SOURCES OF RECONCILIATION
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THE FORGIVENESS WE NEED

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This talk, given first at Mountain House in Caux, Switzerland, was revised following the events of September 11, 2001, for the Inaugural Conference of the Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture at Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Mountain House, located in the picturesque village of Caux, 3000 feet above Lake Geneva in Switzerland, is the International Conference Center of Initiatives of Change, formally known as Moral Re-Armament. Since 1946, it has been a source of hope and reconciliation for divided people and nations the world over. Annual conferences each summer typically bring together more than 2000 people from over seventy countries.

Sources of Reconciliation

Reconciliation between those whose minds overflow with memories of past hurts suffered at the hands of 'the other' does not come easily. When, all too rarely, relationships are restored, it is experienced as a gift, though often from an unseen source. Reconciliation, like the fruit of a well-nourished tree, has varied sources. This series examines some of these sources and illustrates their sometimes gentle and sometimes dramatic influences in specific situations.

The Forgiveness We Need

Introduction

On Friday, November 22, 1963, some of us were just about finishing the text of the sermon we intended to preach the coming Sunday. Then a great, traumatic wound happened to our body politic; and, if we were wise theologians, we laid aside that intended text, and we tried as best we could to address a congregation in deep mourning over the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

"I caution myself about speaking about forgiveness too soon, before we have appreciated evil's crushing burden in the lives and deaths of those who have suffered its most immediate impacts."

Like that fateful weekend almost forty years ago, the privilege of speaking to this conference at its beginning comes to me, it turns out, at a moment in American and world history when it is hard for anyone to speak well, to speak at all. With my wife and children, I became a resident of New York City in 1975. Twenty-six years in that great city should be enough, one thinks, to make even a Virginian a New Yorker. Now,

barely three days after a great disaster in that city and in our nation's capital, the provincialism that separates us from the rest of this world has been decisively shattered for virtually all Americans. We are suddenly brought into lethal contact with strangers somewhere on earth who mean to kill us. In our deepest selves, we now know that we are part of a world human community. But it is not so much a community as a species addicted to war.

That makes this speech, this conference, this weekend difficult to put together. As Anthony Lewis wrote in the *Times*, "We, and the world, are looking for words that can bring us together against evil."[1] Here we are in this conference, asked to think and pray together about a "deeper understanding of forgiveness." I will do my best to find words for introducing this subject, but first I want to dwell upon two cautions.

The first has to do with acknowledging evil and calling it by that name. We Americans are an optimistic people, and even the Christians among us glide swiftly through the Lord's Prayer as though the Lukan version of its last line were not so full of fear and trembling: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." I have spent much of my life as an academic. As most of you are aware, university debate about ethics has suffered a firestorm of rhetoric around the subject of "post-modernism." That philosophy distances itself from all firm statements about right and wrong, good and bad, with the surmise that, after all, these human ideas rise and fall with the political power and sociological consensus underneath them. There is no such

thing as justice, just "victor's justice." There is no such thing as solid knowledge of good and evil, just rival claimants to the privilege of defining good and evil. If one of them wins the war, the election, the control of the media, its claim achieves authority. The other definitions languish in powerlessness.

This week in American history brings many of us up against the foolishness of this view of the world. Doubtless the post-modernists have something to tell us about how easy it is to assume that our views of right and wrong are absolute, that of others just relative. On some days, perhaps ethical relativism has to be given its hour in intellectual court. But on some other days - and this is one of them - human beings have to decide if anything about themselves is worth affirming as solidly, enduringly good; if any human deeds must be tagged, now and forever, as evil. My nomination for the first uncompromisable social-ethical principle concerns the status of human life itself. By no coincidence is murder the first social sin identified in the Ten Commandments. Carelessness about our own or our neighbors' lives is apparently easy for us humans to tolerate. But it is time in world history to reaffirm murder as intolerable. We have just lived through a human century that has compiled a historical record for the organized killing called war. The total number of humans killed in war between the years 1900 and 2000 comes to some 175,000,000. The average number of deaths by war during every hour of those hundred years is 200. (I had to do the arithmetic

three times to be convinced that this is the correct figure.)

