Selecting a Self-Help Book on Forgiveness as a Choice

A review of

The Forgiving Life: A Pathway to Overcoming Resentment and Creating a Legacy of Love

by Robert D. Enright


Reviewed by

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A search of Amazon.com reveals several hundred self-help books containing forgiveness in their titles. However, few are authored or coauthored by such a prominent figure in forgiveness research as Robert Enright. This latest offering is Enright’s second self-help book championing the purported benefits of forgiveness based upon his empirically supported model of the process (e.g., Lin, Enright, Mack, Krahn, & Baskin, 2004; Reed & Enright, 2006). As such, it can be seen in large measure as a follow-up and extension of his initial self-help book, Forgiveness Is a Choice (Enright, 2001), as well as an updated companion to Helping Clients Forgive (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), which was written for clinicians wishing to integrate the forgiveness process into their therapeutic work.
Given that Enright’s model has previously been presented to both lay and professional audiences, readers already familiar with his publications might inquire about the need for another self-help book about forgiveness. In short, is there anything presented in *The Forgiving Life: A Pathway to Overcoming Resentment and Creating a Legacy of Love* that is different or new to those looking to apply Enright’s model in their own personal lives and/or to mental health professionals wanting to recommend an accompanying self-help book to their clients in forgiveness therapy? The answer appears to be yes, although what has been added or emphasized in the current work in our view is not without some potential drawbacks for both groups of readers.

Though barely given a nod by the author himself in the preface, the intent of *The Forgiving Life* appears to be to go beyond the four-phase, multistep model of forgiveness outlined in his first self-help book. According to Enright, living “the forgiving life” requires more than (a) forgiveness of one or more past injustices or transgressions or (b) a willingness to forgive in the future. Both of these themes appear to be necessary, but not sufficient, ingredients of “the forgiving life.” The final superordinate requirement of the process is “learning to love this moral virtue until it becomes a part of us” (p. x).

The overarching goal of forgiveness, then, appears to be in the service of furthering the development of moral agency. It appears that Enright has set himself the task of convincing readers that their engagement in the process of forgiving a real (vs. perceived) wrong, which is also an integral part of his model, is ultimately undertaken to engender a morally virtuous lifestyle. In doing so, he clearly goes far beyond the model presented in his first self-help book as well as that investigated in his published studies and, in doing so, pursues more of a “self-growth” than self-help agenda.

Although we are certainly not arguing that fostering forgiveness or any other moral virtues is undesirable, Enright’s apparent suggestion that if forgiveness is good, more forgiveness is therefore better appears to be a philosophical and conceptual argument rather than one based on sufficient empirical support. That is, despite the evidence presented that forgiving a specific transgression (or, for that matter, a class of transgressions, such as one involving those who have violated a personal trust) results in a diminution of negative emotional states (Baskin & Enright, 2004), there does not appear to be a corresponding level of empirical basis for the proposition that doing so for every other past, present, and future incident will add anything to the results already experienced. More is often better, but not always, and at times more may even be less.

In addition to recommending that forgiveness be applied in a more expansive manner, Enright also goes to even greater lengths than in his 2001 book to clarify and define forgiveness as a morally virtuous act. A related and obvious strength of the book is in the clarity with which Enright addresses questions regarding the forgiveness process and in distinguishing what forgiveness is (i.e., a gift in the spirit of agape love offered to one’s transgressor) from what it is not.
Although we suspect that this view of forgiveness will resonate with many, particularly those who closely follow certain religious traditions, it may be received less favorably by some agnostic and atheistic lay readers, even though Enright makes a point of including a “humanistic” (i.e., nonreligious) perspective on this issue. His definition of forgiveness may likewise be less palatable to mental health professionals and scientist–practitioners who find it more useful to view forgiveness from a less absolutistic and more contextualistic perspective as a gift that is fundamentally offered to oneself rather than to one’s transgressors (Zettle, Barner, & Gird, 2009).

The better part of the book is devoted to a detailed, step-by-step application of Enright’s model that readers seeking to initiate the forgiveness process may follow. In doing so, it provides readers with several worksheets, with detailed and structured instructions, designed to assist them with identifying individuals and incidents that may be appropriate foci for forgiveness. To facilitate the process of forgiveness, Enright comprehensively minimizes potential barriers or obstacles that readers may encounter along the way.

Overall the book appears to be more structured and tightly organized than its predecessor, thereby making it easier for readers to not only understand what forgiveness is but also how to do it, to manage roadblocks that may appear along the path of forgiveness, and to know if and when the process is having its intended effect.

The book’s final chapters are dedicated to guiding readers in creating a “forgiveness legacy” (p. 331). Included in this section are guidelines for extending forgiveness within the family, including teaching children about forgiveness. Some of this material was presented in Enright’s first self-help book, but it is augmented in The Forgiving Life by the presentation of a more formalized school-based forgiveness education curriculum designed by Enright and his colleagues (e.g., Knutson & Enright, 2008). Some readers, such as parents who homeschool, may find the inclusion of this curriculum intriguing, whereas others might see such material as somewhat disconnected from their purposes in reading the book.

Enright further suggests that readers recommend a version of a forgiveness curriculum (although none has apparently been published to date) to leaders and managers in the workplace. In doing so, Enright is frankly challenging readers who have ventured down the path of forgiveness to become agents of its dissemination. This is certainly a laudable and lofty goal, entirely consistent with Enright’s vision of moral development. We do question, however, to what degree readers from different walks of life would be willing to take up this gauntlet.

Despite the obvious strengths of the book, there are a number of issues about the presentation of the material that gave us pause. The supporting worksheets referenced above are printed in the back of the book, requiring readers to flip between chapters and the appendices. Those hoping to use these worksheets are therefore faced with the options of making multiple photocopies (also problematic because worksheets are printed in a fairly inconvenient format to conform to the size of the book), writing all of the worksheet material
out on separate pieces of paper, or utilizing an online resource that charges for its use. A different arrangement of the material (e.g., more of a workbook-style format), an inclusion with the purchase of the book of a CD containing fillable versions of the forms, and/or an accompanying user code that would allow purchasers of the book to use the online forms without additional charge would be alternatives that might make the material more user-friendly.

In addition to the formatting issues noted above, the language of the book seems somewhat limiting at times. To illustrate the major themes as well as address barriers, obstacles, and questions, Enright adopts the literary device of presenting a large portion of the material in the form of an ongoing conversation between a therapist and her client. Although this device is an interesting alternative to the pages of didactic prose that might ordinarily be used to present the material, it too frequently lapses into a fairly lofty debate in which the therapist (the seemingly appropriately, yet somewhat ironically, named “Sophia”) draws the client “Inez” (who coincidentally, and rather conveniently, possesses a philosophy degree) into the forgiveness model through a series of sometimes rather sophisticated Socratic dialogues. Less erudite readers would quite likely struggle with such material.

We finally return to the question of whether *The Forgiving Life* is an improvement on the material first presented in Enright’s 2001 book. From our perspective, the answer to this question quite likely hinges on the degree of “buy-in” to Enright’s vision of moral virtue. To the degree that readers might already be predisposed to engage in forgiveness, both for their own moral development and for the betterment of the larger human community, the book certainly offers a cohesive and cogent road map. However, for other readers, the expansiveness of the vision presented in *The Forgiving Life* might serve to make the map unintelligible. For much the same reason, forgiveness therapists looking to recommend one of the two books to their clients may find that *Forgiveness Is a Choice* is the preferred option.

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**References**


