

# wisconsin people & ideas

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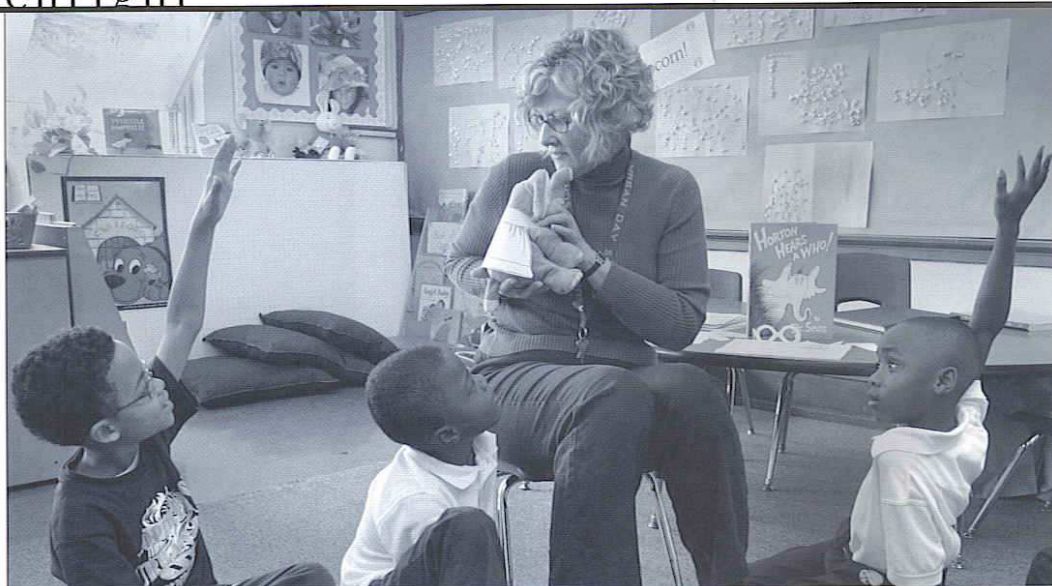
## FORGING FORGIVENESS IN BELFAST AND MILWAUKEE

## VIDEO GAMES— GOOD FOR LEARNING?

## THE BEST STATE POETRY!



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## Forging Forgiveness

BY KERRY G. HILL

Janet Taylor, a teacher at Milwaukee's Urban Day School, fosters forgiveness in children using methods developed by educational psychologist Robert Enright.

Photo by Gary Porter/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Robert Enright, a UW-Madison professor of educational psychology and a pioneer in the study of forgiveness, has long documented how the act of forgiveness benefits the forgiver. Now he's working on how best to foster forgiveness in children who have been exposed to violence. He's conducting his research in an unlikely pairing of cities: Belfast and Milwaukee.

THE NEWS ON OCTOBER 2, 2006, FROM LANCASTER COUNTY, Pennsylvania, was horrific: A gunman had taken hostages at an Amish schoolhouse, eventually killing five girls before taking his own life. Follow-up reports also baffled many observers:

The grieving Amish community responded by offering comfort to the shooter's family, even setting up a charitable fund for the wife and children of the man responsible for the tragedy.

Was this collective act of mercy genuine or contrived? Robert Enright, a pioneer in the academic study of forgiveness, assured inquiring reporters that, to the Amish community, forgiveness comes as naturally as breathing.

"People can respond to injustice and tragedy in a forgiving way," explains Enright, a professor in the department of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Because they had "built their forgiveness muscle," the Amish were prepared

to respond to tragedy in an emotionally healthy way, he says. "I would like to give this to Belfast and Milwaukee"—two cities that have witnessed plenty of tragedy and violence.

Enright and his wife, Jeanette Knutson Enright, have been leading an initiative in Northern Ireland for six years and in Wisconsin's largest city for four to develop, introduce, and assess a comprehensive curriculum for introducing children to the idea of forgiveness.

Exposure to poverty, prejudice, and violence puts children at increased risk of emotional problems—including depression, anxiety, and excessive anger—that ultimately can compro-

mise their psychological development. Says Enright, "Our work in forgiveness education is based on the conviction that forgiveness can reduce anger, and that a decrease in anger leads to less depression and anxiety and to stronger academic achievement and more peaceful social behavior."

Early evidence suggests that the initiatives are making headway in both places, but Enright isn't rushing to declare victory and move on. He anticipates investing another dozen or more years—regardless of funding—"for the sake of the children."

Enright's scholarly focus on forgiveness dates back to the mid-1980s, when he began his trailblazing work of charting the psychological pathway that individuals follow when they forgive. "We had to do everything from scratch," he says.

