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Healing the Hurt in Your Marriage

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Some of the names and details in the illustrations used in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the people who shared their stories with us.

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INTRODUCING THE DIVORCE-PROOFING AMERICA'S MARRIAGES CAMPAIGN

Dear friend,

The book in your hands is a vital part of a campaign to Divorce-Proof America's Marriages. Couples across this nation—from Boston to Los Angeles, from Miami to Seattle—are joining together to divorce-proof their marriages. They are taking a stand *for* healthy, growing, lifetime marriages and *against* the looming threat of divorce.

Why now?

If we don't do it *now*, then when?

If we don't start *here*—with our family and yours—then where?

If we don't do it *together*, who will?

We believe that if we fail to address divorce now, the next generation of marriages will be lost. We must catch the vision for divorce-proofed marriages and push back the threat of divorce as far as our influence can reach. We want to join you not only in proactively protecting your own marriage but in helping divorce-proof the marriage of every couple you know.

As we go to battle together for the cause of the Christian home, we will pay a price. We have a powerful enemy in this endeavor. The apostle Peter warns, "Be careful! Watch out for

attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

You and your marriage are the devil’s intended victims. Since a divorce-proof marriage is high on God’s priority list, you can know that such marriages are also at the top of the enemy’s hit list. Satan would like nothing better than to discourage you, debilitate your marriage, and add another crippled or broken family to his ledger. That is why we are asserting that your marriage and family *are* your ministry.

Let us proclaim together loudly and clearly: Divorce will stop—and stop *now*. Starting in our home and in yours, let’s draw a line in the sand and tell anyone with ears to hear, “As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). Let’s agree to pull out all the stops in order to build biblical homes—for the sake of our marriages, for the sake of the next generation, and for the cause of Jesus Christ.

But it doesn’t stop there. If you—as a couple, a pastor, a small-group leader, adult Sunday school teacher—share these principles with other couples and families you care about, you will become part of God’s work to change the face of marriage in our country. (For additional resources as well as ideas about how to start a small group in your community, please see the appendix).

How does *Healing the Hurt in Your Marriage* fit into the campaign? We believe that many marriages suffer from unresolved conflict that can cause hurt and anger. If we do not learn to close the loop on our conflicts, our marriages will be at risk for sliding toward disconnection, discord, and possibly emotional divorce. Forgiving love—the kind of love that faces the inevitable conflicts and heals wounds—is a critical part of divorce-proofing any marriage. This book will help you develop and practice forgiving love, one of the six different kinds of love outlined in our campaign book, *Divorce-Proof Your Marriage*.

A Special Note from Gary and Barb

We hope you catch the vision for divorce-proofing your marriage—and the marriages of people you know. It's a campaign worth investing in!

Your friends,
Gary and Barb Rosberg

Have You Ever Been Hurt?

Have you ever been hurt in your marriage relationship? Like most married couples, the Thompsons have. Jan and Zach look great on the outside. Thirteen years of marriage, good jobs, a couple of kids, leadership positions in their church, a house in the suburbs, a ski boat—they have it all. But behind closed doors there is conflict, especially over Zach’s mom. Ever since Zach’s dad died, his mother has tried to run his life. Much to Jan’s dismay, Zach does whatever his mom wants him to do, and it is squeezing the life out of Jan. She calls it unhealthy control and manipulation. He calls it honoring his mother. Jan secretly wonders how long she can endure being the “other woman” in her husband’s life.

The ongoing argument between Jan and Zach remains unresolved. They are gridlocked on the issue, yet on either side of this wall of defensiveness are two deeply loving people who long for understanding, care, and validation from each other. Both have a high need for support, but instead of showing their soft side to each other, they stand back to back with hardened hearts.

Angry, defensive, and critical words have piled up into a mountain between them, and the words “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you” have disappeared from their vocabulary. Neither of them likes what is happening, but when they hurt each other, all they know to do is retaliate, bringing more hurt. If they don’t find help soon, the Thompsons may eventually see their names in the newspaper’s public notices under the heading Divorces.



Have you ever been hurt in your marriage relationship? Gideon has. It was the biggest night of his career, his company's annual awards banquet. Gideon's hard work had finally paid off, and he was recognized as employee of the year. He was the star of the banquet. And along with the acclaim and applause came a \$1,000 bonus. It was a night to remember—except for one huge disappointment: Keisha didn't attend the banquet with him.

