

## I Introduction: trauma and forgiveness

As I imagine is the case with most writers, I wrote this introduction after having written the substantive chapters of the manuscript. Shortly before I sat down to write the introduction, a friend asked what my book was about and, when I told him, he immediately assumed that I was writing about the way in which forgiveness helps to overcome hate and heal trauma. This is what I had tacitly assumed when I set out to write this manuscript. What I've learned, and what I hope the reader learns, is that trauma and forgiveness belong to different worlds. Like the Venn diagram most of us learned about in high school or college, the worlds overlap, but they share less than what divides them. In some respects, the key problem is treating each topic with the respect it is due.

This becomes more difficult when forgiveness takes on a magical quality. The risk is greater when forgiveness is understood as a performative act (a deed done with words, as in the statement "I forgive you"). A psychoanalyst quoted later argues that because the real work of coming to terms with the reality of the traumas we have suffered is so difficult and so painful, we turn to forgiveness in the hope that it will heal our pain and rage without our having to go through the hard sorrow-filled work it takes to get there (Smith 2008).

It is difficult to give up the loose, and at times irresponsible, use of forgiveness because the real work that would be required in its place – coming to terms with the grief, the mourning, and the anger – is so terribly difficult and time consuming. Time measured not just in years, but often decades. Precisely because it is so difficult, genuine forgiveness, whether asked for or given, is something to be valued – but not always to be sought or given. Forgiveness is often inappropriate. Forgiveness is frequently unnecessary for the work of life to go on.

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Excerpt

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The manuscript begins with trauma. It begins with the worst trauma of all, the trauma of Holocaust survivors. My research with Holocaust survivors, conducted almost exclusively through the use of videotaped recordings of interviews with survivors held in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University is my data base. My experience watching these interviews is set against the dominant account of trauma in the humanities, at least until recently – that of Cathy Caruth. This account has come to be known as that of the “absent witness.” Its basic idea is that those who have suffered severe trauma are unable to testify to their own experience because they were not there when the trauma happened. Their bodies were present, but the trauma was inscribed upon their psyches before their psyches were prepared to receive it, so sudden, awful, and beyond the normal was the trauma. It is the task of those who listen to the witness to tell the stories of the traumatized, lest the only transmission be that of hysteria from one traumatized generation to another.

Even as Caruth and those influenced by her recognize the need to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, Caruth is wary, lest putting words to the experience of terrible trauma somehow diminishes or memorializes it in a way that makes it prematurely final. The problem, of course, is what is to be done if the witness cannot speak, and his or her spokesperson cannot speak either, lest he or she turn the experience into stone? And how shall we know?

My experience viewing interviews of Holocaust survivors reveals that this is not the problem. Survivors generally tell complete and coherent stories, narratives with all the qualities of a developed plot. The problem is not that they cannot tell a developed story; the problem is that doing so does little to heal their trauma. There seems to be little or no connection between the ability to tell a mature and developed narrative and the affliction of trauma. Survivors tell coherent narratives in the same way as they live, by doubling: dividing the self into the Holocaust self and the post-Holocaust self. Caruth’s account, it turns out, is more suited to explaining and exploring a literary text than the lives of some severely traumatized men and women.

Caruth's account is important in formulating my own. In a sense, her account acts as a foil. In the end, however, my goal is not to criticize Caruth's theory of trauma, but its implication: that the traumatized must be spoken for, as they cannot speak for themselves. In a sense this is true, but not in the sense Caruth intends – in which the result can only be silence. Caruth, in any case, is only my starting point. My goal is to understand trauma as a type of knowledge. Understanding trauma in this way requires a more experience-near formulation of the insult and the injury. It also helps to explain why forgiveness can help illuminate trauma, but is generally not more helpful in healing it.

Chapter 3 turns to the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, who is not generally seen as a trauma theorist. He wrote little explicitly about the topic, though it is implicit throughout his work. For Winnicott, trauma transforms the "true self," as Winnicott calls it, into a way of being that devotes itself to responding to intrusion, never having the capacity to just *be*. In fact, this *is* trauma for Winnicott: the inability to *be*. If all this sounds a little abstract or metaphysical, then the reader will appreciate all the more Winnicott's marvellous ability to bring such terms down to earth, transforming these abstractions into everyday experiences. Chapter 3 also considers the implications of Winnicott's theory of individual trauma for a political theory of trauma.

