



Section 4: Forgiveness and Reconciliation

(<http://ctb.ku.edu>)

Study forgiveness and reconciliation in community settings, and learn how to apply these concepts to improve individual and community outcomes.



This section has grown out of the work of The Forgiveness Project, www.theforgivenessproject.com (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.theforgivenessproject.com>). This and other sections in the Tool Box chapter on Spirituality and Community Building (Chapter 28 (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/culture/spirituality-and-community-building>)) have been written with the support and contributions of experts connected with the Charter for Compassion International, www.charterforcompassion.org (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.charterforcompassion.org/>).

INTRODUCTION

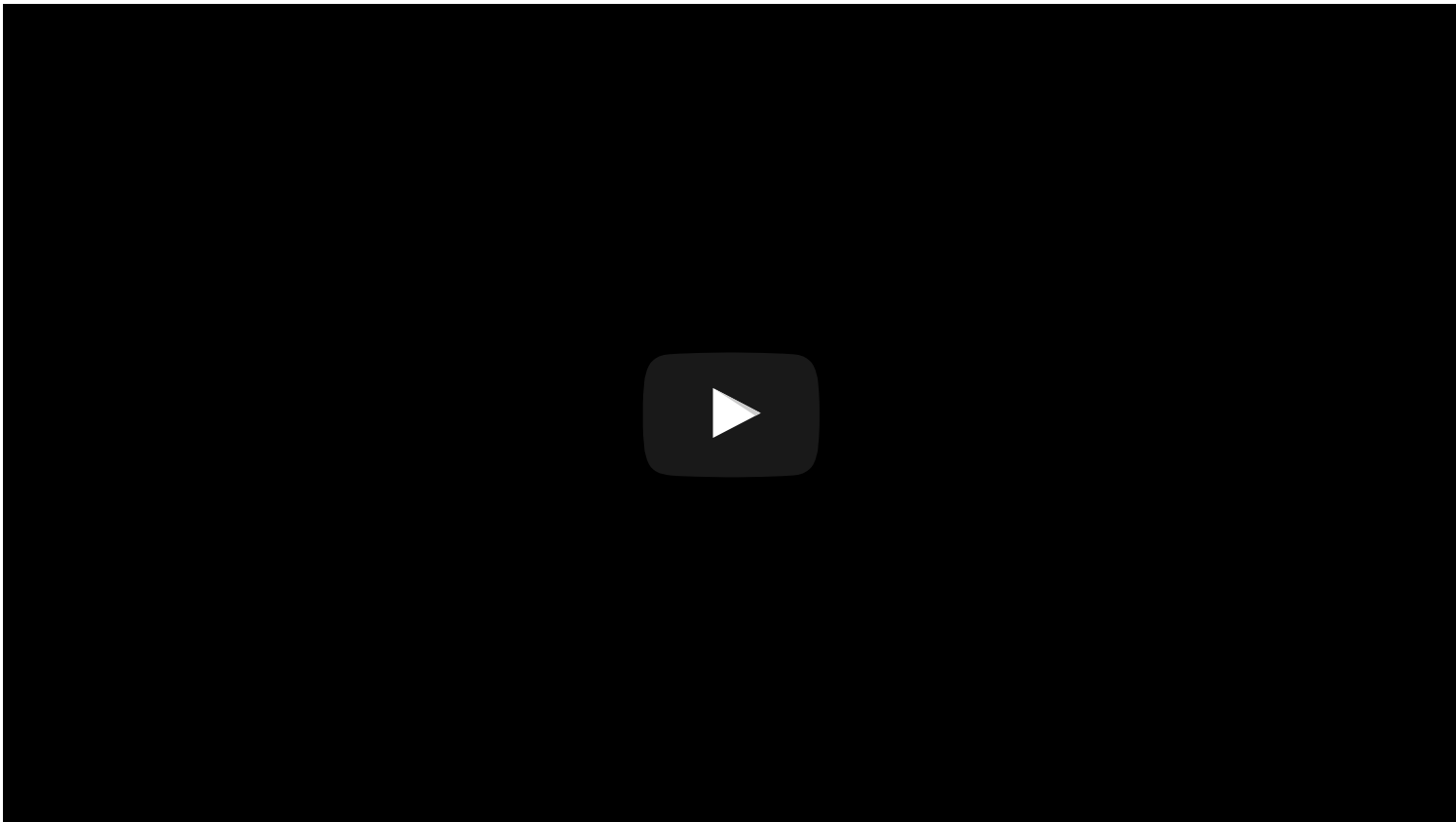
Forgiveness and reconciliation can occur in every sphere of human experience, including individual, community, national, and trans-national levels. In this section of the Community Tool Box, we will explore these common yet complicated aspects of our human existence, describe their importance for personal and community well-being, and illustrate, with many real-life stories, how they might be applied in positive ways to heal and strengthen both individuals and communities.

In any discussion about forgiveness and reconciliation, it is important to make a distinction between the two before analyzing each of them in greater detail. On the one hand, forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the wrongdoer. There may be good reasons why you do not wish to reconcile. Reconciliation is an additional choice. On the other hand, it is nearly impossible to reconcile with someone you have not gone some way to forgive.

We begin with some general thoughts about forgiveness and reconciliation, and their place in the spiritual and community worlds.

- Forgiveness is both a process and a choice, and may be both intrapersonal and interpersonal. It is a complex and enigmatic concept, hard to pin down because it can apply in different ways to different situations; not everyone experiences it in the same manner. For some, it may result in reducing a personal hurt that makes life easier; for others, it may mean reconciling with an enemy and being able to live side by side again.
- If legislated or regulated in any way, forgiveness may become fraught with difficulty. As Richard Wilson, whose sister was murdered in Burundi, put it: “In Burundi, the rhetoric of forgiveness has been used by politicians to avoid accountability.” Similarly, John Braithwaite, a pioneer of the Restorative Justice movement, wrote: “Forgiveness is a gift victims can give. We destroy its power as a gift by making it a duty.” This means that any group movement towards forgiveness might best start with individual storytelling, without any coercion to forgive.
- However, community leaders should also understand that if community members – including both authorities and civilians – adopt a forgiving attitude, that can be a very useful public health and community-building tool; multiple studies have shown that forgiveness produces better health outcomes, helps sustain good relationships, and reduces anxiety (Exline et al, 2003; Luskin, 2002; Worthington and Scherer, 2004).
- Forgiveness may require relinquishing something that was important to you, such as giving up your moral indignation, your desire for retaliation, or your attachment to being right. Yet forgiveness is useful to community building, because people who forgive tend to be more flexible and less certain in their expectations, both in how life will be or how others will treat them. Forgiving people have chosen not to perpetuate a historical grievance; they are somehow able to turn the page, loosen themselves from the grip of the past, and reframe their own story.
- Even though there is no set method to teach forgiveness, many academics and practitioners have devised processes for people to explore on their own forgiveness journeys (Enright, 2001; Luskin, 2002; Tutu & Tutu, 2014). To persuade people to forgive who have no interest

in such processes can place yet another burden on victims. But in that situation, what community builders can do is to enter into a reconciliation process by listening to the story and the pain of the “other,” then start to build empathy and understanding.



- Reconciliation in the context of community building assumes a need, a will, or an actual effort made on the part of an individual or a group of people to live side-by-side in peace with a person or another group they had considered to be their adversaries in the past.
- However, granting that forgiveness may aid reconciliation, it is not always a condition for the latter to unfold. There may be pragmatic reasons for communities to make a conscious decision not to seek to punish or retaliate. This is a form of “pardoning,” which may lead to reconciliation but is different from forgiveness. Just as a victim may forgive a perpetrator serving a prison sentence but still see the necessity for them to be incarcerated, equally a victim may still feel resentment towards a perpetrator but see the practical sense of not doing anything about it in order to end a cycle of violence.
- Finally, while forgiveness may be considered one’s own private business – a visceral and intimate process – reconciling with others who caused you harm or whom you hurt is an outward gesture made to re-connect with others and to renew relationships. In this sense, reconciliation lies at the heart of building and maintaining peace in a community, especially in promoting local reconciliation initiatives between divided communities and the reintegration of people released from prison back into society.
- In time, people may realize that holding on to resentment has a cost (both personally and communally), and therefore instead choose to release their bitterness and anger. Only then they can start to work on ways of developing plans to repair the harm.

With this orientation in mind, we turn to examine some key questions relating to forgiveness, reconciliation, and their community applications.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION?

Forgiveness

Definition

Forgiveness is the principled decision to give up your justified right for revenge; it also requires the forgiver to recognize that the offender is “human like myself.” As the British philosopher and poet David Whyte has written: “It is that wounded...un-forgetting part of us that...makes forgiveness an act of compassion rather than one of simple forgetting.” Following hurt, pain, or atrocity, forgiveness can potentially bring resolution and freedom. It is a practical way of preventing the pain of the past from defining the path of the future.

