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# Forgiveness Motives Among Evangelical Christians: Implications for Christian Marriage and Family Therapists

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*Therapists and researchers interested in forgiveness can learn from those who have experienced interpersonal wounds and have chosen to forgive. We interviewed 20 evangelical Christian forgivers, asking about motives for forgiveness. Transcripts were analyzed using qualitative methods. Five categories of motivation are presented: comfort, duty, relational, humility/empathy, and Christian beliefs. Respondents described multiple motives for forgiveness, often combining a desire for comfort or a sense of duty with their Christian beliefs. Four implications for Christian marriage and family therapists are discussed: Expect diversity, avoid moralistic views of motives, remember religious resources in the forgiveness process, and expect benefits, but not immediately.*

If you were given the task of designing a communications training intervention for married couples, how would you go about doing it? In addition to reading and reviewing relevant research, you would probably talk with and observe successfully married couples to see how they communicate with one another. If the goal were to develop a family-based intervention for anger management, it would be reasonable to learn from families in which anger is well managed. Similarly, as forgiveness becomes an increasingly popular topic in Christian marriage and family therapy, it is important to

learn from those who have forgiven and have been forgiven. The purpose of this study was to learn about motives of forgiveness by considering the stories of evangelical Christians who have forgiven others for interpersonal offenses.

## Evangelical Christian Values and Motivation to Forgive

An adequate understanding of interpersonal forgiveness should include a historical, theological, and philosophical context. The construct of forgiveness has a religious context, and it is quite difficult (and perhaps

undesirable) to divorce forgiveness from religious language and meaning. For example, Worthington and DiBlasio (1990) advocate the facilitation of mutual forgiveness in marital therapy, which they believe involves some form of "repentance, atonement, and sacrifice" on the part of each person (p. 220). Implicitly imbedded in these concepts are religious meaning and a history of religious ritual that epitomize the process of forgiveness. Forgiveness in the Christian Scriptures is a progression of healing where people are confronted with the grace and mercy of God despite their continual failure to deserve it. They learn to proffer the same grace and mercy to others in full awareness of their own fallibility.

In an effort to make forgiveness accessible as a therapeutic technique in a pluralistic society, many authors, researchers, and clinicians have attempted to separate forgiveness from its religious roots. For example, some have emphasized the personal benefits of forgiving an offender. The injured recognizes the destructive consequences of bitterness and anger in his or her life and is willing to forgive for the purpose of symptom relief. Though this approach may have therapeutic value for many, it also lacks essential components that imbue forgiveness with its religious significance.

McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) describe a model of forgiveness that is based on the hypothesis that people forgive others to the extent that they experience empathy for them and recognize their own capacity to hurt others. This approach has been used in marriage counseling (McCullough, 1997; Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990) with positive results. Forgiveness bestowed out of empathy and humility has clear parallels with evangelical Christian faith. Evangelical Christians believe that all humans are fallen, broken by the effects of original sin, and fundamentally flawed in personal and interpersonal behavior. The most vile sinner and the most upright citizen are both in need of God's mercy, forgiveness, and grace. Those who have experienced God's forgiveness are able to empathize with the propensity for evil they see in others and to offer forgiveness out of gratitude for the forgiveness they

themselves have experienced. Despite the parallels between the empathy/humility model of forgiveness and evangelical Christian faith, advocates of the empathy/humility model have not made these connections explicit in their writings.

For evangelical Christians, forgiveness is not just an act of self-care or empathy and humility, but also a response of gratitude to one's awareness of the grace and mercy of God:

The Church is the forgiven community and the forgiving community. To be a Christian is to know one's own undoneness and one's own need for forgiveness. It is also to participate in the power of forgiving and healing (Cunningham, 1985, p. 142).

The Church as the forgiven community is continuously offered a relationship with God despite its constant failings. Christians can use this information to respond in the same forgiving manner toward others in humble gratitude to the one who continuously forgives them.

Meek and McMinn (1997) suggest several important motivational ingredients for forgiveness stemming from this evangelical Christian worldview. Forgiveness begins as one is able to recognize and understand human propensity toward evil. Once a person grasps the reality of human depravity, he or she begins to comprehend humanity's need both to give and to receive forgiveness. Equally important in the forgiveness process is learning to identify oneself as an active ingredient in the "human problem." Theologically, this involves understanding and personalizing the doctrine of human depravity—acknowledging one's own fallibility and need for forgiveness. The forgiving person is able to see his or her personal failings in viewing the failings of others and increasingly responds to the wrongdoing of others in loving identification. Bitterness and anger subside, not because they are forced out of consciousness, but because they are eliminated as a natural by-product of focusing on love, compassion, gratitude, and personal sin, which are constructive and productive reflections

likely to foster personal and relational healing (Downie, 1965).