In face of that sort of statistic, I have to reflect that talk about forgiveness will always be superficial, even unethical, if the talker has not stood with reverent fear and trembling before the reality of human evil. Paul Mojzes, born in Croatia, says that the unfolding of the Balkan wars has left him more convinced than ever about original sin. Original or just always reoccurring, our violence against each other in world history deserves the moral caution that, in the world of nature, belongs analogously to tornadoes, earthquakes, and volcanoes.

In a similar connection, as we begin to speak about forgiveness, I caution myself about speaking about it too soon, before we have appreciated evil's crushing burden in the lives and deaths of those who have suffered its most immediate impacts. I am a fortunate Manhattanite who did not work last Tuesday in the World Trade Center. I was not the father who phoned from a top floor to say good-bye to his wife and two small children. I am not the orphaned child of two parents massacred in Rwanda. Nor did my own government in Pol Pot's Cambodia widow me. Nor did my son disappear in a prison in pre-1990 Johannesburg. I have no right, therefore, to expect such victims of humanly enacted evil to turn soon to the possibility of forgiving those who have thus trespassed against them. As one who believes that the God and Father of Jesus means to heal this world of its sins, I must not lose touch with that belief. As for translating it into the realm of

our fractured human affairs, I must beware of calling anyone to forgive until I have struggled to appreciate the depth of their suffering, the depth of the evils which they suffer and which I have not yet had to suffer.

Having said that, I want now to venture upon something of a catechism of questions and answers about forgiveness, in quest of the "deeper understanding" which is the theme of this conference. In an astonishing way, the world of the 1990s embarked on such a quest in an explosion of literature, journalism, and political debate on the subject. Never before the 1990s have the words "forgiveness," "apology," and "reparation" entered so often in the speeches of political leaders, the headlines of newspapers, and learned debate among philosophers. A Cambodian scholar scanned the Internet in 1999 and found that as of that year 396 books on forgiveness were extant—a total of about 93,000 pages. Something is brewing in world culture around this subject. I believe that Christians have a contribution to make to world understanding of forgiveness, but for that to happen we need some clarifications and reassessments of our own understandings of this classic element in our historic faith and ethic.

Twelve Questions

My purpose here will be to ask twelve questions and to give them brief answers in a somewhat elliptical, catechetical style. We Calvinists have produced a lot of catechisms over the centuries. We learned the usefulness of the form from Catholics. Christians worldwide

need new clarity about what forgiveness is, what it is not, and what kind of forgiveness comports best with the teachings of the Bible, the experience of the church, and the experience of humans generally in the societies that we construct and destroy.

1. Is forgiveness a synonym for forgetting?
Au contraire: "forgive and forget" is an inhumane motto. "Remember and forgive," is much better. Shall we ask Jews to forget Auschwitz? Or the widow of a murdered Muslim man in Srebrenica to forget that crime and her loss? How morally insulting. If there is no other dignity we can accord the dead, we can remember them, and remember that some of their deaths were grossly unjust. Whatever else the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) did, it gave surviving victims of injustice the chance to inscribe their sufferings on a public record. Forgiveness has to begin with memory.

2. Does justice have anything to do with forgiveness?
It has a lot to do with it. The TRC came under considerable criticism for seeming to overlook justice both to victims and to perpetrators. Defenders of the TRC point out that the truth about crime is the first step in punishing the criminal and in justifying the victim. Historical truth is not the whole of justice, but it is an indispensable beginning. No one yet knows who was behind the World Trade Center atrocity, but elementary justice requires that we find out.

