

International Forgiveness Day  
August 1, 2004



Selected  
Forgiveness Stories  
and  
Forgiveness Projects

For Helping Your Organization Create  
A Forgiveness Program

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to network with organizing groups, submit your Hero Nomination,  
to ask questions or to tell us what you are planning

Hawaii Forgiveness Project  
<http://www.hawaiiiforgivenessproject.org>

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## **Introduction**

The Hawai'i Forgiveness Project was started in 2003 by a diverse group of people in island society. We were concerned to bring greater harmony to our people, and were inspired by the example of International Forgiveness Day.

Intense, committed monthly meetings have been held to learn about forgiveness, experience it personally, and communicate it more widely. Here is a sample of what some of our people have said about the project, and why we have created this book of Forgiveness Stories:

Hawai'i is a multicultural society whose citizens deeply respect the values of the first people who first settled our islands, long ago. A life of forgiveness is shown clearly by traditional Hawaiian culture, through the spirit of Aloha (welcome, love) and the practice of Ho`oponopono (balance, understanding).

We support forgiveness in all its religious, artistic, personal, justice, educational, social and political forms. Our leaders attempt to publicly demonstrate the honesty that forgiveness requires, in their personal and professional conduct.

Forgiveness is a way of creating resilience in our personal, family, community and professional lives.

Today, we aim to experience a sense of freedom that is grounded in reality, and which encourages compassion and caring for others at the highest level. We aim to assure open access to multicultural resources and counseling centers that support people of all ages and institutions, whether small or large.

The mission of the Hawaii Forgiveness Project is to offer opportunities for conversations on forgiveness at all levels of the community and to teach the life skill of forgiveness -- that Aloha shall truly reign in all walks of life in Hawai'i. We will share what we learn with all the people of the world.

The most universal way for people to learn new ideas is through stories. From ancient times, storytellers have spoken to us over campfires, in festivals, in song, religious ritual, dance and art, and the benefit of each generation's experience has passed down from father to son, from mother to daughter. This book of Forgiveness Stories attempts to continue in that ancient way.

Hawai'i is an example, both small in size and large in significance, for the world of what is true and possible.

## **Law of the Splintered Paddle King Kamehameha's Story: Hawai'i**



**King Kamehameha I, the first ruler of all the Hawaiian Islands, lived before European influence became strong in the central Pacific, from 1758 to 1819.**

**He had a reputation for independence, strength, justice and compassion -- combined with a fierce determination to unite the people of Hawaii.**

**Kamehameha's proclamation of Mamalahoe -- the "Law of the Splintered Paddle," came about in a unique way. His story of compassion and forgiveness has been passed down through nearly two centuries, from Kingdom to Republic to Territory to State, and is included today in the Constitution of the State of Hawaii.**

**The story goes like this:**

The young royal warrior Kamehameha, headstrong with youth, was paddling a war canoe with his men near the shoreline of Ke'eau, in Puna, Maui. Seeking a place to rest, they came upon some commoners fishing on a beach, and attacked them. All escaped, except for two men who stayed behind to defend a man carrying a child on his back.

During the struggle, the young chief's foot caught in some lava rocks, and he was trapped there. One of the fishermen struck Kamehameha on the head with a paddle, and the paddle splintered. It was a blow that could have killed the young future King.

The man who hit him, in defending the child, allowed Kamehameha to survive. The young chief never forgot this act of forgiveness. This commoner taught

Kamehameha that all human life is precious and deserves respect, that the strong must not mistreat the weak.

Kamehameha could have taken revenge on the fisherman, but he learned from the experience instead, and made forgiveness part of Hawaii's heritage, and its future.

Years later, King Kamehameha I proclaimed Mamalahoe, the Law of the Splintered Paddle. It provides that any old person, woman or child may "lie by the roadside in safety." This means that anyone who is weak is entitled to protection and assistance, and to respect, even from the King.

story suggested by Ramsay Taum, researched and written by the Hawai'i Forgiveness Project, from online sources at Kamehameha Schools, the University of Hawai'i Law School, and the State Constitution.

For detailed references, see

<http://www.hawaiiforgivenessproject.org/stories.htm#sources>



"We cannot live with broken hearts. In time we have to accept these things have happened to us. To stay with the past will only bring you into turmoil."

## **Christo Brand & Vusumzi Mcongo: South Africa**

**Christo Brand was one of the warders directly assigned to guard Nelson Mandela at Robben Island prison between 1978 and 1987. At the same time Vusumzi Mcongo was a political prisoner serving a 12-year sentence. Following the collapse of the apartheid regime, both men now work for the Robben Island Museum in Cape Town.**

### **Christo Brand**

The first time I saw Vusumzi was on our way to Robben Island. We both arrived on the same day in



1978. I was a warder. He was a prisoner in chains, on his way to maximum security. We did not speak to one another. The first time we spoke properly was nearly 20 years later when we were both applying for a job at Robben Island Museum. We embraced each other warmly. Now that we work together we talk about what was wrong in the past. Sometimes we have a laugh about things that happened then. There is no bitterness between us.

When I started on Robben Island I was told that the men we guarded were no better than animals. Some warders hated the prisoners and were very cruel. But I could never hate because these political prisoners were far more polite and friendly than any prisoner I'd met before.

Eventually I was put in charge of the educational studies of Nelson Mandela and a few other prisoners. Mr. Mandela was determined to turn Robben Island into a university. It meant that prisoners who arrived with no education at all left as powerfully educated men. He kept saying that as long as you're alive, they can't take away your education. He was even determined to learn how to speak and write Afrikaans.

Mr. Mandela is the epitome of forgiveness, able to reach out to all people. While he was in prison, the man who was the architect of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, died. When Mandela was finally released, one of the first people he visited was Verwoerd's widow, Betsie. She received him with open arms in their house in a white suburb.

### **Vusumzi Mcongo**

I was arrested in 1976 for being a member of the South African Student Movement (SASM) during a school boycott in Port Elizabeth. The charges laid against me under the Internal Security Act were for incitement, sabotage and terrorist activities. I was detained for six months, during which time I was interrogated and tortured. I was lucky to survive. Many died in detention.

In prison I noticed Christo, but prisoners didn't talk to officers. I tried to keep out of his way, as it was my job to carry information from one section of the prison to another. It was a risky job, and to be found out would have meant having my studies curtailed. For us prisoners this was the ultimate punishment. Broadening our knowledge was about broadening our future.

Our relationship with the warders at Robben Island was often a stumbling block. We had to convince them we weren't violent men. But I never hated these warders. They were working for a system and the system was brutal. The people I hated were those who had tortured and interrogated me in detention. I used to dream of revenge.

And yet, after I was released, that hatred diminished. All I wanted was to meet these people again to show them that I'd survived. And what's more, survived with a smile.

By chance, during Steve Biko's hearing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), I met some of the security officers involved in his case. I greeted them and reminded them that they'd also interrogated and tortured me. Then I wished them luck in their case. I bore them no ill will. I knew then that the experience of Robben Island had not brutalised me. We had all learned different lessons in different ways.

We cannot live with broken hearts. In time we have to accept that these things have happened to us, that those years have been wasted. To stay with the past

will only bring you into turmoil. No nation can survive without forgiveness.

Preaching reconciliation has become part of my daily task. For me this is a voluntary change, one that comes from within, even though the government has made me no reparation. But some former political prisoners are still very angry. They are not prepared to forgive. It's not hatred against the white man they feel, but anger at the government that has done nothing for them.

**From The Forgiveness Project website**

**<http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/>**



## **First Nations People: Canada**

Recounted by Lency Spezzano

**The First Nations woman stood in the center of the seminar room, and trembled with fury.**

**She was enraged, and she wanted to fight for her dignity and her pride. There was a man in the room, a fellow Native, whom she saw as a transgressor in the extreme. She preached to us of her love for her family, and for her people who had suffered a holocaust of cultural genocide.**

The man revealed that he had been a sex offender during his youthful drinking days. He was so filled with regret and remorse that eleven years after the fact he turned himself in to the authorities, to begin a long series of rehabilitative seminars and counseling sessions.

He had been willing to convict himself with his guilt; his challenge now was to win back the truth. Regardless of the mistakes he had made in his life, his true nature as a child of the Creator was perfect innocence. He said that he hoped someday to be able to find forgiveness within himself.

He had abused others as he himself had been abused in the residential “Indian” schools the Canadian government had forced on the First Nations people for over a hundred years. There the children had been torn from their families, separated from their siblings, raped of their language, religion, and heritage, and were taught that everything “Indian” was evil or inferior. Without their families to protect them, the children were preyed upon by sexual predators who were hired by the churches to supervise the dormitories, and teach the classes.

