

JAEPL, Vol. 16, Winter 2010-2011

## The Forgiveness Classroom: Bringing Together Students from Both Sides of the Walls through Deep Listening

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*“Here they are, all sitting in a circle: The killers and the rapists, the drug dealers and the drug users, the men who stole from others and the men who beat their girlfriends. It is December. There is tinsel strung up on the walls of the visitors’ room at Bay State Correctional Center in Norfolk. A sign above the double doors up front reads: ‘Visits end here.’ But there are no visitors here today, just prisoners. And one of them, Joseph Allen Jr., says he would like to talk about the time his father killed his mother.”*

*“. . . Murdering mothers and abducting daughters are to many people unforgivable acts. But here, in a class called ‘The Nature of Forgiveness’ there is no such thing.”*

—Keith O’Brien, “The Hardest Word,”  
Boston Globe Magazine, April 1, 2007

I have taught seminars and workshops on forgiveness at prisons in Massachusetts and Maine and at Pollsmoor prison in Cape Town, South Africa. This work was an outgrowth of my research on forgiveness in the aftermath of trauma. Keith O’Brien described my Boston University prison course in his *Boston Globe Magazine* article “The Hardest Word.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, I’ve run my forgiveness seminar on the campuses of Boston University and Endicott College, and my most recent work involves bringing students together from both sides of the walls.<sup>2</sup>

My twelve-plus years of focus on forgiveness in the aftermath of trauma stems from my experience that compassion and forgiveness can serve to reduce violence significantly. Over the years, I have worked with many men who have committed extreme acts of violence, and who are now living in relative peace as they pursue their ongoing transformation. Many have achieved significant insight into the motivations behind their past behavior even as this ownership-taking process continues. If there is one thing above anything else that has helped them achieve their new way of living, it may be the experience of being listened to, and it is this crucial quality that I will focus on here. This deceptively simple tool of listening—deeply listening—has great power to effectively address much violence.

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\* Ruth Henderson’s research and fieldwork centers on forgiveness in the aftermath of trauma and the role that narrative plays in the forgiveness process. Her work takes her to South Africa, Germany, Israel, and into New England prisons where she has worked as an arts therapist and educator for over twelve years. She created a seminar on forgiveness for incarcerated men through Boston University’s Prison Education Program, and she now teaches this course on college campuses.

1. *Boston Globe Magazine*, April 1, 2007. See [http://www.boston.com/news/globe/magazine/articles/2007/04/01/the\\_hardest\\_word/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/magazine/articles/2007/04/01/the_hardest_word/)

2. The incarcerated men who participated in this meeting had participated in a one-day forgiveness workshop with me. They were not part of the college seminar I teach in prison. Their responses to the material were no different than those of the inmates in my seminars.

The following is presented not as a model to replicate, but as an essay designed to stimulate reflection on the role that listening can play in addressing the root causes of violence and an invitation for readers to explore how they might encourage deeper listening in their teaching practice. Here, I use the term *practice* in its broader sense, as when we speak of spiritual practice. For me, teaching is a sacred experience.

### My Pedagogical Approach

Keith O'Brien describes the openness of the educational approach I use in this seminar, which was employed in both my prison course and my on-campus classes:

Forgiveness . . . requires deep thought about the past. But whether they actually learned to forgive themselves or others was up to them, Henderson told the men. Their grades were not dependent on that. The men could even take the class pass-fail if they wanted . . . All she asked them to do was really consider things, walk away with some insight, and respect the men in the circle. (47)

The flexibility of this approach, the seeming absence of rules, is heretical to the instruction-oriented, outcome-based pedagogies that dominate education today. Yet the less I was concerned with "instruction" and "results," the more I was available to listen to the students, the more learning seemed to occur. While this may sound more like therapy, and I have no doubt that this educational experience was therapeutic for some, this was very much an academic course. The listening I was doing—that all of us in the class were doing—was sparked by reading and writing assignments, student discussion, current events and possibly, on occasion, last night's dream.

When Parker Palmer points out that teaching can create an extraordinary kind of space, Mary Rose O'Reilley responds:

For what, we wonder? Well, for whatever has to happen. The act of contemplation begins, for each of us, simply in creating a space . . . . After twenty-five years of teaching it takes all the courage I have to keep silence. . . . Something can rush in, something we did not plan and cannot control; how each of us, students and teachers, experiences these openings will differ. (6)

This approach is often demanding, and certainly can be frightening at times, but the openness of this kind of teaching can enable the kind of learning that stays with students throughout their lives. I was fortunate enough to experience this as a student in some formal educational settings, and so it was easier for me to develop this approach in my college teaching.<sup>3</sup>

O'Reilley further describes the openness of her teaching approach, which is very much in accordance with my educational values and methods, whether I taught the forgiveness course in prisons or on a college campus:

Pedagogy emphasizes technique; spirituality addresses who we are . . . when we talk about teaching within a contemplative frame of reference, I think we should keep our

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3. My graduate school education was interdisciplinary and learner-centered—essential elements which enabled me to create the curriculum that I teach.

prescriptions to a minimum.

Good teachers . . . seldom tell you how to do whatever it is they do . . . . Dance teacher [Arthur Murray] did not paint little feet on the floor . . . . That's why, approached in one way, it's so hard to figure out what he was teaching, and approached in another, so easy. *It's easy if you just dance and get the feeling of the process from within the process itself* [emphasis mine].

