

## The Linacre Quarterly

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Volume 66 | Number 3

Article 5

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August 1999

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### Recommended Citation

Connelly, Robert J. (1999) "The Process of Forgiving: An Inclusive Model," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 66: No. 3, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol66/iss3/5>

# **The Process of Forgiving: An Inclusive Model**

by

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The bulk of philosophical/ethical discussion about forgiveness emphasizes the importance of narrowing down the concept by defining basic elements or characteristics, or specifying conditions or good reasons in support of the act of forgiveness. The goal is to determine when forgiveness is complete and ethical or not. Forgiveness has been portrayed as an either/or sort of phenomenon. Very little attention has been given to what has been called the process of forgiving.<sup>1</sup> I intend to develop the idea of a process by showing that forgiving may be best explained in terms of a range or continuum of forgiving. I will describe forgiving as an attitude with a basic structure that allows for stages with different degrees of mastery of negative feelings and different levels of understanding of ethical reasons that justify the process. I will show that "trying to forgive" may in fact constitute the first step, both logically and psychologically, in the forgiving process.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Welch Case**

Consider Bud Welch's agony over what should be done to Tim McVeigh for causing the death of his daughter and 167 other victims in the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Welch is quoted as saying:

McVeigh shouldn't get off easy. Lock him up for good, with no chance to get out. Is that punishment enough? The part of me that

still screams "kill him" doesn't think so. But my Catholicism teaches that even he has a soul, and we must at least try to save him. I'm still too angry to deal with that now. But I'll have to be forgiving if I am to have peace. That would be harder if he is executed. I don't want McVeigh's death on my head. A lady from Texas called me and said her husband had been murdered. After his killer was executed, she began to feel guilty. She thought knowing the murderer was dead would help ease her grief but it didn't – and I don't think it would help me, either.

I am not trying to win converts. I just want people to think hard about the costs of the death penalty. Killing McVeigh won't bring my daughter back. The only way I can go on is to continue to believe in the sanctity of life – even a mass murderer's.<sup>3</sup>

Welch apparently feels that his anger is still getting in the way of forgiveness. I would like to suggest that Welch's reliance on values he learned as a Catholic, saving a soul and sanctity of life, indicate he has already taken the minimal first step in the forgiving process.

### **The First Step of Forgiving**

For purposes of this article, forgiving will be described as an attitude shaped in response to injury inflicted on oneself and/or one's family or close friends.<sup>4</sup> The forgiver must be aware that moral wrong was done by an individual, or individuals, who was responsible for the act and is the object of forgiving.<sup>5</sup> This awareness, however, should be based on objective fact as far as possible to avoid subjective fabrication or projection on the forgiver's part.

The forgiver also experiences an emotional response to the wrongdoing. Negative emotions nearly always constitute the first line of defense against inflicted injury. Ever since Joseph Butler<sup>6</sup>, the philosophical literature has concentrated on resentment as the most potent and debilitating of the negative emotions. Robert Solomon characterizes resentment as the "villain of the passions. It is among the most obsessive and enduring of the emotions, poisoning the whole of subjectivity with its venom..."<sup>7</sup> But other feelings may accompany an injury, singly or in combination, as mentioned by various authors: hatred, bitterness, hostility, outrage, contempt, indignation, aversion, anger, sadness, or disappointment.

The above presuppositions describe the relevant background against which an individual may make a two-fold decision that forms the basic structure of a forgiving attitude. The first decision is negative, to refrain from inflicting injury in return for wrong done. Welch, for



