

INTRODUCTION BY **MALCOLM GLADWELL**

New York Times Bestselling Author



THE
WAY
OF
LETTING
GO

One Woman's Walk Toward Forgiveness

WILMA DERKSEN

With this book Wilma Derksen has found a way to redeem the seemingly irredeemable. After living through a parent's worst nightmare, she devoted herself to the hard work of forgiveness, dissecting each stage with a surgeon's skill. The practical wisdom that has emerged could only come from someone who strained to forgive the unforgivable—and somehow succeeded. What she learned along the way brings hope to all of us who struggle with this most difficult, yet most necessary task.

PHILIP YANCEY, editor-at-large, *Christianity Today*

I have followed Wilma's journey for years. It has been incredibly difficult, incredibly moving, and her insights incredibly profound. She has much to teach us all.

HOWARD ZEHR, Distinguished Professor of Restorative Justice, codirector, Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice, Eastern Mennonite University

In *The Way of Letting Go* Wilma Derksen demonstrates how the healing process is to pass from the narrative of trauma as overwhelming grief into the narrative of trauma as an experience of deep and meaningful significance. Bringing together all her experience and learning following the agony of her daughter's murder, here over thirty years later Derksen is able to give voice to a humanity born out of suffering. There are few who have given as much thought to

the transformative power of forgiveness—she has defined, refined, probed, and reevaluated one of the most difficult, complex, but never more relevant forces in the world today.

MARINA CANTACUZINO, founder,
The Forgiveness Project

Wilma Derksen's powerful book highlights a profound paradox—to achieve some degree of control over one's life and emotions in the face of grief and trauma, one has to do the opposite—let go of control.

TED WACHTEL, editor, BuildingANewReality.com

The answer is love and compassion for all of humanity. When the Nazarene said that we should forgive seventy times seven, he was telling us that forgiveness should be a habit, a way of life. Forgiveness is not for the person who has wronged us; it is for us—it sets us free. Wilma's story is proof of this.

BILL PELKE, author, *Journey of
Hope ... from Violence to Healing*



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The Way of Letting Go

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Chapter 1

THE ENDING AND THE BEGINNING

This year I vow to learn how to garden. I will be the Farmer of Love and grow in understanding and forgiveness.

—JAROD KINTZ



Memories are the key to the past, but not to the future.

—CORRIE TEN BOOM

At the end of the most horrific day, January 17, 1985, there was a knock on the door. I glanced at the clock; it was ten o'clock.

I opened the door, and there was stranger in black standing there against the dark night.

“I too am a parent of a murdered child,” he said, introducing himself. My heart sank—I could feel the blood drain from my face. *Parent of a murdered child?*

I was now a parent of a murdered child. My identity was at stake. Around noon that day, we had just heard that

the body of Candace, our thirteen-year-old daughter, had been discovered by an employee of Alsip Brick, Tile and Lumber Company as he was checking an abandoned shed on the yard.

Who was this man at our door? Every stranger was now a suspect. Everyone was a potential murderer.

“I’ve come to tell you what to expect next,” he said.

It was hard to believe that only seven weeks ago we had been an unknown, unnoticed, happy family. Cliff, my husband, was working as a program director for one of the largest camps in the province, and we had three children: Candace was our oldest, Odia was nine, and Syras was three. I was working my way into a journalism career.

Candace had called me from school to ask me for a ride home. Ordinarily I would have, but time had slipped by me, and I was running late. I had asked her if she wouldn’t mind walking home this time so that by the time she got home I would be finished with my writing project, and the planned festivities for the weekend could begin. I promised to buy party food for her sleepover that weekend.

She said she didn’t mind at all and then told me, rather breathlessly, that she had just had her face washed with snow by “David.” The way she said his name, I knew how special he was.

When she didn’t come through the door at the expected time, a little after four, I had a sinking feeling. I quickly packed up the children and drove down the street looking for her. Then I went to pick up Cliff from the office. Once home, we started calling all of her friends and our friends

and family until we exhausted our leads. Around ten o'clock we called the police. By this time we were in a state of panic.

