GRADE 10, UNIT 5

INDEPENDENT LEARNING SELECTIONS

The Independent Learning selections will reside in the Interactive Student Edition in time for back-to-school 2016. Students will be able to engage with these texts by highlighting, taking notes, and responding to activities directly in the Interactive Student Edition.

Until that time, the selections are available in this document. This unit includes:

- The Sun Parlor
- The Forgiveness Project
- A Dish Best Served Cold
  Aminatta Forna on Laura Blumenfeld’s Mission to Understand Violence, *Revenge*
- *from* Shakespeare & the French Poet
- What We Plant, We Will Eat
- Understanding Forgiveness
This a tale with a moral. I will try not to tax your attention too long. But I have to go way back to begin because it begins with my childhood. It is about houses and children, and which came first.

There were four of us children, well-schooled in good manners, well-behaved almost all of the time, and obedient to the commands of grown-ups, the power people who could make or break us.

We lived in a beautiful house. The reason I knew that is because all my mother’s friends said so, and brought their other friends to see it. On the day appointed for the tour, which included inspection of every room on every floor, my mother would gather us around her and say in her gentlest voice, “I’m sorry, children, but Mrs. So-and-so is coming today and bringing a friend to see our house. You children keep clean and play quietly while they’re here. It’s not a real visit. They won’t stay long. It’ll be over before you can say Jack Robinson.”

Most often a first-time caller, having lavished praise on everything she saw, including us, proceeded out without any further remarks. But there were others who, when they saw four children good as gold, did not see beyond their size, and asked my mother in outspoken horror, “How can you bear to let children loose in a lovely house like this?”

Every time it happened we were terrified. What would happen to us if my mother decided her house was too good for us and she hated the sight of us? What would we do, where would we go, would we starve?

My mother looked at out stricken faces and her own face softened and her eyes filled with love. Then she would say to her inquisitor, though she did not say it rudely, “The children don’t belong to the house. The house belongs to the children. No room says, Do not enter.”

I did not know I could ever forget those sentiments. But once, to my lasting regret, I did. With the passage of years I took my place with grown-ups, and there was another generation, among them the little girl, Sis, who was my mother’s treasure. The summer she was eight was the one time I forgot that a child is not subordinate to a house.

We had a cottage in the Highlands of Oak Bluffs of unimpressive size and appearance. My mother loved it for its easy care. It couldn’t even stand in the shade of our city house, and there certainly were no special rules for children. No one had ever looked aghast at a child on its premises.

Except me, the summer I painted the sun parlor. I am not a painter, but I am a perfectionist. I threw my whole soul into the project, and worked with such diligence and painstaking care that when the uncounted hours ended I felt that I had painted the Sistine Chapel.
School vacation began, and Sis arrived for the long holiday, the car pulling up at the edge of the brick walk, and Sis streaking into the house for a round of hugs, then turning to tear upstairs to take off her travel clothes and put on her play clothes, and suddenly her flying feet braking to stop in front of the sun parlor, its open door inviting inspection.

She who was always in motion, she who never took time for a second look at anything, or cared whether her bed was smooth or crumpled, or noticed what was on her plate as long as it was something to eat—she, in the awakening that came when she was eight, an her first awareness of something outside herself, stood in the doorway of the sun parlor, her face filled with the joy of her discovery, and said in a voice on the edge of tears, “It’s the most beautiful room I ever saw in my whole life.”

I did not hear her. I did not really hear her. I did not recognize the magnitude of that moment. I let it sink to some low level of my subconscious. All I saw was that her foot was poised to cross the threshold of my chapel.

I let out a little cry of pain. “Sis, I said, “please don’t go in the sun parlor. There’s nothing in there to interest a child. It’s not a place for children to play in. It’s a place for grown-ups to sit in. Go and change. Summer is outside waiting for you to come and play wherever you please.”

In a little while the sounds of Sis’s soaring laughter were mingling with the happy sounds of other vacationing children. They kept any doubt I might have had from surfacing. Sis was surely more herself running free than squirming on a chair in the sun parlor.

All the same I monitored that room, looking for smudges and streaks, scanning the floor for signs of scuffing. The room bore no scars, and Sis showed no trace of frustration.

The summer flowed. My friends admired the room, though they did it without superlatives. To them it was a room I had talked about redoing for a long time. Now I had done it. So much for that.

The summer waned, and Sis went home for school’s reopening, as did the other summer children, taking so much life and laughter with them that the ensuing days recovered slowly.

