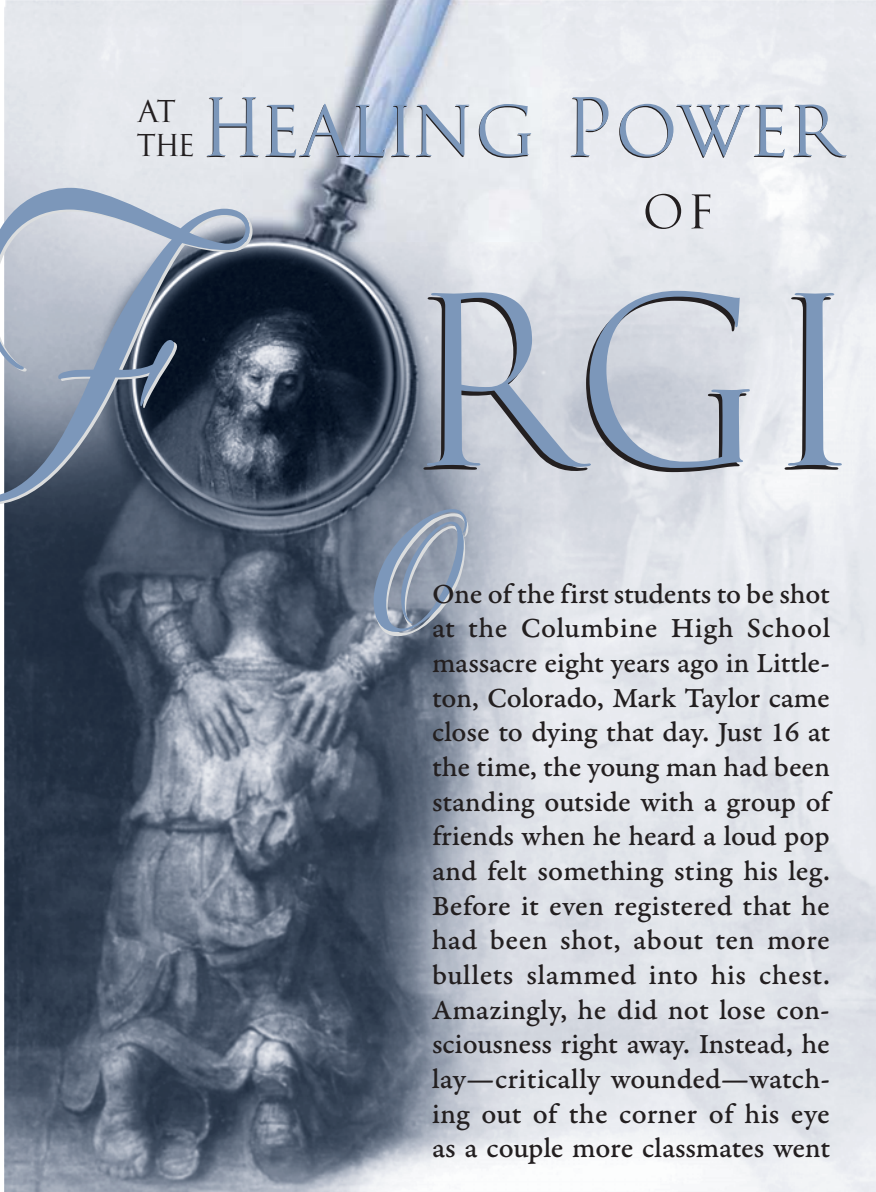


# Science Looks

AT THE HEALING POWER  
OF

# FORGIVENESS



One of the first students to be shot at the Columbine High School massacre eight years ago in Littleton, Colorado, Mark Taylor came close to dying that day. Just 16 at the time, the young man had been standing outside with a group of friends when he heard a loud pop and felt something sting his leg. Before it even registered that he had been shot, about ten more bullets slammed into his chest. Amazingly, he did not lose consciousness right away. Instead, he lay—critically wounded—watching out of the corner of his eye as a couple more classmates went

down. One of them died on the spot.

