Amish Grace as Popular Christian Scholarship

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Amish Grace as Popular Christian Scholarship

David Weaver-Zercher

One needn’t be a scholar to know that outsiders’ fascination with the Old Order Amish has made non-Amish entrepreneurs a lot of money—through tourist enterprises, tawdry romance novels, and a host of other media. More than serving to score dollars, however, the Amish have frequently been employed to score points. Their countercultural lifestyle, considered in light of their community stability and economic viability, has provided a useful foil for many outsiders to assess and critique mainstream North American life. Even the leading scholars of Amish culture, first John A. Hostetler and later Donald B. Kraybill, could not resist the temptation to promote the Amish way of life as an example for others to emulate. In his popular tourist booklet, written before the Amish assumed their now iconic status, Hostetler concluded that “the hurried, worried, and fearful world” would be wise “to learn something from the Amish.”¹ Thirty-five years later, Kraybill echoed his mentor’s thoughts: “We have much to learn from the Amish story....They have distilled some insights that can enlighten those of us within the cultural mainstream.”²

Much of my own scholarship has served to critique what I think are facile calls to learn from the Amish.³ It’s not that I don’t think the Amish have constructed a meaningful and largely satisfying way of life (I’m pretty sure that the Amish, taken as a whole, are more content with their lives than most Americans). The problem is that the Amish way of life, as a way of life, is an integrated whole that is difficult to adopt piecemeal. For example, the stability of Amish

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² Donald B. Kraybill, The Riddle of Amish Culture (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), viii-ix.
³ In particular, The Amish in the American Imagination (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), but also Writing the Amish: The Worlds of John A. Hostetler (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2003) and to a lesser extent The Amish and the Media (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).
marriages cannot be separated from the functional, non-romantic approach the Amish take to marriage, nor can it be separated from the fact that seeking a divorce from one’s Amish spouse would almost certainly result in excommunication and shunning. Similarly, the Amish community’s close-knit family life that enthralls socially isolated Americans cannot be separated from the fact that Amish children, forced to discontinue their educations after the eighth grade, lack the vocational options and geographical mobility that college degrees afford. In these and many other ways, the aspects of Amish life that outsiders find appealing—the things we think we should “learn from the Amish”—come at a price that most modern Americans, formed by liberal assumptions about individual rights and consumer choice, are not willing to pay. Speaking for myself, I prefer to keep my options open.

But does that mean there is nothing to learn from the Amish? Or to ask the question more generally: is it impossible for outsiders to examine a culture vastly different from their own and gain information that can then be used to modify, and perhaps improve, their own way of life? As suspicious as I tend to be about that activity, I can’t conceive of an argument that would deny that possibility altogether. Stated positively: we can learn from the Other without going native.

The October 2006 shooting at a Lancaster County Amish schoolhouse, and the subsequent Amish response to it, spawned the kind of reflection I’ve outlined above. Non-Amish observers found the Amish community’s quick extension of forgiveness curious and wished to have it explained. More than that, however, many outsiders used the Amish response to weigh their own convictions and actions. “Wouldn’t the world be a better place if more of us acted like the Amish,” was the standard rhetorical question that circulated widely—a question that only a few commentators had the good sense to challenge. Of course, the lessons that sympathetic commentators drew from the school shooting and its aftermath were wide-ranging and
sometimes contradictory. Even so, most agreed that the Amish community’s commitment to forgive was a good thing that others should seek to emulate. Given my longstanding interest in the usability of the Amish, this call to emulate the Amish provided one of the more interesting questions to consider in the months following the school shooting. It was certainly the hardest question my co-authors and I sought to answer in *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy.*

*Amish Grace* as Popular Scholarship

In their book *Scholarship and Christian Faith*, Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen define scholarship as “disciplined and creative reflection...disseminated for the benefit of others and judged by appropriate standards of excellence.” They further note that, although those who benefit from scholarly offerings are typically specialists in the field, good scholarship can and should be produced for non-specialists. Packaging one’s scholarship for the masses comes with particular challenges, to be sure, not the least of which is the suspicion that the simplicity of popular presentations runs counter to the academy’s “standards of excellence.” Still, scholars in the humanities have a long history of adapting and disseminating their scholarship to the general public. Some of that scholarship has been very strong.

In the weeks that followed the Nickel Mines schoolhouse shooting, my co-authors and I answered many queries about Amish people and their culture and, before long, received requests to produce a mass-market book on the shooting and the Amish response. These requests created

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6 Given widespread interest in the Amish, it’s not surprising that many scholars of Amish life, including John A. Hostetler and Donald B. Kraybill, have used popular or semi-popular vehicles to present their ideas.
something of a quandary for me. One of the reasons I’ve oriented my scholarship as I have—
focusing more on mediators of Amish life than on Amish life itself—is because most Amish
people would rather be left alone. Although many Amish people recognize the difference
between Hollywood films and academic books, it’s not unusual for Amish people to tell
researchers that there are already too many books about the Amish. At the very least, most
Amish people are reticent to accommodate scholars’ questions about their peculiar way of life.

Of course, writing about the Nickel Mines school shooting was even more fraught. Not
only was it a horrific tragedy, the media coverage of the event had already assumed epic
proportions. Most Amish people abided the media’s intrusions in the shooting’s immediate
aftermath; still, they were relieved and pleased when the satellite trucks, television cameras, and
journalists pulled out of Nickel Mines and headed home. Indeed, some Amish felt that moving
on from the tragedy meant redirecting their attention to the present and the future, an activity that
was difficult to undertake as long as outsiders kept asking their thoughts on the shooting. I was
well aware that many Amish people—and some non-Amish people—would be sceptical and
possibly even offended by the prospect of a book.7

So why did we choose to write Amish Grace? Our motives were various, not just with
respect to one other, but also with respect to our individual selves.8 Three reasons in particular
prompted me to conclude that writing the book was a worthwhile endeavor. First, the Amish
community’s response to the schoolhouse tragedy illustrated aspects of Amish spirituality that
typically get lost when observers focus on the Amish’s more conspicuous practices, e.g., horse-
and-buggy transportation and plain dress. By focusing on forgiveness (as opposed to, say,

7 One scholar has written that the most appropriate scholarly response, out of respect for the grieving and publicly
reticent Amish community, was silence. See Julia Spicher Kasdorf, “To Pasture: ‘Amish Forgiveness,’ Silence, and
8 Some of those motives were self-serving, to be sure. I’ve yet to meet a scholar who didn’t want to be considered an
expert in his or her discipline.
technology), a book on the Nickel Mines school shooting held the potential to highlight essential aspects of Amish spirituality that often go unseen. Second, the topic of forgiveness carries significance far beyond the specifics of this particular event; exploring the Amish response at Nickel Mines thus afforded a way to contribute to a burgeoning interdisciplinary literature on an important but contested topic. Third, the public’s reaction to the Amish response raised interesting questions about public esteem for the Amish and, more specifically, whether the larger world could/should learn from the Amish. In sum, I chose to write about the Nickel Mines school shooting to (1) help explain Amish life; (2) foster informed reflection on the problem of forgiveness; and (3) answer questions about the transferability of the Amish way of life.

These questions are important scholarly questions. At the same time, they carry have broad resonance. It’s not just anthropologists who are interested in Amish life and culture; it’s pretty much everyone who sees a horse and buggy. And it’s not just theologians who are interested in forgiveness; it’s religious people generally. For that reason my co-authors and I chose to write our book in an accessible manner: a jargon-free writing style, few assumptions about background knowledge (not just of the Amish, but of Christianity generally), relatively short chapters, silent citations, etc. As a result of that decision, the book and its ideas have circulated widely. Numerous churches and book clubs have used *Amish Grace* for discussion purposes, and my co-authors and I have received scores of speaking invitations from libraries, churches, and other civic groups. Although not every published review has been uniformly positive, taken together the reviews have affirmed the fact that popular scholarship can achieve the academy’s standards of excellence. In that way, *Amish Grace* participates in a long tradition of Amish scholars orienting their scholarship to general audiences.
Amish Grace as Christian Scholarship

In some respects, the claim that *Amish Grace* constitutes Christian scholarship is a rather obvious assertion. Tracing their roots in sixteenth-century Anabaptism, the Amish are firmly situated in the Christian tradition. To be sure, some evangelical Christians, unsettled by the Amish community’s unwillingness to use born-again language (e.g., “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ”) and troubled by their rule-oriented religious lives, assume the Amish are sub-Christian and seek to evangelize them in one manner or another. From the perspective of most religious scholars, however, Amish theological assumptions place them firmly in the orthodox Christian tradition. If scholarly writing about the Christian faith is Christian scholarship, then writing about the Amish is likewise Christian scholarship.

