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# The Experience of Forgiving in the Marital Relationship

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THE EXPERIENCE OF FORGIVING IN THE  
MARITAL RELATIONSHIP

BY

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological investigation was to understand and describe the experience of forgiving in marriage and bring into being rich, thick, descriptive accounts of this experience. Seidman's (2006) in-depth, unstructured and face-to-face interviewing method was utilized to collect data from nine participants. The analysis of the interviews was informed by the theoretical and methodological approaches of Ely (1997, 2006), Seidman (2006) and vanManen (1990, 2002, 2003). Three themes – *Broken Heart, Change of Heart and Healing Heart* and three metathemes- *Love, - divine and human, Sacred and Grace* emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data and are discussed in the findings, implications and conclusion of the study.

*Key Words: forgiving in marriage, forgiving, forgiveness, marriage, marital relationship, phenomenological study, interviewing*

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

#### Background

Forgiving remains a very distant dream for many people traveling through life but for nine courageous people who were willing to tell their stories, and relate their experience of forgiving, the dream of forgiving became a reality.

Who among us has not longed to be forgiven? Who among us has not felt the brokenness of a relationship through a wrongdoing or transgression? As imperfect people it is most probable that we will hurt another and, paradoxically, those we love are often the ones we are most likely to hurt.

The relational nature of forgiving is well accepted (McCullough, et al., 1998; Fincham, 2000; Hill, 2001; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). Forgiving may well be the means of restoring the relational harmony between self and other. The human experience of *being-together-with-the other* (Koenig, 1992) points to forgiving's relational nature and why forgiving is a guiding principle in our lives. Hill (2001) posits that forgiving is an essential element in human relationships regardless of the circumstance and it is considered one of the most critical processes for restoring relationships and emotional well-being.

“I’m not sure what forgive means in terms of the root of it all, but it’s letting go of pain and anger to continue having a relationship and to continue the relationship forward. So it’s an essence of relationship. It needs to be in a relationship. It’s where it does all its work in a relationship” (Catherine, 2009)

This study aimed at understanding, describing and interpreting the lived experience of forgiving in a marriage. The research question was, “What is the experience of forgiving in a marital relationship?”

The history of forgiving can be found in the philosophical and religious literature that goes back thousands of years. Hope (1987) posits that forgiving is deeply embedded in our Judeo-Christian culture and is a core value of Christianity and other major religions. In the religious community the concept of forgiving has been used since antiquity to reflect an essential component in the reconciliation and healing of broken relationships as well as being viewed to be an essential factor in spiritual health (Hargrave & Sells 1997).

On Good Friday, Catholics and Christians all over the world, reiterate Christ’s words as He was dying on the cross “Eli Eli . . . Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34, New American Bible (NAB), Saint Joseph Edition,). The New Testament (NAB, 1970) supports that Christ was metaphorically forgiving all people, past, present and future; of sins and hurts that damaged their relationship with God. One can extrapolate that Christ’s forgiving is a prime example of the value of forgiving in reconciliation and healing in valued relationships, such as marriage.

Forgiving is the pathway toward healing, for the intention of forgiving is to restore the broken bond held by the couple in the marital relationship.

Forgiving is the underpinning of a successful marriage (Worthington, 1994) and a critical element in the healing process after major transgressions (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005). From a contextual perspective the issues of trust and justice in marriage are understood to be critical concepts of a *relational ethic*. When transgressions occur that breach trust and justice it may be very painful, especially when they are perceived as a violation against the sanctity of the marital bond. If not addressed, these can fester and destroy the marital relationship (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). Because forgiving is positively associated with marital relationship satisfaction (Fincham, 2000), it is important to understand the experience of forgiving from the perspective of the persons having the experience.

Although the centrality of forgiving arises in the legacy of Christianity and Judaism (Worthington, 1998; Cantens, 2008) forgiving also may not be connected to any religious belief or spirituality but rather be viewed as a *pragmatic, social amenity* (Arendt, 1958; Black, 2003, p6). However, there is sacredness in the dynamic of forgiving embedded in our ethics and cultural morality. Forgiving endures as one of the most valued principles in our lives and it remains and can be subsumed under an overriding human struggle to find meaning, or purpose in life. Those who find meaning in forgiving “rise above it and grow beyond themselves” (Frankl, 1984, p.70).

The nature of forgiving is considered transformative (Frankl, 1984; Gassin & Enright, 1995; Fow, 1996) and captures an individual's sense of the sacred and of morality (Blazer, 1991).

Since forgiving is associated with relationship satisfaction, relationship satisfaction may also help meet the challenges of forgiving (Fincham, 2000; Gordon & Baucom, 2003).

### **The Research Question**

What is the experience of forgiving in the marital relationship?

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

#### **Why It Is Important to Study Forgiving in Marriage**

Researchers and clinicians have found that forgiving is the underpinning of a successful marriage (Worthington, 1994) and a critical element in the healing process after major transgressions (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005). Forgiving is not easy but rather “learning to forgive someone who has hurt you may be one of life’s most demanding, yet meaningful tasks” (Thorsen, Loskin & Harris, 1998, p. 164).

Studies suggest that being married is beneficial to health and well-being for husbands and wives (Worthington, 1998) and that people who are married generally live longer than those who have never married (Ross, Mirowsky & Goldsteen, 1990). Married men and women are less likely to have chronic illnesses or disabilities and exhibit lower levels of depression, anxiety and other forms of psychological distress, than single individuals (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Because forgiving is positively associated with marital relationship outcomes (Fincham & Beach, 2002), it is important to understand the experience of forgiving in marriage.

Literature supports that forgiving is beneficial in healing marital relationships (Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990) and can positively affect the health and well being of spouses (Vaillant & Vaillant 1993). It is a useful phenomenon in both marital



therapy (Gordon, Bauucom & Snyder, 2004) and individual psychotherapy (Hope, 1987). Alternatively, not forgiving is associated with both relationship termination (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998) and decreased psychological and physical well-being (Miller, Smith, Turner, Guijarro, & Hallet, 1996; McCullough, et al., 1998).

Research validates that forgiving is an important element in the process of psychological mending (Coleman, 1998; Hill & Mullen, 2001; Tan & Dong, 2001; Luskin, 2002) and studies suggests that forgiving decreases depression and anxiety (Mauger, Saxon, Hamill & Pannell, 1996; Coyle & Enright, 1997; Newberg, d'Aquili, Newberg, & deMarici, 2000), and increases self-control and hope (Freedman & Enright, 1996; Newberg et al., 2000) self-esteem (Freedman & Enright, 1996) and life satisfaction (Poloma & Gallup, 1991). The effect of forgiving includes an enhanced interpersonal relationship, which in turn supports and promotes health behaviors within the marital dyad; these benefits are also associated with promoting and improving mental health (Temoshok & Chandra, 2000; Worthington, Berry & Parrott, 2001; Saltzman & Holahan, 2002). Luskin (2002) posited that, “you may experience an increase in positive emotions . . . have easier access to hope, care, affection, trust and happiness, . . . experience less anger [and] see a reduction in depression and hopelessness” (p. 78) when you forgive.

Forgiving has social, health and psychological implications that psychiatric nurses, especially nurse psychotherapists need to be aware of. By understanding the lived experience of forgiving in a marital relationship, nurse psychotherapists as well

as other mental health practitioners will be better informed about the requisites of marital counseling and have better insight for developing therapeutic interventions for psychotherapy. Thus, professionals developing a better understanding of forgiving in a marital relationship will be beneficial to spouses, families and society in general.

From my professional experience counseling clients who have encountered marital difficulties, I believe clients can be taught how to use forgiving as a proactive strategy to initiate healing in their marital relationships. Once learned, forgiving behaviors can positively change the dynamics of the marital relationship, thereby facilitating success and personal growth in the marriage.

Since forgiving occurs on the “common ground of a shared human experience” (Hill, 2001, p. 383), understanding the experience of forgiving is an important therapeutic element and will enhance the therapeutic process between nurse psychotherapists, mental health practitioners and their clients; but unless the understanding is grounded in voluntary descriptions of the experience of forgiving by persons who have had the experience, we will remain without a basis for developing such interventions in professional practice.

Interest in and studies of the concept of forgiving have mainly been philosophical and theological in context. Most of the scientific research on forgiving, though only beginning to gain attention, has emanated from psychology and other social sciences (Fincham, Beach & Davila, 2004) and little is found in the science of nursing. Therefore, there is a need for nursing to address this gap in the literature. There is no research in any discipline that describes the experience of forgiving in the

marital relationship from the perspective of those who have forgiven. Parahoo (1999) posits that nurses have an important contribution to make by expanding the body of knowledge and published research findings.

### **Why I Value Forgiving**

The value of forgiving was instilled in me as a child and also during my schooling through Catholic education. I learned that forgiving was part of Christ's legacy. This view was supported, valued, practiced and modeled by my family who reinforced that forgiving was Christ-like, selfless, showed character, and as part of the moral compass forgiving led one "to turn the other cheek." For these reasons, forgiving became a quality I learned to admire and it had importance in formulating the person I wanted to be, and have become today. Hence, my current beliefs, which have their roots in the past, have remained as strong influences throughout my life.

As a professed Third Order Carmelite, these notions are reinforced and forgiving continues to show itself to me as being powerful and empowering especially as a healing agent. For me forgiving is a core value of humanity, of relationships and of spiritual, mental and physical health. In marriage forgiving might be one of the most crucial elements for marital success.

Because of the ubiquitous nature of forgiving, I have experienced the act of forgiving within my spousal relationship, and have also forgiven others following tragic events. These experiences have helped to shape my attitudes and ideas on forgiving.

I embrace the idea that forgiving encourages well-being in others and advances the idea of love and interpersonal harmony. Lundeen (1989) puts forth my thoughts very well: “When forgiveness is in the picture, all of life has wondrous potential for change, for growth, for renewal” (p.191).

## CHAPTER III

### **Method**

#### **Researcher Stance**

It is almost for selfish reasons that I have chosen to engage in qualitative research since the goal of the qualitative researcher is to better understand human behavior and experience. Ultimately, as the researcher, I wish to capture human experience, seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning, and describe what those meanings are.

For a good portion of my life I have been doing just that, trying to understand human behavior not only personally but professionally as well. I have counseled numerous clients in psychotherapy and treated individuals and couples as a psychiatric nurse for 33 years. Munhall (1993) suggested that a researcher's choice of a topic might come from his or her worldview "the particular way of regarding the nature of being human and of reality and truth" (p.425).

I like the practice of a researcher continually striving for greater self-awareness. The connection to the prolonged engagement in the process of data collection suits me well. The intimacy about sharing attachments, feelings, emotions, connections, behaviors, and the whole idea of someone telling his/her story relating his/her experience, intrigues me and is a situation with which I am most comfortable.

As a psychoanalyst I practice Freud's *talking cure* (Breuer, J., & Freud, S., 1893–1895). This requires well-developed listening skills. The implication for me as a researcher is that I do know how to listen. Listening to another's story (their experience) is hard work, and takes concentration. It means bearing witness to what is being said. It means caring about what the person has to tell. For the researcher, "listening goes far beyond the normal realm of hearing what someone said. There is listening through which both *teller* and *listener* are changed"(Atkinson, 1998, p.32).

As I explore my reasons for choosing qualitative inquiry, the beauty and compatibility and feasibility of this research design, as well as the phenomenon of forgiving, I can not help but think what Denzin (1989) noted: "Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher" (p. 12).

This notion of how one's self influences one's research interests is the beginning of recognizing the insidiousness of bias and how bias can permeate into data collection, analysis and findings. I have to acknowledge that my experience as a psychotherapist certainly influenced my choice of method and my topic of forgiving. My experience of being married and a Catholic also influence my worldview.

Marshall and Rossman (1995) point out that the practice of reflecting on the reason for studying a particular phenomenon is important. "Researchers ... need to be aware of their personal reasons for carrying out a study -- their subjective motives -- for these will have important consequences for the trustworthiness of a project" (Maxwell, 1996, p 85).

## Interviewing

“Though ordinary life roots you in one position, when you are interviewing, you see life in the round, from all angles, including multiple sides of a dispute and different versions of the same incident.” (Rubin & Rubin, 2004, p. 4).

I love stories. I’ve always been interested in other people’s stories and because I understand that “stories are a way of knowing” (Seidman, 2006, p. 7), I chose interviewing as a means of inquiry.

The power of stories for me lies in the knowledge and reality that stories people tell teach a great deal about what is in their hearts and mind and convey deeply meaningful information in a simple way. Storytelling has always been a powerful means of communication and a way for individuals to most effectively make sense of their world (Ricoeur, 1981; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Wiltshire, 1995).

The goal of this research was to provide ways of understanding experience from the perspective of those who lived it (Sokolowski, 2007) and create meaning from their experience (van Manen, 1990). One form of meaning construction identified in qualitative interview data is story (Mishler, 1986, p. 82; Mishler, 1995).

When I needed to decide the best way to answer the question, *What is the experience of forgiving in a marital relationship?*, I choose the method of in-depth phenomenological interview. I was immediately comfortable with this choice. First, the question, *what is the experience of forgiving* is a true phenomenological question. It points to the nature of a human experience that addresses the question of what something is *really* like (van Manen, 1990, p. 35). Additionally, I knew I would be

secure and capable in using this method. Interviewing would be deeply satisfying to me since I have a great interest in other people's stories.

### **The Three Interview Series**

The model of in-depth interviewing that I conducted was a three interview series as outlined by Irving Seidman's (2006) in his book – *Interviewing as Qualitative Research A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. What influenced me most about using this method was that Seidman (2006) tied the core of phenomenology to the qualitative philosophy. Expounding, Seidman (2006) noted:

Interviewing, provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience .... Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action. (2006, p. 16-17).

Prior to doing any interviews, I had identified certain characteristics that defined the type of relationship I sought between the participants and myself. I felt strongly about and was hopeful to gain emergent connection between us and knew in due time it would evolve. It needed time and the three-interview structure would allow for that time. After all, the participants were engaging in an extraordinary undertaking, as they were willing to share and did share their intimate personal emotional and touching experiences with me.



I felt a fellowship with the participants, a kinship with them. The trust, rapport, and interviewing relationship the participants and I developed grew out of this. Theresa validates this experience:

At the start of the interviews I almost felt like I was on a pedestal. You sat across from me, you were looking at me; you were very gentle. I really learned about myself. You made sure I was comfortable. You looked at me. You made me feel important. You seemed very interested in what I was saying. We live in a world where people don't take time out for each other, and I felt more that you were doing the interviews for me than for the study. I had total trust in you. I have no fear of telling you anything. I don't know if I would trust anyone else to do an interview. I had no fear. It was enjoyable. I didn't feel shame or put on the spot. If it were a different person I probably would feel shame. I didn't feel that I had to hold anything back. I totally was comfortable to expose myself to you (Theresa, 2010).