So please don't try anything I've done . . . rather . . . follow the deepest leadings of your own heart . . . let methodology follow from the particular (this student, this hour, this blue spruce) rather than from the world of theory. (14)

As a scholar-practitioner, I offer my work as a *poetics of forgiveness*. By this I mean that my approach has more to do with the creative experience of poetry than it does with the construction of a fixed theory or argument. My approach is best understood as a *creative work*, the application of which has moved me beyond the limits of a conventional academic course. The creation of my forgiveness seminar was, for me, the creation of a poem. It is a kind of artistic creation, akin to a work of theatre, where every performance is unique, and dependent upon many actors. I understand my pedagogy itself as a living, breathing thing, not a static theory. And because of this, I invite readers to read about my seminar in the way a poet might read a poem: with the analytical aspect taking a back seat, still in the car, so to speak, but letting intuition drive.

While I am very intuitive and foster intuitive experience in my classroom, there *are* some instructional suggestions that I use from time to time, but they are small, simple and, like O'Reilly's approach, come out of the moment. For example, in the beginning of the semester, I talk a little bit about how one can use silence by drawing upon common meditation practices, such as recognizing thoughts as they interrupt the focus on your breath, and the compassionate detachment from those thoughts by acknowledging them and then letting them go. Easier said than done!

Wendell Berry offers spiritual instructions about how to enter the consciousness of creativity and contemplation in "How to Be a Poet," which is a listening we may bring to other people or to the *page*, whether we are writing or reading:

Make a place to sit down.  
Sit down. Be Quiet

Breathe with unconditional breath  
the unconditioned air.  
Shun electric wire.  
Communicate slowly. Live  
a three-dimensional life;  
stay away from screens.

Accept what comes from silence.  
Make the best you can of it.  
Of the little words that come  
out of the silence, like prayers  
prayed back to the one who prays,  
make a poem that does not disturb the silence  
from which it came.

In my own education, I discovered that contemplative silence as a learning process not only enabled deep listening, but just as importantly, it enabled *action* that came from awareness and clarity. My research on forgiveness was developed through qualitative investigation of the subject and later in collaboration with my inmate-students through teaching the seminar. This forgiveness work then developed further in collaboration with my college-campus students, as the course expanded its reach. Real education, to my

mind, consists of developing insights and discoveries that are acted upon. But what those actions are, I leave up to the student.

Forgiveness involves not just the mind, but the heart—many would say the *soul*. My seminar, whose title evolved to *The Experience of Forgiveness: Psychological, Sociological and Spiritual Perspectives*,<sup>4</sup> was designed from this premise. This broader, interdisciplinary approach has been met with great appreciation and also with great resistance. Many students on both sides of the walls expressed a yearning to bring their “whole selves” into the classroom. Some academic administrators have been very encouraging of this approach. Others have found it quite threatening. Overcoming resistance from the system—both in the prisons and in academia—has always been more taxing than doing the actual work with the students, but the students have always made it worth it.

### **My Background and How I Developed the Seminar**

My passion for working with prisoners began as an undergraduate at Boston University, where I took an English course with Professor Elizabeth (“Ma”) Barker, who had founded the BU Prison Education Program (PEP). Barker invited my class to a poetry reading at Norfolk prison (where Malcolm X learned to read), and I was enraptured immediately. Stunned by the intelligence, creativity, and moral sensitivity of the incarcerated men that I met, I started volunteering at the prison. Upon graduation, I co-taught an acting course at Norfolk in 1989, and this course inspired me to get a master’s degree in arts therapy, where I focused on working with incarcerated men. Among the prisons I’ve worked in are Bridgewater State Hospital (of Fred Wiseman’s *Titicut Follies* infamy) and the Treatment Center for the Sexually Dangerous.

One day, while working inside, I started wondering about the rehabilitative process for the *victims* of these men. At that point, I left my prison work to earn a doctorate in narrative studies, focusing my research on forgiveness. After investigating the stories of victims’ healing experiences through forgiveness outside the prison setting, I returned to work with inmates again. In this way, I’ve come full circle.

I taught the seminar for three semesters behind the walls and then started teaching the forgiveness course on college campuses. There, I began to dream about doing what my mentor Elizabeth Barker had done—bringing students into the prison with me. The opportunity arose at Endicott College, when a group of students in my forgiveness seminar asked me if I’d work with them through their Student Peace Alliance chapter. Before describing the experience of going into the prison with the Endicott students, let me further describe the forgiveness seminar they were taking.

The forgiveness seminar I designed was a hybrid program combining education, therapy and spirituality. I based my course in an academic environment because it had all the elements of a conventional academic course, such as assigned readings, final papers and grades, but the hybrid nature of the course enabled students to include both their

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4. The course name was changed when I extended the seminar to the Boston University campus and then used the new name when I brought the course to Endicott College. I chose to change the name to provide a more comprehensive description of the course than the original title afforded. It is important to note that the course content did *not* change, for the most part, when the course was brought to campus.

feeling experience and their spiritual insights in their learning processes. While the course that I created may be unique in this respect, the principles and practices that governed my work are the most basic forms of human caring. They are used by people of all walks of life, throughout the world, every day—to great effect. Yet these principles are often lost today in the flux of complex socio-economic and political dynamics, resulting in much dehumanization. Comprehensive analysis of the harsh forces that fuel such violent dynamics and the inhuman treatment of individuals are beyond the scope of my expertise.

What I *can* offer is a glimpse of how I worked with men who have committed extreme acts of violence and who are now living in relative peace. I present myself as a witness to these men, who have achieved significant insight into the motivations behind their past behavior and who continue to engage in their ongoing transformation. The basic tools of compassion—like being carefully listened to—have helped them achieve their new way of living, and it is these simple tools that need to be rediscovered. It is my conviction that only by recommitting to these basic forms of compassion will it be possible to effectively address the violence that plagues us.