It’s arguable, however, that Christian scholarship is something quite different from writing about a faith-related topic. Once again the Jacobsens offer welcome observations on this question, suggesting that Christian scholarship is less *topically related* than it is *approach oriented*. In particular, they suggest that Christian scholarship assumes one of two approaches: “faith-informed scholarship” and “academically shaped faith.” According to the Jacobsens, faith-informed scholarship holds Christian faith as “the fixed point of reference” in view of critiquing or revising disciplinary knowledge. Academically shaped faith turns that process around; in it, Christian scholars “use disciplinary knowledge as a fixed point of reference to critique or tweak their own Christian faith.” Most scholarly endeavors give priority to one approach or the other, though sometimes they appear in tandem. In the field of religious studies believing scholars are

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9 An interesting example is the organization Mission to Amish People (MAP), whose primary goal is “to reach the Amish people with the gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark 16:15.” See http://mapministry.org.
10 It goes without saying that many unbelieving scholars have written intelligently about various aspects of the Christian faith. The Jacobsens call this “Christian studies,” as opposed to Christian scholarship. “Anyone can engage in the historical, sociological, psychological, literary, or philosophical examination of Christian faith. Anyone can do Christian studies because its aim is to be descriptive.” *Scholarship and Christian Faith*, 152.
11 *Scholarship and Christian Faith*, 153-54.
more apt to use their disciplinary expertise to examine and refine understandings of faith (academically shaped faith). At the same time, careful scholars also recognize that their faith commitments affect their scholarly questions, approaches, and conclusions (faith-informed scholarship).12

From the standpoint of the Jacobsens’ work, *Amish Grace* is best conceived as an exercise in academically shaped faith. More than explaining Amish life in an objective fashion, *Amish Grace* provides numerous inroads for evaluating the Christian life more generally.13 This latter goal—to help Christians think more intelligently about certain aspects of the Christian faith, and to provide new resources for living it—is a somewhat covert activity in the book, for we wanted the book to reach a wider audience than simply Christian readers. Moreover, as we frequently acknowledge in the book, the virtue of forgiveness is not an exclusively Christian virtue, but is rather embraced and advocated in many religious realms (and also some secular ones). Nonetheless, because the Amish are Christians who draw heavily from shared Christian resources (e.g., the biblical text), as they ponder forgiveness, *Amish Grace* affords many opportunities for Christian readers to ponder their own Christian faith.

The most obvious way *Amish Grace* incarnates this faith-reflective approach is through its analysis of forgiveness. More specifically, *Amish Grace* seeks to address the following questions: What is forgiveness? Who can and/or cannot extend forgiveness? Is it simply a transformation of feelings, or is it something more? Why is it considered a virtue in the Christian tradition? Is it always a virtue, or must it be weighed against other virtues? How is the notion of

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12 Indeed, my chapter in the Jacobsens’ book argues that Anabaptist faith commitments shape the way that Anabaptist scholars think about their disciplines. See David Weaver-Zercher, “A Modest (Though Not Particularly Humble) Claim for Scholarship in the Anabaptist Tradition,” in *Scholarship and Christian Faith*, 103-117.
13 In terms of Ernest Boyer’s definitions of scholarship, *Amish Grace* functions as both “integrative scholarship” and “applied scholarship.” That is, it makes connections between various disciplinary fields—sociology, psychology, and theology—and, in its concluding chapter, seeks to apply the concept of forgiveness to other situations beyond the Amish practice of it.
forgiveness related to, but different, from the notions of pardon and reconciliation? *Amish Grace* seeks to address all of these questions and many more, thereby allowing its readers to reflect more thoughtfully on their own experiences of hurt and the responses that can emerge from those hurts.

In addition to answering questions about forgiveness, *Amish Grace* explores other questions related to the Christian life, for instance, the question of biblical interpretation. Why do the Amish place such a strong emphasis on forgiveness? Because they take Matthew 6:14-15 literally: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Why do the Amish shun those who depart from the Amish faith? Because they take I Corinthians 5:11 literally: “But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy….Do not even eat with such a one.” And why do Amish women refuse to wear jewelry and fashionable clothing? Because they take I Timothy 2:9 literally: “…women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes.” Although *Amish Grace* is hardly a primer on biblical interpretation, its articulation of Amish biblicism complicates the claim of some non-Amish Christians that they themselves “take the Bible literally” when in fact they don’t. Although we don’t say it overtly, thoughtful readers will recognize through their reading of *Amish Grace* that all Christian traditions are selective in their use of biblical texts, allowing some texts to trump others in their authority.

*Amish Grace* also offers insights into the process of spiritual formation. One of the most persistent questions in the aftermath of the schoolhouse shooting focused on the seemingly superhuman ability of Amish families to forgive such a heinous act. How could the Amish
respond in such a manner so quickly and so fully? Our response to that question, drawing on the work of cultural sociologists, points to existence of cultural habits, “assumptions and conduct that are so deeply rooted and so often practiced that most people are not even aware of them.” These habits, we write, are “especially visible in times of stress that demand immediate response, when there is no time or emotional energy to think through all the possible actions.” In other words, the Nickel Mines Amish responded to the schoolhouse shooting as they did because their response extended a pattern of behavior that was already prominent in their community.

Although we don’t use this specific example in the book, I’ve since used (in good Pauline fashion) an athletics analogy to explain the Amish response: to play well in the biggest games of their lives, athletes must first develop certain habits by practicing them over and over again. Indeed, Amish Grace demonstrates that the Amish commitment to forgiveness is not something tacked on to their Christian lives when necessary as “a good thing to do.” Rather, it’s a commitment deeply embedded in their community life on numerous levels, so much so that one cannot talk about Amish forgiveness without talking about dozens of other aspects—and practices—of Amish life. From childrearing to communion taking, from lectionary reading to storytelling, the Amish engage in bodily practices that, over the years, shape them into forgiving people—not completely or perfectly, but more forgiving than most North American Christians.

That recognition, of course, raises the question I highlighted earlier in this essay, the question of the applicability of the Amish example to other situations. More than most observers, and even more than my co-authors, I’ve been critical of employing the Amish as an inspirational example. To be sure, the Amish response was “inspiring” in the sense that it alerted many people to the possibility of a healing, nonviolent response to injustice. At the same time, when reduced

14 Of course, we challenge some assumptions of that question, assumptions based on certain media accounts that overplayed the ease and extent of Amish forgiveness. See Amish Grace, 132-36.
15 Amish Grace, 68.
to an inspirational story without an adequate account of the Amish cultural milieu, the story of Amish forgiveness fails to identify the real applicability of the Amish example.¹⁶ Most observers fool themselves if they think they can learn how to forgive, from the Amish or from anyone else, by watching a heart-rending, five-minute clip on Good Morning America. To the contrary, learning how to forgive typically requires a formation process over a long period of time in a community that values forgiveness.¹⁷

Why is Amish Grace a work of Christian scholarship? Because recognizing the cultural milieu that fostered Amish forgiveness enables those of us who aren’t Amish to reflect upon the communities that we ourselves are building. If we truly think that forgiveness is a good thing, then we need to construct cultures that value and nurture forgiveness. How might we work more imaginatively to create communities in which enemies are treated as members of the human family? How might our communities foster visions that enable their members to see offenders, as well as victims, as human beings with authentic needs. There are no simple answers to these questions, though if the Nickel Mines Amish have anything to teach us, it’s that our answers will involve the habits we decide to value, the images we choose to celebrate, and the stories we seek to remember. By delineating the habits, images, and stories that nurture forgiveness in Amish life, Amish Grace provides modest resources for evaluating and reshaping our own communities of faith.¹⁸

¹⁶ Inspirational stories can have an even more insidious effect, allowing people to move past a tragedy without adequately addressing the evil that spawned it. Nearly absent in the aftermath of the Nickel Mines school shooting were serious considerations of violence against women and American gun violence more generally, a loss that was exacerbated by the forgiveness story’s ascendance.
¹⁷ See Miroslav Volf, Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 205), 14.
¹⁸ This last paragraph is drawn from Amish Grace, pp. 182, and David Weaver-Zercher, “Amish Grace and the Rest of Us,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, September 30, 2007.
Amish Grace
How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy

Donald B. Kraybill
Steven M. Nolt
David L. Weaver-Zercher

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
Amish School Shooting. Never did we imagine that these three words would appear together. But the unimaginable turned real on October 2, 2006, when Charles Carl Roberts IV carried his guns and his rage into an Amish schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Five schoolgirls died that day, and five others were seriously wounded. Turning a tranquil schoolhouse into a house of horror, Roberts shattered a reassuring American myth—that the Old Order Amish remain isolated from the problems of the larger world.

