

IMAGINE FORGIVENESS

A Guide for Creating a Joyful Future



JULIET ROHDE-BROWN, PH.D.

Acclaim for IMAGINE FORGIVENESS

“Imagine Forgiveness suggests that one of our greatest resources is our imagination, and it presents ways to utilize this resource in the context of forgiveness. With brief stories, guided moments of reflection, and suggested visualizations, Dr. Rohde-Brown invites the reader into a felt experience of what it means to forgive. While refraining from psychological jargon and providing an integrative theoretical framework that is both practical and esoteric at the same time, Dr. Rohde-Brown offers a unique approach to facilitating an entry into forgiveness. Her closing chapter discusses the broader implications of compassion-based practices for communities and suggests that forgiveness is systemic and contagious, an important piece to consider in these current times. Readers will find *Imagine Forgiveness* a useful guide on the path to forgiveness.”

—Frederic Luskin, PhD, co-founder of the *Stanford Forgiveness Project* and author of *Forgive for Good*, *Stress Free for Good*, and *Forgive for Love*

“Humanity is deeply enmeshed in an era when a book of the magnitude of *Imagine Forgiveness* offers an explicit opportunity for hope and healing. Juliet Rohde-Brown has explored the primary antidote for today’s troubled times and brought it forth to us with wisdom and compassion.”

—Patricia J. Turner, Founder, *Tierra Sagrada, The Sacred Earth Foundation*, www.sacredearthfound.org

“A beautifully written book that will help you find the healing power of forgiveness without forgetting or condoning wrongful actions. Dr. Rohde-Brown’s experience and compassion weave together a deep but easy to read guide to a deep level of personal healing.”

—Martin L. Rossman, MD, author of *Guided Imagery for Self-Healing, Fighting Cancer from Within*, and co-founder of the *Academy for Guided Imagery*.

“Dr. Juliet Rohde-Brown offers a way to invite forgiveness into our lives within the context of loving-kindness and serves as a welcome companion on a healing journey toward wholeness.”

—Barbara Lipinski, PhD, JD, clinical psychologist, educator, and author of *The Tao of Integrity: Legal, Ethical, and Professional Issues in Psychology*, and *Heed the Call: Psychological Perspectives on Child Abuse*.

IMAGINE FORGIVENESS

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A Guide for Creating a Joyful Future

JULIET ROHDE-BROWN, PhD

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Imagine Forgiveness

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For John

“Forgiveness requires a surrendering to the core self, the part of all of us that transcends time and place and attachments.”

— Juliet Rohde-Brown, PhD

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Introduction



This book was developed as an aid for fostering compassion and forgiveness for oneself and others. In my work as a psychotherapist and researcher, I have found that lack of self-forgiveness or forgiveness of others feeds depression and anger and harms people's ability to adjust to life-changing events. Forgiveness does not occur in a linear way. It is more spiral-like in nature. There are certain practices that will be presented in this book that can foster an activation of one's spiral toward forgiveness.

Anger is often the primary emotion that accompanies an initial sense of difficulty in forgiving a person who has hurt you or in forgiving yourself. When anger is turned inward, it can foster self-hatred, physical ailments, and an overall sense of malaise and depression. When anger is projected outward in an uncontrolled manner, it can destroy lives and create unnecessary breaks in relationships. The longer one stays in an angry state, the more likelihood there is that anger will become habitual, or even become like a personality trait. However, when anger is worked with mindfully, it can be the very force of renewal.

It is often in the acknowledgment of loss and in finding a way to come back to our hearts that we open the door to forgiveness for ourselves and others. I have been inspired in my own life by Metta, or loving-kindness meditation, mindfulness practice, and working with imagery and ceremony. Metta is a heart-centered Buddhist practice that involves visualizing oneself and others in an intentional gesture of love

and compassion; mindfulness practice fosters acceptance and awareness of our moment to moment experience and helps us to transcend past conditioning. These practices cross cultural boundaries and nurture empathy and love for oneself and others at the very core. I was first taught meditative practices by one of my mentors, Marv Treiger, back in the early 1990s, and I have continued to develop this work through the years. I have been working with guided imagery and ceremony for more than twenty years as well.

Where there is a wound there is an opportunity for learning and healing to occur. We can shift our perspective so that we can emerge into an integrated and mature spirituality. This must begin with our imagination. We can then use our bodies as conduits for putting intention into action. Our thoughts can direct our lives individually and collectively in the most astounding ways. We are active agents in bringing about integration and change, and when we do so in ourselves, we bring this into our relationships with those in our immediate lives, as well as our global family.

A large part of the function of change is acceptance of who we are right now, with our strengths and weaknesses, with our joy and vulnerability. Both self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others involve acceptance of ourselves so that we may transcend patterns of our past that are no longer needed. Before we can forgive others, we must forgive ourselves.

Forgiveness *does not* equate with condoning. It does not mean that one should give up appropriate and safe interpersonal boundaries or responsibility for hurtful acts.