As forensic psychiatrist James Gilligan and others have pointed out, we know how to prevent violence; we simply have been unwilling to pay the cost of doing so.<sup>5</sup> It is my hope that reflection on the basic elements of human compassion can serve to stimulate renewed awareness and inspiration for addressing violence in its various forms through the exercise of deeper listening.

### **Seminar Specifics: Details of Its Contents**

To give you a clearer picture of what we were actually doing in the seminar, let me provide some of the nuts and bolts of the course. The following course catalog description and the questions that guided the classroom discussion were used in all of the college forgiveness seminars I have taught—on both sides of the walls.

#### *Course Description*

This seminar explores the psycho/ social/ spiritual dimensions of the individual's experience of forgiveness. The forgiveness process is investigated through the theoretical work of psychologists such as Carl Jung and Robert Enright, and spiritual/ political leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. Individual narratives by forgivers are considered and analyzed in relation to the frames provided by these researchers and political activists. Through readings, journals and group presentations, students will explore both the beneficial and problematic

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5. Gilligan states "My own work over the past twenty-five years, in violence prevention programs with the most violent homicidal . . . men that our unusually violent American society produces. . . has convinced me that it is possible to eliminate most of the violence that now plagues us if we really want to. I am far from alone in reaching the conclusion that violence prevention is being limited more by lack of will than by lack of know-how. Elliott Currie in one of the best American studies of criminal violence that has yet been written also concludes ' . . . it is not because the problem is overwhelmingly mysterious or because we do not know what to do, but because we have decided that the benefits of changing those conditions aren't worth the costs.'" (22)

aspects of forgiving. Students will develop a warranted, personal position on forgiveness and its limitations in personal and social life.

### Questions that Guided Classroom Discussion

The following open-ended questions were each given as separate, written assignments, which were then discussed in small groups and later brought back to the class by group reporters:

- What is forgiveness?
- Who is forgiveness for?
- Is forgiveness a response of weakness or strength?
- What are the benefits of forgiving?
- What are some of the ways people forgive?
- What are the obstacles to forgiving?
- According to Martin Luther King Jr., why should we love our enemies?
- Also according to King, how does one love one's enemies?
- What is love?

Students in all of my forgiveness classes wrote final papers consisting of two parts: part one was academic (some variation of “choose a leader we studied, focus on a passage from the reading, and discuss its transformative significance in terms of individual and societal forgiveness”). Part two was a personal response to the content of the seminar. Here, students focused on the most significant insight they had gained from the course—their *a-ha* experience, describing what they learned and why it was meaningful to them. The prisoners worried over their papers as all good students do. From an academic perspective, the inmates were diligent students, even as some of them struggled to write effectively.

When I taught the class on campus, I wondered if it would have the vitality that it did in prison. But the students on campus rose to the occasion when offered the opportunity to integrate the academic and the personal. In their final papers, they fulfilled the academic requirements even as one student wrote about forgiveness and the death of a parent, and another described his struggle to forgive an alcoholic father after he abandoned the family.

### *Listening 101*

Early in the course, all students in my forgiveness seminars are introduced to the tool that is fundamental to this educational process: the crucial ability to listen deeply. The first reading assigned is Carl Rogers' “Communication: Its Blocking and its Facilitation.” In this article, Rogers explains the reason listening is so difficult is that if we listen with an open heart and mind, we might have to change not only what we do in the world, but our very sense of who we are. Rogers gives the example of listening to a Communist during the height of the Cold War (for today, think *terrorist*). Nothing could be more threatening than to have our sense of self questioned at the core, and so we often half-listen or listen only to formulate our counter-argument.

To address this issue, Rogers suggests that when talking with someone whom we disagree with, we do not say anything about our own perspective until we have been

able to reiterate—to the satisfaction of the person we are having a dialogue with—that person's viewpoint. Rogers also suggests that we actively seek out those aspects of the other person's position that we can value and acknowledge these things. In this way, we begin to empathize. This article had a profound effect on many students who worked to practice the openness of this kind of deep listening.

Students cultivated their listening skills through a variety of means. They developed the practice of *listening to oneself* through journal writing, *listening to one another* through group dialogue, and *listening for the spiritually transcendent* (however that is envisioned) through meditation. These listening skills are akin to what Peter Elbow describes as the development of *in-dwelling*, where the language of story and poetry help us experience alien ideas.<sup>6</sup> Students reflected on the diverse narratives in the reading as well as the stories of each other as if making them their own.

Learners in college as well as in prison grew to love the practice and benefits of deep listening, but both groups also struggled to develop this difficult set of skills. One challenge concerned meditation, which I introduced to classes by giving a very basic overview of the range of meditation options. Some of these approaches we would try in class. I am no expert in meditation and told them so. This openness enabled a strong connection with students who appreciated my transparency. In the prison, I would often draw out those students who were experienced meditators, inviting them to lead the short meditation portion of class.

Classes on both sides of the walls had members who found it difficult to meditate. In both situations, I approached the issue in the same way: by affirming their experience and encouraging them to do what they felt comfortable doing, which might mean turning to reading or writing when the meditation became uncomfortable, or by quietly going off to the bathroom if they wanted to take a break. Giving these options to students always addressed the problem, and most stayed and did some meditation, once they knew they didn't "have to."

At times, students on both sides of the walls found it challenging to listen during classroom dialogue. I used *meditation as a conflict resolution tool* to address these occasions. For example, in my seminar on the Boston University campus, significant tension arose as we discussed forgiveness in relation to the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And in Norfolk prison, one student confronted another who was wearing sunglasses, accusing him of hiding from the class. In each situation, tension escalated, and as voices began to rise, I stopped them for a teaching moment and said we could use meditation as a tool to diffuse the interpersonal conflict. Any way they wanted to use the meditative silence was fine, I told them, "but the only thing you should not do is to rehearse your rebuttal to the person with whom you don't agree."