The Amish rely less on that myth than do those who watch them from afar. In fact, their history reminds them that even the most determined efforts to remain separate from the world and its iniquities are not foolproof. The Nickel Mines Amish certainly didn’t anticipate the horror of October 2. They were, however, uncommonly prepared to respond to it with graciousness, forbearance, and love. Indeed, the biggest surprise at Nickel Mines was not the intrusion of evil but the Amish response. The biggest surprise was Amish grace.

This book explains the Amish reaction to the Nickel Mines shooting, especially their forgiveness of the killer and their expressions of grace to his family. Given our longtime study of Amish life, we weren’t surprised by the Amish response. At the same time, their actions raised a host of questions in our minds: What exactly did the Amish do in the aftermath of the tragedy? What did it mean to them to extend forgiveness? And what was the cultural soil that nourished this sort of response in a world where vengeance, not forgiveness, is so often the order of the day?

As we explore these questions, we introduce some aspects of Amish culture to show the connection between Amish life and Amish grace.
This tie is important for two reasons. First, it clarifies that their extension of grace was neither calculated nor random. Rather, it emerged from who they were long before that awful October day. Second, embedding the Amish reaction in the context of their history and practice enables us to suggest more easily what lessons may apply to those of us outside Amish circles.

In the Appendix we provide details about some of the distinctive features of this community, but a few words of introduction here will help set the stage for our story. The Amish descend from the Anabaptists, a radical Christian movement that arose in Europe in 1525, shortly after Martin Luther launched the Protestant Reformation. Opponents of the young radicals called them Anabaptists, a derogatory nickname meaning “rebaptizers,” because they baptized one another as adults even though they had been baptized as infants in the state church. These radical reformers sought to create Christian communities marked by love for each other and love for their enemies, an ethic they based on the life and teaching of Jesus. Nearly two centuries later, in the 1690s, the Amish emerged as a distinct Anabaptist group in Switzerland and in the Alsatian region of present-day France.

The Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, are one of many Amish subgroups in North America. Most Amish groups are also known as Old Orders because they place a premium on maintaining old religious and social customs. Mennonites, who are religious cousins to the Amish, also trace their roots to the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Many, but not all, of the Mennonite groups in the twenty-first century are more assimilated into mainstream culture and use more technology than the Amish.

Even though the occasion for this book is one we would like to erase from Lancaster County history, we believe it opens a window onto Amish faith. Buggies, beards, and bonnets are the distinctive markers of Amish life for most Americans. Although such images provide insights into Amish culture and the values they hold dear, Amish people are likely to say that they are simply trying to be obedient to Jesus Christ, who commanded his followers to do many peculiar things, such as love, bless, and forgive their enemies. This is not a picture of Amish life that can easily be reproduced on a postcard from Amish Country; in fact, it can be painted only in the grit and grime of daily life. Although it would be small comfort to the families who lost daughters that day, the picture of Amish life is much clearer now than it was before October 2006.

This book is about Amish grace, but it is also about forgiveness, pardon, and reconciliation. Grace, as we use it in this book, is a broad concept that characterizes loving and compassionate responses to others. A gracious response may take many forms: comforting a person who is grieving, providing assistance to someone in need, sacrificing for another’s benefit, and so on. Amish people are somewhat uncomfortable talking about “Amish grace,” because to them, grace is a gift that God alone can give. We use grace in a broader way throughout the book, as a synonym for graciousness and gracious behavior toward others.

Forgiveness is a particular form of grace that always involves an offense, an offender, and a victim (in this case, a victimized community). When forgiveness happens, a victim forgives the right to revenge and commits to overcoming bitter feelings toward the wrongdoer. Some people who have studied forgiveness extend this definition a step further, contending that positive feelings toward the offender—feelings such as love and compassion—are also essential to forgiveness. For their part, the Amish believe that gracious actions extended to the offender are an important aspect of authentic forgiveness. It is not our goal in this book to define forgiveness once and for all. Ours is a more
modest goal: to tell the story of Amish forgiveness at Nickel Mines. Although we give priority to the Amish understanding of forgiveness, we sometimes link it to scholarly conversations on the topic.

In telling the Amish story, it is important to distinguish forgiveness from both pardon and reconciliation. Whereas in forgiveness the victim forgoes the right to vengeance, pardon releases an offender from punishment altogether. In many cases, pardon can be granted not by the victim but only by a person or institution with disciplinary authority over the offender (such as the judicial system). Reconciliation is the restoration of a relationship, or the creation of a new one, between the victim and the offender. Reconciliation is not necessary for forgiveness to take place, and of course it does not always happen, because it requires the establishment of trust between two willing parties. In many situations, however, reconciliation between victim and offender constitutes the ultimate goal, and forgiveness is a crucial step in that process.

We talked with more than three dozen Amish people in the course of writing this book, and we quote many of them liberally in the following pages. Because Amish culture emphasizes humility, the Amish people we interviewed did not want their names to appear in print. We have respected their wishes and simply cite many of our sources as “an Amish grandmother” or “an Amish carpenter.” Similarly, we do not identify by name Amish people who wrote letters or essays in Amish magazines and correspondence newspapers.

For the eight individuals we quote extensively, we use typical Amish first names as pseudonyms (Amos, Eli, Gid, Katie, Mary, Mose, Sadie, and Sylvia). Each pseudonym refers to an actual person, not a composite of characters. This is a book about grace, and in that spirit we also use a pseudonym for the killer’s widow.

In a few circumstances, we use the real names of Amish people because their names were published so widely in the news media. We use the first names of the girls who attended the West Nickel Mine School, as well as their teacher’s first name. We also include the full names of Amish people in forgiveness stories unrelated to the school house shooting because these names have already appeared in the news media or in other publications when the stories were originally reported.

Finally, we must clarify our use of the phrase the English. Amish people often use this term for non-Amish people. The Amish speak a German dialect, Pennsylvania German (also known colloquially as Pennsylvanian Dutch), as their first language. They also speak, read, and write English which they typically learn when they begin school. Amish adults routinely speak English in their interactions with non-Amish neighbors whom they refer to simply as “the English,” even if the outsiders have no formal ties to Great Britain. In the pages that follow, we use the terms non-Amish, English, and outsiders interchangeably.

We’ve organized the text into three parts. Part One, which comprises the first five chapters, tells the story of the school shooting and the responses that flowed in its wake. Part Two explores broader understandings and practices of forgiveness in Amish life. Part Three reflects on the meaning of forgiveness, not only for the Amish but for the rest of us as well.
To err is human; to forgive, divine.” These well-known words from the English poet Alexander Pope strike many as the right way to think about forgiveness: as something good but almost impossible to do. For that reason, many people found the Amish almost saintly for their expressions of forgiveness at Nickel Mines. A local dentist, expressing Pope’s idea without the poetic refinement, put it like this: “Those Amish people—they impress the bejeebers out of me!”

Although forgiveness earned the Amish high praise, it also brought them criticism. The act of forgiveness did not take the crime seriously enough, said some. It was offered too quickly, said others. It repressed natural and necessary emotions, claimed a third chorus of voices.