I also knew that context was important for a richer research product. The three-interview method facilitated that goal. Participants had the opportunity and time to describe meanings and feelings and events that surrounded their lives as it related to forgiving in their marriage and that added richness and depth to their words. The value of the three-interview method was its cumulative effect where each interview built on the next.

There was another important reason I used the three-interview method. I had a deep concern for details and wanted my interviews to emphasize completeness in the

accounting of the participant's experience, what Weiss (1994) referred to as *intensive interviewing*. Furthermore, the structure of the three-interview method supported and facilitated my desire to unearth and bring to light the participant's beliefs, values and opinions as it related to the experience of forgiving.

The in-depth interviewing method (Seidman, 2006) was grounded in the phenomenological tradition. Each participant engaged in three distinct and separate thematic interviews. The interviews were intended to gain access into each participant's world as they described the essence of the experience (van Manen, 1990) of forgiving in marriage. Additionally, the interviews were designed to question the meaning of that experience in the context of the participant's world. Without context there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of the experience (Patton, 1989). Seidman (1998) wrote, "making sense or meaning-making requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to the present situation. It also requires that they look at their present experience in detail and within the context in which it occurs" (p. 12).

In the first interview I established the context of the participant's experience by making the participant's life history the focal point. I referred to the first interview as *getting-to-know-you* and I encouraged the participants to tell me about themselves.

In the first interview with Cece I began with:

Interviewer: "Let me just give a little guideline on the interviews. There's going to be three interviews. The first interview is really about you. Not about you and your marriage, [or] husband, but it's really about you - because that serves the foundation for the other interviews." (2009).

In other first interviews I simply said: ‘How about starting with your story.’ (2009).

Or,

Interviewer: “Catherine, can you tell me your story?”

Catherine: “Should I go from my marital history, or just anything?”

Interviewer: “Yeah, a little bit about yourself.” (2009).

In the second interview the participants, reconstructed the details (Seidman, 2006) of their experience of forgiving in their marital relationship. During this interview I encouraged participants to concentrate on the concrete details of his/her present lived experience in forgiving his/her spouse. I referred to the second interview as *getting-to-know-the-phenomenon*.

Here are some examples of how I began the second interview and encouraged participants to focus on the phenomenon.

Interviewer: "So this is the second interview. Today is the 12<sup>th</sup> of June, I guess, about 10:15 AM. And this interview is going to focus on the phenomenon of forgiving, what that experience was for you, you describing it the best way you can, and in the context of your marriage. Can you tell me as much as possible the details of your experience of forgiving?" (To Sarah, 2009).

Interviewer: “Frank, would you like to try to tell me about the forgiving that was involved in your relationship with your wife and what that experience is like?” (2009).

Interviewer: “Okay. So this is the second interview, it's 12:06. It's on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April and this interview is more about the experience of forgiving. So it's more about the phenomenon.. Tell me as much as possible about the details of the experience of forgiving. So this is all about the forgiving aspect of it. We're reconstructing that” (To Cece, 2009).

In the third and final interview the participants were encouraged to reflect on the personal meaning of his/her experience (Seidman, 2006). The purpose of the third interview was to help the participants understand the experience of forgiving in marriage and make sense or meaning of it. I referred to the third interview as *getting-to-know-the meaning of the experience*. I used these and similar opening statements to assist participants in centering the third interview on meaning:

Interviewer: “Okay. Given what you have said about your forgiving experience, and given what you said about your marriage and how the forgiving worked in your marriage, how do you understand forgiving in your life? So it’s not what is the meaning of forgiving. But how do you understand forgiving in your life?” (To Cece, April, 2009).

Interviewer: "The third interview is about reflecting on the meaning of the experience. That’s what the main thrust of this is. And let me just read this because it’s very well put. So it’s like, given what you have said about the experience of forgiving, how do you understand the meaning of that in your life? So it’s not so much of what does it mean to you, but more or less reflectively. (To Catherine, May, 2009)

In using the structure of the three-interview method, with each interview having its own distinct purpose, it was possible for the context, the details and the reflected meaning to emerge in the interviews (Seidman, 2006). Using this structure provided me with a better awareness and understanding of the participants’ perspectives of their experience of forgiving because the time span of three interviews allotted me access to the participants’ thoughts, feelings, and view of their lives which they portrayed to me in their stories through this interview process.

The phenomenological engagement of in-depth interviewing was for me a personal experience of self-discovery, of living and being in the present with the participants, of really discovering the art of listening and of learning and knowledge building.

### **Style of Interviews**

The style of interview was unstructured and face-to-face. In deciding to use unstructured interviews, I had to consider my research question and what I wanted to learn from the participants and how much time would be involved. Would I have enough time to engage in an unstructured interview? The three-interview method would give me ample time. Since there was little known about the experience of forgiving in the marital relationship as told by those who had experienced it, one benefit of the unstructured interview was that it would allow me to develop an understanding of a not fully understood phenomenon.

Another aspect of the unstructured interview that attracted me was that it made it possible for me to build rapport with the participants, which I believed helped the participants to open-up and express themselves in their own way about their own experience. The use of open-ended questions facilitated that process. The open-ended questions allowed for exploration and gave the participants control over their responses. Open questions made it possible for the participants to direct the flow of conversation, which produced richer and deeper data.

In contrast, structured interviews would have left little room for variation in participants' responses. The unstructured interview permitted my understanding to keep evolving in the moment.

The style, form and method of interviewing enhanced the narrative description participants shared with me of their experience of forgiving. They were able to tell their *stories* in the everyday sense about an important life event and in doing so provided me with deep, rich data.

### **Personal Reflections**

"Interviewing can be defined as a moment of listening" ( Schostak, 2006).

I have a history that I bring to this interview process. That history has led me to give great thought to the character of my interviews as well as the trustworthiness of my data. I most assuredly wanted to engage in ethical listening as I collected data through interviewing. What led me to think long and hard about ethical listening stemmed from my experience as a psychotherapist who was well trained in modern psychoanalytic method and technique (Spotnitz, 1908 – 2008) and who had literally spent thousands of hours listening to patients.

The sense of duty to be an ethical listener prompted my first reflection, which was to recognize that my knowledge and experience would introduce an obvious bias.

By profession I was a therapist and trained listener. I was going to have a natural inclination to listen, as a therapist. My awareness and acceptance of this bias enabled me to focus on myself in the researcher stance rather than in the therapeutic stance. It helped me to recognize potential threats that could interfere with the interview process such as interjecting my own beliefs or projecting an attitude through my grimaces or body language.

My second reflection about ethical listening was that of retaining objectivity. As a researcher who was investigating forgiving in marriage I knew the topic's sensitivity. I understood the potential for evoking strong emotion in me. I had to remain objective as I listened to the words and felt the feelings the words induced. I had to hold back from becoming overly sympathetic and solicitous which would affect how the interviews were conducted and the results of the interviews. As a therapist I might have the overwhelming desire to help a patient. By attempting to maintain objectivity, I realized as a researcher that being moved by dialogue didn't require I do anything. I would actively pursue change in the patient as a therapist. As an objective researcher change would not be pursued rather, the changing process would naturally occur with the unfolding of the participant's stories.

I believe that if I was to act for the benefit of the participants and also cause no harm, ethical listening was a mandate. Ethical listening provided safeguards. As I listened, I observed for cues such as elevation in tone of voice, or decrease in voice quality, speed of speech, increase in movement, uneasiness and restlessness. These

cues may be indicative of discomfort experienced by the participant and the emotions and feelings evoked by discussing forgiving in marriage.

I had to recognize when the participant was feeling uneasy or uncomfortable and slow the interview, stop it if necessary, or just check in with the participant. By incorporating ethical listening into the interview process in this study, the participant's sense of well-being was preserved and his or her safety ensured.

Atkinson (1998) described the process of listening well:

There is listening that goes far beyond the realm of hearing what someone has said. There is listening through which both teller and listener are changed ...it is like a moment of grace... it is a gift of leaving one's own life for a moment to travel in another's (Atkinson, 1998, p. 34).

### **Dimensions of the Interview**

"Ethical listening means giving the person unconditional attention" (Levitt, 2001).

We may believe that interviewing is easy as most of us are familiar with television and other media interviews. What we conjure up in our minds is that interviewing is merely the firing off of questions to the person being interviewed. But a research interview such as Kvale (1996) posits "is a craft that, if well carried out, can become an art" (p.13). The craft of good interviewing for a researcher requires empathy, good listening, managing the environment, time management and preparation. Most importantly it has an ethical dimension.



There may also be a misconception about interviews in that interviews may be viewed as conversation. It is true that interviews do look like conversation particularly when using an unstructured, open-ended interview style where the interviews are informal. Nonetheless, in this research and most research interviews, the participants were doing the talking and I the researcher was doing the listening (Atkinson, 1998).

A distinction between research interviews and conversation is in the fact that interviews have structure and a clear and distinct purpose where the researcher sets the agenda. Conversation is a back and forth exchange of ideas that are expressed spontaneously and freely and the persons involved have an equal partnership with each other. The greatest difference between conversation and interviews is the issue of power. Typically there is an inherent inequality in power and status between researchers and participants (Marx, 2001) and that mandates an ethical dimension in the interview process, which will be discussed in a subsequent section.

Listening well means not letting anything get in the way of hearing what the participants had to say. That required discipline on my part, and being consciously aware of the impulse to speak, interrupt, and interject ideas. It was important for me to be aware of my own gestures, grimaces, nods, moving about in the chair, or sighs. Even coughing and sneezing can impact the participant, and the capacity to listen well in the interview. Any such small response can also potentially influence the participant's responses (Siedman, 2006).

The open-ended questions I asked had to be timed right. I had to be sensitive to where the participant was in the telling of his or her *story* before I explored further. Any probing was done in response to the participant and in the moment. Attentive listening helped me identify the participants' need for *space to talk*, which enabled the participants to explore their experience at a deeper level and enabled me to become more open to their experience. As Kvale (2008) noted, when a researcher is open toward the participant's experience and a participant is freely sharing their experience "the researcher becomes absorbed in their lifeworld" (p. 126).

I thought about the question of whether listening is an art or listening is a science. I found both to be true. I recognized that listening well as an art and as a science depended primarily on the relationship between the participants and me. I saw it in this context. The art of listening induced in the participant a sense and feeling of being heard, a sense that what's being said was important to me, a sense that their story had value. The art of listening created an atmosphere (during the interviews) of trust, empathy and engagement. The science of listening held that respect, beneficence, self-determination and confidentiality were foundational to the relationship between the participants and me.

Though the line between listening as an art and listening as a science is often blurred, the reality is that within the realm of data collection listening is a critical aspect of the collection process.

The crux of the listening encounter as I saw it was in developing and maintaining a listening ethic - listening in an ethical manner. That became the

underpinnings of the researcher-participant relationship throughout the in depth interviewing. Listening in an ethical manner obliged me to strive to understand (listen to) the participant's own understanding of his or her experience. That meant that I refrained from imposing my own understanding and meaning onto the participants.

I can infer from Catherine's comments that I abided by that ethic:

I thought the interview relationship was very professional. I felt that you were trying to get my information and not **bias me** into the answer that you wanted. I experienced you as **being** non judgmental and so I was able to say what I was **thinking**. In fact my ideas of the forgiveness experience drove the interview and I basically recall me and not you. (Catherine, 2010).

This illustrated unconditional regard for the participants by the researcher and authenticated the participant's experience. More importantly it built the trust necessary for the participants to freely communicate their experience to me. Listeners (researchers) need to communicate to the speaker (participants) that they are involved and are giving the person unconditional attention (Levitt, 2001).

## Encounter with Reliability and Validity

I keep concerning myself with rigor. The word is burned into my mind. I get tense thinking about it. Perhaps I should have done a quantitative study. Then I could have started with an answer and applied variables. I could have measured the variables with math, some statistical formulas or better yet have gotten a statistical analysis done by a statistician- then reliability and validity could have been calculated. But oh no, I went for the *WORDS* instead of *NUMBERS* and so I have to struggle with rigor and it's all hazy and seems so illusive to me. I mean I have to rely upon myself, just me, totally myself to do this thing called rigor in order to have a valid study. It's unbelievably terrifying. And daunting. Will I ever trust my own assumptions - relying only on myself, my words, my thoughts with no math to back me up?  
(Reflective Note, K. Leo, May, 2009)

The principles of validity and reliability are fundamental cornerstones of scientific method. Those principles are primarily characteristic within the positivistic paradigm. Quantitative researchers are usually concerned with two questions: are we measuring what we think we are measuring; and can the findings be replicated and yield consistent scores? Naturalistic researchers are concerned with trustworthiness. When the research goal is to provide a detailed description of an individual's experience derived from a narrative, using in-depth interviewing, the focus is not measurement but description. *Description* then becomes the cornerstone of the scientific method for qualitative researchers. Thus, the primary concern of the

qualitative researcher is the question of whether the accounts and description generated from the interviews are valid and accurate portrayals of reality and obtained in a trustworthy manner. The purpose of the in-depth interview study is to “understand the experience... not predict or to control that experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 22).

Qualitative researchers are not concerned with replication and generalizability as a standard for the quality of a study. There is a key distinction between *statistical generalization*, which is found in quantitative findings when research is drawn from a random sample, and *analytic generalization* when research findings are predicated on obtaining a great depth, and richness of details and understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 1999). Seidman (2006) noted, “The job of an in-depth interviewer is to go to such depth in the interviews that surface considerations of representativeness and generalizability are replaced by compelling evocation of an individual’s experience”(p. 51). However, this does not mean that results from a qualitative study cannot be generalized. In qualitative research, generalizability is known as transferability (Guba & Lincoln 1989). Richly described data or sufficient contextual information can provide researchers with enough information to judge the “fittingness” of applying the findings to other settings.

*Fittingness* will be contingent upon producing thick descriptions of the data, based on the inclusion of the widest possible range of information. The three-interview series allowed each participant to fully explain his/her experience and thus produce the desired description I sought. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress that it is

not the qualitative researcher's "responsibility to provide index of transferability; it is his or her responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers" (p. 316). The goal is to provide transferable findings, within the context of the research. However, the goal of this study and the primary goal of qualitative research is not generalizability of findings because generalizability is not a primary goal of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Analyzing the Research Process**

I analyzed the research process after all my interviews were completed. I found it beneficial to analyze the process retrospectively going back a few months and really looking at some of the issues I had encountered and how these issues impacted the research, the interviews (data collection), the participants and me. As I explored these issues I noted whatever else emerged in my thinking.

During the interviews the participants and their well being were always at the forefront of anything I did. The interviews were intense. They were emotional. They were engaging. They were intimate. Kvale (1996), referred to the interviewing experience as *magical*, and I agree. Additionally, the interviews required concentration, preparation, organization, and fascination. I was fascinated, the state of my being intensely interested in what the participants were saying about their experience. And unequivocally a researcher needs to be poised, gentle, considerate, quietly calm, attentive, and be comfortable with silence. The interview process was multidimensional.