Then my mother’s sister, my favorite aunt, arrived from New York for her usual stay at summer’s end. She looked ten years younger than her actual years. She seemed to bounce with energy, as if she had gone through some process of rejuvenation. We asked her for the secret.

There was no way for us to know in the brimful days that followed that there really was a secret she was keeping from us. She had had a heart attack some months before, and she had been ordered to follow a strict set of rules: plenty of rest during the day, early to bed at night, take her medicine faithfully, carefully watch her diet.
She was my mother’s younger sister. My mother had been her babysitter. She didn’t want my mother to know that she was back to being a baby again, needing to be watched over, having to be put down for nap, having to be spoon-fed pap. She kept herself busy around the clock, walking, lifting, sitting up late, eating her favorite foods and forgetting her medicine.

And then one day standing over the stove involved in the making of meal that a master chef might envy, she collapsed, and the doctor was called, and the doctor called the ambulance.

She was in the hospital ten days. When she was ready to come home to convalesce, we turned the sun parlor into a sickroom, for the stairs to the upper story were forbidden to her. At night we who, when she slept upstairs, would talk family talk back and forth from our beds far into the night, without her we were now quiet, not wanting our voices to wake her if she was asleep, knowing her recovery depended on rest and quiet.

But at night she slept fitfully. The sleeping house and separation from the flock were unbearable. She was afraid of the sun parlor, seeing it as an abnormal offshoot from the main part of the house, its seven long windows giving access to so many imagined terrors. She did not know if we would hear her if she called. She did not know if she would ever get well.

She did not get well. She went back to the hospital, and for our sakes was brave in her last days, comforting us more than we comforted her.

When it was over we took the sickbed away and restored the sun parlor to its natural look. But it did not look natural. The sadness resisted the sun’s cajoling. It had settled in every corner. The seven long windows streaming light did not help. I closed the door and locked it.

My mother saw the closed door and the key in my hand She said as a simple statement of fact, “A little girl wanted to love that room, and you wouldn’t let her. We learn so many lessons as we go through life.”

“I know that now,” I said. “I wish I had known it then.”

Another summer came, and with it Sis. The sun parlor door was open again, the room full or light with the sadness trying to hide itself whenever she passed. I did not know how to say to her, “You can go in the sun parlor if you want to.” I did not know whether she knew it had been a sickroom, and might say, “Take your sun parlor and you-know-what,” though in less succinct phrasing. I did not know if she yet knew that nothing can be the same once it has been different.

Other summers passed, older family members died, and mine became the oldest generation. I was living on the island year-round in the winterized cottage. The sun parlor
was just another everyday room, its seven long windows reduced to three of standard size, most of the furniture replaced for sturdier sitting.

Sis was married, a mother, coming to visit when she could—coming, I think, to look for bits and pieces of my mother in me, wanting to see her ways, hear her words through me.

It was a year ago that I asked her the question that had been on my mind, it seems, forever. A dozen times I had bitten it off my tongue because I did not know what she might answer.

“She’s gone.” My mother always referred to me as “she” when she was annoyed with me. “She said she’d be gone awhile. You go play in that sun parlor if you want. There’s nothing in there you can hurt. Nothing in that room is worth as much as a child.”

I saw her lips beginning to part. And I felt my heart trembling.

“I don’t want to know the answer. Please don’t tell me the answer. I had to ask the question. It’s enough for me that you listened.”

She smiled.
During the Second World War Eric Lomax was tortured by the Japanese on the Burma-Siam Railway. Fifty years later he met one of his tormentors. His book, *The Railway Man*, tells the story.

If you are a victim of torture you never totally recover. You may cope with the physical damage, but the psychological damage stays with you forever.

In 1945 I returned to Edinburgh to a life of uncertainty, following three and half years of fear, interrogation, and torture as a POW in the Far East. I had no self-worth, no trust in people, and lived in a world of my own. The privacy of the torture victim is more impregnable than any island fortress. People thought I was coping, but inside I was falling apart. I became impossible to live with; it was as if the sins my captors had sown in me were being harvested in my family. I also had intense hatred for the Japanese, and was always looking for ways and means to do them down. In my mind I often thought of my hateful interrogator. I wanted to drown him, cage him, and beat him—as he had done to me.

