

## FORGIVENESS - THE F WORD: A CONVERSATION WITH LOUISA HEXT

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon)

### Abstract:

*IJPS* Editor-in-Chief Riane Eisler interviews Louisa Hext, North American Coordinator of The F Word: Stories of Forgiveness, a traveling exhibit presenting stories from The Forgiveness Project.

**Keywords:** The Forgiveness Project; The F Word; Restorative Justice; Restorative Practices; Encounter; *Tikkun Olam*

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To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest.  
Archbishop Desmond Tutu (n.d.)

**Riane Eisler:** Louisa, your work represents an important initiative of The Forgiveness Project. What, in your own life, led you to this work?

**Louisa Hext:** I have always been drawn to visual representations of people's emotions and interactions, particularly through photography. I was involved in something called The Smooch Project, started by a photographer colleague, Bonnie Fournier (you can learn about it at [www.thesmoochproject.com](http://www.thesmoochproject.com)). It began with Bonnie taking photos of

pairs, and then groups, of people in which one was kissing the other on the cheek, and the stories the images told were so compelling that it is now a huge initiative aiming to gather 10,000 of these photos from around the world.

Another aspect of my career has been as a community organizer with Jewish Community Action ([jewishcommunityaction.org](http://jewishcommunityaction.org)) and with the Charter for Compassion (<https://charterforcompassion.org>), centered on my concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). This has always been a guiding philosophy for me, both in my work and wherever I am.

So, when I saw the possibilities for healing that Bonnie's photos represented, I started searching for other ways to use collections of visual images for healing. That's how I learned about The F Word: Stories of Forgiveness, a traveling exhibit of photographs and stories compiled by The Forgiveness Project.

The Forgiveness Project is based in the U.K., where I am originally from. I am the North American Coordinator for The F Word exhibit, partnering with community groups, educational institutions, businesses, arts organizations, wellness organizations, faith communities, and other groups in the US and Canada to schedule presentations of the exhibit. The presentation I just completed was at Grace Lutheran Church in Andover, Minnesota, a large suburban church with a strong social justice ministry - they were very welcoming. Our next two sites are Grace Avenue United Methodist Church in Frisco, Texas, and then a group of congregations called **the** Faith Coalition of Lancaster County, in Lincoln, Nebraska. The Nebraska presentation will be at a local mall and will include various related activities. In the fall the exhibit will be at Lexington Theological Seminary in Lexington, Kentucky, and in November there are plans to be in Portland, Oregon, in partnership with a contemporary chamber orchestra called Fear No Music.

**Eisler:** Can you tell us more about The Forgiveness Project? What are this organization's core principles? And how does The F Word exhibit fit in?

**Hext:** The Forgiveness Project was founded in 2004. It grew out of an exhibit generated by Marina Cantacuzino, a journalist who wanted the wider world to know the stories she was learning and reporting. She and her photographer colleague Brian Moody organized an exhibit of these stories and the accompanying photos, thinking it would be a one-time event. But the response from the public and the media was so strong, asking for more stories and more information, that the exhibit grew organically into The Forgiveness Project. The story of the birth and early growth of The Forgiveness Project is told in her book, *The Forgiveness Project: Stories for a Vengeful Age* (2015).

The organization collects and shares stories from individuals and communities who have rebuilt their lives following hurt and trauma, providing resources and experiences to help people examine and overcome their own unresolved grievances and deal with their pain. The stories they collect act as an antidote to narratives of hate and dehumanization, presenting alternatives to cycles of conflict, violence, crime, and injustice. To quote the web site, “At the heart of The Forgiveness Project is an understanding that restorative narratives have the power to transform lives; not only supporting people to move on from harm or trauma, but also building a climate of tolerance, resilience, hope and empathy. This idea informs our work across multiple platforms - in publications and educational resources, through the international F Word exhibition, in public conversations, and our award-winning RESTORE prison programme” (<https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/our-purpose>).

The F Word: Stories of Forgiveness is a traveling exhibit of some of the many stories The Forgiveness Project has collected, with photos and first-person narratives; you can learn more about us at <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/f-word-exhibition/>.

Our exhibits sometimes also include sharing of personal stories. At the presentation at Grace Lutheran Church in Andover, Minnesota, Mary Johnson-Roy and Oshea Israel shared their stories and explained how their lives became tragically entwined when Oshea killed Mary's son, Laramian. They call their message "From Death to Life" (<http://www.fromdeathtolife.us/home.html>).

