

Readings for Preparation of the Seminar on Forgiveness

After reading the materials in this document, please consider the following questions in preparation for the seminar.

1. Do these essays make the case that forgiveness is a function of the collective as well as the individual?
2. How does culture relate to forgiveness?
3. Is forgiveness universal or is it specific to culture? Is there a common thread addressing this question in these essays?
4. Some say that the arc of history is moving toward justice. Do these essays support this?
5. In what ways do these essays expand your understanding of forgiveness?
6. Do these essays color your view of our response to terrorism?
7. Does forgiveness interfere with justice?
8. Can we forgive one who's values conflict with ours? What does Tutu say on this topic?

Excerpts from *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* by Simon Wiesenthal

[Jose Hobday] The question, "What would I have done?" seems to imply that my response might be a judgment on Mr. Wiesenthal's action. I make no such judgment. Altruism, mental gymnastics, conundrums, theologizing, and debates could swirl around this question. To me, these are not integral.

For some, forgiveness is weakness and may actually be a condoning of the evil done. I do not agree. In the air is also the question, "Does Karl even have the *right* to ask for forgiveness?" That is beside the point, because he does ask. Mr. Wiesenthal tells us that he stays with the dying man, listens to his story, but does not want to give comfort to him. Mr. Wiesenthal leaves in silence, a silence that will have a different meaning for each man.

I am of Native American descent (Seneca, Iroquois, and Seminole) and have felt discrimination all my life on the land. I have listened to the stories and read of the atrocities, executions, starvation, and genocide committed against my people. History gives us many accounts of these afflictions. Native people have been wiped out by government gifts of smallpox blankets; we have had dogs set upon us and have been shot down for sport – many more than six million of us. This too has been going on for centuries, while invaders/conquerors have stood by and watched. Many others around the world have suffered terrible indignities as well.

But the words of my Seneca mother to me when I was badly wronged and wanted revenge and retaliation stay with me: "Do not be so ignorant and stupid and inhuman as they are. Go to an elder and

ask for the medicine that will turn your heart from bitterness to sweetness. You must learn the wisdom of how to let go of poison.”

Forgetting and forgiveness may seem to be two different things, but I believe they are of a piece. Every time you remember a wrong, you are asked to forgive it. From my experience, wrongs will return to the mind for years and years and years. Each recall asks for forgiveness, and you stay in the power of that act until you let go. Compassion is all-embracing, extending to all creation – to plants and to animals, including the two-legged variety. Forgiveness is of the heart. I would have forgiven, as much for my own peace as for Karl’s. Mr. Wiesenthal has gained the sure knowledge that he should follow the path of doing good and seeking justice. My hope is that he finds peace and harmony in his heart, and if the memory is still a burden to him, that it be wiped away. No one, no memory, should have the power to hold us down, to deny us peace. Forgiving is the real power. I offer him the sturdy sunflower of our great West – it is small enough to dance. Ho!

[Harold S. Kushner] I am not sure there is such a thing as forgiving another person, though I know there is such a thing as being forgiven. To be forgiven is to feel the weight of the past lifted from our shoulders, to feel the stain of past wrongdoing washed away. To be forgiven is to feel free to step into the future unburdened by the precedent of who we have been and what we have done in previous times.

My imagination, contaminated by computer imagery, sees the human soul as possessing a “feedback mechanism.” Every time we are called on to make a decision, we not only weigh the alternatives, we deal with the memories of how we have responded to similar situations in the past. A voice inside our head tells us “these are the choices, and this is the way you have chosen on other occasions.” Thus Maimonides and Erich Fromm see that every time the Pharaoh of the Exodus story says no to Moses, he makes it more likely that he will say no the next time and harder for him to change course and say yes, because his feedback mechanism keeps telling him “you are a person who says no to such demands.”

If we feel that our past behavior was wrong, being forgiven means erasing that message, liberating ourselves from the idea that we are still who we used to be, and freeing ourselves to become a new person.

To be forgiven is a miracle. It comes from God, and it comes when God chooses to grant it, not when we order it up. That is why, in the Amidah, a Jew prays three times a day for the miracle of God’s forgiveness. To say that God forgives is not a statement about God, about God’s emotional state. God’s forgiveness is something that happens inside us, not inside God, freeing us from the shame of the past so that we can be different people, choosing and acting differently in the future.

That was the mistake of the Nazi soldier in *The Sunflower*. His plea for forgiveness was addressed to someone who lacked the power (let alone the right) to grant it. If he wanted to die feeling forgiven, he should have said to himself: “What I did was terribly wrong and I am ashamed of myself for having done it. I reject that part of myself that could have done such a thing. I don’t want to be a person who would do such a thing. I am still alive, though I don’t know for how much longer, but the Nazi who killed that child is dead. He no longer lives inside me. I renounce him.” And if God chose to grant him the miracle of forgiveness, he would feel that he had expelled the Nazi within him as our body expels a foreign object, something that is not us, and he would die a different person than he had lived.

Of course, had he repented of his crime earlier and not at the point of death, he would have had the opportunity of experiencing the cleansing power of repentance by facing the same situation and

acting differently. Unfortunately, by summoning one Jew to absolve him of what he had done to other Jews, he leaves us doubting whether he has in fact transcended the Nazi view of seeing Jews as less than human, interchangeable entities rather than unique human beings, even as a person sins by hating all blacks, whites, Christians, Jews, Germans because of what some other blacks, whites, etc., may have done to him.

That is what it means to be forgiven. What does it mean to forgive? A woman in my congregation comes to me. She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says to me, "Since my husband walked out on us, every month I struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?" I answer her, "I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was unacceptable. It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, by you're hurting yourself."

Forgiving is not something we do for another person, as the Nazi asked Wiesenthal to do for him. Forgiving happens inside us. It represents a letting go of the sense of grievance, and perhaps most importantly a letting go of the role of victim. For a Jew to forgive the Nazis would not mean, God forbid, saying to them "What you did was understandable, I can understand what led you to do it and I don't hate you for it." It would mean saying "What you did was thoroughly despicable and puts you outside the category of decent human beings. But I refuse to give you the power to define me as a victim. I refuse to let your blind hatred define the shape and content of my Jewishness. I don't hate you; I reject you." And then the Nazi would remain chained to his past and to his conscience, but the Jew would be free.

[Albert Speer] Afflicted by unspeakable suffering, horrified by the torments of millions of human beings, I acknowledged responsibility for these crimes at the Nuremberg Trials. With the verdict of guilty, the court punished only my legal guilt. Beyond that remains the moral involvement. Even after twenty years of imprisonment in Spandau, I can never forgive myself for recklessly and unscrupulously supporting a regime that carried out the systematic murder of Jews and other groups of people. My moral guilt is not subject to the statute of limitations, it cannot be erased in my lifetime.

Should you forgive, Simon Wiesenthal, even if I cannot forgive myself? Manes Sperber assumes that you would not condemn this SS man if he had lived and remained faithful to his conviction of remorse: Well, on May 20, 1975, we sat facing one another for more than three hours at your Vienna-based Documentation Center, a meeting preceded by a six-month correspondence. It was in fact your *Sunflower* that led me to you: "You are right," I wrote you earlier, "no one is bound to forgive. But you showed empathy, undertaking the difficult trip to Stuttgart in 1946. You showed compassion by not telling the mother of her son's crimes. This human kindness also resounds in your letter to me, and I am thankful for it." You showed clemency, humanity, and goodness when we sat facing one another on this May 20th, too. You did not touch my wounds. You carefully tried to help. You didn't reproach me for confront me with your anger. I looked into your eyes, eyes that reflected all the murdered people, eyes that have witnessed the misery, degradation, fatalism, and agony of your fellow human beings. And yet, those eyes are not filled with hatred; they remain warm and tolerant and full of sympathy for the misery of others. When we parted, you wrote for me in my copy of your book that I did not repress that ruthless time, by had recognized it responsibly in its true dimensions.