Trauma is political when it prevents the socially marginalized from appropriating the defensive resources of the culture, resources that mediate between the individual and trauma. Today there are more marginalized people than ever, at least when compared with the wealthy mainstream of Western society. Among the marginalized are people living in persistent poverty, those institutionalized in asylums and prisons, as well as those living on American Indian reservations. Migrant laborers and their children, as well as those pushed to the edges of society, such as the aged, the isolated, and unwelcome strangers in new lands, are also included.

For Caruth, trauma becomes the vehicle of world history, via the hysterical transmission of trauma (understood as post traumatic

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stress disorder, or PTSD) down the generations. Winnicott's contribution, and my goal, is to see trauma as more than an individual clinical disorder, but less than a world historical event. Trauma is political, but it is political on the scale of groups of individuals, particularly marginalized groups. Understanding this renders trauma subject to political analysis and intervention; if, that is, we have the will to look and to act. This is why it is so important to see trauma with the right lens: neither too big nor too small. Only then does trauma become subject to politics. Only then *is* trauma politics.

Chapters 4 and 5 draw on the work of the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein in order to unravel the knot that is forgiveness. This may seem surprising, for Klein is better known as a theorist of original hate. In fact, this is what makes her work so valuable. Whatever resources for forgiveness one finds in Klein will not come cheaply.

We seem to be living in an era of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the topic of numerous symposia, hundreds of books, thousands of professional articles, at least one special edition of a psychoanalytic journal, and the International Forgiveness Institute ([www.forgiveness-institute.org](http://www.forgiveness-institute.org)). As a topic of popular psychology and theology, forgiveness is approached almost entirely in terms of the benefits it brings to the one who forgives. About the most intelligent statement of this position is that of Ira Byock, who says, "I think forgiveness is actually a very sophisticated emotional strategy for caring for ourselves. Because when there is anger and a feeling of retribution it's really ours and it keeps us stuck. It's hard to move beyond that sort of anger" (NCC 2001). Dr. Byock works for a hospice, helping the terminally ill come to terms with their unresolved anger.

The position taken in this manuscript is roughly the opposite of Byock's, a good man doing good work. Forgiveness is properly about a normative relationship with the offender and the community, and forgiveness is a virtue in the classical sense of embodying a human excellence. As such, forgiveness must meet certain ethical standards before it should be given. It should not be given primarily in order to make the self *feel* better, but in order to make the self *be* better, as in

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be a better person. Nonetheless, these are complicated issues, and the distinction is never quite so clear in practice as in the normative ideal. The reality of human psychology must be taken into account.

It might seem as if there is a tension between forgiveness as an expression of an ethical relationship and forgiveness as an expression of a human excellence. Seen as a human excellence, forgiveness requires the relationship, but the excellence is not measured by the relationship. Seen as an ethical relationship, the quality or standards of the relationship come first. An interesting consequence of paying attention to the psychology of forgiveness from the British Object Relations perspective is that it sees human excellence in terms of relationships. The result is to mitigate, but not eliminate, this tension between excellence and relationship.

Melanie Klein is known for her concept of reparation, and it would be easy to confuse reparation with forgiveness. They are not the same, and the unfair thing about forgiveness is that reparation is even more important for the victim than the offender. To be sure, the victim need not make reparation to the offender. Rather, the victim, who is often a victim of trauma, must come to see this world as a good enough world to live in, even as it is this same world that is capable of taking everything of value from the victim in a heartbeat. Here is where trauma and forgiveness find their closest connection, here is where the Venn diagram overlaps most fully – not when forgiveness heals trauma, but when the experience of forgiveness, which includes the experience of the impossibility of forgiveness, helps to explain the experience of trauma, and what trauma destroys: faith in the reliability of the world.

Chapter 4 considers Hannah Arendt's well-known explication of forgiveness. Cynthia Ozick calls it "jabberwocky," and while the judgment is harsh, Ozick is not mistaken. Arendt's attempt to save forgiveness for special use in the political realm renders it irrelevant for deeds done under the influence of hate, recklessness, and wilfulness; that is, for most of the actions for which forgiveness is both difficult and important. Arendt also misinterprets the

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New Testament on forgiveness. Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida also write about forgiveness, and their contributions are assessed.

