

# Why the Amish forgive so quickly

One year after the school shooting, a closer look at their religious impulse.

By Donald B. Kraybill OCTOBER 2, 2007

ELIZABETHTOWN, PA. — ONE year ago today, a shooter entered a one-room Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pa., dismissed all but 10 girls, and fired at them execution-style, killing five before shooting himself.

Within hours, the Amish community forgave the killer and his family.

News of the instant forgiveness stunned the outside world – almost as much as the incident itself did. Many pundits lauded the Amish, but others worried that hasty forgiveness was emotionally unhealthy.

In dozens of interviews with Amish people since the tragedy, I discovered that the Amish approach to forgiveness is indeed quick and unconventional – but also inspirational to the rest of us.

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Members of the Amish community began offering words and hugs of forgiveness when the blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor. A grandmother laughed when I asked if the forgiveness was orchestrated. "You mean that some people actually thought we had a meeting to plan forgiveness?"



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**PHOTOS OF THE DAY** Photos of the day 02/08

As the father of a slain daughter explained, "Our forgiveness was not our words, it was what we did." Members of the community visited the gunman's widow at her home with food and flowers and hugged members of his family. There were a few words, but it was primarily their hugs, gifts, and mere presence – acts of grace – that communicated Amish forgiveness. Of the 75 people at the killer's burial, about half were Amish, including parents who had buried their own children a day or so before. Amish people also contributed to a fund for the shooter's family.

For most people, a decision to forgive comes – if ever – at the end of a long emotional journey that may stretch over months if not years. The Amish invert the process. Their religious tradition predisposes them to forgive even before an injustice occurs.

Amish faith is grounded in the teachings of Jesus to love enemies, reject revenge, and leave vengeance in the hands of God. As a father who lost a daughter in the schoolhouse said, "Forgiveness means giving up the right to revenge."

Unlike those who hire lawyers at every turn to protect their rights, the Amish yield to divine providence in the case of an unspeakable tragedy such as the one at Nickel Mines – believing that God's long arm of justice removes that need for human retaliation.

In the Amish view, forgiveness is a religious duty. As a young Amish carpenter said, "It's just standard forgiveness," but he was wrong. Conventional Christian forgiveness posits a God who forgives sinners and urges them to forgive others – to pass the grace on to those who wrong them. The Amish refrain – "If we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven" – shows a different impetus. Their salvation hinges on their willingness to forgive, a powerful motivation to extend grace to others. They cite the Lord's Prayer, and Jesus' story about an unforgiving servant as their motivation. One bishop, pointing to verses following the Lord's Prayer, said emphatically, "Forgiveness is the only thing that Jesus underscored in the Lord's Prayer."

"Forgiveness was a decided issue," one bishop explained – decided, that is, by Amish history and practice over the centuries. When the religious ancestors of the Amish were torched at the stake for their faith in 16th-

century Europe, many of them, echoing Jesus on the cross, prayed aloud that God would forgive their executioners.

Despite their front-loaded commitment, the Amish still find forgiveness to be a long emotional process. Though there were no expressions of outright rage or hopes that the gunman would burn in hell, the wanton slaughter of their children did bring deep pain, tears, and raw grief.

While forgiveness means not holding a grudge – "the acid of bitterness eats the container that holds it," one farmer explained – the Amish are clear that it does not free the offender from punishment. Had the gunman survived, they would have wanted him locked up, not for revenge but to protect other children.

In mainstream society, retribution is a taken-for-granted right. Around the world, names of deities are often invoked to fuel cycles of revenge generation after generation.

In refreshing contrast, rather than using religion to bless and legitimize revenge, the Amish believe that God smiles on acts of grace that open doors for reconciliation.



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**1990:** Nelson Mandela, recently released after twenty years in a South African prison, tells a rally, "We especially need to forgive each other, because when you intend to forgive, you heal part of the pain, but when you forgive you heal completely."

**December 27, 1983:** Pope John Paul II visits his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, who shot him in the abdomen in St. Peter's Square, and forgives him.

**October 2, 2006:** Within hours of the school shootings that left five little Amish girls dead, members of the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, visit the killer's wife to offer comfort and support.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was created by Nelson Mandela's Government of National Unity in 1995 to help South Africans come to terms with their extremely troubled past. It was established to investigate the violations that took place between 1960 and 1994, to provide support and reparation to victims and their families, and to compile a full and objective record of the effects of apartheid on South African society.

To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. It is also a process that does not exclude hatred and anger. These emotions are all part of being human. You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things: the depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger.

## The Life of Frederick Douglass

**Frederick Douglass** (1818-1895) was an African-American social reformer, public speaker, writer, and politician. Born a slave in Maryland, he taught himself to read and write (despite literacy being forbidden to slaves) and eventually escaped to the North. He became an important leader of the abolitionist movement through his persuasive writing in antislavery publications and the talks he gave during his frequent speaking tours. He made it clear that slaveholders' arguments about slaves' inferior intelligence were fabricated and helped see the country through the Civil War and out of the era of slavery.

The life of Frederick Douglass can be used to support the following theses, among others:

**(Opinions and Values)** *Should people be valued according to their capabilities rather than their achievements?*

- Yes; Douglass, like many others even today, faced nearly insurmountable difficulties in achieving even literacy. For these people, opportunities for achievement are rare, and capabilities are the only accurate measure of their value.

**(Morality)** *Can dishonesty be appropriate in some circumstances?*

- Yes; Douglass had to be dishonest with the slaveholders who 'owned' him in order to learn how to read and write, because slaves were not

allowed that privilege. He later had a large influence on the abolition of slavery, so his dishonesty was well worth the cost.

**(Success and Achievement)** *Is productivity the result of the demands of others?*

- No; Douglass achieved an unimaginable amount and published a number of books *despite* the fact that he was a slave and nothing at all was expected of him.