

Forgiving the Devil: Coming to Terms with Damaged Relationships by Terry D. Hargrave.

Chapter 1 ***The Work of Forgiveness***

"If we are going to do the job right, this is where we need to cut you." These are the words that echo from underneath a scarred over, painful wound that lies deep in my psyche. These words represent the "watershed" in my life where I came to the terrible conclusion that my family did not love me and that they were not trustworthy.

For many of us, the relationships that shaped us were dangerous places. When we lean into the memories of these relationships, we may find heinous acts such as incest, physical abuse, emotional manipulation. The people from these relationships are threatening manipulators who robbed us of our emotional stability and infect us with doubt and insecurity. If we have these types of relationships in our pasts, then likely there are similar relationships in which we are currently involved. These relationships are with people whom we may love, but we may find that even simple interactions are difficult as we struggle to act in trustworthy and loving ways.

When I hear the stories of people who have experienced such pain, my first inclination is to shy away, hide, and hope that I can soon forget the story so my nausea will go away. But these people cannot forget. They live every day with the way these experiences have molded, and to some extent ruined, their lives. How do they go on? How do they get past such heinous acts committed against them?

This book is about forgiveness. Forgiveness is necessary because relationships always define who we are and how we act. If we really want to feel better about ourselves and act differently in our relationships, it will be necessary to go back and redress those relationships that damaged our lives and taught and defined incorrect and erroneous information about who we are and how we should act.

THREE PERSONAL MEMORIES

In order to talk about the work of forgiveness, I must always return to the personal place where the pain, and then reconciliation, of relationships began. My story revolves around a series of memories that wash through my mind like waves. The first memory is of a time when I was eight. I was the fourth of four children, and my mother and father were struggling hard to keep life together on an even keel. My mother had married my father on a whim when she was 16 and he was 21, because she did not want to go home and tell her

father that she had been expelled from school. My father gladly eloped with my mother because he was deeply in love and also was anxious to escape the life of the dreary New Mexico town where they lived. We four children were born over the next seven years. After a failed attempt at farming, my parents came to the courageous decision to pursue teaching degrees to improve their prospects. My mother earned her high school equivalency diploma and started college, while my father worked two and three jobs to see her to a successful graduation and a secure job. He then finished his college degree and began his teaching career.

Something, however, was desperately wrong in my family. The stress of my parents' working endless hours, trying to make financial ends meet, and raising four children ranging in age from 8 to 15 was taking its toll. Childhood survivors of the Depression, financial bankruptcy early in their marriage, my parents had come back together after a yearlong separation in the interest of keeping our family intact. But in spite of all this effort and commitment there was still a feeling of desperate hopelessness in the family. My parents were emotionally immature, and at times manipulative and physically abusive to each other and to us as children. Certainly, they did many things right; we were always fed and clothed, and they made extraordinary attempts to improve our lives. But the times that they were out of control the beatings, burning, raging, leaving left me with the impression that I was not loved and not wanted. The family was unsafe, and I saw no prospect of recapturing its security and promise.

At the age of eight and somewhat depressed, I decided to end it all. I went into my family's bathroom and selected one of my father's doubleedged razor blades. Carefully, I sliced into my forearm. I knew that if I cut into my wrist, I would really be in trouble and might die! Looking back, I realize, of course, that I wanted a declaration that my family loved me and never wanted me to try such a thing again. But when my mother discovered what I had done, the result was quite different. She jerked my skinny arm up to her eye level, took the razor to my wrist and made the terrible statement that dominated my belief about love and trust for a third of my life: "If we want to do the job right, we need to cut you here." She did not cut, but she left the room in a rage and me with a toxic shame permeating my being. I had wanted a declaration of love, but what I had received was a blunt statement that convinced me that not only was I not loved, I was not wanted and my family would be better off without me. For the rest of my years at home I laid very low, never venturing out to discover whether my family felt differently. My sister and my two brothers bolted or drifted from my family of origin much in the same way that I did, carrying the damage of the past and desperately trying to make life better.

