

INTRODUCTION

“NO FUTURE WITHOUT FORGIVENESS”

For me, forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?

—BELL HOOKS, IN CONVERSATION WITH MAYA ANGELOU¹

The Conflict over Forgiveness

Desmond Tutu, a Black South African who grew up under apartheid, insisted that “without forgiveness there is no future” for South Africa. He rejected the Nuremberg trials model that was used in post-Nazi Germany in dealing with war crimes. That approach would have required a full trial and punishment for all accused of violent crimes under the apartheid regime. Instead Tutu devised a plan that offered amnesty and forgiveness for any perpetrators of violence—Black or white—who would come forward and publicly confess the full truth of what they had done during certain prescribed years.

While there were no civil penalties for confessors, the light of truth and knowledge made it possible for their society to move forward; there were natural consequences, moral and social, for the perpetrators. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission created opportunities for personal forgiveness to be extended and relationships to be restored. Bishop Tutu argued that the alternative to forgiveness in South Africa would have been the cycle of violence seen in the Balkans after the breakup of Yugoslavia.²

When Desmond Tutu died the last week of 2021, I wrote this on Twitter:

Many argue “forgiveness culture” helps abusers escape accountability. Desmond Tutu argued that without forgiveness abusers hold us in thrall, that it was possible to pursue both forgiveness and justice at once. He rejected the Nuremberg Trial model for Truth and Reconciliation.³

The response, as I expected, was mixed. Many survivors of abuse warned that the requirement of forgiveness had been used against victims, imploring them to move on, get over it, and forgive. Some responders saw this as a strategy for institutions and abusers to avoid accountability. And yet most of these same voices could not deny the accomplishment of Desmond Tutu’s commission. One person responded to the tweet: “Asking people to forgive and move on . . . helps abusers escape responsibility,” but then added: “I know Rev Tutu did an amazing job and showed and taught true grace.”

Others said that Tutu’s model might modify our current cancel culture. Michael Dyson admitted that today, his call for forgiveness “might seem quaint, hokey or downright irrelevant . . . including most social justice advocates,” but he urged all to pay attention to it nonetheless.⁴

The Fading of Forgiveness

The contradictory responses to Tutu’s work upon his death serve as a microcosm of our own society’s conflicted attitude toward forgiveness. In June 2020 Elizabeth Bruenig of *The New York Times* tweeted:

There’s just something unsustainable about an environment that demands constant atonement, but actively disdains the very idea of forgiveness.⁵

She was quickly inundated with upset emails and soon deleted what she had written out of concern for the distress she had caused. In an interview, however, she explained that we have a culture marked by an outraged sense of justice and the desire to make people atone for sins. “I [see] in American culture how offended people seem by the very idea of forgiveness itself. They seem to find it immoral and I think that is very disturbing.”⁶

Many are finding the concept of forgiveness increasingly problematic.

After the 2014 deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City, a new movement for racial justice emerged, originally embodied by a new network called Black Lives Matter. But after George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis in May of 2020, the calls for changes to the systemic racism in Western societies burst the banks of any one organization. Tens of millions of people took to the streets around the world to call for change. This new movement sounded different notes than did the civil rights movement of the sixties. “This ain’t your grandparents’ civil rights movement,”⁷ said rapper Tef Poe. He argued that it would be much angrier.

Our cultural problem with forgiveness is not confined to matters of race. The #MeToo movement also struggles with the call to forgive. Many

women ask: Doesn't forgiving perpetrators only encourage abuse? The social media world also seems to be a realm in which missteps and wrongful posts are never forgiven. Instead, screenshots of every foolish word you have ever said online can be circulated in perpetuity.

Even after TV personality Whoopi Goldberg apologized for offensive remarks about the Holocaust, she was still suspended and punished. Jewish writer Nathan Hersh found this lack of forgiveness "troubling." He found Goldberg's remarks anti-Semitic and offensive, but he cited the Jewish and biblical tradition of forgiving the person who repents. He expressed concern that the culture's need to cancel even those who were willing to change would not serve to diminish bigotry. It might fuel it.⁸

"To Hell with Forgiveness Culture"

Relatives of the nine African Americans killed in Charleston, South Carolina, publicly said to the shooter, Dylann Roof, "I forgive you." A *Washington Post* opinion piece by Stacey Patton responded that "Black America Should Stop Forgiving White Racists."⁹ The expectation and admiration for Black people's forgiveness, she wrote, "is about protecting whiteness. . . . It enables white denial about the harms that racist violence creates. . . . Our constant forgiveness [only] perpetuates the cycle of attacks and abuse." Quick forgiveness, she argued, translates into the inability to hold perpetrators of injustice accountable for their behavior.

In September 2018 Amber Guyger, a Dallas police officer, came home from work and entered a neighboring apartment, mistakenly thinking it was her own. When she saw a Black man inside the apartment, she shot and killed him. It was Botham Jean, her unarmed neighbor, watching TV in his own home. Just after Guyger was sentenced in court to ten years in prison, the victim's brother Brandt Jean publicly forgave her and embraced her. Across the country the response to this moving scene was decidedly

mixed. The Institute for Law Enforcement Administration gave Brandt the 2019 Ethical Courage Award.

