

2009

# Offering and Accepting Forgiveness: How the Aged Do It

Kathleen Hughes Brighton

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/ma\\_theses](http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/ma_theses)



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Brighton, Kathleen Hughes, "Offering and Accepting Forgiveness: How the Aged Do It" (2009). *MA Theses*. Paper 4.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses at Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in MA Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary.

**OFFERING AND ACCEPTING FORGIVENESS**

**HOW THE AGED DO IT**

**By**

**KATHLEEN HUGHES BRIGHTON**

A Research Paper Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

**CONGREGATIONAL/COMMUNITY CARE: AGING**

St. Paul, Minnesota

2009

## Introduction

At a time when radical forgiveness has been extended in one instance by a whole Amish community on an October day in 2006, after ten “precious Amish girls had been shot by a madman who stormed into their peaceful school in Nickel Mines, PA.”<sup>1</sup> (Briggs 2008, 9), and in another instance revenge sought by a whole nation after terrorists flew into the twin towers in New York on September 11, 2001, killing 2,823 persons, perhaps the topic of forgiveness is in order concerning another group of people, i.e., the aged. Do we assume that offering and accepting forgiveness is easier for the aged simply because they have lived longer and have thus attained the wisdom necessary to understand what this forgiveness business is all about? Or, is offering and accepting forgiveness more difficult for the aged because of their long-standing beliefs and attitudes concerning this topic that make it next to impossible to change – “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks!” Or does the answer lie elsewhere? The editors of *Forgiveness, Theory, Research and Practice* contend that forgiveness can play a role in freeing the 21<sup>st</sup> century from the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s “crimson shadow” of “ethnic strife, political violence and world conflict”<sup>2</sup> (Eds., McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen 2007, xiii). These authors wonder what role forgiveness will play in this. I wonder what the aged population might proffer to help us with this topic. As an ELCA deaconess, I believe that my knowledge of the topic of forgiveness will provide many opportunities in ministry in which I will lead, teach and walk with the aged as they address “the need for both victims and perpetrators to move away from a hunger for revenge

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Briggs. *The Power of Forgiveness*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen, (Eds.), *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*. (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), xiii.

and blame towards a desire for increased empathy and personal courage”<sup>3</sup> (Malcom and Ramsey 2006, 175).

Both ageing and forgiveness are multi-dimensional topics which intersect in the areas of psychology, biology, spirituality, and theology. This makes it imperative that persons in the field of ministry with the aged have a full understanding of forgiveness and how it pertains to each of these dimensions. I will begin by exploring the psychological nature of forgiveness as scientific scholarship to-date on the topic of forgiveness has been primarily psychological in nature<sup>4</sup> (Eds., McCullough et al. 2007, xiv).

### Psychological Dimensions and Health Benefits

In the 1990s, the Templeton Foundation began giving grants for research into forgiveness<sup>5</sup> (Snyder & Lopez 2007, 279). Since 1992 “forgiveness has moved from a controversial, rarely discussed intervention to a more accepted, legitimate form of treatment in psychotherapy,”<sup>6</sup> (Garzon et al. 2002, 349). In *Forgiveness, Theory, Research and Practice*, the topic of forgiveness is treated almost exclusively as a psychological topic due to the academic backgrounds of the contributors<sup>7</sup> (McCullough et al 2007, xiv), but does not assume that it is the only dimension or the most important dimension in understanding forgiveness. A study by Krause and Ellison bears out the psychological aspect of forgiveness saying that a direct relationship was discovered between forgiveness of others and psychological well-being so that

---

<sup>3</sup> Lois Malcom and Janet Ramsey, “Teaching and Learning Forgiveness: A Multidimensional Approach.” *Teaching Theology and Religion* (2006): 175.

<sup>4</sup> McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, xiv.

<sup>5</sup> C.R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez. *Positive Psychology – The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strength*. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007), 279.

<sup>6</sup> Fernando Garzon, Julie Richards, Marj Witherspoon, Stacey Garver, Zongjian Wu, Lori Burkett, Heather Reed, and Leroy Hall. Garson, F. “Forgiveness in Community Cultural Contexts: Applications in Therapy and Opportunities for Expanded Professional Roles,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (2002): 349.

<sup>7</sup> McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, xiv.

those forgiving “experience fewer symptoms associated with a depressed affect. . . [have] fewer somatic symptoms of depression. . . [are] more satisfied with their lives. . . [and feel] less anxious about dying”<sup>8</sup> (Krause and Ellison 2003, 85- 86).

### Spiritual Dimension

Psychological well-being is possibly not the purpose which first prompts the aged or others as offering and accepting forgiveness is contemplated. Possibly, for the aged in particular, the spiritual dimension and faith background might be what first prompts forgiveness. As Kimble asserts, “the transition to older adulthood must first be made in the spiritual dimension”<sup>9</sup> (Kimble 2001, 39). Enright quotes the 1991 Gallup Poll which attests to 83% of over 900 questioned said they “needed God’s help to forgive,” and included a statement by Dr. Martin Luther King:

We love men not because we like them, nor because their ways appeal to us, nor even because they possess some type of divine spark; we love every man because God loves him. At this level we love the person who does an evil deed, although we hate the deed that he does.<sup>10</sup> (Enright 2001, 150).

### Spirituality Defined

This “needing God’s help to forgive” is expressed in the broad, inclusive definition of spirituality: “that which gives meaning to one's life and draws one to transcend oneself”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Neal Krause and Christopher G. Ellison, “Forgiveness by God, Forgiveness of Others, and Psychological Well-Being in Late Life.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2003): 85- 86.

<sup>9</sup> Melvin A. Kimble, “Beyond the Biomedical Paradigm: Generating a Spiritual Vision of Ageing,” *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, (2001): 39.

<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice – A Step By Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*. (Washington DC: APA Life Tools, 2001) 150.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret A Burkhardt, "Spirituality: An Analysis of The Concept," *Holistic Nursing Practice*, (May 1989): 60-77.

(Burkhardt, M. 1989, 60-77). In one study of persons aged 20 to 74, with an average age of 45 years, and predominately female, the respondents became aware, through prayer “of their own faults and need for forgiveness and thus some degree of empathy for their offender”<sup>12</sup> (McMinn, Fervida, Louwse, Pop, Thompson, et al 2008, 105). King Lear in the play by the same name, learns that what he had thought would be weakness or foolishness should he forgive or reconcile, is actually strength. “When, through God’s help, we can leave the madness of our despair and accept the losses and hurts we have experienced, human forgiveness becomes possible”<sup>13</sup> (Ramsey and Padgett 2007, 40). In the same way, Corrie ten Boom, through the help of God, forgives “one of the most cruel guardians at Ravensbrück,” who tells Corrie that he had “converted to Christianity after the war and that he believed that God had forgiven him for all the evil he had done at the concentration camp, but that he needed that she personally told him that she forgave him”<sup>14</sup> (Ferreira, n.d.). These examples let us see that the spiritual dimension of forgiveness is significant to the aged in health outcomes physically and psychologically as well and can be accessed through prayer asking for God’s help in order that one might forgive.

