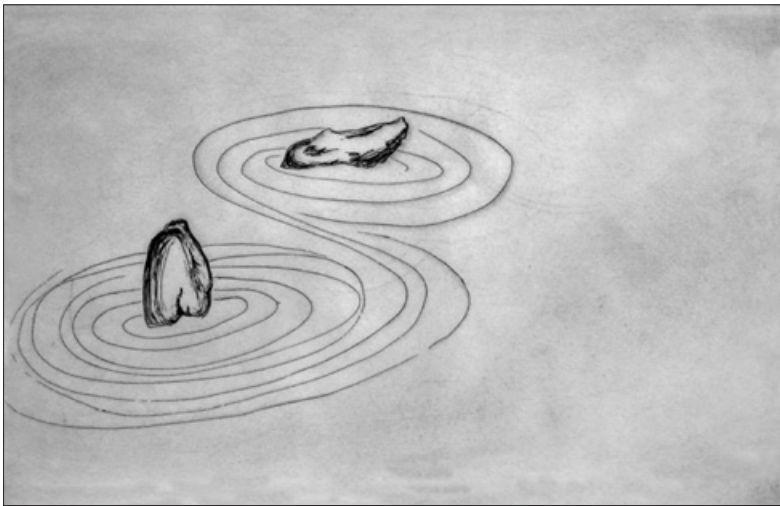


# The *Insight* Interview Forgiveness

MICHAEL HENDERSON  
INTERVIEWER: ALAN RACE



*Stone Poem #7, 2001; original art, Liz Gill Neilson*

**Editor:**

*Is it possible to give a coherent definition of forgiveness?*

**Michael:**

Many people try to do so. But inevitably any definition must be incomplete and limiting. I like “Surrendering the right to get even”. Possibly because it is easy for me to remember! To me forgiveness is a journey, an attitude, even a way of life. Somewhere along the line it encompasses recognizing the humaneness of the other; the humility that says, “There but for the grace of God go I.” It is intensely per-

*Michael Henderson is a freelance journalist who, over many years, has researched the realities and opportunities of practical forgiveness in political and social terms as well as between individuals. He has spent his life committed to building bridges between people of different religions, cultures and backgrounds. This interview, conducted by Alan Race, coincides with his new book, No Enemy to Conquer: Forgiveness in an Unforgiving World (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009).*

*The Interview was conducted by Rev. Alan Race, Editor-in-Chief of Interreligious Insight.*

sonal and has to do with conscience and responsibility yet it can affect the way whole nations live with each other. It may not be always recognized but those of us who are older can testify to the fact that modern Europe is built on the foundation of forgiveness. It can even be, as the Chief Rabbi of Britain and the Commonwealth, Lord Jonathan Sacks, has said, “a stunningly original strategy”. “Forgiveness,” he writes, “means that we are not destined endlessly to replay the grievances of yesterday. It is the ability to live with the past without being held captive by it. It represents our ability to change course, reframe the narrative of the past, and create an unexpected set of possibilities for the future.”

**Editor:**

*Is forgiveness a spiritual or religious word only or can it apply more broadly?*

**Michael:**

To the religious it is a religious word, with social and political ramifications. This has been shown powerfully in recent years in South Africa, through the example of Nelson Mandela and through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Forgiveness established the ethos of a country's independence. Yet one wonders whether part of the response of South Africans to his call is that they are fundamentally a religious people. I see it as a religious word but I am more interested in the experience than in the terminology. If God intervenes in a person's heart I don't think he is worried whether he gets the credit or not.

**Editor:**

*What are the main reasons why people forgive others?*

**Michael:**

For many it is because they want to remain faithful to the teachings of their religion. They may recognize intuitively that hatred is wrong and counterproductive, that often the only person who suffers is the hater. For some it is recognizing the humanity in the other person and that, given the circumstances, they might have behaved similarly. For some it is a belief that a new future might be more beneficial than quarrelling over the past. The traditional reason is that someone has genuinely and specifically apologized or atoned for a wrong action they have done and asks you for forgiveness. Some want to leave behind the past's hold over them. “We just wanted to move on.”

**Editor:**

*Many commentators speak of our world as having increased in selfishness, with fewer prohibitions on causing other people harm. If this is the case, does this mean that human beings find it harder than ever to forgive those who have wronged them?*

**Michael:**

I don't know whether this is the case or not. I doubt it. The concern for others, though perhaps more for people a long way off, and the generous outpouring for people in need, reflects an increase in unselfishness. It may unfortunately be easier to walk by on the other side of your locality than on the other side

of famine or earthquake sufferers whose plight is brought to you courtesy of TV in your home. It is has never been easy to forgive; it still is hard. But the stories of others doing it are an encouragement, which is why I tell them.

