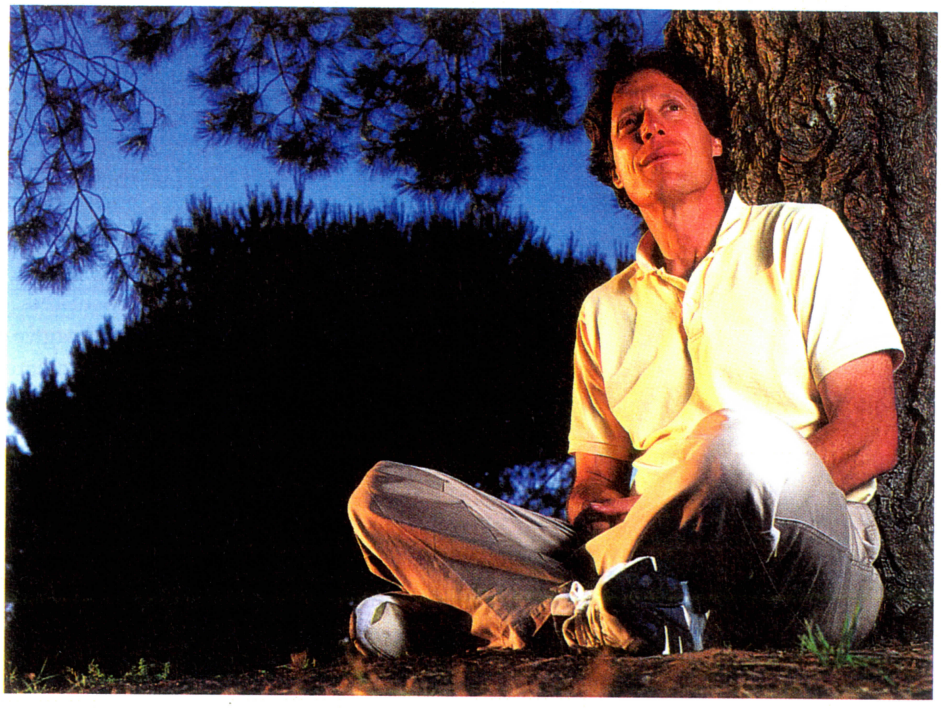
BY VESELA SIMIC

Sweet Forgiveness

Stanford University researcher Fred Luskin's studies on the science of forgiveness show how letting go can free your heart.



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WHEN FRED LUSKIN was 35, his best friend, Sam, ended their friendship. An only child, Fred considered Sam to be family, but the decade-long friendship deteriorated after Sam met his future wife. Although Sam had been Fred's best man, when Sam married, Fred wasn't even invited to the wedding—the news of the marriage came to him through another friend.

While he looks at the situation with an entirely different perspective today, at the time it happened Luskin was "deeply hurt and confused. It took me years to get over my hurt. Sam and I had been like brothers. My confidence in my ability to attract and keep friends was shattered; my sense of trust was broken." What Luskin didn't anticipate was that his years of struggling with abandonment, sadness, and anger would seed the fruit of the Stanford Forgiveness Project—and his life's work.

A psychotherapist and a steadfast meditator in the tradition of Paramahansa Yogananda's Self-Realization Fellowship, Luskin struggled with this loss for four years. His rising blood pressure and misery persisted until he finally had enough. He wanted to appreciate life again, and he knew his way back was through forgiveness. The lessons he needed to learn about forgiveness, he recalled, became clear to him in response to his resolve and restored his peace of mind and love for life.

Studying Forgiveness

A SCIENTIST and psychotherapist, Luskin wondered if the forgiveness skills he learned would be useful to others, so he put them to the test in the dissertation that earned him his doctorate in counseling and health psychology at Stanford University. Luskin undertook his study in 1999 with three major assumptions in mind. First, that forgiveness is the same process no matter what the offense. Some offenses are unquestionably greater than others, but what varies is the time needed in the forgiveness process, not the process itself. So when Luskin recruited volunteers for his study, he admitted participants who were hurt by a wide range of offenses—unlike preceding researchers who studied people suffering from a specific offense—to more comprehensively assess the dynamics of forgiveness.

