

Endorsements

A few years ago, a small group of women in our local church was experiencing difficulty connecting with others and staying connected. Outside of sharing Jesus, these women also shared the commonality of broken relationships, sometimes the fractured relationship being due to fleeing abuse. They needed extra care, attention, patience, and every other virtue that describes the love we find in 1 Corinthians 13:4–8. As I asked the Lord for help and provision within His church to care for these women, Denise Renken’s face kept popping into my head. Knowing her for over a decade, she was always the woman who would say “yes” to care for the hurting, broken, and hopeless, whether the request came from me or our marriage ministry. When she honored me by sharing her whole story with David present, it all clicked: “Her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” Denise is marked by the one action that Jesus says marks His disciples: *love*. I’m so excited for you to meet my friend and Jesus’s disciple as you work to untangle your past and move toward healing guided by Denise’s story, insights from God’s Word and the psychological developmental process, and reflection questions in *Triage*.

—**Rob Barry**

Retired Elder, Watermark Community Church, Dallas, TX

Triage is a valuable resource for women who seek release from the life-crippling grip of their negative pasts. In this well-researched and practical how-to book, Denise Renken shares her own raw journey from the darkness of trauma to the sweetness only achieved through God's healing. With honesty and vulnerability, Denise leads the reader to spiritual healing, wholeness, and a fresh relationship with the God who desires her flourishing.

This book is a must-read for anyone wanting to leave the heavy burdens of the past behind and move forward—renewed and restored.

—**Cheryl Schuermann**

Author, *Farmhouse Devotions*

Denise Renken's *Triage* is a powerful story of emotional trauma and the wounds created. This is a journey of healing and forgiveness through the blood of Jesus. Everyone's pain may look different, but the same Jesus provides healing for us all. This book is a must-read!

—**Carla Shelton**

Author, *Conquering the Book Thief*

Radio Podcast, *Monday Manna*

Denise Renken's latest project, *Triage*, explores her past hurts to show readers how to mend their mental and spiritual wounds. Her testimony about God's faithfulness in her life resonates with many of my core beliefs. Her practical activities will help the reader complete the journey to wholeness. Be ready to dig into your spiritual roots to heal from your past.

—**Jennifer Wake**

Author, *Call Signs* and *He Is Jehovah*

Triage is a powerful and courageous story of how God loves us personally and provides for our every need when we submit to Him. The author grew up with neglect and abuse and was launched into a dark world of sin and struggle. But God pursued her. She learned to listen, obey, and finally committed her life to Jesus, where she found freedom and healing. Denise Renken is a beautiful example of how God can heal us and bring joy. I recommend this book for all who carry heavy burdens and have yet to meet their Savior.

—**Kristy Sheridan**

Author, *Third Save*

Triage is an unbelievable true story written with courage, vulnerability, practicality, and wisdom. This is a great text to counsel individuals and married or premarital couples. Denise Renken brings a unique voice and perspective by utilizing the Bible and the best of the social sciences. I am recommending all the missionaries in our organization read, study, and inwardly digest *Triage*.

—**Larry Merino, PhD**

Pastor of Missional Discipleship, Holy Cross Lutheran Church
President and Founder, Gospel to the Gypsies, Inc., Fort Wayne, IN

TRIAGE

HEALING
MENTAL
AND
SPIRITUAL
ROOTS

Denise Renken

REDEMPTION 
P R E S S

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This book is dedicated to all women.

You are my beloved sisters.





Acknowledgments

To David, my husband and champion. Through forty-seven years of highs and lows, you were the one who asked, “How can I help?” You lived through the difficulty of penning this book, the tug on my soul for women’s hearts, and my passion to serve them. Through stressful moments and joyous moments, support thrived. Thank you.

To the thousands of women who heard my testimony, you pressed me to *tell all*. My love for you set this book in motion.

Cheryl Schuermann, you guided me through this foreign world called publishing and believed in this project from the beginning. We come from such different worlds yet quickly became sisters.

To my family, your extension of grace reflects a heart for God. What a precious gift to me.

To my daily prayer warriors, Amie, Laura, and Michelle, you drew swords on the battlefield to challenge Satan's internal dialogue with me. God bless you.

To my friends, who I affectionately call "The page 54 and 55 WordWeavers International critique group," y'all deserve a Purple Heart. You encouraged, corrected, shed tears, and asked, "Where's the popcorn for this movie?" Thank you for embracing my journey.

To my community group, y'all took one for the team. You listened to my fears and frustrations and prayed for me. Thank you.

To Redemption Press, thank you for your support from start to finish and then beyond.

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Triage

Triage, a French word meaning “to sort,” was initially used to sort agricultural products by quality. Its use later evolved to the medical field, prioritizing casualties at three levels of needed treatment.

As it pertains to this book, “triage” sorts mental and spiritual wounds in search of root causes. One by one, they are left on the throne of God for His healing.

Note: all page numbers remain aligned to the page numbers of the book.



Introduction

How to Get the Most Out of This Book

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

—Genesis 50:20

The intuitive withdrawal into a fetal position
braced me for the inevitable—the pull of the trigger.

—Denise Renken

Each day presents a set of life choices, some trivial, others life-altering. The method we use to make our determinations is a product of past experiences and current spiritual health. Both hold power. But how do we release the life-crippling grip of our negative experiences so we can heal? It is God who unleashes His power to mend our hearts and minds—not for a day or a year, but forever. Any damage inflicted upon us by individuals and ourselves falls to the ground in submission before Him. Only then do we rise in triumph.

I invite you to walk with me through a process to help you better understand yourself and the power of God to mend wounds. I have many wounds you may or may not have experienced, including sexual abuse, poverty, and a violent, heroin-addicted father. As I revisit my date rape, homelessness, prostitution, and abortion, my memories will assist in springboarding the identification and analysis of *your* wounds. Recognizing wounds creates a connection to specific prayer and God's hand of redemption. Life's possibilities change when we trust God.

It has been my privilege to mentor women for over thirty-five years. Ladies say, "I don't trust, I don't know, I don't believe God can restore my heart." I respond, "There has never been anyone, not Mary, Ruth, or Esther, who has been loved more than you. The Holy Bible is your guidepost to the truth: God loves you and heals."

Triage is my desire to embrace a world of women bound by past and current events. Satan encourages the world to toss struggling lives, relationships, and marriages into the garbage. He generates internal dialogues telling us nothing will ever change, we don't matter, and we deserve a chaotic life. I cannot change your current circumstances, but I'm offering a path to change how you make future decisions, to make choices with the discernment of God. Are you weary of chasing the world's solutions? Are you ready to ask God, "What is Your plan?" May God's peace gather you up to Him so you can seek His path for recovery from the hurts this world has inflicted upon you. God can create a new woman with a heart prepared for healthy relationships if you will let Him.

Where Did I Begin?

When the time arrives to sort out your life, it forces the question, “Where do I begin?” I wasn’t ready to share my past, not even with a professional counselor, nor could I afford it.

I needed to narrow my focus on the damage the events caused, the root causes. But a thick, impenetrable fog surrounded me. Thoughts of escape were met with the reminder of the shackles binding me to past regrets. My mind raced, heart pounded. The entangled mountain of disastrous life decisions seemed overwhelming. I recognized the road signs in front of me: *Turn Now. Decide Now.* I didn’t know what it meant to be a daughter of God, but He met me with His provision of peace and clarity for what lay ahead. I urge you to please step into His arms. He will meet you, take your hand, and guide you.

I needed a simple solution, but my search to locate “simple” took place in the days before computers or the internet. I spent exhaustive days in the library, searching for my easy, which led to Erik Erikson’s books. Erikson’s process for healing was ideal for several reasons. It was straightforward and respected worldwide, and did I mention *simple*? His methodology led me to discover that the emotional damage I was carrying need only be placed at the throne of God. *Triage* marries the mental and spiritual healing of root causes, and I will show you step-by-step in each section.

How Did I Discover What Needed to Be Healed?

