Book Summary: Forgive and Forget

by Lewis Smedes (Harper Collins, 1996)
Summarized by Erik Johnson

Although this book is an oldie, it’s a golden oldie. There are hundreds of books on the subject of forgiveness but none of them (to my knowledge) summarize the topic as well as Smedes. The best books on forgiveness cite Smedes as a seminal thinker in this field. As a marriage and family therapist I hear many stories of horrific evils either committed by or committed against family and friends. We’ve got three choices when this happens: invent a time machine and go back in history and undo the deed (impossible), hold a grudge and risk the poison of bitterness (unhealthy), or work toward forgiveness (hard but liberating). This was the option chosen by MLK, Tutu, Mandela, Ellie Weizel, and others. Smedes gives us pointers on how to do it. I’ll be happy if this summary whets your appetite to read the whole book.

Forward: “If we wait to forgive people until they say they are sorry we make ourselves hostages to the very person who wronged us to begin with,” (p. x). “Our sense of fairness tells us people should pay for the wrong they do. But forgiving I love’s power to break nature’s rule,” (p. xvi).

Part One: The Four Stages of Forgiving

Chapter One: We Hurt: “Hurt brings us into the first stage of forgiving—the critical stage at which we have to make a simple decision: Do we want to be healed or do we want to go on suffering from an unfair hurt lodged in our memory? . . . The hurt that creates a crisis of forgiving has three dimensions. . . . When you feel this kind of three-dimensional pain, you have a wound that can be healed only by forgiving the one who wounded you,” p. 5

1. personal pain. “People (not nature, not systems) are the only ones who can be held accountable for what they do. People are the only ones who can accept forgiveness,” p. 6. “Some of us deny the pain we feel,” p. 7.

2. unfair pain. “There is a moral difference between what we lose fair and square and what we suffer in violent unfairness!” p. 7. “You may need help to sort out your hurts, so you can see the difference between feeling the pain that comes from our vulnerability and the pain that comes from being the butt of an unfair attack,” p. 9. “Pain is unfair when we do not deserve it, or when it is not necessary,” p. 9.

   a. people hurt us because they think we deserve it.
   b. people hurt us compulsively.
   c. people hurt us with the spillovers of their problems.
   d. people hurt us with their good intentions.
   e. people hurt us by their mistakes.
f. “Every human soul has a right to be free from hate, and we claim our rightful inheritance when we forgive people who hurt us unfairly, even if their intentions were pure,” p. 13.

3. deep pain. Some wounds are superficial and we can tolerate them:


b. slights (snubs, minor wounds to our self esteem). “Slights are really for shrugging off, not for forgiving,” p. 14.

c. disappointments (unmet expectations). “It can slap you in the face of your pride and leave you feeling cheated. Yet, though deeply disappointed, you are not betrayed and you don’t need to forgive,” p. 14.

d. coming in second. “The hurt is hardest to bear when the person who gets there ahead of you is a close friend . . . But we do not quit a friendship because our friends got something we wanted, nor do we have to forgive them,” p. 15.

e. Three examples of unfair hurts deep enough to bring us into a crisis of forgiving.

⇒ disloyalty. “I am being disloyal when I belong to a person and I treat him or her like a stranger,” p. 15. “Disloyalty is not acceptable; it is offensive. We must either separate and carry the hurt alone or forgive the person who was disloyal to us,” p. 16.

⇒ betrayal. “My partner betrays me when he treats me like an enemy,” p. 16. “A close colleague who promises to support my bid for a promotions, but secretly signals to my boss that I am not competent to do the job, betrays me . . . a friend, lover, spouse or partner who lets others do us harm just as surely betrays us. No matter what the method is or how superficial the cut, we are betrayed...“Every human relationship built on trust is fractured by betrayal. To be friends or lovers after betrayal would be a sham. We know it is so because we feel the stab so deeply. And when we feel it, we are in the crisis of forgiveness,” p. 17.

⇒ brutality. “We are brutal whenever we reduce another person to less than human existence . . . brutality, no matter who commits it, confronts us with one of the most agonizing crises of forgiveness,” p. 18.

Chapter Two: We Hate: “Hate is our natural response to any deep and unfair pain,” p. 20.

1. Passive hatred. Failure to wish that person well. Inability to hope that our offender succeeds. “I do not wish for him to die, I simply have no desire for him to do well while he lives,” p. 20.

