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The Ultimate Forgiveness

TO ERR IS HUMAN, TO FORGIVE DIVINE — TO BEFRIEND SOMEONE WHO TOOK THE LIFE OF A LOVED ONE IS ANOTHER MATTER. WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE WHOSE EMPATHY SEEMS TO KNOW NO BOUNDS?

BY VINCE BEISER

NOW THAT SHE LIVES IN OREGON, ABA GAYLE IS only able to get down to San Quentin State Prison a couple of times a year to visit her friend Douglas Mickey. Gayle used to see him often when she was in nearby Santa Rosa, but now contents herself by exchanging letters and phone calls with the man who stabbed her daughter to death.

Gayle is a lively, silver-haired grandmother of five with little oval glasses framing her gray-blue eyes. She recently retired from a career in health care. For eight years after the death of her daughter, Gayle was submerged in a miasma of depression and rage. Then one night, in an epiphany, she decided to forgive Mickey. She wrote him a letter saying so. From his cell on death row, where he has been since 1982, Mickey wrote back, full of remorse, and invited her to visit. The two corresponded, which led to more visits, until today Gayle says unabashedly, "I consider Douglas a good friend. He's such a wonderful man."

Gayle's story is extraordinary by any standards. But what's even more surprising is that it's not unique. She is one of a small but resolute society of individuals who have had a beloved relative murdered—and gone on to befriend the murderer.

Gayle and about 5,000 other people are members of a national anti-death penalty organization called Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation. It seems safe to assume there are other murder victims' relatives who oppose capital punishment but aren't affiliated with the group. Out of those many thousands, there are a much smaller number who say they have found it in their hearts to forgive the killer. And within that is an even smaller subset who have gone a step further, by actively supporting and befriending the person who took the life of someone they loved.

There's no way of knowing just how many people have made this bewildering emotional leap. When I started researching this story after meeting Gayle, I thought I'd find perhaps two or three. But each one I met knew of one or two others, and so on, until I had collected a list of more than a dozen. Renny Cushing, executive director of the Victims' Families group, who is not interested in forgiving the man who killed his father, estimates there are probably "scores" of them.

There's the San Diego investment banker who wants to see the man who gunned down his son released from Pelican Bay State Prison. The Connecticut reverend who helped get his son's murderer out of the penitentiary and later officiated at his wedding. The Kansas housewife who sent birthday gifts to her stepfather's slayer and tearfully witnessed his execution last year. The retired steelworker in Alaska who helped get the girl who butchered his grandmother off of death row and regularly writes her letters. The Texas machinist who visited his sister's killer, Karla Faye Tucker, in prison, spoke out on her behalf and went to her execution as a friend. It's not even an exclusively domestic phenomenon: After Newport Beach native Amy Biehl was beaten and stabbed to death by a mob in South Africa in 1993, her parents hired two of the convicted murderers to work for the foundation they had started in her name.

Most people consider the ability to forgive a generally positive trait. We don't tend to think highly of someone who holds a grudge against the co-worker who snagged the choice office, the in-laws who gave a cheap wedding present, the ex-wife who made off with the Loretta Lynn boxed CD set. The fact that these exceptional murder survivors exist answers one question: Can a person forgive someone who has killed someone they love? But it also forces us to think about other questions: about the nature and meaning of forgiveness, its possibilities and limits—and whether it's always a good thing.

These survivors—let's call them "befrienders," for the sake of convenience—are doing something beyond just holding fast to an abstract opposition to capital punishment or a belief in forgiveness. Forging a connection with someone you have every reason and right to hate is evidence of something much deeper—although what, exactly, isn't clear. Are these people proof of the human spirit's powers of mercy, of the infinite possibility of redemption, of the existence of God's love in this world? Are they born *Continued on Page 30*

Photograph by Peter Stember

Winifred Potenza with William Ernst. Potenza campaigned for years for Ernst's release after he was sentenced to 15 years to life in the death of Potenza's son.

Victims

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with an extra impulse to kindness, the opposite of whatever equally inscrutable impulse to evil drives a similarly small group of individuals to open fire on their high school classmates?

Or are they just plain nuts?

WHEN DOUGLAS MICKEY showed up at Eric Hanson's home outside of Auburn, Calif., on a September night in 1980, Hanson let him right in. The two men, both around 30, had been friends for several years. Mickey had previously bought pot from Hanson, who was a well-known local grower. Hanson had no idea, however, that Mickey had become gripped by a delusional paranoia. Mickey was convinced that Hanson was taking control of his mind and had to be killed. The two sat and talked for a while, and then Mickey suddenly pulled out a knife and drove it into Hanson. His screams awoke Catherine Blount, 19, Aba Gayle's daughter and a friend of Hanson who was sleeping upstairs. When she ran down to see what was going on, Mickey stabbed her several times. He fled, but was eventually arrested, tried and sentenced to death for the murders of Hanson and Blount.