Categories

Forgiveness is often categorized as having two distinct forms:

- **Unilateral forgiveness:** This requires nothing in return. It is an act of generosity on the part of the victim(s). There can be many different motives; for instance, it may stem from compassion for an offender, the wish to free oneself from pain, or simply a pragmatic means of moving forward.
- **Bilateral forgiveness:** This involves an exchange. It is a contractual relationship between people or groups, dependent on apology and remorse. It is often tied up with justice, as it involves the paying of a social debt.

It's important to recognize that if you attach too many conditions to forgiveness it may become almost the opposite, with characteristics akin to being vengeful or vindictive.

Some Key Points about Forgiveness

- **Process:** Forgiveness is not a single magnanimous gesture in response to an isolated offense, but a longer-term, fluid, and ever-changing process where people work towards repairing broken relationships, or broken hearts.
- **Recognition:** Forgiveness is about recognizing that life is messy and unpredictable – that we are all fallible human beings capable of messing up. It requires a broad perspective.
- **Empathy:** Forgiveness is more than just accepting or letting go, because it requires a degree of empathy or compassion. It is the ability to place yourself in someone else's life (empathy) and to act according to this empathic connection you feel towards your fellow human beings (compassion).
- **Reconciliation:** Forgiveness is different from reconciliation, which requires some kind of peace process and the coming together in unity of two or more formerly hostile sides.

It's important to note that forgiveness does not exclude a passionate or painful response to being hurt, or witnessing others being hurt. Anger, sorrow, rage, and despair are a part of the process, and may be the launching pad for forgiveness. Essentially, this means that we do not endlessly replay past gripes and grievances; it is rather the ability to live with the hurt without being held captive by it; it means not being defined by those who have hurt us and not being broken by our own victimhood.

Common Themes in Forgiveness

It would be a mistake to impose a false uniformity onto highly diverse forgiveness perspectives. Forgiveness can be viewed as a cognitive process, a narrative or journey, a philosophical position, or a combination of these. However, definitions of forgiveness have tended to express some commonality. Sells and Hargrave (1998) conducted an extensive literature review of empirical and theoretical forgiveness studies. They found that every definition or theory of forgiveness they encountered contained each of the following underlying principles:

- There is an injury or violation with subsequent emotional or physical pain.
- The violation results in a broken or fragmented relationship between parties.
- Perpetuation of injury is halted.
- A cognitive process is pursued where the painful event or action is understood or reframed with a fuller context.
- There is a release or letting go of justifiable emotion and retaliation related to the event.
- There is a regeneration of the relationship.

Regeneration does not necessarily occur, especially when the offender cannot be communicated with (for any of a variety of reasons). But the first five elements, when combined, are good starting points in a discussion about the process of forgiveness.

Reconciliation

Definition

Reconciliation refers to the restoration of fractured relationships by overcoming grief, pain, and anger (<http://ctb.ku.edu><https://www.hastac.org/opportunities/forgiveness-and-reconciliation-probing-boundaries-forgiveness-project>).

It is, as Karen Broenus has written, “a societal process that involves mutual acknowledgment of past suffering and the changing of destructive attitudes and behavior into constructive relationships toward sustainable peace.”

The path toward reconciliation can also be described as a lifelong journey going in two directions: inward, towards self-discovery and reconciling with suffering, and outward, toward recognizing and perhaps forgiving others. It is both an intrapersonal and an interpersonal exercise, each aspect advancing the more deeply a person discovers that reconciliation is possible both within and without.

Some Key Points about Reconciliation

Reconciliation can be seen as a five-step process, including:

1. Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society
2. Acknowledging and dealing with the past
3. Building positive relationships
4. Facilitating significant cultural and attitudinal change
5. Enabling substantial social, economic, and political change.

Reconciliation can also involve the reframing of identity.

Typically, this also has key elements and steps, often including:

1. Understanding the threat to people's identity
2. Seeking to move individuals from singular affiliation to multiple identity; e.g., away from "I am a Serb" to "I am a Serb, a European, a civil rights activist, a trade unionist...etc."
3. Deconstructing or reconstructing an individual's identity frames
4. Separating group and individual identities
5. Dismantling of enemy images and misrepresentations that demonize the "other"
6. Looking for a common vision or threat around which to unite.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF FORGIVENESS FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING?

- Forgiveness can bring new insights
- Forgiveness can help transform attitudes
- Forgiveness can help repair broken relationships
- Forgiveness can help break the cycle of violence

Individuals choose forgiveness for a number of reasons in times of hurt and trauma. In his book *Unattended Sorrow*, Stephen Levine writes that when trauma disturbs our future, deeper psychological wounds may persist; and "Long after the shrapnel is removed, the inner war continues" (Levine, 2005, p. 67).

For some, forgiveness is a personal decision as part of their own self-healing process: Forgiveness liberates people from the resentment and anger that they have carried with them. Some feel inspired to forgive, because they experience compassion for those who have hurt them; others see a spiritual value in forgiveness, because they recognize that we are all connected and are therefore each individual is in some way responsible for the pain in the world.

When it comes to the specific role forgiveness may play in community building, we can offer these propositions:

- Forgiveness can contribute to creating a foundation for dialogue.
- It can help release bitterness and anger, and facilitate the re-humanization of the "other." This is key to the reconciliation process, which cannot happen without eradicating dehumanization.
- It can induce a shift in mindsets and transform harmful attitudes.
- It can build bridges between opposing parties, and help repair fractured relationships.
- It can help break the cycle of violence, aid post-traumatic reconciliation, build a more peaceful common future, and ultimately sustain peace.

Forgiveness Can Bring New Insights

A first step in community building is recognizing that we are all capable of harm, given the right circumstances. The Russian author and dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*: “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” (Solzhenitsyn. 2003, p. 75).

[Note: Citations for the case examples to follow are found under the “Online Resources” heading at the end of this section.]