My trauma led me to you. You helped me a great deal – as you helped the SS man when you did not withdraw your hand or reproach him. Every human being has his burden to bear. No one can remove it for another, but for me, ever since that day, it has become much lighter. It is God's grace that has touched me through you.

[Desmond Tutu] I have been overwhelmed by the depth of depravity and evil that has been exposed by the amnesty process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission appointed to deal with the gross human rights violations that happened in our apartheid past. I am devastated to hear police officers describe how they drugged the coffee of one of their charges, shot him behind the ear, and then set him on fire. That is bad enough, but it is all made more appalling by the police describing how while this cremation was taking place, they had a barbecue – turning over two sets of meat as it were. That is the one side.

There is another side – the story of the victims, the survivors who were made to suffer so grievously, yet despite this are ready to forgive. This magnanimity, this nobility of spirit, is quite breathtakingly unbelievable. I have often felt I should say, "Let us take off our shoe", because at this moment we were standing on holy ground.

So, what would I have done? I answer by pointing to the fact that people who have been tortured, whose loved ones were abducted, killed, and buried secretly – a young widow whose husband's brains were blown out by a booby-trapped tape recorder, a father whose son was killed by a Wimpy Bar bomb explosion – can testify to the Commission and say they are ready to forgive the perpetrators. It is happening before our very eyes. But there are others who say that they are not ready to forgive, demonstrating that forgiveness is not facile or cheap. It is a costly business that makes those who are willing to forgive even more extraordinary.

What would I have done? Our president, Nelson Mandela, was incarcerated for twenty-seven years and not mollycoddled. His eyesight has been ruined because he had to work in the glare of a quarry; his family has harassed by the state security police. He should by rights be consumed by bitterness and a lust for revenge. The world watched with awe when he so magnanimously invited his white jailer to his inauguration as South Africa's first democratically elected president. I could tell of others, both black and white and less well known, who if asked, "What would you have done?" would have done the same – they have forgiven amazingly, unbelievably. Many claim to be Christians. They say they follow the Jewish rabbi who, when he was crucified, said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." I sit and marvel at it all as I preside over the process of seeking of seeking to bring healing and reconciliation to a deeply divided, wounded, and traumatized nation.

It is clear that if we look only to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous things. This is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future.

Excerpts from: *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Desmond Mpilo Tutu

Martin Luther King, Jr. : “Unless we learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] we will die together as fools.”

Over the entrance to the museum now at Dachau Concentration Camp, are the haunting words of the philosopher George Santayana: “Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.”

In the newly created South Africa (following the period of Apartheid), the approach that was chosen to deal with the atrocities that had occurred under Apartheid was what could be called a *third way*; that is, a compromise between the Nuremberg trials approach and blanket amnesty or national amnesia. That third way was granting amnesty to individuals in exchange for a full disclosure relating to the crime for which amnesty was being sought. It was the carrot of possible freedom in exchange for truth and the stick was, for those already in jail, the prospect of lengthy prison sentences and, for those still free, the probability of arrest and prosecution and imprisonment.

Let us conclude this chapter by pointing out that ultimately this third way of amnesty was consistent with a central feature of the African *Weltsanschauung*- what we know in our languages as *Ubuntu*, in the Nguni group of languages, or *botho*, in the Sotho languages. What is it that constrained so many to choose to forgive rather than to demand retribution, to be so magnanimous and ready to forgive rather than wreak revenge?

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, “*Yu, u nobuntu*”; “Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.” Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.” We belong in a bundle of life. We say, “A person is a person through other persons”. It is not, “I think therefore I am.” It is rather: “I am human because I belong, I participate, I share.” A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us a *summum bonum*-the greatest good. Anything that subverts, that undermines this sought-after good, is to be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good. To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me. It gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them.

When *uhuru*, or freedom and independence, came to Kenya, many expected the Mau Mau to embark on a campaign to turn Kenya into the white man’s grave through an orgy of revenge and retribution. Instead President Jomo Kenyatta came to be so revered that there was much consternation at his death. There was anxiety about Kenya would become after Kenyatta. *Ubuntu* was abroad in the post-*uhuru* Kenya. One could point to the opposite that had occurred in the Belgian Congo in the early 1960s, and more recently in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Where was *ubuntu* then? But in Zimbabwe, after one of the most bruising bush wars, Robert Mugabe on the night of his election victory in 1980 amazed all by talking about reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. That was *ubuntu*

at work. In Namibia after SWAPO won the first democratic elections in 1989, President Sam Nujoma wowed everyone with his engaging smile. There were no reprisals against whites. That was *ubuntu* in evidence. What happened in South Africa had already taken place in these other countries.

We are bound up in a delicate network of interdependence because, as we say in our African idiom, a person is a person through other persons. To dehumanize another inexorably means that one is dehumanized as well.

... perhaps justice fails to be done only if the concept we entertain of justice is **retributive justice**, whose chief goal is to be punitive, so that the wronged party is really the state, something impersonal, which has little consideration for the real victims and almost not for the perpetrator.

We contend that there is another kind of justice, **restorative justice**, which was characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. Here the central concern is not retribution or punishment. In the spirit of *ubuntu*, the central concern is the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships, a seeking to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offense.

This is a far more personal approach, regarding the offense as something that has happened to persons and whose consequence is a rupture in relationships. Thus we would claim that justice, restorative justice, is being served when efforts are being made to work for healing, for forgiving, and for reconciliation.

... We had to distinguish between the deed and the perpetrator, between the sinner and the sin, to hate and condemn the sin while being filled with compassion for the sinner. The point is that, if perpetrators were to be despised as monsters and demons, then we were thereby letting accountability go out the window because we were then declaring that they were not moral agents to be held responsible for the deeds they had committed. Much more importantly, it meant that we abandoned all hope of their being able to change for the better. Theology said they still, despite the awfulness of their deeds, remained children of God with the capacity to repent, to be able to change. Otherwise we should, as a commission (the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), have had to shut up shop, since we were operating on the premise that people could change, could recognize and acknowledge the error of their ways and so experience contrition or, at the very least, remorse and would at some point be constrained to confess their dastardly conduct and ask for forgiveness. If, however, they were dismissed as being monsters they could not by definition engage in a process that was so deeply personal as that of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act [in South Africa], which brought the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into existence, required that this commission should, in seeking to provide as complete a picture as possible of the gross human rights violations that happened as a result of the political conflict of the past, try to rehabilitate the civil and human dignity of the victims who had suffered as a result of that conflict. A small minority had monopolized political power, which gave it access to all other kinds of power and privilege and maintained this vicious system of privilege by equally vicious and immoral methods.

... It was so very much like what even someone as wise and astute as Aristotle had been guilty of. He had claimed that human personality was not a universal possession enjoyed by all human beings

since slaves were devoid of this. It is odd that Aristotle should have failed to note the utter absurdity of his position, which must have given great comfort to slave owners who thus could ill-treat their chattels with varying degrees of cruelty with impunity, knowing that they were not quite as human as their owners. What, though, would be the fate of freed slaves?

