

# The Limits of Forgiveness

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In the inaugural address of the Public Thinking Lecture Series, delivered at the University of Chicago on March 27, 2023, Elizabeth Bruenig offered a meditation “the limits of forgiveness” in modern American life. A Point Program for Public Thinking event, presented by The Point Magazine in partnership with the Parrhesia Program for Public Discourse, and the Neubauer Collegium at the University of Chicago. Visit [publicthinking.thepointmag.com](https://publicthinking.thepointmag.com) for more info.

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87EYmV6v\\_nE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87EYmV6v_nE)

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How can one be a truly forgiving person without effectively condoning everything every person has ever done? I first began grappling seriously with this question when Pope Benedict XVI passed away and I was asked to write a short retrospective on his life. My initial impulse was to take a rather unsparing account. I had my reasons: Benedict XVI had made serious errors in his handling of the Catholic sex-abuse crisis, and I feel especially obligated as a Catholic to be scrupulously honest about such matters. But I had my doubts as well. Benedict XVI was a favorite of a certain kind of right-inclined aesthetically traditionalist internet-based fellow I’ve occasionally beefed with, so I suspected my own motives for tending toward a tone so harsh and exacting. I decided to wait to write until I could straighten myself out.

There are certain writers I read in order to clear my head. (There is another category for when I need to muddle my thoughts and make the world feel dreamlike.) It must be that the turns their minds take reacquaint my own with the way it ought to move, because reading them typically sets me thinking clearly again. In this case, I went through a few of Hannah Arendt’s essays, and a quarter or so of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and went to bed.

But first I prayed, and while I was praying I became aware of a thought: *How can you write with simple human sympathy for confessed killers on death row, but not for this dead man who authored grave deeds which still never rose to the level of murder, and many good deeds too?* I wasn’t being fair.

Yet I doubted this thought, too, and told myself that it was the difference in their influence, or social power, or obligations that made the pope’s sins worse than the convict’s. Then again, I thought, the killer asserts the most absolute and permanent form of power one can assert over another person; death is the threat that all other threats imply. It is the worst crime. And it didn’t really matter, for my purposes, if one wanted to argue that the pope’s wrongdoings morally amounted to murder; all that meant was that the two men ought to be equal in my sight, the killer and the one just as bad. I hadn’t actually escaped the charge of unfairness.

I wondered: *To whom am I being unfair?* It occurred to me that you can be unfair to someone either by being too forgiving or too unforgiving. There has to be some kind

of balance between justice and mercy, with mercy being the work of forgiveness, and punishment being the work of justice.

All the while I continued thinking. (I think you're not exactly supposed to be doing that, while you are praying, possibly; but I have been praying at greater length because it is Lent, and I can't help myself, I am always ruminating.) Lots of people say I shouldn't extend sympathy of any kind, not even the barest sort of human understanding, to the men on death row I write about. Some of their reasons I find totally unconvincing and repellent (basically arguments from sadism), but the charges I take more seriously have to do with dignity and justice: that by sharing any fellow feeling with a killer, I have implicitly denied the value of their victim's life (an insult to justice) or have judged the inmate irresponsible for their actions (an insult to their dignity).

To respect justice *and* honor the prisoner's dignity, I have made an intentional and concerted effort to tell their stories in the fairest way I can, without obscuring any aspect of their crimes *or* their humanity. Both seem relevant to the question at hand, which is: *Ought this person live?* That I mean to answer it in a particular way neither requires nor tempts me to be unfair in the telling.

If I was being fair to the prisoners, it was bad news for the pope. But there was a silver lining: if I had figured out the right way to write about the prisoners, then I already knew the right way to write about the pope. All I had to do was keep track of proportion, to try to distinguish the best of the man from the worst, to reveal a human as best I could. That and a stiff edit would keep things fair.