2. Aggressive hatred. “You hope the friend who hurt you . . . will get fired from the new job he found. . . we are not only drained of the positive energy to wish someone well, we devoutly wish them ill,” p. 20.

3. Some things about hate make it a hard sickness to cure. It is people, not merely evil, that we hate. “When we only hate the wrongness of a thing, our hate dies when the wrong
hate is righted. But when we hate people who do us wrong, our hate stays alive long after the wrong they did is dead and gone,” p. 22-23.

4. We most often aim our hatred at people who live within the circle of our committed love. “Hate for people we love makes us sick,” p. 23.

5. We hate people we blame. “When we hate a person who deserves our hate we feel very righteous in our hating. The jerk had it coming,” p. 24.

Chapter Three: We Heal Ourselves: Healing begins when we pull our minds away from the wounding person. Focus instead on yourself and how you see your offender. Separate the wrong they did from who they are. This involves two steps.

1. New insight. “The truth about those who hurt us is that they are weak, needy, and fallible human beings,” p. 27. “If we can peel the wrong away within our . . . memory, we can see the person who really lives beneath the cloak of the wrongdoing,” p. 28.

2. New feelings. The wrongs done against us become irrelevant to how we feel about the offender. The offense does not matter, does not count, has no bearing, can not be figured into your attitude toward them.

3. “If you cannot free people from their wrongs and see them as the needy people they are, you enslave yourself to your own painful past, and by fastening yourself to the past, you let your hate become your future….You will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well,” p. 29.

Chapter Four: We Come Together: Forgiveness is abolishing the moral hindrance to fellowship. “Both parties—the wronged and the wrongdoers—must bring about an honest coming together….But when they take your hand and cross over the invisible wall that their wrong and your hate built between you, they need to carry something with them as the price of their ticket to your second journey together. If they cannot or will not pay their fare, you will have to settle for your own inner healing, your private freedom from hate, your own inner peace. What must they bring? They must bring truthfulness,” p. 32.

1. The offender must truly understand the reality of what they did to hurt you. “They need to know that the pain you suffered at their hands was unfair to you. You did not deserve to feel the hurt; no matter what was meant by it, you suffered what you should not have had to suffer,” p. 32. “You cannot expect them to agree with you about every little detail. No two people in the history of personal misunderstandings have ever remembered their painful experience in the same colors and the same sequences, because no two people have experienced the same hurt in precisely the same way. So, if you want total recall, blow for blow, insult for insult, hurt for hurt, you will never get what you need,” p. 33.

2. The offender must be truthful with the feelings you have felt. “They must feel the hurt that you feel…it is not enough to admit that they hurt you, they must feel the very hurt they hurt you with. Their feelings need to be one with your feelings. They must be truthful about what happened in the eye of the storm of your sad falling-out. And you need to believe that they are truthful before you can let them all the way back into your life,” p. 33.
3. The offender must be truthful in listening to you. “You must make sure they have listened long enough,” p. 34.

4. The offender ought to be truthful about your future together. “For two people who are coming together again after a falling out, truthfulness requires a promise made and a promise meant to be kept. Those who hurt you must return to you with a promise that they will not hurt you again; and you need to believe that they intend to keep the promise they make. They promise to be there for you in the future, when you need them, to be there in a style that lives up to the kind of relationship you have together. You should not ask for a lot more; but you should ask for no less. They cannot offer you a guarantee; they cannot be depended on the way you might rely on a computer or a well-trained dog. They are ordinary, fallible human beings; they are not God. You lay a bet on them; you need to take a risk. But if they are truthful, they intend to keep their promise. And their honest intentions tilt the odds in their favor. You don’t have to have total truthfulness before you can begin forgive them. The forgiving you do to heal the wounds in your memory has no strings attached; it is your free act of grace, done for yourself within the innermost cells of your soul. The demand of truthfulness is for the fulfillment of and climax of your forgiving, the coming together again of two people who once belong to each other and were separated from each other in their spirits,” p. 34-35.

Chapter Five: Some Nice Things Forgiving is Not

1. Forgiving is not forgetting. “You do not have to forget after you forgive; you may, but your forgiving can be sincere even if you remember,” p. 49.
2. Excusing is not forgiving. “You do not excuse people by forgiving them; you forgive them at all only because you hold them to account and refuse to excuse them,” p. 49.
3. Forgiving is not the same as smothering conflict. “You do not forgive people by smothering conflict; if you forever smother people’s differences, you rob them of a chance to forgive,” p. 49.
4. Accepting people is not forgiving them. “You do not forgive people merely by accepting them; you forgive people who have done something to you that is unacceptable,” p. 49.
5. Forgiving is not tolerance. “You do not have to tolerate what people do when you forgive them for doing it; you may forgive people, but still refuse to tolerate what they have done,” p. 49.

