There was a man who had given much thought to what he wanted from life. He had experienced many moods and trials. He had experimented with different ways of living, and he had had his share of both success and failure. At last, he began to see clearly where he wanted to go.

Diligently, he searched for the right opportunity. Sometimes he came close, only to be pushed away. Often he applied all his strength and imagination, only to find the path hopelessly blocked. And then at last it came. But the opportunity would not wait. It would be made available only for a short time. If it were seen that he was not committed, the opportunity would not come again.

Eager to arrive, he started on his journey. With each step, he wanted to move faster; with each thought about his goal, his heart beat quicker; with each vision of what lay ahead, he found renewed vigor. Strength that had left him since his early youth returned, and desires, all kinds of desires, reawakened from their long-dormant positions.

Hurrying along, he came upon a bridge that crossed through the middle of a town. It had been built high above a river in order to protect it from the floods of spring.

He started across. Then he noticed someone coming from the opposite direction. As they moved closer, it seemed as though the other were coming to greet him. He could see clearly, however, that he did not know this other, who dressed similarly except for something tied around his waist.

When they were within hailing distance, he could see that what the other had about his waist was a rope. It was wrapped around him many times and probably, if extended, would reach a length of 30 feet.

The other began to uncurl the rope, and, just as they were coming close, the stranger said, “Pardon me, would you be so kind as to hold the end a moment?”

Surprised by this politely phrased but curious request, he agreed without a thought, reached out, and took it.

“Thank you,” said the other, who then added, “two hands now, and remember, hold tight.” Whereupon, the other jumped off the bridge.

Quickly, the free-falling body hurtled the distance of the rope’s length, and from the bridge the man abruptly felt the pull. Instinctively, he held tight and was almost dragged over the side. He managed to brace himself against the edge, however, and after having caught his breath, looked down at the other dangling, close to oblivion.

“What are you trying to do?” he yelled.
“Just hold tight,” said the other.

“This is ridiculous,” the man thought and began trying to haul the other in. He could not get the leverage, however. It was as though the weight of the other person and the length of the rope had been carefully calculated in advance so that together they created a counterweight just beyond his strength to bring the other back to safety.

“Why did you do this?” the man called out.

“Remember,” said the other, “if you let go, I will be lost.”

“But I cannot pull you up,” the man cried.

“I am your responsibility,” said the other.

“Well, I did not ask for it,” the man said.

“If you let go, I am lost,” replied the other.

He began to look around for help. But there was no one. How long would he have to wait? Why did this happen to befall him now, just as he was on the verge of true success? He examined the side, searching for a place to tie the rope. Some protrusion, perhaps, or maybe a hole in the boards. But the railing was unusually uniform in shape; there were no spaces between the boards. There was no way to get rid of this newfound burden, even temporarily.

“What do you want?” he asked the other handing below.

“Just your help,” the other answered.

“How can I help you? I cannot pull you in, and there is no place to tie the rope so that I can go and find someone to help me help you.”

“I know that. Just hang on; that will be enough. Tie the rope around your waist, it will be easier.”

Fearing that his arms could not hold out much longer, he tied the rope around his waist.

“Why did you do this?” he asked again. “Don’t you see what you have done? What possible purpose could you have had in mind?”

“Just remember,” said the other, “my life is in your hands.”

What should he do? “If I let go, all my life I will know that I let this other die. If I stay, I risk losing my momentum toward my own long-sought-after salvation. Either way this
will haunt me forever.” With ironic humor he though to die himself, instantly, to jump off the bridge while still holding on. “That would teach this fool.” But he wanted to live and to live life fully. “What a choice I have to make; how shall I ever decide?”

As time went by, still no one came. The critical moment of decision was drawing near. To show his commitment to his own goals, he would have to continue on his journey now. It was already almost too late to arrive in time. But what a terrible choice to have to make.

A new thought occurred to him. While he could not pull this other up solely by his own efforts, if the other would shorten the rope from his end by curling it around his waist again and again, together they could do it. Actually, the other could do it by himself, so long as he, standing on the bridge, kept it still and steady.

“No, now listen,” he shouted down. “I think I know how to save you.” And he explained his plan.

But the other wasn’t interested.

“You mean you won’t help? But I told you I cannot pull you up myself, and I don’t think I can hang on much longer either.”

“You must try,” the other shouted back in tears. “If you fail, I die.”

