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Why the Amish Forgave a Killer

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Today marks the one-year anniversary of the West Nickel Mines Amish school shooting. People around the world were stunned by the execution-style slaying of five Amish girls, and perhaps even more stunned by the Amish response to it: forgiveness, extended to the gunman's family within hours.

It wasn't long until two of my colleagues and I received invitations to write books about "the happening," as some Amish people call it. Some publishers wanted murder-and-mayhem narratives (yes, that's an actual category at Amazon.com), but others approached us with a more reasonable request: might our knowledge of Amish life illumine the Amish forgiveness that emerged in the wake of the shooting?

We debated these requests and sought the advice of friends. Would writing such a book constitute the academic equivalent of ambulance chasing? How would the Lancaster County Amish community—in particular, the families whose daughters and sons were terrorized that day—react to further acts of public exposure?

For better or worse, we decided to write a book, together. Our overriding rationale was this: more than buggies and bonnets, forgiveness goes to the heart of Amish spirituality. If our job as scholars is to foster understanding about Amish life, to ignore this event would be to abdicate our responsibility.

By advancing understanding of Amish life, we also hoped to chasten public reactions to Amish forgiveness. Most media commentaries that emerged after the shooting sounded a similar refrain: The Amish have shown the rest of the world how to live. The rest of us should be more like the Amish. Some pundits opined that the world would be better off if George Bush was Amish.

I agree that Amish response offered a welcome alternative to the religiously-fueled violence that fills our newspapers. Still, too many commentators overlooked important details. For instance, almost everyone failed to mention that, in the case of the Nickel Mines shooting, the situation was relatively uncomplicated: the gunman was dead (he committed suicide at the end of his rampage) and therefore posed no further threat to the community. That's very different from forms of victimization that continue day after day, year after year. Think about the centuries-long oppression of African Americans, the extermination of six million Jews, or repeated abuse at the hands of a spouse. Forgiveness is much more complicated when the person who traumatized you today might return tomorrow.

That's not to say that the Amish response was devoid of meaning. If there's anything my co-authors and I learned from studying Amish forgiveness it was this: their act of forgiveness did not emerge from thin air, or even from some reservoir of generic Christian piety. To the contrary, the entire Amish approach to life and faith prepared them to forgive the man who shot their daughters.

Recognizing the importance of the Amish cultural milieu should offer a dose of realism about momentary glimpses of grace. Many observers commented at the time that the Amish witness was moving, even inspirational. That may have been true, but fleeting stories do little by themselves. If the Amish have anything to teach us, it's that habits instilled over time shape our lives far more profoundly than do uplifting stories we read in the newspaper or download from the Internet.

What do we learn from the Amish? Forgiveness may (or may not) be divine, as the poet Alexander Pope once suggested, but it's primarily available to those who prepare for it—before an offense is committed that makes it necessary.

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