

THE MEANING OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE STRUGGLE TO FORGIVE

by

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of the lived experience of the struggle to forgive. Six people currently engaged in the struggle to forgive described their understandings of their experiences in written and semi-structured interview formats. The orientating questions used to guide participants was, “What can you tell me about your struggle to forgive?” and, “What have you learned about forgiveness based on your struggle?” A qualitative, interpretive phenomenological approach was used to collect and analyze the testimonies provided by participants and to construct hermeneutical statements based on their written and spoken stories. The six participants varied in gender, age, ethnicity, spirituality, and experiences. Five themes emerged as a result of the phenomenological analyses: struggles with forgiveness, struggles with oneself, struggles with the offender, struggles with outside influences, and struggles with reconciliation.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The one who pursues revenge should dig two graves. - Chinese Proverb

If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive. - Mother Theresa

A forgiven person forgives. - Henri Nouwen

To err is human, to forgive is divine. - Alexander Pope

In recent years, the idea of forgiveness has begun to catch the attention of therapists all over the world (West, 2001). It is transitioning from a solely religious and theological phenomenon to one explored in secular settings (Sells & Hargrave, 1998). This transition, however, has been slow and shaky despite positive results found in early studies (Sells & Hargrave, 1998).

Over the past ten years forgiveness has gained greater recognition in the field of counselling, especially in the USA (West, 2001). However, the models that have been developed, and the results of the studies that have been done, have had little effect on further research and the practice of therapy. Also, until recently any interventions designed around a theoretical understanding of forgiveness were greatly lacking in specificity and direction. West (2001) argues that the lack of progress with respect to forgiveness in the secular practice of counselling and psychotherapy is due to a lack of “recognition of the key role of forgiveness in psychological healing.”

Perhaps the incredible lack of formal theory and research into forgiveness can further be explained due to the association of forgiveness with religion. In a study by DiBlasio and Proctor (1993) found that both therapists’ openness to clients’ religiosity and therapists’ age were the most significant factors in predicting a therapist’s ability to

use forgiveness in a therapeutic manner. Perhaps the relative religious openness of the therapist demonstrates a possible avoidance by less spiritually open therapists to use techniques for a phenomenon that is closely associated with spirituality.

While it is true that forgiveness has historically been closely associated with religion, its theory and practice are now beginning to move outside of churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques. Sells (1998) cites numerous authors who have challenged the notion that the religious history of forgiveness decreases its applicability to mainstream counselling today. However, he also notes the divisive effect of forgiveness within the counselling field.

Philosophers, ethicists, theologians, and now counsellors and therapists are debating, arguing, and exploring the topic of forgiveness. Many view forgiveness as an intentional process by the offended of letting go of anger, resentment, and hatred towards the offender (Karl, Steven, Barry, & Robert, 2003). Some, however, disagree on the moral implications of forgiving or not forgiving. Many feel that forgiveness is an offended human's "moral duty", while others believe it to be simply a "gift" given to one's offender. Some even believe that forgiveness is unethical, claiming that it undermines justice, instead of promoting an appropriate punishment for the offense committed. Others oppose forgiveness because they feel it denies the guilty party their "right" to be punished (Karl et al., 2003). Such debates, however, seem to be slowing as more and more research reveals the positive effects on human beings who forgive those who offend them.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines forgiveness as, "The act of forgiving or the state of being forgiven." Webster's claims it is, "to cease to feel resentment against

on account of wrong committed, to give up claim to requital from or retribution upon an offender, to absolve, to pardon.” Both definitions reveal hints of the paradoxical nature of forgiveness. The first definition describes it as both an active and a passive state, while the latter implies that forgiveness is both the means and the goal. Shakespeare wrote of forgiveness: “It is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.” Forgiveness has a circular, and at times, backwards nature in that it must be given in advance of benefit – to fore give. Hope (1987) states: “choosing to forgive is a paradoxical act that releases a person from the need to seek repayment or revenge for past insults or disappointments through an up-leveling or re-framing process” (p. 241).

Enright & Zell (1989) defined forgiveness in the following way:

Forgiveness involves two people, one of whom has received a deep and long-lasting injury that is either psychological, emotional, physical, or moral in nature. It is an inner process by which the person who has been injured releases him or herself from the anger, resentment, and fear that are felt and does not wish for revenge. Forgiveness may be slow in coming and does not necessarily mean that one forgets all the painful memories.

For the purposes of this study, Enright and Zell’s definition of forgiveness will be used to establish the paradigm from which the participants’ experiences will be viewed. This definition seems to capture most aspects of the many philosophies of forgiveness, and also incorporates elements of the processes and experiences involved in struggling to forgive.

However one may construct their philosophy of forgiveness, what seems to matter most to those actually doing the forgiving is their experience of the struggle. It seems

reasonable then that our ever-developing understanding of forgiveness must take into account the actual experience of forgiving. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the experiences and meanings associated with the lived experience of the struggle to forgive. This exploration was carried out in an interpretive phenomenological manner and was based on the written and spoken expressions of six people who had suffered a serious offense. Interpretive phenomenology is a qualitative method used for studying a phenomenon within its context. This method is intended to help the researcher reveal the essence of the phenomenon while considering the circumstances within which the phenomenon is experienced. This study also aspired to confirm the benefits of forgiveness for those who offer it, qualitatively support empirically created models of interpersonal forgiveness, and inform forgiveness therapy practices.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

Forgiveness as a philosophy is informed by a number of different philosophies. From theology and spirituality, to psychology and therapy, our assumptions of forgiveness are heavily based on such topics. The following chapter will explore perspectives and previous conducted research which relates to our current understanding of forgiveness.

#### 2.1 The Theological Perspective

To theologians, forgiveness is considered the method for the removal of wrongs which serve as barriers between God and humanity, and between individuals (Ferch, 1998). It is also the key to reconciliation between God, self, and others. Forgiveness is seen as the process of voluntarily giving up one's right to resentment, anger, and revenge because of a harmful act. The harmed person chooses to respond to the offender with compassion, even though the reasons for hate might be understandable and justified.

#### 2.2 The Psychological Perspective

From a psychological perspective the definitions and applications of forgiveness are varied and are usually accompanied by a number of criteria. West (2001) cites Enright and Coyle who define forgiveness as the occasion when one who has suffered an injustice chooses to abandon his or her right to resentment and retaliation, and offers mercy instead. They add that the injured person must be aware of a real injustice, and choose without coercion or conditions, to respond with mercy instead of "justifiable retribution" (West, 2001). Stated simply, to forgive is to "cease to feel angry or resentful towards" someone or something (Thompson, 1996, p. 343). There are others, however,

who would take this definition one step further and add that forgiveness is not only about ceasing to feel, think, and behave negatively towards someone. They would also define forgiveness as the presence of positive feeling, thoughts, and behaviours towards the one who has wronged you (Subkoviak, Enright, Wu, & Gassin, 1995).

Forgiveness can also be seen as part of the process of relationship renewal, which makes it possible to work out the consequences of actions in relationships. It removes the burden of debt between family members, spouses, and friends, thereby allowing them to move forward after conflict, hurt, or harm has occurred. From this perspective, forgiveness is seen as a necessary, restorative force in relationships (Walrond-Skinner, 1998). More broadly it is described in counselling as an action, element, and opportunity for the purposes of resolution, healing, the giving of mercy, and personality development (Ferch, 1998).

Family systems therapists use forgiveness to deal with the past hurts caused by family members that still exert force on the feelings and behaviours present between family members (Walrond-Skinner, 1998). The job of the therapist is to help uncover these hurts, promote forgiveness between victim and persecutor, and encourage family members to make a new start in their relationships. From a family systems and forgiveness point of view, current dysfunctions are simply the expressions of unresolved resentment and bitterness (DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993).