The second memory emerges around 1984 at the death of my maternal grandfather. I had gone on with my life and part of me was really okay. I had married and was beginning to get some sense of career direction where I could make a contribution. I had some good friends and some good times, but there was still a part of me that I had to keep blocked off and hidden away. No one really knew me, including my wife, because there were just too many terrible thoughts there. I felt a burden of incompetence and became threatened and

defensive at the least suggestion. I protected myself emotionally from friends by keeping to myself and reducing to a trickle the amount of emotional nurture and commitment I gave them. I decided not to have children partly because I did not want to pass along the abuse that I had experienced as a child, but mainly out of my desire not to have to share my wife's nurturing of me with anyone else. Most disturbing to me, however, was my relationship with my wife. I would feel desperately dependent on her love and affection, and at the same time would want her to stay out of my space and leave me alone. In her presence, I would feel shamefully needy of her and yet angry at her encroaching on my life, both emotionally and physically. These things I kept to myself, laboring with the reality that all was not as good on the inside as it looked on the outside.

I traveled with my wife and my mother to see my grandfather for what I knew would be the very last time. I had very little to do with him over that weekend and remember very little of the time. I do, however, have a very vivid memory of my last words to him. As we were getting ready to leave, I stepped up to my grandfather's bedside and said something like, "Take care of yourself." My mother then patted her father's hand and said, "Daddy, I will see you next week." But then my wife, Sharon, who had experienced the extreme pain of losing loved ones to suicide, sickness, and murder without having had the opportunity to say goodbye, took his enormous round head into both of her hands, looked tenderly into his eyes, and said, "I love you, and I will miss YOU."

I glanced at my grandfather as he stiffened, not knowing what to say. Then I looked at my mother, who was feeling the same tenseness. I became painfully aware of my own anxiety. Sharon had revealed the heart of the pain in my family in her moment of tenderness. I had had many issues with my grandfather. He had always expressed extreme disappointment at my inability to perform up to his expectations. He seldom called me by my name; instead, he often called me by my brother's name. He failed to come to my wedding or recognize any other accomplishment in my life. I had never experienced an intimate moment with him, and had never seen him have an intimate moment with anyone else. In short, all these issues represented what I felt was his lack of care and nurture for me and, in response, my lack of love for him. As we stood beside my grandfather's deathbed on that day, I realized that this was the same issue that lay between my grandfather and my mother. Painfully and realistically, I also came to realize that it was that same lack of caring that stood between my mother and myself. No words were spoken. We left my grandfather's house for the last time. For me, the pain was beyond normal grief.

Not long after we left, I was able to acknowledge that the words my wife had spoken had been what I wished I could have said. The opportunity to work things out was gone, however, and I would never see him again. But I knew that I faced the same issue with my mother, and that one day she and my father inevitably would lie on their own deathbeds. I wanted to be in the position by then where I would no longer be imprisoned by secrecy and confusion and would be able to say to them, all issues resolved: "I love you, and I will

miss you." But to do so would mean that I would have to open myself up to the wounds that had been inflicted in the past. I began to work in earnest to make sense of my abused childhood and to grow through the pain I faced as an adult.

I did not confront my parents immediately, nor did I make dramatic moves to "work things out." I did a significant amount of reading, went to some therapy, and had small discussions with my family to ascertain if there was any potential for establishing a more loving and trusting relationship. After five years or so, we had made significant progress. I had become more open and did not feel nearly as threatened. I had learned to achieve a more balanced life with Sharon in the sense of my being okay as an individual while also being intimately connected to her. My parents and I had moved along to the point where we were able to be together without feeling tense about impending conflict. Although we had not discussed every issue related to my growing up in an abusive place, we had talked about enough instances for which they acknowledged some responsibility that I knew they wanted to make things better. And things were better. My parents had become older, wiser, and more nurturing, and I had reached a place where I could work through some of my anger and get some of the answers I needed.

The third memory surfaced a few years ago, when I was visiting my parents while on a trip. My mother had retired from teaching and was now tutoring students. I observed her with one student and saw how caring, patient, and helpful she was. When I questioned her about why she exhibited those qualities now when she hadn't with me and my siblings when we were younger, she laughingly replied, "I had so many things to worry about with you kids, like the length of your hair and whether or not you would be good people. With this kid, all I have to worry about is if he can pass biology!" But she then became very serious and said, "You know, I never knew how important it was to rock and cuddle children. I didn't have that when I was young, so I never did it for any of you. There is a lack of nurturing that comes from my side of the family." I listened to her words and parked them in my mind.

