

Forgiveness as a Core Ingredient of Spiritual Care: An Exploration of Four Resources

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Forgiveness is a journey that many who have been wounded find most difficult to undertake. The author has over thirty years of experience as a behavioral health chaplain during which he developed and conducted spirituality groups focused on Everett Worthington's models of moving from unforgiveness to forgiveness and seeking to reconcile broken relationships. In addition to Worthington's five steps to forgiveness, this article presents three other resources that chaplains may use to assist patients in realizing these goals.

FORGIVENESS OFTEN IS A PRIMARY SPIRITUAL ISSUE for patients, at least for those hospitalized for psychiatric and substance dependence reasons. The challenge to forgive the Divine, others and oneself is daunting. Yet, if this journey is not undertaken, *unforgiveness* may grow like dangerous bacteria without the presence of the antibiotic of *forgiveness* that arrests and sometimes cures it. This article introduces four excellent resources that the author commends to any caregiver who seeks to become a midwife of forgiveness.

Five steps to forgiveness

A middle-aged woman I'll call Miriam was a patient in a hospital-based day treatment program for adults with mood disorders. Typical attendance for a spirituality group in this program was twenty or more persons. Miriam sat on my far left. I could barely see her out of my peripheral vision. The topic was "forgiving those who have wronged us." As it unfolded, I noticed Miriam was becoming physically agitated. Then she began to mutter under her breath. Finally she stood up, shouted, "This is a bunch of crap," and stormed out of the room. In the days that followed, her self-destructive thinking increased to the point that she was hospitalized. I made two attempts to visit her but each time she angrily told me to leave. She did *not* want to talk with me.

Eventually, two spirituality groups were developed utilizing the forgiveness models of Everett Worthington, a psychologist and professor at Virginia Commonwealth University.¹ The first focused on his "five steps to forgiveness." The second group described a process for those who seek to reconcile a broken relationship.

From my experience with Miriam, I learned that a calm, methodical introduction to the first group was essential. I began by asking for a show of hands as to how many in the group had at least one person in their lives that they had never been able to forgive and secondly, how many thought that it had something to do with their need to be in this program. Typically half or more raised their hands for the first question and almost all of those hands went up again for the second. I learned to warn the patients that the content of the forgiveness group would be controversial, challenging, radical and possibly triggering and that if they needed to leave the group they had my permission in advance. It was not unusual to have at least one person leave.

I learned to inform the program staff whenever the forgiveness group was scheduled so that they could be prepared for possible fallout. I am grateful to that team for their collaboration and the trust and respect they placed in this work.

Empathy is the basis for Worthington's model and he states very clearly that God must play a role in the healing of unforgiveness. At the core of his model lies a radical idea based upon research he has done with those who are trying to forgive. If one forgives in order to feel better, it does not last. Instead, one must make the far more difficult journey toward developing empathy for the perpetrator and eventually give what usually is an undeserved and unearned gift of forgiveness, often because the perpetrators have never taken responsibility for their actions.

In the forgiveness sessions I conducted, I briefly outlined Worthington's description of the journey into unforgiveness and more carefully explored the journey to forgiveness. Each has five stages. *Unforgiveness* results from

- A transgression,
- Perception of offense and hurt,
- Resulting hot emotions like anger and fear,
- Rumination, which lasts until
- Unforgiveness has made a permanent home in the psyche.

Worthington devotes a chapter to each of the five stages of *forgiveness*:

- *Recall the hurt* but with enough detachment to explore it from a fresh perspective.
- Develop *empathy* for the perpetrator in three ever more challenging levels—shallow, middle and deep.
- Give the *altruistic gift of forgiveness*. He explicitly names the importance of his Christian background and the necessity of a role for the divine. Granting the gift of forgiveness may or may not be done in person, due to issues of safety or to the inaccessibility of the perpetrator.
- *Commit publicly to forgiveness*, recognizing that if this is only an internal process, it will not prove to be lasting.
- *Hold on to the forgiveness*. He describes strategies to accomplish this.

The second spirituality group explored the stages of reconciliation in which two persons may engage in order to restore a broken relationship. Briefly, using the metaphor of approaching a bridge from opposite sides and meeting in the middle, Worthington devotes a chapter to each of the four stages in this model:

- *Decide* whether or not to try to reconcile.
- Initiate *discussion*, probably with a therapist guiding the process.
- *Detoxify*, i.e., remove the negative elements from the relationship.
- Restore or reach a new level of *devotion*.

Worthington provides many practical suggestions for utilizing both processes. They may be more suitable for a pastoral counseling or therapy setting, as this is primarily a group rather than an individual model. In a psychiatric treatment setting, the goal of these two spirituality groups was to

introduce the difficult path of forgiveness to the patients and to claim a central role for spirituality. Often, requests for individual chaplain visits followed the group experience.

