

# THE PROMISE OF FORGIVENESS

## *Inner Healing is a Path to Social Revolution*

Sarah Elizabeth Clark

**T**welve years ago, near Cape Town, South Africa, four South African men, Easy Nofemela, Ntobeko Peni, and two others, murdered Amy Biehl, a white American Fulbright scholar. When South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission granted the men amnesty for their crime in 1998, Amy Biehl's parents supported the decision.

Linda Biehl, Amy's mother, wrote in an article called "Making Change" in the Fall 2004 issue of Greater Good magazine, "Easy and Ntobeko needed to confess and tell the truth in order to receive amnesty, and there was a genuine quality to their testimony. I had to get outside of myself and realize that these people lived in an environment that I'm not sure I could have survived in. What would you do if you had been oppressed for generations?"

She continues, "I do think forgiveness can be a fairly selfish thing. You do it for your own benefit because you don't want to harbor this pain, you don't want to hold this cancer in your body. So you work through it. The reconciliation part is the hard work. It's about making change."

Today, Easy Nofemela and Ntobeko Peni work with Linda Biehl at the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust in Cape Town, a charity that supports youth education and anti-violence programs in South Africa.

How is this possible? How on earth was Linda Biehl able to forgive the men who murdered her daughter? Why

would she ever want to? Why does this move and inspire us? What can we learn from this amazing story and from others like it?

The process of forgiveness is not merely sentimental, it is extremely transformative. It is transformative because it creates a new relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. Through the act of forgiveness, an individual is able to overcome his or her victimhood, feel empathy for their 'enemy,' and ultimately re-humanize the person who did them wrong. As we will also see, the act of forgiveness on community, national and international levels can even promote a new political world

order based on cooperation and dialogue, rather than threat and violence.

### *Forgiveness as Liberation*

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, one of the architects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, writes that a recent issue of the journal Spirituality and Health had on its front cover a picture of three U.S. ex-servicemen standing in front of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. One asks, "Have you forgiven those who held you prisoner of war?" "I will never forgive them," replies the other. His mate says: "Then it seems they still have you in prison, don't they?" (Tutu, p. 272)

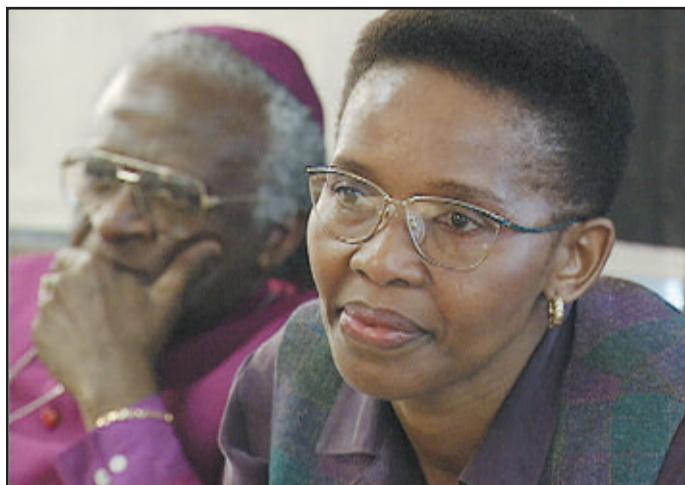
To forgive those who have wronged you is an act of great inner freedom, and though very difficult, it is also very necessary. In the act of forgiveness we declare our faith in the future of a relationship and in the capacity of the wrongdoer to change (Tutu, 2004, p.12). Forgiveness gives both the perpetrator and the victim the chance for a fresh start.

But what happens if the perpetrator does not offer contrition or seek forgiveness? Must the victim be dependent upon this request before he or she can forgive? Archbishop Tutu answers with an emphatic 'no.' If the victim could forgive only when the culprit confessed, he explains, then the victim would be locked into the culprit's whim, locked into victimhood, no matter her own attitude or intention (Tutu, p. 272).

For victims of crime, forgiveness is not condoning or excusing the crime. It is letting go of the power that the offence and the offender had over them. It means no longer letting the offence and the offender dominate.

### *Love the Sinner and Condemn the Sin*

Forgiveness can be extremely difficult. But, it becomes a little bit easier when one is able to separate the perpetra-



Truth and Reconciliation chair Desmond Tutu (L) and committee member Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela at the TRC hearings. Photo: IRIS FILMS, [www.irisfilms.org](http://www.irisfilms.org)

tor from the crime. The person is not evil, their act was evil. Peace philosopher Cheyney Ryan states, “When we forgive another what we accept is not what they have done or the acts that have injured us, but them. Forgiveness rests on a separation of doer and deed, the sinner and the sin.” (Hastings, p. 221.)

If perpetrators were to be dehumanized as monsters and demons then, as Archbishop Tutu explains regarding the TRC, “we were thereby letting accountability go out the window because we were then declaring that they were not moral agents to be held responsible for the deeds they had committed. Much more importantly, it meant that we abandoned all hope of their being able to change for the better.” (Tutu, p. 83.) If people who commit crimes are dismissed as monsters, they cannot, by definition, engage in a process so deeply meaningful as forgiveness and reconciliation.

### *Remembering and Forgiving*

“If forgetfulness is the enemy of justice, so also is it the enemy of forgiveness.” (Shriver, 2003, p.30.) People should not be asked to “forgive and forget”. On the contrary, it is important to remember so that we do not let atrocities happen again. As noted earlier, forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the hurt, and the truth (Tutu, 2004, p. 12). Forgiveness means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it. It tries to understand the perpetrators so as to engender empathy. In the words of Archbishop Tutu, one who forgives tries to “stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them” (Tutu, p. 271).

