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Who Can Forgive Jared Loughner?

By Ronald Pies, MD | 2 de marzo de 2011

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Is it possible to “forgive” Jared Lee Loughner for what he is alleged to have done? Is it morally justifiable to do so? I was surprised to see these questions circulating on the Internet, even before the dead were laid to rest.¹ Aside from the legal issue of “forgiving” someone who has yet to be convicted of a crime, there are serious ethical problems with the notion that anyone other than the survivors of this horrific shooting can “forgive” the assailant. There are also psychological reasons why “forgiveness” is probably too much, too soon, for many of those directly touched by the horrific events in Tucson.

From the theological perspective, there are differing views as to when forgiveness is justified and who is justified in granting forgiveness. Some ethicists and theologians believe that all sins can and should be forgiven. For example, after the horrendous killings of 5 children in an Amish schoolhouse in 2006, some Amish community leaders advocated “forgiveness” of the murderer.² We can admire the Amish for their generosity and compassion while disagreeing with their concept of forgiveness.

Indeed, in the ethics of the Judaic tradition, the Amish community had no right to forgive their children’s murderer. The rabbis insist that *we are prohibited from forgiving on someone else’s behalf*. As Rabbi Joseph Telushkin³ has argued, the only one who (in principle) can forgive a murderer is the person murdered—and since that is impossible, the rest of us cannot act in the victim’s stead by conferring “forgiveness” on the murderer. Similarly, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel—commenting on “forgiving” the Nazis for murdering 6 million Jews—argued that “no one can forgive crimes committed against someone else. It is therefore preposterous to assume that any Jew alive can grant forgiveness for the suffering of any one of the six million people who perished . . . even God Himself can only forgive sins committed against Himself, not against man.”³

Forgiveness in psychiatry

A recent review by psychiatrist Prakash Gangdev observed that “all religions practiced in India emphasize the value of forgiveness . . .” and that forgiveness is emphasized in Buddhist, Christian, Sikh, and Islamic scriptures. In contrast, Gangdev⁴ notes, “. . . the literature on forgiveness in psychiatry is very sparse,” despite “the benefits of forgiveness as a therapeutic intervention.” Perhaps the aim for “scientific objectivity”

or a “values-neutral” psychiatry has made some of us a bit reluctant to deal with forgiveness. And yet, in my view, we cannot avoid dealing with such human values—embracing some and not others—in our work with abused or victimized patients.

I am therefore encouraged by the article by Stein and Kaminer,⁵ which suggests that psychiatrists are becoming more interested in forgiveness, both from a theoretical and a therapeutic perspective. These authors even posit that “forgiveness in humans may have evolutionary underpinnings” and that “frontal-limbic circuits may mediate processes involved in forgiveness.” Some intriguing but preliminary research by Farrow and colleagues⁶ suggests that “. . . specific regions of the human brain activated by empathy and forgivability judgments changed with symptom resolution in PTSD.” From a more practical standpoint, Stein and Kaminer⁵ note that “. . . a growing database of controlled trials of “forgiveness therapy” has indicated its efficacy in decreasing anger, anxiety, and depression in various clinical contexts. At the same time, forgiveness may not always be appropriate.”

This last point is important for therapists as well as ethicists: each person who has been the victim of violence or trauma is unique, and no single approach to forgiveness will be helpful for everyone. Nobody should be pushed into a premature or feigned state of “forgiveness.” Yet if the patient appears to be moving in the direction of forgiveness, gentle encouragement could prove psychologically beneficial, at least for some.

Relinquishing hatred

There are some crimes so heinous, they may simply be beyond the human capacity to forgive: genocide, murder, and rape come quickly to mind. Gangdev⁴ (following Mahoney et al, 2005) defines forgiveness as the “. . . releasing or foregoing of bitterness and vengeance *by a victim toward the perpetrator* of an offence while acknowledging the seriousness of the wrong [Dr Pies’ italics].” Thus, none of us—other than the surviving victims—is in a position to forgive the Tucson shooter for the wounding or killing of innocent bystanders. The rabbinical view holds that even the survivors of the Tucson shooting can forgive the shooter only for what was done *to them*—not for what befell the slain. Furthermore, the rabbinical tradition stresses the *dialectical* nature of forgiveness: ordinarily, it requires both *apology* and *restitution* on the part of the transgressor. Fully realized forgiveness is not a unilateral act on the part of the victim, but a process of reconciliation that begins with the victimizer.

Yet it is important to distinguish the limits of forgiveness from the *capacity to let go of hatred*. Each of us, in principle, is capable of relinquishing hatred of the shooter. This does not mean that we should blithely “move on” and forget about the terrible deeds that occurred. It certainly does not mean “excusing” the shooter’s actions. Nor does it mean that we must cease hating the cruelty of the shooter’s *act*. Acts are not persons, and there is no ethical prohibition in any major faith against hating evil *deeds*.

And yet, I would respectfully suggest that we are also obligated to move beyond hatred. President Obama, in his recent Tucson speech, called upon us to “. . . use this occasion to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.” The President was not demanding that we “forgive” the Tucson shooter. But I do believe he was calling upon us, in the fullness of time, to transform our revulsion and rage into something higher and nobler.

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Additional Reading

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