Enright published the first social scientific journal article on person-to-person forgiveness and the first cross-cultural studies of interpersonal forgiveness. He also pioneered forgiveness therapy, in which he and others have demonstrated that as people learn to forgive offenders for serious injustices, they reduce substantially in their level of anger, psychological depression, and anxiety.

He has been meticulous in validating his findings using accepted scientific procedures such as randomized trials. He collaborated with UW-Madison colleague Michael Subkoviak, now an emeritus professor of educational psychology, to create a reliable social development test, the Enright Forgiveness Inventory.

The Enright Forgiveness Inventory is an objective measure of the degree to which one person forgives another who has hurt him or her deeply and unfairly. The inventory has 60 items and three subscales of 20 items each that assess the domains of affect, behavior, and cognition toward the offending other.

Robert and Jeanette Enright use Dr. Seuss stories in their work with children, who can easily relate the simple tales of conflict and resolution to their own lives.

In his studies, Enright has looked at individuals from a variety of cultures and countries—including Taiwan, Brazil, Austria, and Denmark—who have suffered grave unfairness, for example, incest, spousal betrayal, child abuse, and a partner's decision to abort without the other's consent. From this, he identified three characteristics of forgiveness common to all adults:

- The individual has been treated unjustly;
- The individual struggles to deal with the injustice; and
- The individual looks for something good and positive to give to the offending person, regardless of whether the offender deserves mercy.

He found that people who had been deeply hurt and emotionally compromised often were depressed and struggled with high levels of anger and anxiety and low self-esteem. Those

## READING ENRIGHT

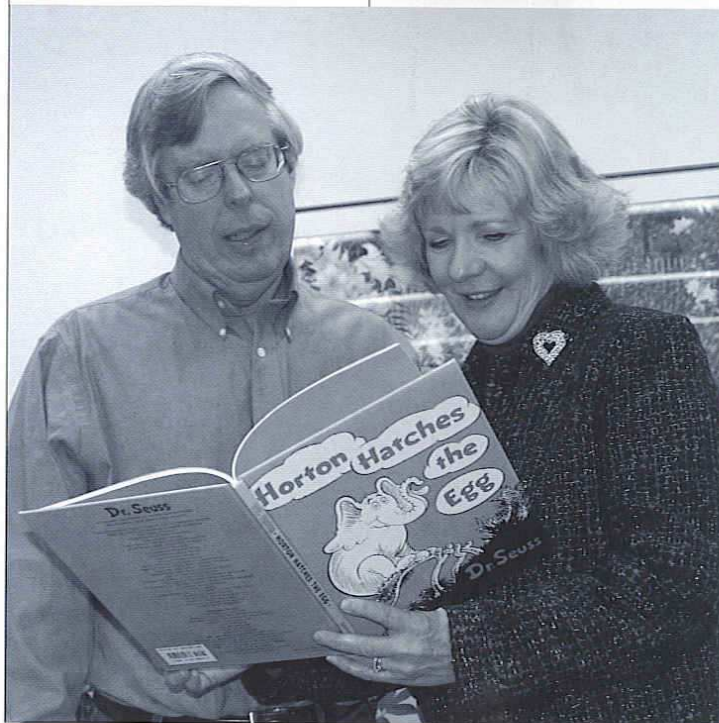
Robert Enright's books include:

***Forgiveness Is a Choice*** (American Psychological Association, 2001), for the general public.

***Rising Above the Storm Clouds: What It's Like to Forgive***, with Kathryn Kunz Finney (Magination Press, 2004), a picture book for children.

***Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope***, with Richard P. Fitzgibbons (American Psychological Association, 2001), for professionals in psychology, psychiatry, and related disciplines.

***Exploring Forgiveness***, with Joanna North (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), a collection of 12 essays that explore forgiveness.



Forgiveness, says Enright, has a way of cutting through anger, anxiety, and depression, and restoring emotional health. Even moderate levels of forgiveness can make a difference.

who followed Enright's roadmap to forgiveness were able to reduce their depression, anger, and anxiety and improve their self-esteem. Follow-ups found that the emotional health improvements were sustained.

"Forgiveness has a way of cutting through anger, anxiety and depression and restoring emotional health," Enright concludes. He adds that even moderate levels of forgiveness can make a difference.

Enright describes forgiveness as a freely chosen gift of mercy from someone who has been offended. Forgiving, he stresses, isn't the same as condoning, excusing, forgetting, or necessarily even reconciling with an

offender, whose actions don't necessarily deserve exoneration.