3. Is justice in fact compatible with forgiveness?

Yes, but not every version of justice. One version is simply incompatible: the so-called justice of revenge. Another columnist wrote in the *Times*, "Like Israelis, we will have some explaining to do to our children about the world we live in, and our ability to leach the hatred from the lessons will be strained."[2] Religious people we may be or not, anger and grief at this week's event camp on the frontier of hatred in us all, and we should pray for one another that we resist crossing that frontier. Punishment there has to be for unjust acts; but acts of revenge merely imitate acts of injustice. Revenge is a greedy demon: it hungers for more and more punishment of offenders. Avengers are happy to kill the relationship between victims and perpetrators. Reversing the roles, they create a new set of perpetrators and victims. Revenge repeats the crime it presumes to punish. This is the chief argument against capital punishment, an argument not widely accepted among citizens of the United States of America, unlike the governments of the European Union. Whatever else forgiveness is, it is forbearance from revenge. On this point Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, quotes Edward Said, a Palestinian: "Those drawn to the two great themes of liberation and injustice, have to figure out how to achieve the first without reproducing the second." How encouraging it was to read the letter from Mohamed Khodr, a Muslim living in Winchester, Virginia. He reflected: "Seeking retribution is a human instinct, yet around the

world at such times our government has called upon warring parties to forego a cycle of violence and begin a peaceful dialogue. Will we follow our own advice or seek revenge?"[3]

4. Does forgiveness belong to the realm of personal relations and not to the realm of social-political relations?

The answer is "no," but only in recent years have many thinkers around the world understood, with the American poet Robert Frost, "To be social is to be forgiving." Berel Lang has put the matter succinctly: "It is possible...to imagine a world without forgiveness or any of its allied concepts. But that world would be either more than human (that is, one in which no wrongs are committed or suffered) or less than human—one where resentment and vengeance would not only have their day, but would also continue to have it, day after day."[4]

Are there any countries on earth where no wrongs have been committed or suffered? If so, I want to know about it! Are there countries in which vengeance is still having its day? Oh yes. In all our countries the demons of vengeance are either wide-awake or just sleeping. Evil spirits continue to haunt our present societies with their pasts. And that suggests a fifth question.

5. Can the past be changed?

Our human wish to change some of it must be universal. My wife Peggy puts this yearning in a poem in her recently published volume, *The*

Dancers of Riverside Park, The poem is entitled, "A Hunger for Righteousness."

"For Germany, no Holocaust
Americans, no slavery
Japanese, no greed for space
No Russian gulags or pogroms
Nor Chinese prison labor camps
Rwandans no mad massacres

Nor Turks against Armenians
Cambodia without Pol Pot
No Indian religious wars
Or Balkan never-ending strife
No Argentina "disappeared"
No starving North Koreans
Bangladesh, Somalians
No Latin death squads, SS troops
No missiles aimed to launch assault.

Could we expunge our history,
Back up, begin again
Before the Inquisition,
Roman Conquest
Or Crusades?
Before Spain's lusty search for gold
Upon an alien coast,
Before the Czars or Stalin,
Alexander,
Genghis Khan?
We hunger, thirst for righteousness.
But eating evil, we confess
"There is no health in us."

Oh God of grace and mercy,
When shall we be filled?

If she were writing that poem this week, there would be another line in her liturgy of grief: "No Death-filled World Trade Center..." The image of that collapsing building will be in the mind of the world for long years to come. In his Nobel Prize address in 1950, William Faulkner remarked, "The past is not dead and gone. It isn't even past." And as Amos Oz said, "Attempts to burn the past can only set fire to the present." One might think of the past as a visitor who is always knocking on every present door. Open the door, and the past makes a demand: "What are you going to do about us?" One answer readily leaps to mind, "We will forget about you!" So we slam the door on the past, only to hear the knock again: "What are you going to do about us?" Second answer: "We will not exactly forget you. We will just smooth over the real evils of the past. We will clothe you with the pleasant facts. We will write comfortable history books that never name the evil doers or their collaborators. Why should we subject our children to all those terrible events which their ancestors caused or suffered?" At that answer, the past puts its foot in the door and says, "The only way to make peace with us is to remember us with such honesty that we become a permanent powerful warning to your children not to repeat the mistakes of this past."