Since I had encouraged students to use the classroom as a laboratory, some student or other would make mention of Carl Rogers' communication strategy, quote a line from Martin Luther King Jr., or cite another figure we were studying. I always found it remarkable to see how students would work on such profound levels in these moments and how they would try to work as a group to resolve the tension. "We love you anyway,"

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6. For an excellent article on the practical ways learners can enter into the perspectives of foreigners, see Peter Elbow's article in the bibliography.

one prisoner called out when the sunglass-clad student refused to take his glasses off. By the next class, the student had shed the sunglasses.

Group silence was powerful. During these times that tension arose, I lengthened our meditation period. Meditation served us well in calming things down in order to return to the heated issues later on. In the five semesters that I taught this course, several students who started to meditate outside class told me they were able to handle conflict in a more productive way as a result of meditating.

Another benefit of meditation for some of the incarcerated men (and I'm sure for the on-campus students to some degree) concerned the opportunity to work with their fear. In meditation, the men were directly confronted with themselves. Many of them have run away from this experience much of their lives, and so it can be very disturbing to face themselves in the silence of meditation. For some of the men, it is terrifying to do this. Since much violence can occur when an offender feels frightened, the meditation exercise gives men an opportunity to be scared and this time, not act out aggressively from their fear—to learn how to cope with fear differently. As one of my students once said about this issue, "In the old days, when I was afraid, I made *you* afraid." Fear of silent meditation did not appear to be an obvious issue on campus, but fear had to be worked through for the five students in my Endicott forgiveness class who wanted to go into the prison.

### **Preparing Endicott College Students to Meet Inmates**

We met as a group three or four times to prepare ourselves for the encounter. In addition to using short, meditative silences to strengthen our listening ability, I asked them to keep journals of their thoughts and feelings about going in, particularly to write about any fears they had about meeting the prisoners.

We discussed their fears together. One student expressed fear of not knowing how he would respond to the prisoners. Would he have genuine compassion for them, or would he appear judgmental? Would he actually *be* judgmental? And just as important, would they judge *him* as a suburban kid who knew nothing of hardship and therefore couldn't be taken seriously? Another student was concerned about whether she would be able to "be herself" with them. She wondered how to be friendly and open while maintaining appropriate boundaries. For example, she was concerned about small talk leading to the question of where she lived, which happened to be in the state of Maine, and she did not want the prisoners to know this.

I listened and provided a space for students to respond to each other's concerns, offering my experience when I thought it would be helpful. This included telling the students what to expect in terms of getting into the prison (locking their personal possessions up, signing in, and going through a series of locked gates). I invited every question, which we discussed until all said they felt reasonably comfortable. By the last time we met, the group had gotten close and students indicated they felt fairly confident about going in, although, as one student put it, "It's like going on a roller coaster for the first time—there is still the unknown that won't go away until after you've done it."

This field trip was by invitation only. I chose five outstanding Endicott students from my on-campus forgiveness course. I knew them well, and they got along with each other well. Three of the students had just founded the Student Peace Alliance on campus, and



the other two students had been in other classes with me.

Each of the students I invited to be a part of the group said they'd like to go into the prison. I then asked them to talk it over with their parents. After they had a chance to talk with their parents, I called to talk with each parent for a half hour or more, giving them a picture of exactly what we would be doing and making sure I'd given them ample opportunity to express any question or concern they had.

### **Preparing Inmates to Meet Endicott College Students**

Preparing the inmates for the encounter was fairly simple. I had given a short workshop on forgiveness to their unit of 30-odd men prior to this, which was well received. So the men in this sex offender treatment program had a sense of who I was and how I worked. They had sent me a thank-you card via the program director Dr. Barbara Schwartz. Dr. Schwartz is an international expert in the treatment of sex offenders. She and I first met at the Treatment Center for the Sexually Dangerous in 1993, when I worked there as an arts therapist.<sup>7</sup> In preparation for this proposed meeting, I sent the following letter through Dr. Schwartz:

Dear Rule Program Men,

Thank you for the card you made me. It means so much. I, too, found our meeting together remarkable. You all had such open hearts and spoke your truths, whatever that truth was. I was so touched that I'm returning with some students from my on-campus forgiveness course.

These students have been listening to me as I have told them about you. They understand that you are all still human, regardless of what you have done in the past. They are eager to meet you, with open minds and with compassion in their hearts.

Now, I ask you, what would you like to say to my students?

You may want to begin by telling your story. You can tell them about who you are—where you have come from and who you are working to become. I recommend that you begin to reflect on this and start writing down your reflections in preparation for our meeting. [Some men wrote, some did not.] It would be good to bring your written reflections to the meeting, for you might want to read them to the group as a way to begin our discussion.

Remember that this experience is about developing understanding and connection through dialogue. Compassion and love are at the heart of this meeting.

There will be five students with me and I would like to have five volunteers to meet with them. If you have any questions, please convey them to Barbara Schwartz, and I will respond through her.

I am very excited to have this opportunity of learning and growth.

See you soon!

### **Going to Another World: A Narrative of the Face-to-Face Encounter**

The following narrative of the trip to the prison is largely comprised of quotes that came from written reflections made by both Endicott College (EC) students and the

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7. Dr. Schwartz was the clinical director there at the time. I knew of her renown prior to taking the job at the Treatment Center and accepted the position with the stipulation that I receive individual supervision under her. She later served on my doctoral committee.

prisoners after the experience. Occasional comments of my own experience as facilitator are also interspersed.