### 2.3 Previous Research

Most of the previous research regarding forgiveness has focused on only one of three aspects of forgiveness. The most common focus of forgiveness is its place within a therapeutic setting such as a counsellor working with a married couple dealing with

infidelity (Diblasio & Proctor, 1993; Ferch, 1998; Walrond-Skinner, 1998; West, 2001). Other studies have looked at forgiveness within a specific population such as inmates, people struggling with addictions, victims of domestic abuse, or the elderly (Fincham et al., 2004; Gordon et al., 2004; Lin et al., 2004; Watkins & Regmi, 2004; Witvliet et al., 2004). Also, many studies have tried to clarify a specific role of forgiveness such as its effects on physical health, its ability to relieve intergenerational pain, its role in character development, or its association with humility and empathy (Exline et al., 2004; Konstam et al., 2003; Lawler et al., 2003; Ross et al., 2004). Few studies, however, have attempted to take a deeper look at the subjective human experience of the process of forgiveness.

Prior to 1980 there were only five psychological publications on the topic of forgiveness. Between 1980 and 1989 there were 24 publications. Between 1990 and 1999 there were 144. And from the year 2000 to date there have been over 290 psychological publications on the topic of forgiveness. It is clear that forgiveness is quickly becoming a phenomenon of considerable interest to the psychological community. However, of all of the studies published on the topic, only a minute fraction of them have been qualitative in nature, and even fewer have focused on subjective human experience. From its beginnings in pastoral care, simple process models, and interventions, the study and practice of forgiveness has made great strides during the past two decades. And much of the credit for this movement must be given to Dr. Robert Enright.

Dr. Robert Enright is a pioneer in the scientific study of forgiveness, and has done more to establish forgiveness as a legitimate therapeutic concern than any other

researcher. Since his first publication in 1989, he has contributed over eighty publications, as well as, four books and a number of book chapters on the topic of social development as it relates to the psychology of forgiveness. Enright has been a Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 1978 and is co-founder of the International Forgiveness Institute. He developed the Enright Forgiveness Index (the measurement most often used to assess interpersonal forgiveness), the Levels of Forgiveness Development (see Table 1), and the comprehensive Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness (see Table 2). What follows is a series of brief descriptions and discussions of some of the most relevant and influential studies of forgiveness to date.

In a ground-breaking study entitled “The adolescent as forgiver,” Enright, Santos, and Al-Mabuk (1989) tested a social cognitive developmental model of forgiveness (Table 1.). They performed two studies on 119 predominantly Catholic subjects who were in grades 4, 7, and 10, college students, and adults. All participants were given a forgiveness interview that assessed their current stage of forgiveness and a test of their religiosity. Results showed a strong relationship between age and an understanding of the constructs of forgiveness and justice, which were related but separate. Researchers also discovered that the more an individual practiced their faith, the more developed their understanding and motivation for forgiving was, thereby causing them to appear higher on the Levels of Forgiveness Development Scale. Enright et al. also concluded that a person’s understanding of forgiveness increases with age.

This study was the first of its kind to attempt to create a developmental understanding of forgiveness. According to Enright et al. this greatly influenced the

direction of therapy and the psychological understanding of the process of, and motivations for, forgiveness.

The work I will focus on in the book edited by Enright & North (1998) was begun by Enright and the Human Development Study Group before being published in the aforementioned book by Enright, Freedman, & Rique (1998). This group of faculty and students from the University of Wisconsin-Madison performed the first significant group research on the topic of interpersonal forgiveness. One of their most important contributions to the field to date is their process model of interpersonal forgiveness (Table 2.). After developing a rational process model, the group presented their ideas to hundreds of people involved in the field of forgiveness, and asked them for feedback. Next they developed a series of tests to see if their process model was an effective pathway for bringing about forgiveness between individuals after an offense has occurred. This process model is not intended to be a rigid step-by-step process towards forgiveness, but rather a flexible series of processes towards an outcome. Units 1-8 represent the “uncovering” phase as the offender and offended discover the problem and the resultant emotional pain associated with it. Units 9-11 represent the “decision” phase, when the offended person realizes their previous attempts to ignore the problem are unhealthy. They then begin to entertain the idea of forgiving their offender. The “work” phase is summarized in units 12-15, when the offended person begins to directly address the problem of their pain. Finally, the “deepening” phase (units 16-20) represents the personal benefits or outcomes of the process for the forgiver, thereby revealing and completing the paradox of forgiveness: “When we give to others the gift of mercy and compassion, we ourselves are healed.”

The purpose of the next study by Subkoviak, Enright, Wu, Gassin, Freedman, Olson, & Sarinopoulos, (1995) was to test the validity and reliability of the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI). The EFI was developed by a panel of faculty and graduate students for the purposes of operationalizing the process of interpersonal forgiveness. Items were created to address the six factors involved in the presence of forgiveness. These factors were (1) the absence of negative affect, (2) the presence of positive affect, (3) the absence of negative cognition, (4) the presence of positive cognition, (5) the absence of negative behaviour, and (6) the presence of positive behaviour. The EFI contains 60 items with 10 items focusing on each of the aforementioned factors. Subjects complete each item (e.g. "I think of ways to get even.") by recalling the most recent offense they suffered and then responding on a 6-point scale of agreement-disagreement. The range of scores for the 60-item EFI, therefore, is from 60 to 360.

The EFI was given to 197 college students and their same-gender parents, along with a background information scale, an anxiety scale, a religiosity index, and a one-item forgiveness question.

Results of the tests revealed strong consistency reliability for the EFI. It was also discovered that the EFI correlated strongly and negatively with anxiety – a result greatly supported by published literature which links unforgiveness with increased anxiety (Fitzgibbons, 1986). Age differences were also discovered with parents demonstrating a higher degree of forgiveness, and a lower degree of anxiety, than did their same-gender children. Overall, the EFI was found to be sound psychometrically speaking.

Denton & Martin's (1998) study explores therapists' views on the process and role of forgiveness in therapy. For several years, therapists helping clients forgive

themselves or someone else have reported benefits for clients, however, this phenomenon has yet to become widely accepted in the psychotherapeutic field. The authors believe this lack of acceptance is due to a common association of forgiveness with religion and a weak empirical basis. Denton & Martin's study attempted to address the weak empirical basis for forgiveness by assessing how experienced therapists viewed the central themes and processes of forgiveness.

Denton and Martin did an excellent job of building support for their value of forgiveness by citing previous works which expressed the necessity, universality, and inherent need for forgiveness in therapy – many works which have already been cited in this proposal. They used theoretical works on forgiveness to build a working definition and process model which they then used to construct their survey and assess the results. Their survey measured clinicians' definitions, misconceptions, order of process, and therapeutic applicability of forgiveness.

The process model used by Denton and Martin in their survey was further developed by Brandsma in 1982. Brandsma's model suggests the following four steps in the process of forgiveness (Brandsma, 1982):

1. The individual must choose to let go of negative feelings.
2. The individual must be willing and able to face the past experience and the painful feelings in a comfortable and less threatening environment.
3. The person needs to begin to see other people in terms of their needs, motives, and reasons for behavior.

4. By taking these steps, the individual is nearer to the point of releasing anger and resentment; therefore, he or she is closer to giving up the idea of revenge or retaliation.

While this process model works well for the purposes of Denton and Martin's study, it is questionable whether it sufficiently captures the complexity of the process and struggle to forgive for the purposes of my study.