When the children graduated from high school and returned to their villages, they brought the pattern of abuse home. Drugs and alcohol were used by many as an attempt to escape emotional suffering, which caused more damage to families and communities, especially due to their natural physical intolerance for alcohol. Violent death and suicide became common place, as did sexual and physical abuse.

I helped the woman recognize that her issue with this man was that she had not forgiven her own perpetrator for the violation, shame, and loss of innocence that occurred when she had been raped as a girl.

If she could find it in her to forgive her perpetrator, she could recover the innocence and joy she knew as a child. If she could allow this man in the seminar to stand for the one who had hurt her, she could forgive both of them at the same time. If she could free her mind of the judgment she had placed on them so that she could see them as innocent, she could win back their innocence as well as her own.

Without hesitation, she agreed to do the healing that would be required. The man crumpled forward from the torment of his guilt. For him to step to the front of

the room to represent the woman's perpetrator would be the greatest act of courage and willingness of his life. With great effort, he was able to rise and face the woman in her pain.



My husband, Chuck, suggested that she choose two women friends to walk with her and support her as she crossed the room, each step representing a step forward in her forgiveness.

Clutching each other, the three faced the man, and wailing from pain, began their slow but steady progress toward joining him in the truth. As they came close to him, their faces brightened, and soon the tears were tears of joy and release.

As the woman reached him, she gave him the gift of his innocence and therefore was able to receive it as



her own. When they embraced, they were filled with love and gratitude for each other.

During the remaining days of the seminar, whenever I saw her around the compound, she was skipping like a child, a big grin on her face. Forgiveness had made her so lighthearted that she proved the adage, “It’s never too late to have a happy childhood.”

Many people are convinced of personal guilt so great that it separates them from their Creator’s love and acceptance. In the face of the miracle of forgiveness, Reality registers the only Truth in our minds: we are still just as God created us. We are perfectly innocent regardless of our mistakes, and we will one day share God’s evaluation of who we are.

In the year following this seminar, the young man continued to work on self-forgiveness. He started a support group for sexual offenders, knowing that he was in a position to help others.

From <http://www.gaia-mind.com>



"These boots are like my life - they've been healed, resoled and restored."

## **David: England**

**In 2003 David was released from prison after serving almost 17 years of a life sentence for a double domestic murder. During his prison sentence he spent four years at HMP Grendon Underwood, a prison run along therapeutic lines.**

In the 1980's I was convicted of a double murder. I cannot discuss the details here owing to the rights to anonymity of those still affected. However, I can say that circumstances at that time had conspired to take me to my lowest ebb. Everything I valued in life, I was about to lose. The night before the offences, I went to bed and washed down a fistful of pills with Southern

Comfort. I didn't expect to wake up. When I did awake, 12 hours later, my head was all messed up with drugs. All sense of value for human life had dwindled to zero.

I spent the first part of my sentence on D Wing at Wormwood Scrubs: a hard, brutal place full of lifers. Then I heard about HMP Grendon, a prison run on group therapy lines. I knew that in order to make sense of my life I had to go there. In 1990 I arrived at Grendon. The therapy gave me insight into myself. As I started putting together the jigsaw pieces of my life, I took on board the wider consequences of the crime. For the first time I realised how much my actions had blighted my children's lives.

I have struggled with the concept of forgiveness. At first I was seeking forgiveness from others, then at Grendon I realised I had a real problem with forgiving myself. I had counselling with the Chaplain. He was a great guy. We had fierce debates. During one of our talks he went for me, pinning me up against the wall. "Who the fuck do you think you are?" he shouted. "If God can forgive you, why can't you forgive yourself? Do you think you're better than God?"

I still struggle with the issue of forgiveness, but since then I've been able to find a place within myself where

my crime is easier to bear. I don't deserve forgiveness, but unless you can reach that point where you feel OK, you can never fully heal and move on.

When I was at Grendon I took part in a live Kilroy programme. I was sitting next to a couple who had lost their daughter in a violent unsolved murder. Having opened the programme with my story, the cameras then panned to the couple. They turned on me. Suddenly, in their eyes, I became the perpetrator. It was pretty ugly: their feelings were 'hang 'em and flog 'em'.

And yet from this encounter came the most precious friendship. The moment the cameras stopped rolling the three of us just embraced and cried. Later they started writing to me and visiting me in prison. They kept in contact until I was due to be released. Perhaps they couldn't handle contact beyond that point, but for all of us some sort of healing had been reached. It certainly gave me a valuable insight into what victims and extended families go through.

Grendon enabled me to shed my past and to grow. Although rehabilitating and finding a supportive employer is difficult, I've managed to change a

negative into a positive – and I owe that to my victims. Recently, sorting through some of my belongings stored in a friend’s loft, I’ve been reconnecting with my past. In one of the boxes I found my favourite boots. These boots are like my life – they’ve been healed, resoled and restored.

**From The Forgiveness Project website**

**<http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/>**



“I learnt from practising martial arts that to overcome your opponent you should meet hardness with softness.”

**Camilla Carr & Jon James: Chechnya**

**In April 1997, Camilla Carr, 45, and her boyfriend, Jon James, 43, went to Chechnya to set up a rehabilitation centre for traumatised war-children. Three months later they were taken hostage by Chechnyan rebels. Their ordeal lasted 14 months, during which Camilla was repeatedly raped by one of her jailers.**

### **Camilla Carr**

Rape is a terrible violation of a human being. I will never forgive the act, yet I can forgive the man who raped me; I can feel compassion for him because I understand the desperate place he was coming from.

That's not to say I condone what our captors did to us (the physical and psychological abuse was appalling), and if I met them now I'd want to ask all of them, "Did you have any idea how much you were harming us?" But I still understand the desperation that caused them to do the things they did.

As soon as we were taken hostage we decided to take the line of least resistance, because our four captors were so clearly traumatised by the war. If we'd shown anger or sadness they could have reacted with violence.

After several weeks in captivity one of them – an ignorant and wounded person who we named Paunch – took the opportunity to rape me. The only way I could get through this horror was by thinking to myself, “You can never touch the essence of me – my body is only part of who I am.”

He raped me many times, but mostly I was able to cling on to this detached state of being. He always did it when he was alone and I didn't dare tell the other captors in case it gave them the idea of gang rape. This went on until I got herpes, which gave me the strength to say no. Paunch asked me to explain why. With a dictionary I shakily pointed out, “No sex, no violence”. I couldn't take any more. He said he just wanted to be my friend! In his own way he was apologising. He stopped raping me and instead he would talk about his dreams.

We were released in September 1998. Initially I seemed to be doing well. We were basking in the euphoria of freedom and love from our family and friends. Then two months later I collapsed. I couldn't stop crying and had no energy. This lasted a few weeks, but it wasn't until 2001, when Jon and I moved to Wales, that I found the space and silence to

let go and surrender to weakness and vulnerability. Only this way could my nervous system finally heal.

Some of our Chechnyan friends can't understand how we can forgive. They feel tarnished with the guilt of their community. I tell them that I believe forgiveness begins with understanding, but you have to work through layers to obtain it. First you have to deal with anger, then with tears, and only once you reach the tears are you on the road to finding peace of mind.

### **Jon James**

I had a horrible feeling as Paunch took Camilla next door. I heard a few muffled words, then silence, and an awful wave of realisation hit me. I felt sick. I was powerless to take any physical action since I was handcuffed to the heating pipes. The only tool available was prayer. I prayed that the invasion would be swift and painless.

Throughout our ordeal I continued to hold back my emotion, as I had learned from practising martial arts that to overcome your opponent you should meet hardness with softness. Knowing this saved my life. But in my dreams I murdered Paunch several times.

