

To Forgive or Not to Forgive— Can you afford to be unforgiving?

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Anger, bitterness, hostility, and unforgiveness are hungry parasites that feed and feed until there is nothing left for the brain or heart to eat.

—Arlene R. Taylor



Forgiveness.

The word, to say nothing of the concept, has been around a very long time. Most people have heard of it; many have been encouraged to forgive or not to forgive. However, confusion and misunderstanding typically surround the topic—not to mention the various definitions of forgiveness, likely as many as there are brains thinking about the concept.

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, *forgiveness* involves the process of giving up your right for requital from an offender and ceasing to feel resentment against someone who is an offender.

That all sounds well and good, but (as many individuals have found to their consternation) it's not always easy to do. And forgiveness may need to happen more than once. When a specific memory of how you were wronged pops up in your brain, you may need to forgive again.

It can be important to develop your own definition of what forgiveness means to you. Here are examples that may help you get started.

- Forgiveness involves the process of giving up your right to retaliate toward an offender and ceasing to feel resentment against that offender. —Online Dictionary
- Forgiveness can be defined as the peace and understanding that come from: blaming that which has hurt you LESS, taking the life experience LESS personally, and changing your grievance story. —Dennis A. Marikis PhD

- Forgiveness is giving up the wish that things could be different. —Valerie Harper
- Forgiveness has everything to do with relieving oneself of the burden of being a victim, letting go of the pain, and transforming oneself from victim to survivor. —C. R. Strahan
- Forgiveness involves giving up your right to exact ‘an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth’ from the individual who hurt or wronged you (and sometimes that individual is you). You choose to think about something else rather than harbor resentment in working memory. You refrain from repeatedly bringing up the incident to yourself and/or others and rehearsing all the gory details. And you move from victim mindset to a survivor mindset.
—Arlene R. Taylor

Somewhere around 1623, William Shakespeare opened a soliloquy in his play *Hamlet* with the words: “To be or not to be; that is the question.”

In the 21st century, as human beings continue to navigate the *slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*, the apropos line for many may now be: *To forgive or not to forgive; that is the question.* Or perhaps: *Can you really afford to be unforgiving?*

This mini-monograph on forgiveness is presented in the following sections:

- I. What Forgiveness Is ‘Not’
- II. Forgiveness and Remembering
- III. Effects of Unforgiveness
- IV. Counterfeit Forgiveness
- V. Religious Confusion
- VI. Genuine Forgiveness
- VII. Forgiveness-Health Connection
- VIII. Life-saving Strategies
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Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself and to the people who love you.

—Edward Hallowell MD
Dare to Forgive

I. What Forgiveness Is ‘Not’

My brain’s opinion is that any discussion of forgiveness needs to identify clearly what forgiveness is ‘not,’ so everyone is on the same page.

Forgiveness is ‘not:’

- Condoning bad behavior; minimizing, justifying, excusing the injury / wrong, or even trying to pretend it did not happen. Perpetrators may say “I’m sorry,” (assuming they even believe themselves responsible in any way for what happened). Perpetrators often act as if they think grace means they are immediately granted immunity from personal, professional, or relational fallout of their actions and believe forgiveness entitles them to full reconciliation. Unfortunately, they may pressure their victim to comply. Sometimes they search for an advocate (e.g., teacher, clergy, attorney, judge, family member, close friend) who will serve as a go-between and try to obtain amnesty from the person that was harmed.
- Absolving a criminal of his/her crime or the individual for the incident he/she caused. As the old saying goes, “If you do the crime you do the time.” Sometimes parents try to ‘protect’ a child from adverse financial or other types of negative outcomes. Perhaps a friend will take responsibility for the incident (because the actual driver didn’t have a current driver’s license or was under the influence of alcohol or other drugs). Denying the other person’s responsibility for the incident, taking the credit or the blame for what happened (when you did not cause it) is really a form of lying. It can actually ‘enable’ the individual to repeat a similar type of behavior because, after all, someone else took the responsibility.
- Waiving your right to compensation. If someone smashes your car, it is your right to ask for and accept compensation for the damage. If you lease a vehicle and fail to take care of it as outlined in the lease agreement, the company may not throw you in jail but will, in all likelihood, require that you pay some appropriate compensation or penalty. Turn-about is fair play. Just letting it all go, sweeping it under the rug, and pretending it never happened does a disservice to both the perpetrator and the victim. If you have been abused, suffered violence, or been the victim of a heinous crime, there needs to be some recompense. If the perpetrator (or a representative, or even a family member or friend) says, “Can’t you just let it go?” the healthy and functional response would be, “No. To just let it go would be an injustice.” Your refusal, of course, would have nothing to do with bitterness or vengeance or even unforgiveness. Forgiveness doesn’t erase what happened or make up for it or even balance the score. If you have been badly wronged, just hearing “I’m sorry,” is not enough. Something else is required—some type of recompense needs to be made.

- Choosing to reconcile or remain in an abusive relationship or environment. Forgiveness is not an excuse to remain in an abusive relationship, allowing others to mistreat you, nor is it an excuse to mistreat yourself. When you lease a vehicle, the company typically provides you with manufacturer's guidelines on how to care for the vehicle, along with information about penalties that you will incur if you fail to care for it appropriately and return it in less than optimum condition. Following that lease analogy, you are leased a brain and body to use during your sojourn on this planet, along with the responsibility to care for them in the best way possible. This includes protecting both brain and body from abuse and mistreatment by others or by yourself through an unhealthy lifestyle.
- Punishment inflicted or retribution exacted for a perceived injury or wrong as seen in generational vendettas. When you retaliate through vengeance, it can eliminate unforgiveness but vengeance is certainly not forgiveness

II. Forgiveness and Remembering

The stupid neither forgive nor forget; the naïve forgive and forget; the wise forgive but do not forget.

—Thomas Szasz

The goal of forgiveness is not to erase your memory. If that happened, you would also lose the lessons you learned and the wisdom you gained. Remembering helps you to becoming wiser, to develop and implement appropriate personal boundaries, and to avoid falling victim to the dysfunctional and abusive behaviors of others (especially in adulthood).

Remembering can also assist you in distinguishing between horrible events that were truly an accident versus those that resulted from premeditated selfishness or even from evil. Genuine forgiveness allows you to recall what you want or need to remember minus the sting of mental, emotional, sexual, or physical pain.

