

# Betrayal and forgiveness

by *Shirley Hershey Showalter*

Human experience teaches us that betrayal hurts, deeply. Promises made, believed, then broken, shatter our innocence and steal our trust. Manipulation, lies, abuse of power—these cause trauma. Horrors that happen in the lives of others cause trauma also.

Compared to many I know, I have been fortunate. The traumas I remember from childhood have nothing to do with abuse or violence. I often felt

lonely, but I can't say I felt betrayed. My six-week-old baby sister died when I was in the first grade. I still remember her little body in the white casket and the pall that fell over our home, but this kind of trauma has no perpetrator, unless one blames God, which did not seem to occur to any of us.

I grew up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Betrayal was not a word I heard very often except in Bible stories. Judas, of course, played the leading role in the drama of biblical betrayals. But let's not forget Jacob's sly stealth, deceiving his father, and betraying his brother. Or Peter's denials of Christ. Then there were the many adulteries, perhaps topped by David's seduction of Bathsheba and his passive murder of her husband Uriah.

Occasionally, I overheard gossip about betrayals in our community. But apology and forgiveness hit home when my grandfather stood at the front of the church in his plain suit with a little black bow tie making a pre-communion confession because he harbored bitterness toward his brother regarding the settlement of his father's estate. As I became a teenager, I listened to my own father's bitter stories about the terms of another sale he considered a betrayal—stemming from the day when the man who made the confession,



*Members of the Nickel Mines Amish community came together to share their sorrow the day after the anniversary of the school shooting the previous year that left five girls dead. When the community reached out to the widow and parents of the murderer, they sparked a national conversation on the power of forgiveness.*

*Photo by Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

his father, sold the family farm to him. I tried to help my grandfather and father reconcile before my father's untimely death in 1980. They both did their best, and God granted them grace.

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I now work at the Fetzer Institute, where our mission is “fostering awareness of the power of love and forgiveness in the emerging global community.” My colleague, Wayne Ramsey, has collated highlights from recent research. Researchers almost always begin with a list of what forgiveness is not, which helps to clarify misconceptions. For example, forgiveness is not:

- The same as pardoning, a legal term.
- Condoning (which implies a justification of the offense).

Some people are afraid to forgive because they think it means giving up claims for justice.

- Excusing (which implies the offender has a good reason for committing the offense).
- Forgetting (which implies that the memory of the offense is no longer in conscious awareness). When someone forgives, she remembers, but she remembers in different ways from how she remembered before forgiveness occurred.
- Denying (which implies simply an unwillingness to perceive the harmful injury that has occurred).
- Accepting or tolerating the injustice. Many psychologists speak of forgiving as outward-looking and other-directed. When we forgive, we make room for the injurer.
- Reconciliation (which implies restoration of a relationship).

This will involve different circumstances and also what the other person or persons want.

The list above makes it clear that we do not need to sacrifice justice in order to embrace love and forgiveness. It is true that there is no peace without justice, but it seems equally true that there is no justice without peace. Hanging on to wounds because an injustice has occurred hurts the person who hangs on as much or more as it hurts the offender.

What are some practical steps to take when you need to forgive someone (don't overlook the possibility that someone is yourself!)

or you want to seek forgiveness from someone else? Some psychologists have developed group therapies wherein people help each other prepare for forgiveness. Psychologist Everett Worthington often works with married couples. In his program individuals sometimes engage the emotions by talking to an empty chair and telling the chair what they need to tell their spouses—how much and in what way they were hurt. Then the individual sometimes takes the empty chair and tries to imagine what or how the offender was thinking or feeling. Deeply felt apologies often result.

Each of us betrays and is betrayed. So it is vitally important to our health, faith, and community that we each forgive and are forgiven. The prayer Jesus taught us, forgive us as we forgive our debtors, contains wisdom science is only now uncovering. ■

## Resources

The Campaign for Love and Forgiveness web site <<http://www.loveandforgive.org>>. This site contains many resources, articles, films, etc.

The Fetzer Institute <<http://www.fetzer.org>> web site contains many more resources, names of researchers, articles, practices, films, etc.

The book *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* contains excellent summations both of research and the concept of *gelassenheit*, the explanation for the kind of forgiveness the Amish practiced at Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania.