After my retirement in 1982, I started searching for information about what had happened in Siam. The need to know is powerful. In the course of my search I learnt that Nagase Takashi—my interrogator and torturer—had offered to help others with information. I learnt that he was still alive, active in charitable works, and that he had built a Buddhist temple. I was skeptical. I couldn’t believe in the notion of Japanese repentance. I strongly suspected that if I were to meet him I’d put my hands round his neck and do him in.

My turning point came in 1987 when I came across The Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture. For the first time I was able to unload the hate that had become my prison. Seeing the change in me, my wife wrote to Nagase. The letter he wrote back was full of compassion, and I think at that moment I lost whatever hard armor I had wrapped around me and began to think the unthinkable.

The meeting took place in 1998 in Kanburi, Thailand. When we met Nagase greeted me with a formal bow. I took his hand and said in Japanese, “Good Morning Mr. Nagase, how are you?” He was trembling and crying, and he said over and over again: “I am so sorry, so very sorry.” I had come with no sympathy for this man, and yet Nagase, through his complete humility, turned this around. In the days that followed we spent a lot of time together, talking and laughing. It transpired that we had much in common. We promised to keep in touch and have remained friends ever since.

After our meeting I felt I’d come to some kind of peace and resolution. Forgiveness is possible when someone is ready to accept forgiveness. Some time the hating has to stop.
In the winter of 1986, an American tourist making his way alone up the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem’s old city was shot in the head by a Palestinian gunman. Some months later his daughter, a Harvard undergraduate, wrote a poem about the shooting of her father for one of her assignments. The last verse ended with a promise to her father to find the gunman. Then she shelved the poem along with her other college memorabilia—and moved on.

David Blumenfeld was lucky. The bullet merely cleaved his scalp. Had there been half an inch difference in the angle of the gunman’s aim, he would be dead. His daughter Laura graduated and went on to become a successful journalist writing for the Washington Post. Twelve years later, she uncovers the poem as she is about to depart on her honeymoon year to Israel. She decides to track down the gunman.

At the start of this remarkable memoir, Laura Blumenfeld confesses that she never really overcame the emotions aroused by the attempt on her father’s life, and had nursed revenge fantasies about it. She collects together various stories, drawn from encounters with people who have sought revenge. The majority come from the Arab and Jewish communities, cultures saturated in tales of faith-sanctioned vengeance.

There is the young boy in Hebron who saw his father slaughtered at prayers in the mosque, who sleepwalks at night literally dreaming of revenge; the Israeli military commander who believes in an eye for an eye, but prefers to shoot to kill first. Each side justifies the killing with lies. Her own father, a New York rabbi, was in Israel to visit the Holocaust museum. She is assured he was in reality a CIA agent. How much revenge is enough? she asks the widow of Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli prime minister assassinated by a right-wing Jewish extremist: “There’s not enough revenge in the entire world,” comes the reply.

Blumenfeld’s search takes her to places where revenge is an obsession. In Albania there is codified revenge. Feuds are passed from generation to generation, vengeance a filial duty governed by a 15th-century canon, which is in turn interpreted by a Blood Feud Committee. In the Holy City of Qom in Iran, she discusses blood money with the Grand Ayatollah. She encounters collective revenge: Jews who hold all Germans responsible for the Holocaust and set out to poison the water system of entire German cities. Everywhere, she finds revenge is a man’s game. Women have no role as avengers. Only as “revenge cheerleaders, chanting funeral dirges, shaking the victim’s blood-soaked clothes like macabre pompoms.”

Blumenfeld’s research leads her around to her starting point: the shooting of her father. The attempt on his life, she discovers, was neither a single nor a random act of violence, but part of a campaign to kill tourists. Compulsive and meticulous, she traces the threads that connect a series of shootings, as did Gabriel García Márquez in News of a

A Dish Best Served Cold
Aminatta Forna on Laura Blumenfeld’s Mission to Understand Violence, Revenge • Aminatta Forna

In the winter of 1986, an American tourist making his way alone up the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem’s old city was shot in the head by a Palestinian gunman. Some months later his daughter, a Harvard undergraduate, wrote a poem about the shooting of her father for one of her assignments. The last verse ended with a promise to her father to find the gunman. Then she shelved the poem along with her other college memorabilia—and moved on.

David Blumenfeld was lucky. The bullet merely cleaved his scalp. Had there been half an inch difference in the angle of the gunman’s aim, he would be dead. His daughter Laura graduated and went on to become a successful journalist writing for the Washington Post. Twelve years later, she uncovers the poem as she is about to depart on her honeymoon year to Israel. She decides to track down the gunman.