That horrific day two of Taylor's fellow students had gone on a shooting rampage, ultimately killing 12 students and one teacher and injuring 22 more people before they were killed themselves. At the time, Taylor recalls, it all seemed so unreal. What *was* real,

It would have been understandable for Taylor to be angry and resentful, to carry that rage and trauma with him for years, perhaps even for the rest of his life. In the end, though, he forgave his shooters. In the process, he tapped into what scientific research is now identifying as one of the most powerful healing forces available: forgiveness.

By Alice Feinstein

was the pain, both physical and psychological, that followed. He spent forty days in the hospital and underwent four surgeries. One doctor told Taylor that it was a miracle that he survived so many hits to the chest; but he did survive, only to deal with months of agonizing treatment for blood clots and damage to muscles and organs. "The surgeries were even more painful than when I took the bullets," says Taylor, now 24.

"When I was in the hospital, my godmother came in and read scriptures to me on forgiveness," Taylor says. "The scriptures helped me more than the pain medication. For me, the major healing was forgiveness."

This teenager had a lot to forgive, but forgive he did. A Christian, he explains that the concept of forgiveness is so central to his faith that forgiving his shooters was vital. Forgiveness did not

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*Illustration opposite: Detail from "The Return of the Prodigal Son," by Rembrandt van Rijn.*

come right away, though. Even with daily scripture reading and prayer, “it took at least a year,” he says. However, the result was not only emotional and spiritual healing, but physical recovery as well.

### *Forgiveness Brings Healing*

What Mark Taylor discovered through personal experience, medical science has confirmed: Forgiveness *does* have the power to prevent and heal both mental and physical problems.

“There is abundant, clear evidence that forgiveness is good for people,” says Frederic Luskin, Ph.D., director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, and author of *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*.

Over the past two decades, says Dr. Luskin, researchers across the nation have demonstrated in numerous studies that forgiving others helps to:

- Reduce depression
- Decrease stress
- Lessen anxiety
- Increase self-esteem
- Lower blood pressure
- Increase physical vitality
- Relieve backache
- Reduce muscle tension

- Alleviate chronic pain
- Improve relationships
- Boost the immune system

In one study that Luskin describes in his book, college students alternated angry periods of thinking about a grudge they held against an individual with periods of thinking about forgiving that same individual. During the periods of anger, their heart rate went up, as did their blood pressure. During the periods devoted to forgiveness, the students reported feeling more positive emotions and relaxation.

“This study showed that holding a grudge in the short term could stress participants’ nervous system,” notes Luskin. “No study has yet proved that holding grudges causes long-term health damage, but many studies hint at it.”

A number of studies, including a couple that he conducted himself, have pointed to the ability of forgiveness to defuse anger, says Luskin. “Anger,” he says, “is a risk factor for all sorts of cardiovascular disease”—citing the conclusive body of evidence that people who cannot control their anger are more likely to have heart attacks and strokes.

Not only that, but research has

documented that both depression and high levels of anger reduce immune system function. A poorly functioning immune system can increase the likelihood of contracting a wide variety of illness—everything from the common cold to cancer—and impede the body’s ability to heal from illness or traumatic injuries such as Columbine student Mark Taylor’s.

Given all that forgiving others does for the body, “there’s almost no aspect of physical health that wouldn’t be benefited,” says Luskin.

And yet, the healing power of forgiveness does not stop with what it can do for the individual.

“We each help to cocreate this world. Therefore the central challenge today is a spiritual one,” says Luskin, who as a member of Self-Realization Fellowship has practiced Kriya Yoga meditation for many years. If you are angry and you don’t forgive, “your anger and hatred pollute the world,” he says. “There’s so much we can do to increase harmony and peace on this planet simply by making ourselves more forgiving persons.”