"The gist of forgiveness intervention is to help the person think about the offender in broader ways than just the offense itself and to cultivate empathy and compassion toward the offender, while, at the same time, protecting oneself as necessary," Enright explains. By forgiving, an individual refuses to let anger and resentment prevail.

## BEGIN WITH THE CHILDREN

Several years ago, Enright and colleagues became intrigued by the idea of cultivating forgiveness on a community level in an area afflicted by war or

violence. "No social experiment where forgiveness is planted as a component of the peace movement had ever been done," he notes. He doesn't offer forgiveness education as an opiate, but as a means to equip people to respond with mercy to difficulties.

Mohandas Gandhi has said that for true peace to be achieved in communities, we must begin with the children, notes Enright. With that in mind, he and his colleagues proposed developing a forgiveness education program starting in the early elementary levels and expanding upward through the grades.

His team selected Belfast, Northern Ireland, where residents speak English—avoiding the need for translators—and the warring English Protestants and Irish Catholics hold world views that respect the idea of forgiving. Seeds of Hope, a Belfast peace organization, helped Enright open doors in a commu-

**Enright leading a forgiveness workshop with Adoption Resources of Wisconsin in Milwaukee**

*Photo by Jeff Miller/UW Communications*



nity that generally resisted the meddling of outsiders. He was given access after presenting his ideas to principals, teachers, parents—and the paramilitaries, the de facto power brokers.

Working with teachers in Belfast's dangerous "interface areas"—where poorer Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods are in close proximity to each other—Enright's team started with a first-grade curriculum that introduces the concepts that underlie forgiveness through the stories of Dr. Seuss. These stories show the children that conflicts arise and that we have a wide range of options to unfair treatment.

Each year, a new grade level is added to the curricula. As the children get older, the lessons grow in sophistication. The effort started in three classrooms and now is used in 75 classrooms, with an average of 25 students per class.

In these schools, where no psychological services are offered, the teachers play an integral role in shaping how the curriculum is delivered.

"It is important that the child's own teacher, rather than our research group, impart the concepts to the children to ensure cultural and religious sensitivity regarding the nuances of forgiveness," Enright explains. "We know the core of forgiveness, but we don't know the nuances for every culture. We stand by the teachers and nurture them through the curricula."

Follow-up research has found that children exposed to the forgiveness education program showed reduced levels of anger and anxiety compared to those in control groups—classes where the introduction of forgiveness curricula has been delayed.

"If these children can reduce anger and become more forgiving throughout the course of their schooling, they will have built their forgiveness muscle,"

Though "the troubles" have subsided, murals throughout Belfast urging citizens to take arms are a grim reminder—and a menacing backdrop of life in this city long torn by war. They are slowly being replaced by murals featuring figures from history and sports.

Photo by Michael Kienitz

Enright explains. "The findings are above our expectations."