At the start of this remarkable memoir, Laura Blumenfeld confesses that she never really overcame the emotions aroused by the attempt on her father’s life, and had nursed revenge fantasies about it. She collects together various stories, drawn from encounters with people who have sought revenge. The majority come from the Arab and Jewish communities, cultures saturated in tales of faith-sanctioned vengeance.

There is the young boy in Hebron who saw his father slaughtered at prayers in the mosque, who sleepwalks at night literally dreaming of revenge; the Israeli military commander who believes in an eye for an eye, but prefers to shoot to kill first. Each side justifies the killing with lies. Her own father, a New York rabbi, was in Israel to visit the Holocaust museum. She is assured he was in reality a CIA agent. How much revenge is enough? she asks the widow of Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli prime minister assassinated by a right-wing Jewish extremist: “There’s not enough revenge in the entire world,” comes the reply.

Blumenfeld’s search takes her to places where revenge is an obsession. In Albania there is codified revenge. Feuds are passed from generation to generation, vengeance a filial duty governed by a 15th-century canon, which is in turn interpreted by a Blood Feud Committee. In the Holy City of Qom in Iran, she discusses blood money with the Grand Ayatollah. She encounters collective revenge: Jews who hold all Germans responsible for the Holocaust and set out to poison the water system of entire German cities. Everywhere, she finds revenge is a man’s game. Women have no role as avengers. Only as “revenge cheerleaders, chanting funeral dirges, shaking the victim’s blood-soaked clothes like macabre pompoms.”

Blumenfeld’s research leads her around to her starting point: the shooting of her father. The attempt on his life, she discovers, was neither a single nor a random act of violence, but part of a campaign to kill tourists. Compulsive and meticulous, she traces the threads that connect a series of shootings, as did Gabriel García Márquez in News of a

A Dish Best Served Cold
Aminatta Forna on Laura Blumenfeld’s Mission to Understand Violence, Revenge • Aminatta Forna

In the winter of 1986, an American tourist making his way alone up the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem’s old city was shot in the head by a Palestinian gunman. Some months later his daughter, a Harvard undergraduate, wrote a poem about the shooting of her father for one of her assignments. The last verse ended with a promise to her father to find the gunman. Then she shelved the poem along with her other college memorabilia—and moved on.

David Blumenfeld was lucky. The bullet merely cleaved his scalp. Had there been half an inch difference in the angle of the gunman’s aim, he would be dead. His daughter Laura graduated and went on to become a successful journalist writing for the Washington Post. Twelve years later, she uncovers the poem as she is about to depart on her honeymoon year to Israel. She decides to track down the gunman.

At the start of this remarkable memoir, Laura Blumenfeld confesses that she never really overcame the emotions aroused by the attempt on her father’s life, and had nursed revenge fantasies about it. She collects together various stories, drawn from encounters with people who have sought revenge. The majority come from the Arab and Jewish communities, cultures saturated in tales of faith-sanctioned vengeance.

There is the young boy in Hebron who saw his father slaughtered at prayers in the mosque, who sleepwalks at night literally dreaming of revenge; the Israeli military commander who believes in an eye for an eye, but prefers to shoot to kill first. Each side justifies the killing with lies. Her own father, a New York rabbi, was in Israel to visit the Holocaust museum. She is assured he was in reality a CIA agent. How much revenge is enough? she asks the widow of Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli prime minister assassinated by a right-wing Jewish extremist: “There’s not enough revenge in the entire world,” comes the reply.

Blumenfeld’s search takes her to places where revenge is an obsession. In Albania there is codified revenge. Feuds are passed from generation to generation, vengeance a filial duty governed by a 15th-century canon, which is in turn interpreted by a Blood Feud Committee. In the Holy City of Qom in Iran, she discusses blood money with the Grand Ayatollah. She encounters collective revenge: Jews who hold all Germans responsible for the Holocaust and set out to poison the water system of entire German cities. Everywhere, she finds revenge is a man’s game. Women have no role as avengers. Only as “revenge cheerleaders, chanting funeral dirges, shaking the victim’s blood-soaked clothes like macabre pompoms.”

Blumenfeld’s research leads her around to her starting point: the shooting of her father. The attempt on his life, she discovers, was neither a single nor a random act of violence, but part of a campaign to kill tourists. Compulsive and meticulous, she traces the threads that connect a series of shootings, as did Gabriel García Márquez in News of a
Kidnapping. In Germany, Wales and Jerusalem, she finds relatives and victims who have found their own ways of coping.