Three hours before they were to leave for the banquet, Gideon's wife of six years announced that she was spending the evening with her sister. Gideon was blindsided by her statement, having assumed that Keisha was as excited about his award as he was. "That's your world, honey," she had said. "I don't know those people, so the evening would be very boring for me. You go and have a good time." Driving home after the festivities, Gideon found himself wondering if he made a mistake by marrying Keisha. Not knowing how to connect with his wife, he feels like shutting down and not trying anymore.



Have you ever been hurt in your marriage relationship? Laura has. When she met Dave at a singles' Bible study, she knew he was the man she had been waiting for. God had certainly kept her from committing to any other man so he could save her for Dave. He asked her out the night they met and they fell deeply in love. They were married a year later.

Their first year of marriage was like a fairy tale. Dave would send Laura little notes and call her unexpectedly during the day just to say, "Hi, honey, I love you." He brought her flowers and gifts. He took her on dates. Laura's church friends were so happy for her.

Then Dave's career suddenly took off, and along with the promotions came the big money. It was great until Laura noticed that

Dave is too busy working to send notes and to call. Now he has to work many evenings, which means they practically never go out. And when Dave does come home early, he doesn't want to talk much. Exhausted, he just eats dinner and falls asleep in front of the TV. Laura cries herself to sleep many nights because she feels Dave slipping away from her. His career has become his mistress, and Laura doesn't know how to win him back.



Have you ever been hurt in your marriage relationship? JoAnne has. Her husband, Randy, took the checkbook away from her. "I think you're spending too much," Randy said when JoAnne asked if he had seen the checkbook. "So I'm going to pay the bills from now on. You can have some spending money, but if you need to buy groceries or something else for the house, I'll write the check for you."

At first JoAnne thought it was a joke—and a poor one at that. But Randy is serious. JoAnne, who managed her own finances as a single woman, argues the point. But Randy won't relent, convinced that he is better suited to take care of their money. JoAnne feels humiliated by his decision, but she refuses to allow Randy the satisfaction of knowing how badly she feels. She will get even somehow.



Have you ever been hurt in your marriage relationship? Jack has. He and Lynda have been married fourteen years. Jack has worked hard to provide a nice home for her and their three kids. He knows Lynda hates his graveyard shift, and he doesn't like it either. Leaving home at 8:00 P.M. really messes up his time with the kids. And it limits his intimate moments with his wife.

But Jack *has* to work graveyard. He and Lynda decided early on that Lynda would stay home with the kids. So Jack's graveyard bonus pays for things they can't otherwise afford, including braces,

clarinet lessons, and church camp for the kids. Jack hopes his next promotion will allow him to switch back to working days.

Then one night around midnight, Jack cut his hand on the job, and his supervisor told him to go home. Instead of calling to wake up Lynda and the kids, Jack drove himself to the emergency room for stitches and then headed home. He walked in on Lynda and a guy from his Bible study group locked in a passionate embrace on the sofa. Jack was devastated, and Lynda was mortified. They still love each other, but they don't know how to deal with what has happened between them.

MARITAL BREAKDOWNS

Have you ever been hurt by your spouse? Sure you have. Have you ever been the cause of pain in your partner's life? Absolutely. In every marriage relationship, the husband and wife have both been the offended and the offender, the cause and the recipient of marital pain. There are no exceptions, including Barb and me, who have committed our lives to strengthening and divorce-proofing marriages across the country.

We talk with people like Jan, Zach, Gideon, Laura, JoAnne, Jack—and you—practically every day. They phone-in during our daily nationally syndicated radio program, *America's Family Coaches . . . Live!* They come up to us between sessions at the many marriage conferences we host each year around the country. They call our office, and sometimes they pull us aside at church, in the mall, at a restaurant—wherever. These husbands, wives, and couples share stories of struggle, conflict, and hurt in their marriages. Some of the problems are very serious, even marriage-threatening. Most are relatively minor and common. But the hurt still hurts, and they come to us for help and healing.

Why do we hurt each other as husband and wife? Why do two people who have committed to love each other for a lifetime

sometimes forget each other, ignore each other, or turn on each other? Because every marriage is made up of two imperfect people who are sometimes thoughtless, insensitive, unkind, or downright selfish. And two imperfect people sharing the same space are bound to get into disagreements. We all get into these marital “fender benders” now and then, no matter how much we may wish to avoid them and how sad we feel when they happen.

