

FORGIVENESS

Imagine your seven-year-old child was kidnapped by a stranger in the middle of the night. Now imagine forgiving the man who did it.

*Health Magazine, May/June 1998
by Ann Japenga*

FOR MOST AMERICANS SETTLED EAST OF THE MISSISSIPPI, SOONER OR LATER the time comes to pack the brood in the jalopy and go see what's out west. For the Jaeger family of Detroit, the call came in 1973. Bill Jaeger, a die designer for the auto industry, saved his paychecks and hoarded days off. He bought a new GMC van, and his slim blond wife, Marietta, sewed curtains for the windows.

They set out for their first-ever camping trip on a June morning, van stuffed full of kids, borrowed tents, and sleeping bags. The couple's five children pressed to the windows and drank in the sights:

Badlands National Park, Mt. Rushmore, the Black Hills. At every rest stop seven-year-old Susie-the gangly, dark-haired youngest child-practiced cartwheels. Then it was everyone back in the van. Marietta would make a quick head count, and they were off again.

On June 23 they reached their destination: Missouri Headwaters State Monument, near Three Forks, Montana. Here, where the Gallatin, Jefferson, and Madison rivers converge to form the Missouri, the clan set up camp beside a river rumbling with snowmelt.

Even bedtime held new thrills for the kids. Four of them had a tent all to themselves, an arrangement that lent itself to secret nighttime conversations. On the third night Susie and 13-year-old Heidi awoke at about two and whispered awhile before dropping back to sleep.

A few hours later Heidi was roused by a cold breeze on her shoulders. Groggy, she groped to locate the source. Her hand brushed grass where there should have been canvas. Suddenly fully awake, she found a hole sliced in the side of the tent. Two of the sleeping bags beside her were still occupied, but Susie was gone. Quickly the alarm spread, and the campground lit up. Searchers found Susie's two stuffed lambs on the grass outside the tent.

The next few heart-stopping hours blurred into days and then weeks as the sheriff was notified, then the FBI. Military crews with tracking dogs combed haystacks and outbuildings, Boy Scouts hacked at the underbrush with machetes, search planes droned overhead, and boats patrolled the river.

Marietta, the parent who usually took charge in crises, managed for a time to keep her composure, reassuring the kids and communicating with authorities and the press.

It was the boats that finally undid her.

Two weeks into the ordeal-the family was still living in the campground, now guarded by an FBI command post-she spent an entire day watching as a search boat inched its way down the Madison. Each time the craft halted, the men on board would reel in a net, examine its contents, and let it out again. At every stop the young mother feared that her daughter's body would be the haul.

As anger and panic rose in Marietta, her stomach roiled and a heavy weight seemed to press against her chest. She fought her feelings, terrified that they would become uncontrollable.

But that night everything she'd been holding in boiled into a murderous rage. When she crawled into her sleeping bag, she turned to her husband and said that even if the kidnapper returned Susie unharmed, she would happily kill him with her bare hands.

She lay awake all night. Whenever a car pulled into the campground, she wondered if it was the kidnapper bringing Susie back-or just another tourist snapping pictures of the now-famous tent where the child was abducted. Each time a car drove away, the ensuing silence intensified both her anger and the heaviness in her chest.

Then, near dawn, she heard a voice.

Some might call it her conscience; others would say it was the echo of a strict Catholic upbringing. What Marietta heard was God telling her, "I don't want you to feel this way." The admonition resonated: As a child she'd been taught to love her enemies and pray for those who hurt her.

As she pondered the message, the weight on her chest seemed to lift and her stomach relaxed. She fell into the first deep sleep she'd had since Susie vanished.

The next morning nothing had really changed. She still wanted to murder the monster who'd snatched her little girl. But she'd opened the door just a crack to the possibility that revenge wasn't the best course.

This is how forgiveness often starts: not with a rush of compassion but with a weary willingness to try.

