

## **On Forgiveness and Social Healing**

**presented by Judith Thompson, Ph.D.  
for a panel discussion on The Role of Forgiveness in Social Healing  
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I would like to begin by sharing my gratitude to Leonel for being the spark-plug igniting this conversation and the many others that have been taking place all week long in the Cambridge area.<sup>1</sup> His remarkable work in Colombia, in the midst of what some say is the most violent society in the world, has greatly inspired many of us. Thank you.

My first memory of him comes from an international dialogue I co-convened in Cyprus in 2003. He opened with a story, which I would like to share:

Just two weeks ago I was with a very famous guerilla leader in Colombia who has killed many people, I think. We are friends since years ago when I was working in that area. I was kind of challenging him with sweet eyes asking him: 'What about if, instead of your gun, you start embracing people and feeling the kind of tenderness that your mother taught you?' And I remember that he just put his head on my shoulder and was kind of crying. You know, I am saying this because I think we, especially increasingly in church, I would say the Catholic Church, have not been witnesses to tenderness and compassion. (Frontiers of Social Healing Dialogue, 2003, p.38).

I love opening with this remembrance of Leonel for two reasons. First, because for me, it speaks deeply to who he is and to the real heart and substance of his work. And secondly, because my own recent research has been around the question: "How does compassion arise in the process of social healing?", and his story speaks to that question beautifully. His image of the tender mother is found also in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition where the cultivation of compassion is seen as a process of "thinking like a mother." Feminist scholar Sara Ruddick (1989) advocates "maternal practice" as a means of creating a life-sustaining society contending that it is not confined to women, but is a way of thinking and being available to everyone (Thompson, 2005, p. 91).

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<sup>1</sup> This talk was part of a program put together to host the visit of Fr. Leonel Narvaez, a Jesuit priest in Colombia who has founded Schools for Forgiveness and Reconciliation.

I offer that opening thought to us as we move into the topic of forgiveness because I think the contemporary work exploring the “ethic of care” as it has grown from women’s lived experience is an absolutely necessary dimension of investigation when approaching the topic of forgiveness in social healing. And, because I will not take more time with it today, I appreciate that my early memory of Leonel has given me an opening to at least refer to the feminist/humanist frame he brought forward as medicine toward healing the wounds of his patriarchal institution.

Twenty-three other peacebuilding practitioners from around the world also came to this gathering in Cyprus. Together we explored, what we were calling “The Frontiers of Social Healing”. These frontiers are what we are sharing today: the role of forgiveness in social healing; the lessons from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and other truth commissions; psychosocial healing, approaches to reconciliation and even epistemological premises – how do we know what we know – were all part of our dialogue together. This meeting came one year after another similar gathering I convened in Cambridge at the Boston Research Center for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century around my own research on the role of compassion in social healing. Both of these meetings were designed as learning communities grounded in the premise that through dialogue we engage in participatory knowing, a process that supports the greater whole of our knowledge to be revealed.

In exploring the frontiers of social healing with others in a “community of practice”, the theme of forgiveness and social healing was a prominent thread. And, given the diversity of this community, the varying perspectives on how to define what forgiveness is and how one arrives at it showed up in our room just as it has during the course of Leonel’s opportune visit to our community.

The fault lines in forgiveness discourse seem to congregate around these questions: Is forgiveness primarily a personal act or a relational one? And, what is the relationship

between forgiveness and reconciliation? Are these two interdependent; does one follow the other? Is reconciliation dependent on forgiveness and vice versa?

For Father Michael Lapsley, a former chaplain for the ANC and the victim of a brutal assassination attempt, which cost him both his hands and an eye, forgiveness without apology is not an option. As an ardent promoter of the TRC, and founder of the Institute for the Healing of Memories in South Africa, which invites all citizens of the new South Africa to come together in safe environments to share their stories and find healing together, he daily lives his commitment to reconciliation. And he is quite clear that forgiveness is a relational act. In a morning homily he shared with us what he calls "bicycle theology":

"I come and I steal your bicycle. And six months later, I come back to you and I say to you, "I am the one. I am the one who stole your bicycle. I'm very sorry. Please will you forgive me?" And because you are full of compassion, you respond immediately and say, "Yes, of course I forgive you." And I keep your bike! Many places where people speak of forgiveness, it is reduced to saying "sorry," and the bicycle is not returned" (ibid., p.273).

For Fr. Michael the story of Jesus and the tax collector, Zaccheus, fits his model of forgiveness.