I had to listen, hear, and retain hundreds of words without reflection during the interviews. For these reasons I would not have been able to fully analyze the research process while living it. That is not to say that I did not recognize the mistakes I made at the time during the six months of collecting data. For example, on my first interview after checking and rechecking my equipment, arriving at the location where the interview was to take place one hour early, having in my possession two back-ups of triple A batteries and an adapter (just –in-case), I found out after the interview when I was in my car ready to go home, that I never got one word of that interview. With embarrassment gone and tears dried I came next time with a new machine, a quite simple one, and a back- up recorder.

One of the other mistakes I made early in the data collection was in assuming that knowing the transgression that occurred in the marriage was crucial to understanding the experience of forgiving. With the first participant, Frank, throughout the three interviews, and convinced I needed this information, I was unrelenting asking in as many different ways as possible “what was the transgression?” I extracted this one sentence from Frank’s (2009) critique of my interviewing techniques: “I found her (interviewer) to be at times relentless, to the point of at times making me feel a bit uncomfortable.” Although Frank did not specifically mention the word transgression, I know he was referring to my being relentless in trying to get him to discuss the transgression.

I quickly learned that knowing the transgression was inconsequential to the experience of forgiving in the marital relationship and in my following interviews it

was little mentioned. More importantly, I learned that relentless was not how I wanted to be conducting my interviews.

### **Gender Difference**

I spent time reflecting on whether there were differences interviewing the male participants from interviewing the female participants. If I think of it rationally and intellectually, I would probably say no there was no difference. But if I reflect upon how I *felt* during the interviews, I would have to affirm that there was a difference. First of all I was in relatively close proximity with all the participants while interviewing but with the men I was more conscious of the distance between us. Understanding the rules of personal space where a man and woman would have a larger space between them and woman-to-woman a smaller and closer together space brought me to a greater self-awareness of the physical distance between the male participants and myself.

I always looked directly at the participants during the interviews, giving them my full attention and frequently giving eye contact especially when they were discussing their feelings about forgiving and when I asked questions. I was a little uneasy with that during the interviews with the two male participants I interviewed because there was an intimacy that already existed, intrinsically associated with the topic. As the men confided their most personal information to me I knew that the trusting relationship had been established.



Throughout the interviews I was very mindful of the gender difference. This awareness caused me to be conscious of my movements and gestures as I focused more on the researcher - participant role with the men than I did with the female participants. It seemed that the *role* was somewhat more conventional, slightly more formal, than with the women. When interviewing the female participants, this same set of circumstances created a bond, which seemed natural and typical. I noted that there was nothing during the interviews with the men that indicated that my feeling had any impact on them.

The women interviewees' were relaxed and appeared to be at ease during the interviews. I felt relaxed and at ease too. Two had their legs curled up on the chair, one female participant had her feet stretched out over a chair, and another had her hands wrapped around her knees, shoes kicked off. One sat in a slightly reclined position.

All the women had coffee, soft drinks or water including me. Some munched on food and enjoyed the comfort of the notion that talking and eating go together. It all seemed natural. It was two women together, close, one was talking about forgiving in the marriage, one was listening and immersed in what the other had to say. It felt natural and at ease. Although, I was also intently interested in what the men had to say and was attentive to them, it felt different and I am not sure I can

identify that difference. I can say there was a camaraderie with the women interviewees that did not exist with the men.

I also want to note that one of the male interviewees did eat at each interview. I did not. Perhaps that was keeping it a little more formal. There may be other differences but most probably very subtle ones and too subtle to identify.

### **Gender Differences, Bias and Subjectivity**

Did the feelings I experienced while interviewing the men affect the interviews and the data collected? I do not speak with the voice of an experienced researcher but I can speak to what I did experience during the research process particularly during interviewing. I can also speak with the voice of knowledge and professional capabilities as a psychotherapist, and it is in recognizing these skills that I responded to the matter of the validity of the interviews.

With the knowledge of the importance of the study's credibility and subjectivity in my thoughts at all times, it was my professional know-how that eased the way to exploring the conscious subjective aspects of my feelings and emotions as it related to the gender differences while interviewing. I *worked through* uncertainties about whether my way of thinking and feeling would contaminate the male interviews by confronting myself with these issues. In psychoanalytic terms this would be considered analysis of my countertransference, which I believe can be invaluable for addressing bias and subjectivity with in-depth interviewing.

Countertransference as well as therapist-researcher roles will be discussed later. When we have accurate knowledge about the factors that can influence the relationship between the researcher and the participant and reflect back on underlying feelings and their meanings the quality of our studies greatly improves (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1992).

Qualitative researchers have had to deal with the complaint that attitudes and prejudices of the researcher can easily bias the data (Bogdan & Bilkan, 1998). Being involved with the qualitative research process, I understood that this encounter with my emotions, preconceptions, beliefs, values, impressions, my past and present, all parts of my humanness, were also imbedded in this research process. These aspects were not to be separated, denied or covered over, but be accepted as being part of myself, the same self that also recognized that I was the *research instrument* (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Piantanida & Garman, 1999; Patton, 2002; Ely, et al., 2006). Unlike pulling a question or two from a survey, these features of me would be ever present in the data collection and analysis, the reflective notes, and the researcher -participant relationship. In a sense, that same humanness can be both a strength and a weakness in the research process.

I continually grappled with the concept of objectivity and its importance in qualitative research. Researcher bias and subjectivity in qualitative research are commonly understood as unavoidable and inevitable. When too much effort is focused on achieving objectivity, credibility may be lost. Patton (1990) noted that research strategies ultimately need to be credible to be useful. Centering attention on

objectivity counteracts the acceptance that the researcher is fallible, will make mistakes, and that there is some paradigm that can eliminate bias. For me to focus on credibility and not objectivity meant reflecting, analyzing my feelings and reactions (using logs) and talking about my concerns including what I felt were differences between interviewing men and interviewing women. Ely et al. (2006) posits, "The log is the place where the researcher faces the self as instrument through a personal dialogue about hunches, feelings, insights, assumptions, biases, and ongoing ideas about method" (p. 69). Embracing this approach as well as confronting my feelings (in this case how I felt about the differences between interviewing men and women) enabled me to transcend my feelings and gave me awareness of the potential for bias during the interviews.

### **Countertransference**

My professional abilities and knowledge positively affected my data collection and also assisted in helping me work through my subjectivity, feelings, biases and attitudes. As a trained analyst I am familiar with the concept of countertransference and was able to use this to enhance the trustworthiness of the research.

Countertransference is a concept that refers to all of the "therapist's personal responses to the patient" (Gaylin, 2001, p. 76). The therapist's experience of countertransference recognizes that unconscious processes affect the therapist as well as the patient. Its presence acknowledges that the therapist is not a neutral expert and

that understanding his or her unconscious attitudes should be an ongoing continuous part of the therapist's everyday practice.

Countertransference leads to a greater understanding of the therapeutic relationship (Giarni, 2001, p. 3). As a therapist I must always be aware of my own emotional responses to my patients and I must self analyze these feelings "in order to discover as much as [I] can about why they (my feelings) are being elicited"(Gaylin, 2001, p.77). Moreover I do not seek to eliminate my own feelings toward patients, but employ them in the therapeutic process as a reflected subjectivity. This is the essence of countertransference. Likewise, as a researcher, I did not seek to eliminate my own feelings toward participants but employed those feelings in the research process.

In theory whether you are conducting a research inquiry or providing psychotherapy to an individual, both are inherently subjective tasks that cannot be done neutrally. Both therapist and researcher must be cognizant of their own feelings in order to make certain that they do not interfere with the research in one case or therapy in the other case. Just as a psychotherapist learns to recognize and use his or her own feelings beneficially, researchers can utilize their personal feelings to benefit themselves, the participants and their research. All fields of scientific practice, considered as a human and social activity, involve the subjective influence of the researcher and therefore need to take account of countertransference.

If we take our partiality as researchers, the fact that we always influence the direction of our work, indeed, that our work is in many ways an expression of who we are and who we are becoming, we can interact with our connection to the research not as a liability to be guarded against, but as an opportunity to make the research more meaningful by more fully appreciating our part as researchers, in it (Haskell, Linds, & Ippolito, 2002, para 2).

Piantanida and Garman (1999) noted, "...the researcher is as much a part of the inquiry as the intent of the study and the inquiry process. In fact, *the researcher's thinking* lies at the heart of the inquiry" (p. 24).

Qualitative inquiry is *subjective* and therefore will have a proclivity toward bias. I understood that and guarded against my own biases by being vigilant but I also understood that there were no set rules for judging the validity of my inquiry, nor were there procedures or formulas. I did have a good understanding of the potential sources of my bias and some part of that understanding centered on my responding favorably to the notion of subjectivity. I believed my subjectivity opened opportunities for my *knowing* and helped me see that feeling connected to my research and to the participants was an asset. At the same time, my thinking on the question of objectivity follows what Haskell, Linds and Ippolito (2002, para 1) put forth that "A purely objective approach to qualitative research is impossible," and a "logic of objectivity," is unproductive.

Having the knowledge that countertransference was present during the interviews and having the ability to analyze it, helped me to confront the emotional nature and responses that I experienced during the interviews as well as the means I used to examine and explore my own subjectiveness.

To continue the process of analyzing the interview encounter with the participants and the research process required another course of action. When I had strong feelings resulting from an interview, without divulging the participant's name or identifying information, I would discuss these feelings with a trained therapist. This was another way for me to limit bias, as I strived to achieve trustworthiness.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

#### Getting to Know the Participants

A small, relatively homogenous sample of nine individuals participated in this study and they were located in a similar geographic area. Denzin and Lincoln (2002) recommend as few as three and no more than ten participants for phenomenological investigation. There were seven women and two men who shared their experiences of forgiving in the marital relationship. All the participants had experienced forgiving in their marriage. In addition, the participants identified themselves as heterosexual, were legally married for five years or more and spoke and expressed themselves in English. These were the required inclusion criteria.

The success of the interviewing process lay entirely on the basic conditions of how the details of the lived experience of *forgiving in marriage* were recounted to me by the participants. In essence there had to be an appropriate depth of factual knowledge when participants narrated their experience and they had to be able to access and fluently communicate that knowledge. It became clear to me that there is such a thing as *participant qualifications* for individuals being interviewed in a phenomenological study. There needed to be and was a certain amount of organization of ideas, using appropriate language, understanding metaphors, and



expressing thoughts with a fluency and coherency during the narration of the participants' stories. All of the participants in this study were adept and qualified to articulate their stories and strived for *narrative probability*, a story that makes sense, and *narrative fidelity*, a story consistent with past experiences and they [were] able to fluently access that knowledge (Sandelowski, 1991). I attribute this to the fact that all the participants in the study were educated and most were professionals. One participant had a PhD and was an author, four held graduate degrees, two were artists, one participant was an engineer, and one participant worked at a financial institute.

Sandelowski (1991) notes that participants have to "in a *remember moment* (Spence, 1982, p 31) strive to achieve the most internally consistent interpretation of the past-in-the-present" (p. 165). This was achieved as all the participants were able to reach inside themselves and consistently interpret their past during the interviewing process.

Descriptions of participants can take many forms. As I struggled with trying to describe the participants in my own words, nothing seemed adequate. How would I be able to bring the reader into their lives and give them a sense of who the participants were? Bearing in mind writing is one way for participants to express themselves by giving the researcher their words in an exact form (Gilbert, 1993; Oskowitz & Meulenberg-Buskens, 1997), I decided to use the participants' own written words, a direct reflection on their thoughts and experiences.

Additionally, I identified three themes, *Voices*, *Vow*, *Value*, which capture elements of the participant's humanness and ultimately provided insight into the participants' experience of forgiving. The hope is that the reader will get a greater sense of who the participants are, their childhoods, their struggles, their commitment to their marriages, and where their ideas of forgiving originated.

## Participants at Time of Interview (January to June 2009)

| Name<br>Age of Participant | Years of<br>Marriage | Religious<br>Affiliation           | Gender |
|----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|--------|
| Cindy 41                   | 13                   | Episcopalian                       | F      |
| Catherine 50               | 27                   | Catholic                           | F      |
| Theresa 51                 | 27                   | Jewish converted to<br>Catholicism | F      |
| Cece 54                    | 32                   | Christian                          | F      |
| Amanda 41                  | 16                   | Native American<br>Spirituality    | F      |
| Frank 57                   | 12                   | Catholic                           | M      |
| Sarah 57                   | 36                   | Catholic                           | F      |
| Frances 65                 | 42                   | Catholic                           | F      |
| Ray 69                     | 28                   | Agnostic                           | M      |

### Voices, Vow, Value

Three themes, voices, vow and value, portray the essence of the participants' lives and help to describe the participants' personal life stories (voice), their beliefs about marriage (vow), and the importance of forgiving in their lives (value). For each of these themes a well known musical piece captures the essence of the theme.

#### Voices

*Hero*, by Mariah Carey captures the essence of the theme Voices. Each of the participants emerged as a hero in their own life after encountering and overcoming difficult and painful circumstances.

#### Hero Mariah Carey



*And then a hero comes along  
With the strength to carry on  
And you cast your fears aside  
And you know you can survive.  
So when you feel like hope is gone  
Look inside you and be strong  
And you'll finally see the truth  
That a hero lies in you.*

The voice of Sarah

Hi my name is Sarah. When I was born it must have been a beautiful day. I was here. I was perfect and my mom told me I was always happy and I was always a bounce-back kid. And she was right. I was.

At six months old I got bacterial meningitis. I made it through, though. That was probably the first step to being a strong person. I lived! That's strength. I needed the strength to go through the many things I went through; and the many things that were ahead for me when I got married.

I have two brothers, two sisters. There were seven in the family. Two died. One died of brain cancer when she was seven years old. She was waked in the house. I still remember it – sometimes I think - I wonder what she would be today. I miss her. My younger brother died also when he was two years old of bronchial asthma.

I remember early on I came from a pretty well to do family until my father got caught. He owned his own business a tow trucking business; but he did something very wrong. He was paying off the cops to give him the business so he could get the buzz on where the accidents were happening. He got caught. He was arrested and put in protective custody because he probably would have been killed since he had to name names.

That was pretty big stuff happening when I was 5 years old. I remember a newspaper reporter jumping high up to get a good view through our window to take pictures of us kids. I remember that. Sitting here I think that was pretty exciting for a 5 year old.  
(Sarah, July, 2010)

Voice of Sarah continued:

My father sold the business got the money and drank it down at the local bar. I remember I went with him. I loved it when I went to the bar with him. I always got a coke with a cherry in the glass. It was like heaven here on earth. But things got worse. The drinking increased and every thing went down hill from there. And life went on.