None of these authors quite seems to grasp the danger posed by forgiveness. The danger is not that it will be seized upon by a few hundred (or few thousand) popular authors who would turn forgiveness into a self-help program: forgive the one who hurt you, and forgive yourself, so you can get on with your life. More dangerous is the idea that one does not need to forgive, because one cannot be harmed by anything that happens to you. This is a crimson thread that runs through Western philosophy, from Socrates to Plato to Aristotle to the Stoics to Nietzsche and beyond. One of the most important things to be learned from forgiveness is how vulnerable we are, and how easily we can be hurt, which is why forgiveness is important and valuable. Recognizing the value of forgiveness, practicing it well as both the one who asks for forgiveness and as the one who grants it, is a cardinal human virtue precisely because it recognizes our terrible fragility.

Chapter 5 develops the Kleinian perspective on forgiveness further, before turning to a section called "Voices of Forgiveness and its Simulacrum." Here it is not theorists, but the people who have struggled mightily with the problems of forgiveness that are considered. Only those people whose actual faces and voices could be seen and heard on video were considered, a practice that excluded a number who have written beautifully about the subject, such as Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2003). My goal, as much as it was possible, was to create a situation parallel to that of the testimony of the Holocaust survivors. That turned out to be impossible. A documentary film is so different from a well-conducted videotaped interview with a Holocaust survivor that at some level there is no comparison. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for watching the person speak, often for minutes at a time without interruption (but possibly with editing). The face and body of the speaking subject are simply different, more corporeally real, on video, than words in a text. While I used videos, in virtually every case the quotations are backed up by published text.

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The most fascinating thing about the voices section is that none of them quite fits the categories of forgiveness developed in the two chapters on Klein and forgiveness. That's good, not bad. Above all, it's hopeful, for it suggests that real people are more imaginative in finding solutions than theorists. The voices are sometimes troubling. Eva Kor, the first to be heard from, was a "Mengele twin," one of about 100 twins (out of several thousand) who survived the experiments (actually tortures) inflicted upon her and her sister by Josef Mengele. After some preliminary meetings with some of Mengele's surviving colleagues, Kor went to the gates of Auschwitz and read a statement forgiving Mengele. Then she went on to forgive all Nazis. Other Mengele twins were outraged.

Surely Kor misunderstands something fundamental about forgiveness. Yet, when one looks at the life she made for herself, including the founding of a Holocaust museum in Terra Haute, Indiana (not the most likely place), one begins to wonder what it is that this misnamed "forgiveness" has done for her. Also considered are an activist who was sentenced for unintentionally murdering a policeman during the Vietnam War, the policeman's daughter, and finally a woman who abandoned her children. Not all are dramatic cases. All are about forgiveness. And all have a richness about them that overflows the categories developed in the chapter.

Chapter 6 considers what Donald Winnicott's concept of transitional experience might contribute to our understanding of forgiveness. Something of a palinode to the last chapter, this chapter considers whether forgiveness might stem not from the offender's contrition, but from the way the victim has come to reside in the world. Can the victim come to experience the world itself in a new way, as transitional space, as Winnicott calls it, a space charged with subjectivity, while remaining objectively real? This is a different solution than that offered either by Klein or Moses Maimonides (introduced in Chapter 5), but it is no easier. To live in transitional space requires a willingness to let go of the mental holding of ourselves, which is what we do when we are traumatized. Once again,

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forgiveness leads to a deeper understanding of trauma. Not because forgiveness heals trauma – though it may help – but because the conditions of forgiveness reveal, as their opposite, the conditions (more precisely, the consequences) of trauma: the inability to stop clinging not only to one's wounds, hatred, and bitterness, but also to the world we live in.

“Don't cling, and don't cling to not clinging” is a wonderful Buddhist saying, and it helps make sense of Winnicott's concept of transitional experience. Winnicott's is not just a piece of advice. He reveals that the ability to experience the world in this way requires the support of others. For adults, the ability to experience the world as a transitional place and space requires living in a community of others who care. As with the treatment of trauma, Winnicott transforms forgiveness into an experience that makes little sense in the absence of a supportive community.