But I didn't want to kid myself. I knew this would require a good deal of reading and research on my part, and that I would actually have to develop a genuine sense of sympathy with a man about whom, I now sheepishly admitted to myself on the verge of sleep, I knew relatively little. Some writers can spin glowing profiles and elegiac obituaries out of contempt, resentment or, more shockingly, total indifference; I can't do that. The less elemental something feels, the more I struggle to write it. I'm fortunate to be not at all alienated from my work, or not much, a modern marvel...

I was falling asleep. And a thought came to me from the abyss: *You should talk about this at the University of Chicago.*

I bring up this brief tussle with forgiveness, fairness, justice and mercy because it's a minor example of a tangle of broad issues I struggle with all the time. Writing about death row and executions as well as crime and punishment, forgiveness and mercy (or social proscriptions on just those things, in particular cases) are always at the forefront of my mind, such that I am always noticing the strange relationship between contemporary society and these seemingly uncomplicated virtues. In reality, these are deeply complex principles with all sorts of quagmires and questions, as I've tried to show above, and they are worthy of serious consideration.

And so, in recognition of the broad philosophical conversation around forgiveness, and largely for my own sake, what I'd like to do today is to try to give a rough account of what forgiveness is, to detail some of the long-standing and more recent critiques of

the practice, and to offer some thoughts in support of forgiveness with those critiques in mind.



Definitions of forgiveness vary across place and time. I suspect it's safe to assume that since there have been offenses between people, which dates to the dawn of human history, there have been practices of forgoing vengeance and discharging feelings of anger and bitterness. And for just as long as these related practices—mercy and forgiveness, which are often used interchangeably but deserve their own respective definitions—have existed, I would further guess, there has been some dispute as to whether they constitute social virtues or vices.

We might look to the ancients to help us trace the roots of forgiveness and mercy in our culture, and to help us distinguish the two concepts from one another.

In his book *Before Forgiveness*, the NYU classicist David Konstan argues from careful reading of relevant ancient Greek and Latin terms compared to their contemporary counterparts that the Greeks and Romans lived in a world without forgiveness as we know it. The modern English use of forgiveness, he writes, “implies a confession of guilt on the part of the offender, along with clear signs of sincere remorse and repentance,” which signifies a “complex of sentiments” between forgiver and forgiven that is in some sense transformative. Yet in Greek and Roman thought, concepts commonly translated as “forgive” “were rather perceived as resting on the restoration of the dignity of the injured party, whether through compensation or gestures of deference, or else by way of discounting the offense on the grounds that it was in some sense involuntary or unintentional.”

Much of the work of appeasing anger and voiding vengeance in these societies was done by righting the relations of status and power that were initially upended in the initial offenses. Rather than confessing to having intentionally done something wrong, expressing remorse and requesting amnesty from vengeance, a person who had caused offense to another in the ancient world might instead insist that the harm was entirely unanticipated or unintentional; in other words, that there was *never* any plan in place to offend the other's dignity. Konstan points to an example in a third-century BCE Herodas play, wherein an enraged mistress accuses her slave of having slept with someone else. The slave confesses, humbling himself, but this isn't enough to assuage his mistress's wounded pride; she still intends to have him whipped, except that she is reminded of a religious festival approaching for which the remittance of punishments is called for. The mistress's dignity is assuaged by an obligation to a higher order of power; the slave's confession doesn't signify a greater transformation, and is an effort at making punishing him *beneath her dignity* at any rate. Meanwhile, Seneca's *De Clementia*, either *On Clemency* or *On Mercy*, offers mercy as the distinguishing characteristic that separates a just, reasonable and righteous king from a wicked tyrant; part of the tyrant's failure to show mercy is an incapacity of reason and self-restraint,

an almost bestial inability to recognize he himself already *is* the master, and need not avenge his mastery to wild excess to affirm it. One whose dignity is so high as to nearly escape offense altogether need not so jealously defend it.