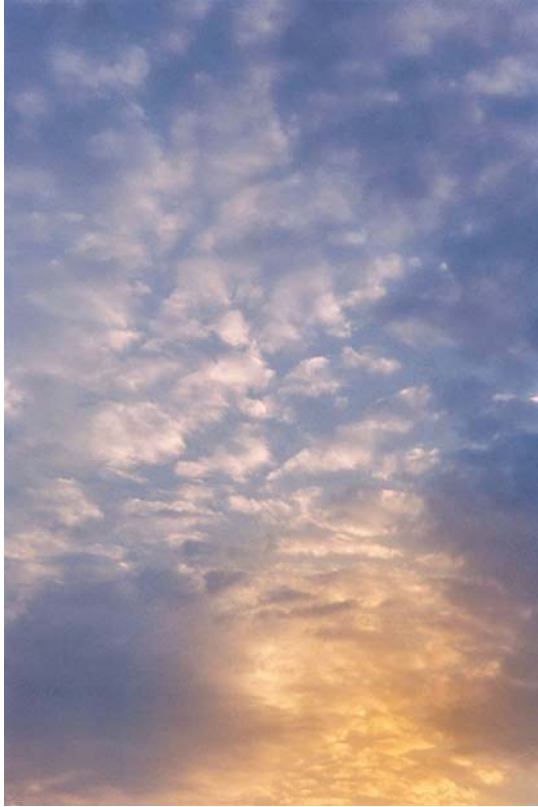


We'd do yoga and Tai Chi every morning and survived by the skin of our teeth. I got punched around and there was a lot of mental torture, even a mock execution at one point when we were certain we would die.

After our release we needed space. We'd been stuck together like glue for 14 months. We were both so used to supporting each other we had to learn to stand alone again. For a long time I experienced anxiety and a lot of physical pain. Like Camilla I've come to an understanding of where our captors, and where her violator, were coming from. Not many people in this world do stuff out of pure maliciousness. But it's taken me a long time to get to a point where I can think about what happened without feeling a charge of negative energy.

**From The Forgiveness Project website**

**<http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/>**



**George Ritchie and Wild Bill: Germany, Poland**  
Recounted by Lency Spezzano

**As a 20-year-old U.S. Army private going through basic training in 1943, George Ritchie “died” of pneumonia. At the hospital, his body was covered with a sheet, ready to be taken to the morgue.**

**Finding himself standing beside his own body, Ritchie encountered a “Man made out of Light,” whom he recognized as Jesus. With certainty he knew that this Man loved him with an astonishing love. A love beyond his wildest imagining.**

**Ritchie then was shown every episode of his life, all seeming to take place at the same moment. At the end, the Man asked, “What have you done with your life to show Me?”**

Ritchie realized that the question had to do with love. How much have you loved with your life? Have you loved others as I am loving you? Totally? Unconditionally?

Ritchie thought, indignantly, “Why didn’t I know that love like this is possible? Someone should have told me! A fine time to discover what life was all about – like coming to a final exam and discovering you were going to be tested on a subject you have never studied! If this was the point of everything, why didn’t someone tell me?”

The Being then showed him fascinating glimpses of life after death before returning him to his body. Ritchie was terribly distressed to return to this life, wondering how he could live without the presence of the love.

After this encounter, as a World War II medic in Europe, Ritchie wanted to die, even wondering if he

had been brought back to life as a punishment. Then one day he encountered a wounded officer with a familiar and beautiful look in his eyes.

Not recognizing at first what attracted him to this man, he finally realized that the look reminded him of the look of love that he had seen coming from the Man of Light. He could see “Christ” looking out at him through the wounded officer’s eyes.

When the war in Europe ended in May, 1945, Ritchie’s unit provided medical help to newly liberated prisoners at a concentration camp near Wuppertal, Germany. He met a Polish Jew nicknamed “Wild Bill” by the Americans because of his long drooping handle-bar mustache. He had been one of the prisoners, but his posture was erect, his eyes were bright, his health was radiant. He worked up to 16 hours a day to help the Americans, but showed no sign of fatigue.

Wild Bill had actually been an inmate at that concentration camp for six years, performing the same work, eating the same starvation diet and exposed to the same diseases that had killed thousands of other men. Ritchie wondered what could have saved his life.

One day Wild Bill told Ritchie what it was that made him so different. It all came from a choice he had made years before.

Wild Bill had lived with his wife and five children in the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. The Nazis came and forced everyone out of their houses, lined them up against the wall, and shot them with machine guns.

Wild Bill's family was murdered in front of his eyes, but the soldiers ignored his plea to be killed alongside them. Because of his ability to speak German, his life was spared and he was put in a work group.

The obvious response would have been for Wild Bill to hate the soldiers. Instead, a miracle occurred. Wild Bill was shown, in this most dire circumstance, that he had a *choice* in the matter.

He could hate the soldiers who had done this, thereby committing himself to a life of hate and a future that would be nothing but a product of hate; or, he could choose love, and the life that would be love's outcome.

Wild Bill chose love, deciding that, for the rest of his life – however long or short it might be – he would love

every single person with whom he came into contact with. He started with those Nazi soldiers.

In the concentration camp, love had kept him strong and well; love had given him life.

**from George G. Ritchie, *Return From Tomorrow*, 1978**



"I have come to believe passionately in restorative justice."

**Linda Biehl & Easy Nofemela:  
America, South Africa**

**On August 25 1993, Amy Biehl, an American Fulbright scholar working in South Africa against apartheid, was beaten and stabbed to death in a black township near Cape Town.**

**In 1998 the four youths convicted of her murder were granted amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) after serving five years of their sentence – a decision that was supported by Amy’s parents. Easy Nofemela and Ntobeko Peni, two of the convicted men, now work for the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust in Cape Town, a charity which dedicates its work to putting up barriers against violence. Since Peter Biehl’s sudden death in 2002, Linda still regularly returns to Cape Town to carry on her work with the Foundation.**

### **Linda**

When we heard the terrible news about Amy the whole family was devastated, but at the same time we wanted to understand the circumstances surrounding her death. Soon afterwards we left for Cape Town.

We took our strength in handling the situation directly from Amy. She was intensely involved in South African politics and even though the violence

leading up to free elections had caused her death, we didn't want to say anything negative about South Africa's journey to democracy. Therefore, in 1998, when the four men convicted of her murder applied for amnesty, we did not oppose it. At the amnesty hearing we shook hands with the families of the perpetrators. Peter spoke for both of us when he quoted from an editorial Amy had written for the Cape Times: "the most important vehicle of reconciliation is open and honest dialogue," he said.

"We are here to reconcile a human life which was taken without an opportunity for dialogue. When we are finished with this process we must move forward with linked arms." A year after Easy and Ntobeko were released from prison, an anthropologist who was interviewing them sent us a message to say they'd like to meet with us. They were running a youth club in Guguletu Township where Amy had been killed and wanted to show us their work.

We wanted to meet them. It wasn't about pity or blame, but about understanding. We wanted to know what it would take to make things better. Some time later we took them out to dinner. We talked about their lives and our lives, but we didn't ask about the past. We were all looking to the future.



I've grown fond of these boys. I enjoy them. They're like my own kids. It may sound strange, but I tend to think there's a little bit of Amy's spirit in them. Some people think we are supporting criminals, but the Foundation that we started in her name is all about preventing crime among youth.

I have come to believe passionately in restorative justice. It's what Desmond Tutu calls 'ubuntu': to choose to forgive rather than demand retribution, a belief that "my humanity is inextricably caught up in yours." I can't look at myself as a victim – it diminishes me as a person.

And Easy and Ntobeko don't see themselves as killers. They didn't set out to kill Amy Biehl. But Easy has told me that it's one thing to reconcile what happened as a political activist, quite another to reconcile it in your heart.

## **Easy**

When the anthropologist suggested bringing the Biehls to meet me my mind was racing. This was a big challenge. I'd grown up being taught never to trust a white person, and I didn't know what to make of them. Yet I thought that if I could meet them face to face,

then perhaps they might see that I was sorry. “Yes, bring them,” I said.

The next day Peter came to Guguletu. I was very nervous, but my first thought was to protect him because there was violence outside. I took him inside my home and told him about the youth club. He was very and said Linda would love to see what me and Ntobeko were doing. The next day they came bringing us T-shirts and tickets for Robben Island. I remember Peter was very strong and Linda very shy.

Later we became involved in the Amy Biehl Foundation because they were having trouble in Guguletu where they ran a community baking project. Crime had become so bad in the township that drivers were getting shot at every day. We helped them by talking to the community.

Not until I met Linda and Peter Biehl did I understand that white people are human beings too. I was a member of APLA – the armed wing of the PAC. Our slogan was “one settler, one bullet”. The first time I saw them on TV I hated them. I thought this was the strategy of the whites, to come to South Africa to call for capital punishment. But they didn’t even mention wanting to hang us. I was very confused. They seemed

to understand that the youth of the townships had carried this crisis – this fight for liberation – on their shoulders.

At first I didn't want to go to the TRC to give my testimony. I thought it was a sell-out, but then I read in the press that Linda and Peter had said that it was not up to them to forgive: it was up to the people in South Africa to learn to forgive each other. I decided to go and tell our story and show remorse. Amnesty wasn't my motivation. I just wanted to ask for forgiveness. I wanted to say in front of Linda and Peter, face to face, "I am sorry, can you forgive me?" I wanted to be free in my mind and body. It must have been so painful for them to lose their daughter, but by coming to South Africa – not to speak of recrimination, but to speak of the pain of our struggle – they gave me back my freedom.