The operational definition for forgiveness used for Denton and Martin's (1998) study was based on one established by Enright and Zell (Enright & Zell, 1989) who stated:

Forgiveness involves two people, one of whom has received a deep and long-lasting injury that is either psychological, emotional, physical, or moral in nature. It is an inner process by which the person who has been injured releases him or herself from the anger, resentment, and fear that are felt and does not wish for revenge. Forgiveness may be slow in coming and does not necessarily mean that one forgets all the painful memories.

In Denton and Martin's (1998) study, surveys were mailed to 164 members of the North Carolina Society of Clinical Social Workers and 101 completed surveys were returned. This method of selection may have biased the results of this study because therapists who felt forgiveness was an important part of their work may have been more likely to take the time to fill out the survey and mail it back. Based on the responses of those who mailed their surveys back, the researchers discovered no significant agreement on the process of forgiveness (except for the first step which involves the client choosing to let go of negative emotions), and respondents believed forgiveness to be

therapeutically most beneficial when dealing with family and marital relationships, grief and loss, and chemical dependence. These findings would tend to reveal a need for a deeper understanding of the process of forgiveness, and an expression of this process that resonates with therapists.

In 1998, Mullet, Houdbine, Laumonier, & Girard attempted to discover the degree to which laypeople agree with (1) the literature in regards to definitions of forgiveness, (2) the idea of forgiveness being purely dyadic, and (3) the notion of forgiveness promoting better behaviour in the forgiven. This study also tried to measure the extent to which conceptualizations of forgiveness were shared between parents and children. All subjects were from the “Centre” region in France, but varied in their degree of education, faith in God, religiosity, and previous experience with forgiveness.

Mullet et al.’s (1998) study used a questionnaire containing ninety-three statements regarding the nature of forgiveness which were taken from previous works, and participants were asked to express the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The article went on to make claims of a general consensus on certain concepts of forgiveness. However, in all concepts other than forgiveness being immoral (only four percent agreed), general agreement or disagreement was around forty-five percent. There seems to be no consensus at all. In fact, the only claim this study could reliably make is that parents’ views of forgiveness tend to be similar to their children’s views (seventy-five percent of the time).

The discussion of this article presented two interesting findings. Firstly, they discovered that many participants did not equate forgiveness and reconciliation (which would agree with most literature); however, many participants also did not equate

forgiveness with the cessation of anger towards the persecutor (which would disagree with most literature). Secondly, this study found that about forty percent of participants did not believe that forgiveness can benefit the forgiven person as well. These findings tended to diminish any sense of a collective movement towards a common ethic surrounding forgiveness, thereby demonstrating a need for further in-depth investigations.

Hill's 2001 article suggested forgiveness was more a process of discovery than a process of will, based on conceptualizations and definitions found in previous publications. Hill described the complex psychological and relational processes involved in forgiveness and went on to suggest that forgiveness was more about discovering something than actually doing something – more a pilgrimage than a militant march. Hill suggested that the most important thing to discover within forgiveness is, “that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them.” This would suggest that perhaps the human struggle to forgive is mostly about redefining oneself. If I have been offended and I discover that I am very much like my offender, then I must let go of my previously held belief that I am blameless and innocent, and adopt a new, less amiable self-definition. This requires the death, bereavement, and eventual rebirth of one's self-image - a process which requires enough grace and forgiveness for ones' self, as well as ones' offender.

Hill also reported the impotence of forgiveness interventions which attempt to reduce forgiveness to a single, specific, forced act. He instead suggested that greater success came from simply letting go and allowing one to be surprised by forgiveness when one eventually discovers that resentment has dissolved. He emphasized the need to

engage in a process rather than a ritual, and encouraged therapists working with offended clients to focus on empathy, thereby creating a safe environment where the offender can safely relive the shame of their actions, and the offended can engage in the process of discovery.

A 2004 meta-analysis by Baskin and Enright examined 9 published studies that assessed the effectiveness of various forgiveness interventions within the counselling field. The researchers concluded that all forgiveness interventions could be grouped into 3 categories: decision-based, process-based group, and process-based individual interventions. They further discovered that, based on the 9 previous studies, the decision-based interventions resulted in no effect, the process-based group interventions resulted in “significant” effects, and the process-based individual interventions resulted in “large” effects. Baskin and Enright concluded that forgiveness interventions, when utilized effectively, can prove beneficial in clinical and non-clinical settings.

Baskin and Enright’s (2004) meta-analysis is very useful in beginning to categorize the growing number of forgiveness interventions. Also, by reviewing the effectiveness of interventions in each category, we can begin to see on which foundation new interventions should be built. It appears that interventions which stress and encourage a person to engage in the process involved in forgiveness are much more beneficial than are ones which try to bring about a simple decision to forgive. This seems to reveal even more of the importance of the process of forgiveness, of which I believe the struggle to be a significant part.

The next study by Lin, Mack, & Enright, (2004) compared the effectiveness of Forgiveness Therapy (FT) with more commonly used therapies for treating inpatient

substance-dependent clients. Fourteen substance-dependent clients were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Both groups underwent twice-weekly individual therapy sessions, however, the clients in one group experienced FT, while clients in the other group underwent treatment based on “routine drug and alcohol therapy topics.”

Researchers found the participants who completed FT demonstrated a greater reduction in symptoms related to anger, depression, and anxiety, and significant improvements in self-esteem, forgiveness, and vulnerability to future drug or alcohol use than did the other treatment group. A 4-month follow-up revealed the changes established by FT were sustainable.

Lin et al.’s (2004) study demonstrates the efficacy of treatments which specifically address issues related to forgiveness. Anger, depression, and resentment have been demonstrated to be “triggers” for substance abuse. And if such triggers remain for prolonged periods of time, substance use will naturally progress into substance dependence. One could reason, therefore, that if FT is effective in decreasing substance dependence, it may prove beneficial to view substance-dependent individuals as people stuck somewhere in the process of forgiveness. They may be stuck in not knowing where to begin, or they may have become stuck somewhere further along the way. In either case it may demonstrate the necessity of sufficient strength and direction to continue to engage in the struggle to forgive.

In the next study, Ferch (2000) used a hermeneutic phenomenological (van Manen, 1990) approach to study the personal meanings ascribed to the experience of touch in the context of forgiveness. I appreciate this study very much as this is the same methodology I will use in my study. Ferch used data from six semi-structured interviews

with self-reported Christians to explore “themes in the meanings participants assigned to a forgiving touch.” Ferch performed triangulation to check his interpreted themes against existing themes in the literature, or to adapt those themes into a new interpretation. An extensive literature review, in-depth interviews, and observing the topic of forgiveness in its own environment were used to triangulate a new understanding of the topic in question. However, Ferch does not outline how he observed the act of a forgiving touch in its own environment.

Each participant was interviewed twice, the first time to gather information, and the second time to allow the interviewer and interviewee a chance to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and reflections on the information provided in the first interview.

Ferch placed particular emphasis on the following three questions:

1. Have you had an experience of forgiving or being forgiven in which touch was involved?
2. What was the experience like - its nature, purpose, intensity, meaning, and result?
3. Please describe this experience in as much detail as possible.

Upon analyzing the participants’ responses to the previous questions, Ferch interpreted five predominating themes: restoration of a loving bond, restoration of character, lifting the burden of past relational pain, lifting the burden of shame, and restoration of oneness. He also derived a structure inherent in the human experience of the forgiving touch. Ferch used this structure as a framework with which to understand the human experience of this process. Stated simply this structure is, “(a) the connection, (b) the injury, (c) the altering of connection, (d) the acknowledgment of the injury's

threats to connection, (e) the choice to forgive, and (f) a touch to communicate forgiveness.” This structure appears to be a simplified version of Enright’s Process Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness (Table 2). The touch to communicate forgiveness may fall in the final deepening phase – more specifically in Step 18 when the offended party gains insight that one is not alone. The forgiving touch may simply be an expressing of the company of the offender within the life and experience of the offended.