Jill, a dark-haired sophomore with brown eyes, begins:

When we took the trip up to Windham for a very unconventional field trip . . . . I was not mentally ready yet . . . a little lost . . . I had no grasp on my feelings. I was about to compassionately listen to five men who committed sex crimes. Not that I live a textbook life, but this still was a weird concept for me. Once we drove into the prison parking lot, I was most drawn to . . . how funny these buildings and barbed wire looked set in the middle of so much open land . . . set into the rolling hills . . . . It hit me as strangely beautiful.

I know something has been a big influence in my life when I remember the little details. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Teri, a slight guy in an oxford shirt and dark dress pants, commented on the meditation circle we held in the parking lot just before going into the prison: “I felt a strong bond between all of us; as if we were about to share something sacred and wouldn’t let foreign influence destroy it . . . . It was as if [we] . . . were brothers and sisters . . . this bond helped my confidence . . . going to a world I had never been in.”

Late afternoon, my students and I entered the gatehouse, where everyone entering the prison goes to register, lock up their personal possessions, get their hand stamped, and in our case, await our escort. Elizabeth, an EC sophomore with a confident gaze, describes her experience there:

While others were in the bathroom a guard [said] something . . . that made me feel a great deal of empathy towards those we were going to see. He asked us why we had chosen to go to see *that* block of prisoners; he told us they were the most undesirable people in the prison . . . *the sex offenders*. He said that . . . with such disdain . . . I looked away, not sure how to answer this man.

Elizabeth’s experience in this early moment was the exact opposite from mine. “God bless you for bringing those kids in here,” I heard a woman’s voice call out to me from the door as I washed my hands in the women’s bathroom.

A guard with a friendly smile escorted us out of the gatehouse, behind the walls, and down a long stretch of open space toward the building that housed the sex offender treatment program. Jill continues: “I felt a surge of adrenaline run through me as we walked into the common room. . . . I think that was my body saying ‘you know, you can still run.’ Or maybe it was saying ‘this is about to be a really important experience.’”

We went into the small meeting room where Barbara Schwartz works with the men. Painted on the wall was a giant, multi-colored circle, a diagram describing the deviant cycle of sexual abuse: “Triggers [what instigates the abuse], low risk situations, negative emotional states, medium risk situations, planning, grooming [victims], high risk situations, offense, transitory guilt, pretend normal.” Each of these categories was subdivided to promote recognition of thoughts, feelings and behaviors at each of the stages.

Barbara Schwartz, who uses an electrical scooter, had her service dog, “Tembo” next

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8. All student and inmate names are pseudonyms. Permission was obtained to cite their written commentary.

to her on the linoleum floor. An inmate in his 20s, balding, in a white tee-shirt and institution-issued pants, came into the room with a vanilla ice cream cone. With every lick the inmate took, Tembo grew more pleading. After a few more licks, the young guy bent over and offered the rest to Tembo. Everyone cheered. None of us could have imagined in advance how important this simple moment would be to our unusual encounter, but it broke the ice. We immediately had a shared, human experience—and something nonthreatening to talk about!

We sat in a circle: five incarcerated men, five EC students (three young women and two young guys), Barbara Schwartz, and I. I read aloud the letter I'd sent the men, which served as a reminder that this encounter was occurring in the context of compassion and open-mindedness. I told them that I was open to whatever any one had to say, so long as it was respectful and came from the heart.<sup>9</sup>

Teri described how his nervousness began to fade when I started: "As soon as you began to talk, being familiar with your voice, I already felt a lot calmer. . . . It felt good to see how excited the men were, you could see it in their smiles . . . . They looked at you for the most part, I think because at that time, they weren't sure how we would react. . . ."

The inmates ranged in age from early 20s to early 60s. Most took great care in their grooming and dressing habits, although their dressing options were limited to the institution uniform of blue jeans, light blue shirts and grey sweat shirts.

An inmate named Jared, 30ish, with wavy, dark hair, described first meeting the EC students: "I must tell you, I was scared as hell, sitting in a room with a group of people I didn't know and wondering if I would say something to cause even one of you to think worse of a sex offender."

"I did not know . . . what to expect from the students that came with you," Al, a prisoner in his late forties, would later confirm. "The atmosphere in the room not only allowed, but also invited me to feel more comfortable, more at ease, and to share openly and honestly. Soon after we came into the room, I realized that your students had not journeyed here to put us down or to judge us."

We all introduced ourselves by first names only. Barbara suggested that the EC students also include their majors and class years. A few of them added a small comment in their introductions, such as: "I'm Sharon, I'm a sophomore, a nursing major, and I want you to know that I'm coming here to listen and that I don't believe everything I hear on TV."<sup>10</sup> During our preparation period Sharon had shared her fear that the group would have a difficult time getting into conversation. Now she was leading us in this important moment.

At Barbara's suggestion, when the men introduced themselves, they included the crime that had brought them to prison. In the treatment program which these men were immersed in, they were being taught to own what they had done. So out came their crimes: rape, sexual molestation of a step-child, murder in addition to rape.

But some inmates also added short comments to their unusual introductions.

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9. Barbara Schwartz added that it would be best for the men not to discuss their crimes in sexually graphic terms. She needed to say this since, as part of her therapy program, the men *do* speak in that manner.

10. This dialogue is a paraphrase.

Elizabeth recalls:

Max's first words really stuck with me; I think they always will. He said 'I am not this place.' He went on to say that he liked to coach sports for kids and that he had a family who loved him. It brought out a real side of him . . . and I related to him much like in the thoughts of the Dalai Lama, as a person who sought out happiness and wished to avoid suffering . . . I found them to be very polite and articulate people, who craved to be heard, and I was more than happy to listen.