The law’s attempt to civilize the raw need for revenge satisfies public but not individual wants. Rachel, Blumenfeld’s best friend, is needlingly sceptical about her endeavor. Blumenfeld’s father is wavering in his support. Her brother is uninterested. It is she, the younger daughter, persistent in the face of tradition, armed with a pen and not a sword, who seeks the vengeance that nobody but she really seems to want.

Describing herself only as a journalist writing a book, she makes contact with the family of the gunman, who is serving a prison sentence for the crime for which he was convicted, and becomes a regular visitor to their home. Never suspecting who she is, they even take her on a visit to the prison where he is being held. Blumenfeld and the gunman begin to exchange letters, smuggled to him by the unsuspecting relatives. She joins the Palestinian crowds at a prisoner exchange, and finds herself disappointed that he is not among those released. She realizes how close to the gunman and his family she has become: “It was awkward, I felt guilty, they were so nice, they hated Jews so.”

Many books begin with a personal story, gradually broadening to encompass a grander narrative. This one does the opposite. What begins as a path to understanding cultures narrows to the story of a daughter caught between two divorced parents. At the time of the shooting, her parents had just separated. Her mother, in Miami with her new lover, takes the call from her estranged husband, brushes the incident off and returns to the poolside. Years later, she barely remembers it. “Bernie and I were having fun. It was a happy time.”

Not for Blumenfeld and her brother. “It was a turbulent time for our family,” recalls Hal, who also prefers to forget. Blumenfeld’s compulsion for revenge is really a displaced anger at her mother and a desire to make up to her father for her own neglect of him after the divorce.

If there is one aspect of Blumenfeld’s book I found less than compelling, then this is it. On the subject of her family, the self-knowledge that has carried the narrative slides too often into a kind of cheerless self-analysis. Readers in this country may find it a little too, well, American. But that should not detract from what is certainly a mighty achievement.

Blumenfeld’s drive to understand revenge leads her towards an examination of the emotional converse: empathy, compassion. Her decision and efforts to reveal her true identity lead to the denouement - in a courtroom during a parole hearing for the imprisoned man—which is absurd, almost farcical and all the more touching for her inability to get it quite right.

Blumenfeld draws her story to a close in a postscript written after the events of September 11, as she listens to the US president promising revenge—a word he later switches to justice on the advice of his aides. Blumenfeld’s book should be required reading in the White House.

A Dish Best Served Cold
Aminatta Forna on Laura Blumenfeld’s Mission to Understand Violence, Revenge
What happens at the beginning of Act 5, when Prospero takes stock of the day’s events? Ariel describes for him the wretched state of the king of Naples and his companions in misfortune, exhausted from the delusions and ordeals to which they have been exposed; he discretely suggests to Prospero that he should be moved to pity them. And there can scarcely be any doubt that Ariel, who is but a spirit of the air, ignorant of time and suffering, only advances this idea because, as he puts it a moment earlier, “Thy thoughts I cleave to,” words that Shakespeare has surely considered deeply. Ariel is one with Prospero’s thoughts; he hears it as it comes into being, and he sometimes anticipates it. The idea of pity, of compassion, therefore comes as such to Prospero himself, and it is obviously a sign of the awareness he has that the present situation offers him the possibility for self-transcendence, for if it no longer holds the promise of progress on the mystical level, it does afford an occasion for experience on the moral one. And although he has given no thought to it before—since it was only social order that mattered to him, not the fate of individuals—he now sees that his situation as victor has become a test. He can accept it as such, learn from it that forgiveness is more important than vengeance, practice “virtue,” as he says, and once again feel greater than what I would call his unconscious self. Moreover once he has made his decision to grant pardon, he resolves to abandon the powers that were his as magus, powers that can only incite him to idle dreaming and thus distract him from the one true path, which is the practice of virtue. Already that very morning he had agreed to give up Ariel, but in the way that one leaves behind the first rung on a ladder. What he is now rejecting is entirely different, and we can sense an element of condemnation in it. Scarcely has he told Ariel, with regard to the shipwrecked prisoner he has held captive, “release them, . . . their senses I’ll restore,” than he turns toward the universe whose occult forces he had sought to master and abjures with great solemnity that magic which clearly was only “rough,” something material, since nothing true along the path toward the salvation of the soul was encouraged by it. He will use one last bit of this power to awaken those wandering on the island and to assure a peaceful sea this time for the ship’s return, but nothing more, and Prospero breaks his staff and drowns his book “deeper than did ever plummet sound”: so deep beneath the waters that no one will ever be able to recover its incitement to delusion and self-misunderstanding.