**Eisler:** It sounds like The Forgiveness Project directly addresses instances of human conflict. What role does forgiveness play in alternatives to conflict and revenge?

**Hext:** Much of the language I use to talk about forgiveness, with audiences and now in this interview, comes from my colleague and mentor Marina Cantacuzino. She teaches that forgiveness is the oil of personal relationships because it can soften hardened positions which lock us into the dynamic of "I'm right and you're wrong." It lies at the heart of compromise, and embraces the radical philosophy that we are all responsible for the world we create, and therefore have the responsibility to participate in its repair.

Forgiveness is very useful in the aftermath of the heat of conflict, such as when families fall out or when groups are at war. It's a resilient response to trauma. It can be a pain management strategy that helps people to recover, and a step in the right direction to repair communities and mend broken hearts. Forgiveness can be helpful where justice isn't possible for whatever reason. Forgiveness can contribute to breaking the cycle of grievances passing through generations - for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in post-apartheid South Africa and the Gacaca reconciliation courts in response to the Rwandan Genocide.

The reason the exhibit was called The F Word was because when Marina collected the stories, she realized that forgiveness was a word no one could agree on, with multiple

meanings, splitting public opinion down the middle like a guillotine. There are some who believe forgiveness is a moral relationship between yourself and the wrong-doer and that it is entirely dependent on remorse and apology. There are others who say forgiveness has nothing to do with the other person, the one who has wronged you. That it's an act of self-healing, and if you wait for an apology, you're putting the power in the wrong hands.

Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning, excusing, or sanctioning bad behavior. It's not letting someone off the hook or forgetting the harm. It's ultimately about making peace with a situation or a person or a group you can't change. Forgiveness is more than acceptance and letting go of painful emotions, because it requires a higher degree of understanding and compassion for the wrong-doer. It isn't reconciliation or apology - neither is it transactional, but rather a shift in attitude from "Why me?" to "Why them?"

If people can see that even in the direst of circumstances, forgiveness is possible, then many of us will see the potential to forgive those who might cause us small upsets in our daily lives. However, if you make forgiveness an obligation or a duty, it can become a tyranny. From what I've seen and experienced, forgiveness is difficult, messy, and painful. It is never about "forgetting and moving on." However, it can be transformative.

**Eisler:** From what I have read about The Forgiveness Project and especially your traveling exhibit and presentation, you have heard many personal stories from people from various cultures whose lives were affected by violence and terrorism but who have been able to forgive. Please share a few of those stories.

**Hext:** Many of the stories I've heard and shared celebrate the power of the human spirit. These journeys demonstrate how it's possible to walk through pain and suffering and to break the cycle of resentment and vengeance.

I'll start with the story of Letlapa Mphahlele, a black South African who demonized the people he was fighting against and says he "...had no choice to armed resistance" (Williams, 2014, p. 7). From prisoner to guerilla combatant, he rose from a fledging cadre to senior command in the Azanian People's Liberation Army, the armed wing of the Pan Africanist Congress. His command in the Heidelberg Tavern Massacre of 1993 was responsible for the killing of four civilians, including Lyndi Fourie, age 23.

As a youth, on the run across the African continent, he endured a turbulent, nomadic life in exile for nearly 20 years. He defied South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which individuals, in return for amnesty, can "declare their past crimes and admit remorse..." Yet he escaped any criminal sentence for his actions.

Letlapa does not shirk the responsibility for his command that led to the killing of innocent civilians, nor does he shy away from the tough decisions or controversial social issues his country faces today. He sadly observes, "South Africa is suffering from 'soul sickness.' We are not a normal society. We have taken the exercise of healing to its logical conclusion..." (Williams, p. 7).

In Letlapa's early years he was a born-again Christian, but as a freedom fighter he became disenchanted with the Christian faith and rebelled against all forms of worship. What provoked his transformation to atheism? He professes to having been a fanatical Christian, going from house to house, trying to convert people to Christianity. However, he discovered what he describes as hypocrisy in the Church being the backbone of

apartheid. It was the indifference of Christians towards apartheid - oppression, exploitation - that led to Letlapa's switching off religion and switching on atheism.

There is much to reflect on about forgiveness. For many it is difficult to comprehend and for most it does not come easily. Christians are taught to forgive everyone, to let go of feelings of anger and resentment and to keep on forgiving. With criminal charges mysteriously dropped and little or no justice for the victim's family, it was difficult to imagine that forgiveness was at all possible. But Ginn Fourie, Lyndie's parent, forgave. Ginn and Letlapa's story is an example of how it is possible to break the cycle of vengeance.