I am not a killer, I have never thought of myself as such, but I will never belong to a political organisation again because such organisations dictate your thoughts and actions. I now passionately believe that things will only change through dialogue. People are shocked I work for the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust. I tell them that I work here because Peter and Linda came to South Africa to talk about forgiveness.

Peter was a lovely man. He kept us all happy. It was a great shock when he died. He would say to Ntobeko and me, “I love you guys. Are you happy, guys?” He tried to avoid things that would upset us. He was like a grandfather to us.

**From The Forgiveness Project website**

**<http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/>**



"The act of friendship  
invites forgiveness."

## **Tom Tate: Germany & England**

**In March 1945, airman Tom Tate was on special duties over Germany when his B17 Flying Fortress was hit by fire. The crew bailed out. Seven of them were captured a few hours later near the village of Huchenfeld, close to the town of Pforzheim. A month earlier Pforzheim had been destroyed in a massive RAF bombing raid killing 18,000 people. Revenge was in the air. The British airmen were dragged to a nearby cemetery to be executed by a Hitler Youth lynch mob. Only Tom and one other crewmember escaped.**

They wanted to kill us in the school, but the mayor of the village refused, saying that blood would be on the heads of the children for all time. So we were dragged outside and down the hill. When I realised we were about to be killed, a sudden burst of energy overcame me and I ran for it. I was barefoot and exhausted, but somehow I got away. The next day I was recaptured by the German army and taken to a POW camp by two Luftwaffe escorts. I was treated according to the Geneva Convention and assured that my comrades were safe. One of my escorts even handed me a pair of boots. He explained that a woman in Huchenfeld, hearing of my plight, had sent them to me.

After the war, back in England, the RAF asked me to return to Pforzheim to find out what had happened to the missing crew. So back I went, and turning into the cemetery in Huchenfeld I knew instantly what had happened, for there in front of me were five wooden crosses.

The perpetrators of the crime were brought to justice at the War Crimes trials in Essen the following year, and the ringleaders were sentenced to death. I had no compassion. I despised them and said to my wife that I was never going back to Germany.

But then, 50 years later, a fellow golf player mentioned a possible holiday to the Rhine. It was a SAGA holiday, and with their brochure came a magazine. For weeks it lay unopened by my fireplace, until I finally took it out of its plastic cover. It fell open at a double-page spread, which read: “The Village that asked Forgiveness.” I couldn’t believe it – it was all about Huchenfeld and the executions.

I read how Pastor Heinemann-Grüder had arranged a memorial plaque to the five British airmen murdered in his church. On the plaque was written “Vater Vergib” (father forgive). Many people still had that terrible event on their conscience. Only the widow of one of the murdered airmen had been traced, but press interest meant that the pilot, John Wynne, eventually contacted the village too. He had taken a rocking horse and presented it to the new kindergarten in Huchenfeld as a gesture of reconciliation. It was called Hoffnung – the rocking horse of hope.

I contacted John Wynne through the magazine. He couldn’t believe we’d found each other after so many years. “You have to go to Pforzheim,” he urged me. “For years people have longed to meet a survivor to

express their shame and horror. They want forgiveness.”

A short while later I received a letter from a couple, Renate and Gotthilf Beck-Ehninger, who were very involved in the reconciliation process but hadn't known I was still alive. They were so thrilled to find me, and invited me to the commemoration ceremony in 1995. Renate wrote: “I was only nine when Pforzheim was raided, and you were in your youth when you saw the abyss, the darkest depth of human nature.”

I didn't attend the actual ceremony because I still felt in danger, imagining someone might want to finish the job off. But when I arrived the following week I was given such an enthusiastic welcome. It was clear I had become a symbol of reconciliation. I was greeted by so many people, all of whom wanted to shake my hand. I've never been hugged by so many ladies in all my life! I also met Emilie, the woman who in 1945 had sent me the boots.

Guilt had hung over the village for years, but by going there it somehow changed things for them. I was so welcomed, and so well looked after, that suddenly I realised I'd made a mistake. I wish that I'd gone to



Germany earlier to relieve these people of their guilt. When someone comes with arms open to embrace you, you can't feel enmity any more. The act of friendship invites forgiveness.

**From The Forgiveness Project website**

**<http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/>**



**Steven McDonald: New York City**

**When New York City policeman Steven McDonald stopped to question three youths in Central Park one day in 1986, he was shot and paralyzed from**

**the neck down. Steve had been married less than a year, and his wife was two months pregnant.**

Steven and his attacker, Shavod Jones, could not have been more different. Steven was white; Shavod was black. Steven came from the upper-middle class suburbs of Nassau County; Shavod from a Harlem housing project. Their brief encounter might have ended right there. But Steven wouldn't let it. Knowing that his attacker had just altered the course of both of their lives, he felt an uncanny connection to him, and began to write to him:

I was angry at him, but I was also puzzled, because I found I couldn't hate him. More often than not I felt sorry for him. I wanted him to turn his life to helping and not hurting people. I wanted him to find peace and purpose in his life. That's why I forgave him. It was a way of moving on, a way of putting the terrible accident behind me.

Shavod didn't answer Steven's letters at first, and when he finally did, the exchange fizzled out because Steven declined his request for help in getting parole. Then, in late 1995, only three days after his release from prison, Shavod was killed in a motorcycle

accident. But Steven has never regretted reaching out to him.

I was a badge to that kid, a uniform representing the government. I was the system that let landlords charge rent for squalid apartments in broken-down tenements; I was the city agency that fixed up poor neighborhoods and drove the residents out, through gentrification, regardless of whether they were law-abiding solid citizens, or pushers and criminals; I was the Irish cop who showed up at a domestic dispute and left without doing anything, because no law had been broken.

To Shavod Jones, I was the enemy. He didn't see me as a person, as a man with loved ones, as a husband and father-to-be. He'd bought into all the stereotypes of his community: the police are racist, they'll turn violent, so arm yourself against them. No, I couldn't blame Jones. Society – his family, the social agencies responsible for him, the people who'd made it impossible for his parents to be together – had failed him way before he had met me in Central Park...

Over the last several years I have met Steven many times, and spoken with him on numerous occasions. A highlight of our friendship was an appearance we

made in June 1999 at an event in Belfast – I as a Protestant, and Steven as a Catholic. In a joint address delivered to members of the new government, we urged them to work for reconciliation and against revenge.

When visiting Steven in his Long Island home, I am always struck by the extent of his incapacitation. Life in a wheelchair is hard enough for an elderly person to accept, but to be plucked out of an active, fun-loving life at the age of twenty-nine is devastating. Add to that a tracheostomy to breathe through, a personal nurse to hover over you twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week – and a son you have never been able to hug, let alone play ball with – and you have Steven McDonald.

Still, I have never sensed any anger or bitterness. Steven speaks quietly, almost timidly, but his words reveal the pillar of his strength: a forgiving spirit that prevents him from wallowing in self-pity and allows him to see his confinement in a positive light. A speaker at elementary schools and high schools throughout New York, Steven has given meaning to his suffering by using it to teach others about the importance of forgiving.

Of course, I have my ups and downs. Some days, when I am not feeling very well, I can get angry. I get depressed. There have been times when I even felt like killing myself. But I have come to realize that anger is a wasted emotion...

Though Steven's story is remarkable in many ways, it is his honesty about his ups and downs that I find most significant. Steven chose to forgive rather quickly, as did many others whose stories we have already examined. Like many of them, he says he forgave so as to be able to move on, to heal, to get on with life. But Steven also says that no matter how sincerely you decide to forgive, your decision must be reaffirmed every day. And he admits that, far from being a magical key to serenity and relief, the act of forgiving carries its own measure of anguish and pain. To borrow from Dostoevsky's oft-quoted reminder about love, forgiveness in action is a "harsh and dreadful thing" compared to forgiveness in dreams.

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## **Bud Welch: Oklahoma City**

**When Bud Welch lost his 23-year-old daughter Julie, he lost the pride of his life, and to this day he cannot say he has forgiven the man who killed her. Still, he refuses to give resentment and despair the upper hand, and tries instead to keep her memory alive by sharing his pride in her with others.**

**I'm the third of eight children and grew up on a dairy farm, and I've run a service station in Oklahoma City for the last thirty-four years. Until April 19, 1995 - the day Julie and 167 others were killed in the bomb blast that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Building - my life was very simple. I had a little girl and loved her a lot.**

Julie had a rough start; she was born premature, but she survived and grew healthy and strong. She had just graduated from Marquette with a degree in Spanish and started a job as a translator for the Social Security Administration. At the time of her death she was dating an Air Force lieutenant named Eric. The day after Julie was killed I found out that they had decided to announce their engagement in two weeks.