It was pretty clear looking back on those many years that I went through so much. I grew up in a very painful family. I went through an alcoholic father and a very depressed mother. She was good. He wasn't. Most of the time she was tired. I think I was too but maybe I didn't know it. My father use to beat the children. He used to beat her up. We'd be running to my grandmother's house once a week at 2:00 in the morning because he was kicking us out and beating us up. I recall the beatings with his fists and his big belt with the large buckle.

I was in the hospital twice when I was very small because he threw a beer bottle at my head and I got stitches. Another time, he knocked me down a flight of stairs after blasting me with a bat. I can still remember. That was pretty hard to handle. My mother was beaten, my two sisters were beaten, my younger brother was abused and I remember my younger brother sleeping under the bed or in a closet and he was told terrible things. I'm glad my brother's alive today; he's my favorite sibling.

I recall my father throwing plates at my mother and also in my face; terrible things like cutting her up with can openers, punching her in the face; really bad things. It's funny he was a very nice guy 40 days out of the year and that was during Lent. Don't ask me why but he didn't drink for 40 days, he just gave up drinking. Lent was his fast. As soon as Easter Sunday rolled around, he was drunk again until the next Lent.

But one thing I can say is we always had a Christmas tree in by 11:30 pm. even though it was stolen from the corner because the man who sold trees on the corner went home. Who wants a tree at almost midnight? We did – a Christmas tree for Christmas. And my mother she was shopping for toys at 10:30 at night so we could have a nice Christmas. I don't know maybe it was a lousy life but it was what it was. (Sarah, July, 2010)

### The voice of Frances

In a sense, I feel my life is very sad. I've been handicapped because of the fact of suffering with obsessive-compulsive disorder. I mean, it all started in my family of origin because my mom had a major inferiority complex and I had an inferiority complex too. I mean, I guess obsessive-compulsive disorder was in the family because my sister and brother and I all suffer from it.

I would say probably when I was like maybe 6, 7, 8 that's when it [OCD] started, and especially it was tied in with my religious background. I became scrupulous. Both my sister and I suffered from scrupulosity as far as our religion went. And I don't know whom I feared most, God or my mother. It was a tie. So I remember growing up, being scared. I was afraid because of the obsessive-compulsive disorder and all the thoughts that went through my mind. And I was very fearful of going to hell, and I was fearful of my mother, fearful of a lack of approval, like I wanted approval so desperately from my mother.

My mom was strict and kind of harsh; but also loving. She was strict and harsh and loving, all at the same time and my mother was also very critical of me. I became rebellious, but my brother and sister were both very compliant. They did everything my mother wanted. I kind of turned outward from the family, and I used to go out to Long Island to my aunt, and I used to feel more comfortable out there because she was very accepting of me. And we used to sit up at night and talk about boyfriends. She'd recite poetry and sang songs and she just was fun. My mother wasn't fun. My aunt was the most loving person.

My mother and father did not have that good of a life themselves because they lived in my grandmother's house. They were tenants, and we lived in three rooms. And as much as they loved each other, and they did love each other very much, my mother was the boss, my father was the compliant one, except when he'd have a few drinks, and then he'd go after her, like strangle her. But my mother was domineering, and I guess maybe when I married my husband, I went from one domineering person to another, although I didn't know he was domineering at the time. I just thought he was a macho man.

There's a lot of sadness in this story because of the fact of suffering with OCD, which hampered my ability to make the best decisions for myself including decisions in my marriage. At the time I married I was pregnant with my first child my daughter and therefore I didn't really make a free open decision to marry. I felt pressured. In those days 44 years ago, for me there was no other way to go.

So I entered the marriage in trepidation; with shame and guilt and fear of being found out – being exposed to my relatives, friends, and neighbors; and especially since I was a college graduate, a school teacher, a product of 16 years of Catholic education and a professional who should have behaved more prudently. So that's how I began my marriage. These are some of the difficulties I've lived with but I have endured and in the process have come to a loving acceptance of myself. (Frances, August, 2010).

## The voice of Cece

I'm 54 years old and from way back when, I was just one of those thinkers. Not really like the other teenage girls. I was fat. I grew up fat. I was a fat little toddler, an overweight teenager, and a fat adult. I wasn't worried about going to the prom or anything like that because I knew I wasn't going to the prom. I've always been semi-introverted. When I was younger, I was much more introverted; and probably depressed.

My father was from a large Italian family and my mother just had a brother and when I was eight years old they got divorced. They were married for 19 years. That was a big deal to me. It was like the universe exploded when that happened. My father would not move out of the house because it was his house that he built with his own two hands.

My mother had to take us kids and leave. We went to her mother and father's house, which was in the same town, but it might as well have been on Mars. It was very difficult for my sister and also my brother who suffered with schizophrenia and later died. For me it was especially painful and left me wounded.

I lived with my grandparents. They were good people. I loved them. My grandmother was very religious. She was a good Methodist woman, schoolteacher, choir leader, and with a very strong personality. She liked to read. I loved to read. We both always loved reading and learning. I think she gave me my interest in religion, which I studied later in college.

My mother was a refined young lady, educated and kind of genteel. My father was certainly not refined and not educated. It's not just that he was uneducated. He was uncouth. He acted like a lunatic at times, and he had a very bad temper. (Cece, April, 2009)



The voice of Cece continued:

My grandmother didn't like him at all. I used to wonder, 'How did these two get together?' I think my mother married him to spite my grandmother. It was never anything I asked my mother. We just didn't talk about those things. I guess if she was alive now, I'd ask her, but they were just so different as night and day.

There was progressive arguing and jealousy and womanizing. Finding the earrings in the car that didn't belong to my mother. I know she said there were a couple of women my father had made advances toward and that sort of thing. That was all going on. I don't know how many years. They'd argue, and it was violent and so frightening.

My father was a hunter, trap shooter, and plenty of shotguns in the house. On at least one occasion, I remember a shotgun coming out during an argument. My sister used to take my brother and me into our bedroom, or sometimes we'd go across the street to the neighbor's house while they were arguing. It was really hard because we didn't talk about our feelings in my family. You didn't talk about it at all, no matter what you were feeling.

You hear kids that are so relieved that they're not there with the arguing anymore, and they're glad the parents split up so they don't have to be subjected to that. I never felt that way. I felt like I didn't want to leave my house. I didn't care that they were arguing. I just wanted to be back home, but that was never to be.

There was a certain amount of resentment towards my father for that and for being a bastard and not doing the right thing. He did it to be spiteful to my mother. A lot of things I hated him for. Then I always loved him. It's like, damn. We always hate these parents, but we still love them. I ought to hate this guy's guts, but for some reason, I loved him. (Cece, April, 2009).

The voice of Theresa

My name is Theresa and I'm 51 years old. I was born into a broken home. My father left my mother during her pregnancy with me when she was 19 years old and I think he was 11 years older. We went to live with my grandmother. I grew up with my mother, my grandmother, and my brother and basically, my grandmother raised me. I had no cousins either because my mother didn't have any brothers or sisters.

My grandmother was angry at my mother because she didn't want her to marry this man, and now there were two babies. So my grandmother was always angry. My grandmother was always talking bad about my mother, and my mother was always talking bad about my grandmother. And my brother and I felt very neglected. We were in the midst of hiding from a very early age, and feeling like we were the cause of all this turmoil. It was painful – I had a very painful childhood. And there was no love.

One thing I can say about myself is that I come from a world where there was no forgiveness and that pain brought me and made me what I am today. I can remember throughout my childhood always feeling rejected by my mother and for good reason. Both my brother and I knew and she often told us 'I should have never had you' I never felt like she cared about me.

And when I think about my childhood, all I feel is pain. I'm being very honest. All I feel is pain. Even when I was older and an adult my mother said 'You're no good' and I remember I went into such a depression. I had deep feelings of rejection and still fight these feelings today.

And I ended up in a marriage where I felt the same way like I'm worthless. My brother wound up having a nervous breakdown at a very early age and was hospitalized. But I was a fighter. I was a fighter. I wouldn't give in. I didn't give in.

(Theresa, September, 2010).

## Vow

Implicit in the dialogue from the interviews was the notion that the words the participants uttered in their marriage ceremony expressed a *vow* of permanency (Lauer, 1992). The sacredness of the promise they made points to their belief that when they entered the marital state they had an expectation of permanency which was supported by their commitment to their marriage vows. The likelihood was they did not view their marriage in the legal sense of a contract but rather in a spiritual sense where marriage is considered a covenant, which is not to be dissolved. The Christian view of marriage as a sacrament also points to the sacredness of the vow (Leo, K. (Interviewer ) & (Interviewee) Rev. Swift, D., Pastor, April 5, 2011).

All of the participants saw marriage as a commitment to their spouse, before God, and even if they had disbelief in God, before family, relatives and friends. The following dialogue illustrates that the participants consider their marriage vow to be a commitment, a promise, as well as a lifetime relationship. The Gershwin's' song *Love Is Here To Stay*, captures the essence of their beliefs.

### Love Is Here To Stay

Words by Ira Gershwin and Music by George Gershwin



*It's very clear; our love is here to stay  
 Not for a year but ever and a day  
 In time the Rockies may crumble  
 Gibraltar may tumble  
 They're only made of clay  
 But our love is here to stay*

Frank expressed it in these words:

“I think those vows did mean something to me - ‘in sickness and health’ - ya know. I mean I don’t think marriage is just ‘I’ll stay married to you if everything is hunky –dory’. I don’t think **that’s** really the essence of it.” (2009).

While Amanda lamented:

“I haven't ever had anything that difficult in my life [my marriage], but that's actually not true at all. But the other things, I was able to leave. Whereas, this was my marriage, and I just didn't wanna leave” (2009).

Theresa conveyed her commitment to marriage with this statement:

“And I want my marriage to work, regardless of whatever happens” (2009). I didn’t want my marriage to break up (2010).

Frances affirmed the sacramental nature of marriage:

“Throughout the marriage I was conflicted by thoughts of leaving but I realized the sanctity of marriage due to my Catholic faith and being married in the Church. I mean, ... I wasn’t happy, and because of my religion, there was no turning back.” (2009, 2010).

Both Catherine and Cece articulated their belief in commitment and permanency by speaking out against divorce.

Catherine - “I even remember saying, “I’m not going to get divorced. Divorce is not an option. That’s not an acceptable event in my family” (2009).

And

Cece – “It was very important to me – given my childhood and my arguing parents and the[ir] messy divorce ... it was very important to me not to be divorced – just even thinking I had to get a divorce was enough to make me a nervous wreck. I just couldn’t cope with the thought of being divorced.” (2009).

Cece's strong feelings from her early childhood experience with divorce may have greatly influenced her to remain in the marriage if she and her husband had had children - that wasn't the case. It's most likely that CeeCee believed that marriage was a commitment of permanency.

Ray conveyed his commitment with this statement:

**"I was willing to do anything. We moved. I got her the house she wanted. I wanted her happy. I wanted our marriage to work."**  
(2009).

Cindy responded to a question about forgiving her husband that illustrates her thoughts about marriage.

Interviewer: Does this experience that you had of forgiving your husband - is it about, maybe, keeping the marriage, the sanctity of marriage? Or is it about some ideal that you have about people stay together? Or is it, 'I'll be there for the kids, and in order to do that, I need to forgive'? (2009).

Cindy: No. Not the kids. I would say its about - more on – its the sanctity part because, to me, when you get married, you make a promise to God. It's a promise to God that you are making. (2009).

And finally, Sarah briefly noted, "I think about the marriage vow as me, him, and God." (2009).

**Value**

In this third and last theme the focus of the participants' dialogue centers on where their personal beliefs about forgiving originated. The popular song from West Side Story captures the essence of their deeply held beliefs about forgiving.

**(West Side Story, 1961)**

Music by Leonard Bernstein; lyrics by Stephen Sondheim



*Someday!*

*Somewhere.*

*We'll find a new way of living,*

*We'll find a way of forgiving*

*Somewhere.*

Cindy stated it simply:

“My mother ...she was a very forgiving person. I think that’s where it stems from for me. That’s where I get it from. I get it from her” (2009).

Also in a simple manner, Amanda affirmed;

“Forgiveness was looked at as the ideal. I grew up in a family where people would say they were sorry.” (2009).

Frances pulled the value of forgiving from both her family, her religion, and her Catholic school education.

Interviewer: “Where do you think you got your ideas about forgiving?”

Frances: “Probably from my religion, I would say.”

Interviewer: “Did you go to Catholic school?” The participant indicated that she went to Catholic school through college. “So [do] you think that's the formation of it?”

Frances: “Probably. And, I mean, as a child, ..even though my mother was harsh and strict, I'm sure she forgave me for my mishaps - and so forth. And, I mean, I had a very extremely loving father. I mean, I'm sure I learned it in the home, as well – but even more so in my religious education.

Some participants did not experience forgiving while growing up.



Catherine has this to say:

My upbringing wasn't about forgiveness. I was raised Irish Catholic, in a loving family; Mom, Dad, a bunch of brothers and sisters, but forgiveness came as an adult for me. Because I kind of thought that if you did something wrong, that's it. And I think that might be somewhat Irish – of Irish decent. And I'm so glad you asked the question, Kathy because I didn't - it never would have occurred to me the reason why I had such a hard time with forgiveness.

And I think a huge struggle that you're bringing out for me right now was like, 'why was this [forgiving] so hard'? But your question makes me today realize why it was so hard - because forgiveness wasn't part of the game. You did something wrong – I mean I lived in sort of a little bit of fear.

I mean fearful because I had to do the right thing. I am a really good girl. In front of you is a good girl. I am the best girl, or person, out of nine brothers and sisters. I was the best because I got that message clearly. I had to follow the line, toe the line, and my – internaliz[ation] – although it wasn't the truth – was I wasn't gonna be loved, I wasn't gonna be accepted if I didn't follow the rules.

So I think that - then we fast forward - ... I couldn't forgive him [my husband] because there is no such thing as forgiveness. You can't forgive somebody - once you've made a mistake, once you've done something wrong, there is no forgiveness. And so I think how I was raised caused this difficultness that I had with the forgiveness.

And I thank you for that question because that's it in a nutshell. I think for me, there is no - you don't forgive. You screw up, someone hurts you, and that's it. You know? There is no going back. That was the belief system.

When I think about how close I was to ruining something [marriage] because I was hurt and angry because you don't forgive because that's your story. Someone hurts you - you don't forgive them. They're a son of a bitch. And you're gonna get them to the grave, no matter how big or how small" (2009).

When Catherine was growing up her brother had hurt her deeply. It may have been an act of prankishness or it may have been a deliberate act. Her other siblings were also aware of this and did not intervene perhaps because as children they were not sensitive to it. It was only when Catherine was an adult that she realized the full impact of her brother's action.