Gayle recounted this story last fall in Cincinnati to a convent meeting room half-filled with retired nuns. Her lecture was part of "The Journey of Hope"—a speaking tour of murder victims' family members who are opposed to the death penalty.

The tour is not exactly a popular attraction. Over the course of the few days in which I tag along, most of the events are attended by no more than a few dozen people, generally at churches or religious schools. That doesn't bother Gayle. Despite having told her tale countless times, she delivers it to the nuns with verve.

When she learned Catherine had been murdered, Gayle tells them, she was shattered. She was a middle-class housewife, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, with two other children who had just entered medical school. She had never dealt with anything like this before. "I can tell you, I know what it's like to be temporarily insane," she says. "I was so full of rage, I actually lusted after revenge." She thought of Douglas Mickey as nothing but a "terrible monster," and intended to witness his execution. She passes around a picture of Catherine at 19—pretty, brunet, smiling—for the nuns to admire.

Gayle stayed sunk in fury and misery for years, until she eventually started reading books on world religions and spirituality. She wasn't observant—she didn't even believe in God at that point—but something in those books spoke to her pain. She was especially taken with one called "A Course in Miracles," which stresses "the healing power of forgiveness." Gayle soon found a study group that used the book as its foundation. Her beliefs began to change. "I learned one very important lesson," she tells the nuns. "That we are here to love one another." Then one day in her car, she says, she suddenly heard a voice saying: *You must forgive him! And you must let him know!*

"That voice was so loud and so clear it wouldn't let me sleep that night," she says. "It had me out of bed at 4 in the morning, typing a letter to the man who murdered my daughter."

In that letter, Gayle told Mickey that after the murder she had wanted to see him punished; but now, to her surprise, she found she could forgive him. "This does not mean that I think you are innocent or that you are blameless for what happened," she wrote. "What I learned is this: You are a divine child of God . . . . The Christ in me sends blessings to the Christ in you."

Within weeks, Mickey wrote her back, expressing repentance for his crime and inviting her to visit him in San Quentin. Gayle accepted. "We sat together that first visit and cried," she says. They cried for Gayle's loss, and Catherine's, and Mickey's—since, as Gayle says she realized, he too had lost his future the night Catherine died. They have stayed in close touch ever since. She has become a voice not only for Mickey but against the death penalty in general, giving talks like this around the country.

"I'd like to see him released," Gayle tells me later. "He has paid his debt to society. He's totally rehabilitated. It serves no purpose for him to be sitting on death row. It doesn't change what happened. It's a total waste of his life, and of taxpayers' money."

There doesn't seem to be any one common factor to explain why a person would befriend their loved one's killer. "Sometimes it comes at the initiation of the [victim's relative]. Sometimes it starts with the killer reaching out to family members," says Cushing, the Victims' Families group leader. "For some it comes from faith, for others, not."

Many of the befrienders say their actions were guided by their Christian beliefs, which emphasize forgiveness of even the worst sinners. After all, the story of Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of a father forgiving and continuing to love those who killed his only son.

That's how Bill Pelke sees it, anyway. Pelke is a retired steelworker who is now a full-time organizer with the Journey of Hope. He is a craggy, barrel-bodied man with a demeanor somewhere between Johnny Cash and Chris Cooper, exuding a palpable gravity and warmth tempered by deep sorrow.

Pelke's grandmother was robbed and stabbed to death in her home by a 15-year-old girl, Paula Cooper, who had tricked her into thinking she wanted to come in for Bible lessons. Cooper became the youngest female sentenced to death in the U.S. At the time, that was fine with Pelke. But many months later, moved by his faith and a vision of his grandmother he experienced one night, Pelke forgave Cooper, launching an ultimately successful campaign to have her death sentence commuted to 60 years. The two still keep up a warm correspondence.

"If Jesus loved Paula Cooper enough to die for her sins, who was I to say she should die?" says Pelke.

But Christian notions of forgiveness certainly don't motivate all the befrienders. Azim Khamisa, the San Diego investment banker whose 20-year-old son Tariq was shot dead while delivering a pizza, reached out to the shooter and unsuccessfully petitioned then-Gov. Gray Davis in 2001 to commute his sentence. Khamisa is a Muslim. Winifred Potenza campaigned for years for the freedom of the man who killed her son in a drunk-driving accident, and she is now close with him and his family. She is not particularly religious at all. "It just seemed like the right thing to do," she says simply.

Whatever the motive, befriending a loved one's killer often divides the befriender from other survivors. Pelke and Potenza, for example, fell out bitterly with other family members over their embrace of the killers.

