Clearing the Air

Walter and Thanne Wangerin saw turn their despair into a lifetime of fresh starts
By Annette LaPlaca

Walter and Thanne Wangerin do a lot of forgiving, but not nearly as much as they used to.

Years ago, Walter was consumed by the responsibilities of a demanding ministry; and Thanne wondered whether her husband even remembered he had a wife. One night Walter woke up in an empty bed. He went looking for Thanne, who was curled up on the sofa with tears streaming down her face. When he found her, all she said was "Don't touch me."

Thanne had been quietly withering, feeling abandoned by Walter as she cared for their four young children. She also was struggling to address the needs of their extended family. Meanwhile, Walter devoted longer hours to his work-failing to notice the burdens weighing down his wife. Until he found her that night on the sofa, so distraught she refused to be touched.

Thanne’s anger and pain were deeply rooted, and Walter feared he had doomed their marriage to years of emptiness. But he began to set aside time and energy for his wife, and Thanne worked out a freeing balance in their life together. These efforts, along with the giving and receiving of forgiveness, made it possible for them to start over.

Today, after 28 years of marriage, the Wangerins find their life has been far from empty. A few years ago they moved to northern Indiana, where Walter is a professor and writer-in-residence at Valparaiso University. (His most recent book is The Book of God: The Bible as a Novel [Zondervan].) Now that their children are grown, Thanne plans to return to graduate school. In a recent interview, they shared the lessons they have learned about forgiveness and new beginnings.

The concept of two flawed people living in the same house for 50 years or more seems to necessitate a lot of forgiveness.

Thanne: A marriage can’t exist without it.

Walter: Without forgiveness, sin will destroy a marriage. Forgiveness is daily renewal. It’s like your blood-it keeps pumping through your body, picking up fresh oxygen and renewing every cell. If that renewal stops, death begins. Forgiveness is a marriage’s lifeblood.

What do you mean, exactly, when you say "marriage's life-blood"?

Walter: A long-lasting marriage does not have a flat-line of growth. Trust and hope grow in spurts. It’s like your relationship with God. Certain events-like the moment you became aware of your need for God and accepted his salvation-are so significant that they
illuminate everything that follows. From then on, you understand your status as a person forgiven by God.

Likewise, the one "big" marital crisis Thanne and I faced created a lasting atmosphere of forgiveness in our marriage. She had so much to forgive me for and so much change to trust me for, her forgiveness was an obvious work of God’s grace. That crisis shines on the rest of our marriage. It showed us God could do something even in that terrible moment of terrible emotion, so we never have to feel that hopeless again.

Thanne, how did you manage to forgive Walter when the hurt went so deep?

**Thanne:** Well, I didn't do it myself. I couldn't forgive Walt; I didn't even choose to forgive him. It was God's miracle that moved us both. I forgave him. But it's important to note that he forgave me, too, for my anger, for my part in the misunderstandings and everything else. It worked both ways.

**Walter:** Once Thanne woke me up to how I had hurt her, I crashed. We were both in despair. It didn't look like a beginning, but it was. The subtle, beautiful beginning of God's forgiveness comes when the sinner realizes his sin.

**Thanne:** I didn't forgive Walt because he had changed or because our problems had been solved. Forgiveness had to come before the change. People get it backwards, thinking "I'll forgive as I see that the person is really sorry and is really changing." But the forgiveness is the beginning of healing.

**Walter:** That's a crucial truth. Also, Thanne wasn't forgiving me just to save our marriage or because it would be the best thing for our family. It wasn't a pragmatic decision. Grace offers forgiveness as a pure gift. That's when forgiveness becomes marriage's lifeblood. Forgiving doesn't remove all the hurt feelings. It's not a love potion. Fears and anger can remain, but something new-God's intrusion of grace-comes in to energize your relationship.

The conventional wisdom is that it's important to "forgive and forget." Are you able to "forget" something that has been forgiven between you?

**Walter:** Often it can be important not to forget. I shouldn't forget how I hurt Thanne early in our marriage because "forgetting" would mean I could easily go back to taking her for granted and breaking her spirit. Change was necessary. And I don't want Thanne to forget either, because she's the one who sends up the red flag when she sees me slipping back into neglect.

**Thanne:** It’s good for a husband and wife to become sensitive to a particular sin and help each other avoid it. Walter does the same for me.
**Walter:** But the fact that we both occasionally confess sins to each other doesn't mean we're "even"—with an unsteady balance of "you forgave me, so I forgive you." That's not grace. Grace extends the forgiveness and doesn't keep score.

How does not forgetting past sin and forgiveness work to improve your marriage?

**Thanne:** For one thing, it means when things go wrong, neither of us finds the situation hopeless. When we were first married, Walt was quick to think, "This is the end." He didn't think we would divorce, just that our marriage from that point on would be grim. But when he learned that forgiveness would eventually come, it actually gave me a lot more freedom. Before that time, I thought if I expressed completely how I felt, Walt would sink into hopelessness and I'd have to "fix" that, too.