Now, what's curious about the history of these concepts, at least to me, is that while I take Konstan's argument that the ancients didn't share our modern concept of forgiveness quite seriously, it also appears that they had a very robust theory of mercy, and even a fairly robust *practice* of it. In their book *The Decline of Mercy in Public Life*, political science professors Alex Tuckness and John M. Parrish trace the downfall of civic expressions of mercy from the ancient to the modern world and find that the Enlightenment—with all its worthy emphasis on impartial justice and fairness and equality before the law—created or heightened a tension between mercy and justice that ultimately broke in favor of a harsh and uniform justice as opposed to a world with greater room for mercy. And so, it seems, historically, we can track the rise of forgiveness alongside the fall of mercy.

Forgiveness, as Konstan implies, seems to be something moral, something interpersonal, dynamic, with an emotional basis. It is a practice, but it is an emotional practice. In one of the more common academic formulations of forgiveness, the philosopher Charles Griswold's<sup>1</sup>, forgiveness is described as an explicitly social, two-person process that must satisfy a number of conditions: e.g., the wrongdoer must admit their responsibility for their wrongdoing; must renounce their actions; must express regret for their consequences, must commit to becoming the kind of person who does not cause such injuries; must show they understand the nature and impact of their wrongdoing; and must give an account of how they came to do wrong and intend to do better. It is, as Konstan alluded, a transformative process, something Griswold is forthright about: while the offender goes through a process of developing and expressing regret for prior transgressions, which implies a certain reorientation toward oneself and one's past, the injured party also experiences an almost total shift in sentiments and plans regarding the offender, which implies a reorientation toward one's past feelings and future intentions.

For Griswold, forgiveness includes the forswearing of resentment *and* revenge. I agree these are necessary components of forgiveness, but it's helpful here to say a word about mercy. The political philosopher Jean Hampton defined mercy thus: "Whereas forgiveness is a change of heart towards a wrongdoer that arises out of our decision to see him as morally decent rather than bad, *mercy is the suspension or mitigation of a punishment that would otherwise be deserved as retribution, and which is granted out of pity and compassion for the wrongdoer.*" Seneca might quibble with the *causes* of mercy in Hampton's telling, but otherwise the principle is pretty much unchanged: mercy is when you have the right to exact some sort of penalty or punishment upon someone for having wronged you, and you elect to do less than you could or nothing

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<sup>1</sup> Both Martha Nussbaum, in *Anger and Forgiveness* (2016), and David Konstan, in *Before Forgiveness* (2010), cite Griswold's framework.

at all. It's easy to see how mercy, in this sense, constitutes an element of forgiveness—though Hampton herself points out that the two can exist independently of each other. The example she gives specifically is that in Puritan New England, if a criminal was about to be hanged but then repented of his crime, the community would throw him a feast, they would reconcile themselves to him—and then hang him. So you can have forgiveness and no mercy—in other words, they can be decoupled.

For my own part, I am a journalist and not a philosopher, so what I have in mind when I use the term forgiveness is probably less exact than much of the above—I am not entirely sure whether forgiveness ought to be conditional or unconditional, and suspect that it probably varies case to case—but I do feel it has to do with forsaking an emotionally salient set of rights or privileges one acquires when injured. I will say more about this particular angle on forgiveness later, but I should point out that in my work as a journalist I have come across real-life reasons for thinking this way about forgiveness.

A most remarkable example occurred just recently, when I was talking to a woman who has forgiven her grandmother's murderer, who is currently on death row. She was explaining to me what that forgiveness felt like. I asked her if she ever wavered and went back and forth after her initial forgiveness of this man who murdered her grandmother. And she said, "I waver only if I try to go back to that night, I can't go back to that night. I simply can't go back to the night it happened." So, in some sense she had in her possession a memory, or a thought, or a source of anger, a well of anger, that she could go back to at one point. But after her forgiveness, she herself has relinquished, has forsaken, has given up, which I think is a very useful way to think about forgiveness. It's the relinquishing of a certain set of privileges, rights and emotions that a person has when they're wronged.