Forgiveness *does* equate with compassion for oneself and for others, regardless of events that have occurred. Forgiveness requires a surrendering to the core self, the part of all of us that transcends time and place and attachments. It involves a shift in meaning and perspective.

More and more studies are emerging that support the notion that forgiveness heals the body, mind, and spirit. The physical and mental

health benefits are indeed objectively measurable. There are now studies that are exploring compassionate intention with tangible results, as well. We are only beginning to emerge into a greater understanding of how our intentions shape our individual and collective world.

This book is arranged in three parts, which are entitled: What Is Forgiveness, Feelings and Forgiveness, and the Practice of Forgiveness. The word *imagine* becomes an acronym for the chapter titles, and you will see these seven letters embedded into the seven chapter titles.

The first chapter invites you to *imagine considering forgiveness*, and it explores exactly what forgiveness is. The second chapter focuses on self-forgiveness and suggests incorporating *mindfulness and Metta* (loving-kindness) meditation into your life. Part II begins with the third chapter that discusses *activating forgiveness through feelings*, and it suggests some brief check-ins to help one recognize their emotional process. The fourth chapter focuses on *grounding forgiveness in one's body*, and it explores the implications of a lack of forgiveness.

Part III begins with Chapter 5, which fosters *intention through imagery*. Chapter 6 offers a way to *nurture* the intention of forgiveness though a step-by-step ceremony. Finally, Chapter 7 speaks about *engaging* in global neighborliness and about the power and resonance of groups. It encourages us to understand ourselves as unique, yet interconnected, parts of an astounding shared consciousness, with examples of group and community-based actions that have had an impact on forgiveness.

While most of the suggestions and visualizations offered in this book are framed for individual work, they may be used in a group format as well. Visualizations have been used in indigenous practices and spiritual traditions for millennia, and they have been used in integrative healthcare for at least the last twenty-five years or so. They have been proven to be effective in promoting relaxation, self-healing, and psychological and spiritual insight. Imagery work has even shown success in reducing prejudice.

Ideas coming from modern physics and backed by thousands of years of spiritual and health practices give us insight about how we

interconnect at an energetic level with all that is around us. Through focused breathing and loving intention we ground ourselves in a centered way in this world and use our bodies as conduits for purposeful action. The benefits are not only present at an individual level, but at a collective level as well.

I feel passionately about supporting a culture of peace and social justice. One of the ways that I choose to do this is by continuing to pass on what others have shown me along the way. I believe, as many other integrative psychologists do, that fostering a deep and loving relationship with each other and with our natural environment and its various forms is crucial to our psychological and spiritual health. An acknowledgment of our shared life together inclines us to feel embodied and grounded in our daily life, while at the same time feeling more trusting.

In this light, I have included some brief stories throughout the chapters so that you can have an opportunity to reflect on how your own experience may resonate with others. Reading about other people's experiences can be a powerful avenue of healing through forgiveness.

While I have refrained from an "academic" style of writing in this book, you may peruse my suggested reading list in the reference section and find research articles and books that fulfill that purpose. The list is by no means conclusive, but it will start you in the right direction if you are interested in exploring further.

Although I am a licensed clinical psychologist, the following pages are not intended to serve as psychotherapy. I suggest that you seek a therapist if something is triggered for you that requires more attention than the gentle self-generated practices and reflections presented in this book. These chapters are simply shared words and practices from one ordinary human being to another. I would, of course, love to be an enlightened guru offering you a miracle cure for matters of forgiveness. The fact is that there are very few enlightened gurus on this planet. Most of us do the best we can with the resources that we have available to us. I deeply respect your inner knowing, and I am certain that there

Imagine Forgiveness

is much that you can do toward your own process of forgiveness if you engage in some of the suggested practices in this book.

More than all of my professional education and training and head-centered endeavors, I am profoundly grateful that I have learned how to be heart-centered and to forgive, for without forgiveness, my life could have been crushed. I am sure some of you can relate to that statement.

Quiet and focused reflection and creative expression encourage a deep sense of knowing that does not depend on events and circumstances to direct our state of being. Rather, our sense of well-being is directed to our own inner core that is embedded in an interconnectedness with all. I wish for you feelings of confidence, inner peace, and compassion as you turn the pages of this book, engage in some practices toward forgiveness, and walk each day into the future with dignity and grace.

Part I



What Is Forgiveness?

Ho'okahi no la'au lapa'au, o ka mihi.

The first remedy is forgiveness.

—Hawaiian prayer

Chapter 1



Imagine Considering Forgiveness

“Forgiveness is unlocking the door
to set someone free and realizing
you were the prisoner.”

-Max Lucado

Simple human kindness can evoke forgiveness from us when someone we care about makes a mistake. Their mistake may have cost us dearly, but in our hearts we know that they would have never done it intentionally, and they will always regret it. We forgive them open heartedly, to relieve ourselves of the wrenching pain of resentment, but also to console our loved one for their inadvertent act. Forgiveness, in this case, reminds us how frail we are; how vulnerable we are to poor judgment and selfish, bumbling mistakes that can hurt the ones we love. As we forgive our loved ones for their humanity, we inherently forgive ourselves.

