

THE  
HEART  
OF THE  
AMISH

Life Lessons on Peacemaking  
and the Power of Forgiveness

SUZANNE  
WOODS  
FISHER



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*For those who need forgiveness  
and those who need to forgive.  
Lord, have mercy on us.*





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# Acknowledgments

The idea for this book began after I had a radio interview with Becki Reiser (see “Through My Tears”). Her story touched me deeply and profoundly, partly, I think, because I have a daughter the same age as Becki’s daughter, Liz. Mostly, I was stunned by the ability of Becki and her husband, Jeff, to make a choice to forgive at a crucial moment. In a way, they saved their family in that moment. The Reisers weren’t Amish, but their response was very similar to the Amish of Nickel Mines: startling, radical forgiveness that set healing and wholeness into motion for those who had been deeply wounded.

And that’s what started this journey of studying forgiveness for me.

Many Plain People shared their stories with me, for which I’m very grateful and without whom this book could not have been written. Individuals like Linda Yoder, who sent me regular leads to articles she thought I might find useful. And they were! Others like Mina Benedict, Sherry Gore, Sabine Aschmann, Joanne Hess Siegrist, Wilma Derksen, Terri Roberts, Chandler Gerber, Marie Roberts Monville, Dwight

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LeFever, Jonas and Anne Beiler, and the many others who chose to remain anonymous. In most cases, identifying details have been changed to ensure the privacy of those involved. If the surname is an initial, such as Sarah Z., it is a pseudonym to protect privacy. Because of the emphasis that the Amish place on humility, the Amish people I interviewed were willing to share their stories but did not want their names to appear in print.

Another thank-you goes to my editor, Andrea Doering, who helped shape this book and bring it to life. The Revell team, of course, who take in a manuscript and turn out a polished book, ready for the market. Michele, Robin, Twila, Barb, and so many others whose hands touch a book in process. To Joyce Hart, my agent, who has been such a faithful supporter. To Lindsey Ciraulo, my crackerjack first reader. To my family, for listening and reacting to stories. Even—maybe, especially—when they gave me a blank look and suggested I skip a story or two.

My goal has been to present true stories of the Amish in a way that honors their heritage and inspires readers to live better lives. If there are any blunders, they are mine. If there is any takeaway value from this book into your life, consider it a gift from the example of the Amish.

# Introduction

A warning: there's a pretty good chance you won't feel like the same person after reading this book. About halfway through the research and writing of this manuscript, I called my editor, Andrea. "If one more event occurs in my life that requires forgiveness, I will have to cancel this contract."

She just laughed.

"No, I'm not kidding!"

She laughed again.

*Fine.* She was no help. I got back to work.

The reason I started this book in the first place was because, as I have studied and written about the Amish, I have felt so impacted (*convicted* might be a better word) by their intentional forgiveness. The world got a taste of Amish grace after the school shooting at the Nickel Mines schoolhouse on October 2, 2006. The Amish responded with ready forgiveness, not vengeance, to the shooter's wife and family, because such a response has had centuries of conditioning. "When forgiveness arrived at the killer's home within hours of his crime," the authors of *Amish Grace* write, "it did not

appear out of nowhere. Rather, forgiveness is woven into the very fabric of Amish life, its sturdy threads having been spun from faith in God, scriptural mandates, and a history of persecution.”<sup>1</sup>

The Amish believe that to forgive an enemy—so contrary to human nature—is to follow Jesus’s instructions on forgiveness, as well as His example. And they don’t just seek to forgive. They also love and bless those enemies.

I’ve always asserted that studying the Amish doesn’t mean you have to “go Amish.” But I’ve also discovered that much (not all, but much) of what drives their customs and traditions isn’t, or shouldn’t be, unique to the Amish. Many behaviors belong to all Christians. Key customs, such as the eternal significance of forgiving others, rest on verses from the Lord’s Prayer, embedded in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–8). An oft-repeated proverb is “You can stop forgiving others when Christ stops forgiving you.” The fundamentals of Amish forgiveness rest on a literal interpretation of this verse: “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14–15 KJV).

Most Protestant traditions assert that forgiveness begins with God, that we receive it and *then* are able to forgive others. The Amish believe they receive forgiveness from God *only* if they extend forgiveness to others.