Given this specific religious and motivational context for evangelical Christians, to what extent do these motives actually affect the forgiveness process that Christians experience? The present study is an effort to address this question and then to extrapolate implications for the practice of marriage and family therapy with evangelical Christian clients.

### **Interviewing Christian Forgivers**

We sent a general invitation letter to 131 employees of Wheaton College, explaining that we were interested in interviewing those who had made significant efforts at forgiving an interpersonal offense. Because employment at Wheaton College requires endorsing an evangelical Christian statement of faith, this sampling strategy assured us of hearing forgiveness stories from those with Christian faith commitments. Approximately 30 replied, expressing a willingness to participate in the interview. These respondents were contacted by phone, the purposes of the interview were explained, and an interview time was arranged. Several of those expressing initial interest did not return our phone calls or later decided not to participate. Twenty-one arrived at the scheduled time and participated in the interviews. Of these, 20 interviews were successfully audiotaped and transcribed for qualitative analyses. A stipend of \$15 was paid to each person who participated in the interview. Transcripts were coded and evaluated using Nonnumerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theory-building (NUD\*IST 4, 1997) software.

Of the 20 participants, 3 (15%) were male and 17 (85%) female. The ages ranged from 25 to 65 years. Fifteen (75%) were European-American and 5 (25%) were African-American. Before each interview began, participants were asked to identify a primary offender to whom they had granted forgiveness or were in the process of granting forgiveness. The vast majority of offenders were still living (95%), and they were evenly distributed across gender lines. Nine participants (45%) reported their offender as male, 9 (45%) as female, and 2

(10%) reported both parents to be equally responsible for the offense. The depth of hurt was relatively high for most participants. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 signifying no hurt and 5 a great deal of hurt (Subkoviak et al., 1995), 15 (75%) reported that the injury caused a great deal of hurt in their lives (rating of 5). Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1-100 the percent to which they had completed the forgiveness process. Seven people (35%) indicated complete forgiveness with a score of 100%, 9 (45%) stated that they were close to complete forgiveness (ratings between 90% and 99%), and 4 (20%) people indicated more intermediate stages of forgiveness (ratings between 50% and 85%).

Three of the authors served as interviewers, all having previous training in standard interview techniques. After developing a structured interview form, we tested the interview format in two videotaped pilot interviews. The videotapes from these pilot interviews were used for further revision of the structured interview form and to develop a consistent style of interviewing among the three interviewers.

The interview consisted of three main parts, based on the aspects of forgiveness that we were most interested in exploring. In Part 1, designed to assess the processes of and motives for forgiveness, respondents were first asked to describe the process of forgiveness they had experienced ("What was the process of forgiving like for you?"). They were next asked if the offender had expressed remorse and asked for forgiveness ("Did the person apologize for the offense or ask for forgiveness?"). Finally, they were asked to reflect on their motives for pursuing forgiveness instead of other alternatives ("Many people are hurt by others, but not everyone chooses to forgive. We're interested in knowing why you chose to forgive."). In Part 2, designed to assess the consequences of forgiveness, participants were asked to articulate the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive implications of their choice to forgive their offenders ("In what ways has your decision to forgive affected you?"). In Part 3, designed to assess the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation, respondents were asked how their choice to forgive had affected their relation-



ships with the offenders ("How has your decision to forgive affected your relationship with the person?"). These specific but open-ended questions were crafted in an effort to introduce general topics without leading the participants to particular conclusions. In addition to the standardized questions, the interviewers used reflective comments and acknowledgements to encourage the participants to give detailed replies.

Before the interview, participants were given a brief questionnaire. In addition to providing us with important information about the circumstances of forgiveness, this questionnaire was a stimulus for participants to begin thinking about the incident leading to forgiveness. Participants were also given a brief questionnaire after the interview, consisting of quantitatively scored items to be used for scale-development purposes beyond the scope of this article.