example, appears to have decided not to seek personal revenge. Nor does he think that the state should kill the wrongdoer on his behalf. The decision to personally forgo retaliation is necessary but not sufficient to distinguish an intention to forgive from an intention to seek revenge. An additional intention seems necessary to give a positive focus to the individual's attitude toward the wrongdoer. As a bare minimum, it would seem that another feature of the structure of forgiving would have to draw upon the forgiver's general attitude of goodwill towards others and have some aspect of that focused on the wrongdoer. I contend that Welch's references to McVeigh's soul and the sanctity of life are evidence of a minimum of goodwill already extended toward McVeigh and a decision of Welch to commit to do more over time. Unlike others who have been quoted in the press, Welch does not vilify McVeigh as a degenerate animal, as one who does not deserve to live, who has forfeited all human rights. Another survivor gives voice to such a vengeful attitude: "I don't want McVeigh to have the freedom to even get a drink of water in his cell."<sup>8</sup> Even though Welch has not yet worked out his personal feelings toward McVeigh and has not found the peace of mind he is longing for, he seems to illustrate a first step in the process of forgiving. He already possesses the goodwill that can spur further changes in the way he thinks and feels and acts towards McVeigh.

Recognizing the need to forgive is already a stage in the forgiving process. The stage may be characterized as ethical to the extent that the forgiver also has a sense that a good reason is necessary to justify the forgiving. Welch eventually may draw upon his Catholic background to supply him with a ready source of credible moral concepts and reasoning. But even before he explores this resource in more depth, if he does, it may be possible to identify in him an initial awareness that manifests the bare minimum of justification for forgiving. He seems to possess, at the very least, an intuitive sense that it is the right thing to do, to personally do no harm to the wrongdoer and to try to do some good that acknowledges that the wrongdoer still has some moral standing in the community.

This initial awareness suggests a posture of openness and willingness to explore the forgiving path. My thesis is that this posture already is a part of, not just preliminary to, the process of forgiving. This posture may serve as the general framework that gives initial structure to the process of ethical forgiving. Overall evaluation of an individual's response to wrongdoing depends on such variables as the sincerity of the goodwill intention, the quality and duration of negative feelings, the quality and depth of self-awareness and reflectiveness about moral reasons, the strength of commitment to act, and the consistency of action. But on the whole, evaluation must bear on the life story that recounts the process of

response to a case of wrongdoing rather than a single decision or act of the forgiver. The phrase, "trying to forgive", may well sum up, not someone who has yet to make up their mind to forgive, but rather the story of someone in the process of forgiving and also struggling as long as it takes to reach closure. The phrase, "trying to forgive", also implies that in some cases forgiving lasts a lifetime and closure is never complete.<sup>9</sup>

### Negative Feelings

The process model sketched above suggests that the initial attitude of goodwill toward the wrongdoer is consistent with the process of some negative feelings in the forgiver, in the beginning and perhaps throughout the forgiving process. Thus, Welch can be angry but still want some good for the wrongdoer. Over the long run, however, one measure of the sincerity of an individual's attention to show goodwill is success in coming to terms with one's feelings so that one can find some inner peace<sup>10</sup>, but also so that one can avoid jeopardizing one's relationship or connection with the wrongdoer and one's role in the ongoing life of the community. In most cases, hopefully, the forgiver can gradually diminish unwanted feelings that are destructive of self and others.<sup>11</sup> But even in the worst case scenario, when feelings cannot be overcome entirely, acts of forgiving have ethical value if there prevails an intention to show the wrongdoer some goodwill and there is sincere effort to act in accordance with this intention.

H.J.N. Horsbrugh, one of the few to characterize forgiveness as a process, shares with many authors the view that forgiveness is the complete overcoming of negative feelings. Even though he distinguishes between the original volition to forgive that begins the process and the level of achievement which may take time, he clearly places emphasis on the ideal, the point of fruition when all negative feelings are, in his words, "extirpated." He compares this to hitting the bull's-eye. But the impression is that he is thinking of a kind of competition in which a person has one or a limited number of arrows to shoot, and hitting the bull is what wins the prize. In my model, the analogy is more like developing a virtue that includes commitment to practice as long as it takes to master the skill of consistently hitting the target and perhaps over time finding the bull more often than not. In the best case scenario, in a particular practice session, one hits the bull repeatedly and then feels no further need to be on the archery range. This illustrates reaching the point of having managed to control one's feelings satisfactorily in one specific case of forgiving. Then the person only returns to the archery range the next time one is called to be forgiving. If the virtue of forgiving is well-developed, it may take less time to get back into the groove of being consistently on target. My version of