Erikson's background and his methodology help people to identify life wounds. A winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his structure of *life stages*, Erik H. Erikson was a renowned German psychologist. He is best known for developing the framework used to analyze critical events in our lives, mapping our lives into eight stages. These stages include psychological and social needs from birth to death, making it easier to dissect significant patterns. Perhaps you have heard the term "formative years" when discussing child development. It was Erikson who created the "Formative Years" concept. The first four stages of our lives comprise these years.

Per Erikson, each stage faces a crisis. These crises do not represent anything negative, but they are hurdles to mental growth for us to overcome. Crises shape our physical and psychological development and our success in life. The way the crisis is handled determines our characteristics and strengths and shapes our personality. Think of a baby. Gaining the ability to roll over will lead to crawling, which will lead to walking and then running. The first crisis is whether the child will roll over. If she rolls over, she is better equipped for the next stage and its crisis. Each stage builds on the successes and failures of the previous stage. Running will prove difficult if she has not learned to walk.

A layman's understanding of what should have been achieved during each stage is presented in this book.

I have structured each chapter as follows:

My story. Beginning at birth and continuing in chronological order, I will share my past experiences within each of Erikson's stages. The impact of violence, mental abuse, sexual abuse, abandonment, date rape, abortion, prostitution, marriages, divorces, my alcoholic/heroin-addicted father, and more are poured out. Since God holds the power to redeem and restore, my hope is that my life wounds can be used to better assist you in understanding *your* hurts. I recognize people have experienced differing levels of harm. This book addresses experiences similar to mine or those involving less trauma.

Erikson's life stages, by age group, and the crisis in each stage. What should we achieve (the crisis) versus the residual damage if achievement falls short? We already know that past harms have created current issues. Erikson provides a more thorough understanding of the damage generated, providing a path for God's healing.

Reflection Sections. Sprinkled throughout the chapters, I have written some reflections about what God was doing in my life or things I noticed or learned about His character. On your own journey, you might want to journal your own reflections about God's intervention in your life.

Triage Questions. In chapters one through eight, I've included questions for you to answer to help you process your stages.

Closing Triage Prayer. Each chapter ends with a Triage Prayer to guide your thoughts and prayers.

Before you begin, I also want to provide a few guidelines to help you with healing your mental and spiritual roots:

- Approach your mental and spiritual restoration with a mindset of grace for yourself and others. Your parents may have been great, but there may have been hurts created in your formative years. You will examine big and small wounds inflicted on you. This requires a God-centered heart, one empty of the desire to seek revenge or conflict, hold resentment, or blame. A humbled heart requests God's mercy and restorative hands.
- Dissecting the past is not limited to traumatic events. I also want you to seek out and find the sweet times of God's presence.
- As we navigate this journey together, we will pray to transfer the weight of your burdens to God's shoulders. Allow Him to carry the wounds of your heart.

- Although not essential, you may find it helpful to have a friend walk this process with you. The appendix contains helpful information on mentoring. Jesus and I navigated my wounds, just the two of us, for many years. When the time came to widen my circle of help, I sought a Christian psychologist. I openly shared things with him that I feared would change how my friends saw me. There are alternative resources to paid counseling, which I'll share within the appropriate chapter.
- I encourage you to spend this season praying for yourself, just you. It will strengthen your relationship with God and provide healing to your soul. God is aware of all the other people in need of prayer. Trust the Holy Spirit to lift those folks to God. Instead, pray for your needs, desires, restoration, and peace. Permit yourself to spend a season with only you and God.
- As I unpack my formative years as an example for you, it's your turn to create a list of impactful events from *your* formative years. This list should include the offender, the offense, and, most importantly, the *damage* caused by the event. This will be clarified as you move through the book. Remember, don't limit this inventory to the negative. Find the sweet moments.

Ladies, you are precious to God, created in His image. Your mental and spiritual health matter to Him. I pray comfort and healing to your soul and that you feel His presence and my love as you move forward. I'm so proud of you.

Section I

Evaluate the Influence of Past Years





Chapter 1

Why Do I Struggle with Trust?

Stage One: Birth to Eighteen Months



Triage Questions

You may never receive acknowledgment or apologies for past harm. I am sorry for everything done to you, care not given you, love withheld, and the weight of carrying the pain. I'm sorry for how the past has colored your decisions and how you processed your worth. If deep wounds are leading to dark thoughts of suicide, seek professional assistance now. God created your life and breathed it into your lungs. He wants you rejuvenated, as do I.

If you don't get anything else from my story, know this: The source of our internal dialogue is either from God or Satan. It's as simple as that. Satan tells you, "You don't matter." God says, "You are Mine, loved and valued; come to Me." Close your eyes, sit quietly, and feel His arms wrap around you.

1. Did you leave stage one with your ability to trust?

a. If so, how is trust exhibited in your closest relationships?

b. If not, how does the lack of trust continue to limit your relationships?

2. Do you trust God?

a. If yes, what events have occurred in your life to bring you to this place of trust?

b. If not, try to understand the root cause. For me, the lack of trust in an earthly father blocked my recognition of a good, heavenly Father for many years. I could not trust the concept of a loving father who wanted the best for me. When I prayed for the courage to love and trust God, He *immediately* began my sweet redemption.



Triage Prayer

Father, please remove the remnants of distrust. Grant us wisdom to discern trustworthiness through Your lens and not ours. Dismantle our emotional walls and tenderly guide our hearts to the other side. Help us know we only need to trust You to carry us through the valleys of life.

We yearn for the peace and lasting joy only found with You. Thank You for the privilege of calling You Father.

In Jesus's name, Amen



Chapter 2

What Is the Source of Shame and Self-Doubt?

Stage Two: Eighteen Months to Three Years



Triage Questions

1. Did this stage give you confidence to approach new tasks and opportunities? Or are you fearful of trying new things?

2. We all fail. How do you manage failures? Are you defeated or willing to try again?

3. Are there secrets in need of sharing with a trusted friend? Who can you share them with, and are you ready to do this?



Triage Prayer

Father, Satan wants us to be plagued by shame and doubt. It cripples our lives, robs us of our joy and peace. You see our value. You perfectly created us for Your plan. Place a yearning in our souls to read the Bible. Allow its encouragement and wisdom to bathe us in peace.

In Jesus's name, Amen



Chapter 3

Will I Always Carry This Guilt?

Stage Three: Three to Five



Triage Questions

1. What are some of your successes and failures during stage three?

2. Where can you see the hand of God during those years—the sweet moments?

3. What failures continue to impact you today?



Triage Prayer

Father, thank You for calling us daughters. Build within us a desire to move into a closer relationship with You. Release our unmerited guilt, heal the life wounds of years gone by. We know You will carry us on eagle's wings across the barren land stretching before us.

In Jesus's name, Amen



Chapter 4

Why Do I Feel Inferior?

Stage Four: Five to Twelve

Completion of the Formative Years



Triage Questions

1. My stage four bred inferiority and a longing to retreat to my stage three. How would you describe your stage four? Were you industrious (did you believe you could be productive)? Were you confident in exploring your possibilities?

2. Did this stage contribute to your desire to please others? If so, how does it manifest today?



Triage Prayer

Father, we acknowledge, with gratitude, Your goodness. You perfectly created each of us. You do not make mistakes. Remove any residual feelings of unworthiness, inferiority, and the desire to please a world we will never please. Direct us to clarity and courage as we revisit our wounds. Heal us, Jehovah Rapha, God of all healing. May everything we do bring glory to You.

*The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever,
yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.
When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.
(Jonah 2:5-7)*

In Jesus's name, Amen



Chapter 5

Who Am I? Finding My Identity

Stage Five: Twelve to Eighteen

Beyond the Formative Years



Triage Questions

1. Puberty is a time of uncertainty. Think of your teen years and the possibilities of who you could have become. In what ways did peers help you with the uncertainties surrounding your life's possibilities?

2. In what ways did your peers disappoint you?

6. We need a willingness to compromise. It is not good to believe we should always get our way. However, when this stage is incomplete, a conflict between compromise and forfeiting what we know is right can emerge. What you deem correct versus others' opinions may be at odds. You may feel bullied. Perhaps your past decisions were driven by teen peer pressure. What directs your decision process now? Peers, past experiences, God, or something else?