Ferch reported that participants in this study pointed out the need for intentionality in forgiving. However, he also suggested that even if intentionality is needed, the ultimate step in the process is the need to overcome, “the emotional barricade of forgiveness.” Therefore, Ferch concluded that, “the struggle to forgive is primarily an internal struggle.” It is this internal struggle to forgive that I intend to explore in my study. Ferch’s statement that the struggle is the determining factor in the process of forgiveness will be discussed further in the rationale for my study.

#### 2.4 Rationale

The most significant shortcoming in the current research into forgiveness is the minimal understanding of the experiences involved in the struggle to forgive (Denton & Martin, 1998; Mullet, Girard, & Bakhshi, 2004). Multiple process models of forgiveness have been created to outline the various steps involved in interpersonal forgiveness. However, as of yet there appears to be no studies which look at the profound, subjective and emotive experience of someone struggling to move through the steps laid out before us in these process models. A simple review of the ever-increasing number of studies on forgiveness reveals the vast majority of them to be almost purely quantitative in nature. Qualitative studies on forgiveness, however, have the potential to provide an

understanding that is available only from the human experience of forgiveness.

Unfortunately, to date most studies on forgiveness remain detached from the human experiences and the meanings related with such experiences (Ferch, 2000).

In his study on healing touch and forgiveness, Ferch (2000) makes two major conclusions which relate to this study. His first conclusion is that, “The struggle to forgive is primarily an internal struggle.” This implies the most difficult part of forgiving an offender is what goes on inside of us – our thoughts and our feelings. I alluded earlier to the possible process of self-redefinition which may be a significant part of what makes forgiving such a struggle. Because forgiving requires us to begin to see ourselves as somewhat similar to our offender, we may need to redefine ourselves in a manner that is less innocent or blameless. This would obviously be a less desirable view of ourselves and therefore would be internally resisted. There may also be other things going on inside of us which have yet been undiscovered, and may only come to the surface if we spend enough time listening. The lack of case studies and in-depth examples in the published literature of real people struggling to forgive makes me wonder if forgiveness research has gotten ahead of itself. As we develop more intricate process models and more elaborate interventions to systematize forgiveness, we may in fact be missing pieces of the foundation of forgiveness.

The second relevant conclusion made by Ferch was that, “Experiencing pain and emerging from it transformed may be the definitive metaphor of human resilience. Yet the experiential dimensions of how we proceed from brokenness to resilience remain elusive.” The published research on forgiveness would tend to suggest that the human struggle to forgive is “how we proceed from brokenness to resilience.” Yet by Ferch’s

admission the “experiential dimensions” of this process “remain elusive.” By asking the question, “What is the meaning of the lived experience of the struggle to forgive?” I plan to shed some light on exactly these dimensions of the human experience.

## 2.5 Hypotheses

The hypotheses inherent in this study are the existence of universal and personal definitions, processes, and experiences within the struggle to forgive. It is also hypothesized that the process of the struggle to forgive involves a series of stages, although possibly vaguely defined, that are common to all people. Finally, it is also believed there are personal and universal experiences (i.e. thoughts, feelings, behaviours, circumstances, and effects) present in every person’s struggle to forgive.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Method

This study used an interpretive phenomenological approach, otherwise known as hermeneutics, to explore the meaning of the struggle to forgive. Forgiveness is a phenomenon that is essential to consider within its context making interpretive phenomenology an appropriate method to use as it is designed to consider the time, language, and culture of both the participants and the researcher. The intent was to systematically expose and describe the themes and meanings of the experience of struggling to forgive based on three things – the expressions of the participants, the assumptions and insights of the researcher, and the previous relevant research. The desired process was to convert these three aspects into a relatable text that captures the essence of forgiveness.

While interpretive phenomenology does not have a prescribed set of procedures, Van Manen (1990) does describe the manner in which the researcher is best able to gain a degree of objectivity regarding the phenomenon they are studying. Through journaling, discussion, and indwelling the phenomenon itself, I gained greater perspective and insight into my own assumptions, biases, and beliefs about the struggle to forgive. This in turn allowed me to more clearly view and interpret the meaning making statements of my participants as expressed in their writings and our interviews.

#### 3.1 Participants

Six adults who had suffered a serious offense and struggled to forgive were invited to participate in this study. A mixture of male and female subjects was selected from all of the individuals who volunteered to participate in this study. The offenses

suffered varied; however they all caused a lengthy and difficult struggle to forgive on the part of the victim. Recruitment of participants was accomplished through word of mouth, emails, conversations and telephone calls.

The six participants varied in gender (3 male and 3 female), ethnicity (Caucasian and Eastern European), spirituality (Buddhist, Christian, and Shamanist), experience, and age (25 to 53). Selection criteria involved suffering a serious offense from which the participant struggled to move on from, and the offense must not have occurred within one year of contacting the researcher. Participants must also have the ability to speak and write in English, and to deeply reflect upon and consider their experience of struggling to forgive. This was determined by an applicant's responses to basic questions asked by the researcher during an initial telephone conversation. Participants would not have been selected if the researcher believed they were unable to explore and revisit the offense without harming themselves in any way. Also, individuals believed to be suffering from a social, psychological or personality disorder would also have been excluded from the study for confounding reasons.

### 3.2 Procedures

Two approaches were used in order to carry out this qualitative study of the meaning of the lived experience of the struggle to forgive – written responses and semi-structured interviews. The orientating questions used to guide participants throughout this study were, “What can you tell me about your struggle to forgive?” and, “What have you learned about forgiveness based on your struggle?”

An initial telephone conversation was conducted with each potential participant. This conversation was used to present a prepared explanation outlining the purpose and

procedures of the study, and to gather information regarding the person's appropriateness for the study. The person was informed of their inclusion or exclusion either immediately following the initial conversation, or within twenty-four hours. To those who were included, resources for free support counselling from a third party were made available and any further questions were then answered.

Participants were asked to provide a written account of their offending experience, subsequent struggle to forgive, and their ideas regarding forgiveness. Some people may process and express their thoughts and feelings more clearly in writing than they do verbally. With no shortened time frame or need to respond immediately to a presented question, many people may feel freer to consider their response. Also, in writing the participants were able to choose the words that most accurately described their experience. This account was sent to the researcher prior to the interview. This enabled both the participant and the researcher to be well prepared for the interview – the participant having already begun to process their experience, and the researcher having considered what questions to ask this particular participant.

Semi-structured interviews were also used in this study. These interviews provided an opportunity to discover similarities and differences in participants' responses to the same questions, while still allowing for flexibility on the part of the interviewer. The purpose of these interviews was to go deeper into the participants' experiences in order to discover how the participant made meaning and sense of their experience. Each participant did one interview which lasted from one to two hours. Breaks were encouraged as necessary or desired. Interviews were concluded when both the researcher and participant felt the researcher clearly understood the participant's responses to all

questions. Along with the orientating questions presented earlier, some such questions included: How did you come to know what you know about forgiveness? How has the offense you suffered changed you? How has the struggle to forgive changed you? How has your struggle changed over time? What motivated you to struggle with forgiveness in the way that you did? What has your struggle to forgive cost you, and what have you gained from it? If you could change anything about your struggle to forgive, what would it be?