These complaints raise important questions: What exactly is forgiveness? How do we know if someone has really forgiven someone else? Do the words I forgive you mean that forgiveness has happened, or is more required? What are the conditions, if any, for granting forgiveness? Is it
possible to forgive someone who does not apologize—like a gunman who shoots your children and then takes his own life?

What Is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a concept that everyone understands—until they’re asked to define it. Many Christians say that people should forgive because God forgave them. The Amish say that people should forgive so that God will forgive them. But those statements point to theological motivations for offering forgiveness; they do not define what forgiveness is. Others argue that forgiveness brings emotional healing to the forgiving person, but this psychological motive for forgiveness also fails to define forgiveness.

In recent years, psychologists such as Robert D. Enright and Everett L. Worthington Jr. have helped to define forgiveness and examine its effects. As a result of their clinical research, both Enright and Worthington have come to believe that forgiveness is good for the person who offers it, reducing “anger, depression, anxiety, and fear” and affording “cardiovascular and immune system benefits.” To make that claim, however, they’ve needed to clarify what forgiveness is—and what it is not.

Enright, in his book Forgiveness Is a Choice, uses philosopher Joanna North’s definition of forgiveness: “When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love.” In Enright’s view, this definition highlights three essential aspects of forgiveness: that the offense is taken seriously (“the offense was unfair and will always continue to be unfair”), that victims have “a moral right to anger,” and that for forgiveness to take place, victims must “give up” their right to anger and resentment. In sum, forgiveness is “a gift to our offender,” who may not necessarily deserve it.

Forgiveness, then, is both psychological and social: psychological because the forgiver is personally changed by the release of resentment, and social because forgiveness involves another person. That other person, the wrongdoer, may or may not change as a result of the forgiveness. In fact, Enright and many other scholars argue that forgiveness does not and should not depend on the remorse or apology of the offender. Rather, forgiveness is unconditional, an unmerited gift that replaces negative feelings toward the wrongdoer with love and generosity. “In spite of everything that the offender has done,” writes Enright, forgiveness means treating the offender “as a member of the human community.”

There are certain things, however, that forgiveness does not mean. Partly in response to their critics, forgiveness advocates have developed a long list of things that forgiveness is not: it is not pretending that a wrong did not occur, it is not forgetting that it happened, and it is not condoning or excusing it. To the contrary, “forgiveness means admitting that what was done was wrong and should not be repeated.” Similarly, forgiveness is not the same thing as pardon. In other words, granting forgiveness does not mean that the wrongdoer is now free from suffering the disciplinary consequences of his or her actions (for example, legal or other forms of discipline).

Finally, forgiveness should not be confused with reconciliation—the restoring of a relationship. That’s because “reconciliation requires a renewal of trust, and sometimes that is not possible.” Forgiveness may open the door to reconciliation, and in some ways is a prerequisite for reconciliation, but a victim may forgive an offender without reconciliation taking place. For instance, a victim of domestic abuse may forgive her abuser but at the same time seek legal means to keep him at a distance. Forgiveness advocates such as Enright even argue that forgiving
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a dead person is both possible and appropriate, even though reconciliation cannot take place in such cases.

These ideas suggest that some of the reactions to Amish forgiveness at Nickel Mines resulted from mistaken, or at least questionable, assumptions about forgiveness. For instance, when one columnist asked, “Why Do the Amish Ignore Reality?” she assumed something that all forgiveness advocates would challenge: that forgiveness means pretending an evil did not occur. Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright likewise challenges the notion that forgiveness implies indifference. “Forgiveness doesn’t mean ‘I didn’t really mind’ or ‘It didn’t really matter, ’” says Wright. “I did mind and it did matter; otherwise there wouldn’t be anything to forgive at all.”

Other critiques of the Amish response were more formidable than the suggestion that they “ignored reality.” The problem wasn’t that the Amish offered forgiveness, some remarked; it was that they offered it too quickly. Others suggested that the speed with which forgiveness was offered stifled healthy emotions. For instance, one observer reduced the Amish reaction to one sentence: “They have responded to the massacre of their innocents by repeating that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away”—charging the Amish with substituting trite theological mantras for heartfelt grief. In reality, however, the Amish emotional response was much more complex than this one-sentence summary. Similarly, their gift of forgiveness was not as quick or as easy as some commentators thought.

Amish Anger?

It hardly makes sense to talk about forgiveness unless anger or other negative emotions arise from an offense. Did the Amish feel anger toward Charles Roberts? Did they feel anger toward his family and friends? Some commentaries implied that they did not. “I would not want to be like them, reacting to terrible crimes with dispassion,” wrote Jeff Jacoby of the Boston Globe. “How many of us would really want to live in a society in which no one gets angry when children are slaughtered?”

Jacoby’s critique was more spirited than most, but it was no unique. Moreover, he did not make up this notion of a mild Amish response. On Wednesday morning, two days after the shooting a Mennonite nurse-midwife close to some of the grieving families told NBC’s Today Show that one of the slain girls’ mothers had already forgiven Roberts. “She holds no ill will toward the shooter,” reported Rita Rhoads. “Even last night [Tuesday night] there was no anger toward the shooter.” An Amish woman living in Georgetown said, “I just shiver when I think what would have happened if we had been angry at the firehouse, the funerals, or the burials. It was not a choice we made a the time to not be angry. The emotions of deep hurt and sadness along with the tears of grief suffused out the feelings of anger. Love was something I felt a lot more than anger.”

Is it possible that some of the families most affected by the shooting felt absolutely no anger? Some of our interviews suggest that this may have been the case. “There was never a time that I felt angry,” the father of one slain girl told us. “It’s been a very hard experience, but I don’t hold any hard feelings against anyone, not against the killer or anybody in his family.” Citing a newspaper article he read about a non-Amish family that “spouted hateful things” for years after a family member’s murder, this grieving parent concluded that “anger helps no one and simply makes the bearer of the anger feel worse.”

In other interviews we did hear Amish people admit to angry feelings at the time of the shooting and in the months that followed. Typically, however, the killer was not identified as the target of the rage. Sylvia, for instance, spoke of the anger she felt when she attended th
viewing for Naomi Rose, the youngest victim. "She was just so beautiful. It really made me angry. I wasn't angry at Charles; I was mad that she was dead, just mad at the evil." Her husband concurred: "I am angry at the evil and at how much suffering the evil caused because of sin." The couple went on to tell of a time, several months after the shooting, when the father got mad at his son for failing to clean up some tools in the shop. "You were really angry," said his wife, "and I think it was because of October 2nd." In fact, she said, "I think sometimes you get more angry now because of all the emotion related to the shooting."

These comments illustrate what psychologists call displacement: the redirection of one's feelings to an alternate target. It's a coping mechanism that is hardly unique to the Amish. As these comments show, some anger was part of the Amish experience, but it was often deflected or otherwise constrained. In some cases, Amish persons we interviewed did connect the offense and the person who committed it. Still, compared with the way many Americans express their rage, Amish anger was always carefully controlled. And it was expressed in a uniquely Amish manner, as in one elder's refusal to use the term evil to describe the gunman. "It would be better to say he was overcome by evil," he told us, speaking softly and with no visible hint of anger. "He was overcome by Satan, by evil, but he was not an evil man."

Psychologists have long observed that both the experience and the expression of emotions are shaped by cultural conditioning. This is true even of anger. "People get angry and interpret [anger] according to the culture in which they live," write scholars Eric Shiraev and David Levy in their book Cross-Cultural Psychology. In collectivist cultures, which stress the goals and identities of communities at the expense of individual freedoms, anger "is seen as an emotion of disengagement from the society" and is therefore discouraged. In individualist societies, on the other hand, tolerance for anger is much higher because people "recognize other people's rights to independence and self-expression."

This description helps to explain why some outsiders considered the Amish community's emotional response inappropriately mild. Judging Amish emotions by American cultural norms, they found the restrained Amish response unnatural and therefore inappropriate.

