FORGIVENESS:
PART OF HEALING

by Elaine Walton

An earlier version of this article was published in the AMCAP Journal, 23(1)(1998): 71-95, and was adapted with permission.

When someone hurts us—knowingly or otherwise—we may wonder if we would be helped by forgiving the offender. When wounds are deep and scars permanent, we may ask if it is even possible to forgive. We can say, “I forgive,” but still question if we have truly forgiven. We may not be able to decide if forgiveness is important or valuable.

Although the old “an eye for an eye” approach seems like a potential solution for the offended, that attitude never leads to a complete solution with all pain gone and all wounds healed. It only substitutes another’s pain for one’s own. This is substitution, not resolution. Revenge is never resolution. Revenge obscures the attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices that led to the original offense, rather than eliminating them. Forgiveness allows healing to take place regardless of the location or attitude of the offender.

Those who struggle with issues of abuse and injustice may have different views of forgiveness. One person may be reluctant to forgive, fearing the process will leave him weaker and even more vulnerable. Another injured person may subscribe to a
What is Forgiveness?

When we say, “I forgive you,” we are saying “I let it go.” It implies a change of heart. It also conveys a change in expectations concerning the forgiver’s future thoughts and behavior. “I forgive you” does not say why or how feelings were changed, nor does it require the forgiver to pretend that his or her relationship to the offender is “normal,” as though the offense never occurred, or that a relationship exists at all. Perhaps feelings changed because feelings of resentment by dwelling on injuries is simply a bad idea—bad for one’s health or damaging to a valued relationship.

Genuine forgiveness is a process, not an event. It takes time and hard work. It is a voluntary act that gives meaning to the injury, disengages the offended from the offender, and frees the injured person from the ills of bitterness and resentment.

Forgiveness is the process by which the injured person gains peace, freedom, self-acceptance, and release from self-pity, and through which wounds are healed. Forgiveness need not be connected to the offender’s repentance. The offender may or may not be in a position to benefit from being forgiven by the offended person, but forgiveness definitely benefits the offended person who forgives.

Forgiving involves accepting responsibility for how one feels, acts, and responds. For example, if I loaned a friend some money and the friend didn’t pay me back, I could follow that friend around forever, nagging and hounding. I could try to make him feel guilty for every pleasure he enjoys or desires—since he does not deserve pleasure while he still owes me money. I could dream about all the things I could buy if the loan were paid. No matter how small the debt, everything I thought about acquiring could somehow be linked to that hope of payment, and I could always use the unpaid debt as an excuse for not better managing my own finances.

At some point, however, I would have to decide whether to continue reminding the debtor that he owes me. I would have to balance the benefit of feeling free of the hassle and bad feelings connected to nagging the debtor against the benefit of having a vague hope and built-in excuse for my own problems, two of the advantages I enjoyed when I expected the debt to be paid. By forgiving the debt, I would not be sending the debtor a message that he somehow deserved the money—I would be freeing myself of that entanglement and empowering myself to go on without that burden. I would no longer give the debtor power to invade my thoughts and actions. By taking away that power, I would also transfer responsibility for “tending” the unpaid debt from the debtor to me. I would not take responsibility to

pay the debt—that belongs to the debtor and could never be mine. But I could take responsibility to stop spending time in thought, action, or reaction concerning the debt. By taking that responsibility (as unfair as it once seemed), I would actually be free of the burden of tending the debt because I could choose to stop caring about it. I would be in charge of my fate and I could no longer use the unpaid debt as an excuse for my own financial ills.

Flanagan explained forgiveness in the context of an interpersonal transaction in which a moral law is violated. She defined moral law as “the voluntary agreement that sets the mutually defined limits of fairness between two people.” When there is a breach of those mutually defined limits, injury results. If the injury is acknowledged and the offender repents, forgiveness is a natural response, even though it may still take time and be a painful process. When the injury is not acknowledged and the offender does not repent, forgiveness is still essential in the healing process. In fact, if there is no repentance by the offender, forgiveness may be even more important to the injured person, because he or she must take the initiative to become free from the pain rather than wait for the offender to repent. But when there is no repentance, forgiveness may not be a natural response.

Forgiveness: A Process

If repentance is a natural part of the forgiveness process, but the offender cannot or will not repent, then it would not be right for the offended person to deny the benefits of forgiveness by the ignorance or refusal of the offender. The injured person may still gain the benefits of forgiveness through his or her own actions by taking steps that allow him or her to move forward. The injured person does not in any way feel guilt or accept
responsibility for the injury suffered through the acts of the offender. Nor is the injured person asked to minimize or trivialize the pain suffered at the hands of an offender. The injured person does not excuse the offender from repenting—no human being has the authority to excuse another from repenting. When the injured person takes steps to heal, it may not affect the offender in any way, but it can be a part of the victim's recovery and survival. The offended person could consider the following actions.