Jesus sees him firstly not as he was, as an oppressor, as a tax collector who didn't just take the tax that was due to the state, but also a great deal that he put in his own pocket. Jesus treats him with compassion and dignity, invites him for dinner. And, in the context of being accepted as a human being, Zacchaeus says that he will return what he has taken four times over. So, the bicycle becomes a Honda 650 when it is returned.

In my faith tradition, people speak as if forgiveness is something glib and cheap and easy. Most human beings find it costly and painful and difficult. I've always been fascinated that the Greek word in the New Testament for forgiveness is the same word for untying a knot. Because when it does happen, both parties are freed to go on their journey (ibid).

Richard Moore was blinded by rubber bullets at the age of 10 in Belfast and has gone on to work with community reconciliation efforts and create an organization called Children in the Crossfire. He says:

For me, forgiveness, or being able to say that I have no resentment unconditionally, about the soldier that shot me, gave me a freedom of my mind, which is very important. [In the case of the soldier who shot me], I totally forgive [him]. In fact, its not even a case of forgiving him, because I never felt I had to forgive him to start with. Because, if my brother can join the IRA because of what happened to me, then other people can do the same thing because of their life experience as well (ibid. p. 272).

Immaculee Illigabiza from Rwanda describes how she received spiritual illumination hiding from her killers in the wall of her house day after day, listening to the cries of women and children outside who were being mercilessly slaughtered. She prayed continually, struggling with a desire to forgive and a desire for revenge. She says that she heard words from God reminding her that even the Tutsis were His children. In her story, we witness the grace, which can touch people who are deeply attuned with their faith.

I held onto my father's rosary and called on God to help me, and again I heard His voice, "Forgive them Father, they know not what they do." I took a crucial step toward forgiving the killers. My anger was draining from me; I had opened my heart to God and He had touched it with His Infinite Love. For the first time, I pitied the killers. I asked God to forgive their sins and turn their souls toward His beautiful Light. For the first time since I [had gone into hiding], I slept in peace. (Illigabiza, personal email, 2005).

Mary Rothschild is the daughter of a Holocaust survivor and Gottfried Leich a German man who was, as a child, a member of the Hitler Youth. They originally came together through an organization called One by One, Inc., which has a mission to transform the legacies of conflict, war and genocide through dialogue. Gottfried described the intense fear he had in revealing his history and facing his deep sense of shame this way:

I had spoken about that before to other people, but never face to face to a Jew and a daughter of a holocaust survivor. And it was awful for me to so. And, to be challenged to speak in front of the second generation people about the influence of the Nazi regime on my life...I was afraid that the earth would open and I would fall in. And it's a miracle that it happens in the opposite way; that behaving this way and speaking this way and listening this way – it's a bridge over the abyss (Thompson, op.cit., p. 261).

Mary refers to the encounter as the most profoundly life-changing experience of her life, saying that she experienced a deep sense of compassion coming from Gottfried. His

apology was the “emotional restitution” that she never knew she was seeking. Yet , for her, forgiveness is not a part of the equation. She says,

In Judaism, its not my business to forgive something that wasn't done directly to me. And it was done by I don't know whom. I was there [in Berlin] not to forgive or forget, but just to address what happened. And something miraculous, some alchemical transformation happened in the addressing.” (ibid., p. 273).

Leonel speaks of forgiveness as a personal journey of “rediscovering our tenderness and compassion – the better parts of ourselves – and releasing ourselves from the poison of anger. It is a path to spirituality, holiness. It's to be like God” (Frontiers of Social Healing, op. cit., p.400). I would find this way harder to believe if I did not know Leonel and see how he models that path. For him reconciliation is dependent on forgiveness and cannot occur without it. For Fr. Michael, reconciliation can happen without forgiveness. Both of them see “getting out the poison” as a necessary step, but for each the path is different.

As I see it, the bottom line is that there are many different viewpoints about how to define and conceptualize forgiveness. These differences reflect our personal lived experience, our cultural traditions, our historic circumstances, our social location and our religious beliefs. What works will be different for different individuals and groups and attempts to universalize are always problematic.

Having said that, I do ponder whether there aren't some universals, or perhaps better put, “some areas of consensus” in the greater story that are worth trying to identify.

Here I want to make mention of a recent source of inspiration for me, John Paul Lederach's new book *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (2005). He addresses himself to peacebuilders and reflects upon the development of the field. His hope is that we will begin to see our work more as art than technique.

