

What is forgiveness, and is it good?

“In the wrong hands, forgiveness can become a kind of tyranny.”

[Amy Frykholm](#) interviews Marina Cantacuzino in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue



Marina Cantacuzino. Photo © Katalin Karolyi. All rights reserved.

*In 2004 Marina Cantacuzino founded an organization called [The Forgiveness Project](#). It began with an exhibit called *The F Word*, created with photographer Brian Moody, which joined photos and stories of reconciliation and forgiveness. The exhibit has been displayed in 14 countries. The Forgiveness Project runs a prison program in England and Wales called RESTORE. Cantacuzino is also the author of *The Forgiveness Project: Stories for a Vengeful Age*.*

How did you become interested in forgiveness?

It began with my anger at the Iraq war: anger at the rush to war; anger at the dominant narrative of retaliation; anger at the black-and-white thinking that says “if you’re not with us, you are against us.” I was fascinated by the notion that forgiveness might be a way of putting things right between conflicting individuals or groups, and I was interested in forgiveness as a pain management strategy, a means of self-healing and renewal. I became determined to collect stories that showed peaceful solutions to conflict, stories where victims had met their offenders, where people had forgiven the killer of a loved one, or where former perpetrators had transformed their aggression into a force for peace.

I thought about asking you to define forgiveness, but you make it clear in *The Forgiveness Project* that you resist defining the word. Why is that?

Forgiveness has multiple meanings, and people don’t agree on the meaning. Even my own current working definition—“making peace with something/someone you cannot change”—doesn’t quite cut it, because forgiveness is more than acceptance or letting go. It has to include an element of compassion or empathy. As an organization, The Forgiveness Project is well served to be unspecific about the meaning. I have had people insist that forgiveness must be unconditional and therefore an act of self-healing. I’ve also had people insist the exact opposite, that forgiveness is entirely dependent on remorse and apology, and that therefore it has to be earned and deserved.

You also resist calling forgiveness “good.”

When I first started collecting stories for the F Word exhibition in 2003, I imagined forgiveness as a place where everything was transformed and healed. Along the way, however, I met Alistair Little, a former Protestant paramilitary soldier from Northern Ireland who had killed a man from the opposing side and served many years in prison for his crime. He told me categorically that he did not want to be involved in anything that pushed forgiveness as the only way or best way to heal. He said, “Some people can’t forgive. But that doesn’t mean they’re weak, or that they’ll be consumed by bitterness or anger. I’ve met people who haven’t been able to forgive, but who haven’t allowed the event to paralyze them. As human beings they’ve been hurt beyond repair. Who are we to say they should forgive?”

The word *should* affected me. I thought to myself, I never want people to feel they have failed if they cannot forgive. I agree with the late Marshall Rosenberg, founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, who believed *should* was one of the most violent words in the English language. In the wrong hands, forgiveness can become a kind of tyranny.

So you advocate a path of forgiveness, even while recognizing its limitations and potential divisiveness?

I don't advocate a path of forgiveness so much as an openness and a willingness to explore it—and then accept or reject it. I think people often don't want to think about forgiving someone or themselves, or about asking for forgiveness, because they have so many misconceptions about what it means. The Forgiveness Project is fundamentally a place of inquiry. We tell other people's stories. Some of them will be strong advocates of forgiveness, while others will focus on the limitations.

What do you mean by the need to free forgiveness from “the straitjacket of religion”?

I mean that sometimes forgiveness is barnacled by eons of piety. There is this perception that you need to be morally or spiritually superior in order to forgive.

How else is the concept of forgiveness misused?

I find it dangerous to be too prescriptive about forgiveness. For instance, I read an opinion piece in which the author said the physical effects of being unable to forgive can lead to cancer. There is plenty of evidence to show that forgiveness is good for your health and may even extend your life span, but there is no causal link between nonforgiveness and cancer.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu draws a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. He advises us either to renew or release a relationship that is harming us. In other words, forgiveness does not mean reconciliation.

I am also concerned about forgiveness being promoted as a quick fix. Rowan Williams said: “I think the 20th century saw such a level of atrocity that it has focused our minds very, very hard on the dangers of forgiving too easily . . . because if forgiveness is easy, it is as if the suffering doesn't really matter.”

What do you aim to accomplish through the prison program RESTORE?

RESTORE is a three-day, intensive, group-based process involving both a victim or a survivor of crime and an ex-offender who by working together model a restorative process. Restorative justice is about humanizing crime. It views crime as injury rather than as lawbreaking, and justice as healing rather than as punishment. The leading restorative justice theorist, John Braithwaite, has written: “Because crime hurts, justice should heal.” Pure restorative justice (the face-to-face meeting between an offender and the victim) can only happen when the offender accepts that he or she has committed an offense and is willing to show remorse.

The RESTORE program supports offenders in developing emotional resilience, demonstrating that everyone has the ability to change; and participants learn to create a new narrative from a basis of hope, responsibility, and a sense of agency.

How can we respond to the nationalistic mood evident around the globe and to the increase in hate crimes?

The only thing I know of—and the most powerful, and the quickest and the simplest response—is to share humanizing stories. This sharing of human stories creates what you might describe as a virtuous cycle and is therefore a powerful antidote to the vicious cycle of revenge and retaliation. As the poet Ben Okri wrote, “Stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart bigger.”

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