### 3.3 Data Collection

This study began with a pilot interview in order to finalize the wording of the orientating questions and to consider which standard questions to ask. As participants were selected for the actual study, they were asked to send a letter describing their experiences and thoughts to the researcher. This letter was opened and read only by the researcher and was kept in a safe and secure location. After receiving the letter, an interview was scheduled to take place in the Psychoeducational Research and Training Centre (PRTC) at the University of British Columbia. This semi-structured interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. All tapes and manuscripts were also kept in a safe and secure location. All participants' identities, as well as any third parties discussed in writing or interviews, were kept completely anonymous.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

This qualitative study used an interpretive phenomenological methodology, otherwise known as hermeneutics. This approach was intended to discover the essence of the construct while still respecting the context that the construct was experienced within. Participants' statements were interpreted by the researcher in order to determine how

each individual created meanings from their experiences. These meanings revealed personal, as well as, potential universal themes which ultimately make up the construct itself. The researcher looked for meaningful statements made by the participant and noted in an adjacent column what the specific theme of each statement was. The researcher maintained transparency by writing any personal thoughts, feelings, or biases in brackets throughout any documents or interviews to be analyzed.

All letters and interviews were studied thoroughly using the steps outlined by van Manen (1990). The personal letters and transcribed interviews were printed in one column and hermeneutical or meaning making statements were written in the adjacent column. After interpretations of meaningful statements were made and expressed in writing, the researcher consulted with a supervisor and the participants. Any discrepancies were discussed and jointly altered to co-construct the interpreted meaning. The researcher maintained interpretive authority while always respecting the imperative role of the participant.

### 3.5 Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this study was twofold. Firstly, it was to guide and facilitate a deep expression of each participant's struggle to forgive through letter writing and verbal responses to questions asked during an interview. And secondly, to explore and interpret the participants' expressions for meaningful statements which revealed the themes and processes involved in the struggle to forgive. The researcher encouraged an honest and thorough presentation through empathic listening, poignant questions, and co-construction of meanings. This required the researcher to maintain objectivity, neutrality, and transparency. This was accomplished through bracketing, journaling, and

supervision throughout the process. This ensured the researcher's assumptions and biases did not cloud the collection and interpretation of data.

Some of the main assumptions held by the researcher are: (1) forgiveness is a worthwhile and valuable construct, which can benefit those who offer it and those who receive it, (2) personal and universal themes exist within the human experience of forgiveness, (3) forgiveness is a method often used by victims to overcome past offenses, (4) forgiveness requires time and intentional effort, (5) any offense is forgivable if the victim wants to forgive, and (6) there is currently a lack of understanding of the subjective, human experience of forgiveness which should be addressed.

The paradigm from which this research was conducted is an interpretive phenomenological one because forgiveness is a phenomenon that is essential to consider within its context. The intent was to systematically expose and describe the themes, meanings, and process of the struggle to forgive, and to convert the lived experience into a text that captures its essence. The study was conducted from the researcher's perspective which is obviously within the context of time, language, and culture.

The epistemology of the researcher was post-positive. While the researcher was looking for the meanings of a lived experience, which is personally constructed, he was also looking for the common themes and essence of how those meanings were constructed. The meanings of the subjects' statements and stories were interpreted by the researcher, so that the definitions, themes, and process of forgiveness could be co-constructed by both the researcher and the participant. This study was retrospective in nature in that it was dealing with past offenses; however, it was also concurrent as every participant was still engaged in the struggle to forgive.

### 3.6 Rigor

Three main criteria for establishing the rigor of this study have been selected – resonance, fidelity, and pragmatic usefulness.

Resonance asks if the text expresses a richness and variety which evokes a response in the reader. If the underlying themes of the struggle to forgive have been expressed, then when people read the text it will simply make explicit the movement that is already occurring within themselves. Resonance was established through reviews by participants, peers, and therapists. I gave the final text to each of the participants, and one peer and therapist. We then discussed their responses to the text to see if it resonated with them personally and professionally. Each participant expressed their general agreement with the emerging themes I had identified and also suggested minor adjustments to clarify the wording of their expressions of one or two minor points. The peer and therapist reviewers also expressed a high degree of resonance with the text. They claimed to have gained insight from it and suggested other questions that could be asked for future research.

Fidelity asks if the text actually does what it said it would do. Does it capture the true meanings and themes of forgiveness? Is it accurate to its topic and does it represent the truth? Fidelity was established through the same reviews by the participants, peer and therapist, as well as through an assessment of the degree to which the text establishes resonance. This is because much of forgiveness exists only as a human experience. During the follow-up interviews, each participant claimed that the text seemed to accurately express their experience of the struggle to forgive. The peer and therapist also agreed that the text was accurate to the topic in their personal and professional opinions.

Pragmatic usefulness exists if the text serves a useable purpose and is accessible to a variety of people and venues. Can people of various faiths and experiences, living in different circumstances, gain something from the text? Does the text bring about a positive change for individuals and cultures, and does it inform the practice of therapists working with clients who have been seriously offended? While pragmatic usefulness cannot accurately be measured by the researcher, it will be discussed with the peer and therapist reviewers and continue to be held as a long-term goal. The results of this study will be published in a counselling journal and seminars and workshops will be developed in the future to inform the practice of therapists.

### 3.7 Ethical Concerns

The greatest ethical dilemma presented by this study was the potential for retraumatization of a participant. This study required participants to explore an experience surrounding an offense they have suffered. Depending on the severity of this offense, painful emotions could have resurfaced. While this study was not attempting to look at the offense itself, but rather the subsequent struggle to forgive, measures such as a one year waiting period, free support counselling, and regular check-ins by the researcher were used to monitor and protect the well being of all participants. Also, applicants who expressed a high level of vulnerability or risk of trauma would not have been selected for this study. No one in this study reported adverse effects from their participation.

Another possible ethical dilemma was the implication of a third party based on the testimony of a participant. It was possible that a participant could name their offender. It was also possible that the offense was a criminal act which previously had not been revealed. And it was possible that the participant may in fact have been using

this study in an attempt to bring about justice. All participants were informed prior to participating in this study that their own identity, and the identities of any other persons involved in their story, would and must remain completely anonymous. Should the participant have not been satisfied with keeping third parties anonymous for the purposes of this study, their testimony would not be presented in the final draft of this study. Also, if any participant attempted to use this study as counselling rather than research, they would have been reminded of the purposes of this study and their access to free support counselling, and asked if they would like to continue their participation in this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### 4.1 Introduction

As I begin my discussion of this topic I feel it imperative that I pause to communicate what an incredible privilege this study has been for me. This is due in large part to the six people who so willingly agreed to be participants in this study. The openness and vulnerability with which they shared their stories and experiences with me have left me changed and profoundly impacted. This study would not be what it is without them. I hope that I am able to express something of the truth of their experience of struggling to forgive in a way that will honour and encourage anyone who reads this work.

I must confess to being naïve to the nature of the human struggle to forgive prior to beginning this study. However, after reading only a few sentences of the first writings, I quickly realized what a painful and difficult struggle I was delving into. This struggle to forgive is not a dance with a willing partner, it's a wrestling match with an angry opponent, anger itself.

To the reader I feel I must explain my intentions for this discussion. It is obvious that with only six participants, any form of generalizability in the results of this study would be irresponsible and shaky at best. Therefore, as I describe the experiences of my participants I will endeavor to do simply that – to describe in detail what it was like for these six people to struggle to forgive their offenders. I hope that the following description will provide a deep understanding of what it is like for these six people to struggle to forgive, and I hope that their stories will allow you to be sensitive to the

possibility that a similar experience may exist for yourself or someone you know. The themes that emerged from the collected stories involved: (a) struggles with forgiveness, (b) struggles with oneself, (c) struggles with the offender, (d) struggles with outside influences, and (e) struggles with reconciliation. Before discussing these themes I will introduce the participants themselves and the offenses they suffered. It should be noted that for the sake of confidentiality all participants' and associated names have been changed, as well as, any other possibly identifiable details.