But life asks more of us than this. It is nearly inevitable that, sooner or later, all of us will encounter an event that is much harder to forgive. Our natural compassion will help us, but it will not be enough. We'll need to reach for something more within ourselves. We'll search for a

different way of understanding what has happened that will allow us to consider forgiveness. In these cases, it will not be easy to find.

When Things Go Awry

What do we do when something happens that we consider wrong or unfair? We all have a sense of what is and is not good and right. From early childhood, we can recognize when something goes awry. We cry, as infants, when something goes wrong, as the adults around us do their best to soothe us gently. In life, we soon discover that soothing isn't always enough.

Suppose you were crossing the street on the way to school at eight years old when an inattentive driver turned a corner, without warning, and ran you over. As a result of those few terrifying seconds of inattention, you are paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair. No amount of gentle soothing can change the situation or ameliorate the unfairness of your fate. How we respond to such things defines the amount of suffering we experience. I have a friend whose mother accidentally backed the car up over her legs when she was a child. She has been a paraplegic ever since. When people ask her about her suffering concerning this, she replies, "My mother and sister have suffered much more than I." This woman is now a social worker, a teacher of energy medicine, and a living representation of forgiveness.

"Resentment is like drinking poison
and expecting someone else to die."

~Anonymous

As joyous and fulfilling as life can be, it is never free of tragedy and suffering. When it happens to others, it is easy to empathize and offer consolation. When it happens to us, we often struggle to find a way to cope and move on. There is inevitably a period of grief over what we have lost or the new situation that has befallen us. We can react with bitterness and despair, but those emotions will quickly choke the joy from our lives.

The challenge of putting the past behind us and moving on can feel enormous. We may ask ourselves how it is possible to live in a world that has proven to be so cruel and unjust. Instinctively, we know that if we do not come to terms with what has happened, the penalty will be too great. We will actually amplify the harm that was done to us if we harbor our resentment and cling to our pain. It is ironic, but forgiveness rarely emerges from a sudden tenderness for the one who hurt us. Far more often, it is motivated by a desire to set ourselves free. Only forgiveness can relieve us of that burden. But how do we find it?

Dr. Frederic Luskin, founder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, points out, “Nobody’s ever taught us how to forgive. People have taught us how to get angry, how to become depressed, even how not to react with rage when life doesn’t turn out as we want it to, but nobody has taught us how to forgive.”

In fact, many people refuse to forgive others, because they have the mistaken impression that forgiveness implies a kind of tacit approval of the wrong that has been done to them. They assume that forgiveness entails welcoming the forgiven person back into their lives with open arms. And, especially when the wrong has been great, few people are naive enough to do such a thing.

Our strong survival instincts tell us it is foolish and dangerous to embrace a person when we have evidence that they cannot be trusted. These are the instincts that have kept the human race alive on the planet for centuries and deserve our respect. As I assert in the introduction to this book, forgiveness does not equate with condoning. It does not mean that you must give up appropriate interpersonal boundaries or fail to hold another person responsible for their hurtful acts.

Forgiveness does equate with compassion for yourself and for others, regardless of the events that have occurred. Forgiveness requires a surrendering of grievances to the perspective of the core self, the part of all of us that transcends time and place and attachments. It involves a shift in meaning and perspective. It is in our power to forgive, regardless of the wrong that has been done.

Juliet Rohde-Brown, Ph.D.

“Just as trust had within it the seed of betrayal
so betrayal has within it the seed of forgiveness.”

~James Hillman

Apart from the effect on the person you forgive, the act of forgiveness is in your own best interest. It allows your body, mind, and spirit to heal and move on. The physical and mental health benefits are objectively measurable. Mindful compassionate focus is proposed to create neuroplastic changes over time. Our intentions shape our individual and collective world in profound ways.

Forgiveness does not change wrong to right. We are not asked to forgive the crime, but the criminal. As we will discuss in future chapters, forgiveness does not even imply reconciliation. The act of forgiveness can exist entirely within our own hearts. It is about our relationship to ourselves and to our own lives.

“Outside of the ideas
of right and wrong, there is a field.
I’ll meet you there.”

~Rumi

The Light of Forgiveness

Forgiveness allows us to laugh and enjoy life again. It releases the burden weighing on our hearts when we have been wronged, and returns the joy and light to our lives.

When we resist forgiveness, we lock ourselves into a darker vision of the world. It is like wearing dark sunglasses that add ominous shadows to everything we see. We carry those glasses with us and even ask others to look through them as well. Letting forgiveness into our hearts is like taking off the sunglasses and letting the light in again.

Harboring anger and grief, resentment and bitterness can squelch that light and keep us far from the buoyant place we know to be our birthright.