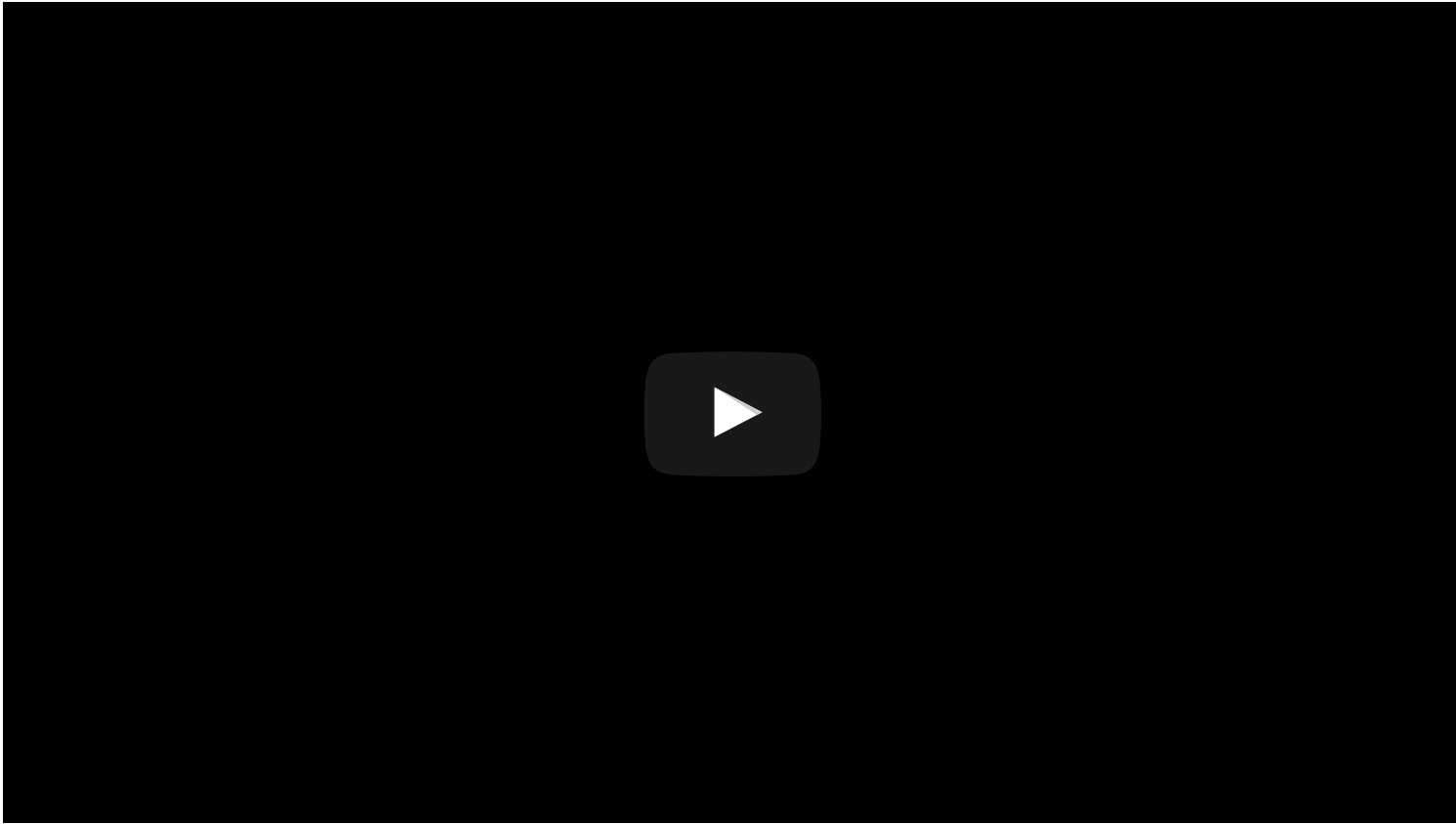
Case Example: Bosnia

When Kemal Pervanic, a survivor of the notorious Omarska concentration camp in Bosnia (<http://ctb.ku.edu/http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/kemal-pervanic-bosnia/>), returned to Bosnia some years after the end of the war, he recognized the cruellest of his former Serb camp guards standing by the road hitch-hiking. The image caused Pervanic to react in way that might seem surprising – he started to laugh. “What else could I do?” he explains. “I didn’t want to swear or scream or get violent. I laughed because I remembered the monster this man had been. But now, hitch-hiking alone on a dusty road, he looked almost pitiful. People describe these people as monsters, born with a genetically mutant gene, but I don’t believe that. I believe every human being is capable of killing.”

Forgiveness Can Help Transform Attitudes

Forgiveness and reconciliation in this context are therefore about shifting and even transforming people’s attitudes, prejudices, and perceptions about the “other.” Forgiveness isn’t an act of kindness born out of the victim’s generosity, but rather a re-humanizing gift emphasizing the humanity of the perpetrator. In other words, it is about reducing fear through the recognition of the human being in “the enemy.” In the softening of positions comes the acknowledgement and possibility of each side’s complicity.

Case Example: Palestine and Israel



This is well demonstrated in the case of Palestinian Bassam Aramin, and Israeli Rami Elhanan, who both lost young daughters in the Israel-Palestine conflict

(<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/bassam-aramin-palestine/>) . As Bassam says in the film about his and Rami's life, *Within the Eye of the Storm*: "If you want to change others, first you have to change yourself."

Rami Elhanan describes the suicide bomber who killed his daughter as a "victim, just like my daughter, grown crazy out of anger and shame." He also reflects, "When this happened to my daughter I had to ask myself whether I'd contributed in any way. The answer was that I had – my people had, for ruling, dominating and oppressing three-and-a-half million Palestinians for 35 years."

Forgiveness Can Help Repair Broken Relationships

Another way forgiveness and reconciliation promote community building is that they allow people who were once hostile towards one another to live together again. Forgiving past wrongs may be a key to reconciliation between friends, family members, spouses, neighbors, races, cultures, and nations. More complete reconciliation means that we engage co-participants honestly and respectfully in the construction of a newer world through meaningful and faithful relationships. The process results in decreased motivation to retaliate or maintain estrangement from an offender despite his or her actions.

Case Example: Senegal

Salimata Badji-Knight was brought up in a Muslim community in Senegal

(<http://ctb.ku.edu><http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/salimata-badji-knight-senegal/>), where she was circumcised at the age of five.

“Today my three sisters work with me to stop the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Even my mother now understands that it’s a violation of human rights and has told me that she had never wanted to put me through FGM and had done everything in her power to protect me. Hearing this made me happy, as it created a closer relationship between the two of us and I no longer blame her for what happened to me.

In addition, before he died, I was able to have a good talk with my father. I opened my heart to him and explained how female circumcision could affect you physically and mentally. He cried and said that no woman had ever explained the suffering to him. Then he apologized and asked for forgiveness. The next day he called my relatives in Senegal and told them to stop the practice. As a result, a meeting was cancelled and 50 girls were saved.”

Forgiveness Can Help Break the Cycle of Violence

Finally, forgiveness can help end violence. “It is the responsibility of the living to heal the dead.”

(<http://ctb.ku.edu><http://theforgivenessproject.com/news-responsibility-living-heal-dead/>) **Alexandra Asseily** (<http://ctb.ku.edu>http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Asseily),

founder of the Centre for Lebanese Studies in Oxford and creator of the Garden of Forgiveness in Lebanon, has spoken and written extensively about the repetitive nature of conflict; that consciously (and unconsciously) held grievances are received by each new generation through an ancestral bond that can only be released through forgiveness and compassion.

Case Example: Lebanon

Asseily has described the deep ancestral connection she felt with the “agony of war,” which manifested in her own life during the civil war in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990. She has spoken about the horror of seeing her good Christian friends destroying everything she had worked for with their Muslim neighbors. “I saw grievances being played out that went back to the Crusades,” she said, explaining why she would not wear a cross for 20 years. “It was after I came to London that I tried to make sense of my life and started to ask the question, *What is it that makes me at the same time human and inhuman?*”

In a similar vein, Kay Pranis, a pioneer of restorative justice in the United States, is convinced that while the victim has a right not to reconcile with the wrongdoer, the community must accept an offender when he or she transitions from prison back into the neighborhood (Cantacuzino, 2013, p. 10). “It is the community’s responsibility to reconcile with the one who has harmed, because if they do not, they set up the next victimization,” she says.

In both of the above examples, as well as in the case of the Israeli Rami Elhanan, citizens who may not be directly responsible for a conflict nevertheless take responsibility for repairing the harm. This recognition of the interconnection of all human life seems a key component of forgiveness. As the psychologist Erik Erikson (1902-1994), famous for his work on the conceptualization of identity, put it: “Living together means more than incidental proximity. It means that the individual’s life-stages are ‘interliving,’ cogwheeling with the stages of others which move him along as he moves them” (Erikson, 1964, p. 114).

WHAT ARE FAVORABLE CONDITIONS FOR FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION IN COMMUNITY BUILDING?

There are three in particular:

- In post-conflict situations (i.e., not being in the midst of active conflict)
- In peace-building
- When the law is inadequate

In Post-conflict Situations

Forgiveness can help reconcile two opposing sides in almost any situation. However, in the midst of violent conflict it may not be safe or expedient to talk about forgiveness. It is a concept that irks some people, and to suggest forgiveness when past grievances are currently being played out – when people are hell-bent on survival on the one hand, whilst destroying the enemy on the other – may be insensitive and counter-productive.

In Peace-building

Forgiveness can be a critical ingredient in rebuilding broken relationships and repairing damaged communities. It can be an important part of any peace-building process, and sometimes the only thing that can help divided communities move toward reconciliation. Festering trauma so easily has the capacity to become festering dehumanization; since both sides may believe there is risk in equality, they therefore adopt fear-based thinking such as: “If you’re equal to me, then you may harm me.” Sometimes it takes something radical like empathy, forgiveness, and reconciliation to break this impasse.

Case Example: England

Denise Green's son died in 1992 in Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool, U.K.

(<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/denise-green-england/>), where his organs were later used, without her permission, for research purposes. News of what had happened to Denise and hundreds of other bereaved parents caused a national scandal in England in the late 1990s with headlines such as, "Burying your baby once is bad enough – to do it again is just agony."

Denise's fury in the end led to forgiveness, a positive decision which not only healed her but restored relationships with the professionals. "I chose forgiveness because I did not want to be destroyed by bitterness," she says. "What happened was out of my control, but how I respond is within my control. Subsequently, the medical profession hasn't shut me out. I can sit down and talk to pathologists because I'm not out to attack them. They realize I want to listen and learn. And they too have learned from me."

When the Law is Inadequate

Forgiveness can be especially advantageous when the law has been inadequate in exacting measured retribution. Justice is dependent on the existence of an authority perceived as just; so when that is absent, who then can bring justice?

In the insightful documentary *Beyond Right and Wrong* (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://filmraise.com/beyond-right-and-wrong/the-forgiveness-project/>), Lord John Alderdice, psychiatrist and negotiator for the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, warns: "If you simply hold tight to the requirement of justice come hell or high water, then you probably won't find it possible to move forward. But if you try to move forward without attending to the pain and the hurt of the injustice and the trauma of the past, your move forward will probably be illusory, and you will carry some of that difficulty into the future and into your relationships as an individual or as a community." Forgiveness then comes into play.

In South Africa, leaders sought to attend to the hurt of injustice and the trauma of the past through formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as noted below.

