

Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy

A Discussion and Reflection Guide for Groups and Individuals

Chapter 1: The Nickel Mines Amish

1. Prior to the tragedy at Nickel Mines, what were your perceptions of Amish people? What were the sources of those impressions?
2. How did the Nickel Mines tragedy change your views of the Amish?
3. If a shooting of ten schoolgirls had occurred in a suburban or urban setting, do you think it would have attracted as much interest as the shooting at Nickel Mines? In other words, how much of the public interest in this story was related to the “Amish factor”?
4. The authors suggest that the Amish do not explicitly teach religion in their schools or in their churches. How then do they pass on their beliefs to their children?
5. Chapter 1 provides some cultural background on the Amish community. What was your biggest surprise in learning about Amish faith and life?
6. What do you consider the most significant or biggest difference between Amish culture and mainstream American values?
7. It is often said that the Amish are a countercultural people. What are the key Amish values, in your mind, that challenge the cultural assumptions of mainstream society?
8. How does Amish faith and religious practice differ from that of other Protestant groups in North America?
9. At the time of the shooting, many journalists asked if the Amish were prepared for such a tragedy. How would you answer that question? In what ways were they better prepared than other Americans? In what ways were they less prepared?
10. At the end of Chapter 1, the authors suggest that the last safe place in America’s collective imagination had disappeared with the shooting at Nickel Mines. Do you agree with that assessment? Why or why not?

Chapter 2: The Shooting

1. A number of Amish people compared the school shooting to the September 11 attack on the twin towers in New York City. In what ways were these two events similar? Or is a comparison inappropriate?
2. Some people were surprised to learn that, although the Amish are pacifist, some Amish men own guns for hunting. Do you consider the use of guns for hunting inconsistent with pacifist principles? If so, why?

3. Consider and discuss some of the ironies that emerged from the tragedy. The killer could not forgive God for the death of his twenty-day-old daughter nine years after her death. He also said he hated himself, suggesting an inability to forgive himself for his own shortcomings.
4. What might be some reasons that Roberts targeted the West Nickel Mines School?
5. How would you describe some of the chief differences between an Amish school and the typical public elementary school in American society?
6. As you reflect on the horror that visited the schoolhouse on Monday morning, October 2, how might you have responded if you had been the teacher? If you had been the parent of one of the children?
7. One of the thirteen-year-old girls told the killer, "Shoot me first." Some observers think she meant "shoot me first before you molest me." Others think she meant "shoot me first" in the hope that her death would satisfy Roberts's anger and he would not shoot the others. What are your thoughts about the meaning of her statement?
8. How was the response of the Amish community on the afternoon of the shooting different from or similar to the response you think non-Amish parents would have had if this tragedy had happened in a public school?
9. At the end of Chapter 2, the authors quote an Amish mother, who did not have children in the schoolroom, as saying that the children were martyrs. Do you agree? Why or why not?
10. What might have been done to prevent the tragedy at Nickel Mines? What might be done to prevent similar tragedies in the future?

Chapter 3: The Aftermath

1. When did you first hear about the shooting? What was your response?
2. What was it about this particular tragedy that brought such a great outpouring of sympathy and support for the Amish community from the outside world?
3. An Amish man who lived near the school said, "We were all Amish this week." What did he mean?
4. What most surprised you about the Amish response to the tragedy?
5. What most surprised you about the larger society's response to the tragedy?
6. Non-Amish people in other communities also reach out to their friends and neighbors in times of tragedy. What did you find unique about how the Amish responded to victims of the tragedy within their own community?
7. The Amish typically have a public viewing of the body of the deceased in their home over several days before the funeral. What does this suggest about Amish acceptance of death?
8. What do we learn about the Amish view of death and children in the song "I Was a Little Child," which was read at one of the funerals?

9. The Amish destroyed the school building soon after the shooting. Would it have been better to save it as a memorial, or at least create some type of memorial at the site, rather than turn it back into a horse pasture?
10. What do we learn about the Amish view of life and God's providence from their reaction to changing the security in their schools as a result of this tragedy?

