The Challenge of Forgiveness

LYNDON HARRIS

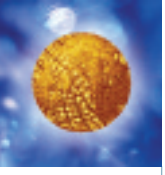
VESELA SIMIC

During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, Immaculée Ilibagiza managed to escape death. For 91 days she hid with seven other women in one of the bathrooms of her local pastor's home. A large wardrobe in front of the bathroom door kept it out of view whenever Hutu killing squads returned to search the house. In her recently released book, *Left to Tell* (Hay House, 2006), Ilibagiza has written about the horror and stunning transformation she experienced. What she essentially describes is her working through the trauma of the holocaust as it is happening. In her desperate situation she finds she has nothing left to sustain herself but prayer—incessant, passionate, questioning prayers that move her consciousness to deeper levels of understanding and courageous love. When the massacres are over and she is eventually brought face to face with one of her family's murderers, now a crouching prisoner who can barely bring himself to look at her, Ilibagiza grants him her forgiveness.

How is forgiveness possible in response to such abominations? Does forgiveness undermine justice, or do we need to reexamine our ideas about justice? Ilibagiza's mercy confounds many at the same time that it impels us to examine what we are capable of. What exactly is forgiveness?

THE SCIENCE OF FORGIVENESS

In the last 15 years, various scientists have begun to explore this phenomenon. From developmental, clinical, educational, and social psychologists to psychiatrists, neuroscientists, and even geneticists—all bring their expertise to what in its simplest terms is a willingness to



let go of resentment and to stop suffering. In the *Handbook of Forgiveness* (Routledge, 2005), an anthology of scientific studies edited by Everett Worthington Jr., chair of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University and executive director of A Campaign for Forgiveness Research, investigations to date include studies of primate behavior, cultural and religious contexts, relationship dynamics, health and disease, neurophysiology, genetics, restorative justice, and the effectiveness of teaching forgiveness. Although these multifaceted studies reveal gradations in scientists' definitions of forgiveness, they agree on this: Unforgiveness is a state of anger, bitterness, hostility, and, at its most extreme, hatred; forgiveness is a *prosocial change* in someone's experience after a transgression. When people choose to forgive, they change.

Can the psychological process of forgiving be mapped in our brains? Why would it matter? Tom Farrow, a lecturer in psychiatric neuroimaging at the University of Sheffield, and Peter Woodruff, director of the Sheffield Cognition and Neuroimaging Laboratory, have begun neuroimaging studies of forgivability. Their work reveals that whenever subjects chose to forgive, areas in the emotional limbic center of the brain, similar to areas already mapped for empathy, were activated. When subjects were asked about the fairness of transgressions, however, they found it more difficult to forgive and the limbic brain was less active. Worthington points out that these findings are useful for understanding better how to help others learn to forgive: Rather than focusing on the fairness of a situation, facilitate an empathic response. Farrow and Woodruff underscore the clinical value of mapping forgivability: "It may be that neuroimaging techniques could be used to monitor an individual's psychological response to therapy or even help make predictions of their likely response to treatment."

Investigation into the influence of genetics on forgiveness—such as the work of Ming Tsuang, director of the Harvard Institute of Psychiatric Epidemiology and Genetics—is in its earliest stage. Research on the relationship between forgiveness and health, however, repeatedly shows that forgiveness is good for our physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Not forgiving creates stress responses that increase the risk of heart attack, stroke, and other cardiovascular illnesses. In one of her studies, Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, a psychology professor at Hope College in Michigan, monitored people who were asked to think about someone who had hurt or mistreated them in some way. Their blood pressure and heart rate increased, they sweated more, and they reported feeling angry, sad, and anxious. When Witvliet directed subjects to imagine forgiving, their physical arousal diminished. Stress responses produce high levels of the neurohormone cortisol. At high levels cortisol compromises the immune system, affects the cardiovascular system, and has been connected to malfunctions in thinking, memory, and the reproductive system. In one of his studies, Worthington measured cortisol stress levels among a sample of people reporting on their satisfaction in romantic partnerships. Those reporting unhappy relationships scored low on a test measuring their willingness to forgive and showed higher baseline levels of cortisol.

Kathleen Lawler, a professor of psychology at the University of Tennessee, found that "forgiveness adds uniquely to the prediction of health," as measured in cardiovascular responses, self-reports of physical symptoms, number of medications used, quality of sleep, and several indices of psychological well-being. Loren Toussaint, a psychologist at Luther College in Iowa, led a study of almost 1,500 middle-aged and older Americans that showed a significant relationship between forgiving others and good health. James Carson, a clinical psychologist at Duke University Medical Center, taught a Buddhist loving-kindness meditation, which fosters forgiveness, to patients with chronic low back pain and found significant improvements in their pain and psychological distress levels.

Although science is documenting the many health benefits of forgiveness for individuals—which suggests exponential benefits for any society with an established culture of forgiveness—the science of forgiveness is still young. For example, as Worthington points out, most of the current research has focused on the victim's experience. How does forgiveness affect all the participants in the process? Are there costs to forgiveness? Is it universally beneficial? What role does forgiveness play in the healing of post-traumatic stress disorder? What is the relationship between forgiveness and spiritual transformation? And are there particularly effective ways to facilitate forgiveness with individuals, families, and larger societal groups? To this last question, current research already reveals that forgiveness can be effectively taught and learned.

