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INTRODUCTION

FORGIVENESS AND MAGICAL THINKING

ON JUNE 17, 2015, the white supremacist Dylann Roof committed what many would call an unforgivable crime. During a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, he murdered nine Black churchgoers. The shooting and the subsequent courtroom events gripped the nation not only because of the horrific nature of the crime but also because of the way in which some members of the victims' families responded to Roof. They forgave him.

At Roof's first court appearance, Nadine Collier, the daughter of seventy-year-old victim Ethel Lance, said, "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. God have mercy on your soul." Anthony Thompson, the husband of slain Myra Thompson, forgave Roof and implored him to repent and confess. Bethane Middleton-Brown, the sister of Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, acknowledged her anger in the courtroom but expressed her sister's commitment to love over hate: "She taught me that we are the families that love built. We have no

room for hate, so we have to forgive.” Bethane forgave Roof, as would Felicia Sanders, the mother of Tywanza Sanders. As Bethane told Roof at his sentencing in 2017, “I wanted to hate you, but my faith tells me no. I wanted to remain angry and bitter, but my view of life won’t let me.”

Despite the slaughter of their family members in a sacred and safe space by a man whom the victims had welcomed, the bereaved found it in their hearts to forgive. Many of us witnessing the case could not imagine that we would do the same. Surely, we have withheld forgiveness from people for transgressions far less serious. Even the most pious of bystanders would have understood the families’ refusal to forgive. And yet, some resisted hatred and publicly forgave.

With resentment and revenge so rampant in Western culture, these forgivers deserve our praise for their unconditional act. Perhaps they could teach us something about forgiveness. Following the courtroom statements, many editorial columns across the country suggested as much, with headlines like “Hate Won’t Win” and “How ‘Emanuel’ Reveals the Power of Forgiveness.”

In response to what took place at Emanuel, I became overwhelmed by grief, sadness, and anger. Soon after, reading the media’s coverage of the families, I was overtaken by worry. I was troubled by the fact that forgiveness was being depicted as something magical—enchanted words that once spoken and performed could immediately heal wounds and racism. Less was said about what it took for the family members to forgive and continue on that path.

In addition, even though the case is an example of extraordinary acts of forgiveness, not every family member or person in attendance responded with a forgiving stance. Who were they and why did they decide to withhold forgiveness? Weren’t their

stories worth hearing too? I was bothered by the fact that the media were using the word “forgiveness” with no attention to what it meant, what it didn’t mean, what forgiveness required, and what our role was as community members in helping to make forgiveness a reality. I was also worried that outsiders would use Nadine’s and Anthony’s forgiveness to force other people to forgive. If those in Charleston could forgive Roof, clearly you should forgive me!

My sense is that while many were inspired by these individuals’ willingness to forgive, fewer were inspired to curb and halt hatred and violence. We were praising and promoting forgiveness, yet taking its meaning for granted. Part of the problem had to do with our narrow definition, amplified in popular culture. It’s akin to the endings of certain Hollywood films—desirable results have been achieved, good has prevailed over evil, and positive emotions win the day. Similarly, we tend to depict forgiveness as a feel-good act that can provide a happy resolution for all those involved. Forgiveness is the thing that helps us ride off into the sunset together, always!

All of us have either forgiven or received forgiveness. And many of us believe it has some moral value, even if we disagree about what that value is. We tend to think that we know, somewhat naturally, what forgiveness is and how to use it well. This helps explain why when I meet a person for the first time and tell them that I write about forgiveness, they immediately and confidently share their thoughts about the subject. Forgiveness is such a central and prevalent practice in our social world, how could we fail to understand it? Social media quotations echo claims about the psychological benefits of forgiveness; businesses promote it as a workplace value; and, as we’ve seen, newspaper reporters praise victims and their families for extending it to seemingly unworthy candidates. We often beg for and expect

it from family and friends—thinking forgiveness alone, or at least primarily, can solve our interpersonal problems.

In the wake of the Charleston tragedy, the power of forgiveness was quickly becoming exaggerated. To be sure, forgiveness is powerful. But it's not magical. It doesn't work on its own, nor does it transform states of affairs in an instant. And just as with any other power, we can misuse it, thereby causing more hurt. As I watched these events unfold in the media, I knew that what was needed was a demystification of forgiveness—an account of its powers and limitations, and how we might do better as extenders, promoters, and withholders of forgiveness. To discover those answers for myself, I decided to write this book.

