

Tales of Absolution

The Release from Pain

(AP, December 22, 1997) A father mourns a son slain by a drug addict. A daughter turns her back on a violent, alcoholic mother. A husband thinks of killing himself or the wife who abandoned him.

A minister, a mother, and an attorney — ordinary people who lived in unendurable pain.

Until they stopped it with an extraordinary act: forgiveness.

They are part of a national trend reflected in an increase in religious revivals, mass movements such as Promise Keepers, and best-selling books extolling the virtues of forgiveness. But their stories reveal that the road to forgiveness is different for each individual.

None forgave easily or quickly. Each got there in different stages, sometimes even when their tormentors were unrepentant. But none regrets it.

“The anger has totally gone away,” said Jim, the newly divorced man. “God had a plan. I still don’t understand the plan. But it’s got to be something good, after all He’s put me through.”

The Rev. Walter Everett’s shock at the murder of his son, 24-year-old Scott, turned to rage when the killer plea-bargained his way to a five-year sentence.

When the killer, a drug addict named Michael Carlucci, was sentenced, he said that although they must sound like empty words to the Everetts, he was sorry for what he had done.

Everett’s friends dismissed the remorse as a ploy for leniency, but Everett himself, a United Methodist minister in Hartford, Conn., was moved.

On the anniversary of his son’s death, he composed a letter to Carlucci in which he talked of his family’s suffering — “the pain is almost unbearable at times” — and said he could not accept one person having so little

regard for another.

And then he wrote: “Although words seem so trivial in some ways (yet they are all that we have now), I do accept your apology, and, as hard as these words are to write, I add: I forgive you.”

Those words, the bearded minister would later recall, were a turning point. “I felt a burden lifted from my shoulders. It was the beginning of healing for me.”

But it was not the end. His marriage would fail; his wife could not understand his forgiveness. When he went to visit Carlucci a few months after writing the letter, he was enraged anew to find that the murderer had already been transferred from a maximum to a medium-security prison.

“Healing doesn’t come immediately. It comes in stages. It’s a process that goes on through one’s life,” Everett said.

At that first meeting, Everett was making small talk about Carlucci’s weight when the prisoner, who had never been forgiven by anyone before, reached over and embraced him. Both broke down in tears.

Everett and Carlucci would become friends. It was Everett’s testimony that helped Carlucci win early release from prison, and it was Everett whom Carlucci would visit while on prison furlough. In 1994, Everett officiated at Carlucci’s wedding. They still see each other regularly.

Everett will never forget his murdered son. But if you are going to love your enemies, as Christ commanded, you first have to forgive them, Everett believes.

“When I look at Mike, I don’t see a man who injured my son,” Everett says. “I see a man who is forever changed by God. And I celebrate that.”

When Kate’s husband told her he had invited her mother to stay with them for Christmas, Kate was furious.

When Kate was growing up in pov-

The power of forgiveness

By Jane Lampman, *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 28, 1999

Little Earl and his mom and dad were having a terrible time. Diagnosed as hyperactive and defiant at school and at home, the redheaded seven-year-old with a sprinkle of freckles couldn’t seem to control his anger. One tumultuous week it got so bad he was hospitalized for the weekend.

Six months later, Earl was much happier: He had found a new way to deal with his feelings, his parents’ relationship with each other had improved, and he no longer needed the Ritalin or Prozac he was being given for hyperactivity. He began to do well in school.

Both he and his parents had found a “third way” to deal with their anger. Rather than denying or venting it, they had learned how to forgive. And their answer is one that is being explored much more widely today.

“Forgiveness has remarkable healing power in the lives of those who utilize it,” says Richard Fitzgibbons, the Philadelphia psychiatrist who worked with Earl and is one of the pioneers in introducing forgiveness into the mental health field.

Whether it be small wrongs, betrayals, or great crimes and injustices, most people struggle with the resentments and grudges that can arise from being treated unfairly. And the failure of so many to deal effectively with them echoes loudly in today’s school violence, high rates of divorce and domestic battering, drug and alcohol abuse, as well as in criminal acts, ethnic warfare, and terrorism.