As Marina gathered these stories that we hear and recount, themes emerged that provide us with examples of strategies we can use as a tool for our mental health and well-being. These themes form a framework for experiencing the stories and asking questions about them.

### **Knowing Yourself**

People who forgive seem to have done a lot of work on themselves. Forgiveness doesn't happen by running away from the hurt - or from yourself. It involves self-awareness and self-discovery. This means the ability to look into the darkest parts of what it is to be human: fear, anger, shame and grief. If we don't have self-knowledge, we become deluded and can easily do damage to ourselves and others. There are too many people who, instead of feeling hurt, act out their hurt. For example, Brenda Adelman, whose father killed her mother. She says, "I had so much self-judgment and you can't really forgive someone else unless you've forgiven yourself. I recognized that with each negative thought directed at my father, I was re-wounding myself" (The Forgiveness Project - Brenda Adelman, n.d.).

### **Being Curious**

Curiosity is an ingredient of forgiveness - to wonder why. Nothing changes unless you're curious - this is the first step to understanding. For example, Shad Ali, who was attacked when he came to the rescue of two Pakistani women who were being racially abused by a passing pedestrian. Six years later Shad met his attacker at a face-to-face restorative justice meeting. He says, "Forgiveness comes from wondering how on earth someone could inflict that kind of pain on another human being without feeling anything" (The Forgiveness Project - Shad Ali, n.d.).

### **Broadening Perspective**

Unforgiving people tend to be very rigid thinkers. Forgiving people tend to come from a place of thinking that says, "I can't predict what life will hand me, or how people will treat me, but I'm going to respond in a way that doesn't perpetuate the cycle of hate." As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn says, "The battle line between good and evil runs through the heart of every man" (1974, p. 168). To forgive requires an open mind. This includes giving up expectations that life owes you. It's a realization that life is morally complicated, that good people do bad things and bad things happen to good people; Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book of that title (Kushner, 1981). For example, Zak Ebrahim, whose father was convicted as one of the conspirators in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. It was actually Zak's watching Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* that forced him to be intellectually honest about the bigotry he had learned growing up, and helped him to realize that people's race, religion, or sexual orientation had nothing to do with the quality of their character. Inspiration came from an unexpected place, and a Jewish comedian did more to influence his world view than his own extremist father.



### **Practicing Empathy**

In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Atticus Finch says, "You never really understand a person until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it" (p. 86). This is moving from a place of self-pity - "Why me?" - to the more inclusive attitude of "Why them?" For example, Jo Berry, whose father, Sir Anthony Berry, was a member of Parliament in the United Kingdom. He died in a bombing when Patrick Magee, a member of the Irish Republican Army, attempted to assassinate Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Jo says that she lost a piece of herself in the bombing but was determined to retrieve something positive, and started to build bridges with people in Ireland, a conflict that until then she knew nothing about. When Magee was released from prison, Jo met him. And they have been talking ever since. It's not an easy conversation but it's a real one, about recovering one's humanity, telling one's story as a model for change in the world when it's easy to discount people as different and other. Empathy is about imagining what it would be like to be the other person. As Jo says, "If I had lived your life, perhaps I would have made your choices" (The Forgiveness Project - Jo Berry and Patrick Magee, n.d.).

### **Relinquishing Grievances**

Sometimes anger can be positive. It allows us to be empowered and to reclaim our voice. It protects. But I believe that lasting anger exhausts, just as lasting hate corrodes. You can become imprisoned by your own grievances. Hate and resentment have a tight grip, in the same way that the more we focus on a problem, the more ingrained it becomes. The truth is, as adults we're not as well equipped to forgive as children are. The older we get, the more pride and resentment we hold onto when in conflict with others. Something has to be given up in order to forgive. We must give up our justified right to retaliate; our attachment to being right; and our moral indignation. We must give up the assumption and expectation that people should

behave like us. We must give up grievances and grudges, releasing obsessive thoughts, revenge, and fantasies. For example, Gayle Kirschenbaum, who experienced a deeply emotionally abusive relationship with her mother. She says, “I choose to forgive her for my own health and happiness and to free myself from mental angst and bondage. Holding on to resentment is letting someone you despise live rent free in your head” (The Forgiveness Project - Gayle Kirschenbaum, n.d.).