Name the offense and recognize the injury. The offended person can name the offense and recognize the injury. Flanigan explained that to name the offense, the injured person must ask questions such as "What were the moral rules that were broken, and how did the betraying event break those rules?" "What is the meaning of the injury, and what are its consequences?" (e.g., "How am I more vulnerable? How has my belief system changed?") Flanigan went on to explain that claiming or recognizing the injury is a process of exploring and owning. "What gifts have I received because of the injury—how am I stronger or different because of the injury?"

Experience healing sorrow. In our compassion, we are tempted to spare the injured person from further sorrow. Certainly the injured may not wish to experience additional sorrow. It is appropriate, even desirable, for the offender to feel sorrow for the offense, but the injured person, we would agree, has experienced enough pain by being injured. Nevertheless, sorrow is part of the healing process for the injured. For many injured people, sorrow has been averted or camouflaged by anger, and in giving up that anger, one has to be willing to feel the sorrow that precipitated it. Sorrow is a natural response to loss and will come naturally as the injured person is able to name the offense and explore and claim the injury. Religious leaders (and even therapists) may try to expedite the healing process by jumping from identifying the injury directly to forgiving the offender—skipping the stage of sorrow. Sorrow is uncomfortable for others to watch, and for some, it may look too much like wallowing in misery. Wallowing usually means the offended person is stuck in the grieving process. Whining associated with wallowing may be a subconscious plea for help in appropriately identifying the losses and experiencing the grieving process in its entirety. Sorrow, as part of grieving, is a necessary acknowledgment of the losses experienced in connection with the offense. The expression of sorrow may lead to a sense of restored wholeness and new perspective.

Break the silence. The injured person can benefit from disclosing the offense in detail to a confidante, therapist, or legal authority. Through disclosure, the injured person assigns responsibility, because recognizing the person responsible for the offense is prerequisite to forgiving. In order to heal and forgive, the injured person must recognize that something was wrong and someone else was at fault. Once the silence is broken and responsibility is established, the process of forgiving can proceed.

Prevent the offense from happening again. The injured person must do everything possible to prevent the offense from happening to the injured again. Although the injured may not be able to prevent an offender from re-offending, he or she can take protective measures against future injuries. At this stage, the injured person takes

continued on page 11

HOW CAN I HELP?

We sometimes learn, to our sorrow, that a family member or friend was abused or victimized at some time in the past. That person may be trying to heal, with or without professional help. We may want to help, but may not know what to say—sometimes we're afraid that anything we do will make the situation worse. Because I was once a victim of abuse and now consider myself a survivor, I'd like to share some things that are helpful and some things you may want to avoid in trying to love and support a person who has told you of past abuse.

First, however, there are people who are still suffering abuse—including children who may tell you or show signs that they are being abused. These people need immediate help. All states have mandatory reporting requirements for adults who suspect child abuse. Some states limit the requirement to teachers, doctors, and others most likely to observe injuries, but in some states, like Utah, all adults are required to report suspected child abuse to the police or the state agency charged with protecting children. Those who report child abuse under these laws are usually protected from liability if they acted in good faith. When the person who tells you of ongoing abuse is an adult, there usually is not a reporting requirement. Information on how to help should be available from a local women's shelter or crisis hotline, listed in the white and yellow pages of the phone directory.
When the abuse took place in the past, here are some things you can do:

**Listen.** The person who is telling you about the past abuse has chosen you as a safe person to tell. As difficult as it is to hear about the victimization your friend endured, it is an honor to be chosen. Understand that the offended person may need to tell the story many times, and express additional details or trust that you will not find further details so repulsive that you are unwilling to listen any more. Conversely, a few injured people first tell the worst story they can think of, to see if you will reject them, and later share the real story after you have passed a “test” of trust.

**Encourage professional help.** The injured person, even with support and love from friends, family, and religious leaders, probably will not heal without professional help. Of course it is beneficial if your friend can pray for healing and ask God to help. Often, however, one of the most terrible results of abuse by a father or other male authority figure is the injured person’s confusion and difficulty in his or her relationship to God. In any case, a professional listener/helper may be able to help your friend learn how to heal and then to live with survival and healing. A religious leader, family doctor, local mental health clinic, counseling center, or nearby university program that trains counselors may be able to suggest two or three clinical psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, or marriage and family therapists who have been reliable helpers for people injured by abuse. The injured person can then make an appointment and, if the first professional doesn’t seem like a good “match,” can make other appointments until she or he finds someone who seems like a good helper and listener.