Forgiveness is less a matter about whether you forget and more about how you remember. There are many ways to remember an event or situation. Think of these as styles of remembering. You may habitually favor one style or use a combination of styles, depending on the environment. Each style has its consequences, however, which means it is a good idea to evaluate the consequences before you develop habits around one style.

Three examples follow.

#1 – Repressing

Because it is painful to remember, you may have tried to deny or repress your memories, putting them out of mind or keeping yourself extremely busy in an attempt to forget. It can be thought of as an attempt to hide the memory from your conscious awareness. They are alive and well in your subconscious, however.

Consequences of repressing memories may include the following.

- (a) You expend great amounts of mental energy trying to block your conscious thoughts of the event or situation.
- (b) You fail to move through the grief recovery process, which can result in the building up of a slush-fund of unresolved grief. When this happens, the dam can break (metaphorically) at any time, allowing all the unresolved emotion to overwhelm you.
- (c) You tend to forget the lessons you learned and the wisdom you gained, or you forget to create and implement appropriate boundaries. The result is that you become involved in events and situations where you get *hurt* again.
- (d) You develop physical symptoms because the body remembers—and does not lie. The memories that are not dealt with appropriately may be expressed through illness.

#2 – Ruminating and Rehearsing

You can get in the habit of ruminating to yourself and/or rehearsing to others in living color, going over all the gory details, sensing the emotions, and re-experiencing the pain. Consequences may include the following.

- a) You extend the stress response, flooding your brain and body with stress chemicals such as cortisol, adrenalin, and dopamine. As adrenalin increases, so do levels of dopamine, which temporarily helps you to feel better. You can even become addicted to the adrenalin and dopamine and trigger their release through ruminating and rehearsing.
- b) You tend to keep your mind occupied with the event, situation, or loss, which can keep you stuck in the past. This can derail you from moving on successfully and appropriately.
- c) You can wear yourself and your listeners out with the repetitive and seemingly endless rehearsal, which rarely leads to recovery and resolution.
- d) You reinforce a very subjective, intensely personal, and somewhat skewed view of the event or situation.

#3 – Recalling and Releasing

You can recall only the key facts when it is important to do so. When a thought pops into your mind, you choose whether or not you want to keep thinking about it or change your mental focus. If you need to recall something about the event or situation, you do so—but in a somewhat detached manner—more like an observer. You avoid re-experiencing all the emotion, reliving all the gory details, becoming immersed again in the pain, and pumping out adrenaline and dopamine. Consequences may include the following:

- a) You are able to recall lessons you learned and new protective boundary strategies without flooding your body with stress chemicals such as cortisol, adrenalin, norepinephrine, and dopamine that tends to rise whenever adrenalin rises).
- b) Your mind is freed to primarily get on with the business of living a successful and productive life, rather than ruminating about the past and getting stuck in rehearsal.
- c) You avoid exhausting yourself and others through endless rumination and rehearsal. When you do need to discuss something about the event or situation, you are able to do so in a more neutral and less emotional manner.
- d) You reinforce a larger, more objective, and balanced view of the event or situation.

You may use a combination of these styles. For example:

- You may use Style #3 (Recalling and Releasing) when you are alone and then transition into Style #2 (Ruminating and Rehearsing) when you have an empathetic audience.
- You may use Style #1 (Repressing) when you are alone and fear the pain, then move into Style #2 to get energy from the adrenalin and comfort from the dopamine whenever anyone will listen to you.

Interestingly, people who get caught in the trap of counterfeit forgiveness, often exhibit the repressing style of #1.

Those who refuse to forgive may exhibit style #2.

If ‘to forgive or not to forgive’ is the question, then learning how to forgive appropriately may be part of the answer. Using and developing the most appropriate style of recalling and remembering ultimately becomes a personal choice that involves practice.

Reframing

Have you ever reframed a so-so painting, only to discover that the artwork now looks quite different, exquisite even? Turn that into a reframing metaphor. Reframing a painful event or situation can help you view what happened from a different perspective. By moving it (figuratively

speaking) from one frame to another frame, one can often look at the experience(s) less from the perspective of the pain and more from the perspective of it being just one small snapshot in your entire life's album.

Reframe a painful event or situation and view what happened from a different perspective. Sometimes you may now see the "gift," identify something valuable you learned, or even glimpse the metaphoric silver lining. Try several different frames. There are many options. Pick the best possible frame to create the perspective that fits best with the whole of your lifetime and your desire for health.

When you stand back and view the picture in its new (and sometimes larger) frame, ask yourself:

- What do I want for my life?
- Do I want to be stuck in a frame, living with and rehearsing my grievance on a daily basis?
- Or, do I want to be living in a different frame, acknowledging what happened but no longer in bondage to the person(s) who caused me pain?

Forgiveness might be an *old* word but understanding and practicing it in a healthier (poison-free) way could be the exquisite frame holding the portrait of the *healthier* you.

III. Effects of Unforgiveness

One of the secret causes of stress plaguing millions of people is unforgiveness.

—Don Colbert, MD

The woman made her way slowly and painfully across my office and into a chair. Her name was Jaylee. Attractive, in her early forties, mahogany hair pulled back in a low ponytail, obviously in great discomfort. As she began her story, silent tears coursed down her face and fell onto hands clasped tightly in her lap, hands that were beginning to show signs of arthritic disfigurement.

Several years before, Jaylee had returned home early from a meeting to discover her husband in bed with the babysitter. "I've tried to get over it," she said. "We got a new bed and redecorated the room. We went to counseling. I've tried everything, I really have, but nothing has worked. Every time I look at him all I can see my mind's eye is the two of them in our bed amidst ruffled sheets. And to add insult to injury, a few weeks ago my doctor told me I had an autoimmune disease. I'm always in pain. Everything about my body aches."

"Have you tried changing the picture in your mind's eye?" I asked. "Every time that old picture pops up, have you purposefully envisioned a new replacement picture?"

She shook her head. “That psychological stuff doesn’t work with me.”

I smiled. “It’s brain-function stuff.”

“Whatever,” she said, rolling her eyes. “As I said, I have tried everything, but nothing has helped. Finally I told him to move out.”