Triage Prayer

Father, mend our broken hearts, minds, and souls. Show us our identity is in You and the power of the cross where You bore our sins. Shed our insecurities that were formed when we were teens. Grant us courage and wisdom to make sound life decisions. Surround us with sisters in Christ who will love us well. Let them counsel us based on your Word, not the world's opinions. We are daughters of the King. We choose to value ourselves. We ask You to rehabilitate the wounds of our lives.

In Jesus's name, Amen

Section II

Adulthood





Chapter 6

What Drives the Desire to Isolate?

Stage Six: Eighteen to Twenty

Young Adulthood



Triage Questions

1. Do you have close friendships? If not, what event(s) hinders
the development of close relationships?

2. Do you believe God desires us to form relationships with other Christians? If not, why?

3. Have you prayed for God's healing of past and current events? If not, what keeps you from asking for God's help? Write a few words of prayer below. He loves you dearly.

4. Do you struggle with isolation? We should be comfortable with ourselves. Time alone is healthy. However, a preference for isolation is not productive to your well-being. Blessings are discovered when we help others and allow others to assist us. Relationships bring laughter, tears, celebrations, and grief. They bring life. If you withdraw from the world, you miss the growth afforded by lows and the zeal of the highs. What soul damage drives this appeal to isolate?

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Triage Prayer

Father, thank You for my sisters in Christ. You created us to be relational. We want to step forward into Your plan and out of our places of fear. Help us to be better friends to others, to love them well. Send us women of God. We need our sisters in Christ.

In Jesus's name, Amen



Chapter 7
Selling Ourselves

Stage Six: Twenty to Twenty-One

Young Adulthood



Triage Questions

There are many ways we sell ourselves. We sell our desperate hearts to have a mate. Our belief of right and wrong is sold to those who dominate us. God calls us to be servants but not to sell ourselves into servitude. Healthy relationships require give and take, not just give.

Godly counsel checks our belief system with His Word. When we fail to move through life with God, we often sell a piece of ourselves.

1. When you think of the mercy, protection, grace, and forgiveness of God, what comes to mind?

2. How have you seen the power of God in your life?

3. What mental/emotional injuries did you carry into your twenties?

If you're procrastinating, please stop; create your list. While your past is fresh in your mind, begin a list of people who caused you harm. I want you to have time to generate a thorough list. I'll explain more when the time comes to use it.

Next to the offense, list the *damage* done. The event is not as critical to long-term mental/spiritual healing as the *damage* created. Don't forget to include yourself in the list. What decisions have you made that hold regrets for you?



Triage Prayer

Father, there are many ways we sell ourselves. Help us recapture who You created, not what the world has designed. Thank You for gently guiding us to a place of resuscitation. Bless our prayer time with You. Prepare our hearts to recognize everyone and everything we need to release.

In Jesus's name, Amen

Section III

New Beginnings





Chapter 8
Does God Care?

Stage Six: Twenty-One to Twenty-Eight

Young Adulthood

2. **Sexual**

a. Married—Is there contentment? How would you describe your sexual relationship?

b. Single—Do you agree with God about purity? If so, what are you doing to remain pure?

3. **Family**

a. If married, are there boundaries with the in-laws? Is there interference? Describe the relationship with your in-laws.

b. If single, do you agree there should be boundaries with parents and other family members? How might this look?

4. Communication

a. Do you have open, honest discussions? What do you not talk about?

5. Conflict Resolution

a. Do conflicts get resolved?

b. What is your method for working things out? Is everyone in the conflict heard and respected? How does this work?

6. Children

a. Is there agreement in parenting? What do you agree with, and what needs some work?

b. If your children are adults, are boundaries in place? What kind?

7. Is there quality time together with spouse, family, friends? What does that look like for you?

8. Do you read the Bible and have a prayer time? Is your faith a top priority? Describe.



Triage Prayer

Father, You know who is suffering a similar reality. Hearts are devastated, health issues loom ahead, monetary provision is daunting, and the loss of loved ones breaks us. Feelings of inadequacy, lack of worth, and loneliness can drive us spiraling. Please gather us into Your arms. Send other women into our lives to listen, love, and counsel. Use my redemption from anguish to help others find their path to You.

In Jesus's name, Amen



Chapter 9

Marriage, Divorce, Marriage

Stage Six: Twenty-Eight to Thirty

Young Adulthood



Triage Prayer

Father, give us the courage to transfer our past and present wounds to You. Calm our anxious hearts. You know the condition of our relationships. Guide us to know when to pause desperate decisions such as divorce. We need time to heal and absorb your wisdom. We want to make better life decisions. Ease the damage to our souls, allowing us to see life challenges with clarity for our next steps.

In Jesus's name, Amen

Section IV

The Path to Healing





Chapter 10

God Draws Us to Him

Completion of Stage Six: Thirty to Thirty-five

Young Adulthood



Triage Prayer

*Father, we sit in the quiet, we ask the Holy Spirit to convict us
of the needed changes in our lives. Help us hear Your desire for us.
Create discernment and courage to make good choices.*

In Jesus's name, Amen



Chapter 11
Going Home

Triage Prayer

Father, thank You for Your perfect timing. You encouraged me to say yes yet left me partly broken. My brokenness gave David a view of the consequences of betrayal. Thank You for Your power in our lives. Thank You for shepherding our forgiveness and the restoration of trust. Press into women's hearts to trust You and Your timing.

In Jesus's name, Amen.

Section V

Restoration





Chapter 12

Triage Heart Repair

What Forgiveness Is and Is Not

Buried in the rubble of my life, I appealed to God to restore my heart. Knowing the connective thread of restoration and forgiveness was critical, it was time to forgive. The recognition of my need for a more thorough process toward forgiveness began when *the woman* came to my house with David's things.

Branded with the word "victim," first by others, then myself, I asked God, "Is this all You planned for my life? What happened to the little girl You created me to be? A girl undamaged, destined to be a woman of God? Father, help me find a path of *complete* forgiveness. Help me find myself."

Yes, growth in my relationship with God included many years on a consistent path of forgiveness. But there are multiple layers when it comes to full forgiveness. Unforgiveness shackles you to the damage, and I didn't want to be in bondage anymore. Prayers for a heart of forgiveness intertwined with my quiet time. My achievement of

forgiving David, at this point, was related only to surface-level issues of infidelity. God already granted the healing of childhood damage and restoration, which gave me the courage and insight to move forward.

God stripped away the power of evil that dared come near me. The grief, self-pity, and certainty of His next steps required my full attention. God returned me to clay. He was about to rebuild a new woman, one who was restored. The time to get serious about forgiveness was at hand. Erikson's approach to the chronological division of life served me well, and I segmented my forgiveness plan into increments of ten years. Focus on the people who impacted my life became manageable.

My Triage Plan

I began with a tourniquet of sorts to stop the bleeding of new injuries so I could triage the more serious past wounds. The Holy Spirit guided me to reassess my *expectations* of people. This insight forged a lifetime pattern toward forgiveness in my life. For example, parents should provide their children with unconditional love and protection. They may or may not deliver on these expectations, but it is *appropriate* to expect trustworthy and protective parents.

Let's sit here for a moment and discuss righteous anger. Jesus exhibited righteous anger when He flipped over the tables in the temple and shared His opinion of their ungodly actions. But you never read about it again. He did not grumble on and on about it. It

did not fester in His heart. We can have righteous anger with those we should be able to depend on. Parents are only one example.

Was my anger toward David's breach of trust righteous? Absolutely. Did it give me license to allow bitterness in my heart? No. Without David following God, I should have had zero expectations of long-term changes.