It's the wisdom that Kierkegaard voiced when he said: "Forgetting is the [scissors] with which you cut away what you cannot use, doing it under the supreme direction of memory.... When we say that we consign something to

oblivion, we suggest simultaneously that it is to be forgotten and yet also remembered." We change the past when we change our relation to it. Especially we change its relation to us when we commit ourselves to preserving the good in the past and refusing to repeat its evil.

6. Is talk about forgiveness really a matter of religion?

Well, yes and no. True enough, religion, especially Christianity, speaks much of forgiveness. In fact, Jesus taught us that the forgiveness of God is inseparably interconnected with the forgiveness we owe each other. The Christian problem is that we have so often relegated forgiveness to the secrecy of a church sacrament or to sins of one person against another person that we have neglected the importance of forgiveness in human society generally. Both Catholics and Protestants have too much closeted forgiveness inside the church. Since forgiveness is such a well-known doctrine in Christianity, secular people have often assumed that forgiveness has little to do with ordinary, collective human relationships. Other religions, too, have a place for forgiveness, but few have considered its place in ordinary collective affairs.

Certain world cultures know better. They know what happens to ordinary human relations when something like forgiveness is absent. I think, for example, of an ancient Korean village tradition called the annual ceremony of Hae Won Sang Saeng, literally translatable as "grudge removing inter-living." The tradition

calls for a ritual, every January 15, for neighbors to offer each other rice cakes. As the author Kyu-Tae Lee describes it, "When one year passes, resentment among people always occurs, whether it is associated with interests, disadvantages, or misunderstandings....The more grudges [various neighbors] have, the larger a piece of rice cake they make...In this way the new year gets underway, they remove the uncomfortable relationships of the last year and get off to a fresh start."[5]

Again, Robert Frost, not an especially religious American, put it very realistically: "To be social is to be forgiving." That truth applies to every human society on earth. A fresh start: that is what forgiveness is all about. But it is time for a question from folk who are insulted by proposals of forgiveness.

7. Forgiveness seems patronizing and presumptuous. Suppose two people or two groups haven't even agreed that there is something to forgive?

Very astute question. Come to me with your announcement, "I forgive you for doing that to me!", and I may reply with some hostility: "What do you mean, 'forgive me' I didn't do what you said I did, and even if I did, it wasn't in the least bit wrong!" Participants in a forgiveness-transaction may need to enter into extended discussion with each other. There is such a thing as forgiveness too soon, just as there is such a thing as forgiveness too late. Too soon is when the nature of the evil, and the evilness of the evil, have yet to be agreed upon.

Again, questions of truth are central. Hence the need, in collective relations in particular, to allocate time for stories to be told, for different experiences to be shared, and for historians to be invited to do their necessary work of interrogating the past and letting it interrogate the present. A notable work of this sort was achieved by German and Polish historians in the 1960s and '70s. They sought together to write accounts of the Nazi occupation of Poland which did justice to the experiences of both sides of that awful conflict. A similar project is now underway between historians and textbook writers in Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia. One of these days we Americans might study the history of slavery, the Civil War, and the slaughter of Native Americans with a much deeper appreciation of all sides of these tragedies than the typical high school textbook ever discloses. Not to forget the social past is to take care to remember it from the points of view of the many victims in that past, and to give many perpetrators a chance to confess their culpability.

8. If we look at all sides of a tragic conflict, won't we find that there is guilt on all sides? And if there is mutual guilt, why not just call the balance even?

