to open our minds as we study.

### **God Knows Us Personally**

Consider that God calls people by name. He knows our parentage and background. He knew Jonah was the son of Amittai. When God summons people, He doesn’t just say, “Hey, you.” He calls them by name.

A belief in the God of Scripture gives us personhood and authenticity. The modern philosophical movement of “existentialism” says that there is no ultimate purpose to life. Existentialists insist that human life is meaningless and absurd. But biblical Christians think differently. We believe that the Lord of heaven and earth has given each of us life and a destiny, and that He even knows us by name!

### **God Knows Big Cities**

God called Jonah and said, “Arise, go to Niniveh” (Jonah 1:2). “Among the cities of the ancient world in the days of divided Israel one of the greatest was Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian realm” (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 265). To obey God’s commission, Jonah would have to make a tremendous journey across the desert—about 750 miles on foot. Yet it was not really the travel that distressed him, but rather Nineveh itself.

“Nineveh?” Jonah must have gasped. “The capital of Israel’s worst enemy?” For Jonah, Nineveh meant the center of Assyrian power, the menacing threat to Israel’s survival. The city of Nineveh itself was the epitome of everything Jonah hated about the Gentiles. He knew its reputation as an idolatrous, sin-ridden city, and nothing was more repulsive, repugnant, or distressing than going there to preach repentance.

God knows all people and all places by name—and we can never presume to know what God is going to do next. Who would have thought that God had any plans but judgment for the wicked city of

Nineveh? This should remind us that we cannot always predict whom God is going to convert next. The next person on God's calendar may surprise us.

He surely surprised Jonah! For He sent him to a Gentile city—one of the most renowned cities of heathendom on the face of the earth.

### **God's Ways Can Surprise Us**

And on top of that, God was sending him on a precedent-breaking mission. Of all God's messengers, only Jonah had ever received such a commission. The Lord did a new thing by Jonah—a startling and marvelous new thing upon the earth. He violated all current Israelite expectations by manifesting His care for people outside the seed of Abraham. He was sending His first apostle to the Gentiles!

However, Jonah seemed to prefer a funnel of God's providence targeted exclusively on the Israelites. The drama of the situation was profound. And a contest of wills between Jonah and Yahweh began with God's command: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me" (Jonah 1:2). Archaeologists have excavated numerous ancient Assyrian inscriptions. And from these we are reminded that God was accurate in His particular concern over their self-confident pride and their cruelty. (See Is. 10:12,13; Nahum 3:1,19.)

### **God's Judgment Reveals His Mercy**

Examine God's pronouncement: "Their wickedness has come up before Me." This is formal legal language. The Lord is seated in His court. We are ushered before God the judge. A case is to be called and judged. We are reminded that all nations come under His rule. Regardless of some modern voices that seek to soothe our consciences with an exclusive "God is love," we observe here (and all through Scripture) that God notices human wickedness. Thus this was a very serious situation.

But there came another surprise, for this announcement was also an indication of God's mercy. Yes, the people of Nineveh were notoriously wicked, and Jonah was commissioned to bring Nineveh a judgment message.

However, the Assyrians could be grateful for that. The greatest curse that can ever be brought against a nation or a people is for God to turn away, as He had announced through Hosea: "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone" (Hosea 4:17).

But the mercy granted to Nineveh was just the beginning of God's astonishing attention to details. We have noted God calling a person by name and commissioning him or her. This is a frequent Old Testament pattern. But what happened next was far from routine.

"But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3). The shocking surprise was Jonah's stark refusal to shoulder his task. Moses and Jeremiah also initially shrank from their divine assignments, but Jonah's blunt defiance went far beyond their hesitation. As a result, what ensued was an accumulation of hair-raising phenomena, one after the other, as God pursued Jonah. The violent sea storm, Jonah's survival in the belly of a fish, the mass conversion of a great pagan city—these were not routine.

### **Jonah Doesn't Agree With God**

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Notice in verse 3 that in just one verse we are informed twice that Jonah fled “from the presence of the Lord.” One time would be shocking enough. However, this duplication in a single verse compels attention to the irony of anyone, let alone a prophet, thinking they can escape from the presence of the Lord! Notice, too, that Jonah did not just depart—he fled!

Furthermore, three times in this same verse we are notified of Jonah going “to Tarshish,” which punctuates the fact that Jonah was traveling in a diametrically opposite direction from God’s instructions! Nineveh is northeast. Tarshish is west. This verse emphasizes three times the magnitude of Jonah’s rebellion.

As he “thought of the difficulties and seeming impossibilities of this commission, he was tempted to question the wisdom of the call.” I mean, what “could be gained by proclaiming such a message in that proud city” (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 266)? Maybe if he just ignored these divine instructions, doom would come to the despised Gentiles, for they surely would not think of repentance on their own. Jonah may have thought that if God had a little more time to think about the situation, He might change His mind.

There are some people today who are of the opinion that God actually matures. This contemporary theory is termed “process theology.” The understanding is that God’s thinking ripens through experience just as ours does—God’s mind improves as it processes what happens in His creation. In other words, God becomes wiser by watching what transpires, and He discovers better ways of administering His kingdom.

The account of Jonah (and of all Scripture) strongly contradicts this perspective. For it reveals to us just how diligent God was in getting His message to Nineveh. God did not learn from Jonah. Nor did He make mistakes. Jonah remained His chosen messenger even though he refused the assignment and tried to escape. Nor did God change His mind about Nineveh.

### **God Begins to Nudge Jonah**

“But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea” (Jonah 1:4). For Jonah’s sake a tempest was unleashed. It whipped up the ocean and caused the ship to founder. But its purpose was to smash Jonah’s inflexibility. The elements of nature and many innocent sailors were engaged in the adventure with Jonah and because of him.

The extensive confession of both the Old and New Testaments (see, for example, Jer. 23:19, 20; Ps. 107:23-31) is that the functioning of all nature is dependent on God’s action. Scriptural testimony opposes contemporary views in which the universe is considered a closed and secular system allowing no place for the action of God.

Right here in the book of Jonah the wind has begun to blow. The tempest is stirred—God has acted. God went to extreme measures to show Jonah how much He loved him—and Nineveh. This was a sign of His special grace.

God thought His message so important, and the person he elected so consequential, that He brought nature into play to help this chosen person fulfill his task. As God wrestled with Jacob at the brook Jabbok, so now He began to wrestle with Jonah. One of the major underlying themes of this book is the dogged persistence of God. Jonah disobeyed and was trying to escape God, but God pursued him

relentlessly. “Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god” (Jonah 1:4,5). To their credit, these pagan sailors could see that this was no ordinary storm, but one divinely instigated.

“But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship” (verse 5). As we noted initially, twice the text mentions that Jonah tried to “flee from the presence of the Lord,” emphasizing the futility of what Jonah was trying to do. Now we are informed for the third time that Jonah “went down.” The first two times are in verse 3, when Jonah, trying to escape God’s command, “went down” to Joppa and “went down” into the ship. In verse 5 we see that he “went down into the lowest parts of the ship.” Jonah just kept going down and down and down in his miscalculated attempts to escape his divine commission.

The storm raged dangerously, and the captain of the ship, “distressed beyond measure,” (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 267) checked the ship from stem to stern and found Jonah asleep.

“Arise,” he said. Note the close similarity of the captain’s exclamation and Jonah’s original summons from God in verse 2, “Arise.” The word must have mocked Jonah. This was the very word with which God had disturbed his pleasant life a few days before. “Arise, call on your God” (verse 6). Note the irony of a heathen skipper pleading with a Hebrew prophet to pray to his God.

“So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah” (verse 7). Notice Jonah’s response. He evaded all the questions about his town, country, and occupation and admitted only to the fourth inquiry: “I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven” (verse 9). Again, what delicious irony: Jonah did not want to carry salvation to Nineveh. But now he was forced to speak of God to pagan sailors on the ship.

Jonah acknowledged that the God he worshiped was not merely a nationalistic deity, but that He was Yahweh, the God of heaven and earth, the Creator Himself.

“What is this that you have done?” the mariners implored. “Why have you not obeyed so great a God, and how did you think to escape the hand of the Creator Himself?” These are words of amazement and wonder, an exclamation of horror at Jonah’s flight from the God of heaven and earth. The frightening storm preached the omnipotence of God to the mariners more powerfully than words could possibly have done.

The sailors were impressed in spite of Jonah, for they certainly saw nothing particularly good or virtuous in him. In fact, what moved them was that they saw he was a disobedient man. But behind all this, they saw that there is a real God out there, a God who is in control! God had broken through in spite of His recalcitrant messenger.

“What shall we do to you?” they asked (verse 11). They had acknowledged the God Jonah worshiped. Now they asked him what attitude they should take. The sailors confessed their fear and sought the remedy. “What can we do that God should not be angered? You tell us and we will obey.”

### **Jonah Still Refuses God’s Call**

Jonah replied, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me” (verse 12). Jonah was no pious martyr. He knew he deserved death for his profound disobedience. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures and their teaching that the wicked will die. He knew that his ignoble disobedience had put everyone in jeopardy, but he stubbornly chose to drown rather than repent. What might have happened if Jonah had repented of his defection right

there and called for God to save him, the crew, and the ship? What an opportunity Jonah missed to witness.

After struggling for a while in vain to save Jonah's life, the sailors faced the awful choice. "So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging" (verse 15). And with the immediate change in storm, the arm of the holy God was so suddenly manifested that the sailors "feared Jehovah with great fear." They had feared the storm greatly, but now they "feared the Lord exceedingly" (verse 16).

Such a stark contrast between Jonah and the sailors. The pagan mariners had been willing to do everything in their power to save Jonah's skin. Jonah was unwilling to make any such effort for the pagan Ninevites. Jonah, although orthodox in his beliefs, responded to God in disobedience. He claimed to fear God, but his actions contradicted his confession.

### **But God Still Wants Jonah**

But what happened to Jonah? "Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah" (verse 17). And "Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish's belly" (Jonah 2:1).

Nowhere in his prayer, however, did he mention his rebelliousness and sin. He recognized that his troubles were great, but Jonah never acknowledged why all this had happened to him.

This prayer of Jonah should remind us that we can pray in the midst of failure, when our distress has been caused by our own disobedience. Often that is when it is most difficult to pray. Our self-condemnation makes us think that either we have no right to call on God or, if we do, we surely do not deserve His help. But Jonah discovered God's grace at the precise moment that his situation seemed hopeless—when to all appearance nothing should be expected from God. At last Jonah learned that "salvation is of the Lord" (verse 9).

But what happened to Jonah? "So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land" (verse 10). Jonah was deposited on the beach. There Yahweh still awaited him.

### **Jonah's Second Chance**

"*Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time*" (Jonah 3:1). Hug those words! Surely these are some of the most encouraging words in Scripture! Jonah deliberately and stubbornly rebelled against God. But marvel that even his disobedience was not enough to make God turn His back on him. The wonder is that despite his disobedience God called him. He is the God of the "second time"—Abraham's, Jacob's, David's, Peter's. And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:32).

### **Nineveh Is Over-Turned**

"Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). Jonah was again commanded to proclaim the startling message. It was a proclamation of judgment. And the response of the Ninevites was unbelievable. From high society to the hotel, every segment of Ninevite society humbled itself before God. From the king to the beggar, everyone put on "sackcloth and sat in ashes" (verse 6).

“God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them” (verse 10). The Ninevites did more than perform proper deeds of penance. They changed inwardly. “They turned from their evil way.” Thus, paradoxically, Jonah’s prediction was true. Nineveh was “overturned”!

Yet another surprise awaits us. “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry” (Jonah 4:1). The overturning of the Ninevites resulted in turning away God’s wrath (Jonah 3:10). But this caused an adverse effect on Jonah (Jonah 4:1). The Hebrew reads: “It burned to him.” His reaction stops us in our tracks.

### **Jonah’s Confusion about God’s Ways**

The issue for Jonah was not so much that God repented, but for whom He repented—this indiscriminate extension of divine compassion to notoriously wicked people. Sharing His mercy with the corrupt Ninevites? God should be more strict with His benevolence, Jonah thought. Jonah was furious at God’s slowness to anger!

“He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, One who relents from doing harm’” (verse 2). For the first time Jonah openly revealed the reason he tried to evade his call to Nineveh. He was concerned about his own reputation if God did not come through with the predicted judgment.

However, the wicked Ninevites were really no different from Jonah. All of them were rebellious sinners deserving only punishment. Yet God had graciously decided to show mercy to both. Jonah was willing to accept this mercy in his own case, but not for Nineveh. And so he begged God in Jonah 4:3: “Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!” Jonah just couldn’t comprehend why God had extended Nineveh’s probation. He did not want to live if God could forgive the wicked Assyrians.

“Then the Lord said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’” (verse 4). It was a mild response. He would have liked Jonah to come to his senses and see the childishness of his behavior. The Lord could not have been gentler with Jonah. Helping this person become a more mature believer seemed to be a goal second only to the salvation of Nineveh. He was challenging Jonah to think again about his reaction, to analyze the way he had set his mind.

What was God’s response to Jonah’s anger? He acted out a parable (see Jonah 4:4-8). Like the great fish, the worm was now God’s instrument, and like the great fish, it obeyed.

Jonah’s attitude demanded of God that He destroy. So God did just that, to see how Jonah liked his theology coming true in his own life. God sent a weevil and a hot wind, and the shade plant withered, and Jonah was miserable and ready to die. He was more passionate about punishing Nineveh’s disobedience than obeying the Lord Himself.

“Then he wished death for himself, and said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live’” (verse 8). These are Jonah’s last words in the narrative. He ended, as did his actions in the beginning, opposing God.

### God's Amazing Portrait

But Jonah did not have the last word. Yahweh posed another question: “It is right for you to be angry?” God inquired (verse 9). “Let us analyze this anger of yours, Jonah,” God proposed. “It suggests your concern over this plant, but what did it really mean to you? Your attachment to it could not have been very deep, for it was here one day and gone the next. Your concern was dictated by self-interest, not by a genuine love. You never had for it the devotion of the gardener. If you feel as bad as you do, what would you expect a gardener to feel like who carefully tends a garden and watches it grow, only to see it wither and die? This is how I feel about Nineveh, Jonah, only much more so. All those people, even all those animals—I made them. I have cherished them all these years. Nineveh has cost Me no end of effort, and its people mean the world to Me. Your pain is nothing compared to Mine when I contemplate their destruction.”

Nowhere in the Bible do the personhood of God and His entanglement in our human situation stand more clearly revealed than here. A person's troubles are dwarfed by God's own hurt.

So, said the Lord, “should I not spare Nineveh?”

How much greater the mercy of God than ever that of His chosen people!

Jonah had become a recipient of God's grace in a way no different from that which would be the case for Nineveh—quite apart from the question of justice. This is one of the major themes of this narrative. And this is at the very center of the argument between God and Jonah.

### A Look in the Mirror...

All this brings us to the very heart of God's love. In reality God abhors sin, but He cannot bear the loss of any person. He detests evil because it destroys life and plunges a child of His into suffering and death. But God endures the sinner. He just cannot simply blot him or her out. It began with Adam and continues even to this day with me and you.

As a church we stand where Jonah stood. God has told us “Go,” and we must discern through Jonah's experience that His commands are not to be taken lightly. “Men boast of the wonderful progress and enlightenment of the age in which we are now living; but God sees the earth filled with iniquity and violence” (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 275). God has commissioned the Seventh-day Adventist Church to proclaim the final judgment message, that “the great things of God's law—the principles of justice, mercy, and love therein” may be set forth in their true light (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 275). He is serious about it. God is determined, indeed, as He was with Jonah, that the Great Commission shall be carried out.

Perhaps we, like Jonah, are hesitant to proclaim such a startling judgment message. Maybe we too are embarrassed that God's mercy has postponed the judgment we have preached for so long. Now it seems as though we do not know what we are talking about. And we are like Jonah, who, “jealous of his reputation, . . . lost sight of the infinitely greater value of the souls in that city” (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 271).

Consequently, this “test case” of Jonah is a look in the mirror. Have we too run away from God or His explicit guidance? A potential Jonah lurks in every heart.

What is the command from God that we find difficult to hear? What instructions from God annoy us? What prompts us to say “Anything but that, Lord”? What divine assignment causes us to dig in our heels? Most of us have our own Ninevehs, our own cities of escape and evasion.

Nineveh might be the Lord’s urging that we change our behavior to do some action that demands more than we are ready to give. How many of us hear the word of the Lord and go the opposite way? Our running off to Tarshish can happen in our soul long before we physically board the ship. Some run away from God without ever leaving their geographical location. We can run away by so filling our lives with noble activities that time for God is squeezed out. We can be running off in all directions, but not under God’s direction.

We readily notice others in the church who blur the message, but may God hasten the hour when we finally begin to accuse ourselves before God. The fact is that even the finest of us are “poor, miserable, blind, and naked.” And in spite of all the good things we do for this church, we finally realize with Jonah the words of the great spiritual: “Not my brother, nor my sister, but it’s me, O Lord, standin’ in the need of prayer.” From the very beginning we all have been problem children.

Ultimately, the book of Jonah is about a magnificent God and His amazing compassion, especially enhanced against Jonah’s self-centeredness. Jonah had never learned to look out at the world and its many people through God’s eyes. He needed to let this divine perspective overcome his natural selfishness. Today we also need this great compassion to wash and cleanse our own hearts.

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# Parable of the Wonderful Father

by *Danie Swanepoel*

## Theme

The Heavenly Father looks every day “up the road,” ready to welcome home prodigals.

## Theme Text

Luke 15:11-24

## Introduction

In the previous parables of lostness, Jesus has told of a lost sheep that was lost unintentionally and a coin lost through carelessness. This parable of the lost son is, by contrast, a wilful lostness, a lostness by intentional choice. The son willfully breaks from the restraints of home. He is old enough to be responsible for his own choices and conduct. He exercises his own free will, a citadel that God Himself never violates. He chooses to leave home, and he alone can choose to come home. Only when he sees his son in the distance does the Father go out to meet him.

## I. The Son’s Choice

He has reached the age where he thinks he knows more than his father does. He is tired of the restraints of home. He is weary of his father’s watchfulness. He wants freedom. He wants fun. He has heard about the pleasures of the far country. Self-will grows stronger in his heart. He will do as he pleases. He will have his own way. He demands a division of the property. (Jewish law afforded the elder son two-thirds of the family inheritance. He has a right to his share, but not as long as his father lives.) His heart is already in the far country. His feet were sure to follow.

## II. On Becoming a Prodigal

A person becomes a prodigal in gradual stages. The transition is made in degrees. A person is first a prodigal in the heart, then in fact. The transition may not always be immediately visible, but inevitably—though perhaps imperceptibly—the cracks begin to show and the condition of the heart is evidenced in attitude and behavior.

## III. Hard Consequences

In the far country he “wastes his substance with riotous living.” He has the best chariot and the fastest horses in town. He lives in style, spends freely. He revels in his freedom. No hampering restraints, no guilt-producing influences, no disquieting cautions. Too many “friends” to count. He lives hard and fast and with abandon, fleetingly feeling sorry for his poor brother still at home.

As often happens when we follow the Devil’s enticing lures, just at the moment we think we have it all, a twist of fate reveals our true condition (cf. Rev. 3:17). Famine strikes. The prodigal finds himself

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penniless on the streets. His Afriends” leave him in the dust. His last remaining hold on life is the pittance he is able to earn feeding a man’s pigs.

#### **IV. A Long Look in the Mirror**

At this point in the story, the prodigal does an about-face from “give me” to “make me.” “Give me” represented the epitome of self-will. “Make me,” represents a surrender of his will. The Scripture says the prodigal “came to himself.” Perhaps he caught a long look at himself in the mirror. His clothes are in rags. His eyes are sunken, his cheeks hollow, his stomach shrunken. Perhaps he had a flash of insight into his true condition, really understood his lostness, his helplessness, the hopelessness of his condition, how far away from home he really was (cf. Eph. 2:1-3, 12-13; Rom. 5:6-10). His thoughts turn toward home. His senses come alive as he smells the aromas from the kitchen, lingers on his vision of each face, abandons himself to the memories of the good times. Even the servants live in luxury compared to this. He will go to his father. He knows he deserves nothing. He has squandered his inheritance; he has not more rights in his father’s house. But perhaps he will take him in as a hired hand. There’s nothing to lose.

#### **V. The Wonderful Father**

In one of Scripture’s most glorious metaphors for our Heavenly Father, the boy’s father appears on the scene, looking longingly down the road for the returning prodigal. And when he sees him a long way off, his heart leaps and his legs run. He throws his arms about him, lifts him off his feet and twirls him around. He sets him back down, holds him at arms length, looks long into his face, then draws him to himself again in another long embrace. The boy is babbling something about becoming one of the hired men, but the father will hear nothing of it. What is he talking about! This is his son he had given up for lost! The dead come back to life! He needs food. He needs clothes. He needs to tell his story, but that can wait. “Hurry,” he calls out to the servant who has followed to see what all the commotion is about. “Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

So it is with us. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:1-9).

What a wonderful father! It’s never too late for new beginnings! Let the celebration begin!

# Walking Down Memory Lane for Family Revival

by Waveney Martinborough

## Theme

Family revival is born of telling and retelling our stories of God's workings in our lives and in our families.

## Theme Text

Is. 12:1-6

## Introduction

How many of you have ever gone down memory lane? A place, a song, certain objects or words might cause you to recall a pleasant experience. Then if you are alone the memory might make you smile to yourself, or talk about it if you are with company. My husband and I go down memory lane when we are driving and get the green of the traffic lights. When he asked my Dad's permission to marry me, my Dad had told him, "I give you the green light," meaning I happily consent to your marrying my daughter.

The message today is entitled, "Walking Down Memory Lane for a Family Revival." We will see what happened to Jacob and his family when he walked down memory lane. We will look at this topic under the following areas—Family Crisis, Down Memory Lane, Family Revival.

## Family Crisis

It was love at first sight. When Prince Shechem saw Dinah, daughter of Jacob, he loved the young woman (Gen. 34:3). But, unfortunately, his sexual passion overruled and Genesis 34:2 tells us that he violated her. Rape is the ultimate violation that emotionally destroys its victim. The consequences of his impulsive act were severe both to his family and Jacob's family. Her real brothers Simeon and Levi sought revenge that ended in violence and bloodshed (Gen. 34:1-31).

Jacob was filled with horror and grief when he heard what his sons had done. "You have troubled me and made me stink among the inhabitants of the land . . ." Then in concern for the safety of his family he added, "And since I am few in number, they (the Canaanites) will gather themselves together against me and kill me. I shall be destroyed, my household and I" (Gen. 34:30). This was a family crisis.

All families today experience crises at different times in their marriage. In some families the birth of a child could create a problem. Children can be a source of enjoyment, but can also add stress to a marriage. The crisis happens because wives tend to neglect their husbands as they care for their children when they are young and worry over them when they are older. So wives, even though your children are important to

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you, guard against neglecting your husbands. Husbands, even though the temptation and opportunity to

be unfaithful is great, instead of looking for an extramarital affair, seek to understand and support your wives.

Other family crises include loss of job, resistance to changing roles, children's behavior such as teen pregnancy and drug abuse, severe illness, divorce. Isolation, or the feeling of being excluded, is another malady. Many times we take our spouses for granted. We have many other "urgent" matters that need our attention. Our careers/jobs take priority. Soon meaningful communication, which is the heart of the family and the key to relationships, gets less and less. There is resentment; there is bitterness because of suppressed anger. Then we say, "I don't love him/her anymore." This is what a husband told a counselor about the relationship with his wife: "You just don't understand, I don't love her anymore!" And the counselor replied, "Love her anyway for love is a verb not a feeling even though love has feelings." He showed his love by many deeds of love and saved their marriage. Family/couples enrichment programs of the church can facilitate expressions and deeds of love.

You know family crises can be a negative weapon in marriage, dividing hearts and destroying unity, or they can be opportunities for recommitment and new beginnings for families. This was the experience of Jacob and his family.

### **Down Memory Lane**

God is interested in families and He is in the business of bringing healing to dysfunctional families. He did it for Jacob's family then and He can do it for our families today. Genesis 5:1 reads: "Then God said to Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.'" In other words walk down memory lane, Jacob. And Jacob remembered! Then, calling his household together, he shared his experience with them.

"I was a cheat," he began. "That is what my name, Jacob, means. I cheated my twin brother Esau of special blessing that goes to the eldest son in the family. I did not care too much for the material wealth. This special blessing afforded two-thirds of the father's wealth to the son receiving it. What I really wanted was the spiritual blessing—the privilege to commune with God as my grandfather Abraham and father Isaac. And so I joined with my mother and pretended to be Esau. I lied to my blind father. After my old father, Isaac, had eaten of my food, he gave me the blessing.

"My brother was angry and threatened to kill me when he realized that I had cheated him of this blessing. I had to leave home and travel many miles by foot to Uncle Laban. I tell you, my sons, cheating never pays. I never saw my mother again. The first night I felt scared and lonely. I was sorry for what I had done. I wept and confessed my sin. As I lay down to sleep on the ground with a stone for my pillow, I felt that God had forsaken me." (See *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 183.)

At this point Jacob's face lighted up as he said, "But God had not forsaken me! That night I had a dream! I saw a ladder reaching from earth to heaven and angels ascending and descending the ladder. And the Lord stood above it and made a promise to me (Gen. 28:13-15). It was the same promise that He had made first to Abraham and then to Isaac. Then I awoke, made a vow, set my stone pillow as a memorial and called the place Bethel. For surely God was in that place! That is what Bethel means."

And what does the "ladder" mean? In John 1:51, Jesus referred to Himself as the "ladder." He told Nathaniel, 'you shall see the heavens open and angels ascending and descending on the Son of man.'" Ellen White also tells us that the "ladder represents Jesus." She explained that before man's rebellion God talked with Adam and Eve face to face. But their sin separated earth from heaven so that man could no

longer have open communion with his Creator. Jesus is the medium of communication between God and man. Through His life and death, He bridged the gulf that sin had made so that ministering angels can hold communion with fallen man. Thank God for Jesus! (See *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 184.)

If you are a spouse cheating on your wife or husband or a youth lying to your parents and you are feeling lonely, thinking that God has forsaken you, take courage. You can be restored to the favor of God if you confess your sin like Jacob. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

If you have unresolved conflicts in your marriage that are tearing you apart, take a walk down memory lane. Remember the day you walked down the aisle with your beautiful bride or your handsome husband on your arm. Remember some of the challenges you faced and how you overcame. If you are grieved by the actions and behavior of your children, remind them of the good times you shared together as a family. If you are ready to give up on God, review your past life. Recall with gratitude the ways God has delivered you, supported you in trying times, and opened doors when all seemed dark. Walk down memory lane and revive your relationship with your spouse, your children and your God.

Ellen White puts it beautifully when she says,

When you look back into the chapters of your life [marriage] experience, do you not find some pleasant pages? Are not God’s promises . . . growing beside your path on every hand? . . .

Thank God for the bright pictures which He has presented to us. Let us group together the blessed assurances of His love, that we may look upon them continually. . . . [T]hese are the pictures which God would have us contemplate. (*Steps to Christ*, p. 117, 118)

### **Family Revival**

As Jacob reviewed the wonderful dealing of God with him, his own heart was softened, his children also were touched by a subduing power. Then he looked at his children and all his household and said in Gen. 35:2, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. This was a three-way call to repentance. First, put away the foreign gods. Jacob believed that somehow idolatry had invaded the camp and that there were false gods in his household. Rachel still had the gods she had stolen from her father Laban. Second, purify yourselves. Wash yourselves of the blood of the Shechemites. Your outward washing is a symbol of inner cleansing from bitterness, anger and resentment. Change your garments as a sign of a change from cruelty and revenge to forgiveness and kindness. Then, “arise, let us go back to Bethel where the Lord answered me in the day of distress” (Gen. 35:3).

This call to reformation was effective. Genesis 35:4 tells us, “So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which were in their hands, and the earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak tree which was by Shechem.” What a touching scene! The entire household experiencing a revival!

What about us today who are preparing for the coming of Jesus and face to face worship of God? Do we need the same call to repentance? What idols have invaded our lives and homes? Idols can enter the best family. So every parent, needs to look through your houses and ask, “Are there idols here?” Bad books, dangerous amusements, ungodly music and videos? Remember, anything that takes first place in our hearts above the Lord God is a strange god and an idol. Then ask God to cleanse us of abuse, lust, anger, pride, criticism, self-sufficiency. Put on His garments of kindness and honesty. Express love.

Affirm each other. Share feelings, desires and wishes. Build trust. Deal with conflicts. Evaluate how you communicate with each other and with the children. Spend quality time with the children. Plan together, play together, and above all pray together. Rebuild the family altar and begin again. Reformation begins with reconsecration. Family revival begins with repentance and forgiveness.

Genesis 35:9-12 tells us that when Jacob and his family put away their idols God did five special things for him. He protected them from the Canaanites. He again appeared to Jacob. He blessed him. He affirmed Jacob's change of name—no more Jacob the cheat, but Israel the Prince of God. God repeated to him the promises made to Abraham and Isaac.

God will bless our families also. We will have peaceful homes even in the midst of the storms of life. Marriage vows will be repeated and new commitments made. The family altar will be restored and the old promises of God will be wondrously new. Promises of His love—"yea I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3). Promises of forgiveness of sins—"if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Promises of His soon coming found in John 14:1-3—"Let not your heart be troubled . . . ."

I believe that Jesus is coming soon and He will make "all things new." Oh what a day that will be! No more family crises but a new home where there will be peace and joy forevermore. And we will see Jesus face to face and tell the story "saved by grace."

I want to be there. I want my family to be there. What about you? All those who would like to join me in saying, "Lord I want a revival in my heart and my family" would you stand with me? The call is to "put away the foreign gods . . . purify yourselves, and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel and make an altar to God." Walk down memory lane and renew your commitment to your spouse, your children and to your God.

# Friends Again

by Karen M. Flowers

Janet and Julie were sisters. They were also best friends. They played together every day after school. Best of all, they liked playing with their dolls. Janet's best doll had real hair and would drink water from a bottle. Julie's favorite had the most beautiful dress you could ever imagine.

One day the girls had to ride downtown with their mother on an errand. They didn't mind because they just pretended they were taking their dolls for an outing. But the trip took longer than they had expected, and after awhile they got tired of playing with their dolls. Before you knew it, the girls were fighting.

"Hey, you're crowding me. Get over on your own side of the seat," Janet fussed.

"I'm not on your side! Mom, Janet's fussing at me and I'm not doing anything," Julie whined.

"And keep your hands off my doll," Janet retorted.

"I'm not hurting your doll. What do you care if I smooth her hair, anyway? You don't take care of her!" Julie kept the fight going.

"Then see how you like it if I give your precious little baby a thrill or two. You never take her out for any fun!" Janet dangled Julie's doll out the window by one leg. "Whee, baby! Don't you love feeling the wind in your hair?"

Julie went crazy! "Mom, Janet's going to throw my doll out the window! Make her stop! Make her stop!"

Janet felt the car slow as Mom put on the brake. "Julie needs to be taught a lesson," Janet

thought. "She's always getting into my things. I'll just let go of her doll and give her a scare. Mom's stopping the car anyway." So Janet let go of Julie's doll and Julie began to wail.

Mom stopped the car and turned to ask the girls what on earth was going on. "She threw my doll out the window!" Julie screamed.

"I only dropped her as Mom brought the car to a stop." Janet pouted. "She's not hurt. You'll see. Anyway, you started it. You touched my doll first!"

Mother opened the car door. Julie and Janet pushed their heads out the window. The worst possible scene met their eyes. Julie's precious doll was pinned under the car's rear wheel. Her beautiful dress was covered with mud and her chest pressed flat.

"Now look what you've done!" Julie yelled. "I'll never forgive you, I won't, I won't! And I don't ever want to play with you again. You're not my friend! And I wish you weren't my sister!" Julie began to cry inconsolably.

How do you feel when someone hurts you badly? Usually you feel so bad you just wish you could hurt the person back just like they hurt you. You don't want anything to do with them, and there doesn't seem to be any way you could ever be friends again.

But God has provided a way for us to heal the hurts between us. The Bible teaches us how Christians live in relationship with one another. Human beings will hurt each other because of their sinfulness. But the Bible teaches us to say we are sorry when we have done wrong. And Jesus helps us to forgive one another even when

we have hurt each other deeply. Saying we're sorry and forgiving one another is hard, and it doesn't happen fast. But it is God's plan for helping us to live together as His family.

At first Janet was so mad at Julie she didn't want to say she was sorry. But after awhile she began to feel very badly about what she had done. It would be hard to admit she had done wrong. Maybe Julie wouldn't want to be her friend anymore. Then Janet had an idea. She would give Julie her favorite doll with the real hair and her baby bottle. It was the only way she could think of to show how sorry she was.

Meanwhile, Julie was so upset about her broken doll that all she could think about was getting back at Janet. She knew what she would do! She would sneak into her room and rip the hair out of her favorite doll and stomp on her baby bottle with her foot. A little part of her was worried she'd miss Janet as a friend, but right now she didn't care. Quietly she opened Janet's bedroom door. "Oh! Janet! I didn't know you were here!" she cried out in surprise. Her plan would just have to wait, she thought to herself.

Imagine her surprise when Janet invited her into her room. "I'm really sorry I dropped your doll out the window and she got run over," Janet said. "Mom says there's nothing that can be done to fix her up. So I want you to have my doll with the real hair and the baby bottle. Here. She's yours now."

Julie just looked at her friend. She thought about her plan to stomp on the baby bottle and pull out the doll's beautiful hair. "I'm sorry too for wanting to get you back," Julie said softly. "I can't take your favorite doll. But we can share her! I tell you what. Let's play like we're teachers and all our dolls are our students, want too?"

One thing was sure. Janet never wanted to hurt Julie like that again!

Saying your sorry and forgiving can make it possible for friends and family who hurt each other to come back together and live together happily again. It's God's special gift to His family on earth. He was the first to forgive, and when He lives in our hearts, His love makes it possible for us to say we're sorry and forgive too. It's a gift you'll want to pass on in your family and among your friends.



# Lucky

by Pastor Luis Badillo

A jogger noticed a large poster tacked to a tree in her neighborhood. The first word that caught her eye was printed in big black letters: “REWARD! \$100.00!”

The jogger was curious, and certainly interested in a reward, so she read on:

LOST DOG!  
 Black and tan dog of Poodle and German  
 Shepherd descent.  
 Flea-bitten  
 Missing left hind-leg  
 No hair on rump  
 Going blind  
 Too old for tricks  
 Might bite if cornered  
 Answers to the name of “Lucky”

Lucky! The jogger had to chuckle to herself. How could anyone call a mongrel, flea-bitten, three-legged, mangy, nearly blind, old, and dangerous dog “Lucky”? And who would be crazy enough to pay a \$100 reward to get such a dog back?

Then the jogger stopped laughing and a big smile broke over her face. Stop to think of it, this may be one of the luckiest dogs in town. This lucky dog belonged to a family that loved him no matter what. It didn't matter where he came from or what he looked like. It didn't matter whether he could perform tricks or was getting old. All that mattered was that he belonged to the family, and he was lost.

Jesus came to our world because we were lost in sin. He left his home in heaven and offered His life as a reward to get us back and reunite us with God's family. It doesn't matter where we come from or what we look like. It doesn't matter whether we are smart and clever, young or old. All that matters is that He created us and He wants us part of His family forever. And that makes us very “lucky” too. That's the reason we've come to church to sing and praise and pray to our God.

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*Pastor Luis Badillo is on the pastoral staff of Capital Memorial Church in Washington, D.C.*

# Second Chances

by Karen M. Flowers

**Note to storyteller:** This telling of the Bible story “Jonah and the Whale” is illustrated by using balloons filled with helium gas, tied with strings or ribbons approximately 1½ meters long. Older children will enjoy controlling the balloons while the story is being told to the younger children.

Create a barrier (i.e. a large table or two turned on their sides) behind which the balloon “puppeteers” can hide. Practice ahead of time is essential so each one knows when to let his or her balloon(s) rise above the table as marked in the script. Remind the puppeteers to hold the string tightly so the balloon will not escape to the ceiling before the climax of the story. One child can control several “waves” or “people of Nineveh” balloons. This story is especially appropriate for a family camp or retreat setting. If used indoors, take into account how you will retrieve the balloons if the ceiling is very high!