### Spiritual Assessment Instruments

There are numerous assessment instruments which validate the overlap between the physical and psychological. Two such instruments are the *Spiritual Assessment and Intervention*<sup>15</sup> (Brennan and Heiser eds 2004, 1), and the *HOPE inventory*<sup>16</sup> (Anandarajah and

---

<sup>12</sup> Mark R. McMinn, Heath Fervida, Keith A. Louwse, Jennifer L. Pop, Ryan D. Thompson, et al. “Forgiveness and Prayer,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (2008):105.

<sup>13</sup>Ramsey, J.L., and Alan G. Padgett, “The Wisdom of Forgiveness: Singing Like Birds in the Cage with Old King Lear,” *Word & World* (Winter 2007): 49.

<sup>14</sup> Patricia M. Ferreira, *Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch savior*. Retrieved 9/16/09, from <http://www.raoulwallenberg.net/?en/saviors/others/corrie-ten-boom-dutch-savior.2453.htm>

<sup>15</sup>Mark Brennan and Deborah Heiser eds. *Older Adults Current Directions and Applications*. (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2004), 1.

Hight 2001, 8-89). These inventories identify what coping resources persons use and what religious/spiritual practices are helpful in times of crisis. As regards forgiveness, Pulchaski found that people “show less psychological distress if they sought control through a partnership with God. . . in a problem solving way, and if they asked God’s forgiveness or were able to forgive others<sup>17</sup> (Pulchaski 2006, 19). Ramsey and Blieszner write about older adults who, knowing that they have been embraced by Christ, can “become vulnerable” to those who have transgressed them and by reaching out to others they become a participant in the same embrace given to all in Christ.<sup>18</sup> (Ramsey and Blieszner 1999, 71). One older adult called Martha interviewed by Ramsey stated how she used to think of God as a judgmental God. “He was in the thunder,” she said, but now Martha can embrace others because of the grace and forgiveness she has experienced from God<sup>19</sup> (Ramsey and Blieszner 1999, 70). As an older adult myself, my experience is similar to Martha’s. Having been raised a Roman Catholic growing up in the 50s and 60s, I knew of an angry score-keeping God who judged me and I in turn judged everyone else. Each day while growing up as I attended mass, I heard the proclamation, “The body and blood of Christ given for the remission of sins,” but like Alex in Ramsey and Blieszner’s forthcoming book, as he speaks of Lutherans having an “overactive guilt gland,”<sup>20</sup> (Ramsey and Blieszner forthcoming) somehow back then, I just never “got it.” Now however, like Martha, I have come to picture God as full of grace and compassion which I can now extend to others as well.

---

<sup>16</sup> Gowri Anandarahah, and Ellen Hight, “Spirituality and Medical Practice: Using the HOPE Questions as a Practical Tool for Spiritual Assessment,” *American Family Physician* (January 2001): 8-89.

<sup>17</sup> Pulchaski, Christina N, *A Time for Listening and Caring Spirituality in the Care of the Chronically Ill and Dying*. (Oxford Press, 2006), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ramsey, J. and Rosemary Blieszner, Chapter six, “Forgiveness, Aging, and Spiritual Resiliency.” Forthcoming.

<sup>19</sup> Ramsey, J. and Rosemary Blieszner, *Spiritual Resiliency in Older Women Models of Strength for Challenges Through the Life Span*. (Sage Publications, Inc., 1999), 70.

<sup>20</sup> Ramsey, and Blieszner, Chapter thirteen, Forthcoming. Baywood Press

## Biological Dimension

The psychological and spiritual results of forgiveness have shown a positive effect on the aged. The next dimension to be explored is the biological/life-stage dimension. Krause submits that “people tend to be more forgiving with age,” citing a study of “236 people at different points in the life course ranging from adolescence to old age,” which reveals “a linear increase with age in the tendency to forgive others”<sup>21</sup> (Krause 2001, 254). According to Erickson’s life-stage theory, people in the 50’s and beyond “achieve a sense of completeness and self-acceptance that offsets our inevitable physical decline”<sup>22</sup> (Schacter-Shalomi 1995, 71). I laughed when I read the comment by Joan Erickson, the wife of Erick Erickson: “When it comes to understanding life, experiential learning is the only worthwhile kind; everything else is hearsay”<sup>23</sup> (Schacter-Shalomi 1995, 71). And so it appears that as one ages, life experiences, and how one deals with the crisis of each stage, allows for growing old in the best possible way. This biological dimension can result in growth toward wisdom and is manifested both psychologically and spiritually. This growth would certainly include the ability to receive/offer forgiveness<sup>24</sup> (Schacter-Shalomi 1995, 71).

## Life Cycle and Forgiveness

Does a specific life stage of development (specifically that of the aged) determine whether this cohort understands and operates within the definition of forgiveness that says: “forgiveness should be differentiated from pardoning. . . condoning. . . excusing. . .forgetting . . .

---

<sup>21</sup> Neal Krause, “Religion and the Process of Forgiveness in Late Life,” 71.

<sup>22</sup> Zalman Schacter-Shalomi and Ronald S, Miller. *From Age-ing to Sage-ing – A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*. ( New York: Warner Books, 1995), 71.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

denying. . . [and] distinct from reconciliation,” as discussed earlier in this paper?<sup>25</sup>

(McCullough, et al 2001, 8). Ramsey and Blieszner would answer that “older persons are well aware that forgiving and forgetting are not synonymous, and that both can be incomplete and arduous”<sup>26</sup> (Ramsey and Blieszner forthcoming, 1). Krause also submits that “people tend to be more forgiving with age,” citing a study of “236 people at different points in the life course ranging from adolescence to old age,” which reveals “a linear increase with age in the tendency to forgive others”<sup>27</sup> (Krause 2001, 254).