Our daughter's disappearance sparked Winnipeg's most comprehensive missing person's search to date. Together with the cooperation of the city, we left no stone unturned in our search for her, plastering the city with posters reading "Have you seen Candace?" For seven weeks we pleaded with the public to help us find her, exposing our shattered lives to the whole city.

Now that her body was found, we knew for certain that someone had indeed deliberately abducted her that Friday, taken her to a shed, tied her hands and feet, and then left her there to die in the plunging temperatures of the winter's first extreme cold front.

She had been murdered. The search was over.

We were exhausted; it had been a full day already. After finding out from the police that her body had been found, we immediately drove to the hospital morgue to identify her body.

After that, everyone started to descend on our house. Our friends who heard it on the news came with food and words of comfort. Our house was chaotic.

Now this stranger was appearing at our door with the promise of answers that we were just beginning to ask ourselves.

"Would you like to join us?" I asked.

Together with the couple who was staying the night with us, we sat down at the kitchen table for a warm piece of cherry pie. I couldn't eat, but our guests needed something.

He immediately began to tell his story.

“My daughter was murdered too,” he began.

That’s when we recognized him from the TV news reports over the last few years. It was a well-known local story.

There were no tears as he talked—none. But then again, I could talk about my daughter without tears as well. It was odd. Sometimes I cried uncontrollably; other times I was emotionless.

I remembered the day a group of friends came to pray for us. I hadn’t been able to cry with them—or pray with them. There seemed to be two categories: one for talking about the death of our daughter, when we would cry, and one for talking about the murder and the abduction, when we had no tears.

“She was murdered at the donut shop,” he continued. I had the feeling that he had told his story many times.

As he spoke, I kept wondering what had compelled him to come to our house so late at night. What compulsion was this? His mind seemed to be stuck.

Then he admitted it. He said he couldn’t work anymore because he couldn’t focus on anything but the murder of his daughter. He told us every little detail of the day she was killed.

He went on to say that the murder had damaged his health. And his face was blotched with red; he looked like he was smoldering with an inner rage.

He pulled out his collection of black notebooks from his suit jacket. They were much like the ones reporters used back then. He had recorded all the court proceedings in

those books, meticulously and in detail. There had been two court trials already.

He ranted against the justice system, going into greater detail than any of us cared to hear, but he was so obsessed with it all.

Then he started describing the perpetrator, the man charged with first-degree murder. He was absolutely confident that the man was guilty, describing him as evil. He knew every detail of this offender's public and private life.

"I will never rest ... till there is justice." He said it in many ways over and over as if he were locked in a battle for his life.

He was as angry with the media as he was with the justice administration and the killer.

He kept shaking his head, "I've lost so much—everything."

He hinted that the relationships in his family were strained because he couldn't concentrate on anything else but the murder.

And then he paused. "I've even lost the memory of my daughter."

In other words, the act of murder had taken the life of his daughter, but the aftermath of murder had taken *his life*.

The worst part was that there was no end in sight for him. Approximately a month before, an appeal was upheld, and so another trial was called. He didn't know how he would be able to go through it all again. He said he just wanted it to be over.

We sat stunned and horrified. I couldn't believe what

I was hearing. I couldn't believe the audacity of his visit—coming to tell us all of this on the worst day of our lives. Yet I was fascinated by him and listened intently, sensing that there had to be a reason for his coming. Whether we wanted to or not, we needed to hear this.

Besides, I was identifying with parts of his story. We had already encountered some of his trauma ourselves in the last seven weeks as we had desperately searched for our daughter. I was quickly becoming familiar with the terror, the anger, and the feeling that our hearts were breaking—except that this break wasn't only emotional, it was also real pain. I had never experienced such intense emotional pain.

We had also been offered medication. I had declined, believing that if I had gone through the pain of childbirth with Candace without medication, I needed to resist it now as well. I needed my wits about me even more now—even though she was gone physically, the memory of her still needed my mother's attention.