My third attempt to visit Miriam on the inpatient unit met with a more positive response. She had mellowed considerably and spoke openly about the horrific abuse she had received from the parent who had died in the previous year. She thanked me for getting her started on the forgiveness journey, even if had been very difficult for her at the beginning. In time, she returned to the same day treatment program where it all began. When she attended the spirituality group on forgiveness, she smiled and asked if she could address the group. She told her story about how she had reacted initially to the idea of forgiveness and how she was on that forgiveness journey now.

Beyond revenge

Michael McCullough begins *Beyond Revenge* with the following story.² Chante Mallard became front-page news. After a long night of partying, drunk and high, she drove her car straight into a man walking along the highway. Catapulted over the hood, he came to rest wedged into her windshield, his head and upper torso inside her car. After stopping to try to figure out what happened, in her drugged confusion, she panicked. She decided to drive her car home and into her garage. Despite his pleas for help, Mallard, a nurse's aide by profession, let him bleed to death in her garage. The medical examiner stated the victim would have lived if she had called for help. Instead, she entertained her boyfriend in her home that night. With the help of friends she eventually dumped the body in a nearby park and joked about it all.

Chante Mallard was eventually arrested. She was convicted of murder and sentenced to fifty years in prison. At her sentencing hearing, Brandon, the son of the man that she had allowed to die in her garage, made a victim impact statement. Instead of insisting on the severest of penalties, the son spoke to the court and Mallard's family, "'There's no winners in a case like this. Just as we all lost Greg, you all will be losing your daughter.' Later, Brandon would go on to say, 'I still want to extend my forgiveness to Chante Mallard and let her know that the Mallard family is in my prayers.'"³

McCullough, a professor of psychology at the University of Miami, asserts three core truths:

- Revenge is a built-in feature of human nature.
- The capacity for forgiveness is also a built-in feature of human nature.
- To make the world a more forgiving, less vengeful place, don't try to change human nature, change the world!

Firmly planted in evolutionary theory, he amasses a significant body of research from the social and biological sciences, including studies of the behavior patterns of primates, dolphins, hyenas, goats and fish; the experiments social psychologists love to do with university students; game theory; and computer simulations.

He challenges the formulations of the monotheistic religions and much of Western literature, rejecting their conceptualization of revenge and forgiveness as a disease/cure model. In that model revenge is a virus that invades a vulnerable host; forgiveness is an external force that must enter the host to treat and cure revenge. Instead, from an evolutionary perspective, he views revenge as functional. He maintains that revenge was adaptive in that it

- Deterred aggressors from aggressing a second time by actual or threatened revenge.
- Warned would-be harm doers to back off, leading to a deterrence that prevented aggression in the first place, i.e., if you don't take or threaten revenge, you are labeled an easy mark and become susceptible to being taken advantage of.

- Coerced “free riders” to cooperate. A free rider is defined as the person in a group that is loafing and not carrying a fair share of the burden. The threat of ostracism (revenge) brings the person back into line. (Think of resistant members of CPE groups or congregations!)

Likewise, from an evolutionary perspective, forgiveness has adaptive functions. Animals and humans hesitate to inflict revenge on any blood relative for it threatens to reduce the success of their gene pool. Even with nonrelatives, survival in a hostile environment depends upon forming cooperative alliances. We are forgiving towards neighbors and friends because at some level we need to cooperate with them. Stress and anxiety increases in humans and primates when conflict erupts and remains unresolved.

In what ways is forgiveness instinctual or hard-wired into human existence? While clinical psychology makes the distinction between forgiving without continuing a relationship and reconciliation that seeks to restore a relationship, McCullough believes that both are rooted in the same internal process and exist along a continuum of experience. Survival in a hostile environment requires communal living and cooperation, which provides the impetus for seeking forgiveness. Anxiety is an unpleasant outcome of unresolved conflict, and both animals and humans are wired to overcome this. Biological measurements show that stress and anxiety decrease when one moves in the direction of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Three conditions awaken the forgiveness instinct:

- *Empathy* for those who have harmed them, which is easier if it’s a blood relative.
- Seeing *potential value* for maintaining or attempting to restore the relationship.
- *Safety*, i.e., having assurance that the other party can no longer inflict harm or is sincere in promising not to do so.

Three gestures signal the desire to pursue forgiveness:

- *Apologies*, including five key ingredients—carefully chosen words, an admission of responsibility, an explanation/clarification of why the hurt occurred, an offer of reparations and a promise not to repeat the action.⁴
- Self-abasing displays and gestures (*body language*).
- Offer of *compensation*. (The amount is less important than a genuine offer.)