Some see hope in the rediscovered power of forgiveness. They see its potential not only for personal life, but in community, national, and international relations. And many are practicing it. ➤

erty in a small Canadian town, her alcoholic mother regularly beat her while in a drunken stupor and left her alone to care for six younger siblings.

No amount of bruises on Kate's face the following morning would elicit any remorse from her mother, who accused her daughter of lying when confronted with the truth.

When Kate started her own family at age 20, she never looked back. But after the birth of their fourth child, her husband made the Christmas attempt at reconciliation.

The visit was a formal one. Kate sensed her mother was often on the verge of telling her something, but she was determined not to give her mother the opportunity. Kate refused to accompany her to the airport with her husband.

"It was just at the moment of her walking out the door, and she said, 'Can you ever forgive all those years?' And that was all I needed to hear," said Kate, now 48, but still in tears as she relives the moment. "That point was the beginning of a healing process that was an absolute miracle."

Kate had found peace in a Hutterite religious community, where all seek to live like the early Christians, but hatred had burdened her. Given the chance, she discovered she wanted to forgive.

"It only took me about 30 seconds to respond to it, because in a way this was what I had been struggling with for years," she said.

Still, forgiveness came slowly. It took her years to trust her mother to babysit her own children.

"The first time she ever genuinely wanted to hug me, afterward I just tensed up because the physical contact before had been only violent."

Forgiving is not forgetting, and Kate would not want it any other way.

"I don't think I could ever forget," she said. Otherwise "I could not remember the miracle of forgiveness."

Jim was a modern-day Job, the biblical embodiment of the divine mystery of why bad things happen to good people.

When the '90s began, he had a successful law practice, kids in college or prep school, a vacation home in Vermont.

Then he lost his mother to a long illness, and his father was killed in an auto accident. His business collapsed, and he lost his house.

Two years ago his wife of 28 years threw him out with the dog.

Like Job, Jim cried to the heavens. "I blamed God. God's given me a bad set of cards. I'd be better off killing myself."

He became consumed by "pure unadulterated anger, to the point I even thought of killing her," the stocky ex-Marine told his support group of divorced and separated Catholics in Hamden, Conn.

What changed his life was prayer, and the realization, after his wife vehemently objected to court-ordered counseling sessions, that his marriage was lost. At that point, "it became very easy for me to forgive," he said.

"My anger went down by volumes that were just incredible," said Jim, 54. "It's given me a real inner peace."

He could sleep at night. The fury he carried within him was replaced by a sense of serenity. These days, when another driver cuts him off on the highway, he laughs it off.

He went around to other people, asking forgiveness for injuries he had done to them. He has a new job counseling ex-addicts.

With a smiling thumbs-up, Jim describes the point at which he knew he was a changed man: when he could be polite to his ex-wife's boyfriend, whom she brought to their son's wedding not long after the divorce.

"I know where I am," he said, "and I know where I am with God, and that's all that matters." □

(The power of forgiveness continues)

Forgiveness is a "hot topic" now in many areas, from academic research to marital and family counseling to politics and community life. "Long considered the extra mile of mercy toward the offender that is required from a 'believer,' forgiveness is now being rediscovered as a creative human faculty for overcoming estrangement," says Lewis Smedes, professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., in *Dimensions of Forgiveness* (Templeton Foundation Press, 1998).

"Forgiveness is more than a moral imperative, more than a theological dictum. It is the only means, given our humanness and imperfections, to overcome hate and condemnation and pro-

ceed with the business of growing and loving," says Paul Coleman, a psychologist in Wappinger Falls, N.Y., whose work "was rejuvenated" when he started planting that seed with his clients.

Forgiveness has "a spiritual component," Dr. Coleman says, "a grace from God, if you will," and spirituality has only become a little more accepted in the mental health field in the last decade.

Dr. Worthington, author of *To Forgive Is Human*, says the key ingredient is empathy. "The degree to which a person can empathize is related strongly to the degree they can forgive." Given what is happening in the world, he adds, forgiveness "has the

potential to be enormously influential" in the 21st century. Research will also soon show, he says, that it will be very healthy not just to forgive an event or a person but to have a forgiving character. □