

Unforgiveable

A review of the film



Life During Wartime

(2009)

Todd Solondz (Director)

Reviewed by

[Keith Oatley](#)

Images of irreparable damage caused by war now appear on movie screens in the form of young men in wheelchairs. In *Life During Wartime*, written and directed by Todd Solondz, we glimpse effects of another kind of irreparable damage, the kind caused in families by serious mental illness. In this film, the principle damage is caused by a father who has been convicted of raping boys. The “wartime” of the film’s title is that of America’s war on terrorism.

The film starts in a restaurant with an anorexic-looking woman, Joy (Shirley Henderson), talking with her husband, Allen (Michael K. Williams), who promises he will make a new start: give up cocaine, crack, and crack-cocaine. The next scene is of Trish (Allison Janney). She is Joy’s older sister and the mother of Timmy, a befreckled boy played appealingly by Dylan Riley Snyder. Timmy is looking forward to his bar mitzvah, at which he plans to speak on being a man: acting rightly whatever others may think. Trish is starting to date the not-very-attractive Harvey (Michael Lerner). She is delighted with him because, as she tells Timmy, he is a real man.

A schoolmate discovers on the Internet that Timmy's father was convicted of raping young boys. The boys at school taunt Timmy and call him a faggot. Trish had told him his father was dead; now she must explain that his father is in prison. She has moved her family to Florida to get away from all that. Timmy is furious that she lied to him. He calls her names but later apologizes.

One night, Trish comes home late, and Timmy is waiting up for her. She's been on a date with Harvey. She tries to explain to her 12-year-old son the nature of her relationship. "When he touched me on the elbow," she said, "I felt wet all over."

Life During Wartime is a comedy, but at this joke, as at many others in the film, not many people in the cinema laugh. It's too painful.

In a later scene, Timmy says to Trish that he knows what a man and a woman do together. "But what exactly does a man do to a boy when he's raping him?"

Trish manages no better with this than with her explanation of her relationship with Harvey. In fact she recycles it. She says that it's like when Harvey touched her elbow. She tells Timmy that if any man ever touches him, on the elbow or anywhere else, he must scream.

Timmy works on his bar mitzvah speech: Being a man means being able to forgive. But there are questions. "What would you do if a terrorist blew up your office, or if your family was killed?" he asks. "What if someone did something so horrible, so painful, that you couldn't forget?" The adult answer he's given is that terrorists can't be forgiven because they're bad. Timmy has a better answer: The 9/11 terrorists can't be forgiven because they're dead.

In intercut scenes, we see Timmy's pedophile father, Bill, lying on a prison bunk, being released from prison, arriving at Trish's house and breaking in, discovering that his older son, Billy (Chris Marquette), is at a university in Oregon, and going there for an unannounced visit.

Bill, played by Ciarán Hinds, is full of a sad longing, but he also seems menacing because he's large and brimming with inexpressible emotions. In Billy's dorm room, Bill says to his son, "I needed to see you."

Billy says his major is in anthropology and that he's doing a paper on homosexuality in animals. He's interested in bonobos, who have sex frequently: heterosexual, homosexual, with individuals who are unrelated to them, and with individuals who are.

"Are you gay?" Bill asks his son.

"No."

"Sure?"

"Yea."

"So you like women?"

"Yea."

"No rape fantasies?"

We know that Bill has fantasies because one of them is replayed several times during the film to the accompaniment of a Vivaldi lute concerto. Bill's fantasy is of a place that reminds one of Monet's water-lily pond, with a wooden bridge past which the camera pans toward a blurred image of a boy who stands on the other side of the water. Is it a young boy whom Bill desires sexually, or one of his sons whom he loves as a father?

Bill asks his son to forgive him.

"It's unforgiveable," says his son. "I've no sympathy for you."

Bill explains that they've done a lot of work on him: rehabilitation. He's on medication. "I just had to come and see that you wouldn't become me," he says.

Back with Trish's family in Florida, Harvey comes to dinner so that he can meet Timmy and his younger sister. After the meal Timmy asks Harvey to come into his bedroom because he has something important he must ask. They sit, side by side, on the bed.

"My mom says you're planning to marry her," says Timmy. He says he has to ask because, with his older brother being away, he is the man of the house. Harvey understands, and is completely respectful.

"Have you ever had sex with a man or a boy?" asks Timmy.

"No."

"Do you think a pedophile is a terrorist? If you ever met a pedophile, what would you do?"

Harvey realizes the terrible distress Timmy is in. Full of sympathy, he reaches out to comfort the boy. For a moment Timmy gratefully accepts the embrace. Then he realizes. He screams. Trish rushes into the room, and there's a close-up of her face as she regards Harvey with disgust. It's the end of that relationship.

This film is important to psychologists because in it we experience some of the anguish of yearning and impossibility that mental illness can cause in a family. A recent epidemiological study by Katie McLaughlin et al. (2010) found that childhood adversity that derives from parental mental illness and criminality is consistently associated with psychopathology that continues into adulthood.

The center of *Life During Wartime* is the question of forgiveness. There has been a huge burst of psychological research on forgiveness recently. Michael McCullough (2001) proposed that, psychologically, forgiveness is a forgoing of the usual motivations of avoidance or revenge after a harm and a preparedness to think about the perpetrator with sympathy and to act prosocially.

Timmy's thinking that he'll cultivate the character strength of forgiveness is an admirable aspiration. In a recent article, McCullough, Kurzban, and Tabak (2010) cited evidence that, in developed countries, vengeful motivations were causal factors in 20 percent of homicides and that between 1974 and 2000 were in 61 percent of school shootings. They also pointed out that the desire for revenge is a factor in people joining terrorist organizations. McCullough et al. said that whereas revenge has probably been important during evolution because it deters interpersonal attack, mechanisms of forgiveness may have

evolved because they enable valuable relationships to continue despite harms that have occurred.

Evidence of the value of forgiveness has been found by Greenberg, Warwar, and Malcolm (2010), who followed up the therapy of 20 couples in which, over a period of two years, a partner felt persistently angry at a betrayal, an abandonment, or an identity insult. In therapy the couples worked for 10 to 12 sessions on unresolved anger. For 11 of the couples, complete forgiveness occurred, and six made some progress toward it, compared with three who made some progress during a wait-list period. Overall, in therapy there was a significant improvement in marital satisfaction.

Forgiveness tends to focus on a single act. But what if a pattern of behavior is involuntary and continues? What if, as implied by McLaughlin et al.'s (2010) study on the effects of psychopathology in the family, it has irreparable effects on others' mental health, not just in childhood but into adulthood? And what if, as this film depicts so well, children in a family are vulnerable and need something from an adult who cannot be forgiven?

References

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