Better minds than mine have tried to settle that sticky theological debate. Anglican theologian John Stott might have best captured the intention of Jesus’s words in his book *Through the Bible, Through the Year*: “This certainly does not mean that our forgiveness of others earns us the right to be forgiven. It is rather that God forgives only the penitent, and that one of the chief evidences of true penitence is a forgiving spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

Whether, like the Amish, you accept a literal interpretation of those verses or a more figurative interpretation, it is clear that forgiving others who wrong us is evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit within us.

As I wrote and studied, it almost seemed as if this book conjured up opportunities to put into practice what I was writing about. Our family faced a serious issue with someone who has a volatile, unpredictable personality. During one particularly bad stretch, the person would email harsh accusations and then carry on with their day unaffected, while those of us who received their emails would feel, at best, distracted for the rest of the day. At worst, we'd be wiped out. My husband started calling those email missives "drive-by shootings."

My husband and I met with an insightful counselor a few times to sort out how to proceed with forgiveness. For our circumstances, we needed to know what it looked like to forgive someone who couldn't be trusted. Boundaries were necessary, but I also wanted to keep a door open for reconciliation. It took some time, but I could tell I had forgiven this individual when I genuinely celebrated good things that happened in their life. John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, calls it "to will and work for good." I wanted the best for that person and could sincerely pray for God's blessings on them. I'm cautious about interactions with them, but I've learned how to keep a distance without being cold or unfeeling or dismissive. We're at a much better place than we were a year ago.

Other "opportunities" to practice forgiveness were less dramatic but strangely just as emotionally taxing. Not long ago, I got together with a friend, one of those persons who lacks a filter and requires a margin of grace. We chatted

awhile, then out of the blue, she made a rude, hurtful comment about one of my children. I was stunned. I didn't even know how to respond. I could handle criticism from this friend about myself . . . but about one of my children? It cut to the core.

It has taken nearly as much effort to forgive my friend as it has to forgive our "email bomber." The Amish have a saying, "It isn't the mountains ahead that wear you out, it's the grain of sand in your shoes."

One thing for certain, my awareness of the need for forgiveness was growing. Giving it and receiving it. I want to be a person who makes forgiveness a way of life, a ready response. But how?

When it came to forgiving this friend for her hurtful remark about my child, I tried and tried to let it go. No luck. I knew her well enough to realize that if I were to say something to clear the air, she would dismiss it and say I was too sensitive.

A day came when I held out my hands, palms up, and said, "God, I just don't have it in me. Help me to forgive her."

An *aha* moment! I had been trying to forgive in my own power. In fact, most of the current literature about forgiveness is all about "choice." Choosing to forgive is a good start, but it won't get anyone to the finish line—the place of full forgiveness. It's holy work, forgiveness is. It's counterintuitive to our nature, yet so very essential to our well-being. We don't stand a chance at forgiving others without God's help.

I needed to learn how to lean on the grace of God. He wants us to fully forgive, to explore the truth of obtaining the grace of God (see Heb. 12:15). What a difference it made to invite God into the conversation! Forgiving this individual for her comment about my child didn't happen all at once, but it did happen.

The first stirring toward forgiveness began during one of my husband's business trips when I was alone for a couple weeks. It occurred to me how lonely this woman was. Unbidden, I started remembering kindnesses that she had done for my family. I sensed God was at work, helping me to put that comment in its proper perspective. It was a hurtful remark, but it wasn't symbolic of the entire relationship. I'm sure I've made plenty of careless and hurtful remarks too. Little by little, God replaced my indignation with understanding. As the process began, I felt something settle, deep inside, in a spiritual way. It wasn't long before the hurtful comment receded to the back of my mind and I knew I had fully forgiven her.

This book looks at the subject of forgiveness from many different angles, borrowing examples from the Amish and other Anabaptist groups. It's meant to be a book filled with takeaway value, insights, and suggestions for healing and wholeness that can be brought into your life.

The first section includes stories of forgiveness in day-to-day life, where most of our people problems lie. The stories in the second section might be the ones that stick with you long after reading this book. They are profound. You will see how only God could provide the ability to forgive in such circumstances. These stories flip the telescope.

What does it mean to "live forgiven"? It means we invite God into the friction of our daily situations even when they don't seem big enough, or dire enough. They're like a pebble in our shoe. Not irritating enough to take off our shoe and shake it out, but still, it's always there. Wearing, wearing, wearing.