Robert Enright, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, would agree. Dr. Enright is author of *For-*

*giveness Is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* and one of the nation’s top forgiveness researchers.

“Forgiveness, among all the possible virtues, if practiced well and on the largest scale, has the capacity to change the world,” says Enright. “It’s not only injustice that causes problems; often our vengeful response to injustice creates even greater and more enduring problems.”

### *What Is Forgiveness?*

Dr. Luskin gives this description of forgiveness: “It is the moment-to-moment experience of peace that comes when you take less offense, take responsibility for how you feel, and change your story from a victim to a hero.”

At the same time, experts point out the need for common sense. If you’re mad at someone who is abusing a child and you do something about it, that’s *constructive* anger, says Luskin. “Forgiveness is not an excuse for unthinking acquiescence, or a substitute for guarding loved ones and making sure one has good boundaries,” he says. If you need to take action to stop abuse, do so. Forgiveness of the abuser can come later.

## Taking Up the Forgiveness Challenge

It's one thing to believe in the power of forgiveness, another thing to actually put it into effect. Luskin, who has lectured and given workshops on forgiveness at colleges, churches, and temples throughout the nation, says that invariably when he's 5 or 10 minutes into his talk, someone will stand up and say, "That's all well and good. But you don't know my mother-in-law." Or my boss, or my husband, or my ex.... You can fill in the blank here, he says.

Even with all of the proven benefits of forgiveness, actually doing the act of forgiveness can be a challenge—and not just for people like Mark Taylor who have experienced major physical trauma.

Diana B., for example, who sold office supplies in New England, wanted to forgive her boss, whose verbal taunts ultimately cost her her job. It took more than a year of daily effort. As she tells the story, her sales numbers attested to the fact that she was consistently bettering the performance goals that had been set for her. Yet almost from day one her new boss had hurled verbal abuse her way, criticizing everything from how she

dressed to how she spoke.

Diana has held several top sales jobs through the years and knew that both her appearance and her interaction with the public were professional and above reproach. Her boss was clearly out of line, she says, and so irrationally abusive that she began to wonder if they didn't have some kind of karmic tie from a previous life.

While continuing to perform her sales work to the best of her ability, Diana began looking for another job. And she began work on forgiving her boss as part of her personal spiritual growth. Every time she had angry or resentful thoughts towards her boss, she said a prayer of forgiveness. Meanwhile, her boss got wind that her resume was circulating and he fired her without notice. Then she *really* had to work on forgiving him.

"I must have forgiven that man 50 times a day," she says.

About a year later, she heard from one of her old boss's important clients. He passed along some information that could mean significant sales revenue for the company she had worked for. The choice was hers. She could remain silent, thereby exacting a sort of revenge. Or she could pick up the phone and give her old nemesis the

## The Process of Reaching Forgiveness

Dr. Everett L. Worthington, Jr.

*Everett Worthington, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. He has published 22 books and over 200 articles and scholarly chapters, including The Power of Forgiving (Templeton Foundation Press, 2005). His research has identified the following steps to forgiving:*

These steps spell out the acrostic REACH. Think of a person who has hurt you and apply the steps to REACH forgiveness. If the wound is traumatic, you might want the support of a friend or counselor as you move up the steps.

**Recall the hurt.** When we are hurt, we often try to protect ourselves by denying our hurt. We think, often correctly, that if we don't think about it, it won't bother us. But if unforgiveness keeps intruding into your happiness or gnawing ulcers in your gut, consider forgiving. Recall the hurt as objectively as possible. Don't rail against the person who hurt you, waste time wishing for an apology that will never be offered, or dwell on your victimization. Instead, admit that a wrong was done to you and set your sights on its repair.

**Empathize.** Empathy involves seeing things from another person's point of view, feeling that person's feelings, and identifying with the pressures that made the person hurt you. To empathize with your offender's experience, write a brief letter to yourself as if you were the other person. How would he or she explain the harmful acts?

