

# Crossing the Chasm— Radical Forgiveness in Action

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*Beyond our ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.* —RUMI, Sufi mystic and poet

When we go beyond ideas of right and wrong, as Rumi says, we enter a “field.” That field is oneness. Its seeds of peace, renewal, and love find fertile ground in our souls. To forgive is to allow these seeds to grow. *Unlikely Friends*, a documentary film by acclaimed

director Leslie Neale, presents remarkable stories of radical forgiveness. To forgive in the midst of unbearable anguish seems to be an impossibility; yet, where there is forgiveness, as the stories told in *Unlikely Friends* demonstrate, both the victim/survivor of a crime and the perpetrator experience healing. Beyond their painful past, there

is a field in which the people portrayed in Neale’s film are meeting and changing the world. In choosing healing through forgiveness, they are helping to eradicate anger, violence, and hatred in the world. And they are revealing the truth of oneness.

*Unlikely Friends* opens with the chilling cacophony of

gunfire, depicting a horrendous act of violence. Stephen, a Wyoming State Trooper, is shot numerous times by a bank robber, Mark, and returns fire in self-defense. Neither man is killed, but Stephen, severely wounded, continues for years to suffer constant pain as a result of his wounds. Consumed with hatred for Mark, Stephen



The healing journey of Mark and Stephen

wants his attacker dead. One day, unable to bear the hatred any longer, he writes a letter to Mark, now incarcerated. Stephen and Mark meet and together undertake a journey of healing through forgiveness. Over time, as the two men meet and talk, Mark comes to an empathic understanding of the pain that he has caused. He stops blaming others for his actions and begins to take responsibility for what he has done, a step that the film makes clear is essential for healing.

Another story of forgiveness told in Neale's film is that of unlikely friends Debbie and Gabrielle. After her son is shot and killed by Gabrielle, Debbie feels a desperate need to understand what happened that night and, taking pictures of her son with her, she visits Gabrielle in prison. Gabrielle realizes the anguish that his actions have caused and, just as Mark did, he takes responsibility. He holds himself accountable for his actions. He and Debbie begin to meet regularly, and as a result of the forgiveness that Debbie extends to him, Gabrielle is able, in turn, to forgive those who have harmed him.

Victims/survivors forgive, as the film shows, not to condone the crimes committed against them or to mitigate the

**They forgive out of a deep need to heal themselves.**

punishment meted out to the perpetrators, but rather out of a deep need to heal themselves. The pain they feel is so intense that they are forced into taking action. The experiences of Mark and of Debbie, both of which are extreme examples of forgiveness, offer compelling evidence of a spiritual "window" opening. Pondering the stories she has told in her film, Neale says, "I believe that a paradigm shift is occurring. There is a consciousness shift, however small it might be."

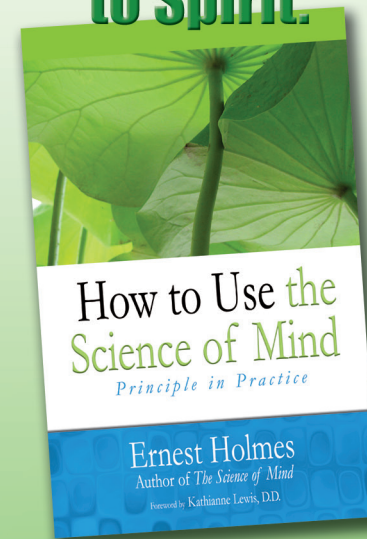
From the time she started working on the film until its completion, Neale has seen an increased receptivity to the idea of forgiveness between victim/survivor and perpetrator. Conducting interviews in California, she asked people, "Could you forgive someone who had killed a loved one, or maimed you or a loved one?" She reports that nine times out of ten, the interviewees said yes. Expecting the opposite answer, she was stunned by this response. "I'm surprised. I was expecting a lot more

resistance to the idea of forgiving perpetrators. I don't know if I could forgive. I hope that I could. But I don't think you know until you're really in that situation."

Other films by Neale have also resulting in real, quantifiable change. Her first film, *Road to Return*, narrated by Tim Robbins, focused on helping ex-offenders return to society and was instrumental in a bill being passed in Congress that provided for more after-care programs. Her film *Juvies*, narrated by Mark Wahlberg, provided impetus for the first conference dealing with juvenile justice. While *Juvies* led to legislation being passed in the State of California, that legislation was vetoed; however, the U.S. Supreme Court later ruled that the death penalty cannot be applied to juvenile criminals.

Neale's interest in making films that promote social justice is "God-led," she believes. Although she refers to her work as "something I fell into," there seems a rightness about the path she took. Having attended a Science of Mind church in Dallas, Texas, she grew up steeped in Science of Mind teachings. Then, in film school, Neale did her thesis on conditions in the Travis County jail in Austin. After graduating, she turned to acting, but years later was

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A prison meeting between a survivor, Jane, and her unlikely friend

drawn back into filmmaking as a result of attending a drumming program in a prison where she had gone with her then-husband to deliver drums. She made the choice to accompany him rather than wait alone in a hotel room, and that choice changed her life. "Spending the afternoon with the incarcerated men," Neale says, "I was moved by the authenticity and honesty of people who I had previously perceived as people to be afraid of. After that experience, I felt the program needed to be documented, but no one came forward to do it. Then someone suggested I do it, so I found a mentor and made my first film, *Road to Return*."