It is important that, within its lifetime, the Commission (TRC) should complete the amnesty process, to ensure that the democratic state is not left with the responsibility of instituting criminal investigations and the possible prosecution of people for actions that took place during the period covered in the mandate of the TRC ... We believe that the TRC should conclude its work as quickly as possible so that we do indeed let bygones be bygones and allow the nation to forgive a past it nevertheless dare not forget.

But there is another side, a more noble and inspiring one. We have been deeply touched and moved by the resilience of the human spirit. People who by rights should have had the stuffing knocked out of them, refusing to buckle under intense suffering and brutality and intimidation; people refusing to give up on the hope of freedom, knowing they were made for something better than the dehumanizing awfulness of injustice and oppression; refusing to be intimidated to lower their sights. It is quite incredible the capacity people have shown to be magnanimous – refusing to be consumed by bitterness and hatred, willing to meet with those who have violated their persons and their rights, willing to meet in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, eager only to know the truth, to know the perpetrator so that they could forgive them.

We have been moved to tears. We have laughed. We have been silent and we have stared the beast of our dark past in the eye. We have survived the ordeal and we are realizing that we can indeed transcend the conflicts of the past, we can hold hands as we realize our common humanity The generosity of spirit will be full to overflowing when it meets a like generosity. Forgiveness will follow confession and healing will happen, and so contribute to national unity and reconciliation.

We happened to have been blessed with leaders who were ready to take risks – when you embark on the business of asking for and granting forgiveness, you are taking a risk.

In relations between individuals, if you ask another person for forgiveness you may be spurned; the one you have injured may refuse to forgive you. The risk is even greater if you are the injured party, wanting to offer forgiveness. The culprit may be arrogant, obdurate, or blind; not ready or willing to apologize or to ask for forgiveness. He or she thus cannot appropriate the forgiveness that is offered. Such rejection can jeopardize the whole enterprise. Our leaders were ready in South Africa to say they were willing to walk the path of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation with all the hazards that lay along the way. And it seems there gamble might be paying off, since our land has not been overwhelmed by the catastrophe that seemed so inevitable.

It is crucial, when a relationship has been damaged or when a potential relationship has been made impossible, that the perpetrator should acknowledge the truth and be ready and willing to apologize. It helps the process of forgiveness and reconciliation immensely. It is never easy. We all know just how difficult it is for most of us to admit that we have been wrong. It is perhaps the most difficult thing in the world – in almost every language the most difficult words are, “I am sorry.” Thus it is not at all surprising that those accused of horrendous deeds and the communities they come from, for whom they believed they were committing these atrocities, almost always try to find ways out of even admitting that they were indeed capable of such deeds. They adopt the denial mode, asserting that such-and-such has not happened. When the evidence is incontrovertible they take refuge in ignorance.

The Germans claimed they had not known what the Nazis were up to. White South Africans have also tried to find refuge in claims of ignorance. The former apartheid cabinet member Leon Wessels was closer to the mark when he said that they had not wanted to know, for there were those who tried to alert them. For those with eyes to see there were accounts of people dying mysteriously in detention. For those with ears to hear there was much that was disquieting and even chilling. But, like the three monkeys, they chose neither to hear, nor see, nor speak of evil. When someone did own up, they passed the blame to others. "We were carrying out orders," refusing to acknowledge that as morally responsible individuals each person has to take responsibility for carrying out unconscionable orders.

I have said ours was a flawed commission. Despite that, I do want to assert as eloquently and as passionately as I can that it was, in an imperfect world, the best possible instrument so far devised to deal with the kind of situation that confronted us after democracy was established in our motherland. With all its imperfections, what we have tried to do in South Africa has attracted the attention of the world. This tired, disillusioned, cynical world, hurting so frequently and so grievously, has marveled at a process that holds our considerable hope in the midst of much that negates hope. People in the different places that I have visited and where I have spoken about the Truth and Reconciliation process see in this flawed attempt a beacon of hope, a possible paradigm for dealing with situations where violence, conflict, turmoil, and sectional strife have seemed endemic, conflicts that mostly take place not between warring nations but within the same nation. At the end of their conflicts, the warring groups in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, the Middle East, Sri Lanka, Burma, Afghanistan, Angola, the Sudan, the two Congos, and elsewhere are going to have to sit down together to determine just how they will be able to live together amicably, how they might have a shared future devoid of strife, given the bloody past that they have recently lived through. They see more than just a glimmer of hope in what we have attempted in South Africa.

Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy, By Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt and David L. Weaver-Zercher

[This book] is one of those rare books that inspires deep personal reflection which recounting a moment in history, telling a sociological story, and exploring theological issues. In the fall of 2006, following the murders of Amish school children by a deranged gunman, how did the Amish manage to forgive the murderer and extend grace to his family so quickly and authentically? Making it clear that the answer involves no quick fix but an integrated, disciplined pattern of life – a pattern altogether upstream to the flow of American culture – the authors invite us to ask not just how to forgive by how we should live. In our era of mass violence and the derangement from which it comes, no question could be more timely.

Parker J. Palmer, author of *A Hidden Wholeness: Let Your Life Speak* and *The Courage to Teach*.

Amish. School. Shooting. Never did we imagine that these three words would appear together. But the unimaginable turned real on October 2, 2006, when Charles Carl Roberts IV carried his guns and his rage into an Amish schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, PA. Five schoolgirls died that day, and five others were seriously wounded. Turning a tranquil schoolhouse into a house of horror, Roberts shattered a reassuring American myth – that the Old Order Amish remain isolated from the problems of the larger world. ... The Nickel Mines Amish certainly didn't anticipate the horror of October 2. They were, however, uncommonly prepared to respond to it with graciousness, forbearance, and love. Indeed, the biggest surprise at Nickel Mines was not the intrusion of evil but the Amish response. The biggest surprise was Amish grace.

... What exactly did the Amish do in the aftermath of the tragedy? What did it mean to them to extend forgiveness? And what was the cultural soil that nourished this sort of response in a world when vengeance, not forgiveness, is so often the order of the day?

... First, it clarifies that their extension of grace was neither calculate nor random. Rather, it emerged from who they were long before that October day. Second, embedding the Amish reaction in the context of their history and practice enables us to suggest more easily what lessons may apply to those of us outside Amish circles.

Amish Father: "We believe in letting our light shine, but not shining in the eyes of other people."

... [shared by a confidant of the killer's parents] "All of the expressions of forgiveness provided a great freedom that enabled them to move on with the healing despite all the sadness and sorrow. It gave them hope for the future and released them from a heavy burden."

... A father who lost a daughter at the schoolhouse stressed again and again that's forgiveness is more than words. Sitting at his kitchen table, he told us, "Our forgiveness is not in our words, it's in our actions; it's not way we said, but what we did. That was our forgiveness."

When forgiveness arrived at the killer's home within hours of his crime, it did not appear out of nowhere. Rather, forgiveness is woven into the very fabric of Amish life, its sturdy threads having been spun from faith in God, scriptural mandates, and a history of persecution. The grace extended by the Amish surprised the world almost as much as the killing itself. Indeed, in many respects, the story of Amish forgiveness became the story – the story that trumped the narrative of senseless death – in the days that followed the shooting. Amish grace, and the way it affected the world, did not rob the tragedy

of its horror, nor did it eradicate the grief of those left behind. Still, it may have been an answer to Amish prayers that somehow, somewhere, some good would come out of this terrible event.

