

The Forgiveness Project

Marina Cantacuzino

February 7, 2012



My background is journalism and I've always known that its real people's stories which move people, make them sit up and listen – far more than the expert, the politician, or the journalist. It was the lead up to the war in Iraq, and against a background of noisy headlines of payback, revenge and retaliation, I decided to collect stories about Forgiveness and Reconciliation. It was a personal project, something I felt compelled to do, and I did it in my spare time (in between other journalistic assignments for the Red Cross and Oxfam) with a photographer friend/colleague. In the end we had 26 stories from around the world - of victims who have become friends with perpetrators, terrorists who have turned their mind to peace building. Thanks to funding from Anita Roddict who saw the raw material and described it as an 'inspiration of the human spirit', the stories then became an exhibition of words and portraits, which launched in January 2004 at the Oxo Gallery, London. I called the exhibition The F Word because forgiveness for some is a dirty word – it seems to inspire and affront people equally. The exhibition was an overwhelming success – people from all round the world were asking to use the stories in their work in trying to resolve conflict. From there on I founded The Forgiveness Project – a charity which works in schools, prisons and out in the wider community, encouraging people encourage people to consider forgiveness as a tool to resolve pain and conflict.

WHY do it I think forgiveness is important: Firstly it's probably easy to see why forgiving those you love is an important part of maintaining relationships. Grievance stories for long-past offenses too often become roadblocks that stop us from moving forward. The most important people to forgive are those close to us. But what about forgiving terrible atrocities – especially where perpetrators show no remorse, don't possess empathy – serial killers, perpetrators of genocide, paedophiles. Are these people deserving of forgiveness and what does forgiveness mean in this context. In order to discuss need to look at what Forgiveness is not – most of all it's not condoning/excusing/absolving

Forgiveness.

- Forgiving someone does not mean you reconcile with them, it means taking hold of your painful emotions and deciding to let them go
- a refusal to let the pain of past dictate the path of the future
- healing the memory of the harm, but not erasing it (not forgive & forget)
- If F is a *struggle for understanding*, then it's a realisation that, "if I had lived your life perhaps I would have made your choices"
- Forgiveness is not forgetting that something painful happened. By forgiving the people who hurt you, you do not erase painful past experiences from your memory. Those experiences have a great deal to teach you, both about not being victimized again and about not victimizing others.

Viktor Fankl – Man's Search for Meaning sums up much about The Forgiveness Project

“WHEN WE ARE NO LONGER ABLE TO CHANGE A SITUATION – WE ARE CHALLENGED TO CHANGE OURSELVES”

I've met some extraordinary people – **At the age of ten, twins Eva and Miriam Mozes, were taken to Auschwitz where Dr Josef Mengele used them for medical experiments. Both survived, but Miriam died in 1993 when she developed cancer of the bladder as a consequence of the experiments done to her as a child. Eva Kor has since spoken explicitly about her experiences at Auschwitz and founded The C.A.N.D.L.E.S Holocaust museum in Indiana where she now lives. In 2003 the museum was destroyed in an arson attack, believed to be by white supremacists.**

Eva Kor: The day I forgave the Nazis, privately I forgave my parents whom i hated all my life for not having saved me from Auschwitz. Children expect their parents to protect them, mine couldn't. And then I forgave myself for hating my parents.

Anne Marie Hagan's father, Thomas Hagan, was 56 years old when he was murdered in 1979 in the little fishing village of Kingman's Cove, Newfoundland, Canada. He received 16 axe cuts, seven in the head, neck and face. The 30-year-old man who committed the act was his neighbour. He was suffering from schizophrenia, and he believed that he'd heard the voice of his dead mother telling him to kill Thomas Hagan.

Anne Marie “Filled with sadness and despair, I became completely consumed with anger, vengeance, and self-pity. I was absolutely determined that this man would never, ever regain his freedom. The longer he was locked away, the greater the value of my father's life. Then, on June 7, 1996, during a comprehensive campaign I'd organized to stop his release, I talked with him face-to-face. It was during this meeting, while learning more about him as a human being and the horrendous suffering that he'd endured, that everything changed. As he started to cry and said, "I'm to blame, I'm to blame", I couldn't take it anymore. I rushed around the table and hugged him, telling him that I forgave him. I remember saying to him, "Blame is too strong a word, blame is too strong a word." I'd not heard of the term restorative justice then but in that face-to-face meeting, which lasted 1 hour and 40 minutes, 16 years and 10 months of misery was just wiped away.”

Bassam Aramin became involved in the Palestinian struggle as a boy growing up in the ancient city of Hebron. At 17, he was caught planning an attack on Israeli troops, and spent seven years in prison. In 2005, he co-founded Combatants for Peace, an organisation of former Israeli and Palestinian combatants leading a non-violent struggle against the occupation. Since then, Bassam has not once picked up a weapon – not even when, two years later, his ten-year-old daughter Abir was gunned down and killed.

“As I was being beaten, I remembered a movie I'd seen the year before about the Holocaust. At the time I'd been happy that Hitler had killed six million Jews. I remember wishing that he'd killed them all, because then I would never have been sent to prison. But some minutes into the movie, I found myself crying, and feeling angry that the Jews were being herded into gas chambers without fighting back. If they knew they were going to die, why didn't they scream out? I tried to hide my tears from the other prisoners: they wouldn't have understood why I was crying about the pain of my oppressors. It was the first time I felt empathy.”

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