Inappropriate expectations are those we form about people not close to us. No personal relationship exists. We should have minimum expectations for people in traffic, the grocery store, school, and work. Think about the craziness of folks in traffic. We witness foul sign language and screams of obscenities. When someone cuts us off in traffic, we decide if anger will be our response. No one forces us to react unpleasantly. How we respond to the world reflects the condition of our hearts. Adjusting my expectations has been a life-changer. If I expect little to nothing, there is nothing to feed my anger and nothing to forgive. It keeps a large section of my heart well protected. Proverbs 4:23 urges us to guard our hearts, for from them flow the springs of life. I'm not surprised when someone acts crazy in traffic, only mildly irritated. There is no wound and, therefore, no soul damage.

The group of *appropriate* expectations is more challenging. These are family, friends, and other Christians. My hopes for this group are higher. The injury received hits harder. My reset for forgiving Christians came from God's perspective. Christians are not perfect humans. I disappoint those close to me my conduct and attitude do not always display the Spirit of God. Christians offer grace, just as our Lord offers grace. My failures do not permit me to ignore my call to become Christ-like. Have I been so disappointed

or wounded by a fellow Christian that it required processing the damage with God? Yes. But it is rare.

Family and friends: Relationships we are not prepared to permanently eliminate may need boundaries. These boundaries reset the relationship in a way that protects the heart. Books on boundaries are available if you need a more thorough plan.

These realignments of expectations served as a tourniquet for ongoing wounds. Living in a continuous state of grace allowed me to focus on forgiving past harms and move forward with a plan for deeper healing.

Erikson's life stages method triaged and sorted my wounds. It brought events to the surface and allowed me to analyze the damage caused by the event. Prayer brought a thorough understanding of how God's view of forgiveness was necessary to complete the healing process.

Again, forgiveness is not a pardon of the trespass. We forgive the resulting damage caused by the event. Forgiveness releases the need for apologies, justice, punishment, and confession and recognizes the harm. It respects that God will save/forgive folks or put them where He deems proper. My heart holds no harshness or vindictiveness.

Please do not misunderstand. This process does not pray for God to render His hand of justice on anyone. I relinquish my right to perceived justice, hoping that God will pull them to Himself in a spirit of repentance and salvation. I want everyone to repent, accept Jesus as Lord, and spend eternity in heaven, knowing a selfish heart needs healing. Like Jesus, we pray for our enemies: "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). When I understood the state of my enemies before God, I went to my knees in prayer.

*“Their throat is an open grave
they use their tongues to deceive.”
“The venom of asps is under their lips.”
“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”
“Their feet are swift to shed blood
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known.”
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

(Romans 3:13–18)

What Forgiveness Is Not

As we dig more into the concept of forgiveness, it's important to understand what it is and what it is not. Let's start with what forgiveness is not and what it doesn't do.

1. Forgiveness does not condone what occurred nor the things neglected. I do not excuse my uncle's sexual conduct against me nor the failure of others to protect me. And I don't brush aside my sins against myself and others.

2. Forgiveness does not establish trust. Children step into confidence because they lack the discernment to make such evaluations. They are at the mercy of those in authority who decide who and what to trust.

Adults view things through the eyes of experience. Dark alleys, underground parking garages, and boats in ill-repair signal caution.

People who have breached our trust require us to keep a keen eye on them, and we listen for God's wisdom. Trust is established over time with proven change.

When we share a confidence with a friend or a relative, and that confidence is broken, will we readily share with them again? No. Even when trust is broken, we must forgive. The restoration of trust should be earned, though. (I'll explain how and why David regained my trust later.)

3. Forgiveness is not restoration. God is a god of restoration. Otherwise, Jesus's sacrifice would not have been required. He died for the possibility of a restored relationship with us. Where possible, God wants relationships restored. We are also called to guard our hearts and be discerning. I forgave "M," but it would be ridiculous to rebuild the relationship. I want God to cleanse my heart of the toxic damage inflicted as I move through forgiveness.

What Forgiveness Is

Now let's start with what forgiveness is and what it does. In John 8:7, Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." None of us are without sin, so we need to lay down our stones and our need to see the other person suffer for theirs. There are two steps we can take toward forgiving those who have harmed us.

Step 1: Agree with God's desire for your life. Without a heart desire to live in agreement with God, there can be no real forgiveness. Do we believe He knows best? Is the Bible inerrant, void of mistakes? Many Scriptures speak about forgiveness, so we know it is an important topic to God. Take a few moments to settle your heart before God. Ask His forgiveness for your wrongs. We are not in agreement with God while we harbor anger or resentment. Who do we want to agree with? Let it be God.

It is natural to want to see our perpetrators suffer like we did, but God calls us to put away our right to see them suffer consequences (John 8:7). If laws have been broken, move forward with the legalities. I have sat in courtrooms, watching as someone receives a deserved life sentence. Release your heart's need for them to suffer. Peace and sweetness are found when we agree with our heavenly Father. Stand in agreement with your God, who wants your heart cleansed of unforgiveness from the poisonous pit where it is entangled. Recognize Satan's role in wanting you shackled to bitterness.

Step 2: If you have not yet completed your list of *who did what to you, do so soon.* Remember to write it on a separate sheet of paper. Write the person's name, what they did, and, in a few words, the damage caused by the event. Now, cut each damage done to your heart and mind into a slip of paper. One of my past mentees created her list on toilet paper, one item per square. She is brilliant how appropriate. I still laugh. I will soon provide examples of my list so you can see what this might look like.

You'll see in the following pages, my forgiveness process that was executed after David and I married the third time. I've repeated some things to allow this to be a stand-alone chapter. I want it to be a ready resource for you, as it may help give insight into how best to complete your list. I pray it benefits you as you change the trajectory of your life.

If you have lost a beloved person or pet, you know what it is to grieve a loss. Perhaps you've cried while watching a movie because the loss of a character tugged at you. We are about to enter a grieving period as we shed the chains of wounds and regrets. Tissues are required, trust me.

*Blessed are those whose lawless deeds
are forgiven, and whose sins are covered
blessed is the man against whom the
Lord will not count his sin.
(Romans 4:7-8)*



The Forgiveness Process

How to follow the structure of this plan:

1. **The offender (person or group) is in bold**, followed by my perception and thoughts surrounding the offense.

2. *The damage of their actions is italicized.* What I needed to forgive was the result of their actions. I found this to be more meaningful to the condition of my heart than to forgive the offense. As you read the result, think about the damage you need to forgive. Modify your list. Note how the damage formed your decisions in life and how those decisions created more damage. Each damage needs its own slip of paper. Just write a few words for each one, then cut them into slips. I'll number my slips with my mother and father as an example. I had seven slips for my dad.



My First Ten Years

My mother: From my child's mind, she failed to protect me.

Result: The lack of rescue made me feel vulnerable to the world.

Slip of paper: 1. Feelings of vulnerability

My father: God showed me we all fail and disappoint. Anyone, without God, will fail those around them in terrible ways. Reset of expectations example: With alcohol and heroin, loving responsible decisions remained out of his scope.

Result: I felt vulnerable, with a need to build walls of protection. I feared abandonment, felt unlovable, and feared conflict. My trust was damaged, and I developed a lack of respect for authority.

Slips of paper: 1. Vulnerable 2. Walls 3. Abandonment 4. Unlovable 5. Fear of conflict 6. Damaged trust 7. Lacked respect for authority

My uncle: Sexual abuse. Molested me on two separate occasions. First at age nine, the second at age twelve. Deacon in his church, my mother's brother.

Result: Warped view of relationships, lack of trust, only an object to be used, defenseless, angry, skewed view of church and religion.

Marvin (Linda's husband): Marvin was the guy everyone liked. Smiles, gentle, kind, and thoughtful. He should have protected me. He knew what she was doing. At thirteen, I told Marvin what was happening in the home when he wasn't around. He let me finish and

then said, “I know.” I asked why he did nothing he replied, “I do not want to upset her.”

Result: Hopeless, only useful as a source of money and Linda’s slave, more walls needed, fed my anger, a sense of no value.

Linda: Evil and mentally ill. Nothing else explains her behavior.

Result: I was unlovable, beaten down, frightened, depressed, hopeless, more walls needed, angry, caged (desperate for escape), ugly, had body image issues, judged by her and therefore by the world, lack of trust, rebellious, lack of my own identity, depression, suicide viewed as my only way to escape.

