

FORGIVING THE UNFORGIVABLE

August 12, 2007

Last month I introduced myself to you with a brief autobiography. I shared with you the story of my daughter's murder at age 28, and how that affected my life. Today I continue that story, hoping that my journey toward forgiveness may help some of you walk that path.

People often ask me how I survived, how I managed to continue living. My answer is always, "One day at a time, one hour at a time." It is not easy, and others feel powerless to help. Friends don't know what to say. Co-workers avoid certain topics, and often find it difficult to look one in the eye. I think they can not handle what they see there.

I had a white German Shepherd dog. I walked him every evening. I stalked through my neighborhood (near downtown Jackson) mentally protecting all the women there. "Don't come near my friends," I snarled inwardly. "This neighborhood is off limits." One evening I was doing my nightly rounds, dog on leash, when I saw coming toward me three young African American men. I saw them look at me, look at the dog, and cross the street. It took me years to figure out that they saw a crazy lady, and no one who is bright wants to mess with crazy ladies.

I think they were right, I was a little crazy during that time. Fortunately it did not last long. John and I married the following year, and he was a wonderful support. He continued going to death penalty vigils. He listened to my rants when I read the daily paper and saw the news of another young woman raped and/or murdered. He held me when my rage and grief left me speechless.

As I told you, I discovered the shelf of feminist theology at the Eudora Welty Public Library. I started with Rosemary Radford Ruether's classic, *Religion and Sexism*. I copied her Bibliography and started working my way through it. By the time I finished, along with other Bibliographies, I was in theological school.

I discovered Neo-Paganism. It was just becoming popular in Unitarian Universalist circles. In our Mid-South District there was a circle of women who met a few times a year. It was a safe place to grieve, a safe place to come back to life.

I became the Women and Religion chair of the Mid-South District. I shared with you the Mission Statement that still guides me. It is: My mission is to help make the world a safe place for women and children. (I knew that if it were safe for women and children, it would also be safe for men.)

John and I were very active in our church in Jackson, and in the district. In our then lay-led fellowship I was chair of the Worship Committee, and often presented Sunday

services. John served on the Board in many capacities. We both served on the District Board. Inevitably, it seems, the topic of becoming ministers arose. We decided to pursue that. We would serve as co-ministers at some lucky church. I would go to school first, while he finished his twenty years at the corporation at which he worked. When he retired, he would go to school.

He was elected President of the Board of Trustees of our church, and I was elected President of the Board of Trustees of the Mid-South District. The week before the District Board was to meet, we were hit by a drunk driver, going 50 MPH through a red light. He was driving without a license, using his uncle's car without permission. John was killed, and I was hospitalized for almost a month with numerous broken bones.

I took a year to heal, physically and emotionally. I interviewed all the ministers I could find, asking if the idea of going to theological school was at all logical. They all encouraged me to pursue this course of action. In 1991 I sold my house and business and moved to Meadville/ Lombard, thinking I was healed from the loss of my daughter, knowing I was grieving deeply over the loss of my husband.

One of the things that good people used to say to me was, "Someday Nana', you are going to have to forgive the man who killed your daughter." My first impulse was to wish I could smack the person so unfeeling as to say those words to me. My only understanding of forgiveness was the old Christian one I learned as a child, Jesus' admonition to forgive seven times seventy times. I knew I could never say, "It's all right," even in my mind, to the monster who killed my daughter. It was not okay that he had killed my first-born. It was not okay that he had turned my second daughter into a frightened woman afraid of relationships and with multiple locks on her doors. It was not okay that I suffered the incredible pain of losing my child to violence. NO—I would NOT forgive.

Counseling has been a part of my life for many years. I don't know how I could have begun to heal without the help of the successive counselors I sought as I changed locations. None of them could get past the block I put up whenever I heard the word *forgive*. However, I began to learn different definitions of that word.

I learned the Jewish theology of forgiveness. They teach that only the one who has been violated can grant forgiveness. If you cheat someone, you must go to the one you cheated and ask for forgiveness. They need not grant it the first time. You are obligated to go back three times. If the victim does not grant forgiveness after three times, you have done all that you can. God will grant forgiveness. However, in the case of murder, the victim is deceased, gone, out of the range of your request. Survivors can not grant forgiveness in the place of the victim. The perpetrator will die unforgiven.

"Well, that's my kind of forgiveness," I thought. "I don't need to worry any longer." Then

I attended a Winter Institute sponsored by Meadville/Lombard featuring Marie Fortune. Fortune is the person who worked with survivors of sexual abuse, especially clergy sexual abuse. Her workshop was very intense and very difficult for those of us who had been touched by sexual violence. However, she presented another view of forgiveness. “Forgiveness,” she taught, “in the context of violence, means letting go of your own guilt. It means refusing to let the perpetrator shape your life.”