Therapy and counseling are often covered to some degree by health insurance. Some clinics and practice groups use a sliding fee scale for low-income clients. Providers of emotional health services are especially careful about client confidentiality. And although therapy may take a long time, those who have spent the time and worked to heal and free themselves from the burdens and sorrows they have experienced almost always feel the journey was worth the sacrifice.

**Don’t exceed your own abilities.** Listening is more important than any advice you could give, especially because there is incorrect conventional wisdom about almost every aspect of abuse. The media sometimes show incorrect portrayals of ways to help others. For example, you may believe from reading the previous article that your friend should seek healing through forgiveness. But not all injured people are ready to take the steps outlined in the article, and you are probably not the best person to see your friend through that process. You may have overcome difficulties by spiritual or intellectual means, by regular physical exercise or a popular herbal remedy. Even if your life’s experience had somehow been exactly identical to your friend’s victimization, you undoubtedly have a different spiritual, intellectual, and physical make-up than your friend. The treatments that have worked for your problems cannot be transferred through friendly advice to someone injured by abuse. He or she is likely to believe you don’t understand how painful and burdensome the victimization was and still is.

You may help best by encouraging the victim to find professional help, expressing your sorrow about and belief in the victim’s story, and being available, within reason, if the victim needs a listener. One thing you can do is monitor the victim’s moods and perspectives. Often, at the time of a major life transition, such as marriage, birth of a baby, a child leaving home, the death of a loved one, or a job change, a victim’s perspective on the past abuse will change, for good or ill. Victims are at risk for depression, and a life transition could trigger a depressive episode. Without professional help, depression can lead to suicide, and your listening skills may alert you that your friend is depressed, or that he or she is becoming more depressed.

If your friend talks about suicide (don’t be afraid to ask), has a plan and can easily get the means to carry it out, or expresses thoughts such as, “The world (my family, my children) would be better off without me,” “If I were in heaven then I’d be healed,” or “I prefer oblivion to dealing with this pain,” you are faced with a medical emergency. If you know the name of your friend’s professional helper, you can call and say or leave a message that you are concerned that your friend is depressed or contemplating suicide. Even better, you may be able to convince your friend to make that call and arrange to get help soon. Most counselors make arrangements to see
responsibility for his or her own protection. That protection may include avoiding or refusing to associate with the offender, which does not mean the injured person has not really forgiven the offender. Forgiveness does not require anyone to act as though the injury never happened, nor does it require the offended person to have feelings of love or trust toward the offender. The challenge is for the offended person to become strong and learn when to seek help without becoming hardened or cynical.

Restore lost order. The injured person may think of restoring lost order as “balancing the scales.” Uneven scales are balanced either by subtracting something from the heavier side or adding something to the lighter side. Likewise, balance is restored either by the offender taking responsibility and accepting the consequences of his or her actions, or by loading resources to the depleted reserves of the offended person. The injured person cannot impose consequences on the offender, just as the injured person cannot repent for the offender. The injured’s attempts to impose consequences on the offender are often destructive or counter-productive. For example, a wife may withhold affection as an attempt to punish an abusive husband, but the husband may not make the connection between the wife’s lack of affection and his own abusive behavior. Or an injured person may mete out punishment by becoming an abuser and injuring others. Appropriate punishment, even if it could be defined, may not be within the power of the injured person.

More important than punishment is the power of the injured person to balance the scales by loading resources to depleted reserves. The injured can draw strength through support from a variety of resources (such as therapy, support groups, or informal support systems). By providing support to others who have suffered similar losses, injured individuals can also strengthen themselves, and become survivors rather than victims.

Forgiveness: Reclaiming Power by Owning Responsibility

The process described above is designed to empower the injured. It provides a way in which they may prepare to forgive, even though the client's first priority must be getting protection. However, it is important that the injured person not become dependent on another person to forgive. The injured person must learn to forgive themselves and accept the consequences of the abuse. This can be difficult, especially if the injured person has been abused for a long time. However, with the right support, the injured person can learn to forgive and move on with their life.

Don’t lie. If you want to continue to help the victim, never lie. You risk losing the victim’s trust. So, for example, if the victim asks if you’ve arranged for him or her to be monitored almost around the clock, as described above, answer yes and tell the victim what you told those people about why they should be in contact. You should also mention that you’ve arranged all this attention because you care so much about the victim. (Of course, if the victim actually needs to be monitored 24/7 lest he or she commit suicide, then the victim should be under suicide watch in a hospital.) Similarly, if some aspect of the victim’s story seems unbelievable to you, admit that you find it difficult to believe and why—not because you think the victim is lying, but because you can’t imagine that someone would victimize a child in that way, or whatever your reason is. Share your sorrow, if you feel it.