If a wide variety of colors of balloons is available, the following color choices are suggested:

God:	gold balloon
Jonah:	red balloon
Ship captain:	silver balloon
Sailors:	2-3 dark blue balloons
Waves:	4-6 balloons, a mixture of light blue and white
People of Nineveh:	4-6 balloons, a mixture of pink and brown
Jesus:	purple balloon
Whale:	gray or black balloon

*(All balloons and puppeteers hidden behind barrier, out of sight.)*

Once there was a man named Jonah. Jonah was God’s prophet which means God gave him special jobs to do for Him.

*(Jonah balloon goes up on string.)*

One day God found Jonah and said to him: “Jonah, I want you to take a message for me to the people living in the big city of Nineveh. I want you to tell them that I want them to change their wicked ways because I love them very much.”

*(God balloon goes up on string.)*

*(People of Nineveh balloons go up on strings.)*

*(God and People of Nineveh balloons down.)*

But Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh. First of all, he didn’t want to walk all that way across the hot desert sand.

*(Jonah balloon bounces up and down with children puppeteers calling out “ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch.”)*

But mostly he didn’t want to go because the things the people of Nineveh did were bad,

bad, bad, and Jonah thought God should just send a plague or something to destroy them from the face of the earth.

*(People of Nineveh balloons up)*

So Jonah thought and thought about how he could get out of doing this job for God.

*(People of Nineveh balloons down.)*

Then he had a bright idea. He would take a trip on a ship in the opposite direction. By the time God found him, maybe He would decide to send someone else. So Jonah went down to the dock and found just the ship.

*(Jonah balloon slowly raised and lowered as though in "thought," ending in lowered position.)*

*(Jonah balloon pops up to full length of string as narrator reads "bright idea.")*

"Ahoy, there, Sir!" he called out to the captain. "Got any room for another passenger?"

*(Captain balloon goes up.)*

"Yes, we can take you along," said the captain. "You look okay to me." But what he didn't know was that Jonah was running away from the God of heaven.

Jonah was very very tired from all his running and he wanted to make sure God didn't find him, so he went down into the bottom of the ship where it was dark. It was a good place to hide and to have a good sleep.

*(God balloon goes up.)*

While Jonah slept, a violent storm blew up that threatened to destroy the ship.

*(Jonah, Captain and God balloons go down.)*

*(Wave balloons up, jouncing up and down as though tossed in a storm.)*

"All hands on deck!" the captain called out to his crew. "Secure the foremast! Keep the ship before the wind! Throw the cargo overboard! Pray to your gods! . . . Hey, where's that stranger we took onboard? I'm going to wake him up myself. He'd better pray while he bails or we perish! I've never seen a storm like this!"

*(Captain balloon up, followed immediately by sailor balloons up.)*

"Let's find out who caused this storm!" the sailors cried out. "Whoever's name we draw out of the hat, he's the man!"

*(Sailor balloons raise and lower in unison as though agitated.)*

Into the hat went one of the sailor's hands.  
Out came the name: JONAH!

*(Jonah balloon up.)*

"Who are you, anyway? And what have we done that made you bring such bad luck upon us?" the sailors asked.

*(Sailor balloon up.)*

"I am Jonah and I worship the God of heaven who made the sea and the land," Jonah replied.

The sailors' faces were filled with fear. "Then what have YOU done?" the sailors wanted to know.

*(All Sailor balloons up.)*

"Just throw me into the sea." Jonah replied. "I'm the reason for the storm."

So they threw Jonah overboard into the storm. And Jonah would have drowned, except for our God who gives people who make mistakes a second chance. Can you believe it? He sent a whale to rescue his prophet from the storm! And immediately the wind and the rain and the thunder and lightening stopped and the sea was calm!

*(Captain, sailor and Jonah balloons down.)*

*(God balloon up.)*

*(Whale balloon up.)*

*(Wave balloons still. God balloon slowly lowered.)*

Safe and sound inside the whale, Jonah thanked God for saving him and promised to do whatever God asked him to do. So God caused the whale to deposit Jonah on dry land so he could be about his business.

*(Jonah balloon up)*

*(Wave and whale balloons down.)*

And God spoke again to Jonah. "I still want you to go to Nineveh," He said. Jonah thought to himself, "Okay. I'll go and preach to those Ninevites, but they are so bad they won't pay any attention and *then* God will punish them like they deserve.

*(God balloon up.)*

So Jonah preached the good news to the Ninevites that God wanted to give them another chance to love Him and live good lives. Much to his surprise, the Ninevites listened. God was so happy, He sent Jonah right back to tell them how

*(People of Nineveh balloons up)*

much He had always loved them. He wanted them to know how glad He was they had stopped behaving badly, because their wicked ways could lead to nothing good!

*(Jesus balloon up.)*

God sent Jesus to bring the same good news to us. No matter what mistakes you have made, this good news is for you. God loves you very much. He wants you to choose the good life He has planned for you. But when you make mistakes, you can always say you're sorry and God will help you begin again. Yay! A big thanks! A big shout of praise to our "second chance" God!

*(At narration's end, all balloons released to the ceiling while puppeteers cheer.)*

*(Jonah, God, and People of Nineveh balloons down.)*

# **I Still Do:**

## ***Choosing Each Other Again and Again***

*by Karen and Ron Flowers*

**Author's note:** *This marriage strengthening resource is designed specifically for use in Marriage Enrichment Groups (MEGs), but may be adapted to a series of sessions with couples or a weekend retreat.*

### **SESSION 1: TRIP DIARIES ARE A GOOD IDEA**

#### **Getting Started**

Enjoy a half-hour of fellowship, a time for getting to know one another, deepening friendships, and leaving behind the other dimensions of life to focus on your marriage.

After introducing yourself as a leader couple and sharing briefly about Marriage Enrichment Groups (See Family Ministries Leadership Resource elsewhere in this planbook entitled: **Marriage Enrichment Groups (MEGs) and How They Work.**) distribute the handouts for the first session and take a few minutes to go over the guidelines together and to appoint a timekeeper.

#### **Sharing Memories**

The first evening is for getting acquainted and remembering. You may wish to ask spouses in advance to bring an item of cherished memorabilia from a good time in their marriage or something which symbolizes their love. Encourage them to bring something which they will feel comfortable sharing with the group as a way of introducing themselves, though no pressure is ever put on anyone to share. They may bring pictures, mementoes, stories, gifts, poetry, a song, etc. First give the couples time to share what they have brought with each other. Then, as a way of introducing couples in the group, invite those who wish to do so to share what they have brought and/or to tell a bit about their “beginnings” as a couple.

As alternatives, you may use the exercise “Pages From Our Trip Diary” (Handout 1.2) or “Riding Our Marriage Carriage” (Handout 1.3), to give couples the opportunity to call up memories of the “good” times they have shared. Give a copy of the exercise to each partner and allow about 10 minutes for husbands and wives to jot notes to themselves as instructed. Then give couples 10-15 minutes to share their memories with each other. When couples have had opportunity to talk with each other, the leader couple usually shares first in the group and then invites other couples to share from their rememberings. In keeping with the guidelines (Handout 1.1), all sharing in the group is voluntary. It is best to avoid “going around the circle,” as this may create an awkward moment for a couple who prefers not to share from their story.

#### **Couple Dialogue: Rediscovering Us**

The remainder of the evening can be spent reflecting first individually and then as a couple on the exercise “Rediscovering Us” (Handout 1.4). If time permits, the leader couple may dialogue about their responses, in keeping with the guidelines, in the presence of the group. Couples need to see dialogue

modeled. They will benefit greatly from hearing the stories of other couples whose experiences may be similar to their own. The group may be invited to share their thoughts about the value of looking to the good times in their marriages to rediscover the qualities which drew them to one another and have kept love alive through the years.

### **Summing Up**

The highest tides in the world rise and fall in Fundy National Park in New Brunswick, Canada. The grandeur is awesome when they peak, the mud flats dismal as they ebb. Human love is like the tide. In the seasons when love crests, we are sure nothing could ever wrench us apart, but in the seasons when love ebbs, we may wonder if anything can hold us together. Remembering the beauty and strength of the tide at its peak can get help us through the low points. Reliving the good times can help to secure their return.

It is also helpful to look from time to time at the big picture. At Fundy National Park the tides rushing up the Petitcodiac River get all the press. We seldom reflect on the reality that tides, as impressive as they may be, are a phenomenon of the edges. The great ocean from which they surge is deep and wide, constant in its mighty presence, unmoved by turmoil at its outer rim.

It is from the great unchangeable ocean of God's love that we may draw as the tide ebbs and flows in our relationships. His love "suffers long and is kind; . . . does not envy; . . . does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. [His] love never fails" (1 Cor. 13:4-8). In Him, it can be our own.

### **Closing**

Close promptly at the agreed upon hour. Host couples as well as others participating need to be able to plan their schedules with confidence that they will be free to be about their other activities at the time the MEG group has covenanted to finish.

## **SESSION 2: LETTING GO TO PAVE THE WAY FOR NEW BEGINNINGS**

### **Getting Started**

Enjoy a half-hour of fellowship and re-entry into one another's lives. Distribute the session handouts as a way of transitioning into the enrichment time.

### **One-of-the-Ten Lists**

A wife was approached at their fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration and asked the secret to their enduring and happy marriage. "There are lots of secrets," she confided, "but I'll tell you one that has served me well. When John and I got married, we really knew each other. And I was already aware of some things about him that were very different from my way of thinking and doing things. Some I knew we would need to work out together, but some I decided I could give him as a gift. So I made a list of ten things I didn't particularly like, but I could live with because I love John."

"What were the ten things?" the questioner interrupted.

"Oh, I don't remember the original ten," the woman responded. "I just know that when John does something I don't like, but it probably isn't worth trying to change and I can learn to live with it out of love, I just say to myself, 'He's lucky that's one of the ten!'"

Most couples get married with the notion that they will change their partners into just the person they want them to be. Most spouses turn out to be amazingly resistant to a make-over! Marriage is about accepting one another as real persons. Of course acceptance should never be offered as an excuse for treating one another poorly. We're talking about coming to understand that knights in shining armor and princesses in glass slippers live only in fairy tales. Marriage is also about coming down out of the dream world of courtship and early marriage to the real world of jobs and bills and children and housework and on and on. Over time, marriage is about living out the Serenity Prayer at very practical levels: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." So, if you were making a one-of-the-ten list today, what would be on your list?

### **Couple Dialogue**

Give couples time to work as individuals and then dialogue as couples on "My One-of-the-Ten Gift List" (Handout 2.1).

### **Letting Go to Make Way for New Beginnings**

David and Claudia Arp, popular authors on marriage and long-time members and contributors to the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (ACME), suggest in their book *The Second Half of Marriage* (1996) that along about midlife, couples make a list of things they will never do or change. It's a time for coming to grips with some realities you just can't fool yourselves about anymore. Perhaps you've fantasized about taking a trip from coast to coast on a motorcycle, or drawn up plans in your heads for developing a piece of mountain property into your dream home. Maybe you've just hoped she'd learn to pick up her shoes or he'd rinse out the sink more carefully after shaving.

Then there are the inevitable signs of aging that are not likely to reverse. Jim and Sally Conway offered this lament. He thanks God daily for his belt that keeps his belly from slipping and collecting in a pool of fat around his ankles! And she is only slowly beginning to accept under-eyes that resemble rising bread dough and the certainty she will probably never fit into those two-sizes-smaller clothes still hanging in the closet! Perhaps you are adjusting to the hard reality that your career may not peak as highly as you had hoped. You have to face it that your children will never be small again. And nothing has changed the fact that her keys are perpetually lost, his agenda too long for a reasonable day's work. Sometimes we have to "let go" of our fantasies to make way for new beginnings. So what's on your reality checklist that may require some letting go?

### **Couple Dialogue**

Give couples another opportunity for personal reflection and dialogue around the exercise "Letting Go to Make Way for New Beginnings" (Handout 2.2).

### **New Beginnings**

In his book *True Love*, Robert Fulghum (1997) collected love stories in response to his invitation: "Tell me a love story. Not one you've read or heard. One you've lived." One of the best stories was told to Fulghum by a husband of ten years. He thought he and his wife had a pretty good marriage, at least it had never occurred to him to look at anyone else. Then a sequence of events began which left him both shaken and terribly excited at the same time. It all started when a note arrived at his office with no return address. It was from a woman who said she saw him often and had fallen in love with him. There were so many things about him she found irresistibly attractive. She especially liked the way he treated people and



couldn't help but notice his fine manners. The letters came almost weekly. Sometimes she sent a poem. She never asked for anything. Never put him on the spot to meet or respond to her.

It wasn't long before the husband found himself scanning the mail, hoping there would be something from her. He felt terribly guilty, but never had he received letters from someone who seemed to understand him so well. In fact, he unconsciously began to live up to her image—started exercising to lose a few pounds, bought some new clothes, spent a few more minutes in front of the mirror each morning.

Then the mail got more exciting. She enclosed some pictures of men and women having fun together, some kissing and holding one another close. Nothing pornographic or lewd, just pictures of couples obviously in love. In her notes she spoke of the relationship she longed to enjoy with him. He had to confess, he longed for the same with her.

One day a dozen yellow roses arrived with a note inviting him to take the risk of meeting her. She would be sitting, the note said, in a nearby hotel lobby, wearing a yellow rose. He knew it was risky, but he had at least to get a look at her. He entered the hotel through a side entrance and took the elevator to the mezzanine overlooking the lobby. Hardly daring to look down, he furtively glanced around the lobby. There, sitting quietly and beautifully adorned with a yellow rose, was his wife. It was their tenth wedding anniversary.

### **Couple Dialogue**

Give spouses the rest of the time to write as guided by **Beginning Again** (Handout 2.3). Encourage couples to share what they have written at home tonight.

### **Closing**

Guard the edges of your meeting to encourage couples to come regularly despite their busy schedules.

## **SESSION 3: COMMUNICATION: KEY TO TOMORROW'S INTIMACY**

### **Getting Started**

Take time for fellowship and housekeeping tasks, like distributing session handouts, planning who will host upcoming sessions, evaluating how things are going, i.e. is everyone happy with the time, setting, program in general, etc.

### **Communication Caricatures: Before and After**

In preparation for this session, gather together, if possible, an assortment of stuffed animals, “beanie babies,” pictures from books and magazines, etc. that can be spread out on the floor in the middle of the group to stimulate discussion. Invite the participants to reflect on the kinds of communicators they have observed and the animals that could be used to characterize the various styles. (For example, are you like a turtle who prefers to be left alone in your private domain until you decide to come out? Or are you more like a chameleon who tries by what you say to just fit in to the surroundings? Then there are the skunks whose style keeps everyone else careful about what they say lest they “set them off,” or the moose who will attack anyone in sight or the kangaroos who jump to another topic when communication gets the least bit uncomfortable. Territorial gorilla types are always on the defensive, bent on proving their point, while the parrots chatter incessantly, clamoring to be heard, and the beavers are ever at work, too busy to talk now, etc.)

Then open discussion on the following two questions: If you could pick one of God's creatures that would characterize the kind of communicator you would like to be married to, what would it be? (For example, dolphins send "sonar" messages which communicate messages and moods so clearly mates can understand and find one another no matter how murky the environment around them. The giant pandas of China communicate love through warm non-verbals and gentle vocalizations, etc.) What characterizes the kind of communication you consider to be optimal in a marriage relationship?

### **Couple Dialogue**

Give couples a few minutes to dialogue together about communication in their marriage using "My Caricature as a Communicator: Before and After" (Handout 3.1) as a starter.

### **Honesty Tempered by Love**

David Mace (1982) writes in his book *Close Companions*:

Honesty in marriage is a good principle; but the ethic of honesty must always give way to the higher ethic of love. (p. 76)

Discuss as a group what you think he means. David himself expands:

Too much disclosure too soon may produce a backfiring effect and bring a negative response. Making disclosures requires the right setting and the right time. In a few situations, unwise disclosures can be damaging—for example, betraying the confidences of others, or telling your partner you don't like him or her. . . . [Marriage enrichment] is designed to bring husband and wife out of the strained detachment and unreality into which many conventional marriages settle and to get the couple started on a new life together, characterized by new openness and new trust. Many couples with dull, dreary marriages long for something to happen that will take down the walls of deception they have built between them. (p. 76)

### **Couple Dialogue**

Allow couple dialogue time around the exercise "Communication in Our Marriage" (Handout 3.2).

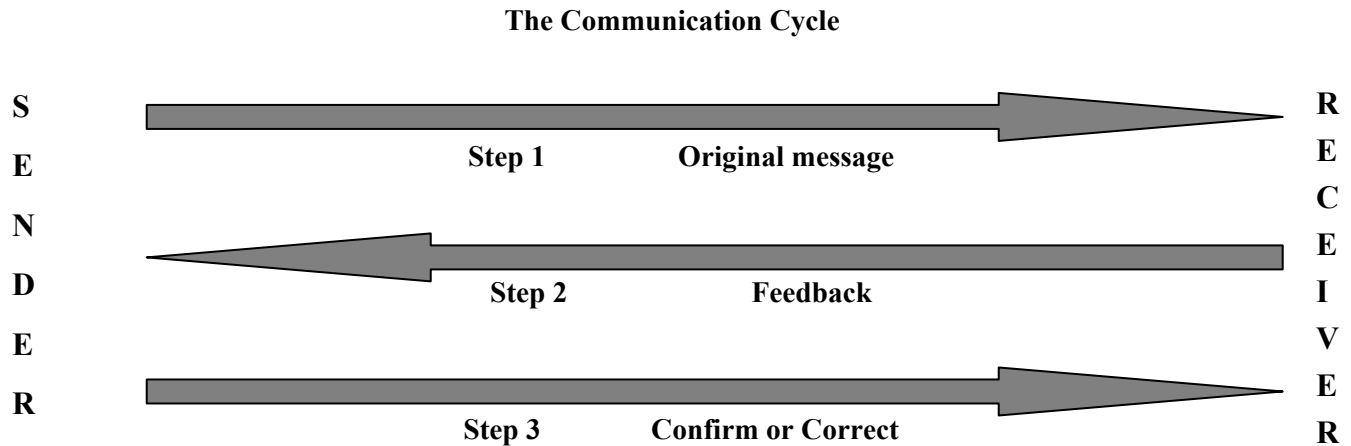
### **The Communication Cycle**

Couples need both a desire to communicate more openly and the skills to do so effectively if they are to break down the "walls of deception" that David Mace identified in many marriages. The good news is that while communication is at the top of most every survey of felt needs among married couples, the skills necessary for good communication are not out of the reach of any couple who want to learn them.

The first lesson in "Communication 101" in anybody's book introduces the three steps in the communication cycle:

1. Original message
2. Feedback to verify whether the message was correctly understood
3. Confirmation or correction of the original message

David Mace graphically portrayed the process this way:



From Mace, D. (1982). *Close companions*. Winston-Salem, NC: The Association of Couples in Marriage Enrichment, p.77. Used by permission.

When Wife A speaks to Husband B, she sends an ORIGINAL MESSAGE. Often this is the point at which communication breaks down. Husband B may be reading the paper or thinking about a difficult task facing him on the job. Or he may have tuned down Wife A because it seems she has been talking nonstop since he got home from work. Husband B doesn't want to admit, however, that he hasn't been listening, so he collects the bits and pieces he has heard and puts them together in his mind into a message he *thinks* is what she said.

Another scenario. Wife A and Husband B always get into a fight when they talk about finances. Wife A has always lived by a carefully planned budget. Husband B is usually responsible about money, but more spontaneous. Husband B sends Wife A an ORIGINAL MESSAGE about the telephone bill. Wife A has already seen the bill and is angry that he has made so many long distance calls to his mother. She definitely has a message to send to him about that, and she puts the finishing touches on just what she will say in her mind while he is talking. Wife A assumes Husband B is only making excuses anyway. She totally misses his tone of voice, the look on his face, and his aside that his mother is paying for several of the calls because she asked him to call when it was convenient to help her make a decision about some home repairs.

Communication breaks down after Step 1 in such scenarios because Spouse B doesn't really "hear" what Spouse A has said. He or she may think they've heard and jump to conclusions based on what they think they heard, but they may or may not have fully received the ORIGINAL MESSAGE. The only way to be sure is to continue with Step 2.

Step 2 involves Spouse B checking back with Spouse A to make sure he/she "heard" correctly. To "hear" well requires the undivided attention of eyes and ears and heart. Eyes to pick up on nonverbals. Ears to listen carefully to the words. Heart to enter into the feelings of the speaker. In Step 2, the receiver FEEDS BACK to the sender both the content and the feelings of the message he or she thinks they heard. It is important for the FEEDBACK message to identify both *what* the receiver heard, and how the

receiver thinks the sender is *feeling* about the message at hand. Introductory words such as “I hear you saying . . .,” “The message I’m getting is . . .,” or “You want me to understand that . . .” are helpful beginnings to such FEEDBACK messages. They are a means of confirming that the receiver got the content of the message correctly.

Identifying the feelings behind the words can be a bit more difficult. But the messages we send to one another always have a feeling component. Unless the feelings are understood, the message cannot be fully grasped. The only way to know if you have understood the feelings correctly, is to FEEDBACK the feelings you are hearing and observing and ask for confirmation or correction of your perceptions.

In Step 3, the sender either CONFIRMS or CORRECTS the receiver’s understanding of the content of the message and perceptions of the feelings behind the words. If correction is necessary, the sender re-sends the message again as clearly as he/she can to give the receiver another chance to understand. Steps 2 and 3 must be repeated until the sender agrees that the receiver has fully grasped the message.

### **Group Exercise**

Give couples a few minutes to work together to choose the best Step 2 response in the exercise “What Did You Say Again?” (Handout 3.3). Go over the exercise together as a group when everyone has had a chance to make their selections. (The best responses are: b, c, a, a, b, b. Note that the best response always includes a statement of the content and an identification of the feelings the receiver thinks he heard. It never contains a new message from the receiver or an attack on the sender.)

**For discussion:** How will an increased awareness of the communication cycle improve communication in a marriage? What gets in the way of our following through on all the steps in our day to day lives together? What changes will be necessary if we are to maximize the benefits of the Step 1-2-3 Communication approach to completing the communication cycle?

### **Couple Dialogue**

The remainder of the time will be given over to practicing the Step 1-2-3 Communication skill by couples.

Suggest that the couples choose an issue they would like to talk about. Pick an issue which they are able to talk about quite easily. It should not be an issue over which they have serious conflict. Give each couple a piece of cardboard on which has been printed the diagram of the Step 1-2-3 Communication approach. This cardboard will help the couple remember the steps and identify who is sending a message and who is receiving the message at any given point in the process, i.e., who has the “floor” at any given time. During the first cycle of communication, the sender of the original message has the “floor.” He/she retains the “floor” until he or she has confirmed that the receiver has fully understood the message in Step 3. (Note that Steps 2 and 3 may need to be repeated until the message has been correctly received.)

When the first receiver has correctly understood the message, he/she then has the “floor.” He/she sends a new message and retains the “floor” throughout the Step 1-2-3 Communication process until his/her partner has fully understood, etc.

## **SESSION 4: ANGER: ONE OF THE BEST WAYS COUPLE GROW**

### Getting Started

Enjoy your fellowship. This is an important time for group formation and bonding. By now, however, the temptation will be very real to let your fellowship time extend into the time you have committed to the meeting. Guard its edges, making sure you keep marital growth the primary focus of your time together.

### Group Discussion

In his collection of love stories, *True Love*, Robert Fulghum (1997) includes a three-line note written on perfumed stationery. It was shared with him by a middle-aged man who informed him that he had received it at least ten years back from his wife—to whom he was still married. It read simply:

*My dearest Harry:  
I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.  
Respectfully, with all my love, Edna.*

This note makes us laugh, but it reveals some pretty healthy couple dynamics. What's healthy about this note? What do you think characterizes the relationship of this couple? What do you imagine happening after Harry read the note from Edna? Why do you think he's still married to the same woman 10 years later?

### Bible Study

A cartoon recently appeared in the newspaper which pictures a bedraggled couple sitting across the desk from their marriage counselor. The marriage counselor is responding, "Yes, I remember suggesting that you never go to bed angry. However two years is a **long** time to go without sleep!"

Another cartoon portrayed a woman in a seminar on anger exploding, "Good Christians don't get angry, and this whole discussion irritates me!"

We have interesting ideas about anger that arise from many areas of our lives. Many Christians feel uncomfortable with negative emotions. We aren't sure we should have them as Christians, we know that we do and we aren't sure what that means, and we don't know what to do with them when we have them.

Work together as foursomes to read the following Bible passages and discuss what they teach us about the emotion of anger.

Mark 3:1-6 (cf. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 10)

Anger is a God-given emotion which stirs us to action in behalf of someone who is being mistreated or oppressed.

Eph. 4:26

Anger is part of the experience of the "new person" in Christ. But there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to use anger in relationships.

2 Samuel 13:1-22

Anger is the God-given emotion that helps a person stand up for themselves and set a limit on abusive treatment.

2 Samuel 6:16-23

Anger can put an end to intimacy in a marriage.

### Couple Dialogue

For the first couple dialogue session of the evening, give couples time to explore their own experience with anger in their marriage using “Anger in Our Experience” (Handout 4.1).

### **Group Discussion**

David and Vera Mace in their couple devotional *In the Presence of God* (1985), make this startling comment:

By getting behind the anger to the hurt feeling that has triggered it, the couple can learn something important about their relationship and clear it up. This is one of the most valuable ways in which relationships grow. (p. 58)

What do you think David and Vera Mace mean when they say “by getting behind the anger to the hurt feeling that has triggered it”? Someone has likened anger to the tip of a huge iceberg. Anger is what you see above the water, but the bulk of the “iceberg” of emotions lies beneath the surface. What “below-the-surface” feelings can you name which are likely to give rise to anger if there is no way to express them or to resolve the problem with which they are associated? What might happen if couples could learn to express these feelings when they arise rather than waiting for them to escalate into anger? What uses of anger lead to destructive relational damage? How do you think the emotion of anger might be used constructively in a marriage to bring growth to the relationship rather than destruction?

### **Processing Anger**

Anger is growth-producing rather than destructive in marriages when it is processed. Processing anger is a skill that can be learned by couples dealing with the normal range of anger which all human beings experience. There is anger which is beyond the normal range of everyday emotion, anger which is so intense as to be categorized as rage. In some circumstances, rage takes over the identity of a person and they go from being angry about something to being an angry person. This range of anger is usually a symptom of issues that need to be addressed with professional help.

Before this session, work together with your pastor or another person working in the helping professions to put together a list of Christian counselors in your area to whom couples who find themselves needing additional help with handling anger can turn. Provide this list as a handout for this session.

### **Learning in Small Groups**

Use Handout 4.2, “Processing Anger,” for presenting the material in small groups. Let two couples work together to “teach” one another the four levels at which anger is processed. Each person takes a few minutes to familiarize themselves with one of the four points. When everyone has had a chance to go over the material assigned to them, they present the four points to each other in order.

### **Couple Dialogue**

Close this session with opportunity for couple dialogue. “Growing Together Through Anger” (Handout 4.3) is provided as a dialogue starter. Recognize that some couples may go deeper in their dialogue around this issue than they have on some other issues. If possible, provide some extra space and privacy for couples as they dialogue together.

**In Preparation for Next Week**

Prepare two pieces of paper for each couple, one with “FP” printed on it, the other plain. Lay these two pieces of paper on the floor in front of each couple and instruct each spouse to pick up one piece of paper. The “FP” holders will meet privately with the leader couple briefly after the meeting. The leader couple will share with the “FP’s” (Fun Planners) the good news that for the next MEG session you will meet together for 1 hour only. The rest of the evening will be devoted to couple fun. It is the responsibility of the FP to plan an evening of fun for their spouse and keep it a secret until next week. Distribute Handout 5.2 *Fun, Fun, Fun!* to help them with ideas. A spending limit can be set if the leader couple thinks this is wise. The point is not that couples need to spend a lot of money, it is just to provide time for busy couples to enjoy one another.

**SESSION 5: PLAY TOGETHER, STAY TOGETHER****Getting Started**

Enjoy!

**Introduction**

Play. A simple word, known even to children. A word easily translated into experience for some. A difficult word to put into practice for others. Likely, we all *wish* we could play more. Some of us wish we could play *more easily*. We have messages to deal with from our families of origin and strong work ethics which leave us vulnerable to overwork. And though we may give assent to the old saying “the family that plays together, stays together,” we continue to struggle to leave work at the office, to find time for vacations, to relax with a good book in the evening, or to “fritter away” a whole Sunday just playing with the kids, without feeling guilty.

**Couple Dialogue**

Think about your “play-potential” together using “Our Play-Potential Quotient” (Handout 5.1).

**Realizing Your Play-Potential**

Claudia and David Arp are champions of couple fun. Their two books *52 Dates for You and Your Mate* (1993) and *10 Great Dates to Revitalize Your Marriage* (1997) are full of creative ideas. Their ideas are based on two beliefs: you can build your marriage and make a “time out” together out of anything and fun doesn’t have to cost much of anything. Keep a few of their ideas (see Handout 5.2: *Fun, Fun, Fun!*) handy for planning future fun times. Meanwhile, your spouse has planned a surprise for you for the rest of the evening.

**Closure**

Send couples off on their fun evening.

**SESSION 6: THE GIFT OF THE MAGIC EYES****Getting Started**

The fellowship time continues to be a good buffer between the day’s busyness and your goal to set aside some dialogue time for your marriage.

**Introduction: A Fable**

In the village of Faken in innermost Friesland there lived a long thin baker named Fouke, a righteous man, with a long thin chin and a long thin nose. Fouke was so upright that he seemed to spray righteousness from his thin lips over everyone who came near him; so the people of Faken preferred to stay away.

Fouke's wife, Hilda, was short and round, her arms were round, her bosom was round, her rump was round. Hilda did not keep people at bay with righteousness; her soft roundness seemed to invite them instead to come close to her in order to share the warm cheer of her open heart.

Hilda respected her righteous husband, and loved him too, as much as he allowed her; but her heart ached for something more from him than his worthy righteousness.

And there, in the bed of her need, lay the seed of sadness.

One morning, having worked since dawn to knead his dough for the ovens, Fouke came home and found a stranger in his bedroom lying on Hilda's round bosom.

Hilda's adultery soon became the talk of the tavern and the scandal of the Faken congregation. Everyone assumed that Fouke would cast Hilda out of his house, so righteous was he. But he surprised everyone by keeping Hilda as his wife, saying he forgave her as the Good Book said he should.

In his heart of hearts, however, Fouke could not forgive Hilda for bringing shame to his name. Whenever he thought about her, his feelings toward her were angry and hard; he despised her as if she were a common whore. When it came right down to it, he hated her for betraying him after he had been so good and so faithful a husband to her.

He only pretended to forgive Hilda so that he could punish her with his righteous mercy.

But Fouke's fakery did not sit well in heaven.

So each time that Fouke would feel his secret hate toward Hilda, an angel came to him and dropped a small pebble, hardly the size of a shirt button, into Fouke's heart. Each time a pebble dropped, Fouke would feel a stab of pain like the pain he felt the moment he came on Hilda feeding her hungry heart from a stranger's larder.

Thus he hated her the more; his hate brought him pain and his pain made him hate.

The pebbles multiplied. And Fouke's heart grew very heavy with the weight of them, so heavy that the top half of his body bent forward so far that he had to strain his neck upward in order to see straight ahead. Weary with hurt, Fouke began to wish he were dead.

The angel who dropped the pebbles into his heart came to Fouke one night and told him how he could be healed of his hurt.



There was one remedy, he said, only one, for the hurt of a wounded heart. Fouke would need the miracle of the magic eyes. He would need eyes that could look back to the beginning of his hurt and see his Hilda, not as a wife who betrayed him, but as a weak woman who needed him. Only a new way of looking at things through the magic eyes could heal the hurt flowing from the wounds of yesterday.

Fouke protested. “Nothing can change the past,” he said. “Hilda is guilty, a fact that not even an angel can change.”

“Yes, poor hurting man, you are right,” the angel said. “You cannot change the past, you can only heal the hurt that comes to you from the past. And you can heal it only with the vision of the magic eyes.”

“And how can I get your magic eyes?” pouted Fouke.

“Only ask, desiring as you ask, and they will be given you. And each time you see Hilda through your new eyes, one pebble will be lifted from your aching heart.

Fouke could not ask at once, for he had grown to love his hatred. But the pain of his heart finally drove him to want and to ask for the magic eyes that the angel had promised. So he asked. And the angel gave.

Soon Hilda began to change in front of Fouke’s eyes, wonderfully and mysteriously. He began to see her as a needy woman who loved him instead of a wicked woman who betrayed him.

The angel kept his promise; he lifted the pebbles from Fouke’s heart, one by one, though it took a long time to take them all away. Fouke gradually felt his heart grow lighter; he began to walk straight again, and somehow his nose and his chin seemed less thin and sharp than before. He invited Hilda to come into his heart again, and she came, and together they began again a journey into their second season of humble joy. (From the book *Forgive and Forget*, 1984. Copyright © 1984 by Lewis B. Smedes. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.)

### **Couple Dialogue**

Use Handout 6.1, “Magic Eyes,” as a starter for this couple dialogue period. Because of the private nature of this session’s topic, it is best to offer couples as much privacy as possible during the dialogue periods.

### **The Three Stages of Forgiving**

Louis Smedes, in his book *The Art of Forgiving* (1996), outlines three stages in the forgiveness process:

#### **1. We rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us.**

The process of forgiveness begins with the realization that we are all sinners. This recognition does not make excuses for injuring another person, nor does it diminish the magnitude or the wrongness of the hurtful behavior. In fact, this realization opens our eyes wide to the possibility that this person may wound us again. But seeing one another as “bruised reeds” (cf. Matt. 12:20) is the first step in the process of forgiving.

**2. We surrender of our right to get even.**

The natural response of human beings who have been deeply wronged is revenge. We want to give the person who inflicted us with terrible pain a taste of their own medicine. We savor the opportunities for vengeance, and more times than we would like to admit, we take deliberate steps to turn opportunities into what we think will be sweet retribution. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. Most of us have discovered, however, that revenge is like a sugar-coated pill. Its sweetness is short-lived, and the bitterness which follows sours the entire system.

Forgiveness offers another scenario. It does not turn from holding the person responsible for his or her behavior. It does not remove the hard consequences which follow in the wake of destructive relational choices. But it does free the person who has been wronged from the equally destructive work of payback and revenge.

**3. We revise our feelings toward the person we forgive.**

As we move step by step through the process of forgiveness, we move from an experience of deep pain toward healing. As we rediscover the humanity of the person who has hurt us and as we forego our right to payback, we find ourselves in time changing our feelings toward the person. We know we are at this stage in the process when we begin to be able to hope for some good things in the life of the person who has hurt us and we are at last able to wish them well.

These steps are a separate process from the process of reconciliation which must take into consideration the response of the other person and the magnitude of the damage done. Forgiveness gives relationships every chance for restoration, though it recognizes that it may not be safe or possible for the persons in every situation to be fully reconciled.

**An Experience in Forgiveness**

The well-known philosopher Robert Fulghum shares a story from his marriage in his book *Uh-Oh!* (1991). Read the story together as a couple and use Handout 6.2 for dialogue.

**Closure**

Have couples pray together. If this is the final meeting of your MEG group, discuss possibilities for a future period in which you will meet together. Discuss the possibility of spawning a new MEG group and recruiting new couples.

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## Guidelines

- √ **Encourage a spiritual atmosphere.** Invite God's Spirit to be present. Pray often for one another and our marriages.
  
- √ **Focus on your own relationship.** Encourage marital growth by participating actively in the couple activities and allowing other couples to do the same. Keep group discussion time focused on relational issues.
  
- √ **Share voluntarily.** All participation in group activities will be voluntary.
  
- √ **Share your own experience.** Other couples can draw upon your experience for insights into their own.
  
- √ **Speak for yourself.** Share your own thoughts and feelings and allow others to do the same.
  