It took a while for these lessons to sink in, but gradually they did. They make sense to me, within the context of a murder victim’s family. This does not necessarily mean that they are easy to do. However, they provide a guideline that is doable. They do not violate my sense of justice, nor of appropriate behavior.

I became conscious a few years ago that I no longer remember the name of the man who killed my daughter. I do wonder if he has been paroled, for I think that endangers other women. But I have no need to try to determine if that has happened. I think I have forgiven him, in the sense of forgiveness I understand—Jewish theology combined with Marie Fortune’s lessons.

In my research I learned about an organization that I wish I had known about years earlier. It is called Murder Victim’s Families for Reconciliation (MVFR). Rachel King is the author of *Don’t Kill in Our Names: Families of Murder Victims Speak Out Against the Death Penalty*. King is an anti-death penalty crusader. She set out to write a book against the death penalty, using the stories of families of murder victims that agreed with her. People are often surprised to learn that there are many people who oppose the death penalty, even when a loved one has been killed. King writes:

Often the family member’s decision to oppose the death penalty has come at great personal cost. It seems that compassion for a killer threatens to disrupt the order of the adversarial system and social paradigm of retribution and vengeance. Many families have shunned, or even disowned, members for publicly opposing the execution of the person who murdered their loved one.¹

We are fortunate that the state of Michigan forbids the use of the death penalty. However, the stories in King’s book illustrate that people can and do forgive the most heinous of crimes, and actively share the consequences of that decision.

King says that the people in her book are ordinary people who have faced extraordinary circumstances. What makes them different is that they found the strength to forgive the people who caused their greatest pain.² Not only did they forgive, but they actively worked against the death penalty for their victimizers. Many were alone when they began, and only after discovering MVFR did they find compatriots.

¹ King, Rachel, *Don’t Kill in Our Names: Families of Murder Victims Speak Out Against the Death Penalty*, Rutgers University Press, Piscataway, N.J., 2003, p. 1

² Ibid, flyleaf.

Most of the people in King's book were Christians, and had a Christian understanding of forgiveness. One, SueZann Bosler, was the daughter of a Church of the Brethren minister. Her father was brutally killed by a man looking for money, and SueZann was badly wounded in the knife attack. She tells the story of the murder and attack, her slow physical healing, and the numerous trials at which she was a witness. And she traces the progress of her forgiveness.

During James Campbell's first trial, SueZann testified that she forgave him his actions. She and others had learned about his very difficult childhood, which included severe abuse, and suicide attempts starting at age eight. She did not believe in the death penalty. However, the prosecutor was zealous in his actions. Although the jury was divided over whether to recommend the death penalty, the judge sentenced him to be executed. An appellate court, saying the judge did not consider mitigating circumstances, mental retardation and childhood abuse overturned this sentence.³

At the second sentencing hearing SueZann was again called as a witness. She was allowed to make a statement:

Why am I doing this? There are several reasons. Number one: I am doing it to have peace with myself. Number two: I know it is what my father would have wanted. Number three: The most important thing right now at this time is James Bernard Campbell's life.

Why kill people who kill people to show that killing people is wrong? To me that says it all. What happened that day ...I will never forget, and the pain may never go away, but I am putting it on hold right now to think about someone else and not just myself.

Pleading for this human being's life to be spared is one of my purposes right now. It's not very easy but it's something I want to do.

I am not condoning what he did to my father and me and how it affected our lives and others. I will ask you this question: will it bring my father back? No.⁴

However, the prosecution presented a strong case for death, and the jury voted 10 to 2 in favor. The judge sentenced James to death by electrocution.

SueZann recalls that by the time of the second trial she had really forgiven James. She reflected: "I didn't really know I hadn't fully forgiven James until that second trial. It's not like I lied when I said I forgave him before. I was just beginning the process; I didn't realize how far I still had to go."⁵

³ Ibid., p. 148

⁴ Ibid. p. 149

⁵ Ibid. p. 152

Again the Florida Supreme Court overturned the death sentence, this time because of “improper conduct by the prosecutor.” SueZann, her family, and James had another hearing to endure. James’ family had deserted him by the time of the third trial.