I also knew the potential of what this trauma could have on our marriage and relationships. After Candace's disappearance, I hadn't allowed Cliff to touch me. Because I thought someone had abducted Candace to sexually violate her, the thought of intimacy was revolting. I had resisted for six weeks. It had left us both isolated, uncomforted, and stressed.

I knew the potential of the damage of the publicity that we had so deliberately and desperately cultivated but that would now remain focused on us. There had already been public misunderstandings of our ways of coping—and some disruptive family discussions because of it.

I was already obsessed with watching the neighbors. I suspected everyone of having something to do with her disappearance. My world had become suddenly very hostile. I felt I was sinking into my own personal abyss.

I couldn't read, eat, or breathe without pain. Sleep was elusive.

I knew exactly what this strange man was talking about.



At midnight, he noticed the clock on the wall and stood up quite abruptly. He looked exhausted. As a hostess, I wanted to say something to comfort him. But too exhausted ourselves, we did not have the energy or the skill to comfort him at that moment. I felt incredible sadness as he stepped into the dark, cold winter night alone and despondent.

After he left, my husband and I went upstairs to our bedroom and just looked at each other desperately. We were scared. We had just lost our child. Were we going to lose everything? Was this the beginning of a spiral of losses that would leave us like the man: dark, desperate, hopeless, and insensitive to everything around us?

There had to be another way.

Cliff and I just looked at each other in disbelief, numb. We knew we would not be able to sleep. We had just identified Candace's body. Every time we shut our eyes we could see her lying there so very still on the gurney. Minus her vibrant, sanguine personality, she looked so tiny, so vulnerable, her face etched with pain.

Chapter 2

THE ONLY QUESTION

Life is grace. Sleep is forgiveness. The night absolves. Darkness wipes the slate clean, not spotless to be sure, but clean enough for another day's chalking.

—FREDERICK BUECHNER



Lights from the TV cameras had dimmed, and I thought the press conference was over. We had spent the entire time talking about our daughter—relieved that we had found her, shocked that she had been murdered, and thankful for everyone who had been searching for her.

Just as we were about to leave, someone asked the question.

“And what about the person who murdered your daughter?”

The reporter who had asked the question was standing in the back, his black note pad in his hands, pen poised. The question hung in the air for quite a while as we just sat there deliberating about what we should say. I think we were in a bit of a fog.

The last three days had been intense. We had driven to a hastily arranged appointment at Klassen’s Funeral Home.

We had never planned a funeral before, so the funeral director led us through a list of things that we needed to think about. So much had to be done. I was exhausted. We tried to keep it businesslike, but the grief was unbearable.

I will never forget going into the huge display room filled with coffins. A white coffin caught our attention almost immediately, one with a little pink bud embedded in ribboned material. It was feminine ... almost childlike, yet adult.

This is surreal, I kept thinking. *This can't be happening. Candace will suddenly show up and tell us to stop this nonsense.* But it was real. We continued planning. Now that the search was over, we seemed to have new energy to focus on the tasks at hand. This funeral was now important to us.

But driving home, as Cliff and I reviewed our decisions regarding the memorial card and program details, we started arguing. It got nasty.

The argument made us all the more worried that we were heading for some kind of emotional disaster. For me, it was a sign that we were indeed heading for the same trauma as our ten o'clock stranger, except for me it was something I called the abyss.

I knew about this abyss. I had intimate knowledge of it.

I had been around the age of thirty when I had faced my first real abyss—my madness—which I came to recognize as a shapeless, chaotic mass inside of me. It was nothingness filled with something dark, watery, and deep.

At that time, we were living in the small town of North Battleford, Saskatchewan. Cliff had just accepted a position as pastor of a small church, and I thought I finally would

be free to pursue my dreams. Since I had supported him through college, it was now my turn to finish university. But I hadn't counted on having children; we had two little girls who needed my full attention.

Suddenly I was overwhelmed with a sadness that I didn't understand. I had everything to make me happy—a wonderful husband, two delightful children—but I could barely get through my days, the burden of it all unbelievable.