Chapter 4: The Surprise

1. People respond in different ways when they are victims of injustice—anger, rage, revenge, silence, acceptance, and forgiveness or more often a combination of these responses. How might you have responded to the Nickel Mines tragedy if some of the children had been *your* daughters, granddaughters, or nieces?
2. What was unique and distinctive about the Amish response to the shooting?
3. The Amish expressed forgiveness to the widow and her family even though they did not hold any direct responsibility for the injustice. Is it possible or necessary to forgive people who are not directly responsible for a wrong?
4. Although the schoolchildren were the primary victims in this tragedy, were there other victims beyond the ten girls and their families?
5. Why, do you think, did Amish people who were not directly wronged feel responsible to express forgiveness to the killer's family?
6. How did the Amish express forgiveness in ways other than words? What does this say about the Amish understanding of forgiveness?
7. Some people in the outside world were shocked at the speed of Amish forgiveness. Do you think the swift forgiveness was sincere and genuine?
8. The Amish were very uncomfortable receiving recognition for expressing forgiveness. What were the roots of their discomfort?
9. Not only was the watching world surprised by the swift Amish forgiveness, the Amish were surprised by the worldwide attention and applause for their forgiveness. One Amish man said, "Our forgiveness was just standard Christian forgiveness." What did he mean by that?
10. How did the Amish find meaning and solace in the deep sorrow and pain that they experienced in this tragedy?

Chapter 5: The Reactions

1. Recall your responses when you first heard about the Nickel Mines shooting. What were your feelings and reactions?
2. Why did the Amish forgiveness story become news? Why did anyone care about forgiveness? Why were journalists and their audiences interested in forgiveness?

3. Do you agree with the columnist who wrote, “The Amish show the rest of us what true Christianity is like”?
4. The Amish showed little public anger or outrage to the killings. What is your response to the columnist who asked, in essence, “Do we really want to live in a society in which no one gets angry when children are slaughtered?”
5. Do you think that some injustices or crimes are so horrific that forgiveness is inappropriate? If so, what might be some of those crimes?
6. The authors cite the book *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. Simon Wiesenthal, a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, was asked to forgive a dying SS officer. Wiesenthal responded to the officer’s request with silence. What would you have done? What *should* you have done?
7. Should forgiveness be dependent on a perpetrator saying “I am sorry” or requesting forgiveness? Or is forgiveness a gift, regardless of the perpetrator’s response?
8. In your mind, is it appropriate to forgive someone for evil acts he or she committed against *other* people?
9. We may think we know what forgiveness is until we have to define it. How would you define it?
10. Is forgiveness ever appropriate, under any circumstances, for men who abuse women?

Chapter 6: The Habit of Forgiveness

1. When you first learned of the Amish expression of forgiveness, did you assume it was authentic? Offered for the sake of public relations? Naïve? Possible only because the killer had taken his own life and would not have to stand trial?
2. The authors describe the Anabaptist tradition and Amish culture as supplying a repertoire of responses that shape life, particularly in times of stress or in situations that demand immediate responses. How would you describe your own culture and cultural values? What repertoire shapes your responses to tragedy?
3. Which of the stories in this chapter surprised you? Inspired you? Disturbed you? Made you angry?
4. If you have been a primary or secondary victim of crime, are you able to identify with the Amish in these accounts? Why or why not?
5. If you have not been a crime victim, do you imagine that your responses would be different from or similar to those of the Amish in this chapter?
6. In two stories, those that occurred in Monroe County and Mondovi, Wisconsin, the Amish participated in judicial processes through which the state sought to punish criminal wrongdoing, but then distanced themselves from the outcomes, substituting forgiveness as their response. How do you view this distinction between consequences and revenge?

7. How did the family—especially female family members—of Naomi Huyard struggle emotionally in the aftermath of her murder? What factors made forgiveness difficult, according to a niece?
8. How do you respond to Amish statements that perhaps a victim’s “time was up” or that a death was part of God’s will?
9. Does forgiveness seem to be easier or more difficult in cases where the perpetrator and victim know one another?
10. The stories in this chapter focus on Amish responses to non-Amish aggression. In later chapters the authors comment on how the Amish handle conflict and wrongdoing within their own community. From what you have read about Amish culture and values thus far, how do you expect the Amish to deal with wrongdoing among themselves?