**Altruistic gift of forgiveness.** Empathy can prepare you for forgiving, but to give that gift of forgiveness, consider yourself. Have you ever harmed or offended a friend, a parent, or a partner who later forgave you? Think about your guilt. Then consider the way you felt when you were forgiven. Most people say, "I felt free. The chains were broken." Forgiveness can unshackle people from their interpersonal guilt. By recalling your own guilt and the gratitude over being forgiven, you can develop the desire to give that gift of freedom to the person who hurt you.

**Commit to forgive.** When you forgive, you can eventually doubt that you have forgiven. When people remember a previous injury or offense, they often interpret it as evidence that they must not have forgiven. If you make your forgiveness tangible, you are less likely to doubt it later. Tell a friend, partner, or counselor that you have forgiven the person who hurt you. Write a "certificate of forgiveness," stating that you have, as of today, forgiven.

**Holding on to forgiveness.** When you have doubts about whether you have forgiven, remind yourself of these steps, refer to your certificate of forgiveness, and tell yourself that a painful memory does not disqualify the hard work of forgiveness that you have done. Instead of trying to stop thoughts of unforgiveness, think positively about the forgiveness you have experienced. If you continue to doubt your forgiveness, work back through the steps.

valuable information. Of course, she made the call. Her boss received the information; then, after a moment of stunned silence, he politely asked her how she was doing.

“I knew in that moment I was free,” Diana B. recalls. “By the end of that call, I felt that we’d finished up the karma and that we’d finished it in a loving way. There was nothing left of the previous antagonism. It felt like I had done something amazing.”

### *Learning to Forgive*

With so many of the world’s

great spiritual traditions advocating forgiveness, and modern science verifying that forgiveness is, indeed, good for physical and mental health, there are clear reasons for making the effort to forgive old wrongs. Yet it’s often not easy. Even a spiritual giant like Mahatma Gandhi acknowledged the challenge. “The weak can never forgive,” he said. “Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.”

So how does one go about developing the strength to take up the challenge of forgiving others? Here are a number of suggestions from

the recent research findings:

**Take baby steps.** Work at forgiving what you see as the smaller injustices in your life—an unkind act from a spouse or child—before moving on to events that are more difficult for you to deal with. During Dr. Luskin’s workshops, people sometimes resist the suggestion that they become more forgiving by saying, “How could I forgive someone like Hitler?” “I tell them to put that on a shelf,” says Luskin. “If you’re still holding a grudge in your life, heal that. Maybe you’ll never get to the Holocaust and that’s okay.”

Try forgiving the person who cuts in front of you at the supermarket line, the slow drivers who insist on hogging the fast lane, the waitress who can’t seem to get your order right. Work on forgiving politicians whose policies you disagree with. Work on forgiving your brother-in-law who hogs the conversation at the dinner table.

**Replace anger with gratitude.** “Remember that 3,500 children will starve to death today,” says Luskin. “Then tell me that it’s unfair that your mother was unkind to you.” Focusing on the grace, privileges,

## The Peace and Harmony Prayer

*Some years ago at a talk given at the Convocation, Brother Bhaktananda (1914–2005), a disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda since 1939 and beloved minister of Hollywood Temple for thirty-five years, responded to the following question:*

**Question:** I have been working on extending love and forgiveness to those who do not love me, and I have run into difficulties in reaching true forgiveness with my family. I spent half my lifetime getting away from them, and now every family gathering awakens old hurts. I feel I am not strong enough yet to maintain mutual balance in their presence. What do you recommend?

**Answer:** You will not be able to forgive them as long as you are holding on to the thought of your past hurt. Instead, as often as such thoughts arise, just let them go by; let them fly away; do not entertain them anymore. Realize that until you let go of those past grievances, you are hurting yourself, not the others. The matter is past and gone with them; you are the one holding on to it.