My abyss would not be denied. I felt trapped—not so much by my husband or children but by what had led me to this vulnerable place, so unprepared for the challenges of being a mother. At thirty years old, I was stuck. Having moved around the country in the pursuit of my husband's dream and now living in a new community, I felt trapped at home without any social supports in place. It was as if all the trauma of my younger years was coming back to haunt me again. Throw in a little postpartum depression, and I knew I was in a dangerous place.

It was the abyss. I felt I was going to suffocate. It was not only an empty, chaotic space but also a hungry darkness; I felt the sadness licking at my feet.

The only way I could deal with it was to sneak out late at night when my family was sound asleep—safe—and get into our car and race across the prairie—that wide open space that went on and on. I just needed to feel as if I were flying. After an hour of that, I needed to drive down to the river and drive along the narrow roads next to the river's edge that snaked through the hills where it was quiet and dark—much like the abyss that was inside of me.

“Let go,” I must have told myself a million times.

“Don’t hang on!” I told myself. “Let it go. Forgive them all.”



The term *forgive* derives from “to give” or “to grant,” as in “to give up.” To me, it has always meant giving up my right to do what comes naturally and to deliberately choose what my response will be. Sometimes the outcome is the same, but the process is different. Most often, that pause of giving up or letting go and then choosing another way can bring astonishing new results.

“Let the past go. Find something new.”

Those words had launched me into an entirely new direction that gave me energy. I started to freelance as a feature writer for the local newspaper. At the end of our stay at North Battleford, I had somehow managed to let it go. I had conquered my depression and was excited about my life.

However, ever after I had developed a fear of the abyss.

Now the reporter’s question was hanging in the air: “And what about the person who murdered your daughter?”

Cliff, my husband, was the first to answer it. And he said it with a kind of *fait-accompli* assurance. “We forgive.”

I would do the only thing I knew how to do; I would let go. But this time I was facing an abyss more challenging and dangerous than the one I had escaped before. My quick heart check didn’t allow me that confidence. I didn’t know if my heart was letting go at the moment.

All I could feel was the breaking of a wounded mother's bleeding heart. I envied my husband's confidence; I still do. But I am a reluctant forgiver—a determined but reluctant forgiver who needs a lot of time. We didn't even know what that would mean.

I answered honestly. "I want to forgive."

The lights that had dimmed had come back on as they asked us what forgiving meant. I have no idea how we answered them. But to me it felt like I had dissolved into a conversation with friends as Cliff and I began to explore the concept with them.

I was stunned the next day that our choice and our attitude was what had grabbed the attention of the city. I had thought the stories would focus on the murder. They didn't. The articles highlighted our statement of forgiveness.

After the funeral, we were again shocked as the newspaper headlines—both papers, front page—jumped out at us. "Peace Triumphs!" said the *Winnipeg Sun*, which devoted the first four pages to our story. The story in the *Winnipeg Free Press* centered on Candace. Both suggested that somehow, in all of this tragedy, good had triumphed.

Dad had been unusually quiet with us, and I hadn't been sure if it was just the hustle and bustle or if he was troubled. I watched his reactions carefully as he read the stories. When he laid down the paper, a new peace was on his face.

"Now I understand," he said quietly. "On the train trip here, I was so puzzled. I wondered how God could allow something like this to happen. But now I know."

Chapter 3

THE EMOTIONAL LANDMINES



Life is an adventure in forgiveness.

—NORMAN COUSINS

The fashion models in their designer clothes were lined up and ready to walk the runway. Our own kindergarten-aged son had been stylishly dressed and was going to be part of the show. A local radio personality at the time was there to host the event. It was sold out.

But something was wrong—desperately wrong. I didn't know what was bothering me, but it was all wrong. I wondered if I should stop everything and sort it out. But everyone else was happy, and it was a smashing success. *The show must go on!* I told myself.

At the time, I was chair of the Child Find Manitoba chapter that we had begun even while Candace was missing so that we could access all the resources of the organization that was already in existence in other provinces. We wanted to get the word out about missing children easily and quickly, as soon as they were reported. This fashion show was a fundraising event organized by the board and made up of talented, beautiful women who were doing what they knew best.