“And how is that working?” I asked. Silence and more tears. “It appears that you are still sad. It’s been five years since the incident. What are you still sad about?”

In a nanosecond her entire demeanor changed. Her black eyes blazed fire and indignation. “What do you *think* I’m sad about?” she shouted. “Are you a complete moron? He ruined my life. *That’s* what I’m sad about!”

It also appeared that sadness was the least of it. For several minutes the woman raged about the injustice of life. After all, she had been a good wife and mother and didn’t deserve this. Repeat, did NOT deserve this. Finally she wound down, took a deep breath, and sighed.

“Are you by chance stuck in the cycle of rehearsing?” I asked.

“What do you mean ‘rehearsing’?” Jaylee demanded. “I’m going to tell my story to anyone who will listen for as long as I’m alive!”

“For what purpose?” I asked. “Are you looking for sympathy or pity?”

Jaylee glared. “I’m trying to help others,” she blazed. “I never want this to happen to anyone else. Yesterday I was ticked off, though. A woman in the doctor’s waiting room fell asleep before I could finish telling her all the details. That was rude!” Then Jaylee added, “Anyway, I always feel better after I tell my story.”

I suppressed a smile, picturing the scene in the waiting room. Personally, I couldn't imagine how telling others all the gory details could help *them*. But I could understand how people sometimes felt better after yet another rehearsal of what had happened to them individually. For the moment, anyway.

“You may feel better after rehearsing,” I replied, “at least momentarily. When you tell your story in living color, reliving it in effect, you trigger the emotion of anger. The anger triggers the release of adrenalin. As levels of adrenalin increase, you feel more energetic. Adrenalin triggers the release of dopamine. As levels of dopamine increase, you feel better. Sometimes people become addicted to the adrenalin and dopamine that are released through continued rehearsing.”

“Do you expect me to believe that what happens in my mind can impact my body like that?” Jaylee asked, more than a touch of sarcasm in her tone.

“Have you ever wakened from a scary dream in a cold sweat, your heart pounding, gasping for breath?” I asked. “Perhaps you dreamed you were falling through space or that you were being chased and running for your life? Because your brain perceived the event, your body reacted as if the event were real, pumping out adrenaline.” Jaylee looked at me, silent.

“When you tell and retell your sad story as if it happened yesterday, your body reacts as if the event were happening all over again, too.” This time Jaylee waved her hand dismissively

I tried another tack. “Have you forgiven your husband?”

“Nope,” she said, shaking her head. “He has asked me to forgive him, over and over again. But it was all just too egregious. Now it’s too late. He remarried last month. Besides, why should I forgive him? He doesn’t deserve to be forgiven.”

“None of us *deserves* to be forgiven for our faux pas,” I said.

“Faux pas!” Jaylee fairly screamed. “Did you say *faux pas*? You must be kidding! What he did was absolutely unforgivable. He ruined my life. Faux pas, indeed!”

I squelched another smile. My French heritage had bubbled up before I’d had time to consider that the words *blunder* or *indiscretion* or *mistake* might have been a more apt. “You could still forgive him,” I said. “It’s never too late. The person could have died, and you could still forgive.”

Some definitions for forgiveness focus on reducing unforgiveness. Many acts have the potential to reduce unforgiveness and are thus often confused with forgiveness. As one researcher put it, successful vengeance will eliminate unforgiveness, but no one would confuse vengeance with forgiveness.

“Forgiveness does not mean that you deny the other's responsibility for injuring or hurting you, condone bad behavior, minimize and justify the wrong, or excuse the act, or make everything right,” I explained. “And it certainly doesn’t mean that you choose to reconcile or remain in an abusive relationship or environment or that you waive your right to justice and appropriate compensation.” Jaylee sat motionless, glowering at me.

I explained that at least two types of forgiveness pop up in the literature: *decisional* forgiveness and *emotional* forgiveness. They both involve personal choice.



The first type is ‘Decisional Forgiveness.

This involves a behavioral intention to resist an unforgiving stance and to respond differently toward a transgressor.



The second type is ‘Emotional Forgiveness.’
It involves the replacement of negative, unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions.

Unfortunately, some go through the first type but never get to the second. And of the two, emotional forgiveness, which involves psychophysiological changes, has more direct health and well-being consequences.

If she chose to do so, Jaylee could begin with decisional forgiveness and then move on to emotional forgiveness. In other words, she could move from a victim position (a person who remains stuck in the past) to a survivor position (a person who moves toward a healthier future).

“The bottom line,” I said, “is that forgiving appears to be crucial to healthy living.” As Doctors Arnold and Barry Fox put it, when you say “I forgive you,” you’re also saying “I want to be healthy.” The act of forgiving allows the body to turn down the manufacture of catabolic chemicals, and instructs the subconscious to banish negative feelings from the mind.

“Forgiveness has less to do with others,” I said, “and everything to do with the forgiver. In this case, the forgiver would be you. The one who benefits the most would also be you.” Silence.

I continued. “Think of it this way. Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself. It’s a way to stop harboring destructive feelings that sap health and happiness. A way of helping yourself to feel better. Forgiveness can improve your health. If you choose not to forgive, you will likely be the one who pays most dearly. I once heard it put this way: A person living in *unforgiveness*, all the while wishing that the other individual would drop dead, is the person actually drinking the deadly poison. I know that you’re accustomed to holding a grudge, but there is another way.”

Studies have shown that forgiveness is involved with more than just psychology. According to internationally renowned cardiologist Herbert Benson, MD, there is a *Physiology of Forgiveness*[®]. Being unable to forgive another person’s faults is harmful to your health.

As recently as a few years ago, it would have been difficult to find much information on the physiology of forgiveness. Few people realized that *forgiveness research* even existed. Although the field is admittedly new, it has grown exponentially over the past decade with more than 1,200 published studies (up from 58 as recently as 1997).

An inability or unwillingness to forgive has been linked with a variety of health hazards and negative consequences, including the following:

- Increased stress levels and muscle tension
- Increased blood pressure and heart rate
- Increased levels of adrenaline and cortisol

- Suppressed immune function
- Increased risk for depression, heart disease, stroke, and cancer
- Decreased neurological function and memory
- Impaired relationships at home and at work

Unforgiveness may underlie many of the problems individuals grapple with in life. According to one cleric, his belief at time of ordination was that about half of all problems were due (at least in part) to unforgiveness. Ten years later, he estimated that at least three quarters of all health, marital, family, and financial problems stem from unforgiveness. After more than twenty years in ministry, he concluded that *over 90 percent* of all problems are rooted in issues related to unforgiveness.