That place is not outside us. How can it rely on other people's acts or omissions? It is secreted away within us—a place we all know intimately.

I often share a quote from the renowned developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, when I see clients who experience depression regarding childhood abuse. Erikson posited that depression can often be framed as "nostalgia for a paradise forfeited." I never forgot that phrase when I first read it, and when I share it with clients, it never ceases to bring a response of deep recognition. For all of us, somehow, intuitively know that our birthright is a paradisal environment of love and support from our caretakers. Erikson considered this state of recognition to be inherent in all human beings.

When our caregivers treat us with sensitive concern in our infancy, they create a sense of trust that stays with us all our lives. We are so utterly dependent upon their care and, for the most part, most of us learn we can rely on our caregivers to do their best to meet our needs. Erikson realized that this early exchange of trust between human beings not only forms the basis of our sense of identity, but it also creates in us a deep security—a sense of being "all right," of being ourselves.

There are many studies on human attachment that support the importance of this mirroring, especially in terms of emotional regulation and brain integration. Dan Siegel refers to a securely attached individual as an "attuned" person; one who is neither in "chaos" or "rigidity" and who is empathic toward others.

Through the practice of loving-kindness, we can see one another compassionately, as the innocent children we are within—children of the heart, who want to be loved and yearn to give love back—more than anything else. From that place, it is quite natural for us to empathize with everyone around us, since we can see quite clearly that they, too, are experiencing the joys, pains, and losses that we all go through together on this planet. It is so much easier to forgive the mistakes we make and realize how redeemable we are.

Eckhart Tolle speaks often about the "pain body." If we assume that an acquaintance who undermines another deliberately must be suffering

from tremendous fear and insecurity, we can imagine our acquaintance's "pain body." This concept allows us to focus on the images that arise in us in relation to such suffering and can reveal important insights into our acquaintance and/or the images our connection evokes in us.

It's important to remember that spiteful acts or words can be the outcome of passion that is out of balance. When someone speaks harshly, it is most likely the inadvertent projection of their shadow side. It may also be that they speak out of jealousy or a longing for connection.

Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way*, suggests that people are envious because of their own unmanifested talents or desires. They wrongly convince themselves that there is not enough to go around or that if a friend is successful, romantically, artistically or professionally, they have somehow used up the success that might have gone to others. They have taken all the cookies in the cookie jar, so to speak. There is also a fear that success means a friend will no longer want to associate with their old friends. Feeling betrayed at the very thought of this, an envious person may lash out at a friend with a spiteful word or gesture. Such acts emerge from a childlike part that is desperately afraid of being left alone with unrealized dreams.

What a relief it is to finally forgive another! It brings us a feeling of lightness because it allows us to come back to our own hearts. From that place, we can see that to be given that opportunity to let go of the repercussions of an act is a great gift, to ourselves and to our fellow beings on this planet.

And besides, the truth of it is that changing the past is not an option. So, we have little choice. We can either continue to torment ourselves with the past or focus instead on the loving people around us and move on with our lives. Living from love is the most healing, empowering choice. "The closer we can come to being 'in love,' accepting and peaceful," Dr. Luskin says, "the better chance we have of a good life. It's just that simple."

We can acknowledge that the act itself was a wrongdoing, while letting go of our identification with it. As you may imagine, this act we

call “forgiveness” does not always occur in a smooth, linear fashion. We do not necessarily begin with a desire to forgive, then progress steadily onward, straight up the escalator toward the shining light. If the wrong is severe enough, the act of forgiveness can provide many challenges. The reactions of the person we would like to forgive can delay the process or set up unexpected obstacles. The repercussions of their wrong may give us pause over and over again as we struggle to reach a place of equanimity.

This is not a day-long endeavor. It is a process; one that often progresses in a spiral-like manner, with ups and downs along the way. It is more like a path through mountainous terrain than a ride on an escalator. You must work to make it happen rather than passively hope it will be draped upon you.

At the Heart of Forgiveness...

Friendship at Risk

When Cathy was getting her master’s degree in psychology, her friend, Emma, who had not gone to graduate school, was finding success as a life coach. The gruelling process of clinical practicum, internship, thesis, and licensing exam for marriage and family counselling was felt as an important rite of a passage by Cathy. While she was learning and teaching others about the nuances of theoretical foundation, the intricacies of brain and psychological development in traditional venues, her friend, Emma, had adopted a basic behavioral approach, learned from a mentor.

By Cathy’s estimation, with none of the rigor demanding of a licensed clinician, Emma had almost immediately made a career for herself with numerous high-profile, money-making ventures. Although the friends clearly shared an interest in psychology and

human insight, their radically different approaches sent tremors through the friendship.