- √ **Respect your sacred circle and the sacred circle of others.** Share only those feelings and experiences in the group that you both feel comfortable sharing and that will enhance the understanding and growth of other couples.
  
- √ **Maintain confidences.** The marriage enrichment experience we will share together is built on mutual respect and trust.
  
- √ **Honor concerns.** Whenever an individual has a concern, it takes precedence within the group at any time.
  
- √ **Keep commitments.** When participants are not present or move in and out during group sessions, the sense of community is lost.



## Riding Our Marriage Carriage

Draw your marriage carriage journey from your wedding day to the present. Mark the high moments when things were going well in your marriage. Note also the moments of challenge on which you can look back now and see how you drew upon both your own strength as a couple and God's power to grow together through the pain.



## **Rediscovering Us**

Things that attracted me to you in the beginning . . .

Feelings I experienced when I first was drawn to you . . .

Things about you that I still find very alluring . . .

Things I am discovering about you that pique my interest . . .

Things that may keep us from enjoying one another fully . . .

Things I would like to do to keep myself interesting and attractive for you . . .

## **My One-of-the-Ten Gift List**

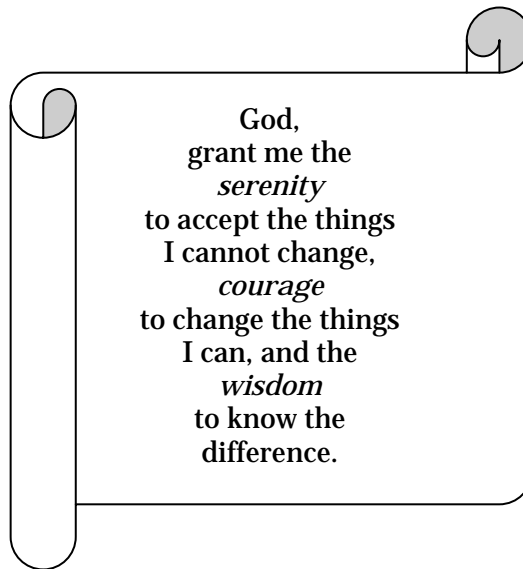
Make a list of ten things about your spouse which are not harmful to your relationships but which simply reflect who he/she is as a person. Present your list to your partner as a gift, with the assurance that in these areas there will be no pressure to change in order to please you.





## Letting Go to Make Way for New Beginnings

Make a list of the things you once thought you would do personally and together, but which realistically you'll probably never get done. Include things that you once thought you could change, but probably won't be able to. If your marriage is too young for this exercise, jot down some dreams and goals and circumstances which you have a sneaking suspicion may prove out of your reach. Spend some time together sharing your lists and talking about how hard it is to let go of cherished desires. You may need more time this week to grieve these losses in your life. When you are ready, you may want to pray the Serenity Prayer together.



## **Beginning Again**

Write your partner an “anonymous” note or series of notes telling them the things you admire and like about them and why you are looking forward to a long future as their marriage partner. Share your notes before going to bed tonight.



## My Caricature as a Communicator: Before and After



Reflect on the kind of communicator you have been, are, and would like to be:



The animal whose characteristics best describe me as a communicator is a . . .



Ways in which this animal and I are so much alike . . .



Things I like about this style of communicating . . .



Things about this style that could be improved . . .



Things I can do either to improve on this style or to change my style of communicating which I think would enhance our marriage relationship . . .



Marriage Seminar Resource: Handout 3.1 *My Caricature as a Communicator: Before and After*



## Communication in Our Marriage

Three things about our communication which are very good . . .

Three things about our communication which are pretty good but could be improved . . .

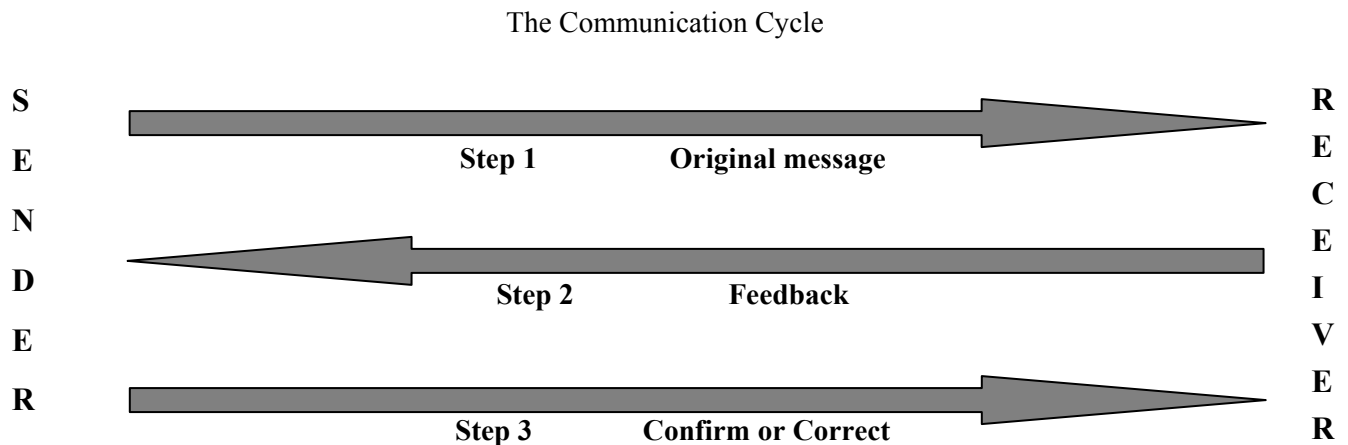
Things we find difficult to communicate about but which I wish we could talk about more freely . . .

Three things I can do to open and improve communication in our marriage . . .



## What Did You Say Again?

Step 1-2-3 Communication is a simple means of helping couples to complete the communications cycle in their exchanges with one another. David Mace conceptualized the steps this way in his book *Close Companions*:



From Mace, D. (1982). *Close companions*. Winston-Salem, NC: The Association of Couples in Marriage Enrichment, p.77. Used by permission.

In the following scenario, mark the responses that illustrate the best Step 2 response:

Bride: I don't know if March 15 is going to be a good date for the wedding.

- Groom:
- I don't know why you can't just set a date and stay with it.
  - Something about setting the wedding date for March 15 has you worried.
  - I never wanted a winter wedding anyway. Let's set the date for spring.

Bride: Yes. March 15 is just coming up too fast.

- Groom:
- If you had started working on wedding plans when I told you you should, you would be finished by now.
  - The days between now and March 15 are all twenty-four hours long just like every other day on the calendar.
  - You are feeling pressured about how little time there is between now and March 15.

Bride: Yes. It's not the wedding plans I'm worried about, I'm just don't know if I'm ready for this.

- Groom: a. You're concerned about whether you are ready for marriage.  
b. Are you saying you don't want to marry me?  
c. Well, if you're not going to be ready by March 15, when are you going to be ready?
- Bride: No. I'm not worried about marriage. I just don't know how I'm going to tell Elizabeth.
- Groom: a. You are feeling anxious about Elizabeth's part in the wedding.  
b. I thought Elizabeth was your best friend. You should be able to tell her anything.  
c. I find Elizabeth difficult to communicate with too.
- Bride: Yes. My mother found out that she expects me to ask her to sing for the wedding, but you know we have decided to ask my sister.
- Groom: a. Why don't we ask both of them to sing and that will solve everything.  
b. You're feeling awkward about not asking Elizabeth to sing.  
c. This wedding is turning out to be too much of a problem; let's just run away and get married.
- Bride: Yes. But I want to ask her to help in some way. I'll just talk to her about it. I just needed to know that I have your support.
- Groom: a. Women! I'll never understand them!  
b. You are feeling relieved to know that I will support whatever decision you make about Elizabeth's involvement in the wedding.  
c. I think you're worrying too much about this wedding. If Elizabeth is a true friend she won't get her feelings hurt.

## **Anger in Our Experience**

Things I would like to tell you about the way anger was handled in the family in which I grew up . . .

Feelings I often experience when I am angry with you . . .

Feelings I often experience when you are angry with me . . .

Patterns I see in the way I handle anger in my relationship with you . . .

Things I wish we could both do when we are angry with each other . . .

## Processing Anger

Anger is processed at several levels:

1. The first level involves **recognition and acknowledgment** of the emotion within oneself. Persons who vent their anger openly don't usually have as much of a problem acknowledging their anger as do persons who tend to suppress and store their anger inside themselves while maintaining a calm demeanor. Vented anger is harmful to relationships when it is expressed in explosions of words and actions which attack, put down, and alienate others. Open acknowledgment and expression of anger, however, is not in itself destructive. It is the first step in processing anger constructively.

Suppressed anger is harmful to relationships when it expresses itself as silence to punish, criticism, passive-aggressive hostility, or stored anger which explodes eventually in an attack much like is typical of a "venter." "Suppressers" can learn to identify their anger and express it openly. Their ability to manage their emotions can be very helpful in using anger to promote growth in marriage.

2. At the second level, couples **give one another permission to be angry and to report their anger** to the other as easily as they would report hunger or fatigue. Anger is not an emotion to be feared. It is an emotion that provides an early warning signal that something is wrong which needs to be resolved. The problem may be owned only by one of the partners. For example, it may have to do with a situation at work or with a parent which does not involve the spouse at all. Or the problem may be a relational one which needs to be resolved between the spouses. Reporting anger feelings can be the first step toward opening the issue and moving toward a solution which meets the needs of both husband and wife.

3. At the third level, couples **talk about the feelings which gave rise to the anger**—exposing the underside of the "iceberg" as it were. David and Vera Mace in their book *Love and Anger in Marriage* point out that it is important to begin with an agreement not to use anger as an excuse to attack, blame, put down or belittle one another.

Timing is also important. Some persons need more space and time to deal with their own thoughts and feelings before talking to the other. Others are very uncomfortable with dissonance in the relationship and want to talk immediately. It is important to respect one another's differing needs and to find a way to allow the space needed by one and yet not intolerably prolong the wait for the other.

When the time to talk is right, spouses need communication skills which enable them to share in ways that respect the other person but also convey depth of feeling and clear messages. The listening skills developed in the last MEG session are also vital to insure that messages are fully heard and interpreted as the sender intended.

4. At the deepest level, working through issues which initially gave rise to angry feelings can open the way for levels of **self-disclosure and intimacy** experienced only by couples who take the risk of acknowledging their anger, working through the issue, and learning together how to better express this emotion and let it work for them in their relationship. It is indeed, as David and Vera Mace said, "one of the best ways couples grow."



## **Growing Together Through Anger**

Some good things about the way we have processed anger in the past . . .

Some things that are pretty good but could be improved about our anger processing . . .

Ideas that I have found valuable in today's discussion . . .

Things I can do to increase the likelihood we use our anger to grow together in our marriage . . .

## Our Play-Potential Quotient

Give yourself and your marriage a score on a scale of 1-10 (1 being “never” and 10 being “always”) on each of the following items:

\_\_\_\_\_ We take the full number of days given to us for vacation each year.

\_\_\_\_\_ The time I spend with my spouse developing our friendship reflects the kind of friendship I’d like to have with him/her.

\_\_\_\_\_ I pace myself in my work week in order to have energy left for my spouse each evening and on the weekend.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel good about the condition of my health for my age.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel good about the network of close friends we enjoy and the support we are able to be to them and them to us.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel good about the interests and hobbies I have developed and the time I am able to devote to them.

\_\_\_\_\_ My spouse would say I’m a fun person to be with.

\_\_\_\_\_ I look forward to each day with eagerness.

\_\_\_\_\_ My spouse and I have spent at least one weekend together in the last 3 months doing something my spouse would call “pure fun.”

\_\_\_\_\_ There is a line item in our budget for couple fun.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total

Add up your total, subtract from 100 and express as % to determine your “Play-Potential Quotient.” For example, if your score is 70, the difference between your score and 100 is 30, i.e., 30%. Think of this 30% as an area in which you can grow. Compare your responses with those of your spouse and think about the fun that might lie ahead were you to turn your play-potential into a reality.

## Fun, Fun, Fun!



### ***Formal-dinner-in-the-park***

Dress up in your best clothes and take a picnic to the park.

### ***Gourmet-cooking together***

Plan a menu, grocery shop together, and prepare yourselves a wonderful meal to eat alone by candlelight.



### ***Scenic Tour***

Explore the back roads you seldom travel within a reasonable distance of home and see what you can discover. Take a bag lunch and stop for a chat under a tree along the way.

### ***Shape Up***

Get in shape together through exercise. Choose something you can do as a couple, and preferably still talk!

### ***Window-Shopping***

Go window-shopping after the stores are closed. Instead of picking out what you would like to have, pick out all the things you already have and give thanks.



### ***A Proposal***

Surprise your mate by planning a special time and place to ask them to “marry you” all over again.

### ***Saying Good-bye***

If you have to wait for someone to come and go at the airport or train or bus station, pretend you are the ones saying good-bye to each other and use the occasion to enjoy a long hug and kiss.



### ***Share-a-Book***

Visit a favorite bookstore or the library and choose a book. Get two copies, curl up together, and read to one another until one of you falls asleep.

### ***Bedroom Spruce-Up***

Plan and shop and work together to redecorate your bedroom into a place you'll enjoy spending time together. Save enough energy to enjoy!

### ***Remember When***

Spend a day together sorting pictures into albums of family memories.



## **“Magic Eyes”**

Times when I know you have looked at me through magic eyes . . .

Feelings I have when I know I have hurt you deeply . . .

Feelings I have when you extend your forgiveness to me . . .

My prayer that God will grant me the gift of magic eyes in my relationship with you . . .

## “Self-Healing and Growing On”

Philosopher and writer Robert Fulghum shares this story from his marriage in his book *Uh-Oh!*:

There is a tree. At the downhill edge of a long, narrow field in the western foothills of the La Sal Mountains—southeastern Utah. A particular tree. A juniper. Large for its species—maybe twenty feet tall and two feet in diameter. For perhaps three hundred years this tree has stood its ground. Flourishing in good seasons, and holding on in bad times. “Beautiful” is not a word that comes to mind when one first sees it. No naturalist would photograph it as exemplary of its kind. Twisted by wind, split and charred by lightning, scarred by brushfires, chewed on by insects, and pecked by birds. Human beings have stripped long strings of bark from its trunk, stapled barbed wire to it in using it as a corner post for a fence line, and nailed signs on it on three sides: NO HUNTING; NO TRESPASSING; PLEASE CLOSE THE GATE. In commandeering this tree as a corner stake for claims of rights and property, miners and ranchers have hacked signs and symbols in its bark, and left Day-Glo orange survey tape tied to its branches. Now it serves as one side of a gate between an alfalfa field and open range. No matter what, in drought, flood, heat, and cold it has continued. There is rot and death in it near the ground. But at the greening tips of its upper branches and in its berrylike seed cones, there is yet the outreach of life.

I respect this old juniper tree. For its age, yes. And for its steadfastness in taking whatever is thrown at it. That it has been useful in a practical way beyond itself counts for much, as well. Most of all, I admire its capacity for self-healing beyond all accidents and assaults. There is a *will* in it—toward continuing to be, come what may.

Last night, I went out for a walk in the darkness of early autumn to check and see if someone had remembered to turn the Milky Way on and the wind off. Drawn back to the cabin by the yellow glow of a reading lamp in the living room, I stood outside the window for a long time and looked in at my wife curled up on the couch sewing a hem in a new pair of wool trousers for me.

For seventeen years she has been my companion, my friend, my co-conspirator.

Yesterday, we were outraged at one another over something that seems trivial now, but the fire of anger is not quite cooled beneath the surface ashes. Yesterday, I made her cry in frustration. Yesterday, she was mad at me. I know I drive her crazy sometimes. She’s not always easy to live with either. Yesterday, old grievances were flung off the shelf where they are somewhat shakily stored.

Yet today we walked up the road to pick sweet corn from a neighbor’s patch and walked back down the road hand in hand in our usual way. We’re good at forgiving. We have to be. The weather of love comes and goes, and we must let it. It is a required condition of loving someone and being loved back.

And now tonight, as I watch her through the window, I see her smile as she carefully fixes my trousers, perhaps thinking to make one leg slightly longer than the other in revenge.

The gate we passed through to pick corn was the one attached to the old juniper. And that tree comes to mind this night as I look in on her. I long for the love we have to always be like that tree. With a steadfast ability to take it—a capacity for self-healing and growing on, scars and all, come what may.

“How was your walk, dear?” she asks as I come through the door.

“The stars are still there.

“The wind is calmed.

“And there’s still enough light to see trees.”

## **For reflection and dialogue:**

Good seasons in which we have flourished . . .

Harder times in which we have held on . . .

Encouraging signs in our marriage of our capacity for “self-healing and growing on, scars and all, come what may” . . .

Ways in which it might be said of us, “We’re good at forgiving. We have to be.” . . .

Our struggle with “old grievances flung on a shelf and shakily stored” . . .

An apology I’d like to extend . . .

My thanks for your forgiveness and commitment to me . . .

# A New Generation with New Songs

*“Let us sing a new song, not with our lips  
but with our lives.” —Augustine*

*by Elaine and Willie Oliver*

## Theme

Parents play an active and important role in the facilitating the character development of their children and socializing them to relate positively to family and friends.

## Introduction

Parenting is one of the most important and challenging tasks God has given humanity. It may not always seem like an important task especially when you are wiping noses, cleaning up spills, and arguing about dirty rooms. However, just imagine what an awesome opportunity it is to raise a little person into an adult. Furthermore, consider the eternal significance of raising a little person into a “good” person, not just good as opposed to being bad, but a person with mature character. As Christians, of course we understand that all goodness comes from God, “for none is good, except God alone” (Mark 10:18).

Over the past century a wealth of data has been collected concerning the development of morality in children and adolescents. During this time much focus has been given to the role that adults, especially parents, play in children’s moral development. The research asserts that development of children’s morality or character lies at the heart of parenting.

In the book *Child Guidance*, Ellen White tells us, “No higher work was ever committed to mortals than shaping of character” (p. 163). It is Christian character which equips our children with the spiritual and emotional underpinnings necessary to be successful in their relationships.

### Small Group Activity

*Reflect on the following scenarios: Why do you think these things happen? What kind of concerns and fears do they engender in you as a parent? Who is responsible for these problems? What could be done to empower the children and youth in each scenario to address the problems they are facing in better ways?*

*(1) A seventh-grader walked up to a group of schoolmates who were waiting for the morning bell, pulled out a gun and began shooting. No students were killed, but five of the students were injured. When asked why he shot at his schoolmates, he replied, “I don’t know.” The 13-year-old boy is a straight A student, is very popular, has lots of friends and belongs to a teen Christian group. (Fort Gibson, Okla, 12/6/99)*

*(2) On her first day at her new school, six-year-old Jessie was told by some of her new classmates that she couldn't play with them because of the color of her skin. Jessie's new school is a Christian school; she and her new classmates attend church regularly.*

*(3) Two closely related families live within five miles of one another. The wives in the two families are sisters. Their father (Grandpa) employs both of their husbands in his family-owned business. Each family has a daughter in the same age range; the two cousins are best of friends. When Grandpa dies, he leaves his business, which for years has provided a good livelihood for both families, to his daughters. In time, however, disagreement over how to run the business fractures the relationship between the husbands. The conflict spreads to the wives as each takes the side of her own husband. Social interaction between the two families comes to a screeching halt. They sit on opposite sides of the church and avoid situations that bring them together. Conflict becomes more open and hostile as the business falters financially. The cousins struggle to remain apart from what is going on between their parents. Neither is welcome in one another's homes. They meet at friends' places, and even make a pact to remain friends despite all that is going on between their parents. But relationships between the cousins are strained seemingly beyond repair by manipulations on the part of one family who is in a stronger financial position to secure the family business for themselves, leaving the other family struggling even to maintain payments on their home. Friends get the message that the two families prefer not to be placed in the awkward position of even social interaction. Sometimes, however, the cousins confide to their friends how much they miss each other and wish they could do something about the situation that would bring them back together. But no one knows how to take the first step.*

### **Summing Up**

As we approach the third millennium, the task of shaping our children's character becomes even more imperative as our children live in the milieu of societies which are hostile to our core Christian values and becoming increasingly desensitized to violence, abuse, discrimination and other societal ills.

We can debate gun control, we can put metal detectors in schools, we can build more youth centers in our communities, and even strengthen Adventist Youth programs, but ultimately we have the most power to change what happens in our own families.

Let's keep in mind that none of us is the "perfect parent" who always does the right thing. Fortunately, by God's grace, our children can grow up to be fine people having had parents who are less than perfect. We also need to remember not to expect our children to be perfect. They too will make mistakes, experience failures, and exhibit human foibles just like the rest of us. Parents need other parents for support and encouragement. We all need Jesus. The same Jesus that took little children on His knee promises to bless our children too. This seminar is about bringing us together to support one another and to bring our children to Jesus.

### **The "Good" Child**

"And please be good!" a mother calls out the door as her children are off to the Pathfinder camp out. So much is encapsulated in those words! We all want our children to be "good." But what do we mean by "good"? Certainly we aren't meaning to pass a good-bad judgment on the value of a child. Every child is infinitely precious as the handiwork of our Creator God and a person for whom Christ died. Neither are we speaking about sinful human nature, in which sense the Scripture makes a clear declaration that no



human is “good” (Phil. 2:21, Rom. 3:12, Jer. 17:9). So take a few moments to think about what you want for your children when you want them to be “good.”

**Individual Activity**

*Allow participants 1-2 minutes to think individually, then ask for volunteers to share their answers. The following are examples the facilitator could use to initiate the discussion or add to it: You want your children to be fair, honest, trustworthy, forgiving, respectful of others rights, respect legitimate authority, responsible for their own behavior, capable of generosity and love, etc.*

All of these qualities are part of being a “good” person and most parents who are concerned with raising good children would like to see these qualities in their children. When we speak about raising a “good” child, then, we are talking about developing character qualities or traits which give rise to behavior befitting our Christian values. Wynne & Walberg (1984) define character as

- “engaging in morally relevant conduct or words, or refraining from certain conduct or words.”

From a Christian perspective, however, the standard for character is set by God Himself. It is an awesome standard! One that left the hearers of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount convinced it would be useless even to try to attain it (see Matt. 5:31-32; cf. Matt. 19:8-10).

We cannot speak about character development without setting our understanding of what this means in the context of the gospel. The good news of the gospel is that Christ’s perfection of character stands for all of us. In Him, the law’s demands have been fulfilled. Character development on our part can add nothing to the abundant salvation which is ours in Christ. Such grace is truly amazing!

Our desire to “be good” and to raise “good” children, then, must not be misunderstood as in any way contributing to our salvation. It is only our *response* to grace. Thus, for the Christian, the goal toward which we stretch in the development of Christian character is to:

- reflect Jesus’ manner in the way we relate to others.

To the authors’ way of thinking then, character is observable in an individual’s conduct. In this sense “character” can be differentiated from “values.” The term “value” as it is used in this seminar can be defined as an “orientation” or “disposition.” It is more philosophical in nature. Character is active. We might say it is the activation of knowledge and values. Character is made up of foundational traits like empathy, integrity, responsibility, faithfulness, generosity, and a sense of justice. When these qualities are part of a person’s character, one can expect them to be exhibited relatively persistently and consistently in the person’s behavior. One would not expect them to change as the person interacts with different people or in different situations.

Often, parents place much emphasis on and put enormous effort into developing their children’s intellectual ability. We become concerned and frustrated when our children do not seem to be achieving as well academically as their peers and so we go to great lengths to boost their performance. Or we focus our energies on developing musical or athletic talent. Some of us may be more concerned with our children’s physical attributes or artistic abilities.

While these are worthy pursuits, developing them is not in the same category as socializing our children to be persons with good and decent morals, whose behavior speaks of the Christian values they espouse. Without morals or strong character our children do not stand “tall” as individuals.

The Christian community has put much emphasis on teaching Christian values. It is a responsibility given to parents by Scripture (see Deut. 6:4-6). This seminar focuses on an important step beyond *teaching* values. While it is important to identify biblical values and present them engagingly, it is not enough. Foundational character traits like those mentioned above must become integral to who our children are as persons, and they must be empowered to translate these into everyday decision-making and action. This seminar is designed to give parents practical help to empower their children for Christian *living*, which gives testimony to the core character traits from which Christian conduct arises. Ellen White puts it succinctly:

Mental ability and genius are not character, for these are often possessed by those who have the very opposite of a good character. Reputation is not character. True character is a quality of the soul, revealing itself in the conduct (*Child Guidance*, p. 161).

### So Who Is Responsible for Our Children’s Behavior?

#### **Small Group Activity**

*Reflect again on the three scenarios posed at the beginning. The first question on the lips of people looking on, even parents themselves, are: “What went wrong?” “What did I do wrong?” Do you think this is an appropriate question? Is it the best question? In what sense might you answer “yes”? In what sense “no”? After taking feedback from the groups, focus the discussion of the entire group on the question: “Is it the parent or the child who is responsible for the child’s behavior, for his or her moral maturity and readiness to relate positively to others and behave prosocially?”*

### Summing Up

How the question of responsibility is answered deeply impacts parents’ attitude toward their children and how they assume their responsibility for them. Parental answers lie all along a continuum between extremes. Some parents believe that responsibility for a child’s actions, be they successes or failures, lies solely at the parents’ door. Statutes have been proposed recently in some jurisdictions which would hold parents responsible for their children’s behavior to the extent of putting parents in jail for the likes of their child’s truancy. From this perspective, the way children behave, and ultimately the way they turn out as adults, reflects directly on how well they have been parented. This belief motivates many parents to high levels of control in their children’s lives.

At the other extreme are parents who believe most children will turn out pretty well if just left alone to develop as they will. When their child struggles, they are able to shrug it off with a “we did our best, but she has to be allowed to make her own choice.”

In their book *Raising Great Children* (1999), Drs. Cloud and Townsend make three points in answer to the question, “Who is responsible”:

1. Responsibility lies on a continuum between parent and child, and where it lies on the continuum changes over time. For example, at the beginning of a child’s life the only responsibility of the child is to

need and to take in from the sources of life—parents are totally responsible. As the child becomes more self-sufficient, more ownership and responsibility for behavior is taken by the child and the parents assume less. Around the teen years, the parent exchanges a more controlling role for one which relies more on consultation and influence. By the late teens, the child should be taking full responsibility for his/her behavior and moral choices.

2. Although responsibility shifts, parents and children have their own distinct and unique tasks. Parents provide safety and love. They also provide experiences which will help the child mature. The child responds to these experiences by taking risks and learning lessons through experience and consequences.

3. Ultimately, the child bears responsibility for his/her life. No parent is perfect. All children will suffer some injuries along with the benefits they receive from their parents. We are told in 2 Corinthians 5:10 that in the end we will all be called to account for what we did in life, whether good or bad. Parents are responsible for providing the love, nurture and experiences which will move a child toward full responsibility for his/her moral life.

God has given parents their work, to form the characters of their children after the divine Pattern. By His grace they can accomplish the task; but it will require patient, painstaking effort, no less than firmness and decision, to guide the will and restrain the passion . . . . The character building of your children is of more importance than the cultivation of your farms, more essential than the building of houses to live in, or of prosecuting any manner of business or trade (*Child Guidance*, p. 169).

Neither the church school nor college affords the opportunities for establishing a child's character building upon the right foundation that are afforded in the home (*Child Guidance*, p. 170).

This shift in responsibility over time, in keeping with the child's developing capabilities and maturity, is a difficult challenge for parents. Many struggle to separate their own reputations from those of the child and exert strong pressure on children to make the family look good. Unfortunately, though children raised in such families often comply as children, they are likely to rebel when they are teens and the parents can no longer force control. Others struggle to let their children learn from the consequences of their choices. They mistake for love their desire to protect them from the painful consequences of their mistakes. Unfortunately, by the time these children learn that consequences always follow choices, the consequences they are facing are much more serious than they might have learned lessons from as children. Still others make the mistake of drawing their children into the adult arena for which they are ill prepared. These children are called upon to nurture their parents rather than the other way around and are robbed of their childhoods as a result. Unfortunately, rather than preparing these children for assuming adult responsibilities, these parents catapult their children into adulthood with needy hearts.

Should we let go or hold on? How much is too much or too little? Do we give the kids independence or exercise control? It's a tricky balancing act, independence and control, but absolutely essential for raising good children from toddlerhood to teens. Children need parents to set clear limits. They rely on this guidance in both childhood and adolescence. Children begin asking for independence from very early on, however, the parent who gives independence without limits is not doing the child a favor. Rather, this creates havoc and insecurity for the child. Control without independence, on the other hand, is also a

hindrance to development. Children must be respected as persons with a point of view and given opportunities to make choices. Our ultimate goal in parenting is for our children to become mature adults who reflect Christ's manner in their relationships with others and the values of His kingdom when making decisions for their lives.

And the good news is, it's never too late to start and we are not in this alone!

Jesus Himself, in His infinite mercy, is working on human hearts, effecting spiritual transformations so amazing that angels look on with astonishment and joy (*5 Testimonies*, p. 731).

### **The Process of Moral Growth**

As parents help to facilitate their children's moral growth, they must keep in mind that morality does not just appear fully formed. Children develop morally just as they develop in every other domain, in predictable stages. It is important to remember, however, that every child has his or her own built-in pace setter, so the approximate ages given are not as important in determining where your child is in the process as are the characteristics of children at each stage. The first work of parents who wish to be intentional about their children's moral development, then, is to understand the stages. It is a way of getting inside the mind of a child, to see morality from the child's view.

#### **Small Group Activity**

Handout 1, "The Stages of Moral Reasoning," presents a user-friendly outline of the stages children grow through as their capacity for moral reasoning expands. (*In small groups, review the stages together. Share stories from your experience with children that confirm the kind of reasoning research has discovered to be prevalent in a particular age range.*)

### **Summing Up**

When parents understand the stages of moral development, they can assess where their children are coming from and where they want to help them head. There is a sense in which the stages are like steps in a staircase, but it must be remembered that children, like adults, usually operate in a predominant stage at any given time, but they may slip back or even rise above where they are in some instances. Progression through the stages is a process which loops forward and back, but hopefully with steady forward movement. The process is not about racing to the goal, but about keeping the process moving steadily in the right direction as is appropriate for the child's age and maturity.

### **Facilitating Moral Growth**

*(Read the following story by Leo Tolstoy to the group.)*

Grandfather had become very old. His legs wouldn't go, his eyes didn't see, his ears didn't hear, he had no teeth. And when he ate, the food dripped from his mouth.

His son and daughter-in-law stopped setting a place for him at the table and gave him his supper in back of the stove. Once they brought dinner down to him in a cup. The old man wanted to move the cup, but he dropped and broke it. The daughter-in-law began to grumble at the old man for spoiling everything in the house and breaking the cup. She would have to give him his dinner in a dishpan. The old man only sighed and said nothing.

One day the husband and wife were at home watching their small son playing on the floor with some wooden planks. He was building something. The father asked, “What is that you are doing, Misha?”

Misha replied, “Dear Father, I am making a dishpan so that when you and dear Mother become old, you may be fed from this dishpan.”

The husband and wife looked at one another and began to weep. They became ashamed of so offending the old man, they seated him at the table and waited on him from that day on.

### **Small Group Activity**

*Reflect on this story and discuss the questions, “How is morality developed?” “How did your own parents influence your moral development?” “What lessons have you learned from your children?”*

If we are to facilitate the development of our children’s characters, there are several important truisms we must understand and implement in our relationships with them (Lickona, 1983):

- 1) **Morality is respect.** Respect is at the core of morality—respect for ourselves, for others and for God. We must respect children and expect respect in return. If we want to raise moral children, we must treat them as *persons*. A pastor was jarred into this realization when a church member touched his shoulder as he was taking a step backward and said, “Careful, there’s a person behind you.” Turning to excuse himself to another adult, he was surprised instead to see a two-year-old struggling to stay on his feet. Indeed, a *person* was behind him, and learning about respect cannot begin too early. Even as we are reminded to treat even the smallest child with respect, so they must learn to have respect for us as parents. Respect is a two-way street; it’s give and take. It is living by the Golden Rule in all our relationships—“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (cf. Luke 6:31).
- 2) **Actions speak louder than words.** Children take stock of everything we do, they observe, file away, and later imitate how we adults live, what we do and how we treat those around us. Modeling is a very effective teacher. But remember, modeling isn’t about perfection. It *is* about letting our children see our commitment to Christian ideals. It is also about modeling what Christians do when they have made a mistake. It’s saying you are sorry. It’s talking to kids about your struggles to *live* the way you *believe*. It’s about turning together to the Savior you all need.
- 3) **Values must be both seen and heard.** As the old saying puts it, “We must not only practice what we preach, but preach what we practice.” Children need our words as well as our actions. For maximum impact, they must not only be taught the values, but they need to know the reasons and beliefs which lie behind them. Parents need to guide, instruct, listen and advise. In the *Valuegenesis Study* of 12,000 Seventh-day Adventist young people, one of the best predictors of high levels of faith development in youth was parents who talked openly about their faith.
- 4) **A capacity to think is vital.** Parents need to teach their children *to* think, not *what* to think. One person shares his parents’ successful strategy:

Whenever I did something wrong, my parents didn’t just demand that I stop my behavior. Instead, they almost always asked, “How would you feel if someone did that

to you?” That gave me a chance to reflect on whatever I did and how I’d like to have it done to me.

I feel this has helped me throughout my life. Now I always try to stop and ask myself that question before I do something, rather than after the fact. (Lickona, 1983, p. 24)

There are two very important lessons here: first, take the time to think; second, put yourself in the other person’s shoes. Neither of these things come naturally to children. They need our encouragement and much practice. Situations present themselves every day—in family living, in the newspaper, on the television, etc.—which can be turned into opportunities to engage our children’s thinking. Even when real situations do not present themselves, we can pose scenarios to help children exercise and sharpen their moral reasoning.

- 5) **Love is foundational.** Love is the foundation on which parents build. The Scripture says, “God is love” (1 John 4:16). It is His love that we reflect to our children. Children need to be rooted and grounded in love (Ephesians 3:17), the kind of love that God bestows upon us—unconditional love. The kind of love that doesn’t require anything in return. This kind of love helps our children develop a positive self-concept, a sense of worth, an inner strength.

Love bonds us to each other and it connects us to God. Being loved helps us to love ourselves. The biblical command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39) recognizes that we must first understand our own value as persons before we can value or love someone else. Children (or adults) who do not feel loved have much difficulty opening up to or loving others.

Love can be spelled in many ways.

- It is spelled **f-o-c-u-s-e-d a-t-t-e-n-t-i-o-n**. Children need to know they are being heard and that they are important enough for you to devote your full attention to what they have to say.
- It is spelled **t-i-m-e**. There are no shortcuts, even for busy parents. No “quality” of time makes up for minimal “quantity.” Strong families structure their schedules, however busy and hectic, to spend time together eating, working, and playing. The bottom line—parenting takes time.
- It is spelled **s-u-p-p-o-r-t**. Growing is about taking risks. Taking risks is scary. Fortunate is the child whose parents foster an I-can-do-it attitude and encourage children to try new things, who celebrate successes and reframe “failures” as simply “tries which teach us what doesn’t work.” Fortunate also, is the child who receives much more praise and appreciation than criticism and complaint. Such parents help their children to develop a sense of themselves as “good” and competent persons who can stand up for what is right and who don’t need the approval of the group at any price.
- It is spelled **c-o-n-n-e-c-t-e-d-n-e-s-s**. The latest research indicates that the young people most likely to be involved in high-risk behaviors (drugs, alcohol, premarital sex, fast driving, etc.) are the ones who feel disconnected.

On the other hand, those who experience strong connectedness with family, church, school and community are least vulnerable to such behavior.

- It is spelled **l-i-m-i-t-s**. Love and limits go together. A review of 500 studies of parenting styles isolated these two factors as the most significant predictors of the kind of parenting that produces children most likely to buy into their parents values and most likely to have the capacity to establish warm, positive relationships with others.
- It is also spelled **c-o-m-m-i-t-m-e-n-t**. Ultimately, children need most of all to know there is nothing they can ever say or do or be that moves them out of the circle of your love.