It’s kind of like driving on our crowded streets and freeways. None of us ever intends to have an accident, but it happens sometimes. Even if you drive defensively and have a perfect record, some of the people around you don’t. Someone follows too closely, tries to race through on a yellow light, forgets to check the mirror before changing lanes, or backs out of a parking space without looking. A momentary lapse of driver alertness and—*crunch!* You have a fender bender to deal with—or worse.

Every marriage has its share of relational misunderstandings and mistakes, clashes and cold shoulders, sharp words and shouting matches that result in pain. And sometimes it’s more like a head-on collision causing major damage—such as betrayal, unfaithfulness, or abuse. It doesn’t matter how deeply you and your spouse love each other, conflict and hurt at some level are inevitable. It’s not a question of *if*, only *when*.

So what do you do when it happens? How do you respond when a conflict brings hurt to you, your spouse, or both of you? Many couples, like the examples opening this chapter, don’t know what to do. So they do nothing and inevitably drift apart. Diane Sollee, founder and director of the Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education, states, “The number one predictor of divorce is the habitual avoidance of conflict.”¹

Most marriage surveys reveal that resolving conflict and hurt is right up there with communication as the biggest problem facing couples. Our own experience at America’s Family Coaches bears this out. We know what to do when we tangle bumpers

with another driver. We exchange names and insurance information, we get estimates and repairs from the body shop, and soon we're back on the road again. Yet so many of us today are clueless about how to resolve marital breakdowns.

Why? Because no one taught us how to do it. Healthy conflict resolution was not modeled in many of our homes as we grew up. However, conflict, alienation, and divorce were modeled. Research reflects that “seventy percent of all persons in our society have been impacted by divorce—either the divorce of their parents or their own.”² If we don't find the answers at home, where will we find them? We sure don't see programs about healthy conflict resolution on prime-time TV. And often we don't even learn how to resolve marital conflict in church. So rather than heal our hurts and move on with life, we allow our problems to pile up, mistakenly thinking—or secretly wishing—that time really does heal all wounds. It doesn't. Instead, over time, unresolved conflicts and unhealed hurts harden our hearts and drive a wedge between us as husbands and wives.

And the pain doesn't stop there. When we bury our conflicts instead of facing them, when we stuff our pain instead of dealing with it, a process is set in motion. You may think you get rid of conflict by burying it, but you are burying it alive and it will continue to haunt you. Avoidance will eventually lead you toward a place you don't want to go: emotional divorce. You may never physically separate or file for legal divorce for a number of reasons such as appearances, the children, or religious convictions. But the distance between you will continue to widen to a relational disconnect and an emotional divorce. You will feel stuck and unhappy living in the same house and sharing the same name. The marriage dream you once shared will die a slow and painful death. All that's missing is publicly filing the paperwork in the county courthouse.

When your spouse talks about the importance of your marriage, listen to him or her. Spouses who see their troubled mar-

riage as viable will usually talk about the problems and suggest that measures be taken to improve it. When they stop talking, beware; it may mean they have stopped trying. If this pattern of emotional withdrawal continues for six months or more, this spouse may end up walking away physically.

THE PATH OF FORGIVING LOVE

Barb and I don't want to be anywhere near that road to emotional divorce, and we don't want you there either. In order to keep moving in the direction of your marriage dream and far away from disconnect and divorce, three things need to happen.

First, you need to come to grips with the reality that you and your spouse cause each other pain from time to time. It may not be intentional, and you may not even be aware of when it's happening. But it happens in the day-to-day course of your life together through what you say or fail to say and through what you do or fail to do. Admit that both of you are responsible. You are both victims and culprits in the marital pain you experience. Face it: It takes *two* to tango, and it takes *two* to tangle!

Second, you need to know what to do when the inevitable conflicts and pain occur in your marriage. Conflicts must be resolved. Offenses must be confessed and forgiven. Hurts must be healed. The Bible has a plan for working through marital door dings, fender benders, and head-on collisions. You both need to internalize that plan until it becomes second nature.

Third, you need to put God's plan into practice when conflict and hurt happen in your marriage. Knowing what to do isn't enough. Warm feelings and a positive attitude about your spouse are insufficient. Good intentions won't cut it. Even prayer won't accomplish everything, though it is the essential starting place. Let us teach you a biblical plan so that, when the next conflict rears its ugly head, you will know how to handle it by doing the right thing.

As Jesus said to his disciples, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17, NIV).

