

# **The Garden of Forgiveness**

# **White Paper**

**The Gardens of Forgiveness  
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**“Every act of revenge is a time bomb thrown into the future.”**  
**Alexandra Asseily, Psychotherapist, Beirut, Lebanon**

**Whether violence, retribution and revenge are innate to human existence can be debated.** But the fact of violence, and its rampant presence throughout the world, presents an extraordinary problem. For the first time in history, the twentieth century witnessed a promethean crisis of cataclysmic proportions: human beings obtained the capacity to *render the future obsolete*. Thankfully, the dénouement of the Cold War came about without nuclear incident. But it could have been otherwise. And the current crisis in the Middle East is an ongoing cause of grave concern.

## **Creating the Future through Forgiveness**

**“There is no future without forgiveness.”**  
**Nobel Prize winning Archbishop Desmond Tutu, South Africa**

**Forgiveness is a trainable life skill** that heals grievances, increases hope and optimism, and offers a real-world approach to the transformation of conflict. Forgiveness works for individuals, interpersonal relationships, and in communities. Forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past and, with courage, creating new possibilities for the future.

This white paper will consider what forgiveness is and what it is not, examine the research, making the case that forgiveness is vital to our health as individuals and communities, and demonstrate ways in which forgiveness as a tool for conflict transformation may be employed usefully and strategically.

**Forgiveness is grossly misunderstood**, and a clinical working definition needs to be postulated. To begin, we will consider what forgiveness means. It is also important to understand what forgiveness is not.

### **What is forgiveness?<sup>1</sup>**

- 1 Forgiveness is the peace you learn to feel when you let go of unresolved grievances.
- 2 Forgiveness is for you and not the offender.
- 3 Forgiveness is taking back your power.
- 4 Forgiveness is taking responsibility for how you feel.
- 5 Forgiveness is about your healing and not about the people who hurt you.
- 6 Forgiveness is a trainable skill just like learning to throw a baseball.
- 7 Forgiveness helps you get control over your feelings.
- 8 Forgiveness can improve your mental and physical health.
- 9 Forgiveness is becoming a hero instead of a victim.
- 10 Forgiveness is a choice.

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<sup>1</sup> Luskin, Frederic. *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003.

11 Everyone can learn to forgive.

**What forgiveness is not:**

- 1 Forgiveness is not condoning unkindness.
- 2 Forgiveness is not forgetting that something painful happened.
- 3 Forgiveness is not excusing poor behavior.
- 4 Forgiveness does not have to be an otherworldly or religious experience.
- 5 Forgiveness is not denying or minimizing your hurt.
- 6 Forgiveness does not mean reconciling with the offender.
- 7 Forgiveness does not mean you give up having feelings.
- 8 Forgiveness does not exclude or preclude justice.

Enright points out that it is important that forgiveness be distinguished from pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting and denying.<sup>2</sup>

**The Toxicity of Un-forgiveness**

Nelson Mandela once said that not to forgive is “like drinking a glass of poison and waiting for your enemies to die.” There is too much of this poison readily available and eagerly consumed in our society today. Forgiveness enables one to stop drinking the poison; it is vital to life. The person who is willing to forgive demonstrates less anxiety and stress, better cardiovascular health, lower blood pressure, and a renewed energy inspired by hope and optimism.

Based upon his research at Stanford University, Dr. Frederic Luskin (Co-Chair of The Garden of Forgiveness initiative) has developed a nine step methodology for a wellness approach to forgiveness:

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then, tell a trusted couple of people about your experience.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to do what you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation with the person that hurt you, or condoning of their action. What you are after is to find peace. 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."
4. Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts and physical upset you are suffering now, not what offended you or hurt you two minutes - or ten years -ago. Forgiveness helps to heal those hurt feelings.

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<sup>2</sup> Enright, R. D., Gassin E. A. and Wu C., “Forgiveness, a Developmental View,” *Journal of Moral Education*, Vol. 21, pp. 194-97, 2001.