This book is about Amish grace, but it is also about forgiveness, pardon, and reconciliation. *Grace*, as we use it in this book, is a broad concept that characterizes loving and compassionate responses to others. A gracious response may take many forms: comforting a person who is grieving, providing assistance to someone in need, sacrificing for another's benefit, and so on. Amish people are somewhat uncomfortable talking about "Amish grace," because to them, grace is a gift that God alone can give. We use *grace* in a broader way throughout the book, as a synonym for graciousness and gracious behavior toward others.

Forgiveness is a particular form of grace that always involves an offense, an offender, and a victim (in this case, a victimized community). When forgiveness happens, a victim forgoes the right to revenge and commits to overcoming bitter feelings toward the wrongdoer. Some people who have studied forgiveness extend this definition a step further, contending that positive feelings toward the offender – feelings such as love and compassion – are also essential to forgiveness. For their part, the Amish believe that gracious actions extended to the offender are an important aspect of authentic forgiveness. ...

In telling the Amish story, it is important to distinguish forgiveness from both pardon and reconciliation. Whereas in forgiveness the victim forgoes the right to vengeance, *pardon* releases the offender from punishment altogether. In many cases, pardon can be granted not by the victim but only by a person or institution with disciplinary authority over the offender (such as a judicial system). *Reconciliation* is the restoration of a relationship, or the creation of a new one, between the victim and the offender. Reconciliation is not necessary for forgiveness to take place, and of course it does not always happen, because it requires the establishment of trust between two willing parties. In many situations, however, reconciliation between victim and offender constitutes the ultimate goal, and forgiveness is a crucial step in that process.

Despite the widespread admiration of Amish forgiveness, a small but insistent chorus emerged on the other side. An early and stinging critique of Amish forgiveness appeared in the Boston Globe the Sunday after the shooting. In a frequently reprinted op-ed piece titled "Undeserved Forgiveness," Jeff Jacoby admitted that it was "deeply affecting" to watch the Amish strive to follow Jesus' admonition to return good for evil. Still, he insisted, "hatred is not always wrong, and forgiveness is not always deserved." Jacoby asked his readers, "How many of us would really want to live in a society in which no one gets angry when children are slaughtered?" The problem is not with forgiveness per se, he said; in fact, "to voluntarily forgive those who have hurt you is beautiful and praiseworthy." No, the problem in this case, wrote Jacoby, was that the persons who granted forgiveness forgave a person who hurt others. "I cannot see how the world is made a better place by assuring someone who would do terrible things to others that he will be readily forgiven afterward." Appealing to the Bible, the same authority that the Amish often cite, Jacoby reminded his readers that Ecclesiastes teaches that "there is a time to love and a time to hate." He concluded by quoting from Psalm 97: "Let those who love the Lord hate evil."

Jacoby is not alone in his criticism of Amish forgiveness. "Why Do the Amish Ignore Reality?" was the headline for Cristina Odone's opinion piece in Britain's Observer. Odone called the Amish

community's response to their daughters' killer "disturbing". "They have responded to the massacre of their innocents by repeating that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away," she complained. In many respects, Odone's concern was less about forgiveness that it was about what she called the "fatalism" inherent in Amish life. In her view, the Amish acceptance of whatever comes their way, combined with their commitment to pacifism, means that they "inhabit a hopeless universe where senseless massacres are accepted. Not even the charming old-fashioned horse and buggy can make up for that."

The lack of appropriate emotion, a fatalistic approach to evil, a willingness to forgive the unrepentant, the extension of forgiveness on behalf of others, and its swiftness – all of these critiques of the Amish response echo concerns that some scholars raise about forgiveness more generally. Much has been made in recent years about the virtue of forgiveness, both as a means to heal the victim and offender. [These issues and dynamics are explored more thoroughly in the book.]

Amish Culture

Culture is the term we use for a group's repertoire of beliefs and behaviors. It involves assumptions and conduct that are so deeply rooted and so often practiced that most people are not even aware of them. Culture reflects people's history and teaching, and is especially visible in times of stress that demands immediate response, when there is no time or emotional energy to think through all the possible actions. Like musical repertoires, cultures change over time, but they change in ways that extend present patterns.

The Roots of Forgiveness A Foundational Theme of Christianity

[Remark of a non-Amish observer]: "All the religions teach forgiveness, but the Amish are the only ones that do it." Many scholars have described the Anabaptist tradition, from which the Amish descend, as a discipleship tradition. From their beginning in the 16th century, Anabaptists emphasized "following Jesus" as an essential mark of Christian life. Of course, the other Christian traditions value Jesus' life and example, but they find the essence of the Christian faith in something other than discipleship. Roman Catholics, for instance, give priority to the Eucharist, and Pentecostals stress the work of the Holy Spirit. For Anabaptists, the primary expression of faith is following – even imitating – Jesus. ... It is not surprising, then, that Amish churches focus their attention on the words and actions of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. The New Testament clearly takes precedence over the Old Testament in the biblical texts that preachers use in their sermons. ...

We believe the answer lies in the communal nature of Amish life. In the Amish faith, the authority of the community overshadows the freedom of the individual. In fact, a different understanding of the self is the deepest wedge between Amish life and mainstream American culture. "Individualism," said a 40-year old Amish father, "is the great divide between us and outsiders."

Contemporary American culture tends to accent individual rights, freedoms, preferences, and creativity. From a young age, children are encouraged to distinguish themselves through personal pursuits and creative expressions; later in life adults highlight their achievements with see-what-I-have accomplished resumes. These individually oriented values have produced a society marked by great innovation, awe-inspiring creativity, and a remarkable array of choices. At the same time, some critics

complain that these values have contributed to a “culture of narcissism,” a culture of self-love. In fact, in his book, *The Saturated Self*, psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen argues that many modern people are practically obsessed with their personal desires. ... For the Amish, genuine spirituality is quiet, reserved, and clothed in humility, expressing itself in actions rather than words. Wisdom is tested by the community, not by an individual’s feelings, eloquence, or persuasion. ... Forgiving and being forgiven are inseparable. ... Forgiveness is never dependent on our initiative.

What exactly is forgiveness? How do we know if someone has really forgiven someone else? Do the words *I forgive you* mean that forgiveness has happened, or is more required? What are the conditions, if any, for granting forgiveness? Is it possible to forgive someone who does not apologize – like the gunman who shoots your children and then takes his own life?

My motivations to “love” is not conditioned by another meriting being loved; rather, it is my choice, - my integrity regarding who I chose to be – who I am.

When the men went to see Amy Roberts (the wife of the gunman) on the evening of the shooting, were they extending forgiveness on behalf of the entire Amish community or just speaking for themselves? The answer (via members of that community) that they were speaking on behalf of the whole community.

Anyone who has seen the movie *Witness* can attest, barn raisings are a striking example of Amish mutual aid: dozens of people complete a project that would take an individual weeks or even months. But mutual aid happens in far less visible ways too as church members help one another through difficult times. In the case of the shooting, the Amish helped one another forgive Charles Roberts. At the very least, they helped one another tell the Roberts family their intention to forgive.

