

From Giving to Forgiving—A Bridge Too Far?

A Review of

Beyond Right and Wrong: Stories of Justice and Forgiveness (2012)

by Roger Spottiswoode and Lekha Singh (Directors)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035983>

Reviewed by

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Reconciliation and forgiveness have been in the political air in recent decades in such hotspots for violence as South Africa, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere, and in light of the recent death of Nelson Mandela in December 2013. In psychology and psychiatry, forgiveness has broken out of its religious trappings, and science and education have entered the picture. A new science of forgiveness has developed, and education for forgiveness and forgiveness therapy has been proposed (Enright, 2001).

Frank Farley (1996) in his 1993 Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association (APA), argued that horror is the Number 1 problem confronting humanity. In the aftermath of horror, the idea of forgiveness always arises. But few documentary films have attempted to depict the process from horror to forgiveness, engaging horror at the source in real contexts and following the course of forgiveness and reconciliation with real people and apparently genuine forgiving. Roger Spottiswoode and Lekha Singh's film *Beyond Right and Wrong: Stories of Justice and Forgiveness* is an exemplary exception. It has won multiple awards, including an APA award in 2013, and has been shown before the UN General Assembly. The film takes the viewer through an emotional roller-coaster involving terrible personal tragedies and confrontations of victim and perpetrator. Forgiveness is often sought by the latter and given by the former.

In the opening moments of the film, viewers meet Beata, a Rwandan mother who is later featured talking of forgiveness with Emmanuel, the man who, with others, slaughtered her five children with machetes in the Rwandan genocide. The 1994 genocide is briefly described, including mention that approximately 800,000 Tutsis were killed by Hutus.

The next brief introduction is to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with a Palestinian father, Bassam, speaking of his daughter's death at the hands of a member of the Israel Defense Force. An Israeli father, Rami, later speaks similarly of his daughter being killed by two Palestinian suicide bombers.

The history of violence in Northern Ireland in the IRA era is next briefly introduced with a scene of the release from prison of IRA member Patrick Magee, who had served 14 years for murder. Jo Berry, the grown daughter of Magee's victim, met with Magee after his release, and the film covers them meeting together.

Other short vignettes involving victims and perpetrators are presented as well. One is of a middle-aged man blinded when 10 years old by a bullet from an Irish soldier. Here the victim seeks out the perpetrator after this long period of time to say he has no hatred toward him and that he forgives him.

These and other vignettes are all heartbreaking stories of individual lives being profoundly affected by terrible violence and of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, with the evolution of forgiveness depicted for some of the victim-perpetrator relationships. In some vignettes, the perpetrator is not identified, but in most cases he is (note, all perpetrators in the film are men). The underlying theme is simple and profound. Can forgiveness from a victim of horror help both victim and perpetrator, and can such forgiveness fit into a common understanding of justice?

The candor of many of the victim/perpetrator meetings is astounding, with Spottiswoode and Singh able to extract clearly authentic emotions particularly from the victims, often many years after the precipitating violence. Not all scenes involve a confrontation between victim and perpetrator. Some simply show expressions by the victims of their sorrow and the need for understanding and forgiveness. In a few instances the victims are the parents of a child killed by the enemy, as noted above. The range of examples of heinous violence leading ultimately to some degree of reconciliation and forgiveness is rich and varied. These are not cases of social slight, personal rejection, or banal moral trespass; these are in every case examples at the very heart of darkness, with the revelation of some degree of redemption and forgiveness.

Some of the vignettes are more transformational and compelling than others, often raising significant questions in our minds as to the rightness or wrongness of the course of action being taken. One example, noted above, is Jo Berry's meeting with IRA member Magee upon his release from prison for killing her father. Their meeting comes across as a public discussion, as friends considering the power of forgiveness. Aside from the possibly faint hint of Stockholm syndrome, their duet seems to whitewash a killing and proselytize how killer and victim (albeit indirect victim) can get along just fine. They gloss over reprehensible behavior, discussing issues as if they were before an audience in a sitting-room session, to be followed by tea and tasties.

A starker example of problematic forgiveness, the most emotionally memorable instance in the film, is that of Beata and Emmanuel, noted above. In their early discussions Emmanuel, who admitted being among those who slaughtered her five children with machetes, approaches Beata for forgiveness, without luck. But after several discussions she finally forgives him! This astounding conclusion (which in our view would profit only the perpetrator, with any benefit to Beata being accomplished at the heavy cost of accepting horror) has the clearest implications for the film's central themes. Yes, forgiveness and reconciliation might help the victim deal with the psychic pain, and that is good, but is there not a larger cost to society in this selfless act? Could such consequences of horror reinforce the horror by making it somehow sanitized, understandable, and by taking away some of its sting? If forgiveness makes victims feel better, lifting a psychic burden, is there a terrible cost of that in taking away some of the horror and immorality of the violence?

The psychological effects of forgiveness on perpetrators have been little studied. Is not the prime directive regarding the human perpetration of horror to stop it in the first place? We applaud the creative work of Enright (2001) and others who have advanced our

understanding of the effects of forgiveness on victims, but we know little of its effects on perpetrators and almost nothing about its long-term effects on the incidence of human horror. Farley (2010) has advocated for the central importance of generosity (the “G factor”) and altruism in heroic progress in human society, the priority of giving over forgiving. If individuals would be more giving in the first instance, there would be less need of subsequent forgiving. By this view, giving trumps forgiving and should be the target of major psychological study and social action.

What are the processes in family, education, and social life that will encourage people to be more giving, more generous, and more altruistic, as antidotes to the horror? Is Albert Schweitzer’s (1979) timeless ethic of reverence for life a rallying cry? Should we not start our major efforts at the front end, before the horror happens, rather than after the bloody consequences? Psychology as a discipline so often comes into the action after the action has gotten far out of hand. Could the forgiveness that victims so dramatically offer as shown in Spottiswoode and Singh’s film be a subtle societal license for more horror? Is the connection of giving to forgiving a bridge too far?

Other features of this fine and provocative film include discussions of justice, of the Gacaca courts after the Rwandan genocide, of grass-roots movements on both the Palestinian and Israeli sides to stop the Israeli occupation and find common cross-national cause and bonds of family and community, among many other interesting features.

Frank Farley showed this film to his graduate personality and psychotherapy course. It elicited profound silence at the showing and profound discussion afterward. This film is about real people coping with unspeakable tragedy and loss. It is not fictional Hollywood. It is raw humanity up close, a treatise on humanistic psychology far beyond the laboratory or the clinic.

References

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- Schweitzer, A. (1979). *Reverence for life: Sermons 1900–1919*. Chicago, IL: Ardent Media.

Footnotes

The film is available through Article 19 Films, 239 Centre Street, 2nd floor, New York, NY 10013; www.beyondrightandwrongthemovie.org