Controversial elements in forgiveness remain. For example, while Griswold requires several conditions to be met before forgiveness proper can be dispensed, certain Christian peace-church traditions famously require far less, and even offer unconditional forgiveness regularly. While some thinkers find unconditional forgiveness practically insulting to the dignity of the injured party, others view forgiveness more in the domain of gift, and feel that placing numerous conditions on the distribution of forgiveness reduces a virtuous expression of self-giving to an item of exchange. It isn't exactly clear to me which version of forgiveness is the better one, but it is clear that we're already verging on a discussion of forgiveness's many complaints, so let's turn to that.



Sometimes we forgive and sometimes we don't, and the cases that warrant our forgiveness versus the ones that don't can be somewhat surprising.

Consider a pair of (more or less) recent episodes of publicized forgiveness and their reception:

There is the case of Maegan Hall, a Tennessee police officer who came to the attention of the internet when she and several members of her small-town department were

disciplined for having sexual relationships, sometimes on the clock. For her numerous trysts, Hall became a temporary laughingstock online, and a stand-in for feminine infidelity at large. Eventually, tabloids learned from colleagues of Hall's husband Jedidiah Hall that the man had chosen to forgive his wife and attempt to salvage their marriage rather than leaving her. Among the comments on that story:

Husband is a real dummy.

This woman has completely disrespected him as a man. Get some balls and leave her. You deserve way better.

Worst thing he can do at this moment is trying to "work things out with her."

And on and on. Meanwhile, in Massachusetts, a woman named Lindsay Clancy attacked and killed her three children before jumping from a second-floor window in her home. Clancy survived. Her husband, Patrick Clancy, shortly released a statement in which he explicitly forgave his wife, and asked the public to do so as well, writing:

I want to ask all of you that you find it deep within yourselves to forgive Lindsay, as I have. The real Lindsay was generously loving and caring towards everyone—me, our kids, family, friends, and her patients. The very fibers of her soul are loving. All I wish for her now is that she can somehow find peace.

Patrick's plea for forgiveness was covered on *Good Morning America*, which later uploaded the segment to YouTube, where it received acclaim along the following lines:

This is heartbreaking. Mental illness is real and it can happen to everyone, to us, if not addressed properly. I wish healing and prayers for the family. My condolences.

This is such a sad story. I cannot imagine what she will be going through once she recovers from [postpartum psychosis.]

Too sad for words, I can't imagine what she must have been feeling in order to do that. I forgive her because she's going to spend the rest of her life trying to figure out how to forgive herself.

What immediately struck me about the (admittedly nonscientific) contrast between the tenor of the respective receptions of each act of forgiveness was that the far worse offender had evidently been met with far warmer feelings. But it isn't that homicide is easier to forgive than infidelity—it isn't even clear to me that the spectating public is in any position to forgive anything, which I'll return to—it's that in the second circumstance, forgiveness itself isn't actually in play.

To return to Griswold's formulation of forgiveness, it's enough to point out that the first condition has to do with responsibility, and therefore culpability, to clarify why that might be. In the Clancy case, the woman who killed her three children is distinguished from "the real Lindsay," the same woman as she was before her mental condition dramatically deteriorated. Her illness is such that her crimes are essentially those of another person; therefore, she ought not be damned for them.

So for forgiveness to apply, one needs genuine culpability on behalf of the wrongdoer, of which that person can allocute, repent and so on. Means of explaining diminished culpability (i.e. that the person in question is a child, that they were intoxicated, impassioned or under duress) are important morally, but they don't constitute forgiveness,

which can only be addressed to culpable wrongdoing. Usually this kind of wrongdoing causes harm to the wronged party, which is why it's so odd that the viewing public in both of our cases felt entitled to redress whatsoever.