MacKinley states that this “final stage of ageing is important, not only as a stage of psychosocial development but also for spiritual integrity. . .[and that] reminiscence. . . [may be] more properly identified as a naturally occurring spiritual task of ageing”<sup>28</sup> (MacKinlay 2001, 22). Kimble speaks to this stating that “at a certain point, one’s perceptions of aging becomes intertwined with perceptions of oneself. . . the experience of transcendence and the mysterium tremendum fascinans, the mystery that is at once overwhelming and fascinating, that renders my existence significant and meaningful in the here and now”<sup>29</sup> (Kimble 1993, 27). This is the spirituality that comes with aging and enables one to sort out what is really important – “living life at every stage of the life cycle sub specie aeternitatis - under the aspect of eternity”<sup>30</sup> (Kimble 1993, 28). An example of this is told by researcher Black concerning Miss Mel who struggles with the fact that her husband had been unfaithful to her for the duration of their marriage. Miss Mel tells of her process of working to “lift myself out of hatred” and eventually

---

<sup>25</sup> McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Janet Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner forthcoming, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Neal Krause, “Religion and the Process of Forgiveness in Late Life,” 54.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Mackinlay. *The Spiritual Dimension of Aging*. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), 22.

<sup>29</sup> Mel Kimble, “A Personal Journey of Aging: The Spiritual Dimension.” *Generations* (Spring/Summer 1993): 27.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

be able to see the other woman as “another human being” who also has frailties<sup>31</sup> (Black 2003, 32). Moody says that some authors call what happened to Mel as “spiritual life-review,” and calls this “an examination of conscience or repentance”<sup>32</sup>(Moody 1995, 94).

As opposed to Erickson and Levinson’s life stages and seasons, today’s psychologists look at biological and social clocks rather than life-stages and point to the psychological clock as “the dominant regulator . . . making each of our paths unique”<sup>33</sup> (Kotre and Hall 1990, 72). As age norms become “less compelling. . . the Social Clock follows the lead of the Biological Clock and quiets down, allowing the Psychological Clock to dominate”<sup>34</sup> (Kotre and Hall 190, 282). Jung’s way of speaking of this is to say that the aged “person’s attention turns inward” and in this way finds meaning and wholeness<sup>35</sup> (Thibault in Kimble, McFadden, Ellor and Seeber 1995, 353). Else Frenkel-Brunswik speaks of this stage as completive, saying that “individuals in this last stage are frequently preoccupied with religious concerns”<sup>36</sup> (Thibault, in Kimble, McFadden, Ellor and Seeber, eds. 1995, 353). As pertains to forgiveness, Phyllis, a subject interviewed by Kraus says, “If you don’t forgive, you can’t go and ask God to forgive you. . . He is going to forgive you like you forgive someone else”<sup>37</sup> (Krause 2001, 261). Besides religious concerns, the elder’s preoccupation may be spiritual as well. Take for instance King Lear who

---

<sup>31</sup> Helen K. Black. “Narratives of Forgiveness in Old Age.” In *Ways of Aging*, edited by Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein. 13-35. (Maine: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 32.

<sup>32</sup> Harry R. Moody. “Mysticism.” In *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion A Handbook Volume*, edited by M.A. Kimble, S.H. McFadden., J.W. Ellor, and J.J. Seeber. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 94.

<sup>33</sup> John Kotre, and Elizabeth Hall. *Seasons of Life – Our Dramatic Journey from Birth to Death*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), 72.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>35</sup> Jane M. Thibault. Congregation as a Spiritual Care Community. In . Melvin A. Kimble, Susan H. McFadden, James W. Ellor, and James J. Seeber (Eds.), *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion A Handbook Volume 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 353.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Neal Krause, “Religion and the Process of Forgiveness in Late Life, 261.

learns that “in the end, if forgiving love remains, there is always hope”<sup>38</sup> (Ramsey and Padgett 2007, 45).

### Forgiveness Defined - Religious/Faith Meanings of Forgiveness

Scholars have often differed in their definitions of forgiveness,<sup>39</sup> (Swinton 2007, 159),<sup>40</sup>(Enright 2001, 5),<sup>41</sup> (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, 279). However, since 1998, most researchers “agree that forgiveness should be differentiated from pardoning. . . condoning. . . excusing. . . forgetting . . . denying. . . [and] distinct from reconciliation.” Forgiveness is now defined as: “intraindividual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context”<sup>42</sup> (McCullough, et al 2001, 8). I particularly resonate with philosopher Joanna North’s definition of forgiveness as restated by Enright because she puts it in relational terms that I believe anyone can understand:

“When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrong doer compassion, benevolence, and love; as we give these, we as forgivers realize that the offender does not necessarily have a right to such gifts”<sup>43</sup> (Enright 2001, 5).

Ramsey and Malcom agree with McCullough, and others saying: “forgiveness does not always or of necessity entail reconciliation”<sup>44</sup>(Malcom and Ramsey 2006, 179). However, for those within the Jewish tradition, this is not so. There are two words used when discussing forgiveness in the Jewish tradition. *Mehillah* “denotes the wiping away of transgressions,” and

---

<sup>38</sup> Janet L. Ramsey, and Alan G. Padgett, “The Wisdom of Forgiveness, 45.

<sup>39</sup> John Swinton. *Raging with Compassion*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Snyder, and Lopez, *Positive Psychology*, 279.

<sup>42</sup> McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, *Forgiveness: Theory, Research*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Malcom, and Ramsey, “Teaching and Learning Forgiveness, 179.

selihah, has the same meaning and is accompanied by reconciliation<sup>45</sup> (McCullough, et al 2001, 20). Mention of this is made only to reiterate how important an understanding of faith differences will be in ministering with the aged. Just as forgiveness has had many definitions, so reconciliation may also look differently within various faith traditions. For instance, within the Jewish tradition, reconciliation has three parts: “confession: admitting the act; repentance: asking for forgiveness; lastly, the act of penalty: accepting the punishment,” which can mean making financial or other restitution<sup>46</sup> (Richmond 2009). And, within the Christian faith, Wadell believes that, “Jesus tells us to love our enemies, not necessarily to live with them, and certainly never to allow them to destroy us”<sup>47</sup> (Wadell 2002, 166). “Release from the past is beneficial for those who have suffered, says Gulliford, whether or not they can ultimately be at one with those who have wronged them [for God] comes to proclaim release to the captives, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18)<sup>48</sup> (Gulliford 2004, 105). Mr. Marks, an elderly man interviewed by Black thinks that as he gets older and life “gets harder. . . it’s really tougher to forgive.” For him, not being able to forget the memories of the injustices of his past life leaves him asking, “How do you forgive?”<sup>49</sup> (Black 2003, 21).

Ramsey and Malcom believe that forgiveness “almost always, entails changes in underlying patterns of behavior, if only for the one forgiving”<sup>50</sup> (Malcom and Ramsey 2006, 179). This is attested to in the research by MacKinlay as she speaks of several women struggling with whether or not they have been forgiven by God for the harm they have caused other people

---

<sup>45</sup> McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, *Forgiveness: Theory, Research*, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Raymond L. Richmond. (1997-2009). *A Guide to Psychology and its Practice Forgiveness*. Retrieved 09/21/09 from [www.GuideToPsychology.com](http://www.GuideToPsychology.com)

<sup>47</sup> Paul J. Wadell. *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 166.