Unnatural or not, the Amish restraint at Nickel Mines reflected typical Amish views of anger. For the Amish, anger is a dangerous emotion. In fact, one Amish magazine illustrated a series of essays on anger with a diamond-shaped warning sign containing the words "Danger Zone." Of course, to call anger dangerous does not say whether or not it is acceptable to feel angry. Although every Amish person we interviewed admitted that Amish people do get angry, we received mixed responses when we asked whether it was OK to be angry. Mary told us, "Feelings of anger are not a bad thing," a view that's supported by Putting Off Anger, a popular booklet in some Amish communities. The booklet's author, John Coblentz, describes anger as an involuntary emotion that is "part of the human experience." Citing Jesus, Moses, and other biblical figures who experienced anger, Coblentz says the Bible forbids only the "destructive words and actions provoked by anger," not anger itself.

But not every Amish person we interviewed was so willing to condone angry feelings. Demonstrating the literalism with which the Amish approach the Sermon on the Mount, Bishop Eli reminded us that, in Matthew 5, Jesus equated anger with murder. "Anger is not OK," he concluded, "but it does happen. The main thing is not to carry a grudge."

Indeed, the most consistent Amish view of anger is that nursing grudges is wrong. Scholars who study forgiveness often make the distinction between anger, the first response to hurt, and resentment, continually "re-feeling the original anger." The Amish make the same distinction. They may disagree among themselves about whether initial angry feelings are acceptable, but they agree that angry reactions are
wrong, as is resentment and harboring bitterness in one's heart. Sylvia's husband put it this way: "We say, 'It's OK to get angry, but don't hit the horse or kick the dog or punch your brother.'" Gid spoke for many about the problem of nursing angry feelings: "If I hold a grudge for one day, it is bad. If I hold it for two days, it's worse. If I hold a grudge for a year, then that man [Roberts] is controlling my life. Why not just let go of the grudge now?"

Gid's question is a good one, though even Amish people will admit it is not easy to release a grudge. "Forgiveness is something that's easier said than done," Mary confessed. "We know we're supposed to do it. In the Bible it says we should do it. But when we're tested and tried, it's not always easy to forgive." A retired farmer used warfare metaphors to describe how hard it is for some Amish to forgive. "We have a battle with it," he told us. "We have to really fight the tendency not to forgive." Of course, the Amish have a very strong theological motivation to move beyond resentment, a point he quickly added: "We can't be forgiven if we don't forgive, you know, so we really try hard to overcome that."

Instant Forgiveness?

Some reports suggested that the Nickel Mines Amish were not angry after the shooting, and indeed some of our conversations, even with parents who lost daughters, confirmed that fact. On the other hand, some Amish people continued to wrestle with bitter feelings months later. Given the horrible nature of the killer's actions, it's not surprising that these feelings lingered. But it does raise a crucial question: Did the Amish really forgive the killer after the shooting? That's what the media suggested. Did the media get it right?

As we consider that question, it's important to highlight once again the collectivist nature of Amish society. Most studies of forgiveness take an individualistic approach to it: an individual victim gets hurt, experiences negative feelings, and has a choice to forgive. This is how most Americans think about forgiveness: it's something the victim does, or does not do, to his or her offender. In fact, some who have pondered the meaning of forgiveness argue that only the victim can forgive the evildoer.

This raises an important issue. All of our references to Amish forgiveness at Nickel Mines pertain to Amish adults. Because we did not seek access to the surviving schoolchildren, we know relatively little about their response to the horror they faced on October 2. We do know that Amish families sought help from English mental health professionals to talk with their children about the trauma they experienced. Even so, the challenge of navigating the emotional fallout remains. "We're not sure what to tell our boys," confessed one parent. "We don't really talk with them about forgiveness."

Implicit in this parent's confession is an important truth: the responsibility to forgive Charles Roberts was not assigned to the schoolchildren or even to their families but was embraced by the entire Amish community. Indeed, because of their collectivist nature, the Amish would never place the responsibility to forgive an offense of this magnitude on the principal victims alone. Clearly the primary victims at Nickel Mines were the persons Roberts accosted in the schoolhouse, but the Amish of Nickel Mines also knew that their entire community was wounded in Roberts's rampage; they understood forgiveness as a community responsibility, not as the exclusive task of the individuals most directly affected. Mose confirmed this when he responded to one of our questions. "When the men went to see Amy Roberts on the evening of the shooting, were they extending forgiveness on behalf of the entire Amish community or just speaking for themselves?" we asked. His answer was clear: "They were speaking for the whole community." Other Amish people agreed.

This is one more example of mutual aid among the Amish. As anyone who has seen the movie Witness can attest, barn raisings are a striking
example of Amish mutual aid: dozens of people complete a project that would take an individual family weeks or even months. But mutual aid happens in far less visible ways too as church members help one another through difficult times. In the case of the shooting, the Amish helped one another forgive Charles Roberts. At the very least, they helped one another tell the Roberts family their intention to forgive.

Therefore, did the media get it right? Did the Nickel Mines Amish really forgive Roberts within twenty-four hours of the shooting? If forgiveness is defined as forgoing the right to revenge, the Amish clearly forgave Roberts immediately. If forgiveness also includes overcoming resentment and replacing it with love, then the answer must be yes and no. As we’ve noted, some bitter feelings lingered. Nonetheless, the community's commitment to forgive had been set long before Charles Roberts entered the schoolhouse, and therefore the Amish could declare immediately their intention to forgive.

Their verbal declaration was soon accompanied by small but noteworthy acts of grace: hugs between Amish people and members of the Roberts family, the presence of Amish families at Roberts’s burial, and Amish contributions to the Roberts Family Fund. Of course, these gracious actions were expressed not to Roberts directly but to his surviving family. Still, they were an outgrowth of forgiving Roberts himself. Gracious words came first, quickly followed by gracious acts—words and acts offered in good faith that kind feelings would eventually replace bitter ones.

All of this falls in line with the research of Everett L. Worthington, who has identified two types of forgiveness: decisional and emotional. Decisional forgiveness is a personal commitment to control negative behavior, even if negative emotions continue. “Decisional forgiveness,” writes Worthington, “promises not to act in revenge or avoidance, but it doesn’t necessarily make a person feel less unforgiving.” Worthington, a Christian, connects decisional forgiveness to two biblical passages that are central to Amish thinking about forgiveness: the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6 (“forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”) and the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18. Emotional forgiveness, on the other hand, happens when negative emotions—resentment, hostility, and even hatred—are replaced by positive feelings. Thus, forgiveness is both a short-term act and a long-term process, but as Worthington points out, the two are connected. The initial decision to forgive may spark the emotional change. A decision to forgive does not mean a victim has erased bitter emotions, but it does mean that emotional transformation is more likely to follow.

The Amish at Nickel Mines would not use academic phrases such as decisional forgiveness to name what they did after the shooting, but we think the term helps to explain the media reports of that week. An Amish man, interviewed less than forty-eight hours after his granddaughters had been shot, was asked if he had forgiven. “In my heart, yes,” was his simple reply. With these four words, a grieving Amish grandfather expressed his commitment to do something that God expected him to do, a commitment embedded in the history and spirituality of the Amish church. Still, as Gid told us, this commitment to forgive was only the first step. “I’m concerned these families will struggle with the forgiveness issue for a long time. They will have to forgive again and again and again, and accept [the loss] again and again.”

Gid was actually struggling with resentment himself, which surfaced because his twelve-year-old son had recently dreamed of an armed intruder entering their home. The boy’s nightmare “really torqued me up again about the Nickel Mines shooting,” the minister confessed. “I had to forgive Roberts all over again.” His wife concurred: “Regardless of how many times you forgive, forgiveness must be practiced again and again.” For the Amish, this insight comes not from clinical research but rather from experience—and also from the Bible. Invoking Jesus’ instructions to Peter to forgive his brother seventy times seven,
one Amish writer counseled his readers to forgive their offenders “repeatedly, unceasingly.” Only then, he concluded, can “the broken relationships that threaten to destroy our families, our churches, our communities, and ourselves” be healed.

Forgiving the Killer’s Family

As we recounted in Chapter Four, the Amish forgave not only the killer but the Roberts family as well in the days following the shooting. Like other observers at the time, we found these particular references to forgiveness perplexing. The Roberts family was not responsible for the shooting; in fact, they were victims of the gunman’s actions too. They were casualties of a different sort than the schoolgirls, to be sure, but they were victims nonetheless. We later learned that the killer’s wife found the reports about “forgiving the family” cause for some chagrin. “She had no culpability,” one of her friends told us. “She was a victim and didn’t do anything to harm anyone.”