But what are pity and forgiveness, as Prospero understands them? Control that he will be able to exercise over his impulses, and nothing more. When Ariel persuades him, the masque having reminded him of what in fact he now knows, that is, that he is merely a human being like all others, suffering just as deeply from the same passions, he calls upon his reason to check his resentment, his “fury.” Virtue is higher and more beautiful than vengeance, it is the “rarer action”: and reason and virtue in this context are no longer a part of the Platonic world of ideas but are, rather, a function of the will to mastery, which has to do with who one is, and has no other concern than with oneself.
What We Plant, We Will Eat
A Korean Folktale • retold by S. E. Schlosser

Many moons ago, two brothers lived with their father in a small house in Korea. The younger brother worked hard and was kind to all he met. The elder, knowing he was to inherit his father’s prosperous rice farm, was arrogant and proud. He scorned his younger brother and ignored his aging father.

Every night after supper, the father would say: “Remember, my sons. What you plant you will eat.” The younger son nodded politely, for he loved his parent and honored him. But the elder son would yawn and walk away. The father watched him go with sadness.

On his deathbed, the father beckoned the two brothers close to him. “Remember, my sons. Nothing is as important as family. Share this property and work together. I leave this land to both of you.” And so saying, he died.

The elder brother was furious. The law of the land said that an elder son inherited everything. As soon as the funeral ceremonies were past, he thrust the younger brother from their home, ignoring the last wish of his dying father.

Heartbroken, the younger brother walked for many miles, far away from his home and village, until he found some broken down land that nobody wanted. He tended it carefully, planting a small crop of rice and building a mud cottage that was thatched from the dirty straw that dropped from passing farm carts. By saving and scraping, he managed to make enough money to build a small house and make a profit. So he was able to marry and have a family.

One year, a drought overcame the land and the younger son’s rice crop failed. Without assistance, his family would starve. It broke his heart to hear his wife and children moaning with hunger in their sleep, so he went to his wealthy brother to ask him to share some of the rice raised on the property which their father had willed to them both. “It’s my rice crop now,” the elder brother cried with a cruel laugh. “Go away.” So saying, he slammed the front door in his younger brother’s face and locked it against him.

Brokenhearted, the younger brother turned away. As he left the village, he heard a shrill cry from a tree above him. A snake was attacking a baby swallow. Flapping frantically, the tiny bird tried to escape, but it was too young to fly and fell to the ground instead. The younger brother picked the helpless baby up and cradled the tiny bird in his hands. Its leg was broken, and so he tore a strip of cloth from his shirt and set the swallow’s leg. When the snake slid away, he returned the baby to its nest and went home to his starving family.

The next few weeks were hard. The younger brother gave every spare scrap of food to his tiny children, who were so thin he could count their ribs. His wife walked over the fields searching for any edible plants she could find, but her harvest was scant.
Then one day a tiny swallow flew to their house and landed on the thatch. It was the baby swallow the younger brother had rescued. Leg now healed and able to fly, the swallow sat on the thatch and sang a merry song of thanks to the marveling family. Then it circled the younger brother’s house three times and then dropped a large seed into a damp patch of earth.

The family stared at the seed, and the youngest daughter wanted to touch it, but her father held her back. As they watched, the seed put out a root, and started to grow. The starving family watching in astonishment as the seed became a vine and the vine grew and grew. Within minutes, luscious melons were growing on the vine. Within an hour, they were ripe and ready to pick.

“Father, father! May we eat a magic melon?” cried the hungry children. Laughing in delight, the younger brother pulled a melon off the vine and cut it open. Beside him, his wife gasped in astonishment. Inside, the melon was filled with so many gold coins that they spilled to the ground all around the starving family’s feet. Every melon was full of gold.

The younger brother and his family were rich beyond their wildest dreams. They had plenty to eat, they bought a large house with land, and they had brand-new clothes to wear. It was amazing.

When the elder brother heard of this good fortune, he was filled with jealousy and started searching for his own magic bird. He spent days combing the lands around his village, greedy for more power, more money, more land. When at last he stumbled upon a little bird with a broken leg, he picked it up, saying: “I will help you, little bird if you will help me.” The little bird stared up at him with wise eyes, seeing through the fake sympathy into the greedy heart beneath.