<sup>48</sup> Liz Gulliford. “Intrapersonal Forgiveness.” In *Forgiveness in Context Theology and Psychology in Creative Dialogue*, edited by Fraser Watts and Liz Gulliford. (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 83-105.

<sup>49</sup> Black. “Narratives of Forgiveness in Old Age,” 13-35.

<sup>50</sup> Malcom, and Ramsey, “Teaching and Learning Forgiveness, 179.

in their lives. Through the process of feeling guilty for acting inappropriately and yet knowing intellectually that they are forgiven by God, it allowed for “major changes in outlook in life,” and changed behaviors<sup>51</sup> (MacKinlay 2001, 161). These women experienced the freedom that Alex spoke of which comes when people finally forgive themselves and embrace God’s forgiveness also<sup>52</sup> (Ramsey and Blieszner forthcoming, chapter 13). Worthington’s term for this is emotional replacement - in which a person’s decision to forgive culminates in changed emotions – “the forgiveness that heals our hearts”<sup>53</sup> (Worthington 2003, 44). This is what the woman in the MacKinlay study spoke of saying, “this (i.e., knowing that she is forgiven) is easier to know intellectually than in [my] heart”<sup>54</sup> (Mackinlay 2001, 160). Watts says that because “theology often proceeds in an apparently abstract way. . . it is helpful to use psychology to make the human significance of theology explicit”<sup>55</sup> (Watts 2004, 9).

In my experience, there are people from varied faith backgrounds who struggle with the concept that they are really forgiven by God. These people can quote Scripture which assures them of their forgiveness, but guilt still possesses them. Research makes it clear that many of the aged begin to move from head knowledge to heart knowledge at this life stage and healing can begin. For instance, in *Forgiveness in Context*, the editors reinforce the multi-dimensional and overlapping aspect of forgiveness saying, “many human realities need to be described from more than one point of view, with no single description being able to capture the phenomenon

---

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Mackinlay. *The Spiritual Dimension of Aging*. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), 161.

<sup>52</sup> Janet Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner, chapter 13, forthcoming.

<sup>53</sup> Everett L. Worthington, Jr. *Forgiving and Reconciling – Bridges to Wholeness and Hope*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Mackinlay, *The Spiritual Dimension of Aging*, 160.

<sup>55</sup> Fraser Watts. “Relating the Psychology and Theology of Forgiveness.” In *Forgiveness in Context: Theology and Psychology in Creative Dialogue*, edited by Fraser Watts and Liz Gulliford. (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 1-10.

completely”<sup>56</sup> (Watts 2004, 6). Perhaps, as people begin the process of forgiveness using only one dimension, i.e., religion, as in the case of the MacKinlay study, the approach seems “abstract. . . disembodied, and not at all closely related to the human realities of forgiveness with which psychology is concerned”<sup>57</sup> (Watts 2004, 4). Hence, the difficulty the woman in the MacKinlay study experienced in trying to move from the intellectual understanding of forgiveness to the emotional or heart feelings of forgiveness. Watts believes that the contemporary approach is not anti-theological, but that people need something more than theology to help them with “the experience of forgiveness”<sup>58</sup> (Watts 2004, 187).

#### Health and Well-Being - Benefits of Forgiveness Vs. Unforgiveness

McCullough and van Oyen Witvliet cite a number of researchers stating that forgiving people “report less negative affect such as anxiety, depression, and hostility. . . are less ruminative. . . less narcissistic. . . less exploitative. . . [and] tend to endorse socially desirable attitudes and behavior”<sup>59</sup> (McCullough and van Oyen Witvliet 2002, 451). And in a study of twenty-four elderly women conducted by Hebl and Enright (1993), reported by McCullough and van Oyen Witvliet, findings showed that “higher levels of forgiveness were associated with higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety and depression after participating in either an eight-week forgiveness intervention group or a discussion-based control group”<sup>60</sup> (McCullough and van Oyen Witvliet 2002, 451). Krause and Ellison say that older people “enjoy a greater sense of psychological well being” but have significantly greater feelings of

---

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 9

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>58</sup> Watts, “Concluding Reflections,” 187.

<sup>59</sup> Michael E. McCullough, and Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet (2002). *The Psychology of Forgiveness*. In C.R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez (Eds.), *A Handbook of Positive Psychology*. (NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 451.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 451.

death anxiety when they are unwilling to forgive others<sup>61</sup> (Krause and Ellison 2003, 91). Of course, the willingness to forgive becomes stymied if the transgressor is a repeat offender or if the nature of the specific offense is so “egregious that they are never forgiven.”<sup>62</sup> (Krause and Ellison 2003, 91). One can see how complex the issue of forgiveness is and how hard it is. Worthington states that “Forgiveness isn’t for wimps. . . [and that] the destructive path of unforgiveness is much easier than the tough, steely pull of forgiveness”<sup>63</sup> (Worthington, Jr. 2003, 29). Being unable to forgive because of the specific offense and yet knowing that there are psychological and physiological benefits to forgiveness must be terribly unsettling. Ransley and Spy report that even though a person can find freedom in forgiveness, the hurt caused in remembering the offense can make a person feel raw as if re-experiencing the hurt anew<sup>64</sup> (Ransley and Spy 2004, 38).

### How is Forgiveness made Possible?

Unlike author Zalman Schacter-Shalomi who offers a step by step exercise called *Giving Yourself the Gift of Forgiveness*, which he uses in moving people toward forgiveness,<sup>65</sup> (Zalman Schacter-Shalomi 1995, 277), Worthington believes that it does not matter how forgiveness begins, whether it be changed decisions or thoughts or actions, but states that “healing forgiveness will not occur until people’s emotions change”<sup>66</sup> (Worthington 2003, 45). This is exactly what the woman in the MacKinlay study needed - an emotional or heart understanding

---

<sup>61</sup> Neal Krause, and Christopher G. Ellison. “Forgiveness by God, Forgiveness of Others, and Psychological Well-Being in Late Life”. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2003): 89.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 91.

<sup>63</sup> Worthington, *Forgiving and Reconciling*, 29.

<sup>64</sup> Cynthia Ransley, and Terry Spy ( Eds.), *Forgiveness and the healing process A central therapeutic concern*. (New York: Brunner-Toutledge, 2004), 38.

<sup>65</sup> Zalman Schacter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing – A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*. (New York: Warner Books, 1995), 277.

<sup>66</sup> Worthington, *Forgiving and Reconciling*, 45.

that she had been forgiven by God perhaps for failing to have her baby baptized or doubting her faith. In some circumstances, therapy or counseling in some form, such as guided meditation and structured writing exercises, as was the case of a woman written about by Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, might be necessary in order that people come to see what is keeping them from forgiving<sup>67</sup> (Schacter-Shalomi 1995, 101).