Ages 11—20

First husband: Bullied me, abused me sexually, humiliated me in front of people, lazy, irresponsible, abandoned me to homelessness.

Result: I felt less than enough, a sexual object, a meal ticket, anger, lack of trust, more walls needed, unworthy of kindness or love, fearful, and demoralized.

Everyone associated with me selling myself: This required effort to dissect them all.

Result: Shame, humiliation, bullied, unworthy of real relationships, rebellious, controlled, angry.

Me: For selling myself, the abortion, my rebellion toward God, promiscuity, harmful words toward others. If I believed God forgave me, and I did, then I stood in disagreement with God to not let go of

the shame and guilt. I do not understand God's level of love, mercy, forgiveness, and power but I believe it.

Result: Shame, anger, depression, lack of trust in my judgment to make decisions, resigned that I was "less than," self-hatred, controlling, massive walls to keep others out of my life.

The person who raped me:

Result: Victim, more walls needed, lack of trust, fear, anger, numbness to emotional issues, compartmentalization as a coping mechanism, could not trust my discernment of others and what was best for me.

Ages 21—30

Me: Failure to seek God's counsel, struggle for control within the marriage, judging others, gossip, envy of other marriages and possessions, lack of patience with my kiddos.

Result: I grieved the Holy Spirit and my soul. My rage was forced to stay at bay (rather than biblically released). My disobedience to God opened doors for Satan to use the above behavior. All this led to additional stress and a lack of self-respect. Envy led to discontent, and lack of patience led to self-loathing as a mother.

Family: Unbiblical counsel (ranged from not biblical to legalistic), judged, gossiped.

Result: I cared more about what people thought than God's view. This led to continued poor decisions and more self-loathing.

Lady from church who begged me not to remarry David:

Result: Confusion about how to recognize godly counsel.

Ages 31—40

PTA ladies: slanderous, gossiped about me.

Result: I felt judged, isolated, and rejected.

Ages 41—50

David: I've included an overlap of prior years. His adultery, failure to parent (guide), domination, control, micro-manager, broken trust, lying, selfishness, manipulation, and emotional abandonment.

Result: Hopeless, rejected, body image issue, not attractive, lack of trust, felt I was in the way of what he perceived as his perfect life, unworthy of love and kindness, taken for granted, controlled/manipulated, fear, desperate for security, fueled self-reliance rather than reliance on God, depression.

Me: Supporting David's behavior rather than establishing boundaries early in the marriage (codependent), continued intimacy of our relationship (*I felt as if I prostituted myself again*), my disrespectful tone toward David (I continue to struggle), lack of respect shown to David, for all the many ways I failed my children. For making them my god. For my sexual fantasies about other men (*gave Satan a stronghold*).

God knows the sins of the heart and mind. My journey with God began at age thirty-one.

But I say to you that everyone who looks at
a woman with lustful intent has already
committed adultery with her in his heart.

(Matthew 5:28)

All the other women: When I resist God's plan, I verbally argue. We are called to "pray for our enemies." I told God, "I know I'm supposed to do this, and so I will. But I don't mean a word of it." Within a few weeks of obedience in prayer, I wept for these women and their state before the throne of God. Isn't God patient with us? To not want them restored to God was wanting them in hell for eternity. That's a long time. I hope they each come to know Jesus.



What to do with all those slips of paper? How do we approach a deep level of forgiveness for a lifetime of hurts? I'll share how God catapulted me over the last hurdle.

I listen to Christian radio in the car. One day, during an interview, they discussed forgiveness. The interviewee's processes for forgiveness involved the structure of an altar. Yes, an Old Testament stone altar. She instructed listeners to write down what they needed to forgive. Her guidance on what to forgive spoke of the event. I believe stopping at the event without looking at the damage does not

result in a complete soul cleansing. The next step included burning them on the altar in a ceremonial release of burdens to God.

Sounded simple enough. The state park was an hour's drive. I decided to write my plethora of grievances on sheets of paper, then tear them into individual strips. No problem.

After some thought, I grew concerned. By the time I dropped the kids off at school, went to the state park, built the altar, and completed the process, I would be on the evening news as the crazy lady who started a forest fire. Plan B was required.

I began with David. I needed to forgive him for not being the husband and father he should have been, for destroying the remnant of trust I still had before marrying him—my self-worth was at zero, for the abandonment I felt, the rejection imprinted on my heart, and more. I began with him because his offenses were the most plaguing. There was no urgency to go through my entire life in one setting. The others came later. It took a month of tears to prepare the David list.

The day arrived to build my altar. With papers in hand, I lit the fireplace and sat cross-legged on the floor. I read the first snippet of paper aloud, shared my broken heart's feelings, and grieved over it. We're talking serious weeping and groaning. I released the sorrow of damage to my heart. I wept because my children did not have the father I wanted for them. I bawled because they lost the childhood I had hoped for them. It didn't mean David would be a terrible dad in the future. But thousands of unretrievable moments of opportunity had passed.

When my well of tears ran dry from the damage on the first slip of paper, I placed it on the altar and prayed, "Dear God, please carry this wound for me. I will no longer give it a place in my heart."

Only then did I pick up the next slip to read aloud, grieve the loss, and give to God. I grieved the loss of trust and how it had impacted my life. I wept for the belief implanted deep into my soul that I was not good enough. It took most of the day to release, forgive, and thank God. His shoulders are much broader than ours.

I'm sure my swollen face was frightful when I picked up the kids from school. No comments came from the back seat. Over the months, I repeated the process for everyone and everything in my life. My soul was breaking free.



Triage Prayer

Father, it is hard to step into forgiveness. The volume and severity of our wounds leave a trail of scars. We can become overwhelmed with the idea of forgiveness. Help clear the dark clouds Satan has created above us. Unshackle the chains of unforgiveness so we can run into Your arms of peace. Heal our wounds but leave a scar as a reminder to avoid that path.

In Jesus's name, Amen



Chapter 13

Molded by the Master's Hands

David and I share our marriage testimony at churches nationwide. Afterward, ladies always come to me in tears, asking the same questions that spurred the writing of this book:

- Why remarry him?
- How did you forgive David?
- How did you restore trust?

This is my quest for trust.

God, The Master, worked in the hearts, souls, and minds of two selfish people to redeem them. Humbled from our arrogance, we knelt before God, begging for marital direction. God took a marriage wrought with decay and raised it from the dead.

Before we remarried, I shared with David the emptiness of my heart. God continued to lay His hands on my mind and soul. Emotionally, I was not a whole woman. What I asked of David was not intended as punishment. I needed time. My request was for us

to begin our marriage with an in-house separation. I was determined that this marriage would be void of deceit. If I had given my body to David at that time, I would have felt used. We needed honesty from both sides.

How much time did I need before we consummated the marriage? I didn't share my timing goals with David. The fear of stepping into conflict still ruled. It is worth stressing again that our two primary issues were conflict resolution and communication.

To approach marriage with a separation is different. Open-ended separations are not biblical. For example, to separate with a "let's see how things go" attitude is not God's plan. A structured separation sets a time goal. During this time, both people are actively aligning their hearts with the Lord and seeking counsel from His people. Counsel can be your small church group, a seasoned couple, pastoral support, marriage programs, or a professional Christian counselor. Separation should not reflect selfishness and anger.

It may be an in-house or out-of-house time away. Where possible, an in-house separation is preferred, although not always possible. Set appropriate boundaries to avoid conflict and misunderstandings. Each couple's boundaries will be different. Our agreement eliminated all physical contact. We had meals together and went out together, but we slept in separate bedrooms.

My unspoken plan, via prayer, projected six months for complete restoration. Six months may seem excessive for some or not enough for others. Each couple should assess their needs. Notice, this was an unspoken plan. I did not share it with David. It was not withheld for secrecy; I just lacked the skill to have a detailed conversation about it.

