



AMISH GRACE AND THE REST OF US

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

—Desmund 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 expression 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 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 the 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 intricately 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,

Donald B. Kraybill, Ph.D., is senior fellow at the Young Center of Elizabethtown College. Among his many publications, he has authored or co-authored numerous books on Amish society. The Young Center fielded hundreds of media calls in the week following the shooting.

Steven M. Nolt, Ph.D., is professor of history at Goshen College. He has written extensively on Amish history and culture.

David L. Weaver-Zeercher, Ph.D., is associate professor of American religious history at Messiah College. His books on Amish life explore outsiders' fascination with and perceptions of the Amish.



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 been shaped by their nonviolent martyr tradition. With the martyrs hovering nearby, offering admonition and encouragement, the Amish have esteemed suffering over vengeance, *Uffgevva* 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? Deciding 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 counterculture 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 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 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 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 feat 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 of 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 this 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 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 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.



AFTERWARD FROM AMISH GRACE

Our narrative of Amish grace comes to a close in November 2006. Since then the Nickel Mines community has returned to "a new normal" that includes joy, sadness, occasional fears, expressions of courage, and moments of grace.

By Christmas 2006, four of the five injured girls had returned to school and were functioning well. Some of them continued various types of rehabilitation and faced additional reconstructive surgeries. The most seriously injured girl remained semicomatose in the care of her parents but showed small signs of improvement. One of the girls who returned to school successfully completed all the homework assignments she had missed in the weeks after the shooting.

In late February 2007, Amish carpenters had a new school under roof. Located less than half a mile from the old school, the new building sits in a more secluded spot, close to several homes and away from the road. After attending classes in a temporary facility on a nearby Amish property, the pupils moved to their new building, named New Hope School, on Monday, April 2, exactly six months after the tragedy. A new family with several daughters moved into the area, increasing the number of girls at New Hope. The killer's widow and members of her family visited the new school. State troopers and the police commissioner also visited the school, speaking with the children, playing ball with them, and showing off the lights and sirens on their patrol cars.

The forgiveness and grace of October 2006 were first steps in an ongoing, sometimes awkward, but always insistent effort at reconciliation—at mending the relationships so strained by the shooting. The emotional meeting at the Bart firehouse at the end of October between Charles Roberts's relatives and the Amish families was not their final contact. For example, Roberts's widow, Amy drove one of the mothers to see her injured daughter recovering in a hospital, and at Christmastime the Amish schoolchildren went to the Roberts home to sing carols. Although Amy and her children eventually moved away from Georgetown, other family members remain in the area and continue to have contact with the Amish families.

Roberts's parents visited the temporary school, attended an Amish school Christmas program, and visited the parents involved in the tragedy. Amish people who had used

the taxi service provided by the gunman's father assured him that they still wanted him to drive them and have continued to use his services. Amish fathers around Georgetown welcomed the reassignment of Roberts's milk route to his father-in-law so that they would still have contact with the family. One Amish parent, reflecting on the graceful response of the Roberts family said, "Their kindness has helped us a lot in the healing process."

Nevertheless, the pain from the trauma continues. "The half-year mark has been pretty rough on some of us," said Sylvia. Certain images, sounds, and words still provoke anxious thoughts and reactions. Some of the schoolchildren have nightmares, but others are sleeping well. Some adults still flinch at the sound of helicopters flying in the area. Everyone understands that finding a new normal will take time and hard work. Two new babies born to parents who lost children in the shooting helped the quest for a return to normal life.

The parents of the schoolchildren have found meaningful support among Amish and English friends and particularly among one another. The mothers continue to meet periodically in one of their homes to share their grief and find encouragement. The fathers get together too, but on a less regular schedule. A father who lost a daughter said, "We get our most support just meeting and talking with the other parents." Six months after the shooting one church leader noted, "We are still processing some anger, but we are moving in the direction of forgiveness."

Members of the broader community continue to support one another in many ways. A few financial gifts still trickle in to the Accountability Committee, which oversaw and distributed the more than \$4 million it received. The annual Bart Township "mud sale," a fund raiser for the fire company that is named for the soggy spring conditions in which it is often held, took place on March 3 and 17, 2007. The sale provided an opportunity for the community members, Amish and English, to gather again, this time for a festive occasion. The auction features antiques, quilts, furniture, buggies, farm equipment, livestock, and food donated by Amish and English alike. Always a much-anticipated event, this year's sale assumed additional meaning, reminding local residents that their community, which had experienced an unimaginable tragedy, was on the road to recovery.



Locals are looking forward to a summer 2007 picnic—a reunion, they call it—which they are hosting for police officers, fire company personnel, emergency responders, Amish parents and families, and the Roberts family. An Amish artist has crafted a large wooden plaque for the event, with messages of gratitude for the state police. Pupils from the West Nickel Mines School used a wood-burning pen to inscribe their names on the plaque which will be presented to the police at the reunion.

By then the fall communion season will be just a few months away. Revisiting a New Testament scripture they know so well, the Amish will read Matthew 18 and ponder again Jesus' words about forgiving seventy times seven.

April 2007

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