What meanings were embedded in the forgiveness the Amish offered to the Roberts family? First, some Amish people used forgiveness as a blanket term—something they wanted to express toward the killer. With Roberts dead, they transferred some of their forgiveness, which they felt duty-bound to extend, to the family, which became a surrogate recipient of their forgiveness for the killer. Second, many Amish people realized that the Roberts family would feel shame for what their family member had done. A parent of a slain child said, “The pain of the killer’s parents is ten times my pain. You would just feel terrible if you were the parent of a killer.” Thus some used the words we forgive you to mean “we feel sorry for you.” In that respect, we forgive you doubled as an expression of sympathy for a grief- and shame-stricken family that was also victimized by the school shooting.

There was one additional meaning of the forgiveness granted to the Roberts family by their Amish neighbors. It was, we believe, the primary meaning: despite the evil your family member enacted on our children, we will do our best not to hold a grudge against you. Strictly speaking, the gift of forgiveness can be given only to someone who has perpetrated a wrong. As we’ve noted, however, the most widely held understanding of forgiveness—in the Amish world and beyond—is refusing to hold a grudge. Realizing that tragedies can quickly spawn bitter feelings, and knowing how easily bitterness can be heaped onto scapegoats, the gift of forgiveness to the Roberts family was the Amish way of saying they would seek to keep bitterness at bay.

In sum, the Amish response to the Roberts family was about tending relationships. In the small-town world of southern Lancaster County, relationships between the Roberts family and their Amish neighbors had existed long before the October 2006 shooting. The words we forgive you were a promise to the Roberts family that, in the aftermath of this horrific event, the Amish community would seek to maintain those relationships and not focus their feelings of anger on the gunman’s family. It may be too early to know whether that promise will be fully kept, but the gracious acts that followed their words indicated that many Amish people would work hard to make it happen.

The Question of Self-Respect

Our final reflection on Amish forgiveness extends far beyond the events at Nickel Mines and far beyond the Amish themselves. Some critics have suggested that forgiveness can be a self-loathing act wrapped in sentimental garb. Jeffrie G. Murphy, for instance, has argued that vindictiveness, while a dangerous passion, has too often received “bad press.”
Murphy contends that some vindictive feelings reflect a healthy degree of self-respect.

This critique goes to the heart of forgiveness. If forgiveness means giving up resentment that one has every right to feel, then forgiveness is by definition self-renouncing. The question Murphy raises, then, is really this: When does self-renunciation become emotionally damaging to a forgiving person? This complicated question cannot be answered in a few short paragraphs. Suffice it to say that Murphy’s observations are important, and that we agree that there are times when self-renunciation is an improper response to evil.

There have been times in Amish life when the church’s understanding of forgiveness has led to sad consequences and multiplied the pain of victims. In 2005, the periodical Legal Affairs published an account of sexual abuse in several Amish communities, abuse typically perpetrated by the fathers and brothers of young girls. In addition to detailing the abuse, author Nadya Labi records the actions—or in many cases the inactions—of Amish church leaders. In particular, Labi cites the leaders’ willingness to “forgive” the abusers, which in Labi’s article means pardoning offenders who acknowledge their sins and verbalize remorse. In these cases, Labi writes, the Amish “ethic of forgive and forget” often enables offenders to continue their abusive practices.

We explore disciplinary procedures within the Amish church in more detail in Chapter Eleven. Ideally, church sanctions should punish wayward behavior and bring it to a halt. In reality, Amish disciplinary procedures are often ineffective with chronic behaviors related to alcohol abuse or sexual abuse. Moreover, some Amish leaders are reluctant to report illegal behavior to outside authorities, and women, taught to submit to church authority, may fear reprisals if they contact police themselves. In these situations, perpetrators may go unpunished and return to their abusive behaviors. Because church decisions to pardon remorseful offenders must be endorsed by church members, victims may feel enormous pressure to swallow their pain and get on with life.*

This problem of pressured forgiveness is not unique to the Amish, of course. In The Cry of Tamar, Pamela Cooper-White decries the widespread tendency of Christian churches to pressure victims of sexual abuse to forgive their offenders too quickly. “All too often,” asserts Cooper-White, “survivors of violence are retraumatized by pastors and other well-meaning helpers who press forgiveness upon them.” In these cases, “if the survivor tries to forgive, she can only fail, and her failure will reinforce all the self-blame and shame of her original abuse.” This tendency is especially strong in Christian communities that, like the Amish, place a heavy emphasis on forgiveness.

Although the Amish girls and boys who survived the school shooting are not victims of domestic violence, some observers may wonder if these children have felt a similar pressure from their families and church to forgive Roberts before they were ready. We cannot answer this question definitively, but our impression is that no, they have not. When we inquired about her surviving children and their thoughts about Roberts, one parent told us, “We explain to them what forgiveness is, but we don’t make them forgive.” Continuing, she said, “You can’t make someone forgive. It takes time.” Perhaps because of her conversations with English mental health professionals, perhaps for other reasons, this Amish woman seemed attuned to the counsel of mainstream psychology: those who care for the abused, especially abused children, should not force them to arrive at any place of emotional resolution before they are ready.

*In recent years, some Amish communities have enlisted the help of outsiders to confront the problem of domestic and sexual abuse. One Amish publisher has distributed nine thousand copies of a resource book titled Strong Families, Safe Children, which provides guidance on recognizing and reporting instances of abuse. Written by social service professionals, the book’s publication indicates the desire of some Amish to address the issue more effectively.
Of course, it is also important to recognize the differences between situations of domestic abuse and the Nickel Mines school shooting. Unlike domestic violence, the evil perpetrated at Nickel Mines ended when the gunman took his own life. Also, because of Roberts's suicide, there was no pressure on victims to reconcile quickly with their offender. In fact, when we pressed Amish people on how they could forgive Roberts so quickly, some of them noted that it was easier because he was dead.

Did this swift forgiveness include an element of self-renunciation? Of course, it did. Forgiveness involves giving up feelings that one has a right to feel. Still, we believe that the Amish willingness to give up the right to be bitter about the shooting was not self-loathing. It may, in fact, be the opposite. In *Forgive for Good*, Fred Luskin, director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, writes that forgiveness means becoming "a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell." Granted, we heard no claims of heroism when we listened to Amish people talk about forgiving Charles Roberts, but given their understanding of the Christian life, we do see some parallels with Luskin's assertion. In Amish life, offering forgiveness places one on the side of the martyrs, indeed, on the side of God. It is the spiritually courageous thing to do.

This does not mean, as we've noted, that the Amish of Nickel Mines found forgiveness easy. Still, forgiveness probably comes easier for the Amish than it does for most Americans. Genuine forgiveness takes a lot of work—absorbing the pain, extending empathy to the offender, and purging bitterness—even after a decision to forgive has been made. Amish people must do that hard work like anyone else, but unlike most people, an Amish person begins the task atop a three-hundred-year-old tradition that teaches the love of enemies and the forgiveness of offenders. An Amish person has a head start on forgiveness long before an offense ever occurs, because spiritual forebears have pitched in along the way. Like a barn raising, the hard work of forgiveness is easier when everyone lends a hand.

**Chapter Eleven**

What About Shunning?

Some outsiders think that shunning is barbaric.

—Amish carpenter

Despite the widespread acclaim for the grace displayed at Nickel Mines, some observers thought they saw a glaring inconsistency in the Amish way of life. "Forgiveness—but Not for All," proclaimed a newspaper editorial four days after the shooting. The writer described a woman's decision to leave her Amish community to marry an outsider, only to be ostracized by her own family and friends. "A terrible killer might be forgiven," the writer observed, but "a woman in love with an English man could not be." The commentary then asked a pointed question: "Where is forgiveness for her?"

It's an important question to consider. Many non-Amish people are troubled by the Amish practice of shunning, which stigmatizes offenders in the community. How can the forgiving Amish be so judgmental of
The poem written by a sister of one of the boys in the Nickel Mines school included these lines:

Some days we think we can't go on
When so many of our friends are gone.
But we just hold on to the good things,
We're surrounded by miracles.