This isn't to presume that their reasons are automatically suspicious. A careful observer might point out that people are motivated to enforce the moral norms of their societies, and that the feeling of offense caused by violations thereof is a rearguard action against further violations. It causes us to behave protectively, in other words, of the norms we cherish as a group, and rely on one another to uphold. That forgiveness dispensed too readily and too liberally might extinguish this necessary social reaction and therefore give rise to generally bad behavior is one critique of forgiveness, though typically this critique is aimed at the "flabby" (to use philosopher Jeffrie Murphy's term) sort of unconditional forgiveness that expects little of its subjects.

Then there are the arguments that forgiveness poses a risk to or indicates a problem with the forgiver's self-respect. Murphy, drawing on Nietzsche, delves into this critique at length in his and Hampton's book *Forgiveness and Mercy*. "A too-ready tendency to forgive may properly be regarded as a *vice* because it may be a sign that one lacks respect for oneself..." In that sense, to forgive is to "convey emotionally either that we do not think we have rights or that we do not take our rights very seriously." This gloss is not hard to understand. In a particularly cynical reading, a forgiver's willingness to discharge resentment and revenge are evidence of a lack of pride, seeing as someone who held themselves in proper esteem would vindicate their rights when violated. Versions of this critique are visible in the response to the forgiving of Maegan Hall—in people who seem almost angry at her husband for forgiving his wife.

These so far are perhaps the more conservative criticisms of forgiveness, from strength and pride and order. But there are also critiques of forgiveness from the left. In fact, I've just had the privilege of reading a soon-to-be-released book by UC Riverside philosopher Myisha Cherry entitled *Failures of Forgiveness*, which very eloquently sums up most of the left-liberal critiques of forgiveness that have grown in visibility over the last several decades.

In particular, Cherry is skeptical of forgiveness because it burdens the wronged party with moral work—in my view, there's no getting around this fact—and also because, practically speaking, forgiveness in the United States appears to be valued on a racialized basis, with Black forgiveness of white wrongdoings being highly prized and praised as noble, without any kind of symmetry. Cherry points out that such undue focus on Black forgiveness redirects emotional energy away from the redress of racist offenses and instead compels people to expect forgiveness and mercy rather than to combat the underlying systemic injustices that create the initial offenses. This leads into a broader critique of the role of forgiveness in society and interpersonal relationships at large, where Cherry worries that forgiveness can become a self-serving practice encouraged by the powerful in order to maintain their status as oppressors.

And so the critics of forgiveness, right and left, seem broadly to hold that the practice is or can be (in fact) injurious itself, both to the person who was wronged



and has the option to forgive (who in so doing may declare their own lack of self-respect, relinquish rightful anger and invite further offenses against themselves and similar members of society) and to the person who has done wrong and stands to be forgiven (who in so doing would risk being held less than morally accountable for their actions, and thus less than equal; and who might also deduce from their encounter with forgiveness that morally wrong actions are consequence-free and all but condoned by society.)

On a personal level, forgiveness is just a difficult and harrowing process. It is emotionally taxing to engage a person who has wronged you in a process of transformation towards forgiveness and reconciliation, possibly for your sake but much for theirs. Being faced with a genuine apology, even, is a strange and disarming experience: one day you're living your life, wronged, mad about it and completely within your rights to feel that way; and the next, the very person who put you in the position of being angry and indignant to begin with appears with some words that are difficult to hear and whose intention is to steal away your protective and socially sanctioned aura of anger. It is no wonder that we scrutinize apologies to the degree that we do. Oftentimes, it's more comfortable to simply reject them. But I am going to argue, now, that it is worthwhile to take them seriously, and to forgive.