We think that forgiveness is the “letting go” of negative feelings. It aims at reconciliation and is necessary to build a better future. It is what the mature extend and what the bitter hold back. We think promoting it is always a virtue, and discouraging it is a vice. As I hope to convince you over the course of this book, we could not be more misguided.

This narrow view of forgiveness is one with which I was intimately acquainted. I grew up constantly hearing “Let it go” as a religious command and wise advice from Christian ministers and older community members. As a child, I was taught that holding on to anger wasn't “pretty.” However, I began to notice that something wasn't quite right with the way religious leaders, self-help gurus, journalists, my elders, and my peers were talking about forgiveness. The coverage surrounding the Charleston massacre, which occurred as I was entering graduate school, was the straw that broke the camel's back and compelled me to focus my research on forgiveness. During that time, I encountered perspectives about forgiveness that were drastically different from what I'd been taught growing up and what I was witnessing in the media. From the work of the eighteenth-

century British moralist Joseph Butler, I discovered that we can forgive and yet remain angry. From contemporary feminist philosophers such as Kathryn Norlock and Alice MacLachlan, I learned that forgiveness doesn't require rigid conditions. Others, such as the ethicist Charles Griswold, taught me that forgiveness could be done well or badly. I was discovering like-minded thinkers—folks who, like me, were not satisfied with our prevailing picture of forgiveness.

Now, as a philosopher, self-proclaimed “public defender” of anger, and proud withholder of forgiveness, I believe it is time to draw back the curtain so that we can see forgiveness in a new light. On the broader view of forgiveness that I propose in this book, forgiveness is not one thing, nor does it aim at one goal; and it is not without its limitations. This new way of thinking about forgiveness, I'll argue, challenges how we often talk and think about it, as well as how we go about recovering from wrongdoing. Frankly put, the narrow view doesn't do anyone any good. I hope to show you that the broader view does.

I will explore how this more expansive understanding of forgiveness can help us improve in our roles as requesters, encouragers, and recipients of forgiveness, as well as forgivers and withholders of forgiveness. I'll examine how such improvements can make it more likely that we will repair our relationships, communities, and our lives. The type of repair that I will challenge us to seek is *radical repair*. Radical repair addresses the roots of a problem, aims for change, and requires everyone—not just the victim—to help make things right. Those who participate in radical repair accept that some things may never return back to their original state, but that trying is worth the effort. I will also demonstrate how a narrow view of forgiveness can have a negative impact on the above roles, making radical repair less likely. Even when we have a more expansive view

of forgiveness, however, I'll argue that we can still misuse our powers of forgiveness. The effect of the narrow view and the tendency for us to misuse our powers show why it is necessary for us to restrain ourselves. This retraining involves thinking differently about forgiveness and doing forgiveness better.

In this book, then, I do not merely aim to offer a better understanding of forgiveness. Instead, I will show how we can make better use of forgiveness, recognize when we are wielding it in ways that are abusive and oppressive, and accept its limitations. I will outline just how and why we should rethink the ways we respond to wrongdoing.

We all navigate the complicated paths of relationships, emotions, conflict, tough conversations, and solidarity. And many of us have been victimized by those who have vowed to never hurt us. We've witnessed wrongdoings by others or have ourselves wronged others. This book speaks broadly to all of us as we grapple with the aftermath of wrongdoing and seek out ways to help repair our world. This book is about victims. But it is also about wrongdoers, family, friends, religious leaders, psychologists, and journalists.

I am going to take you into courtrooms and truth commissions to examine what goes wrong when we encourage forgiveness with a narrow view. I'll delve into our private lives to examine the philosophical and social factors that influence our own unreasonable expectations of forgiveness, including our beliefs about who should give it, when they should give it, and why.

I'll examine obstacles that a refusal to forgive poses to familial bonds by considering whether we have a duty to forgive family members. Is a lack of forgiveness compatible with love? And why does the long shadow of wrongdoing make personal reparative attempts both difficult and, at times, impossible?

I'll take you into the workplace to examine the appropriateness of forgiveness in a professional context. I'll take you to press conferences in the aftermath of police violence to talk about how publicly inquiring about forgiveness ends up disrespecting victims by rushing and coercing them to forgive. I'll challenge the ways in which we criticize both those who forgive and those who refuse to forgive.

In the pages that follow, I will wrestle on a personal and intellectual level with forgiveness. And, I admit, I am still wrestling. I know I am not alone. I hope what I've discovered can be of use to you on your own journey. In the end, I believe you will have a better understanding of your own relationship with forgiveness—when you are willing to offer or ask for it, and why. And you will be able to use it more wisely—for radical repair.

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