Chapter 6 concludes with the longest case study, the voice of Terri Jentz, who was run over and axed by a man intent on her destruction. Fifteen years after the attack, Jentz returned to the scene, and in repeated trips over the next eight years, sought to find her attacker. What she found instead was that many people in the small community where the attack took place knew or strongly suspected who her attacker was, but did not inform the police, who were themselves remarkably lackadaisical in their investigation. Jentz's attempt to create, out of this not-very-promising community, one that could hold her, so that she might let go of some of her rage and fear, and better come to terms with her trauma, is testimony to human creativity. If you don't have a holding community, if one has let you down, then create one to hold you. Jentz did, but it required the responsiveness of members of the community, particularly the nurses who originally cared for her when she was so severely injured, and who were willing to share themselves with her almost twenty years later.

Chapter 7 is a study of Jean Améry, a Holocaust survivor who was tortured as a member of the resistance. *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* had as



its original main title *Jenseits Von Schuld und Sühne*. “Beyond Guilt and Atonement,” is the literal translation, and easily seen as Améry’s ironic evocation of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*. Améry sought to rehabilitate resentment as an important and valid emotion in the face of outrage. (Though he wrote in German, Améry used the French *ressentiment*, as did Nietzsche.) Against forgiveness, Améry sets resentment as the only valid moral position. More importantly, Améry claims that one must hold to the impossible, that history itself be reversed. Since that is impossible, Améry settles for what is really his version of the categorical imperative: that offenders *wish* as much as victims that history be reversed, that the Holocaust never happened. The wish is sufficient, as long as it is held with equal fervency by executioner and victim alike. For Améry, ethics must stand against history, against time, against reality, or it is not truly ethical.

Strange as it may seem, I argue that Améry is writing about forgiveness.

When SS-man Wajs stood before the firing squad, he experienced the moral truth of his crimes. At that moment, he was with *me* – and I was no longer alone . . . I would like to believe that at the instant of his execution he wanted exactly as much as I to turn back time, to undo what had been done.

(Améry 1980: 70)

What Améry wants from utopian reunion in death is what so many want from forgiveness: a reconciliation with their offender. This is what so many people seem to mean when they talk about forgiveness as the restoration of lost wholeness. The longing for lost wholeness is almost as common among secular proponents of forgiveness as it is among the religious. Like so many, Améry isn’t just talking about forgiveness, but his desire for what forgiveness brings, relief from the loneliness and isolation of hurt and pain.

Améry’s ethic of resentment makes a valid ethical claim, as well as helping us understand that trauma is not just an illness,

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but a demand that the past not be as it was. Such a demand need not be futile if it is seen as a moral declaration, not an inability to accept the reality of historical time. The same cannot be said of Améry's refusal to accept aging and death. Aging and death are not enemies of life in the same way that the Nazis were. A natural death, that comes in its own time and its own way, is not an enemy of life, but a part of life. Why Améry was unable to make this distinction is considered.

Coming to properly value forgiveness means coming to see it as a virtue – a rare, fine, and difficult achievement. For there are many ways to miss the mark, and few ways to hit it, as Aristotle almost said about the mean (*N. Ethics* 1106b: 10–35). How often is forgiveness given in order to make the victim feel better? How often is forgiveness withheld, because withholding forgiveness is easier than letting go of one's attachment to hate and anger, as though hate and anger had come to be the only things one can count on in an unstable, shifting world? Finally, how often is forgiveness ignored out of the fantasy of self-sufficiency, as in “how could one as proud and independent as I be hurt by someone like you?”

Forgiveness is not the primary way in which trauma is healed. Forgiveness has its place. Asked for at just the right time in a serious way, forgiveness can make a difference in how the traumatized person learns to let go of a past that haunts his or her present. Nevertheless, the primary way in which forgiveness and trauma are related is epistemological. Expressed less extravagantly, what forgiveness requires helps us understand what trauma takes from us, and what trauma gives in return. Trauma takes away our confidence in the existence of a stable, ordered, and meaningful existence. Trauma gives back knowledge in return. Trauma *is* knowledge. Trauma is ethical knowledge. The inability to move forward, the tendency so characteristic of the traumatized to repeat the past, the difficulty in moving from then and there to here and now, is also a statement about what we owe the past. That we respectfully remember our own suffering as well as that of others. That we do not accept what happened without protest, a protest that is beneath all words, often expressed in the symbolism of the body.