"Randomized research trials show that forgiveness therapy with adults can reduce anxiety and depression and increase well-being for people suffering from many different kinds of injustices such as incest, parental neglect, and spousal abuse."

Forgiveness education as a path to peace

OVER THE PAST EIGHT YEARS my colleagues and I have been involved in a new experiment in the peace movement: introducing forgiveness education into schools and homes, in the hope of reducing resentments, and making people more open to seeing the worth in others, even those with whom they have been in deep social conflict.

We have done this in Milwaukee, Wisconsin's central city, and in Belfast. The point is to assist children in learning about and practicing forgiveness so that deep resentments, which can lead to prolonged violence when they reach adulthood, are reduced. We are honored to now be working with Corrymeela on this effort.

Forgiveness is an ancient concept with roots in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, and other philosophies and religions. Because forgiveness is a virtue (as is justice patience, and love), we are free to practice it whenever we wish. As we forgive we reduce resentment or ill will towards someone who was unfair to us, and we offer mercy in the form of beneficence or even love. When we forgive we begin to see the inherent worth in the other person, not because of what he did, but in spite of any injustice. As Aristotle reminds us in his Nicomachean Ethics: we usually start slowly in our mastery of any virtue and become better with practice and time; rarely reaching perfection.

Our approach to peace-through-forgiveness is a 'bottom-up' or grass-roots approach in which we assume the following nine points:

First, conflict between people is directly connected to conflict within people. Excessively angry people start conflicts.

"When we forgive, we begin to see the inherent worth in the other person, not because of what he did, but in spite of any injustice."

"Forgiveness must become part of the community, not isolated and individualised, if it is to aid peace initiatives."

Second, one person's internal conflict has a way of infecting others, creating resentment within them until many in a social group are suffering from the malady of excessive anger.

Third, even if economic and social reconstructions are effective in altering a society's infrastructure, the inner world of the human heart, when resentment remains, can prevent true peace from being realised.

Fourth, forgiveness is not a substitute for programmes centred on justice, but instead are complements to them.

Fifth, forgiveness practiced over years in schools, families, and places of worship, should be able to reduce or even eliminate internal resentments. This should allow people to accept rebuilt infrastructures and live together in peace.

Sixth, to be effective, forgiveness programmes must have a clear definition of the term forgiveness and not confuse it with somewhat related but distinct terms such as excusing.

Seventh, to be effective, forgiveness programmes must be sustained over a period of years to allow people to learn, and then to incorporate the practice of forgiveness into their daily lives, and to pass the learning and practice to others.

Eighth, forgiveness education cannot be isolated to a few willing participants, but instead needs to pervade a society if it is to change towards peace where deep social conflict was once the norm. In other words, the assumption is that forgiveness must become part of the community, not isolated and individualised, if it is to aid peace initiatives.

Finally, our approach is slow and developmental. We do not ask children in Belfast, for example, to confront 'The Troubles', but instead to learn from good children's stories how the characters, despite their differences, can learn to forgive and live in harmony. As the children see story characters forgiving, might they too take up the challenge and begin to forgive the 'little things' of their lives, such as an unkind word from a sibling or a fistfight on the playground? As they continue to practice forgiveness in these small ways throughout childhood, might they confront the societal injustices once they are adults, once they are philosophically and psychologically sophisticated forgivers, because of years of forgiveness education?

Might such learning from children's literature have a two-fold effect of improved emotional health in the short run and improved community relations in the long run? My colleagues and I answer "yes" to both questions because of our past research with adults, outlined in my book, 'Helping Clients Forgive'. Randomised research trials show that forgiveness therapy with adults can reduce anxiety and depression and increase well-being for people suffering from many different kinds of injustices such as incest, parental neglect, and spousal abuse.

Our research on the forgiveness programmes in the Milwaukee and Belfast schools show that as children take part in them, all taught by the children's own classroom teacher, they reduce significantly in anger: a key catalyst to family and social unrest.*

Forgiveness education, as a scientifically proven approach to reducing anger in the short run, may be one of the answers to peace, within conflict zones and in post-accord societies, if we give it a chance to flourish.

We now have teacher curriculum guides for forgiveness education available from primary two through year three in secondary school (available from the International Forgiveness Institute, Inc. in Madison, Wisconsin, forgiveness-institute.org). Feedback from teachers is that these guides are easy to use and help build character in both themselves and in their students.

- This research is published in the Journal of Research in Education in 2007 (volume 17) and 2008 (volume 18) in America

Robert Enright, Ph.D

Robert Enright is a Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, a position he has held for 31 years. He has been scientifically studying forgiveness since 1985. His books include: 'Forgiveness Is a Choice' and a children's book on forgiveness 'Rising Above the Storm Clouds'. Both are available at www.amazon.com

The Forgiveness Project at Corrymeela

MY OWN INVOLVEMENT with forgiveness education began in 2006 when I first learned about it through a good friend who was, at that time, facilitating the programme in Belfast.

Padráig O'Tuama did a fantastic job at convincing me this was a programme worth investing in so… I changed my career path and moved back to Belfast. With a background in child, adolescent and family therapy, the hope that forgiveness education could bring to the lives of children and families regardless of background seemed evident to me.

I had spent years working with people affected by trauma, and what I recognised in the forgiveness curriculum was its ability to help children learn how to forgive the small hurts and injustices of childhood; with the hope that in adulthood, they will be able to see the humanity in everyone, even in those who have committed larger injustices or perpetrated larger hurts and learn to forgive them as well.

I have had the privilege of co-operating with some very talented teachers as they work tirelessly to share the hope of forgiveness education with the children in their classrooms across Belfast.

- The forgiveness education programme has been utilised in several primary schools in Northern Ireland for the past eight years.
- In 2002, Dr. Robert Enright, Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin launched a research project in selected Belfast primary schools with the aim of establishing that forgiveness education can help reduce anger, increase academic performance, and improve peer-to-peer relationships within the class context.
- Initially starting in primary three classes, it spread throughout three schools. The programme now has over 1100 pupils participating every year across 50 classes in Belfast, with specially written curricula for every class from primary two to primary seven.
- This year will also see the expansion of forgiveness education outside of the Belfast area to schools in Derry/Londonderry and Ballymoney.

I have also met some wonderful primary school pupils who have shared stories with me about how they have learned to forgive the bully in their class, or the sibling who wouldn't share their toys.

These children are learning to look beyond the initial hurt by focusing on the humanity of the other and seeing instead a person who has value, who has dreams, and who also has a hope for the future. I believe it is a lesson we could all do with learning, and it leaves me filled with hope for our future.

Becki Fulmer

To find out more about Forgiveness Education go to www.forgiveness-institute.org or to contact Becki e-mail bfulmer@corrymeela.org

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