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## 🔍 Is Forgiveness the Only Option to Heal From Historical Trauma?

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### Is Forgiveness the Only Option to Heal From Historical Trauma?

I recently attended a play put on by a Native production company under the command of the acclaimed Lakota playwright, Larissa FastHorse. Titled “**Urban Rez**,” the players interacted with the audience as part of the play, to create an experiential event that examined the diverse realities of Indians in Southern California, including the history of genocide. The most significant moment for me was when the question was posed: Can you forgive?

What was meant was, can you as a Native person, forgive what was done to your people by the United States? One audience member, a non-Native, turned to me said “You have to forgive if you want to heal.” I have been thinking about it ever since.

Forgiveness is, of course, a foundational principle in Christianity, and naturally the concept of forgiveness has permeated American society. We hear a lot about forgiveness being a necessary part of individual healing, whether it is healing from being wronged in a personal



relationship, or even from the violence of rape or other kinds of sexual or physical assault. Forgiveness is trendy these days among new agers and psychologists as well. Underpinning arguments about forgiveness is a sense of moral obligation.

However, **not all psychologists agree that forgiveness** is necessary to healing. Some argue that we haven't been given the freedom not to forgive, **and that sometimes forgiveness is not possible**, or even the best option, especially when the person who has committed the wrong hasn't earned the right to be forgiven. **Others see the imperative to forgive** an abuser as itself abusive for the way it shames those who have been victimized when they aren't able to forgive. In a framework where forgiveness is a moral obligation, the inability to forgive is thus a moral deficiency.

As a survivor of domestic violence early in my adult life, I learned that forgiveness was not needed for me to overcome my trauma. What I needed was to get away from the abusive relationship. Once I did, I learned behavior patterns to avoid repeating those kinds of relationships. If the goal was healing and emotional well-being, forgiveness was irrelevant.

Healing from trauma is not only about liberation from the circumstances of mistreatment, but also from a mental state of victimization, to not be stuck in a state of trauma. The ultimate objective in order to achieve peace of mind is acceptance. Forgiveness might be one path to acceptance, experts tell us, but it isn't the only one.

Things become far more complex at the group level. Communities or nations who are surviving wars or other conflicts face the extremely challenging prospects of having to rebuild their communities, as well as heal from the psychological trauma inflicted by violence in its many forms. Even more complicated is when peoples who engaged in violent conflict must continue to coexist with each other after the cessation of violence.

Some conflicts are so deep, pervasive, or old that they are said to be **intractable**, or endless. And that the psychological damage caused by extreme violence may never be overcome in many individuals. Yet intractability does not imply hopelessness. Innovative approaches toward resolving conflict continue to evolve. In recent years, for example, we have seen the trend toward truth and reconciliation commissions (TRC's).

TRC's have been applied in numerous contexts, perhaps most famously in South Africa after the defeat of the oppressive apartheid regime. In that case, the majority black population, having come to power, **resolved to promote national unity** with its minority white population who had committed extreme human rights violations during its rule. It was conceived in the spirit of restorative justice, rather than "retributive" justice, and those who admitted to committing politically motivated atrocities were offered the possibility of amnesty (though few were actually given it).

The South African TRC has been hailed as a remarkable step toward the healing of the nation, but was **not the ultimate panacea for national unity**, and not without criticism. One of



the problems was identified by secularists who condemned the religious centrality of some of the commissioners (who were clergy) and the confession and forgiveness framework.



The TRC process has also been applied in Canada, but limited its inquiry to the abuses of the residential schools. The commission found the Canadian government to have committed cultural genocide, and although **recommendations were made** to “redress” the schools’ legacy, **it remains to be seen** how it will benefit aboriginal communities in the long run.



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It’s crucial to point out that unlike in South Africa where the aggrieved populations came into political power, gaining control over their own destinies, First Nations people in Canada still live in a system of colonial domination and have gained no real power as a result of the TRC process. The abuser, in other words, is still in charge, just as is the case in the U.S.

It seems to me the better question to ask than “can you forgive” is “what will it take to heal from historical trauma, and heal the relationships between indigenous peoples and settler governments and societies?” This way the oppressed aren’t held to what may be an impossible standard—and thus blamed for their wounds. And it also implies a shared responsibility for healing, by recognizing both the oppressor’s role in the inflicting of trauma, and the victim’s responsibility to take healing into their own hands.



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