

The Forgiveness Fallacy: Standing by our Painful Truth

by Kevin Annett



Whenever my abusive boyfriend wanted to make up with me, he'd tell me he was sorry for beating me up, and naturally, I'd forgive him. That was just a green light for him to start beating me up all over again.

- Carol Martin, Vancouver, February 9, 2010

By refusing to forgive, I give up my illusions.

- Alice Miller, *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence*

While he was alive, Harry Wilson was homeless, starving, plagued by alcoholism and drug addiction, and regularly beaten and robbed on Vancouver's meanest streets. Yet neither that suffering, nor his childhood rape and torture by a clergyman with an electric cattle prod, caused him to collapse, as had most of his fellow alumni from the death camps called the Indian Residential Schools.



Most of those other survivors never found their voice, but Harry did, and he endured. When he spoke of his life, he often ended by saying the same thing: *“I’ll never forgive those bastards for what they did to me.”*

Harry Wilson proved to me something I have observed over many years working with survivors of torture and genocide: that the people who endure these crimes with a semblance of self-respect are those who have never forgotten or forgiven what was done to them as a child.

Over the years, I’ve routinely asked counselors and other “helping” professionals why they believe that a traumatized man or woman must forgive their tormenter if they are to become well. I have yet to receive a clear or logical answer. Rather, it remains an unquestioned assumption of these “experts” that forgiveness is indispensable to recovery from any form of torture or violence.

In reality, when we look at the actual survivors and their experiences, we find that the exact opposite is true: that the most basic requirement of commencing recovery from any assault is to never surrender one’s capacity to remember and name the wrong and the wrongdoer, and to be able to freely speak about it and express our natural outrage at what has happened to us. And yet precisely such a surrender and self-silencing is expected from survivors by their unconditional “forgiving” of their tormenter. In practice, that means inwardly resigning oneself to having been tortured at the hands of another person who has invariably escaped justice or accountability for his crime: in effect, being “reconciled” to one’s victimhood.

According to our culture’s dominant religious, medical and psychological paradigm, “forgiving” an aggressor is inexplicably framed as a medicinal stage towards recovery, even though it requires a unilateral, non-reciprocal act on the part of the victim that does not require the victimizer to change. “Forgiveness” is seen as an end in itself that will somehow bring about personal “healing”, without considering how the assault can be prevented.

The fact that under this paradigm the assault can continue and is tacitly encouraged to continue doesn't seem to count as much as the need for supplication and self-abasement by the one who is being assaulted.

In short, most modern “therapists” seem intent on subjecting victims of trauma to precisely what is needed to sustain them in a state of unalleviated humiliation and non-recovery and prevent their recovery. Anger and the refusal to let go of one's violation is seen by such therapists as a hindrance to “moving on”, as if not accommodating to one's wronged condition is the source of one's problem. *“Forgive and forget, and you will be better”* is the unchallengeable secular creed of counseling psychology. The onus, in other words, is placed upon the victim, and not the victimizer, to change.

Why is this?

It is alarming to the extent that so-called “helping” professionals base their methods not upon provable truths but on this partisan bias towards the abuser. To do so is to operate from an underlying and destructive assumption that there is something wrong and unhealthy about challenging or confronting one's abusers.

In this approach, there seems to be endless room for “reconciliation” and “forgiveness” by the victim, but just so much time and space allowed for the naming of the full and terrible truth: as if the sheep cannot be “reconciled” with the wolf except by agreeing to be eaten over and over again.

More people than I care to remember have told me how their counselors have told them that healing is only possible by moving beyond their past, “finding closure” and learning to live with the injustices and betrayals done to them. Remarkably, a victim of violence is thereby being asked to repress the memory of the crime and disassociate their life from its consequences: precisely what one should **not** do if one is to come to grips with a traumatic experience and not be morally and legally complicit in the concealment of a crime.