Ruth was a 31 year-old single woman who was studying counselling at a western Canadian university. She had a Bachelors degree in psychology and criminology, and had worked with young offenders for a number of years prior to beginning her counselling degree. Ruth was raised as a Catholic though she was not practicing at the time of this study. Her parents are of European descent and lived in a nearby city. Ruth described in writing the offense she suffered:

Peter and I were together for just over 2 years. I had met him shortly after I moved to Scotland in 2000. He was killed on March 11, 2002. He was a police officer and he and his partner were killed on duty when 2 youth in a stolen car crashed into their patrol car... Peter and Jason were killed instantly and the 2 youth survived, but had broken bones and were taken to hospital. They were both charged - the driver with manslaughter and the passenger with being a passelger in a stolen vehicle... I stayed in Scotland for 9 months after Peter died and attended most of the initial court appearances. I learned during this time that both youth had a long history of offenses. The driver had 42 prior convictions and had been

released on probation a few months earlier. The passenger was supposed to be in a detention center but there was no space and apparently he was supposed to be going in that week. Apparently both of the youths' parents were drug addicts and both youths had been wards of the state at some point. Both youth eventually pled guilty to lesser charges... The process of struggling for forgiveness has been a long one. Right after the event, I was really angry and confused as I kept hearing stories about the youth (e.g., that when they went into the hospital, they were cheered by their friends for getting rid of 2 cops). I'm not sure if these stories were true, but hearing this did not engender a desire to forgive them for what they had taken away from us. Peter's family was so angry, and his uncles vowed that if they ran into the youth, they would kill them with their bare hands. Again, this did not make it any easier for me to feel any desire to forgive, as I felt that I should be just as angry... Up until Peter's death, I had always been on "the youth's side." And all of a sudden I was on the other side, and to be honest, I didn't know what to feel towards them... I have never witnessed the youth acknowledging what they did and the impact it had. Although their lawyers said they were sorry for what they had done, it would have helped to hear it myself, to actually hear them express remorse. And as I sat a few feet away from them in the courtroom, they just looked sullen and annoyed, but never really remorseful. This is probably the single most important part of my forgiveness process, the part that has been the most difficult. Seeing them

get sentenced was of little comfort. I think what I would really like is to sit down across from them and tell them about what they've taken from us, tell them about Peter, about the gentle, fun soul that he was and that he was more than just a cop. But I fear that I will see something in them that will make me realize they are not sorry and then I probably wouldn't be able to maintain my forgiveness. I can only forgive if I feel like they are remorseful... In writing this, I realize that a huge factor in my choice to 'forgive' involved believing that they would take responsibility for their actions. And as part of my process to forgive, I have had to convince myself that they feel remorse... Is this forgiveness?

Elin was a 53 year-old single woman, who immigrated to Canada from Scandinavia fifteen years ago. She had a Ph.D. in geography and was a professor at a community college. Elin chose to describe the offenses she suffered and her struggle to forgive in the form of a letter to her father – a man who abused her emotionally and physically throughout her childhood:

Dear Dad, I would so much like to tell you that I forgive you. You asked for forgiveness about ten years ago but I was so stunned by your unexpected and unusual request that I wasn't able to say, "Yes, Dad, I forgive you." Now you are old and ill. You may go soon and I may never see you again. I wish I had the courage and heart to tell you that I forgive you. I think it would be important for you to know that I forgive; that would give you peace of mind. You could go in peace. I think that you must feel ashamed. You must know you exceeded the limits of parental

rights of discipline when you accused us for something we had not done and forced us to go and break a branch of a tree and bring it to you so you could beat us with it. That's one occasion I remember. I remember it clearly and it brings tears to my eyes. I would like to scream... Why did I never as a child realize that you were an alcoholic?

...I need to forgive you in order to heal myself - to reduce the fears, the paralysis, the inability to trust; to regain the ability to love and be loved; to be able to focus and sustain an effort. For now, as long as your humiliations haunt me, what's the point to trust or love or make a commitment, if everything will be destroyed tomorrow or the day after without any of my fault. Or that's how the 3 year-old in me reasons and ends up sabotaging everything I try...

More and more of these humiliating situations come back when I write this. I am so mad! I realize that they need to come up and be processed, once again, for the umpteenth time, until they lose power. Maybe then I can forgive. The sooner the better because they keep me imprisoned in this fear and paralysis.

I see a bit clearer now than I did yesterday how my abusive past keeps a hold on me and makes me do things that are counterproductive. It is important for me to do healing work and if this writing and eventually forgiving my abuser helps, then go for it. Right now I would say first, "I want to heal" and if that requires forgiving, then "I want to forgive".

Oliver was a 30 year-old single male who worked as a real estate agent. He described the offense he suffered and his subsequent struggle to forgive the offender he hardly even saw:

On April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2004, I was walking home from the bus stop at Main and Broadway. It was approximately 10pm... My mind was focused on what I had to do the next day (i.e. get up early, go to class, just planning the day). I saw two men walking down the sidewalk towards me but paid no mind to them, as Main is always bustling with people. As I walked past, one of them threw a left handed hook at me. I saw the twitch in his body as he began his punch, I looked up quickly (not knowing what was going on) and saw his fist. It hit me very hard on the bridge of my nose. My head snapped back, and my nose broke severely (it was pushed all the way to the right hand side, with the bone coming out of the skin, a compound fracture), and the force of my front teeth onto my lower ones sheared one of my bottom front teeth in half. I wasn't sure what had happened. I stumbled forward and looked down to see blood pouring out of my face. Seconds later I heard the assailant's friend say, "Holy shit." I looked backward and they continued walking as if nothing had happened. As they were walking away, I never saw the assailants face. I couldn't pick him out of a lineup if I had the opportunity.

... I would later be told that the police had complaints about this man trying to start a fight outside a Commercial Drive bar. He also tried to punch someone. I was in the very wrong place at exactly the wrong

time. I would also be told that despite wearing a white hoodie doused in blood, he was never caught.

The next day and weeks were not fun. I suffered paranoia ("Is he coming to get me?"), headaches, and the gut wrenching necessity of telephoning my parents in Ontario to tell them what had happened... The first weeks I was very emotional and at times thought I could forgive, and at others thought I never would. Rationally, I thought anyone that does this to someone, must have had a shitty life, so that's his payback... I am sure the attack took a few years off my life. The stress was unbelievable, and the pain was very intense. How can you totally forgive someone for that? I have learned that forgiveness must be unconditional for it to qualify as forgiveness (much like the old adage, "You can't dig half a hole."). I have not forgiven and I know this. There are days when I feel that I have, but when I have those rare days when I think about it and feel angry, and think about knowing who it is, and giving him a beating and smashing the bones in his hands so he can't do this to anyone else, then I know I haven't. So until those rare days are gone I continue to struggle to forgive. I don't think those days will ever go away. That is until I am dead, or too old to remember.

Emmett was a 40 year-old homosexual male, who lived with his partner, had a Ph.D. in education, and worked as a music therapist for the elderly. He described the abuse he suffered as a child at the hands of his mother and his struggle with forgiveness:

I have hated the word forgiveness. Still do. It's a loaded term, usually touted by those who want you to put it all in the past. At my doctoral defense someone asked me what I thought about forgiving and forgetting and I said, "Those are two F words I don't use." Forgiveness is the Christian thing to do, and I left the church long ago. Forgiveness is for those who have said, "Yes, I was terrible to you, and I'm sorry." That was never forthcoming. And yet, after all of the bloody therapy I've done about the incest, I find myself arriving at that topic in order to be able to continue with this life, since it does continue whether I'm a willing passenger or not...