I have learned a lot about life observing people and their behavior as a journalist, but I have learned even more about these things as a mother. My children are soon to be seven and four, and they know that generally adults don't permit them to hurt each other. (In fact, my husband, who is a lawyer and a former philosophy major, has made this common rule even more explicit in the charter that mandates our older daughter's allowance, which provides that a dollar can be docked from the weekly amount for "knowingly and willingly hurting your sister.") But being clever little people, they already know that there is a major exception to this general rule: self-defense, including the vindication of one's rights. This is why when I find my kids locked in some kind of combat, they both inevitably provide me with the exact same moral story: *I wasn't doing anything to her, and then she hit me first.*

Now, rare cases of simultaneous unprovoked aggression aside (they do happen), this story is usually true, at least coming from one participant in any given conflict. And the girls have learned to tell it because it is *efficacious*. We, as a society, do care who instigates conflict versus who merely responds in kind. This is because we basically respect an individual's right, when injured, to vindicate their rights, or express their anger, or reassert their agency, or however you want to look at it. And what we do in those cases, as a society, is not so much as give people a prescribed set of behaviors or countermeasures to be taken in any instance of being wronged—there is no specific list of socially prescribed revenge projects—but rather, we take a set of preexisting moral limitations on what a person can do to another person *off*. And we do this because we deem that both parties involved in the conflict deserve it.

The proof is in the pudding: though I tell my daughters I don't care who started what and that neither of them should be hitting one another, when I can reasonably ascertain who did actually instigate the conflict, I take measures to reverse their action and sometimes to punish them, while the other child is usually the recipient of some kind of reparation. Let me give you an example.

Suppose my children are playing together when my younger girl discovers a dress-up gown that she would like to put on. As she begins to shimmy it on, my older daughter notices it and decides that *she* would like to wear the dress-up gown, so she pulls it off my younger daughter and puts it on herself. In retaliation, my younger daughter pulls her big sister's hair, demanding that her gown be given back. The scuffle summons me, and after hearing both of them recount roughly the same story, I lightly chastise my younger daughter for pulling her sister's hair, but then direct my older daughter to give the dress-up gown back to her little sister and strongly chastise her for taking it in the first place. From my older daughter's point of view, her little sister is having all the fun: not only did she get the gown in the end, she got to pull her sister's hair and got little more than a gift for it!

But this is because my younger daughter was operating in a *state of moral exception*. She was behaving in a state where the normal rules of morality—such as the general prohibition on pulling her sister's hair—did not apply. I would like her not to attack her sister generally, so I chastised her for it, but I clearly didn't rule against her, and she wasn't ultimately punished—in fact, she got what she wanted in the end. You can imagine how tantalizing a loophole like this is to a child—it represents the opportunity not only to get what one desires, but the opportunity to indulge a darker, typically repressed desire too, and the only precondition for doing so is being wronged in the first place. As you can imagine, “she hit me first!” is something of a prized status among small children for this reason.

But are these states of moral exception equally attractive to adults? That is to say, knowing for a fact that we will hurt one another—nothing seems so clear-cut or obvious to me as that fact—is it possible that adults, too, are attracted to states of moral exception, in which they can not only pursue projects of vengeance that would normally be socially proscribed, but also do so with full social sanction? I certainly think so. Consider the state of social media, where people frequently go in order to find something to be angry about, so that they can express their anger in ways that would typically be forbidden but are permissible in cases only of having been wronged. Had the social media user not sought out an example of someone doing something offensive or outrageous, they wouldn't have anger to discharge, but it seems to me that acquiring anger and the right to discharge it is precisely the point. (Cable TV also offers you lots of reasons to get pissed off at people and yell at them.)

In a forum we both participated in for the *Boston Review*, University of Chicago philosopher Agnes Callard once observed that if a person is wronged and therefore made angry at another person, there's no logical reason for that anger to be extinguished, ever. Sure, it may run its course, or the angry individual may become bored

with the emotion or simply elect to drop it, but there is no *logical reason*, once the anger is felt at the initial offense, that one should ever stop feeling angry—even once one has avenged oneself. I believe that Callard is quite right about this, and that the observation bears itself out in daily life, where we can see people nurse grudges for decades at times. But it also means that people can enter states of moral exception and remain there indefinitely if they so choose, and there’s no logical reason to put an end to them. Once a person has been wronged, they have been wronged in perpetuity; therefore, once a person has entered a state of moral exception, they can remain there in perpetuity.