Case Example: South Africa

In 1993, Amy Biehl

(<http://ctb.ku.edu><http://www.amybiehl.org/>), an American student working in South Africa against apartheid, was stabbed to death in a black township near Cape Town. In 1998, the four young men convicted of her murder were granted amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) after serving five years of their sentence – a decision supported by Amy’s parents

(<http://ctb.ku.edu><http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/linda-biehl-easy-nofemela-south-africa/>).

Easy Nofemela, one of the convicted men, demonstrates just how

important trust is in the peace process, and that it can’t be established unless individuals and communities find ways of repairing and rebuilding relationships with each other. “Not until I met Linda and Peter Biehl did I understand that white people are human beings too... The first time I saw them on TV I hated them. I thought this was the strategy of the whites, to come to South Africa to call for capital punishment. But they didn’t even mention wanting to hang us. I was very confused. They seemed to understand that the youth of the townships had carried this crisis, this fight for liberation, on their shoulders.”

Photography by Brian Moody.



HOW CAN ONE DEVELOP AND PROMOTE FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION IN COMMUNITY BUILDING?

- By engaging in the process of forgiveness (individual level)
 - Self-forgiveness
 - Common stages in the engagement process
 - Developing forgiveness on an individual level
- By engaging in the reconciliation process (community level)
 - Promoting forgiveness on community level
 - Ways to build and rebuild relationships
 - Cultivating dialogue
 - Starting grassroots initiatives
 - Utilizing the healing power of sharing stories
 - Developing victim – offender programs

“Forgiveness is neither just a therapeutic technique nor simply self-regarding in its motivation. It is fundamentally a moral relation between self and other.”

– Charles Griswold

Engaging in the Process of Forgiveness

Self-forgiveness

Experiencing forgiveness either towards self or others can have a constructive, life-altering effect as part of the process of healing personal pain and trauma as well as building more peaceful communities.

But much of what has been said about forgiving others also applies to forgiving yourself. That can play an important part in the positive transformation of perpetrators’ attitudes and in the process of their preparation for re-entering society as free individuals. In this context, self-forgiveness may facilitate the perpetrator’s ability and willingness to start anew and be open to becoming a non-violent and productive member of society.

Just as with forgiving others, self-forgiveness can be a complex and at times challenging process, where one needs to address various aspects of one’s personality, mindset, and behavior to move forward. While there is no set order of actions to take, one may start with putting an end to self-punishment. This involves letting go of your self-hatred and self-pity. As with forgiving others, self-forgiveness is not about forgetting about the past or excusing bad behavior. It is about taking responsibility, healing, and changing.

It is also worth noting that self-forgiveness is different from forgiving someone else in one important way, in that it must be about reconciliation. When you forgive another, reconciliation is a choice; but an important part of forgiving yourself is to integrate your previously unacceptable characteristics so that you can accept all of who you are without self-sabotaging, which can lead to self-abuse or any type of addiction.

Luskin (2002) makes a helpful distinction by breaking self-forgiveness into four main categories:

- Failing at one of life’s important tasks – graduating from college, getting married, having

children, etc.

- Not taking action to help yourself or someone else
- Hurting others
- Self-destructive acts

These categories can overlap; for instance, you could be upset with yourself for your alcohol abuse *and* the impact it has on your spouse. Self-forgiveness can also be an aspect of interpersonal forgiveness. While you can be angry and upset with someone else for hurting you, you can also be angry and upset with yourself for the part you may have played.

Learning to forgive yourself gives you the freedom to heal, let go, and move on. It is a tool that allows you to become more self-aware. Moreover, some believe that you cannot forgive another until you have learned self-compassion and self-forgiveness. In this sense, forgiveness is a movement of compassion; and learning to forgive yourself is an important step in learning to become a forgiving person.

Common Stages in the Engagement Process

When aggression leads to injury, pain, and shock, people may go through different phases to deal with their hurt. The following stages may apply to the experience, thought processes, and actions of individual victims or perpetrators as well as whole groups:

Fear, anger, and revenge may maintain the cycle of violence, through

- Realization of loss
- Denial, and suppression of grief and fear
- Anger: Why me?
- Desire for justice and revenge
- Telling and retelling the “right” conflict story, leading to acts of “justified” aggression

While forgiveness may lead to breaking the cycle of violence, through

- Mourning and expressing grief
- Accepting loss and confronting fear
- Re-humanizing the enemy: Why them?
- Moving beyond tolerance
- Choosing to forgive, committing to taking risks
- Rewriting history, negotiating solutions
- Repairing your life, establishing justice that restores, leading to movement towards reconciliation

Developing Forgiveness on an Individual Level

While everyone’s process is unique, and there are no fixed steps one has to take in order to forgive, real-life stories collected by The Forgiveness Project – a secular charity based in the United Kingdom – demonstrate that there are some key attributes to being a forgiving person and

some key components to going on a forgiveness journey. Highlights and lessons from many of these stories are presented below.

However, it is important to keep in mind that not everyone experiences all of these components, nor necessarily in the same order. Forgiveness is not a fixed process and it may have no completion. Triggers throughout life might throw one off course again; therefore it is probably more helpful to think of forgiveness as a direction, rather than a destination.

Some key components to a forgiveness journey

These may include:

- **Feeling rage:** The anger and rage elements of loss must be expressed. Anger naturally arises after being hurt and often needs to be integrated, not rooted out like some bacterial illness. Denial or suppressing anger is a survival strategy that helps some people cope for a while. However, being in denial for too long is unhealthy, as the underlying emotions evoked by a past event may become self-consuming as well as hinder one from moving beyond the initial pain.

Case Example: United States

Brenda Adelman's mother, an award-winning artist and photographer, was shot and killed in her home in Brooklyn, New York, in 1995 (<http://ctb.ku.edu/http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/brenda-adelman-usa/>). Brenda's father pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter, and served two and half years in prison. Brenda's work today focuses on helping people transform pain into healing narratives.

"The missing step was embracing my anger in a healthy way

(<http://ctb.ku.edu/https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anger>). I still felt a deep level of anger at myself for ever trusting my father, demonstrated by my over-eating. I had so much self-judgment, and you can't really forgive someone else unless you've forgiven yourself. It was while taking a course in spiritual psychology that I recognized how with each negative thought directed at my father I was re-wounding myself."

- **Grieving deeply:** Through the process of accepting loss and feeling the full force of grief and pain, survivors in time may learn to (1) separate themselves from the events that have happened to them, and (2) integrate these events into their lives, so that the pain of the past becomes a part of who they are without consuming them.

Case Example: England

Camilla Carr, who was taken hostage in Chechnya in 1997 (<http://ctb.ku.edu/http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/camilla-carr-jon-james-england/>), held captive for 14 months, and repeatedly raped, says: "First you have to deal with anger, then with tears, and only once you reach the tears are you on the road to finding peace of mind."

- **Facing fear:** It can be a lonely and isolating journey to forgive, especially when family or close friends show reluctance towards the idea of embracing forgiveness, e.g., in the case of a violent crime. Forgiveness takes courage, the willingness to explore the unknown, and resilience that enables one to follow what feels personally right.

Case Example: England

Shad Ali is a British Pakistani who has lived and worked in Nottingham all his life

(<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/shad-ali-england/>) . In July 2008, he was violently attacked when he came to the rescue of two Pakistani women who were being racially abused by a passing pedestrian.

“I received a huge amount of criticism and confusion from friends and family who didn’t understand why I wanted to forgive – especially from my wife who initially felt nothing but hatred towards this man. In spite of this, forgiving has really helped me move forward after the attack. It has been about me, and has nothing to do with the man who attacked me.”

- **Developing self-awareness:** Understanding yourself opens up a space for understanding others. This involves giving up the expectation that life owes you something, and instead adopting a broader perspective (the realizations that life is morally complicated, that good people do bad things, and that bad things happen to good people). Such a perspective is crucial, because it allows people to have fewer black-and-white expectations of how life and others will treat them. This way of thinking says: “I can’t predict what life will hand me, but I’m going to respond to it in a way that doesn’t perpetuate the cycle of hate.”

Case Example: United States

In 2005, Matthew Boger and Tim Zaal had a life-changing conversation. Both were working at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles when they realized they had met 26 years earlier, when a group of teen-aged Nazi punks attacked and beat a gay homeless 14-year-old boy. Matthew Boger was that young boy and Tim Zaal, at age 17, was a member of the group who left Matthew for dead in a West Hollywood alley.

Matthew: “I also experienced a grieving process when I forgave, because I had so identified with the events that took place when I was 14. By letting that part of me go, I mourned the person I’d known for so long. But that’s also a very beautiful thing, because what got replaced was a person who was more tolerant, more open-hearted, and a lot stronger.”

- **Developing empathy:** One of the turning points in the process is when the question “why me?” becomes “why them?” Forgiveness in this sense is not something that is done, but something that is discovered. And for the victim/survivor, the relevant discovery is the understanding that the offender is “human like myself.”