All of this falls in line with the research of Everett L. Worthington, who has identified two types of forgiveness: (1) decisional and (2) emotional. Decisional forgiveness is a personal commitment to control negative behavior, even if negative emotions continue. “Decisional forgiveness,” writes Worthington, “promises not to act in revenge or avoidance, but it doesn’t necessarily make a person feel less unforgiving.” Worthington, a Christian, connects decisional forgiveness with two biblical passages that are central to Amish thinking about forgiveness: the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6 (“forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”) and the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18. Emotional forgiveness, on the other hand, happens when negative emotions – resentment, hostility, and even hatred – are replaced by positive feelings. Thus, forgiveness is both a short-term act and a long-term process, but as Worthington points out, the two are connected. The initial decision to forgive may spark the emotional change. A decision to forgive does not mean a victim has erased bitter emotions, but it does mean that emotional transformation is more likely to follow.

... There was one additional meaning of the forgiveness granted to the Roberts family by their Amish neighbors. It was, we believe, the primary meaning: *despite the evil your family member enacted on our children, we will do our best not to hold a grudge against you.* ... In sum, the Amish response to the Roberts family was about tending (to) relationships.

... An Amish person has a head start on forgiveness long before an offense even occurs, because spiritual forbears have pitched in along the way. Like a barn raising, the hard work of forgiveness is easier when everyone lends a hand.

What About Shunning?

How can the forgiving Amish be so judgmental of their own people? The answer lies in the distinction between *forgiveness* and *pardon*. Amish forgiveness, like forgiveness in the outside world, can be offered regardless of whether an offender confesses, apologizes, or expresses remorse. Extended by the victim of the offender, it is an *unconditional* gift. Pardon, on the other hand, at least in the Christian tradition, requires repentance. The Amish believe that the church is responsible to God to hold members accountable to their baptismal vows. When a member transgresses the *Ordnung*, the church's regulations, he or she is given several chances to repent. Upon making a confession and accepting discipline, a member receives pardon from the church and is restored to full fellowship. If the person does not confess, the Amish, drawing on particular New Testament texts, practice shunning, with the goal of restoring an offender to full fellowship. Although shunning may seem inconsistent with forgiveness, it logically follows from the Amish view of spiritual care.

When an outsider (e.g., Charles Roberts) wrongs an Amish person, the Amish consider themselves responsible to forgive but not to punish or pardon, for that is the state's responsibility. However, when a member wrongs another member or affronts the church as a whole, both forgiveness and pardon fall within the jurisdiction of the church. For minor and interpersonal offenses, the distinction between the church and the world works quite simply: the church alone handles the disciplinary process. But if a member breaks the law, then he or she will face not only discipline from the church but also punishment from the public system of justice. ... Thus, the Amish assume that the government will use coercion and even lethal force if necessary to impose its will. At the same time, the church, as a part of the kingdom of God, espouses nonresistance and nonviolence. For this reason, activities such as participating in the military, serving jury duty of capital offenses, holding political office, and filing legal suits are forbidden for members. Although the Amish respect the state and pray for its leaders, they will not participate in state-sponsored activities that involve the use or threat of force.

Are ex-members forgiven? To answer this question, it is important to note once again the distinction between forgiveness and pardon. Erasing feelings of resentment toward a wrongdoer is different from pardoning a culprit of his or her sins. Letting of a grudge does not require remorse from and offender. Pardon, however, does require repentance. This is certainly the case in the Amish church, where pardon and restoration of fellowship are available to wayward souls who confess their wrongdoing.

Four Rituals of Grieving

- (1) Receiving of visitors [Note: this is done at varying intervals over a period of week for up to a year.]
- (2) Dress – black is worn [Note: this is done in varying degrees, depending on the relationship to the deceased, for a period of weeks to months.]
- (3) Writing of memorial poems [expressing gratitude as well as anguish of over the loss.]
- (4) "Circle letters" [These are mailed from family to family to connect the people who are grieving; this can go on for years.]

Other Amish people develop their own, more private rituals. Some write in diaries or compose memoirs. Said one, "I felt the need to express my feelings on paper in order to dispose of my thoughts and get them out of my system, for they were like poison inside me. Writing down my feelings has done the work of a psychiatrist for me." Some of the parents of the Nickel Mines children also found writing to be helpful therapy for their grief. Nonetheless, a father who lost a daughter said, "The best counseling happened when we parents got together and talked. That's where we got our most support."

Psychologists who study forgiveness find that, generally speaking, people who forgive lead happier and healthier lives than those who don't. ... forgiveness heals the person who offers it, freeing that person to move on in life with a greater sense of vitality and wholeness.

Still, if the Amish provide evidence that forgiveness heals the forgiver, they provide even more evidence that forgiveness benefits the offender. Forgiveness does not deny that a wrong has taken place, but it does give up the right to hurt the wrongdoer in return. Even though Charles Roberts was dead, opportunities to exact vengeance upon his family did not die with his suicide. Rather than pursuing revenge, however, the Amish showed empathy for his kin, even by attending his burial. In other words, the Amish of Nickel Mines chose not to vilify the killer but to treat him and his family as members of the human community. Amish forgiveness was thus a gift to Charles Roberts, to his family, and even to the world, for it served as the first step toward mending a social fabric that was rent by the schoolhouse shooting.

Most of us have been formed by a culture that nourishes revenge and mocks grace. ... In a culture that places such a premium on buying and selling, as opposed to giving and receiving, forgiveness runs against the grain. ... We are not only products of our culture, we are also producers of our culture. ... How might we work more imaginatively to create communities in which enemies are treated as members of the human family and not demonized? How might these communities foster visions that enable their members to see offenders, as well as victims, as persons with authentic needs? There are no simple answers to these questions, though any answer surely will involve the habits we decide to value, the images we choose to celebrate, and the stories we remember.

In fact, forgiveness is less a matter of forgive and forget than of forgive and *remember*-remembering in ways that bring healing. When we remember we take the broken pieces of our lives – lives that have been *dismembered* by tragedy and injustice – and *re-member* them into something whole. Forgetting an atrocious offense, personally or corporately, may not be possible, but all of us can and do make decisions about how we remember what we cannot forget.

Excerpt from *The Sunflower*: portion of the story of Karl

(scene at Mauthausen – the final concentration camp at which Simon Wiesenthal was confined)

Two days later, when a new consignment of prisoners arrived, a Pole was allocated to our bunk. His name was Bolek and he had come from Auschwitz, which had been evacuated in the face of the Russian advance.

Bolek was a strong character and nothing could shake him. Little disturbed him, and he retained his sangfroid in the worst situations. In some ways he reminded me of Josek, although physically he hadn't the slightest resemblance to him. At first I took him to be an intelligent country lad.

At Mauthausen nobody asked a fellow prisoner where he came from or what his profession had been. We accepted whatever he chose to tell us about himself. The past was no longer important. There were no class differences, we were all equals – except for one thing: the times of our appointments with death.

Bolek told us about the men who perished on the transportation from Auschwitz to Mauthausen. They died of starvation during endless days of railway traveling, or they collapsed from fatigue during all-day marches. Those who could no longer walk were shot.

One morning I heard Bolek murmuring his prayers in Polish, which was a very unusual occurrence. Very few of us still prayed. He who is incessantly tortured in spite of his innocence soon loses his faith. . . .

Gradually I learned that Bolek, who had studied theology, had been arrested outside the seminary in Warsaw. In Auschwitz he endured the most inhumane treatment, for the SS knew that he was a priest in training and never tired of inventing new humiliations for him. But his faith was unbroken.

One night as he lay awake beside me in the bunk, I told him about my experience in the Lemberg hospital (with Karl, the dying SS soldier).

"After all, they are not all exactly alike," he said when I had finished. Then he sat up and stared straight I front of him in silence.