5. At the moment you feel upset practice a simple stress management technique to soothe your body's flight or fight response.
6. Give up expecting things from other people, or your life, that they do not choose to give you. Recognize the "unenforceable rules" you have for your health or how you or other people must behave. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, peace and prosperity and work hard to get them.
7. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you. Instead of mentally replaying your hurt seek out new ways to get what you want.
8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving the person who caused you pain power over you, learn to look for the love, beauty and kindness around you. Forgiveness is about personal power.
9. Amend your grievance story to remind you of the heroic choice to forgive. The practice of forgiveness has been shown to reduce anger, hurt depression and stress and leads to greater feelings of hope, peace, compassion and self confidence. Practicing forgiveness leads to healthy relationships as well as physical health. It also influences our attitude which opens the heart to kindness, beauty, and love.

## **The Research<sup>3</sup>**

### **Psychological-Educational Model for Forgiveness**

The Stanford Forgiveness Projects are a series of research studies that investigate the effectiveness of a group psycho-education forgiveness methodology. The intervention uses a combination of narrative therapy (telling and reclaiming one's story), cognitive disputation (unenforceable rules), guided imagery, and stress management to create conditions where forgiveness of an offender is more likely. It is based on a three part model of grievance that includes offense, blame and victim-hood, and forgiveness, which involves the unraveling of the grievance process. Forgiveness is defined as the affirmative ability to remain at peace when one is unable to get what one wants. In

### **Summary of Findings:**

- Forgiveness is a life skill that can be taught in a group format
- It is helpful for a large variety of interpersonal offenses
- Forgiveness improves physical and emotional well being
- It can be provided through education and/or therapeutic modalities

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<sup>3</sup> Luskin, Frederic. "The Stanford Forgiveness Projects." Research Report from *Forgiveness: A Sampling of Research Results*, compiled by the American Psychological Association on the occasion of the 59th Annual DPI/NGO Conference at the United Nations Headquarters Midday Workshop on *Forgiveness: Partnering with the Enemy*, September 2006. 2 October 2007.  
<<http://www.gofnyc.org/articles/forgivenessbrochureend.pdf>>.

According to Dr. Luskin, in more colloquial terms, forgiveness is defined as making peace with the word “no.” Forgiveness is contrasted with reconciliation, justice, condoning, and acceptance.

### **Methodology of Dr. Luskin’s Work**

This methodology was first tested with 55 college students in a randomized wait listed controlled study (participants are randomly assigned to either an immediate treatment condition or to the waitlist for treatment control condition). Students were recruited who had an unresolved interpersonal hurt with someone in their life. The treatment condition consisted of one 50-minute session intervention per week for a 6 week period and a subsequent 2 month follow-up period. After this time the treatment group showed significant reduced hurt and state and trait anger, complemented with significant increases in hope, compassion, forgiveness, and quality of life. Then the largest random controlled forgiveness intervention study to date was completed. Participants were recruited who had any form of unresolved interpersonal hurt, and were randomized into treatment and wait-listed control. The treatment group received a 90-minute intervention over 6 weeks to teach the methodology’s 9 steps of forgiveness. Treatment participants showed significant reductions in state and trait anger, perceived stress, hurt, and physical symptoms of stress, and showed increases in forgiveness both toward the offender and for difficult situations in general, and increases in optimism. Follow up four months after the end of the intervention period showed stable gains.

### **Application in Northern Ireland**

The Stanford Northern Ireland HOPE projects brought men and women from both sides of the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland to Stanford for a week of forgiveness training. The first group included mothers from both sides who had lost sons and the second group included 17 people who had lost an immediate family member to murder. There were no control conditions and the intervention was offered over 6 days with 2, 90-minute sessions per day. The group of mothers showed significant 50% reductions in perceived stress, a 40% reduction in depression, and a 23% reduction in trait anger at the end of a 6-month follow-up period. In addition, forgiveness of the offender increased significantly. In the second group participants showed a significant reduction in hurt, perceived stress and depression and a significant increase in physical vitality at the end of the intervention week. There was no follow up evaluation.