Case Example: England

Marian Partington's younger sister, Lucy, had been a victim of serial killers Fred and Rosemary West (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/marian-partington-england/>) . "I heard [Rosemary's] voice on tape, shouting, swearing and full of rage, and I began to have some insight into her mind. I later discovered she'd been sexually abused by her brother, then abducted from a bus stop and raped at age 17...Her story seems to be about the impoverishment of a soul that knew no other way to live than through terrible cruelty...Since then my work has been about connecting with Rosemary West's humanity and refusing to go down the far easier and more predictable path of demonizing her."

According to Marina Cantacuzino, founder of The Forgiveness Project – who has collected over 140 real-life stories of forgiveness – it seems that people are able to forgive heinous crimes because ultimately they are able to muster what Stephen Cherry refers to, in *Healing Agony: Reimagining Forgiveness*, "distasteful empathy." It is distasteful because in order to empathize with the cruel and heartless, one has to imagine being cruel and heartless oneself.

Case Example: United States

In 1999, Samantha Lawler's father killed her mother (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/samantha-lawler-usa/>) . Samantha, at just 18, lost both parents in one fatal blow. Thirteen years later, for the first time since the murder, Samantha visited her dying father in prison. She discovered that forgiveness was "not about forgiving the act, but forgiving the imperfections which are inherent in all of us."

- **Recognition:** This seems to be the crux of forgiveness: recognizing that we are all somehow implicated, that we all have responsibility for the society we have helped create, with its bandits, thugs, killers, and saints.

Case Example: South Africa

In 1993 Ginn Fourie's daughter, Lyndi, was killed in the Heidelberg Tavern Massacre in Cape Town (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/ginn-fourie-letlapa-mphahlele-south-africa/>) . In 2002 Letlapa Mphahlele, the man who master-minded the attack, invited Ginn to his homecoming ceremony and asked her to make a speech. "It was here that I was able to apologize to his people for the shame and humiliation which my ancestors had brought on them through slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. Vulnerable feelings, when expressed to other people, have the potential to establish lasting bonds."

- **Remorse:** For some people, remorse is an essential ingredient to forgiving. For others, it chains the victim to the perpetrator, waiting for something the victim may never receive;

therefore it may maintain the power imbalance between perpetrator and victim. But remorse for a wrongdoing can play an important part in healing the victim's past wounds.

Case Example: Rwanda

Former enemies can more easily live as neighbors and help to rebuild communities if remorse is shown, as in the case of Ngirente Philippe (a Tutsi) whose father was slaughtered by Uzabakiriho Teresphore (a Hutu) (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/philippe-ngirente-teresphore-uzabakiriho-rwanda/>). Both men now live as neighbors in Rwanda.

Philippe says of Teresphore, whom he first encountered at a gacaca (community) court: "Four months later he came to my house. He brought food and banana wine. Again he started crying and repeatedly saying how sorry he was. Eventually I escorted him home. Then my wife and I embarked on the path of true reconciliation. We wanted to do more than just forgive, but to actually live as neighbors and friends, side by side. We wanted to improve society, to respond to evil with goodness. So now his mother also comes to my home, and we share meals."

- **Acknowledgment:** Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, author of the award-winning *A Human Being Died that Night* and a senior research professor in trauma, memory, and forgiveness at the University of the Free State (in South Africa), has come to believe that apology and acknowledgment are of the utmost importance when dealing with historical memory. This is because, as she said at a conference in South Africa in 2014: "When people are wounded they feel as if they have been dehumanized...The recognition of the pain of the other is an evocation of empathy."

While punitive justice can be problematic because it relies on a "just" authority that can restore the balance, restorative justice places the emphasis on acknowledgment and accountability, which have been shown to enable those who have been harmed to move on. Acknowledging guilt is hard, because people are uncomfortable with their own shame, and afraid to recognize that they are to blame. "But unless you feel the shame, you can't feel remorse," contends Gobodo-Madikizela (2004).

Forgiving people, however, also recognize that some wrong-doers are simply unable to face their own shame and therefore cannot take responsibility. In other words, if you wait for remorse and apology to happen, you may wait forever.

Case Example: England

Anne, a victim of sexual abuse, has forgiven the man who repeatedly abused her during her childhood. She doesn't believe that forgiveness requires remorse or apology (in other words, that it should be a contractual relationship between two people) because, as she says: "If I'm still waiting for my abuser to show remorse, then I'm still in his power and he's still in control of my feelings. For me, it's about a choice to be in the world, relating to the world in a particular way that is not perpetuating the hurt and damage that caused that particular act of violence towards me all the years ago."

Forgiveness requires acknowledging the pain of the "other," i.e. the person who caused you pain or harm, but not necessarily accepting injustice. This is what Rami Elhanan, whose daughter was killed by a suicide bomber in a Jerusalem market in 1997, means when he says: "We don't have any expectations of our politicians; we need to work from below to change this endless cycle of violence."

Case Example: Palestine and Israel

Rami is a former officer in the Israeli Defense Force, and member of the Parents' Circle - Families Forum, a group of bereaved Palestinians and Israelis who have lost family members in the conflict and now campaign for peace. Frequently Rami gives public talks alongside his Palestinian friends, such as Bassam Aramin, whose 10-year-old daughter, Abir, was killed by an Israeli soldier in 2007 (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/bassam-aramin-palestine/>).

Where does forgiveness fit into this difficult dialogue between two bereaved fathers, or two communities at war? How can you forgive when the power imbalance is so vast and when justice is so far from being achieved?

Rami and Bassam's message is simple: The only real way of affecting change is through heart-to-heart discussion, one person at a time. For Rami, forgiveness is not the solution, but part of a quest to understand what makes a young man so angry that he chooses to blow himself up alongside a group of 14-year-old girls.

- **Managing expectations:** Crucial to forgiving is not being attached to an outcome and not making assumptions. People tend to expect others to react like them; they compare their responses to how they would respond; they blame people for not doing what they think they should.

Case Example: Sheila

“A long time ago, before I found lasting happiness with my husband, I fell in love with Jack. The feeling was mutual. It was powerful and passionate and we described each other as soul mates. This was going to be the defining relationship of my life. However, just six months later Jack started to behave differently. Sensing something was wrong, I confronted him and he confessed he had strong feelings for someone else. Our relationship quickly and painfully unravelled. I was stunned, angry, and very upset. I thought of all the special things that Jack had said to me and wondered how his feelings could just have evaporated into thin air.

“During the ensuing months I held onto my anger like a prized possession, nurturing it until it defined who I was, and the story I told. I felt humiliated, betrayed, and profoundly hurt. However, at some stage, I must also have realized that while this hurt was defining who I was right then and there, I didn’t want it to define who I would become. I didn’t want to carry my hurt into future relationships.

“And so something shifted. I changed my lens and gained a new perspective. I came to understand that people have a right to change their minds, and that just because someone says they love you one day, doesn’t guarantee that this statement will hold true for the next. I have come to believe therefore that people don’t owe me anything, and just because they are capable of hurting me doesn’t make them into bad people: It might simply mean that my needs are greater than theirs.”

Comparing Sheila’s story – a relatively small example of harm – with all the many forgiving people who have struggled with great traumas, it seems that they too have been able to let go of an expectation that the world owes them. In other words, they don’t assume that they’ll be safe, their house won’t be burgled, they won’t get mugged, or their child won’t get killed. They have understood life’s moral complexities, that what happens to you is not always correlated with your personality, character, or behavior. The question then becomes not “why me?” but “why not me?”

- **Meaning making:** This component is defined as “making sense out of” and “finding significance and benefit in” what happened. It isn’t about making sense out of horror, but rather about “the intense pursuit of what matters.” In other words, when survivors pursue what matters to them they find meaning in their life again, and start acting in congruence with what they now feel is important. The by-product of this intense pursuit of meaning is that people are able to adapt to circumstances and start to develop new coping skills and new ways of belonging to society.

Case Example: United States

In 2004, Cathy Harrington's 26-year-old daughter, Leslie, was murdered in a brutal attack in her own home (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/cathy-harrington-usa/>). “During those early years of trying to make sense of such unspeakable horror, I spent a lot of time living among the poor doing street retreats and visiting the dispossessed in Nicaragua. I found comfort there. If there was a place I could find grace, it was in the streets.”

Based on the above-mentioned key components, forgiveness can be difficult to bring about, and may require a series of challenging intellectual and emotional stages for those involved to go through.

Conditions under which forgiveness is most likely to occur

- People must have an opportunity to express their grief and rage (in small group work, restorative circles, community courts, etc.).
- People must be able to hear the other's story (as in restorative justice initiatives).
- People must be prepared to give something up – e.g., firmly held views, assumptions, or expectations. This is something that can only be encouraged and can only come about through exposure to those with whom you were formerly in conflict.
- People must be prepared to see the others as human, like themselves.
- People must develop the ability to put meaning back into their lives and therefore bring about identity reconstruction. Engagement in such meaning-making activities rebuilds a self-identity.