All my life I have opposed the death penalty. Friends used to tell me that if anyone ever killed one of my family members, I would change. "What if Julie got raped and murdered?" But I always said I'd stick to my guns. Until April 19.

The first four or five weeks after the bombing I had so much anger, pain, hatred, and revenge, that I realized why, when someone is charged with a violent crime, they transport him in a bullet-proof vest. It's because people like me would try to kill him.

By the end of 1995 I was in such bad shape, I was drinking heavily and smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. I was stuck, emotionally, on April 19. I just couldn't get over it. But I knew I had to do

something about it. That's when I went down to the bombing site.

It was a cold January afternoon, and I stood there watching hundreds of people walking along the chain link fence that surrounded the lot where the Murrah Building had stood. I was thinking about the death penalty, and how I wanted nothing more than to see Timothy McVeigh (and anyone else responsible for the bombing) fried. But I was also beginning to wonder whether I would really feel any better once they were executed. Every time I asked myself that question, I got the same answer: No. Nothing positive would come from it. It wouldn't bring Julie back. After all, it was hatred and revenge that made me want to see them dead, and those two things were the very reason that Julie and 167 others were dead...

Once he arrived at this realization, Bud returned to his original belief that executing criminals was wrong, and he has since become a leading opponent of the death penalty. Sought across the country as a speaker on the futility of capital punishment, he makes appearances in churches and town meetings, on campuses and at activist gatherings. He is always on the go. But nothing he has done means as much to him as his meeting with Timothy's father:



A person like Bill McVeigh is as much a victim as I am, if not more. I can't imagine the pain he and his family have been through. I've lost a daughter, and when Timothy is executed he's going to lose a son. I have a son myself, and if he was convicted of killing 168 people, I don't know how I'd deal with that. Bill has to live with that for the rest of his life.

I first saw Bill McVeigh on television a few weeks after the bombing. He was working in his flower bed, and he looked up at the camera for a couple seconds. When he did I saw a father with deep, deep pain in his eyes. I could recognize it, because I was living that pain. I knew right then that someday I had to go tell him that I truly cared how he felt.

So I did. The day I visited him he was out in his garden again, and we spent about half an hour just getting acquainted, kicking dirt and pulling weeds. Then we went into the house so I could meet Jennifer, his 24-year-old daughter. As we walked in I noticed a few family photos on the wall over the kitchen table. The largest one was of Timothy. I kept glancing up at that picture. I knew that they were watching me, so I said, "Gosh, what a good-looking kid." Bill had told me outdoors that he was having a lot of trouble showing

emotion – that he couldn't cry. But when I commented on that photograph he said, "That's Tim's high school graduation picture," and a great big tear rolled down his cheek.

We talked for another hour and a half. When I got ready to leave I shook Bill's hand and extended my hand to Jennifer. She didn't take it. She hugged me around the neck. I don't know who started crying first as we embraced, but we were both in tears. Finally I said, "Honey, we're in this together for the rest of our lives. And we can make the most of it, if we choose. I don't want your brother to die, and I'll do everything in my power to prevent it." Never in my life have I felt closer to God than I did at that time. I felt like a thousand pounds had been lifted off my shoulders.

Still, Bud says he has no desire to meet his daughter's killer. Sometimes he's not even sure he's really forgiven him:

At least I don't think I have forgiven him. I was speaking at Oklahoma State University one time, and the Bishop of Tulsa was there. I was telling the group about my struggle, and that I didn't feel that I had forgiven him. Anyway, the bishop chimed in and said, "But I think you have forgiven him." And he started

quoting some verse from Scripture, which I'm not very good at doing. But he's a bishop, and I suppose he's qualified. I guess he was trying to convince me that I have forgiven Timothy, and maybe I have.

I still have my moments of rage. I remember crossing the campus of a high school in California, on my way to speak to an all-school assembly, and looking around as I walked. The place reminded me of Julie's high school. Suddenly this rage just hit me. So here I was, getting ready to speak to a whole auditorium full of kids about my opposition to the death penalty, and I was thinking to myself, "That bastard doesn't even deserve to live."

I know I don't want Timothy executed, because once he's gone, it will be too late to choose to forgive him. As long as he's alive, I have to deal with my feelings and emotions. But I do have setbacks, even when I'm sure I want to forgive. That's probably why I can't handle that word "closure." I get sick of hearing it. The first time someone asked me about closure was the day after Julie's burial. Of course I was still in hell then. In a way, I still am. How can there ever be true closure? A part of my heart is gone.

Bud has been an inspiration to me from the very first time we met, and each time I see him, I sense an increased determination to make the best he can of the tragedy that hit him. While it was grief that first led him to visit the family of his daughter's killer, it is her life-affirming spirit that drives him now. And even if he hasn't yet found the full measure of healing he seeks, his journey – like every journey of forgiveness – is one of hope:

It's a struggle, but it's one I need to wage. In any case, forgiving is not something you just wake up one morning and decide to do. You have to work through your anger and your hatred as long as it's there. You try to live each day a little better than the one before.

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## **Bill Chadwick: Louisiana**

Bill Chadwick of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, makes the distinction between forgiving and excusing quite clearly in writing about the death of his son, Michael. Never tempted simply to excuse the boy responsible for Michael's death, Bill felt a compelling need to see justice done. In the end, however, he discovered that justice by itself couldn't bring him the satisfaction and peace he was looking for:

My twenty-one-year-old son Michael was killed instantly on October 23, 1993, in a car crash. His best friend, who was in the back seat, was also killed. The driver, who had been drinking heavily and was

speeding recklessly, received minor injuries he was subsequently charged with two counts of vehicular homicide. Michael had only a trace of alcohol in his system, and his best friend had none.

The wheels of justice grind very slowly. The courts took more than a year to find the case against the driver. We attended hearing after hearing, and each time the case was delayed. There was even an attempt by the defense attorney to discredit the findings of the blood-alcohol tests, although this was unsuccessful. Finally, the defendant pleaded guilty and was sentenced to six years per count, to be served concurrently.

We suggested to the probation office that a bootcamp-style program might be of benefit to him – we really weren't out to hurt him, but we believed he needed to pay for what he had done. All the same, we received a pretty ugly letter from his mother suggesting that we had somehow pushed for the maximum sentence. She said that if it had been her son who died, with Michael driving, she would not have held a grudge. I suggested that until her son were actually dead, she should not talk about what she would or wouldn't do.

**Her son was finally sentenced** to six months in bootcamp, with the rest of his six-year sentence to be served on intensive parole. In six months, her son was coming home. Ours was not.

I guess I had bought into the belief that, somehow, things would be different after the driver had been brought to justice. I think that is what people mean when they talk about "getting closure." We think that if there is someone to blame, then we can put the matter to rest. It's sort of like thinking that if it somehow makes sense, or if the victims get some sort of justice, then the pain will finally go away. In the years since Michael's death, I have read countless accounts of bereaved people who are looking for closure of this sort.

I have even seen them on the Oprah Winfrey show, shouting for the death penalty, as if having the perpetrator dead would somehow help.

**I was angry at the driver**, of course. But I was angry at Michael, too. After all, he had made some really bad decisions that night he had put his life in jeopardy. I had to go through this anger in order to come to grips with my feelings. However, even after the sentencing,

I did not find closure. What I did find was the same big hole in my soul – and nothing to fill it with.

It was some months later that it hit me: until I could forgive the driver, I would not get the closure I was looking for. Forgiving is different from removing responsibility.

The driver was still responsible for Michael's death, but I had to forgive him before I could let the incident go. No amount of punishment could ever even the score.

I had to be willing to forgive without the score being even. And this process of forgiveness did not really involve the driver – it involved me. It was a process that I had to go through I had to change, no matter what he did.

**The road to forgiveness was long and painful.** I had to forgive more than just the driver. I had to forgive Michael, and God (for allowing it to happen), and myself.

Ultimately, it was my inability to forgive myself that was the most difficult. There were many times in my own life I had driven Michael places when I myself



was under the influence of alcohol. But that was the key to my forgiveness – to forgive myself. My anger at other people was just my own fear turned outward. I had projected my own guilt onto others – the driver, the courts, God, Michael - so that I would not have to look at myself. And it wasn't until I could see my part in this that my outlook could change.