### **From Christian Values to Christian Behavior**

Understanding the stages of moral reasoning is one thing, but how do we help our children move from thinking to doing? How do we help our children turn nouns such as generosity, kindness, thoughtfulness, sensitivity, forgiveness, compassion into action verbs? Children do not acquire what Robert Coles (1997) calls “moral intelligence” by memorization of rules and regulations. A list of good qualities and virtues will be as quickly forgotten as they are memorized, but practice in actual situations, created scenarios or imagined plots set the stage for action. As values are internalized, being “good” becomes a part of our children’s identity. Their commitment to Christian values moves beyond mere belief and talk; it is acted upon.

Hear this testimony from a thirteen-year old boy:

If you just try to remember to be polite, and help someone, if you can; if you try to be friendly to folks, and not be a wise guy . . . then you are off to a start, because it’s on your mind (you see?), it’s on your mind that you should be out there doing something about it, what you believe is right, is good, and not just talking about it (Coles, 1997, p. 17).

#### **Small Group Activity**

Parents are encouraged to provide their children with many opportunities to develop into “good” persons. Any time is a good time for character building. The traits on which you focus will depend upon the situation at hand. Teachable moments present themselves everyday as you interact with your child or watch your child interact with others and make decisions. Teachable moments can also be planned with the intent of opening dialogue and creating opportunities for action. (*Share stories of teachable moments in your experience with children. Handout 2, “Teachable Moments” may be used to stimulate this discussion.*)

### **The Payoff**

Parents cannot take away all of the storms and stresses of their children’s passage to moral adulthood. There will be growing pains for parents as well as children. However, when parents set the foundation for character development in their children’s lives, then children will have the best chance of becoming the persons God intends them to be. They will be able to choose right when they are faced with tough decisions; they will not be easily swayed by other’s opinions; and their relationships will have the best chance of flourishing. They will find that not only does the “good” life benefit them personally, but they

will be a benefit to the family, church and society as a whole because they have been given the essential building blocks for life.

Ellen White states it well:

If Christian [parents] will present to society children with integrity of character, with firm principles, and sound morals, they will have performed the most important of all missionary labors. Their children, thoroughly educated to take their places in society, are the greatest evidence of Christianity that can be given to the world (*Child Guidance*, p. 163).

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## The Stages of Moral Reasoning\*

*(Ages indicate reasonable developmental expectations  
for a child of normal intelligence growing up in a supportive moral environment.)*

<p>Stage 0: <b>Egocentric Reasoning</b></p> <p>(preschool years—around age 4)</p>	<p><b>What’s Right:</b> I should get my own way.</p> <p><b>Reason to be Good:</b> To get rewards and avoid punishments.</p>
<p>Stage 1: <b>Unquestioning Obedience</b></p> <p>(around kindergarten age)</p>	<p><b>What’s Right:</b> I should do what I’m told.</p> <p><b>Reason to be Good:</b> To stay out of trouble.</p>
<p>Stage 2: <b>What’s-in-it-for-me Fairness</b></p> <p>(early elementary grades)</p>	<p><b>What’s Right:</b> I should look out for myself but be fair to those who are fair to me.</p> <p><b>Reason to be Good:</b> Self-interest: What’s in it for me?</p>
<p>Stage 3: <b>Interpersonal Conformity</b></p> <p>(middle-to-upper elementary grades and early to mid-teens)</p>	<p><b>What’s Right:</b> I should be a nice person and live up to the expectations of people I know and care about.</p> <p><b>Reason to be Good:</b> So others will think well of me (social approval) and I can think well of myself (self-esteem).</p>
<p>Stage 4: <b>Responsibility To “The System”</b></p> <p>(high-school years or late teens)</p>	<p><b>What’s Right:</b> I should fulfill my responsibilities to the social or value system I feel part of.</p> <p><b>Reason to be Good:</b> To keep the system from falling apart and to maintain self-respect as somebody who meets my obligations.</p>
<p>Stage 5: <b>Principled Conscience</b></p> <p>(young adulthood)</p>	<p><b>What’s Right:</b> I should show the greatest possible respect for the rights and dignity of every individual person and should support a system that protects human rights.</p> <p><b>Reason to be Good:</b> The obligation of conscience to act in accordance with the principle of respect for all human beings.</p>

*\*Lickona, T. (1983). Stages 1 - 5 are adapted from Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral reasoning as described in Kohlberg (1975, 1978, 1981); Stage 0 is adapted from William Damon (1977) and Robert Selman (1980).*

## Teachable Moments

Any time is a good time for character building. The traits on which you focus will depend upon the situation at hand. Teachable moments present themselves everyday as you interact with your child or watch your child interact with others and make decisions. Teachable moments can also be planned with the intent of opening dialogue and creating opportunities for action. Here are a few examples:

- You are driving and come upon a car accident or a homeless person. Use this opportunity to teach your children about compassion and concern for others. Even if you can't stop to offer on-site help, you can lead your children to sympathize with the victims of the accident or homelessness. Perhaps you can include these persons in your family prayers.
- Playing sports or games provides a good opportunity to teach your children about traits like honesty, perseverance, and humility. Watch how your child responds when he or she loses/wins. Speak about the importance of following the rules and resisting the urge to cheat. Encourage your child to stay with the game and maintain a positive attitude even when they are losing.
- When your child is having difficulty with a friend(s), engage them in conversation about love, forgiveness, loyalty, and patience. Help them figure out which character strength applies to their situation and help them develop a plan to put it into action. You may also need to help them implement the plan. For example, if your daughter's best friend gave away one of her secrets, after exploring the situation with her you might help her find words to tell her friend how badly that made her feel and give the other child opportunity to respond. You will need to help your child understand how forgiveness which makes a decision not to get back at the other child can help her feel better inside. You will want to stay close to her as she expresses her feelings to the other child so you can help her deal with the unpredictable response of the other child.
- When your child "borrows" something from a sibling without permission, explain that borrowing something without permission is really stealing. Help your child think through how they would feel if someone "borrowed" something of theirs without permission.
- When your child is confronted with a tough decision, encourage him to use the question, "What would Jesus want me to do?" to guide him in choosing how to respond. Sometimes our children don't tell us the details, but if we spend time listening to them, we set the stage for them to open up to us and create the best possibility that they will be open to our guidance.
- When you are reading Bible stories and other books or watching selected programs on television, take the time during a break or afterward to discuss what your child would do if she found herself in a similar situation.

# Family Fun Trail

by *Bernie & Karen Holford*

**Synopsis.** *Family Fun Trail* is a family enrichment activity that may be done indoors or outdoors weather permitting. The activity may be adapted for whole church groups by clustering members into small “family” groups or devising “superfamilies” comprised of a family plus one or two other church members.

“Trail Signs,” outlining different family activities, are placed randomly at various places throughout a given area—a room or rooms, around the outside of a building, in a park or woods. Families locate the signs and use corresponding pages in their “Trail Books” to complete the activities. (Though Trail Signs are numbered, families do not have to find them or complete them in order.) Also, a message for families is encoded in the set of trail signs, with one letter found on each sign. In addition to completing the various activities, families collect the various letters, then unscramble them to spell the word “ENCOURAGE!” [*Editors’ note to translators: Appropriate adjustments will need to be made to the letters on the ten trail signs: animémonos; ermutigt!; animeme-nos; etc.*]

## Materials needed.

- Set of 10 trail signs (See *Trail Sign - 1; Trail Sign - 2*, etc.)
- One copy of *Family Fun Trail Book* per family

## Summary of Family Fun Trail Instructions

**Trail Sign 1.** Design and draw a machine that your family really needs, but that no one has invented yet, and give it lots of interesting details! Some ideas could be:

- A Finding-Things Machine
- A Making-Children-Go-To-Sleep-Machine
- A Time-Stretching Machine
- A Lunch-Box-Packing-Machine

**Trail Sign 2.** Write down the first names of each person in your family, so that their name runs down the page vertically, and each letter has a line:

J \_\_\_\_\_  
 O \_\_\_\_\_  
 E \_\_\_\_\_

Then write some positive and special words about the person, each beginning with a letter from their name, for example, J - jolly; O - optimistic, E - energetic.

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*Bernie and Karen Holford write from the Department of Family Ministries, South England Conference, Trans-European Division.*

**Trail Sign 3.** Design a poster: Either adapting a popular advertising slogan, to encourage families, or advertising prayer! Examples: A hug a day helps you work rest and play; Have a break! Have a Chit-Chat - with God!

**Trail Sign 4.** Think of the funniest thing that ever happened in your family! Draw a simple cartoon picture of the event (stick men are O.K.!), and write what happened underneath. Example: One of our family members fell in a puddle at a wedding and had to go to the reception in their pajamas!

**Trail Sign 5.** Make up a slogan for your family, where each word begins with a letter from your surname! Write your surname down the side of the page with one letter per line, and then find the words to make a zany slogan for yourselves. Here is an example from our Holford family:

H - Happy

O - Ones

L - Loving

F - Fun

O - On

R - Relaxing

D - Days

**Trail Sign 6.** If possible, go out-of-doors and draw the shapes of as many leaves as you can find on this site! Can you name the trees and plants to which these leaves belong? If so, write any names you know in the middles of the leaves you have drawn. Or if you are inside, design a new plant. What color will it be? What insects will visit it? How long will it take to grow? Does it grow fruit to eat? Then thank God for the trees and plants He has designed and created.

**Trail Sign 7.** Our fun stuff! Collect a joke or saying from each person in your family and write them in the places for fun stuff on this page. Example: What do you get if you cross a grizzly bear with a kangaroo? A miserable fur coat with big pockets!

**Trail Sign 8.** Our encouraging texts! Write the words or the reference for a Bible verse from each member of your family.

**Trail Sign 9.** Let each person in the family draw themselves on this page to make a special family portrait.

**Trail Sign 10.** Write each person's name on a different present. Around each gift, let each person write what they would most like to give to that person, if only they could.



## **Family Fun Trail Sign 1**

Turn to page 1 in your  
Family Fun Book.

Design and draw a machine that your family really needs, but that no-one has invented yet, and give it lots of interesting details!

Some ideas could be:

A Finding-Things machine

A Making-Children-Go-To-Sleep-Machine

A Time-Stretching Machine

A Lunch-Box-Packing-Machine

Trail Sign - 1



## Family Fun Trail Sign 2

Turn to page 2 in your  
Family Fun Book.

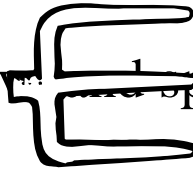
Write down the first names of EACH  
PERSON in your family, so that their name  
runs down the page vertically, and each  
letter has a line:

J \_\_\_\_\_

O \_\_\_\_\_

E \_\_\_\_\_

Then write some positive and special  
words



about the person, each beginning with a  
letter from their name. Example: J - Jolly,  
O - Optimistic, E - Energetic.



**Family Fun  
Trail Sign 3**

Turn to page 3 in your  
Family Fun Book.

Design a poster:

Either adapting a popular  
advertising slogan, to encourage  
families to have fun together!

(A hug a day helps you work rest and  
play)

(Have a break! Have a Chit-Chat - with  
God!)

OR to advertise how wonderful your  
own family is!



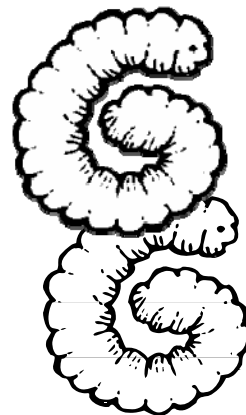
## Family Fun Trail Sign 4

Turn to page 4 in your  
Family Fun Book.

Think of the funniest thing that ever  
happened in your family!

Draw a simple cartoon picture of the  
event (stick men are O.K.!), and write  
what happened underneath!

Example: One of our family members  
fell in a puddle at a wedding and had  
to go to the reception in their  
pajamas!



Sign - 4





## Family Fun Trail Sign 5

Turn to page 5 in your  
Family Fun Book.

Make up a slogan for your family,  
where each word begins with a letter  
from your surname! Write your  
surname down the side of the page  
with one letter per line, and then find  
the words to make a zany slogan for  
yourselves.

H - Happy

O - Ones

L - Loving

F - Fun

O - On

R - Relaxing

D - Days

A decorative border of black footprints and a compass rose. The footprints are arranged in a circular path around the text, with a compass rose at the top right.

## Family Fun Trail Sign 6

Turn to page 6 in your Family Fun Book.

If you can go outside draw the shapes of as many leaves as you can find on this site!

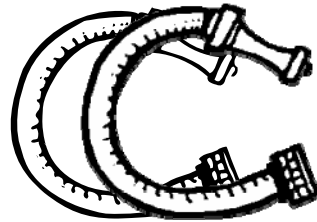
Can you name the trees and plants to which these leaves belong? If so, write any names you know in the middles of the leaves you have drawn. Or if you are inside, design a new plant. What color will it be? What insects will visit it? How long will it take to grow? Does it grow fruit to eat?

Then thank God for the trees and plants He has designed and created.



## Family Fun Trail Sign 7

Turn to page 7 in your  
Family Fun Book.



Collect a joke or saying from each  
person in your family and write them  
in the places for fun stuff on this  
page!

Example: What do you get if you  
cross a grizzly bear with a kangaroo?  
A miserable fur coat with big pockets!



**Family Fun  
Trail Sign 8**

Turn to page 8 in your  
Family Fun Book.

Favorite Bible Texts!

Write the words or the reference for a  
Bible verse from each member of  
your family.

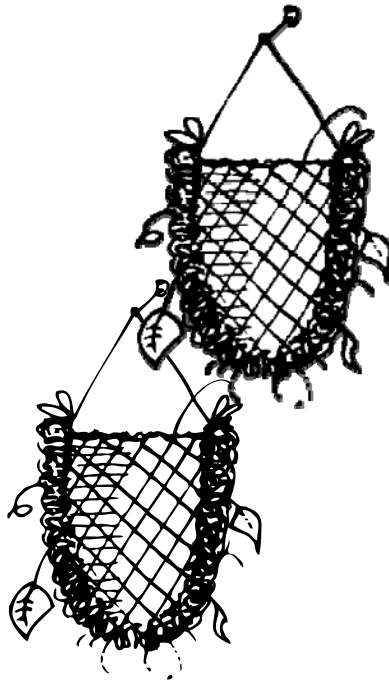


Trail Sign - 8

# Family Fun Trail Sign 9

Turn to page 9 in your  
Family Fun Book.

Let each person in the family draw  
themselves on this page to make a  
special family portrait.



Trail Sign - 9



**Family Fun  
Trail Sign 10**

Turn to page 10 in your  
Family Fun Book.

Write each person's name on a  
different present. Around each gift, let  
each person write what they would  
most like to give to that person, if  
only they could.





# The Family Fun Trail Book of the

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## Family



# Family Fun Trail

## Instructions

*Important - you will need all your family members, all the time, in order to complete the trail!*

Complete the trail in any order. Run around and look for any of the footprint trail signs, and then follow the instructions on the sign to complete the family fun tasks in this booklet.

There are ten trail signs to find.

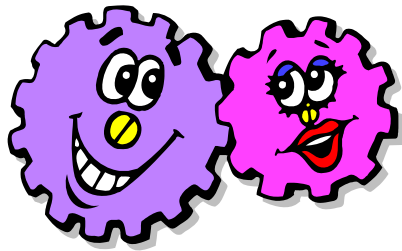
As you go around - collect the letters (one special letter is found somewhere on each sign), and write them in the spaces below. When you have found all the letters, rearrange them to make a word which describes something we should do as often as we can to every person in our family.

Letters found - \_\_\_\_\_

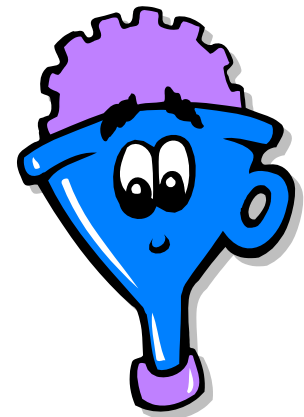
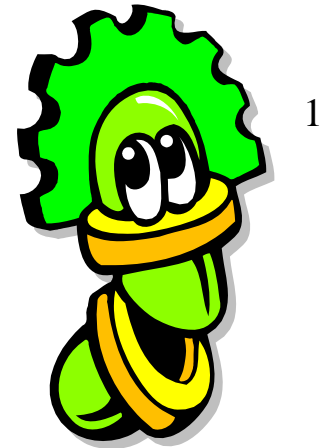
Final word - \_\_\_\_\_







The \_\_\_\_\_ Family  
Special Machine!





# Our Names Are Special!



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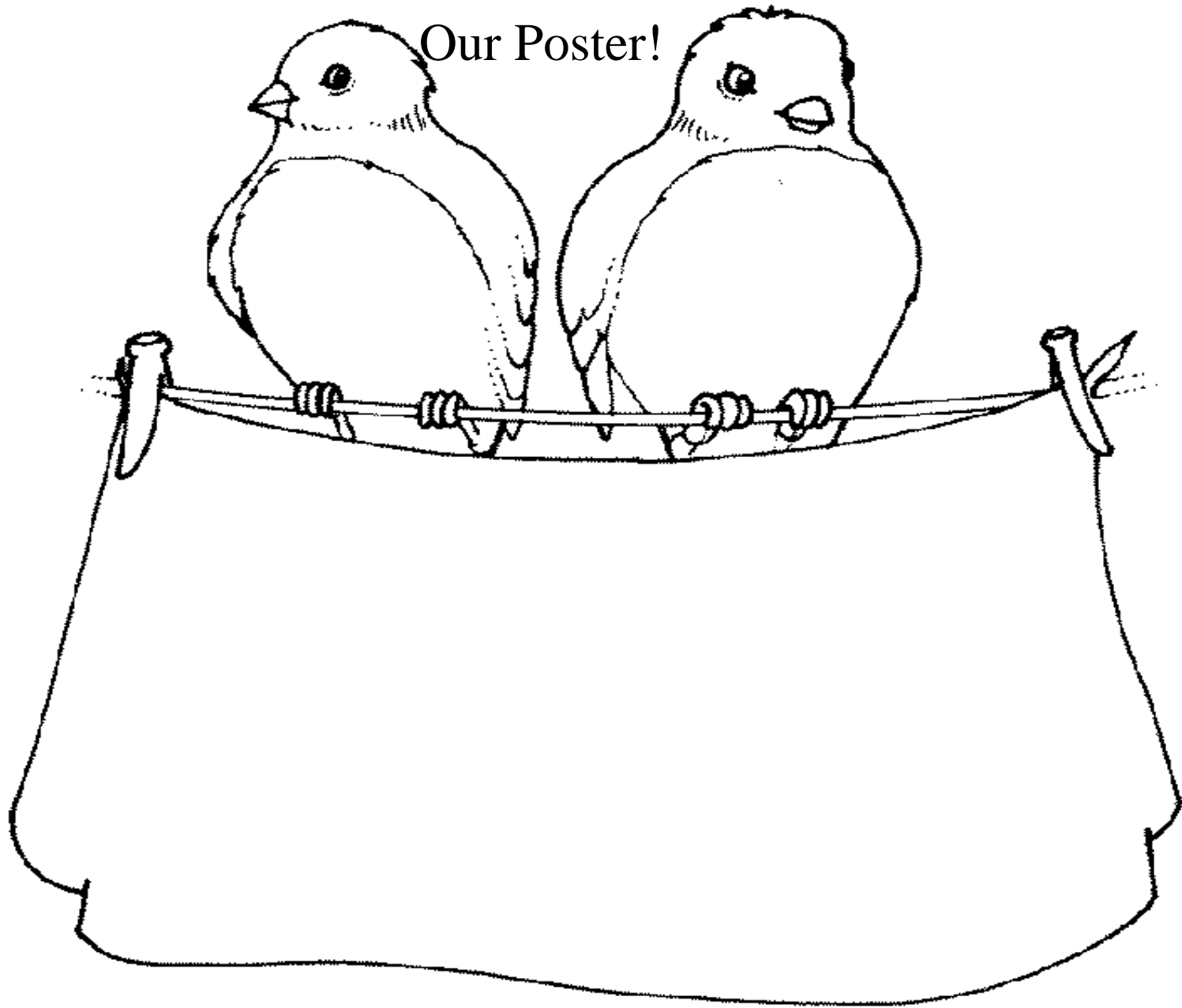
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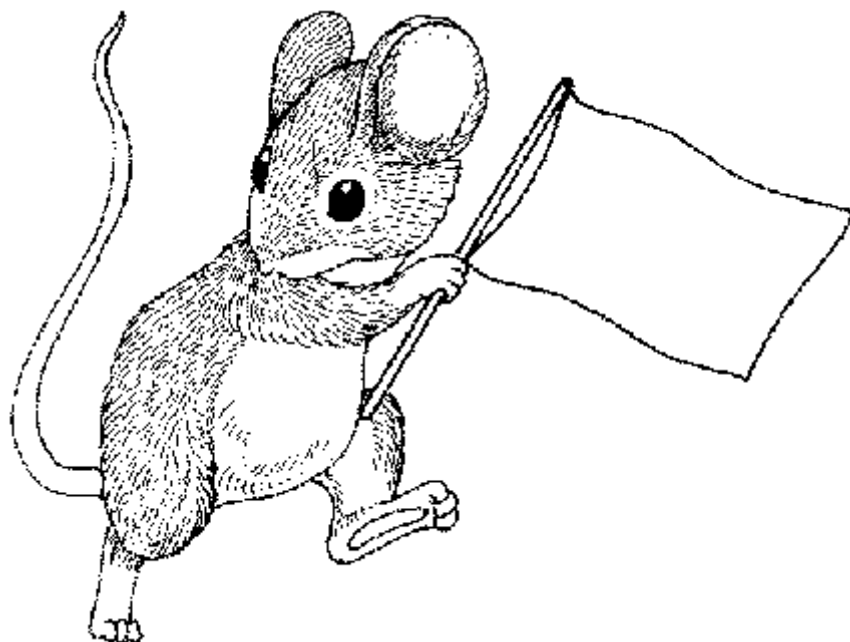
# Our Funny Story!



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# Our Surname Slogan!

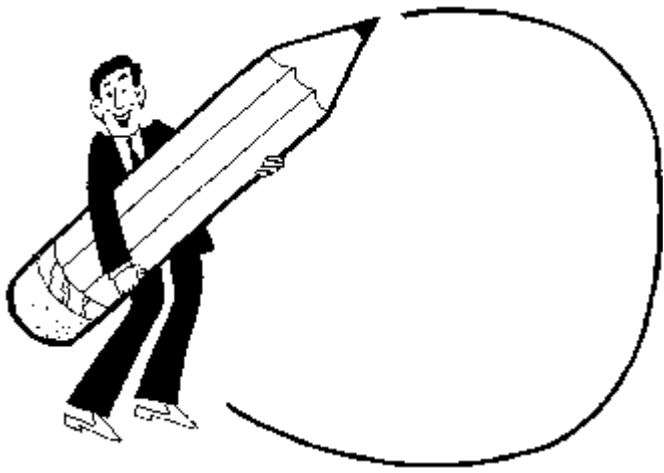



Write your finished slogan here.

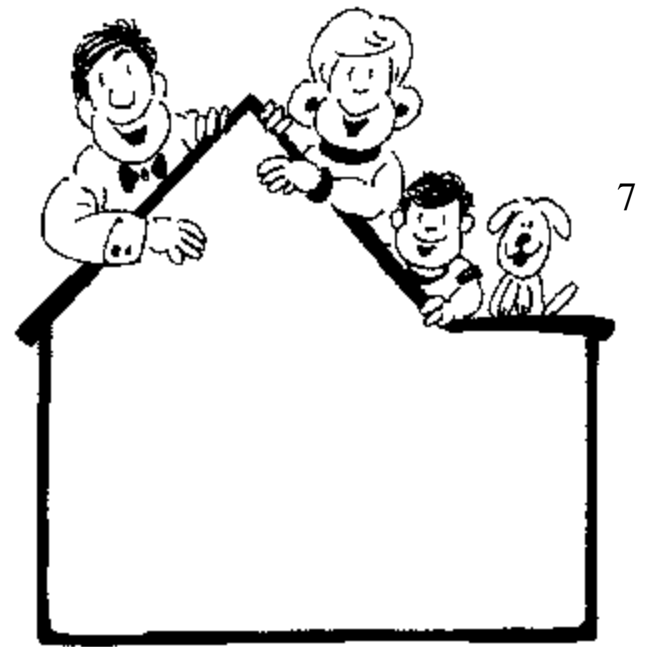


# Our Leaf Collection!

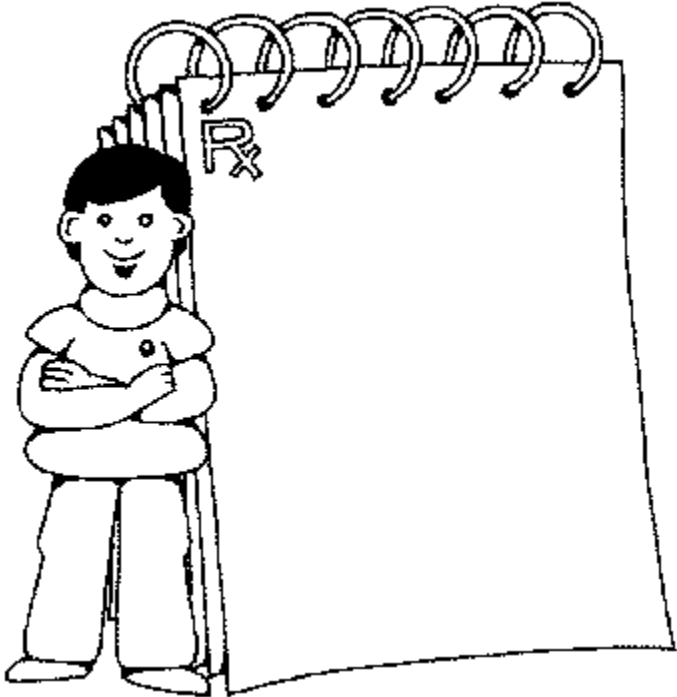




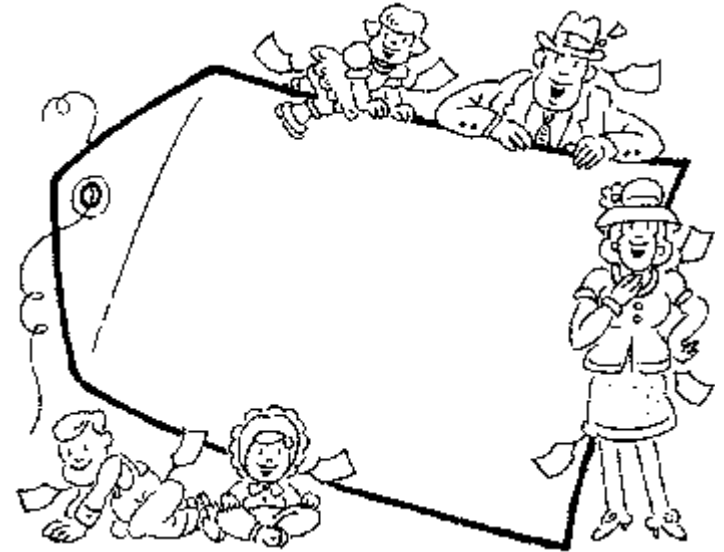
Our Fun Stuff!



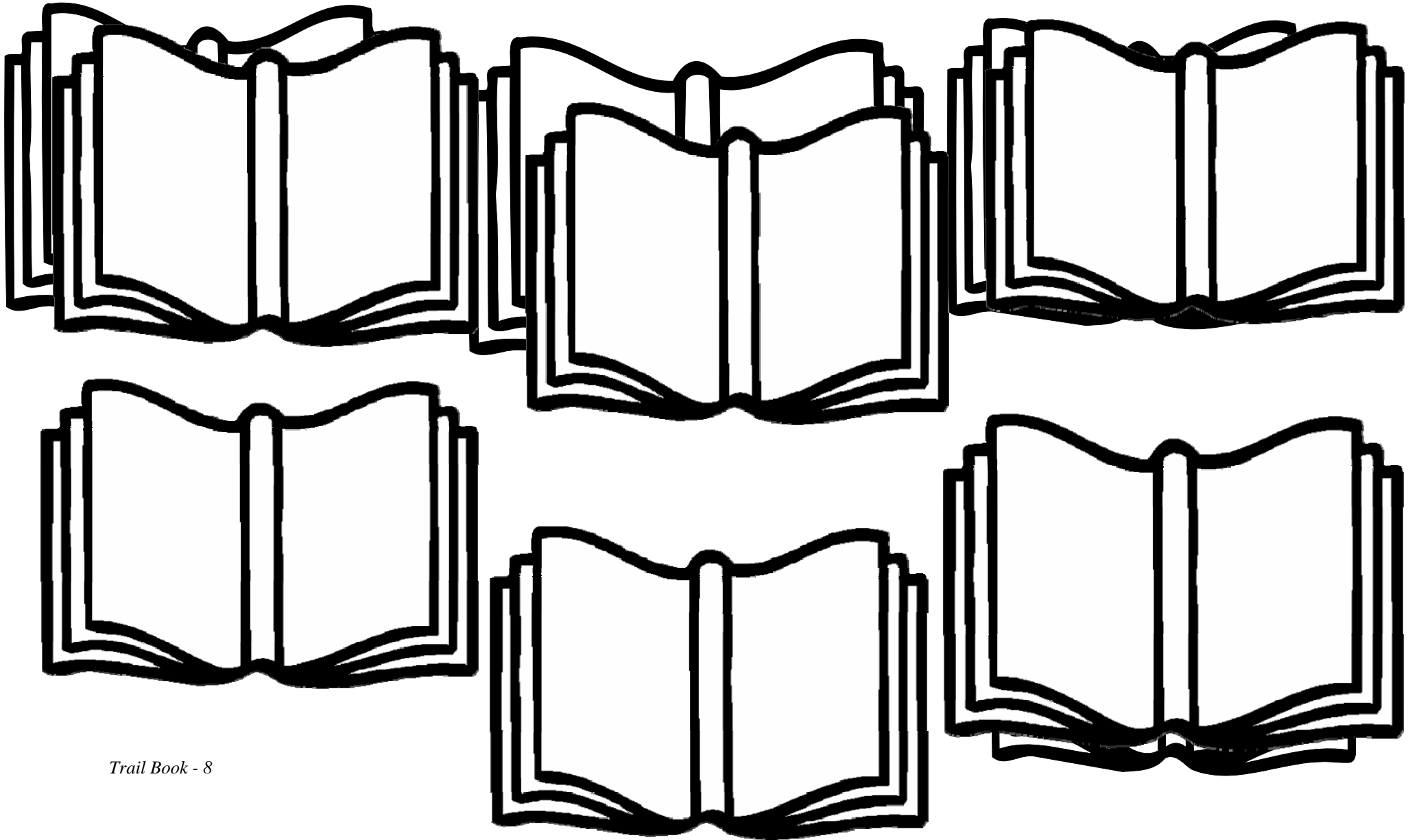
7



Trail Book - 7



# Favorite Bible Texts

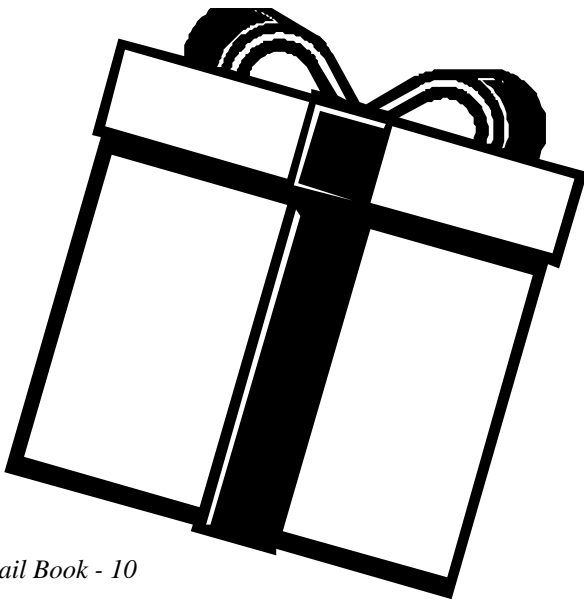




# Our Family Portrait!



# Gifted Moments!



# The Prodigal Daughter

*Adapted from a drama presented by the delegates from the South Philippine Union Conference under the direction of the Family Ministries Director, Pleny Camagay, to the first bi-division Family Ministries Convention for the Northern and Southern Asia Pacific Divisions Beijing, China, October 1999.*

## Cast of characters:

Janet, the prodigal daughter	Casino owner
Mary Grace, the prodigal's sister	Casino waitress
Mrs. Nowadays, the prodigal's mother	Restaurant owner
Mr. Nowadays, the prodigal's father	Restaurant customers
Galadriel, the prodigal's guardian angel	Bus Driver
Savron, an evil angel	Welcoming party
"Friends"	

## Scene 1

*(The setting is a comfortable living room. No one seems to be at home, until a voice off stage breaks the silence.)*

- Galadriel: My name is Galadriel. I am a guardian angel. Before Janet Nowadays was born, Michael the Archangel charged me with her care. This is my eighty-fifth emergency guardian trip to the dark planet Earth because she is in trouble. How well I remember watching over Mrs. Nowadays before Janet was born. Now my hands are more than full trying to protect her daughter's health and well-being! But there are some things I cannot do. I cannot force Janet to make good choices. Right now I'm having the time of my life just keeping her from harming herself! Ever since her eighteenth birthday, Janet has become more and more open about her frustration with her Christian upbringing. She says the Christian way of life just isn't exciting enough. . . . Oh! Here she comes now. Listen for yourself.
- Mary Grace: *(She looks inquisitively at the large shopping bag Janet is carrying.)* Ooooh! Looks like you've been shopping. Show me what's in your bag!
- Janet: Oh Sis, it's no secret what I'm likely to have. But you're going to love this! Look at these new earrings. *(She holds them up to her ears for her sister to admire. She then pulls out a skimpy black dress with sequins and holds it up to Mary Grace.)* Oooo. You'd look like a beauty queen in this. For myself—I'll take one of Princess Diana's collection. *(The girls giggle.)* Want to try on what's here? *(She pulls several outfits from the bag which they hold up to themselves and admire. She then digs to the bottom of her shopping bag and pulls out a couple of new CD's.)* And I got some new CD's too. We wouldn't dare let Mom and Dad hear these. They're just so old-fashioned!

Mary Grace: I don't know, Janet. This stuff's really neat and all, but Mom and Dad make some sense too. Don't you think you're spending a lot of money and that some of these things are a little too . . . , I mean a bit . . . revealing? And that music group you're listening to . . . have you listened to the words of their latest hit? I'm not sure what to think about their values.

Janet: Just be quiet, Mary Grace. I don't need to hear it from you too. I'm sick and tired of all the "discussions." The bottom line is everyone just wants to force me to live my life by their rules. Well, I don't like rules. And anyway, look at me. Can you believe I am still living here in my father's house at my age! Still abiding by his values! He doesn't like jewelry. He doesn't like mini-skirts. He hates my music. But I'm not a child anymore!

Mary Grace: You shouldn't talk like that. It's good of Mom and Dad to provide . . . I mean, what with Dad's heart surgery and all, they need us now more than ever. . .

Janet: *(She cuts her sister off in mid-sentence.)* I don't care. I'm sick and tired of this place. I want to get out and have fun. I want to make a life for myself. I need to find out who I am and what I want to accomplish with my talents. *(She snaps her fingers in a flash of "insight.")* And that's just what I'll do, too!

Mary Grace: *(Shocked.)* What?

Janet: *(Matter-of-factly, like it's no big deal.)* I'll just tell Dad I want my share of his estate, and I'll move to the city.

Mary Grace: Janet! Mom and Dad will be so upset! No! I need you here.

Janet: You'll all get over it. I'm sorry, but this is something I need to do for myself. You do understand, don't you?

Mary Grace: I'm afraid I'll never understand this! *(The girls freeze their action in place while the voice of Galadriel is heard off stage.)*

Galadriel: There! Do you see what I mean? I know what this means. Savron has been getting to her. Savron is the evil angel assigned to Janet by Lucifer. I've encountered him before. His job is to undo all the influences for good in Janet's life. Well, I better be going. I've got my work cut out for me.