Luskin's second assumption was that forgiveness concerns one's present life more than one's past. His study aimed to help people feel better in the present so that they could move on with their lives. And Luskin's third assumption was that forgiveness is an ongoing practice appropriate in all situations, from forgiving an abusive parent to forgiving the driver who cuts us off in traffic. Forgiving smaller offenses supports our forgiving the more challenging ones.

Fifty-five student volunteers, from 18 to 35 years old,

were randomly assigned to two groups: one receiving the forgiveness training immediately, and the other receiving the training after the first group had finished. The comparison group assured Luskin that positive changes were due to the forgiveness training and not other factors.

The study's results proved positive and statistically significant, validating Luskin's hypotheses. Participants measured emotionally healthier and stronger and reported feeling more confident and optimistic. A 15 percent reduction in anger also meant a 15 percent reduction in the risk of heart disease.

With the success of this first study, Luskin's dissertation advisor, Carl Thoresen, author of the first major scientific book on forgiveness—*Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Guilford Press)—joined Luskin that same year to obtain a grant for another study they named the Stanford Forgiveness Project, the largest forgiveness study yet undertaken. More than 260 adults, from 25 to 50 years old, participated in this expanded training. As in the first study, there were a variety of offenses to be forgiven, and again the results were positive. Participants felt less angry and became increasingly optimistic; the training also reduced physical symptoms of headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, tiredness, and muscle aches.

The Process

ALTHOUGH MOST OF us have been taught at one time or another that it is good to forgive, what forgiveness is and how one goes about it isn't all that clear. Simply put, Luskin says, "Forgiveness is another way to describe peace." Practically speaking, many of us don't even consider forgiveness an option when we're trying to manage a hurtful experience because the skills involved haven't been articulated.

To understand the process of forgiveness, Luskin first teaches how we create and all too often attach ourselves to grievances. "A grievance emerges when two things coincide," he says. "The first is that something happens in our lives that we did not want to happen. And second, we deal with this problem by thinking about it too much." In Luskin's experience, this occurred when his friend ended their friendship, and Luskin found himself unable to stop experiencing the rejection.

Luskin uses the analogy of an air traffic controller's plight to illustrate the predicament we create for ourselves when we think too much about our hurts. Unresolved grievances are like the planes that don't land. They take up precious air space and drain resources. Having them circling for days, weeks, and even years on end forces the controller to work harder and increases the likelihood for accidents. These "grievance-planes" become a source of stress and burnout. Anyone who has meditated will recognize these planes, these unresolved grievances, as thoughts that crowd the mind and obscure the spaciousness of peace.

How do those planes get up there in the first place? We take something too personally, persist in blaming, and in this way create a grievance story. The more we tell ourselves and others this story, the

more we embed this suffering into our ongoing experience.

Luskin cautions us to remember that every painful life event has a personal and impersonal component. When we dismiss the personal element of pain, we're in denial, but more often, most of us take pain too personally and begin carrying a grudge. To re-establish balance, we need to recognize that pain and suffering are universal. We also need to understand that most offenses are committed without the intention of hurting anyone personally. The personal and impersonal perspectives on our pain are both valid, but emphasizing either aspect impedes our growth and healing.

Once we've taken something too personally, Luskin says, the dynamic of blaming our offender follows. "Feeling bad every time we think of the person who hurt us leads us to feel like the victim of someone more powerful," says Luskin. "This mistake takes the keys to our release out of our hands and puts them in someone else's hands." Blame prolongs the pain, obscuring our responsibility for taking care of ourselves now.

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Another strand in this web of pain is the story we tell when we've been hurt. Telling our story is an important step in recovering from a painful experience, but there is the all-too-common risk that our story prevents us from letting go and moving on. Our story becomes a grievance story and an obstacle when we cast ourselves as a victim and reinforce our painful status by telling it over and over—recreating now what hurt in the past.