I don't know if I'll ever get over the shock during my first session at a psychologist whom I went to see about coping with anxiety. She listened to my family situation at home and suddenly asked, "Was there anything about incest?" What emerged was a long held family secret: incest with my mother. It was something I knew but which I could never acknowledge and had also blocked out a ton of childhood memories along with it... Later in therapy I finally connected sexual problems I was having with the fact that she had fondled me, climbed on top of me, and suffocated me. This was a woman who rarely bathed, never brushed her teeth, slept in her clothes, and peed in a pan under the bed because she was too lazy to walk to the bathroom...

I feel that if I forgive that I'm not entitled to be angry anymore - that I can't rant and rave about it. That it leaves no space for other pieces

to emerge... I'm the only one who can do anything about the past. I can't change it. But I can change the lens through which I view it. I don't want to be anxious or angry all my days. I need to understand that it's a process, that it's complex, that it doesn't deny my voice or my feelings or my rage. It doesn't stop me from presenting about it. It doesn't require her apology. Forgiveness is an act of transcendence of the trauma, and is a work in progress.

Kelli was a 25 year-old, single female, who was born in the US and moved to Vancouver with her family when she was 10. She was studying to be teacher at a local university. Kelli described the abusive environment she grew up in at home and her subsequent struggle to forgive her father:

When there are a string of offences perpetrated by the same person over a time period of almost 40 years, it is hard to pick just one instance to write about... I have a very long memory, which has been both a blessing and a burden. I remember too much some times. One constant memory is that I never trusted my dad; I don't think I even really liked him all that much. He told me a story once that when I was a three year-old, I would stare at him with a look of indescribable hatred. My dad said that no three year old should ever look at her father like that, however, if he thought about what was going on at that time, he might understand. We were living in New York in a house that was over two hundred years-old. My dad was drinking quite heavily. I have one flash of memory of my mother screaming as she ran into their bedroom to get away from him. My sister

took my brother and me and we went and hid under her bed. I think my sister also called my uncle that night because apparently my uncle was the one who stopped him from almost killing my mom.

... I used to pray at night and try to make deals with God. “If someone were to die in the family, please make it my dad, then the cat, then the dog, and then...no one else, kay? Oh yeah, hail Mary full of grace the lord is with thee...” Forgiveness is not really a part of my belief system, not with my father anyways. I spent 21 years forgiving and then trusting, only to have it thrown back in my face time and time again...

Forgiveness is not something that I have ever been asked to do ironically enough. What I have learned is that when forgiveness actually occurs, it is a physical sensation. The hurt is no longer there and I can think about that person without my chest getting constricted or my blood pumping. The legacy of my father’s actions has made it difficult to forgive, especially when I think about my sister and my mom... I know I have a lot of work to do still.

Finally, Elliott was a 40 year-old, married father of two small children. He described himself as a liberal Anglican and worked as an engineer. Elliott outlined the situation with his father he was trying to forgive:

The offense suffered by me was the fact that my father refused to deal with the fact that he suspected I was being sexually abused by our parish priest in the Anglican Church and chose to do nothing. My father at the time was in the process of becoming a priest – was in seminary part

time and our parish priest was part of his sponsoring group – so politically it would have been a mistake for him to rock the boat by bringing any accusations against the fellow. Also my father has always suffered from anxiety and sexual scrupulosity so I think he was just too weak and “sexually odd” himself to cope with accusing our priest.

Whenever he was away (which was a lot) I took care of my mother who had schizophrenia and my 2 younger sisters who I cared for from the age of eight. When my father came home he would want to be in charge and I would resent and disagree with his decisions - occasionally my mother would agree with me over and against my father. I resented my father being around and was unable to agree or talk with him about anything. It was deeply isolating to me and very lonely...

I have as a result of the above some bit of rage inside me that comes out on occasion. I was recently fired from my job for telling my bosses what I thought about a range of things. Two summers ago I exploded in anger at my mother and father when we were holidaying with them and they got up and left us after we had driven two days to be with them. I spent some time in counselling to try and manage my anger but my recent firing reveals how inadequate this counselling was. I was fired the last Monday before Lent began. That Ash Wednesday was deeply meaningful. Due to my inability to forgive and let myself be healed I had reduced my life to ash. But I find great hope in the Lord's Prayer: If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will forgive you.

## 4.2 Struggles with Forgiveness

It seems the struggle to forgive involves numerous struggles within the mind and emotions of the victim; however, there also seems to be a struggle going on with forgiveness itself. Many who struggle to forgive seem to be struggling to make sense of forgiveness in a way that melds together their philosophy, theology, spirituality, and experience. How we define forgiveness, what conditions we have on our forgiveness, what we expect the struggle to forgive to be like, and what previous associations we have with forgiveness, all influence our experience of the struggle to forgive.

I asked each of the participants how they define forgiveness and received the following responses:

**Ruth:** The only thing I'm thinking is that forgiveness... after I wrote this I went on the Internet and it was talking about relinquishing blame, and to me forgiveness isn't about saying you don't blame someone, it's just about letting go... But I really don't know what forgiveness is... I think I was just going through it blindly like in a dark room. I was never really sure because I've never really given that much thought to it.

**Elin:** I would say that forgiveness is personal growth, spiritual growth, healing - it is also reconciliation.

**Oliver:** Well immediately my thought was accepting what people have done to you. If you have to forgive someone for doing something to you, or forgive someone for doing something to the earth, then you have to accept what they've done. I would say that's exactly what it is, accepting what they've done to you and all that comes with that, all the

repercussions. The changes in my situation, the changes in my worldview, being aware of what's going on around you on the street, accepting all of those things, I would say that's forgiveness.

**Emmett:** I think it is a process of absolving the other person and what they did, the transgressions. It's acknowledging what could have been, and then the reality of how things are. It's kind of a letting go. It's a releasing it. Understanding is a big part of that. How did this come to be? What happened that it was like that?

**Kelli:** It's more of a physical feeling. All I can describe is that it's something around my chest, and when I think about that person or event it doesn't hurt anymore, or it doesn't flare up.

**Elliott:** I think I would probably give some religious value to the whole concept of forgiveness. I think human beings traditionally have formed in a pattern of rivalry among people, and desiring what other people desire - desire and rivalry. So the forgiveness that I seek with my father is within that whole context of forgiveness.

I was surprised by the range of responses I received to the question of how one defines forgiveness. Ruth, Oliver, and Emmett all seemed to define forgiveness as letting go. Elin defined forgiveness by what she believes the outcomes of forgiveness to be. Kelli defined forgiveness by the physical feelings she experienced, or no longer experienced, when she forgave. And Elliott defined forgiveness as the opportunity to step outside of his established pattern of rivalry with his father.

As previously stated, Enright & Zell (1989) defined forgiveness in the following way:

Forgiveness involves two people, one of whom has received a deep and long-lasting injury that is either psychological, emotional, physical, or moral in nature. It is an inner process by which the person who has been injured releases him or herself from the anger, resentment, and fear that are felt and does not wish for revenge. Forgiveness may be slow in coming and does not necessarily mean that one forgets all the painful memories.

