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Upside-Down Forgiveness

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On October 2, 2006 a shooter shattered a cloudless day in Amish country at Nickel Mines, PA. After dismissing the boys and adults in the one-room school, he tied the legs of ten girls and then in execution style fired off thirteen shots in eight seconds, killing five and injuring the rest before shooting himself. Within days of the massacre, hundreds of news accounts reported that the Amish had forgiven the killer and his family. News of the instant forgiveness stunned the outside world. Many pundits lauded the Amish but others worried that hasty forgiveness was emotionally unhealthy.

What the news stories did not explain was *why* the Amish forgave. In dozens of interviews with Amish people after the tragedy I discovered that Amish forgiveness is upside-down in many ways.

The father of a slain daughter explained, “our forgiveness was not our words, it was what we did.” Of the seventy five people at the killer’s burial over half were Amish, including parents who had buried their own children a day or so before. They hugged the gunman’s widow and other members of his family. They also brought food and flowers to the killer’s home. Amish people also contributed to a fund for the shooter’s family. There were a few words, but it was primarily hugs, gifts, and presence—acts of grace—that communicated Amish forgiveness.

For most people a decision to forgive comes at the end of a long emotional journey that may stretch over months if not years. The Amish invert the process. Their religious tradition predisposes them to forgive even before an injustice occurs. Members of the Amish community began offering words and hugs of forgiveness without any planning when the blood was barely dry on schoolhouse floor. A grandmother burst into laughter when I asked if the forgiveness was orchestrated. “You mean that some people actually thought we had a meeting to plan forgiveness?”

In the words of a bishop, “forgiveness was a decided issue,” decided, that is, by Amish history and practice over the centuries. When the religious ancestors of the Amish were torched at the stake for their faith in 16th century Europe, many of them, echoing Jesus on the cross, prayed aloud that God would forgive their executioners. Despite their front loaded commitment, forgiveness is also a long emotional process for Amish people. The wanton slaughter of their children brought deep pain, tears, and raw grief, but no expressions of outright rage, not even hopes that the gunman would burn in hell.

In the Amish view, forgiveness is a religious duty. A young carpenter, said, “Its just standard forgiveness;” but he was wrong. Conventional religious forgiveness posits a God who forgives sinners and urges them to forgive others—to pass the grace on to those who wrong them. The Amish flip the formula upside down, by saying, “if we don’t forgive, we won’t be forgiven.” They cite, the “Lord’s prayer,” and Jesus’ story about an unforgiving servant as their motivation. In fact, one bishop, pointing to the verses following the Lord’s prayer, said emphatically, “forgiveness is the only thing that Jesus, underscored in the Lord’s prayer.” Thus, their salvation hinges on their willingness to forgive—a powerful motivation to extend grace to others.

Amish faith is grounded in the teachings of Jesus to love enemies, reject revenge, and leave vengeance in the hands of God. A father who lost a daughter in the school house, said, “forgiveness means giving up the right to revenge.” That’s of course upside-down in mainstream society where getting even is a taken-for-granted right. Unlike those who clamor to protect their rights at every turn, the Amish, yield to divine providence in the case of an unspeakable tragedy like the one at Nickel Mines—believing that God’s long justice removes that need for human retaliation.

An Amish farmer explained that forgiveness means, “not holding a grudge,” adding that, “the acid of bitterness eats the container that holds it.” Nevertheless, the Amish are clear that forgiveness, giving up the grudges, does not free the offender from punishment. Had the gunman, survived, they would have wanted him locked up, not for revenge but to protect other children.

Rather than using religion to bless and legitimize revenge, the Amish believe that God smiles on acts of grace that open doors for reconciliation and that is upside down indeed in world where the names of deities are frequently invoked to fuel cycles of revenge generation after generation.

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