As a facilitator, I was relieved to notice that when the inmates named their crimes, none of the students flinched. I was thankful for the quiet meditation we had practiced together, both in the parking lot beforehand and throughout the semester. Sharon describes her experience of listening to the inmates:

While sitting with the men, I could feel myself listening more attentively than ever in my life. It felt like I was meditating in a way because my attention stayed solely on the men and not on thoughts that often tried to sneak in. Such power radiated from the words they spoke that any planned reaction to what they might say did not follow through, especially when Steve told his story.

Steve, a tall and slender man, had a small, folded paper in his hand, which he kept before him, ready to consult if necessary. I asked if any of the inmates wanted to start us off, perhaps by reading a statement they might have prepared for the meeting. Steve jumped in. He told the group that in order to explain how he came to prison—specifically, how he had committed his crimes—he'd first need to tell us where he came from. He said:

I'm a perfect example of what can happen to a person when you keep secrets about sexual abuse. My whole family life was very dysfunctional; our father was a sexual abuser, raping my sisters almost every night. . . . We never told, and the abuse went on for years. . . . I myself had become a sexual abuser later on in my life because of all the secrets I kept. The hardest thing for me while in prison was . . . to face myself and to come to terms with the bad things that I have done in my past. . . . I hurt a lot of people.

As a child . . . I was filled with hate. By the age of 10 . . . I was stealing and getting into fights with bullies at school. By the time I was a teenager, I was angry . . . not being able to protect my siblings from my dad . . . . I trained myself not to feel hurt when I was about 16. . . . In the long run it made things worse. . . . It took me nearly 30 years in prison to change. . . . I've begun to think differently about others and myself. God helped me through one suicide attempt back in 1983. I now read my Bible every day and night . . . . I know I can call upon Him any time . . . as well as my friends in the Rule program.

Steve explained to the group that in addition to sexually abusing others, he was also in prison for having killed someone. Although he didn't go into the details then, Barbara Schwartz later told me that he had killed a man as a way to "practice" killing his father—his distorted idea to save his sisters. He then turned himself in to the police for the crime.

Sharon describes her experience of hearing Steve's narrative:

I always thought I would react negatively and shut off whomever I spoke to who uttered the words, 'I murdered a man.' This can be contributed to my thoughts on violence . . . . However, as those exact words slid out of Steve's mouth, nothing happened. No negative

emotion, no disgust, nothing. I accepted it without any second thought, and to me that proved I already was growing from this experience. To look into the eyes of not only a murderer but a sexual offender, I felt two powerful emotions: trust and hope.

Other inmates went on to speak of their experiences prior to treatment, and students responded by offering supportive remarks or by asking questions for further understanding. At this point the group was running itself. The inmates in the room started talking about a poem that another man in their treatment unit had written. Barbara had one of the inmates get the poem, and she read it aloud, including the lines:

Let me look through the eyes of the innocent one I hurt,  
Let me sort through all my lies, for once put her needs first,

Allow myself to feel her pain, when at first I broke her trust,  
Take me back to that night again, feeling empathy is a must.

Let me feel her shame and pain, I will keep it inside my heart,  
Never to forget her eyes of fear, when I tore her childhood apart.<sup>11</sup>

With Steve's story and the poem, we all entered a level of listening that defies explanation. I sensed it in the others, and I knew that I had entered into a prayerful listening, myself—the kind of listening I do when I know I am going to hear some dangerous thing that is far bigger than I am. This kind of listening protects me from details that could destroy me if I didn't access a greater Presence. As a result, the deplorable details of experiences that should never have occurred were somehow absorbed into this deep listening and instead of feeling overwhelmed by the situation being described, there was, what I would describe as a *lightness* in the room.

"I'm glad I got caught," one of the prisoners said.

EC student Corey, slim and soft-spoken, later recalled: "I thought prisoners had no remorse. While this may be true of some . . . it was most certainly not true of this man or any of the men I talked to. All of them faced what they had done with eyes wide open, and they were helped to not turn away from the pain they saw before them."

They were *helped to not turn away from the pain* through Barbara Schwartz's fine work, and in that moment, I believe, through our group's compassionate listening.

Then, the inmates Jared and Max started talking about the role that their spirituality plays in their transformation process. Both men have adopted Native American spiritual practices. I was aware of this important aspect of Jared's life because earlier, when I had facilitated a forgiveness workshop, he had given me as a parting present, a bird's feather, which had been sanctified in a ritual. Now Jared and Jill were talking about Native American spirituality. As Jill asked more questions, inmate Max started sharing *his* experience of this spirituality. Jill and Max went back and forth in a clear and close exchange.

Max pointed to a leather braid he wore around his neck and spoke about how he had made it and the importance it bore for him, spiritually. He took it off his neck and turned toward Jill. "I would like to give this to you," he said, "if it's OK with Barbara." Barbara nodded and Max turned to look for Jill's response to the offer. "I would be honored," Jill

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11. With permission of the author

affirmed.<sup>12</sup> The two of them stood up and in the middle of our circle, Max placed it on Jill's neck without touching her body in any way.

As the time drew toward a close, I asked each person to reflect upon the experience as a whole. Inmate Jared wrote: "Thank you for giving me the chance to share with you who I am as a man, rather than the bad choice so many people define me by." Steve, who had shared his story so comprehensively, described his experience of the encounter concisely: "I was very touched . . . It gave me a chance to tell my story to the students and to show we are still humans, even though our act was monstrous. Our goal is no more victims."