Although the judge forbade her from voicing her objection to the death penalty in court, SueZann’s attorney had coached her carefully. When the prosecutor began his questioning, one of his first questions was “Are you employed?” Sue Zann replied, “Yes, I have several jobs. I am a hairdresser, but for the past ten and a half years my main job has been working to abolish the death penalty.”⁶

The judge threatened her with fines and six months in jail if she said anything further about the death penalty. Several witnesses testified as to the horrific abuse James suffered as a child. After deliberations the jury returned a verdict, eight to four in favor of life imprisonment. The judge quickly sentenced him, shaping the sentence to prevent his ever being freed. Then SueZann was allowed to make a statement to the jurors. She thanked and blessed them for sparing the life of the man who killed her father and severely wounded her.⁷

I wish I could say that I am certain I could have been so generous and forgiving. I am not at all sure that I could. However, SueZann and other members of MFVR are powerful witnesses against the death penalty. Although SueZann’s father was a Church of Brethren minister, and it is clear that she embraced their theology and piety, not all of the people in King’s book shared a Christian background.

Gus Lamm, whose wife, Vickie, was killed, was basically unchurched. His healing process included moving to live in the mountains, and intensive therapy. He was not connected to the trial of the man who killed his wife. The only time he was contacted by the authorities was when a “presentence investigator” called to talk with him. Gus told him that both he and Vickie opposed the death penalty. Randy Reeves, Ottawa Indian, was sentenced to death for the murder of Vickie and her friend, Janet. It was nineteen years later, after Gus had reared his daughter, after he had spent years in counseling, and after he had discovered Taoism, that he received a call saying Randy was due to be executed in a few months.

Gus consulted with his daughter, Audrey, and they agreed to go to Nebraska, the site of the crime, to see if they could prevent this death. It took two years, but they succeeded. In doing so, they alienated Vickie’s family. Her mother died earlier, but her father and brother, Greg, were ardent supporters of the death penalty. Gus reflected on their experience:

....I would like Audrey to have a relationship with Vicki’s family, but they are angry,

⁶ Ibid. p. 157.

⁷ Ibid. p. 159

bitter people.

I think they honestly thought that seeing Randy executed would relieve their pain.

I see them as being a tragic example of what happens when people really clamor for the death penalty. Vicki's brother, Greg, is aged beyond his years. He is forty-four, but looks sixty. I can't help but think that he is a most reluctant participant in this process. His mom and dad became invested in the trial and outcome, and as they got older, he took over representing their interests. ...

Twenty-one years later they are reaping the seeds they sowed. They get to keep all of the hate they fostered over the years. That is what they invested in. I think the answer to surviving something like the murder of someone you love is to ask yourself how you want to invest your time and energy.⁸

Lamm's thoughts ring true for me. One cannot invest their time and energy in revenge, if one wishes to live a life of meaning and purpose. I was delighted to find, in *Changing Lenses*, by Howard Zehr, an affirmation of my interpretation of Marie Fortune's work on sexual violence. He cites her work in his discussion on forgiveness. "Often we think forgiveness means forgetting what happened, writing it off, perhaps letting the victim off the hook easily. But forgiveness does not mean forgetting what happened....It does not mean saying, 'It wasn't so bad, it doesn't matter.' It was bad, it does matter, and to deny that is to devalue both the experience of suffering and the very humanity of the person responsible."⁹

And he affirms my tortured learning as I struggled through Fortune's lesson: "Forgiveness is letting go of the power of the offense and the offender have over a person. It means no longer letting that offense and offender dominate. Without this experience of forgiveness, without this closure, the wound festers, the violation takes over our consciousness, our lives. It, and the offender, are in control. Real forgiveness, then, is an act of empowerment and healing. It allows one to move from victim to survivor."¹⁰

Now, a word about Zehr's term, used above—closure. This metaphor is now so over-used as to be meaningless. Or else, death penalty advocates have captured its meaning. I often hear it employed by prosecutors, who argue for the death of a perpetrator, "so the family can find closure." No, no, no.

The truth is that family members of murder victims will never find closure, if by that one means forgetfulness. I tell those victims of trauma that I counsel that they will never forget—however they will learn how to live more comfortably with the memories. And I assure them that they don't really want to forget, for they want to retain the good

⁸ Ibid. p. 219

⁹ Zehr, p. 46

¹⁰ Ibid.

memories of their loved one. "You will always be sad that you lost the presence of your loved one," I say. "However, you will also be happy that he or she was with you for the time of their life on earth."

Advocates of the death penalty do all of us a very big disfavor by perpetuating the myth that the death of a killer will cure the pain of traumatic loss.

Healing from such a loss is a long, difficult process. One must make meaning out of the pain and tragedy. For many of the people in the books I read, publicly opposing the death penalty served that purpose. In my case, focusing my energies on ministry, and keeping always in mind my Mission Statement helped me heal.

My mission is to help make the world a safe place for women and children.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.