Certainly, as we have seen, the Amish conviction that God intervenes in miraculous ways does not mean the Amish have solved age-old questions about God's providence. It doesn't mean they never wrestle with questions of how a loving God is involved not only in "the good things" mentioned in the poem but also in the terrifying and tragic things in life. Nor does it mean they skirt questions of justice.

But accepting miracles, like accepting mystery, goes hand-in-hand with Amish humility, submission, and patience with life. This combination of virtues provides them with an enormous capacity to absorb adversity, forgo revenge, and carry on—gracefully.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Amish Grace and the Rest of Us

True forgiveness deals with the past, all of the past, to make the future possible.

—Desmond Tutu, South African archbishop

As we began writing this book, we soon faced a challenge: what should we title it? We settled on the main title, Amish Grace, quickly, but the subtitle, How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy, took much longer. The problem was the verb between forgiveness and tragedy. To put it simply, we couldn't quite decide what the act of forgiveness had done to the tragic events of October 2, 2006.

We discussed the word redeemed. Had Amish forgiveness redeemed the tragedy that befell their community? For a book about the Amish, the word redeemed had the advantage of carrying Christian connotations. It also suggested, as many Amish people told us, that good is more powerful than evil. Still, the more we thought about it, the less comfortable we became with the notion that forgiveness had redeemed the tragedy at Nickel Mines. The tragedy remains. Five girls died, others carry scars, and one remains semicomatose. Amish families continue to grieve, Amish children still have nightmares, and Amish parents pray for their children's
safety with an urgency they didn’t know before. The expressions of forgiveness that flowed in the aftermath of Robert’s rampage brought healing, but they didn’t bind up all the wounds of the shooting. The word redeemed claimed too much.

We settled on transcended, for two reasons. First, transcended conveys very well how the Amish of Nickel Mines rose above—far above—the evil that visited their schoolhouse. Whether good is more powerful than evil may be a matter of philosophical debate, but who can dispute the fact that the Amish responded to absolute horror with an amazing generosity of spirit? Second, the story of Amish forgiveness quickly eclipsed the story of the shooting itself. Devastating violence visits our world every day, but rarely is violence greeted with forgiveness. In Nickel Mines it was, and that response became the big story to emerge from a small village in Lancaster County.

But what should we make of that story? Like some of the Amish people we interviewed, we are glad that the story of Amish forgiveness received wide play after the shooting. At the same time, we have reservations about the way the story was used and celebrated. As much as we were impressed, even inspired, by the Amish response in Nickel Mines, we wondered: Is there anything here for the rest of us? The longer we worked on this book, the more vexing that question became.

The Amish Are Not Us

If there’s one thing we learned from this story, it’s this: the Amish commitment to forgive is not a small patch tacked onto their fabric of faithfulness. Rather, their commitment to forgive is intrinsically woven into their lives and their communities—so intricately that it’s hard to talk about Amish forgiveness without talking about dozens of other things.

When we first broached the subject of forgiveness with Amish people, we were struck by their reluctance to speak of forgiveness in abstract ways. We did hear forgiveness defined as “letting go of grudges.” More frequently, however, we heard responses and stories with forgiveness interspersed with other terms such as love, humility, compassion, submission, and acceptance. The web of words that emerged in these conversations pointed to the holistic, integrated nature of Amish life. Unlike many of their consumer-oriented neighbors, the Amish do not assemble their spirituality piecemeal by personal preference. Rather, Amish spirituality is a precious heirloom, woven together over the centuries and passed down with care.

To hear the Amish explain it, the New Testament provides the pattern for their unique form of spirituality. In a certain sense they are right. The Amish take the words of Jesus with utmost seriousness, and members frequently explain their faith by citing Jesus or other New Testament texts. But the Amish way of life cannot be reduced simply to taking the Bible—or even Jesus—seriously. Rather, Amish spirituality emerges from their particular way of understanding the biblical text, a lens that’s been shaped by their nonviolent martyr tradition. With the martyrs hovering nearby, offering admonition and encouragement, the Amish have esteemed suffering over vengeance, Uffgcury over striving, and forgiveness over resentment. All Christians can read Jesus’ words in Matthew’s Gospel—“forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”—but Amish people truly believe that their own forgiveness is bound up in their willingness to forgive others. For them, forgiveness is more than a good thing to do. It is absolutely central to the Christian faith.

All of this helps us understand how the Nickel Mines Amish could do the unimaginable: extend forgiveness to their children’s killer within hours of their deaths. The decision to forgive came quickly, almost instinctively. Moreover, it came in deeds as well as words, with concrete expressions of care for the gunman’s family. For the Amish, the test of
faith is action. Beliefs are important, and words are too, but actions reveal the true character of one’s faith. Therefore to really forgive means to act in forgiving ways—in this case, by expressing care for the family of the killer.

In a world where the default response is more often revenge than forgiveness, all of this is inspiring. At the same time, the fact that forgiveness is so deeply woven into the fabric of Amish life should alert us that their example, inspiring as it is, is not easily transferable to other people in other situations. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but how does one imitate a habit that’s embedded in a way of life anchored in a five-hundred-year history?

Most North Americans, formed by the assumptions of liberal democracy and consumer capitalism, carry a dramatically different set of cultural habits. In fact, many North Americans might conclude that certain Amish habits are problematic, if not utterly offensive. Submitting to the discipline of fallible church leaders? Forgoing personal acclaim? Constraining intellectual exploration? Abiding by restrictive gender roles? Declining to stand up for one’s rights? Refusing to fight for one’s country? Could any set of cultural habits be more out of sync with mainstream American culture?

Many observers missed the countercultural dimension of Amish forgiveness, or at least downplayed it, in the aftermath of the Nickel Mines shooting. Outsiders, typically impressed by what they saw, too often assumed that Amish grace represented the best in “us.” Few commentators did this as crassly as the writer who equated the faith of the Amish with the faith of the Founding Fathers. In his mind, the Nickel Mines Amish were not acting counterculturally; they were simply extending a long American tradition of acting in loving, generous, and “Christian” ways. Other commentators, eager to find redemptive lessons in such a senseless event, offered simple platitudes. Rather than highlighting the painful self-renunciation that forgiveness (and much of Amish life) entails, they extolled Amish forgiveness as an inspiring expression of the goodness that resides in America’s heartland.

We are not suggesting that the Amish response to the shooting was not praiseworthy. We contend, however, that the countercultural value system from which it emerged was too often neglected in the tributes that followed in the wake of the shooting. As if to drive home the depth of this cultural divide, ministers in one Ohio Amish community forbade a member from giving public lectures on Amish forgiveness. Ironically, the very value system that compelled the Nickel Mines Amish to forgive Charles Roberts constrained a member’s freedom to talk about forgiveness with curious outsiders. No, the Amish response at Nickel Mines was not so much the “best of America” as it was an expression of love by a people who every day challenge many of the values the rest of us hold dear.

The Perils of Strip Mining

If some observers detached Amish forgiveness from its countercultural weave, others severed it from its social context—drawing dubious lessons the Amish could teach the world. For instance, numerous writers cited the Amish example at Nickel Mines to score points against the violence so prominent in U.S. foreign policy, particularly the Bush administration’s war on terror. Many of these critiques contrasted the Christianity of President Bush with the faith of the Amish and then asked readers which one Jesus himself would endorse. From a rhetorical standpoint, the contrast worked well, though its proponents failed to mention that the two-kingdom Amish would never expect the government to operate without the use of force. Even as the Amish use their own disciplinary procedures to prune unrighteousness within their churches, they expect the government to restrain evildoers in the
larger society, often by force. For that reason, it’s unlikely the Amish would encourage a U.S. president to pardon someone like Osama bin Laden.

Of course, it’s possible that these commentators were talking not about pardoning terrorists (releasing them from punishment) but rather about forgiving them (replacing rage with love). Still, in their quick application of Amish forgiveness to complex, entrenched conflicts, many pundits neglected a key point: the schoolhouse shooter was dead and his offenses were in the past. As horrible as the shooting was, it was a single event that dawned unexpectedly and ended quickly. Contrast this, for instance, with the centuries-long history of oppression of African Americans, the calculated extermination of six million Jews, or the fear that families living amid ethnic conflict experience every day. Offering forgiveness is much more complicated, and much more challenging for ongoing offenses. Even minor offenses—demeaning comments from a supervisor, for instance—can obstruct forgiveness when they continue day after day.

