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The Amish Remind Us All that Forgiveness is Possible

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The peaceful Amish world of Nickel Mines, Pa., was shattered one year ago today. On October 2, 2006, a milk truck driver named Charles Roberts took his guns and his rage into the West Nickel Mines Amish schoolhouse, ordered the boys and adult women out of the building and then shot the ten remaining girls, killing five and seriously wounding the others.

Although news of homicides and even school shootings are all too common, the execution-style murders of these innocents shocked the world.

Then there was a second shock: Within hours of the slaughter, the Amish expressed their forgiveness of the killer.

Surprise soon gave way to skepticism. Was such forgiveness possible? Had the Amish *really* forgiven their children's killer? Had church leaders coerced parents to forgive before they were ready? Did the Amish forgive Roberts only because he was dead—he had turned his gun on himself—and they would never have to confront him?

As any victim of crime or injustice knows, forgiveness is a difficult process. It involves decisions—decisions to forego revenge and to view the wrongdoer as a fellow human being. It also involves emotions, replacing resentment, hostility, and bitterness with positive feelings.

So did the Amish really forgive their children's killer? In the months after the murders, colleagues and I interviewed three dozen Amish people close to the tragedy. We found that their *decision* to forgive was instinctive and that their commitment to forgive was *communal*. Those elements, in turn, carried them during a difficult emotional process of forgiveness that is ongoing.

The Amish stand in a centuries-old tradition that supports the decision to forgive. They believe God expects people to forgive and that their own martyred ancestors modeled forgiveness by not seeking revenge.

They also know that emotional forgiveness is hard. So rather than allowing feelings to direct one's way of living, Amish culture encourages living one's way into new feelings. A grieving grandfather, asked by reporters less than 48 hours after two of his granddaughters had been slain if he had forgiven the killer responded, "In my heart, yes."

His words conveyed a commitment to move toward forgiveness, offered with the faith that loving feelings would eventually replace distraught and angry ones.

Indeed, the Amish impulse to act in forgiving ways after the shooting was spontaneous and unqualified. Half the mourners at Roberts' burial were Amish, and they made sure that some of the money that poured in from around the world went to a fund for the gunman's children. And although Roberts' suicide eliminated the possibility of legal retribution, Amish survivors resisted the most common form of vengeance: denigrating his memory. While others said the killer's ashes belonged in a trash barrel, the Amish spoke differently. Roberts was "overcome by evil," one elder explained. "But he was not an evil man."

Undoubtedly these kinds of actions would be impossible for immediate victims of such trauma, but the Amish commitment was collective. Forgiveness was not assigned to the schoolchildren, or even to their families, but was embraced by the entire Amish community. The Amish would never place the responsibility to forgive an offense of this magnitude on the immediate victims alone. Clearly the people Roberts accosted in the schoolhouse were the primary victims, but the Amish also knew that their entire community was wounded in Roberts's rampage.

This is another instance of mutual aid among the Amish. As anyone who has seen the movie *Witness* knows, barn raisings are a striking example of Amish mutuality: dozens of people complete a project that would take an individual family weeks or months. Mutual aid also takes less visible forms, as members acted for those who pain was too raw and emotions too vulnerable to pursue forgiveness alone.

None of this meant that the emotional side of forgiveness was easy or is complete. Amish victims and those less closely connected felt anxiety, anger, and other emotions—many still do today. They gathered regularly to talk about their experience and some made use of professional counseling. But their decision to forgive set them on a path to emotional healing.

Clinical research shows that forgiveness improves the physical and mental health of those who offer it. But in a society so prone to retribution, most of us believe we will feel better only by getting our due.

The Amish remind us that forgiveness is possible, that it is both a short-term act and a long-term process. And that both are more likely in the company of others.

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