**Walter:** Now when tension arises, I retain a trust that God will enable us to forgive each other. We don't underplay problems or sweep them under the rug. We now know that God will bring our marriage along another step beyond them.

With this understanding of the power of forgiveness, do you find yourselves frequently asking each other for forgiveness?

**Thanne:** No! Walt knows it would drive me nuts. I mean, we sin against each other every day. If I felt I had to say "I'm sorry" every time, I'd just be creating a set of little laws for myself. Walt and I assume we're living in grace with each other, that part of our marriage covenant is forgiveness. We trust each other that we are forgiven, in the same way that we're vulnerable with God, trusting that his forgiveness is a reality.

I wouldn't want Walt to have to analyze his every action—what an awful lot of work! Both of us have a responsibility to confess to God the sins we are aware of. But think of all the sins I must be committing that I don't even realize are sin! Do I really want my life, or Walt's, to consist of rooting around for all that? It seems healthier to assume the forgiveness is there. I don't need to know every private sin Walt deals with, but I do expect him to take care of these things before God.

When do you feel it's necessary to apologize and ask each other for forgiveness?

**Walter:** You should usually confess to your spouse only things that affect your relationship. For years now I've met with a friend once a week, and he is my confessor. Talking with him helps me objectify a sin or struggle enough to know whether it's something I'd better talk with Thanne about.

**Thanne:** Formal "apologies" or asking forgiveness aren't always necessary. I'd rather come to the end of a hard day and have one of us say, "I'm sorry I was such a crab today," or something general like that. Of course, in a very troubled marriage, the "little things" are often "big" problems that need to be confronted.
**Walter:** If the little things are like small weeds growing in a garden, a good raking will take them out. But sometimes the "little things" add up to evidence of one big, deep trouble root in the soil of the marriage. Usually, in those instances, one person is involved in a persistent sin-something like profound self-centeredness or habitual sexual sin. That calls for confession and forgiveness.

But how often do people who are mired in their own sin realize their obligation to seek forgiveness?

**Walter:** Sadly, it's almost always the "sinned against" spouse who has to say, "You're hurting me, and it's more than just all these small hurts. Something deeper is going on." It's a painful task, a sad task. But this is the irony of Christianity: What begins in pain may end in healing and life again.

*Few people really feel comfortable talking about their own sin. How do you do that?*

**Walter:** Individuals who are already dealing with their sins with God have a good start. For Thanne and me, the confession to God that is a regular part of our worship setting is crucial. Thanne, especially, finds communion to be a significant time of self-examination. Knowing that the genuine forgiveness of Jesus is just moments away gives Christians an ability to look with cold eyes at their sin. That's important.

In marriage, though you might find it difficult to tell your spouse there is some persistent sin between you, you usually find that he or she already knows things are not right. Changes in behavior patterns have been providing clues all along. Your tone of voice has changed, or you're suddenly more guarded in conversation. Your spouse may already be asking you, "What's the matter?" A spouse’s awareness that something is "different" can persuade you to approach a moment of confession or to ask for forgiveness.

You have mentioned that we are able to forgive one another because we have experienced God's mercy firsthand. Does that mean Christians can forgive, while non-believers really can’t?

**Thanne:** As people made in God’s image, we all have the capacity to love, and love includes a capacity to forgive. Whether a person is a Christian or not, that capacity to forgive in love comes from God.

**Walter:** But being exhaustible humans, our capacity to forgive is limited. People who have never connected with the infinite source of forgiveness-God-will find their capacity strained to the limit and sometimes broken. But the presence of Jesus in a marriage can become power to forgive, especially in crunch periods. When you're too angry or too exhausted to deal with things, God can be the source of a divine ability to forgive.

Have you had many "crunch periods" where you really needed that divine ability?
**Walter**: Not too many really, because we've tried to live with grace in a daily way. One time that comes to mind is when we moved here to Valparaiso. We left behind a beautiful home, and I was responsible for buying the new house. And we bought a house that really was not good.

**Thanne**: It should have been bulldozed! Everything was wrong with it, right down to the frame. But Walt wanted acreage and the land is beautiful, so we ended up with this old farmhouse. And I was responsible for getting the house in shape, on top of working full-time. I finally fell apart.

**Walter**: Thanne had been getting more and more defeated. Not only was she facing the challenges of the ugly house and a new job, we were living in a new area where she didn't have friends. When her pressure and exhaustion reached a crisis point, she was very articulate and forceful in expressing her emotions.

Thanne needed my attention and support, and she needed me to acknowledge the burden I had thrown on her by choosing this house. Over the years we've lived here, we've never stopped working on the place.

**Thanne**: Now, after all that work, it's a good house.

**Walter**: But back at the beginning, when Thanne's negative feelings seemed so strong that they would last forever, my blessing was that I knew there would be forgiveness. This is what I mean when I say trust and hope grow in a marriage: Every instance of significant forgiveness and grace in your marriage makes trust and hope grow—trust and hope in your spouse, and trust and hope in God.

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