A few months later, my parents came to visit my home upon the birth of my second child. I had come to love the process of putting my first child to sleep, as much for myself as for her. I would rock her in a quiet, subdued room and gently sing to her, "Hush, little baby, don't say a word. Papa's gonna' buy you a mockin' bird" One evening during my parents' visit, while I was rocking my newborn son, I noticed the silhouette of my mother in the hall, listening and rocking back and forth as I sang.

Later that year, my mother and father went on a mission trip to Brazil with their Presbyterian church group. After the mission was over, part of the group returned to the United States and others, including my parents, stayed behind to do some touring. At the time, I was moving my family back to the area where my parents lived, and one of our friends who had been on the mission trip dropped by to see us. She commented, "Your mother is such a loving and nurturing woman." My mother and I certainly were different

now, but I still found it extremely difficult to perceive that much change. The look on my face must have communicated exactly what I was feeling. "My mother? Loving? Nurturing? You must have her mixed up with someone else." But then the friend told the story. My mother had chosen as her mission the children who had tuberculosis and were quarantined in the hospital. For six or seven hours a day, my mother would rock, cuddle, and sing to children who would be separated from their families for months. I asked my mother about the story upon her return, and she said, "If I had it to do all over again, that is what I would have done for you."

My mother and father were loving and trustworthy people. I suspect that they always had been, and that they were finally able to overcome their own issues of damage enough to access those resources and give them to me. And as I watch my mother and father rock, hold, and cuddle my children, and hold me as they do, I experience the empowerment of nurture. It strengthens me to be a better person, husband, and father. It strengthens my whole intergenerational group.

FORGIVENESS DEFINED

One of my fundamental beliefs is that people are hurt by relationships and healed by relationships. Family relationships, because they are the first relationships in which we engage and everything we learn in the world is in that context of family, are the most powerful in terms of potential damage and healing. We must be clear, however, about what forgiveness means. *Forgiveness is the process by which love and trust are reestablished in relationships.* Forgiveness doesn't consist of simple platitudes or superficial statements that are expected to make the past go away. It is not forgetting about serious damage or letting someone off who caused hurt without taking responsibility. It is not about subjecting yourself to an untrustworthy or unloving person who will just hurt you all over again. What forgiveness is about is the coming together of at least two people, after there has been severe damage or hurt in their relationship, to rewrite the story of love and trust in a responsible way that will make their relationships and families stronger and healthier.

Two things make families work: love and trust. The way my family loves me tells me about who I am. They are the first people and perhaps the only ones who have the opportunity to love me unconditionally. When you are born into a family, you can do nothing for yourself, and certainly can do nothing to benefit your family. You require constant attention. In response to their many sacrifices, you may be colicky and cry constantly. You may disturb everyone in your new family group. But if that family continues to care for you, to cuddle and nurture you despite the trouble you cause, then you learn that you are someone special. You have no claim to their good will and love, but they give it to you because they are thankful for your being in their lives. You are loved. Through your family's love, you learn that you are worthy as an individual and important not for what you can do, but for who you are.

Love is an important part of family relationships, but it is not the whole story. The second necessary component of family is trust. As I grow, I see how individuals in the group make personal sacrifices and give of themselves for the good of the family. In return, the family provides encouragement and safety to the individual members. I learn by watching and experience that it is my responsibility to look out for the family and that it is fair for me to expect that they will help me grow and accomplish my individual goals. I learn to give to my family what they need because I trust that they will give me what I need. In this balance of giving and receiving, I learn how to act responsibly in relationships. I learn how to trust.