*(Galadriel then speaks to Janet, who cocks her head as though she hears someone speaking to her.)*

Janet, do you remember all the fun you've had with your family and friends from the church over the years? Has it really been so unbearable being a Christian? Do you think the limits your parents have placed on your lifestyle are really so unreasonable? Just last night I heard your Dad tell you he loved you as you went off to bed. I know he meant it.

**Scene 2**

*(Mr. and Mrs. Nowadays are sitting in the living room reading. Janet enters.)*

Janet: Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad. Have you got a minute? I need to talk to you about something. *(Mother looks up with a worried look on her face.)*

Dad: *(Lowering his paper.)* What did you say?

Janet: I said I needed to tell you something. Now you both know that I love you very much and I appreciate all that you are doing for me, giving me such a good home and all. I mean, I don't want to sound ungrateful, but I'd like to start living on my own. Other girls my age are already living on their own in the city. And I'm sure I could find a roommate to share expenses . . . .

Mom: But who will you live with? How will you survive on what you can earn? What will you do for transportation? What about school?

Dad: This is a big decision, Janet. Tell me about the money you've saved and the plans you have worked out for . . . .

Janet: Well, . . . I figure if you will just give me my share of the family inheritance now, I'll have enough to get myself set up in the city. Then I'm sure I can find a good job and support myself. Come on, please! This is very important to me.

Mom: I can't believe you're asking . . .

Dad: I think we need to talk this over some more before you do anything rash.

Janet: Why? I'm only asking for my share of the estate now instead of waiting until you die. I'm only asking for what's coming to me. You just want me to wait until I'm an old woman with no time to enjoy the money!

Dad: *(Looking very concerned.)* All right, Janet. You are an adult now. Old enough to make your own decisions. I don't think this is a wise venture, but I'll go to the bank in the morning. *(Mother leaves the room in tears, shaking her head. Janet is all smiles as she plants a big kiss on her father's forehead.)*

Janet: Oh thank you, thank you, Dad. I knew you'd understand!

**Scene 3**

*(The setting is a glitzy casino. Janet enters all decked out in the latest fashions, followed inconspicuously by Galadriel and Savron.)*

Savron: *(Speaking to Galadriel.)* Ha! I've got her now, Galadriel! Yes, I am Savron the Satanic, and your job here is through! You can just go back and tell Michael the Archangel that Janet is mine. Mine! Do you hear?

Galadriel: *(To Savron.)* Oh, no you don't, Savron. I'm not about to leave my post of duty. I have been commissioned by heaven to protect Janet from the likes of you, and I plan to be right here by her side no matter where she goes or what she does. *(To Janet.)* Janet, this is no place for you. The youth from the church have invited you to join their group tonight. They're over at Sue's right now making dinner together. Later they're all going over to the gym to play volleyball. Why don't you head over there right now.

Savron: Janet, Janet. Don't listen to him. You've played volleyball with the youth group all your life. Come with me. I'll show you things you've never dreamed of.

Galadriel: Janet, please. No good can come from staying here.

*(Janet hesitates a minute, then deliberately makes her way into the casino. She is met by several young people about her age.)*

Girl 1: Hi there. I don't think I've seen you around before.

Girl 2: You new in town? What's your name?

Janet: Uh, yeah. My name's Janet Nowadays. I just moved last week.

Boy 1: Oh, really! *(Pausing to admire Janet's figure and slick attire.)* Well then, we'll have to show this young lady around, won't we!

Boy 2: Oh, yes indeed! You just sit right down here with us. We'll take good care of you.

Waitress: Can I get you something to drink?

Janet: I . . . I really don't know.

Girl 1: Yes, of course. Get us, let's see *(counting)* . . . we'll need five of the strongest drinks you have. You'll treat all of us, won't you, Janet?

Janet: Oh, sure . . . *(Janet fumbles in her purse and pays for the drinks. Waitress leaves and returns with the drinks. Group ad lib getting acquainted, leading Janet into a table game where she loses lots of money while continuing to cover*

*the expenses of food and drinks for the crowd. When she has no more money for gambling and partying, her new “friends” leave to look for other company. Janet gets into an argument with the casino owner over who will pay for the last round of drinks and is thrown out.)*

#### Scene 4

*(Janet stumbles on stage, her clothes tattered, looking hungry and sick. To the side is a restaurant table where people are enjoying a meal.)*

Janet: *(Looking longingly at the group enjoying their meal at the table.)* I’m so hungry. I can’t remember the last time I had anything warm in my stomach. I never thought I’d stoop to begging. But my friends are all gone. I have no money. It’s the first time in my life I have really been afraid I might die. *(She makes her way toward the restaurant door, but she is met by the restaurant owner who shoos her away.)*

Restaurant owner: Get away from here. My customers don’t want to look at the likes of you. You’re just a dirty beggar! Be gone! *(Janet turns away, humiliated, sick with hunger and exhaustion.)*

Galadriel: Janet, Janet. I’m so sorry you have to go through this. Your mom and dad would feel so bad if they could see you now. They still love you, Janet. I heard them praying for you only this morning. Why don’t you come with me. We’ll go home together. I know your dad . . .

Savron: *(Cutting Galadriel off.)* Look at you, Janet. I told you I would show you a good time, but I didn’t tell you to spend all your money drinking and gambling. Was that ever stupid! Never mind. We’ll just have to see what we can find for you now. You know you can’t go home! Your father would just throw you out. And Mary Grace, she’s furious at you for what you’ve done. You have no one left but me now, Janet. You can never go home again. It’s just you and me against the world!

*(A woman, dressed in business clothes and carrying a pail overflowing with garbage, emerges from the restaurant, muttering to herself.)*

Restaurant owner: How many times do I have to tell those kids I hired to empty the garbage every day when they clean up the kitchen? This stuff smells awful! The whole place will reek by tomorrow if I don’t get it out of there. But I shouldn’t have to be carrying it around in my good clothes on my way out the door!

Janet: Excuse me, ma’am. I am so hungry. Do you have any work that I could do for you, just to earn a good hot meal?

- Restaurant owner: No . . . no, I'm sorry. I'm on my way home now. The place is closed up. I'm just taking this garbage out to the dumpster so the place won't stink to high heaven tomorrow . . .
- Janet: But ma'am, I'll do anything. (*She looks at the bucket.*) I haven't eaten in three days, and I'm so hungry. I've tried everywhere to find work. Even a few coins would put something in my stomach. Here. I'll take that pail out back for you so you won't spill anything on your fine clothes. You don't have to give me much. Ma'am please, just enough to get myself something to eat.
- Waitress: Okay. (*She fumbles through her purse for a few coins.*) Here. It's not much, but like you say . . . Anyway, take this bucket. The dumpster's out back in the alley.
- Galadriel: You don't have to carry garbage and beg just for a decent meal, Janet. Your dad has food and clothing and love to spare back home. He looks for a letter from you every day. And he spends long hours standing on the porch, just watching up the road toward town.
- Savron: (*With a sneer.*) You think you dad will forgive you and give you another chance? Never! Don't be proud now. You can get that lady to hire you every day to keep the garbage cleaned up. In no time you can get back on your feet all by yourself and be indebted to nobody. You'd have to beg your father to take you back, and that would be so humiliating. And besides, he will never take you back once he finds out you've gone through all that money he gave you!
- Janet: (*Discouraged.*) Look at me. Just look at me! Here I am covered with yesterday's garbage from other people's plates and that even seems appetizing I'm so hungry. I wonder if you could eat this stuff . . . Maybe if I . . . (*Holding her nose, she gingerly puts a piece of slimy lettuce into her mouth.*) Oh, I wish I were home. (*Janet bursts into tears.*) The maids would be out back about now enjoying their dinner, laughing among themselves, munching on whatever they baked today and enjoying a hot drink. . . . (*Shouting to no one in particular.*) I know what I'll do. I'll go home! (*She flings the bucket over her head.*) I'll call Mom and Dad with this change that woman gave me and tell them I'm on my way! The worst that can happen is that they'll say they don't want to see me. I've got nothing to lose. Maybe if I work really hard and do everything I can for them I can earn their love again.

### Scene 5

(*Janet is sitting on the bus, alone with her thoughts.*)

- Janet: (*Musing to herself.*) This is crazy! How do I know Mom and Dad got the message I left on the answering machine? And this bus gets in in the middle of the night! No one's going to be there to meet me at this hour! What if they're out of town? I should have waited another day or two until I could have reached them personally. They probably think I'm dead or dropped off the end of the earth. I should have given them time to recover from the shock! What on earth



will I say to them? I should have been working on this a long time ago. . . . “Dad, you know I always was strong-willed, just like you . . . .” No, don’t go there. “Dad, you know that corner that’s filled with old junk in the barn, well if you’ll just give me food and a roof over my head, I’ll start tomorrow morning to clean that all out. And after that . . . .” No. . . . “Dad and Mom, I know I can’t just ask you to forgive me . . . .” Oh, dear! I haven’t apologized for anything in so long, I don’t know where to begin. . .

Bus Driver: Traverse City. We stop here for only 15 minutes. If you’re going on with us, be back on the bus!

Janet: Well, it’s now or never. I’ll probably just use the restroom and get back on the bus, but . . . (*Janet gets out of her seat and steps through the door of the bus.*)

Crowd of friends and relatives: (*Extended family rush toward her, all dressed in party clothes, with hats, and noisemakers, etc. Cheers and noisemakers and a huge “WELCOME HOME JANET” banner create a festive atmosphere. But Janet has eyes only for the faces of her father and mother. Making her way toward them in the crowd she pours out her heart.*) Dad, Mom, I’m sorry, so sorry. I took all your money and I lost it all. I’ve done everything in the book and look at me! I’m a wreck! I’m dirty, I’m hungry, I’m exhausted, I’m sick. I know you’d never hire the likes of me if I applied for a job at your place, but I will work harder than anyone you’ve ever hired before just for a night in the servant’s quarters and a chance at some leftovers . . . .

Mr. Nowadays: (*Engulfing her in his arms and putting his finger to her lips to stop the flow of words.*) Hush child. What’s all this talk about my hiring you like a maid! That’s utter nonsense! From the day you left your room has been waiting. It’s still there, just as you left it. Except I think your mother put up some curtains she thought you’d like and there are some new posters, if you like, for your walls. Oh, there’s so much catching up to do. So much I want to hear, so much I want to say. But there’s no time for that now. You’ll miss the party! Everyone’s here. Your sister, your aunts and uncles, grandpa and grandma, your cousins, your friends, why the whole town pretty much is over at the place. This bunch followed us to the station they were so excited. Come, come, my precious one. Let’s get you in your party dress! I’ve waited so long for this day!

(*Janet moves toward the crowd arm and arm with her dad and mom. First her sister gives her a bear hug and starts chattering. One by one the others press their way in to greet her and welcome her home.*) In the background, you may wish to have a soloist sing an appropriate song such as “Jesus Loves Me” [SDA Church Hymnal, 190]; “Holy, Holy, Is What the Angels Sing” [SDA Church Hymnal, 425]; “O, How I Love Jesus” [SDA Church Hymnal, 248].

# Marriage Enrichment Groups (MEGs) and How They Work

by Karen and Ron Flowers

## The Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment

### *To join A.C.M.E. in the United States . . .*

Mail your check with the following information to:

A.C.M.E.

P.O. Box 10596

Winston-Salem, NC 27108

Wife's Name; Occupation

Husband's Name; Occupation

Address

Home Phone; Wife's phone; Husband's phone

Wedding Date

Who or what influenced you to join A.C.M.E.?

Annual Dues:

For couple or individual: \$30.00

Lifetime: \$1000.00

Organization \$85.00

### *When you join A.C.M.E. you . . .*

- receive the bi-monthly newsletter, *Marriage Enrichment*.
- join with other couples in promoting enrichment activities within local communities.
- receive discounts on enrichment resources available through the A.C.M.E. office.
- promote growth in your own marriage.
- support the development of Marriage Enrichment materials.
- show that you care about marriage.
- link with a network of others who want to strengthen marriages.
- financially support the work of building strong marriages.
- gain satisfaction from participating in a movement that helps build marriages.

The Marriage Enrichment movement was born in the hearts and ministry of Drs. David and Vera Mace, a Methodist pastoral couple who later became Quakers. Their first couple retreat coincided in 1962 with Father Gabriel Calvo's first Catholic Marriage Encounter in Spain and Methodists Leon and Antoinette Smith's first training program for leaders of marriage strengthening events. Seventh-day Adventists became involved early in both the Marriage Enrichment and the Marriage Encounter movements through the pioneering efforts of Ed and Letah Banks and Al and Betty Brendel, respectively. The church owes a great debt of gratitude to these and other individuals and couples who have since developed a plethora of marriage strengthening programs which have blessed thousands of couples within Adventist churches and the communities they serve. While utilizing a spectrum of approaches, each has brought richness and strength to the church's ministry to married couples. Your church can join the parade of congregations that put energy and resources into keeping marriages strong by providing marital growth opportunities, such as an annual couple retreat and on-going Marriage Enrichment Groups.

As a pastoral couple first in Europe and then in America, and as seminal leaders in the field of marriage counseling, David and Vera Mace avidly pursued their interest in the dynamics of the husband-wife relationship. Their commitment to strengthening marriages was to become the focus of a lifetime of ministry together, culminating in the founding and nurturing of an international, nonsectarian organization for the strengthening

**How to contact A.C.M.E. . . .****United States:**

A.C.M.E.  
 P.O. Box 10596  
 Winston-Salem, NC 27108  
 Phone: 336-724-1526  
 800-634-8325  
 E-mail: wsacme@aol.com

**Australia:**

Gerlinde and Ian Spencer  
 National Chaircouple  
 Couples for Marriage Enrichment Australia  
 85 River Road  
 Greenwich, NSW 2065  
 Australia

**England:**

Ron and Rosemary Foyle  
 National Chaircouple  
 The Association for Marriage Enrichment  
 2 Overcliff Rise, Bassett  
 Hants SO1 7BY  
 England  
 Phone: 01703 392030  
 E-mail: Ron\_rose@rjfoyle.freemove.co.uk

of marriages, the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (A.C.M.E.). Marriage Enrichment Groups (MEGs) is the name given by A.C.M.E. to local church- and/or community-based groups of 6-8 couples who meet regularly to focus on strengthening their marriages. The Marriage Encounter movement also fosters similar follow-up groups to their weekend events. Weekend events can bring about attitude change, but the real work of “growing” a marriage, of building new skills and working through issues in a marriage relationship, is a process which takes energy over time.

The foundation stones upon which MEGs are built are both simple and profound:

1. Couples need other couples.
2. Couples can help other couples.
3. All couples have strengths on which they can build.

A leader couple takes responsibility for organizing the group, planning the venue(s), and making preparation for the meeting. Experience has shown that the most effective MEG groups

contract with one another to meet once a month over an 8-10 month period. At the end of the agreed-upon period, couples may choose to re-contract for another series of meetings together. Re-contracting allows a break for new couples to join the group and for couples to leave who may for one reason or another desire to stop meeting with the group.

Contracting together involves a commitment on the part of the couples to attend the meetings and to share in basic organizational tasks. The purpose is to support one another in their commitment to set aside time and energy for growing together in their relationship as marriage partners. One couple may take the lead in all of the meetings, or the leadership may rotate between couples. It is very helpful if the leader couple has received training in marriage enrichment leadership. Such training is available through the A.C.M.E. organization on several continents. (See contact information provided.) You may also wish to check with your Family Ministries Director about providing this kind of leadership training in your area.

The heart of the MEG process for enriching marriages is couple dialogue. In their experience with thousands of couples who came to them for help, the Maces observed that creating opportunities for couples to dialogue with one another, within the supportive circle of couples with a similar commitment, was a very effective means of promoting couple growth. Dialogue is a skill that can be learned. It is learned best through modeling and experience. In couple dialogue, the husband and wife turn to one another and talk about marital issues common to all couples from their own experience.

The issues to be discussed at a given MEG meeting are usually decided on ahead of time by the

group and introduced briefly by the leader couple in a short presentation and group discussion. Couples are then given a guided exercise to stimulate their personal dialogue. The leader couple usually models the process by dialoguing in the presence of the group, in keeping with the guidelines. These guidelines (Handout 1.1 of the Seminar Resource, “I Still Do”), to which all participants submit, regulate appropriate sharing among couples in the group.

A typical MEG meeting runs 2 - 2 ½ hours. It is often hosted in one of the couple’s homes or at a church. It includes a half-hour of fellowship at the beginning, with perhaps a glass of juice or a hot drink served. It is suggested that the serving of refreshments be kept to a simple drink so that providing food will not become a burden to host couples willing to open their homes. The largest portion of time is carefully guarded for the primary purpose of the meeting—couple dialogue. The couple exercise for the evening may be introduced with a brief presentation. A timekeeper is appointed by the group to assure that closure is prompt at the agreed-upon time.

The Seminar Resource “I Still Do: Choosing Each Other Again and Again” is typical of the sort used in MEG sessions.

# To See Inside My Heart: A Guide to Helping the Wounded to Begin Again

by Leila James

*Author's note: I have been dreading, promising, threatening, hoping to write this THING for quite some time now. Writing it has never been far from my mind because somehow I thought just the act of putting it on paper would bring me some measure of peace, comprehension and closure. I think it has. I hoped too that it would bring understanding to you who have been closest to me these past months since my rape experience. Forgive the times it may read like a reprimand. I do not mean to scold you in any way. Your kindness in reaching out to me in your busyness has all the more firmly established you in my inner circle of friends. I'm just thankful you are my friend. I give you permission to put it aside if you find it too religious, too graphic, too depressing. I only seek to give form to my own thoughts and feelings and to put a light into a dark place so that others, both those in pain and those who hold their hands, may find their way. I pray God can bring some good out of all this pain.*

My dear friend—you who love me and want to help—I know this time of confusion and pain is difficult for you. I am wrapped in my own heavy blanket of dark thoughts and torturing memories, but I sense your desire to reach me. Out of ignorance you may alienate and hurt instead of accomplishing that which you so lovingly long to administer. If our positions were reversed, my response would be like yours. How can we know the right thing to do when such unspeakable horrors have never been a part of our thoughts or lives?

So I offer you signposts that may give you direction along the way. I begin with those which plead “Do Not Enter.” It is not my intent to focus on the negative, but rather to share the thoughts which first struck my consciousness during a time of shock when I didn’t know what to ask for myself. I only knew what did not help. The first few days, weeks, even months were filled with terror and numbness.

As time passed, and thankfully some measure of acceptance and recovery began, I could post “Enter Here” signposts. I could open windows for you on the words and actions I longed for when I was finally able to analyze my own needs.

Lastly, I would like to share with you some facts gleaned from my counselors at the sexual assault crisis center and from my reading on the subject. May our journey together bring peace and healing to both of us.

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*Leila James is a pseudonym.*

## **DO NOT ENTER: What Not to Say**

### **1. “You’re strong. You’ll soon be okay again. You’ll bounce back right away.”**

I might be strong, but none of my inherited or learned strengths have prepared me for abduction, assault with a weapon, and rape. It is true that a strong personal faith, supportive friends and family, and perhaps a generally optimistic outlook provide a firm foundation for the rough road out of hell, but to imply that my “strength” will automatically cancel out a lengthy recovery or eliminate the need to cry, grieve, be angry, or have flashbacks and nightmares, forbids me to heal in my way, the only way I know how.

### **2. “Stop crying. You’re making me feel badly.”**

I’M making YOU feel badly! It is difficult enough dealing with my own trauma without being responsible for your reactions. If you claim to be my friend, please, please allow me a safe haven for my tears and confusion. Don’t force me into silence and isolation.

### **3. “It’s time to put this behind you and get on with life.”**

That’s my struggle! There is nothing I would like better and nothing which is more impossible. Don’t you see? It won’t STAY behind me. It’s not “over” just because I am no longer physically in the presence of my attackers. It is present, ever present, constantly replaying every “what if” in my mind. My life is different now. Things have changed for me. I will never be the same as I was before this happened. I don’t know where to fit this horror into the narrative of my life. Things that used to be a joy are now laced with fears and insecurities. This is not a broken arm that heals in a prescribed length of time and in a highly predictable fashion. “Time” is relative. You may think one week is enough time. Or maybe your generosity will allow me two months. But if I still cry, feel apprehension, have panic attacks or moments of despair five years from now, will this take away my value in your eyes? Perhaps you think this is like a car accident—the inconvenience of finding temporary transportation and the nuisance of dealing with insurance settlement and then it is all over. Dear God, if it were only that easy. I’m truly sorry if you are tired of thinking or hearing about it, but again when you say “It’s time to put this behind you,” I feel you are reprimanding me and demanding that I conform to your agenda.

### **4. “You’re lucky to be alive!”**

Yes, perhaps I am. Maybe with time I will value the gift that was given to me when they “let me go.” Right now I don’t feel so lucky. I feel tortured, betrayed, abandoned and isolated. Not only did I lose control over what happened to my body, I had no control over whether I lived or died. And if this paralyzing fear that sits in my stomach, if this ache of grief and loss that fills my heart, if these “pictures” of replay that occupy my mind are LIFE, then I’m wondering . . . . But I must stress that this lucky-to-be-alive line is not to be confused with telling me you are glad or thankful that I am still alive. Those are welcome words which remind me of my value to you. These two messages have two different, very different, meanings.

### **5. “God must have allowed this for a reason,” or more bluntly, “Maybe God is trying to teach you something.”**

I’m quite certain that God had nothing to do with this. I have a huge “why” I want Him to answer someday, but I think the dimensions of the spiritual battle we are caught in is beyond human comprehension. My concept of God is limited to His relationship with me when in fact He is the Ruler of the whole universe. I have no question that He COULD have knocked those two men into the ocean, but he didn’t. I don’t know why, but He didn’t. And if I believe this came as some sort of discipline, then my

whole affirmation of our call to ministry in this place and my sense of value as a person doing God's bidding, is only broken glass under my feet. I have to believe God was with me on the mountain just as He was with Christ in Gethsemane and on Golgotha, with Mary and Martha at Lazarus's tomb, with Steven as the stones rained down upon him. That's all I have left—the only hope I have to which to cling. And I will not let go!

**6. “You’ll be a better person for going through this experience.”**

How do you know? Maybe I'll be worse. Your saying this makes me feel that I was sadly deficient or a poor learner before. I am praying constantly that God will take the “bad” and create something beautiful and good from it. I believe He can, does, and already has. But somehow these words do not bring understanding, healing or comfort right now. I don't know the future. I can't see the results of my experience. It will only be as I look back from the safe haven of the pearly gates that I will be able to say, “It was worth it all.”

**7. “It must be awful to be violated in such a personal manner.”**

Please don't imply that this crime had something to do with sex. This was not a sexual encounter or an act of passion. Perhaps you think a “loss of purity” is my biggest concern. Oh no! Being terrorized into submission meant a loss of control over everything—my whole body, arms, legs, mouth, private parts—everything physical, mental, and emotional. No! The violation is one of spirit, a cruel theft of security, peace, self-worth, value, simple enjoyment, the safety and renewal of solitude. The rapist sneaks off, leaving his victim behind with a paralyzing curse of fear, apprehension, insecurity, loss of control, worthlessness and numbing isolation. His is a criminal act of power and control.

**8. “You should have . . .” or “You shouldn't have . . .” or “I would never . . .”**

Please don't shovel any more loads of lead into my guilt basket. I have minutely examined every action, thought, motive, until I am physically and mentally exhausted and overcome with shame and despair. I've never known hindsight to be other than 20/20. I didn't want this to happen, plan for it, ask for it, choose it. I'm only struggling to recover from it. Don't blame me. Help me!

**ENTER HERE: Things I Would Appreciate**

**1. Hold me.**

Push away the desperate loneliness and isolation I feel with physical assurances of your caring.

**2. Say “I love you.”**

Of course it does not necessarily have to be these exact three words. It could be “I'm sorry,” “I treasure you,” “You are precious to me,” or anything that assures me of your understanding. My heart cannot “hear” when you preach, lecture, instruct or reprimand.

**3. Believe me.**

Totally, without reserve, believe me. Don't question where I was, what I was wearing, what I said or did, or how I reacted to the attack. We are all human, imperfect and struggling to make informed decisions. And our response to crisis situations at a most basic level becomes the animal instinct to survive. You aren't me. You weren't there. Just let me tell “my” truth.

**4. Listen to me when I need to talk or cry without offering solutions, judgment, censure or doubt.**

Talking about my experience is a desperate effort to find light in the midst of darkness and an understanding of the incomprehensible. I know you would like to think that I have forgotten (for your own peace of mind), and I feel badly when I destroy this illusion. But my being quiet about what has happened won't help me forget.

**5. Recognize recovery as a long, painful process that has no set formula.**

It isn't over with the emergency room visit, the filed police report, the antibiotic "bomb" to combat STD's, or the counseling session. We don't need to go into details and long stories for months to come, but just ask me once in awhile how I'm doing as though you really care about knowing. Then give me the freedom to reply with honesty. Let me know that your thoughts, prayers and love don't stop with my return home.

**6. Affirm my value as a person.**

My self-worth is at zero. I feel confused, ashamed, guilty, and very alone. I question my ability to minister and serve. I wonder if I'm needed or even wanted in this place, or was my "call" just a romantic flight of imagination. Does anyone care that I chose to come back? Please tell me so.

**7. Reach out to me even when I withdraw and push you away.**

My thoughts are so jumbled I don't know what I want or need. When I am so far down, I don't have the energy or will to make healthy decisions or to ask for help. This is why I need you, as my support person, to stick with me—calm, understanding, tender, positive, and "on-going."

**8. Pray for me.**

In the initial shock of the experience, I found myself unable to concentrate enough to speak or think a coherent prayer other than, "Please help me, Lord." Therefore I lean on and am comforted by your intercession. I still have faith in my Savior and my hope in the ultimate victory of good and right is undiminished, but my most basic and exclusive spiritual need right now is to know He is holding me, that He will "quiet me with His love." If you can express this idea to me, I'm longing to hear it. Save the religious platitudes for another time and place.

**9. Let me pick up my shattered life at my own pace.**

Don't force me to do or see things that confront my fears and pain until I'm ready to do so myself. Be patient with me. Give me time. Don't exclude me or assume that I don't want to join in the usual activities, but don't be offended if I choose sometimes to say "no."

**10. Let me know that the knowledge of my pain and trauma did not destroy you.**

I need the assurance that it was okay for me to tell you the truth. I want you to be real in expressing your responses of hurt, horror, disgust, anger or sorrow, just as honestly as you communicated with me before this happened. But hearing about your kids, job, fresh bread, jokes and successes gives stability and normality to my topsy turvy world. I'm struggling to deal with an everyday existence that suddenly seems foreign, overwhelming, and threatening. It would be comforting to know that YOUR world is intact!



### **LEARN WITH ME: Insights from the Journey in the Wider Circle**

In addition to my personal observations and desires, I wish to add a bit of the wisdom and growth I gleaned from other rape survivors. Their stories, though tragic and painful, have allowed me to gain insights into understanding my own confusion and unpredictable responses.

I was appalled by the memory of the numbness that I felt during the attack which resulted in helpless compliance. There was nothing in my mind, after the first desperate struggle, except a heart cry to God for help and deliverance, and the words of the song, “My Jesus I Love Thee.” Why did I just give up? Why didn’t I fight harder, longer? Why wasn’t I planning an escape as the truck bounced up the mountain? I had plenty of time, heaven knows!

Nancy Venable Raine (1998) confirms this experience in her book *After Silence*: “The experience of utter helplessness, established during the first moments of trauma (when the natural fight-or-flight response is blocked completely by inescapable circumstances that cannot be changed, only endured) is a toxin at the core of the self” (p. 151). Helpless human beings rarely spring into action in traumatic situations. It was a relief to know that what happened had a physical cause. But even though I gave mental assent to my husband’s assessment that it would be impossible for a 50-year-old grandmother to overpower and escape from two young strong males wielding a knife, I still catch myself asking the same questions over and over again.

For months following the rape, my inability to concentrate or remember distressed me to the point of tears. As I have already mentioned, I couldn’t even formulate a decent prayer. Five books lay around the house open to the first page or two, but never read further. What was wrong with me? New studies in post-traumatic stress disorder indicate that “overwhelming terror, even a single instance of it, can physically alter the brain forever. . . . New studies into the destructive path that overwhelming experience cuts through the neural pathways of the brain suggest that ‘getting over it’ is nothing short of miraculous. . . [According to one report] the hormones that flood the brain to mobilize it in the face of terror may even be ‘toxic to cells in the hippocampus,’ a brain structure vital to learning and memory, actually shrinking it” (Raine, 1998, pp. 60-62). My memory and learning ability are gradually returning, praise the Lord. For some victims, the loss is permanent.

I could not understand why I felt shame. Why should I be ashamed of something I didn’t do? The shame, I learned, stemmed from the idea that I had somehow made a “deal with the devil.” If I had fought harder, I would have either escaped or died. But I quit fighting. The decision was an unconscious one, not deliberate, and I take no credit for it. However, what seemed wise at the time, suddenly comes under the scrutiny of others who might question this wisdom. Shame results when others react to me with embarrassment or unease. And if intense shame forces me to be silent, then I appear to accept the concept of being caught in an “act of wrongdoing.” I want to hide, disappear. I feel worthless. I also now believe that much of my felt shame resulted from misconceptions about rape which others expressed in word or deed.

Another puzzle was why the “video” in my head kept playing the attack over and over. Why couldn’t I just dismiss it from my mind? The reason is really quite simple. Rape trauma is a “new” experience that my being isn’t prepared to process. I can’t get rid of the scene, and it won’t fit into anything I have known or understood before. Therefore somehow I must rewrite the narrative. I also relive the experience in “an

attempt to master the terror, helplessness, and rage of ‘mortal danger’” (Raine, 1998, p. 193). Almost without exception, rape victims fear for their lives, even when the perpetrator is known to them.

People are free to talk about their car accidents or purse snatchings, so why did my experience feel so different to both others and myself? I desperately wanted to please and obey those who advised me to get on with life. But I couldn’t. Was this just a morbid preoccupation with self and my problems? I learned that rape differs from other traumas because, as in torture, “the source of the injury is another human being acting intentionally, not an inanimate object or an accident of nature or man” (Raine, 1998, pp. 254, 255). This casts the long shadow of the torturer himself in the victim’s subconscious mind. “Rape is evil. It is not an act of God but an act of man” (Raine, 1998, p. 273).

I have already mentioned that rape is not a sexual encounter but an attack on the spirit. The most profound result for me was perfectly stated by another rape survivor. “The feelings of wholeness evoked by my connection with nature, feelings that had been a glimpse of heaven since my childhood, were transformed in an instant into feelings of foreboding” (Raine, 1998, p. 9). Rape is a theft of the feelings of safety, joy and delight that I, as a woman alone, formerly experienced in the solitude of wild, lonely, lovely spots of nature. It is a wound to my soul that shrivels mind and spirit. Once the feeling of safety was robbed from me, I have found it almost impossible to reclaim. Safety meant freedom. Fear means imprisonment. My rapists are free, literally, and I have received a life sentence.

Upon learning of my rape (or someone else’s rape), many women seem to try very hard to find an excuse for the happening. It was because of the clothes, or the location, or the time of day, etc. Therefore, if they don’t look like that, go there, run around at night, this will never happen to them. Wrong. No one is exempt as long as we live on this sinful planet. But I can accept this reasoning as an attempt to distance oneself from an unspeakable nightmare. If you can fabricate some “reason” for the attack, or weakness or mistake on the part of the victim, you subconsciously feel you are immune and safe. Unfortunately, statistics show that most rapes are perpetrated by people known to the victim, and most take place in the victim’s home.

One writer stated that rape victims are in shock for at least four months following the attack. After eleven months, the shock is wearing off for me. I am groping my way out of a dark valley, out of the smothering cold black mist into sunlight—warm, welcoming sunlight. My first “anniversary” is coming up—a time for remembering in a place of “never forgetting.” It is a time of grateful celebration for life, progress, healing, hope—a time of thankfulness to you, my friend, for your arms around me, and to the Lord for keeping His promise to be with me.

I do not spend every day behind walls of pain, but never a day passes without thoughts of the rape intruding into my mind in some form. Nor am I rashly rushing around as though nothing has happened just to prove that I have not been affected. I have tried to be a “learner,” and this piece is written with a desire to share the knowledge without the grief and pain of first hand experience. I am more aware of my surroundings, more tuned in to body language and feelings of discomfort when around other people. I am attempting to balance my fears and apprehension with the desire to live and move and experience new things and places.

I rejoice in the return of joy in simple duties. I greet each morning with growing confidence—good days and bad—knowing that soon the dark glass will be shattered and I will see. And if my picture of trauma and horror can help just one person visualize more clearly the ongoing battle between good and

evil and be influenced to choose good, then I am content. My questions have not been answered, but God promises that perfect love casts out fear. May that love come to rest in my heart.

**Reference**

Raine, N. V. (1998). *After silence: Rape and my journey back*. New York: Crown Publishers.

# Toward Understanding Forgiveness

by Karen and Ron Flowers

Forgiveness is a costly word. Yet it lies at the heart of Christianity. Understanding forgiveness is central to understanding the gospel. Unfortunately, however, many have questions about forgiveness and misunderstanding abounds.

- Is forgiveness the same as tolerance, as finding a reason for the hurtful behavior, as trying to understand and excuse the person who hurt you?
- Is forgiveness just another form of denial?
- Is forgiveness conditional or unconditional or both?
- Can a person be both forgiven and held accountable? Does forgiveness remove all consequences?
- What is the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation?
- How does a person go about forgiving?
- What kind of a process is involved?

Forgiveness is God's gift to families and relationships when deep wounds have created barriers between them. In His design, forgiveness first sets the wounded one free from the destructive forces of revenge and hatred and provides a soothing balm that in time brings healing and release from the awful pain. Forgiveness is also one of God's chosen means to call the culprit to accountability and repentance for the wrong he or she has perpetrated on another. And when the response of both parties allows for forgiveness to come full circle, forgiveness is the only door to a safe and satisfying restoration and reconciliation in the relationship.

## Forgiveness is Not

by Bernie & Karen Holford

**The ostrich approach.** "I know what she did was wrong, but I survived, so it's all fine now." This can cause us to bury our heads in the sand and deny the wrong that was done, rather than dealing with the offence.

**The quilt approach.** "Of course I forgive everyone everything!" Offering a blanket forgiveness for all wrongs ever committed against you is like throwing a pretty cover over a messy bed. Treating all the offences as a whole and not separating offences out to be dealt with individually prevents us from fully exploring our feelings, finding names for our feelings, and working through the individual problems effectively. This approach can lead to denial and avoidance of the real issues.

**The bargaining approach.** "I'll forgive *you*, if *you* do such and such for me." This turns forgiveness into a mechanism for extracting payment in return for forgiveness.

**The psychoanalyst approach.** "It's O.K. You were under a lot of pressure at the time, and you didn't really know what you were doing." This approach is an attempt to rationalize away the offense because of circumstances. It is based on the belief that if a person can understand the wrongdoer's reasons, he/she can make adjustments so it won't happen again.

### The Word “Forgiveness” in Scripture

The word translated “forgiveness” in Scripture has several roots in the original languages. The English language is poor in this regard. Throughout this resource, the Hebrew and Greek words translated “forgiveness” and the richness of meaning they afford are noted.

### Lessons About Forgiveness from the Great Forgiver

All that we know about forgiveness we learn from God. Consider the following passages:

1. Ex. 34:6,7—“. . . forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin . . .” (Hebrew *nasa*, meaning “to lift up, lift away”). Cf. Ps. 32:5.

2. 2 Chron. 7:14—“. . . then will I . . . forgive their sin and will heal their land” (Heb. *salach*, meaning “to send away, let go”). Cf. Dan. 9:19.

3. Ps. 78:38—“. . . he forgave their iniquities . . .” (Heb. *kaphar*, meaning “to cover”). Cf. Jer. 18:23.

4. Mark 11:25—“. . . forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Greek *aphiemi*, meaning “to send or let off or away”). Cf. Matt. 6:12-15; Luke 5:20; Luke 7:47; 11:4; 12:10; 17:3; 23:34.