the archery analogy seems more realistic and is comparable to other challenging situations that require us to continuously struggle, as we seek to reaffirm our initial resolve to show goodwill to others and keep our caring skills sharp. Rare is the occasion when we experience the "spontaneous reversal of feeling" that Horsbrugh says can occur when the decision to forgive in a quarrel between old friends happens almost automatically.<sup>12</sup> Horsbrugh and others would have us aspire to this ideal, but then warn us that failure to achieve the ideal means forgiveness is not yet within our grasp. My view is that the intention to show the wrongdoer some goodwill itself provides a minimum of ethical integrity to forgiving, both in its beginning stage and throughout the process, however long it takes.

J.G. Haber offers an alternative to Horsbrugh when he argues that a key element defining the meaning of forgiveness is the sincere intention to will away resentment. The expression, "I forgive you," among other things, must mean that the individual actually has overcome resentment. This agrees with Horsbrugh's position. Or, "I forgive you" may mean that the individual "is at least willing to try to overcome it [resentment]."<sup>13</sup> This second meaning is consistent with the model I am advocating above. The intention to show goodwill should include a commitment to overcome resentment. Haber, however, does not acknowledge that other negative feelings need to be included in such a commitment. Nor is he willing to grant that forgiveness has moral status based on such a commitment. He argues that the only sufficient reason that makes forgiveness a moral act is sincere repentance on the part of the wrongdoer. Again, this seems to focus on a particular ideal that may define what constitutes "authentic" forgiveness, the fullness of realization of forgiveness. My concern is to show that we need to develop a minimal meaning for moral forgiving which serves as a general form that can manifest different degrees of realization depending on level of mastery of negative feelings, whatever they may be, and depending on the quality of reasons used to justify the forgiving as ethical.

### **Ethical Reasons that Justify Forgiving**

The foundational reason advocated in this paper for determining what is ethical is the general intention to show goodwill to the wrongdoer. Further specification and expansion of this reason is possible by integrating one or more reasons elaborated on in different models of ethical forgiving found in the literature.

Welch's allusion to peace of mind suggests that egocentric reasons may dominate at an early stage in the forgiving process. But self-

preservation is not necessarily incompatible with goodwill unless a sense of altruism is virtually absent. It might be absent if a person were to say "I forgive you," and have in mind: "I just can't stand the hurt of it anymore and want to be done with it," or "I need to get rid of the guilt I feel in not forgiving." If no element of goodwill is present in the individual's awareness and intention, then it seems that even though the word "forgiveness" is uttered (or thought), the basic meaning of the concept, at least as I have articulated it, does not apply and use of the term is inappropriate.

Most of the philosophical literature goes beyond egocentric reasons and stresses the larger goals of reconciliation and restoring/building the moral community as the basis for good reasons that justify ethical forgiving. My purpose in summarizing some of the options below is not to defend a particular model but only to show that the minimal approach that I am developing is consistent with all of the models. My thesis is that forgiving admits of degrees, of which one dimension is the quality of the ethical reasons cited to justify a process of forgiving actions. Most of the discussion in the literature has grappled with how to adjudicate such quality and determine the best model. I will group these models under two approaches, one which emphasizes self-reform of the forgiver, and the other the transformation of the wrongdoer.