This book will help you take all three steps. Barb and I will coach you in the skills that will help you build what we call *forgiving love* into your marriage relationship. You will learn how to resolve your conflicts—great and small—before they accumulate and grow into a wall between you. We will guide you through a process that will help you heal emotional wounds before the gangrene of distance and disconnect poisons your marriage. As forgiving love becomes a daily expression in your life together, you will take major steps toward divorce-proofing your marriage.

To get started, Barb is going to give you a brief overview of where we are headed.

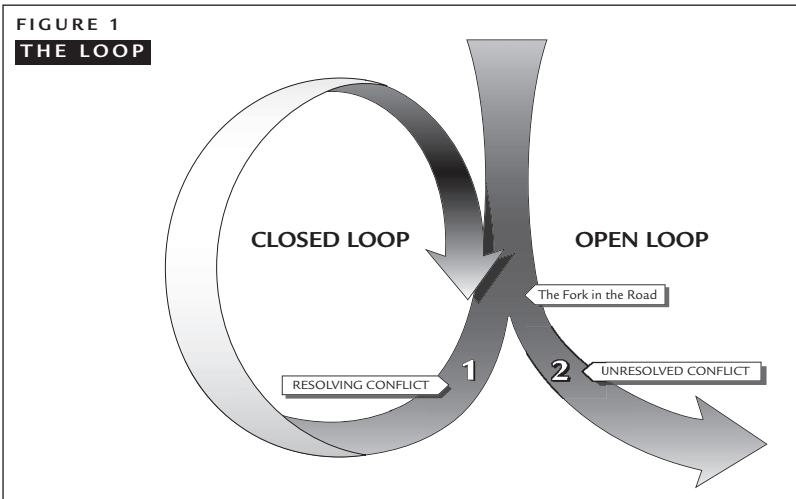
A LOOK AT THE LOOP

Before we founded the nationwide ministry of America’s Family Coaches, Gary counseled families in private practice. During those years he listened to people pour out the pain of their marriage and family relationships every hour of the workday all week long. This is when God gave him insight to draw up a plan to help couples visualize where they were in their marital breakdown, determine how they got there, and experience biblical principles for forgiving love. As he listened to hundreds of hurting people pour out their marital pain, Gary noticed a common thread of events woven through virtually every sad story. As he analyzed this sequence, he developed a concept that has helped heal and revitalize countless marriages. It’s the same concept we use in our ministry across the country today and the concept we will share with you in the chapters ahead. We refer to it as “The Loop.” Here’s how it works. (See the diagram in figure 1.)

The Open Loop of Conflict. Marital conflict begins with an offense of some kind. Your spouse says or does something harmful

to you, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The offense provokes an emotional reaction: You are hurt and then angered. We picture this as an open loop of conflict in your relationship. At this point, your spouse may not even be aware that something is wrong.

Instead of addressing the offense and resolving the conflict, many offended spouses respond in ways that only make things worse. You may strike back verbally or in your actions, venting your anger on your spouse. You may bury your anger and let it simmer, hoping to keep the peace until the rift blows over. Or you may just give up and let your spouse have his or her way. In time the issue dies down, and the two of you go on with life. But the painful loop is still open.



Many couples live with dozens of open loops in their marriages. Gary and I have heard their heartbreaking stories. Unresolved conflicts and unhealed hurts pile up on each other. Smoldering anger grows into bitterness, resentment, apathy, or even hatred. And with each additional conflict, husband and wife drift further from each other and closer to emotional divorce. In

part 1 of this book, we will explore in detail the pain and pitfalls of ignoring the open loops of conflict in your marriage.

The Fork in the Road. Whenever an offense opens a loop in your relationship, you have a choice. You can decide to do what is needed to close the loop, or you can do nothing and suffer the painful consequences. Sounds like a no-brainer decision, doesn't it? Yet our experience over the years has convinced us that husbands and wives have difficulty choosing to heal their hurts. In part 2, we will look more closely at this important choice and identify some common hindrances to it.

The Closed Loop of Healing. The Bible provides clear instructions for resolving conflict and healing hurts. Once you make the choice to exercise forgiving love in your marriage, God will empower you for the task by his Spirit and will set in motion the healing process.

Closing the loop begins with preparing your heart, diffusing your anger, and communicating your concerns to your spouse. Next, you need to confront your conflicts, forgive your spouse, and rebuild your trust as husband and wife. In part 3, Gary and I will coach you through these important steps for closing the loop.