This is what I learned: that the closure we seek comes in forgiving. And this closure is really up to us, because the power to forgive lies not outside us, but within our own souls.

**Michael's father learned** what may be the most painful lesson for any parent. Yet it is one that each of us needs to learn, whatever our situation in life. Unless we have forgiveness in our hearts toward those who harm us, we will find no peace, however "right" we may be in claiming retribution.

In a society that places a premium on revenge, this is hardly a popular idea. Increasingly, sentencing by a court is no longer enough people want a personal role in the act of retribution. Several states have even introduced legislation that gives murder victims' families the right to be present at executions. Yet these families never seem to find the peace they are

looking for. Their desire to see others hurt by the same violence that has hurt them is never satisfied. Instead of healing their wounds, their quest for revenge leaves them disillusioned and angry.

Forgiving is not condoning. In some cases, "forgiving and forgetting" is not only impossible, but immoral. How can anyone forget a child? Pain, indignation and anger are perfectly understandable, and perhaps even necessary, but ultimately these must yield to a longing for reconciliation.

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**Chris Spezzano: Hawai'i**

Recounted by Lency Spezzano

**I witnessed one of my son Christopher's first heartbreaks when he was about three years old.**

**He loved one of my friends, and he courted her with great devotion. When she visited, he would take her by the hand and romantically lead her into his bedroom to play. She was the apple of his eye, his sunshine, his Girlfriend.**

One evening we went to her home for a dinner party. Children were running about the house excitedly

when she decided to get everyone seated for dinner. As my son trotted past her with a prized toy in his hand she stopped him, removed the toy from his grasp and ordered him to sit down at the children's table. She was stressed by the pressure of cooking a dinner and pulling off a successful party, and her attention was focused on her situation, not on Christopher.

From across the room I could see my son's face as it shattered. His Beloved had treated him just like another kid! He would never have treated her so indifferently, without consideration for her feelings. The realization dawned in his mind: she was not in love with him. She did not feel for him what he felt for her.

This understanding hit him and with such a wallop of shock and pain he screamed, and then looked wildly about for me. He ran to me in horror, the emotion too strong for him to talk. My heart went to him, and I felt a pain so sharp and clear, it was like his heart had been opened with a butcher's cleaver. He clung to me as I carried him to another room.

Small as the incident was, I could feel its devastating effect. All I could do was hold him, feel with him, and

say, “I know, I know.” Within a couple of minutes enough of the pain had burned away for him to be able to speak.

“Mommy, she made a mistake!” he gasped. “She needs a Time Out!” As he pictured her sitting in her room by herself, taking a Time Out, he said with some satisfaction, “Then she would cry.”

Within moments he brightened, purity and openness returning to his face. “But *I* would save her!” he exclaimed as he jumped from my lap to run and join the others. The heartbreak was over, just like that.

I was floored by the beauty of the process I had witnessed. By simply allowing the natural completion of an emotional experience, my son was not only saved from a broken heart, he had benefited from the experience of forgiving a friend when she made a mistake. He actually had a better self-image after the experience, and he had tasted the love and lies at the end of every heartbreak.

By the time most of us reach adulthood, we are full of broken hearts. Some of these broken hearts are easy to remember; others have slipped into the

subconscious mind. There, forgotten pain and loss lie hidden, seemingly unimportant.

In truth, these heartbreaks are constantly affecting us. They determine how we see the world; they make decisions for us; they control our relationships. But if we experience our emotions fully at the times we create them, those feelings move through us without causing any damage. We emerge stronger and wiser. This is how, and perhaps why, we were made.

Recounted by Lency Spezzano

From <http://www.gaia-mind.com>



**Hela Ehrlich, Josef Ben-Eliezer:  
Nazi Germany**

**Hela Ehrlich, a Bruderhof member of Jewish descent, grew up in Nazi Germany. Her family managed to emigrate just before the outbreak of World War II and so escaped the death camps. But they suffered greatly, nevertheless. Her father died at the age of just forty-two, and she lost grandparents on both sides as well as all her childhood friends in the Holocaust.**

**She tells of her long struggle with bitterness and her continued unwillingness to forgive, which came to a head one day during a meeting of the whole community:**

I sat down trembling, and as I did it dawned on me that if I looked into my own heart I could find seeds of hatred there, too. I realized that they are there in every human being. Arrogant thoughts, feelings of irritation toward others, coldness, anger, envy, even indifference – these are the roots of what happened in Nazi Germany. I recognized more clearly than ever before that I myself stood in desperate need of forgiveness, and finally I felt completely free.

**Josef Ben-Eliezer, another member of the Bruderhof, was born in 1929 in Frankfurt,**

**Germany, to Jewish parents of East European descent. Like thousands of others, his parents had emigrated from Poland to escape persecution and poverty. There was little respite from either.**

My first encounter with anti-Semitism came when I was only three years old. We were watching from our window at the *Ostendstrasse* when a formation of the Hitler Youth marched past, singing a song that even I understood: *Wenn Judenblut vom Messer spritzt* ("When Jewish blood runs from our knives"). I still remember the horror on my parents' faces.

Very soon, our family decided to leave the country, and at the end of 1933 we had moved back to Rozwadow, Poland, on the River San. Most of its inhabitants were Jews: artisans, tailors, carpenters, and merchants. There was a great deal of poverty, but under the circumstances we were considered middle-class. We lived in Rozwadow for the next six years.

In 1939 the war started, and within weeks the Germans entered our town. My father and older brother hid in the attic, and whenever someone knocked at our door and asked for them, we said they were not at home.



Then came the dreaded public announcement: all Jews had to gather in the town square. We were given only a few hours. We took whatever we could carry – just tied things in bundles to carry on our backs. From the square, the SS forced us to march toward the San, several miles from the village. Uniformed men rode alongside us on motorcycles. I will never forget how one of them stopped and shouted at us to hurry up then he came up to my father and struck him.

At the riverbank other uniformed men were waiting for us. They searched us for valuables – money, jewelry, and watches. (They did not find the sum of money my parents had hidden in my little sister's clothing.) Then they ordered us to cross the river, into a no-man's-land. We were not instructed what to do, so we found lodging in a village across the river.

A few days later we suddenly heard that this area was also going to be occupied by the Germans. We panicked, and with the little money we had hidden, my parents, together with two or three other families, bought a horse and wagon to carry the younger children and what little we had managed to bring along on our backs.

We traveled east toward Russia, hoping to reach the border before dark, but found ourselves in a large forest when night fell. There we were attacked by armed men who demanded we hand over everything we had. It was a frightening moment, but there were a few men in our group who had the courage to resist them. In the end they left with a bicycle and a few other small items.

**Josef's family spent the war years** in Siberia.

Miraculously, he managed to escape to Palestine in 1943. After the war he met Jews who had survived the concentration camps:

The first children freed from Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald began to arrive in Palestine in 1945. I was horrified to hear what those young boys, some of them only twelve, thirteen, or fourteen, had gone through. They looked like old men. I was devastated...

I struggled with the British colonial occupation over the next three years. I was filled with hatred for the British, especially after they began to restrict the immigration of Holocaust survivors to Palestine. We Jews said that we would never again go like sheep to slaughter, at least not without putting up a good fight.

We felt we lived in a world of wild beasts, and to survive, we would become like them.

When the British mandate in Palestine came to an end, there was more fighting for land between the Jews and the Arabs. I joined the army because I was convinced that I could no longer allow myself to be trampled on...

During a campaign in Ramla and Lod, my unit ordered the Palestinians to leave within hours. We didn't allow them to leave in peace but turned on them out of sheer hatred. We beat them and interrogated them brutally. Some were even murdered. We had not been ordered to do this but acted on our own initiative. Our lowest instincts had been released.

Suddenly, my childhood in wartime Poland flashed before my eyes. In my mind I relived my own experience as a ten-year-old, driven from my hometown. Here, too, were people - men, women, and children - fleeing with whatever they could carry. And there was fear in their eyes, a fear that I myself knew all too well.

I was terribly distressed, but I was under orders, and I continued to search them for valuables. I knew that I was no longer a victim. I was now in power.

**Josef soon left the army**, but he still wasn't happy. He abandoned Judaism, and then religion as a whole, and tried to make sense of the world by rationalizing its evils. But that didn't seem to work. Eventually he came to the Bruderhof.

Here I experienced, for the first time, the reality of forgiveness. And I ask myself, how can I not forgive others when I myself need so much forgiveness again and again? Most of all, I am filled with the hope that one day people all over the world might be gripped by the same spirit that has saved me.