To conclude our discussion of forgiveness at an individual level, the following story of the over 140 collected and shared by The Forgiveness Project sums up the complex, untidy, and often intangible journey of forgiveness:

Case Example: Canada

Wilma Derksen, whose 13-year-old daughter Candace was murdered in Canada in 1984 (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/wilma-derksen-canada/>), describes how her decision to forgive didn't necessarily mean everything was suddenly better. She says: “Little did I know that the word ‘forgiveness’ would haunt me for the next 30 years – prod me, guide me, heal me, label me, enlighten me, imprison me, free me, and in the end define me.” She concludes: “Forgiveness is not just a one-off event, nor does it mean you're doing the same thing again and again. The issues of Candace's murder present themselves differently every day. Forgiveness is a fresh, on-going, ever-present position of the mind, which takes on many different forms. It's a promise of what we want to do, a goal, a North Star, a mantra.”

Whether it is pursued due to an inner voice, family traditions, or religious teachings, forgiveness is a powerful tool in transforming people's lives for the better. As the Michigan-based Fetzer Institute's Campaign for Love and Forgiveness has put it, "individual transformation can lead to societal change." While forgiveness is first and foremost a personal journey of discovery (see examples above), it also has the potential to induce positive change in entire communities. This will be discussed under the Engaging in the Reconciliation Process heading, just below.

Engaging in the Reconciliation Process

Developing Forgiveness on a Community Level

Forgiveness is often portrayed as a deeply individual process with personal healing as its prime goal (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://loveandforgive.org/images/stories/pdf/forgiveness_participant.pdf). But individual traumas are often part of a larger societal trauma, and therefore larger change can often come about from healing and forgiveness at both individual and societal levels.

In the Fetzer Institute's (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://loveandforgive.org/resources>) short documentary *Being with the Energy of Love and Forgiveness*, Dr. Mark Umbreit, founding director of the Center for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking at the University of Minnesota, explains his work in restorative justice. The film represents one of the most useful and comprehensive insights available into the practical application of forgiveness and reconciliation at a community level.

Describing the impact of healing circles, victim-offender dialogue, and community conferencing, Umbreit concludes that "respect," "openness," and "compassion" are the underlying components of engagement. "I literally feel and sense what I would call the authentic energy of forgiveness there; more than I do in institutions that talk about it a lot or preach it or push it," he says.

For Umbreit, "Restorative dialogue is one of many pathways to a deeper experience of forgiveness. It's about creating a safe space to go deep within your heart, to feel vulnerability, to be open to others' pain, to recognize their humanity at the deepest level. When you humanize your adversary it's harder to hold on to hate, it's harder to kill."

The film also shows interviews with members of the Native American Somali Friendship Committee in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis. This initiative grew out of conflict arising when thousands of Somali refugees settled in the Twin Cities in the early nineties.

The Native American Somali Friendship Committee was formed when Wade Keezer, an Ojibwe leader and organizer, called the Native American and Somali communities to address the growing tension. The result was the beginning of a cross-cultural dialogue intended to promote peaceful community building. Peacemaking in this context was a process based on traditional methods of dispute resolution, which is a cornerstone of Native American culture and addresses the need to rebuild relationships between people.

The first meeting between the two communities took place on Martin Luther King Day in 2010. At first, only negative feelings were aired as people were able to safely express their pain and fear; but in time and through sharing stories, food and other cultural activities, the two communities

discovered they had more similarities than differences.

This peacebuilding initiative worked because both communities were able to look at each other in the eye, find respect, and build a relationship with greater understanding. Umbreit concludes this was not “little common conversations...but real restorative dialogue,” as people spent hours together, listening to each other’s pain and trauma. In this way, both communities were able to hear each other’s stories, forgive, move forward, and build a safer neighbourhood.

Moving beyond small, local communities, forgiveness in large-scale peace-building processes that involve two or more opposing social, ethnic, or religious groups can affect the future of a country. It did so in South Africa, where politicians and civic leaders urged large groups of people to forgive other groups with whom they had previously been locked in conflict. While forgiveness was never obligatory in South Africa, its value was upheld within the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (<http://ctb.ku.edu><http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/>), chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In addition, several public figures spoke out in favor of forgiveness, thus modeling a way forward for the communities they represented.

Nelson Mandela, by publicly forgiving those who had wronged him, became a global symbol for forgiveness, compassion, and peace-building. “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.”

Case Example: South Africa

Albie Sachs – the anti-apartheid campaigner who lost an arm and was partially blinded in a car bomb in 1988 – has spoken about ubuntu, the spirit of reconciliation that allowed a nation not to resort to bloody recriminations post-apartheid.

“We called the peaceful transition in South Africa from the vicious system of apartheid to a constitutional democracy a miracle.... It became possible because millions and millions of African people, despite their hardship, or perhaps because of their hardship, had never lost the deep traditional spirit of ubuntu, a shared sense of humanity: I am a person because you are a person; my humanity can’t be separated from a recognition of your humanity.

“Because of ubuntu and the Truth Commission, I was able to meet the soldier who had organized the placing of a bomb in my car that cost me my right arm and the sight of an eye. It was a moving encounter, from which we both emerged better human beings. The key to the encounter was that our country had changed. Ubuntu, the spirit of reconciliation, requires dealing with the causes of the conflict. But it can help overcome those causes, and be liberating to the individuals involved in a very personal way.”

Ways to Build and Rebuild Relationships

In a similar matter, reconciliation must involve actively rebuilding relationships by creating opportunities for people to engage with each other through spaces, activities, and enterprises. In order to build or rebuild relationships, there must be platforms on which to develop understanding between groups and communities.

Cultivating dialogue: Enabling people to embrace tensions in the process of reconciliation and dialogue is the starting point. Dialogue can take place in many settings, such as a national dialogue or within communities across divisions of race, religion, or gender. Dialogue can be practiced in community halls, schools, prisons, and corporate institutions. However, dialogue by itself can be a fairly shallow gesture. To be effective, it has to include:

- Genuine exploration of self and the “other”
- Addressing the roots of conflict
- Building closer bonds between individuals and groups
- Promoting systemic and structural change

Starting grassroots initiatives: Reconciliation often builds on grassroots initiatives, such as theatre, music, and sport, so that barriers between people can be addressed and broken down. Other examples might include initiatives such as workshops that promote psychological healing, perhaps offering safe spaces for narrative sharing and storytelling; or social projects that bring together individuals from diverse groups and communities. By so working to effect social change, people also learn to respect each other and to coexist peacefully.

An important element of the reconciliation process is the restoration of broken relationships, which may be addressed in various ways. While some of these will be discussed in detail under the “Developing Victim-Offender Programs” heading, it is worth mentioning here the contributions of Howard Zehr, who is widely known as the grandfather of restorative justice. He describes his work as being about “changing lenses,” and sums up some of the different approaches as follows:

“Some advocate the use of restorative approaches such as ‘circles’ (an approach that emerged from the First Nation/aboriginal communities in Canada) as a way to work through, resolve, and transform conflicts in general. Others pursue circles or ‘conferences’ (an effort with roots both in New Zealand and Australia and in facilitated victim-offender meetings) as a way to build and heal communities.” (Zehr, 2002).

Utilizing the healing power of sharing stories: Stories of hope in hopeless times can change lives. A constructive strategy that may help one break out of an endless cycle of violence is to develop the ability to listen to the pain of the other (the so-called “enemy”), because if people focus only on their own pain and trauma this locks them into a sense of despair.

The Forgiveness Project collects and shares real stories of forgiveness in order to create opportunities for people to consider, examine, and choose forgiveness in the face of atrocity. Its work in restorative storytelling demonstrates that personal narratives can broaden perspectives and bring healing to those impacted — whether victim or perpetrator — as well as motivate others regarding future life choices.

Research has shown that storytelling is a powerful tool for which humans are hard-wired. Storytelling enables individuals and groups to form connections and collaboration at the same time as they overcome differences and defenses. The spiritual teacher Anthony Mello has said: "The deepest truth is found by means of a simple story." And as the German-born political theorist Hannah Arendt has noted: "Storytelling is the bridge by which we transform that which is private and individual into that which is public" (Arendt 1958). Some other examples follow.

