

WOMANNEWS™

SUNDAY, MARCH 15, 1998 • SECTION 13

CN

Chicago Tribune

To err is human, to forgive healthful

By **Marya Smith**
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Another week, another political scandal, with the dutiful wife standing by her errant husband. Does she also forgive him when they step outside the public spotlights, or does she, as the Bible says, harden her heart? Or in the parlance of contemporary psychology, does she engage in passive/aggressive behavior, saying she forgives even as she behaves in subtly hostile ways that eventually embitter both their lives?

We'll never know, because forgiveness

is the most private of acts. Many women far from the political arena debate the age-old question in their own lives: Will I or won't I forgive? A husband's infidelity, a friend's betrayal of a vital confidence, a parent's abuse of a child's trust, a drunken driver's destruction of a loved one — aren't these deeds that are beyond forgiveness?

Although our sense of justice usually recoils at the thought, most therapists and spiritual advisers agree that there is no act that is beyond forgiveness. But the reason they often urge us to forgive may come as a surprise: to heal our own hearts

and create more joy in our own lives.

"Forgiveness is not something we do for another, but for ourselves, for our own peace of mind," says psychotherapist David W. Schell, author of "Getting Bitter or Getting Better: Choosing Forgiveness for Your Own Good" (Abbey Press, \$5.95) and "Forgiveness Therapy" (Abbey Press, \$4.95). "Of course victims feel rage, frustration and bitterness, but with forgiveness, a great weight is lifted and we begin to heal and grow, psychologically, spiritually and emotionally.

"I've found that women are often very resistant to forgiveness, and I believe

that's because a lot of women suffer victimization, such as battery and sexual abuse."

Schell tells of a 14-year-old client who was sexually molested by her father for years. She told Schell that her bitterness toward her father, though justified, was poisoning the rest of her life, crowding out everything positive.

"Forgiveness was slow and agonizing for this young woman," he recalls, "but a breakthrough came when she understood that she could forgive her father without having to justify his cruel pathologic

SEE FORGIVE, PAGE 10

Forgive

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

behavior or allow herself to be further victimized by abuse. With this insight came a new sense of confidence and self-worth."

Many experts agree with Schell that forgiving does not mean condoning or forgetting.

"Forgiveness is not saying, 'It's all right.' In fact, it's incredibly important for women to say something is wrong when it is," says Stephanie Dowrick, a psychotherapist and author of "Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love" (W.W. Norton & Co., \$23.95). "Nor does forgiving mean never remembering or pretending something hasn't happened. Rather, it simply

means living without those events being in your mind almost every second of the day. By withdrawing your attention from the person who hurt you and returning it to yourself and whoever else is in your care, you catch a precious glimpse of freedom."

Nor does forgiveness require reconciliation.

"Forgiving is private, deep and personal, something that happens within ourselves. It's not an agreement to go back into a relationship. You can say, 'I forgive, but don't come back. I don't want you as a friend,'" says Lewis B. Smedes, author of "The Art of Forgiving" (Ballantine, \$10) and "Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve" (Pocket Books, \$5.99).

Sometimes forgiveness is a power issue.

"I don't know of any research studies that say women are asked to forgive more than men, but we have anecdotal evidence that this is so. It goes back to our roots in Roman law when women only had what their husbands had," says Dr. Carla Johnson, assistant professor of communication at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Ind., and a scholar of marketing and popular culture. "In previous centuries, if a husband cheated on his wife, she had no choice but to forgive. But there are no stories about men being stoned for adultery. Men didn't have to forgive because they had all the power.

"However, as women gain power and autonomy, they don't

have to forgive men the way they did even 30 years ago. Looking at two television shows that are the pulse of how the new generation sees the world, you do not see forgiving women. In 'Friends,' Ross cheated on Rachel in an episode some time ago and she still refuses to forgive him, even though he begs her to in show after show. In 'Seinfeld,' Elaine would never forgive any man. Now that there is a leveling of the playing field, women can choose to forgive or not.

"I'm glad that women aren't the ones who always have to give in and forgive, but it makes me wonder who's going to do it," Johnson adds. "Forgiveness is necessary in society. In order to correct problems and go on, you have to be able to forgive."

"Men are so power conscious that forgiving seems to them like a weak thing to do," says Smedes. "Women, on the other hand, are more relationship conscious and don't feel as if they're groveling or losing power when they forgive."