Cathy was critical of what she deemed to be Emma's trite, unexamined theory of change. It goaded her to see how quickly Emma had adopted the confident persona of an expert and how willingly the public bought into what Cathy saw as a patently "unsophisticated, shallow approach to human relationships." At the same time, Emma was critical of Cathy's "know it all" persona and what she perceived as a sense of superiority, intellectualism, and impracticality. She frequently made rude comments about how much the graduate education and training process had aged Cathy. The tension between them ultimately became so great that Emma made overtly insulting remarks, saying, "I'll throw all the sickos to you so they can sit for years whining about their problems, getting nowhere."

One night, Cathy, when she was very hurt by a comment Emma had made, woke up and meditated on the problem. She soon realized she did not resent her friend's success. She loved Emma and was truly happy for her. She knew Emma was truly helping people as well. Instead, at the core of her own pain was an image of abandonment. She feared most that her dear friend would move on in her success, develop new associations and friendships, and leave her.

As she did a heart-centered meditation, Cathy saw Emma as a precious child. She realized that the hurtful comments and attitudes each had for the other were really their own critical voices toward themselves; each of them was terribly afraid of being invalidated and abandoned by the other. In fact, Cathy had been longing

for an expression of creativity and fun that had been lacking in her life, and Emma had been longing for a validation of her intelligence and acknowledgement of her capacity to make a difference in people's lives.

Somehow both of them had imagined that the other had taken away what they desired, and that there wasn't enough to go around. If one took all the cookies first, the other would only be left with crumbs. Their assumptions about a lack of abundance and of love were undermining their connection.

Once Cathy let this go, her attitude changed, and so did Emma's. Cathy took responsibly for her end of things. She extended empathy to herself and to Emma. It had a sort of "mirror neuron" effect on her friend, Emma, who quickly came to the same resolution. As a result, a situation that could have caused a complete split between two dear friends facilitated the opportunity for mutual love and support instead.

As you reflect on this story and any situations that come to mind from your own life, take a moment to ask yourself the following questions:

- ❖ Have I said something sarcastic to a friend or loved one recently?
- ❖ What did I really want from our relationship in that moment?
- ❖ What did I want the person to know about me? About my feelings or thoughts regarding something they said or did?
- ❖ Did I want to express that I was disappointed about something or that I was feeling sad about something?

With these considerations, can you imagine an alternative way that you might have behaved toward that person? How might you have behaved? What might you have said instead of the sarcastic comment?

Write this out. You may want to keep these reflections in a specially chosen box. Give this reflection a name. For instance, you can refer to this piece as “Sarcasm Check-In,” with the suggestion to yourself that the next time you feel the impulse toward a sarcastic remark toward a friend or loved one (or anyone, for that matter), remember this reflection and check in with yourself before reacting with a hurtful comment.

Know that it is natural to have these different shadow voices within; so don’t judge yourself harshly. This reflective exercise and personal check-in is an example of treating yourself with a forgiving attitude. It is easy to see how, by extending an accepting yet forgiving attitude toward yourself by checking in with your innermost feelings, this attitude naturally begins to translate to your treatment of others as well. That is the beauty of how forgiveness works in the world.

Chapter 2

Metta and Mindfulness: Forgiving Ourselves

“Whether hatred is projected out or projected in,
it is always corrosive of the human spirit.”

~Anonymous

When Marian Partington’s younger sister, Lucy, went to catch the bus to visit a friend in 1973, she disappeared. Her family was devastated. They gradually came to accept that the worst had happened, since Lucy was not one to have willingly run away from home. But for the next twenty years, her family had no way of knowing for sure what had become of her.

Then, in 1994, the police recovered her body as part of the investigation into the crimes of the Frederick Wests. Marian and her family were forced to come to terms with the gruesome knowledge that Lucy had been abducted, raped, and tortured, and then beheaded. The images haunted Marian day after day.

Forgiveness continually slipped beyond Marian’s reach. In an effort to find it, she attended Chan Buddhist retreats and vowed to find a way

to forgive the Wests. The challenge was nearly impossible. As Marian explains:

When I came home from the retreat, I had an overwhelming, involuntary, and profoundly physical experience of murderous rage: it went ... whoosh! All the way up from my belly to my skull. I wanted to scream, pull my hair out, claw at the ground. So for me, forgiveness began with murderous rage...

Months later, Marian met a mother whose daughter had been murdered. The woman told her something she will never forget: "Forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past." It helped Marian move toward the forgiveness that allowed her to reclaim her own freedom from these horrible events. For Marian, forgiveness is a way to "find a positive relationship with [her] own suffering which can be beneficial to others." She knows she is honoring her sister, Lucy, by her act of forgiveness.

Accepting Ourselves

When we "give up all hope of a better past," we relinquish control of events in a very important way. No matter how terrifying it may seem that we do not control some of the things that are most vital to us, we can find peace in the acknowledgement that that is the way life is. We cannot always avoid the experience of even the most devastating pain and grief. When a horrific crime occurs, like the one committed against Marian Partington's sister, it can be very hard to accept our own helplessness in the face of such an act.