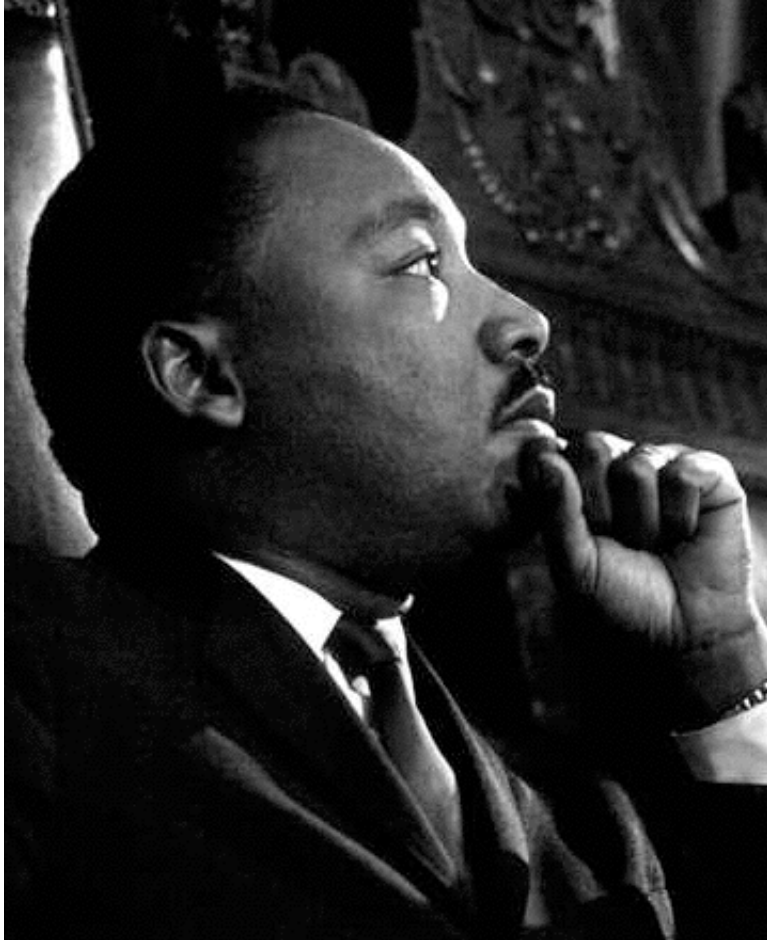
**Hela and Josef had good reasons for not forgiving their enemies. Humanly speaking, they were innocent. The burdens they carried were the result of other people's prejudices and hatreds, not their own. In a sense, they had every right to feel the way they did.**

I'm not trying for a moment to suggest that it is easy to forgive those who have massacred your family, friends and neighbors, but my overwhelming

experience as a pastor and counselor is that those who are unable to forgive their persecutors remain their victims long after the physical pain or danger is over.

What's more, Hela and Josef could feel themselves becoming just like the people under whom they and their families had suffered so much. They all found, as many others have found, that only by forgiving could they end the terrible cycle of hatred and free themselves from the horrors of their past.

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## **Dr. Martin Luther King: Alabama**

**In the spring of 1965 I marched with King in Marion, Alabama, and experienced firsthand his deep love and humility in the face of injustice. I was visiting the Tuskegee Institute with colleagues from New York when we heard about the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young man who had been shot eight days earlier when a rally at a church in Marion was broken up by police. State troopers from all over central Alabama had converged on**

**the town and beaten the protesters with clubs as they poured out onto the streets.**

Bystanders later described a scene of utter chaos: white onlookers smashed cameras and shot out street lights, while police officers brutally attacked black men and women, some of whom were kneeling and praying on the steps of their church.

Jimmie's crime was to tackle a state trooper who was mercilessly beating his mother. His punishment: to be shot in the stomach and clubbed over the head until almost dead. Denied admission at the local hospital, he was taken to Selma, where he was able to tell his story to reporters. He died several days later.

At the news of Jimmie's death, we drove to Selma immediately. The viewing, at Brown Chapel, was open-casket, and although the mortician had done his best to cover his injuries, the wounds on Jimmie's head could not be hidden: three murderous blows, each an inch wide and three inches long, ran above his ear, at the base of his skull, and on the top of his head.

**Deeply shaken**, we attended a memorial service there. The room was packed with about three thousand people (many more stood outside), and we

sat on a window sill at the back. We never heard one note of anger or revenge in the service. Instead, a spirit of courage emanated from the men and women of the congregation, especially as they rose to sing the old slave song, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round."

Later, at a second service in Marion, the atmosphere was decidedly more subdued. Lining the veranda of the county court house across the street stood a long row of state troopers, hands on their night sticks, looking straight at us. These were the same men who had attacked Marion's blacks only days before. The crowd of whites gathered at nearby City Hall was no less intimidating. Armed with binoculars and cameras, they scanned and photographed us so thoroughly that we felt every one of us had been marked.

Afterwards, at the cemetery, King spoke about forgiveness and love. He pleaded with his people to pray for the police, to forgive the murderer, and to forgive those who were persecuting them. Then we held hands and sang, "We shall overcome." It was an unforgettable moment. If there was ever cause for hatred or vengeance, it was here. But none was to be felt, not even from Jimmie's parents.



Not long ago I read about a remarkable act of forgiveness by the children of Selma in those same days of early 1965. Local students had organized a peaceful after-school march when the town's notorious Sheriff Clark arrived. Clark's deputies began to push and prod the children, and soon they were running. Initially the boys and girls thought the sheriff was marching them toward the county jail, but it soon became clear that they were headed for a prison camp almost five miles out of town. The men did not relent until the children were retching and vomiting. Later they claimed they wanted to wear out Selma's "marching fever" for good.

A few days after this incident, Sheriff Clark was hospitalized with chest pains. Unbelievably, Selma's school children organized a second march outside the court house, chanting prayers for his recovery and carrying get-well signs.

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## **Bishara Awad: Israel-Palestine**

**Like so many others on both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Bishara Awad, a Palestinian acquaintance of mine, has been wounded by his share of injustices. Speaking recently about his life-long struggle to forgive, he told me:**

In 1948, during the terrible war between the Arabs and the Jewish settlers, thousands of Palestinians died and many more became homeless. Our own family was not spared. My father was shot dead by a stray bullet, and there was no decent burial place. No

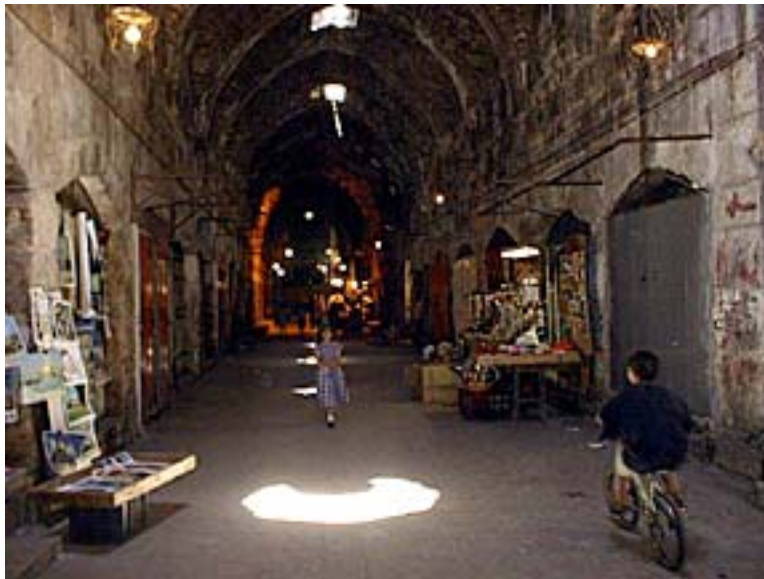
one could leave the area for fear of getting shot at by either side; there was not a priest nor a minister to say a prayer. So Mother read to us from the Bible, and the men who were present buried my father in the courtyard. There was no way they could have taken him to the regular cemetery in the city.

Mother thus became a widow at the age of twenty-nine, and she was left with seven children. I was only nine years old. For weeks we were caught up in the crossfire and were unable to leave our basement room. Then one night, the Jordanian army forced us to run to the Old City. That was the last time we ever saw our home and our furniture. We ran away with nothing but the clothes on our backs, some of us only in pajamas...

In the Old City we were refugees. We were put in a kerosene storage room that had no furniture. A Muslim family gave us some blankets and some food. Life was very hard; I still remember nights when we went to sleep without any food.