The Amish practice forgiveness right from the start, modeling it to their children, turning negative thoughts into positive

ones, being the first to extend the olive branch to others. Forgiveness is a habitual way of thinking. They believe that life *isn't* fair—the toast burns, the milk spills, the car breaks down. They believe we are part of an imperfect world, far from the Garden. They *expect* life not to be fair, so when the hard things come into their life—and they do, just like everyone's life—they've had experience with how to manage them.

What will spill out of you when you are under great stress is what spills out of you now in the day-to-day friction of living. Our ability to forgive what seems unforgiveable is deeply connected to how we handle the smaller transgressions: when someone cuts in front of us at the grocery store, when our spouse forgets an anniversary, when our family accidentally locks us out of the house.

The goal of this book is to help you make a habit of forgiving. None of us can know for sure where life will take us, but we do know there will be potholes and detours and fender benders along the way. We just don't have much control over the things that happen to us in life. To think that your life will be perfect and nothing will ever go wrong is a serious self-deception, writes Dr. Dick Tibbits, author of *Forgive to Live: How Forgiveness Can Save Your Life*.

Since you know you will need to forgive someone in the future, why not practice forgiveness every chance you get? Each time you forgive, it becomes easier to forgive the next time. Forgiveness is like a muscle: the more it is exercised, the more it can do. And the more you practice forgiving the little hurts in life, the better you will be able to handle the big hurts.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who taught and lived forgiveness, said it best: "Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude."<sup>4</sup>

PART ONE

# EVERYDAY FRICTION



*The trouble with our past is that it refuses to stay  
past.*

Amish proverb

Not long ago, a phone call came in from an Amish man who had seen an advertisement I placed in *The Budget* to seek out stories of forgiveness. This elderly fellow was blessed with the gift of conversation—he did the talking and I did the listening. He had some interesting thoughts to share, including a very relevant story about a time when his business had been taken advantage of by a customer.

He told me the story in exhaustive detail. At the end of our conversation, I asked him if he might be willing to let me use the story in this book. After all, wasn't that why he called?

"Absolutely not!" he roared back. "It's best not to remember these things. It's best not to dwell."

As I hung up, I couldn't stop grinning. Without meaning to, that Amish man—with a touch of irony—had summed up the Amish way of coming to grips with offenses and injustices. They might try to live separate from the world, but the world doesn't separate easily. They have their share of hurt feelings, committed wrongs, crimes against the innocent. But as a practice, they choose not to dwell on them, they don't give those things power over them or let them control their lives, including their thought life.

Threaded throughout many Amish sayings is the emphasis on taking the initiative to forgive, regardless of who is at fault.

- "He who cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass."
- "When someone hurts your feelings, it's unimportant unless you persist in remembering it."
- "The best way to get the last word in is to apologize."

These sayings show how the Amish aim the spotlight on the restorer of the relationship, not on the question of fault.

In the early years of our marriage, we lived in Houston, Texas. Because of Houston's hot and humid weather, the trash collectors picked up trash twice a week—on Mondays and Thursdays. Sometimes the truck would rumble down the street earlier in the morning than usual and we didn't get our garbage out in time for the pickup. By the time the next pickup day arrived, you can imagine how eager we were to

get rid of the accumulated garbage. Who in their right mind would intentionally let trash get crammed full and backed up when there was a chance to get rid of it? Yet that's what we do when we nurse grudges, hold on to hurts, let anger fester, allow resentments and bitterness to brew—things that foul our life and spoil our relationships. We do with our memories, emotions, and relationships what we wouldn't do with rotten bananas and spoiled milk.

We refuse to let go of the garbage.

According to the Laboratory of Neuro Imaging at the University of Southern California, the average person has about 70,000 thoughts a day.<sup>1</sup> (Some research has put that number at 50,000 or less, but whether the number is 15,000, 50,000, or 70,000, what's important is those are *big* numbers.) Psychologist and Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman determined that the “psychological present” is a window of about three seconds—everything else that runs through our minds is either past or future.<sup>2</sup> An old Penn Dutch proverb seemed to have already figured that out without the supporting data: “Regrets over yesterday and the fear of tomorrow are twin thieves that rob us of the moment.”