The point of decision arrived. What should he do? “My life or this other’s?” And then a new idea. A revelation. So new, in fact, it seemed heretical, so alien was it to his traditional way of thinking.

“I want you to listen carefully,” he said, “because I mean what I am about to say. I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own; the position of choice for your own life I hereby give back to you.”

“What do you mean?” the other asked, afraid.

“I mean, simply, it’s up to you. You decide which way this ends. I will become the counterweight. You do the pulling and bring yourself up. I will even tug a little from here.” He began unwinding the rope from around his waist and braced himself anew against the side.

“You cannot mean what you say,” the other shrieked. “You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. What could be so important that you would let someone die? Do not do this to me.”

He waited a moment. There was no change in the tension of the rope.

“I accept your choice,” he said, at last, and freed his hands.
A major part of the Yom Kippur liturgy is that God is a compassionate, forgiving God, restoring the people of Israel to God’s grace and special relationship. As God forgives us, so are we to forgive each other. But under what circumstances? According to Maimonides and other authorities, forgiveness comes only after regret and apologies have been made. The perpetrator must be genuinely sorry, and ask forgiveness of his/her neighbor. We know that Yom Kippur cleanses us of our sins against God, but we must confront directly our failures against our friends and family by asking for their forgiveness. Without that regret and apology, forgiveness cannot be expected.

In the following story we have no evidence of such regret or apology, but it is nevertheless a tale of deep pathos, and gives a vivid example of how powerful the force of forgiveness can be. It may be that the offender in this story did ask forgiveness, but in any case, the offended party was able to rise above the expected, normal reaction, and offer forgiveness in exceeding measure—beyond the call of duty.

George Romney, the English painter, achieved widespread recognition for his paintings, but couldn’t handle his success. He left home, deserting his wife and children. For 36 years he remained in London, having no contact with his wife and family. Finally, a debilitating illness robbed him of his power to paint. Suddenly, remembering his wife, he went back to her. She took him in without complaint and cared for him tenderly until he died. Romney’s biographer says, “That act of forgiveness was more significant than any canvas George Romney ever painted.”
As a prisoner at a concentration camp during the war, Wiesenthal spent a day assigned to a work crew at a local hospital. There, a nurse pulled him away from his work to come to the room of a dying man. The man lay on his bed, face entirely wrapped in bandages. As Wiesenthal listened, the dying man told of how he had joined the SS, and participated in one particularly horrible massacre of Jews. He had felt revulsion for his own actions, but followed the orders of his superiors. Now, on his deathbed, he sought to confess his sins before a Jew. He admitted his crime, and took full responsibility for his actions.

Wiesenthal listened to the dying SS man’s confession, and without saying a word, left the room. Wiesenthal neither forgave nor condemned. His response was silence. But his own silence, in the face of sincere repentance, troubled him. Perhaps he should have forgiven, redeemed one soul who had seen his own errors and owned up to them. What would you have done? Wiesenthal asked this question of some two dozen prominent theologians, authors, and politicians: "How would you have reacted?"
Forgiving does not mean ignoring injustice. Letting go of grudges is one thing, and it takes an immense amount of moral muscle to do so, but the most controversial aspect of the entire subject of forgiveness, in my view, concerns confronting not ignoring the great evils perpetrated by people. While some are prepared to forgive the war criminal, the slayer of children, the terrorist who kills innocent civilians in the name of peace, others like Cynthia Ozick insist, and reasonably so, that even if such transgressors repent, the evil suffered is too unjust to be forgiven, that only vengeance shows pity to the victim, that whoever is merciful to the cruel is indifferent to the innocent. We must never forgive, in this view, because forgiving is a sign there is a moral escape valve, that to forgive acts of brutality is in effect to endorse and perpetuate rather than combat their evil deeds. The blood of the innocent cries out forever.

Yet we are humbled when we read that Tomas Borge, a brutally tortured Sandanista fighter, when asked by the Nicaraguan court to name an appropriate punishment for his torturer and said, "My punishment is to forgive you."

And the father of Matthew Shepard, the young gay man brutally murdered in Wyoming told his son’s killer at his sentencing, "I would like nothing better than to see you die, but this is the time … to show mercy to someone who refused to show mercy. I give you life in the memory of one who no longer lives. May you have a long life, and may you thank my son Matthew every day for it."