

VARIETY

# Rosenblum: Forgiving well leads to living well

SEPTEMBER 13, 2015 — 6:52AM

**Gail Rosenblum**

@GROSENBLUM

Imagine a long, thin line, stretching from end to end of a piece of paper and signifying a continuum of difficult life experiences.

On the far left — let's call this A — we place a driver who cuts into our lane without signaling, or a coffee shop customer ahead of us who orders while talking mindlessly on a cellphone.

In the middle we might place a bruising conversation with a parent, a breakup or a sudden job loss.

On the far right — let's call this Z — we place extreme human sorrows. Murder. Abuse. Betrayal.

Now imagine forgiveness. That oblivious driver or rude customer? Sure, we can forgive them or, at least, quickly forget them. The parent? With time, perhaps.

But forgive crimes at the extreme?

Never.

So it might come as a surprise to learn that people are embracing forgiveness in growing numbers and across the spectrum, including for the most heart-wrenching transgressions against them. We don't have to look hard to find their stories.

In Charleston, S.C., the loved ones of nine people gunned down in a historic black church spoke of their intent to forgive Dylann Storm Roof, the 21-year-old white gunman.

Closer to home, Neftali Ramirez was spared prison time, due largely to the extraordinary graciousness of the family of Erin Randall, who requested leniency for the 26-year-old. Ramirez, driving drunk in March, killed Randall, a 34-year-old Fulbright scholar who worked for the St. Paul-based Wilder Foundation.

"She would forgive the defendant," said Randall's sister Laura Pezan, "and I know that she wants me to forgive him, too."

These generous acts support what long-term research is revealing: While perpetrators certainly benefit from compassion, it is victims who have the potential to benefit the most from the act of forgiving, physiologically and psychologically. Many experience a return to health — stomachaches and headaches gone, a lessened risk of heart attacks and depression — and a sense of freedom to move forward with a robust life and relationships once thought impossible.

"Forgiveness is coming into its time, at last," said Mary Hayes Grieco, director of the Midwest Institute for Forgiveness Training ([forgivenesstraining.com](http://forgivenesstraining.com)) and author of "Unconditional Forgiveness."

"All of almost 4,000 forgiveness studies over the past 20 years are telling us what Grandma always knew: It is bad for us to hold onto resentments. It is good for us to forgive."

## Forgiveness workshop

Mary Hayes Grieco will offer her Wonderful Forgiveness Weekend Sept. 25-27 at the Carondelet Center in St. Paul. Go to [forgivenessstraining.com](http://forgivenessstraining.com) or call 612-874-6622.

I've been thinking about forgiveness lately, as I always do this time of year. Tonight at sundown, Jews around the world welcome our New Year, a solemn 10-day period of -teshuvah, or introspection, that encourages us to seek forgiveness and grant forgiveness to others and ourselves.

It's serious and humbling work if done correctly. And it's so hard to do correctly.

We mustn't forgive so quickly and superficially that true healing can't occur. We mustn't forgive so slowly that we throw away our own lives.

And we mustn't ever blame ourselves, or anybody else, for not being ready to do this difficult work.

### **'Forgive — and remember'**

Forgiveness, said Grieco, who has taught the topic for 25 years, "is an ancient and troublesome concept." But after several decades marked by cultural crassness and cynicism, people of all ages seem to be deciding that it's worth the trouble.

For her three most recent forgiveness workshops, Grieco had to add a few dozen chairs to the back of the room. And she jokes that, when people at parties learn about her work, they no longer disappear to get another drink.

"They lean in and say, 'Really? I've been thinking about forgiveness.' There is really a change in people's willingness to see this as something beneficial."

But Grieco is candid that the numbers remain small, due mostly to myths and misunderstandings about what forgiveness is and what it is not. The most stubborn is that, to succeed, we must forgive and forget.

"That never works," she said. "Some people are not trustworthy. They're damaging to us. We need to forgive — and remember."

For those reluctant to try forgiveness because the work will take forever, she assures them that it doesn't, "if you have been taught how to do it."

In her workshops, she guides people through what she calls Eight Steps to Freedom, beginning with a personal decision that you want to forgive. The eighth step is acknowledgment of the good in yourself and, perhaps, the goodness in the transgressor.

Regardless of whether you want to forgive a bad driver or a parent who sexually abused you, you must go through all eight steps, she said.

"Everything can heal," she said, recalling the two years of ultimately successful work she did with one woman. "It just takes shorter or longer."

Interestingly, forgiving oneself is among the hardest work people face. "We have a vision of ourselves. We think, 'I'm falling short!' It's part of the human condition to feel like a failure to some degree," she said.

"Even when we are victimized, almost everyone blames themselves."

### **Forgiveness is not linear**

A shared fascination with forgiveness led Megan Feldman Bettencourt to write the newly published book "Triumph of the Heart: Forgiveness in an Unforgiving World."

Bettencourt, a Denver-based journalist who has covered war, addiction and immigration, weaves research and science with real-life stories about the power of forgiveness. First, though, she had to sell herself on the concept.

“I had always considered forgiveness kind of a weak thing,” she said. “I’m really more of a grudge holder, pretty judgmental. I had this misconception of what forgiveness was.”

Then she met Azim Khamisa, whose 20-year-old son, Tariq, was shot dead by a 14-year-old gang member while delivering pizzas. Khamisa eventually founded a nonprofit dedicated to ending youth violence and invited the killer’s grandfather to join him.

“I’ve always written about and been obsessed about how people overcome the most difficult circumstances in life,” Bettencourt said. “Forgiveness was never a particular interest for me, until I met Azim.

“Azim said forgiveness is what enabled him to survive his son’s death and create a meaningful life.”

But she emphasized that this was far from a speedy process, noting that neither grief nor forgiveness is a linear process.

“Sometimes, people want to forgive, then feel murderous rage. I like to think of this as a practice, a habit, like compassion or mindfulness,” she said.

“People who forgive allow themselves to be honest with themselves, to honor their feelings. With Azim, that process took time. He was depressed, suicidal. But because he allowed himself to grieve, he didn’t get stuck in his grief, or stuck in depression.”

### **Remembering better times**

Another huge benefit of doing forgiveness work is that the process often brings back the gift of comforting memories long buried.

Bettencourt tells the story of a woman who was nearly killed by her mother, who was bipolar. After the daughter did her forgiveness work, childhood memories flooded back. She remembered her mother painstakingly sewing a beautiful green dress for her when she was a child, and how her mother was her supreme cheerleader, once telling her, “Well, of course, you should run for president of the United States!”

She, like many of those profiled in Bettencourt’s book, was freed to move forward.

And that is the point.

“We tend to think about forgiveness as being about the past,” Bettencourt said, “when really it’s about creating a better future.”

Grieco agreed wholeheartedly. “Forgiveness is about joy, and about being yourself and living purposefully,” she said.

“After healing a painful story, I see people ready to laugh again and remember their fun selves. ‘I used to be fun,’ they say, ‘and here I am again.’”

---

Gail Rosenblum writes two to three columns a week on people, social issues, trends, and the complexities of human relationships.

[gail.rosenblum@startribune.com](mailto:gail.rosenblum@startribune.com)    612-673-7350    @grosenblum