Well, in the world of commerce, if we put a pound of grapes on the scale and then add a pound of oranges, we get charged for two pounds. My mother taught me, "Two wrongs don't make a right." That rule applies as much to evils done between hostile nations as to wrongs of children against each other in

kindergarten. Every evil deed deserves acknowledgment. Massive, public evils deserve public acknowledgment. This is ethically fundamental. One might as well say, "I cut off your arm, because you cut off my foot. So we are even." That's the logic of revenge. It leaves neither side of the conflict healed, nor the relation between them healed. Uncovering all sides of an evil may be burdensome and embarrassing. But it is a burden and an embarrassment which must be endured if persons and societies are to undergo healing. We may have to oppose forcefully the designs of an Osama bin Laden, but we need to perceive the nature and root of his hatred of Americans. That brings to mind question number nine.

9. It seems that, in human experience, everyone is at one time or another a victim and a perpetrator. What does that fact have to do with forgiveness?

It has a lot to do with forgiveness. The philosopher Jeffrie Murphy said: "I once heard a boy say, after learning that the class bully was in fact a victim of child abuse, 'That takes all the fun out of hating her.'" Hate feeds on stereotypes, on demeaning, one-dimensional images of another: mere bullies, greedy capitalists, power-hungry communists, white devils, slant-eyed monkeys, cockroaches, other subhuman descriptions ad infinitum. It is only one element in forgiveness, but it is indispensable: empathy for the humanity of the wrongdoer.

Now, empathy for victims demands ethical priority in our emotional budgets. Americans are not used to being victims, and it was a new, welcome touch of immediate healing for some of us to receive e-mails on Tuesday from friends in Europe, Africa, and Asia expressing great sympathy for that day's assault on us. And it was a like touch of fellow-feeling that impelled that Muslim writer in the *Times* to say, "American Muslims share in the pain of this tragedy. It appeared that terrorists contemptibly attacked my America, killing my fellow citizens..." Now, if ever, is the time for us all to assert that Muslims can be, and mostly are, good Americans.

But such healing touches rise from sympathy. Empathy with the wrongdoer must be strictly distinguished from sympathy. In his monumental study of the Nazi doctors in Auschwitz, Robert J. Lifton demonstrates that one requirement for the culture of killing in Auschwitz was the Nazi definition of inmates as subhuman. Define another as less than human, and you have begun to prepare yourself for killing the other. What then, Lifton asks at the end of the book, about the Nazi doctors themselves? Were they subhuman? Or, difficult as it is even to try, must we try to understand them, too, as being only too human? A French writer said once, "Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardoner." Not so! Justice does not disappear in warm embraces of empathy. Rather, understanding lessens the moral distance between the best of us and the worst of us. Empathy for those who have done evil surfaces

in us disturbing thoughts; "Might I, too, have been seduced into the doing of such evil? Am I really so different from this perpetrator that I could never have done what he did?" People who study Germany in the 1930s, Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s, learn to ask that disturbing question. These days some Bosnians take comfort in the thought, "We all are victims." But that is only a half-truth. Some, at least, were perpetrators, many collaborated or approved, and all were capable of doing so. Once you have learned this sober truth, the possibility of healing a relationship, human on both sides, begins to seem more possible.

10. Is forgiveness the same as reconciliation? It depends on how you define reconciliation. I prefer to define forgiveness as a start towards reconciliation, as an agreement between the parties to put their feet onto the same road again, to begin to treat each other as neighbors again, but all under that caution that some evils take a long time to recover from. Some resentments are slow to drain away from memory. The effects of some evil deeds last and last and last down to one's death. Whether it is possible ever to be reconciled with the soldier, the general, the dictator, or the terrorist who decreed the death of your wife, husband, child: that is a question to be dealt with tenderly, patiently, and realistically. Time alone may not heal all, but forgiveness takes time and reconciliation yet more time. An offer of forgiveness is like the opening of a door onto a new future. It is an invitation to a new partnership. But the

partnering must not be rushed. And it is wrong to tell a newly wounded person, "You ought to forgive." In due time, it may be pastoral to raise the question tentatively, "Is it possible for you to forgive?" Even then, one has to respect the "yes," or the "no," or the tentativeness of the answer.