On the flip side, studies have revealed the power of forgiveness, which can result in these benefits:

- Healthier relationships
- Greater mental, physical, spiritual health
- Less anxiety, stress, and hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- Lower risk of alcohol / substance abuse
- Making room for compassion, kindness, and peace

“It appears,” I explained, “that the one who forgives tends to benefit more than the one who is forgiven. Who knew? Although not always easy, the first to forgive may be the stronger individual.”

“But it’s not fair. What he did wasn’t fair or right,” Jaylee said.

I nodded in agreement. “What he did wasn’t fair or right. Forgiving him doesn’t make what he did fair or right. It doesn’t erase what happened. Forgiveness is about you and your health. When you forgive, you tend to benefit more than the one who is forgiven.”

“I don’t feel like forgiving him,” said Jaylee. “He doesn’t deserve it.”

I smiled. “You don’t forgive because the other person deserves it. You forgive because you need it in order to let go and move on with your life. Feelings follow thoughts. As Dr. Wayne Dyer put it, ‘If you want to change the way you feel you need to change the way you think.’ Change your thoughts and you change your feelings.”

Finally Jaylee shook her head violently. She would have none of it. Rising from the chair, she painfully made her way toward the door.

“Think about it,” I said.

Her parting comment sounded like, “I’ll think about it and let you know.” It was hard to be sure. Her words sounded like they were being forced out through gritted teeth.

Several days passed. The weekend came and went and was followed by another. Then one morning the call light on my office phone was blinking. Picking up the receiver I dialed into voicemail and heard Jaylee’s bitter voice: “I’ve decided. I won’t do it. I’ll die first!”

Regretfully, I replaced the receiver. Yes, Jaylee probably would die well before her life-span had been reached—a devastation that might have been avoided had she been willing to forgive.

Bitterness, a form of anger, can be very destructive. In terms of consequences to the person who has been wronged or abused, bitterness can be more destructive to his or her health than the betrayal itself.

IV. Counterfeit Forgiveness

When forgiveness is offered too quickly, it may not be forgiveness at all. It may just be avoidance.

—Dick Tibbits

Candace wheeled herself into my office and announced, “My body is falling apart, it is, and the doctors can’t seem to explain what’s happening or find a treatment that works.”

I looked carefully at the woman. Pain lines were etched into her middle-aged face. Worry lines, too. “Tell me about it.

Candace launched into a fifteen-minute recital of physical symptoms. Well, more like a thirty-minute litany. Eventually she wound down. Knowing that ‘the body never lies,’ (to quote Alice Miller), I asked Candace whether she thought her ill health might be related in any way to hurtful experiences from her past.

“Oh, it couldn’t be,” she said, quickly. “I forgave everyone long ago.”

“Forgave everyone for what?” I asked.

“For doing the best they could,” she replied.

“Forgave them for what?” I repeated. There was a very long silence while I waited.

Finally she said, “I forgave my father for molesting me and my mother for not believing me.”

“At what age were you molested?” I inquired.

“It started when I was three,” Candace said, “and continued until I was nearly eleven. It stopped because my mother’s sister visited us and caught my father touching me inappropriately. She made a huge fuss about it and threatened to report my dad to law enforcement.” Candace smiled ruefully. “My dad was so angry he told my aunt to leave his house and never come back. He also forbade me from ever seeing her again. I loved my aunt . . . But at least my dad stopped molesting me.”

“Ouch,” I said. “You must have been very angry at having had your boundaries invaded like that and then also losing contact with your aunt.”

“Oh, yes,” Candace replied calmly. “I’m still angry, but not at my parents. I forgave *them*. I’m just angry at myself for not preventing it. And I didn’t stand up for my aunt.”

“What part of ‘A child is no match for an adult male’ don’t you get?” I asked.

Candace shrugged. “There must have been something else I could have done.”

“Something else besides what?” I asked.

“Well, I told my mother, and she said I must be mistaken because my father would never do anything like that. So I decided that it must have been my fault, something I said or did. I’ve taken responsibility for that.”

Same story, same chapter, same verse, I thought. Aloud I said, slowly, “Let me get this straight: You are **not** angry at your father for molesting you—even though anger is the appropriate emotion when your boundaries have been invaded—**nor** at your mother for not believing you **nor** at being told you could never contact your aunt. But you **are** angry at *yourself* for not having prevented the abuse, and you have taken complete responsibility for being molested.”

Candace nodded, albeit a bit uncertainly.

“At some level your brain knows that a child cannot protect itself from an adult,” I continued. “Therefore, you cannot be responsible for what your father did. I’ll bet your body is hurting partly because your brain can’t believe that you are angry at yourself.” Silence.

“Have you ever contacted your aunt?” I asked, breaking the silence.

Candace shook her head. “I’ve thought about it, but I’ve never called her because I felt like I must obey my father.”

“And how old are you?” I asked.

Candace actually laughed. “I know, I know,” she said sheepishly. “It’s not like I’m still a little girl at home and must obey my parents, but sometimes I feel like that.”

“It appear to me that emotionally you still act like a little girl who must obey her parents, not like a confident grown-up woman who knows how to take care of herself and does so.”

“Oh my!” said Candace. “I’ve never looked at it like that. I think there is some truth to what you say, but I couldn’t dishonor my parents by being angry at them.”

I clearly needed a different approach. “While driving recently, I saw a road-work sign and a highway worker waving an orange flag. What did I know for certain? I asked.

Candace laughed and said, “That there was a road-work sign and an orange flag.”

“Exactly,” I replied. “Based on life experience, what did my brain guess?”

“That there might be something up ahead you needed to deal with,” said Candace.

“Right again,” I said. “The flag was a signal to get my attention. There was a large hole in the asphalt. I slowed and drove around the hole. I did not stop the car, grab the highway flag and wave it as I continued on my way.”