Torture and rape victims are told over and over by modern “therapy” that they are somehow damaging or belittling themselves by not forgiving and forgetting those who harmed them. And so “closure” means, in practice, closing off forever one’s memories, legitimate anger, and the capacity to secure justice and personal vindication. I hope it is self-evident whose interests are served by such a self-destructive approach.

In the case of aboriginal survivors of Christian genocide, such a charade of “healing” has become a shrewd political maneuver by the guilty government and churches to sideline and prevent lawsuits and protests by their victims. But the argument is the same, whether for aboriginal or non-native refugees from childhood rape and torture: the torturer is not responsible for changing and must ultimately be appeased and placated by being forgiven by his victims.

The fact that this attitude is so universal, and that the capacity to “forgive” their torturers is held up as some sort of qualifying morality test for victims, suggests that it arises from something more intrinsic and basic in our culture. I suggest that this something is the collective, fearful memory of parental retaliation: a fear that gives rise to the entire structure of personal and societal morality in European Christian culture which is based on a dominator, “winner and loser” model of social relationships.

In a nutshell, Christian morality states that goodness consists of respecting and obeying constituted authority and one’s elders, especially the ultimate parental authority: God. One cannot be wronged or abused by those in such authority because they are superior to us, and thus, are incapable of being in error or guilty of a crime. Or in the words of medieval inquisitors, *“Holy Mother Church is never in error; only the heretic is.”*

This autocratic mindset explains, in part, why no politician, church leader, or other father-figure ever goes to jail or is held legally accountable for the crimes and murders committed by them and their institution, when the law clearly requires that they be charged and tried. For the terrorizing of the innocent by the mighty is in practice not only legitimate, but a functionally necessary part not only of western society but any hierarchical social order.

The template of such elite-worshipping morality is, of course, the Biblical message that a rebellious humanity and all of creation are being punished by an all-wise father-figure “god” because his instructions were disobeyed by our original ancestors, Adam and Eve. Yet the same punishing deity offers us a way back into his graces if we will return to our original unthinking state of obedience through our blind faith in his sacrificed and tortured son Jesus Christ - and in those who claim to “represent” him. If we reject this one-time offer, we are damned for eternity.

In this Christian paradigm and its modern equivalent, we are incapable of goodness on our own and can only be well through our obedience to powerful and dominating figures who know better than we do, whether they be political, familial, religious, or workplace leaders. We can only live and think vicariously through such dominating figures, as any political campaign demonstrates. Morality, good citizenship, and ultimate salvation means unflagging obedience to the very authorities that rule, exploit, and harm us.

To kiss the hand that strikes us never makes sense. But the unswerving requirement to do so pervades all our therapeutic thinking and social practice, however subtly it is disguised or elaborately it is rationalized. So, it is hardly surprising that the pressure to conform to the interests of authority figures conditions every aspect of our lives, from religion to the law to politics as well as all our social and family relationships.

By this scheme, humanity is divided into the dominators and the subjugated. In our western religious-philosophical tradition, one cannot envision anything - and in fact, nothing and no-one is allowed to operate - outside the bipolar dynamic between the dominator (abuser-winner) and the accommodator (the abused-loser) personalities.

Even for those unfamiliar with this prevailing paradigm of Euro-Christian culture, it remains their firm belief that they must personally forgive a wrong done to them if they are to avoid an allegedly crippling resentment and desire for vengeance. This attitude is prevalent in not only Christian circles but in supposedly “secular” treatment centers, where it’s routinely espoused that *“I must forgive not just for the sake of another, but for my own sake.”* After all, does not Jesus admonish us to forgive all who harm us?

In fact, the word “forgiveness” in the New Testament, the Greek word *aphiemi*, is not a moral term at all but is akin to the Biblical Hebrew word for “repentance”, *shuba*, which means to turn around and walk in a completely different direction. Jesus was simply saying to not be like the person who has harmed us, but instead to be different. This is a radically dissimilar thing than saying we must be reconciled with one who has harmed us. It actually means the opposite: to be separated from such a person.