One thing these befrienders have in common is their down-home, small-town, Middle American normality. Almost everyone on the Journey of Hope fit a similar profile. They are not the dreadlocked students, stylish movie stars or earnest clergy one usually sees protesting the death penalty. They are flyover-state folks, living in unglamorous towns and holding humdrum jobs. Their commonness bespeaks the commonness of murder in America. Every year, more than 16,000 people die at the hands of others in this country—an average of about 45 murders a day.

Those homicides inexorably create a permanent link between the killer and the victim's family. Most victims' families simply ignore that link, hope that the killer is caught and punished, and try to move on. Others feel it acutely, and react to the pain it causes by lashing back, making it their mission to see the killer punished as harshly as possible. The befrienders, on the other hand, try to turn that unwanted bond into something positive.

Such befriending requires not only a survivor willing to reach out to the loved one's killer, but for the killer to be willing to meet the family member, which many are not. (If you have even the ti-

niest shred of conscience, surely one of the hardest things imaginable is to meet a relative of someone you have murdered.) William Ernst, the man who slammed his car into Potenza's son's, was willing to meet with her despite his tremendous remorse.

"Without the love I got in that visiting room, I wouldn't have become deserving of another chance," says Ernst, who received two concurrent sentences of 15 years to life. "I wouldn't be free, or deserving of freedom, without Winifred's involvement." Released after seven years behind bars, he now runs a prosperous plumbing business and has a wife and five children.

It also seems to help if the killer has what are called in death penalty cases "mitigating factors"—youth, a history of mental illness or abuse, and so on. Douglas Mickey, for instance, was by all accounts mentally ill. Tony Hicks, the boy who shot Tariq Khamisa, was only 14 at the time. "I see Tariq as the victim of his assailant, and his assailant as a victim of society," says Khamisa, a neatly coiffed man with a calm, thoughtful manner, seated in his spotless home in a cookie-cutter development. "I'm angry not at him, but at the circumstances that push children into joining gangs, that put a young boy on a dark street with a handgun."

Several befrienders say forgiving turned out to be something they did as much for themselves as for the killer. It's a way of putting the whole thing behind them, of laying down at least part of the hideous burden of grief and loss they'll be carrying for the rest of their lives, of obtaining something like closure.

"Forgiveness frees the forgiver," says Khamisa. "You do it for yourself. It's essentially a selfish thing." After Tariq was murdered, Khamisa started a foundation dedicated to reducing youth violence. He now spends much of his free time giving talks to schools, churches and anywhere else he can, often accompanied by Ples Felix, the grandfather of the boy who shot Tariq. For Khamisa, that's a far worthier way of honoring his son's memory than seeking vengeance. "You can become bitter and angry, but what kind of life is that? If I'd gone that way, where would I be today?" he asks. "Eight years ago I was emptied of all joy and filled with despair. I found a way back through my response to tragedy."

I asked Bill Pelke whether he was concerned that Paula Cooper might be taking advantage of him to boost her chances of getting paroled, something for which she will be eligible after serving 30 years of her sentence. "Forgiving her did more for me than for her," he says without hesitation. "Regardless of whether she's sincere, I did the right thing." (He does, incidentally, think she is remorseful and a changed person.) "It's not forgive and forget," he goes on. "I'll never forget what happened to Grandma. But it's the getting rid of the desire to get even. If you hold on to that, it will destroy you."

But it's one thing to let go of hate and anger so that you can move on with your life. It's another order of magnitude to do what Pelke did. His grandmother was stabbed 33 times with a 12-inch butcher knife. She was found in a pool of blood in the dining room where the family had gathered every year for holidays. Yet

Pelke went to meet the attacker in prison, looked her in the eye and said, "I forgive you and I love you." He went on to prove it by helping to save her life.

To Sharon Tewksbury, that's not evidence that Pelke is a man of compassion. It's a sign that he's crazy. "To forgive is one thing, but to become involved like that with the murderer is insanity," she says. Tewksbury, wearing jeans and a sweater embroidered with the U.S. flag, has a certain authority on the subject. In 1983, her husband was knifed in the Ohio convenience store where he worked part time. He managed to stagger out to a pay phone and call her; she arrived in time to ride with him in the ambulance to the hospital. He died within hours. She had no qualms when his killer was executed.

Tewksbury is the national volunteer coordinator for Parents of Murdered Children, a nationwide group that operates out of two cramped rooms at the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. The office's walls are plastered with hundreds of photos, mostly of children and young people: a teenage boy in a graduation gown; a smiling little girl holding a cat; a youthful mother feeding her baby with a bottle. All of them were murdered.

The handful of staff and volunteers here are not big on forgiveness. Their main mission is support to homicide victims' loved ones through a network of chapters in 24 states. One of their programs involves circulating petitions opposing parole for murderers.