5. Luke 6:37—“Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Gr. *apoluo*, meaning “to loose away”).

6. Luke 7:42—“. . . so he forgave (canceled) the debts of both” (Gr. *charizomai*, meaning “to be gracious to”). Cf. Eph. 4:32, “. . . forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

### The Process of Forgiveness

In situations where the responses of both persons make it possible for the forgiveness process to be fully completed, Louis Smedes’ book *Forgive and Forget* (1984) describes the process of forgiveness in four stages: we hurt, we hate, we heal, we come together. For a fuller treatment of Smedes’ ideas, see the reprinted article included here entitled “Forgiveness: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve.” In his follow-up book *The Art of Forgiving* (1996), Smedes outlines three mile markers along the journey from pain to healing: (1) we rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us; (2) we surrender our right to get even; and (3) we revise our feelings toward the person we forgive. For a fuller treatment of these points, see the marriage seminar resource included in this Planbook, “I Still Do.”

**The blame-bouncing approach.** “It’s not your fault. If your parents hadn’t divorced (abused you, brought you up so badly, etc.), you would never have behaved the way you did.” This approach takes the blame off the offender and puts it somewhere else, removing the need for owning the problem and taking responsibility for dealing with the offense.

**The eye-for-an-eye approach.** “I want him to suffer as much as he’s made me suffer!” There is a Chinese proverb that says, “Anyone who seeks revenge should dig two graves.” This approach prolongs the suffering and usually widens the circle of persons affected by the problem for generations.

**The mental-eraser approach.** “I don’t remember anything about it any more. I’ve forgotten what happened.” Denial prevents the real issues from being raised and resolved.

**The it-must-have-been-my-fault approach.** “I must have done something that invited the offense.” This approach can lead to false guilt and depression.

**The back-pack approach.** “I can’t let go of the past and all the pain I’ve been through. It has become a part of me now.” This approach holds on to resentments, hurts, and anger and encourages you to become a victim of your past.

On first reading, Bible passages on forgiveness may seem to present a confusing response to the question “Is forgiveness to be conditional or unconditional or both?” On closer look, the passages can be reconciled into a meaningful whole when the Scripture is seen as portraying forgiveness as a multifaceted process with at least two distinguishable parts—unconditional forgiveness and conditional forgiveness. There are unconditional and conditional dimensions to God’s forgiveness. There are also both unconditional and conditional aspects to the forgiveness to which human beings are called.

### **Unconditional Forgiveness**

**God’s objective, unconditional forgiveness.** The essence of the gospel is that, through the cross of Jesus Christ, the human race has been forgiven objectively, that is, apart from whether an individual has received God’s forgiveness or not. This was the good news that was preached by the early church. (See Acts 5:31; 13:38; 26:18; Eph. 1:7—“In him we have . . . the forgiveness of sins” (Gr. *aphesis*). God has forgiven, dealt graciously with, all our trespasses in Christ (Col. 2:13, Gr. *charizomai*). With Christ, forgiveness is present even before the offender asks for it. (Luke 23:34; cf. Rom. 5:6-11). Christ’s forgiveness of our sins took place at the cross. The fountain is prepared from which we may draw. It is the surety of the fountain which gives us courage to come and drink (Rom. 2:4).

**God’s call to us to forgive unconditionally.** The clarion call to forgive unconditionally is sounded in Eph. 4:32: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Unconditional forgiveness is not tolerance; it is not rationalizing. It is not excusing wrong or denying the wrongdoing has occurred. Unconditional forgiveness is a positive decision to let go of my right to revenge and retaliation. It allows the wrongdoer to go free from my punishment. It does not free the wrongdoer from responsibility for what he or she has done, from God’s call to repent, nor from the consequences of his or her behavior. Unconditional forgiveness does not deny the reality that relationships are changed by the hurtful event and may not be recoverable. Unconditional forgiveness in no way

### **Quotable Quotes on Forgiveness**

*by Bernie & Karen Holford*

Forgiveness . . . acknowledges the reality of evil, wrong and injustices, but it seeks to respond to wrong in a way that is creative of new possibilities. Forgiveness signals an approach to wrong in terms, not of peace at any price, nor of a destructive intention to destroy a wrongdoer, but of a willingness to seek to reshape the future in the light of the wrong, in the most creative way. (John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 310)

What does forgiveness really mean? C.S. Lewis said it goes beyond human fairness; it is pardoning those things that can’t readily be pardoned at all. It is more than excusing. When we excuse someone, we brush their mistake aside and do not punish them for it. When we forgive, we not only pardon a failing or a deliberate act of evil, but we also embrace the person and seek to rehabilitate and restore them. Our forgiveness may not always be accepted, yet once we have reached out our hand, we cleanse ourselves of resentment. We may remain deeply wounded, but we will not use our hurt to inflict further pain on others. (Johann Cristoph Arnold, *The Lost Art of Forgiving*, p.16)

circumvents the hard process that moves persons from deep pain to eventual healing and perhaps restoration and rebuilding of the relationship.

The stimulus to forgive unconditionally comes from the awareness of the magnitude of our own forgiveness by God in Christ (Matt. 18:23-27; see Sermon Resource, “If You Don’t ‘Get It,’ You Don’t Get It”). Forgiveness is grace we offer as an extension of our own pardon. We pass on what we have received (Matt. 18:33).

#### **The effects of unconditional forgiveness.**

Genuine forgiveness is a free gift offered in love by the one who has been wronged. It may never be asked for, but it is there—a reservoir of refreshing. To have forgiven already, whether or not forgiveness is asked for, is the balm which brings healing and peace to the heart of the offended one. Forgiveness sets two captives “free” from the destructive malice of payback—the offender and the wounded one.

#### **Conditional Forgiveness**

**With God.** If God’s forgiveness is to be effectual, there must be a response by the sinner (2 Chron. 7:14, Jer. 15:19). As in the parable of the king and the unforgiving servant, forgiveness is present with God (Matt. 18:27), but the sinner must lay hold of it by responding with gratitude, confession and repentance (Matt. 18:32-35, Mark 11:25). Forgiveness of others—the passing along of God’s graciousness—is the surest evidence that we have comprehended the magnitude of God’s forgiveness of us and unclasped our hands to receive His magnanimous gift. David confessed his sin, and Nathan could assure him of God’s forgiveness (2 Sam. 12:13; cf. Ps. 32, 51). While unconditional forgiveness is God’s winsome call to repentance, it is by our confession that we reach out and grasp the forgiveness granted us in Christ (1 John 1:9).

**With one another.** If the unconditional forgiveness extended by the person who has been wronged is to be received by the wrongdoer, there must be repentance (Luke 17:3, 4). Repentance is not a hasty “I’m sorry.” It does not hurry or press the hurting one to suppress feelings of anger and pain. While only God knows hearts, true repentance has recognizable earmarks. A repentant person:

The truth about forgiveness is that it recognizes the immensity of the act which has been perpetrated, the inability of the person who has perpetrated it to make amends (although amends are a good and proper thing), and the emotions within me that say the person does not deserve to be forgiven (they don’t!). It does not eliminate the memory, it draws the memory’s sting, and experience goes a long way to show that memory fades gradually after the act of forgiving has taken place. Forgiveness is an act of will, which comes at the beginning of a process. (Adrian Chatfield, from an unpublished lecture at St. John’s College, Nottingham, England)

Forgiveness is a process of >giving up.’ When we forgive we give up our demands for perfect behavior, perfect justice, perfect resolution and perfect retribution. (Emmaus Associates, *Forgiveness—The Heart of Healing?* Unpublished manuscript.)

If you are trying to forgive; even if you manage forgiving in fits and starts, if you forgive today, hate again tomorrow, and have to forgive again the day after, you are a forgiver. (Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, p. 151)

The one thing essential for us in order that we may receive and impart the forgiving love of God is to know and believe the love that He has to us. (Ellen G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, p. 115.)

- expresses apology
- takes full responsibility for the wrongful behavior and the damage done to the person and to the relationship
- tries to understand and enter as fully as possible into the feelings and pain of the person wronged
- seeks to make restitution in every way possible
- makes changes in attitude and behavior to protect against re-occurrence.

### Reconciliation

Reconciliation—full restoration of the relationship—is not synonymous with forgiveness. Objectively, God has reconciled the human race to God and to each other in Christ. Ephesians 2 declares that the barriers that separate us from each other have been broken down in Christ: “His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (vss. 15, 16). As with forgiveness, the fountain is prepared from which we can draw. However, the gateway to the possibility of reconciliation is repentance. Repentance is the first step toward the changes in attitude and behavior which are necessary before reconciliation is a safe course to be considered.

But even repentance may not be enough to make reconciliation possible. Certainly reconciliation cannot be safely considered until whatever steps are necessary have been taken to stop the hurtful behavior. Even then, the destruction wreaked in the relationship has been so devastating as to leave no building blocks for restoration. For reconciliation to take place, there must be a desire and re-commitment on the part of both to begin again to rebuild love and trust. When such a desire is present, the reconciliation process may come about over time through communication, the processing of the needs and feelings of all concerned, making changes in destructive relational patterns, and the resolution of conflicts and differences in ways that meet the needs of everyone.

### The Power of Forgiveness

Luke 7 (vs. 41ff.) records the story of the woman with the alabaster box. The Pharisee Simon hosting the feast knows the woman and the kind of life she has led and is exceedingly critical of the Master for allowing her touch and accepting her extravagant gift. Jesus tells Simon a story of two debtors—one forgiven much, the other forgiven little. Then he turns to Simon with a most perceptive question: “Now

### Things to remember when I need encouragement *by Bernie & Karen Holford*

- **God has made me very special.** Psalm 139:14; Ephesians 2:10
- **He knows me by name and I am precious to Him.** Isaiah 43:1
- **God loves me and He always has.** Psalm 103:17; Jeremiah 31:3
- **There is nothing that can separate me from His love.** Romans 8:38-39
- **Even when I turn away from Him and make mistakes, He still loves me and forgives me.** Isaiah 43:25; Isaiah 44:22; Psalm 103:10-12; 1 John 1:9; 2 Chronicles 7:14; John 8:11
- **He will supply all of my needs.** Philippians 4:19; Psalm 54:4
- **I have nothing to be afraid of.** Isaiah 41:10; Deuteronomy 31:8; Psalm 118:6; 1 Peter 5:7
- **God is compassionate towards my human frailties.** Psalm 103:13-14
- **Even when I feel weak, He is there, being strong for me.** 2 Corinthians 12:10; 1 Corinthians 1:6
- **He has wonderful plans for my life.** Jeremiah 29:11; Psalm 138:8; Philippians 2:13; Philippians 1:6
- **He wants me to live with Him forever, and He’s making a place for me right now.** John 14:2-3



which one of them will love [the moneylender] more?” With great reluctance, Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.” Little forgiveness produces little love. Much forgiveness produces much love.

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### A Story of Forgiveness

*Submitted by Linda Koh, Family Ministries Director, Southern Asia-Pacific Division*

If you've seen any pictures of the Vietnam War, you've probably seen this picture. A nine-year-old Vietnamese girl, her clothes burned off by the napalm, is fleeing an American-led assault on her village. She is running toward the camera, her mouth open wide in terror and incomprehensible pain.

That picture is forever etched in the mind of John Plummer. He was the American chopper pilot responsible for raining fire that day on the village of Trang Bang. The next day when that picture hit the front pages, John Plummer was devastated by it. For 24 years he carried that image of a burned and terrified girl in his mind. Three marriages, two divorces, a severe drinking problem, and a recent surrender of his life to the Lord Jesus Christ later, he saw the girl's picture again on a television newscast. It was the first John Plummer knew she was still alive. The first time he knew her name. Kim Phuc, now a young woman of 33 years residing in Toronto, lives with pain. Even after 17 operations to repair the damage, thick white scars from the splashing napalm remain on her neck, arm and back.

John knew what he wanted to do. Providentially he was able to find and meet Kim as the speaker at a Veterans' Day observance at the Vietnam War Memorial. When she finished her address, John fought his way through the crowd to her side. For this encounter there was no news photographer to make a record. But it was an equally unforgettable moment. John told Kim who he was, and she just opened her arms to him. He fell upon her neck sobbing. All he could say was, "I'm so sorry. I'm just so sorry." Amidst his sobs, she repeated the words he longed to hear. "I forgive. I forgive."

# Beyond Betrayal

by Dick G. Waggener

When infidelity occurs in a marriage, can it survive? What will it take to rebuild a marriage after an affair has been discovered or revealed? How can the betrayed partner begin to trust again? What must the betrayer do to take responsibility for the infidelity?

Answers to these questions are not simple, nor are they the same for every couple. However, for the couple willing to reinvest and take certain basic steps toward renewal, it is possible for a marriage to survive infidelity. It takes a lot of communication and a lot of understanding of the relationship and what happened. Here are typical questions that a couple must face and steps that must be taken for the survival of the marriage.

The first core question for both partners is: “Do I want this marriage to survive? Am I willing to reinvest in our future?” Often the answer has to be provisional at first: “I am willing to work for the survival of our marriage provided my partner is equally invested.”

## **Deal with the Pain**

Early in the process, the pain must be dealt with—by both partners. When infidelity is discovered or revealed, the pain can be devastating for the partner betrayed. It is like a death in the family. Indeed, the innocent dream of exclusivity formalized in the wedding vows is gone forever. Its death must be mourned, and the grief process runs the gamut from shock, to despair, to anger. Recovery from infidelity is

never easy for the one betrayed. And the betrayer, if conscientious at all, will live the rest of his or her life with deep regrets. God certainly understood His creation when He instructed, “Thou shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14). He does not want His creation so devastated.

Another core question that must be answered is, “Where does the commitment of the unfaithful partner lie?” How the partners deal with the pain of the infidelity will provide a good indicator of the marriage’s chances for survival. Rebuilding is possible if the betrayed partner is allowed to and is willing to feel and express all the emotions, and if the unfaithful partner is willing to acknowledge and respond adequately to the impact of the affair on his or her mate. If the betrayer too soon asks the question, “Can’t we just put this all behind us?” he or she is not wanting to deal with the pain caused by the affair. This may indicate a lack of commitment.

## **Communicate**

The affair must be discussed. Typically, there are many questions the betrayed partner has about what happened. Such partners often sound like a courtroom interrogator and the betrayer quickly becomes defensive, reluctant to face the affair. What lies beneath these questions, however, is the partner’s need to know the answer to the core question, “Can I ever trust my partner again?”

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One couple found a creative way to get through this phase of recovery. When discovered, he admitted his liaison with his secretary, ended the affair, asked his wife to stay with him, and they committed to rebuilding their relationship. As is so often the case, the wife had a myriad of questions about what happened and why. By common agreement, she wrote her questions, as they occurred, in a special journal. They both committed to regular sessions of uninterrupted time in which he would browse the journal, choose which questions he would respond to, and discuss openly with her as he became more comfortable talking about something he would rather forget.

### Understand

The rebuilding process requires a vigorous pursuit of a better understanding of what has happened in the relationship. An affair is one marital partner going outside the marriage to seek what the marital contract has reserved for the marriage. It is usually marked by secrecy and conspiracy. The resulting behaviors typically trigger suspicion and heightened anxiety in the mate being betrayed.

Although all affairs are sinful in God's sight, we need to understand that all affairs are not alike. Subotnik and Harris, in their recent book, *Surviving Infidelity: Making Decisions, Recovering from the Pain*, (Bob Adams, Inc., 1994) concluded that "affairs fall along a continuum according to the degree of emotional investment the unfaithful spouse feels toward the lover."

The lowest emotional investment is found in the **serial affair**. The betrayer who is involved in a series of one-night stands and/or a series of many affairs is on a quest to find sex in the excitement of knowing there is no commitment, no accountability. It is a way to distance, a way to medicate psychic pain, or an escape from reality. Because they are addicted to sex, serial lovers seldom stop their behavior. In this kind of

infidelity, the betrayer's emotional connection to the "lover" is not serious, but the errant behavior is very serious. If it ever ends, it will probably be because of some major trauma, such as a death, a major illness, or a loss of position.

**The fling** is a one-time act of infidelity, with no real commitment to the new sexual partner. It is a one-time act because one or both lovers react negatively to the infidelity themselves, realizing the potential devastation it could cause if continued. While the revelation of such an affair is painful, recovery from it can be full and complete.

**Romantic love affairs** involve a high degree of emotional investment on the part of the lovers. The relationship is not taken lightly. It may have begun with a fling that did not stop at the first sign of reality. This kind of affair is marked by the struggle of decision making. The lovers must decide either to end the affair or to divorce and marry each other. This is usually a difficult and tumultuous time. If the decision is made to end the affair, then rebuilding the respective marriages becomes more viable. If the affair is exposed before any decision is made, rescuing the marriages becomes more difficult. The decision still must be made in the midst of the pain and devastation erupting at the discovery.

**The long-term affair** often began with a romantic love affair in which a decision could not or would not be made. The partners become so emotionally invested they cannot extract themselves. They often feel more married to the lover than to their own mates. This kind of affair is not easily abandoned, and there must be clear lines of delineation or disengagement defined and adhered to for any marital recovery to succeed.

### Repair

The process of repairing a broken marriage is best carried out with the skills of a Christian marriage counselor. Clearing the air, dealing with blame, learning to define and communicate needs, and

rebuilding trust are major undertakings that need professional guidance. If the offending partner is not willing to go for this kind of help, his or her commitment should be questioned. Committing to this kind of repair is a clear sign of good faith.

Then, and only then, is forgiveness\* viable. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ demonstrates to us that forgiveness never comes without suffering. In the case of a marriage betrayed, good sense sees true forgiveness accompanied by a lot of

hard work—work that may be rewarded with a marriage that is better than ever.

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*\*[Editors' note: We believe the author speaks here of forgiveness that has come full circle to include reconciliation.]*

# Forgiveness: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve

by Lewis B. Smedes

*In this article, condensed from his book *Forgive & Forget*, Lewis Smedes opens up a whole new understanding on this vital subject.*

If you live long enough, chances are you'll be hurt by someone you counted on to be your friend. If you're like me, you may let that hurt fester and grow until it stifles your joy.

Our wounds may look superficial to others, but we know better; after all, we're the ones who feel them.

## Forgiving . . . The Only Way to Be Fair to Ourselves

You worry that people who hurt you are not getting what is coming to them. But you worry, too, that you are getting a bad deal; you get hurt and do not get even. Forgiving may not seem fair to the people who must do it.

But you are not thinking clearly when you refuse to forgive on grounds that you would not be fair to yourself. Forgiveness is the *only* way to be fair to yourself. Getting even is a loser's game. It is the ultimate frustration because it leaves you with more pain than you got in the first place.

Recall the pain of being wronged, the hurt of being stung, cheated, demeaned. Doesn't the memory of it fuel the fire of fury again? Suppose you never forgive, suppose you feel the hurt each time your memory lights on the people who did you wrong. And suppose you have a compulsion to think of them constantly. You have become a prisoner of your past pain.

Your own memory is a replay of your hurt—a videotape within your soul that plays unending

reruns of your old rendez-vous with pain. You cannot switch it off. Is this fair to yourself—this *wretched justice of not forgiving*. You could not be more unfair to yourself.

The only way to heal the pain that will not heal itself is to forgive the person who hurts you. Forgiving heals your memory as you change your memory's vision.

When you release the wrongdoers from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life.

You set a prisoner free—yourself.

## What Is Forgiving?

The act of forgiving, by itself, is a wonderfully simple act; but it always happens inside a storm of complex emotions.

*We forgive in four stages.* If we can travel through all four, we achieve reconciliation.

The first stage is **hurt**: when somebody causes you pain so deep and unfair that you cannot forget it, you are pushed into the first stage of the crisis of forgiving.

The second stage is **hate**: you cannot shake the memory of how much you were hurt, and you cannot wish your enemy well. You sometimes want the person who hurt you to suffer as you are suffering.

The third stage is **healing**: you are given eyes to see the person who hurt you in a new light. Your memory is healed; you turn back the flow of pain and are free again.

The fourth stage is the **coming together**: you invite the person who hurt you back into your life; if he or she comes honestly, love can move you both toward a new and healed relationship. The fourth stage depends on the person you forgive as much as it depends on you; sometimes he doesn't come back and you have to be healed alone.

We need to sort out our hurts and learn the difference between those that call for the miracle of forgiveness and those that can be borne with a sense of humor. If we lump all our hurts together and prescribe forgiveness for all of them, we turn the art of forgiving into something cheap and commonplace.

The hurt that creates a crisis of forgiving has three dimensions. It is always **personal, unfair, and deep**. When you feel this kind of three-dimensional pain, you have a wound that can be healed only by forgiving the one who wounded you.

Never underestimate the demands that forgiving puts on an average person's modest power to love. Some skeptics, when they heard Jesus forgive people, challenged: "Who can forgive sins, but God alone?"

Nobody seems to be born with much talent for forgiving. We all need to learn from scratch, and the learning almost always runs against the grain. Yet, people do forgive—ordinary people, not saints—and they do heal themselves of terrible pain.

### **With A Little Understanding**

When we get hurt we are half-blinded by our pain. There is always more going on in an encounter with pain than meets the eye of somebody freshly hurt; it takes a while to see it.

Even longer to understand it.

Understanding your enemies helps bring them down to size. When we first feel the raw smart of an unfair assault, we draw a bloated caricature of that person—twice as large, twice as powerful, and twice as evil. Rotten to the core.

Sometimes, by understanding *some* of what was really going on inside the person who hurt you, you make forgiving a little bit easier for yourself.

Careful, though; you are not going to understand *everything*. Those who hurt you did not really have to do it; they could have acted differently. To that extent, you will always be left with mystery; you can never fully understand evil *freely* chosen.

The hardest person for me—ever, in my whole life—to forgive was Mrs. Broutmeier. Mrs. Broutmeier lived in a yellow frame house across the street from the smallish house my father built.

My parents shipped off third-class to the United States from Holland, as soon as they were wed. My father lived just long enough to see five children born and to get his own house almost built on Amity Avenue in Muskegon, Michigan. Then he died, only thirty-three years old. Left alone, with few skills and no money, my mother put bread on our table and clothes on our bodies by cleaning other people's houses and washing other people's clothes in a second-hand Maytag that broke down every other Monday.

I should explain that the Broutmeiers were our "betters." What made them "better" was partly that Mr. Broutmeier had a steady job and Mrs. Broutmeier stayed home and kept her children's noses clean. But their "betterness" came out most plainly in the accent factor; they spoke English like real Americans. They were second-generation people; they knew how to talk.

Mrs. Broutmeier, in all her true American

betterness, became a monster. She had a co-monster next door, too, and every day one of them would report the delinquencies of my mother's grubby kids to her as she came home from that day's scrubbing.

Once they both came across Amity to deliver to my mother their well-considered counsel that she should give her two youngest children—my brother Wesley and me—away as orphans, the reason being that my mother lacked the money and the savvy to care for us all in a proper manner. They got my mother to feel that it was a shameful thing for a woman with a brood of little children to let her husband die so young, and an immoral thing to be talking to real Americans with a foreign accent.

Deep down, where God's gift of dignity was simmering in her soul, my mother raged, she seethed, she was a goddess with fire in her bosom. And one Saturday night, the latest Broutmeier slap at one of her children popped the safety valve on her fury.

She left the kitchen and strode head down, face red, fists tight, through the dining room, the living room, and out the front door. With apron string fluttering behind her, she stalked across Amity and up the Broutmeier front stoop to lay siege on the monster. The hosts of heaven never had a chance to stop her.

The five of us huddled around our bay window; we could see it all from there.

She pounded on the front door and, when Mrs. Broutmeier opened it a wedge, she pushed it aside and walked into the devil's lair. Face aflame, eyes brimming with tears, finger cocked straight at the shocked Broutmeier eyes, the widow Smedes launched a frenzied defense of her beloved brood.

Mrs. Broutmeier retreated to the dining room and took up a protected position on the other side of the round oak table. My mother used the table

as a pulpit, pounding on it with her fist as she delivered her furious, inspired, prophecy against Broutmeier and on behalf of her own children. Mrs. Broutmeier sputtered something about the police, about calling them, and about being attacked by a woman gone crazy.

The word "crazy" seemed to bring my mother to her humiliated senses. Was she crazy? Maybe she was. She didn't know. Better get out of there just in case.

She walked, head still down, face white now, back across Amity, up our front porch, into the living room, past her children clustered at the window; she didn't look at us, didn't say anything to us, but strode straight ahead, through the dining room and kitchen, into the bathroom, and vomited. Then she wept.

I do not remember when she came out or what she said to us when she did. What I do remember is that we were sure Mrs. Broutmeier had done us all in. We would never have a friend in the neighborhood again. I grew up hating Mrs. Broutmeier. I wanted her house to burn down. I hoped her children would fail in school and get into a lot a trouble.

Have I forgiven her?

I am still in the process of forgiving her. I enjoyed my hate too long. But I could never have forgiven her at all if I had not also tried to understand her.

I learned something about people who were born Americans, but from the womb of an immigrant. The Broutmeiers were second-generation immigrants with second-generation problems; they felt second-class to third-generation Americans, their "betters"—the "real" Americans. I came to understand that our "inferiority" was a stool she stood on to lift herself to the level of the people a rung above her. In short, I came to see her as a weak, needy, and

very silly woman who was using cruelty as a way of coping.

But I do not understand everything. Something about her cruelty is still beyond my grasp. She freely *chose* to hurt a decent woman, a neighbor who badly needed a friend, and such a choice is never to be completely understood.

It also helps if you can understand yourself a little better. With a little time, and a little more insight, we begin to see both ourselves and our enemies in humbler profiles. We are not really as innocent as we felt when we first hurt. And we do not usually have a gigantic monster to forgive; we have a weak, needy, and somewhat stupid human being.

When you see your enemy and yourself in the weakness and silliness of the humanity you share, you will make the miracle of forgiving a little easier.

### **With Anger Left Over**

Is there anger after forgiving? Yes, often. It can't be helped.

Some people believe that they should not feel anger in their hearts once they forgive. I do not agree. I think that anger and forgiving can live together in the same heart. You are not a failure at forgiving just because you are still angry that a painful wrong was done to you.

You cannot erase the past. You can only heal the hurt it has left behind. When you forgive, you heal your hate for the person who created that reality. But you do not change the fact. And you do not undo all of their consequences.

Can you look back on the painful moment—or painful years—without a passionate, furious, aching longing that what hurt you so much had never happened? Some people probably can. But I don't think you should expect such placid escape from terrible memories. You can be angry still, and you can have your anger without hate.

Once you start on your forgiving journey, you will begin to lose the passion of malice. A man slowly finds himself wishing his ex-wife well in her new marriage. A father is surprised at how desperately he wants his rebellious daughter to be happy. We wish a blessing on the frail humanity of the person who hurt us, even if we were hurt unfairly and deeply.

What is happening? Malice is gradually fading, just as your head gradually stops pounding after you take three aspirin. You have anger without malice—a sign that your forgiving is real.

Anger minus malice gives hope. Malice, unrelieved, will gradually choke you. Anger can goad you to prevent the wrong from happening again. Malice keeps the pain alive and raw inside your feelings, anger pushes you with hope toward a better future.

There are three things you can do to drain the poison of malice while you use the energy of anger. They may be worth trying.

First, *express your malice*. Be specific, nail the object of your fury down. It doesn't help to let malice fester as an ugly glob of undirected misery. And it doesn't help to throw it at people, either. But you need to express it to somebody who can help get rid of it. You can express it secretly to God, or to someone who represents God to you.

Then you can *let God handle* those people you would like to manhandle in your hate. If they need teaching, let God teach them. If they need rescuing from their own stupidity, let God rescue them. If they need saving from their own crazy wickedness, let God save them. What you need is *healing* from the infection of malice left over from the open wounds they left in your life.

Finally, you can even *try a prayer* for the peace of the person you hate. If you do, you may



discover another secret of forgiving; you don't have to choke your anger, you only have to surrender your malice. For *your* sake.

Malice is misery that needs healing. Anger is energy that needs direction. After malice, let anger do its reforming work. Forgiving and anger can be partners in a good cause.

### **Know Whom—And What—You Are Forgiving**

Forgiveness cannot heal our narcissistic resentments toward people for not being all that we expect them to be. Nobody can really forgive people for being what they are. Forgiveness wasn't invented for such unfair maneuvering.

We overload the circuits of forgiveness when we try to forgive people for being burdens to our existence, or for not being the sort of people we want them to be. There are other means for coping with the threads of tragedy that are woven into the fabric of our lives. They go by such names as courage, empathy, patience, and hope. And God knows they come hard.

But pain compounds itself when we try—and fail, as we are bound to—to forgive people for being themselves. Resentment is added to resentment. We blame them for our failure to forgive them, as well as for wronging us.

We also end up feeling sorrier for ourselves than we did before, and guiltier too, because now, besides everything else, we are ashamed of ourselves for not being able to forgive. Our pain feeds on itself. It grows like an invisible carcinoma.

The forgiving that heals focuses on what people *do*, not on what people *are*.

### **A Little at a Time**

The worse you've been hurt, the longer it takes to forgive. Minor bruises can be handled quickly. But when you've been sliced and diced inside your being, you'd better count on a longer

process.

Ordinary people forgive best if they go at it in bits and pieces, and for specific acts. They bog down if they try to forgive people in the grand manner because wholesale forgiving is almost always fake. Forgiving anything at all is a minor miracle; forgiving *carte blanche* is silly. Nobody can do it. Except God.

The first rule for mere human beings in the forgiving game is to remember that we are not God.

### **What Is It Like To Feel Forgiven?**

Forgiveness is fundamental to every other good feeling.

Think of the feeling you have when you finally manage to do what you have been trying to do forever: "I did it! I did it!" The feeling is triumphant. Or the feeling of relief at seeing a familiar landmark after you've been lost and almost out of gas.

These are all jubilant feelings, but none of them is fundamental. They do not make or break our joy. But the fundamental feeling makes a difference to everything.

You feel forgiven at the ground floor of your being, where everything else rests. It is a feeling of total acceptance, a feeling lodged in your deepest self, a feeling that no bad thing you do can take away. You feel totally affirmed, totally loved, totally received. Your entire being is rested because you feel that nothing can separate you from the source of love, even though you cannot do enough good things to earn your right to be there. You know that nothing can really hurt you now.

One sure way of missing out on the fundamental feeling is to worry too much about being a spiritual success. We all want badly to have a place in the sun, nestled securely alongside

the lucky people who have made it and who think very well of themselves for succeeding so well.

But sometimes we need to look at ourselves more honestly, to follow our feelings into the darker regions of our lives where we are neither very pretty nor very pure. We are mixed breed, shadow and light, weak and strong, foul and clean, hate and love, all at the same time. Our middle name is ambiguity. Admitting this fundamental ambiguity opens us to the fundamental feeling of being forgiven.

Obsession with spiritual success can take you on idiotic detours around the fundamental feeling. I know a man who needs to be good so badly that he cannot face up to the puniest fault. He often groans about being a poor, poor sinner—always in gorgeous generalities, and always as a trick to get people to reassure him of his unusual virtue. But when his wife complains that he forgot to take out the garbage, he is ready to hire a criminal lawyer to defend himself against her indictment.

Why? The reason is simple: his passion to be a spiritual success will not let him fail at anything at all. He needs to be terribly good because he is scared to death of being the least bit bad. And he loses his chances at the fundamental feeling of being forgiven.

Let me speak for myself. When I am most anxious about my personal worth I become an armed guard of my ego's imperial highness. If someone assaults my self-esteem, I call up all my reserves to defend myself. I get rigid, grim, frightened; I am poised for attack. I cannot allow myself to accept the feeling of being forgiven.

But in the same awful hours of emptiness, when I knew that I could not win my case by defending my virtue, I have emerged feeling forgiven—and free and joyful and hopeful as well. I was free to forgive. Liberated by the fundamental freedom of being forgiven.

Corrie Ten Boom was liberated from a Nazi concentration camp a few days after the Allies conquered Germany. It took longer to be liberated from her simmering hate and to forgive the Nazis who had dehumanized her life in the camps.

In forgiving, she believed she had discovered the only power that could heal the history of hurt and hate for the people of Europe. So she preached the *possibilities* of forgiveness. She preached it in Holland, in France, and then in Germany, too.

In Munich one Sunday she preached forgiving. Outside, after the service was over, a major drama of the human spirit unfolded. A man walked over and reached out his hand to her, expecting her to take it. "Ja, Fraeulein Ten Boom, I am so glad that Jesus forgives us all of our sin, just as you say."

Corrie knew him. She remembered how she was forced to take showers, with other women prisoners, while this beast looked on, a leering, mocking "superman," guarding helpless naked women. Corrie remembered. He put his hand close to her. Her own hand froze at her side.

She could not forgive. She was stunned and terrified by her own weakness. What could she do, she who had been so sure that she had overcome the deep hurt and the desperate hate and had arrived at forgiving, what could she do now that she was confronted by a man she could not forgive?

She prayed. "Jesus, I can't forgive this man. Forgive me." At once, in some wonderful way that she was not prepared for, she felt forgiven. Forgiven for not forgiving.

At that moment—in the power of the fundamental feeling—her hand went up, took the hand of her enemy, and released him. In her heart she freed him from his terrible past. And she freed herself from hers.

The linkage between feeling forgiven and the power to forgive is the key to everything else.

### **Forgiving Fits Faulty People**

And we are all faulty. The best of us belong to the universal club where nobody dares throw the first stone. For us to forgive others, then, has a certain congruity about it, a kind of fittingness, for the mixed bag of vice and virtue that we all are.

All this explains why Jesus was so tough on sinners who refused to forgive other sinners. He saw the laughable incongruity of people who need to be forgiven a lot turning their backs on people who need a little forgiving from them.

He tells a story about a palace servant who was forgiven a large debt; his king forgave him a debt of ten thousand talents, a sum it would take fifteen years to pay off in labor. After he was forgiven this enormous debt, the servant met a man who owed him a mere hundred denarii, a sum that could be worked off in a day; the king's servant demanded every denarius. When the king heard, he summoned the servant, *took back his forgiveness*, and slapped him into servitude to work off the ten-thousand talents to the last denarius.

The story is about God and us. If we act like the unforgiving servant, God will act like the king. But why is Jesus so tough on us?

He is tough because the incongruity of sinners refusing to forgive sinners boggles God's mind. He cannot cope with it; there is no honest way to put up with it.

So he says: If you want forgiving from God and you cannot forgive someone who needs a little forgiving from you, forget about forgiveness you want. Take away the eloquence of King James English and you get Jesus saying something like this: If you refuse to forgive other people when you expect to be forgiven, you can go to hell.

How do you usually respond to people who hurt you? Do you always go for the jugular? Do you plan revenge every time someone treats you badly? Is getting even a way of life? If you never even *want* to forgive, never even *try* to remove a hateful memory and restore a loving relationship, you are in a lot of trouble.

If you are trying to forgive, even if you manage forgiving in fits and starts, if you forgive today, hate again tomorrow, and have to forgive again the day after, you are a forgiver. Most of us are amateurs, bungling duffers sometimes. So what? In this game nobody is an expert. We are all beginners.

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# The Prodigal Father

## *Seeking Forgiveness and Becoming a More Effective Dad*

by Wade F. Horn

By almost every measure, Jeffrey Stiefler was an American success story. At age 47 he was president of American Express, one of the nation's largest and most successful financial companies. He had a luxurious office on the 51<sup>st</sup> floor of the American Express Tower, membership in all the best clubs, and unlimited access to the company's many corporate jets. But he also had been married four times and rarely saw his children on a weekday for more than 15 minutes. So at the height of his career, he decided to quit—leaving behind a \$4-million-a-year job—and spend more time with his family.

Many Americans would also view Quincy Jones as a success. A Grammy award-winning producer and composer, he had it all: money, power, and fame. He also had seven children by three ex-wives and a girlfriend. So at age 62, he too decided to reduce his work commitments and spend more time being a father to his children. "As I got older," he said, announcing his decision, "I realized being a great father is not just providing a roof over my children's heads."

What these two men have in common is profound regret—that they didn't spend enough time with their families and their children. What these two men also have in common is hope—that it is not too late to change things and that they will be forgiven for the lack of time and attention they gave their loved ones.

