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Forgiving is woven into life of Amish

Their forgiveness of a killer mystifies. But anger and revenge simply aren't an option.

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The blood was hardly dry on the bare, board floor of the West Nickel Mines School when Amish parents sent words of forgiveness to the family of the killer who had executed their children.

Forgiveness? So quickly, and for such a heinous crime? Out of the hundreds of media queries I've received in the last week, the forgiveness question rose to the top. Why and how could they do such a thing so quickly? Was it a genuine gesture or just an Amish gimmick?

The world was outraged by the senseless assault on 10 Amish girls in the one-room West Nickel Mines School. Why would a killer turn his gun on the most innocent of the innocent? Questions first focused on the killer's motivations: Why did he unleash his anger on the Amish? Then questions shifted to the Amish: How would they cope with such an unprecedented tragedy?

In many ways, the Amish are better equipped to process grief than are many other Americans. First, their faith sees even tragic events under the canopy of divine providence, having a higher purpose or meaning hidden from human sight at first glance. The Amish don't argue with God. They have an enormous capacity to absorb adversity - a willingness to yield to divine providence in the face of hostility. Such religious resolve enables them to move forward without the endless paralysis of analysis that asks why, letting the analysis rest in the hands of God.

Second, their historic habits of mutual aid - such as barn-raising - arise from their understanding that Christian teaching compels them to care for one another in time of

disaster. This is why they reject commercial insurance and government-funded Social Security, believing that the Bible teaches them to care for one another. In moments of disaster, the resources of this socio-spiritual capital spring into action. Meals are brought to grieving families. Neighbors milk cows and perform other daily chores. Hundreds of friends and neighbors visit the home of the bereaved to share quiet words and simply the gift of presence. After the burial, adult women who have lost a close family member will wear black dresses in public for as long as a year to signal their mourning and welcome visits of support.

In all these ways, Amish faith and culture provide profound resources for processing the sting of death. Make no mistake: Death is painful. Many tears are shed. The pain is sharp, searing the hearts of Amish mothers and fathers as it would those of any other parents.

But why forgiveness? Surely some anger - at least some *grudges* - are justifiable in the face of such a slaughter.

But a frequent phrase in Amish life is "forgive and forget." That's the recipe for responding to Amish members who transgress Amish rules if they confess their failures. Amish forgiveness also reaches to outsiders, even to killers of their children.

Amish roots stretch back to the Anabaptist movement at the time of the Protestant Reformation in 16th-century Europe. Hundreds of Anabaptists were burned at the stake, decapitated and tortured because they contended that individuals should have the freedom to make voluntary decisions about religion. This insistence that the church, not the state, had the authority to decide matters such as the age of baptism laid the foundation for our modern notions of religious liberty and the separation of church and state.

Anabaptist martyrs emphasized yielding one's life completely to God. Songs by imprisoned Anabaptists, recorded in the *Ausbund*, the Amish hymn book, are regularly used in Amish church services today. The 1,200-page *Martyrs Mirror*, first printed in 1660, which tells the martyr stories, is found in many Amish houses and is cited by preachers in their sermons. The martyr voice still rings loudly in Amish ears with the message of forgiveness of those who tortured them and burned their bodies at the stake.

The martyr testimony springs from the example of Jesus, the cornerstone of Amish faith. As do other Anabaptists, the Amish take the life and teachings of Jesus seriously. Without formal creeds, their simple (but not simplistic) faith accents living in the way of Jesus rather than comprehending the complexities of religious doctrine. Their model is the suffering Jesus who carried his cross without complaint. And who, hanging on the cross, extended forgiveness to his tormentors: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Beyond his example, the Amish try to practice Jesus' admonitions to turn the other cheek, to love one's enemies, to forgive 70 times seven times, and to leave vengeance to the Lord. Retaliation and revenge are not part of their vocabulary.

As pragmatic as they are about other things, the Amish do not ask if forgiveness works; they simply seek to practice it as the Jesus way of responding to adversaries, even enemies. Rest assured, grudges are not always easily tossed aside in Amish life. Sometimes forgiveness is harder to dispense to fellow church members, whom Amish people know too well, than to unknown strangers.

Forgiveness is woven into the fabric of Amish faith. And that is why words of forgiveness were sent to the killer's family before the blood had dried on the schoolhouse floor. It was just the natural thing to do, the Amish way of doing things. Such courage to forgive has jolted the watching world as much as the killing itself. The transforming power of forgiveness may be the one redeeming thing that flows from the blood shed in Nickel Mines this week.

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