Even in our daily lives, one of the most difficult aspects of forgiveness can be the task of forgiving ourselves. We plague ourselves with questions: Why were we unable to prevent appalling events that happened to someone we love? Why have we done something to cause others pain? We can find something to berate ourselves over,

twenty-four hours a day. The critic in our minds will never be short of accusations. It is too ruthless and knows us too intimately to stop at generalizations. Whatever we feel most uneasy about will be thrown up before us.

We have to step out of ourselves and become the witness to those accusations. In order to begin a practice of forgiveness in our lives, we have to learn to forgive ourselves. Extending forgiveness to ourselves in a conscious way informs everything we do in the world. Our ability to not get caught up in the subjective experience of guilt or badness toward ourselves will help free us from the tendency to project those same accusations onto others.

The psychologist and researcher, Robert Enright, has provided one of my favorite definitions of self-forgiveness. He describes it as:

...a willingness to abandon self-resentment in the face of one's own acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity, and love toward oneself. As in interpersonal forgiveness, a self-forgiver has a right to self-resentment for the specific behavior(s) leading to self-offense, but he or she gives up the resentment nonetheless.

Also, in the face of serious, acknowledged wrongdoing, the self may not be duty bound to give oneself compassion, generosity, or love, although self-respect is necessary. Perhaps self-respect may allow one to see the offense and thus enter a self-forgiveness journey or another journey that leads to healing.

As with forgiveness of another, self-forgiveness involves not just a general sense of discomfort inside us, but a response to a wrong we have done—to ourselves or others. And, just as our forgiveness of another does not require reconciliation, forgiveness of ourselves does not necessarily mean that we accept or condone our actions. What is crucial, however, is that we accept ourselves.

Without that, it is impossible to live a happy, contented life. In her work with people who are literally in the last stages of life, Kathleen Dowling Singh has observed that self-forgiveness is important in creating an essential level of peace in those who are dying. As people look back over their lives, they gradually come to recognize that they will no longer have the time or ability to change things. Things must stand as they are. The illusion of control is abandoned. The dreams of making amends slip away. And the next thing that emerges is forgiveness of themselves. Singh speaks of it with great respect, when she says that, in these people who find self-forgiveness, “a new capacity for compassion arises, for others and for our self, as well as a growing clarity, deepened experience of pure existence, and an increased capacity to intuit the truth.”

Others who work in hospice care have observed the same, remarkable healing process in those who are faced with the end of their lives. It may be that the intensity of the final weeks of dying accelerates the process of forgiveness.

One thing is clear, forgiveness of others correlates with self-forgiveness. We cannot truly extend genuine loving feelings to others until we have offered forgiveness to ourselves

At the Heart of Forgiveness...

My Own Self-Forgiveness

Out the window he went. His pattern; it was the tenth or eleventh time. He chose the most ill-opportune moments to plunge himself out of our window on Wilder Avenue. John's brain damage urged him to do odd things. Not just the ordinary risks of many toddlers, but the operatic plunges over the rickety bridge into the property canal or the wild tantrums and head pounding on stone floors. The old sugar plantation house with its wide veranda that wrapped around the perimeter of the house was raised from

the ground with quite a high crawl space underneath, a space where rats and centipedes chose to fester. Although the house was one-story, it was perched up high off the ground.

The cold bottom line: I was a six-year-old wanting attention. Middle of the night. Coax John to the window. He had done it so many times without getting hurt. Come on, John. Come to the window. Jump, Jump, John! in my whispered voice. He jumps. I run to Mom and Dad's room screaming, "John jumped, John jumped!" Lights on. Panic. Mom scrapes her foot badly on the metal jutting out from the corner of the bed frame. Dad runs in his naked sleeping suit. We all run to look out the window where four year old John sits on the cool dawn Manoa ground looking up at us innocently, dazed eyes in his half awake tender face. Scoldings unfurl toward John—reprimands for jumping yet again when he was told not to. I, the hero for calling out for help, remain silent, as if a witness to his disobedience. I did not have the words to contradict or disclose my strategized crime.

Seeing his innocent face looking up at us, I recognized in that moment that he was a bodhisattva of sorts, a very special being; he was one who sacrificed so much so that others could thrive. I stared into the face of pure loving eternity with John's forgiving, silent eyes, and I punished myself deeply. It did not matter that he was not hurt. I was relieved with the factual evidence, but haunted with guilty feelings and with the awareness that he could have actually been hurt, all for the puny reward of being praised for a slender moment. It was the first time I can remember reflecting on my own actions.

I held a secret, a shadow, and I retreated more and more into an inner world of fantasy, where I could find solace juxtaposed with an ever-prompting question about what it means to exist. John taught me compassion in that moment and in many moments hence. I loved him so much that I could feel the pain in my heart for him. But what I had done had pierced my own heart so badly that I silently punished myself. This is a story about a girl who needed to forgive herself, but it took me a long time to discover this—and in the progression of this story there were many others whose behaviors were reprehensible and they needed to be forgiven as well—but it had to begin with me.