Unfortunately, these concerns are—or ought to be—shared by millions of men. Overall, parents today spend roughly 40 percent less time with their children than did parents a generation ago. One recent study found that almost 20 percent of 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders had not had a good conversation lasting for at least 10 minutes with at least one of their parents in more than a month. Indeed, a 1992 Gallup poll found that 50 percent of all adults agreed fathers today spend less time with their children than their fathers did with them.

Children pay a terrible price when they grow up without an engaged and committed father in their lives. Compared to children living with involved fathers, those without engaged and committed fathers are more likely to repeat a grade at school or drop out. They are also more likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems, commit suicide, suffer health problems, and become criminals. Children, it seems, need their fathers.

Men are beginning to realize they need to be good fathers to their children. For example, stadiums bulging with Promise Keepers reflect that men are seeking to renew their commitment to their children. But can a man who realizes he has not been an involved father get forgiveness from his children and move toward more involved fathering?

### **Steps for obtaining forgiveness**

Fortunately, the answer is yes. But there are

plenty of hidden land mines along the way that can disrupt and even end the journey to more committed fatherhood. If you are a father seeking a new and healthier relationship with your family, here are some suggestions:

**Step One: “First, to thine own self be true.”** The initial step is understanding why you are a disengaged father in the first place. Many fathers make mistakes of assuming the first step is to ask for forgiveness. But if you do not learn what led you to be an uninvolved father, it is likely you will eventually repeat the process.

Countless circumstances can lead to a disengaged father. For example, some men grew up with a disengaged father themselves and therefore lacked a model as to what involved fathering is all about. Others grew up with an abusive father and are so afraid of losing control with their own children that they avoid establishing intimate relationships with them. Still others have been led to believe that bread-winning is the only important role a father can play in his family.

I am not suggesting you need to enter long-term psychotherapy to uncover all of your underlying motivations. But becoming aware of the causes for past transgressions gives you more control over your own behavior, making it less likely you will repeat past mistakes. And it allows you to accept personal responsibility when asking for the forgiveness of others.

**Step Two: “Slowly I turn, step by step.”** Men tend to be results oriented, and the quicker a result can be achieved, the better. This leads many men to move too fast as they adapt to a new fatherhood role, leading them to seek forgiveness and behavior change as if it were a game of “ready or not, here I come!” The difficult fact is that others in the “game” must be ready before “play” can begin. Indeed, it is often the case that a man’s spouse and children have tried unsuccessfully in the past to get the father

to change his behavior. Hearing that he now seeks forgiveness and desires change is often received with some suspicion. They may, in fact, have “heard it all before.”

Fathers seeking renewed relationships with their families need to understand and accept the natural suspicion of their loved ones and understand that forgiveness comes at the end of the process, not at the beginning. Your children and spouse need to be given time to work out their anger, frustration, and resentment over your past behavior. If you pressure them to forgive you, they will either decline or become resentful about being pressured into expressing forgiveness. Forgiveness must be freely given. Unfortunately, it can also take a while.

One way to keep the process moving at a reasonable pace is by writing a letter to each family member, acknowledging your past behavior and requesting forgiveness. This gives each of them time to react to the letter. It may also be helpful to encourage, but not require, each family member to write a letter in return. This gives them time to collect their own thoughts rather than reacting out of the emotion of the moment.

**Step Three: “Patience is a virtue.”** After proffering a request for forgiveness, allow others time to forgive. Forgiveness cannot be demanded or placed on a time schedule. You need to understand the necessity of giving others time to accept your plea for forgiveness and agree to work toward more fulfilling relationships.

Don’t become disappointed or resentful if forgiveness is not given right away. Indeed, if forgiveness is initially withheld, some fathers interpret this as evidence others are “not trying as hard as I am.” But coming to the decision to ask forgiveness was neither easy nor quick. You can’t expect the decision to grant forgiveness will be easy or quick either.

A biblical model for forgiveness is found in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). In this parable the younger son, after having been given half his father's wealth, left for a journey to a distant country where he squandered his estate. Upon returning to his family, he approached his father saying he had "sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men" (vv. 18-19). That the son returned with contrition, not demanding forgiveness but confessing his past transgressions, allowed the father quickly to forgive him, saying, "Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (vv. 22-24).

But the often overlooked part of this parable is the reaction of the elder son, who went to his father to complain about his forgiveness saying, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (vv. 29-30).

One lesson to be drawn from this story is that requesting forgiveness is about confessing past transgressions, not demanding forgiveness. Another is that it will require more time for some than for others to be able to forgive.

**Step Four: "The proof is in the pudding."** Forgiveness is necessary but not sufficient. Like a child seeking forgiveness for breaking a household rule, saying "I'm sorry" is not enough; behavior change is the ultimate goal. To become a more effective father, you need to understand what makes a good father—time, commitment, and responsibility.

First and foremost, good fathers understand it is important to spend time with their children. Activities don't need to be elaborate. Indeed, simple things may be the most often remembered. Read a book together. Play a game. Visit a park and play on the swings. Play catch. It really doesn't matter what you do together as long as you spend time together. But don't try to do too much too soon. Making up for lost time is a slow process. Ease into it.

Good fathers also understand the importance of commitment. If you say you're going to be at your child's class play, be there. If you say you're going to take your child fishing this week-end, do it. When you make a commitment to your children, make sure it is the last thing that gets canceled and not the first. Indeed, the most important evidence that you have "changed" will be whether or not you keep your commitments to your children. Paradoxically, one way to ensure keeping more of your commitments to your children is to make less of them. But those you do make, *keep!*

**Finally**, good fathers understand the necessity of accepting responsibility for the well-being of their children. This doesn't mean buying them everything in sight. It does mean seeing they are adequately cared for and receive the necessary moral instruction to become persons of good character. To do the latter, you will need to do two things: show love and set limits.

In fact, one pitfall of the repentant father is an unwillingness to enforce limits for fear of causing the child to become angry with him. Some children may even use this to their advantage, saying, "See! I told you you didn't mean it when you said you wanted to be a better father!" You will be doing no one any favor—and especially not your child—by giving in to such manipulation.

Fatherhood is the most important job any

man will ever take on. Even if you came up short in the past, you can, through seeking self-awareness, forgiveness, and behavior change, become a more effective father in the future. The good news is it is not too late. The difficult news

is it is hard work. But it is also the most rewarding work any man can do. Jeffrey Stiefler and Quincy Jones are discovering this fact. You can too.

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# A Purse Filled With Longing

*For some, risking intimacy is just too painful*

by *Andrea D'Asaro*

I am sorting through the treasures of a lifetime, preparing for a garage sale. My mother-in-law, Sarah, could never bring herself to throw out anything. In the top drawers of Sarah's bureau, I find the black cloth purse she wanted close to her in her last hours in the hospital. I clutch the purse to me, remembering the terror in Sarah's eyes that moment we left her hospital room. I'll look inside later, I tell myself.

The next drawer is filled with cards and family photographs I sent her over the years. She always talked about putting the photos in books, but never did. Yet she saved each picture and note in its original envelope. My messages were light: "It was great to see you the other day" and the like. When her husband died after a long struggle with cancer, I wrote, "I'm sorry for your loss." I pack a box with the letters, photos and the black purse—labeling it "Keep."

I felt we had a bond, but I was never sure. Sarah never came right out with her love for me, nor I for her. I spoke my longing through photos, jewelry and cards. She attested to our relationship by telling her friends about my career triumphs and showing off photos of her only grandchild. Now I look for testimonies to our relationship in her closets and drawers. I find the turquoise necklace I bought her, the Japanese pen and ink picture I made, all those framed snapshots I sent of my son. Everything I ever gave her was carefully kept.

Before her final hospital stay, my husband, Ralph, and I visited her at home. I noticed her long, untrimmed nails. "Would you like me to file your nails for you?" I asked, imagining the warm connection we'd enjoy.

"You might cut me," she worried. "In my condition, I can't afford to bleed."

"No, I'll use a file, the kind that's like sandpaper," I said. "It can't hurt you."

She looked away and muttered, "I don't think so. . . ."

Sarah and I followed our family scripts. No one in her family, or mine, talked about feelings. Her family expressed connection by engaging in raucous debates and spreading family gossip over the phone lines. Sarah, too, kept the family rules. I dared not cross the boundary from debating distance to outright expression of affection.

During Sarah's last days in the hospital, I waited for a moment when I could casually slip in a hug, a tender touch, a casual "I love you." That moment never came. Nor did I dare create it. I desperately talked about the good times we'd spent together. She didn't seem to remember them. Grasping for another subject, I asked her to tell that story of the first time she went away to summer camp. She happily retold it, recalling



each detail, despite the tubes and blinking monitors around her.

“When I came home from that first trip, I remember my parents’ faces, their hugs and welcomes,” she recalled, her gray face flushing. “They weren’t ones to say how much they loved me. That day, I understood how much they cared.”

I knew then that Sarah yearned for openly stated love—like me. Sarah and I were both second born. We were the workhorses—putting in extra duty to make up for some imagined deficiency. I once heard Sarah’s older sister teasing her about this diligence. “You would scrub the kitchen floor at age 5, hoping mother would like you.”

I, too, tried to corral my parents into expressions of affection. Instead of coming home one Christmas, I stayed with a friend in Colorado. My plan was to wait until someone in my family openly said they actually wanted to see me. Instead, my parents accepted my decision.

My grandmother, whom I adored, begged me to come home. In desperation, she offered to pay for my plane fare. She told me I was her favorite grandchild of the four, told me how much she loved me, promised me her precious breakfast filled with old china from her mother. I refused, waiting for the right words from my parents. They did me a favor, they imagined, by letting me go my own way. I spend a lonely Christmas with a few homesick friends at a ski resort. One month later my grandmother died.

The last day I visited Sarah in the hospital, she wanted only peace. “I need to rest, why don’t

you go home.” It was my last chance. I wanted to kiss her, but couldn’t reach her face through the oxygen mask. I wanted to hold her hand, but it was bandaged from the intravenous needle. I squeezed her foot in good-bye, frantic for a better way. I choked with unspoken words.

Seeing how frail and frightened she was, my husband asked a nurse’s aide to sit by her bedside, hold her hand. She seemed more comfortable with a stranger. The aide later told us Sarah had wanted her purse, with its few familiar items from home, moved closer to her as she slipped away.

Now I’ve packed away the few clothes I can use. On her walls, the oil paintings she collected over 30 years on a teacher’s salary still proudly hang. I pull each one off its hook and carefully wrap the original paintings and weavings from Mexico, Haiti, Israel and Harlem. I feel like an invader desecrating a shrine. The bone walls retain the outline of each picture.

Back at home in Philadelphia, our basement is now filled with Sarah’s treasures, and her junk. Sorting through it, I find the box of letters and the black purse. It’s a worn-out nylon SportSac from the ‘70s. I take out the contents: a pair of bifocals with red frames, a cloth wallet with no money, a driver’s license with Sarah looking out from green eyes under an arching brow, four pens and a clump of tissues. At the bottom I find a postcard of Venice’s St. Mark’s Square from her concerned sister-in-law. “It’s been a lovely trip. I’ve been thinking about you constantly. I can’t wait to give you a hug.”

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# Reflections on a Prodigal's Return

## *What Made Me Leave; What Brought Me Back*

by William R. Holbrook

In more ways than I care to think, my life parallels that of the prodigal son. It was begun with every advantage. I was born to a proud Adventist heritage and a family legacy characterized by real purpose and meaning. I grew up in a family dedicated to service, and witnessed many examples of authentic discipleship. I was entrusted with traits and talents that included eternal optimism and an ability to administer, persuade and lead. As a child of missionary parents, I grew into adolescence with a distinctive worldview and the benefits of an excellent Christian education.

When I completed my academic career, I wanted to take advantage of every opportunity that came my way. At a relatively young age—though never satisfied—I felt I had achieved a measure of success. In truth, my world had begun to break apart, and I was the architect of the destruction.

### **The All-Too-Familiar Story**

I represent a whole generation of Adventists who have been given every advantage. We come from stable Christian homes; we are well educated; we know the difference between right and wrong. We were shown the way. We had great passion; we've been idealistic; we thought we could change the world. We have been successful. We focused largely on ourselves.

We have been wrong.

Some have kept faith with early conviction and continue to grow and develop their talents, completely submitted to God's plan for their lives. Their life view is Christ-centered, and He has blessed them immeasurably. I admire them. But I have not been one of them.

I failed in my success. I developed what Patrick Morley has described in his book *The Man in the Mirror* as a "secular life view." I became arrogant and self-centered, believing my success was mine alone. The talents God entrusted to me to do His will, in fact, became the tools of my destruction.

A. W. Tozer was describing me when he wrote, "A whole new generation of Christians has come up believing that it is possible to 'accept' Christ without forsaking the world." I invented a version of God that suited me, that fit my secular interests and ambitions.

The early successes in my life became a source of false pride. Believing in my own indestructibility, I began misusing my talents. I behaved badly and caused my world to break apart. Only later did I understand and appreciate how Jeremiah's inspired observation applied to me: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9).

My mistakes began to mount, and in time they

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led to serious failure. My professional and personal life disintegrated.

I soon discovered that it's impossible to cope with failure alone. Disillusionment and despair are intimate friends of failure, and a common reaction is to blame someone or something else. In my case, I blamed the church. I felt it had failed me and was responsible for my spiritual turmoil and vanishing faith. I left.

Like many, I had trouble with some of the stumbling blocks we know well: self-righteous sanctimony, excruciating mediocrity, passionless platitudes, deadly gossip and rumor mongering, pitiful jealousy, hairsplitting theological debate, meaningless standards, and all the other usual suspects, such as ambition and pride, which are so rooted in human nature. A friend of mine once said, "There's a real live Pharisee in every human heart." And the church, it seemed to me, had more than its fair share.

### **The Long, Difficult Road Back**

Facing the fundamental flaws in my life and confronting the spiritual conflict have not been a day at the beach. Rediscovering who I really am and committing my life to Christ has been a war Paul understood: "We know that the law is spiritual," he wrote, "but I am not: I am unspiritual, the purchased slave of sin . . . . The good which I want to do, I fail to do; but what I do is the wrong which is against my will" (Rom. 7:14-19, NEB).

Reflection can be a sobering thing. Denial is the quick fix we usually use when faced with a mirror's reflection that we can't accept. But I found that honest reflection is the beginning of real change. I discovered that the book of Romans has two parts: the first is the indictment; the second is a masterpiece of hope in Christ.

Gordon MacDonald's *Rebuilding Your Broken World* helped me redefine the larger issues in my life and gave me hope. By sharing

his own experience, he helped me focus on what was wrong in my life and to whom I could really go for help.

One of the primary reasons I left the church was that in my broken-world experience I sensed that it was unsafe for me to struggle there. I didn't believe that the church would ever understand my mistakes and flaws, and would ever be able to resolve the spiritual conflict in my life and be the source of joy and peace it promised to be. I never found the sense of community that I read about in the book of Acts.

I represent a generation that is struggling and frequently losing the battle for our hearts. We too often choose the wrong place to run. I left the church very obviously. But I know many who have gone quietly, just disappeared into a great spiritual abyss.

In my case, I thought my mistakes were unique. But they were no more than the time-honored trap of doubting that God could love someone like me. I had to come to terms with the singular arrogance of my doubt. As I began studying the Bible again, I found comfort in the stories of other culprits for whom God performed miracles of grace: those with great talent, such as David and Paul; men of greater heart, such as Abraham and Peter.

In his book *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, John Bunyan wrote, "Great sins draw out great grace; and where guilt is most terrible and fierce, there the mercy of God in Christ when showed to the soul appears most high and mighty." Yet the apostle Paul wrote: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

In giving my life to Christ, I have begun charting a different course. In words of Patrick Morley: "I am chiseling a new life view" by a personal search for truth and obedience to His will. I have rediscovered that there is no

meaningful life outside of God's plan. The challenge for me is to know Him and trust Him.

### **Help Along the Way**

In my pilgrimage back "to the Father" I owe debts I can never repay. Teachers helped me sort out the truths I had to rediscover. Pastors, in their sermons, spoke to my heart. I'm indebted to a church administrator who lived on my street and took time he didn't have to encourage me. Christian writers shared their struggles in the pages of their books, and in so doing, instructed me and inspired me and helped me to know I was not alone. A church in New England embraced me unconditionally and gave me a spiritual home when I needed it most. I have friends who were baffled, bewildered, and profoundly disappointed, but who never let me go. (It was an astonishing discovery to be told that there were people I'd never met, in parts of the world I had never been, who were praying for me.)

I owe the greatest debt to my family—particularly my mother and father, who were always there, no matter the circumstances. My daughter also helped to define the meaning of unconditional love.

If, reading between the lines, you hear the sound of a drowning scoundrel, read again. If you hear the sounds of remorse, repentance, and anguish, followed by real hope and assurance, you read well. I now want my life to serve as a living, present-day example of redemption—of what God can do in the life of a prodigal.

Gordon MacDonald has written: "In pain, failure, and brokenness, God does His finest work in the lives of people." I hope some will hear the anguish and understand the change. I hope some will celebrate with me the small victory of making Christ the center of my life. While some will smile the knowing smile of doubt, I hope others will be challenged to begin

again to discover the meaning and purpose of discipleship.

I could wish that the church would continue the work of evangelism, but at the same time make the church a safe place for those of us who have failed and are broken, where we can win our struggles, rebuild our faith, find community, and rediscover our place in God's plan. In the final analysis, it's not theological debates, performance reports, organizational charts, or new buildings that save broken-world people. It's the rediscovery of who God really is; it's the encouragement to trust Him and learn to love Him.

For that reason we must park our best evangelists at the "back door" of the church and charge them with the task of never letting go.

As I pick up the pieces of my life, I face very specific realities, including wounded friends and fractured family. There are many steps yet to be taken, and many battles to be won. But the war for my heart is over. Jesus Christ has won; this prodigal is coming home. There is redemption, and I'm committed to a new course, armed with this promise: "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6, KJV).

### **Epilogue**

I began writing this nearly seven years ago. Although the road home has been marked by challenges I never expected—painful losses, inexplicable circumstances—I wouldn't change a thing. Charles Swindoll likes to say, "The Lord doesn't provide detours around troubles; he gives us guided tours through them."

God has done things in my life during the past few years that I could never have imagined. He has replaced disillusionment and despair with peace, joy, and purpose. My life has become a great adventure that would not have

been possible—or even imaginable—on my own.

God has been good to me. He can be trusted. He delivers on His promises. In the words of Philip Yancey: “He will do whatever it takes to

get His family back! There is redemption; His name is Jesus.”

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Reprinted with permission from the *Adventist Review*, July 17, 1997.

# Ripped Apart

by Molly Layton

**Editors' Note:** *This article, which appeared in a professional journal for marriage and family therapists, offers very helpful insights into the thoughts and feelings of persons who have been deeply wounded in relationships.*

I opened the door to my car, swinging my feet out onto the dark asphalt of the driveway. Suddenly I found myself out of balance for a moment, found myself swaying into the gravel path edged by the shadowy yew bushes as if I were going to spill, chin first, onto the ground. I righted myself abruptly, jerking up marionette-style, strings taut again, and heard at that moment—with a sort of auditory hindsight—that I had been screaming, moaning really, but low and powerful, like a train coming through. The sound shocked me more than the dizziness. I had never felt a sound like that in myself before.

My husband had just left me, suddenly, mysteriously, and the sound in my body came from the strange rift his leaving had made. Of all the parts of my life that I had just lost—the two of us nested in bed at night, our working hip-to-hip in the narrow kitchen, the family's joking after dinner, elbows sprawled around the plates and glasses—the most startling loss was this, the crack in the spirit, the gyroscope tumbling over, the compass points scattered.

When I was a child daydreaming on shiny metal fold-up chairs in the cool retreat of a Sunday school classroom, the act of forgiving other surely a sign of rightness as the chicken and cream gravy I knew my mother had waiting

for us back home. But there came a time, *this* time, when I found myself so stunned with anger and suffering that the transcendent relief of forgiveness seemed as unreachable as heaven.

Even five years later, just having coffee with the man who was now my ex-husband, I would find myself lashed by startling wind shears of anger and sadness. I felt wronged, felt forever harmed, not just by the loss of our marriage but by his betrayal of our family life. Yet, I kept a vision of the family I still wanted to share, a relationship that had enough love and trust to carry us through children's weddings and grandchildren. So I knew that I wanted to forgive. But how would I do it, how could I forgive and move on, feeling so righteously aggrieved and, moreover, detecting in him no regret for the pain he had caused?

That question set me on a path. I took to asking friends, colleagues, spiritual gurus, clients in my own psychotherapy practice, "What's been your experience with forgiveness?" It turns out the question induces a certain hesitation.

"It's too much to get into in one afternoon," a good friend says, noticeably upset. A colleague at lunch tells me, "It's humiliating just remembering that someone could hurt me so much that I would *need* to forgive."

I found, in fact, that I was plunging into a politics of forgiveness, the complications of a world divided secretly into leavers and leavees, perps and victims, actors and those acted upon. “I’m trying to find a way to forgive her,” I say to a friend about another’s snooty cut-off.

“Why forgive that?” my friend replies, suggesting by his laughter that too soft a heart shows a certain lack of sophistication, an unwillingness to *wise up*. I’m confused. Don’t we all want to unburden ourselves of hatred? Then it occurs to me that he’s a leaver himself, one of those hard-hearted people, I say to myself, momentarily filled with suspicion.

But how *do* we forgive offenses against the spirit? Does forgiveness come only slowly, with time—say, seven years later, after renewing, as our bodies do, every molecule cell by cell? Is forgiveness a task best supervised by priests and rabbis and ministers? Perhaps so, but if forgiveness helps us to absorb and transform loss, it is startling to realize that its discussion is not more central in the training of psychotherapists.

People often come into psychotherapy seeking a cherished peace with someone, someone perhaps long gone, who has broken their heart—a mother who killed herself, an incestuous father, a spouse who abandoned a family. People who have been injured can find themselves with a double burden: there’s the original injury—the childhood terror or the tragic, drunken auto accident—and then there’s a choking hatred and disillusionment to digest. That’s often a meal we are forced to eat by ourselves.

So I have come to look at the act of forgiving as a profoundly intrapsychic or spiritual shift, where we do not necessarily depend upon the will or the skill of the injuring person to ask us to forgive them. There are stories of people who *ask* to be forgiven, and

while that presents a richer dilemma, I know that even in those situations the heart needs its preparations. For the injured and abandoned person, forgiveness often proceeds along a path from stunned innocence, to the tortures of obsession, to a surprising expansion of meaning.

### **Innocence**

In the early stages of suffering we begin a search for meaning: Why me? Do I truly deserve such pain? A great injury cracks into our childlike belief that good people surely thrive and bad people are punished.

But if we are not to believe that we are so bad that we deserve suffering, then great injury shapes a new story—the story of contamination, the world cleaved now into what is pure versus what is tainted, sweet pearly innocence set upon by rank and greasy selfishness. Without this tale of persecution of the good by the bad, injury disorients us, cracks the frame of our cherished beliefs, reveals our weak and human shame. And we’ll do anything to avoid feeling shame.

However, a dogged fascination with innocence has its costs. When I first met with Jack and Ann, they were coming out of years of worry about a runaway son who had finally made it into responsible adulthood. Now facing retirement, they were turning to look at their marriage.

But Ann had stored up years of resentment about how she had labored under Jack’s temper and how nobody in her family had taken her seriously. “I didn’t deserve that!” she said over and over. In our sessions, at least, Jack was earnest and undefensive, but Ann unremittingly kept up an attack on him. Hour after hour, Jack absorbed Ann’s painful assessments of his behavior, his obvious remorse contemptuously decried as “too little, too late.”

Ann truly wanted relief from her anger; and she and I puzzled together over her dilemma. It

seemed that no amount of understanding—or empathy or apology or remorse—was making it to her heart. Together, we questioned whether Ann’s real argument about innocence wasn’t so much with Jack as with her overbearing father, a harsh and imperial intellectual. No matter how hard her husband worked to earn her forgiveness, she was not ready to give up the power of a moral position that her judgmental father had never, not once, allowed her. At least with Jack, I said probably not too helpfully, you speak up against his temper, you try to break that spell of injured innocence.

However useful as a psychological and developmental state, innocence is vastly overrated as a moral state. The hallowed innocence of the inner child is a starting point, not a steady state. Everyone needs a fundamental experience of basic worth, of goodness at the core of one’s being; it helps us tolerate the full, pulsing complexity of being truly human—which, alas, includes such realities as coming in last in a race, losing someone’s love, feeling failure at letting someone down. Like calibrating scales to true zero, a sense of basic worth sets the point for all the complications of life that weigh in afterward. It’s a start.

For example, because of early childhood experiences with two sexually abusive adults, my client Julia had only a tentative reckoning of her own innocence as a child. “I keep thinking there must be something wrong with me,” she often despaired. Dealing with a warning from a supervisor on her highly skilled nursing job, she would find herself once again awash in tears, battling suicidal thoughts. Sitting with Julia’s torturous questioning of herself, I realize how well a basic feeling of innocence protects us from overwhelming, undigestible and especially inappropriate feelings of wrongdoing. It’s a defense against corruption.

I could feel this defense going on in my own heart when, at the beginning of the separation, I

searched myself hourly, even minute by minute, for a story line that would reconcile my idealistic faith in our 30-year-marriage with its loss. For example, when my separated husband told me that he was so worried about money he thought he might have to file for bankruptcy (which made no sense given our income), I grew hysterically convinced that he was suffering with an undiagnosed brain tumor. “All these years, did I just make you up?” I later asked him. And I knew that at some point I would want to take a long, hard look at my own contribution to our dilemma. I deliberately put that aside, however, in order to get through from one day to the next. In the beginning, I just couldn’t abide the rotten feeling of corruption, either his or my own.

Then I watched in amazement as a friend of mine, a distraught member of the First Wives Club, fell in love with a married man. Mired in her own morally compromising situation, Sarah’s anger softened and she began to think differently about her ex-husband’s infidelity. “I had always felt that Tony had not behaved very well when he was leaving the marriage,” she said ruefully, “but now behaving well doesn’t seem as simple as it did before.” She no longer felt secure in her own innocence. She was in a shadow. “It wasn’t even a conscious decision. I just found that I had forgiven Tony. . . .”

If our first childlike belief is that innocent people don’t deserve bad things, our second is that our suffering itself will render us good. The hard truth, I learned slowly, is that just because you hurt me, that doesn’t make me the good guy.

So I’ve come to believe that a rigid fascination with the moral stance of innocence sets us up for prolonged suffering, for passivity, for a heartbreaking expectation that the world can be tidily divided into good people and bad people. As the rightfully innocent, we argue that someone—not us—should *pay*, as if innocence



lost were wealth stolen. Often we are angry more at bystanders than we are at injurers themselves, so powerful an idea (and not necessarily wrong) is it that innocence should be protected. Of course, the bystanders then protest their innocence. Such passivity, while tempting, leaves us all stuck; no one picks up the bill. Thinking orally, are we not *all* charged with repairing and restoring our disordered universes, including the messes left by others?

### Obsession

At times, the loss of the marriage felt hard and final, like a death. I thought I knew about death. My mother had died just weeks before my husband's sudden leaving, and the two losses were sometimes joined into one great numbing cosmic whack, while at other times they shaped themselves into two sharply contrasting experiences.

For a month, I had flown back to Texas every weekend to be with my mother. When it finally became clear that the emphysema would soon kill her, we spent her last afternoon in a strange joy, remembering all the party dresses we had designed and sewn together—kelly-green taffeta, sleeveless brown linen with a billowing white chiffon skirt, a long column of creamy white satin. At 77, my mother died too young, and I still miss her generous and spirited realism. But her dying, no less than her living, was saturated with profound meaning. On the other hand, I couldn't begin to comprehend the loss of my marriage. Nothing made sense to me.

For a good half year, my thinking flowed in two layers, a double dialogue. On one layer, I thought about my mother, my children, my clients, my friends. I talked to the car repairman, I bought movie tickets, I drove to Connecticut. But in every moment the other layer flowed along, too, a dark and grumbling creek, ice rimmed. I drove muttering to Connecticut, wondering the whole way: Had he meant *this* when he had said *that*? Should I have spoken up

here, kept quiet there? Going through my own obsession, I began to appreciate its grinding mission: the effort to hold an absent and often unrepentant person accountable.

Similarly, my client Susan racked herself to understand her husband Ed's abandonment after 22 years of marriage. "Why?" she plaintively asked him in one of the few times he agreed to meet in my office. "Well," he said, "I know this sounds stupid, but remember when I asked you to wear those earrings? And you wouldn't!" Susan's mouth dropped open. Ed went on. "Then something just shut down in me." Except for insisting that he had "done nothing wrong," that's all he could say.

In the cruel poverty of her husband's account, it was Susan who was left to imagine what it was that had truly gone wrong. His failure of imagination fired hers to such intensity that she thought of nothing else for almost a year. Teaching literature at a community college, she saw in every class discussion about culture and family and gender the possible explanation for her husband's behavior.

In the absence of the perpetrator's accountability, the injured people work with the only material they've got: their minds. Indeed, it is the essence of obsession to try to handle something in the mind when one believes it cannot be resolved in the outer world. Ann's unremitting anger at her contrite husband was a vivid example of how irrelevant that "outer world" might be to a tortured heart.

Similarly, in working with people who have been sexually abused, the therapist is often aghast at how obsessive the injured person remains, not only about the original injury, but about the sort of bumps and knocks we must all endure; a telephone call not returned is equated with an incest incident. Person B holds Person A inside like a dark and foreign mass, contaminating everything.

I learned about Person A and Person B from my friend, psychologist Jill Harkaway. She had come in from Boston for a visit, and over our salads at lunch that day, I asked what she thought about the burden laid on injured people. “One person can’t harm another person without it *creating* a relationship,” she said. “A hurts B. A walks away. A leaves B holding the relationship.” A new bond is inevitably formed, in which the combination of helplessness and injury forges a deep, strangely empathic connection with the person in power.

Perhaps it is this bonding of A to B that explains the persistence of certain kinds of suffering. As I work day in, day out, with people who are stuck in their sense of injury (as, indeed, I found myself helplessly perseverating there), I have wondered what maintained such a chronic state. After all, most people, if given a choice, would say that they would gladly lay down their suffering. But they don’t. Some are caught in repetitive fantasies of outright revenge, imagining scenes of public humiliation or private torture, and their bitterness stunts their growth with the power of an addiction.

My client Phyllis spared no energy in concocting daily malicious retaliations during her divorce from a bully of a husband, delighting in leaving him waiting at the curb for poky children, enforcing restrictions on his calls to them, refusing to bend concrete-set rules, even when he had the flu. I liked Phyllis, but I was unable to help her set limits on her sadism, despite my endless appeals to the well-being of her children. I finally asked what it was, really, that would be a proper punishment for him. “Oh, I wish every day that he would die. I really do,” she said.

“Would you like to kill him yourself?” I asked.

She didn’t blind an eye. “I would if I could get away with it.”

I pushed further. “Maybe we should take some time to imagine you causing great pain to your husband. A sort of guided fantasy.” Open mouthed, clearly stunned, she looked at me with glazed eyes. “Like, you could hit him with a baseball bat.” Her mouth was still open. “A gun?” Her husband had loved guns.

Phyllis swallowed and finally spoke. “No, I can’t. I can’t really imagine any of that. It doesn’t move me.” Her voice grew firmer. “That’s not what I want.” But she had clearly made a shift out of her ruthless desire to persecute. We sat together in wonder and some thanks, watching her hatred in its dying fall.

That persevering anger is one of the things that make those of us who are struggling with feeling victimized look so, well, unattractive. I recently spoke with Sue Johnson, a Canadian couples therapist who writes about the trauma that occurs when someone is abandoned or betrayed. “In these cases,” she said, “we often don’t take people where they are. There’s a period—a long period—when injured people are even homicidally angry. They want to hurt someone. They’re interested in retribution: ‘Someone must pay! *I cannot accept that I can be hurt with impunity,*’ because that means that, somehow, they don’t matter.” As therapists, we can’t guide people toward forgiveness, if, in fact, that’s what they want, without a knowledge of how people typically react in the aftermath of trauma. The ever-circling energies in obsession, swirling around the same point, are reenactments, attempts at mastery—well-known sequelae to a traumatic event.

Other injured people are caught in repetitive, fantasized scenes, not of retaliatory harm, but of rescue and reparation. It’s another way of not letting go, of trying to master what is otherwise unthinkable. Fantasies of either revenge or repair

at least temporarily help us manage the humiliations of great injury and loss.

For example, I called my ex-husband one day to tell him that I had forgiven him. On one level, my motivation was fairly simple: I felt less angry and thought I needed to admit that shift. On the other hand, I could have merely behaved with more warmth, and he would no doubt have gotten the message, so there was something else in my longing to speak.

It's hard to remember any of the details of the call, as it took such presence of mind that my attention had narrowed to a tiny wave band of sound. I said that I wanted to let him know that I was at last able to feel that I was doing well. Keeping to my task, I pushed ahead to say that I forgave him, but then realized in speaking that not only did my voice feel flat, but also the long, wired space between us was flat. His response was thin: "Well, ah, thanks," he said, and dropped the unwelcome gift. A friend to whom I told this story said, "What arrogance!" and accused me of asserting some kind of moral superiority. I was astounded at his reaction because superiority was not what I felt at all. The wave of emotion that carried my words, in fact, almost swamped me, was humiliation.

Indeed, I have come to realize that sometimes we can rush too quickly to forgive someone in an attempt to avoid humiliation. "Oh, no problem," a friend says when I call to apologize for not calling her sooner after her father died. Still, her tone makes me wonder whether my neglect stirred up her feeling that she doesn't count very much with me. She counts with me very much, so I try to apologize again, but that just makes her withdraw more. She wants to keep the small dignity of acting as if she's okay.

Even in that limp and mildly depressing moment of speaking to my ex-husband, I understood that this small awkward display of

forgiveness was certainly real and meaningful enough to me. It marked a kind of increasing independence in my own spirit, a shift—surviving humiliation—that was internal, not interpersonal. I wish the moment could have been shared, that A recognized the pain in B, but otherwise the price was not too bad.

Real change had other costs as well. Susan was determined to learn how to accept her loss and move forward in her life. She wanted peace and she wanted her kids to see her thriving. But she found herself in a strange predicament: if she were suddenly to find herself lightened of rage, if her suffering ended and she went merrily on with her life, what would such lightness of spirit say about her husband's abandonment?

Somehow—and here's the strangeness of the equation—she found herself caught in suffering *as if to prove that what he did was wrong*. Paradoxically and inevitably, her own thriving would be living proof that his abandonment was not such a big deal. "I start to imagine letting go of all this bitterness, and then such sadness comes up! He gets off scot-free, saying 'See it wasn't such a terrible thing.' But I know one thing: this is a truly crazy idea—that my suffering will make him pay!" She hated her own martyrdom, even as she found herself in the art museum, eyeing the darkened old portraits of bleeding saints with a mixture of revulsion and interest. The therapist's job at this point is to hold a delicate balance between understanding the wish for revenge or reparation and keeping clients' feet in that fiery despair a little longer, helping them manage the sickening feeling that fairness does not always rule the day.

"People can be so disappointing," I recently said to one such despairing woman, with a voice that I hoped resonated with strains of both the sympathy and the realistic resignation I had in my own been-around-the-block heart. I didn't think that that remark would ease her pain, but I hoped that it would help with the extra, crazy-

making torture that we add on top of tragic losses by insisting that, because they are not deserved, someone somewhere should rescue us. Suffering is, among other things, a communication.

### **Transcendence**

As injured people give up obsessively replaying scenes with the person who injured them, they begin to deal with a hole they find in themselves. If they can tolerate the emptiness—so much lost, so much taken away—they have a chance to look inward, toward a self they might now experience as both spare and surprisingly spacious. Giving up the effort to be whole, unsullied, I was astounded at how I was both cracked *and* liberated by the loss of the marriage. Everything was up for grabs. What, really, did I want to eat for dinner? Left now to myself, did I want to visit a friend in Chicago? And what about my work—did I really want to sit, hour after hour, listening to more tales of cruelty and suffering? It seems I did, but not out of habit or even out of a very solid sense of myself.