I paused, so her brain could catch up. “Think of anger as a highway flag, a signal to let you know your boundaries have been invaded. You can recognize the emotion, get the information it is trying to give you, and take appropriate action—without picking up the flag of anger and carrying it around with you.”

“Oh, I get it,” said Candace. “I picked up the flag of anger and have been waving it madly, but I directed the anger at myself.”

“Do you still visit your parents?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” she replied. “My father even built a ramp at their house for my wheelchair. I visit regularly, but it’s not pleasant. Even before I turn into their driveway my stomach heaves, and I feel sick. Once inside, my father stares at me in a way that makes my skin crawl. But they are my parents, and I need to honor them.”

I raised an eyebrow, hoping Candace would continue. She did.

“I was advised to forgive and forget, so that’s what I’ve tried to do,” Candace said, a slight edge to her voice. “Whenever the memories start gnawing at me, I just try to put them out of my mind.”

Ouch, I thought to myself. Even when an individual tries to put memories of abuse out of his or her mind, the body remembers. Without taking the path of genuine forgiveness, those unfortunate memories will likely be acted out in some type of illness that can result in a shortened lifespan.

In her book, *The Body Never Lies* (2005), author Alice Miller talks about how some adults misapply admonition to *honor* their parents and how some parents misuse this admonition to either sweep their bad behaviors under the proverbial carpet or to control their grown children. Miller’s position is that individuals who were seriously abused in childhood, thinking they must honor their parents, try to do so through repression and emotional detachment, since they cannot build up a relaxed and trusting relationship with parents whom they still fear consciously or unconsciously.

“Have you ever heard of *counterfeit forgiveness*?” I asked. Candace shook her head.

I explained to her carefully how, as is often the case, some type of counterfeit exists for the genuine article. Forgiveness is no exception. Counterfeit forgiveness involves pretending, minimizing, denying, or repressing. For some grown children it means, allowing their brains and bodies to remain emotionally battered in any number of unhealthy ways, continuing to accept abuse from dysfunctional family members or others, or even abusing themselves.

Genuine forgiveness, on the other hand, involves giving careful thought to identifying what happened, the life-long consequences, and what needs to be done for personal recovery and healing. It involves choosing and systematically following through with these choices and behaviors:

- Identify and label the abuse honestly, specifically, and completely
- Assume responsibility only for your contribution (if any) to the event or situation
- Discover, accept, and connect the negative consequences of the abuse to your adult life
- Give up rehearsing all the gory details to yourself and to others
- Develop and implement appropriate personal boundaries to prevent subjecting your brain and body to the abusive behaviors of others—deliberately crafting an abuse-free lifestyle.

Current studies indicate that forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself for prolonged health and well-being. Counterfeit forgiveness, on the other hand, can actually be deleterious to one’s health and longevity. I defined *counterfeit forgiveness* for Candace as saying to her parents, “I forgive you,” without moving through the process of genuine forgiveness and recovery.

To say that these concepts were new to Candace would be putting it mildly. She actually stuttered when she said, “B-b-b-but I never heard anything like this before, and I wouldn’t know where to begin!”

I encouraged her to find an experienced counselor who could help her move through the recovery process and then recommended three that she might wish to interview.

Six months later I answered a knock on my office door to find Candace standing outside. Standing, mind you. With a cane, but standing. Of course I was interested in her story.

“I’m putting it together,” she announced, “and I feel better than I have in years. Do you know that I’ve been married three times to abusive men? In effect, each time I married my *father!*” And she was off and running. Candace had been working diligently with her counselor and she was connecting the events of her childhood with some of the choices she had made in adulthood.

“You were right,” she said. “There *is* a connection between my past and my current health. When I told my parents I was taking a break from visiting them, my father said that I was no longer his daughter and that he never wanted to see me again.”

“How are you handling that?” I asked.

“I was shocked at first, but it has turned out to be a very good thing. It is an immense relief not to talk to my mother every day on the phone, not to have to see them and be stared at in that scary way. Oh! And I’ve reconnected with my aunt. It’s great!” Candace smiled widely.

In a perfect world, healthy functional parents would take great pains to protect their children and avoid abusing them in any manner whatsoever.

Ours is not a perfect world.

To ‘honor’ abusive parents may simply involve acknowledging the position they hold in your generational inheritance and refraining from exhibiting ugly or abusive behaviors toward them. At the same time, moments of contact may need to be limited—or stopped altogether, if abusive behaviors continue.

Counterfeit forgiveness is a form of crazy-making. At one level you think, “I’ve forgiven the person,” but at a subconscious level your body not only remembers the abuse but acts out the pain daily.

Candace had not only been abused most of her life, but also had become stuck in the lethal trap of counterfeit forgiveness. She had turned the anger, designed to help her recognize how badly her boundaries were being invaded, against herself. Fortunately, Candace recognized this and took immediately corrective steps to improve her life. In another six months she may totally be able to discard her literal cane—as well as her metaphorical crutch of well-meaning but unenlightened excuses.

In the familiar fairy tale ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes,’ a false perception existed, to the humor of all. However, like the foolish crowd who cheered for the naked Emperor, a person who practices counterfeit forgiveness pretends that the Emperor actually *is* wearing clothes. Unfortunately, those assumptions (whether rooted in imagination or denial) could result in serious physical symptoms. And there’s nothing funny about that!

Are you ensnared in the lethal bondage of counterfeit forgiveness? That which is counterfeit is not real. Forgiveness, above all else, should be real. Practice genuine forgiveness—or pay dearly.

V. Religious Confusion

Resentment and unforgiveness are like taking poison and expecting it to kill the other person.
—Old Proverb

Churches around the world espouse differing beliefs about forgiveness and what that entails. Sometimes these differences have created even more confusion and puzzlement for their adherents. Religions that espouse Christianity point to scripture as a guide and verses related to forgiveness are found in any translation. For example:

- Forgive and you will be forgiven —Luke 6:37
- Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. —Colossians 3:13
- Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors —Matthew 6:12
- If you do not forgive (others) their sins, yours will not be forgiven —Matthew 6: 15

Problems can arise for some attendees when the religion or denomination or church emphasizes how the Deity forgives (or doesn’t forgive) and confuses that portrayal of forgiveness with the ability of human beings to forgive. Scriptural texts that purport to describe how the Deity forgives include these:

- Hurls your iniquities into the depths of the sea —Micah 7:19
- Forgives ... and remembers your sins no more —Jeremiah 31:34
- Forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases —Psalm 103: 2-3

This can provide an unrealistic goal for human forgiveness and be so discouraging to some that they throw up their hands and either try to repress the memory or exact vengeance on their own.