"Feeling hurt is a normal and difficult aspect of all of our lives," Luskin says, "and almost everyone creates grievances at some point. Learning to handle pain more skillfully will not stop things from going wrong in life. People may still be unkind, and random events can still hurt you. The world is filled with suffering and difficulty. Just because you can learn to adapt better does not mean these problems go away. What will change, however, is the space you rent them in your mind and the amount of anger, hopelessness, and despair you feel."

To begin to disentangle ourselves from our web of grievances, Luskin suggests we first look beneath each grievance where we will uncover what he calls an "unenforceable rule" that we need to examine. An unenforceable rule is an expectation we hold that we do not have the power to make happen. These rules can be as generic and basic as "I should not suffer," "People should be nice to me," or "I have to be loved"; or they can be as specific as "My lover should clean the bathroom exactly as I tell him to."

In any case, underlying every grievance is the stark reality that the offended party had an unenforceable rule that was not

followed. These rules are exercises in frustration and cloud our judgment. "We try so hard to get our rules met that we don't see the damage our rules are causing," explains Luskin. "We do all sorts of things then, except look at whether our rules are enforceable."

When we've uncovered an unenforceable rule, we can challenge it with a more realistic way of thinking, all the while honoring the desire that gave birth to the rule. So, rather than "My partner must be faithful," that unenforceable rule becomes, "There is a risk in love and offering trust. I hope my partner can be faithful." Instead of "My mother should have loved me," that rule gives way to "I wish my mother had loved me, but I will deal with life on its own terms."

Understanding how we form grievances enables us to reframe our own perspective so that we may begin to forgive. Forgiveness does not require reconciliation with the person who has hurt us; it is work we undertake to liberate ourselves.

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Luskin also emphasizes that we are ready to forgive only when we have satisfied three existing preconditions: We must know what our feelings are about what happened; be clear about the action that wronged us; and share our experience with at least one or two trusted people. He also believes "anger and hurt are appropriate responses to painful events"; it's just that, "unlike wine, they don't improve with age."

The Possibilities

A CHALLENGE AND a significant opportunity for Luskin's work presented itself in the summer of 1999 when Byron Bland, a Presbyterian minister, asked Luskin to work with women from Northern Ireland, both Catholics and Protestants, who had lost family to the nation's violent conflict. This was the beginning of the HOPE Projects (Healing Our Past Experience). Donated funds enabled five working-class women to travel to Stanford University in January of 2000 to participate in the forgiveness training.

Each woman had lost a son to murder. One had been kidnapped on his way to work, taken to a grave with his hands tied behind his back, and then shot in the head. Another had been working in a restaurant fixing platters of fish and chips when a gunman arrived and started shooting. The young man was shot seven times and died on the spot.

"We started with women who understandably felt extremely hurt and angry in their grief," he says, "and we ended with women who mourned the loss of their children but through forgiveness gained a measure of strength with which to cope. I don't claim that these women are completely over their loss, but each in her own way chose to focus on the living and to honor the memory of her son by being more hopeful and less angry."

When they returned home, these women continued to meet to support one another's newfound peace. They also helped to recruit a new group who traveled to Stanford University for their forgiveness training in January of 2001. By the end of 2001, a third group from Northern Island had also completed the forgiveness training. "They demonstrate the incredible power of human beings to heal from even the most blatant of horrors," Luskin observes. "They reinforce my belief that people can learn to forgive."

Bland and Luskin say they plan to continue bringing groups of 15 to 25 people to Stanford each year, from Northern Ireland and other parts of the world, so that these participants can in turn train others in their country to work as forgiveness activists. To learn more about Fred Luskin's work and taking the proper steps toward forgiveness, read *Forgive for Good* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002) or visit his Web site at *www.learningtoforgive.com* for a schedule of workshops. ■

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