Part Two: Forgiving People Who are Hard to Forgive

Chapter Six: Forgiving the Invisible People

1. The parent who died

   A. No parent is perfect. “You will not shake the foundations of life if you admit that your father could have been cruel to you and your mother could have left you in the cold,” p. 55. “If you feel a need to forgive a dead parent, you must face up to the reality that your father or mother could truly have done you wrong,” p. 56.
B. Our painful feelings are valid. “You find freedom to forgive your dead parents when you admit the validity of your feelings about them and when you let yourself feel the pain you want to forgive them for,” p. 56.

C. You never completely forgive a dead parent. “Perfect forgiving ends in a reunion of two people estranged by hurt and hate. But when death intervenes, this happy ending is postponed for a time … you must be satisfied for now with a healing of a memory,” p. 57.

D. You need to forgive yourself even as you forgive your dead parents. “The hurt we get from parents almost always makes us feel guilty or ashamed of ourselves; I have never met a person who hated his father or mother who did not also hate himself,” p. 57.

2. The invisible mother who gave her child away. “We are sure that the toughest challenge for adopted children is their struggle to forgive the invisible birth-mother who gave them away,” p. 58.

A. Get some information about the biological parents. “Get a feel for their personal reality,” p. 59.

B. Learn about the agonies a young woman goes through before she decides to give her baby up for adoption,” p. 59.

C. See yourself as you really are. “Having been given away as a baby could not diminish her own superb worth as a [person],” p. 57.

D. Believe that God forgives the birthmother. “If God could forgive a birthmother, why shouldn't we forgive, too?” p. 57.

3. The invisible ghost behind the organization. “What do you do when you hate the organization and your hate is tarnishing your golden years, turning you into a crotchety, maybe surly, but surely wounded old soul? What you have to do is find yourself a living, breathing, responsible person in the organization and forgive that person (or persons, if more than one were involved). If you were thrown out of your job before your time by a callous company policy, you must not try to forgive the impersonal company. You will never pull it off. You need to find a vice-president or a personnel manager, someone who could have seen to it that you were treated fairly. And, if you can, you should make an appointment for a confrontation. He or she will probably put you off with a reasonable explanation. But it is better to forgive someone whose name you know and who may not be solely to blame than to be saddled for the rest of your life with caused by an impersonal system. You shouldn't waste your soul's vitality trying to forgive an organization. The secret to peace is: get to a person behind the corporate facade. Chances are he or she will tell you the system was to blame. You mustn't let the company's spokesman off the corporate hook too quickly. You must declare him or her guilty of second-degree hurt, at least, and then you can use the power that God gives you to hold your hand out to the vice-president or the foreman and say, "I forgive you." After that, you are on the way to healing. Only on the way. But it is enough for starters,” (p. 60-61).

4. People badly out of focus (mentally handicapped folks). “When we meet [in heaven] maybe they will teach us how people with small brains forgive people with small souls,” (p. 63).
Chapter Seven: Forgiving People Who Do Not Care: Should we forgive people who don’t repent? “Realism, it seems to me, nudges us toward forgiving people who hurt us whether or not they repent for doing it...we need to forgive the unrepentant for our own sake. We need to forgive people who do not care if only so that we do not drown in our own misery,” p. 69.

Chapter Eight: Forgiving Ourselves: “Healing may come slowly, but better a snail’s pace than standing still, feet sunk in the cement of self accusation,” p. 77.


1. No one knows at what point an offender crosses the border into monster-hood.
2. If we say monsters do not deserve forgiveness, we give them power to continue to hurt us.
3. To deny that forgiving a monster is possible makes them like gods, beyond accountability.
4. “If forgiving is a remedy for the wounds of a painful past, we cannot deny any human being the possibility of being forgiven lest we deny the victim the possibility of being healed through forgiving,” (p. 82).

Chapter Ten: Forgiving God: “When you forgive your enemies, they may stay your enemies even after you forgive them. When you forgive God, you just live in the silence, and grope toward the goodness of life, and believe that, in spite of everything, his is your friend,” (p. 92).