In order to understand evangelical Christians' motives for forgiveness, we met as a research team for approximately one year after collecting these interview data, engaging in the following five activities. First, we met for several months to discuss various motives for forgiveness from theological/philosophical perspectives (e.g., Enright, Eastin, Golden, Sarinopoulos, & Freedman, 1992; Gassin, & Enright, 1995), attempting to categorize forgiveness motives for purposes of developing a multidimensional taxonomy. Several different models for categorizing forgiveness motives were discussed and discarded. After considering various classification systems and models, some of which were quite complex, we settled on a simple categorization system that includes five motivational categories: comfort, duty, relationship, empathy/humility, and Christian beliefs. Second, during this same time period we transcribed the 20 interviews for subsequent qualitative analyses. Third, two raters went through each of the 20 transcripts to determine which of the five motivational categories were present in the transcripts. We have had mixed results in our ability to reliably code the various forgiveness motives for our 20 respondents. The raters were quite successful in identifying motives of comfort (85% agreement) and duty (95% agreement), but only moderately

successful in identifying relationship (75% agreement), empathy/humility (80% agreement), and Christian belief motives (80% agreement). Fourth, based on the ratings received in the previous step, one rater went through each interview and coded specific statements for motivational content. Finally, the NUD\*IST software then allowed us to compare and contrast multiple descriptions of each motive.

### **Categories of Motivation**

Examples of the five categories of motivation were seen throughout the 20 transcripts. A brief description of each category follows, along with illustrative statements from our transcribed interviews.

#### ***Comfort***

Conflict within meaningful relationships can be a source of great emotional, physical, and spiritual pain. Some choose to forgive in an effort to ameliorate existing pain or experience growth. These motives, similar to what Meek and McMinn (1997) call self-help motives, lead one to forgive for the sake of attaining greater personal comfort. Examples from our interviews include the following:

I'm the one that would suffer from [unforgiveness].

If there were areas of unforgiveness in my life, there would be corresponding parts of me that would not be free to grow, develop....

[I forgave] because it was hurting myself. Stomachaches, headaches, the pain, the darkness, the sadness, the emptiness—it was taking up all my energy.

#### ***Duty***

Some experience a moral obligation to forgive an offender, often related to religious values among our respondents. The following excerpts provide some evidence of the obligatory use of forgiveness:

I knew I should do it. I knew I had to forgive.

Oh, sure you forgive them. That's the thing to do. You are taught that. The biblical standard is unconditional love.

God commands us to forgive. He tells me in his Word that I must forgive.

### ***Relationship***

Conflict in the context of close relationship may often affect one's choice to forgive one's offender. Thus, motivation to forgive may be influenced by the felt need to maintain a meaningful relationship, especially in the context of family relationships. For example:

It was the only relationship that I ever had that was irreconciled. I just didn't want that to be.

One reason [I forgave] was because I had a very strong relationship with the person.

I probably...tried to forgive because of my relationship with them...and not wanting this big schism to be between us.

### ***Empathy/Humility***

McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) note that one's ability to forgive is often a function of empathy for the offender coupled with humility regarding one's own fallibility. When empathy and humility occur, forgiveness is the natural by-product (Worthington, 1998). Examples of empathy and humility include the following:

Reaching out to other people and forgiving them for some of the things I could identify and see in my own faults became so much easier after I had been broken myself and realized that I needed to get out of myself and get more into other people.

[I recognized] my own weakness and my own tendency to hurt others...I

have come to recognize that there is a need for forgiveness in order to redeem wholeness.

We're all so self-absorbed, and I was so self-absorbed for so many years, that you don't see beyond your own hurts and needs. It's that greater thing outside ourselves that can make the world a beautiful place.

### ***Christian Beliefs***

Some motives for forgiveness are unique to the Christian belief system, where forgiveness is a cardinal doctrine. These are not primarily duty-based motives for forgiveness, but come instead from an intrinsic personal understanding and commitment to Christianity. The following quotes provide some insight into forgiveness from a distinctly Christian perspective:

I chose to forgive, not just because I was told to, because I was free to choose it because the pain and everything could be taken by [Christ].

It's God's grace that...can heal the world and bring us forgiveness, and I was never aware of those things until I could experience forgiving a person.

Sometimes it makes me weepy. Weepier still than even the hurt that I feel because...if you recognize your own position before the Lord without his grace, then I weep thinking how beautifully he has cared for us. And so it's a little embarrassing sometimes. I'll be sitting in church and people will think I'm crying because I'm in pain but I realize, *No, it's not that at all*. I'm really quite content and joyful and it comes out in tears.

