



Forgiveness and Justice

Everett L. Worthington Jr.

On New Year's Eve 1995, my mother was murdered. Someone broke into her house in search of hidden treasure. When she awakened, she was bludgeoned repeatedly with a crowbar and then assaulted her with a wine bottle.

The police were vigilant. Soon a youthful suspect confessed to the crime. But later, when the police found that the physical evidence was contaminated, the youth recanted his confession and walked away freely.

My brother Mike had discovered Mama's body when he and his son visited on New Year's morning. The sight of the house in shambles was devastating. As he walked into the house, he first saw the blood-splattered walls, then my mother's body in a pool of blood.

Within a month, Mike, my sister Kathy, and I independently forgave the murderer. Furthermore, in honor of Mama's memory, we wanted to do what she had taught us—to honor life rather than dishonor it. Independently, each of us decided that if evidence could be uncovered so that the youth could be prosecuted, we would not advocate the death penalty.

This crime had a profound impact on me. I had studied forgiveness scientifically since 1990. The crime focused my attention more on how to balance justice against forgiveness and how to help people who are experiencing deep wounds to forgive. The crime and its aftermath literally gave me a new mission in life - to promote forgiveness in every willing heart, home, and homeland.

Mike was also profoundly affected by the murder. He couldn't get those scenes of violence, bloody walls, and Mama's broken body out of his mind. He had flashbacks and recurring depression. In summer 2005, Mike ended his life, unleashing a new wave of suffering in our family. We grieved for his loss, which trickled down like spreading blood from the act of violence perpetrated by a youth in search of quick cash.

Besides suffering and coping with the loss of loved ones, our family has had to deal with profound questions. Here are eight discussion questions about forgiving. I'll give you a few thoughts on each, but I encourage you to come up with your own answers.

- **Did we dishonor my mother's memory by forgiving her murderer?**

Some people believe that by forgiving, we let the criminal get away, literally, with murder. This, they say, dishonors the victim. But we believed that Mama taught us to forgive. If we did not follow her teaching and example, then we believed we would not be honoring her.

- **Was it even possible for us to forgive since we had not been the victim of the murder?**

Some people hold that only the victim can grant forgiveness. In the case of murder, therefore, there can be no forgiveness. This opens up questions about what forgiveness means. An aggrieved family member who says it isn't right for a victim's family member to forgive must ask himself, "Am I not feeling unforgiveness?" If the family member feels unforgiveness, then isn't he or she able to forgive?

What would such forgiveness accomplish? It wouldn't change anything about the crime, its morality or moral consequences or the perpetrator. The murderer would still be accountable to God and to civil authorities. Most professionals believe that forgiveness is experienced within a person's skin. One level of forgiveness is a decision about one's intention for future actions toward the offender, with the possibility of renouncing vengeance and advocating benevolence. Another level of forgiveness is an emotional change from negative, unforgiving emotions like resentment and hatred to either a neutral state (I don't really want to be best friends with the murderer, just to get rid of the negative) or a positive emotional state if the offender is a loved one.

- **Isn't forgiveness a social process?**

Forgiveness is located inside the forgiver's skin. It is not a social act. *Communicating* that you have forgiven someone is not forgiveness. It is *telling someone* that forgiveness has happened inside you. Nor is *granting* forgiveness forgiving either. It is *saying* to the person, in effect, "I forgive you, and I won't hold this against you socially." Someone could grant forgiveness without either deciding to forgive or experiencing any emotional forgiveness. Perhaps a man is pressured by his boss to forgive a co-worker. The man says, "I forgive you." By granting forgiveness publicly, he forfeits any future recompense. Yet he doesn't internally forgive with either decisional or emotional forgiveness.

- **When we elected not to advocate capital punishment, were we right in that decision?**

This decision about recommended justice is not the same as forgiving. Each of us could have forgiven the murderer internally yet be willing to let the legal system make its own decision about punishment for the crime. Forgiveness does not affect what the justice system does. Justice is social. Forgiveness is internal.

- **By forgiving, did we lessen our drive for justice? Does forgiveness work against justice, or can forgiveness ever work alongside of justice?**

Forgiving changed our emotional experience, but it did not affect our desire for seeing the perpetrator caught and brought to trial. Justice often actually works to promote, not undermine forgiveness. Isn't it easier to forgive a convicted and punished criminal than someone who gets off scot-free? When we are harmed, we experience a sense of injustice. This is called the "injustice gap." The bigger the injustice gap, the harder an offense is to forgive, and the stronger the negative emotions are. If the offender does anything to help balance the books, the injustice gap is narrower and forgiveness is easier.

- Did forgiving shorten our grief?

Forgiving probably doesn't shorten grieving. But part of grieving is telling a story repeatedly about the loss. If the story is spiced by bitterness, resentment, and rage, the griever makes his or her self-image more negative. But if the griever can rise above the suffering to forgive he or she sees the self as a stronger person. Grief will not be shortened but one's sense of self will be different.

- **Did our Christian faith affect our decision to forgive? Might we have made a different decision had we been Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist?**

Religious people report themselves to be forgiving—more than do non-religious people. Different religions understand forgiveness differently. Many Christians, for example, find unilateral forgiveness to be called for in Christian Scriptures. Many Jews, however, believe that forgiveness should only be granted if the offender apologizes, makes thorough amends, asks for forgiveness, and demonstrates conclusively that he or she will not offend in the same way again. Religious beliefs definitely affect forgiveness.

- **When my brother killed himself, I struggled with being unable to forgive myself. Was forgiveness of self appropriate?**

Many of us find it more difficult to forgive ourselves than to forgive others. Sometimes I cannot forgive because I did something terribly wrong. In those cases, I need to do something to make things right with God, the victim, and others I affected before I forgive myself. Even if I forgive my wrongdoing, though, I am usually struggling with being able to accept myself more than to forgive myself. That is, I cannot accept myself as a person who would do such an awful thing to another person. It takes a long time to accept that I am more flawed than I thought I was.

At other times, though, I get down on myself not because I harmed someone, but because I regret making mistakes. I am simply ashamed of who I am. In these cases, I cannot make amends. I must work directly on self-acceptance.

This article was developed for community conversations around *The POWER of FORGIVENESS* by Journey Films.
More material available at www.journeyfilms.com.

Funding provided by The John Templeton Foundation, Supporting Science, Investing in the Big Questions,
and Fetzer Institute, as part of their Campaign for Love and Forgiveness.