Some Story-Sharing Examples

- In the 11 years since it was founded, The Forgiveness Project has gained a reputation for using narrative and storytelling techniques as a way to reach across the rifts not only of race, faith, and geography, but also the rifts of enemies. Presenting, producing, and examining real stories of transformation is The Forgiveness Project's key tool for change. The project does this through "The F Word" travelling exhibition (a thought-provoking collection of arresting images and personal narratives), through filmed interviews, through written stories on its website accessed by the public as an open resource, through a restorative justice program in U.K. prisons where facilitators are victims and ex-offenders share their redemptive narratives, and through real lived experiences from a Speakers Bureau at events, lectures, workshops, and seminars. The stories have also appeared in a book, *The Forgiveness Project: Stories for a Vengeful Age*, by the organization's founder, Marina Cantacuzino.
- Another storytelling initiative including forgiveness and narratives is "The F-You Project (<http://ctb.ku.edu><http://theyouproject.com/home>),” an acclaimed youth-led nonprofit organization and movement in Toronto, Ontario, which utilizes arts and self-expression to empower youth to find strength to overcome some of the most intractable circumstances. This organization provides first-hand experiences in forgiveness within the context of violence. It focuses on organizing public events, featuring speakers who have evolved from victim to survivor in the face of their own internal adversities. This is a good example of the community working together to erase negativity and inspire healing.
- Compelling examples also come from Rwanda. In that country, alongside the stories of murder and carnage, when neighbors killed neighbors, teachers killed students, and armed gangs across the country at one point reached a killing rate of seven people per minute, it is important to hear stories of people who acted with kindness, empathy, and self-sacrifice.

Case Example: Rwanda

At the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda there is the story of Nsengiyumra, a Muslim who during the genocide is said to have saved over 30 people by protecting or hiding them in his outhouse (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://ghfp.info/Portals/1/publications/GHFP%20Seminar%20on%20Healing%20Forgiveness%20and%20Reconciliation_Notes_VF.pdf) . A survivor's testimony reads: "The interahamwe (Hutu paramilitary organization) killer was chasing me down the alley. I was going to die any second. I banged on the door of the yard. It opened almost immediately. He (Nsengiyumra) took me by the hand and stood in his doorway and told the killer to leave. He said that the Koran says: 'If you save one life, it is like saving the whole world.'"

- Some other examples of those who are using their stories to support divided communities are Jo Berry, with "Building Bridges for Peace" (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.buildingbridgesforpeace.org/>), Rami Elhanan (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/ghazi-briegeith-rami-elhanan-israel/>), through the "The Parents' Circle" (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.theparentscircle.com/>), and Alistair Little, who started the organization "Beyond Walls" (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://beyondwalls.co.uk/>). These examples show that any community can start collecting stories as a way of listening to the pain of the "other" in order to build empathy and understanding.

Developing victim –offender programs:

The RESTORE Prison Program

For eight years The Forgiveness Project has run RESTORE (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/programmes/restore/>), a group-based restorative justice (RJ) intervention program in England to enable prisoners to turn their lives around and give them the tools to re-enter society as active and responsible citizens.

Restorative justice views crime as injury rather than law-breaking, and justice as healing rather than punishment. Forgiveness should never be a condition of RJ, but is frequently an outcome, simply because when two people or two groups come to hear the story of the "other," fixed perspectives start to shift.

This restorative justice process demonstrates how individual transformation can lead to societal change. As participants learn about different aspects of forgiveness and reconciliation, and practice them in their own lives, there is a ripple effect into communities.

How does the RESTORE process work?

1. **Creating a safe space** for reflection, and creating conditions conducive to questioning and changing attitudes (e.g., discussing how society works, how humanity works, how forgiveness works, how revenge works, and how the psyche of a victim or a perpetrator work).
2. **Storytelling** is at the heart of RESTORE (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://womensenews.org/2006/01/programs-batterers-changing-their-focus/>); it is considered a powerful tool in developing empathy, creating community, and constructing/reconstructing identity.
3. **Empathy-building** is developed through shared dramatic experience of traumatic and

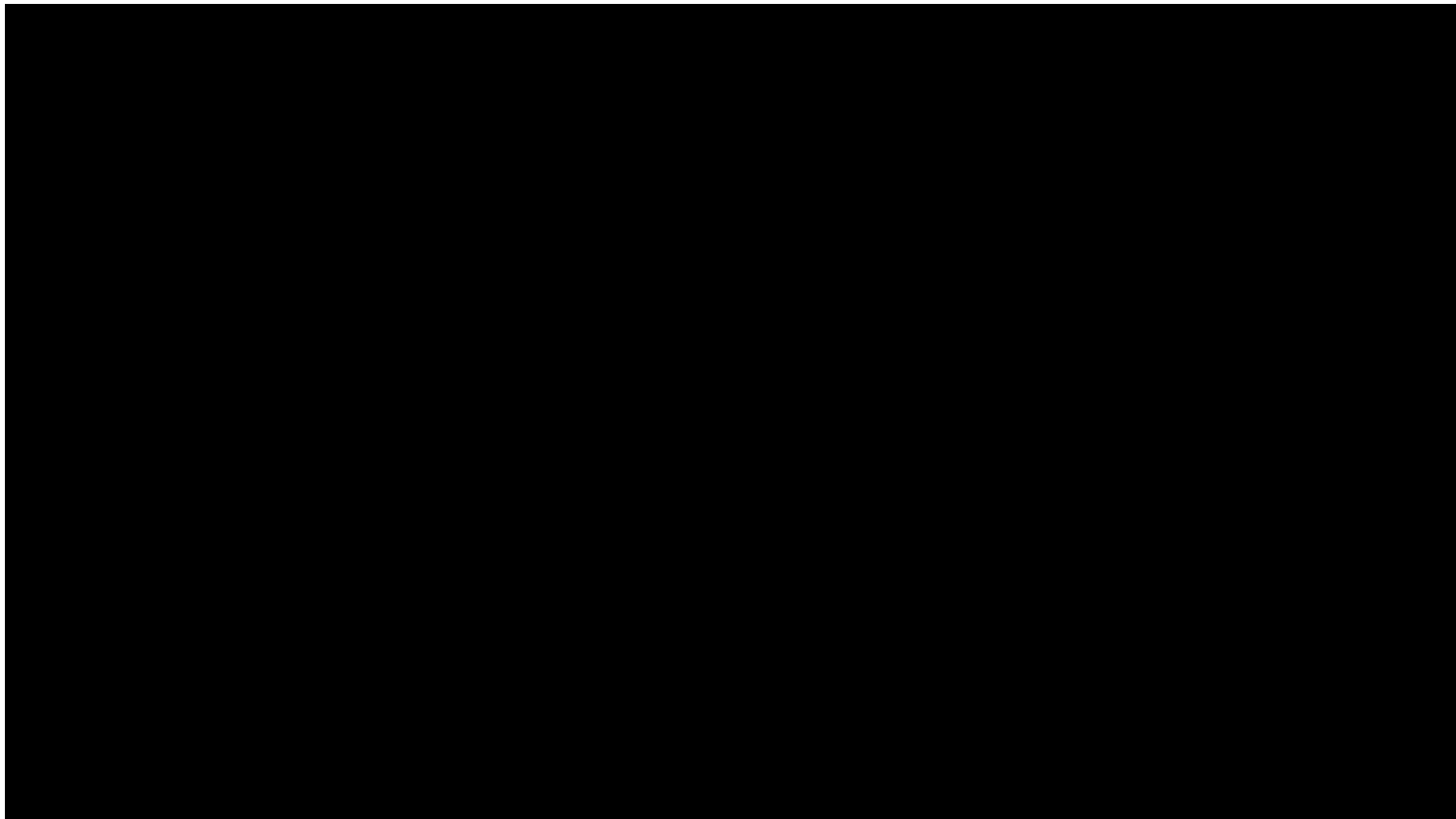
authentic stories, in an atmosphere of non-judgmental sharing and humanity

(<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/john-carter-england/>), using positive psychological principles and values modelled by facilitators.

4. **Transformative change** means that one's perspective or worldview goes through a significant transformation. Through this change, one arrives at appreciating, seeking, and attaining "forgiveness." This type of attitude transformation is considered a "humanizing process" that requires a psychological and conceptual shift. That is, one is required to move away from being emotionally and mentally detached and to become mindful and critically reflective. In the process, one abandons the perception of being a "victim" in favor of actively reassessing oneself as "offender" and acknowledging the "ripple effect" of one's own behavior.
5. **Different choices and intentions are catalyzed** through RESTORE's focusing on the positive potential of offenders' future life paths (e.g., participants are encouraged in deciding to follow – and to believe they are capable of following – inspirational examples, to reconcile and restore damaged relationships, and to break cycles of violence and damage).

RESTORE is one example of how the process of forgiveness may unfold and be successfully employed in a given context. The overall impact of this restorative program can lead to reduced offending behavior both in prison and beyond release; it has been shown to result in fewer victims and offenders amongst participants, their families, and the communities they live in.