### ***Motivational Patterns***

Based on the theoretical work of Meek and McMinn (1997), we anticipated that many of our evangelical Christian respondents

would cite Christian motives for forgiveness and that they would only infrequently cite the more self-focused comfort-based motives. This hypothesis was only partly supported: Our respondents did indeed cite distinctively Christian motives for forgiveness, but they also routinely reported various other motives as well, including comfort-based motives.

### *Distinctively Christian Motives*

As expected, the majority of participants spontaneously described their faith in describing their process of forgiveness, signifying that evangelical Christians draw heavily upon their religious faith in healing, and many described overtly religious motives for pursuing forgiveness. Of course these religious descriptions could be related to the context of the study—Christian researchers interviewing Christian respondents at a Christian college. To partially correct for this demand characteristic of the study, we were careful not to use any religious phrases in our standardized interview questions. Moreover, it is important to remember that any research context has demand characteristics. If nonreligious interviewers at a nonreligious institution had interviewed these same respondents, they might have felt compelled to inhibit their discussion of religious motives for forgiveness.

Considering three rationales for forgiveness helps to summarize these distinctively Christian motives. First, some evangelical Christians forgive to follow the example set by Jesus Christ. One respondent put it this way:

I think that Christ was obviously in the business of forgiving, so he set the example, and if we are truly Christians and we are trying to live like him that's how we should be trying to be. Because if he can forgive us for all the things that we do, then...we should find a way to [forgive].

Notice that this is not so much duty (e.g., "God insists that I forgive," or "God will punish me if I don't forgive") as it is fol-

lowing a positive example. This same connection is at the center of the Lord's prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

Second, some evangelical Christians forgive because they are able to release their grief and pain to a loving God in an act of faith. Notice that this is not just a releasing of pain in order to find personal comfort, but a releasing in the context of a relationship with God—the sharing of a burden with one whose very nature is love.

Well, it's interesting because as you asked the question I remembered that there was a time in my life where I was reading Alice Miller books and going around telling everybody that forgiveness was really not what we were supposed to be doing.... I don't know, she might have changed her position.... She seemed like a person that was genuinely growing toward something. I don't know where she's at now, but at any rate, I definitely went through a stage where I felt I was confident forgiveness was not the plan because the griefs had not been addressed. I was going to, as much as I could, stick up for myself to the point that the griefs should be addressed before I forgave anybody anything. Then, what had to happen inside me was the realization...I went through a process of realizing that the Lord did address those griefs, and take them upon himself so that I was free to be able to forgive. So then my choosing of that option was definitely based on the fact that, first of all, it was a choice for me, not just something that I was told to do, and then secondly that I was free to choose it because the pain and everything could be taken by another.

Third, many of our respondents articulated a rationale similar to the empathy/humility model articulated by McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997), but with explicitly Christian underpinnings. These responses emphasized forgiving out of a profound awareness of

one's own sinfulness and need for forgiveness. For example:

Well the more I was able to recognize my own failings in situations, the easier it was to forgive other people. To quit blaming other people for things that had gone wrong in my life and to start taking my own responsibility for things that happened in my life became a real eye-opener, because I realized how weak and unable I really was. And when you realize your own mortality, your own humanness..., it's much easier to be more forgiving of others' weaknesses and realize they're trying to struggle in their own way.... It's between you and God.... It becomes something he works on with you ..., and when you're freed from the bitterness...it's easier.... Each time you [forgive] more readily. It becomes something you want to do.

### ***Multiple Motives***

Contrary to our expectations, most respondents gave additional motives beyond the distinctively Christian motives described previously. We had expected that Christian motives might supercede and replace self-care and duty-based motives, which we perceived as reflecting a lower level of moral development. This expectation was incorrect.

Most described multiple motives, moving seamlessly from comfort and duty-based motives to humility/empathy and Christian motives. For example, one respondent described how forgiveness helped rid her of stomach pain. She went on to discuss how Christians have a duty to forgive, and then discussed her desire to follow the example of Jesus Christ in forgiving others. This description of multiple motives was typical of most respondents. They perceived no inconsistency or inherent contradiction in these multiple motives—all were presented as reasonable and appropriate.

## **Implications for Marriage and Family Therapists**

Based on these findings about evangelical Christians' motivations for forgiveness, we offer four implications for marriage and family therapy with evangelical Christian clients.

### ***Expect Diversity***

This study of forgiveness motives revealed a variety of different motives being used by various individuals under various circumstances. We expected relatively consistent motives among our evangelical Christian respondents and found surprising diversity. This serves as a reminder of human differences, even among those with relatively homogeneous religious beliefs.