While the aforementioned researchers seem to speak of forgiveness as something people do, Patton, on the other hand, says that “forgiveness [is] discovered rather than done. . . [coming to the knowledge] that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them. . . that I am in no position to forgive”<sup>68</sup> (Patton 1985, 12, 16). As I have read the life stories of Corrie ten Boom, Miroslav Volf and the nameless persons whose stories or research participation on the theme of forgiveness have been recorded here, I can see how the discovery of forgiveness comes about in the aged aided by the accumulated wisdom of their years<sup>69</sup> (Watts and Gulliford 2004, 102), <sup>70</sup> (Ramsey and Blieszner forthcoming, 56), <sup>71</sup> (Schacter-Shalomi 1995, 101). I believe that this wisdom is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit and a person’s proclivity to respond to that. Some have said that we need to forgive as God forgives us. Fraser Watts, however points out that “we do not have, and cannot hope to have, the resources of grace that God brings to forgiveness,” and quotes Moberly as saying that only as one processes God’s forgiveness for themselves can “God’s forgiveness. . . find an expression of itself in man’s forgiveness of man”<sup>72</sup> (Watts 2004, 56).

---

<sup>67</sup> Schacter-Shalomi, and Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, 101.

<sup>68</sup> John Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible? A Pastoral Care Perspective*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 12,16.

<sup>69</sup> Watts, and Gulliford, *Forgiveness in Context*, 102.

<sup>70</sup> Janet Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner, Chapter Six: Forthcoming.

<sup>71</sup> Schacter-Shalomi, and Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, 101.

<sup>72</sup> Watts, “Christian Theology.” 56.

McCullough believes that forgiveness is made possible because “evolution seems to have outfitted us with a forgiveness instinct. . . a built in feature of human nature [so that] our brain-generated feelings are cues that prod [us] to forgive. . .” especially if the person is someone who is worthy of our care, who is safe and valuable and who we wish to try and salvage a relationship with<sup>73</sup> (McCullough 2008, 155, 224). Using the example of domestic dogs who, even though they have not evolved to do so, raised orphaned squirrels and tiger cubs, McCullough wonders whether people can “create social conditions that will conjure up the psychological ingredients for forgiveness,” even in situations where forgiveness would not normally be offered<sup>74</sup> (McCullough 2008, 155). Certainly the Amish community has created this social condition along with the Christian, Jewish, Islamic and Hindu traditions all espousing a forgiveness which is seen as very radical in the eyes of the secular world.

According to Mary Anne Coate, forgiveness is not only possible, and reminds us that the Lords’ Prayer has within it the “charge to give and receive forgiveness [and] that it is philosophically and psychologically appropriate and is within our capacity”<sup>75</sup> (Coate 2004, 123). So, the question arises - What is it that keeps people from offering/receiving forgiveness? And, what about the forgiveness instinct and those brain-generated feelings that McCullough speaks about which are cues that prod us to forgive?<sup>76</sup> (McCullough 2008, 155). The current definition of forgiveness may give us a clue. “Forgiveness should be differentiated from pardoning. . . condoning. . . excusing. . .forgetting . . . denying. . . [and] distinct from reconciliation,?”<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Michael E. McCullough. *Beyond Revenge The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*. (San Francisco: Jossey- Bass, 2008), 224.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>75</sup> Coate, Mary Anne, “The Capacity for Forgiveness.” In *Forgiveness in Context Theology and Psychology in Creative Dialogue*, edited by Fraser Watts and Liz Gulliford. (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 123.

<sup>76</sup> McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, *Forgiveness: Theory, research*, 155.

<sup>77</sup> Michael E. McCullough, *Beyond Revenge*, 8.

(McCullough, et al 2001, 8). When one is contemplating forgiveness and thinks erroneously that forgiveness includes any, some, or all of these things, then it is likely that forgiveness will not occur. For instance, Ramsey and Blieszner speak about forgetting as it applies to forgiveness saying, “older persons are well aware that forgiving and forgetting are not synonymous, and that both can be incomplete and arduous”<sup>78</sup> (Ramsey and Blieszner forthcoming, 2).

### Forgiveness, Scripture, Feelings

Coate reminds us of the Hosea passage 11:8-9: “My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger.” Hosea does not deny his anger and that “its habitat is with Pity (compassion), Peace and Love”<sup>79</sup> (Coate 2004, 130). The imprecatory Psalms in Scripture are examples of what Hosea speaks about. These Psalms are prayers in which the psalmist shows us how to place “unattended rage before God [so that] we place both our unjust enemy and our own vengeful self face to face with God who loves and does justice”<sup>80</sup> (Volf 1996, 124). Inge, in retelling the hurtful experience of her son’s death and the pastor’s refusal to bury her child because the child had not been baptized, does not downplay her anger, anguish and pain, but finds within herself the “ability to let go of her anger—towards God, towards the Church, perhaps even toward herself”<sup>81</sup> ( Ramsey and Blieszner Forthcoming, chapter six). Inga is able to confront her own pain “of the *shame* of falling short. . . of the image of God within [her] and its human correlate, [her] ‘ego ideal’”<sup>82</sup> (Coate 2004, 130). Inga, just as the prophet Hosea, gives voice to her pain and doubt in her faith and her shame at having to bury

---

<sup>78</sup> Janet Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner, Chapter Six: forthcoming.

<sup>79</sup> Coate, “The Capacity for Forgiveness.” 130.

<sup>80</sup> Miroslav Volf, “Exclusion and Embrace A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 124.

<sup>81</sup> Janet Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner. Chapter Six: forthcoming.

<sup>82</sup> Coate, “The Capacity for Forgiveness, 130.

her unbaptized child and all that this means to her— “I had to lay my child in a coffin myself, to close it, and with no flowers!”<sup>83</sup> ( Ramsey and Blieszner forthcoming, chapter six). Yet, Inga is able to return to the source of her hope by returning to church. Coate comments that she marvels “in something approaching awe – that we see as much of it (forgiveness) on the human level as we do”<sup>84</sup> (Coate 2004, 43).