"Bolek," I insisted, "you who would have been a priest by now if the Nazis had not attacked Poland, what do you think I ought to have done? Should I have forgiven him? Had I in any case the right to forgive him? What would you have done in my position?"

"Stop. Wait a minute," he protested. "You are overwhelming me with questions. Take it easy. I realize that this business sticks in your memory although we have been through so much, but I take it that your subconscious is not completely satisfied with your attitude at the time. I think I gathered that from what you said."

Was this true? Did my unrest come from my subconsciousness? Was this what drove me again and again to think about the encounter in the hospital? Why had I never been able to put this behind me? Why was the business not finished and done with? That seemed to me the most important question.

Some minutes passed in silence, although Bolek's eyes never left mine. He too seemed to have forgotten time and place.

"I don't think that the attitude of the great religions to the question of forgiveness differs to any great extent. If there is any difference, then it is more in practice than in principle. One thing is certain: you can only forgive a wrong that has been done to yourself. Yet on the other hand: Whom had the SS man to turn to? None of those he had wronged were still alive."

“So he asked something from me that was impossible to grant?”

“Probably he turned to you because he regarded Jews as a single condemned community. For him you were a member of this community and thus his last chance.”

What Bolek was saying reminded me of the feeling I experienced during the dying man’s confession: at that time I really was his last chance of receiving absolution.

I had tried to express this view when discussing the affair with Josek but he managed to convince me otherwise at the time. Or was it illusion?

But Bolek continued: “I don’t think he was lying to you. When one is face to face with death one doesn’t lie. On his deathbed he apparently returned to the faith of his childhood, and he died in peace because you listened to his confession. It was a real confession for him – even without a priest. . .

“Through his confession, as you surely know – though it was not a formal confession – his conscience was liberated and he died in peace because you had listened to him. He had regained his faith. He had become once again the boy who, as you said, was in close relation with his church.”

“That’s not the question. I thought a lot about this problem when I was in Auschwitz. I argued with the Jews there. And if I survive this camp and ever get ordained a priest, then I must reconsider what I have said about the Jews. You are aware that the Polish church in particular was always very antisemitic. . . . But let us stick to your problem. So this Lemberg fellow showed signs of repentance, genuine, sincere repentance for his misdeeds – that at least is how you described it.”

“Yes,” I answered, “I am still convinced of that.”

“Then,” Bolek pronounced solemnly, “then he deserved the mercy of forgiveness.”

“But who was to forgive him? I? Nobody had empowered me to do so.”

“You forget one thing: this man had not enough time left to atone for his crime; he had no opportunity to expiate the sins which he had committed.”

“Maybe. But had he come to the right person? I had no power to forgive him in the name of other people. What was he hoping to get from me?”

Without hesitation Bolek replied, “In our religion repentance is the most important element in seeking forgiveness. . . . And he certainly repented. You ought to have thought of something: here was a dying man and you failed to grant his last request.”

“That’s what is worrying me. But there are requests that one simply cannot grant. I admit that I had some pity for the fellow.”

We talked for a long time, but came to no conclusion. On the contrary, Bolek began to falter in his original opinion that I ought to have forgiven the dying man, and for my part I became less and less certain as to whether I had acted rightly.

Nevertheless the talk was rewarding for both of us. He, a candidate for the Catholic priesthood, and I, a Jew, had exposed our arguments to each other, and each had a better understanding of the other’s views.

Another Example of Simon Wiesenthal's experience as described in The Sunflower

During World War II, Simon Wiesenthal was a Jewish prisoner in his hometown of Lemberg because he was Jewish. Starved, frightened, beaten and humiliated, he and a group of fellow prisoners were taken out of the prison camp to work at a hospital. The building was formerly his school where he and his fellow Jewish students were bullied and beaten. While at the hospital, a nurse chose him to visit a dying officer who had requested a visit from a Jew.

To Wiesenthal's surprise, this officer, Karl, told him of his family, who were not Nazis. He had been involved in the Catholic Church as a child. He had joined the Hitler Youth Movement against his parent's wishes. Although Karl's mother was consistently loving, his father stopped talking to him for fear his sons' zealotry could lead to his own arrest. When the war started, he voluntarily became an SS officer. His father became more estranged and distant from him.

Karl, whose wounds were fatal, knew he was dying. Full of remorse, he described for Wiesenthal his sins. He was tortured by his participation in the killing of 300 Jews who were forced into a home too small to hold them that had been doused with gasoline inside and out. They were herded into the house--men, women, children--and grenades were thrown through the windows. There was screaming as the flames went from one floor to another. One man, his wife and child jumped out of the house only to be murdered with guns as was any body that fell from the windows of the house. The memory of that child and his parents haunted Karl. The memory of this experience filled Karl with regret and shame and he was seeking a Jew to absolve him of his guilt. He asked Wiesenthal to forgive him. Wiesenthal remained silent through it all.

Needless to say, this experience affected Wiesenthal greatly. He discussed this with his close friends in the camp but found the discussion unsatisfying. The next day he returned to the hospital with a work group and again was picked out of the group by the same nurse. She explained that the officer had died and wanted him to have his remains. He couldn't take them--he could be killed for stealing! He told the nurse to send them to his parents.

Over the next two years of torture, threat of murder, starvation, loss of friends, and changes in camps, this experience continued to trouble him.

After the war, he decided to visit Karl's parents. He wondered until the moment he arrived if he would share the truth and if he would be able to verify Karl's version of his youth. Stuttgart had been devastated by bombs and he found Karl's mother living alone in a partially bombed out apartment building. Karl's father had died. Without prompting, Karl's mother verified her son's story right away--that he had been a good boy, that he had joined the Hitler Youth Movement and how unhappy she and her husband was and how her husband stopped talking to their son so as not to give their son any reason to report them. He was their only child and she tried to remember him as a good person. Wiesenthal realized how lonely she was and left her view of her son intact.

Wiesenthal wrestled with whether he should have pardoned the young dying soldier who seemed genuinely remorseful and repentant. Despite the fact that Judaism requires you ask forgiveness from the people you wronged, they were dead. What should he have done? The second part of the book focuses on various responses from theologians, philosophers and intellectuals. What would you have done?

A Lord's Prayer for Justice

Our Father . . . who always stands with the weak, the powerless, the poor, the abandoned, the sick, the aged, the very young, the unborn, and those who, by victim of circumstances, bear the heat of the day.

Who art in heaven . . . where everything will be reversed, where the first will be last and the last will be first, but where all will be well and every manner of being will be well.

Hallowed be thy name . . . may we always acknowledge your holiness, respecting that your ways are not our ways, your standards are not our standards. May the reverence we give your name pull us out of the selfishness that prevents us from seeing the pain of our neighbor.

Your kingdom come . . . help us to create a world where, beyond our own needs and hurts, we will do justice, love tenderly, and walk humbly with you and each other.

Your will be done . . . open our freedom to let you in so that the complete mutuality that characterizes your life might flow through our veins and thus the life that we help generate may radiate your equal love for all and your special love for the poor.

On earth as in heaven . . . may the work of our hands, the temples and structures we build in this world, reflect the temple and the structure of your glory so that the joy, graciousness, tenderness, and justice of heaven will show forth within all of our structures on earth.

Give . . . life and love to us and help us to see always everything as gift. Help us to know that nothing comes to us by right and that we must give because we have been given to. Help us realize that we must give to the poor, not because they need it, but because our own health depends upon our giving to them.