A misunderstanding of what forgiveness is not can also contribute to individuals returning to abusive environments (sometimes to their death), on their own or upon the unenlightened advice of others. Some religions have their own ‘writ,’ which may suggest a responsibility on the part of adherents to wreak vengeance on any who believe differently. When this happens there can be a clash between vengeance and forgiveness.

How do humans forgive?

- Often under duress or pressure
- Grudgingly or incompletely (may only do the first type of forgiveness)
- Some continue to recall the injury, harbor resentment, and rehearse to anyone who will listen or ‘reheat and serve it for dinner.’

Nevertheless, humans *can* forgive. It’s a choice.

Metaphors can be very helpful and the brain tends to like metaphors. Create a metaphor for yourself. Here are a couple examples.

Create a metaphorical cemetery. You can use this cemetery to bury all the wrongs, injuries, and mistakes that have forgiven (your own and those of others). Use no headstones so you cannot go back and dig up what you have forgiven and buried.

Place what you are forgiving on a large leaf or piece of bark and float it away down the stream, or river, or even the ocean.

VI. Genuine Forgiveness

When we react to other people, we join their dance—and why dance with a person you don’t like? Forgiveness allows you to stand on the side and watch them dance. You don’t have to dance with them if you don’t want to. You can dance the dance you enjoy with whomever you enjoy.

—Dick Tibbits

Eyes downcast, hands jammed into jean pockets, he paced my office. Beyond the fact that he’d announced his name as Carlton, he had paced in silence. I thought about saying, “Just give me the bottom line.” But then I realized his male brain would likely do that, anyway—when it was ready. More pacing. More silence. Finally he delivered a series of bottom lines:

- “My wife left me five years ago.”
- “We’d been married nearly fifteen years.”

- “We did everything together, a perfect match in every way.”
- “I’ve taken complete responsibility for her leaving. I didn’t give her enough time.”
- “I forgave her right away. Must have been caught in the counterfeit forgiveness trap, though, as nothing has changed for me.”

A few pointed questions gave me some additional information. He was just starting to repeat how perfectly matched they were, when I held up my hand. He noticed the movement.

“There’s an elephant in the room, Carlton. Do you see it?” I asked. Carlton turned to me with a look of bewilderment. I explained. “You were a ‘perfect match in every way’ and yet she didn’t value the relationship enough to be monogamous. How many emotional and physical/sexual affairs did you say she had during your marriage?”

“Several,” he replied.

“How many did you have?” I asked. He shook his head.

“You did everything together and yet she left because you didn’t give her enough time?”

He nodded. “That’s the reason she gave when she left.”

And you’ve taken ‘complete responsibility for her leaving’?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“It makes no sense,” I said emphatically. “The *reason* is never the *reason*. I repeat: There’s an elephant in the room. Do you see it?”

Carlton stopped pacing. “Oh, I think I get it,” he said. However, the widening of his eyes suggested that this was a new concept for him. “But if the reason is never the reason, I wonder why she really left?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I replied, “and you may never know, but there are a plethora of possibilities. For starters:

- “The baggage she brought to the marriage hooked into yours. As you began to work on your stuff and get a little healthier, her baggage no longer meshed.
- “She had a history of sexual relationships with multiple partners. She may have become addicted to the chemical tsunami of three ‘love’ chemicals, produced when a person is sexually or romantically attracted to another individual: Phenylethylamine or PEA (that turns the person into a PEA brain) and that triggers the release of norepinephrine and dopamine. That could cause her to find monogamy boring.

- “She never genuinely *loved* you to begin with. The marriage may have been one of convenience for her or her rewards came when you performed in public, so no *glue* was developed to hold you together in the long term.
- You were sexually attracted to her, and the resulting hormonal tsunami kept you from clearly evaluating whether or not she had the characteristics that would bode well for a long-term monogamous relationship, to be the parent of your child(ren), ad infinitum.

“Do any of those fit for you?” I asked.

“Probably all of them,” Carlton replied with his first smile, albeit a wry smile.

“Well, that water has already gone over the falls,” I said. “While it is important to identify what happened and learn from it, the question is, where do *you* want to go from here?”

His answer was immediate. “I need tips on how to genuinely forgive. She ‘moved on’ the day she walked out. I’m trying to move on but haven’t gotten very far. I mean, her leaving was a big loss for me.”

“First,” I said, “avoid confusing genuine forgiveness with loss and the need for grief recovery. They are two separate journeys, although they may overlap at times.”

Grief recovery is important. For everyone. Otherwise, you risk developing a slush fund of unresolved grief. Then, when another loss occurs—even a comparatively minor loss—that slush fund of unresolved grief can come rushing forth and trigger a tsunami of over reaction. That can not only be startling for everyone involved, but extremely unhelpful.” Carlton nodded.

“Second, the process for *moving on* differs for every brain because every brain is different. Naturally, the time frames differ, as well. Moving on usually needs to involve a clear choice. If the person is saying “I’m trying to move on,” the brain may not get in gear in the way it would if the person were saying ‘Carlton, you are moving on to a better and more fulfilling life.’ Speak in the present tense and use your given name and the pronoun ‘you.’ That will help your brain get in gear.”

Carlton nodded again and said, “Carlton, you are moving on to a better or more fulfilling life.”

Genuine forgiveness and a healthier future go hand in glove.

VII. The Forgiveness-Health Connection

There’s something called the ‘physiology of forgiveness’ ® — being unable to forgive other people’s faults is harmful to one’s health.

—Herbert Benson MD

Counselors have known for a long time that those who refuse to forgive tend to struggle with relationships—but that’s not all. In a nutshell:

- Unforgiveness results in negative outcomes to your health and overall wellbeing.
- Forgiveness results in positive outcomes to your brain and body and increased health and overall wellbeing.