Chapter 7: The Roots of Forgiveness

1. Why are the Anabaptists described as having a “discipleship tradition”? What does that mean? From what you know of other Christian traditions, how distinctive are Anabaptist emphases?
2. How similar or different is the Amish approach to and interpretation of biblical texts from that of other Christian traditions with which you are familiar?
3. If you are part of a Christian tradition, how do you view and use the Lord’s Prayer? How central is it to your faith? If you are not part of a Christian tradition, how does the theology of the Lord’s Prayer compare with your own beliefs?
4. The Amish embrace ritual and prescribed, habitual practices. Do you find such an approach to life familiar or alien?
5. How does the communal nature of Amish life shape Amish religious thought and practice?
6. The authors contend that “the Amish believe if they don’t forgive, they won’t be forgiven.” Does this sentiment surprise you? Resonate with your own beliefs? Trouble you?
7. How do the Amish understand what the authors call “the cross-stitch between divine and human forgiveness”?
8. Why might one say that forgiveness is central to Amish life? Do you see it as more central to the Amish than to those in some other faith traditions?
9. At the beginning of this chapter, the authors ask whether the public’s surprise at Amish forgiveness in the wake of the Nickel Mines shooting was because Amish understanding of forgiveness differed from that of other Americans, or because the Amish simply practiced something many people believe but few act upon. Which do you think was the case?
10. At this point in your reading, has the Amish approach to faith either challenged or reaffirmed your own beliefs and values?

Chapter 8: The Spirituality of Forgiveness

1. In your own words, describe the concept of *Gelassenheit*, or *uffgevva*.
2. How is *Gelassenheit* different from fatalism?
3. What do you imagine to be some of the implications of *Gelassenheit* beyond those the authors mention as examples?
4. Does the Amish understanding of submission clarify your understanding of their gender roles, or does it raise new questions for you?
5. Do you think Jacob Hochstetler was a good father?
6. In twenty-first century North America the Amish are not being persecuted as were their ancestors in sixteenth-century Europe. Do you find it surprising that their self-understanding and communal worship is still so heavily indebted to the memory of martyrdom? What memories of historic events shape your sense of self, or your community's identity?
7. What is your own understanding of the meaning of martyrdom?
8. What is your reaction to the Dirk Willems story? Do you consider Dirk a moral exemplar or a fool?
9. How do you respond to the Amish inclusion of sometimes graphic stories of death or near-death into their grade school curricula?
10. At the end of the chapter the authors suggest that Amish schoolchildren have absorbed Amish values to a remarkable degree. Do you agree? What influences shaped—or did not shape—the children of the West Nickel Mines School?

Chapter 9: The Practice of Forgiveness

1. An Amish minister noted that “sometimes it’s harder to forgive each other than it is [to forgive] someone like [Charles] Roberts.” Why might this be the case? Have you ever had similar feelings? Or opposite sentiments?
2. Did Amish parental reflections on teaching forgiveness to children surprise you? How do they compare with the way you were raised?
3. The Amish see “giving up self” as central to their faith and life. Do you find the concept appealing or unattractive?
4. How do Amish religious values shape their religious practices, and vice versa?
5. How are the rituals and practices of the Amish “communion season” similar to or different from rituals and practices in other faith traditions with which you are familiar?
6. What are the implications of the communal dimension of Amish worship, as opposed to an approach that views worship as something that simply connects an individual to God?
7. The authors say that “Council Meetings encourage deep soul-searching.” Would you appreciate such structured time for reflection in your life, or would you find it morally coercive?

8. Many Amish people described forgiveness as a struggle. Do you see their struggle as uniquely Amish in any way?
9. Community relationships and church rituals keep Amish people talking to one another, even if they are at odds. What social structures in your society encourage people who disagree with one another to remain in conversation? What things discourage such interaction?
10. Do you agree that Amish rituals facilitate forgiveness even if they do not make it easy?

Chapter 10: Forgiveness at Nickel Mines

1. How would you define forgiveness? Do you agree (with psychologist Robert Enright) that forgiveness does not, and should not, depend on the remorse or apology of the offender?
2. The authors make a distinction between “forgiveness” and “pardon.” Do you agree with that distinction, or should pardon always be an aspect of forgiveness?
3. Is it possible to forgive a dead person? In what ways is that process different from forgiving a living person? How might this apply to Charles Roberts?
4. The authors quote the father of a slain Amish girl as saying, “There was never a time that I felt angry.” Is that possible? Is that healthy? Is it possible to distinguish anger from resentment in real-life situations?
5. Why would collectivist societies find anger less acceptable than societies that are oriented toward the individual?
6. Does it make sense to talk about forgiveness as a “communal responsibility”?
7. Everett Worthington makes a distinction between “decisional forgiveness” and “emotional forgiveness”? Is the distinction between making a decision to forgive and the emotional process helpful for understanding the task of forgiveness?
8. Do you agree with Jeffrie G. Murphy when he says that “vindictiveness” can sometimes be a good and healthy response to being wronged?
9. Can forgiveness be extended too quickly? When is the appropriate time for a victim to forgive his or her offender?
10. Do you know of religious leaders who have pressured victims to forgive too quickly? How can religious communities promote the practice of forgiveness without putting undue pressure on victims to “get over” their hurt?