But this creates a problem for society. A few minutes ago, I said that when a person is the object of revenge, we as a society deem that they deserve to be subjected to behavior outside the moral norm. And why is this the case? Because we feel that through the commission of bad acts, people surrender certain rights they have that protect them, generally, from those behaviors. This is what I mean when I say that we imagine that in cases of revenge both parties “deserve it”: the avenger deserves their state of moral exception on account of having been wronged, and the wrongdoer deserves their own unique state of moral exception on account of having done wrong.

This means that people who do wrong make themselves lesser than the rest of us—through the commission of wrongdoing, they sustain a kind of moral injury that diminishes their rights. If you, like me, are the kind of person who believes that society functions best when we all have equal dignity and equal moral status, then it’s clear that the states of moral exception created when people wrong one another are antithetical to a good society. The best option would be for nobody to ever wrong anyone else. But the more realistic option, when faced with the fact that states of moral exception are potentially desirable *and* potentially permanent, is to generally counsel forgiveness.

From this standpoint, forgiveness isn’t so much a sign of one’s respect for oneself—it’s really not much of a commentary on how one views oneself at all; it isn’t expressive in that way, which makes it a bit of a weird fit for contemporary society—as a sign of respect for a certain kind of society. It’s a response to being wronged that intentionally negates a potential state of moral exception, and returns the wrongdoer to their initial status as a moral equal. To me, this is a prerequisite for, rather than a barrier to, a truly equal society—the kind critics like Cherry have in mind.

And it’s easy to put real-life examples to this theory of forgiveness. I am currently working on a death penalty case in Texas in which a prisoner brutally murdered a man’s sister using an entire butcher’s block of knives during the course of a robbery in 1993. Though the man spent years angry with the killer, and supported her conviction and death sentence at the time, he has since relinquished his anger due to changes in his own life, and has come to feel differently about her death sentence. Since forgiving her, he has taken steps to make sure that her execution will not be carried out—definitively reversing the most extreme expression of inequality humankind can muster. While he

once saw her life as so unequal to his and others' as to be fit for taking, he now views her life as so valuable as to be worth saving. This is the work of forgiveness.

To me, this is a vision of the role and purpose of forgiveness that leaves open a broad range of ways for forgiveness to take shape—conditional and unconditional, instantaneous and delayed, with and without reservations. It does require, in my view, the inclusion of mercy, as sparing an individual from behavior strictly justified by their offense is key to restoring their rights and dignity. But this does not require that an individual who has done wrong be spared consequences entirely, as some consequences are justified by factors other than the offense itself—for example, acts of reparation and repair may be justified by the necessities of the injury rather than permitted by the diminishment of the wrongdoer's rights.

But perhaps the most important thing about this broad reading of forgiveness is that it recommends not so much a specific kind of practice as a specific kind of person—a forgiving kind. This is what I eventually decided when trying to right my mind about how to handle telling stories about convicted killers and retired popes. It isn't so much that every case of wrongdoing ought to be forgiven on the same terms or in the same way as much as every case ought to be viewed with a forgiving eye, approached with an openness to that transformation in sentiments that Griswold writes about. We should find ourselves ever open to changing our minds about people and their actions, both in direct interpersonal interactions wherein we have standing to forgive, but also in the spectator relationships we tend to engage in contemporarily, wherein we form moral judgments about one another without direct interactions. (In those cases, we may not exactly have standing to forgive, as we ourselves may not have been wronged, though we may well be angry; nevertheless, that anger is enough to make approaching the subject with a forgiving disposition worthwhile, since it suggests an incipient inequality of moral statuses.)

Forgiveness is hard. It is not, as Cherry points out, a magic process that redresses all wrongs. Nor is it necessarily a short and straightforward process. But in my view it's a process that unites wronged and wrongdoer in a plan of peace, and since we've all been on both sides of that equation hoping for the same thing, it seems a most useful virtue.

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