### **Self-Reform of the Forgiver**

Joseph Butler and many others call for keeping a tight reign on resentment and other negative emotions so that constructive relationships can be maintained.<sup>14</sup> Others see a need for a change of heart in the forgiver. Jean Hampton asks us to see the wrongdoer in a new light, in effect to separate the sin from the sinner as Augustine suggested.<sup>15</sup> Cheshire Calhoun challenges us to show respect for wrongdoers by sympathetically entering into their life histories and stop demanding that they be different from what they are.<sup>16</sup> Joanna North contends that a willed change of heart is the key to restoring damage done to relationships.<sup>17</sup> Appeals to humility, characteristically found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, tend to encourage unilateral forgiveness.<sup>18</sup> As individuals reflect on their own moral history, they realize that they have been in need of forgiveness, have been forgiven, and so should forgive others, even to the point of "forgiveness of enemies."<sup>19</sup> Self-transformation, of course, also may have the positive effect of facilitating transformation of the wrongdoer. Forgiveness as proof of love may be more powerful than punishment in touching the heart of the wrongdoer, according to Hastings Rashdall.<sup>20</sup>



In sum these self-reform models tend to view forgiveness as unconditional and unilateral. They often refer to respect for others and love and compassion as operative principles or virtues to achieve reintegration of the wrongdoer into a relationship or into the community.

### **Transformation of the Wrongdoer**

Repentance has received the most attention in models that require signs of transformation of the wrongdoer to justify forgiveness. Regret and the promise to do no wrong in the future are the basic elements of repentance cited. Haber sees repentance as necessary to "negate the justifiability of the injured party's resentment," and to preserve the victim's self-respect.<sup>21</sup> John Wilson shows that repentance is a means to reconciliation since it restores a kind of equality between the wrongdoer and the forgiver based on "norms of fair play."<sup>22</sup> If you don't play by the rules of a relationship or society, then you have to pay a penalty. Justice-related reasons may include references to the humiliation and suffering already experienced by the wrongdoer.<sup>23</sup>

The Welch case suggests a transformation model based on the Catholic idea of satisfaction or penance. In the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation, the wrongdoers receive absolution after confessing sins, but must commit to restoring their spiritual health. Doing penance is the means and, in the words of the *New Catholic Catechism*, may "consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of [sic] neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear [that is, to associate oneself with the suffering and death of Christ]."<sup>24</sup> Justice as well may demand repair of the harm done by means of compensation for injuries, etc.

Transformation models also may focus on the future potential of wrongdoers. Hannah Arendt argues that forgiveness is necessary to counter "the predicament of irreversibility."<sup>25</sup> Persons cannot move forward in their lives, in case of serious wrongdoing, if we cannot be released from the consequences of their deeds.

Models that require transformation of the wrongdoer tend to view forgiveness as conditional and bilateral. They refer to mutual respect and justice as the principles necessary for restoring a sense of community among moral equals.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined a position that defines ethical forgiving as a process guided primarily by an intention to show goodwill to the



wrongdoer. The value of this approach is that it fits with commonsense experience that forgiving, like other forms of action involving commitment, admits of degrees of realization. This approach avoids the problems of exclusiveness and relativism related to other models. Many models of forgiveness describe an exclusive ideal standard that leaves little room for our ordinary experience of progressing (and sometimes regressing) through stages of development from lower through higher levels of ethical forgiving. With a development model, our intuition is that we can function ethically even while struggling with our feelings and while trying to sort out our reasoning. Other commentators suggest that the term forgiveness defies easy categorization because it has as many meanings as individuals use it to mean. This relativistic approach only serves to confuse forgiveness with other concepts like mercy, pardon, condonation, absolution, excuse, exoneration, and leniency; and in the extreme, forgiveness even has been construed as a form of retaliation.<sup>26</sup> My position makes the modest claim that forgiving includes a core meaning that can accommodate definitions of the ideal at one end of a continuum and the first minimal step of ethical forgiving at the other. But there is an identifiable continuum that clearly differentiates forgiving from other related concepts.

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2. For specific discussion on the phrase, see Note 1, Horsbrugh, and J. Haber, *Forgiveness* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), pp. 17-19.
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