You may say, “No one knows I’m unforgiving.” Avoid kidding yourself. Your brain knows and your body knows—and this knowledge will impact your health. As the old saying goes, denial is a never-ending river. When you are unforgiving, the accompanying anger increases the release of stress hormones such as adrenalin. As adrenalin levels increase, dopamine release is triggered. Individuals can actually become addicted to their own adrenalin and dopamine that is released by rehearsing dramatically. And the sadness that accompanies being unforgiving can impact levels of serotonin, which can increase depression.

Every thought you think (*imagine*) changes the structure of your brain. PET scan studies have shown little if any observable difference in changes to brain imaging print-outs between actual versus virtual experiences.

Your thoughts create mental pictures that the subconscious mind can follow. If you say: “I hate _____ and I refuse to forgive . . .” a representation (mental picture) of whatever *hate* and *unforgiveness* means to you goes into working memory.

On the other hand, if you say, “I regret what happened and choose to forgive _____ for the benefits I receive . . .” a representation (mental picture) of whatever *forgiveness* means to you goes into working memory. Be very clear: your choice will impact your brain-body-health and maybe even your longevity.

Steven Campbell PhD points out that *your brain locks onto what you decide to lock onto, which locks out other options.*

When you say: *I refuse to forgive*, you lock out forgiveness options. When you say: *I choose to forgive*, you lock out *unforgiveness*.

To reiterate. If you choose unforgiveness, studies have shown negative side effects, including:

- Increased stress levels and muscle tension
- Increased levels of adrenaline and cortisol
- Increased blood pressure and heart rate

- Increased risks for depression, heart disease, stroke, and cancer
- Suppressed immune function
- Impaired neurological function / memory

Bottom line? Unforgiveness results in negative outcomes to your health and overall wellbeing.

On the flip side, if you choose decisional and emotional forgiveness, studies have shown positive outcomes, including:

- ✓ Healthier relationships
- ✓ Lower blood pressure
- ✓ Less anxiety, stress, and hostility
- ✓ Fewer symptoms of depression
- ✓ Lower risk of alcohol and/or substance abuse
- ✓ Increased compassion, kindness, and peace
- ✓ Increased mental, physical, and spiritual health

Bottom line? Genuine forgiveness results in positive outcomes to your brain and body, which may include receiving forgiveness for your own negative-consequence behaviors, and increased health and wellbeing.

VIII. Lifesaving Steps

Following are seven steps to consider.

Step 1: Identify what happened to you

Denial is more than the name of a famous river.
—Old Proverb

Acknowledge the event or situation simply, clearly, and honestly. Avoid pretending either that the event or situation was no big deal or making more of it than is warranted. Take responsibility for the contribution you made, if any. Never take responsibility for anything you did not contribute. Avoid blaming others in an effort to displace some of your discomfort onto someone else. Realize that your goal is to create a future that is better than your past. Start moving from a victim stance to that of a survivor, one day at a time.

A **victim** stance allows what happened in the past to control your future. A victim mindset burns up norepinephrine (mood and stress), stops emotional growth, and blocks recovery. It involves feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and often a sense of being *special* because you have been injured. You are not special because you've been injured—everyone is damaged in some way or another because of living in the war zone of planet earth.

A **survivor** stance allows you to create a healthier future regardless of what happened in the past. Moving into a survivor mindset is a badge of honor—you can:

- Recover
- Grow up emotionally
- Heal wounds from the injury
- Role model a survivor mindset
- Help others appropriately and effectively

Note: Those who subscribe to Christianity would do well to remember that although clearly abused according to historical accounts, scripture always portrays Christ as a survivor and never as a victim.

Step 2: Outline the actual consequences to you

When you forgive, you in no way change the past—but you sure do change the future.
—Bernard Meltzer

There may be many negative outcomes from the event or situation. Some of them may represent your own hurt feelings rather than actual damage. There are usually some positive outcomes, also, if you're willing to look for them and be open to even that possibility. It is important to have as accurate and balanced a picture as possible.

Mentally step away from the situation and ask yourself how others might view the event, might perceive what happened. This can help you look at the event or situation in a slightly different way. At times it can result in your identifying positive outcomes that you have missed, lessons you have learned, opportunities that have opened up, and so on.

- Genuine forgiveness acknowledges the consequences and faces the pain.

- Genuine forgiveness works through the process so that the pain no longer dominates your thinking and no longer triggers anger and thoughts of revenge.

Step 3: Make a decision to forgive

Without forgiveness there is no future.

—Desmond Tutu

Recognize the value of forgiveness to your life and health. Think of decisional forgiveness as a behavioral intention to resist an unforgiving stance and to respond differently toward a transgressor—in your mind, if not literally in person. State your behavioral intention to stop hanging on to an unforgiving stance to mentally respond differently. In effect, it removes the enemy outpost in your head that has been staffed by the person who hurt you. Otherwise you'll live in the past and be held hostage to the person who caused you pain. Forgiveness neutralizes the power of the person in your past and allows you to move forward. This doesn't mean you choose to associate with the person, however.

- You may choose to be in the same room for short periods of time (e.g., at family gatherings if the person is a relative or at holiday gatherings if the person is a friend) or you may not. It's entirely up to you.

In the same way, trust must be earned. Forgiving does not mean trusting injudiciously.

- You may never ever choose to trust the person in the future. Again, it's entirely up to you.

Step 4: Embrace emotional forgiveness

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

—Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi

Think of emotional forgiveness as the replacement of negative unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions. Emotional forgiveness, which involves psycho-physiological changes, has more direct health and well-being consequences.

If you have been harboring anger and resentment, replace those thoughts and emotions with positive emotions. While it has often been said that love is blind, so is anger. Emotional forgiveness is a process of altering a one-dimensional perspective into a more inclusive big-picture dimension. If you fail to forgive, the person who hurt you still holds you as an emotional captive. Remember:

- Forgiveness doesn't erase what happened or make up for it or even balance the score.
- Forgiveness does keep you from spending the rest of your life with the person who did you wrong.

Step 5: Alter your personal perspective

To be wronged is nothing unless you continue to hang onto it.

—Oriental Proverb

Your perspective reflects your brain's opinion. It will be as unique as your brain is unique—there isn't another on the planet exactly like yours. Forgiveness doesn't change what happened. Rather, it is designed to help you alter your perspective. It's the old 20:80 rule. Only 20% of the negative effect to your brain and body can be laid at the door of the event or situation. About 80% of the negative effect involves your personal perspective, i.e., the weight you give to what happened, the importance you place upon it. You may not be able to do anything about the 20%; you most certainly can do almost everything about the 80% because it involves your own brain's opinion and you can alter your opinion.