### **Making Meaning**

When we're hurt, it's easy to nurse and nurture our wounds. Forgiveness implies that where the wounds are, the gifts lie. This coping and pain management strategy is to transform the impulse for revenge into a search for something larger. I've found that in reading the stories The Forgiveness Project has collected (and there are more than 160 of them), there is something called meaning-making, which is to find some purpose and significance in the suffering. Meaning-making doesn't imply that one makes sense out of something. Most things that cause deep pain are senseless. It means that you find a purpose by intensely pursuing what matters to you, and this in turn puts meaning back into your life. It builds confidence and helps to create a sense of belonging to society. For example, Calvin Hodges and Aqeela Sherrills, two friends who were once part of two bloody gangs in South Los Angeles, the Crips and the Bloods. Aqeela's desire for peace was severely put to the test when his 18-year-old son Terrell was murdered. He knew who the killer was, and had the opportunity to retaliate, but chose not to. He says, “I decided that revenge shouldn't be Terrell's legacy. Instead I chose to have valuable conversations with the community about why revenge doesn't work. I tell people that Terrill's killer is a victim too - a victim of the culture that lacks compassion” (The Forgiveness Project - Aqeela Sherrills and Calvin Hodges, n.d.). Other exemplars are Phyllis Rodriguez, whose son Greg was killed in the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, and Robi Damelin, whose son David was shot by a

sniper in 2002 while serving in the Israeli army. Both say that there should be no vengeance in the names of their sons.

### **Grieving Takes Time**

There can be a dark side to forgiveness. I don't think it's appropriate to talk about forgiveness in the midst of heated conflict, because we are in survival mode. Rage and all-consuming grief have their place. For example, Mary Johnson-Roy, whose son Laramian was fatally shot by Oshea Israel. Directly after she learned of her son's shooting, she described Oshea as a monster, and wanted him to be incarcerated for life. Think about a fight between two people - both feel equally right and equally wronged. To say, "I forgive you" in that context can be patronizing, and therefore quickly could become incendiary and lead people to spiral back into conflict. As Mary healed, her story and experience changed. Eighteen years later, she joined with her community and welcomed Oshea home from prison. A few years later Oshea was in the wedding party for Mary and her husband Ed.

There are social and cultural ramifications of forgiveness. Those who choose to forgive may be criticized. After white supremacist Dylan Roof murdered nine African American worshippers and wounded three others at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015, some of the family members who lost loved ones spoke immediately about forgiveness. People, especially in white majority settings, have asked whether African Americans' forgiveness of violence simply condones white hatred and therefore perpetuates inequalities. If people jump to forgiveness immediately after something appalling has happened, people question whether it's genuine, whether it's premature, or whether they may feel an obligation because of their faith. Others may accuse them of stampeding on the memory of their loved ones. But if we create a safe place where people can talk and hear each other's differences, then forgiveness becomes much more possible.

**Eisler:** How does your work help people who have suffered trauma?

**Hext:** In her master's thesis titled "A Change of Heart: Internal Narratives, Forgiveness & Health," Keiko Ehret says, "Forgiveness is an internal process by which an individual is able to let go of negative emotions and thoughts as well as enhance positive emotions and thoughts, toward self and others, associated with harms suffered or traumatic events experienced" (Ehret, 2018). In discussing and depicting forgiveness, using the language of trauma and healing is useful, but The Forgiveness Project's philosophy makes very clear that we do not take a stand about what forgiveness looks like. I personally believe that there needs to be some kind of release, whatever that looks or feels like. Otherwise the trauma stays in the cells of our bodies. We may go on living and functioning, but there's a kind of spiritual bypass, and sooner or later the effects of the trauma will be manifested. There is strong scholarly support for the health effects of forgiveness, from Robert Enright, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; Everett Worthington at Virginia Commonwealth University; Fred Luskin at Stanford University; Tom Farrow at the University of Sheffield in England; and Pietro Pietrini at the University of Pisa in Italy, among others.

One other thing I would say about recovering from trauma, and the part forgiveness could play, is that, for some people, it's a step-by-step process, but for many others, there aren't steps, just an ongoing coping with life. And for others, if there are steps, they aren't linear, but rather a journey with turns and regressions as well as forward progress.

**Eisler:** Can you tell us about how you and the Forgiveness project work within prisons, schools, community groups, and companies? What kind of outreach is available?