That day and the next and the next brought no solid leads. Five weeks after Susie's abduction, the Jaegers reluctantly rolled up their sleeping bags and piloted the van homeward, Marietta now counting four heads after every rest stop instead of five.

Back in their squat cinder-block bungalow on the outskirts of Detroit, Bill sank into silent brooding and began packing a gun wherever he went.

For her part, Marietta recalled the flicker of revelation she'd had by the river. And she remembered relatives who'd died embittered over ancient affronts. The conclusion was obvious: Hatred of the magnitude she was feeling got people nowhere.

She decided that the best thing she could do for herself was to try to forgive. So she would have to make a concerted effort to transform her loathing for the kidnapper into something approaching understanding.

Her project was on her mind as soon as she awoke every day and began preparing breakfast for her family. But the focused effort came on weekday afternoons, in the lull after lunch, when Marietta retreated to her tiny bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed.

For inspiration, she remembered when she was a high school freshman and a nun assailed her in front of the class, saying she had plagiarized a paper. Though humiliated by the false accusation, Marietta believed that retaliation was wrong. So she told herself that the nun was a worthy person at heart and that she must have been hurt to lash out so unfairly at a child.

Contemplating that episode now, Marietta reminded herself that even if he hadn't acted like one, the kidnapper was still a member of the human race and so had intrinsic worth. In the eyes of the God Marietta believed in, the kidnapper was as precious as Susie. The thought was hard to swallow. At this point the exercise was purely mechanical.

To bring about a change of heart, Marietta resolved not to talk about the kidnapper in subhuman terms, no matter how great the temptation. She didn't have to pretend to like him or that he hadn't committed a detestable wrong. But she would have to watch her language.

Everyone from the police to her friends and family spoke of the criminal in invective. Marietta's own parish priest told her, "I hope they fry the son of a bitch." On several occasions Marietta asked acquaintances to please tone down their talk. She sympathized but let them know she was working in a different direction.

In another strategy, Marietta found a way to apply the classic precept "Pray for your enemies." She tried to think of one good thing to wish on the kidnapper. It grated. It was so much easier to want him to hurt as badly as her family did.

A practical hitch was that she knew nothing about him, except that he probably lived in the West. She didn't know his name and had to call him "the man who has Susie." How about wishing "the man who has Susie" clear skies, then? Even criminals must appreciate a fine day. She could try wishing him that.

At first every conjured image rankled and seemed disloyal to Susie. How could Marietta picture good things happening to the man who stole her baby?

Her work became even harder each time a development in the case rekindled her rage, as when a man claiming to have Susie called authorities and talked about ransom, but hung up before he could be identified.

Marietta's wishes came more easily, though, as the weeks passed. One day the kidnapper would find a valued object he'd lost-courtesy of Marietta. In keeping with the western theme, she visualized him catching a prize fish.

In time Marietta recognized the practical wisdom in what she was doing: If the kidnapper had Susie, she wanted her child's temporary caretaker to be content, not miserable and vindictive. If he no longer had Susie-which Marietta realized was a possibility-she wanted him to come forth and confess. This too, Marietta thought, was more likely if the man was not feeling tormented.

So every weekday afternoon she sent Susie's kidnapper wishes for blue skies and dappled trout, until the kids came home from school.

The relief Marietta Jaeger felt when she focused on compassion for the man who wronged her was more than an imaginary salve. Some of the biggest names in mind-body medicine-Dean Ornish, Carl Simonton, and Bernie Siegel among them-are convinced that forgiveness is essential to physical and emotional well-being. Joan Borysenko, a cancer cell biologist and a pioneer in studying how emotions affect the body, goes so far as to say that forgiveness is the mind's most powerful healing tool.

At Harvard Medical School in the 1980s, Borysenko operated one of the country's first mind-body clinics. Patients suffering from all manner of stubborn illnesses found their way to her, ready to spend ten weeks trying therapies like meditation and yoga.

