

'...probably one of the most important projects in the world today.'

Emma Thompson, actor

· · · · Marina Cantacuzino

the

FORGIVENESS

project

stories for a
vengeful age

Forewords by Desmond Tutu and Alexander McCall Smith

Foreword

This book is one of the most powerful, affecting documents I have ever read. The title tells you what it is about – forgiveness, a familiar and straightforward enough concept for most of us, even if it is an extraordinarily complex issue when one gets close up to it and starts to scrutinize the subtleties involved. Anybody who has ever accepted another’s apology – even for some slight offence – has practised forgiveness, but few of us have felt the need to consider the broader implications of this important issue. That is where The Forgiveness Project, Marina Cantacuzino’s ground-breaking exploration of forgiveness, comes into its own. This book tells the story of that project, from its early stages of private research and conversations, to its emergence as a growing and increasingly influential movement. It is not a dry historical or philosophical account of the subject – far from it: this is a collection of personal testaments that makes for intensely moving reading. These accounts of how forgiveness has been wrestled with by people caught up in personal trauma and tragedy provide fascinating insights into individual lives and into a central moral challenge that each of those lives has encountered.

My own interest in forgiveness arose in the context of my earlier professional involvement with the criminal law. As a law professor I found myself thinking and writing about issues of responsibility:

In what circumstances are we fully responsible for actions that may harm others? What excuses do we have? What is the purpose of punishment? These are all lively topics in the academic debate surrounding criminal law, and, indeed, in the everyday practice of the criminal law in the courts. I talked about these issues with colleagues and with students but in many of the discussions that I had there seemed to be a vital element lacking. The criminal law may be prepared to excuse in certain circumstances – as where, for example, there has been provocation or coercion – but it is not overly concerned with forgiveness. Indeed, in one view forgiveness may even go so far as to defeat some of the aims of the criminal justice system, given that the criminal law has a deterrent role to play. If you tell potential offenders in advance that they will be forgiven, then the efficacy of whatever sanction you may have up your sleeve is considerably reduced.

That may be so, but it still seemed to me that without forgiveness any notion of a rehabilitative or healing system of justice was incomplete. Forgiveness, it seemed to me, provided resolution that the system otherwise could not achieve. Any discussion of responsibility and its consequences without an element of forgiveness was like a symphony without the final movement. Human affairs require resolution, I think, in much the same way that music does. There is a deep human need for it, just as the ear anticipates and yearns for musical resolution.

My interest in forgiveness in that context led me to explore the considerable philosophical literature that had grown up around the subject in the last few decades of the 20th century. That was a period in which an increasing number of philosophers became interested in debating why we needed forgiveness and in what circumstances forgiving was the right thing to do. It is interesting to observe that this philosophical debate had nothing to do with

the religious discussion of forgiveness – indeed it possibly arose precisely because fewer and fewer people were having the duty to forgive drummed into them as part of their religious education.

At the same time that philosophers were debating forgiveness the subject was being aired in a very much more engaged context by politicians and civic leaders seeking to negotiate the settlement of long-running political and military conflicts. This was forgiveness at the macro level – where large groups of people were being urged to forgive other groups with which they had been locked in conflict. Several seemingly intractable disputes were eased in this way through public bodies into whose very existence the principle of forgiveness was written, one of the best-known examples being that of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. These initiatives attracted widespread interest, and many people who might not have thought much about forgiveness suddenly saw its healing power in operation. They also saw an outstanding instance of it in the example of Nelson Mandela, who publicly embraced those who had wronged him. That example had an immense and lasting impact on a world that had grown accustomed to talk of retribution and the humiliation of one's enemies.

I found that my academic interest in forgiveness was to emerge again in my career as a novelist. When I embarked upon the first novel in my Botswana series, *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, I did not have a very clear idea of the character of the main protagonist, Precious Ramotswe. That, I thought, would emerge as I got to know her better in the course of writing the book. I had not, therefore, planned to make her a particular proponent of forgiveness, but that is exactly what she became; it seemed entirely natural. And so, in the course of the subsequent volumes in the series, we saw Precious Ramotswe often forgive those whose misdeeds she had unmasked. That rather goes against the grain of the classic novel

of crime and punishment: the readers of such books very much want the perpetrator to be identified and punished, and indeed feel cheated if that does not happen. Interestingly enough, the fact that Precious Ramotswe always forgave did not attract protest – quite the opposite: the readers approved of her exercise of forgiveness and seemed to concur in her judgement that as long as a suitable attitude of apology was adopted – and sometimes even if it was not – the forgiving of the wrongdoer was still the right thing to do. Resolution once again: if you punish somebody, you are often only punishing yourself. Forgiveness aids healing – lets the healing fountain start, as W.H. Auden put it.

My personal understanding of forgiveness has been vastly increased by reading Marina Cantacuzino's masterly framing of these stories. That sets the scene for what follows – the individual narratives of people whose experiences come so convincingly to life in these pages. Their experiences cover the whole painful range of human mistreatment by others, but what sets them apart from many such accounts is that glowing element of forgiveness. That transforms what might otherwise so easily have been a series of misery-inducing memoirs of suffering into the most extraordinary, positive celebrations of what the human spirit can do to rise above evil – to negate evil not by returning it with further evil, but by stopping it dead in its tracks, by freeing its victims of its hold.

This book, then, has a real transformative power. It is a significant document of the human spirit. It is an important and memorable statement of hope. To read it is like standing in the light of a gentle, healing sun. It is another reason to feel hopeful at a time when people seem to be turning against one another and we are in danger of facing a bleak future of religious and social confrontation. Every one of these accounts is the clearest and most convincing of refutations of those messages of conflict and hatred,

the best answer we can give to them. Marina Cantacuzino points out that forgiveness is neither black nor white, but is, she feels, grey. She is right – but what a warming, vivid grey it is.

Alexander McCall Smith
January 2015