### **Other Interventions: The World of Commerce.**

Current, on-going research began after the stock market crash of 2000 with a Fortune 100 company to see if forgiveness training as a singular component of emotional competence would increase sales and reduce stress. The first group of volunteers showed a reduction in stress of 20% with a corresponding 20% increase in positive emotions. The group of advisors showed a 25% increase in gross sales year-to-year, compared to a 10% sales increase in the rest of their market group. Five other groups of advisors from different market groups on the East Coast have participated in the study, which includes a day-long workshop, the development of an individual plan for change, and regular support via telephone. Average increase in gross sales remains 25% compared with the average increase in gross sales for the remainder of each market group is 10%.

## **Forgiveness: Building Social Capital by Moving from the Interpersonal to Community Level**

Alexandra Asseily, the visionary behind the Garden of Forgiveness movement and the organizer for the world's first Garden of Forgiveness in Beirut, Lebanon, acknowledges that forgiveness is an internal journey. But she observes that forgiveness necessarily has a collective dimension: "As we begin to address our own cycle of fear, anger and guilt, we also create a new momentum of transformation around ourselves, in the lives we touch and within our community. We can build on this momentum to create new avenues that help us to reinforce and accelerate the process of healing and through that to break the cycles of violence."<sup>4</sup> Quoting Jonas Silk, Asseily asserts that an essential gift for us to give our children is to become "good ancestors." She continues, "How do we become good ancestors and refrain from passing on trauma or negative beliefs to future generations? How do we stop being the prisoners and the puppets of the stinging memories of strife that we can still feel today as though we ourselves were present at that first event? How do we clean up what I call our 'ancestral arteries' so that our children are free to act in the now, free from the blocks which echo from the past, and clog up our todays and our tomorrows? When working with the past, 'the goal is to let our history inform us, not control us.'"

Confirming the brutal reality that keeps us from becoming 'good ancestors', David Lotto in his essay "The Psychohistory of Vengeance" states:

Self-perpetuating cycles in which each act of revenge taken by one individual, group, or nation against another generates a reciprocal act, has caused immense suffering throughout human history. Blood feuds, ethnic hatreds, religious disagreements, competing nationalisms, and rival imperial designs have all led to ongoing violent confrontations marked by vicious cycles of mutually escalating acts of revenge. There are numerous examples of mutually destructive violence and warfare between rival groups and nations.<sup>5</sup>

Asseily contends that in order to break free from these inherited patterns and thereby end unhelpful or destructive cycles, we must undergo a process that falls broadly into three steps.

### **Step 1– Taking responsibility**

By taking responsibility for our own choices, for our own lives and for the part we may be playing in any conflict, imbalance, tension, grievance or problem, we learn that we have a way out from existing patterns. We discover that we do certain things or

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<sup>4</sup> Asseily, Alexandra. "Breaking the Cycles of Violence in Lebanon – and Beyond." Brighton: Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace Publishing, 2007. 2 October 2007.

<[http://www.ghfp.eu/Portals/0/documents/Breaking\\_Cyclesofviolence.pdf](http://www.ghfp.eu/Portals/0/documents/Breaking_Cyclesofviolence.pdf)>

<sup>5</sup> Lotto, David. "The Psychohistory of Vengeance." *Journal of Psychohistory*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Summer 2006.

think in certain ways quite ‘unthinkingly’ - because that is the way they have always been done or thought about. It takes courage, honesty and humility to see the role we play in the different conflicts around us.

### **Step 2– Changing our behavior and beliefs**

As individuals learn to deal with their personal grievances within families, they can break a cycle of repetitive pain, anger and violence which has been there for generations - thereby endowing theirs and their children’s future with a new behavioral inheritance. In particular, it is important to be aware of humiliating, shaming, dominating and bullying actions. Those who are humiliated and bullied become humiliators and bullies themselves, particularly when they find someone who appears weaker. Humiliation is a particularly strong cause of vengeful behavior. Indeed it is not hard to see from our own lives, from school, family and war. People, tribes and nations, who have been humiliated, humiliate. The memory stays live, if it is not healed.

Most of the dictators and despots of the world were humiliated as children: Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein etc. The same dynamic applies to a long list of groups: Germany was humiliated after the First World War, which led to the Second World War. The list is endless: Israelis and Palestinians; Hutus and Tutsis; Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq; colonialists and the colonized; and blacks and whites in South Africa and in the USA.

