

Personal Reflections on Public Acts of Forgiveness

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I imagine that when most of us think of acts of forgiveness, images of modest indiscretions for which we have offered or sought recompense come to mind. In a general sense, we seldom associate forgiveness with externally initiated acts that result in irreparable loss. When loss exceeds personally acceptable thresholds, I believe that most individuals perceive such challenges as something that must be endured rather than forgiven. Examples of extreme loss that are likely to evoke thoughts and actions aimed at personal recovery rather than forgiveness include: death, gross disfigurement, and permanent psychological damage of loved ones due to acts of random violence; politically initiated or politically condoned acts of cultural/racial genocide, terrorism, and the use of weapons of mass destruction.

The reader should note the careful insertion of the word "most." I deliberately choose this term because I believe that there is a small and select number of individuals who are capable of forgiving the most unimaginable atrocity. However, I believe that those capable of achieving extraordinary feats of forgiveness tend to organize their pattern of expressing personal loss in a public arena around two theoretical possibilities that are interrelated.

As previously indicated, loss may trigger thoughts and actions aimed at recovery. According to Freire (1970), Fanon (1968), Weinstein and Platt (1973), the people who have suffered loss recognize that they must forgive those who have harmed them in order to free themselves from the pain of the experience. According to this conceptualization, forgiveness is a prerequisite for recovery. Significantly, embedded in this perception of recovery is the notion that the person who has absorbed the loss possesses the ability to assist the person who inflicted the harm in his/her own recovery.

The second pattern of expressing personal loss in a public manner involves forgiveness as a means by which the person(s) who suffered the loss strive to achieve a transcendent state. This idea is perhaps best explained by providing an example. I was born in Pulaski, Tennessee, the birthplace of the Klu Klux Klan. In addition to weekly politically sanctioned cross burnings, African American citizens were subjected to periodic violent acts as a means of maintaining control of social, political, and economic affairs.

When I was in junior high school, a classmate was drowned by the Klan. Knowledge of who killed Robert and how he died was a necessary el-

ement in maximizing the intended impact of the act on the Black community. The community was devastated. This loss touched the private lives of every Black man, woman, and child within our community. I remember going to church on the Sunday following his death. The minister echoed a theme of forgiveness. "It is not our Christian duty to judge these men, we are to forgive them, we are to pray for their souls." I still remember this admonishment. In the weeks that followed Robert's death, community leaders organized structured means of remembering his death... special ceremonies and other ways of honoring his life were developed. Most importantly, the leadership of the community met with public officials, issuing an ultimatum that never again would a Black life perish

in this manner. To this date, no other Black person has lost his or her life in the same way.

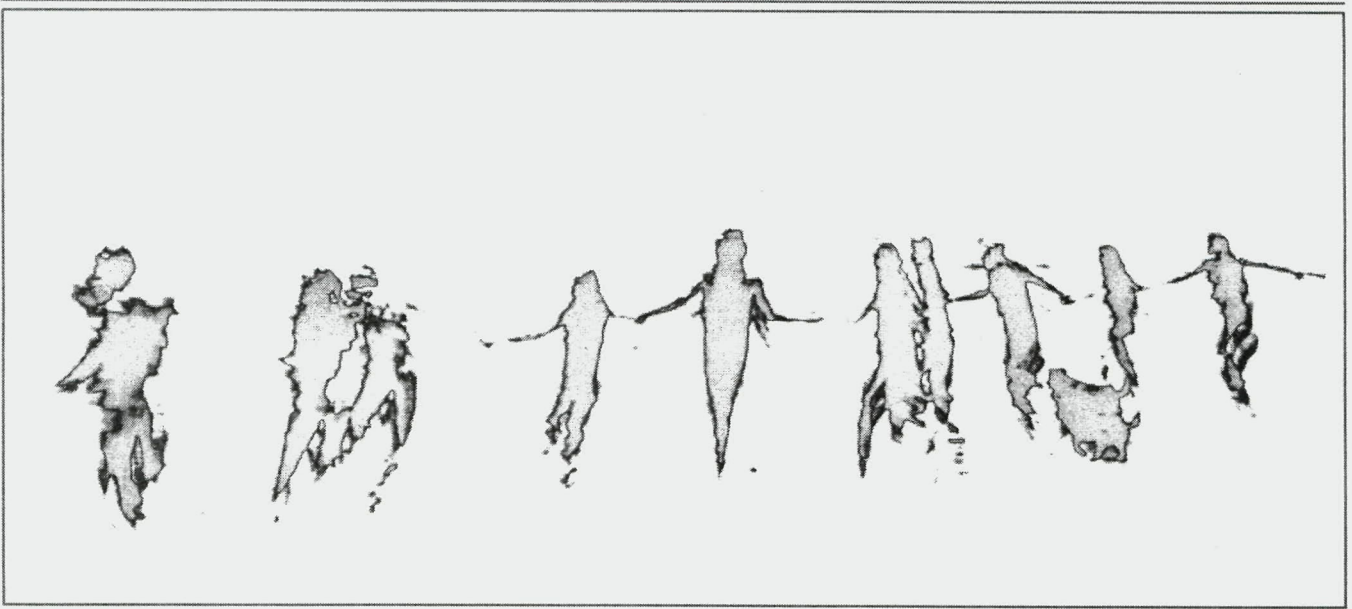
I consider this example of forgiveness as being transcendent. In that the act of private loss was publicly forgiven it helped the communities (Black and White) to overcome the event and to heal. Robert's life was renewed because his memory is forever associated with a significant social change. Indeed, Robert is still alive. Men and women of my own age, when we speak of this event, almost always use the present tense.

When forgiveness results in extending the memory of someone who is deceased, the forgiver most likely experiences that part of the self closely aligned with a creative force or God. For a moment in time, the

forgiver connects with the creative force and is capable of producing life. I believe that forgiveness is the dynamic that makes this improbable act possible. □

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