Further, even in terms of the moralistic claim that forgiving those who trespass against us bestows a personal cleansing, the empirical evidence does not bear this out. To try to forgive one who assaults us is to deny our own common sense and our capacity to freely express our feelings and defend ourselves from further attacks. Unilateral “forgiveness” is not only unhealthy and suicidal but fosters the illusion that a wrong is somehow wiped clean by killing in oneself the desire to protect our own dignity and seek restitution for our pain. It requires that the victim feel ashamed of harboring a natural and just desire for justice and accountability.

When we forgive one who has harmed us, we must not only repress our natural feelings but deny what we know is true for the sake of a supposed settlement with an abuser who usually shows little or no remorse for his action. In practice, such a resolution is rarely achieved, and yet the desperate “forgiver” is not permitted to recognize this and is invariably blamed for not finding a settlement with his adversary. For only the abused, and not the abuser, must change. This masochistic attitude entrenches the victim in an even deeper denial about his condition, like any battered child who keeps proclaiming, *“I’ve told my abusive father I love him! Why does he keep beating me?”* In this manner, the cycle of abuse and torture continues.

To accept on blind faith the efficacy and “healing power” of unilateral forgiveness by the victim is simply another form of repression and assault, because it denies one’s actual condition. By repressing our truth for the sake of a phony unanimity with an assaulter, the victim must immerse himself in a permanently dissociated mental state to continue the false belief that his act of “forgiveness” has redeemed his abuse and reformed his abuser, neither of which is true.

For modern “therapists” to help engender such a neurotic and fragmented psyche in those who have survived assault and torture is not only sadistic and untherapeutic but continues that affliction under another name. And yet, aided and abetted by such a fraudulent model of “therapy”, this destructive pathology is imposed most strongly on those people who have suffered most severely at the hands of others.

I witnessed this in the summer of 2010, when a strange and sad gathering of aboriginal people assembled on Parliament Hill in Ottawa to unilaterally offer to the government of Canada a so-called “Forgiveness Charter” in the name, absurdly, of everyone who ever attended an “Indian residential school”; the dead as well as the living!

The event was sponsored, predictably, by the very churches that ran the death camps called “schools”, acting through various puppet aboriginal politicians and preachers. But the rally was filled with hundreds of everyday survivors of rape and torture in these institutions: people who sincerely believed that their unilateral “forgiving” of the government and its church partners in crime would make everything better.

The very fact that this “forgiveness” was offered not to those actually responsible for the residential schools atrocities - the Catholic, Anglican, and United Churches - but to the more indirectly guilty government of Canada, spoke volumes of the deceitful and obfuscating purpose of the event. Nor did the enormous pretense and travesty of publicly absolving murderers for a crime on behalf of the silent and slaughtered victims who have no say in the matter seemed not to have occurred to anyone at the rally, or to the slavish national media that uncritically reported the charade.

Nevertheless, what I described earlier as the innate dread of parental retaliation that so molds our society’s notion of wellbeing and morality was displayed everywhere at the “Forgiveness Charter” Rally. Every aboriginal speaker implored his fellow survivors of Christian terror to believe that much harder in Christianity, to love those who had harmed them, and to completely absolve their torturers for all the wrongs they had committed against native people: even the systematic massacre of children.

The fear in the speakers' eyes and voices was palpable that day, as was their pitiful hope that their masters would approve their words and stop their reign of terror against them. I have seen the same look in every battered woman who is convinced that just a bit more love from her will still the blows of her husband. The hopes of the eternal victim, robbed of their own voice and the capacity to confront and then depart from their abuser, are always the same - and are never realized.

An Alternative

Can we imagine a genuine recovery geared to the needs of the victims? I have given such recovery the name "Aletheia Therapy", from the Greek word for undeniable truth. *Aletheia* means that which is not concealed and is seen and expressed as it is. Such authenticity is at the core of all life and recovery. It is accessible only through complete self-honesty and remembrance in a climate free of intimidation and domination.