Us . . . the truly plural us. Give not just to our own but to everyone, including those who are very different than the narrow us. Give your gifts to all of us equally.

This day . . . not tomorrow. Do not let us push things off into some indefinite future so that we can continue to live justified lives in the face of injustice because we can make good excuses for our inactivity.

Our daily bread . . . so that each person in the world may have enough food, enough clean water, enough clean air, adequate health care, and sufficient access to education so as to have the sustenance for a healthy life. Teach us to give from our sustenance and not just from our surplus.

And forgive us our trespasses . . . forgive us our blindness toward our neighbor, our self-preoccupation, our racism, our sexism, and our incurable propensity to worry only about ourselves and our own. Forgive us our capacity to watch the evening news and do nothing about it.

As we forgive those who trespass against us . . . help us to forgive those who victimize us. Help us to mellow out in spirit, to not grow bitter with age, to forgive the imperfect parents and systems that wounded, cursed, and ignored us.

And do not put us to the test . . . do not judge us only by whether we have fed the hungry, given clothing to the naked, visited the sick, or tried to mend the systems that victimized the poor. Spare us this test for none of us can stand before your gospel scrutiny. Give us, instead, more days to mend our ways, our selfishness, and our systems.

But deliver us from evil . . . that is, from the blindness that lets us continue to participate in anonymous systems within which we need not see who gets less as we

Amen.

This is an excerpt from the chapter, “A Spirituality of Justice and Peacemaking”, in the book by Ronald Rolheiser entitled, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality.*; Doubleday, 1999.

Additional excerpts from *The Sunflower*

[Matthieu Ricard] For a Buddhist, forgiveness is always possible and one should always forgive.

According to the Buddhist teachings, an action is not considered negative or sinful in and of itself, but because it produces suffering. Likewise, a virtuous act is what brings about more happiness in the world.

There are all kinds of situations in life, far less that murder and genocide, that we find difficult to forgive. This is because we believe that there is such a thing as a self that defines who we are for our whole lives; when this self is offended, we try to protect it. But our bodies and minds are not stable; they are changing every second. The notion of a stable and autonomous self is, from the Buddhist point of view, itself the source of inner poisons such as hatred, obsession, pride, and jealousy, for it divides us from others and prevents us from being more compassionate.

True compassion must embrace all things and everyone: the worthy and the guilty, the friend and the foe. No matter how bad someone is, we believe that the basic goodness remains. A piece of gold, after all, is still gold, even if buried in the ground. Once the dirt is removed, the true nature of the gold will be revealed.

“The only good thing about evil,” goes the Buddhist saying, “is that it can be purified.” In Buddhism, forgiveness does not mean absolution, but an opportunity for the inner transformation of both victim and perpetrator. The perpetrator of evil will himself suffer over many lifetimes to a degree determined by his actions, until he is ready for inner transformation.

For the victim, forgiveness is a way of transforming his own grief, resentment, or hatred into good. To grant forgiveness to someone who has truly changed is not a way of condoning or forgetting his or her past crimes, but of acknowledging whom he or she has become. Only inner change offers the opportunity for the perpetrator to escape the whirlpool of wrongdoing that he is now in. Both individuals and society need forgiveness so that grudges, venom, and hatred will not be perpetuated as new suffering.

For the dying SS soldier, feeling remorse in recognition of the monstrousness of his deeds was a good first step. But he could have created much more good by telling his fellow Nazi soldiers to abandon their inhuman behavior. Wiesenthal acted with remarkable dignity. A Buddhist, however, could have said to the dying soldier, “The best thing you can do now is pray that in your future lives you will be able to atone for your crimes by doing as much good as you have done evil.” Knowing that the soldier is destined to undergo much suffering in his future lives, a Buddhist would feel compassion not just for the soldier and his victims, but for all sentient beings who, until they become free from hatred and ignorance, will perpetrate endless cycles of suffering for themselves.

[Joshua Rubenstein] As we near the close of the most violent century in human history, it seems pointless to consider the case of a mortally wounded Nazi officer who is determined to acknowledge his murder of Jews to a Jew in order to die in peace. By now, the incident he describes to Simon has been outpaced by thousands of similar massacres, from Cambodia to Rwanda, from Indonesia to Bosnia. There have been trials of some perpetrators of official terror and torture, and even more Truth Commissions to document the misdeeds of previous governments, but the number of voluntary, heartfelt confessions is small. In fact, such confessions are so rare that a recent, dramatic example – that of an Argentine naval officer who described his own involvement years before in throwing unconscious political prisoners from airplanes into the sea – reminds us that thousands of his murderous

counterparts in Latin America have gotten away with their crimes and today rest soundly in their beds, not unlike so many Nazi perpetrators who grew old in the comfort of their families.

Simon's encounter with a wounded Nazi brings to mind an incident from the war involving Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsfuhrer SS and chief of the German police. Speaking to a group of Nazi officers in Poznan in 1943, Himmler acknowledged how difficult it must be to commit mass murder and remain a normal human being.

Most of you will know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, when 500 are lying there when 1000 are lying there. To have stuck this out and at the same time – apart from exceptions due to human weaknesses – to have remained decent, that is what has made us hard.

Himmler's claim reflects the cheap sentimentality about human emotions that so enthralled regimes. Hitler was a vegetarian. The Nazis were not senseless brutes. They were good to their mothers, generous to their children, loving to their wives. Historical necessity required them to kill millions of people. The trick was to remain a normal, decent human being, as Himmler proudly explained to his underlings.

I cannot help but think of Himmler's speech when I consider Simon's dilemma. I find myself indifferent to the wounded Nazi's plea for forgiveness. He seems to have been moved more by his approaching death and the severity of his wounds than the enormity of his crimes. According to the story, the Nazi portrays himself as having been genuinely horrified by the massacre, even as he participated in the killing. On top of that, he recalls feeling startled by his unease, as if his years in the Hitler Youth and the SS – and overabundant feast of demagogic hatred and violence – had not prepared him adequately for this vivid, gruesome test of Aryan manhood. Himmler, at least, was clever enough to acknowledge how difficult it must be to murder a thousand people. He would not have been disturbed by the young Nazi's initial misgivings in front of the burning house. They would only confirm for Himmler that this young SS officer was still a "decent human being" who did not allow "human weakness" to get in the way of committing mass murder. He succeeded in overcoming them. The misgivings confirmed he was a "civilized German." Participation in the massacre confirmed he was also a good Nazi.

We know today, if Simon did not at the time, that German soldiers were not punished for refusing to slaughter innocent people. The young Nazi did not have to obey the order to burn and shoot unarmed men, women, and children. The faith he had long abandoned could have returned before he killed rather than later on the threshold of his own death. He could have shot himself in the foot. He could have induced nausea or succumbed to uncontrollable vomiting, as numerous Allied soldiers and journalists experienced when they first came upon piles of decomposing corpses. Of course for us, in the comfort of our peaceful homes, it is useless to suggest how this Nazi could have avoided getting blood on his hands. But it is more preposterous to suggest that after ten years in the Hitler Youth and the SS, including two years of brutal fighting on the Eastern Front, he did not know what was expected of him.