Motives vary, in part, because interpersonal wounds vary. The forgiveness incidents selected by half of our respondents (10 of 20) involved being hurt by family members and revealed a wide variety of circumstances and offenses. Worthington (1998) discusses three types of situations in which offenses occur within families; all three were observed among our respondents. The first is when a family member has inflicted a shameful and deep emotional wound on another member, such as having an affair or being engaged in some form of abuse within the family. These types of offenses are what Seibold (in press) calls "deep wounding." Among the respondents forgiving spouses for extramarital affairs, the wounding did indeed appear to be very deep. These forgivers described the intense anger and bitterness they experienced and daily discipline of forgiveness. One person described the chronic struggle with "ill feelings churning in the heart," noting that forgiveness meant "confessing anger and bitterness daily." Despite the depth of these wounds, they are experienced as singular crisis points and are sometimes accompanied by expressions of remorse and apology by the offender. Those achieving the best resolution openly acknowledged the depth of pain experienced, had received a sincere apology, had been able to empathize and humbly identify with the offending family member, and drew deeply on their faith as a

means of coping.

Second, family members may fail to value each other, which is recognized as one looks back and regards past interactions, realizing they have been neglected or not properly cared for. In our interviews this was expressed by respondents looking to their childhood years, wishing for more from their parents. These wounds of childhood are familiar to practicing psychotherapists—those who often help wounded people make sense of their past in light of present circumstances. Forgiveness under these circumstances is facilitated by a humble awareness of one's own limits as a parent or caregiver. Of course this reasoning should not be used to minimize the pain or damage caused; indeed, grieving the losses of childhood is an important function of therapy.

A third area of family offense described by Worthington involves the frequent devaluing of a family member and numerous emotional wounds accumulating over time. Though this might often involve a verbally aggressive spouse, our respondents more often described ongoing relationships with critical parents, beginning in childhood and continuing into adulthood. These circumstances make forgiveness difficult because the offense is repeated and ongoing. Self-care is important in these circumstances—learning to establish necessary interpersonal boundaries, to honestly confront feelings of hurt, loss, and anger, and to distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation. Self-care motives for forgiveness may be the most reasonable and effective way to initiate forgiveness work with clients experiencing ongoing emotional wounds from a family member.

### ***Avoid Moralistic Views of Motives***

Christian therapists might readily assume that they should teach clients the noblest motives for forgiveness and discourage motives based on self-care. Clinicians might assume, as we did in approaching this research, that certain motives reflect a higher level of moral development or theological sophistication. Though this assumption may or may not be true, the research reported here suggests that mixed motives are the

norm and that self-care motives are not mutually exclusive of other motives that therapists might consider more mature. Encouraging forgiveness is potentially helpful in family therapy, perhaps even when the initial motives are self-focused.

Thus, it seems prudent for Christian marriage and family therapists to consider promoting forgiveness in family relationships (when it is clinically appropriate) even if the motives do not seem entirely consistent with therapists' views of Christian theology. After the initial experience of forgiveness, motives may change and deepen. Even so, motives that are deemed more mature will probably not replace earlier motives. Rather, they will supplement earlier motives.

### ***Remember Religious Resources in the Forgiveness Process***

Even with their mixed motives, it was striking to see the passion with which respondents discussed their Christian faith in describing the forgiveness process. In reporting how the difficult work of forgiveness was accomplished, many respondents described the importance of prayer and other spiritual practices. In Table 1 we list examples of ways prayer was used in forgiving. Others used their faith to help with what cognitive therapists call "decentering"—the capacity to see one's misfortunes from a different, less personal, perspective. For example:

[Forgiveness is] the hardest thing I've ever done because there's that human nature in me that wants to see justice, and forgiveness seems to be contrary to the justice that I desire. But...forgiveness is much easier when I have the bigger picture in mind.... To handle the stresses in life you need to look at them with a backdrop of eternity and...that's what makes it much easier. It's when you get caught up in the horizontal, shortsighted, circumstantial stuff of the day that it gets easier to become less forgiving.

These responses signify that evangelical Christian persons find significant strength

and comfort in relying on their relationship with God as they cope with injury. Marriage and family therapists can help their Christian clients forgive by encouraging them to draw on spiritual coping resources.

Similarly, religious communities provide support for forgiving and being forgiven. Christian church communities often refer to themselves as “church families” and function as social support mechanisms for their members. One person put it this way:

...the church...has been such a blessing. [It is] a great Bible-teaching church where I could learn in particular about forgiveness. Also being blessed with so many friends I could talk to. Many of them had already walked through a similar sit-

uation or were in the same process.