But my soul wasn't in it.

One of the board members, kind and lovely, came up beside me. "What's wrong?"

I started describing my feelings. I don't even know what I said.

Then she said something: "We aren't looking for Candace anymore. She was found, Wilma."

I gasped. She had hit the nail on the head. I could feel the impact of her words.

Those seven weeks of looking for Candace had so traumatized me that I was locked into that time period. I couldn't move on. I could not enter into success.

I went through the motions of the evening as graciously as I could.

That night I wrote my resignation letter. I had some homework to do. The abyss was manifesting itself in negative ways that I hadn't even recognized.

I needed to explore my issues and deal with them. At the same time, I had been receiving calls from a support group organized mainly for parents of murdered children. The few conversations that I had with the president had been so informative and reassuring that I was intrigued. Because his own children had been murdered, he seemed to understand exactly what I was going through.

Eventually I joined the group. At the time we were meeting in a rather unique church, an old converted house on Notre Dame, which was a perfect setting for us—casual, a little chaotic, but homey.

That first meeting I felt as if I had entered a different

dimension. For one thing, we were all headliners. The murders of our children had put us on the front page of the newspapers. Second, instead of talking about our friends and family, we talked about the police as if they were friends of ours. We compared notes about the lawyers, judges, and psychologists. We were connected to all the organizations and agencies in the city but didn't belong to any of them. We could cry one moment and rant the next.

The first circle question was: "Do you feel you are going crazy?"

"Yes." We all agreed. It felt as if we were going crazy.

What made this group especially interesting to me was how articulate people were when it came to describing the "violation" of our lives. Most of us had led rather conventional lives before the event. We had lived by the book and had prided ourselves in doing things right. Then, without warning, our children had been targeted and murdered.

Suddenly we were thrown into a situation about which we had no background, no understanding, and no grid. Something had happened to us that we couldn't understand—and neither did anyone else.

Just listening to each other assured us that we were not going crazy. We met every other week just to be reassured of that over and over.

At the same time, there was a growing interest in trauma, restorative justice, and providing victim services. So it seemed, at least for me, that I was constantly being asked by other organizations what it was like to be a parent of a

murdered child. Why did we meet? What were we learning? The underlying question was: What do victims need?

We didn't have the Internet or any search engines back then, so we didn't have access to all the information. Without much further thought, probably because of my journalism training, I became an amateur social researcher.

I would listen to the issues during the meeting and then go home at night and list them. As my list grew, I started to share them with the group and with my growing audience of churches and programs, including restorative-justice initiatives who wanted to hear my story. This elicited more stories from my audiences. I finally started to see the patterns and the design, and I grouped them together.



As I traveled across the country and met other people who have experienced the murder of a loved one, I would listen to their stories, and I started to incorporate their issues as well, distributing them into a list of fifteen issues that we faced. Except they weren't ordinary issues—these were issues of monstrous proportion, much bigger and fiercer than the ones I faced in my abyss of depression. These were monsters that attacked our most vulnerable places.

Each one of these monsters had the ability to pull us down and bury us in our own emotions so we couldn't move. There was no doubt that they were out to destroy us—mind, heart, body, and spirit—leaving nothing intact. When I wasn't fighting for my life, I was exhausted. No wonder I felt stuck.

What I had discovered in my first journey into the abyss is that the only way to deal with it was to face it and feel all the pain so I could identify and understand it. I couldn't go around it, over it, or under it; I had to go through it.

Now I was facing monsters I had never encountered, and I wasn't the only one. It seemed helpful to other crime victims to name and describe these monsters so that they could do battle better.

I could list them here very clinically, but I sometimes learned more about the abyss and its monsters by going to the movies than I did from doing research on trauma and the aftermath of murder.

Monster #1 resembles the catastrophe of the tower of Babel. It attacks our narrative. One minute we are communicating easily with everyone around us, the next minute there is a violent explosion in the middle of our lives, and thereafter no one is speaking the same language. Words are lost, vocabulary has changed, conflicts are rampant, pieces of information are lost, and the personal narrator has been silenced. Communication is gone.