I don't see finding the art of the matter as a minor corrective to an otherwise healthy system. It requires a worldview shift. We must envision our work as a creative act, more akin to the artistic endeavor than the technical process...The wellspring lies in our moral imagination which I will define *as the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist* [emphasis mine] (p.ix).

Fifteen years ago, we would not have had a forum on the role of forgiveness in social healing because forgiveness was held strictly within the province of theology and religion. The term "social healing" was not really a legitimate expression. Rather, we had peacemaking or conflict resolution – arenas of skills building originally entrusted to diplomats, and later third party practitioners trained in mediation. We had the development of a growing human rights language enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and some architecture for truth commissions as a way to address the requirements of justice in the aftermath of large-scale political violence. But it was in the South African Truth and Reconciliation process that a language of forgiveness was woven directly into a public process as part of a highly publicized and unprecedented social experiment.

There is no question that the TRC has been a watershed moment in the evolution of our social conscience. There have been legitimate critiques of the process. Some felt a pressure to forgive; that the strong religious overtones and the imprimatur of Archbishop Desmond Tutu created a sense that forgiveness was being mandated. Shortcomings in the area of reparations and restitution are also cause for concern and lessons for the future. Nonetheless, critiques notwithstanding, the TRC holds unquestionable historical significance as an act of moral imagination. It is for this reason that it has become a case study of such magnitude.

In his book, Lederach quotes a few lines from the Irish Poet Laureate Seamus Heaney's famous Poem *The Cure of Troy*

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.

Believe that a farther shore  
is reachable from here.

Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells (ibid. p.157-158).

This yearning for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge is what I think has given birth to “the forgiveness” movement. It is a yearning grounded in some deeper knowing about ourselves which I believe is universal, no matter how covered up it might be by the wounds of violence in all its forms. Schools of forgiveness and reconciliation, restorative justice practices, approaches to reconciliation, are all borne from this same belief that “a far shore is reachable from here”. When Archbishop Tutu says “There is no future without forgiveness” he is saying there is no future if revenge and the fear and anger that feed it are not given a means for release, if people are not supported in processes of healing from the wounds of violence – victims and perpetrators alike. To me, this is the common ground beyond the definitions debate: the ground of healing.

I have been using the terminology “social healing” myself for a long time as a way of framing justice-making as a matter of addressing and healing social wounds, not punishing human evil. This is the basic premise of restorative justice, which defines crime as a violation of people and interpersonal relationships. The restorative paradigm creates obligations (as opposed to guilt), involving victims, offenders, and community members in an effort to put things right and focuses on victim needs and offender responsibility for repairing harm (Zehr, 2001, 2002). The Navajo people call restorative justice “justice as healing”.

Can you imagine what such a paradigm would mean if applied to a post 9/11 U.S. political culture? Instead of revenge, justice would have searched for a means to heal. Restorative justice approaches turn western justice on its head in ways that tread on a kind of invisible sacred ground that informs our social conscience and public attitudes.

Conrad Brunk (2001), a philosopher of law, puts it bluntly in his overview of theories about criminal punishment.

The offender’s suffering or loss is what constitutes the ‘pay back’ to societies and victims...Somehow the moral balance of the universe is restored by the suffering of the offender. Because of retributivism’s preoccupation with the infliction of harm as the means by which wrongs are made right, it simply blinds itself to the fact that the real injustice of an offense is the loss and harm suffered by the *victims* [emphasis in

original]. This injustice is not addressed by the suffering of the offender -- the loss is not restored, the suffering is not compensated, the broken relationships with victims and society are not mended. This injustice remains (p. 38).

In reflecting on Western justice, James Youngblood Henderson (2004), who is the research director at the Native Law Center says: "Most aboriginal people have never understood the exotic passion of Eurocentric society for labeling people criminals and making them suffer." To indigenous people, our approach to justice is intolerant of human frailties and justifies a theory of social control by violence.

In the Navajo justice making tradition, when there is a dispute, the injured party approaches the perpetrator to put things right, which means not only material compensation, but more importantly, relational. A traditional peacemaker, or *naat-aanii*, is called in. A *naata-annii* is a well respected figure in the community known for being grounded in wisdom (Yazzi, 1998.; Braithwaite, 2002). Family and clan relations are called in, prayers are offered to summon guidance and a circle process proceeds, which offers first the victim and then the perpetrator the opportunity to share. The community members reflect on what they hear, often exposing the weaknesses or unacceptability of excuses offenders may try to use. A plan of reparation is drawn up using principles derived from traditional teachings; ceremonies and rituals that guide communal understanding about harmony and human ecology as it is embedded within the natural world (Johnstone, 2002, p. 44-47).