McCullough maintains that the major world religions exhibit the desire for revenge and the desire for forgiveness both in their historical behaviors and in their sacred texts. His conclusion about how to move forward deserves a hearing and may resonate with the core convictions of chaplains, pastoral counselors and clinical educators.

If you want religious groups around the world ... to be forces for forgiveness, you need to create the conditions that will cause them to perceive that forgiveness is in their best interests. When you do, they’ll emphasize the doctrine and traditions that favor forgiveness. If those religious groups perceive instead that revenge is the behavioral option that will work best for them, then that’s what you’ll get from them The challenge for harnessing religion’s power to motivate forgiveness is to create the kind of socio-political world in which religious groups can’t help *but* perceive that forgiveness is in their best interests. In figuring out how to make these kinds of sociopolitical realities happen, we’d be fools not to try to work with reformers within those traditions who can offer help and guidance.⁵

Transcending tragedy

The bucolic serenity of Amish life in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania was irreparably shattered on October 2, 2006, when a monstrous deed was done. Some would later say it was their 9/11. A lone gunman, Charles Carl Roberts IV, burst into a one-room schoolhouse of twenty-six children, aged six to thirteen, in the community of Nickel Mines. He brought with him guns and supplies intending to barricade himself for a standoff. The teacher snuck out a side door and ran for help. He dismissed other adults who happened to be present and all the boys. He announced his intention to molest the ten remaining girls. The police arrived more quickly than he expected, disrupting his plans. About twenty minutes later shots were fired inside the school and out the window at them. They rushed into the building as Roberts shot himself and discovered Roberts had murdered five of the girls, execution style. Five survived.

As the news spread, large numbers of law enforcement and community service personnel, including grief counselors, responded to the disaster. It also rapidly became a media event. Huge vans with satellite dishes and reporters with cell phones further shattered Amish life. The media came to report a story of evil, hatred and violence; thus, they were totally unprepared for what gradually became a story of grace and forgiveness. The Amish community quickly realized that the surviving Roberts family members, which included his wife, three children and the children's grandparents, were also victims of this tragedy. They searched for them to offer their compassion and forgiveness. When the Roberts family gathered to bury Charles at the local Methodist Church, more than half of the attendees were Amish.

The question lingered as to whether Charles Roberts was a monster. How could one develop empathy for him, something both Worthington and McCullough have suggested is necessary in order to move from revenge toward forgiveness? One of the surviving children reported that Roberts said to the girls, "I'm angry at God and I need to punish some Christian girls to get even."

During the standoff, Roberts called his wife on his cell phone to say he was not coming home and that he had left notes for everyone. He was angry at God, he said, for the death of their firstborn daughter, Elise, who had lived for only twenty minutes after her birth nine years earlier. In the note to his wife Roberts had written, "I'm not worthy of you, you are the perfect wife, you deserve so much better I'm filled with so much hate towards myself, hate towards God, and an unimaginable emptiness. It seems like every time we do something fun I think about how Elise wasn't here to share it with us and I go right back to anger."⁶

There was speculation that Roberts might have been abused as a child but no solid evidence of it was uncovered. What would the chaplain's assessment be of Roberts' spiritual condition at the time of the shooting?

In their book, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*, Donald Kraybill, et al., have written a meticulously detailed and emotionally moving account of the events surrounding the school massacre and the response of the Amish community to the murder of their children.⁷ Their knowledge of Amish life is extensive. After telling the story at some length, they explore the history of the Anabaptist movement, including its many early martyrs and how literal adherence to the teachings of Jesus, especially forgiveness, is a way of life.

The presentation of this tragedy and its aftermath, especially the insistence of the Amish that they must forgive, gives spiritual caregivers much upon which to reflect. Amish grief is not stoic denial, yet there is no room for anger at God. (The reluctance to support anger in general or anger at God is also part of the spirituality of addiction recovery.) Submission or surrender to the will of God is a core element of their spirituality. Because this tragedy fell upon more than one family simultaneously, an entire community took up the task of forgiveness together. Yet a deeper understanding of Amish life reveals that grief and forgiveness are communal tasks whether or not

there were multiple victims. Their way of life rejects much of the individualism in mainstream American culture that suggests forgiveness is an individual decision and task. It is not left to one person or one family to manage hate, bitterness and resentment; these are absorbed and overcome by the entire community.

Chaplains know the difference between ministering to a nuclear family coping with tragedy and joining in the ministry of a large extended family who gathers to grieve together. The Amish in this story testify not only to their belief in forgiveness but also to the difficulties inherent in practicing forgiveness. There is no denial of how long or difficult maintaining their stance of forgiveness will be. They fully acknowledge it will be an ongoing struggle. These events and their response to them raise challenging questions. Do representatives of the church sometimes counsel or insist upon offering forgiveness too quickly, especially in cases of abuse? Is God's forgiveness conditional or unconditional—does God's forgiveness depend upon our willingness to forgive? Kraybill wrestles with these and other complicated questions.