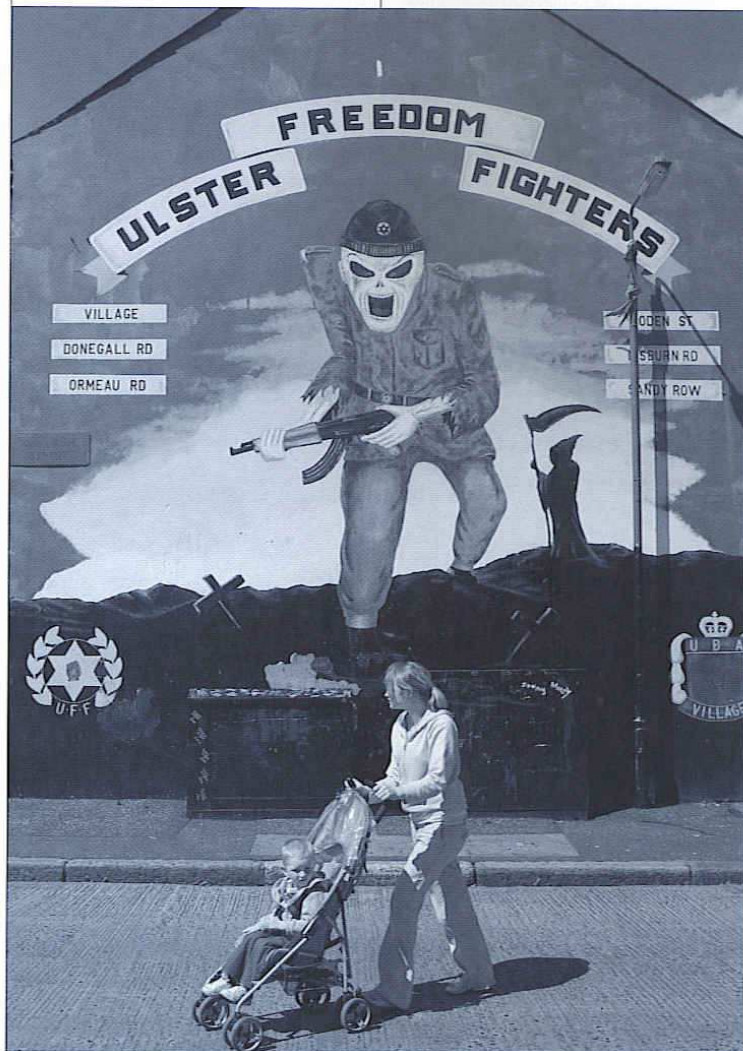
## THE WAR AT HOME

Three years ago, Enright's team began to introduce forgiveness education closer to home—in Milwaukee, one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the U.S. and a city with a murder rate higher than that of Belfast.

"Children in inner-city Milwaukee are growing up in a violent community," notes Enright. He offers his program to

supplement, not replace, the justice and social service activities already in place: "What's missing is the care of the angry heart through forgiveness."

In a progress report, he and his colleagues explain: "We should not think of improved emotional health or forgiveness education as substitutes for social programs that are intended to reduce poverty and/or violence. Children from environments of poverty and violence need both internal coping strategies, tools for effecting peace, and social justice."



Psychological assessments conducted as part of this initiative found that average first-graders in central Milwaukee already were excessively angry and would be seen as good candidates for psychotherapy. "That's an extremely sobering statistic," Enright says.

Janet Taylor, who has been involved in the Milwaukee initiative from the start, has taught for eight years at the Urban Day School, where the student population is nearly all African American and more than 95 percent qualify to receive free or reduced-price lunches. Four years ago, Taylor first introduced the forgiveness curriculum in her first-grade class, teaching 17 lessons based on Dr. Seuss, while the school's other first-grade classroom served as a control group.

Members of Enright's research group interviewed students before and after the lessons were taught and found

that children introduced to the forgiveness concepts showed significant decreases in their levels of anger, while those in control groups—who had not yet received the forgiveness instruction—continued to grow in measures of anger.

"I think that the lasting value of the program is through a cumulative impact on students as they work with the same concepts year after year, along with an expanding awareness of themselves and of the world around them," Taylor says.

"Some students enter the school in the morning angry because of things that have happened to them outside of school. This anger affects their relationships with other students and with their teachers, and it can hinder their ability to focus on schoolwork. The forgiveness curriculum aims to allow them to release that anger without accepting continued ill treatment," she says.

Explains Enright, "Throughout our curriculum, the teachers make the important distinction between learning about forgiveness and choosing to practice it in certain contexts." Lessons emphasize the inherent worth of all people, even those who act unfairly. Approximately two-thirds of each intervention focuses on learning about forgiveness rather than practicing forgiving someone. In the later lessons, teachers help the children—only if they so choose—to apply the principles they've learned toward forgiving a person who has hurt them.

"Children are always free to try or not try forgiveness in response to their own personal hurts born out of unfair treat-

Relating to black America: This mural in a small Catholic enclave in a Protestant area points to the Little Rock school integration struggle in calling for civil rights for all religious groups.

Photo by Michael Kienitz



ment," says Enright. "In our experience in Belfast to date, children willingly try forgiveness when they are free to choose the person who was unfair to them, and the event that each child considers to be unfair."

Taylor adds, "Since the goal is an internal change in children, it can be difficult for me to discover those changes, but I do hear the children using some of the vocabulary of the program, particularly when they talk about being kind to each other. The lessons also encourage them to reveal their feelings through art, and sometimes their drawings are very powerful."

Regarding the use of Dr. Seuss stories, she notes, "It is quite impressive how students can relate stories about Sneetches or Horton the Elephant to discussions of their own lives."

**Children live here: A high-rise call to arms on an apartment building in North Belfast**

Photo by Michael Kienitz

These children are at risk because "they live in a socially contentious region, characterized by both poverty and violence, and have few psychological resources on which to draw."

The Enright and their research team recently published findings from the first follow-up studies of their efforts in Belfast and Milwaukee:

"We have shown that primary school teachers who work on forgiveness interventions with psychologists can have an influence on reducing children's anger, and in the case of third grade, on reducing their level of psychological depression. Both variables are being implicated in the published literature as predictive of children's success within the school setting. We have taken a first step toward further success for these students, all of whom are potentially at risk because they live in a socially

contentious region, characterized by both poverty and violence, and have few psychological resources on which to draw."