What is seen in the following dialogue points to the positive outcome of that incident. During a lunch date with her mother, Catherine moved from a place where "forgiveness wasn't the game" to a place where she learned to forgive.

Catherine: So I called to meet her [Mother] that Friday. Everything she said was what I wanted her to say – And she said those words. ' I'm sorry, please forgive me' because of her allowing a sign in the basement."

Catherine speaking: She said, 'I didn't know, I didn't know. It never registered, and if I knew it - at that moment I would have stopped it. I would have. I kept thinking, why did I allow that? Forgive me.' She said, 'Forgive me.'

Catherine: I said can't, 'Can't we just blame Joey he was responsible? She said, 'That was a childish prank. I was your mother. I shouldn't have allowed it. I'm sorry.'

Catherine: "Retrospectively, now that I think of it, it gave me permission to go out and forgive, because I was still in the middle of this big old hate at that time. I was still really pissed off at him [husband]].

But the fact is that she did it, my mother asked for forgiveness. I think about it, she asked me to forgive her. She said those words, she said, "Please forgive me. My mother .. came to me and apologized to me. [My] mother allowed forgiveness - she said she was sorry.

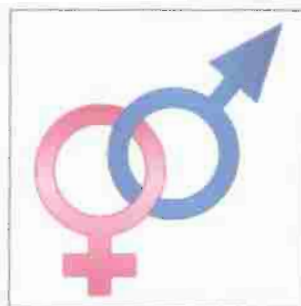
- Catherine                    “I remember after that whole experience, I was sitting and saying – I was crying. It was really good for me. She showed me how to forgive.”
- Interviewer:                “And gave you permission to forgive by her own example.”
- Catherine:                    “Yes. Absolutely. Living in action. [My] mother allowed forgiveness - she said she was sorry” (2009).

In summary, the three themes, *voices*, *vow*, *value*, describe the participants' personal stories, identifies their belief in the commitment to their marital vows and the promise of permanency, and explores the value they placed on forgiving. All these qualities became foundational to the ways in which the experience of forgiving unfolded in their lives.

I didn't start my marriage under the best circumstances. I was afraid of being alone. I was afraid I wouldn't find someone I could love. I was afraid because of anxiety and I was pregnant. After dating a 1½ years, I wasn't sure I loved him, and - I married him.. So it started with shame and guilt and loneliness, an emotionally abusive and very critical husband – but I think he loved me very much, and he still does. (Frances)

When we got married, I was three months pregnant although we had gone together for five years. We had a big beautiful church wedding. My family wanted me to have an abortion but I didn't do it. So the baby was born, and he was healthy and fine. Then when he was 11 ½ months old he died. I think sometimes that the choices that you make also kick you in the behind. Maybe starting out that way was a bad omen. I just don't know. But I think because of my husband's unfaithfulness, it seemed that way. (Sarah, 2009)

Our marriage is really different right now. It's very comfortable in a good way. I can go to him. I can talk to him. We don't argue or whatever. I really, really love him and I can see that now. He's a gift from God, and our relationship is 100 percent God. So that holding onto the pissedoffness that I needed to hold onto – is gone. (Catherine, 2009)



We were making love maybe two or three times a year. Then it was zero for seven years. I didn't like living without sex. But, I can live without sex. So I just let it go. (Amanda, 2009)

I think there's a strong bond but there's a lot of tension around finance. My wife seems to get into one financial jam, after another. I would tap into my reserves and scoop into my pension and some money - I got out of my father's inheritance; some I borrowed from my brother. So I think it was constantly this sorta - I was being tapped to assist her with her money crisis, to bail her out. I just began to feel that the marriage was not a real genuine partnership. (Frank)

I was really unhappy. He ran for the Board and won along with his running mate, who was a woman. They went to everything together. They just got to be quite a pair. I was really mad. I didn't blame her, necessarily. It seemed to me like even if it wasn't an affair of the flesh; it was an affair of the heart. I felt like he was being unfaithful. (Cece.)

## CHAPTER V

### Findings

#### Getting To Know the Phenomenon

##### Themes

Three themes emerged in the analysis: broken heart, change of heart, and healing heart.

##### Broken heart

All the participants felt that they had had their heart broken. It did not matter if the event was big or small. It did not matter if there was a major transgression or not. All of the participants experienced deep pain and emotions of anger, rage, and hate as a result of being wronged. The findings suggest these emotions are an integral, if not necessary, part of the process that ultimately led to forgiving.

While the presenting emotions associated with the deep pain and hurt felt by the participants were anger, rage and hate, what became evident through the interview process was that participants unearthed and described other feelings. Loss, rejection and betrayal were more associated with anger. Helplessness and insignificance seemed linked to rage. Powerlessness, loneliness and isolation were related to hate. These were not discriminate emotions.

These sets of emotions – anger, rage and hate – had a cumulative effect where one emotion set off a chain of events for the others. The participants described these emotions occurring concurrently at times. Participants were in a constant flux between these three emotional states. Some participants never moved to hate. Some stayed at anger for years. Most of the participants raged intermittently. All the participants felt deeply wounded. All the participants experienced loss as a result of the wrongdoing, whether the loss was in the form of marital expectations, trust, betrayal of their marital commitment and vows, or disturbance in their view of permanency in their marriage.

Other losses centered on not feeling secure with their spouse, loss of feeling loved and respected, loss of self-esteem, or, as one participant noted, “I lost that sense of partnership” (Frank, 2009).

Anger would be the appropriate response for participants who had been wronged. However, the anger that was described was not a volatile, eruptive, or an explosive type but rather a general feeling of anger or as Sarah noted, “It feels like generalized anger.”

The findings suggest that loss was antecedent to anger. The way the anger was manifested in the participants, the general feeling of anger rather than the impulsive anger, indicated that loss triggered the anger response. It appeared there was a need for anger in order for participants to ultimately experience forgiving. Furthermore, anger was a clear indication that something had to be changed in the marital relationship. The anger seemed to provide the energy needed to make such changes.

This finding concurred with what Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) noted, that loss can trigger a state of feeling general anger.

Catherine's experience illuminates the intense emotions of a broken heart. Wounded, hurt and in pain she described her feelings surrounding the event of the wrongdoing. Her portrayal parallels what many participants revealed in the interviews.

I was so hurt. I was so angry. It was like a year of huge anger. Boy that was a long time to hold onto it. He was an island by himself, and I was so alone. He left me alone, but in the same bed and in the same house. But I felt so alone. It was like a friend - the rage. I think it was a good full year of just hating him. Oh my God I just wanted to kill him. I was so hurt. (Catherine, 2009)

Talk about hate and resentment and the urge to kill, it was all there. (Ray, 2009)

I got angry at him. I disliked him, intensely. I actually hated him. But I never thought of killing him. I thought of only killing myself. (Frances, 2009)

### Change of heart

All participants had a change of heart, equivalent to a reframing of their beliefs about the spouse who committed the wrongdoing. This change of heart was a slow evolving process where the participant began to view their spouse in a more positive light and moved from the notion that the spouse was a “bad person. Three prominent conditions, of a somewhat moral nature, characterized change of heart: *He cares about me; I'm not perfect, and I feel sorry for him.* These themes occurred concurrently at times in some participants, but in any case the occurrence was not linear.

The groundwork for the change of heart seemed to begin when the participant acknowledged a desire to bring to an end the anger, rage, and hate or when they felt that “enough was enough” (Sarah, 2009). As Catherine put it, “I’m sick and tired of being pissed off.” For others, it was the realization that these powerful emotions, primarily of anger and hate, had an immobilizing effect on them and they wanted to move forward in their lives.

Cece thought about the betrayal and pain. She vacillated between hating him and intense anger. She thought about these things day and night and night and day. A lot of time went by, in fact years, before she decided it wasn't worth all the anguish.  
(K. Leo, note)



Ray was angry and bitter. He felt that he had kept his end of the bargain but she did not keep hers. He lived with the bitterness and hurt for a very long time. But then he began to feel that it was too “cumbersome to hate and be bitter.” The anger too he said was “fermenting within him and creating anguish” He decided that he didn’t want to have these negative feelings and live with them any more. (K. Leo, note)

These findings are consistent with findings from the literature that forgiving results from a change in attitude in individuals who were wronged. Seeing the wrongdoer differently, as not being “a bad person”(Griswold, 2007) is an important factor in forgiving. The findings suggest that a change of heart was essential for participants to move in the direction of forgiving their spouses.

#### **He cares about me**

A thread that kept running through the participants' accounting of their experience of a change of heart, and then forgiving, was searching for evidence that the spouse who wronged them, cared about them, and thus loved them. The need to find love in the spouse who wronged them was very strong and my findings suggest that the power of love can be transformative in bringing back to the participant if not the loving feelings lost by the wrongdoing, at least the sense that they are loved. This helped to lay the groundwork for the needed change of heart.

And one thing I realized somewhere along the line. He always made sure my car was running and stuff. And actually that was one thing that I remember thinking about. I remember there was some incident like that, with the car breaking down and even though he wasn't rushing down the road to rescue me and my car, he was sending somebody to do it. And that's a kind of caring. And somewhere along the lines of me deciding I got to go out and make myself happy, I can't be depressed and hateful and everything. That was something that I saw in him and realized that that's a way that a spouse says I love you. It really is, I think. And that's the way somebody says I care about what's happening to you. (Cece, 2009)

I remember cleaning out one of my drawers, like right after all this was happening. I came across a card he had given me before we were married telling me how much he loved me. I knew that all the things he did to hurt me – telling me he didn't love me and never did love me, telling me he couldn't stand the sight of me; the serving me with divorce papers. Finding that card I knew this just wasn't him. This wasn't really him. I didn't know what had possessed him, what had taken him over, but I knew this wasn't the man I married. I knew that he probably did love me. (Cindy, 2009)

Catherine's speaks about finding love she thought was lost.

I wanted to do this perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. I'm free at 5:00 in the morning, so I can do it then, but it's not in a really good section of town.

But I set my alarm and when I woke up he's getting out of bed.

I said, 'What are you doing?'

He goes, 'I was gonna go with you.'

I said, 'Really?'

He said, 'I was gonna go with you. I just wanted to see – you know, see how it is.'

I said, 'Great. Fabulous.' And he went.

That act was a huge act. He showed me that he loved me. That I was important to him because he wasn't paying attention to *me*, he wasn't meeting my needs, he wasn't there for me. So did he counteract *what* I was trying to forgive, maybe, because then he was there for me. And *then* he was attentive. So – like I was hurt because I didn't think he loved me, so he showed me that he loved me.

The other thing is I couldn't have forgiven. I don't know if this matters. I couldn't have forgiven him if he didn't – I couldn't have done it without him changing things. Like the reason I could forgive him is because he *went to Adoration*. He didn't say, 'I love you.' He always says, 'I love you,' *but he didn't say you're a good wife, a good mother a good blah, blah, blah*. He came to Adoration with me because he was concerned *about my safety*. That's why he went. That's what people do when they love each other. And I *was* – when I saw that, – I was open to forgiving him. He showed it to me so I *could feel – like what it feels to be loved*. (2009)

In the recounting of Catherine, Cece, and Cindy's words, the condition of *He cares about me, therefore he loves me* shows it to be an important precept for understanding the experience of forgiving in marriage.

This paralleled other participants' accounts of looking for love and finding it in the not-so-obvious places. In some cases, participants had to make a big leap from "He cares about me" to "He loves me." Nonetheless all of them found love in their spouse, which they believed to have been lost through the wrongdoing when they embraced "He cares about me".

It is this *change of heart* that allowed participants to begin challenging their perception regarding whether or not they could forgive their spouse. "He cares about me" helped the participants reframe their sense of not being loved or not feeling loved and replaced it with the sense that they had found the lost love. As they began to feel validated, "He cares about me" provided the impetus for participants to move toward forgiving.

It is not clear if participants actually found the lost love, or whether the participants' need to find that the spouse cared about them was so great that they grasped onto any kind act that symbolized to them that they were cared for and loved. The illusiveness of love leaves this question open. One thing was certain. Whether it was the appearance of love or actual love, finding something in the spouse's behavior that verified to the participant that "He loves me" was a key step in the movement toward forgiving their spouse.

Moreover, this bolstered the needed condition of *change of heart-change of mindset* in the participants, which meant seeing the spouse who wronged them in a different light - not as a bad person but one who cared and loved them.

For the participants, changing their mindset about their spouse, while essential to the experience of forgiving, required more than changing the negative beliefs about the wrongdoer. The beliefs or mindset changes had to settle deeply within the participants' hearts and that was where the real transformation began. Then it became possible for the participants to internalize the new beliefs about their spouse.

In addition to *He loves me*, there were two other conditions that mellowed the belief that the spouse was a "bad person" and assisted in preparing the heart for change: *I'm not perfect*, and *I feel sorry for him*. This was implicit in the discourse of the participants and the data suggest that both conditions inclined the participants to have compassion, kindness and sympathy as well as a strong sense of fairness and justice toward their spouse. All of these factors contributed to changing the mindset and eventually changing the hearts of the forgivers.

### **I'm not perfect**

Part of it is also this deep belief that I have flaws. That we're all flawed; and she's flawed And I really think on some level I'm not so sure she's more flawed than any of the rest of us. And maybe that's one of the reasons I stayed in this relationship because I know how imperfect I am and how flawed I am. (Frank, 2009)

Because we're flawed, as human beings, I know to forgive him.  
(Theresa, 2009)

I'm trying to get my philosophy. I mean, the human condition is imperfect. We have an imperfect human nature.(Frances, 2009)

I'm not perfect. I was never perfect. I don't believe that I deserve anything more than somebody else does. Maybe it's coming from a place where we all make mistakes. I think I have to forgive him. (Sarah, 2009)

I'm not the most perfect person. I know I've done a lot of messed up things, and I feel God, Jesus has forgiven me therefore I must forgive. (Cindy, 2009)

But when I moved to that forgiving attitude, you know, everybody makes mistakes. No one is perfect. And you're probably hard to live with, too. I see his human condition just like mine is human. (Catherine, 2009)

### **I feel sorry for him**

I started to pity him and ... I felt bad for him. I was totally outside of the relationship, almost like a stranger looking in, seeing it totally different now, and I actually felt bad for him. And when I stepped back and I looked at him, I said this is – he’s really, he’s pathetic – I felt very sorry for him. (Cindy, 2009)

To be honest with you that made me feel really sorry for her I can’t deny that that increased my level of empathy and pity towards my wife even if she had to go through stage one treatment. I think that did make a difference in my attitude toward her transgressions. I think it did make a difference I think it did effect how I dealt with her and our problems. (Frank, 2009)

Three themes, “He cares about me, therefore he loves me”, “I’m not perfect, he’s not perfect, nobody’s perfect”, and “I felt sorry for him” described the conditions that appeared to be significant in the participants' experience of the change of heart necessary for forgiving their spouse. The significance lies in the power these conditions had in helping the forgivers to reframe and change their mindset about the spouse from being a “bad person” to one who needs compassion

and kindness because of his human nature. Moreover participants became empowered as they transformed themselves from angry, hurt and embittered individuals to people who could have a change of heart and act with benevolence toward their spouse in spite of them being flawed.