Part Three: How People Forgive

Chapter Eleven: Slowly: “Sometimes we do it so slowly that we pass over the line without realizing we have crossed it, as children pass from childhood to adulthood knot know just when they crossed over. Sometimes you seem to slide into forgiving, hardly noticing when you began to move or when you arrived. But after a long dry desert of trying, you gradually get a feeling that somewhere along the way you crossed the line between hating and forgiving,” (p. 96). “For some people, one definite decision is enough. For most of us, it is only a start on a long forgiving journey,” (p. 98).

Chapter Twelve: With a Little Understanding: “But if you can understand what might have influenced them [your offender], and understand a little bit of how they could have hurt you, you’ll take the first step toward forgiving,” (p. 99). “It also helps if you can understand yourself a little better,” (p. 103). “With a little time, and a little more insight, we begin to see both ourselves and our enemies in humbler profiles. We are not really as innocent as we felt when we were first hurt. And we do not usually have a gigantic monster to forgive; we have a weak, needy, and somewhat stupid human being. When you see your enemy and your self in the weakness and silliness of the humanity you share, you will make the miracle of forgiving a little easier,” (p. 104).

Chapter Thirteen: In Confusion: “The confusion is not all our fault. The material we
work with is often a mess. Exactly what happened is often unclear. Who did what to whom? How badly? True, at the kernel of every falling-out, one person hurt another person. The bad guy does a bad thing and the good guy suffers for it. Bur tangled around that simple core of wrongful pain, we often find a skein of hurts and hates that is nearly impossible to unravel. We are also hampered by a bog of emotional slough. To expect two people caught in mutual hate to sort out their pains is like asking a child to calculate the national debt. We often have to grope into forgiving through snarls of feeling as well as clogs of misunderstanding,” (p. 105). “We don’t have to be virtuosos at the forgiving game to make it work,” (p. 107).

Chapter Fourteen: With Anger Left Over: “I think that anger and forgiving can live together in the same heart. You are not a failure at forgiving just because you are still angry at a painful wrong was done to you. It is terribly unrealistic to expect a single act of forgiving to get rid of all angry feelings. Anger is the executive power of human decency. If you do not get angry and stay angry when a bad thing happens, you lose a piece of your humanity. Remember, you cannot erase the past, you can only heal the pain it has left behind,” (p. 108). “You can be angry still, and you can have your anger without hate. Once you start on your forgiving journey, you will begin to lose the passion of malice. Malice goes while anger lingers on. When forgiving begins its liberating work, the malice that once hissed like white flame from an acetylene torch begins to fizzle out....[When] you have anger without malice—[it’s] a sign that your forgiving is real. Anger minus malice gives hope. Malice, unrelieved, will gradually choke you. But anger can goad you to prevent the wrong from happening again. Malice keeps the pain alive and raw inside your feelings, anger pushed you with hope toward a better future,” (p. 109). Take three steps.

A. Express your malice (assertiveness)
B. Let God handle it (relinquish).
C. Pray for the peace of your offender (beneficence).
D. “Malice is misery that needs healing. Anger is energy that needs direction. After malice, let anger do its reforming work. Forgiving and anger can be partners in a good cause,” (p. 110).

Chapter Fifteen: A Little at a Time: “The long and short of what I’ve been saying is that the forgiving that heals focuses on what people do, not on what people are. The healing art of forgiving has to be practiced a little at a time—for most people anyway,” (p. 113).

Chapter Sixteen: Freely, or Not at All: “To set anyone free, forgiving must be freely given—an act of free love, not a devious power play. Forced forgiving makes matters worse for everybody....You forgive in freedom only when you give other people freedom—to do what you don't want them to do at all, if they so choose. Anything less than the gift of freedom is control through forgiving manipulation,” (p. 116).

Chapter Seventeen: With a Fundamental Feeling: What does feeling forgiven feel like? “It is a feeling of total acceptance, a feeling lodged in your deepest self, a feeling that no bad thing you do can take away. You feel totally affirmed, totally loved, totally received. Your entire being is rested because you feel that nothing can separate you from the source of love,
even though you cannot do enough good things to earn your right to be there. You know that nothing can really hurt you now,” (p. 118). “The linkage between feeling forgiven and the power to forgive is the key to everything else,” (p. 120).

Part Four: Why Forgive?