Mother had been trained as a nurse, and she got a job at a hospital for \$25 a month. She worked at night and continued her studies during the day, and we children were put in orphanages.

My sisters were accepted in a Muslim school, and we boys were placed in a home run by a British woman. To me, this was a real blow. First I had lost my father, and now I was away from my mother and my family. We were allowed to visit home once a month, but otherwise we stayed at the boys' home for the next twelve years. Here, with my two brothers and eighty other boys, my suffering continued. We never had enough to eat. The food was terrible and the treatment harsh.



As an adult, Bishara went to school in the United States and became an American citizen. Later he returned to Israel and took a job teaching in a Christian school. Looking back, he says:

That first year I was very frustrated. I did not accomplish much and I felt defeated...There was mounting hatred against the Jewish oppressors: all of my students were Palestinians, and all had suffered in the same way I had...I wasn't able to help my students, because of the overriding hatred in me. I had harbored it since childhood without even realizing it.

One night I prayed to God in tears. I asked forgiveness for hating the Jews and for allowing hatred to control my life...Instantly he took away my frustration, hopelessness, and hatred and replaced it with love.

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## **John Plummer: Vietnam**

**John Plummer lives the quiet life of a Methodist pastor in a sleepy Virginia town these days, but things weren't always so. A helicopter pilot during the Vietnam War, he helped organize a napalm raid on the village of Trang Bang in 1972 – a bombing immortalized by the prize-winning photograph of one of its victims, Phan Thi Kim Phuc.**

For the next twenty-four years, John was haunted by the photograph – an image that for many people captured the essence of the war: a naked and burned nine-year-old running toward the camera, with

plumes of black smoke billowing in the sky behind her.

For twenty-four years John's conscience tormented him. He badly wanted to find the girl to tell her that he was sorry – but he could not. Turning in on himself, he grew more and more depressed (the collapse of two marriages didn't help), and he began to drink.

Then, in an almost unbelievable coincidence, John met Kim during an event at the Vietnam War Memorial on Veterans Day, 1996. Kim had come to Washington, D.C., to lay a wreath for peace; John had come with a group of former pilots unable to come to terms with their shared past, but determined to stick together anyway.

In a speech to the crowd, Kim introduced herself as the girl in the famous photograph. She still suffered immensely from her burns, she said, but she was not bitter, and she wanted people to know that others had suffered even more than she had: "Behind that picture of me, thousands and thousands of people...died. They lost parts of their bodies. Their whole lives were destroyed, and nobody took their picture."

Kim went on to say that although she could not change the past, she had forgiven the men who had bombed her village, and that she felt a calling to promote peace by fostering goodwill between America and Vietnam. John, beside himself, pushed through the crowds and managed to catch her attention before she was whisked away by a police escort. He identified himself as a former pilot in Vietnam and said that he felt responsible for the bombing of her village twenty-four years before. He says:

Kim saw my grief, my pain, my sorrow...She held out her arms to me and embraced me. All I could say was "I'm sorry; I'm sorry" – over and over again. And at the same time she was saying, "It's all right, I forgive you."

John says that it was vital for him to meet face to face with Kim, and to tell her that he had agonized for years over her injuries. Without having had the chance to get that off his chest, he is not sure he could have ever forgiven himself. As it turned out, of course, he got even more than he hoped for: Kim forgave him.

Reflecting on the way the incident changed his life, John maintains that forgiveness is "neither earned nor even deserved, but a gift." It is also a mystery. He



still can't quite grasp how a short conversation could wipe away a twenty-four-year nightmare.

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## **Jackie Young: Hawai'i**

**Jackie Young harbored the burden of her deepest betrayal for almost half a century.**

**Her third marriage was breaking up as she underwent chemotherapy for breast cancer. She**

**lost her hair. She began radiation, and she became reflective.**

**In a guided imagery therapy session, she visualized the thing that would bring her peace. She imagined herself in a beautiful garden with her grandchildren. But she also visualized something darker.**

**"I sort of blurted it out," she said. "I said I think the only way I could heal myself was to forgive the person who raped me when I was 18."**

She imagined meeting the man who raped her 46 years earlier, when she was a student at the University of Hawai'i. She imagined what she would wear and what she would say. She imagined her father appearing behind the rapist and saying: "It doesn't matter what he says. Just tell him how he hurt you." So she did.

"That day," the 68-year-old Kailua woman said, "I felt as if a plug came out of my heart."

While none of the research indicates forgiveness can cure cancer, Jackie Young is sure that at least it can't hurt. She is a breast cancer survivor. Young, director

of marketing for the American Cancer Society, has a long list of achievements in addition to being a survivor. She served as a Hawai'i state representative from 1990 to 1994, was the first female vice speaker of the Hawai'i House of Representatives and at the time was the highest Korean American elected official in the nation.

Though her forgiveness brought her a sense of peace, it also sparked her drive to be an activist in life instead of a spectator. But to get that point, her forgiveness didn't end with her rapist. She also sent a letter to her first husband and met with her two other exes. She told them she was sorry she wasn't as present in the relationships as she might have been if she hadn't carried around the feeling that she didn't deserve to be loved in a relationship.

"It was brought on by my knowing I had to heal myself," she said. "It's given me an uplift in my life."

Before her cancer diagnosis, she was commissioned to write a Korean book of her memoirs. She thought she had a finished version. But it was just a rough draft.

Edited version reprinted from July 14, 2002, The Honolulu Advertiser article: "Is forgiveness the key to your survival?" by Tanya Bricking.

## **Forgiveness Quotes**

*Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to a single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. ....Hannah Arendt*



Hawaiian petroglyphs at Waikoloa, Hawai'i

*At some thoughts one stands perplexed – especially at the sight of men's sin – and wonders whether one should use force or humble love. Always decide to use humble love. If you resolve to do that, once and for all, you can subdue the whole world. Loving humility is marvelously strong, the strongest of all things, and there is nothing else like it. ....Fyodor Dostoevsky*

*Forgiveness is a transformational process. In a heartbeat, we can let go of the externally-based paradigm that says we must look outside ourselves for true happiness. With a simple change of mind, we can release ourselves from the ego's conviction that to be safe we must believe in our victimhood and act defensively. With a shift of perspective, we can stop seeking other people or things outside ourselves to blame ...Gerald Jampolsky*

## **Forgiveness Links**

### **Publications**

Forgiveness: the Greatest Healer of All (Gerald Jampolsky)  
Available worldwide from Amazon.com

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1582700206/102-9326392-6660159?v=glance>

A Spark Neglected: Short Story by Leo Tolstoy

<http://www.hawaiiiforgivenessproject.org/Tolstoy.htm>

Why Forgive? A complete Ebook by Johann Christoph Arnold

<http://www.hawaiiiforgivenessproject.org/WhyForgive.pdf>

Self-Forgiveness

<http://www.hawaiiiforgivenessproject.org/Spezzano.htm>

Unarmed Heroes: The Courage to Go Beyond Violence

<http://www.peacedirect.org/peacedirect/publications/unarmedheroes.html>

Nine Steps to Forgiveness

<http://www.hawaiiiforgivenessproject.org/Nine-Steps.htm>

Forgiveness Stories -- from the Hawai'i Forgiveness Project

<http://www.hawaiiiforgivenessproject.org/stories/>

Complete Forgiveness Books, Music and Films Online

<http://www.hawaiiiforgivenessproject.org/media.htm>

## **Forgiveness Projects**

Stanford Forgiveness Project

<http://www.hawaiiforgivenessproject.org/Stanford.htm>

Amy Biehl Foundation Trust

<http://www.amybiehl.org>

Building Bridges for Peace

<http://www.buildingbridgesforpeace.org>

Parents' Circle

<http://www.theparentscircle.org/>

The Institute for Healing of Memories

<http://www.healingofmemories.co.za>

The Forgiveness Project (UK)

<http://www.theforgivenessproject.com>

Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance

<http://www.forgivenessday.org/>

Campaign for Forgiveness Research

<http://www.forgiving.org/>

International Forgiveness Institute

<http://www.forgivenessinstitute.org/>

The Forgiveness Web

<http://www.forgivenessweb.com/>

Heartland Forgiveness Project

<http://raven.cc.ukans.edu/~forgive/>

# Forgiveness Stories

Hawaii Forgiveness Project  
2004



**website:** <http://www.hawaiiforgivenessproject.org>  
this book, and condensed versions, may be downloaded at no charge here:  
<http://www.hawaiiforgivenessproject.org/stories/>

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