Other factors made this forgiveness story distinct, even within Amish life. The Nickel Mines Amish had neighborly ties with the gunman’s family, relationships they hoped to mend and keep. In this small-town environment, extending grace quickly was both practical and uncomplicated, for the Amish knew exactly whom to approach and could even walk to their homes. Furthermore, the scale of the offense meant that no one person or family had to bear the burden of forgiveness alone. The wider Amish community, in a spirit of mutual aid, carried one another along. Moreover, the enormity of the evil made the Amish more open to the possibility that the shooting might have a place in God’s providential plan. Together these factors help to explain why some Amish people suggested that forgiving Charles Roberts was easier than forgiving a fellow church member for a petty, run-of-the-mill offense.

Again, we are not minimizing Amish generosity in the face of this horrific shooting. We are suggesting, however, that the uniqueness of Amish culture—and the details of the tragedy—should chasten us as we apply the Amish example elsewhere. The Amish do not simply tack forgiveness onto their lives in an individualistic fashion, nor do they always forgive as quickly and as easily as media reports seemed to suggest. For these reasons, Amish-style forgiveness can’t be strip-mined from southern Lancaster County and transported wholesale to other settings. Rather, the lessons of grace that the rest of us take from Nickel Mines must be extracted with care and applied to other circumstances with humility.

Extracting Lessons from Nickel Mines

Although the Amish approach the task of forgiveness with rich cultural resources, they also approach the task as fallible human beings. In that respect the Amish are like the rest of us, and we are like them. This point should be obvious, but some people assume the Amish have access to otherworldly resources that the rest of us have not found. To be sure, that assumption contains some truth: the God the Amish worship fully expects human beings to love their enemies and forgive their debtors. Nevertheless, the ability to forgive is not restricted to the Amish, or to Christians, or to people who believe in God. To forgive may be divine, as the poet Alexander Pope suggested, but if so, it’s a divine act that is broadly available to the human community.

Indeed, in the course of writing this book, we encountered stories of forgiveness that were every bit as moving as the Nickel Mines story: stories of people shot and left for dead, people whose children were abducted and harmed, people whose marriages were shattered by unfaithfulness, people whose reputations were destroyed by so-called
friends. Most of these people had no connection to the Amish and few of the cultural resources the Amish bring to bear when they face injustice. Yet they forgave—not quickly or easily, but eventually and for the good of all involved.

Psychologists who study forgiveness find that, generally speaking, people who forgive lead happier and healthier lives than those who don’t. The Amish people we interviewed agreed, citing their own experience of forgiving others. Some said they were “controlled” by their offender until they were able to forgive; others said the “acid of hate” destroys the unforgiving person until the hate is released. Coming from members of a religious community that emphasizes self-denial, these comments show that the Amish are nonetheless interested in self-care and personal happiness. Forgiveness may be self-renouncing in some respects, but it is not self-loathing. The Amish we interviewed confirmed what psychologists tell us: forgiveness heals the person who offers it, freeing that person to move on in life with a greater sense of vitality and wholeness.

Still, if the Amish provide evidence that forgiveness heals the forgiver, they provide even more evidence that forgiveness benefits the offender. Forgiveness does not deny that a wrong has taken place, but it does give up the right to hurt the wrongdoer in return. Even though Charles Roberts was dead, opportunities to exact vengeance upon his family did not die with his suicide. Rather than pursuing revenge, however, the Amish showed empathy for his kin, even by attending his burial. In other words, the Amish of Nickel Mines chose not to vilify the killer but to treat him and his family as members of the human community. Amish forgiveness was thus a gift to Charles Roberts, to his family, and even to the world, for it served as the first step toward mending a social fabric that was rent by the schoolhouse shooting.

These acts of grace astounded many people who watched from afar. Living in a world in which religion seems to nourish vengeance more often than curb it, the Amish response was a welcome contrast to a barrage of suicide bombings and religiously fueled rage. What is less clear is whether the rest of us saw the Amish response as something to emulate, or as just a noble but impossible ideal.

Perhaps the answer to that question lies somewhere in the middle. Perhaps we were awed and truly impressed that the Amish sought to counter evil with a loving and healing response. At the same time, we may know that had our children been the ones gunned down in the West Nickel Mines School, our response would have been rooted in rage rather than grace. It’s an honest perspective, but also a problematic one, because it assumes that revenge is the natural response and forgiveness is reserved for folks like the Amish who spend their lives stifling natural inclinations.

We often assume that humans have innate needs in the face of violence and injustice. For instance, some who said that the Amish forgave Roberts “too quickly” assumed that Amish people had denied a basic human need to get even. But perhaps our real human need is to find ways to move beyond tragedy with a sense of healing and hope.

What we learn from the Amish, both at Nickel Mines and more generally, is that how we choose to move on from tragic injustice is culturally formed. For the Amish, who bring their own religious resources to bear on injustice, the preferred way to live on with meaning and hope is to offer forgiveness—and offer it quickly. That offer, including the willingness to forgo vengeance, does not undo the tragedy or pardon the wrong. It does, however, constitute a first step toward a future that is more hopeful, and potentially less violent, than it would otherwise be.

How might the rest of us move in that direction? Most of us have been formed by a culture that nourishes revenge and mocks grace. Hockey fans complain that they haven’t gotten their money’s worth if the players only skate and score without a fight. Bloody video games are
everywhere, and the ones that seemed outrageously violent ten years ago are tame by today's standards. Blockbuster movie plots revolve around heroes who avenge wrong with merciless killing. And it's not just the entertainment world that acculturates us into a graceless existence. Traffic accidents galvanize hoards of lawyers who encourage victims to get their "due." In fact, getting our due might be the most widely shared value in our hyperconsumerist culture. "The person who volunteers time, who helps a stranger, who agrees to work for a modest wage out of commitment to the public good... begins to feel like a sucker," writes Robert Kuttner in Everything for Sale. In a culture that places such a premium on buying and selling, as opposed to giving and receiving, forgiveness runs against the grain.

Running against that grain, finding alternative ways to imagine our world, ways that in turn will facilitate forgiveness, takes more than individual willpower. We are not only the products of our culture, we are also producers of our culture. We need to construct cultures that value and nurture forgiveness. In their own way, the Amish have constructed such an environment. The challenge for the rest of us is to use our resources creatively to shape cultures that discourage revenge as a first response. How might we work more imaginatively to create communities in which enemies are treated as members of the human family and not demonized? How might these communities foster visions that enable their members to see offenders, as well as victims, as persons with authentic needs? There are no simple answers to these questions, though any answer surely will involve the habits we decide to value, the images we choose to celebrate, and the stories we remember.

In fact, forgiveness is less a matter of forgive and forget than of forgive and remember—remembering in ways that bring healing. When we remember we take the broken pieces of our lives—lives that have been dismembered by tragedy and injustice—and re-member them into something whole. Forgetting an atrocious offense, personally or corporately, may not be possible, but all of us can and do make decisions about how we remember what we cannot forget.

For the Amish, gracious remembering involves habits nurtured by memories of Jesus forgiving his tormentors while hanging on a cross and of Dirk Willems returning to pull his enemy out of the icy water. When thirteen-year-old Marian said "shoot me first" in the schoolhouse, and when adults in her community walked over to the killer's family with words of grace a few hours after her death, they were acting on those habits. And just as surely their actions at Nickel Mines will be recounted around Amish dinner tables for generations to come, creating and renewing memories about the power of faith to respond in the face of injustice—even violence—with grace.

In a world where faith often justifies and magnifies revenge, and in a nation where some Christians use scripture to fuel retaliation, the Amish response was indeed a surprise. Regardless of the details of the Nickel Mines story, one message rings clear: religion was used not to justify rage and revenge but to inspire goodness, forgiveness, and grace. And that is the big lesson for the rest of us regardless of our faith or nationality.