With all that traffic running through our brains, shouldn't we make more of an effort to stop dwelling on negative thoughts, patterns, endless loops? Scripture has an antidote to holding on to mental garbage:

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes

everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies. (Phil. 4:8–9 Message)

Here's a favorite Amish saying that helps manage a returning negative reflection: "Thoughts might arrive for a visit, but you don't have to invite them to stay." Imagine yourself, on each of your garbage pickup days, putting out your emotional trash for God to haul away. In its place, ask Him to fill the open space with forgiveness.

And then ponder this: If you have 70,000 thoughts per day, you have 70,000 chances to do it better.

# A Little Amish General Store



*If you won't admit you've been wrong, you love  
yourself more than truth.*

Amish proverb

**B**link twice and you'll miss the little Amish general store in Buchanan County, Iowa. It's tucked down a single-lane dirt road, hidden behind a white farmhouse, obvious only to those who know to look for it. Inside are shelves filled with all kinds of humble necessities: enormous black rubber men's galoshes, Band-Aids, Kingsford charcoal, Mason jars. Lining the back of the store are shelves of glass hurricanes, in all sizes. They're used to contain the flame of kerosene lamps, common lighting in Amish homes. Above the shelves of glass hurricanes is a handwritten sign, so startling in its message that you have to read it twice:

*If You Break It, Please Let Us Know  
So That We Can Forgive You.*

When asked about the sign, the Amish storekeeper smiled, her face so open and honest and sincere that one couldn't help but smile in return. "We know that accidents happen, that fragile things break. We'd rather be told something broke than have someone hide it or pretend it didn't happen. We expect a few problems now and then."

What an upside-down view of modern retailing! Most stores that display delicate or breakable items warn parents with small children and instill fear in the clumsy: "If you break it, you pay" or "You break it, you buy it." The message is clear: Shop at your own risk.

In a way, people have similar warning signs, though they're not always visible to the human eye. In fact, it would be much easier if they wore a sign around their neck that stated the obvious: "I'm fragile. I'm broken. I'm wounded. I had a difficult childhood. I'm sensitive. I'm unhappy. I'm angry. If you hurt me, you are going to have to pay for it."

But what would your response be to a friend who had a sign like the Amish store's over the door of her home? Imagine if it said something like this: "Hurts and mistakes and misunderstandings happen in all relationships. Our friendship is more important than allowing an issue to divide us. If there comes a time when you might hurt me, intentionally or otherwise, I'm prepared to offer you forgiveness. Just ask." Most likely, this is a friend you would visit often. You know you are loved. If your friendship hits a bump or two, as most do, it can be restored. Sociologist Brené Brown calls this kind of person a "stretch-mark friend." In *Daring Greatly*, she writes about such friendships: "Our connection has been stretched and pulled so much that it's become part of who we are, a second skin, and there are a few scars to prove it."<sup>1</sup>

What about you? What if you were to hang a similar sign declaring a generous spirit of forgiveness in your own home? “This is a family that allows a margin of error. Our love for each other is greater than our failures. If we say or do something we shouldn’t have, forgiveness is always available. Just ask.”

I imagine the sign over God’s front door is even more generous and potent: “If you’re broken, just let Me know. My Son died on the cross and rose again to offer you forgiveness for your sins.”

If forgiveness is readily available, why is there a condition—asking—placed on these signs? Why do we have to ask at all? When we ask forgiveness of others—our friends, our spouse, our children, our neighbors, our colleagues—we admit our culpability, setting into motion the process of healing and restoring the relationship. When we ask God for forgiveness, we admit our sinfulness, properly posturing ourselves before a holy God (1 John 1:8–10).

But we can’t receive if we don’t ask. For that is the essence of God’s story of forgiveness.



## REFLECTIONS ON PEACEMAKING

How would your relationships be different if forgiveness were built into them? If you were a student of God’s forgiving nature—that is, if forgiveness became a way of life—how would it transform your relationship with your family? Your friends? Your co-workers? Your neighbors? Identify a few of your own shortcomings and weaknesses. What mistakes have you made that hurt others? Who

has forgiven you for these mistakes? Who has been a “stretch-mark friend” to you?

The most difficult seven words to say can be the most healing to a relationship: “I was wrong. Will you forgive me?” What makes those seven words so potent?

Metaphorically speaking, what changes in your heart would have to take place to have a sign like the Amish general store’s over your life?



### Plain *Truth*



As of 2014, a total of 290,090 Amish live in North America. With an average family size of six to eight children, the population doubles every twenty years. At that rate, by the year 2050, there will be over one million Amish.<sup>2</sup>