While God provided the gift of my soul realignment throughout the years, I still faced the recent betrayals that culminated in the

divorce. I knew the process required for growth and repair, and I knew it would take as long as it would take. My advice is to develop the timing of reconciliation before the separation.



Reflection

Father, thank You for honoring my efforts to seek Your will. I know that we can each discover Your will for our lives by reading Your Word and praying.

Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

(1 Corinthians 7:5)



God's Word tells us we may separate for a time. I did not put a time limit on God. I put a time limit on myself. We married, and David moved upstairs. I prayed and wept daily. My tears did not indicate sorrow. I wept in submission and humility before the throne. I prayed, "lease, God, make me a better daughter to you. Continue to work on David's heart."

I cleansed my home by opening my Bible and reading Scripture from room to room. I demanded any forces of Satan to get out. They had no place in our home. "Father, cleanse David's workplace, my kiddos' schools, and their cars of evil forces." Was this exact process necessary? I'm not sure, but I felt the power of the Holy Spirit in those moments. It connected me to the strength He gives us. "I will fear no evil" (salm 23:4). Is there anything scarier than a mama bear protecting her home? I was fierce.

After two months, at my invitation, David moved into our bed. This was my offer: "I want to invite you back to our bed, but I'm not yet ready for intimacy. I'm not angry, just not ready. If moving to the bed will put undue stress on you, we can wait." He moved back into our bedroom. Two months after his move, a surprise for both of us, intimacy was restored.

The deep damage to my life required the continued hand of God. There were times when something triggered old feelings. Did I manage those moments well? Sometimes. Full restoration of a relationship takes a commitment. God's design for marriage became our desire. Divorce was off the table as an option. Rather than just checking a box, we eagerly attended church. We worshipped the God who never abandoned us. Restoration was taking place.

We sought help from our pastor before divorce number two. His counsel was about what he thought rather than what God said about

marriage. Just so you know, all advice should be verifiable through Scripture. When we remarried, we returned to seek guidance for the next steps. He offered little hope and seemed eager for us to leave his office. We were on our own.

We bought several couple's devotionals. These spurred what began as our Saturday morning discussion time. Written primarily for newly married couples, they provided some benefits. The Scripture passages presented in the devotion helped. Despite our feeble successes, we remained committed to finding the best path for our marriage using biblical principles.

As our walk with God took ground, so did the marriage. We sought individual heart changes with God, independent of the marriage. If our lives were strong in God, our marriage would follow suit.

A few years into this process, we received a phone call from our youngest. When our kids are happy with us, we are Mom and Dad. When they are less than pleased, we are "You eople." Here's how the call went. Our youngest calls me: "My church is starting a three-sermon series on marriage next week. You eople wanna come?" Me: "Not sure; let's ask your dad." The phone passes to David. "My church is starting a three-sermon series on marriage. You eople need to come." I still laugh.

On Sunday, we were at Watermark Community Church in Dallas (WM). Todd Wagner began his sermon series. The church furnished an online assessment of marriage. We eagerly took advantage of the resource. It was extremely helpful. Seven years into the new marriage, it verified our primary struggles continued to be communication and conflict resolution. Although not a surprise, it was useful to get an official confirmation. We scored well in finances,

extended family (put your spouse first), sex, and parenting (we agreed on how to parent). Each category provided a more thorough breakdown for discussion.

We took all this information to use as our Saturday morning discussion tool. We soon realized these Saturday morning discussions needed to vary each week between what we did poorly and what we did well. Otherwise, we felt emotionally beaten by the areas of struggle.

We began regular attendance at Watermark, drawn by the transparency and authenticity we found there. WM was preparing to launch its homegrown re|engage ministry for marriages. Seeking church membership, we met with WM staff to see where we could best be utilized in service. Thoughts of placement in a basement filing paperwork, never to be seen again, crossed my mind. The WM staff person didn't seem shocked as he listened to our marriage woes. He spoke of the upcoming launch of re|engage and suggested we lead a small group. We sat stunned, resembling deer in headlights. David came to his senses first. "I think we should first go through the program." We knew what *not* to do but wanted to know what *to* do. He explained, "Before we help others, we need to address areas in our recovery." They understood our hesitation and did not press us. (For more information about the re|engage marriage ministry, visit www.reengage.org.)

The night re|engage launched, we were in attendance. Beforehand, we had discussed what we planned to share with the group. Fearful of other couples' rejection, we planned to scratch the surface of our past. We didn't know those people and had no plans of spilling our lives out to a group of strangers.

The evening came. We sang worship songs and were dismissed to form small groups of people. I stood for a moment outside the room, thinking, *God, what have I gotten myself into now?* The Holy Spirit pressed into my heart, “You don’t need to trust people and what they might say about you. You only need to trust I can carry you through any fire.” I opened the door to our small group of folks, and we took seats in a circle. There were four other couples and our facilitating couple.

When re|engage first began, the timeline to complete a small group was about seven months. Today, it runs for four months. It is not a twelve-step program; it’s God’s plan for marriage, pointing to oneness.

God chose us our facilitators. Wrinkles testified to the trials of their seventy-plus years. Both carried a few extra pounds and smiles which lit the room. They were perfect, and we came to love them.

Our facilitator made eye contact and asked me to start. “What brought you here?” I glanced at David, terrified. God bless him, he said, “Tell them everything.” During our first four weekly meetings, I spilled the twenty-plus years of marriage chaos into the room. Astonishingly, no one ran out. They thanked us. It made their stories less difficult and easier to share.

Our facilitators suggested, “When y’all finish this program, you should become leaders.” Feeling unworthy and a little afraid of the responsibility, we promised to consider it. Six weeks into the program, we got a call at home from them. “We’re on our way to Missouri. We spoke with the WM folks, and they agreed it’s okay for y’all to take charge of the meeting tonight. See you next week.” We had been tossed into the deep end of the pool. To our amazement, all went well.

After completing the program, we went on to facilitate many small groups. Leading groups through re|engage added strength to our marriage.



Reflection

If we wait until we become perfect, we will never serve. Please throw yourself into the pool where God wants you to serve.

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

(1 Peter 4:9–11)



Our communication and conflict-resolution skills significantly improved. One of my favorite pastors once said, “We are either moving forward in our walk with God or moving backward to our sinful nature. There is no such thing as coasting.” I sometimes remind myself of this so that my walk does not move in the direction of dormancy.



Steps Toward Trust

1. I *knew* the Holy Spirit urged me back into the marriage. I had His assurance for the future of our marriage. There were limited reasons to trust David, but I knew I could trust God. Boundaries were in place as I let God adjust my heart and watch as He continued to change David. I leaned into the faith of Abraham:

He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also.

It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

(Romans 4:19–25)

2. David's dedication to God and His Word was evident; it could not be denied. David had a passion for God.

3. David made his life transparent to me. He shared his password for email and began to communicate his feelings and struggles. I did not enjoy listening to his sexual struggles.

Although his sharing was initially important, using me as a long-term accountability partner would be destructive. I did not need to know every time a woman caught his eye. I knew his plan for managing his issues. But, should a temptation arise, he would need to share that with trusted men, just as I share my issues with trusted women. I am not his Holy Spirit. My job is not to identify his sin and convict him to change. I see how he presses into God for direction in small and big decisions. I'm not suggesting we do not counsel one another. But any sexual temptations are for him and the other men, just as he guides the other men with their lustful thoughts.

4. David never pushed or rushed me to the full recovery of the marriage. He respected the time needed for my heart to ready itself. He wanted the best for me, not just himself.

5. David's daily demeanor reflected a shift in his heart and head. He was dedicated to the success of his family and willing to accept his part in the destruction of it.

6. He was *consistent* with the dedication to spiritual growth beyond the ground taken.

7. He knew it was not my job to hold him accountable. Accountability was God's job and David's job. Accountability now includes a close group of men.

8. The evidence of real change in David's life was clear. God alone creates full restoration. Trusting God was my everything and still is today. Otherwise, I could not have penned this book. The above list, and the restoration of two hearts, granted me trust in David and the future of our marriage. It has been over twenty years since we remarried. Thank You, Father, for blessing our efforts toward obedience. Not once have I seen signs of regression.