In making *Unlikely Friends*, Neale continues her impact on social justice. Highlighting the importance of victims/survivors meeting with perpetrators, the film reveals the healing potential for all concerned, not only for the individuals themselves but also for society. As is explained on the film's website, "Victims/survivors of unspeakable crimes forgive out of a deep need to heal themselves, which in turn motivates the perpetrators to fully account for their actions and, thereby, begin the process of true rehabilitation. These relationships, so unfathomable for most of us, open our thinking to new possibilities of how to transform a system ensconced in

punishment and retribution to one of restorative justice that is based in humanity."

But even more than transforming the criminal justice system, the opportunity to practice forgiveness by meeting and talking with perpetrators transforms individual lives. Jane, a victim/survivor featured in *Unlikely Friends*, has experienced this kind of transformation. "Forgiveness made it easier for me because otherwise I would have been consumed with hatred and bitterness." Debbie, whose story is told in the film, attests to the healing value of forgiveness. "I was bitter," she says. "Today I am better, and there is only one difference between the words *bitter* and *better*, and it is the 'I,' and only I can change my life."

Not only victims/survivors but also perpetrators experience healing through forgiveness. "Perpetrators come into the prison system feeling very victimized, rightly or wrongly, and they lose sight of the victim/survivor," Neale says. "It is really from connecting personally with the one who has been harmed that compassion and kindness can grow."

Commenting on the healing value of forgiveness, Frederic Luskin, PhD, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, states in the film, "You have to

let go of bitterness and hatred, or you can't move forward." On the project's website, he writes, "Forgiveness has been advocated for centuries as a balm for hurt and angry feelings....Many sources suggest that forgiveness can lead to decreased anger, depression, anxiety, and stress as well as enhanced well-being, including peace of mind." Yet, despite the potential of forgiveness to relieve hurt and stress, he notes, "Effective means of engendering forgiveness as a way of dealing with life's problems has often been lacking."

Another passionate spokesperson for the healing power of forgiveness, Azim Khamisa, is also featured in *Unlikely Friends*. After the murder of his son Tariq in 1995 through an act of gang-related violence, Khamisa took the path of forgiveness rather than revenge and, along with the grandfather of his son's murderer, has established the Tariq Khamisa Foundation (TKF), the goal of which is to stop youth violence through education, mentoring, and community-service projects. Going beyond the pain of loss to exemplify the healing power of forgiveness in action, Khamisa believes that perpetrators are themselves victims. Through

the foundation, he is committed to providing healthier options for young people at risk. As he states in the film, "In every crime, there is an opportunity to better society. Forgiveness is not an event, it is a process. With true forgiveness, you can be at peace. Change is possible."

A Muslim, Khamisa represents only one of the spiritual paths or religions followed by the victims/survivors featured in *Unlikely Friends*. Desiring the film to encompass a range of traditions, Neale was able to gain access to stories by people from the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic faiths. "I was very focused on making an interfaith film so that forgiveness was not depicted as exclusive to any particular faith. I found that almost every person I spoke with has some form of spiritual practice, which I think is what enabled forgiveness to occur."

Neale adds that while a spiritual practice opens the door to forgiveness, pain provides the impetus. "Consider the unbearable anguish that Azim experienced when his son was murdered. The choice to forgive comes out of such pain that the person just has to do something to get through it. That's a point I really wanted to get across, because I knew there would

be a perception that some of the victims/survivors had identified with the perpetrators as in the Stockholm Syndrome, or that there was a transference of the lost loved one onto the perpetrator. I wanted to make it very apparent that the victims/survivors are driven by pain. One woman told me, 'I have to forgive in order to save myself. I didn't do this for the perpetrator, I did it for me.' Yet, forgiveness, even if offered only for the sake of one's own healing, still affects the perpetrator in a positive way."

Mark is an example of this positive impact. His petitions to the parole board for a reduced sentence have so far been denied and, therefore, he is not free from physical prison; he does, however, as related in the film, experience freedom from a conscience "that eats at you day and night," as one prisoner expresses the torment of unforgiveness. *Unlikely Friends* makes clear that when perpetrators are locked up and nothing is done to change them, they are eventually released still angry and potentially violent. A critical lesson of the film is that the majority of perpetrators are not able or willing to take responsibility unless the victims/survivors participate by meeting with them. In many

cases, offenders want to make amends but are not given the opportunity to do so. Neale states, "Prison officials contend that it is dangerous to allow victims/survivors into prisons, but perpetrators need to be given the opportunity to face their crimes. It helps if they know the pain they caused."

For some, forgiveness of a heinous crime is hard to understand. One victim/survivor depicted in the film, Debbie, says that her forgiveness of Gabrielle actually enraged her friends. Yet, as forgiveness is offered, lives are healed. Both victim/survivor and perpetrator are freed to release the pain of the past and to move forward with greater compassion, empathy, and peace. A loved one is lost and can never be brought back, but the loss now has meaning. The loss leads to pain, which leads to forgiveness, which leads to healing. When forgiveness occurs, the truth of oneness is acknowledged, acted upon, and honored.

"I think we could all learn how to be more forgiving," says Neale. "Making this film caused me to realize that I need to be more forgiving in my own life. A chaplain who saw *Unlikely Friends* wrote to me and said that he had never seen such a powerful response to a film. This



Film director Leslie Neale

response indicates to me that people have a deep yearning to make a wrong right. Most of us are not victims/survivors or perpetrators of violent crimes, but I believe the practice of forgiveness is a universal need for all of us."

As one victim/survivor, Judy, says in the film, "You need to open the prison doors and let yourself out." In *Unlikely Friends*, Leslie Neale has shown us that forgiveness is the key. ■

To learn more about *Unlikely Friends*, go to [scienceofmind.com](http://scienceofmind.com).