A significant motivation for terrorism, in fact, is a desire for revenge based on humiliation and/or shame. Evelin Lindner<sup>6</sup>, founder of *Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies*, raises the provocative question: “What is it that creates unbearable suffering of a kind that triggers the urge to retaliate with violence?” Her answer is humiliation: “Feelings of debasement may lead to acts of humiliation perpetrated on the perceived humiliator, setting off cycles of humiliation in which everybody who is involved feels denigrated and is convinced that humiliating the humiliator is a just and holy duty.” This truth is underscored by Lindner’s citation of Thomas Friedman in the *New York Times*: “If I’ve learned one thing covering world affairs, it’s this: The single most underappreciated force in international relations is humiliation.” (*New York Times*, 9 November 2003).

Lindner juxtaposes two responses to humiliation, Osama bin Laden and Nelson Mandela:

Terror attacks indicates – at least to our understanding – that the entire world community is caught in cycles of humiliation. Men such as Osama bin Laden would never have any followers, if there were not a pool of sullen feelings of humiliation somewhere, feelings that are so intense that young intelligent men, who could found families and have satisfying careers, are willing to follow such leaders and lose their lives in destroying other lives.

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<sup>6</sup> Lindner, Evelin G.. “Mature differentiation as response to terrorism and humiliation: Refrain from the language of ‘war’ and ‘evil’.” 22 September 2005. 2 October 2007.  
<[http://transnational.org/SAJT/forum/meet/2005/Lindner\\_Humiliation.html](http://transnational.org/SAJT/forum/meet/2005/Lindner_Humiliation.html)>

The example of Nelson Mandela shows alternative ways out of feelings of debasement, towards constructive social change rather than turning the cycle of humiliation another turn by retaliating with acts of debasement as response for feeling debased. Nelson Mandela shows that there is no automatic link between feeling humiliated and retaliating with acts of humiliation. Mandela shows that wounds from debasement cannot serve as a 'justification' or 'excuse' for mayhem. Mandela's example proves that strong constructive leadership is what remedies the agony that emanates from being forced into indignity, not inflicting wounds in return.

Mandela's witness and leadership were based on the understanding that forgiveness could transform individuals and communities by confronting and then healing past indignities, thereby creating new possibilities for the future. The power of forgiveness in social and political life is examined in depth in two important volumes, Donald W. Shriver, Jr.'s *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Mark R. Amstutz in his book *The Healing of the Nations: The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

### **Step 3—Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is the only thing that will bring us closer to lasting peace, and is a different way of facing our memories than we have used before. It requires leveraging the formidable power to change in the human heart in order to forgive. It does not mean forgetting, or brushing things under the carpet. Nor does it mean continuing the lies and betrayals that characterize war (which can fester for decades), or denying and covering up memories that are painful or shameful.

Forgiveness therefore is ultimately an act of self preservation, not a gift to be bestowed on others by us (or by others on us), but received as a grace by surrendering our pain and offered to ourselves and others, and even to events beyond our control, with a willing and open heart. Our freedom comes when we realize that in order to thrive and survive and to break out of our prisons of resentments and hate, we do not have another choice but to forgive and live our true purposes – fully alive. It is in this way that we become good ancestors.

### **Forgiveness as a tool for political conflict transformation: South Africa, Rwanda, Liberia, Uganda and the Truth and Reconciliation Process**

In its four-part series entitled "Paths to Forgiveness: Africa after War," *The Christian Science Monitor*<sup>7</sup> investigates how African nations ravaged by war use forgiveness to reconcile and rebuild their communities. Africa's "ethos of communalism," very different from Western emphasis on the individual, influences this process which looks less to punish and more to restore wholeness to the community. Reconciliation among victims, perpetrators, and their families means that the greater whole can move forward.

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<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin, Abraham. "Paths to Forgiveness: Africa after War." *The Christian Science Monitor*, Vol. 98, Nos. 229-232, 23-26 October 2006.



Though such a response is certainly influenced by the spread of Christianity and its focus on forgiveness, it is also practical and based on old tribal traditions: small and impoverished communities “need every last person to survive.” And not only survive, but thrive, as in the case of Rwanda, where a Tutsi woman in charge of a coffee farm has hired Hutu men because all are needed to successfully harvest and process the coffee, Rwanda’s biggest export. This awkward peace forged by economic codependence, has brought together victims and perpetrators of the genocide.