What we share with you is a biblically based plan for healing the hurts in your marriage. God's Word is full of instruction, admonition, and encouragement about our relationships at every level, including marriage. Gary is going to relate to you one of Jesus' parables that is foundational to the process of forgiving love in marriage as well as in other relationships.

A Word Picture of Healing

You are probably familiar with the story of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke 15:11-24. Jesus' parable is a timeless illustration and example of opening and closing the loop: conflict, hurt, resolution, healing. In his story, the Master offers us both hope and help for restoring broken relationships.

The Open Loop of Conflict. The story begins with the younger of two sons demanding that his father hand over his share of the family estate. What a slap in the face! In New Testament times, the greatest offense a son could commit was to prematurely ask for his inheritance. It would be like your teenaged son or daughter demanding, “I want my inheritance now because you are dead to me.”

Amazingly, the father met the young man’s demand by forking over his inheritance. Perhaps the dad knew that the headstrong lad was beyond his control. Then again, maybe this wise and loving dad knew that by releasing the boy’s inheritance, he might open a door for God to do something in his son’s hard heart, ultimately leading father and son to a restored relationship.

As if the son hadn’t hurt his father enough the text says, “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money on wild living” (Luke 15:13). Imagine how the father felt when the boy thumbed his nose at him and the family farm and walked away. Also, imagine the reaction of the other dads in the community: “If my boy pulled a stunt like that, I would tell him, ‘No way, get back to the fields!’”; “My kid would never make it, and when he failed, I would never let him return.” But this dad was different.

The parable doesn’t tell us how long it took the party animal to run through his cash. It could have been only a few weeks, or it could have been months. But then reality set in. He was broke and far from home—and his dad wasn’t there to bail him out. At that point the son could have returned home, but he was probably too proud. The story continues, “About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything” (Luke 15:14-16).

Can you imagine this scene? This hard-hearted boy, who had it all back home, was probably hungry for the first time in his life. I

believe God used the young man's hunger for food to plant the idea in his head that his greater hunger was for a restored relationship with his father. Yet God had to do something in the boy's heart before he could return home.

In the meantime, how was the father holding up in the midst of the conflict? He must have missed the boy terribly. He must have grieved his son's rejection of everything he stood for: solid work ethic, responsible living, righteous conduct. And yet he kept his eye on the road in hopes that his son would return to him someday. I can just see the father walking from the house out to the road wondering, *Will today be the day my beloved son comes home?*

The Fork in the Road. Finally the young man reached the end of his rope. He realized he had made a big mistake. He had not only ruined his own life; he had also greatly offended his father. He stood at a fork in the road. It was time to make a choice. Would he leave the loop open forever—rationalizing his behavior, blaming others, wallowing in self-pity and relentless guilt? Or would he choose to close the loop and restore his relationship with his father?

Back to the narrative. "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man"' (Luke 15:17-19). The lad knew he must humble himself and confess his sin in order to make things right.

But how would the prodigal's father respond? Would his father reject him? That's what he deserved. That's what he had done to his father. Yet the boy knew that he must go home. Pride had been replaced by a broken heart. Once holding fast to a demanding, self-centered outlook on life, the prodigal now desired to restore a broken relationship. So he turned his steps toward home.

I can't help but think that the prayers of a loving father had encouraged the prodigal to this critical realization.

The Closed Loop of Healing. Then something wonderful happened in the parable:

So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.”

But his father said to the servants, “Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.” So the party began. (Luke 15:20-24)

I get goose bumps realizing that the father in the story was even more eager to close the loop than his wayward son was. The father saw his boy coming from a long way off. But he didn’t stand on the porch waiting for him. He took off running to meet him. Throwing his arms around his repentant son, the father granted him complete forgiveness and restored him to fellowship.

What a scene! Can you see the tears of joy? Can you hear the music of celebration in the background? Can you feel the peace of a broken relationship made whole? Barb and I love this parable and how it pictures God’s heart for healing hurts.

And if you like this happy ending, imagine what’s in store for you and your spouse as you begin to exercise forgiving love in your marriage. Husbands and wives are even closer than fathers and sons. The pain of the open loop is even greater in marriage, and the joy and peace of healing is even sweeter. You can reenact

the final scene of this parable over and over in your own experience as you learn to close the loop on conflict and hurt. Let us show you how in the pages ahead.

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