**Editor:**

*Is there any value at all in states or countries asking forgiveness from offended peoples or communities for the wrongs of the past?*

**Michael:**

There is great value – if done sincerely and at the right time and by the right person or persons. Not if it is done for political gain or even political correctness, or superficially. Here are a few of the many examples which I find compelling: the apology by the Australian government to the Aboriginal people for the way the “stolen generations” were treated; the apology of the American government for the illegal internment of Japanese Americans during World War II; the apology of German Chancellor Willi Brandt to the Poles and to the Jews for Auschwitz and the Holocaust; the apology of Prime Minister Blair for the neglect of the Irish at the time of the potato famine.

**Editor:**

*Is there any evidence that religious people find it harder or easier to forgive than others?*

**Michael:**

If by religious is meant those who have been nurtured in the tradition of their

faith, then some may find it easier because they at least recognize why they should do it. For instance, Gee Walker in Liverpool whose son was murdered with an ice axe in 2005. Minutes after his killers were found guilty she told the press, “At the point of death, Jesus said, ‘I forgive them because they do not know what they do.’ I have got to forgive them. I do still forgive them. It will be difficult, but we have no choice but to live on for Anthony.”

Collectively, some of us from different religions – and I think we might exclude some like Buddhists or Jains and others who read these pages – do not have a record in this matter that distinguishes us as clearly as we might like from the non-religious. Northern Ireland has, for instance, been too long held up as a reproach to Christians and I for one rejoice at the example being set there for the world. If, as I do, we were to include repentance in the equation of forgiveness, many of us of different faiths have much to reflect on and to apologize for.

Let me give you the example of someone with an unusual perspective. Eva Kor, a Jew who was one of the “Mengele twins” experimented on at Auschwitz, has even forgiven Dr. Mengele for his gruesome experiments on her and her twin sister. In doing so she has defied all sorts of usual objections – that he is dead and never repented, that she shouldn’t forgive on behalf of her people, etc. She makes it clear that she speaks only for herself: “I forgive not because anybody asked me or imposed it on me but because I realized by taking

back my power, by forgiving somebody I actually give myself the gift of freedom.”

She made one request when I asked if I could put her story in my book, *No Enemy to Conquer*, that I should not put a religious framework round it “because I am not (her underlining) religious.” “My forgiveness has nothing to do with religion; it has to do with our ability to heal ourselves by forgiving. I believe that people do not have to believe in God to forgive.”

**Editor:**

*What is the most telling story of forgiveness that you have come across?*

**Michael:**

In 1972, Richard Moore was a carefree ten-year-old running home from school in Derry when he was shot in the face with a rubber bullet by a British soldier. When he awoke in hospital he was blind. It was a double family tragedy: his uncle had been killed two months earlier by British paratroopers on Bloody Sunday. Yet Richard never heard either of his parents, devout Catholics, say an angry word about the soldier or the British Army. “Their belief in a loving God and in particular the example of Jesus on the Cross convinced them that forgiveness was the key to inner peace.” “Bitterness was an option for me,” says Richard, “but it was one I chose not to take. I just got on with life.” He gained a university degree, married, and went on to found a charity “Children in Crossfire” that has benefitted millions around the world.

All through the years there was

growing in Richard the desire to complete the story, to meet the soldier who shot him. In 2006, after careful preparation, so that the man did not feel threatened, he did so in Scotland and they talked for four hours. “He understands the hurt that I have come through. Once you humanize a situation like mine it is amazing how all the myths evaporate.” Richard no longer saw him as a soldier but rather as a grandfather, a father, a man who had his own difficulties and traumas. “By forgiving him, I am not going to get my eyesight back, but forgiveness can change the future, and that’s what happened in my case.”

The Dalai Lama attended a celebration in Derry of the work of Richard’s charity. He says that Richard could have given him anything but gave the best possible gift, which was introducing him to the man who blinded him. “Richard is the real hero,” said His Holiness. “I talk about forgiveness, he lives it. This is non-violence in action.” Richard has called his autobiography, *Can I Give Him My Eyes*, – the words his father spoke when he first discovered his son was blind.

**Editor:**

*Does forgiveness always require the other person or group owning up to their wrongdoing?*

**Michael:**

No, though it is desirable that this happens. The example of Irene Laure has inspired many. This French woman fought in the resistance against the Germans, her son was tortured, and at

the end of the war she wanted Germany destroyed. She attended a conference in Caux, Switzerland in 1947. Finding Germans there she wanted to leave. She retired to her room wrestling with the question whether she would be willing to give up her hatred for the sake of the new Europe that she passionately desired. She came out and was invited to speak. After describing what she had been through, she turned to the Germans in the hall and asked forgiveness for her

hatred. The Germans were ready for anything but that. It shook them. Many faced up to their responsibility for Hitler in a way they would not have otherwise have done. Jo Montville, the pioneer of the concept of “track 2 diplomacy”, singles out her change as “perhaps the signature event in terms of psychological breakthroughs in the Franco-German conflict” and “one of the most dramatic examples of the power of a simple appeal for forgiveness.”

*Peace of Mind; original art, Setsuko Yoshida*