This particular Nazi was brought up in a religious, Catholic home, with normal, loving parents. He was not a teenage delinquent, a natural born sadist, or a brutal, unfeeling individual. German society was now rewarding moral deviance. Even so, individuals still had to make choices for themselves. The choices this young Nazi made betray his true commitments. No one forced him to join the Hitler Youth. In fact, he did so over the objections of his parents. And no one forced him to join the SS. Other Germans, with similar backgrounds and under similar social pressure, joined the White Rose, a clandestine anti-Nazi group, or resisted military service. They were all executed. There was the extraordinary example of Reinhard Heydrich's younger brother Heinz who had been an enthusiastic Nazi. But once he grasped the meaning of the Final Solution (which Reinhard Heydrich helped to design),

he forged one hundred passports to help German Jews escape the Reich before committing suicide himself in 1944 in fear that the Gestapo had uncovered his work. Finally, we know of one SS officer named Kurt Gerstein who used his access to information to try to alert the outside world to Hitler's plans to exterminate the Jews. These Germans experienced profound remorse for the crimes done in their names and took genuine risks on behalf of the persecuted.

Confession and remorse alone are not enough to warrant forgiveness. Even though this Nazi was dying and had neither strength nor opportunity to do some kind of righteous deed, as other remorseful Germans managed to do, his dying wish to beg forgiveness from a scared, vulnerable Jewish prisoner was as much an act of callous egotism as it was a misguided act of contrition.

A sense of humanity requires regard for justice and mercy. When Simon helps the wounded man to drink water or waves an annoying bug from his face, such spontaneous gestures reflect instincts that could well have grown extinct in the camps. The Nazi had committed mass murder. Simon was merciful enough with him. For Simon to grant him forgiveness, as well, would have been a betrayal of his and his family's suffering, and all the suffering around him. This was the first and probably last time, after all, that he confronted an utterly helpless Nazi and could have smothered him.

[Dorothee Soelle] I have two contradictory replies to that which Simon Wiesenthal asks himself and us all. This contradiction is in Wiesenthal's narrative itself – between his “No, I cannot forgive you, the nice young German man and SS murderer” and “Yes, I can believe your remorse, *absolve te*, go in peace” – in the silent departure, in questioning of the other prisoners, and the visit to the elderly mother. Everywhere, one senses the no, and the necessity of finding a yes.

Perhaps, as a German, I have the least right to say something other than no. As a Christian, whether I wish it or not, I am always as an heir to the Jewish tradition; I cannot separate myself for yes. I would like to tell of an encounter with a professor of German literature; perhaps this will clarify what I mean. In the late 1960s, I learned that this professor, whom I greatly respected and revered for his sensitivity and receptive spirit, had not only been a Nazi but had even participated in a book burning. I couldn't fathom this, and visited him at his apartment to learn the truth. Why did you do this, who commanded it, and did you know which books were burned: were Alfred Döblin's, were Kafka's? I wanted to know exactly. It was an excruciating few hours. He didn't protect himself, but he did insist on the distinction between books and people – which, naturally, was the underlying issue during every moment of our conversation.

When I asked where he stood now, he wept. He stammered something that I didn't understand. Only the word “forgiveness” was unspoken, implicit. And then something utterly extraordinary happened, something I had never experienced, before or since. He threw himself on the floor, knelt down, wrung his hands, and then folded them. I couldn't remain seated in my chair. I didn't want to leave, so I knelt beside him and we prayed aloud the Lord's prayer: . . . and forgive us our sins.

I had never known before what remorse was. Many years later, I learned what the word *teshuvah* meant in Jewish tradition: deliverance, changing one's ways, a new beginning. A Jewish tradition tells that *teshuvah* was created even before the Creation, together with the Torah, the name of the Messiah, and other mysteries. Supposedly, there is no person, time, or place where *teshuvah* is not possible.

This is what I thought as I read Simon Wiesenthal. Wasn't *teshuvah* at work in this dying young SS man? If so, then Wiesenthal didn't have to lie, later, to the mother. Both the murderer and his

mother were not alone in this one-sided conversation. God was there; together with the mother of the youth, he had awaited the murderer.

Perhaps I would have said, No, I cannot forgive you. But perhaps the other. *Oremus*.

[Arthur Waskow] I need to address not Simon Wiesenthal but the Nazi he addressed: What would it mean for me to “forgive” you?

First, someone has – you have – shattered the Ultimate Unity by breaking the connections that hold it together – those connections through which human beings and the earth share the world. You have shattered the Four Worlds our great mystics the Kabbalists used as a profound and convenient map of God’s Reality: the Worlds of Doing, Relating, Knowing, and Being. When these are healthy, there is physical wholeness and material sharing; emotional love; intellectual communication; and the spiritual sense of shared presence within the Divine Presence. For me and for my people, you have shattered each of these Four Worlds.

What you ask of me is to join with you to restore this Unity in each of the Four Worlds. To join *with you* in reconnecting the fragments of the shattered Unity, perhaps into a wholly/holy new pattern of Unity. To make this restoration *with you* is “forgiveness.” Through it, *you and I* would give away the physical damage, the emotional upset, the intellectual disjunction, and the spiritual dislocation of my self and my people’s self. *You and I* would return to a place of equilibrium and equanimity.

I cannot do it. This is why: There is no way for you to repair the physical damage to the Jews you yourself murdered, let alone those whose murder and torture you helped organize and celebrate. There is no way for you to repair the rips and tears in relationship that have left the Jewish people still struggling to be able to trust, connect, make peace, to govern itself responsibly with its newfound power in the world. And, in terms of Spirit, there is no way for you to repair our sense of God in hiding.

I may be able to make these repairs for myself (at least the ones in Relationship and Spirit): we Jews may be able together to do these for ourselves; but not with you. You can take no part in these three repairs. So I cannot “forgive” you.

There is only one of the Four Worlds in which I can even come close to being *with you* – the World of Knowing: Idea, and Intellect.

You are a teacher of what is now possible. From you I learn that the H-bombs can devour the world, that every single one of them is an instant portable Auschwitz waiting for its blaze to be turned on. From you I learn that the careless use of new technology can poison earth’s air and soil and water, can murder many species, even when there is no hatred – only envy of each other. From you I learn what the mass media can do to the child of loving, gentle parents.

From you I learn the raw, ravaging Power – one aspect of God – that has come roaring into the world, into human hands.

And therefore, from you, with you, I learn the need to do all the other *tikkunim* (repairs):

- The need to shape a deeper and broader sense of community among people and species of the earth.
- The need to create a form of intellect that is connective, in which knowledge is indeed like making love, as it is in the Hebrew work *yodaya*.
- The need to relocate God not Up There on a kingly throne but In Here, among us, between us, within us.

- Even the need to redo the physical boundaries of the People Israel, to reawaken our bodies through sacred dance and gesture, to reenliven our physical relationship with the Land of the Earth, to reopen the Song of Songs as a joyful flowering of earthy passion.

I can learn from you the need to do these things, but I cannot do them with you. I can talk with you by I cannot touch you, love you, or pray with you. So I thank you for being my teacher, and I leave you alone in the three Worlds of Body, Heart, and Spirit – alone, cut off, an alien in the alien corner of the world that you yourself have cut off from the Flow of Life.

Enigma

Leonora Speyer

It would be easy to forgive,
If I could but remember;
If I could hear, lost love of mine,
The music of your cruelties,
Shaking to sound the silent skies,
Could voice with them their song divine,
Red with pain's leaping ember:
It would be easy to forgive,
If I could but remember.

It would be easy to forget,
If I could find lost Sorrow;
If I could kiss her plaintive face,
And break with her her bitter bread,
Could share again her woeful bed,
And know with tears her pale embrace.
Make yesterday, to-morrow:
It would be easy to forget,
If I could find lost Sorrow.