One such patient, whom Borysenko calls George, was a Jewish man who suffered from bleeding ulcers and insomnia. In getting to know George, she found he had cut off contact with his daughter Rachel because she'd married a nonJew against his wishes. When George practiced meditation, his mind, rather than quieting down, raged at Rachel.

After seeing many patients like George, Borysenko had an epiphany. "I realized that when people are filled with resentments, that amounts to chronic stress," she says. "When you have a stress-related illness and you're subjecting yourself to constant stress, it's very difficult to heal."

So she began teaching people to forgive. But first she had to correct some misconceptions. Forgiveness, she told her patients, is not a shortcut around anger; it's a way to move on once anger has subsided and to avoid getting mired in resentment. Nor does forgiveness require inviting a wrongdoer back into your life.

Instead, the operative words are give and gift. You are giving a gift of acceptance to someone, whether that person deserves it or not. Doing this runs counter to instinct, Borysenko says, but the effort mends minds and eases pain.

When George started working to recall the things he once loved about his daughter, his symptoms lessened. In fact, Borysenko says that every patient at the clinic who could move away from resentment improved both mentally and physically.

Though the scientific study of forgiveness is still in its infancy, findings so far confirm the benefits Borysenko and others have observed. In a study at the University of Northern Iowa, psychologist Suzanne Freedman worked with 12 incest survivors. After 14 months only the six who'd been taught forgiveness techniques had become less depressed and anxious. Similar studies-of college students with negligent parents, elderly people harboring old grudges, and men angry at their partners for having an abortion-show that those who forgive have lower levels of anxiety, higher self-esteem, and better emotional health than those who don't.

"I'm continually surprised by the strong results we get," says Robert Enright, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin at Madison who studies forgiveness. "There's something to this that people ought to know about."

A 1990 Taiwanese study by Enright and Tina Huang was the first to suggest that the forgiveness-health link goes beyond emotional healing. Among a group of women struggling to forgive hurts such as betrayal by a friend or coworker, those who were able to get rid of their grudges showed fewer spikes in blood pressure when they retold their stories.

Forgiveness as a means to emotional recovery makes intuitive sense. But why should letting go of bitterness improve physical health? One answer lies in the plentiful research showing hostility to be a major risk factor for coronary artery disease.

The crushing weight Marietta Jaeger felt in her chest reflects what was presumably happening in her body as her fury grew. Adrenaline sped into her bloodstream, raising her pulse and blood pressure. Her arteries narrowed, and the blood surged through her heart.

Such short bursts of rage are unlikely to harm a healthy young heart like Marietta's. But if Marietta were to stoke her anger again and again over the course of months or years, the pounding blood could erode minuscule portions of her coronary artery walls. Platelets in her blood would clump to fill the abrasions. Over time plaque could accumulate in the damaged areas, leading to coronary artery disease.

As yet no one has studied what happens in the arteries when people release their rancor. But it's reasonable to assume, Borysenko says, that forgiveness, by providing an antidote to anger, may interrupt the heart-damaging process.

One year to the minute after Susie was snatched from her tent, and nearly a year after Marietta began the laborious process of trying to forgive, the Jaegers' phone rang in the middle of the night.

Marietta sprinted toward the kitchen in the dark and banged her toes on a stool the kids had left in the way. Hopping forward on her good foot, she switched on the tape recorder attached to the phone by the FBI, then grabbed the receiver.

"Is this Susie's mom?" the caller asked. "I'm the guy that took her from you."

Marietta's voice came through the wires so relaxed it was as if she was accustomed to chatting with kidnapers every night at this hour. She didn't gasp, weep, threaten, beg, or scream.

The man said that he'd read a newspaper interview in which Marietta said she wished she could talk to the kidnapper. Now, by the tone of his voice, Marietta could tell he was calling to taunt her for the notion. But he hadn't counted on the homework she had been doing every day after lunch.