Use whatever works in your life to help you to expand and reframe your personal perspective. In the words of Dr. Marikis, you may think of this as changing your grievance story.

- If you embrace Christian ethics and believe that the Deity loves everyone, then ask yourself how you can refuse to forgive someone whom God loves?
- If you have different belief system, ask yourself how refusing to forgive fits into that dogma?

You create your own personal perspective, your brain's opinion, so you can alter it any time you choose to do so.

Step 6: Stop continual rehearsing

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner is you.

—Lewis B. Smedes

When you rehearse, you tell your story again and again from your own perspective. You may rehearse to others; you may rehearse to yourself. Usually you include only the bad, sad, angry,

and hurtful aspects. In the process, you may trigger the release of adrenalin (offering a momentary shot of energy) and, as adrenalin levels increase, so do dopamine levels, which help you feel better for a short period of time. Some people actually become addicted to the adrenalin and dopamine released during rehearsal.

In addition, because the brain wants congruence, while you are rehearsing, your brain will search for other memories involving times when you felt the same way: sad, angry, or hurt. This can begin to snowball until you really feel quite rotten.

- In general, the female brain tends to process verbally and externally, and typically prefers to talk about what happened and get the details out in front of it. If this is your style, you may need to tell your story a time or two. It's easy to get caught in the trap of rehearsing, however, so set a limit that works for your brain. Asking for feedback and listening to another perspective can often help with the process of reframing.
- In general, the male brain tends to process silently and internally, and typically prefers to come to a conclusion before it talks about what happened to others. If this is your style, set a limit on internal processing that works for you and then find a trusted friend or counselor to whom you can state your conclusion. Asking for feedback and listening to another perspective can often help with the process of reframing.

Most award-winning performances require a great deal of rehearsal. Unless you are planning to take your story of injury on the road, stop rehearsing. Instead, spend the time you would have devoted to rehearsing the injury on implementing the next step; step seven.

Step 7: Develop a perpetual mindset of gratitude

Forgiveness is not an act, it is a perpetual attitude.
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

You can create a forgiveness mindset and hone the requisite skills to change your thoughts from negative to positive. A positive mindset helps the neurons of both brain and body create positive electromagnetic energy. When recalling the event or situation (as you undoubtedly will), quickly choose to focus on something for which to be grateful. It is physiologically impossible to be fearful and grateful at the same time. When an old memory crosses your conscious mind, you may need to take a moment and move through decisional and emotional forgiveness again. Then, embrace an attitude of gratitude.

Epictetus, a favorite historical figure of mine, reportedly said: “He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has.”

- If gratitude is not something you learned growing up, you may want to build that into your adult life. Choose, first thing in the morning, for example, to think of one thing for which you are grateful. You might go through the same process at night, just before you fall asleep.
- If you have difficulty getting started or get stuck trying to think of something for which to be grateful, identify something very small and rather ordinary, such as: “_____ (your name), you are grateful for the comfortable shoes you wore today. Not everyone has shoes.” Keep this up and you will have developed the attitude of gratitude before you know it!

Every human being goes through times of discouragement. Working through forgiveness for a particularly egregious injury may be one of those times. If you are fortunate, a close friend may reach out to encourage you.

Albert Schweitzer said it this way: “At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” Each person can be forever grateful to friends who have shared their spark. In a larger sense, part of gratitude may encompass looking for ways to share your spark with others. It’s a way of passing *thanks* forward.

“Do you have those seven steps written anywhere?” asked Carlton. “I want to remember them all. This is doable.” I promised to send them in an e-mail. With a brief smile and handshake, he was gone, his steps definitely lighter than when he had arrived.

IX. Reasons to embrace forgiveness

When you say ‘I forgive you,’ you’re also saying ‘I want to be healthy.’ The act of forgiving allows the body to turn down the manufacture of catabolic (stress-related) chemicals and instructs the subconscious to banish negative feelings from the mind.

—Doctors Arnold Fox and Barry Fox
Wake Up! You’re Alive!

Who knows how many reasons there are for embracing forgiveness? Here are several:

- It’s the right thing to do since all humans make mistakes
- To receive forgiveness (for yourself, first and foremost)
- To preserve your health (if you choose unforgiveness, you will likely be the one who pays most dearly).

- To avoid wasting energy and to keep your energy levels positive
- Because YOU benefit the most (a form of healthy selfishness)

Remember, forgiveness is about YOU. Studies have shown clearly:

- The one who is unforgiving ultimately suffers the most
- The one to be forgiven does not need to know or even still be alive
- The one doing the forgiveness benefits the most

Caveat: Some studies suggest that the brain is innately spiritual (but likely not innately religious—affiliation with a denomination, at least in adulthood, represents a choice). Some have observed that people who are very spiritual tend to forgive at both decisional and emotional levels. Those who tend to be religiously rigid but not very spiritual, also tend to be less forgiving and more critical, judgmental, and vindictive. Examples of situations related to this stance abound down through the centuries; some global, others more local. They include at least the crusades, Middle-Ages persecution, Israeli-Palestinian wars, Iraq-Iran conflicts, India-Pakistan problems, and many others.

Bottom Line

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

—Mark Twain

Do you need to forgive yourself for something? Is there someone in your life you need to forgive? How healthy do you want to be?

To reiterate: Forgiveness is a choice, a gift you give yourself. It is far less about ‘others’ and far more about ‘you’ and may be a quintessential example of healthy self-care. Learn to forgive at both decisional and emotional levels. Bury what you forgive in a no-headstone cemetery or set it free to float away on a body of water. Stop continually rehearsing what you bury and never try to dig it up. Prosper and be in good health. The path to genuine forgiveness is rarely easy. It is, however, a prescription for health. Yours.

The willingness to forgive is a sign of spiritual and emotional maturity. It is one of the great virtues to which we all should aspire. Imagine a world filled with individuals willing both to apologize and to accept an apology. Is there any problem that could not be solved among people who possessed the humility and largeness of spirit and soul to do either—or both—when needed?

—Gordon B. Hinckley