EC student Teri, who in our early preparatory discussions had feared he wouldn't feel sincere compassion for the inmates he met, describes how he felt after this experience: "The time we spent at the prison was one of the most genuine . . . of my life. It was like a natural high that you can only find when you try to help someone or something in the world. I could see it in all of us when we were leaving; we all didn't want to go. . . . I often find my mind going to the same place; it is sunset and I am back at Dorm 2 with the inmates. We are standing right outside the door, watching the sunset. It is very peaceful. It reminds me of a poem from the book *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko":

Sunset,  
accept this offering,  
Sunset.

### **Debriefing Process for Endicott College Students**

A week after our trip to Windham prison, four of the five Endicott students met with me. Jill shared her frustration at her roommates' response: "They asked me how it was, but then after I said a couple of sentences, they were distracted and turned away. I was telling them one of the most important things that ever happened in my life, and no one was listening."<sup>13</sup>

Sharon agreed. "Being back on campus feels kind of surreal after that experience. It feels like what we did in there was real and what we do out here is unreal because it's superficial compared to that."

But Corey said he thought it was good for the others to know about the experience, and he felt that the students in our larger forgiveness class would be genuinely interested. Elizabeth said she'd be up for sharing with the forgiveness class. I recommended that those who wanted to share in class could, and those who didn't, wouldn't.

When I asked if any other insight or concern had come up since we last met, Corey said, "Well, it made me feel very vulnerable, and later, not in a good way." We discussed his discomfort with the discrepancy between who he was with the men and the façade he often presents at school. I encouraged him to regard himself with compassion.

Teri jumped in next "There on the hill where everything was so exposed . . . I felt exposed . . . It wasn't bad . . . just very powerful."

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12. This dialogue is a close paraphrase.

13. This is a paraphrase based on notes of the conversation written directly after the discussion.

“Yes, we were all so vulnerable,” I said, “and it was that very vulnerability that kept us safe.” It has been my experience that when you have the clear motive of trying to be of service and when you empathize as much as you can with the inmates, it is the very permeable boundary of your psyche, created through empathy and the sense of service, that keeps you psychologically safe. This way, if someone wants to try and hurt you, it’s like a knife trying to cut water. Your very vulnerability turns you into water.

After reflecting together upon the prison visit, the students wrote comments. Corey offered this insight:

To hold a person accountable is right. To demonize that person for what they are being held accountable for is not. . . . The most dangerous person in the world is the person who has nothing to lose. When you prohibit a man who has committed a heinous crime from ever rejoining the human community, you create an alienated person that has no incentive to change his behavior.

And Jill wrote:

Throughout the process I have never doubted their humanity. But I don’t think I ever really looked at what their humanity would be like. . . . I never expected the men to be as vulnerable as they were. I’m working on the struggle of understanding how to have compassion for the perpetrator and the survivor or victim. What does it mean to say that you care about both of them? We are not raised to think that is possible. Sometimes I wonder if it is possible. But I know how I felt about those men after we met them and how I still feel when I’m writing this reflection. By caring for these men, it does not mean that I will stop putting all my heart towards helping the survivors of the trauma . . . . But I’m starting to see that it is an insult as well to neglect the perpetrator.

I sent the inmates the Endicott student’s responses to the experience, so the men could know how they had affected the students. I received the inmate’s responses to our meeting and shared them with the students at a later time. Jared’s comments were especially appreciated:

The hand shakes and kind words on your way out were genuine, real and moving. They showed me you all truly cared . . . . Words that were spoken that night [planted] deep roots in my life. I hope and pray you will never forget the power of our meeting, and that it has helped you all in some . . . profound way to understand there is goodness and love in even the darkest of places . . . . It did for me.

At the request of the EC students, our group also had a reunion at a restaurant near the College over a year-and-a-half later. After dinner, Elizabeth commented upon the fact that she would have liked to have a formal discussion about how we understood the prison experience. Here is Elizabeth’s assessment:

Two years later I can say that. . . going into the prisons with our group has made me a more open-minded individual . . . I have realized the root of the problem is much deeper than just their crime . . . . Our society has let these men fall through the cracks . . . The men I visited with in prison were often victims themselves. Prior to my visit I thought

that these men had committed these crimes of their own accord. And while you can argue they certainly did, I passionately feel that the abuse they suffered in their own lives has a direct correlation to their crime.

How has this experience changed my every day life? I would like to think that I am not so quick to judge the people around me. One never really knows someone else's suffering. . . . In the end, compassion is really the only thing that matters.

This is how the work continues.

### **Developing an Approach to Forgiveness Research and Practice**

Over twelve years ago, when I first began my research on forgiveness in the aftermath of trauma, I investigated the existing literature on forgiveness research that had been done in the field of psychology thus far. At that time, I not only discovered a paucity of material concerning the subject, but came to see there were two glaring omissions concerning *research approaches* to the study of forgiveness. The research being done in the field emphasized forgiveness as a *cognitive process* and employed, almost exclusively—the standard cognitive methodological approach of positivist-empiricism. This focus emanated from the discipline of psychology, whose academic culture favors thinking over feeling, and the mind over the body.

My focus on forgiving in the aftermath of trauma had heightened my awareness of these issues since traumatic injury often has a profound impact on the body, and the traumatized body, in turn, deeply influences both cognition and emotion. It is not to say that researchers weren't endorsing research that examined the physiological aspects of forgiving. Rather, they had constructed intervention models of forgiveness that left little room for the body in the process. Further, their models had been designed to exclude traumatized people from their respective forgiveness programs.