Triage Prayer

*Lord, broken trust can damage our trust in You and other people.
We lose our ability to trust our judgment to make sound decisions.
Father, clear the fog and allow us to see clearly who to trust and who
to wait on. Protect our hearts.*

In Jesus's name, Amen



Chapter 15

Conflict Resolution

Our wounded hearts were healing. Now the time had come to deal with our inability to resolve conflict. After studying various techniques, David and I created a unique plan. Sitting at the kitchen table, coffee in hand, the Renken Rules launched into action. We have used these conflict-resolution rules with other relationships. Although one-sided, we have witnessed how they deescalate conflict and provide a godly view of resolution with others.

The Renken Rules of Engagement

The Rules go into effect at the first sign of conflict. This might be a look, tone of voice, or words. It is any sign of potential agitation, subjective to whichever spouse feels it. Here are the rules we agreed to:

E. **No storming out of the room.** While our struggle did not include storming out of the house, calling names, or throwing things, it is important to leave nothing to miscommunication. Permission was granted for a *peaceful* withdrawal.

a. Gently signal to the other person that you need a timeout. We used the same hand signal used for a timeout in sports. I recommend a nonverbal cue because your tone of voice during conflict may not be at its best.

b. During your timeout, there is to be no TV, games, or social media—nothing except you, the Bible, and God (for both people). This allows hearts to settle into a godly posture. You're asking God to take control of your attitude. Are you trying to get your way? Is it important you prove you are right? Or are you aligned with God's heart?

c. When one of you is ready (the heart is God-centered), you let the other person know you are ready to continue the discussion. If the other person is not ready, wait with patience. They should let you know when they are ready.

d. When both of you are ready, step back into the conversation where you left off. If it begins to go poorly again, return to this process, starting with a peaceful withdrawal.

2. **Don't poke the bear.** Deliberately triggering a negative response does not make you the winner. Nothing good will come of clinging to your right to be right. Only God is right. Arguing for the sake of winning does not align with God. If it is not of God, by default, it is Satan-driven.
3. **Louder doesn't make you right.** Raised voices cause us to lose credibility. This applies to your children, too.
4. **Don't assume the worst.** One evening, David came through the door after work. I was in the kitchen finishing dinner. He quickly walked past me. Not a smile, not a "hello" or "dinner smells good." He just hurried past me. My mind raced with thoughts: *He hates what I'm cooking; I must look worse than I thought; I failed to do something he wanted me to do; I did something to annoy him before he left for work.*
 - a. Pause your mind to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. In reality, he'd had another cup of coffee on the way home and was uncomfortably racing to the bathroom.
 - b. Assume the best of the other person, that their intention is not to cause you harm. David didn't mean to cause a panic; he just really needed to go.

5. **Get your affirmation from God.** We should affirm and encourage each other, but a dependency on supportive comments from other people will disappoint. We go to God to affirm our value; our spouse is a poor version of God.
6. **Don't say things like, "You shouldn't feel that way," "That makes no sense," or "Just get over it."**
- a. If the person believes their views or feelings are minimized, they probably are minimized.
 - b. We filter events and information via our history and our current relationship with God. It is common to recall events differently. A different recollection does not make it false.
 - c. We need time to heal wounds caused by actions and words. There is no such thing as "getting over it." Only God steps in to repair the harm caused.
7. **Don't say, "I'm sorry." Instead, ask, "Will you forgive me?"** Asking for forgiveness carries the humility God requires and a deeper sincerity.
8. **Don't correct each other in front of people.** Does it matter if something happened on a Tuesday or a Wednesday? Correcting your spouse publicly is disrespectful. When we disrespect our spouse, we disrespect ourselves and God.

9. **Stop talking.** Heed the advice in James 1:19 that tells us, “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak.” We are to consider the other person’s perspective. Ask yourself, “Will what I’m about to say bring honor to God?” “Will it be beneficial to my spouse?” If not, stop. Although I haven’t mastered this yet, I remain committed to conquering my utterances.

What about the casual remarks, things said in passing? Those things outside of the face-to-face conversations where the Renken Rules don’t apply?

Think about how deep, painful bruises take a long time to heal. Those swollen purple bruises tend to linger. I’m sure you’ve experienced cutting a corner too closely or hitting your thigh on the edge of a table. I once failed to open the car door correctly, and it came back to smack me. Ouch! These bruises are tender, and a mere bump to the area causes additional pain. Without the deep bruise, the bump is just an insignificant annoyance.

As it relates to our topic, some comments we make to our spouse might be a mere bump, but because the comment struck an emotional bruise, it is painful. And just like a deep physical bruise, the impact of the words hinders the recovery of the hurt. Remarks made in passing conversations can cause these bumps, even though they are unintentional. What to do about passing remarks that strike an already bruised heart? Satan’s goal is for the bruise to remain. He wants us to be angry and in conflict.

Sometimes we weren’t in a face-to-face conversation when these occurred and needed a method to acknowledge the injury. We decided to apply a variation of the Renken rules to cushion the

bump's impact. We would leave a sticky note informing the other person of a particular offense on their computer screen (when they are not using the computer, of course). The need for a technical disclaimer is amusing. Don't do this. Don't slap a sticky note in the middle of the screen he's using. Don't use a hair dryer while you're in the shower. Don't eat the bar of soap. Disclaimers are funny.

Placing the sticky note allowed time for the other person to process what he or she had done to warrant the post. A response might be a simple, "Okay, got it," or "I have no idea what you mean, let's talk." Our approach was always with a Christ-centered heart. We wanted God to cure the bruises, and we knew He would honor our hearts. We discussed the intent of what had been said and how to communicate better going forward. We should have bought stock in 3M. I'm sure our purchases of sticky notes helped corporate earnings.

The first six months of our conflict resolution annoyed us. The frequency of use was high, sometimes daily. But our determination to alter our approach to conflict won out. We wanted a marriage, not just a roommate.

The second six months became easier. By year two, the need for withdrawals seldom arose. Our process developed into our automatic reaction to conflict. It took time and diligence, but the reward was worth it.

And by year two, this process had encountered and resolved most of our issues. Deep bruises healed. God taught us how to remain Christ-centered in the struggle. Disputes became a rarer occurrence. Our lifelong preference to avoid conflict continues, but knowing how to process disagreements taught us the benefit of moving into

the conflict. When we get to the other side of issues, we are better people, and I can honestly say our marriage is a joy.

Commitment to reading God's Word and serving others also helped with conflict. Service took our minds off petty issues. Believe me when I say His Word changes hearts. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of the Bible. It softens the rough edges, the tongue, and our human perspectives.



Reflection

Thank You, Father, for the work you did in our marriage. You knew the timing for us to seek a different church. It led us to become a part of Watermark Community Church and the re|engage ministry. Thank You for providing the courage needed to share my life story. You alone know the difficulty of penning this book.

*The Lord is my helper; I will not fear;
what can man do to me?
(Hebrews 13:6)*



Triage Prayer

Father, You know we often move with selfish hearts. We want our way and to win the argument. With heels dug in, determined not to give an inch, chaos bears down. Show us Your way, heart, and desire for our lives as we approach others. Gently massage our pride out of the way. Guide us to set boundaries while moving toward peace.

Whether a marriage, a parent, a child, or a coworker, we want the relationship improved. Adjust our expectations, protect and heal our souls.

In Jesus's name, Amen



Chapter 16

What Satan Meant for Evil, God Uses for Good

Satan stalks his prey, God's creation, seeking ways to devour us. He uses the fallenness of this world—disease, heartaches, and evil people—to lure us away from God. This is why I chose the opening passage for *Triage* from the book of Genesis.

As for you, you meant evil against me,
but God meant it for good, to bring it
about that many people
should be
kept alive, as they are today.
(Genesis 50:20)

Our wounded souls often are fed by the toxic roots nourished by Satan. How do we break free from the shackles of past regrets? How do we bring God to the forefront of our lives to draw His sword on the battlefield of redemption? We need Him to heal our roots. He leaves the flock to find each of us. He loves us.

