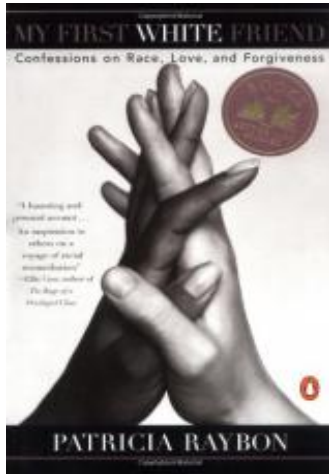


# My First White Friend: Confessions on Race, Love and Forgiveness

by Patricia Raybon



## About the Book

### Taking a Chance on Love

The heart must be ready and brave. That's surely the only way anybody can get past the opening lines in my book: "God help me. I stopped hating white people on purpose a year ago."

I myself couldn't write the words until I'd stumbled around for months missing the point. I tiptoed around the keyboard, making believe that I was going to the heart, but missing it by a mile. That's because I was scared ? worried like many writers that readers wouldn't accept what I needed to tell them most. In the end, I wrote ? and rewrote ? the same 40 or so pages of safe, fearful words, terrified that I'd somehow say the wrong thing. Then my friend and agent Carla Glasser, who doesn't have any fear about getting right to the point, called me up and said this, "You are a writer. So write what you absolutely must say." So I sat down and wrote these words. God help me.

A dam broke.

The next sentence just sort of poured out of my fingers and the next sentence and the next. And instantly I could see where I had to start and where I was going with these pages that would become *My First White Friend*. I would start it with a confession ? talk flat out about race hate and what it had done to me, just pull out all the stops ? and finish with a resolution or a "closure" to all of my racial mess. I would pick apart the reality, as James Baldwin put it, where "all you are ever told about being black is that it is a terrible, terrible thing to be."

I would do this. But then I would make peace with it. God help me. And then the surprise happened. The writing changed my life.

So now I am somebody new. I started out writing about race. I ended up converting to forgiveness.

But first I had to learn about forgiveness ? learn from scratch, because candidly I knew nothing about forgiving. I thought it meant saying the words, I forgive you. It turns out that forgiveness first is about saying you're in pain.

That's the first step. Name your pain, as forgiveness scholar Barbara Flanagan puts it. Of course, that's where most folks in America get stopped, especially when it comes to race. We talk about the details, about what happened. But talking about what got hurt in the process scares us speechless. Certainly, I was terrified to look at my broken self and describe all the wounds resulting from race.

Harder still was step two, choosing to forgive them. But that is what forgiveness is ? a decision. It's choosing to release the person who hurt you from the burden of your resentment, no matter how justified your anger or rage.

Surely, indeed, it takes a change of heart for any of us ? broken and flawed as we are ? to then start the real work of forgiveness. That includes everything from trying to understand the injurer's brokenness ? asking what failure in the injurer's past and in the injurer's spirit allowed such a horrific offense ? to stirring up your own willingness to forgive the hurt.

To forgive so much that you can start to love.

This is hard, hard work. And when I look again at the first chapters of my book especially, the words fairly bleed up from the pages. One woman told me she was just crying and reading, and reading and crying. However, as the book evolves and the outcomes of forgiveness emerge, the tone of the book gives over to a lightness and a brightness that really pleases me. I'm speaking not about my talents or power as a writer, but about the power of forgiveness, a force that can transform hate to love. Surely forgiveness doesn't change the past. But it makes the memory and pain of the past bearable so a person can move on, then move up. That is true even when the injury is racial. That is the essence and the theme of my book and I am grateful to God that I was granted the privilege to write it.

## **Discussion Guide**

1. "White people...had done unspeakable things. These are the things I was taught. I had heard them in childhood, at the knees of people I loved. In time I couldn't hate white people enough." Raybon makes an important point about how hate becomes "justifiable," even "noble" when we learn it from important people in our lives, perhaps even our parents. It took her forty years to realize she could overcome what she had learned from family and friends and forge a new outlook based on her own experiences. Discuss what may have appeared normal to you in your family as a child that in your adult years you realized was wrong. How did you come to that realization? Did your parents teach you to hate any one group? Why did it take Raybon half her life to get to a point where she could relinquish her past and replace hate with love?

2. The difference between Raybon's mother and father is striking. Raybon's mother was a forgiving, nurturing person who took most everyday racial indignities in stride. Raybon's father, although sometimes unforgiving of white people, had faith. He was a pioneer, and he believed in himself. How do you think each parent influenced their daughter? Discuss the differences in the way these two people grew up: the father, poor and motherless in Mississippi; the mother

from a working-class and secure black family. What are Raybon's views about the important role the family plays in love, self-esteem, and forgiveness? Would you say that both the mother and the father are survivors? How so?

3. In 1958 at the pool, a lighter-skinned black girl turns to Raybon and remarks, "You're kind of dark, Patricia." Like a mantra, these words repeat in her head. The impact is powerful. She writes, "I don't know how to transform myself. And in 1958, the truth is that I am ugly. The world says it's so. And I can't change any of that." Why was this comment a turning point for Raybon? What did it say about the pressures she and her peers felt to conform to white images of beauty? Compare Raybon's feelings as an "ugly" black nine-year-old with her self-image in the chapter "The Affirmation."

4. "Forgiveness, for all its moral gloss, starts in a church." Do you think Raybon could have come to the decision to forgive if religion had not been a part of her life? Discuss how the black church was a haven for her.

5. Kerry Monroe is remembered as "the white avenging angel for doing what was right. For going. For reaching. For risking and trying." Looking back, the author is amazed at how pure Monroe's intentions were. "We are skeptical of kindness so unfailing, sympathy so instant," she writes, quoting Wallace Stegner. How important was Monroe to the author's process of forgiveness? Was the memory of this one episode a turning point for Raybon, or was the event meaningful only in retrospect?

6. King and Gandhi both explore the duality of hate: If I hate myself, I can't love others; if I hate others, I can't love myself. Do you think this is true? Why is this concept at the heart of Raybon's transformation?

7. By tracing three generations of a black family in America, Raybon outlines the racism that she, her parents, and her grandparents have faced. In the 1920s it was cotton fields, lynchings, and the KKK. In the 1950s it was Jim Crow laws, segregated housing, and separate public facilities. What are the racial hotpots today? How has the language changed, become more subtle?

## Author Bio

Patricia Raybon is the award-winning author of *I TOLD THE MOUNTAIN TO MOVE*, a 2006 Book of the Year finalist in *Christianity Today* magazine's annual book awards competition; and *MY FIRST WHITE FRIEND*, her racial forgiveness memoir that won the Christopher Award. She is also author of the One Year® devotional, *GOD'S GREAT BLESSINGS*. A journalist by training, Patricia has written essays on family and faith, which have been published in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, *USA Weekend* and *In Touch* of In Touch Ministries; and aired on National Public Radio. She is also a regular contributor to *Today's Christian Woman* online magazine.

With degrees in journalism from Ohio State University and the University of Colorado at Boulder, Patricia worked a dozen years as a newspaper journalist for the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News*. She later joined the journalism faculty at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where for fifteen years she taught print journalism. Patricia now writes

full-time on ?mountain-moving faith.?

Patricia and her husband, Dan, are longtime residents of Colorado and have two grown daughters and five grandchildren. Founder of the Writing Ministry at her Denver church, Patricia coaches and encourages aspiring authors around the country and is a member of the Colorado Authors League and the Authors Guild.

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