### Forgiveness and Evil

Of course, there will always be circumstances which preclude the experience of forgiving/accepting forgiveness. The circumstances of the Holocaust survivors who are now among the aged are examples of this. They particularly have difficulty with forgiveness and speak of the arduous nature of forgiveness. Bar-Tur and Levy-Shiff have discovered that for these survivors, “disengagement from a diminishing outer world and increased engagement with their inner world may be too painful to tolerate”<sup>85</sup> (Bar-Tur et al 2000, 278). Malcom quotes Hannah Arendt as saying that such crimes which she calls “radical evil,” merit the perpetrator to “be cast into the sea, as Jesus said, with a “millstone” around their necks,” and that only the Last Judgment can take care of these crimes because we as humans are “unable” to “forgive” what we cannot “punish” and we are “unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable”<sup>86</sup> (Malcom forthcoming, 14). However, Malcom herself says that because of our baptism, “We find ourselves in the “space” of God’s reign of justice and mercy. . . permeated by the Spirit, which makes our forgiveness of one another—as both victims and perpetrators—possible”<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Janet Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner, Chapter Six, forthcoming.

<sup>84</sup> Coate, “The Capacity for Forgiveness,” 43.

<sup>85</sup> Liora Bar-Tur, and Rachel Levy-Shiff, “Coping with Losses and Past Trauma in Old Age: The Separation-Individualtion Perspective.” *Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss* (2000): 278.

<sup>86</sup> Lois Malcom, “Forgiveness as New Creation: Christ and the Moral Life Revisited,” in *Christology and Ethics*, edited by F. LeRon Shults and Brent Waters (Eerdmans, forthcoming)

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

(Malcom forthcoming, 31). So, while it appears that there are some things that are just unforgivable, by the power of the Holy Spirit, forgiveness is still possible. Ramsey and Padgett respond to this by saying that “Forgiveness is never a human accomplishment. . . it is rooted and grounded in the grace of God”<sup>88</sup> (Ramsey and Padgett 2007, 47).

Volf asks, “How will we satisfy our thirst for justice and calm our passion for revenge so as to practice forgiveness?”<sup>89</sup> (Volf 1996, 123). Yes, forgiveness is possible and so is revenge which is “the exact opposite of forgiveness. . . our natural and automatic response to transgression”<sup>90</sup> (Malcom forthcoming, 14). McCullough, who speaks of forgiveness as being an intrinsic feature of human nature also speaks of revenge as being intrinsic with both forgiveness and revenge paying neurological benefits<sup>91</sup> (McCullough 2008, 147). This forgiveness business is truly multi-dimensional in every way – psychologically, spiritually, theologically, and biologically.

### Spirituality and Ageing

Along with the previously mentioned dimensions is the dimension of spirituality of ageing itself. MacKinley states that this “final stage of ageing is important, not only as a stage of psychosocial development but also for spiritual integrity”<sup>92</sup> (MacKinlay 2001, 22). Kimbel states that “at a certain point, one’s perceptions of aging becomes intertwined with perceptions of oneself. . . the experience of transcendence and the mysterium tremendum fascinans, the mystery that is at once overwhelming and fascinating, that renders my existence significant and

---

<sup>88</sup> Ramsey, and Padgett, “The Wisdom of Forgiveness:”, 47.

<sup>89</sup> Volf, Miroslav, Exclusion and Embrace, 123.

<sup>90</sup> Lois Malcom, “Forgiveness as New Creation:”, forthcoming.

<sup>91</sup> Michael E. McCullough, Beyond revenge, 147.

<sup>92</sup> Elizabeth MacKinlay, The Spiritual Dimension of Ageing, 22.

meaningful in the here and now”<sup>93</sup> (Kimble 1993, 27). This is the spirituality that comes with aging and enables one to sort out what is really important – “living life at every stage of the life cycle sub specie aeternitatis - under the aspect of eternity”<sup>94</sup> (Kimble 1993, 28). So, for instance, as one thinks of giving forgiveness, the question may arise whether holding that grudge or demanding some form of an apology is really what one believes theologically? Simply looking at the story of the prodigal son gives hope to perpetrator and victim alike. As the authors of *Seeking Forgiveness: The View from an Experimental Paradigm* state: “people’s behavior and character are flawed. . . [and] they are loved by the ultimate arbitrator of value (God) . . . [and] will be transformed by that God into something better”<sup>95</sup> (Basset, Edgerton, Johnson, Lill, Russo et al 2008, 148). Just how the Holy Spirit brings this about, I do not pretend to know because biologically we have learned how revenge pays neurological benefits as well. But, the memory of writing my life statement in the ‘90s comes to mind. I wrote, “I will look at situations and circumstances in the face of eternity so as to achieve a calmer perspective in the here and now.” Lamb and Thomson quote Soren Kierkegaard as having said that “living in the light of eternity involves continuous growth towards ‘purity of heart’ . . . that involves a process of self-unification and overall ‘sense’”<sup>96</sup> (Lamb and Thomson 2001, 63-64). Perhaps this is what Kimbel is saying as he speaks of the experience of transcendence being embodied in the socioemotional selectivity theory which states that “when concerns for the future are less relevant, attention to current feeling-states heightens”<sup>97</sup> (Carstensen et al 2003, 104). So if the

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>95</sup> Rodney L. Bassett, Melissa Edgerton, Jason Johnson, Courtney Lill, Greg Russo, Lindsay Ardella, Kara Pascuzzo, Audrey Erbland, Aaron Cox, and Nicole Graf, “Seeking Forgiveness: The View from an Experimental Paradigm”, *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (2008): 141.

<sup>96</sup> Winifred Wing Han Lamb and Heather Thomson, “Wholeness, Dignity and the Ageing Self: A Conversation Between Philosophy and Theology.” *Journal of Religious Gerontology* (2001): 63-64.

<sup>97</sup> Laura L. Carstensen, Helen H. Fung, and Susan T. Charles, “Socioemotional Selectivity Theory and the Regulation of Emotion in the Second Half of Life.” *Motivation and Emotion* (June 2003): 104.

“optimization of emotional experience is prioritized in later life” could it be that offering/seeking forgiveness would be one of the ways we transcend?<sup>98</sup> (Carstensen et al 2003, 105). We certainly have seen this in the story of King Lear, the narratives of Ramsey and Blieszner, the stories of Corrie ten Boom and the unnamed participants in forgiveness research quoted herein. As emotional goals “weigh more heavily than knowledge-related goals. . . people have the time to savor the moment, focus on the present, and derive emotional meaning from in their lives”<sup>99</sup> (Carstensen et al 2003, 119). Which is more emotionally meaningful - holding a grudge and expecting restitution, or seeking revenge, or offering forgiveness to resolve a situation? Enright quotes Lewis Smedes saying: “Surrendering the right to revenge can be equated to surrendering the right to carry the weight of the world on your back”<sup>100</sup> (Enright 2001, 128).

Although each dimension – psychological, spiritual, biological, theological – has been discussed rather separately in this paper, they are not separate and distinct from one another and, as we have seen, actually exhibit much overlap. While the aged might seek to offer or receive forgiveness because of spiritual or religious reasons, the benefits will also be physical and psychological as well. And, because religiosity and spirituality are not synonymous, an understanding of a person’s beliefs concerning these two might very well impact how they offer/accept forgiveness.