### **Healing heart**

Healing heart describes a dramatic change, a transformation, in the participants. Participants were no longer concerned with the emotions that centered on the broken heart – anger, rage and hate. The hurt, as well, no longer had the significance it once had. Transformed by a change of heart, participants were ready to experience a healing heart. In viewing the wrongdoer as a valuable human being, participants grew interiorly, Catherine shared, “it’s so easy for me to look out instead of in but I can do it now.” Participants detached from their hurt and abandoned their pain and as Sarah noted, “I put all the crap aside and thought of him.” These are the intrinsic dynamics of healing heart.

There were commonalities in how participants described what occurred following forgiving their spouse as the brief narrative passages that follow illustrate.



*“It’s a peace. There’s no regret, no pain.”*

When it happens, it breaks. There’s no more pain.  
I say, Thank you, Jesus.’ It’s replaced with calm.  
It’s a peace. It’s a peace. There’s no regret, no pain.  
You take that moment where you took all this pain  
that someone’s hurting you with, and you left it, and  
there’s joy and peace.

There’s something really special that happened in  
my life; this is the most important thing; it’s with  
God. It’s almost a oneness. I did what He would do.  
And there’s a joy in that. I thank Him for it.

My first thing, after this whole experience, was  
thanking Jesus. That’s it. That He got me through.  
That He showed me – that He gave me the strength I  
needed, that He gave me all these beautiful gifts.  
(Theresa, 2009)

Theresa recalled that when she went home from the last interview and woke the following morning she realized how hard it was to put into practice what she had told me about choosing to forgive. “I saw that I’m making it sound too easy” she told me. She realized that it was not as easy as she was making it sound. “It really took courage. It also took a lot of humility. It’s not easy” she said.

And you really have to look deep into yourself, and you have to find a lot of virtue to do it. In a marriage, she continued, “There’s almost not a choice. You have to forgive or living with this other person – you’ll end up destroying each other, whether it’s by silence or by fighting, whatever ways people chose to live.”

Many people, particularly family members told Theresa she was weak but as she noted, “For me I was being courageous. I chose to forgive. It was a decision I made.” So Theresa made herself “vulnerable” as she put it, because and she noted, “Forgiving is without protection, the basic instinct is to lash out and protect yourself and that’s where pride comes into it. Pride, Theresa noted, “Prevents forgiving and it changes the playing field; but humility gives you the ability to let go.”

Theresa recollected that the pain, the hurt was what moved her to forgive. Moved with great feeling, she recollected – “I might be getting deep, but seeing Jesus on the Cross was so valuable because you can’t come to this forgiving without pain and virtues like humility, choosing to do the right thing, choosing to be merciful – all this comes through pain and we can’t get to forgiving without it. Its hard work and painful work. It’s hard to conquer yourself. In forgiving there is so much virtue. Having mercy and there’s detachment and acts of humility and not being self-centered.”

Theresa continued, “Forgiving is not temporary. Forgiving does not come naturally. Forgiving is a gift from God. Forgiving is goodness. Forgiving is a process. It’s a struggle. Forgiving is choosing to do good. I don’t know how it works into it, but you can’t forgive without virtue.” (K. Leo, note)

*"It's just a real loving, beautiful, in the moment moment a lightness of being"*

I had kinda shifted out of hating him, and it was a real freeing – I feel my shoulders drop when I say it – it's just a real loving, beautiful, in the moment moment. The biggest thing I get from it is peace - a peaceful heart. Free - absolutely free. That's the word I'm trying for. Free is a good word (laughter). Light and free. And no more encumbered or burdened or any of that anymore - Lightness of being. And I could never ask for what I needed, after forgiving I can say 'this is what I need, it' so empowering. To be in that forgiving place, and even when I say that - like the forgiveness, it's just – it's just this breathing. I can breathe. I can just feel so – I feel light.

And it's a - not a tightness in my chest – it's a relaxation in my chest. It's a - happy feeling. I feel very energized about everything right now, and it's all due to the forgiveness. The forgiveness I got. The forgiveness I gave. I was transformed, and I have to tell you Kath (researcher), the feelings that came up – I love this man. I love this man deeply, and in every venue. Physical, emotional, this man is - he is an amazing man. He still has exactly the same warts. He'll still closed down

Let me compare it to non-forgiving. Non-forgiving is tightness in the belly, clenched hands, anxious thoughts. My face even gets funny; And just not good feelings. Just really hurt. But holding onto – that is how it feels. It feels tight, and it feels angry and it feels rage. It feels in the belly. It hurts. Not so much a hurt but tightness in the belly. And when it's not there - it's also tightness in your head. But when it's not there, it feels like a deep breath; A nice breeze; A slow heart; A light feeling of happiness, calm and content; Not sad, but happy. That's all I can think about, in terms of how forgiving feels. Euphoria

One of the big things I say and focus in on in church is the, 'Our father,' and, 'Forgive me for my trespasses.' I ask for me to forgive others. And I always think about what Christ, or maybe it's God, said about if you harbor resentment, walk away from me and go forgive that person. Then come to me, and I'll give you forgiveness. I believe that. I buy into that. Forgiving is such a shift and such not a one event. It's this whole entire journey. What do I want to get out of this life? I want to have a good life. I want to have a fun life. I want to be at peace.

And what I want at the end of this life, what I am hoping for at the end of this life is, 'Thank you oh good and faithful servant for a job well done,' and the people will say, 'Catherine loved and lived and laughed.' And that's what I want. (Catherine, 2009)

■ During the interviews Catherine revealed to me her thoughts about the  
 ■ forgiving experience. She remembered that she didn't forgive because it  
 ■ was a good thing nor did she do so because she was being righteous or  
 ■ religious. She knew there was a spiritual component though and that  
 ■ she was following God's wishes. She would think about that later and  
 ■ look at that. "I can't make it sound like it was this altruistic – I saw the  
 ■ light. I did it because it makes me feel better" she avowed. "No, it was  
 ■ a real emotional journey that lead me to – I wanted to forgive him."  
 ■ Listening to her, I recalled that she told me that she put on different  
 ■ glasses. "I took off the pissed off glasses," she said. She knew he hadn't  
 ■ really changed but noted "I looked at him differently, and I showed up  
 ■ differently." Catherine continued to say that forgiving has given her an  
 ■ "all- better perspective on her whole life." She continued, "I'm not  
 ■ perfect. I'm just trying to figure out how to find some peace here.  
 ■ Forgiveness has been huge with that."  
 ■ (K. Leo, note)

*"God so loved the world"*

To me, forgiving is all about love. Love of yourself, love for other human beings and love of God. You can't have forgiveness without love, in my opinion. When you forgive there's inner peace with that love.

You know what grabbed me, John 3:14, 'God so loved the world.' Everything with Jesus is love and joy and focusing on that passage made me strong. Forgiving is strength. Forgiving, I feel free. I feel free. I feel uplifted. I don't feel like I have 40-pound bricks on my shoulder. Not forgiving is just very stressful, very stressful. It makes you sick. It makes you very sick to your stomach. But forgiving, you feel like, seriously, like 40 pounds have been lifted off your shoulders. I felt like I could do anything. I felt I could anything. And I felt joy.

To me the forgiving experience is also about healing, a slow healing process that takes time. Forgiving is patience, love, faith in God. It feels pretty positive and powerful. It began with a decision; a conscious choice to forgive him and an ongoing process and it comes very slowly. You never forget but you do let go like letting air out of a balloon. But inside you feel like this inner light or something – peace, hope and comfort. (Cindy, 2009)

Cindy analogized her forgiving using the visual of a ladder. For her forgiving was a process. It was a “step-by-step process” as she put it of “climbing up the ladder.” She started at the very bottom with devastation, which fluxed back and forth between “that self-hate” as she noted. After a while the self-hate moved to hating him. She never told me there was a timetable for the moves she only said “I knew when I went to the next rung.” She started to feel confident as she moved upwards. In fact she informed me that she felt “powerful” as she put it, “I just felt like I had power. I knew I was the strong one”

Cindy talked about feeling empowered. “I just felt like, you know, God gave me help. I prayed to God, please just help me and instead of like boom, like a major thing, slowly, slowly, He just, every day, just gave me the strength to get through this.”

To Cindy’s surprise, she not only got that needed strength, but she also had a sense of empowerment. She had undergone a transformation from feeling distraught and overwhelmed to feeling confident and empowered. Empowerment became the next rung.

So there it was. Cindy had begun at the bottom rung with devastation, then self hate, after that she hated him. Moving up the ladder, she started to feel confident, next powerful, strong and finally empowered. But then as Cindy continued her climb she began to feel sorry for him. “I felt bad for him. I pitied him,” she said.

She continued up the ladder to the next rung. Now she realized she needed to take care of him. She didn’t understand why she felt that he needed her but her thoughts were that it must be mixed into her feelings of pitying him. But it was part of the rise on the ladder – he needs me.

As the ascent continued from he needs her to – he recognized she was a good person, Cindy felt validated and valued. “He actually appreciated me and that’s another rung in the ladder,” she told me. Cindy’s climb ended with hope and forgiving. Hope for her marriage. Hope for repairing the marital relationship and although she never actually came out and said she forgave him, her heart understood she had. (K. Leo, note)

## CHAPTER VI

### Findings

#### Getting to Know the Meaning of the Phenomenon

*One step at a time;  
One choice at a time.  
We ascend the way of holiness.  
We are ennobled.  
We are changed choosing love,  
Even with sacrifice,  
Choosing trust, even with surrender.*

(Cover, Called To Greatness, Issue 25, Spring 2007)  
Sisters of Life

#### Metathemes

The centerpiece of this chapter is discussion of the metathemes of *love, sacred* and *grace*, which emerged from a deeper analysis of the themes. The metatheme is a statement of meaning that constitutes the essence of the phenomenon. These overarching themes became evident because they appeared many times in the words of the participants and captured the essence of the experience of forgiving for these participants. The metathemes also reflect my “explicit or implied attitudes toward life, behavior, and understanding of persons” ( Ely, et al., 2006, p.150 ).

## Love

### Divine love

Forgiving is an indispensable dimension of love. Love is the foundation for forgiving in marriage. Without love there cannot be forgiving and the participants echoed this belief. Love binds the marital relationship but ever since the fall of Adam and Eve authentically loving, has challenged man. Loving like God is simply beyond man's natural capacity. Because God's very nature is love He gave us marriage as a beautiful covenantal relationship so that we may seek out love (Sri, 2008). Since God has put His divine nature into us we are to love and also forgive one another" as He has done (Mt. 6:14).

It became clear that participants loved their spouses within the spiritual realm. Cindy (Interview, 2009) paraphrased John 4:11, "God so loved us we have to love one another." Sarah (Interview 2009) said, "God in His great love for us set the example."

### Human love

Perhaps the line between divine love and human love is blurred. In addressing findings in this study it seemed that divine love and human love were enmeshed.

Participants' belief in the covenantal nature of marriage suggests that they recognized the covenant to include "becoming one flesh." This would imply a love that would elicit deep emotional feeling. It may be that human love holds for the participants strong feelings of affection and sexual intimacy-participants spoke of this intimacy. But human love for them may include such constructs as commitment, sacrifice, and virtue.

Although participants were not asked directly to define human love, when speaking of loving their spouse, these constructs emerged. The strength and value of their commitment, "I view marriage as a lifetime commitment" (Cece); the ability to sacrifice and put themselves aside, "I let go of my own hurt for him" (Theresa), and "I put myself aside for her (Ray, 2009), and "I tried to think of him first because we all make mistakes (France). The participants strove to be virtuous and act virtuously. "I knew it was the right thing to do" (Amanda), "I didn't want to be a bitch. I wanted to be the caring good person I really was" (Catherine), "I wanted to do the right thing by her" (Ray), "My love is all filled with virtue" (Theresa), were declarations notably a part of the discussion of *love* in the data. It is difficult to conceptualize love since human love can be defined in many ways but these insights may signify the melding of human and divine love.

For all the participants divine love and human love brought them to the table of forgiving. Forgiving in the marital relationship commences with love and forms the fundamental nature of the experience.



Participants speak from their hearts about love.

Cece lived by the simplest yet most difficult love.

‘I’m not a churchgoer. I didn’t even attend church those years. But I have a strong belief in something Jesus commands: Jesus said that – well, the first greatest commandment was to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and soul and mind. The second greatest commandment, Jesus said, was to love your neighbor as yourself. That’s my mission in life. To love my neighbor as myself or to do for others as others have done for me in extending kindness, love, consideration, and forgiveness. I would want to extend that same kind of forgiveness to others but mostly to my husband where it’s even more important to forgive. It’s God’s divine love keeping those two commands.’ (Cece, 2009)

For Sarah forgiving needs love:

“I would not forgive if it wasn’t for my love of God. That’s straight out. That’s straight out. I wouldn’t know how to do it. I forgive for love of God. I choose to forgive because He asks us to forgive. That’s how I forgive in my marriage.” (Sarah, 2009)

Theresa opened up herself to the greatest love.

“You have to have a greater love to teach you how to love. I really believe that I didn’t know how to love. I didn’t even know what love was. But I came in contact with the greatest love, the greatest love – and I saw it. I would read the scriptures all the time and read – ‘He opens up not his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter’. And I could just – and I – I imitated him. I imitated him. Not because I felt such great love for my husband at that moment, but because I wanted Jesus. I wanted Jesus. In order to forgive I had to love like Jesus.”(Theresa, 2009)

Frank shared thoughts similar to Cece’s.

“I knew what He expected. He wanted me to love my neighbor. It’s all over the scripture: Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Forgive or you won’t be forgiven.”(Frank, 2009)

“Just love. Love is everything. You can’t have forgiveness without love, in my opinion”, Cindy asserted. (2009)

And Catherine discovered – “ I really, really love him and I can see that now - it’s a gift from God.” (2009)

## Sacred

For the participants their marital relationship was held in sacredness. They viewed their marriage as a sacred covenant. Their committed relationship began as an expression of spiritual belief as participants had a deep awareness of spiritual meaningfulness. The dimension of their spirituality was not a separate entity. It was an integral part of the participants' characters, a guiding force in their lives, as well as being a unifying philosophy of life.

Sacred is elusive, mysterious, hard to explain, difficult to describe. As such there is an inclination to turn away from that which we cannot understand or explain. The participants embraced sacred and held that their marital relationship was sacred. They valued their marriage and were committed to the permanency of it. An observer might say that marriage was at the core of their existence.

Sacred elevated them as the participants' love for their spouse took on greater meaning and became selfless, as participants grew in greater holiness by accepting the humanness of their spouse, and as they strived to be virtuous by desiring to do the *right* thing: to have humility, charity, mercy, kindness, and be forgiving.