Keep the victim’s confidence, unless it’s an emergency. If you call the victim’s professional counselor, as described above, you are breaking confidence with your friend. That’s why you would only do such a thing if the situation were, or could soon become, a matter of danger to the victim or someone else. You should not divulge what the injured person has told you without permission, even if he or she doesn’t ask you not to share what you know. Such personal, painful stories deserve our respect and confidence. If you discover that you need to discuss what the victim has told you with someone else for a good reason (because it’s disturbing you so much, for example), ask for permission. The person who confided in you understands the need to talk to someone.

Help the victim have hope. The victim needs to know that his or her victimization was not normal—that most people don’t have those experiences and that the victim is not doomed to repeat his or her own victimization, but can be helped and healed. You may be astonished that the victim needs reassurance that the offender’s actions were wrong and abnormal, but that is precisely what the victim needs to know.

Your friend also needs to know that he or she can make choices about life. Be careful to step back and let your friend be independent in healthy ways. Everything your friend chooses—to seek professional help, to change an unhealthy situation, to make other healthy choices—helps your friend be stronger. You can give the victim courage and hope. If your own family is a good example, you may want to invite the victim to see, in the natural course of things, interactions in your family. Carefully chosen literature—even children’s and young adult books and movies can provide examples of families and friends who behave in appropriate, loving ways. Say it out loud: “This is normal. This is the way it’s supposed to be. You can become a person as good as, or even better, than that.”

— Name Withheld
offender has not repented. An appropriate question for an injured person is “How would you be different if your offender repented?”

Many injured people spend so much energy on revenge or validation, continually seeking assurance that the offense was real and he or she has the right to feel injured, that their lives are put on hold while they wait (and wait and wait) for justice. When one has spent so much energy seeking justice, it is hard to imagine a different life—a future free of the injury. One woman, who spent decades stuck in the groove of anger and bitterness, responded to this vision of freedom by saying, “If my offender truly repented, and I could forget about this terrible injury, I think I would be spending more time with my own children instead of mourning my own lost childhood.” Another said, “I would be in school preparing for a meaningful career.” Another responded, “I would be thinner!” The injured often struggle with the vision of repentance and forgiveness because their “victim lifestyle” is accomplishing something for them, and change is frightening. Once the vision is realized, and injured people see themselves as whole, free, and in control, it then becomes apparent that being free and in control means being responsible.

However, new responsibility is often confusing (“Am I free from . . . or free to . . .?”). It is easy for injured people to talk about what they don’t want but often hard to talk about what they do want. When the injured envision themselves as educated, or slender, or having a satisfying career, or happily married, or fulfilling any other dream, it becomes clear who is in charge of making that dream come true.

The Joy of Forgiveness

When one has been deeply wounded, there is no way to forgive genuinely without experiencing a great deal of personal growth. The following statements, by wounded persons who were able to forgive, are manifestations of growth and insight.

I know that I cannot prevent harm from coming my way. It is the rare person who escapes being injured by a person she loves. I will remove myself from harm’s way when I can, but in the future I will know that injuries happen to everyone. Some of them I will be able to control. Some I will not. Knowing this, I am free. Forgiving will never again be so difficult.

It is essential to not excuse. You can forgive, but you must not excuse. Excusing means you believe there is some logical reason a person behaves the way he behaves. In cases like incest or beating, there is no logical reason. So excusing is dangerous. If we have free will, we are responsible for ourselves. Granted, things may affect our judgment, but it is our judgment.

You know, I’ve lost everything. It’s all been ripped off. I understand it, though; nothing is worth the hating.

I decided I’m not the teacher or the judge of who’s a failure or who isn’t. I’m not the scorekeeper. Everyone makes mistakes. So I think I must forgive.

After interviewing many victims of intimate wounds, Flanigan learned that those who were successful at forgiving became stronger and better able to take care of themselves. They made different choices about the people they let into their lives, but they didn’t stop being vulnerable. Instead, they accepted pain as a part of life and developed a new philosophy about people.

Elaine Walton, Ph.D., is an associate professor and the director of the School of Social Work at Brigham Young University.

References
5. Ibid.
7. Flanigan (note 4, above).
8. Ibid., 229.
9. Ibid., 170.
10. Ibid., 168.
11. Ibid., 169.