Chapter Eighteen: Forgiving Makes Life Fairer

1. Forgiveness acknowledges the wrongs that happened. It does not soft soap, side step, or tone down the hurt (which would be unfair to the facts).
2. Forgiveness acknowledges the responsibility of the wrong doer. It does not excuse them as pawns of fate, determinism, or genetics (which would be unfair to the offender).
3. Forgiveness acknowledges that the alternatives are even more risky (which would be unfair to you).
   A. Bitterness glues us to the wretched past.
   B. Revenge escalates the pain; retaliation leads to more retaliation (sometimes for generations).
   C. Grudges close the door to reconciliation and locks us into a ceaseless process of self-destruction.
   D. Vengeance never wholly satisfies but mires us in an endless repetition of “getting even.”
4. “Forgiveness is to set a prisoner free and you discover that the prisoner was yourself,” (p. 133).

Chapter Nineteen: Forgiving is a Better Risk

Won’t forgiving lead to forgetting which will doom us to repeat horrors? “There is a healing way to remember the wrongs of our irreversible past, a way that can bring hope for the future along with our sorrow for the past. Redemptive remembering keeps a clear picture of the past, but it adds a new setting and shifts its focus,” (p. 136). “Redemptive memory is focused on love emerging from ashes, light that sheds darkness, hope that survives remembered evil,” (p. 137).

Chapter Twenty: Forgiving is Stronger

1. Forgiveness takes guts to look hard at the wrongness, the horridness, the sheer wickedness of what someone did to us,” (p. 141). Some people can’t forgive because they fear reality, they’re afraid to face the facts.
2. Forgiveness takes courage to confront. Seething, hating, and plotting do not require such strength.
3. Forgiveness is freedom. “Freedom is strength; you know you have it when you have the power to forgive,” (p. 143).
4. Freedom is love’s ultimate power. “Love is not a soft and fuzzy sentiment that lets people get away with almost everything, no matter what they do to us. Love does not make us
pushovers for people who hurt us unfairly. Love forgives, but only because love is powerful. Love has two ingredients that make it strong,” (p. 143).

A. Love empowers self-respect.

⇒ A person with self-respect sets limits on how much abuse they’ll endure.
⇒ A person with self-respect will not take all the blame. “When love gives you back your self-respect, and you refuse to take it anymore, you will have to make a decision about forgiveness. Will you glue yourself to the painful memory of the hurt you didn’t deserve? Will you roll it around your memories, savor its bitter taste, squeeze the last ounce of crazy-making pleasure you can get out of your pain? Or will you, in self-respect, forgive and set yourself free? ... Your love for yourself will generate enough energy, finally, to say, ‘I have had enough; I am not going to put myself down by letting somebody’s low blow keep hurting me forever.’ And so you begin forgiving,” (p. 144).
⇒ A person with self-respect can respect others. “Love respects people as genuine human beings, even after they have treated you like dirt. People who hurt you so badly are not just lumps of degenerate corruption; they are complex people with more to them than meanness and craziness,” (p. 144).

B. Love empowers commitment.

⇒ Commitment is risky. “For when love commits you, it opens you up to hurts from people who go back on their commitments. And when you get hurt, as most of us do, you either walk onstage to dance to the music of forgiveness or stew backstage in your own depressing pain. But now comes the turnabout again. The very love that dares to be vulnerable by making a commitment has power to heal you of pain that commitments bring. Committed love does not say ‘finish’ before the last act is played out,” (p. 145).
⇒ Commitment is healing. “It gives us the strength to tough out bad times in the hope of better times. Committed love does not throw in the towel before the fight is really over. It holds on. And while it holds, it energizes, it gives you strength to keep the door open for the day when a new beginning may be possible,” (p. 146).

Chapter Twenty-one: Forgiving Fits Faulty People: “Those who get hurt probably need to be forgiven, too, by somebody. And if they need forgiveness, they have extra reason to forgive those who hurt them. We always feel like innocent lambs when someone hurts us unfairly. But we are never as pure as we feel... We often contribute to our own vulnerability. Even if we are the hurt party, we are seldom a completely innocent party,” (p. 147). “Forgiveness is for faulty folk. And we are all faulty. The best of us belong to that catholic club where nobody dares throw the first stone. For us to forgive others, then, has a certain congruity about it, a kind of fittingness, for the mixed bag of vice and virtue that we all are,” (p. 149). “The incongruity of sinners refusing to forgive sinners boggles God’s mind. He cannot cope with it; there is no honest way to put up with it. So he says: If you want forgiving from God and you cannot forgive someone who needs a little forgiving from you, forget about the forgiveness you want,” (p. 150).