

When Forgiveness Moves Both Ways

The Quiet Power That Heals the Brain, Restores the Heart, and Renews the World Around Us.



-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

I watched a video recently on one of my new favorite YouTube channels. It was about Joseph, betrayal, prison, forgiveness, and the neurobiology beneath it all. I expected to watch it, appreciate the insights, and move on. Instead, it lingered long after it ended, not because of Joseph alone, but because it quietly turned the mirror toward my own life.

Over the past few years, I have had moments that left a mark. Seasons where I felt accused in ways that did not sit right in my spirit. Seasons where I felt unheard or not fully respected in a professional environment. Even a financial situation that felt unfair after promises had been made. None of those experiences define me, yet they left a residue. And residue, if unexamined, has a way of organizing the nervous system long after the event itself has passed.

When the Mirror Turns Inward

There are things that still get under my skin. Not dramatic betrayals or headline level injustices. Just situations that, when revisited, still tighten something inside me. I can analyze them. I can justify them. I can spiritualize them. Yet when I rehearse them, my body responds before my theology does. My jaw tightens, my chest constricts, and my mind begins building its case as if it were standing before a courtroom.

And here is the irony that made me smile at myself a little. I am a psychologist. I speak about integration and regulation. I helped build a model around these very ideas. Yet there I was, watching my own nervous system rehearse an old grievance like it had a standing appointment on my calendar. Part of me had to laugh, not in shame but in recognition. Sometimes I think I need to go back and reread my own books, not as the author, but as the student.

What We Rehearse, We Become

In that moment my nervous system did not care about titles or roles. Cortisol still rose. The amygdala still scanned for threat. The body prepared as though the past were happening again in real time. We often speak of forgiveness as if it were primarily a virtue, something noble or spiritually admirable, but it is also profoundly physiological.

Every time I revisit a grievance, I strengthen the pathway that holds it in place. Neurons that fire together wire together. Rumination becomes repetition. Repetition becomes circuitry. Circuitry begins shaping identity. Dan Siegel speaks about integration as the linking of differentiated parts of the brain so that they function coherently rather than chaotically. Neurocardiology research reminds us that sustained negative emotional states disrupt heart rhythm coherence and strain the system. The immune system listens. The endocrine system adjusts. The prefrontal cortex gradually yields ground to limbic urgency. When resentment lingers long enough, I am not simply morally stuck. I am biologically looping.

Joseph and the Choice to Reframe

Joseph had every reason to remain trapped in that loop. Betrayed by his brothers, sold, falsely accused, imprisoned, and then handed power over those who had wounded him. He could have crushed them and called it justice. No one would have objected. Yet vengeance would have kept him neurologically tethered to the original trauma, organizing his identity around what had been done to him rather than who he was becoming.

Instead, Joseph reframed the story. You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. That statement is not denial. It is integration. It means regulating survival circuitry. It is a man

choosing which narrative will govern his biology. Forgiveness did not erase the betrayal or pretend the suffering never happened. It released Joseph from being organized around it and allowed his future to be shaped by purpose rather than pain.

As I sat with that realization, the reflection turned inward again. I can justify my irritation. I can construct airtight arguments for why my grievance makes sense. Yet being right does not calm my nervous system. It does not lower cortisol. It does not restore coherence. It does not heal the body. Release does. Grace does. Choosing a different governing narrative does.

Research consistently shows that sustained practices of emotional regulation, compassion, and cognitive reframing, often over eight to twelve weeks, can measurably alter stress physiology. Amygdala reactivity softens. Prefrontal regulation strengthens. Stress patterns stabilize. Heart rate variability improves as the nervous system shifts toward greater coherence. What we rehearse becomes what we wire, and what we wire eventually becomes how we live.

If I spend the next few months rehearsing grievance, I deepen that groove in my nervous system. If instead I practice intentional release, not pretending the hurt did not matter, not minimizing injustice, but partnering with truth rather than rumination, my biology begins to organize differently. That is not mystical language. It is plasticity meeting faith.

Walking This Road Together

Scripture reminds us that the wisdom from above is pure, peace loving, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruit. That is not abstract theology. It is an invitation to a different organizing principle. And when Jesus said seventy times seven, He was not exaggerating for effect. He was describing a rhythm of living that refuses to let grievance calcify into identity.

Forgiveness moves both ways. It blesses inwardly by calming the storm within the nervous system, restoring coherence to the heart, and loosening the grip of chronic activation. And it blesses outwardly, changing how we show up in relationships, interrupting cycles of retaliation, and opening space for redemption that vengeance never could.

Joseph was released. His brothers were released. Even the future was released from the chains of the past.

And so I do not write this as someone who has mastered forgiveness. I write as someone still learning to live it. Titles do not exempt us from the work. Psychologist, founder, director, reader, friend, we are all standing on the same ground here. We all struggle with loops that tighten us. We all carry stories that still activate something inside us. No one is

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better. No one is worse. We are simply human beings learning how to live toward goodness.

So, my dear friend, let us do this together. You as the reader. Me in whatever role I occupy this season. Fellow travelers choosing not to curse our own physiology through endless rehearsal of grievance. Let us instead bless it. Let us speak compassion to our own nervous systems. Let us allow kindness to become the rhythm that organizes us from the inside out.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Perhaps that begins in the quiet terrain of the heart, where resentment once lived. Perhaps it begins when we soften. When we release. When we allow love to become the protective covering that steadies us.

And in that softening, something beautiful happens. The body settles. The mind steadies. The heart remembers coherence. What blesses within begins to bless beyond. A gentleness forms around us, almost like a protective shelter woven from benevolence and grace.

We are not alone in this work. We never were. Let us move toward peace together.