Those of us who work alongside counseling colleagues are aware that they perceive their task as moving persons from an identity as a *victim* of a tragedy to that of a *survivor*. Kraybill suggests this Amish story raises the possibility of moving to a third stage. Renouncing the right to remain bitter about the outcome of the shooting means one becomes "a hero instead of a victim in the story."⁷ Not that the victims claim to be heroes or heroines, but in our telling of their stories, they are perceived as such. I would suggest that our role as caregivers is not only to help victims, when ready, to move toward empathy and walk the perilous path toward forgiveness. It is also to tell to one another—and to all who will listen—the many remarkable stories of people who were able to forgive. The stories of Miriam, Brandon and the Amish are only a few of the stories we could tell.

The power of forgiveness

These three excellent resources may deepen the chaplain's understanding of forgiveness both from a psychological/clinical and from a spiritual/theological perspective. The final resource is *The Power of Forgiveness*, an excellent DVD production that includes eleven chapters.⁸ Two of the three authors mentioned earlier in this article are featured. Everett Worthington is shown teaching in his psychology classroom and conducting a group therapy session. He tells his own tragic story of the brutal murder of his mother and his challenge to forgive the perpetrator. Donald Kraybill retells the story of the Nickel Mines tragedy. In addition, a number of spiritual leaders from various faith traditions, including James Forbes, Elie Wiesel, Thich Nhat Hanh, Marianne Williamson and Thomas Moore, share their perspectives on the subject of forgiveness.

Lengthier stories include the portrayal of the legacy of hatred in Northern Ireland's long-standing conflict between Catholics and Protestants. Community leaders have come together to address their concern that unresolved conflict and hatred is being passed on from one generation to another without interruption. In response, they have designed forgiveness curricula, which are being implemented in elementary school classrooms. These do not directly address the historic political conflicts. Rather, through story telling and conversation they introduce forgiveness concepts and practices into the daily classroom experiences of elementary school children.

Elie Wiesel reflects on his experiences in Auschwitz and asks a poignant question. Are some human deeds too horrible to be forgiven? Included are excerpts from his address to the German Bundestag in Berlin in which he asks the leader of the Bundestag if the time has not come for him to ask for the forgiveness of the Jewish people for what the Third Reich had done in the name of Germany. Later, in an address to the Knesset of Israel, the German leader does exactly what Wiesel requested.

Another story focuses on the aftermath of 9/11 through the eyes of a widow whose husband died in the Twin Towers and two mothers whose sons also died that day—one a firefighter and the other an office worker. They question the wisdom of the all-out effort to remove the remaining debris as

quickly as possible. They visit the dump where it was deposited, searching in vain for a gravesite and a sense of closure. After an interview with the priest of St. Paul's parish near ground zero, who hopes to create a garden of forgiveness nearby, the three women visit such a garden, which is under construction in Beirut, Lebanon. Alexandra Asseily, who provided the vision for the Lebanese garden, sees it as a place where historic religious conflicts existing over many centuries may begin to heal.

The final story is that of two remarkable men, who united in a mission to speak to schoolchildren about their experiences. The son of Azim Khamisa was murdered in a senseless act of violence. Ples Felix is the grandfather and guardian of the teenage boy who committed that act of murder. Azim is a Sufi Muslim, whose spiritual advisor suggested that if he was ever going to overcome his grief he would have to commit himself to an act of charity. He decided to develop a foundation to educate young people about the evils of violence. He asked Ples, a Baptist from the American South, to help him. On their journey together, they became best of friends. Azim eventually became able to forgive Ples' grandson, which led him to forgive his parents' abandonment of him in his childhood. Ples, in turn, was able to forgive himself for his failures in raising his grandson. This is the story they tell to the schoolchildren.

As chaplains we willingly—and sometimes unwillingly—absorb pain, grief, hate, bitterness and resentment. We are committed to steering those who appear ready and able toward the perilous pathway to forgiveness. These four resources provide excellent assistance in our own journeys as agents of forgiveness. 🕯

1 Everett Worthington, *Five Steps to Forgiveness: The Art and Science of Forgiving* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001).

2 Michael E. McCullough, *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

3 *Ibid.*, xiv.

4 For a humorous account of how not to apologize, McCullough cites Bill Clinton's many failed attempts to apologize to the American people for his White House dalliance and Trent Lott's failed attempts to apologize for his misplaced praise of Strom Thurmond's run for President as a segregationist.

5 *Ibid.*, 222-23.

6 Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons/Jossey-Bass, 2007), 25.

7 *Ibid.*, 140.

8 Martin Doblmeier, *The Power of Forgiveness* (DVD: www.journeyfilms.com, 2007).