Although I was in great pain, I had to admit to myself it was interesting, not knowing what was ahead. I moved through the days with a mysteriously sweet and painful awareness of what a prize, really, life is, and how little we realize that. This work, these friends, this house: all ached with new and emerging meaning. For myself, a great loss made room to grow.

Part of what I lost was a sense of control, and this loss, I discovered, has its liberations as well. There was the story of Leslie, a friend of mine who had an affair with her best friend's husband.

When the affair ended, the injured friend forgave Leslie her betrayal and was able to restore the relationships, both with Leslie and with her own husband. "People are more important than having things the way you want them," she told Leslie. I was dazzled by her capacity for forgiveness. Leslie was dazzled, too. Her friend—a blunt woman who struck me as someone who invariably knew her own mind—demonstrated two aspects of forgiveness that I have come to recognize. One was her willingness to tolerate the loss of control ("having things the way you want them"). The other was her readiness to accept the real, flawed people in her life.

Humans will, no doubt, debate this issue until the end of time: when to hold other people accountable, even punishable, for their offenses against ourselves and when to move toward acceptance and tolerance. There is nothing about genuine forgiveness that precludes holding people accountable, if we have that power, which, it should be pointed out, we don't always have. Nor does forgiveness necessarily include restoration of the perpetrator to a place in our daily life. But it seems to me we have choices about which lessons we want to learn from our own experiences. I would be highly suspicious of a marital partner, including Leslie's friend, who rushed to forgive an infidelity without wanting to understand both partners' accountability for the breach. And it would be outrageous to push a traumatized client back into a relationship with an abusive parent in the name of a generous and tolerant forgiveness. Forgiveness is not about being blind and stupid.

What then makes forgiveness different from passive acceptance? A psychoanalytic colleague, Charles Ashbok, listens to this question over lunch one day. Charles thinks it's a question first of recognizing our own complexity, how we're both good and bad ourselves. . . .

I thought of Phyllis, whose rage finally abated when I offered her a baseball bat. I would hardly call that forgiveness. But I don't think that Phyllis would have pulled back from her aggression until, imagining her own power, she began to have an inkling of her husband's vulnerability and humanity.

And Susan. Four years after her husband left, she had a sudden insight into him. I say "sudden," but, of course, it had its place prepared for it. She had broken off with a man she dated, and standing now for the first time on the leaving side of a split, she gaped at her capacity to hurt someone she cared about. And in recognizing her own blind push for a different life, she better understood Ed's blind push as well. Images spontaneously arose in her mind—instances of her neglect of Ed, his evident unhappiness, the courage that it must have taken to leave—and she felt strangely sympathetic. Perhaps the two of them were, after all, not so far apart, so disconnected. For the first time, she could imagine enjoying seeing him at their children's graduations.

I was coming to understand that the motive to forgive and the motive *never* to forgive both have something to do with intimacy and memory. It has to do with who and what we allow in our heart, what we hunger for, how much aliveness, how much tenderness we want to risk. A knows B.

Jack and Ann returned for a session, another try after a year out of therapy. As an experiment, Ann was not allowed to fuss at Jack. "You can do that some other time," I insisted. "What I want you to do now is tell Jack what you admire most about him." They both had tight grins—edgy, canny. "Don't say anything that isn't true!" I added.

Ann stumbled so hard for words that we all laughed, and I had to stop her virtually every other sentence as she kept careening off into

another well-honed attack on Jack, but slowly she came out with a list of things she truly admired: his unremitting honesty, his reliability, his sharp intelligence, his masculinity. The tenderness between the two of them became palpable. "This is really hard," Ann said, "I can barely stand how vulnerable I feel," and she smiled bashfully at Jack. Jack let out a sigh and beamed back. If forgiveness is the enlargement of ourselves to include the humanness of the other person, then in tolerating this tender intimacy, Ann was beginning to forgive Jack.

I spoke again the other day with my ex-husband. I had the feeling of listening in two directions: inward, toward my own reactivity, and outward, tuning into what he was telling me about a move to the ocean, a project in Mexico. I made a place for hearing him, letting it all leap through me, as a diver might receive the cool electricity of the water, a strange gift, a blue baptism into aliveness.

To forgive, I've come to see, means literally, to give up—to give up hatred, revenge, punishment, hard payment of a hard debt. In struggling to forgive someone, to give up fantasies of revenge, even, alas, hopes of reparation, our motive is to move our lives past bitter obsession.

Regrettably, forgiveness is not necessarily about justice. The murderer may be justly condemned, but the grieving family doesn't necessarily forgive. Nor is forgiveness an otherworldly acceptance of what must be. We all know injured people who push forward in their lives without struggling with forgiveness. Ex-partners remarry, even prosper, but can stay as bitter toward each other as if the split had happened yesterday. In contrast to justice and acceptance, forgiveness includes not only the recovery of our spirit, but the enlargement of that spirit as well—somehow, somehow—to imagine the humanity of the injuring person.

And why would we want that?

In a great injury, something is broken, psychologically or spiritually. The break not only erodes our sense of living in a fair world, corrupts our experience of our own worth, fragments our control over our own lives and our emotions, but it also fundamentally damages our faith in the worthiness of others. It is that loss of the other that we absorb, and somehow transform, in forgiveness.

Driving down the street last year, I heard a radio interviewer ask a minister why there is evil in the world, why people do terrible things to one another. I pulled over to the side of the road; he was a thoughtful man and I wanted to hear his response. He said he didn't have a satisfactory answer to that question. But he thought that the fact that we suffer from others keeps us aware that we are not solitary, that, in fact, we cannot be indifferent to the conditions that make people mean enough or desperate enough to harm.

It was autumn. The car was parked under a canopy of trees and yellow leaves drifted slowly

down. I put the car back in gear and in a whirl of subsiding leaves, headed toward my office, thinking of John Donne's meditation. We're part of the main, and anyone's loss diminishes us all. Strange to think that sometimes the only way we have a chance to truly experience the losses other people suffer is when, no longer able to contain their own grief or greed or rage, they cause us harm.

While injury may heighten the innocence of the injured party, forgiveness dissolves the clear distinctions between perpetrators and victims, self and other. It's an illusion to think that we can keep what is good separate and uncontaminated from what is mean and evil, that it is our birthright to live a gated life. There's no avoiding our vulnerable, mortal lives; there's no way we can stay aloft, like angels, never making the blue dive. It's an existential dilemma—something inevitable, human—living as we do with the outrageous fortune of both leaping and falling, or riding our irresistible urges both to save everything and to destroy it all.

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Reprinted from *Family Therapy Networker*,  
November/December 1998. Used by permission.

# Stony-broke?

by Lorna Arthur

*Forgiveness does not mean accepting further abuse or continuing destructive relationships. Establish boundaries for what is acceptable to you and make those boundaries clear to others. Hold them accountable for their actions.*  
*David W. Shell, 'Forgiveness Therapy'.*

Once upon a time there was a beautiful valley. Through it ran a river, sparkling and full of fish, and beside it was a small village. The grass was green; birds sang in shady trees and flowers dipped their petals in the water; but the people were very poor.

In one of the homes by the water's edge lived Mr and Mrs Stone and their son Peter. Now it happened that there was an unusual custom in that village. Whenever anyone was angry with someone else, or merely wanted to criticize his work, he would throw a rock at the person. Along the main street, piles of rocks were conveniently placed, ready to throw at a moment's notice. In each home there was a cupboard in the kitchen where rocks were stored. This was usually empty when a honeymoon couple moved in, but it soon filled.

Now people dealt with the flying rocks in different ways. Mr Stone was a proud man and not one who easily forgot a rock. He had a bag on his back, and every time a rock was thrown at him he rubbed the bruise, picked up the rock and placed it in his bag. As a sign of his great strength and fortitude, he had vowed that he would never part with this bag. So he carried it at all times. In bed he tossed restlessly, and had

to sleep carefully on his side; usually this meant he did not see Mrs Stone once he had lain down. When he came to take a shower, he often lost the soap in the bag when washing his neck, and as the rocks dried they dripped across the floor. In the early days he had been able to take a bath, but as the rocks became heavier he was pulled under—in fact, many people were lost from the village each year as they tried to cross the river with rock-laden backs.

Mrs Stone handled the rock-throwing tradition differently. She wore special padded clothing. It took her quite a long time to get dressed in the morning; and some nights, fearing her husband was about to throw rocks at her regarding a burnt dinner or overspent budget, she stayed clothed. Mrs Stone gained encouragement from coffee mornings with friends, when the padded ladies of the town gathered to chat about the quality of wadding available in the local shop. This is not to say that Mrs Stone did not feel hurt when a rock was thrown at her, but instead of carrying it in a carrying it in a bag, as her husband did, she had a special cupboard in the kitchen where she stored the rocks that had been thrown at her. Each week she would count the rocks and compare numbers with her friends, when they

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discussed the latest fashions in rock storage.

Mrs Stone did not often throw rocks herself; in fact, she was mostly so busy sewing up sheets her husband had torn, and repairing the back of his favourite chair, that she had little energy left. Just once in a while the rocks in her cupboard would overflow, and the lack of storage would stress Mrs Stone. Her husband would just have to pitch a pebble in her direction and she would explode: "I can't take any more!"

Thereupon she would fling rocks at him wildly, hitting his head, arms and all parts of his body. When their son Peter was in the room, he often became a casualty, too. Mrs Stone would temporarily feel much better at having cleared out her cupboard so successfully, but when her husband tried to sleep with his enlarged bag she would have to crowd onto a narrow strip of mattress to try to get some sleep. The next morning as he struggled to rise, she would feel guilty and fuss over him with a cup of tea; yet as he crashed through the house later, aiming rocks at her and trying to find his tools for work, she would accumulate new rocks as well as bruises, and also have smashed lamps and furniture to fix. Following a breakfast held in stony silence, Mr Stone would leave for work. This gave her only a brief respite, for on his return that evening he would be even more inclined to throw rocks, so that her cupboard was soon fuller than before.

In the early days of their marriage, Mr and Mrs Stone had sometimes wondered if there were any other way to live. Was it possible that some people grew into adults without padding or rocks? Some people said there were such countries, told of in ancient books, but no one seemed to know of them personally. It was common knowledge that the rock throwing habit had begun with the first humans. So as the years rolled by, the Stones thought of alternatives less and less, and used what energy they could muster to cope with what they increasingly

believed was inevitable.

Peter watched them as he grew. Mr Stone urged him, "Be a man, and carry rocks like me." He even went out to his workshop and fashioned a leather bag for Peter. With pride he fitted it to his shoulders and explained about the expanding sides. Peter wore it for a while. Most of the boys at school had bags, too. But he found it too restrictive when he jumped to catch a ball, and one day left it beside the road. He was teased as a sissy for a while and his father wondered if he would ever take up the responsibilities of a man.

One birthday, his mother presented him with a fitted suit of padding. He tried to please her by wearing it, but it was hot and itchy. When he plunged in the river to swim, it became soggy, and he had to slosh home to dry. He left it on the clothes-line till his mother took it down with a sigh. He continued to have rocks thrown at him, but he decided just to let them drop where they landed. His first girlfriend gave him a pack of bandages when she saw his bruising one day, but he wore them only briefly.

When he became a teenager, Peter enjoyed studying in the local library more. There one day, on a dusty shelf, he discovered a book that told of a country where no one carried stones. It became his favourite story. He returned there often when life at home became ever more rocky and tense.

As the years passed, Mr Stone's bag became heavier and his mates at work became more distant. After several had been crushed and others had had their feet stepped on, he was asked to find other employment. He began to look for other work, but his great bulk soon put off prospective employers. Finally, he began to dig the back garden, hoping to grow vegetables to feed his family. This posed some difficulties, as each time he bent over, some rocks dropped out and he would have to replace them. (He sometimes found a useful bar of soap this way.)



As the bag grew larger and Mr Stone grew older, he found it harder and harder to work and had to rest frequently, panting and sweating. He also found less time to spend with his wife and son.

Mr Stone's heavy bag also developed in him a desperate thirst, and he found himself spending more and more evenings with other burdened souls at the local pub. Eyes bleary, he would stagger home. Sometimes he would collapse at the door and Mrs Stone would find him snoring. She could not lift him up the stairs to bed, so next morning he would wake up where he had fallen. Shrugging off the blanket, he would lumber into the new day, holding his head and back by turns.

Mrs Stone seeing him struggle, often urged him to put the bag down, but he would turn on her with a glare, "Woman, I've carried this bag all my life. I'm too old to change now."

She tried to help him in the garden at first, but her padding made bending difficult. She also found that in the rocky soil he had a ready supply of missiles. After she had used two boxes of band-aids and filled three rock cupboards, she decided to leave him to it. Her thick clothes well hid the fact that she was starving inside.

One day the sun was extra-hot overhead; the river flowed by at the end of the small garden, and a swan drifted along, followed by a string of cygnets. Drawn by the beauty, Mr Stone stumbled to the bank and sank down in the shade of a spreading tree. When the shadows lengthened, Mrs Stone called him to come in to tea, but he did not stir when she approached.

His funeral was held the following week. Friends came from the surrounding houses. Mr Stone's mates from the pub were there, black cloaks hiding their stone bags, ties straight. Mrs Stone's friends from her coffee morning were there, huddled about her damp and sobbing bulk. Peter was there, at twenty still young and strong.

Though his eyes were wet, he carried no bag and wore no padding. Some thought of him as a rebel and hoped his father's death would help him knuckle under and become like one of them. A lawyer in a long black robe began to read the will:

*"I, Grudge Stone, being of sound mind, declare that I wish to be buried with all my rocks, except my largest rock, which was passed on to me by my father when I was a boy. I, in turn, pass this on to Peter. May he carry it with pride and bear with courage other rocks that may come his way in life."*

The coffin was lowered and one by one the rocks were passed down. Those assembled saw rocks they had thrown. As Mrs Stone pressed closer, she witnessed stones she remembered flinging in angry haste, and wept in grief and shame. At last they came to the bottom rock in the bag. It rolled out onto the soft green grass. Everyone turned to Peter. He looked at the rock. He saw it crushing the grass. He felt the searching eyes of those waiting for him to pick up what his father had left him.

Suddenly he burst out, "I'm not taking it. There has to be another way to live."

Abruptly, he turned and strode away, past the cemetery wall and home. The villagers were too stunned to throw rocks.

Over the days that followed, great noises of sawing and hammering came from the garden by the river. Curious villagers peered over the fence to find Peter building a small boat. They took turns throwing rocks at him.

"It's never been done before."

"Who do you think you are? You don't know any more than we do!"

“We’ve managed. Aren’t you man enough to cope?”

One large rock almost smashed the prow of the boat.

“You’ll be all alone, and you’ll be a failure.”

Peter was tempted to throw rocks back at the taunting faces, but he had seen the hurt and the hate it caused. Bravely he patched the boat; doggedly he carved the oars. Only at night did his mother hear the sobbing. She thought of comforting him, but was too exhausted from her own rock-filled life to rise and comfort him.

At dawn the next day, Peter dragged the boat to the river. He pushed the boat in and tied it to the shady tree where his father had rested for the last time. His mother stopped pleading, and handed him a meagre bag of provisions gleaned from her own sparse cupboards. He stowed it in the boat.

With a sigh she hugged him. As he embraced her, he thought for a fleeting moment that the padding was empty, that there was nothing to her but the clothing she wore. Her vacant eyes followed him as he pushed off from shore and reached for the oars. Tucked under his seat was the book of ancient stories, purchased in a library discount sale.

As he pulled away from the bank, rocks and pebbles splashed beside him. The missiles were thrown by the villagers who were angry he was escaping. Somehow his leaving caused them to question their own lives. This inner discomfort made them irritable with one another, and the

last thing that Peter saw, as he pulled upstream, was the villagers having a rock fight on the river bank.

It was a long day, and a longer night. With muscles aching, he reached the river narrows. The water there was fresh and clear; he hadn’t realized how stagnant the river by his home had been until he saw this water. Here, dipping in a cup, he could drink freely. At last he came to a place where the stream, though fresh and swift, was too narrow for the boat. He pulled it up on shore, and consulting the book again, pressed on. Walking, he soon became exhausted; being hungry, he soon became weak.

At last his strength failed him, and he lay down beside the road. Through troubled dreams he remembered the taunts; the rocks the villagers had thrown, tempting him to failure and despair. Yet, as he slept, he thought his dream softened. Was a pillow being placed under his head? Was a blanket snuggled around him?

As the sun rose and the birds began their morning chorus, Peter slowly opened his eyes. He felt confused and disorientated.

“So you’re awake at last. Come and have some breakfast.” The farmer picked up the bedding and trundled off, whistling. “The Missus is expecting you.”

Stumbling behind him, weak and half asleep, Peter began to survey his surroundings. Fat cows grazed in lush meadows that were large and well tended. His gaze fell upon the farmer, and he realized with a start that he carried no bag of rocks.

They entered a cottage and Peter saw cheese and bread, honey and milk. He took the proffered chair eagerly. A smiling woman entered, bearing a tray of figs and grapes, and Peter looked with

surprise at the farmer's wife. She wore no padded clothes, but a flowery dress that swished easily as she walked.

After a pause for grace, Peter drank the milk in great gulps, and reached for the bread, but hungry though he was, he couldn't resist the questions that pressed on his mind. Suddenly he burst out, "So is this *the* country? The one mentioned in the ancient stories? I mean, you don't carry bags of rocks or wear padding."

The farmer leaned back in his chair and, thumbs in his braces, began . . .

"We used to carry rocks here, too, and lots of women wore thick padded clothes and hoarded rocks in their cupboards. Mabel here had a few." He looked at his wife and winked. "Our fields were pretty poor because most of us didn't have the energy to tend them, and almost everyone in the town was starving. Then a stranger came. Though he looked like us, his back was straight and he carried no stones. We crowded around to see what he had to say; our bags bruised him as we crowded closer, but he didn't appear to flinch. He told us that he could get rid of our rocks, that he would take them away. At first we laughed at him; after all, he looked no stronger than us, but some of us listened to him and came to believe in him.

"He told us to bring all our rocks to him, so we did. The procession was long, children and adults, girls and boys. Some left town still scoffing, but those who remained deposited all their rocks at his feet. To this day, I don't know how he did it, but he picked up every one of our rocks, then he looked us straight in the eye and asked us if we had any more. Most of us sheepishly pulled hidden rocks out of our pockets, ones we had carried for years and were quite attached to. The hardest ones to part with were the ones we had thrown at ourselves. Somehow, we believed we deserved to carry them the most.

"He lifted all the rocks into a bag and hoisted it onto his back. We followed him as he struggled along the route that led to the side gate. Seeing him stagger under the weight, some of the women began to cry. The path he chose led to the hill next to town; you may have passed it, the one with an unusual head-shape, near the cemetery. We were all there. Some of us questioning the whole process, some of us wary of trusting, all of us hoping.

"As he climbed the hill, we followed his slow and painful progress step by step. Somehow we all knew that he represented our only chance to be free of the cursed rocks. Near the top his steps faltered and we held our breath. Could he do it? The last shaky steps seemed to drain every drop of energy from him. Slowly, painfully, he dragged that bag to the very summit of the hill. Finally he cried out with a loud voice,

"It is finished!"

"We heard a mighty crashing sound as rocks tumbled over the hill and were gone.

"After that, we didn't see him for three days, but none of us dared to follow where he had gone.

"Finally he came back. We saw the scars the rocks had made, and he was changed somehow, a new spirit shone from his eyes. He told us that he would always live with us in our town. Any time we wanted, we could take our rocks and hurts to him and he would take them away. No one in town carries a bag now, and the padding shop went out of business. Now they sell loaves of fresh bread there instead. The farms prosper and no one goes hungry."

Peter wiped the honey from his mouth. "Is he still in town?"

“Sure he is; he lives just next door.”

“But, would he want to *see me*? I’m a stranger here. Maybe he’s too busy . . . .”

The farmer put his arm round Peter’s shoulder, “Friend, you’re just the sort he’s looking for. Come with me now and see him. He’ll gladly take *all* your rocks away.”

*It was our grief he bore, our sorrows that weighed him down . . . .*

*He was wounded and bruised for our sins . . . .*

*And we were healed!*

*Isaiah 53:4,5, LB.*

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Excerpted from *Rocky Road* by Lorna Arthur, 1999. Republished by permission of Autumn House, Grantham, England.

# Forgive and Remember

by Lewis B. Smedes

Forgiving is a way of solving the first of two persistent problems that have forever bedeviled the human spirit: We were given the remarkable power to remember and were given no power to change what we remember. We could live happily with this condition if our pasts were all happy. But it becomes a severe problem to us when the past we cannot change and must remember is a painful past—a past when we were wounded and wronged by someone we trusted.

Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.

In this way, we solve the second persistent problem of the human spirit. This one, like the first, is created by a combination of a power and a weakness. The power is our ability to imagine the future. The weakness is our inability to control the future. The answer to the problem of imagining a future we cannot control is hope. And the way to hope for a better future after a bad past is the way of forgiving.

How does it work? Let me suggest a few ways.

**We remember the good parts of the bad past.** This means we begin to see the bad things that happened in the past through the lenses of whatever good has come to us afterward.

Why do nations build memorials to bad times, and why do we travel across the country to see them? Do we visit the Holocaust Museum or the Vietnam Memorial to wallow in the

horror of those tragic events? I don't think so. I think we build monuments to bad things for three reasons: to keep alive our memories of the good people who suffered them; to revive our gratitude that we were delivered from them; and to renew our resolve that we shall not let such horrors afflict the human family again.

**We remember the past with truth.** When we forgive, we receive new courage to recall what happened even though it wounded us deeply, and even though it was done by the ones we most trusted to do us good.

We also dare to recall our own responsibility for what happened to us, if we have any. In forgiving, we dare admit, for example, that we said yes to an abusive spouse when we really wanted to say no. That we supported his bad habits and made ourselves a target of his fury. Forgiving gives us eyes to see ourselves in truth for what we were and what we did to add to our pain.

**We remember with a new respect for ourselves.** Victims often twist the wrong that someone did *to* them into something that is wrong *with* them. If someone abandons us, we imagine we weren't worth keeping. If someone abuses us, something bad in us must have made him do it. If someone we loved stops loving us, we must be unlovable.

But here is the saving irony. The way to restore our self-respect is to forgive the rotter who made us lose it. As we begin to forgive, we get the grit to aim the blame straight in the eyes of our culprit. And as we go on, we will heal the self-shaming memory and turn the experience of humiliation into a reason for pride. Nobody can

ever do anything more worthy of self-respect than to break the grip of a painful past she never deserved and walk dangerously with hope into the possibility of tomorrow.

**We remember with sadness.** Forgiving does not remove our scars any more than a funeral takes away all of our grief. Not long ago I stood alone at the end of a small grave in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where our infant son had been buried 30 years before. Now living in California, I had not visited the grave for some time, and the tears that this tiny piece of earth once sponged were long since dried. But as I stood there by myself, my old and almost forgotten grief percolated from my spirit as it did when we first buried him. Where did this neglected, long-unnoticed grief come from? From the scars that stayed on the floor of my inner ocean after the waves of early grief had pulled back with the tide.

When we are deeply wounded or sorely wronged, we carry a scar that stays when the wound is healed. If we are wounded in the fifth chapter of our story, we write the sixth chapter as a wounded author. When my grief rose from the grave, I was grateful to feel it again. It reconnected me with past chapters of my story and reminded me that, even though I am now writing another chapter, I am still the same person who wrote the grieving chapter.

It is so when a person forgives and the stitches are torn open by a remembrance of past wrongs. He can feel the healed pain again and be glad for the moment's connection with the past; it reminds him how good it is to be healed.

**We remember without illusions.** Most of us enter marriage with two illusions. The first is that the person we marry matches our fantasy of the partner we wanted. The second illusion is that if two people totally trust each other, their trust is itself security against breakage.

“I was so unbelievably dumb,” the man said, “I thought that if we just trusted each other, we would never hurt each other. What a fool I’ve been.” He was not a fool, but his trust in trust was an illusion. He believed that if someone puts enough trust in another person, that person will always honor the trust. When his wife violated his trust, his view of the world turned on its head, and he did not know how to get it right side up again.

To confuse trust with a guarantee is an illusion. His cheating wife punctured his illusion. Forgiving was his way of seeing his world without illusions and setting it back on its feet. With illusions dispelled, and the wound forgiven, he was ready for the alternative to illusion. He was ready for hope.

Illusions are fantasies of what cannot be. Hope is a faith in what can be. Illusions fantasize about guarantees. Hope is content with possibilities. Hope is based on a faith that lasting trust is possible, but not inevitable. Hope is the spirit's “no” to illusion and “yes” to possibility.

When we forgive someone we change the course of a meandering river that could, if we let it, carry us on an aimless, endless current of remembered hurt and frustrated rage. We have changed our futures by as creative an act as any human being ever performs. Where will the river take us? Who can say? We can't control the winding river we follow to our future any more than we could change the past. It will take us to places we can only imagine.

One way to lose hope for a better future is to be held captive by a worse past. People lose hope when their visions of tomorrow are clouded by the wrongs of yesterday. One way to regain hope is to choose the new way of remembering that comes with forgiving the wrongs of the past.

When we forgive, we bring in light where there was darkness. We summon positives to

replace negatives. We open the door to an unseen future—the door that our painful past had shut. When we forgive, we take God’s hand, walk through the door, and stroll into the possibilities that wait for us to make them real.

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# Annotated Resource List

## Books

Augsburger, David. (1988). *Sustaining Love: Healing and Growth In the Passages of Marriage*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books.

Offers insights to couples on the “four marriages within a marriage” which occur as couples mature through the four central stages of their life together. Provides help to negotiate the treacherous passages between these “marriages,” and how-to’s for keeping your relationship from sinking, so that it can mature into a deeply satisfying and fulfilling alliance.

Canfield, Jack, et al. (1996). *Chicken Soup for the Surviving Soul*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.

In this special collection in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, you will read incredible stories from those who have reached beyond the pain of body and soul to survive cancer. Through loving support, unending hope, a positive attitude, and unswerving faith that they would beat the odds no matter how great, those sharing their stories offer empowerment to all cancer victims and their families. Those recovering from a debilitating illness or a serious injury will also find relief from their pain in the warmth of these stories. This book is a potent tonic for physical and spiritual healing.

Erickson, M. Lloyd. (1996). *The Embrace of God: Seeing Beyond Human Parents to Glimpse Our Nurturing Heavenly Father*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers.

Explores the inevitable linkages between what we think and feel about our parents and our view of God. Offers a fresh, provocative profile of Heavenly Father—His trustworthy character, His constant presence, and His unending love. Shows us how we can put away our misconceptions of God and receive His warm embrace.

Fish, Melinda. (1991). *Adult Children and the Almighty*. Tarrytown, NY: Chosen Books Publishing Company.

Practical, in-depth help from an experienced pastoral counselor for “adult children” who lived with addictive/compulsive parents or suffered childhood experiences of hurt and shame. Identifies how such experiences influence personal relationships, job performance, self-esteem, our understanding of who God is, and our ability to trust Him. Illuminates a Christian path toward recovery and healing.

Fisher, Bruce. (1981). *Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends*. San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers.

Offers a very practical, useful framework within which to examine where you are and where you would like to go in the immediate aftermath of a divorce. Outlines step-by-step guides to getting oneself in a position to enjoy the life that comes after the divorce. Reframes the experience as a chance to learn from the past, get to know oneself better, and also to help to develop new parts of the self that were previously unknown.



Gil, Eliana. (1983). *Outgrowing the Pain: A Book for and About Adults Abused as Children*. Rockville, MD: Launch Press.

Assists adults who have been abused as children to surmount the pain of their experience. The author hopes that this book will provide a “good first step” in the healing process for adult survivors of child abuse to put the experiences in perspective and make positive changes for the future.

Gil, Eliana. (1992). *Outgrowing the Pain Together: A Book for Spouses and Partners of Adults Abused as Children*. New York, NY: Dell Trade Paperback.

Offers help for the spouse of a survivor of an abusive childhood. As a therapist, the author understands the special problems couples face when one or both spouses has a history of past abuse. Based on extensive clinical experience, she has developed unique and much-needed guidance specifically for couples in such circumstances.

Hart, Archibald D. (1982). *Children and Divorce: What to Expect, How to Help*. Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher.

Speaks out in behalf of children caught up in the divorce dilemma. Shows how parents and other concerned adults can understand children’s feelings and help them grow through their experiences, how divorcing parents can avoid common pitfalls that can scar a child for life, and how hurting mothers and fathers can keep their own negative emotions from wounding their children.

Hart, Archibald D. (1993). *Dark Clouds, Silver Linings*. Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family Publishing.

Probes the reality that at some time in their lives two of every ten people will experience depression serious enough to hinder their normal way of life. It can increase feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and helplessness. Left untreated, depression can cripple you emotionally and physically. But depression need not rule your life. Offers stories of real people and how they handled their depressions as well as practical guidelines for creating caring, supportive relationships for hurting loved ones.

Joy, Donald M. (1986). *Rebonding: Preventing and Restoring Damaged Relationships*. Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House.

Speaks to those who look back sadly on broken bonds and wonder if intimacy is possible again. Offers practical help for restoring a damaged bond. Addresses the unique concerns of youth who have fallen into the trap of premarital sex. Calls for a society where principles of commitment and fidelity are the norm. Shows why Jesus can uniquely heal the relational wounds in marriage and family.

Kubetin, Cynthia A., & Mallory, James. (1992). *Beyond the Darkness: Healing for Victims of Sexual Abuse*. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing.

Draws from personal experience and the tragic stories of many others to detail the trauma of abuse. Exposes the false beliefs about abuse and shows its overwhelming effects on the life of its victim. Clearly communicates principles of recovery that deliver victims from the haunting feelings and memories of sexual abuse. Illuminates the difficult road of recovery from victim to survivor to thriver.

MacDonald, Gordon & Gail. (1990). *Rebuilding Your Broken World*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Offers a gut-wrenchingly honest account of a “fallen warrior” who was loved back to wholeness again after a moral fall. Portrays the practical insights he gained in the process. Details the kinds of circumstances which leave every human being vulnerable to a “broken world experience” and solid

practical principles which can be applied to make restoration possible.

MacDonald, Gordon & Gail. (1992). *Till the Heart be Touched: Building Intimacy in Marriage, Family and Friendship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell.

Affirms that, while it is instinctive to want to enjoy the fruits of intimacy, the capacity to live intimately probably has to be learned. Extends encouragement, hope, and practical help for imbuing all your relationships with a new-found intimacy. Offers valuable insights into such vital issues as why we fail to love, mending broken relationships, allowing the other person room to grow, renewing old friendships, etc.

Markman, Howard; Stanley, Scott & Blumberg, Susan L. (1994). *Fighting for Your Marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

This book presents the widely respected and research-tested Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) approach to improving marriage. It teaches couples to discuss difficult issues safely and clearly, use ground rules to contain destructive arguments and resolve conflicts, and enhance their fun, friendship, commitment, spirituality and intimacy.

May, Gerald G. (1978). *Addiction and Grace*. New York: Harper Collins publishers.

Explores the physiology of addiction and maps a process of change based on the Christian understanding of grace. Addictions are defined in the broad sense of attachments that become more important to us than God. Affirms that it is when we feel the most powerless that we have the greatest power to deal with our addictions, because that is the moment we are most likely to relax our hands and receive God's grace and turn to Him for help.

Osterhaus, James. (1997). *Family Tales: Rewriting the Stories That Made You Who You Are*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Presents the grace-filled view that we can "rewrite" past stories of hurt and pain which profoundly affect our lives. We are not locked into any one pattern of life, since God uses all the mistakes, abuses and poor judgments that befell us in our family stories to shape us into the characters he wants us to be.

Rosberg, Gary. (1992). *Choosing to Love Again*. Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family Publishing.

Helps the reader to understand the underlying causes of conflict, find freedom from painful memories, build genuine communication, rebuild trust, and discover the healing power of forgiveness.

Seamands, David A. (1988). *Freedom From the Performance Trap*. USA: Victor Books.

A book for all "driven" Christians who have exchanged the joy and security of God's unconditional grace for the guilt and anxiety of an achievement-oriented society which proclaims that we will be accepted, loved and feel worthwhile only when we have delivered a perfect performance. Helps you to take the first steps toward freedom from the performance trap and to experience the liberating power of true grace.

Smedes, Lewis B. (1984). *Forgive and Forget*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, Publishers.

Shows how anyone can tap the power of forgiveness to achieve healthier relationships and peace of mind. Explains the steps in the four stages of forgiveness: hurting, hating, healing, and reconciliation.

Smedes, Lewis B. (1993). *Shame and Grace*. San Francisco, CA: Zondervan Publishing House.

The author helps the reader to understand how undeserved shame is not a shame that leads to health, but a shame that only kills joy. He looks at several faces of shame, some that have preserved and some that have poisoned the human spirit. He identifies the symptoms and the sources of unhealthy shame that makes life heavier than it is meant to be. He then explores the special sort of grace that heals the shame we never deserved in the first place.

Smedes, Lewis B. (1996). *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Provides a "road map" to making peace with those who have hurt or betrayed you. Places God's gift of forgiveness within the capacity of every wounded person, even in circumstances when only hate and vengefulness seem possible. Helps you understand why we forgive, what we do when we forgive, whom we forgive, and how we forgive.

Walsh, Froma. (1998). *Strengthening Family Resilience*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

A warm-hearted book which presents a sound, clear, profoundly thoughtful method of dealing with stress that calls forth the strengths within us. An engaging, informative and valuable resource for family life educators.

Watts, Dorothy M. (1996). *When Your Child Turns from God: Help and Encouragement for Parents of Prodigals*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

Shares the stories of more than 65 prodigals and their parents and affirms the good news that God walks with parents when their hearts are breaking and that He is in the business of calling prodigals home.

Wegscheider-Cruse, Sharon. (1994). *Life After Divorce: Create a New Beginning*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.

An affirming book that shows how the trauma of divorce can give way to growth and the promise of a new life. No matter how bad the marriage, there is no way to end it without feeling a sense of loss. The difference between people who live in pain and those who grow from the experience is the knowledge of how to grieve and let go. Recovering from the trauma of divorce entails turning losses into opportunities.

Wilson, Earl D. (1986). *A Silence to be Broken: Hope for Those Caught in the Web of Incest*. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press.

Offers a hopeful and caring response for those caught in the web of incest and for communities of faith who wish to create a healing atmosphere in their midst.

Wilson, Sandra D. (1990). *Released from Shame: Recovery for Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

A book for those who feel that God loves them less than others, who feel the need for constant affirmation, who feel that they must work twice as hard to be half as good as others, for those who are terrified of personal criticism or are caught in repeated patterns of destructive relationships. Help to free yourself from the dysfunctional and codependent scars left by shame-based families. Comforting new directions for change toward a new life.

Wright, H. Norman. (1993). *Recovering from the Losses of Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell.

A well-know counselor, author and lecturer discusses the losses of life, some of which are life-changing—death, divorce, retirement, business failure—and others whose effect is more subtle—changing jobs, moving, illness, embarrassing situations. Writing from his own experience (he and his wife, Joyce, have suffered the death of their son), the author covers such issues as the meaning of grief, blaming God, learning to express and share grief, ungrieved losses, and healthy ways to hold on to something you've lost. Probing study questions are included with each chapter for personal reflection or group discussion.

Yeagley, Larry. (1995). *Heartache and Healing: Coming to Terms With Grief*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

Dealing with such issues as divorce, loss of home, and the emotional pain of problems that simply will not go away, the author shows how we can successfully cope with primary losses and secondary losses, or the loss of all those things in our lives entwined with the primary losses.

### **Videos**

*Treasures of the Snow*. Glenray Communications, P.O. Box 40400, Pasadena, CA 91114, 1980. 110 minutes, color.

Available in French, German, Dutch, Italian, and Portuguese. A gripping and touching film about forgiveness and reconciliation within families and between families. Filmed in an Alpine village, the narrative depicts the very real feelings of anger, hurt and rejection that spring from and cause misunderstandings, poor communication and acts of revenge. As compassion, love and acceptance are experienced, the way opens for forgiveness and renewal to take place. A very moving film with universal appeal.