It was not until I learned Metta meditation that I realized the depth of my own pain and self-dismissiveness. In my silent meditations, visualizing my heart extending to John, to my deceased parents, to my siblings, friends, colleagues, partner, my mentors, perpetrators, strangers that I pass on the street, animals, our globe hanging blue and green in a vast cosmic explosion of calm; I would weep and weep as I felt the largeness, the expansiveness of love, in the remembrance of the solid core of light at my very being and at the core of all of us.

My story was about a child's lack of judgment and thoughtless quest for parental attention. Even though we, as adults, might be forgiving toward a child's troublesome acts, you can see from my story that children who are in the process of developing either a healthy conscience or a guilty one are not always forgiving of themselves. I am wondering if, after having read my passage above, you had reflections about your own childhood and the development of an inner self critic, or if any recent events in your adult life come to mind.

Take a moment to do a “guilty conscience check-in.” Ask yourself the following questions, and write down your responses and even draw some symbols that you associate with your responses:

- ❖ Did I do something as a child, teenager, or adult that I still feel guilty about?

- ❖ Have I kept this a secret from others and/or tried to push it out of my own consciousness?
- ❖ Have I blamed other people for things I have done?
- ❖ If I did share this information with another, what was their response?
- ❖ How did that person's response contribute to how I feel about myself currently?
- ❖ If I have not developed a guilty conscience over this event, what enabled this?
- ❖ How do I feel in my body as I reflect on all of this?
- ❖ What might be an alternative, more forgiving way to respond to my thoughts?

Reflect on your answers to these questions, and on how the way in which you answered may have impacted your ability to forgive yourself. If you have not done so already, think of someone whom you feel safe with and make a plan to tell them something you feel guilty about. Write out how and where you will plan on communicating to this person, be it a friend, family member, or person from the past. Perhaps this person is a therapist you are already seeing, but whom you have kept this piece from for fear of your therapist's reaction.

If you still feel too vulnerable to actually face another individual with something you feel guilty about, try writing a letter to that person. You may choose to either send the letter at some point or not to send it. You may find that by simply sitting down to put some of this down on paper, you are already beginning to feel some acceptance of and compassion toward yourself. If words are too uncomfortable for you to use right now, then try simply drawing, moving your body, or making a sound with a drum or other instrument or with your voice alone.

Many practicing Buddhists suggest several antidotes for anger. Understanding of karma, patience, equanimity, and the cultivation of nonattachment are considered to be the wisest responses. All of these can be developed through a practice of concentration meditation and

insight meditation. Since anger and some other conflicted mental states are seen as incorrect projections of the mind, the solution is to teach the mind to see things correctly with greater wisdom and insight. Once the mind's projections have been corrected, unhealthy attitudes can be first accepted, and then transformed.

Here is a brief introduction to mindfulness practice that you can do everyday to help you notice and even label what you are experiencing from moment to moment. This practice is used by many people to build compassionate awareness and acceptance of all the parts of themselves, even the most socially reprehensible. Try this:

- ❖ Breathe in and out softly from your belly several times. It helps to close your eyes when you first practice this.
- ❖ Set an intention by saying, “May this practice bring me acceptance and awareness.”
- ❖ With friendliness, simply begin to notice your breath as well as any sounds and sensations.
- ❖ Notice any thoughts and/or feelings that are present, such as sadness, anger, or impatience. Softly name the experience, without judging it or trying to either indulge it or make it go away. Simply notice it and name it as you focus on it. You can name it more than once. For instance, “worrying … worrying … worrying,” or “anger … anger.” You can say it as many times as you are noticing it.
- ❖ Now notice how this particular experience changes ever so slightly, and how a new experience emerges in the present moment. Name this experience as well. Notice the same process of how this changes moment to moment and moves into the next experience and the next. Notice your breath through this entire process and that place between the breath that rests ever so slightly before you inhale or exhale.
- ❖ Close the practice by opening your eyes and staying with a soft, friendly noticing as you go about your day.

You will find that if you practice this more and more each day, you will begin to make it a part of your everyday existence and it will shape the way that you interact with yourself and others. Instead of unconsciously reacting to people, events, and inner turmoil, you will respond with conscious awareness and mindfulness.

Once you are able to acknowledge that you are committed to engaging in mindfulness practice, you may move to the next step and begin to engage in Metta, or translated from the Pali language, loving-kindness practice. I include a variation of this meditation in the visualizations in Chapter 6. Basically, the practice involves extending a feeling of love and compassion first to yourself, then to loved ones, then to people in your work place or that you pass on the street, then to a difficult person, and it then closes with extending the feeling of love and compassion (impartial beneficence) to all sentient beings. Many include images of spiritual mentors or icons in their practice as well.

Several individuals have been extremely important in bringing these practices to mainstream American culture, but two who stand out for me are the psychologist Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg. In addition, Jon Kabat-Zinn has brought mindfulness meditation into medical settings. You do not have to be a Buddhist to participate in this practice. In fact, Buddha actually means “awake,” and any of us can benefit from wakefulness as well as compassion.