Krause quotes Rye as saying that “Forgiveness is the religious, theological, and ethical core of the Christian tradition”<sup>101</sup> (Krause 2001, 252). However, the United States is home to many diverse religious/faith traditions. Ministering with the aged as a deaconess in the ELCA

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>100</sup> Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice* 128.

<sup>101</sup> Krause, “Religion and the Process of Forgiveness in Late Life.” 252.

demands that I have an understanding of each tradition's beliefs in general, and in particular, those concerning forgiveness. In reviewing the major faith traditions, it seems that the commonality among them is compassion and love so that both the perpetrator and the victim are freed from an offense <sup>102</sup>(McCullough et al 2001, 23). MacKinlay adds to this by saying that "when considering the spiritual, or perhaps the faith needs of older adults, it is necessary to have an understanding of what such meaning-canvases might look like"<sup>103</sup> (MacKinlay 2001, 120).

Black records the story of Mrs. Hesh, an elderly woman who harkens back to her past "dreams and desires that remain unfulfilled" in determining whether she will, in these last years of her life choose forgiveness<sup>104</sup> (Black 2003, 28). Although what Mrs. Hesh describes would not at first glance appear to be a faith or spiritual need, if we ascribe to what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest, geologist, philosopher and mystic is quoted as saying, then we are indeed looking at the spiritual dimension of Mrs. Hesh's life canvas as concerns forgiveness. He says, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience"<sup>105</sup> (de Chardin 2009).

A close friend of mine has struggled for five or more years "trying to forgive" her former husband for marital infidelity throughout their marriage of thirty years, but she does not feel as if she has forgiven. She cannot forget the offenses and feels as if she will never shed her feelings of embarrassment, sadness and abandonment until she does "forgive". The slate for her is not cleared and she desperately wants to forgive but cannot seem to "do it." Perhaps Volf was right in saying that forgiveness is easier if perpetrators are repentant. But this does not happen often,

---

<sup>102</sup> McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, *Forgiveness: Theory, research,*

<sup>103</sup> Mackinlay, *The Spiritual Dimension of Aging*, 120 .

<sup>104</sup> Black, "Narratives of Forgiveness in Old Age," 28.

<sup>105</sup> Pierre T. de Chardin, (2009). Pierre Teilhard de Chardin Quotes . Retrieved 9-19-09 from [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/p/pierre\\_teilhard\\_de\\_chardi.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/p/pierre_teilhard_de_chardi.html)

as is the case with my friend, and so leaves “both victim and perpetrator. . . imprisoned in the automatism of mutual exclusion, unable to forgive or repent and united in a perverse communion of mutual hate”<sup>106</sup> (Volf 1996, 120). Christians who have “trouble enacting the practice of forgiveness, says Witvliet, may experience more adverse effects because of the guilt” in their failure to forgive<sup>107</sup> (Witvliet 2001, 222). It seems that this is my friend’s dilemma. But then, what does forgiveness feel like? Or is it a feeling at all?

### Variables within Offering/Receiving Forgiveness

Janet Ramsey and Lois Malcom began using real life experiences in teaching students about forgiveness at Luther Seminary because of their dissatisfaction with “*stages of or steps to*” forgiveness believing that “both the process of forgiving someone and the inability to forgive others are affected by a multiplicity of variables”<sup>108</sup> (Malcom and Ramsey 2006, 179). Two of the variables are the influence of culture and the influence of religion<sup>109</sup> (Garzon et al 2002, 350). Interestingly enough, although people who are more religiously oriented value forgiveness more, many persons who are not religious use spiritual resources in working through the process of forgiveness as a cultural practice [because] most cultural groups do not separate religion from cultural practices.<sup>110</sup> (Garzon, et al 2002, 349). Garzon feels that these facts make it imperative that persons engaged in ministry “examine more closely indigenous expressions of forgiveness found in the multicultural community [so as not to] unintentionally impose nonreligious clinical

---

<sup>106</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 120.

<sup>107</sup> Charlotte VanOyen Witvliet. “Forgiveness and Health: Review and Reflections on a Matter of Faith, Feelings, and Physiology.” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* (Fall 2001): 222.

<sup>108</sup> Malcom, and Ramsey, “Teaching and Learning Forgiveness:”, 179.

<sup>109</sup> Garzon, Richards, Witherspoon, et al, “Forgiveness in Community Cultural Contexts, 350.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

forgiveness models on cultural groups that are already applying forgiveness in a religious framework”<sup>111</sup> (Garzon, et al 2002, 350).

The “Sister, I’m Sorry” program, is an example of such a program utilized nationally by a variety of Christian sub-cultural groups from all racial backgrounds and “challenges men to seek forgiveness with the women and children in their lives”<sup>112</sup> (Garzon et al 2002, 351). This program, developed by Reverend Donald Bell has been able to elicit an apology – “something rarely seen in clinical strategies and that no clinical forgiveness intervention has so far been able to develop – an apology,” employing the use of biblical passages which illuminate the victimization of women to confront men concerning their role in mistreating women<sup>113</sup> (Garson, et al 2002, 351). After the apology, prayer is then utilized with both men and women praying for each other. In a nationally televised broadcast in 1999 “a diversity of women [experienced release from years of silent hurt and anger by this intervention] (ABC Transcript, 1999)”<sup>114</sup> (Garson, et al 2002, 350).

### Discussion

At the beginning of this paper, a question was raised as to whether the aged offer and accept forgiveness easier than other ages. The narratives have provided us with examples of the aged who do this well and those who do not. Perhaps all one can say with assuredness is that because of the multifaceted nature of both forgiveness and aging (psychologically, biologically, spiritually, and theologically) anything is possible.

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 351

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 350.

“Some older adults indicated they were generally quite willing to forgive, while others say that it depends on the nature of the transgression, and others say that they either don’t forgive others at all, or they are reluctant to do so.”<sup>115</sup> (Krause 2001, 259). Spiritually, many aged realize their need for God to help them forgive, in both receiving and giving the embrace of Christ. Biologically, the life-stage of the aged shows growth psychologically and spiritually resulting in wisdom which tends toward forgiveness. Theologically, forgiveness is espoused and when practiced for that reason has the same psychological benefits when practiced for other reasons. All of this to say that when looked at independently as I have done in this paper, the dimensions involved in offering and accepting forgiveness give only a small window into the vast landscape of this topic. The dimensions which impact forgiveness and aging are interwoven in such a way that perhaps scientific research may never be able to answer the question of this paper in a definitive way because of the diversity at any age. Ramsey and Padgett state that “Learning to forgive and be forgiven is a challenging process for all people, a lifelong curriculum from which we never really graduate,” hence, the differences in the narratives explored herein.<sup>116</sup> (Ramsey and Padgett 2007, 42).