They also note: "We see anger reduction in the short run, as was observed here, as a means to an end much later in the children's schooling and in their adult years within a contentious environment. If anger can be reduced from an elevated range, or stay within the average range, then the children may be less at risk for aggression and academic underachievement later in their schooling."

They conclude: "Continued steps along this path of peace through forgive-



ness education may pay dividends for communities in conflict that we can hardly fathom today, but may indeed be realized in the future."

With support from the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, the Milwaukee effort has grown from five first-grade classrooms to 80 classrooms in first through sixth grades. "We'd be in 500 if we had the funding," says Enright.

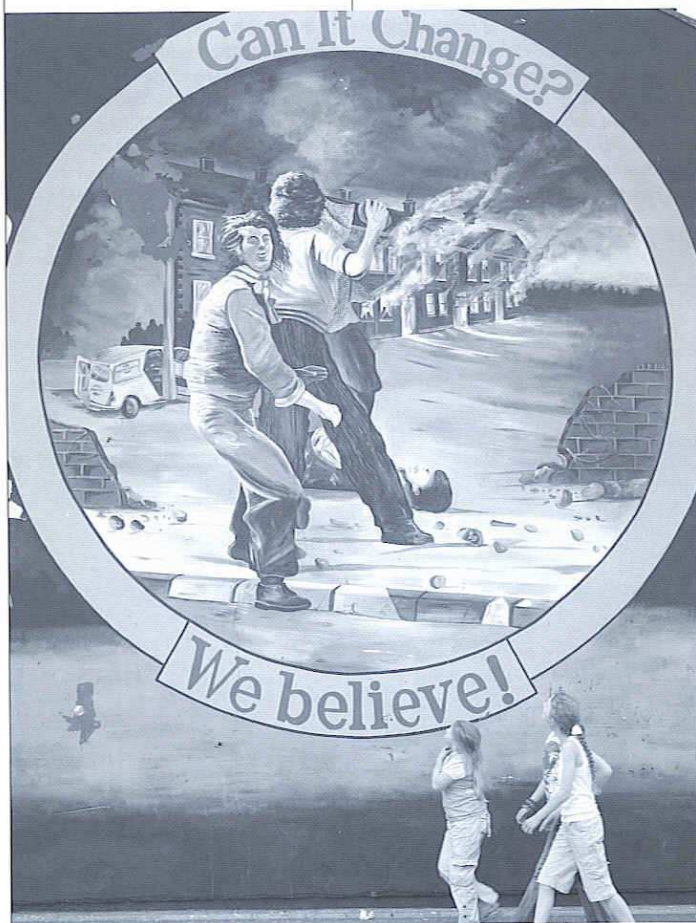
"We're just two small people trying to do the best we can," he says, referring to himself and his wife. "It's time to act now. I would like to have all of central Milwaukee involved. We are offering a vision to war-torn and violence-torn communities."

He sums up that vision: "Forgiveness within individuals' hearts and minds may change communities that have not known peace for many decades. In other words, forgiveness education, though it has immediate benefits of improved emotional health, may have even wider benefits as more psychologically healthy adults are able to sit down together for mutual benefit as well as a gain to the entire community."

It's a vision that holds great promise for individuals and the world we share. ♦

**A call for change in a Protestant neighborhood, Shankill Road**

Photo by Michael Kienitz



*Kerry G. Hill directs communications for the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Prior to joining the UW in 2001, he worked for daily newspapers in Wisconsin and Illinois for more than 20 years, including 10 years as the editor in charge of national and international news at the Wisconsin State Journal.*

## Come Hear Enright

Robert Enright will talk about "The Power of Forgiveness" on Tuesday, May 13, 7-8:30 p.m. in the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art lecture hall in Overture, 227 State Street, Madison. Admission is free, no tickets needed, seating first come, first served. More information at [www.wisconsinacademy.org](http://www.wisconsinacademy.org)

## Children in Conflict

Madison-based photographer and photojournalist Michael Kienitz has for more than 25 years taken portraits of children in zones of war and conflict all around the world, including in Belfast. Many of the portraits and the stories behind them appear in his book, ***Small Arms: Children of Conflict*** (Small Arms Productions, 2007), and were exhibited at the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison last fall. We thank Kienitz for allowing us to use his recent photographs from Belfast in this story. You can learn more about Kienitz and ***Small Arms*** at [www.michaelkienitz.com](http://www.michaelkienitz.com).

### Small Arms