LEARNING TO FORGIVE

Suzanne Freedman, an associate professor of human development at the University of Northern Iowa, conducted a study that begins to explore the public's

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understanding of and experience with forgiveness. In-depth interviews with 48 adults showed differences in their definitions of forgiveness, the importance they gave to apology, and the influence of religion, but the study also revealed that all participants agreed on the difficulty of forgiving. Freedman's avenue of inquiry is an important one for further research: "More detailed knowledge of how the general population makes sense of forgiveness will allow researchers, educators, and clinicians to work more effectively in helping others forgive," she states. "More real-life stories will give us much needed information regarding what factors help individuals forgive and when they find forgiveness most important in their lives."

Robert Enright—a professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, cofounder of the International Forgiveness Institute, and a major investigator in the field—has developed both the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (a measurement tool used by many researchers) and a process model of forgiveness. His 20-step model is not a formula for forgiveness but an articulation of the phases people experience in the process of forgiving. It identifies four major phases: (1) the uncovering phase, when one feels and explores the pain, which can eventually be recognized as limited and lead to (2) the decision phase, when the option to forgive is considered. If forgiveness is chosen, it ushers in (3) the work phase, when one reframes the entire context of the hurtful situation, which often leads to empathy and compassion and involves acceptance and absorption of the pain. The final phase (4) occurs when the individual experiences healing and realizes forgiveness. Enright and other researchers have tested the 20-step model with various populations and repeatedly found encouraging results. In a clinical trial comparing Enright's model of forgiveness to a spiritual model based on Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, researcher Kenneth Hart reports that both treatment programs led to significant and sometimes sustained improvements in the ability to forgive, as well as in"measures tapping closeness to God, positive spiritual coping, and the occurrence of a life-changing experience." Hart, an associate professor in the psychology department at the University of Windsor in British Columbia, says the data further suggest the possibility of developing treatment manuals composed of different standardized forgiveness interventions that therapists could use.

Fred Luskin, director and cofounder of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, says, "The science of forgiveness is the beginning—it's the language of our culture. I'd like to see forgiveness become a normal life skill." Luskin's book *Forgive for Good* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002) makes the training he offers in his research projects and workshops available to anyone. He defines forgiveness as the ability to make peace with your own life by no longer arguing and objecting to the way it unfolds. "It means that difficult things happen in life, and first you have to grieve them, then accept them, and finally move on." According to Luskin, forgiveness does not require reconciliation, is not about forgetting, and does not condone an unkind act—rather, "forgiveness means that unkindness stops with you." He also says that forgiveness is not a one-time response: "It's about becoming a forgiving person."

Luskin's training has made measurably significant differences with a variety of populations, from college students and financial advisors to family members healing from the violent loss of loved ones in the conflicts of Northern Ireland. He emphasizes that forgiveness takes time—genuinely arising only when one has sufficiently grieved—and that it is a choice. He has observed, not surprisingly, that we are reluctant to forgive because it is easier to blame others than it is to take responsibility for ourselves. Fred DiBlasio, an associate professor of social work at the University of Maryland, speaks to this issue as he has observed it in therapy sessions: "When family members come together for therapy, they often want to focus on the mistakes and offenses of others. However, when offered an opportunity to disclose and focus on their own hurtful behaviors, people begin to do impressive work at self-accountability that establishes a basis for understanding, goodwill, and forgiveness."

A CULTURE OF FORGIVENESS

Luskin's work captured the attention of Reverend Lyndon Harris when Harris found himself at the center of a nation's wounding on 9/11. Harris was the newly appointed priest of St. Paul's Chapel, which stands just across Church Street from the World Trade Center in New York. At St. Paul's, Harris became host to clergy, grief counselors, massage therapists, chiropractors, and food workers ministering to the 9/11 rescue crew; he also made pastoral visits to the Ground Zero site, offering last rites, prayers, and blessings over body bags and remains. "The question kept coming to me day after day after day," he recalls. "How in God's name do we end this cycle of violence, revenge, and retribution?" The answer did not come quickly nor easily, but when it came it resonated at the heart of his faith.

"By choosing to forgive, we stand in awe of the horrors that can happen to people in this world," he explains, "and we decide neither to participate in them nor to repay them. It's not a matter of whether or not we will have conflict; it's a matter of what we do with that conflict. There are rare singular moments in history when communities become unfrozen and new possibilities emerge. The 9/12 response, the day after 9/11, was one of those moments. We discovered we could be more than we ever thought possible—more loving, more courageous, more compassionate, more forgiving." Inspired by the Garden of Forgiveness in Beirut, Harris now works with Luskin on a similar project here in the United States. A garden is being planned for Poughkeepsie, New York, and discussions are underway with New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Says Harris, "I am asking that five years after the horrific attacks of 9/11, we commit to the vision of 9/12 where everyone does their piece to heal this world riddled with hatred and violence. Whether this is through prayer or partnering with those who have proven technologies, forgiveness needs to become more common in this world than anger and revenge."

