

Book Review

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No Enemy to Conquer: Forgiveness in an Unforgiving World, Michael Henderson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).

Michael Henderson is an English journalist who lived for many years in Oregon. During this time, he was a member of the American board of Moral Rearmament (MRA). MRA, which changed its name to Initiatives of Change in 2001, was an informal network of people around the world that had Christian roots. Its core belief was that if we want to change the world, then we need to start with ourselves. One of its best known initiatives was the establishment of a center for reconciliation at Caux, Switzerland, which has acted as the venue for many encounters intended to promote understanding between those divided by conflict. Its work has been described by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson as an “important contribution to one of the greatest achievements in the entire record of modern statecraft: the astonishingly rapid Franco-German reconciliation after 1945.”

Coming from such a background, it is perhaps not too surprising that Michael Henderson is what I would term a “missionary for forgiveness,” and this book is his latest attempt to proselytize about its transformative power. In the preface, Michael shares an anecdote. He was about to make a presentation on forgiveness when he was asked “Is your approach journalistic or analytical?” Taken aback and failing to point out that the two approaches were not mutually exclusive, Michael replied, “Journalistic.” “Ah,” his interlocutor observed, “then you’ll tell stories.” And that is what he does. As he phrases it, the book “is a celebration of men and women at their best” in the hope that their stories will strengthen “the forgiveness muscle” in the reader, and it has the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach.

The strengths lie in the case studies of people who have found the courage to forswear hatred and the pursuit of revenge in response to abuse and harm, “surrendering the right to get even,” as Lewis Smedes has phrased it. The reader cannot help but be touched by the exemplary action of those who have refused to embrace the seductive identity of “victim” but have sought to free themselves of the burdens of past suffering by seeking new types of relationship with their erstwhile enemies.

Many of these stories are well-known to those of us who participate in what we might irreverently call the “forgiveness circuit.” Some of the people have been featured in the wonderful “F-Word Exhibition” created by the London-based organization, The Forgiveness Project (<http://www.theforgivenessproject.com>). The examples are empowering, particularly for those of us who have direct experience of the power of forgiveness as a process in transforming relationships. Such processes constitute one of the key means of nonviolent conflict transformation at the interpersonal level.

What is less clear is the significance of forgiveness processes in relation to conflicts taking place beyond the interpersonal level. Michael Henderson tries to address this issue through some of the cases covered in the book, implying that encounters between individuals from different sides of a divide can have a multiplier effect that can ripple out to wider constituencies and publics. Thus, he cites the example of the father of the murdered journalist Daniel Pearl, who has engaged as a Jewish intellectual in public dialogue on interfaith issues with Akbar Ahmed, a Muslim academic. In another of his illustrations, he refers to the Israeli–Palestinian network of Combatants for Peace who have foresworn their former reliance on military might and are now committed to contact and dialogue encounters, “which all each side to understand the other’s narrative via the approach of reconciliation rather than conflict.”

However impressed one might be by the moral (and physical) courage of such people, they also reveal the weakness of Henderson’s storytelling approach. The narratives are based on the accounts of the participants themselves, with the result that, at times, I felt as if I was reading a press release or an extract from a funding application for the different initiatives. There are very few hard questions asked. We read about a member of a Christian militia during the Lebanese civil war, for example. In 2000, he issued a public apology for his actions during the war and asked for forgiveness. Subsequently, other former-fighters from different militias and confessional groups joined in issuing their own apologies and expressing repentance for their past actions and attitudes. No one could say that such initiatives lack significance. But the really difficult question is how significant of an impact such examples of moral courage have had on the dynamics of confessional relationships in Lebanon.

This raises a wider question that is not addressed in the book. Just how significant are all the encounters that are orchestrated between members and representatives of groups on opposite sides of the conflict line as a mode of peacemaking? Of course, the participants might undergo some attitude change—starting to see the “other” as a human-being—during the encounter. But so what? How long does the change last once the dialogue session has ended? How much salience do the participants have in their own communities?

Moreover, is it not possible to see some dialogue encounters and other forms of “contact” as a form of therapy for the participants that can, in effect, reinforce stereotypes and division lines? As one Israeli Jewish friend advised me, “Jews in Israel participate in dialogue sessions with Palestinian Arabs so they can sleep at nights. Palestinians participate so that the Jews cannot sleep at night.”

Another problem with the storytelling approach is that people tell different stories according to their perspective and interests. The result is that the truth that is presented can be shorn of all reference to positions and points of view at odds with the perspective of the narrator. One example from the book comes to mind. In February 1945, allied bombing raids on the German city of Dresden resulted in the slaughter of tens of thousands of German civilians. According to the account presented by Henderson, the raid remained an embarrassment and a cause of shame to the British. Following the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the political changes that ensued, Dresdeners issued a call for help in restoring the city’s baroque Protestant church that had been destroyed in 1945. A fund was started in the United Kingdom to help with the restoration, and in October 2005, the *Frauenkirche* was re-consecrated and presented as a powerful symbol of Anglo–German reconciliation.

But what is not presented in this account is the manner in which the bombing of Dresden has always been a contested narrative, which different interests have tried to use for their own purposes. Furthermore, the reconstruction of the Church of our Lady did not take place without a degree of controversy and conflict. Significant sections of the Dresden public wanted the ruins to remain, as this was the site where they met to remember the victims of the air-raids during the years of the German Democratic Republic. The site was also important as it was there, during the late 1980s, that protestors gathered to bear witness to their opposition to the state. The point that needs to be born in mind is that gestures of apology, processes of forgiveness, and initiatives towards reconciliation never take place in a political vacuum, and if we want to further our understanding of the transformational potential of such actions, we need to factor a range of contextual factors into our analysis.

Having identified what might be considered some of the weaknesses of the book, I feel I ought to return to its strength. I know from my own experience and from the responses of my students when Michael Henderson came to present a seminar to the class: people are moved and inspired by stories. And Michael Henderson is a wonderful storyteller.