Implicit in sentencing circle processes such as the one described above, is a trust in the power of human relatedness and connection -- something that is denied in traditional retributive processes. The process and the outcome are not easily separated. As criminologist Gordon Bazemore (1998) puts it:

Following the logic of aboriginal and indigenous settlement traditions, the argument suggests that **simply making connections** [emphasis mine] and hearing the voices of those with an interest in the crime in a respectful way is itself a positive outcome; in an effective process, solutions or outcomes are said to take care of themselves (p. 794).

Not only do restorative justice practices such as victim-offender mediation programs, sentencing circles and family conferencing, help to heal victim's real needs, but many argue that offender's are more likely to take active responsibility for their crime thus moving toward what Bazemore calls "earned redemption" (ibid., p. 768). Earned redemption is a result of human, face-to-face processes -- offender and victim with the community (that could consist of extended family or other members of a constructed community) -- which offer the possibility for felt remorse, repentance, apology and forgiveness.

This is not to say that these feelings and actions are required or promoted. Indeed, legal scholar, John Braithwaite (op.cit) makes it clear in his list of restorative justice values, that empowerment is a higher value than forgiveness, meaning that a victim's right to deny apology, to continue to hate and even to call for punishment, is asserted as greater than forgiveness. His assertion would be an interesting topic for debate within a forum like this one. But, he adds, the evidence points to the fact that restorative justice conferencing generally helps people to become less punitive and offenders to become more remorseful (p. 249.)

Feminist legal scholar Karen Heimer's feels that "[I]t is the humanity of other people that inspires responsibility."

Restorative justice...shares an interest in putting people in touch with the humanity of others, and therefore might also share the agenda of active responsibility...Retributivists, in contrast, are obsessed with passive responsibility because their priority is to be just in the way that hurts wrongdoers. The shift in the balance toward active responsibility is because the priority of the restorativist is to be just in the way they heals (Heimer as cited in Braithwaite, op.cit., p. 255).

The restorative path is not easy, in either real terms or moral ones. Conditions of mass atrocity are always challenging, and some wrongs can seem too great to forgive. Lederach wisely uses the Biblical Pslam 85:10 as a reference point for considering the difficult job of approach the restorative path. "Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other."

Within the social healing lens the quartet of voices: mercy, truth, justice and peace still aim to serve the cause of healing not inflicting suffering for the sake of punishment. This makes moral sense to me.

Let me return now to Mary and Gottfried. Gottfried's epiphany of "the bridge across the abyss" that came when he surrendered his fear and jumped into the unknown of complete truthfulness in the face of those he was sure would shun him, was met by another epiphany, this time coming through Mary as she turned to Gottfried and addressed him in a way not only respectful and compassionate, but that offered a stark contrast to the alienated otherness of Nazi and Jew. To use Martin Buber's words, Mary experienced a moment of "I-Thou" with Gottfried. The place in-between them was pregnant with a divinely animated presence, and in the words of a Psalm familiar to us all as signifying the safety, protection and comfort of God, Mary turned to Gottfried and said quite spontaneously and sincerely: "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for *Thou* art with me" (Psalm 23).

German theologian Muller Fahrenholz is one of my favorite writers on the subject of forgiveness (1989, 1997). He approaches the subject from the location of German shame saying that as a German, one must think about forgiveness not in spite of Auschwitz, but because of it. From his vantage point, an act of forgiveness must be understood as a complex process of unlocking painful bondage; of mutual liberation. While the perpetrators must be set free from their guilt, the victims must be liberated from their hurt.

This mutual liberation implies a process of catharsis, and this is the point which scares most people. Much as they might long to be freed from their bondage, they shy away from entering into this cathartic moment. Why? What they dread is the process of dismantling and exposure (Muller-Fahrenholz, 1997, p.25).

Yet mutual liberation involves what he calls "a third force", which he likens to Buber's "in-between".

The third force is characterized as the *transcending and contingent element in the relationship of persons* [emphasis mine], a spark of courage to open up, that moment of daring and trusting which causes the heart to jump over the fence. It is

this surprising energy which lays down the dividing walls between us. (Muller-Fahrenheit, 1989, p. 131).