Participants affirmed the presence of God in their marriage, "God is present in my marriage" (Catherine, Sarah, Theresa, Frances, Frank, Cindy, 2009). Participants turned to God in prayer (Frances, Catherine, Sarah, Theresa, Frank, Cindy, 2009).

Some attended Mass or church services (Theresa, Catherine, Cindy, Frank, Frances, Sarah, 2009) others went to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament (Sarah, Catherine, Theresa, Frank) or relied on their personal spiritual beliefs (Cece, Amanda, 2009). For the participants the very belief in sacred and their rich spiritual lives empowered them to transform their lives and determine the destiny of their marriage.

The spiritual dimension of Amanda's holiness centered on forms of sacred ritual and sacred ceremony.

And then, I guess, for me – I don't know how this is for him - but for me, it just sort of got to be much more – I had **much** more awareness.

It's not like I have my spiritual life and then I have **the rest of** my life. It's all my spiritual life. Everything is my spiritual life. When I was going through this I just prayed about it all the time. Every month, I'd do a *Full Moon Ceremony*, which is a *Lunar Ceremony*. And it's a women's ceremony, and it's a traditional ceremony. And I spent a lot of time praying about the situation in the *Moon Circle*.

And you know, then, in my daily prayers, I just prayed about it a lot. And I stopped praying for [Tom] to be different. I just prayed about my own issues. I stopped trying to change him and interfere with him. I guess I realized that **everything** that happens has a lot of dimensions. It's not just one flat dimension. (Amanda, 2009)

The participants' belief that their marital relationship was sacred made it possible for them to view their relationship differently. Their relationship held deep significance for them, therefore the participants wanted to preserve the sacredness of their marriage. They viewed their marriage as a sacred relationship, highly spiritual, honored and respected. Pargament (2002) noted, "identifying that which is sacred and striving to protect and preserve the sacred lends deep significance to human existence" (p. 70). Sacred was one of the overarching common denominator that facilitated the forgiving experience for participants.

## Grace

“God help me, please help me” echoed through my mind as Cindy tearfully told me how she asked God for help. I felt the power with which she said those words. In the furrows of her forehead and quiver of her lips, I saw the hurt and pain she had experienced in her marriage that warranted her plea. I watched as her hands moved from her lap in an almost praying-like manner, droplets falling from her eyes as she softly said, “I had to have God’s help. I couldn’t forgive otherwise. That dialogue held the past and the present as Cindy relived for a moment her need for God’s help in order for her to forgive her spouse. (K. Leo, note)

Forgiving for these participants was a spiritual phenomenon. Participants avowed this to be so. The influence of the spiritual dimension was clear since participants acknowledged that they knew and understood everything about forgiving but still were not be able to forgive. For them forgiving had its footing in spiritual understanding and involved Divine intervention. Thus the participants’ state of mind that enabled them to forgive was created by a deep spiritual stirring awakened by grace. Grace gave them the ability to love, to give up self for the other and made it possible for them to reframe the narrative of self, which transformed them spiritually, emotionally and relationally.

“You need spirituality to experience forgiving. You do. If you don’t have spirituality, you just can’t forgive a person. It’s what you need. I had faith. I prayed to God a lot, and I got through.” Continuing, she noted, “Let God work you, with His grace, and let Him move you from one place to another.” (Sarah, 2009)

St. Augustine, said that “men do absolutely nothing good without grace, whether by thought, will, love, or deed” (De Corrept. et Grat. 2, ST, 1/2, Q- 109, A 4)). Our human work is to forgive and to love, to “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21) and as such God would not ask us to do this without His help, the help of His grace. The participants echoed that belief, that it was impossible by his or her own power to do good acts. Divine help is needed. Divine help is God’s grace.

“So the natural progression was forgiveness. And I needed to [forgive] but it was a progression because I was resistant to it. And if that sounded too corny, it was God’s grace that he gave me. I don’t believe I’m capable of forgiving. I don’t believe I am because of where I’ve come from, but I know that if I ask Him for it, if I ask Him for grace, he’ll give it to me. Catherine continued speaking, “Its crazy, but the one thing was - is that I needed to let go, and what’s the reason why I could let it go? Was that God gave me the grace.” (Catherine, 2009)

Augustine (De Natura et Gratia xxvi) noted further that “as the eye of the body though most healthy cannot see unless it is helped by the brightness of light, so, neither can a man, even if he is most righteous, live righteously unless he be helped by the eternal light of justice” (ST, 1/2, Q-109, A9). But justification is by grace,

according to Romans 3:24: "Being justified freely by His grace." Hence even a man who already possesses grace needs a further assistance of grace in order to live righteously.

According to Aquinas (1265-1273), put it in its simplest form, grace is a favor of God, the action of God's merciful and gracious disposition towards his creatures (ST, 1/2 110.). There is no limit to God's love and grace. It reaches beyond the scope of our comprehension. God gave us His unconditional love as well as His grace to help us in life and to enable us to live in a virtuous way.

Aquinas speaks of grace as an act of love of God, and that love is a creative and transformative gift. Human love is object oriented but the love or favor of God causes good in the person loved (ST, 1/2 109-114). "To say that a man has the grace of God is to say that there is within him an effect of God's gratuitous will (ST, 2, 110). This moves him to act in ways that elevate his human nature. *Gratis*, the act of love is just that, an act of love given freely as "God owes His creatures nothing" (ST, 2, 111). The gift of grace is bestowed freely and abundantly on us (ST, 2, 110). But grace must be encountered as a real gift, unmerited, unearned and subject to our free will, for God let's us decide if we let Him empower us with His grace when all seems lost. Participants turned to God when forgiving seemed insuperable. They understood that to attain what by their own powers they could not, that God's help was needed. Grace was God's help. 'Let all who are thirsty come: all who want it may have the water of life and have it free'(Rev 22:17).



“I don't know”, remarked Frances. “Like He [God] doesn't directly intervene. At times, miracles happen. I don't know. I mean, I guess He gives everyone the grace. I guess everyone gets the grace to surmount, but not everyone accepts it or uses it.” (Frances, 2009)

“This is something that is, humanly, almost impossible for us. It's almost impossible for us to forgive because you need – there's something – I say it simply, but I probably don't understand it as it is. I know there's grace. I know there's grace there. I know. I feel it. I sorta emptied myself. Emptied myself ...otherwise how could grace have come in.” (Theresa, 2009)

Ray spoke of his experience using different language.

Ray stated, “Forgiving is about an intellectual decision. I'm not a very emotional person. I think forgiving is, at least in my case, more an intellectual experience.” Yet Ray experienced much of what other participants described about their experience. Ray felt “wronged... betrayed.. hurt.. and was disenchanted.” He experienced, “bitter and angry” feelings and stated, “it broke my heart.”

Ray also noted, “A good part of, I think, my forgiveness... is the fact that I've admitted a good many of my own trespasses and faults. I'm not perfect” and he exclaimed, “I felt sorry for her. I also recognized she's been good in many ways.”

Ray made this statement: “the human spirit is prevalent in all of us, and that whether you're religious or not, the human spirit is an extension of religion.” He noted, “Forgiving is different when you love. Forgiving has made me grow as a person, and I hate to be corny, but it's also given me peace.” Although Ray was agnostic and described his experience differently, his experience was consistent with the experience of all the other participants. (K. Leo, note)

## CHAPTER VII

### Discussion

This chapter is a discussion focusing on three distinct sections: a summary of the study; contrasting the findings of the study with current studies; and conclusion and implications.

### Summary of the Study

#### **Phenomenon, Research Question, Purpose**

The intent of this study was to understand and describe the lived experience of forgiving in a marriage and to provide ways of understanding experience from the perspective of those who lived it. The research question, “*What is the experience of forgiving in the marital relationship*” was answered by using descriptive phenomenology.

The purpose of the research was to provide deeper understanding of the experience of forgiving in the marital relationship from the perspective of those who lived it.

## **Method**

### **Data collection**

In addition to interviews, data were also generated through logs, analytic memos, reflective writings, music and art, poems and plays. Log recordings centered on my thoughts, reactions to the participants dialogue, feelings, ideas, and hunches that came to my mind.

The style of interview was unstructured, face-to-face, using open-ended questions. The first interview “established the context of the participants' experience.” This interview was “getting –to-know-you.” The second interview “allowed the participant to reconstruct the details of their experience” with forgiving. This interview was “getting –to-know-the–phenomenon.” In the third and last interview participants were “encouraged to reflect on the personal meaning of his/her experience.” The focus of this interview was “getting-to-know-the-meaning of the experience” (Seidman, 2006). Using the structure of the three-interview method with each interview having its own distinct purpose, made it possible for the context, the details, and the reflected meaning to emerge.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis was framed through the lens of phenomenology and facilitated by the works of van Manen (1990; 2002; nd), Ely, et al., 1997; 2006) and Seidman (2006). Using Seidman's (2006) three-interview-series structure for the interviews, I

followed his lead by completing all the interviews before transcribing so as “to minimize imposing on the generative process of the interviews what I think I have learned from other participants” (Seidman, 2006, p. 113). Although there are differing views to this approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Bogdan & Biklin, 1998; Cohen, Kahn, Steeves, 2000), nonetheless I choose this approach as I thought it would balance the subjective nature of the method.

The analysis consisted of two major activities: reflective activities which were ongoing; and, "coding for major themes and categories" (Ely, et al., 2006, p. 69). Reflective activities took precedence until all the interviews were completed. Reflective activities included logs, reflective notes, analytic notes, poems and art. Handwritten logs chronicled events before and after the interviews, as well as documented my insights feelings and thoughts since “the log is the data” (Ely, et al., 2006, p. 70). “The log is the place where the researcher faces self as instrument through a personal dialogue about hunches, feelings, insights, assumptions, biases, and ongoing ideas about method” (Ely, et al., 2006, p. 69). Efforts were made to write logs as soon as possible after the interview, since “forgetting begins as soon as the experience ends” (Ely, et al., 2006, p.79).

The goal of data analysis was to “tease out” the essential meaning in the raw data and find the most economical and interesting way to share the findings with the reader as noted in Ely et al. (2006), “The product of analysis is a creation that speaks to the heart of what was learned” (p.142). The development of codes, themes, and metathemes came from the process of reading and rereading the transcripts of 27

interviews that yielded approximately 200,000 words. The code categories came out of the passages that were marked as important. Siedman (2006) noted, “There is no substitute for studying the interviews and winnowing ... the word” (p.112).

“Winnowing the word” was laborious and at times overwhelming.

The data is voluminous. There are words everywhere. Long words, shorts words, unpronounceable words, compounds words, hyphenated words, unfamiliar words. Words brimming over, spilling over, boundless, unlimited, unending, limitless, words. Words, words, words, and more words. Everywhere words. (K. Leo, note)

## Themes

Three themes emerged during the analysis: Broken Heart, Change of Heart and Healing Heart.

### **Broken heart**

The broken heart theme centered on the hurt and intense emotions participants acknowledged having as a result of the wrongdoing. They were in extraordinary pain and as Theresa said, "My heart was broken in two" (2009). Broken heart materialized

because participants felt their marital expectations were breached, and they felt betrayed and felt as if they were in a broken relationship.

### **Change of heart**

Three prominent conditions characterized change of heart: He cares about me; I'm not perfect, and I feel sorry for him. These three conditions emerged as important conditions that moved participants to let go of anger, rage and hurt and view their spouse more positively. This eventually led to a change of heart where participants could forgive.

### **Healing heart**

Transformed by a change of heart, participants were ready to heal. They spoke with words that indicated that healing had occurred. Cindy noted, "I don't know who said it, or if anyone said it, but it's something like this. As we forgive, we ourselves are healed" (2009).

### **Metathemes**

Three metathemes emerged from further analysis of the data. These metathemes were, Love- Divine and Human, Sacred and Grace. These overarching themes captured the essence of the experience of forgiving. These metathemes were

implicit in the spirituality dialogue and articulated by participants with deep conviction.

### **Contrasting the Findings with the Literature**

In this study, forgiving in marriage was possible because of the participants' strong belief in marriage, the sense of permanency they valued in their relationship, as well as their belief that divorce was not an alternative. The more committed individuals are to their relationship the more likely they are to forgive. Pargament (1997) noted that people seek whatever they hold to be of value or significance in life.

Although the findings suggest that forgiving in marriage was a process, this was different from the stages and models offered by other researchers (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Smedes, 1996; Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Enright & Coyle, 1998; Coleman, 1998; Worthington, 1998; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2000). The findings of this study were consistent with those of Fincham, (2000) and Enright et al. (1996 see Worthington, 2005 for a review) that forgiving was driven by a deliberate decision to forgive.

The participants did not speak of thoughts of retaliation or getting even. Kearns & Fincham (2004) noted retaliation decreases the negative feelings associated with unforgiveness but the participants in this study did not experience thoughts of retaliation, rather their view of forgiving had a "benevolence dimension that involved acting with good-will towards the partner" (Fincham, Hall & Beach, 2006).

It is well established that an apology facilitates forgiving (McCullough et al., 1998) but in this study apology had no bearing on the experience of forgiving spouses. For the participants forgiving their spouse was a private matter and none of the participants actually told their spouses that they had been forgiven. Following the conclusion of her interviews Catherine noted , “I think I may go home and tell [him] that I have forgiven him”(2009).

The experience of forgiving in the marital relationship proved to have an overarching spiritual dimension that was not unlike previous research studies (Davis & Worthington, 2008; Worthington et al., 2009; Worthington, 2009.) When participants spoke about forgiving in their marital relationship they did so within a spiritual context often using religious language and biblical quotes. They described forgiving with profound and explicit imagery.

One might believe that there would be greater forgiving if individuals were religious but studies do not link religion to actually forgiving but only link religious affiliation to beliefs about forgiving (Gorsuch & Hao, 1993; Subkoviak, et al., 1995). “Formal religious affiliation is unlikely to predict forgiving as it is the centrality of religious beliefs and the attempt to live according to those beliefs that most likely predicts forgiveness” (Ficham & Beach, 2002, pp. 163-197). The study findings were unclear as to what impact religious affiliation had on participants' experience of forgiving their spouse although most participants were affiliated with a religion. It was also unclear in this study whether religious involvement and affiliation were associated to any moral reasoning regarding forgiving although Enright, Santos, and



Al-Mabuk (1989) developed a model of forgiveness based on Kohlberg's (1970) six-stage model of reasoning about justice. Findings were in agreement with McCullough and Worthington (1999) that forgiving "is spiritual and transcendent ...and the experience evokes religious and spiritual thoughts, images and affects" (p. 1142).