**Hext:** On our web site under “What We Offer” are descriptions of our programs. The RESTORE program, currently offered only in the U.K., is an intensive group-based intervention program that supports prisoners in their process of change towards desistance from crime, using a skilled facilitation team working with both victims and perpetrators of crime. RESTORE uses narrative techniques that strengthen resilience and restorative thinking in those who have lived experience of trauma. The Forgiveness Project also provides customized programs for prison staff, supporting positive relationships and healthy environments within the community.

Our Education program supports schools and educators to empower children and young people to explore forgiveness, justice, empathy, and compassion. Two examples of written resources are Philosophy for Children, a series that explores forgiveness through questioning, dialogue, and reflection, and Stories of Forgiveness, a series of nine lessons exploring Forgiveness and Justice, Why Do People Forgive? and Forgiving the Unforgivable.

We have books, community toolboxes, courses, and panel discussions called Forgiveness Conversations. Our annual lectures have featured Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, speaking on Is Violence Ever Justified?; forensic psychiatrist Dr. Gwen Adshead, speaking on The Line Dividing Good and Evil; Simon Baron-Cohen, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology, speaking on Exploring Explanations of Human Cruelty and Kindness; Theologian Karen Armstrong, speaking on Forgiveness and Compassion: Is There a Difference?; writer Richard Holloway on The Politics of Forgiveness; and author and commentator Sally Kohn on The Burden of Hate and What We Can Do to Repair our Humanity.

**Eisler:** As you may know, restorative justice is closely aligned with partnership principles. What cultural conditions have you found are needed for restorative justice to work?

**Hext:** In an article called “Redeeming the ‘F’ Word in Restorative Justice,” John Braithwaite, who is a criminologist with a particular interest in restorative justice, shame management, and reintegration of offenders, says, “Genuine forgiveness usually does not happen in restorative justice. It should never be demanded. The objective is to create the kind of space for participants’ empathic and spiritual selves that welcomes forgiveness” (Braithwaite, 2016).

Many of the Forgiveness Project storytellers have experienced restorative justice, and the work we do sharing these stories in prisons in the U.K acts as encouragement for prisoners to consider it for themselves. However, forgiveness is a loaded word that needs to be used with extreme caution within restorative justice settings because while forgiveness may be an outcome of restorative justice, it should never be an objective. One way to understand restorative justice is to explore the implications of three central concepts:

- Harm and Needs. Restorative justice focuses on harm. Justice begins with a concern for victims and their needs.
- Obligations to put right. Wrongs or harms result in offender accountability and responsibility.
- Engagement of stakeholders - those who have a legitimate interest in the offense and its resolution.

(Zehr, 2015)

The language of restorative practices includes these concepts but focuses on the process of healing the harm, a process involving some form of encounter, in which the

wrong or injustice must be acknowledged, equity needs to be restored, and future intentions need to be addressed. In traditional societies, the community plays a key role in establishing and carrying out the obligations (Zehr, 2015).

So restorative practices require work on an individual level, and in that way transcend culture. The person who has harmed must be accountable - must share their story and accept responsibility. That is an action that must be completed. What the person who was harmed chooses to do with that is very individual (and it is a choice). There are different models - the most familiar are various kinds of community diversion programs through the court system, especially for minors and first-time offenders - but they all involve some level of preparation. Face-to-face victim-offender mediation in the prison setting especially requires deep preparation, with exquisite sensitivity to the needs of the person who has been harmed. Any request to have some kind of personal contact needs to come from the person who has been harmed.

**Eisler:** Readers of our journal consist of both scholars and practitioners. In fact, Reverend Tutu, the inaugural speaker of your annual lectures, was our interviewee for the inaugural issue of this journal.

**Hext:** The Forgiveness Project regards Reverend Tutu as one of its two founding patrons (the other is Dame Anita Roddick). When Marina was wondering whether to pursue the project beyond the one-time exhibit, it was Reverend Tutu's advice and support that encouraged her to proceed (personal communication, M. Cantacuzino, March 2012).

**Eisner:** How can our readers support your vital work?

**Hext:** Informing themselves about the work that The Forgiveness Project is doing in the world. Bringing The F Word exhibit to their communities - considering how it can be

used to reach as many people as possible, and discussing the questions raised by the stories it tells.

**Eisler:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Hext:** Just to summarize and remind ourselves that forgiveness requires empathy, humanization, and the recognition that change is an internal job that we are accountable for. And that love is an act of endless forgiveness. It's so important to look at the painful stuff that we can't resolve. Simply stated, hurt people hurt people. Or, as theologian Richard Rohr says, "If we don't transform our pain we will most assuredly transmit it" (2014).

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