Interestingly enough, research points out that the aged don’t require “forgiveness of self or others in order to achieve a sense of equanimity, or even that equanimity is a desired state for elders. . . but is mediated by [a] personal past, a cohort history, and the cultural, ethnic, racial and religious traditions to which the elder adheres (Snowden 2001)”<sup>117</sup> (Black 2003, 13). It is not enough to ask a person, as some researchers here have asked, if they tend to forgive. There are too many nuances to forgiveness making a yes or no answer all but impossible to make in every

---

<sup>115</sup> Kraus, “Religion and the Process of Forgiveness in Late Life,” 259.

<sup>116</sup> Ramsey, and Padgett, “The Wisdom of Forgiveness: , 42.

<sup>117</sup> Black, “Narratives of Forgiveness in Old Age,” 13.

circumstance. Krause states this well in saying “The conditions of an older person’s life and her choice to forgive or withhold forgiveness is not fueled by a simple developmental imperative to forgive, but is drawn through forgiveness’s complex social landscape.”<sup>118</sup> (Black 2003, 14). Even Krause points out that “the Christian model of forgiveness is not universal, and points to the gap between religious teaching and religious practice”<sup>119</sup> (Krause 2001, 270). Neither, I might add, is the Jewish model of forgiveness universal. Black tells of a Jewish elder who struggled with the imperative of his faith to forgive and reconcile. Mr. Marks asks the question, “How can you [forgive]? You can’t obliterate your memories. They’re real. How do you forgive?”<sup>120</sup> (Black 2003, 22). And yet, we are told by Roth about “right remembering” which is about “the higher and truer calling. . . to live the story, to embody the life of a Christian witness”<sup>121</sup> (Roth 2007, 586). Perhaps it is as Worthington recalls in a story of a slave trader in South America who is so consumed by his sins that he feels he must drag his burdens in the form of heavy Spanish armor behind him until his guilt is assuaged and only then will he be forgiven. In the end, the trader has the rope cut from around the sack of armor he carries on his back and so is granted forgiveness. Worthington sums this story up by stating that “in the end, forgiveness is a gift of mercy, grace and love”<sup>122</sup> (Worthington 2003, 67).

Aging is not simply accumulating the knowledge suggested for one’s life-stage nor is forgiveness simply amassing the knowledge needed to forgive. Nuland asks “What would life be like if we somehow had no way to mark the passage of years?” He answers “We would be much

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>119</sup> Krause, “Religion and the Process of Forgiveness in Late Life,” 270.

<sup>120</sup> Black, “Narratives of Forgiveness in Old Age, 22.

<sup>121</sup> John D. Roth, “Forgiveness and the Healing of Memories: An Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective.” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Fall 2007): 586.

<sup>122</sup> Worthington, *Forgiving and Reconciling*, 67.

more what we really are: individuals of infinite variation at any age”<sup>123</sup> (Nuland 2007, 15). The ability to give and receive forgiveness also has the same infinite variation at any age. Each person is, as Nuland says, “molded by everything that has come before and that is now brought to this moment of our lives. Each of us is the product of a cavalcade of living, whose sum is in every encounter in which we partake”<sup>124</sup> (Nuland 2007, 15).

### Conclusion

Is offering and accepting forgiveness easier or more difficult for the aged? The answer is yes and no! The role that offering and accepting forgiveness plays in any age is unquestionably of great importance psychologically, biologically, spiritually and theologically, but it does not mean that every person will do so. Some presume that the life experiences of the aged must have allowed accumulated knowledge and experience for the task of offering and accepting forgiveness. But, as Black states so well, our “lifelong constellations of meanings. . . are understood in relation to particular beliefs about what is right or wrong. . . to hopes. . . to dreams, and to cultural or spiritual legacies”<sup>125</sup>(Black 2003, 35).

It seems to me that our past and current research has tried to measure the dimensions of forgiveness and aging with questionnaires that do not get at the broad canvases of a person’s life showing the hard and painful road that aging and forgiveness sometimes take. If we are spiritual beings, and I believe that we are, then what method can we use to measure aging and forgiveness? I, for one, do not believe that we will unmask a definitive way of measuring whether the aged forgive more easily than persons of any other age. However, I do believe that

---

<sup>123</sup> Sherwin B. Nuland, *The Art of Aging A Doctor’s Prescription for Well-Being*. ( New York: Random House, 2007): 15.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Black, “Narratives of Forgiveness in Old Age,” 35.

teaching and modeling these areas in all stages of life will go a long way in mentoring the world toward forgiveness in the same way the Amish have modeled forgiveness to the world in the face of the horrific loss of their children in recent years. “As interdependent people, we simply have too much at stake to ignore the promise of forgiveness as a balm for some of our species’ destructive propensities”<sup>126</sup>(McCullough and Witvliet 2002, 455).

As I began this paper, I wondered if the aged population might proffer help in freeing the 21<sup>st</sup> century from the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s “crimson shadow” of “ethnic strife, political violence and world conflict”<sup>127</sup>(McCullough, Pargament and Thoresen 2002, xiii). We did see examples of elders such as Corrie ten Boom and Miraslov Volf who reached out to their perpetrators, albeit with great internal struggling, in order to forgive.

Because I tend to think in musical terms, the little song entitled *You’ve Got to be Taught to Hate and Fear* from Rogers and Hammerstein’s play, *South Pacific*, seems appropriate to my suggestion that teaching and modeling and mentoring might be where the topic of forgiveness is headed. And, it certainly shows how the canvas of our lives is shaped by many dimensions, not the least of which is our culture and family background.

You’ve got to be taught  
To hate and fear,  
You’ve got to be taught  
From year to year,  
It’s got to be drummed  
In your dear little ear  
You’ve got to be carefully taught.

You’ve got to be taught to be afraid

---

<sup>126</sup> McCullough, and vanOyen Witvliet, *The Psychology of Forgiveness.*, 455.

<sup>127</sup> McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, *Forgiveness: Theory, Research*, xiii.

Of people whose eyes are oddly made,  
And people whose skin is a different shade,  
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,  
Before you are six or seven or eight,  
To hate all the people your relatives hate,  
You've got to be carefully taught!

Just maybe it will be the aged who will teach us how to overturn this kind of hate and fear moving us toward extending forgiveness and accepting forgiveness. “It is time to look - more carefully and consistently - at the lives of spiritually resilient elders; they can teach us how to live such that both justice and mercy find a place in our hard old hearts” <sup>128</sup>(Ramsey and Blieszner, forthcoming). Amen! May it be so.

---

<sup>128</sup> Ramsey, and Blieszner, Chapter six, Forthcoming.