The mystical strains of all of the world’s spiritual traditions have practices that foster love for and kindness toward all beings, but Metta practice is quite comprehensive and, judging from my own observations, seems to be appealing to many people the world over. The following is a brief introductory example of Metta that you can try right now, if you like:

- ❖ Start with noticing your breath, just as you did with the mindfulness exercise, noticing each experience from moment to moment. Breathe softly from your belly.

❖ Extend to yourself an attitude of kindness. Some refer to this as friendliness. Imagine that you can even see an image of yourself, accepting this friendliness.

❖ State out loud or softly in your thoughts an intention for yourself with words such as:

May I be peaceful.

May I be happy.

May I be safe.

May I awaken to the light of my true nature.

May I be free from the cause of suffering.

❖ Rest with this for several moments, noticing what happens in your body.

❖ Now, bring to mind an image of a loved one (and you can do this for several loved ones). Extend the same attitude of kindness and friendliness to the loved one(s). You may include a spiritual mentor as well.

❖ Repeat the same types of phrases for your loved one(s). Such as:

May you be peaceful.

May you be happy.

May you be safe.

May you awaken to the light of their true nature.

May you be free from the cause of suffering.

❖ Rest with this for several moments, noticing what happens in your body.

❖ Continue to bring up images of others, such as those who are somewhat neutral for you as well as those who are difficult in your life (when you are ready) and all sentient beings. Use the same phrases and extend Metta or loving-kindness to all.

❖ You may extend the practice and envision a spiritual mentor/guide merging with your own heart, breathing in oneness with you.

- ❖ Breathe softly, open your eyes, and go about your day(s) continuing to practice this stance of friendliness toward yourself and others, regardless of circumstances.

You will notice that loving-kindness practice can incorporate a spiritual mentor/guide or role model. There is evidence to support the idea that we can develop self-efficacy through spiritual role models. Dr. Doug Oman and his colleagues have developed a scale to attempt to measure people's self-efficacy when they place their attention on spiritual role models. For some the role model may be Jesus, for others Kwan Yin or a beloved rabbi or teacher. When family role models have been less than nurturing, one can rely on spiritual role models to fulfil the need for appropriate modeling of behavior and attitude.

For instance, Jack Kornfield often encourages his meditation trainees to imagine actually being their spiritual guide, so as to have a felt sense of what it is like to carry wisdom and compassion in their body. Try this on by sitting quietly, breathing calmly and imagining your own spiritual role model sitting and breathing in your own body. Stay with this for some moments and notice what you perceive. Try it the next time you get stressed at work or during a misunderstanding with someone.

These daily practices of mindfulness and Metta, as well as the meditations and visualizations in the following chapters, will help renew your spirit and make you more forgiving. There is much scientific evidence to support the idea that mindfully attending to your moment to moment experience will bring greater well-being. The habit of mindfulness can keep you closer to your heart throughout the day. It will be easier, when you encounter stress, to deflect it. If you need a physical anchor at such a moment, rub a couple of fingers together as a reminder to breathe, label what is occurring for you, and respond with mindfulness.

Meredith Young Sowers, who developed the Stillpoint Foundation and model of integrative healing, suggests putting your hand over your heart in moments of reactivity and telling yourself, "Steady, steady, steady!" I invite you to also say, "I am welcomed! I am loved!"

I have found that the people who have the most difficult time forgiving are those who do not truly feel welcome in the world. They do not have a sense of love in their lives. Perhaps they have rarely heard the words “I love you.” In some cases, they can barely utter the words as a comfort for themselves or others.

This sense of not being welcomed often comes about in infancy. Ironically, people can feel like a fish out of water in cultural or social environments where they are ostracized for being different, even if they have had a basic sense of welcomeness by their caregivers in infancy.

Think of the practice of mindfulness, Metta (loving-kindness), and forgiveness as a way to create a perpetual state of comfort, love, and welcomeness within you, even in the midst of internal and external conflict. Consider that this cradle of compassion you are building in your heart contains a message: “Welcome home.”

It is similar to what some Native American traditions say when a ritual of soul retrieval is in the final phase. They say “Welcome back!” When you stop, breathe, and respond in a new way each time a stressful and potentially blaming or judgmental reaction emerges, you are actually welcoming yourself back in increments to your birthright and your true home—the cradle of compassion. You are creating a gateway for the spiral of forgiveness to occur.

These practices foster impartial beneficence and actually build your ability to stand up for yourself and protect yourself as you would any innocent child. Thus, it is not weak and sappy at all, as some cynics might imply, but the foundation of inner strength and power. Working with and accepting anger and grief are the first steps in forgiveness. As you begin to acknowledge all the parts of yourself with an open mind and heart, one of the things that you will notice is a greater vitality which manifests in positive changes in your overall emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being. Be patient with yourself. This often takes time.