When the bird’s leg healed, it flew to the elder brother’s house, circled his head three times and dropped a seed into the moist soil. With a triumphant laugh, the elder brother watched the seed grow into a vine. Melons swelled up larger and larger until they were as tall as a man. The elder brother was delighted. Obviously he was much worthier then his brother, to merit such large melons. He picked the largest melon and cut it open. Instantly, a band of warriors burst from the melon and fell on him with clubs. They stole his money and left him moaning on the ground.

Unable to believe that all the melons were bad, the elder brother crawled over to the second-largest melon, expecting to find enough gold and silver to make up for the beating he’d received from the warriors in the first melon. Whack! He cut open the second melon and was overwhelmed by a huge ball of hissing snakes that slithered straight into his house. He cut open a third melon, and had to dodge out of the way as a huge colony of rats rustled past. By this time, the magical melons were overripe and began bursting on their own. Spiders, ants, termites, bees, and many other hissing, biting, crawling creatures invaded the house and yard. Within an hour, the elder brother’s property was completely destroyed.

The elder brother ran away from his ruined house and lands. Poorer even than his
younger brother had once been, he wandered from village to village, begging for food. One day, he looked up from his begging and saw his younger brother standing a few feet away, holding a hoe. Ashamed, the elder brother looked down, until the blade of the hoe landed on the ground beside his foot.

“I have lost everything,” the elder brother said, staring at the blade of the hoe. “I have no place to go. No food. I won’t blame you if you send me away too.”

He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Come, brother,” the prosperous farmer said. “Let us sew a new crop, together. For what we plant, we will eat.”

The elder brother looked up with tears in his eyes, and accepted the hoe from his younger brother’s hand.
Understanding Forgiveness • PBS

What is forgiveness? How does forgiving another help us? And how can we cultivate forgiveness in our lives?

The body of research on forgiveness has grown in the last two decades from nearly nonexistent to hundreds of studies and dozens of books. Researchers are finding a powerful connection between forgiving others and our own well-being.

What is forgiveness?

Researchers who study forgiveness and its effects on our well-being and happiness are very specific about how they define forgiveness.

Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky calls forgiveness “a shift in thinking” toward someone who has wronged you, “such that your desire to harm that person has decreased and your desire to do him good (or to benefit your relationship) has increased.” Forgiveness, at a minimum, is a decision to let go of the desire for revenge and ill-will toward the person who wronged you. It may also include feelings of goodwill toward the other person. Forgiveness is also a natural resolution of the grief process, which is the necessary acknowledgment of pain and loss.

Researchers are very clear about what forgiveness is not:

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Forgiveness is one person’s inner response to another’s perceived injustice. Reconciliation is two people coming together in mutual respect. Reconciliation requires both parties working together. Forgiveness is something that is entirely up to you. Although reconciliation may follow forgiveness, it is possible to forgive without re-establishing or continuing the relationship. The person you forgive may be deceased or no longer part of your life. You may also choose not to reconcile, perhaps because you have no reason to believe that a relationship with the other person is healthy for you.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. “Forgive and forget” seem to go together. However, the process of forgiving involves acknowledging to yourself the wrong that was done to you, reflecting on it, and deciding how you want to think about it. Focusing on forgetting a wrong might lead to denying or suppressing feelings about it, which is not the same as forgiveness. Forgiveness has taken place when you can remember the wrong that was done without feeling resentment or a desire to pursue revenge. Sometimes, after we get to this point, we may forget about some of the wrongs people have done to us. But we don’t have to forget in order to forgive.

Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing. Forgiveness does not minimize, justify, or excuse the wrong that was done. Forgiveness also does not mean denying the harm and the feelings that the injustice produced. And forgiveness does not mean putting yourself
in a position to be harmed again. You can forgive someone and still take healthy steps to protect yourself, including choosing not to reconcile.

Forgiveness is not justice. It is certainly easier to forgive someone who sincerely apologizes and makes amends. However, justice—which may include acknowledgment of the wrong, apologies, punishment, restitution, or compensation—is separate from forgiveness. You may pursue your rights for justice with or without forgiving someone. And if justice is denied, you can still choose whether or not to forgive.

Forgiveness is a powerful choice you can make when it’s right for you that can lead to greater well-being and better relationships.