Thus, basically, there are two questions we ask of our family and of most primary relationships: *Do you love me? Are you trustworthy?* Most people would answer the questions with a qualified "Yes," because no family is perfect and may have done things to us and treated us in ways that could not be characterized by total unconditional acceptance and love. Nonetheless, the family perhaps more than any other relationship aspires to this unconditional love. Parents constantly make sacrifices for their children. Spouses commit to each other and then go about the endless task of invoking humility and compromise to attain the peace of intimacy with the human being they chose as a companion. Children maintain an intense loyalty to their families, believing that their existence depends on the family processes they learned. Even though our families may not be perfect, most experience the relationships as places of safety, security, and love. Relational or emotional hurts inflicted by members of these families are like the cuts, bruises, and scrapes that we suffered as children. They hurt sometimes intensely and then they heal, leaving no pain and little or no scarring.

But for those of us who answer the question, "Does my family love me and is my family trustworthy?" with an unqualified "No," the word "family" is a painful reminder of a lack of security, sacrifice, and stability. As children, we were expected to act as adults and take care of our parents emotionally. And those parents felt justified in being more concerned about their own emotional and physical happiness than with ours. Sacrifice does not come easily to spent parents who resent the fact that they receive little or no recognition or compensation for their efforts. The spouses tend to expect each other to make up for the personal deficits that exist in themselves. When these efforts fail, they become more manipulative and threatening. In these families, looking out for oneself is the only way to survive. The hurts are severe, like those engendered by the amputation of limbs or the removal of organs.

Family damage can come in many forms: physical or emotional abuse, neglect, or addictions. But the reality that makes this pain so severe is the underlying influence that our families do not love us and are not trustworthy. Without a change in the family relationship, we are doomed to live our lives in the hopeless pain of not being loved and not being able to trust or be trusted in relationships. It is in families like these that the work

of forgiveness is needed and can be powerful. It has the potential of making a secure place where we can know that we are loved and that we can trust.

Why should we forgive? We want to know that we are loved and that people are trustworthy. Shame, rage, guilt, and fear overwhelm us if we believe otherwise. But the task of forgiving takes enormous courage, because we may reenter relationships only to find that our families still do not love us and still cannot be trusted. If we cut ourselves off from our families, however, we lock in all those toxic feelings about ourselves and relationships. The question becomes this: How do we help ourselves by the work of forgiveness and use its power to restore love and trust to change our feelings and beliefs?

THE WORK OF FORGIVENESS

The work of forgiveness in families can be said to fit two broad categories: *salvage* and *restoration*. Salvage and restoration are related concepts, and neither is inherently better than the other. Salvage is the use of forgiveness to gain insight into how to keep the damage done in the past from continuing to affect one's life, now and in the future. It means understanding the circumstances of the abused, and abuser, so that one does not carry the burden of pain alone. Think of salvage as a ship that has struck an iceberg and sunk. If the hole in the ship is too large and the water is too deep, the ship will never be restored to a seaworthy condition. But there are things that can be salvaged from the ship to use in other ships. Also, lessons learned from the accident will serve to avoid future mishaps. In other words, some relationships are too damaged to be repaired and made useful again. Often, the person who caused us hurt is not trustworthy and may hurt us again. Or, the person who was relationally irresponsible may have died or be otherwise unavailable, in which case it is not possible to restore love and trust by reengaging in the relationship. However, there is forgiveness work that can be done through salvage. The victim can learn to recognize the interactions that were damaging and prevent them from happening again. The person damaged in the relationship can also use that damage as a lesson in how to make future relationships more loving and trustworthy. Finally, the victim can gain an understanding of his or her victimizer that correctly assigns responsibility for the damage caused and relieves much of the ensuing emotional pain. Salvage in the work of forgiveness does not restore love and trust to the damaged relationship, but it does help ensure their presence in future relationships. Salvage efforts involve two stations of forgiveness: *insight* and *understanding*.

Restoration differs from salvage in that it requires the person who has been wronged in a relationship to put himself or herself in a position where love and trust can be rebuilt by the person who perpetuated the hurt. Again, using our ship illustration, a ship hits an iceberg and sinks. This time, if the hole is not too large or the water too deep, the damage can be repaired and the ship refloated. Although it was damaged, the ship can be returned to the service for which it was intended.