My colleague Pumla Gobodo-Madikizella (2002) from South Africa speaks of this as *truly human moments* --- when two people recognize each other's pain; "the perpetrator as the author of the pain suffered by the victim, and the victim's acknowledging the perpetrators 'suffering' as a result of remorse (p.22).

She goes on to say: "This is not a statement about whether it "makes sense" for victims to respond to evildoers with empathy. But it is an analysis of what happens at the moment when victims connect with perpetrators in a way that many may find unimaginable" (ibid.)

The "spark of courage" that Muller-Fahrenheit refers to births the "truly human moment." For Pumla, that moment was activated by remorse. Remorse engages history. It faces truth and offers itself to the necessary task of remembering. It involves a complete disarmament; an opening to the lived experience of that pain and hurt defenselessly, allowing our heart to lament. The white South African theologian Denise Ackermann reflecting on her role in the healing process of a new South Africa urges her fellow whites to move toward lament; to break the silence and face the truth, feel the pain of one's complicity, conscious or not, and move from isolated suffering to a community of solidarity. She calls us to consider the words of the Jesuit spiritual teacher Anthony de Mello who said that "the chances that you will wake up are in direct proportion to the amount of truth you can take without running away" (as cited in Ackermann, 1986, p. 49).

I cannot help but consider what this means in the United States today. As a white American woman, I would like to call myself and others onto a narrow ridge where we might ignite a spark of courage; a spark of moral imagination, which begins with confession, remorse and lament. The future is the past living through its unhealed wounds.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, a social experiment with truth and reconciliation is

underway which could serve as an catalyst to courage. With support from the International Center for Transitional Justice and trainers from South Africa, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) has been set up in an attempt to bring closure to the events of November 3, 1979, when members of the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi party killed five people and wounded 10 others as activists gathered for a statewide "Death to the Klan" rally and conference for racial, social, and economic justice. Four TV crews captured the killings on film, but the perpetrators were twice acquitted of any wrongdoing. If you look on the website of the GTRC you will find this invitation to your moral imagination:

**What if ...**

What if America's cities – especially Southern cities – stopped ignoring the skeletons in their closets?

What if they were inspired by the potential of the truth & reconciliation model as demonstrated in South Africa, Peru, and elsewhere, to help them seek life-affirming restorative justice and constructively deal with past incidents of injustice?

Greensboro, N.C., an all-American city with a proud legacy of civil rights leadership, is finding out through the GTRC's historic effort to honestly confront its tragedy of November 3, 1979. ([www.gtrcp.org](http://www.gtrcp.org))

The Greensboro TRC is just one example of a greater call to address something which I feel really does echo Archbishop Tutu's sentiment "There is no future without forgiveness." But I would, in this case like to substitute other words from the constellation of relational healing and say that in this country today there is not future without remorse, apology and restitution.

Muller- Fahrenholz uses the term "deep remembering" when considering the role of forgiveness in politics.

To remember is much more than a process of the mind and emotion by which we look at our past. It is a way of re-living the anguish and bitterness of the past in order to arrive at a more profound awareness of the human condition. This enables us to link with other members of our immediate communities and to reach beyond them to the whole human race and to all forms of life on earth. The art of remembering is a constructive social exercise and thus constitutes the basis of sustainable politics (1997, p.59).

The art of remembering would remind us that the birth of United States as a national entity, is rooted in the genocide of indigenous peoples, the enslavement of Africans; and the exploitation of immigrant labor all of which made possible the territorial expansion and domination of the American continents and the accumulation of riches that has not stopped as we enter the era of globalization and free trade agreements.

This has never been authentically confronted, internalized and integrated into the national psyche and narrative, let alone publicly acknowledged or redressed in a manner that honors the scope and horror of it's truth and the consequences which have been perpetuated by it. Obviously to do so would require a level of painful self-reflection and consequent action in line with the truth. But based on the experiences of others and what we hold as wisdom in our own hearts, it appears that "making right" (experiencing the culpability, shame and remorse on the one hand and receiving the acknowledgment and reparation on the other) is a liberatory practice for all involved leading to transformed relationships and the creation of a new space from which to birth the future.

Our society is desperate for a new political culture, informed by our understanding of forgiveness, of compassion and social healing. And, what has most captivated my moral imagination in this historic moment is the challenge of creating the space for that culture to arise. I believe that this is our urgent task now in the United States and I invite others whose moral imaginations may be similarly attuned to join me in the soul-searching and heart leaping task of unlocking the bondage of denial, shame, hurt and anger in our own country and transforming our legacy of violence into mutual liberation which will have a global impact.

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