The forgiveness process is a long one, though, and often includes confession and making reparations, the ultimate goal being the restoration of unity and harmony for the collective good. After years of civil war, as in Uganda, or brutal ethnic killings, as in Rwanda and Burundi, communities are eager for the healing that acts of forgiveness can bring. One can imagine the symbolic power of the Ugandan ceremony where perpetrators from the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) step on an egg, to symbolize their rebirth and the beginning of their assimilation back into the community. Of course, where tensions and anger still need resolution, issues of addressing grievances and acknowledging atrocities without inspiring backlashes or fresh violence remain critical. This has been the challenge in Liberia, where a new Truth and Reconciliation Commission will attempt to balance justice with mercy. In this way, with forgiveness ceremonies, rituals, and political processes intended both to redress heinous acts and to promote healing and harmony within a community, these case studies from Africa provide compelling examples of forgiveness working powerfully in the social and political context.

## **The Garden of Forgiveness Movement as an Effort to Seed and Nurture Change through Forgiveness**

### **The Healing Nature of Gardens**

Gardens have been used to aid in the healing process throughout history and, more recently, the healing effects of gardens have been measured in scientific studies. In his paper “Visual Landscapes and Psychological Well-Being,” environmental psychologist Roger Ulrich observes that “exposure to plants and nature causes our emotional shift to a more positive state, away from negatives such as fear, anger, or sadness.”<sup>8</sup> Ulrich observed that even just viewing tranquil garden scenes decreased stress, muscle tension, and blood pressure; other studies show that patients in hospitals with garden views recovery quicker,<sup>9</sup> and report a greater sense of joy, peacefulness, and positive mood shifts.<sup>10</sup> Being in a garden or viewing nature scenes induces calm, thus putting the body in a healing state.

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<sup>8</sup> Ulrich, Roger S. “Visual Landscapes and Psychological Well-Being.” Research Report from The Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine, Vol. 9, No. 55, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> University of Illinois Cooperative Extension. “Between Gardeners: Enabling Gardens.” 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Kimball, Richard. “The Wilderness as Therapy.” *Journal of Experimental Ed.*, Vol. 3, pp 6-9, 1983.

A recent documentary, “The Healing Gardens of New York,”<sup>11</sup> explored how gardens, by offering places of respite from busy urban life, heal lives and build community. Gardens and smaller green spaces built in response to neglect, crime, urban decay, and poverty transform individuals and communities. Communities come together with the common goal of tending the garden, which gives each person a positive purpose, and a space to reflect, develop new meaningful skills, and socialize. In the context of urbanization and development, green space proves to be a solid platform for social change.

### **The Role of the Garden of Forgiveness in the Local Community**

Combining the healing presence of a garden with the healing interior work of forgiveness is our goal. By creating a global network of Gardens of Forgiveness, we hope to offer venues around the world where individuals and communities can reflect on the hurts and horrors that befall us as human beings, and then choose to make the world a better place by releasing anger and grievances, and not reciprocating violence with violence.

We understand forgiveness to mean the ability to release resentment and hostility after a period of mourning and grief. We understand that forgiveness never condones violence nor is it a substitute for the search for justice, nor does it demand reconciliation with those who have injured us. We understand that each of us struggles to know what to do when cruelty is imposed upon us. There is no easy answer.

And yet, without providing spaces to sit in peace and contemplate the horrors of unmerited violence and the possibility of offering forgiveness, we are concerned that revenge and retribution will dominate the conversation. Forgiveness is one of the steps toward healing that will lead to a peaceful future. Forgiveness is a means through which we create the future—a future free of repaying violence for violence and pursuing the desire for revenge. In the Garden of Forgiveness movement, and in our Global Gardens of Forgiveness Network, we want to make a difference, and make the world a better place—to heal the past and create the future—one Garden of Forgiveness at a time.

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<sup>11</sup> *The Healing Gardens of New York*. Dir. Isles, Alexandra. 2006.