Many have healed difficult relationships by using what I call the “peace and harmony prayer.” Visualize all those in the group who hurt you, and mentally surround them with divine light. Then deeply pray, “Lord, fill them with peace and harmony, peace and harmony, peace and harmony,” over and over, for about a minute. Afterward, visualize yourself in a divine light, and pray, “Lord, fill me with peace and harmony, peace and harmony, peace and harmony,” for about 15 seconds. Do this five times a day, and you will see a change come over those individuals.

One woman had a supervisor who was always mean to her, critical of her. So she decided to pray for her, but still there was no change. She came to me and asked, “What can I do?” I suggested to her that she should visualize the woman in the divine light and use this peace and harmony prayer. This is Master’s affirmation/prayer, and people who practice it usually tell me they have wonderful results. It not only changes the person who is being prayed for, but also the one who uses it. People often tell me: “I’ve benefited myself; I feel so good and full of love. I am a different person now.”

About a week later this woman called me on the phone and said: “My supervisor has told me she realizes that she’s been mean to me for a whole year, and that now she’s going to change—she wants us to be friends.”

and prosperity that have come your way will make it less likely that you'll dwell on the perceived slights and injustices that you've experienced in the past.

**Forgive from a distance.** Although it can be helpful to express or demonstrate our forgiveness to others, sometimes circumstances are not conducive to our doing so. Just because you've forgiven a person, doesn't mean you have to spend time with them. "You can forgive from afar," says Dr. Enright. "You can forgive without reconciliation or trusting. Forgiveness does not negate the unfairness. You're not denying reality. Forgiveness says, 'Despite your unfairness, I will have compassion.'"

**Let go of victimhood.** If you've

been thinking of yourself as a victim, start thinking of yourself as a hero, advises Luskin. It takes spiritual strength to forgive. Forgiving transforms you from being a victim to being a spiritual hero.

**Seek inspiration in scripture.** "All the religions of the world have an honored place for forgiveness in their wisdom literature," says Enright. (See shaded box below.)

**Focus on your heart.** Luskin has developed a technique that you can use whenever you feel yourself affected by anger or resentment. It can be done in just a few minutes, and helps to reduce the body's production of stress-inducing chemicals.

➤ Sit up straight and close your eyes. Breathe deeply a few times,

relaxing your belly so that it expands with each inhalation.

➤ Then take your attention up to your heart and spend a few minutes thinking of someone you love or of past events in your life that have inspired you to feel love. Or simply picture a beautiful scene in nature. As you do so, continue the deep breathing and ask yourself how you might think about the offense without feeling pain. If you can't do this, just concentrate on the breathing and positive image until some degree of mental peace replaces the angry desire for retaliation.

### *Help Stop the Cycle*

Lack of forgiveness causes many of the problems in the world, says Mark Taylor. People who have been violently treated as children often perpetuate that pattern of cruelty themselves as adults. Gang members who can't forgive go out and shoot others. Nations that can't forgive get caught up in cycles of mutual revenge that can last for centuries, says Taylor. Even small acts of forgiveness help put an end to violence, he points out.

"This is a spiritual battle," says Taylor. "We're going to have to love those who hurt us. Pray and ask God to help you with forgiving." □

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### RESOURCES FOR FURTHER PRACTICE:

- **Understanding the scriptural principles of forgiveness:** See Paramahansa Yogananda's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita XVI:1-3—sections on *kshama*, etc. Also, his commentary on Jesus' teaching and example of forgiveness in *The Second Coming of Christ*, Discourses 31, 35, and 74: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."
- **Practicing forgiveness of others:** See Sri Daya Mata's counsel in *Only Love*, "View of the Wise Toward Life's Experiences" (page 74), and in *Finding the Joy Within You*, "Love Will Be the Savior of the World" (page 269).
- **Practicing forgiveness of oneself:** Listen to the CD recording by Brother Anandamoy, "Opening to God's Love in Meditation," included with the Winter 2006 issue of *Self-Realization* magazine.



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