"My church taught that unless you forgive, you are not forgiven," says Tewksbury. "But for me to say that to the killer would be like saying, 'It's OK that you did this, my husband's life didn't matter.' It's not for me to forgive; it's for God. My gut feeling is that many people say they forgive because of outside pressure—because it's what their faith requires."

As for taking the next step, befriending your loved one's killer: "I think there must be some emotional, psychological reason for that, and it can't be good," she says.

Certainly losing a loved one to murder is, to put it mildly, destabilizing. In a major study of family survivors of homicide by the Medical University of South Carolina, the authors noted that "clinicians and criminal justice professionals are often staggered by the depth of emotional suffering experienced by survivors . . . the sheer magnitude of distress and the need to ventilate deeply rageful and fearful feelings." The study found that survivors typically display "intense, overwhelming levels" of "rage, terror, numbness and depression." Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder are common.

Given all that, it's not surprising that some experts, such as Dr. Paul Berg, an Oakland-based psychologist who testifies in death-penalty cases, think befrienders are not necessarily acting compassionately, but rather pathologically. Berg sees it as an example of "cathexis"—transferring one's emotional energy from its appropriate object, such as your wife, to someone else, such as her murderer. "Some psychiatrists will tell you forgiveness is healing," Berg says. "I don't believe it. I think it's overrated."

The emotional-transference hypothesis could certainly explain the case of Winifred Potenza, a slender, middle-aged artist with mournful brown eyes who lives in a wood-shingled home on a quiet street in Santa Rosa. In September, 1989, just a few blocks from her house, a drunken William Ernst doing 70 mph plowed into the car carrying her 21-year-old son Jonathan, and his fiancée, Lisa Rodriguez. Both were killed instantly. Ernst, a young man almost Jonathan's age, had already been convicted once of driving under the influence.

"I went nuts. I wanted him to suffer," Potenza says. "I would have killed my neighbor if I thought it would bring back my kid." Potenza spent months lobbying the district attorney to prosecute Ernst for murder, not the manslaughter charge such killings usually receive. She got her wish: Ernst was convicted of murder and sentenced to 15 years to life.

But just as the judge pronounced the sentence, Potenza says, she had a stunning emotional insight. There in the courtroom, with Ernst's weeping mother just a few yards away, she saw him as a person for the first time, and realized the whole thing was a tragic accident.

"It was like waking up," she says. "I thought, 'Of course I forgive him.'" She found herself getting up, embracing Ernst and telling him so. "It felt beautiful. I forgave him completely. I've never held it against him since."

Then, she says, she had to make amends. For the next six years, Potenza became Ernst's staunchest advocate, visiting him weekly in prison and lobbying all the officials she could find to release him. He was finally paroled. He and Potenza remain close friends.

Berg sees such relationships as possible evidence that the relative is clinging to a sense of connection with the murdered family member. If befrienders do indeed suffer from an inability to stop fixating on a dead loved one, then their loved one's killers can be prime enablers of their obsession. "By the time I went to San Quentin, everyone was tired of talking about Catherine with me," Gayle says. "Everyone had moved on. But Douglas would let me talk all day about her."

There may be other unhealthy explanations. Families of murder victims—especially parents—are often racked with guilt. A mother or brother or granddaughter of a murdered man might be left asking themselves, "Why didn't I apologize for that argument

last Christmas?" "Why didn't I tell him I loved him more often?" And perhaps most piercingly, "Why couldn't I protect him from this?" From that perspective, it seems plausible that some befrienders feel that by forgiving the killer, they themselves become worthy of absolution. Bill Pelke, for instance, had his breakthrough moment about Paula Cooper at a moment of great personal duress: He was divorced, bankrupt, and had recently broken up with his girlfriend. Perhaps he felt in need of compassion himself, and externalized that desire.

It's also common for murder victims' relatives to feel distressingly powerless vis-à-vis the killers. Here are people who caused you unimaginable pain, and you can do nothing to them. Could it be that forgiving the killers—much like prosecuting them—is a way of asserting power over them, a way of redressing that sense of imbalance? To err, after all, is human, but to forgive is divine. Forgiveness is something only God and someone who loved the victim can truly give. To absolve a murderer is almost the reverse of taking their life.

How you explain the befrienders probably reflects your own answer to the question: Are human beings basically good creatures who sometimes do terrible things, or are some of us just fundamentally bad? If you believe that a murderer is redeemable no matter what his or her sins, then the befrienders look like saints. But if you believe that a murderer is by definition an evil person, then the befrienders look like saps out of touch with reality.

Most of us have fairly fixed notions about these things. We imagine we would have a pretty clear idea of our answer to the question: How would you react if someone you love were murdered?

It's a safe bet you wouldn't say, "I'd make friends with the murderer." What, then, does it mean that a substantial number of people have done exactly that? ■

Vince Beiser last wrote for the magazine about maximum-security units in California's prisons.