When she heard the man's voice, mocking though it was, she realized something had genuinely shifted in her. She was still desperate for word of Susie, but her efforts at the edge of her bed had allowed her to see this man as something other than evil personified. Yes, he had done something vile. As a result, her child was in dire trouble. Yet the man was someone else's beloved child, and he too was in trouble. The compassion she felt for him came through in her voice.

She asked evenly whether Susie was alive and whether he had hurt her. The caller assured her that Susie was fine and that he'd only hurt her "a little" that first night when he had to choke her to keep her from crying out.

Why did he choose the Jaegers' tent? He said he had crouched outside and listened to Heidi and Susie whispering late that night. Then he waited two hours until they were sound asleep before slitting the side of the tent.

As he talked Marietta could hear the clicks of the FBI tracer on the line; she knew the caller must be hearing the interference, too. But every time he became anxious and said he had to hang up, Marietta gently drew him in again.

"Can we have her back?" Marietta asked.

"I'm kind of in an awkward position to do that," he said. "I've gotten used to her."

"Why did you take her?"

He stammered for a moment, then said, "I've always wanted a little girl of my own." Click. Click. Click.

The caller was weakening, responding to Marietta's concerned tone by staying on the line far longer than was safe for him. But what finally brought down his defenses was when she asked with total sincerity, "What can we do to help you?"

There was a brief silence. Marietta realized the kidnapper was crying. "I wish I knew the answer to that," he said.

The conversation, miraculously, lasted more than an hour, but the tracer malfunctioned and located the caller in Sarasota, Florida: a dead end. Then the FBI matched a voiceprint of the anniversary call with a call to a suspect in a murder case in the same region: David Meirhofer, a popular baby-sitter living in the small town of Manhattan, Montana.

On the strength of that evidence, the FBI took out a search warrant for an abandoned ranch near Meirhofer's home. More than 1,000 bone fragments discovered at the site were shipped to the Smithsonian for analysis. The lab work showed one fragment to be the backbone of a young girl.

When Meirhofer was arrested, he confessed that he had murdered Susie Jaeger about a week after kidnapping her. He also admitted to having killed a teenage girl and two young boys. Marietta's ability to forgive had almost certainly saved lives. Meirhofer was a suspect in other unsolved murders and had attempted still another abduction from a Girl Scout camp before he was caught.

Hours after his confession Meirhofer committed suicide. He was buried near Three Forks, not far from the place where the Jaegers had Susie's remains laid to rest.

In the years that followed, Bill Jaeger continued to seethe over the family's agonizing loss. He developed bleeding ulcers and heart problems, and in 1987 he collapsed on the kitchen floor, dead of a heart attack at 56.

His wife, on the other hand, held to the course she'd embarked on beside the Missouri headwaters. Today a grandmother of seven, Marietta emanates energy and goodwill as she travels around the country giving workshops on forgiveness. People come to her with grievances large and small; she tries to show them how the steps she followed can help them.

"If anyone thinks forgiveness is for wimps, they haven't tried it," she tells audiences. "It takes daily, diligent discipline."

Her listeners protest that surely she must still get mad-say, on Susie's birthday? "No," she says. "I still grieve and I will always grieve at the horrible things Susie had to endure. But she's not in that place of suffering now, and I have absolutely no anger or hatred toward David."

In recent years Marietta has befriended Meirhofer's mother, 71-year-old Eleanor Huckert. Several years ago Marietta made a return trip to Montana, and she and Huckert went together to visit the graves of their children.

Afterward the two mothers sat at the Huckerts' dining room table, sipping coffee and thumbing through old scrap-books. There was David on the front porch—a rosy-cheeked little boy, scrubbed and eager to set out for his first day of school. There were Mother's Day cards and other tokens of affection from a son Huckert described as doting.

As she studied the smiling boy in the snapshot, Marietta felt that her struggle to invest the faceless criminal with humanity was complete. More important, Marietta realized that her homework had been worthwhile.

"If you remain vindictive, you give the offender another victim," she says. "Anger, hatred, and resentment would have taken my life as surely as Susie's life was taken."