If we intend to move on and build a new kind of world community, there must be a way in which we can deal with a sordid past. If we do not, the process of healing will be subverted by the potential risk that some awful atrocity of the past would come to light that could undermine what had been accomplished thus far. If we do not, we will experience again, for example, the willingness of a Serb to kill a Muslim in revenge for ancestors who fought the Battle of Kosovo in 1389.

### *Political Forgiveness?*

When we move from the interpersonal to the sociopolitical realm, forgiveness becomes more complicated. Yet it is only in making such connections between the political and the personal that there can be transformation in our institutions.

Donald Shriver defines ‘politics’ simply as how humans get along with each other in spite of their conflicts (Shriver, p. 3). Seldom has any major political thinker considered forgiveness an essential servant of justice or as indispensable in the initial formation of political associations. Eventually, if opponents are not simply to go to war again with each other indefinitely, former enemies must find a

## Nine Steps to Forgiveness

by Fred Luskin

- 1) Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then, tell a couple of trusted people about your experience.
- 2) Make a commitment to yourself to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and no one else.
- 3) Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the person who upset you or condoning the action. In forgiveness you seek the peace and understanding that come from blaming people less after they offend you and taking those offenses less personally.
- 4) Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset you are suffering now, not from what offended you or hurt you two minutes—or 10 years—ago.
- 5) At the moment you feel upset, practice stress management to soothe your body’s flight or fight response.
- 6) Give up expecting things from your life or from other people that they do not choose to give you. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, friendship, and prosperity, and work hard to get them. However, these are “unenforceable rules:” You will suffer when you demand that these things occur, since you do not have the power to make them happen.
- 7) Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you.
- 8) Remember that a life well lived is your best approach. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving power over you to the person who caused you pain, learn to look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. Put more energy into appreciating what you have rather than attending to what you do not have.
- 9) Amend the way you look at your past so you remind yourself of your heroic choice to forgive.

way of living together. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “We must either learn to live together as brothers, or we are all going to perish together as fools.” (Shriver p. 5.)

Forgiveness in a political context, then, is an act that joins moral truth, forbearance, empathy, and commitment to repair a fractured human relation (Shriver, p.9). Such a combination calls for a collective turning from the past that neither ignores past evil nor excuses it, that neither overlooks justice nor reduces justice to revenge, that insists on the humanity of enemies even in the context of their dehumanizing deeds, and that values justice that restores community above the justice that destroys it (Shriver, p.9). Political forgiveness would begin to break the cycles of vengeance and violence that have plagued us for centuries.

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## THE PROMISE OF FORGIVENESS (CONTINUED)

### The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In South Africa, the world saw evidence that such a forgiveness process is possible. The post-apartheid government, headed by Nelson Mandela, established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in order to move the nation beyond the cycles of retribution and violence that had plagued so many other countries during their transitions from oppression to democracy. The TRC's work is superbly documented in the film "*Long Night's Journey into Day*".

The Commission granted perpetrators of political crimes the opportunity to appeal for amnesty by giving a full and truthful account of their actions and, if they so chose, an opportunity to ask for forgiveness. The Commission also gave victims of political crimes a chance to tell their stories, hear confessions, and thus unburden themselves from the pain and suffering they had experienced (Tutu, 2004, p.10).

The justice presented by the Commission was in the spirit of ubuntu, wherein the central concern is the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships, and a seeking to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offence (Tutu, p.55).

In order for South Africa to heal and become a more humane place, Archbishop Tutu reiterated, "we had to embrace our enemies as well as our friends" (Tutu, 2004, p.10). The same is true the world over. Our own dignity can only be measured in the way we treat others.

### After Forgiveness, What's Next?

Once the wrongdoer has confessed and the victim has forgiven, it does not mean the process is complete. In



Reconciliation is a long process with ups and downs.

Photo: IRIS FILMS, [www.irisfilms.org](http://www.irisfilms.org)

South Africa, the process of reconciliation has been placed in considerable jeopardy by the enormous disparities between the rich, mainly white, and the poor, mainly black. (Tutu, p.273)

The huge gap between the haves and the have-nots, which was largely created and maintained by apartheid, poses the greatest threat to reconciliation and stability.

Reconciliation is a long process with ups and downs, not something accomplished overnight. According to Archbishop Tutu, "the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has only been able to make a contribution. Reconciliation is going to have to be the concern of every South African....

"If one by one we counted people out  
For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long  
To get so we had no one left to live with.  
For to be social is to be forgiving."  
-Robert Frost

by making racial or other jokes that ridicule a particular group; by contributing to a culture of respect for human rights, and seeking to enhance tolerance—with zero tolerance for intolerance; by working for a more inclusive society where most, if not all, can feel they belong—that they are insiders and not aliens and strangers on the outside, relegated to the edges of society.

To work for reconciliation is to want to realize God's dream for humanity—when we will know that we are indeed members of one family, bound together in a delicate network of interdependence." (Tutu, p.274.)

What Archbishop Tutu speaks of is nothing short of creating a new world paradigm. Reconciliation—personal and societal transformation—is the end of a process that forgiveness begins, but it also sets the stage for a new way of living. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Forgiveness is not just an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude."

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