Although the experience of forgiving in the marital relationship was inherently interpersonal at the same time it was a highly individual and a very private experience for participants. It was not contingent on external factors but rather on virtue-like attributes where the participants exhibited humility, charity, selflessness, courage, resilience, kindness, and a change of heart. "In any event, it is the intentional, unconditional and superogatory nature of forgiveness that underpins its characterization as a gift or altruistic act" (Fincham & Beach, 2002, para 2).

### Reflections on Method

There are three areas related to method that are worthy of further discussion: saturation of data; member checking; and participant qualifications.

#### Saturation of Data

I reached saturation of data with 12 interviews that is by the end of interviewing the fourth participant. That would have been sufficient since no new themes emerged and there was redundancy in the reported data after interviewing the

fourth. I continued interviewing five additional participants totaling 27 interviews. This process generated an enormous amount of data. Instead of actually using “self as instrument” and self-determining that I had reached saturation and could stop data collection, I continued to interview thinking more interviews meant a better study. Second-guessing extended the length of my study and gave me a voluminous amount of data. On a positive note the findings are rich and deep, reliable and trustworthy.

### **Member Checking**

Qualitative researchers strive to increase the trustworthiness of their research, that is “how much trust can be given that the researcher did everything possible to ensure that data was appropriately and ethically collected, analyzed and reported” (Carlson, 2010, p.1103). In other words, is the research credible and valid? Member checking is one technique for establishing the credibility of the collected, analyzed and reported data. Member checking is a “way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participant’s experiences” (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p.92) by going back to the participants and having them check or approve the researcher's descriptions and interpretations.

Based on my experience doing this research, I believe that qualitative researchers should be cautious using member checking especially when using it with in-depth phenomenological interviewing, especially when the topic is sensitive. The interviews in almost all the cases were cathartic for the participants but also highly emotional, painful at times, and, most importantly, “in-the- moment.” At the end of the three-interview encounter after researcher and participant have established trust, the participants leave the experience and go back into their world. With everything

about the experience talked out, described, felt, and resolved the participant closes the door to the experience, the researcher, and the research study.

Going back to the participant after he or she feels all has been said-and-done may effect the participants emotionally because the participants have moved beyond the experience and as one participant told me “the door is now closed’ (Theresa, 2009). The depth of the interviewing process was such that some participants felt “there was closure” (Catherine, Cindy, Frances, Sarah 2009) or that “things were now put in perspective” (Frank, Ray, Sarah, 2009).

Additionally, since interviewing is "in the moment" and member checking is not, researchers can be at risk of losing data or having a participant withdraw from the study. When one participant in this study actually viewed the written copy of her dialogue from the interviews, the power of her words in print set in motion responses such as “Did I say these things? I’m feeling nervous about this. You must think I’m crazy”, indicating that she was having doubts about participating in the study. I was available to discuss her concerns and I acknowledged that her uneasiness was understandable. I reinforced with her that I would support whatever she wanted to do. I gave her time to decide what she wanted to do and told her if she wanted to withdraw she could notify me by mail (I left a self-addressed envelop in her mailbox) in order that she not feel any embarrassment if she did decide to withdraw. Two days later she called me and said, “I just panicked, seeing what I said in writing”. This experience led me to rethink the value of member checking.

My observations are consistent with Sandelowski (1993), Morse (1994) and Angen (2000) who see drawbacks and problems with member checking. These authors note that participants might later regret what was said during the interview or see it differently. They may also deny or want data removed. Moreover, the process of member checking may lead to confusion rather than confirmation because participants may change their mind about an issue, the interview itself may have an impact on their original assessment, and new experiences (since the time of contact) may have intervened (Cohen, 2006).

### **Participant Qualifications**

Do participants need to be qualified (see the previous discussion in chapter IV) to take part in in-depth phenomenological interviewing? It is a question I found myself asking and thinking about during data collection. Since the goal of in-depth interviewing is to secure rich thick descriptions of an experience, participants must be able to communicate and recount that experience fluently, coherently, and in an organized manner. True success of the interviewing process and therefore data collection is contingent on how participants narrate their experience.

The researcher who is considering in-depth interviewing may need to ponder the question of whether participants are able to access knowledge and fluently tell a story that makes sense, *narrative probability*; and also have the ability to articulate a story that is consistent with past experiences, *narrative fidelity* (Sandelowski, 1991), before selecting participants. Narrative probability and narrative fidelity

(Sandelowski , 1991) are both qualities that add to the trustworthiness of the data. In this study this was not a concern because all of the participants were adept at articulating their stories. Might their experience of forgiving be different from someone who is less able to articulate their story?

### **What Surprised Me**

How could I imagine when I first began this study that God would be so prominent a figure in marital forgiving? From the voices of the participants, God's way of forgiving was the model for their own forgiving. I had some idea that forgiving had its ethos in Christian spirituality but to my surprise, the essence of the experience of forgiving proved to be very God-centered, more spiritual than first thought, and more religious.

Also it was surprising to hear participants speak so openly about humility, kindness, charity, and selflessness, as part of their experience. These were everyday virtues that the participants practiced. It seemed out of the ordinary for participants to hold these qualities in high regard and to strive to be virtuous in light of the betrayal they felt.

Other eye-openers came when I realized that participants did not tell their spouse that they had forgiven him or her. The experience of forgiving was personal, private, introspective and a discrete event that did not involve the husband or wife asking to be forgiven or the participant telling the husband or wife they were forgiven. This was not quite what I believed would have occurred. I was additionally

surprised that while it was an individual encounter the participant's drive to preserve the marriage and belief in the sacredness and permanence of the marital commitment, had far more power in the forgiving experience than I had expected.

Love, divine and human was one of the most important dynamics in the experience of forgiving for the participants in this study. The influence of love in the lives of the participants, the fact that love was highly valued and held in high esteem, and the appreciation of love's transformative power, as well as, the acknowledgement and recognition that forgiving of a spouse was only possible through love surprised me. Most participants spoke about *loving like God loves* or being *imitative of God, the greatest teacher of love*. Thus belief in love, human and divine was an essential part of the experience. That love was such a big a part of the participant's experience was a revelation.

### Implications

As with any study, findings from any one study should be used judiciously. The richness and depth of these data suggest that the findings *can* be transferred and *may* have meaning or relevance if applied to other individuals, context and other situations. It is up to the reader to determine what resonates with them and how the findings can be used in practice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This is the first phenomenological study to examine the experience of forgiving in the marital relationship. As such, it has potential to open the window of understanding related to the complexity of the experience and the depth of feelings involved in forgiving a spouse. These findings have the potential to assist nurses, other care providers, psychoanalysts, and married couples to have a deeper understanding of the power of forgiving and its potential for healing, emotionally and physically.

The knowledge that forgiving is a powerful healing agent not only is beneficial to patients and clients but insight into the experience can help everyone confront and deal with forgiving issues in their own lives. Nurses, nurse psychotherapists and other practitioners may benefit themselves from understanding these findings as it offers them the opportunity to heal themselves. This may enable them to be more effective healers for clients.

An understanding of forgiving in marriage that is grounded in rich, thick descriptions of the experience provides a basis for developing interventions in professional practice, especially in marital or couples therapy. This important therapeutic element can be used to enhance the therapeutic process between nurse psychotherapists, other mental health practitioners, and their clients. Nurses and other healthcare professionals can find specific facets of the findings, which resonate with them and utilize them as a basis for broadening and deepening psychotherapeutic exploration with clients.

Findings in this study point to forgiving in the marital relationship as having a religious and spiritual dimension. It may be valuable to further examine forgiving in marriage in couples that have a strong belief system that is religious and spiritually based, like participants in this study. This may lead to developing intervention in marriage therapy that combines both spiritual interventions with the psychological ones.

The findings of this study suggest that experiencing forgiving in a marital relationship is difficult, painful and complex. Nurses' awareness of these complexities may provide them with a greater appreciation for the intricacies involved in forgiving. As the findings indicate, forgiving is more than an intellectual decision. This evolving process rises out of deep pain, takes time and work, and brings an array of emotions to the surface. In working psychotherapeutically with clients, nurses' awareness of these findings can be the catalyst to increase their



knowledge, empathy and respect for the hard and courageous work that goes into forgiving.

Nurses' understanding and appreciation for the complexities of the experience of forgiving is critical because, it is most likely that nurses in all specialties will encounter individuals who are experiencing forgiving. Elements of "broken heart" and "change of heart" can provide some guidance for nurses in helping patients/clients who are dealing with anger and rage in their marital relationship and move them beyond the hurt and betrayal. Being familiar with he cares about me, he's not perfect, and I feel sorry for him, nurses can help facilitate thinking about and encouraging patients to grow and move toward forgiving.

Most of the scientific research on forgiving emanates from psychology and other social sciences (Fincham, Beach & Davila, 2004.) Little is found in the science of nursing, therefore the discipline of nursing has an opportunity to fill the gap in the literature with future research. In this study, the participants were demographically homogenous, well educated and were a spiritual individuals. What would the experience of forgiving in the marital relationship look like in individuals who were not formally educated, or in marriages where there were no religious practices or spirituality? What cultural differences are there with forgiving in marriage and would the findings be different with different cultural groups? What does the experience of forgiving look like in second or third marriages? What would it look like in the deaf community? There are many possibilities for future research that have the potential to increase the nurse psychotherapist's as well as other health care practitioner's

knowledge, sensitivity and respect for married people's commitment to their marriage and to each other. This can lead to a better understanding of couples especially those who are in marital therapy.

As a final point, qualitative research is very accessible and intelligible to the lay public. Reflecting on the published findings in this study may provide insights to couples and these insights have the potential to strengthen their marital relationship and enable them to forgive.

### **Conclusion**

My hope is that this study provides interest in pursuing further inquiry into the nature and essence of forgiving in the marital relationship. Findings in this study point to exploring forgiving in marriage within the context of divine and human love, sacredness and marriage, virtuousness, devotional activities, grace and spirituality. These constructs may prove to be valuable to explore as researchers continue to study and advance our understanding of the nature of forgiving in the marital relationship.

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## Appendix A

### Attention Students and Faculty at PSP

Please Note: This study is NOT to be used to recruit patients

Participants Wanted for Research Study Entitled:  
*“What is the experience of forgiving in a marital relationship?”*

- I am a doctoral student at the College of Nursing, Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey. I am in the dissertation phases of my education and I am in the process of identifying possible research participants
- The purpose of my research study is to describe and understand the experience of forgiving told by those who have experienced it. Participants for this study would have to agree to be interviewed by me and tell their story.
- There would be three interviews. The interviews would be approximately 90 to 120 minutes each. There would be three days to one week between each interview.
- The interviews will be audio taped and then transcribed verbatim. The interviews will take place here at the PSP, or at the home of the participant, or at another place convenient for the participant that affords privacy and is comfortable.
- Participating in the research study will be completely voluntary and the participant can stop participating in the study at any time during the study without any penalty.
- The confidentiality of participants will be preserved. That means that personal identity, or any personally identifiable information about the participant will not be known to anyone except me, the researcher. All data obtained from and about the participants will be identified using a pseudonym and/or code numbering system and personal names will never be associated with the data.

- **All audiotapes and written transcripts will be locked in a file cabinet in the researcher's home and only the researcher would have the key to the cabinet. This assures confidentiality of the audio taped and written material. Additionally the audiotapes and written transcribed material will be destroyed after the dissertation process is completed.**
  
- **To participate in the study, you must:**
  - \* **Be legally married for at least 5 years**
  - \* **Be in a heterosexual marriage**
  - \* **Be English Speaking**
  - \* **Be willing to participate in interviews and**
  - \* **Have experienced forgiving in your marital relationship.**

Contact Information  
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## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Document

#### **Researcher and Affiliation**

The researcher, Kathleen M. Leo, M.S., R.N. is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Behavioral Sciences, Community and Health Systems at the College of Nursing Seton Hall University. She is conducting a study entitled: "*What is the Experience of Forgiving in a Marital Relationship*" as part of her requirements for the PhD.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the experience of forgiving for a spouse who is currently in a marital relationship. You have been identified as a possible participant because you have been married for at least five years and have had an experience of forgiving within your marital relationship. The estimated time for participation in this study is 6 -8 hours, which are divided into sessions of 1 ½ to 2 hours each. An additional one hour session -to clarify the researcher's understanding of the information you discuss during the original interviews.

#### **Procedure**

You are being asked to participate in several an in-person interviews. During the four interview sessions of this study the researcher will ask informal open-ended questions about your experience of forgiving in your the-marital relationship. The interviews will be taped recorded and will take place at a mutually agreed upon meeting place that assures an uninterrupted, private session.

Interview: The researcher will conduct all interviews. The first question you will be asked is "tell me about an experience of forgiving you have had during your marriage". Other open-ended questions will follow, depending upon what you tell me about your experience of forgiving.

Audio Tapes: The researcher will tape record all interviews to assure accurate documentation of the dialogue that occurs during your interviews. Accuracy is important because the researcher will need to review the taped interview data at a later time in this study. In order to assure confidentiality, you will not be identified by name on any of the tape recordings- A different code number and fictitious name will be assigned to each person in the study and, rather than using real names, all data connected with each person will be individually coded and labeled throughout the study. Audiotapes will be transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Transcriptions and audiotapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet, in the researcher's work office and the researcher will have the only key to the file cabinet. The audio tape recordings

will only be used for the purpose of this study. Three years after the study ends, the tapes will be erased.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. You have the right to withdraw at any time during the study, and for any reason without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

**Confidentially and Anonymity**

Your participation in this study is confidential and no information about your identity will be shared with anyone. A single master list of each participant's name with its related code number and fictitious name must be created for reference by the researcher in the event that any unforeseen event occurs and the participant needs to be contacted. The master list will be stored in a locked drawer, entirely separate from all other study data. Only the researcher will have knowledge of the storage site and access to it.

All materials collected and/or created during this study will be anonymous. For security reasons all material will be stored on a USB memory key and kept locked in the researcher's home. Participants in this study will not be identified by name. Only academic members of the researcher's Dissertation Committee (Judith Lothian, PhD, R.N. [Chairperson], Theodora H. Sirota, PhD, R.N. and Monsignor Richard Liddy, PhD) will have access to the anonymous research audiotapes, transcripts and data analysis material which will all have code numbers and fictitious names as identifiers. The researcher will always be primarily responsible for this restricted access which is required as part of the researcher's doctoral study. When the results of the research are discussed at professional conferences, or published in academic journals, only anonymous information will be included and no information that would reveal the identity of the participants will ever be used.

***Risks or Discomforts***

This study involves no foreseeable risks, but participation may cause you some discomfort as you discuss your experience of forgiving and the events that surrounded the experience. In the event that this happens, the researcher has a list of resources that you may contact if you need assistance. You may also choose to not answer any questions that cause discomfort and, in addition, you may also stop the interview process at any time.

**Benefits of the Study**

There are no direct benefits for taking part in this study. However, participation in the study may increase your awareness of how forgiving relates to your marital