Professional counseling, church programs, and mentoring offer assistance in healing. I stand with the belief that unless God is the primary healer, we are not healed at a spiritual level. If my spirit is at odds with God, I am at odds with God. First Corinthians 10:31 tells us to do everything for the glory of God. We include Him in the healing process to benefit our mind and soul but also to bring God glory. He gets the credit.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:7–18)

As you move toward restoring your mind and soul, I recommend three action steps that have helped me along the way.

Trust. God waits for you to turn to Him. The course we take will not be easy, but the value of the finish line is immeasurable. He will heal you and direct your steps. Trust Him.

Did you know the minute instructions given to Noah to build the ark excluded a rudder? God moved the boat in the direction He chose; Noah was dependent on God. To travel life's journey without God at the rudder of your ship is like having no rudder at all. You will continue to be tossed about at the mercy of the world which cares not for you. Trust God.

Forgive. Forgive others; forgive yourself. Purge your heart of anger, bitterness, and thoughts unaligned with the heart of our Savior Jesus. This is not a simple ask. It is difficult when there have been so many betrayals. The world, which has cursed God, betrays all. Allow the Holy Spirit to cleanse your precious heart. Allow Jesus to cradle you in His arms as He brings you back home to Him. He alone can restore and lead you in how to protect your heart. Remember, condoning and restoration are not required. Forgive.

Pray. Pray for His guidance, for Him to place His people around you, to find a good church, for a desire to read His Word, and how best to serve others. Service can be in small ways until you are ready for bigger tasks. He always, always, always blesses small steps toward obedience. Do these things. I will continue to pray for you. Pray.



This book is written out of my love and compassion for a world of hurting women. You are not alone. The world is in the midst of a mental and spiritual crisis. Please don't separate the two issues. Roots connect our mental and spiritual health. The condition of our roots drives the condition of the fruit, and the fallen fruit then feeds the roots. We must allow God to repair our roots.

Be thorough in your list of damages. I recommend creating your lists before beginning the forgiveness step. Don't rush the process. Healing is not something to check off your to-do list. Savor this time with God. When we rush things, we risk seizing control of the process rather than letting God guide us. If it is not clear which person to forgive first, ask Him. He might want you to start with something easy, just to remove a small wound, before proceeding to bigger issues. God will *triage* your mind and soul and create a restored woman.

Your Sister in Christ,
Denise



Appendix

Finding a Mentor

In 2 Corinthians 1:4, the apostle Paul instructs the believers to comfort others with the comfort we have received. Titus 2:3–4 encourages older women to mentor younger women. My path to healing included eighteen months of therapy with a psychologist, Erikson’s analytical tools, and a precious woman who mentored me toward God’s solutions. I take these passages to heart, knowing how invaluable a mentor can be in the life of another woman.

What is a mentor? A mentor is someone to walk the healing process with you. We discuss issues, comfort, encourage, pray, dispense tissues, listen, and help you learn to set boundaries. Scripture should back our advice. We are your champion on the battlefield for a better future.

Some of the women I mentor utilize a professional counselor while I serve as a mentor. Others process their issues via a faith-based program while I walk the journey at their side. Or I may guide them through the process without anyone other than God. A mentor can be used with or without a professional counselor or a faith-based program.

Each mentor's process will differ. For me, a lady comes to my home weekly. These visits last about two hours as I allow her to process the issue at the top of her list. I only mentor one lady at a time because it requires my devotion to the journey, lasting about fifteen months. Outside of our visits, we use text messages for other communication needs. I've been known to text short prayers or check on them. When our time together is complete, our frequency of contact transitions to monthly, then quarterly, as I move my focus to the next person. Just as a mama bird nudges the young out, the time always comes for my ladies to leave the nest.

As we navigate their wounds, I direct them to stay on God's path, not the world's vision of right and wrong. My preference follows Erikson's stages. We gently peel back the life layers chronologically, savoring the sweet moments when God stepped in. This is not a quest to assess blame, and I'm not inclined to toss relationships away unless necessary. There may be unavoidable people in need of limitations—family, biblically unsound church folks, and coworkers, to name a few. The proper management of those relationships requires boundaries. We can think of boundaries as triage on the battlefield. We need to find a way to evaluate what injuries take priority for repair, stop the bleeding (boundaries), and bring God into the process.

Many women ask me how they should go about choosing a mentor. This should be a thoughtful, deliberate decision. It helps to know your expectations and communicate those. If possible, get a recommendation from a trusted friend. You need someone who understands how to traverse the deep valleys of life with God's assistance, meaning she should have already processed her life issues with a counselor, faith-based ministry, or Christian mentor. She also

should have zero residual anger. Someone spewing her anger will not help you to process yours. Her unprocessed pain will not help you. You desire empathy extended through the voice of God's peace and hope. When I began to seek God's will for my life, my friends consisted of a mixture of toxic anger and folks in various stages of peace and mental recovery. The angry ones needed boundaries.

When you begin your mentoring relationship, it is important to remove any obstacles that get in the way. It can be difficult to remove toxic friends and family who want to be a part of your process. Toxic family members may not embrace your path to peace and may become defensive. Fearing you may share the family junk in discussions with your mentor can generate varied responses.

Toxic friends may shun you as your behavior changes from negative to positive. They may want you to continue joining them as they verbally blast their offender. They will miss you blasting away at your offender and want to drag you back down.

I'm not suggesting you end relationships. As we travel the struggles of life, it may not be the time to make permanent decisions. The caveat is violent behavior. Never remain in a dangerous environment. Seek shelter immediately. Contact a women's shelter for guidance and a plan of exit.

When God began working in my heart, I was surprised by the disappearance of friends and the distancing of some family. I decided to silence the angry voices who served as my comrades in misery. I reduced the frequency of communication with them. I shifted contact to once per month or once per quarter. When I set a firm boundary with toxic friends and family, it went something like this: "I'm so glad to see you and catch up. First, I need to ask a big favor. I won't be discussing the issues between David and me. I'm taking

some time to process issues with a professional. I need our time together to be about anything except David.” No one was thrilled with this plan. I had to remind a few folks with a gentle, “I’m not comfortable talking about David.” Because of my unwillingness to angrily wade through the mud, folks began to disappear from my circle of friends. Their reciprocation of sent Christmas cards halted. I’ve seen this phenomenon repeated in other women’s lives. A trail of rejection by others will follow you as you move toward His peace and joy. Rejection and judgment are hurtful. Not everyone will celebrate your pursuit of peace.

Think of a favorite relative or friend who fits the mentor criteria and ask them to join you as you move toward healing your mind and heart. I will pray for you.



Triage Prayer

Father, rejection is a painful experience. We move toward Your plan, knowing there will be a loss of some folks. It is a difficult step. May others want more of You because of what they see in me.

In Jesus's name, Amen

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Erik H. Erikson *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (W. W. Norton Company, 1968), 97.
2. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 103.

Chapter 2

1. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 108.
2. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 109.
3. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 109.
4. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 3rd ed. (W. W. Norton Company, 1963), 252.

Chapter 3

1. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 119.
2. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 122.

Chapter 4

1. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 124.
2. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 127.

Chapter 5

1. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 263.

16. John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*,
reprint edition (Crossway Publishing, 2009), 59.



About the Author



Denise Renken loves to visit other places, but she and her husband, David, call Texas home. Her formal credentials include a CPA and MBA, but her passion is serving women. Her heart is drawn to other women's troubled souls and how best to move them into the capable arms of Jesus. Whether speaking at a women's event or mentoring, as she has done for over thirty-five years, she finds ways to encourage women. She and David have also served in marriage ministry for twenty years; they continue to share their testimony nationwide.

DENISE RENKEN

Denise enjoys researching Scripture and how to apply it to her life as a daughter of God. She holds family time as precious, loves animals (especially German shepherds), and treasures her sisters in Christ. No one will ever commission her to write a cookbook. The things that come from her kitchen range from tasty to puzzling. She knows that “finding the humor in life is essential.”

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