Rather than the Christian paradigm that sees humanity as inherently debased and flawed and in need of continual correction by a wiser external authority, Aletheia Therapy arises from the Natural Law axiom that every man and woman is born as a complete, sufficient and self-governing being who holds within themselves the key to what is necessary for their own health and recovery.

Since the truth is indeed within us, it is only by remembering who we are and what we have experienced in its totality that we can find ourselves and our integrity again. This approach is very much in tune with Jesus' teachings and ironically quite opposite posed to institutional Christianity and western patriarchy and their insistence that we respect and reconcile with our abuser-dominator.

In short, we begin by ignoring such a "forgiveness imperative" in dealing with our own pain and trauma. Instead, we commence from the first and fundamental necessity of knowing our own truth by always retaining our capacity to speak freely for ourselves about who and what has caused our affliction. Doing so, we avoid the self-defeating pitfalls of silencing ourselves and burying our feelings for the sake of our tormenters.

By not worrying about forgiveness, we free ourselves from any illusion about our actual condition, and we retain our capacity to speak freely about what we know is true. Time and again I have observed in circles of torture survivors that only when they have reached such a stage of inner freedom can genuine recovery from their suffering begin by breaking out of their isolation and despair. In the words of Alice Miller, *"To live with one's own truth is to be at home with oneself. That is the opposite of isolation."*

My fondest and most inspiring memory of such actual recovery occurred not in a healing circle but at a public protest inside the sanctuary of the Roman Catholic cathedral in downtown Vancouver on Sunday, March 16, 2008. Aboriginal survivors of torture in catholic death camps held aloft their banners and signs and spoke to the congregation of the crimes committed against them by their church. In the process the survivors burst apart their own fears.

The same people who could not enter a catholic church or see a crucifix without becoming nauseous because of the awful memories of their torture as children strode bravely amidst the pews that day and witnessed to the crime to the dumb struck parishioners. These once-cowed survivors faced down threats of policemen and priests and stated their case to them without a trace of fear, and then peacefully left the church to the sound of their own drumbeats, laughter, and joyful triumph. Time and again the survivors would remark, *"I finally showed them"* or *"I'm not afraid of them anymore"*. (See [Exclusive! The day we turned the tables on child killing churches: Historic footage of the church occupation that forced out the truth - Murder by Decree](#)).

What had caused this incredible change that day was summed up by one of the victors, a native man named William Combes, when he said later on my radio program,

I thought I was going to let you all down, but then I saw you outside the church and it made me want to walk in there with you. Just doing that with everybody made me feel safe. Just facing down those priests and speaking out made me not be afraid of them. I didn't give a shit anymore what they could do to me. I was angrier at what they'd done to all my little friends at residential school. I felt like a man for the first time.

On that victorious day, William and the others proved that when the victims speak and act in their own name without fear or thought of their abuser, the true process of recovery begins: not just for victims but for all of us, because it makes justice an actuality. Such justice and the equality it breeds always precedes any possibility of the mutual recovery and transformation that abolishes all distinctions of winners and losers.

Standing by our own painful truth is as necessary as standing by one another, and as dangerous to a society like ours which is based on domination, exploitation, and fear. In times like these, just naming what we feel and know to be true is a subversive act to the dominators in power. It will become more difficult to do in the face of ever-growing oppression by a system that rules by psychically dominating a crippled and traumatized population. It is for this reason that among establishment educators, counselors, and “helping professionals” whose devotion to the political status quo is as entrenched as their dogma, encouraging such inner freedom in the victimized is seen as rank heresy and a threat to society.

So be it. Our aim, after all, is to turn the world upside down. For once we unite and we confront those who are the cause of our torment, there begins to grow something even greater than forgiveness or recovery, and that is transformation, both of ourselves and a hierarchical society that requires that we remain dissociated, brutalized people subject to a few.



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