But others argued that such public Black forgiveness of whites only ends up supporting white dominance. Kevin Powell wrote an article entitled "The Insanity of White Justice and Black Forgiveness: Reducing Another Tragic Loss of Black Life to a Hallmark Card Is Not Justice."¹⁰ Lawyer and activist Preston Mitchum tweeted: "Black people are historically forced to show empathy to colonizers and made to feel bad when we don't."¹¹

However, Barbara Reynolds, a septuagenarian who had marched in the civil rights protests of the 1960s, wrote a counterpoint essay to Stacey Patton's in the same newspaper. She argued that the movements led by Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela won the high moral ground and persuaded the majority because they were marked by "the ethics of love, forgiveness and reconciliation," and they triumphed because of "the power of the spiritual approach."¹²

Reynolds concluded her article by asserting that that love and forgiveness "are missing from this movement." Forgiveness, she argued, disarms the oppressors and wins over many of their supporters, weakening the system. "If you get angry," she quotes Andrew Young as saying, "it is contagious and you end up acting as bad as the perpetrators." The current angry approach, she said, could lead to short-term gains but in the end will only divide the country rather than unify it.

And yet—don't those people frustrated with the lack of change, like Stacey Patton, have a point? Isn't it true that if a continually oppressed group of people forgive their oppressors, it may merely keep the system in place?

Sabine Birdsong blames the abuses of forgiveness not just on bad practice but on Christianity itself. A blog post with the eye-catching title "To Hell with Forgiveness Culture" argued that "we continue to believe forgiveness makes a person superior and if they can't manage something so

simple, the fault lies with them.” The author blames this on “a deeply ingrained religious hangover from Christianity,” a mindset that “manifests itself in edicts like forgive and forget, turn the other cheek.” We condemn persons who won’t forgive, saying they are “poisoning themselves,” which is “tantamount to another Abrahamic culturally-ingrained guilt trip. In short, it is victim blaming.” This serves only to help abusers who “can act with impunity . . . [because] no matter the grave depths of their actions, they can rest in smug assurance that they will be forgiven.” The emphasis on forgiveness also tends to humanize perpetrators, making it harder to hold them accountable. “People love a good redemption story. This [forgiveness] narrative is nothing but a mere plot device spun to give character depth . . . [to] the perpetrator at the expense of their victims.”¹³

In a follow-up the author urged that we “rewrite the outdated narratives of forgiveness,” which idealize “the pseudo-spiritual fairy-tale of redemption and forgiveness over the inherent right for people to not be abused.”¹⁴

This final quote isolates the problem we feel today—the apparent contradiction between forgiveness and justice, the sense that we will have to choose one over the other.

But is that true?

The Indelible Need for Forgiveness

The human need for forgiveness appears to be indelible. It won’t go away by denouncing it or trying to deconstruct it. The need I’m referring to is both a profound need *to grant* forgiveness and *to receive* forgiveness.

On New Year’s Eve in 1843, in a Lutheran parish in Möttlingen, Germany, a young man came to the door of the church’s pastor, Johann Blumhardt. He unburdened himself in confession of many sins and misdeeds,

both major and minor. The man experienced great relief and word of it spread. By the end of January, 35 people had come to unburden their consciences with the pastor and ask for God’s forgiveness. By mid-February over 150 had done so.

This revival, chronicled in a number of places, was remarkable for the concrete changes in behavior it brought about. “Stolen goods were returned; enemies were reconciled; infidelities were confessed and broken marriages restored. Crimes, including a case of infanticide, were solved,” and alcoholics found sobriety.¹⁵ Here we see an example of how the granting of forgiveness ignited a movement toward greater justice in that town.

During Christ’s early ministry, a group of four friends brought a paralyzed man to the house where Jesus was speaking in hopes of getting a healing for him. “Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above . . . by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on” (Mark 2:4). To everyone’s shock, Jesus did not at first heal his paralysis. Instead “when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’” (verse 5).

For a moment imagine yourself as the paralyzed man. You would have felt (and if you had a bold personality you might have said), “Uh, thanks—but isn’t it obvious I have a more urgent need here?” And if you had said that, Jesus would have answered, “No, you don’t.”

It’s likely that the man had been feeling, “If I could just walk again—then I’d be happy. I’d never complain. I’d be content.” But Jesus, as it were, is saying: “Look around you at all these people—they can all walk. Are their hearts all filled with contentment? Are they all happy? If I only heal you, you will be overjoyed for a while, but then you will become like everyone else.” No. What the man needed was forgiveness. Forgiveness gets down to the bottom of things—to the alienation we feel from God and from ourselves because of our wrongdoing.

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Jesus was saying: "I want to show you that the deepest need of your nature is for me. Only I can bestow perfect love, new identity, endless comfort, hope, and glory. *And the doorway into all of that is to know forgiveness.*"

It's time to open that door and walk through it.