Restoration means that after a severe violation has taken place and the relationship has "sunk," the victim and victimizer work together to restore love and trust and make the relationship functional again. This, of course, involves risk, as the damaging acts may reoccur. Trust in the relationship is at risk. For restoration to result, the victimized person must be given legitimate reason to believe that the wrongdoer accepts responsibility for the injustice and hurt he or she caused, while promising to refrain from further such actions. It is accomplished when the victim no longer has to hold the wrongdoer responsible for the injustice; the wrongdoer holds himself or herself responsible. The relationship between the two can then be reestablished because trust has been restored. Restoration involves allowing the wrongdoer to compensate for past injustices by being trustworthy in the future, and also by overtly addressing the responsibility for the injustice. Thus, restoration is accomplished by *giving the opportunity for compensation* and by *overt forgiving*.

The work of forgiveness, therefore, can be divided into the two broad categories of salvage and restoration, as shown in Figure 1.1. Salvage has two stations, *insight* and *understanding*, whereas restoration's two stations are *giving the opportunity for compensation* and *overt forgiving*. Even though the work of forgiveness is the goal of both salvage and restoration, the two are very different and are appropriate in different relationships at different times. Also, even though there are four stations in the work of forgiveness, they are not *stages* in that one precedes or follows another. The work of forgiveness in the four stations is, of course, intertwined, but one must not assume that it moves from one station to the next. People usually oscillate among these stations many times in the course of the same relationship. The stations of forgiveness are simply constructs to help us to better understand the work of forgiveness.

| THE WORK OF FORGIVENESS | | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Salvage | | Restoration | |
| Insight | Under- standing | Giving the Opportunity for Compensation | Overt Forgiving |

Figure 1. 1.
The Four Stations of Forgiveness

DID IT REALLY HAPPEN?

I return to the memories of reconciliation and forgiveness in my family many times. I sometimes wonder, "Is all this restoration for real? Did it really happen?" A few months ago, my oldest sibling, my sister, lay dying of cancer. As in many families, not all of my siblings were able to work through past issues of abuse as I had. My sister had eloped just after graduating from high school and had six children. Although my parents and my sister had made some efforts to stay connected through the years, their relationship had never lost the tense feeling of judgement. My sister did not want to open herself up to improving the relationship because she feared that it would result in additional hurt. My parents would become weary from making efforts that would, in the end, be criticized as being "too little, too late." So, in the last few years, my sister had drifted far outside the family group. But when the call came that she was going to die, my parents once again mobilized their efforts. For the final eight months of my sister's life, they were there doing all they could to take care of her physically. My sister, not having anything to fear any longer, received and responded to their care with heartfelt attachment. I have memories of my father and mother cuddling with her on her bed. I can still see my mother reading stories to my sister. I can hear their quiet moans and prayers together.

The last time I saw my sister was on her 47th birthday. As it happened, my whole family of origin my parents and two brothers as well as myself were in her room alone for about thirty minutes. We laughed together, talking about our favorite memories of one another. We spoke about the things we would miss and the things that we liked best about each other. Finally, it was time to leave. My sister took my hand and said, "We really are a family, aren't we?" I kissed her on the lips, stared into her eyes and said, "I love you, I will miss you, and I will never forget you."

Family is where we return to deal with relationships. It may enable us to do better and make loving and nurturing connections, or it may remind us of insidious damage and make it difficult for us to relate at all. In my family group, the ability to lean into my parents and eventually find that they were loving and trustworthy people enabled me to give to my family in unselfish and caring ways. It enabled my sister to finish her life stronger. It enabled my group to become a family.

The work of forgiveness is not easy or perfect. It is difficult work that leaves many questions about pain and victimization unanswered. But I know from my own family history that forgiveness can redress old relationships, even the most painful ones, to the point where they can be nurturing. I know that when it comes my parents' time to die, I will feel empowered by their legacy of love and trust, just as I did on the day I said goodbye to my sister and told her, "I love you, and I will never forget you. I will miss YOU."

Special Focus One: How Have You Been Hurt?

You might take a few moments before you read on to focus on some of the following statements.

1. How have you been hurt in your family? Was it a violation of love, a violation of trust, or both?
2. Who is the person (or persons) most responsible for the violations in your life?
3. What are the "watershed" events in your life that represent the violations you experienced? (Stories or events that capture the characteristics of what you experienced.)