Chapter 11: What About Shunning?

1. What is the purpose of Members Meetings in the life of the Amish church? Are you aware of other religious communities that pursue the same purpose in a different way?
2. What rationale, biblical or otherwise, do the Amish have for disciplining wayward church members? Do you find their rationale convincing?

3. Although the Amish do not equate the *Ordnung* with divine law, they nonetheless discipline church members who do not abide by it. What is their rationale for enforcing rules that are not, even in their view, divinely given? Is that a justifiable rationale?
4. What, according to the Amish, is the goal of shunning?
5. Some Amish people use the analogy of disciplining (or spanking) children to explain shunning, arguing that is possible to both discipline and love someone. Is this a good analogy?
6. The authors contend that there is no inherent contradiction between Amish forgiveness and their practice of shunning, as long as forgiveness is correctly understood. Do you agree?
7. Should religious communities discipline members who don't abide by their rules? If so, how can this be done in a way that is both loving and effective?
8. Do you agree with the Amish that pardoning someone of their wrongdoing is not always in that person's best interest?
9. This chapter outlines the process of excommunication and the practice of shunning. How does this description square with popular perceptions of Amish shunning?
10. "Some people think that shunning is barbaric," said one Amish person who was interviewed for this book. Would you call shunning barbaric? If not, what adjectives would you use to describe it?

Chapter 12: Grief, Providence, and Justice

1. Did anything in the descriptions of Amish grief surprise you?
2. All communities practice particular grieving rituals. What is unique about the grieving rituals practiced by the Amish? How do their rituals compare with what you've witnessed in your own community?
3. Was there anything about the memorial poem (quoted in this chapter) that caught your attention?
4. This chapter provides a definition and description of "God's providence." Have you ever thought about God's providence? If so, how would you describe it?
5. The authors identify three general answers posed by Christians to the problem of evil. Which of these three answers, if any, do you find most attractive? Why?
6. One Amish person asserted that the school shooting was a part of "God's plan," but also said that God didn't "will it" to happen? Are those two assertions contradictory?
7. What evidence did Amish people offer to claim that "good" had come from the school shooting? Is it appropriate for people to look for good in something so horrific?
8. "We should not put a question mark where God puts a period." What do Amish ministers mean by that? Do you agree with them?
9. What do you think about the Amish reluctance to speculate on their eternal destiny (and on that of Charles Roberts)?

10. What do the authors mean by the Amish “two-kingdom ethic”? Do you think it’s appropriate for people to accept the state’s authority to use force (e.g., in restraining criminals) yet refuse to participate in those coercive practices themselves?

Chapter 13: Amish Grace and the Rest of Us

1. What do you think of the book’s title? Did forgiveness transcend tragedy in this instance? Did forgiveness redeem tragedy?
2. The authors write that, for the Amish, the willingness to forgive others “is absolutely essential to the Christian faith.” Would that be true of most North American Christians?
3. Chapter 6 talked about forgiveness as a “habit.” Is it possible to imitate a habit?
4. The authors contend that many commentators writing in the aftermath of the shooting “missed the countercultural dimension of Amish forgiveness.” What do the authors mean by that?
5. Why would an Amish community forbid one of its members to give public lectures on Amish forgiveness?
6. What do you think about the tendency of op-ed writers to apply the lesson of Amish forgiveness to contemporary world problems? Do you agree with the authors’ reservations about doing that?
7. The authors write that forgiveness is a “divine act that is broadly available to the human community.” Is it?
8. The authors suggest that vengeance is often glamorized in American society. They also suggest that Americans are obsessed with “getting their due.” Do you agree with their assessment? Or are you more inclined to say that Americans have a healthy and realistic sense of justice?
9. Have you had experiences of forgiveness in your life—either extending it to someone or receiving it from someone? Was there anything in this book that helped you understand that experience?
10. What are some ways that religious communities can help their participants become more forgiving people? Do the Amish provide any clues in this regard?