The Fambul Tok Model



A different model is Fambul Tok (Krio for "Family Talk") (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.fambultok.com/>), which emerged in Sierra Leone as a face-to-face community-owned program bringing together perpetrators and victims of the violence in Sierra Leone's 11-year civil war (1991–2002). In these communities, naming and shaming is considered justice, and while forgiveness is imperative, it is not granted

without remorse. Fambul Tok has proved to be a more effective and much cheaper way of providing justice and facilitating reconciliation than the international community's £300 million worth of international trials for perpetrators of civil war in Sierra Leone.

This community-healing process of reconciliation and forgiveness addresses the roots of conflict at the local level, and restores dignity to the lives of those who suffered most directly from violence. The work helps war-affected individuals reflect on the past and move forward in ways that avert the renewal of aggressions. By grounding reconciliation in traditional practices, it also helps create healthy communities capable of building new foundations of peace.

How does the Fambul Tok process work? (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.fambultok.com/about/synopsis>)

1. **Consultations.** Community-led reconciliation begins with consulting the individuals and communities who will make and sustain peace.
2. **Implementation.** Fambul Tok pilots each new phase of the community-owned reconciliation process and incorporates the lessons learned from the pilot as the program expands.
3. **Training.** Fambul Tok empowers community stakeholders through customized, targeted training in reconciliation, conflict mediation, and trauma healing.
4. **Reconciliation Ceremony.** The reconciliation ceremony is at the heart of Fambul Tok's approach to community-owned and led peace-building efforts. Drawing on the tradition of truth telling around a bonfire, communities host a bonfire in the evening, where victims and perpetrators have an opportunity to come forward for the first time to tell their stories, apologize, and ask for or offer forgiveness. The communities then sing and dance in celebration of this open acknowledgement of and resolution to what happened in the war. The next day, the communities hold cleansing ceremonies that draw on traditional cleansing practices as well as traditions of communicating with the ancestors and pouring libations. These cleansing ceremonies culminate in a communal feast.
5. **Follow-up Activities:** From football (soccer) to community farms, the follow-up activities of Fambul Tok strengthen community and help sustain the peace achieved through consultation and reconciliation ceremonies.

Participants' Comments on Fambul Tok:

Hawa Koroma, Moyamba town: “Most of us do not have the opportunity to face the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] to tell people what happened to us. With Fambul Tok, we can now share our stories and have the opportunity to forgive and reconcile.”

Sahr Ngaoja, Lei chiefdom, Kono district: “I have no regret for moving from such a far distance to listen to Fambul Tok. After the war, plenty of people are afraid to return to their homes for fear of revenge. Now that Fambul Tok is creating the platform for victims, witnesses, and perpetrators to mediate reconciliation for peaceful co-existence, we have no alternative but to welcome Fambul Tok. I am sure community reconciliation will help us fight poverty.”

Hawah Wurie, Bunumbu, Kailahun district: “Most of our brothers and sisters played an active role during the war. Some of them amputated hands, some of them slaughtered women, some split women open to see what baby was in their stomach; but at the ceremony most of them came forward and confessed and asked for forgiveness and we have forgiven them. We have encouraged them, embraced them, we do things together. Even myself, my elder sister was killed during this war. Those that killed her, I knew who they were, but when they confessed, I forgave them.”

SOME CHALLENGES AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

To practice forgiveness and reconciliation in daily life comes with its own challenges, and prompts a number of reflection questions. As one example, there is a popular notion that if you do not forgive you will be depleted in some way, tied to the past, holding on to grudges, filled with negative and even violent thoughts. This sentiment is found in much literature (blogs, articles, books, and motivational quotes) and creates a perception that forgiveness must be the panacea for all ills, a key to serenity, and the route to enlightenment. But it glosses over the fact that forgiveness is a slippery and complex concept, meaning many things to many people.

The above assumptions not only ignore the real pain many people suffer, but shame those who chose not to forgive. In a BBC1 TV program in 2011 “What is the Point in Forgiveness?”, the U.K.’s then-Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, warned against forgiving too easily

(<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1375952/We-forgive-easily-says-Archbishop-Canterbury.html>) . He told the Radio Times: “I think the 20th century saw such a level of atrocity that it has focused our minds very, very hard on the dangers of forgiving too easily” (Thomas, 2011). The point he went on to make very strongly was that if forgiveness is easy, it is as if the suffering doesn’t really matter.

Some other challenges in the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation follow.

Challenges

- **Letting go: Forgiveness** (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttps://www.hastac.org/opportunities/forgiveness-and-reconciliation-probing-boundaries-forgiveness-project>) requires a deliberate — or as Gandhi put it, “strong” — letting go of negative emotions

toward the offender.

- **Assuming that forgiveness means reconciliation:** People can mistake forgiveness for reconciliation. Sometimes it is best to do as Desmond Tutu advises: release the relationship (and forgive!) rather than renew it.
- **Accountability:** Another challenge is how forgiveness is promoted. There is a real danger in politicizing forgiveness, since the rhetoric of forgiveness can prevent politicians being held accountable, as in the above-mentioned case of Burundi. It has also been suggested that in transitional justice (which can be defined as a society's attempt to come to terms with legacies of massive human rights abuses) perceived pressure to forgive and the repression of anger or resentment may be psychologically harmful and reinforce structures of inequality. Similarly victims of child sex abuse within the church have sometimes complained that members of the clergy urged them to forgive rather than pursue justice.

Case Example: England

Susan says, “My crisis began when my daughter approached her eighth birthday, and the horror of what happened to me finally dawned. I sought help through Christian literature, but it just told lovely stories about reconciliation. Trusted Christian friends offered well-meaning advice, and in one case an exorcism. The focus was on praying for my abuser’s redemption. It is not hard to see how in this context, forgiveness can allow abuse to thrive.”

- **Creating the right climate:** A paradox of forgiveness is that in a restorative justice setting the more you talk about forgiveness or encourage it, the less safe people may feel. Moreover, pushing forgiveness may make people feel pressured, hence trigger direct resistance from them. Forgiveness is not a magic bullet; it can re-traumatize.
- **No set formula:** Since forgiveness may have relevance in a great variety of social, cultural, and racial settings, it is important that forgiveness be approached according to the given context and not applied as a one-size-fits-all solution.
- **Provision of resources:** The greatest challenge to any successful reconciliation process, whether in building bridges between warring communities on a national level, or seeking to rehabilitate violent individuals into the community, is the provision of financial resources to allow these processes to be sustained and developed.
- **Sustaining dialogue:** The challenge to any society is to develop sustained dialogue and reconciliation processes, so that our differences will never serve as the source of division, conflict, and violence.

Reflection Questions

Many of the questions below are thought-provoking and challenging. What are your own answers to them?

- How can forgiveness (a word too often seen as a weakness and associated with excusing and condoning) be used in the everyday world to develop and sustain community-building

and peace?

- Can we forgive an ongoing evil? Or, can forgiveness be granted to those who have committed terrorist acts? By whom? Upon whose authority?
- Can one forgive in the absence of apology or remorse?
- Can true reconciliation be accomplished? On whose terms?
- Can there be reconciliation following mass murder? Is forgiveness also then possible? As defined by whom? For whose benefit?
- What kind of processes should be developed so that dialogue continues and peace can be maintained?
- Can it ever be wrong to offer forgiveness, or to attempt reconciliation?

IN SUMMARY

Forgiveness, as a means of relieving oneself from the burden of victimhood, is intrinsically subjective. In her book *The Forgiveness Project: Stories for a Vengeful Age*, Marina Cantacuzino writes:

In this hotly contested territory, the only thing I know for sure is that the act of forgiving is fluid and active and can change from day to day, hour to hour, depending on how you feel when you wake in the morning or what triggers you encounter during the day.

Forgiveness may unfold like a mysterious discovery, or it may be a totally conscious decision, something you line yourself up for having exhausted all other options. It may have a strong degree of pardoning attached to it, or it may just be a sense that you have released something poisonous or let go of something heavy that no longer weighs you down.

In this sense, forgiveness means not allowing the pain of the past to dictate the path of the future. It requires a broad perspective, namely understanding that life is morally complicated, that people behave in despicable ways, and that some things can never be explained” (Cantacuzino, 2015, p. 2).

The reality is that some people don't forgive because it is not the right time to forgive. Taking the time to proceed at one's own pace can be smart, commendable, and empowering. For those working to promote forgiveness and reconciliation, it is important to remember that forgiveness is first and foremost a choice, and not necessarily the best medicine for all people all the time.

At the same time, it is also important to remember that when introduced as an option, as a concept with limits as well as opportunities, forgiveness (if chosen as a path through trauma) is undoubtedly a powerful healing process that can mend broken hearts and repair broken communities.

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Online Resources

The Ancient Heart of Forgiveness

(http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_ancient_heart_of_forgiveness) by Jack Kornfield explains how we can tap into the great human capacity for forgiveness.

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