11. Is forgiveness possible without repentance?

Yes, but one has to ask the further question, "Is forgiveness desirable without repentance?" As pursued in my book, *An Ethic for Enemies*, my answer is mostly "no." Many Christian writers speak of "unconditional forgiveness." Check Chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew, ponder that parable of the forgiven servant who refuses to forgive, and ask if Jesus believed in unconditional forgiveness. The idea of unconditional forgiveness worries me, precisely because forgiving someone who claims not to need forgiving insults the ethical seriousness of the forgiver. True enough, better to give up resentment than let it gnaw away at you inwardly, year after year. Hatred, like revenge, is bad for body and soul; and sometimes forgiving enemies, absent their repentance, may be beneficial to the forgiver. But full-bodied forgiveness concerns the restoration of a relationship. It seeks reconciliation, not just a new inner personal disposition. Forgiveness without healed relationships is like a hand extended without a handshake. It lacks completion. It leaves in the forgiver a continued yearning that the wrongdoer may at last be

healed of the illusion that no wrong has been done or that none is to be repented of. Again, forgiveness is a door open to one's enemies. But if the enemy shows no inclination to enter the door, it leaves a void that only repentance can fill. Forgiveness is a partner of repentance. Both are friends of justice and reparation.
All are foretastes of reconciliation. A final question now, and this from the skeptics.

12. Is forgiveness the ethic of the soft-hearted? The hope of the naive? The sentimental virtue of those who are uncomfortable with the realities of power politics?

Make your own judgment about that. If you have ever had to face deep, radical evil in your life or in the suffering and death of those you love, you will deny that forgiveness is a romantic idea. At the end of World War I, Max Weber remarked: "Politics is the slow-boring of hard boards." Yes, and forgiveness is the same. In the mid-1980s Desmond Tutu remarked: "In South Africa it is impossible to be optimistic. Therefore we must hope." Concerning such hope Tutu was anything but sentimental. Hope has to be hard as nails. So also must forgiveness, a complex, demanding discipline. It is, in one process over time, an act of intellect, emotion, self-assertion, and other-affirmation. Abandon simplicity and lightheartedness all ye who enter upon the road of forgiveness! It will test your mettle, and your ability to wrestle with evil until you defeat its power to continue harming you. It will draw you to rehearsing the pains of the past

in the hope that they need not be repeated. It will divert you from the easy road of taking up the guns of revenge. It will ask you to lift heavy stones for reconstructing a home in which both you and your enemies may live together.

Closing Thoughts

I have tried in this catechism to suggest a definition of forgiveness that holds the promise of healing political as well as personal relationships. I have omitted many other important questions, such as: who in society has a right to offer forgiveness? What is the relation of forgiveness to reparation? To just versus unjust punishment? To intergenerational coping with the crimes of ancestors? Let me be content with this beginning, and with a definition that is implicit in my answers to the above twelve questions. Perhaps such a definition will bring some proper balance and sobriety to the discussion to come in this conference:

Forgiveness is an act that joins moral-historical truth, forbearance from revenge, empathy for wrongdoers, and a commitment to repair a fractured human relation. Such a combination requires a turn from the past that neither ignores past evil nor excuses it. That neither overlooks injustice nor reduces justice to revenge, that insists on the humanity of enemies even in their commission of inhumane deeds, and that values the justice that serves reconciliation above the justice that destroys it.

So defined, forgiveness links realism to hope. What greater gift do we of the 20th century have to bequeath to our descendants of the 21st, than just such hope? In the wake of September 11, 2001, what greater gift to the United States of America?

[1] Anthony Lewis, New York Times, 9/12/01, p. A27
[2] Bill Keller, New York Times, 9/12/01, p. A27
[3] Mohamed Khodr, New York Times, 9/12/01, p. A26
[4] Govier MS, p.80
[5] Pp. 150-51, as quoted p.240 in Jeong thesis

Additional Reading

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