But how viable is a culture of forgiveness? David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk and prolific author, says that "the great difficulty with forgiveness is that it is so radical an attitude." Even though methods for teaching and learning forgiveness have shown themselves to be effective, they make no difference unless people are

In Lebanon, A Garden of Forgiveness

On a 5.7-acre site in central Beirut, straddling the Green Line where much of the heaviest fighting of Lebanon's 1975–1990 civil war took place, a garden of forgiveness is being created. Called *Hadiqat As-Samah* in Arabic, the garden will provide a refuge, a space for reflection, a place to cultivate peace. "Coming to terms with the cruelties of war is compounded by the distractions of a modern city that disengages us from contemplation," says Alexandra Asseily, the garden's founder.

During that war, Asseily was a foreign aid coordinator working with the International Red Cross and the United Nations. She survived the bombs, the bullets, the tragedies, but years later, living in London, she still struggled to understand how "a land of kind and hospitable people could be transformed into a jungle of destructive militias." Asseily came to see it as the legacy of grievances, trauma, and repetitive violence that generations inherited, and the responsibility each person has in healing that legacy became clear to her. Ruminating on her role in war and peace, she remembers asking God: "Am I on the right track? Do the living and the dead hold each other in a kind of contract, echoing each other, until released through the compassion that enables forgiveness?" Then, she says, "I had a beyond-the-brain experience of such intensity that it transformed my life. Every cell of my body was charged with energy, purpose, and wonder. It was humbling and inspiring and gave me direction and courage beyond my own capacities." Asseily wanted to ground that experience

RICHARD DAVIES

Hadiqat As-Samah today

actually willing to forgive. And despite all the promised benefits, horrific acts make the willingness to forgive that much more challenging. And yet there is hope. Six months after 9/11 Loren Toussaint conducted a survey of four hundred people—some directly affected by the attacks—asking about their willingness to forgive the terrorists. Forty-two percent indicated a capacity to forgive. "Historically, Americans have shown themselves to be forgiving," Toussaint says. "We reconciled after the Civil War, with Japan after Pearl Harbor, Germany after the World Wars, with the USSR . . . Governmental policies don't always reflect the forgiving nature of the people."

In her latest work, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (Knopf, 2006), Karen Armstrong points out that every single one of our great religious traditions "began in principled and visceral recoil from the unprecedented violence of their time." Her book is a historical explication of the Axial Age, the period from about 900 to 200 BCE when spiritual and philosophical geniuses such as the Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, Jeremiah, and the mystics of the Upanishads pioneered an entirely new kind of human experience, showing us what a human being can be. They saw suffering as a spiritual opportunity and created a spiritual technology using natural human energies to counter aggression. Armstrong has written her book in deliberate response to the violent and uncertain time we now find ourselves in: "We have never surpassed the spiritual insights of the Axial Age. All the sages preached a spirituality of empathy and compassion; they insisted that people must abandon their egotism and greed, their violence and unkindness. Our technology has created a global society. We now have to develop a global consciousness, because, whether we like it or not, we live in one world." Armstrong's work shows that the Axial sages developed the compassionate ethic amidst destructive conditions. "They were not meditating in ivory towers but were living in frightening, war-torn societies." And she emphatically points out that the teachings they gave us are actually methods that engender higher states of consciousness. We don't first reach a state of consciousness that results in compassion, empathy, or forgiveness; rather, we practice and cultivate these attitudes. The practice leads to our evolution. Radical times such as these call for radical attitudes and practices.

Vesela Simic is the associate editor of Shift *magazine.*

in some way. A year later the idea came to her: a garden, rooted in forgiveness, "a place for people to gather inspiration and strength." When Asseily's husband shared her vision with the chairman of Solidere, the company already contracted to rebuild the central district of Beirut, Chairman Nasser Chammaa agreed.

GUSTAFSON PORTER

Architect's model

In March 2000 the landscape design firm Gustafson Porter won an international competition to design the garden, and in September 2003 construction began. Excavation at the site surprised every-one: Remnants from at least 15 different civilizations were unearthed, including the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Persian, Abbasid, Mamluk, Ottoman, French Colonial, and Lebanese—most of them destroyed by wars. Also found was a heart-shaped well, at least 3,000 years old and once related to Astarte, the goddess of love and fertility. An ancient shrine to the Virgin Mary, where Christian and Muslim women once prayed, was recently reconstructed as a small chapel in the garden. And three cathedrals and three mosques belonging to different Christian and Muslim denominations will surround the garden, already rich in symbolic significance.

It was anticipated that the Garden of Forgiveness would be ready by April 2008, but Asseily reports that after the recent conflagration in Lebanon, she cannot yet tell how the garden will be affected, though the site was not destroyed. Although she acknowledges that, "Most of our political leaders, many religious leaders, and the chieftains of the arms industries have different agendas," she continues to believe it is her purpose to stay open to miracles: "Already the garden is a miracle!" She adds, "Those of us who believe these wars are leading us to self-destruct should be doing all we can to wake others." (For more information, go to *www.solidere.com/garden* and *www.gofnyc.org*.)

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