Family therapists helping Christian clients forgive should view religious communities as potential sources of strength and encouragement for the forgiver.

*Expect Benefits, but Not Immediately*

Motives based on seeking personal comfort provided impetus for our respondents to pursue forgiveness. To what extent can therapists promise clients that forgiveness will bring comfort? Do we have evidence that forgiveness brings personal benefit? Based on our limited sample, the answer appears to be yes, but with some qualification. Those volunteering for this study found the benefits to be worth the efforts of forgiveness. In some cases, years of bitter-

**Table 1      Examples of Prayer As a Resource in the Forgiveness Process**

**References to Prayer As a Forgiveness Resource**

I spent time alone with the Lord, being obedient to his guidance....  
[Forgiveness] happened with lots of prayer and crying.

One night I called out to the Lord, I called my [offender's] name and said,  
"I forgive." God did a mighty work in my heart.

[Forgiveness involved] recognizing the painfulness of the experience,  
reflecting on the situation in the presence of God.

I prayed to be kind and accepting so my conscience would be clear....

Several are holding me up in prayer.

There are people who support me through encouragement and prayer.

I look at [resentful] feelings as temptations and try to deal with them in  
the context of prayer and worship.

...every day checking my heart before the Lord...confessing anger and  
bitterness daily.

... it was all prayer, asking God to help me....just make choices to stop  
rehearsing the hurt.

I'd sit there with tears in my eyes just praying and asking Jesus to just  
help me through this because without him there I wouldn't have made it.

I knew he [God] was my only hope in a time when I needed him most.

ness between the forgiver and the offender evaporated, sometimes quickly and sometimes over time. One person described it as a "big load off my back...years of all this stuff just fell aside." Some described a sense of self-efficacy and accomplishment through forgiveness. For example, "I felt really good about myself...there was a 'victory' part to it—like I had accomplished something that I don't usually do." Others described benefits such as release from anger, becoming a better listener, feeling peace and joy, improved self-image, gratitude to God, increased physical health, increased generosity, and even help with serious depression. One person reported being able to forgive others more easily for "the smaller things in life" after having forgiven someone for a deeply painful injury. Many described the relational benefits of forgiveness, pointing to the fact that a meaningful relationship, often a family relationship, had been restored because of their willingness to forgive.

Despite these benefits of forgiveness, it is important for therapists to remember that the benefits are not always evident to the forgiver at each point along the journey. In reporting similar qualitative research, Halling (1996) notes that being disillusioned by another disrupts the very foundation of our existence and causes us to reconsider our understanding of ourselves and our direction in life. At certain points in such a crisis, we should not expect a wounded person to see benefits (Seibold, in press). One person stated, "I think eventually I will see some more benefit from it, but now...I wake up in the morning and I have to work at getting into a right frame of mind because the wrong one is already there." As the forgiveness process nears completion, as it had for most of our respondents, the benefits and motives for forgiveness come into focus. Therapists should be cautious not to push too forcefully for forgiveness or promise too many benefits too early in the forgiveness process. Such promises might be perceived as disingenuous or trite to the one going through the difficult work of forgiveness.

## Conclusion

Meek and McMinn (1997) contrasted Christian motives for forgiveness with the self-help motives that are prevalent in the emerging therapeutic literature on forgiveness (e.g., forgiving in order to feel better or to get on with one's life). Based on the stories of forgiveness collected in this study, this contrast may have more theological and philosophical significance than clinical utility. It seems that most respondents experience multiple motives that coexist peacefully. These motives often including both self-help and distinctively Christian motives, as well as other motives.

This study is not an example of systematic science that can be easily generalized to various populations. It is, however, an example of the emerging qualitative methods of inquiry that have found a home in the context of postmodernism. Human narratives can be helpful in the research process, as they are in the therapy process. As is often the case in doing therapy, we went into this research expecting to find one thing, but we ended up finding something slightly different from what we had expected.

These 20 interview participants were not so much our "subjects" as they were our teachers. We conclude with the words of one such teacher:

William Blake says something about heaven, that what we will do is stand around forgiving one another, and in some ways I feel like that is part of what I am trying to learn. Forgiveness has to be the air that I breathe. It has to be a constant thing between forgiving myself and forgiving other people.... So I guess I have come a long way from saying, "Forgiveness is not what we are supposed to be doing in this life" to saying, "Forgiveness is what we are supposed to be doing all the time."

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