Monster #2 resembles the eye of Dark Lord Sauron, who whispers, "You cannot hide. . . . I see you. . . . There is no hope for you—and I will destroy." It is hard to function normally under the grip of the eye. It keeps us spellbound and immobilized with terror.

Monster #3 acts like the Dementors straight out of the Harry Potter series, a negative, emotional energy force that feeds on our peace, hope, and happiness. Everyone else seems to be able to live at high speed, but we are drained of

all energy, slowing down to first gear (and even that is hard to sustain). When unresolved grief has no place to be buried, it wanders like a zombie, pursuing the living for its energy.

Monster #4 is the Tasmanian Devil that comes roaring into the scene mirroring the turmoil inside us. Life makes no sense anymore. We spin and swerve out of control. Our psyche panics as it desperately tries to find answers to soothe the crazed mind.

Monster #5 comes at us like a rogue wave on the high seas of life. We are caught in the perfect storm. We try to power over it, but the wave starts to break, and we capsize—sinking into a spiritual blackness. Our old faith doesn't survive. It dies; it has to die to be reborn as something new.

Monster #6 is the evil stepmother, Lady Tremaine, who takes over our lives. We are sidelined, cursed, disgraced, completely diminished, stigmatized, and marginalized, so we are forced to find a small place beside the hearth in the ashes of life. Everyone else can go to the ball but us.

Monster #7 is the Führer himself at the helm of the concentration camp, brutally plundering and imprisoning everyone. We have encountered the spirit of the Nazi regime. Our space is no longer ours. We are prisoners. We don't have a name; we now have a number.

Monster #8 is like being caught in the trenches of a Transformer super power battle. We can't seem to identify what is evil and what is good.

Monster #9 is like a chill that sweeps into the room, and we know it is Lucifer, better known as the father of lies, the master of illusions, the artist of smoke and mirrors. This

monster turns everyone around us into liars. We need the truth desperately.

Monster #10 is the birth of the green Hulk. Our emotions enlarge inside of us, outgrowing who we are as we become unrecognizable to those around us and to ourselves in our green rage.

Monster #11 erodes our moral sensibilities. Everyone seems fairly sane till they turn from a Dr. Jekyll into a Mr. Hyde. We meet people who live in different realities and interpret things differently from the way we do. We never know who will show up.

Monster #12 is like an elephant in the room. The systems and organizations that come in to help us can feel huge and imposing, which can feel limiting and dangerous when they start to move.

Monster #13 is the icy White Witch of the North in the Narnia series, who forces us to live in the land of endless winter during her reign. Even Christmas, the best part of winter, is prevented from ever coming. Years can slip by between words and healings, and in no time we have wasted ten years in the winter and missed every Christmas. It is the reign of endless waiting.

Monster #14 can be like a trickster or a joker, a seemingly jolly, harmless person who starts to entertain us, promising laughter and good times. We think we are engaging in joy and the promise of happiness until we realize we are up against the joker, a goofy clown who turns into a vicious, calculating, psychopathic killer at the end. There is no program, no medical plan. All the promises of healing lead to a dead end.

THE WAY OF LETTING GO

One Woman's Walk toward Forgiveness

By Wilma Derksen

Maybe it was the sting of remarks from a relative or friend. Maybe a miscarriage ended your hopes for a family. For all of your heartbreaks, maybe you wished there was someone to help you through. For Wilma Derksen, letting go of the 15 misconceptions about grief led her back to hope. In this book she tells how you can do the same.

Wilma's world collapsed when her teenage daughter, Candace, was taken hostage and murdered. Wilma now shares her choices to "let go" of heartbreak, which gave her the courage to navigate through the dark waters of sorrow. Like Wilma, maybe your heartbreak forced you to retreat from happy expectations, of believing that life is fair, of finding closure for every circumstance. She encourages patiently: let go of the happy ending, let go of perfect justice, let go of fear, and let go of closure. Wilma's wisdom will help you overcome your broken heart, and her advice will enable you to break free of pain to live a life of true joy.

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