When I examined how these psychologists worked with emotions, I ran into a similar limitation. As a writer and arts therapist, I discovered that research approaches to the study of forgiveness omitted adequate exploration of feeling experience. I found that cognitive-oriented social science approaches didn't offer enough ways to respectfully facilitate non-rational engagement concerning forgiveness. The arts, on the other hand, incorporate the world of dreams, visions, images, and intuition.

While much can be gained from standard social science quantitative research concerning forgiveness, qualitative approaches are able to get to the *heart* of the forgiveness experience in a way no statistical analysis ever can. Qualitative approaches typically include one-on-one interviews using open-ended questions. Here, it is possible for the interviewer to open himself or herself up to an engagement with the unknown through deep listening. With this attentiveness, people being interviewed can tell their stories.

While traditional social scientists often include interviewing in their research, it doesn't tend to have the level of openness I'm talking about here. The kind of listening that I'm speaking of involves a vulnerability on the listener's part. The person asking questions is so open that s/he may be profoundly changed by receiving the speaker's response—not just as a professional, but as a person.

Artistic research methodologies facilitate the discovery of many unique insights by including the humanity of the investigator-creators, rather than by trying to detach



themselves from their humanness. In this way, I experience the culture of the arts as having more integrity for forgiveness research. That is, the arts provide a more integrated approach.

But the arts offer even more to the forgiveness process. They provide vehicles for healing. In addition to facilitating deep feeling processes, they provide frameworks to express such experience through structures such as poetry, dance and music. Because expression is fundamental to healing, engagement in the arts is often inherently therapeutic for someone who has been injured.

As a writer, I was most aware of this in terms of storytelling. Still, I was stunned to discover just how crucial a role story plays in healing. I learned that narrative engagement wasn't just important to the healing process of novelists, but was fundamental to the therapeutic experience of a vast spectrum of people (such as those speaking at truth commissions, historic memorials and self-help groups). As the men spoke their truth in the forgiveness seminar, the course became a place to hear their stories and to hold them as sacred.

### **A Final Word on Theoretical Influences**

Both my research and practice evolved in response to that which I was investigating. My research approach was eclectic and can be understood as an "emergent design," a term coined by Shulamit Reinharz, founding director of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute at Brandeis University.

In creating a poetics of forgiveness, *imagination* became a tool in the research process. Subject matter took precedence over any pre-established, formally structured methodology. I served the subject and, through intuition, the subject taught me how it wanted to be investigated each day. Yet, there are several psychologists whose theoretical work has deeply influenced my way of working. Carl Jung, Judith Herman, James Gilligan, and Clark Moustakas have provided cornerstones that enabled me to build my research and practice.

Carl Jung's transpersonal psychology taught me how to work with spiritual matter in a way that was detached from metaphysical debate and offered students a validation of their various experiences and acknowledgement of the basic human need for spirituality. Forensic psychiatrist James Gilligan was the Medical Director at Bridgewater State Hospital, when I worked there as an arts therapist. His book, *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic*, offers profound insights into the psychic terrain of violent men. Trauma psychiatrist Judith Herman provides the flip side of the equation of violence by outlining the therapeutic course trauma survivors generally take in their healing processes. While her work primarily highlights the experience of traumatized women, many of her findings not only apply to men, but also to male perpetrators, once we see they are also victims.

Finally, humanistic psychologist Clark Moustakas's transpersonal phenomenology and heuristic research methodology have had a major impact on how I approach my work. The major elements in Moustakas's transpersonal phenomenology are self-identification with the focus of inquiry, inner-dialoguing, heightened use of intuition, and indwelling. These elements have helped me understand the importance of Carl Rogers's deep listening on the profoundest level. The researcher or group facilitator seeks to put out of action her

preconceptions, theories, and ideas that would interfere with listening to and hearing the person in therapy from *his* perspectives and views. Such deep listening requires setting aside interfering moods, attachments, and concerns that intrude on the development of an open and fresh relationship with the person. Putting one's preconceptions aside and fully opening oneself to the new experience of listening to what the person has to say requires the commitment of significant energy. There is no substitute for the expenditure of such energy, if one wants to help the person transform.

On the other hand, the stages of Moustakas's heuristic process are immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis. As a writer, I found these latter stages to be congruent with the creative process of artists. One is paid a visit by the muse in the form of a powerful desire or a persistent pull to learn more about an issue, problem, or question. In spiritual terms, one might say a "call" is heard. Responding to the muse or call sets off a process where a student immerses himself in the subject of inquiry. This *immersion* in the material is followed by an *incubation* period, where the subject of inquiry is no longer the focus of the student's deliberate mental calculations. It is as if a seed has been planted, and it now lies in the ground until it is ready to sprout forth. It bursts forth only when it is ready, and with it comes the emergence of new insight. This *illumination* occurs spontaneously and is followed by an explication of the new insight, which is deepened as it is explained. This *explication* process is akin to a storytelling experience, where the storyteller, who begins the narrative, tentatively gains understanding as a result of telling the story. "A-ha moments" occur, and the explication of those moments naturally results. The seminar format I designed provided room for students to have incubation periods and to share their flashes of insight when they felt ready.

I am certain that my openness to the men I worked with played a substantial role in their willingness to be open and honest with me. This mutual openness was the ground of our exploration together. Clark Moustakas's deceptively simple tools enabled many creative, healing experiences. My use of them was equally creative in that I drew upon them spontaneously, and only when useful, for I had intuitively incorporated them into my own being.

The fruits of becoming present for another person's experience and deeply listening to *another* are life-changing. Such openness brings understanding, and deep understanding often brings a profound sense of personal peace. I know this peace. It is what fuels the work, which is bigger than I am. This kind of teaching enables me to continue learning how to listen and how to respond—and to watch people grow before my eyes.



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