However, there are risks for women who forgive too easily, Smedes cautions.

"First, they are sometimes forgiving just to avoid pain and you can only truly forgive if you've felt the hurt," Smedes explains. "Too often this kind of quick-draw forgiver is saying, 'I'll put up with this horrible treatment because I don't know what I'll have without it.'"

"And second, sometimes quick forgiveness is a one-upmanship proposition, a way of making the other person feel guilty. A person who really forgives first confronts and blames, saying, 'This is intolerable.' Only then can you move to forgiveness."

For Pauline Tomeski, a resident of Matteson, Ill., whose 19-year-old daughter was killed by a drunken driver, forgiveness was an unexpected but healing experience.

"When I saw Bonnie dead on that gurney, I died right there. I wasn't looking to forgive," recalls Tomeski, a factory worker who is active in Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. "When the court date came, I couldn't talk, couldn't speak. I just cried and cried in the courtroom. You start with resentment, then bitterness sets root and begins eating you up."

"The man who killed my daugh-

ter was in the courtroom, and he said to me, 'I am so sorry,' with real regret and repentance. I saw that he was suffering, too, and I took his hand and said, 'I wish you well.' I felt such a heavy burden lifted from me, and my other kids saw the change in me too. I know now that the only way to forgive is through the grace of God because our first reaction is to hold a grudge and want vengeance."

How do we begin the journey that Tomeski undertook?

"Forgiveness is not a single act, but a process of healing," says Suzanne Simon, co-author of "Forgiveness: How To Make Peace with Your Past and Get on with Your Life" (Warner Books, \$11.99). "To come to a place of peace, you must go through all the stages to come out the other end."

She says these overlapping stages include moving past denial and self-blame to a point where you hold the person who hurt you totally accountable. Then you can move on to feeling sorry for yourself, and then feeling indignant and angry. The ultimate stages are survival and integration, where forgiveness is finally possible.

"People often think they're finished when they finally become angry at the person who hurt them," Simon notes. "We all need to have access to our anger, but in an appropriately short-term manner. Otherwise we enter the world as an angry person, cutting in line, acting out of resentment for years. Anger is important, but not as a way of life."

Carrying rage against someone damages you more than the other person, agrees Carolyn Schuham, a Chicago psychotherapist and co-director of the Midwest Institute for Enneagram Studies, a theory of personality organized around nine basic types.

"When we don't forgive, we hate and hate while the other person is off living his or her life. We're the ones in pain," Schuham explains. "But unfortunately we often get really connected to our resentments. So many of us go through life numb, without a lot of connection to our feelings. Anger may be the only way some people feel alive because they get a connection to a powerful emotion."

Yet how is it possible to move

past anger to forgiveness when you have been wronged?

"Look at yourself and ask, 'Have I never betrayed someone, wronged someone, harmed another human being?' Unforgiving is a very righteous stand and you can't stay there very long if you look at yourself with total honesty," says Schuham. "When I see myself, not as I wish I were, but in my own human culpability, it puts me in a place where I can open my heart again. I recognize you as a fellow human being, and as humans we're all capable of everything."

"When we forgive someone else, we let them into the human race," Simon adds.

Although there is no final exam or measuring stick to tell us if we've achieved forgiveness, there are signs along the way.

"The journey to forgiveness is like grief. You can be healed of pain and anger, but a memory might make the scar break open," says Smedes. "The important thing is not to have forgiven, but to be in the process of forgiving, to be in the healing stream."

Simon agrees that forgiveness is a lifelong habit of mind and contends that your life will reflect your forgiveness back to you.

"You'll find that you're not uptight, vindictive, resentful, whiny or weepy," she says. "You still have deep feelings about what happened, but now you can take it out and look it in the eye and rage or cry for a short time, and then put it back."

Forgiveness is not for the faint-hearted, Simon says, but for those who want their lives back, to be free of certain chains.

"The reason to forgive is to better enjoy our lives and leave our mark," Simon explains. "We'll also make a better world community because if we heal ourselves, chances are we'll hurt others less."

"The benefits of forgiving are peace of mind and access to our hearts," says Schuham.

Though arduous, the process of forgiving can be richly rewarding and empowering. To paraphrase Shakespeare, forgiveness truly blesses she who gives as much as she who takes.