This definition tends to encompass most of the elements of the definitions given by the participants; however, I found it surprising that most of the participants did not seem to have a clear or concise definition of forgiveness, especially in light of the progress some of them had made in their struggle to forgive. Many participants seemed to simply believe they would know forgiveness when they felt it. Many also seemed to associate forgiveness with feelings, both emotional and physical. Perhaps this fact accounts for the uncertainty many participants expressed in their future of the process as emotions and physical feelings are unpredictable and ever-changing. Perhaps it would serve us well to view the process of forgiveness more cognitively and behaviorally, focusing on what we will choose to think and do about our offender, rather than emotively, so that the forgiver can experience more control over their own process. Perhaps once the cognitive and behavioural processes are established the emotions will follow. Kelli especially defined forgiveness as her physical and emotional experience of the state of forgiveness, while others tended to be more philosophical or cognitive in their response.

I found it interesting that for most participants, their definition of forgiveness was developed through their own thinking or through conversations with friends or family. Few participants had done any reading or spoken to anyone whom they felt had any authority on the topic.

It seems previous associations with forgiveness exert a significant influence over how one struggles with the concept of forgiveness. Experiences with family, friends, and churches seemed to both skew and inform the way in which each participant oriented themselves towards forgiveness. Ruth, Emmett, and Kelli all described how their Catholic upbringing influenced their view of forgiveness. Each one of them described their experiences of mass and confession as something they wanted to overcome. These associations seemed to serve as a limiting factor in their struggle to forgive. It was as if they felt the need to break free from these experiences in order to truly discover what forgiveness was to them. Kelli described her first experience of Catholic confession:

**Kelli:** Yeah, because you go to confession for the Lord's forgiveness so he can forgive your sins... I remember going to confession when I was in Grade 2 and it scared the crap out of me. And I said I swore and I lied to my mom. So I had to say ten "Hail Mary's" and five "Our Father's" and pray with the Rosary. I think that's why it appealed to my dad because you could have your sins forgiven.

Elin struggled with aspects of forgiveness because she associated it with childhood experiences when her father would demand she ask him for his forgiveness. He would repeatedly demand she ask for his forgiveness even if Elin believed she had done nothing wrong and deserved no blame. Elin, therefore, felt that if she was to

forgive her father, she would somehow be taking the blame for something she did not do. As we spoke about this association Elin quickly realized how it was clouding her view of forgiveness and making it more difficult to navigate through it.

Perhaps the variable that most greatly influences how a victim struggles with forgiveness itself is the conditions the victim places on their forgiveness of their offender – that is, the things the victim requires before they are willing to forgive. This aspect of the struggle with forgiveness was most apparent in the stories of Ruth and Emmett - Ruth because she had some very complicated conditions on her forgiveness, and Emmett because he consciously avoided placing any conditions on his forgiveness.

Ruth suffered the terrible loss of her fiancé at the hands of two young offenders. What seemed to hinder her struggle to forgive the most was the lack of remorse shown by the offenders. This one circumstance in the midst of the entire messy and painful ordeal seemed to have Ruth completely stuck. This was because Ruth required her offenders to be remorseful before she was willing to forgive them.

**Ruth:** I fear that I will see something in them that will make me realize that they are not sorry, and then I probably wouldn't be able to maintain my forgiveness. I can only forgive if I feel like they are remorseful, and not just sorry about getting caught, but truly sorry for taking away Peter and Jason's lives... And there's people that haven't acknowledged once what their role was in this. If they were to stand up and say, "I messed up," and admit any remorse and take responsibility, then I could maybe forgive if they wanted to be forgiven.

Ruth went on to describe the vulnerable state she was in because of her condition of their remorse on her forgiveness.

**Ruth:** It started to make me very vulnerable. It would be so much easier if I could just forgive them based on myself without having to connect it to their behavior, but it is totally dependent on their behavior.

By placing such a condition on her forgiveness, Ruth had unwittingly handed total control over her struggle to forgive to her offenders. Her offenders were now also her prison guards and would release her only when they were ready to admit their wrongdoing. Ruth's sense of vulnerability was very understandable considering she was being so greatly influenced by two people who had no concern for her wellbeing. During the period between our initial and follow-up interviews, however, Ruth decided to take back control of her own struggle to forgive by deciding she was not going to wait any longer for the offenders to demonstrate any kind of remorse. She was going to venture forward without her previously held condition and take her first steps into the depths of her anger.

Emmett seemed to inherently know what Ruth had learned about conditions on forgiveness. Emmett consciously avoided placing any conditions he could not control on his forgiveness of his mother. He seemed aware that most conditions might steal his ability to move through the process at his own pace.

**Emmett:** Yeah, if I put conditions on it then it will never happen, so I have to be flexible.

**Interviewer:** What is your view of conditions on forgiveness? Do you have any conditions? Are there things that you require before you can forgive?

**Emmett:** I suppose I do require that there is an explanation for what happened... seeing her diaries and being able to look at that and say, "Okay, it wasn't some bizarre, unexplained event."

Emmett's condition of an explanation may not actually be a condition, but rather an understanding of his need to be able to empathize with his offender in order to forgive. It may be about reframing the offender, the offense, and himself as the victim. We continued.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any other conditions on it? Things that you require before you feel you are able to forgive?

**Emmett:** I don't think so. If you do then you may never get there. There's too many... I guess it's just explanation, understanding.

I believe conditions are within the victim's power to place or not, however, it seems that usually once a victim has placed conditions on their forgiveness they feel less empowered.

Towards the end of each of my initial interviews I asked each participant what they would change if they could change anything about their struggle to forgive. I was hoping to touch on any areas of disappointment for the participants within their struggles to forgive. I was surprised by their responses.

**Ruth:** I think I would've had the opportunity to sit down with them and talk to them... I think maybe I would've allowed myself to feel more anger earlier on because I think I've delayed this process for four years.

**Elin:** Some kind of closure about this whole episode. It still affects me every day, something about some closure.

**Oliver:** Probably the duration, I would like it to be much shorter than I feel it's going to be. It would be nice to have gotten it over with in a week or a couple of days. But that's not going to happen.

**Emmett:** Yeah, I wish it was easy. I wish I could say, "It is beyond forgiveness." Then I could be so relaxed now.

**Kelli:** In a lot of senses I think [my father's] existence. I wish he would permanently go away. I think I've said that ever since I was a kid.

**Elliott:** Maybe pursuing counseling and stuff like that earlier on.

Ruth and Elliott expressed a desire to have done things differently in their struggle to forgive in the past. Elin wished she had already attained something she was still striving for. Oliver and Emmett would change the duration and difficulty of their struggles to forgive. And Kelli in essence wished the cause of her struggle to forgive, her father, never existed in the first place.

I found each of their responses provided some kind of insight into their view of how the struggle to forgive would be in an ideal world (recognizing, of course, that in an ideal world the initial offense would never have occurred). What seemed to be most significant, however, was how each participant dealt with the discrepancy between their real and their ideal experiences of the struggle to forgive. The participants who seemed

emotionally unattached to the ideal struggle, and focused instead on how they could continue to move forward with their real struggle, seemed to demonstrate the most determination, confidence, and progress.

### 4.3 Struggles with Oneself

#### 4.3.1 Motivations to Forgive

Anyone who has struggled to forgive someone of a serious offense will know what a difficult and at times painful undertaking this is. And in order to begin this endeavor one must be acutely aware of their reasons for choosing to forgive instead of seeking revenge, holding a grudge, or simply sitting with their anger and resentment.

Throughout these six interviews I found that the more someone spoke of their motivations to forgive, the further up the mountain of forgiveness they had managed to climb. This may mean that if one is keenly aware of why they want to forgive, they will be more motivated to do the work required. However, this pattern could also mean that as someone moves forward in their struggle to forgive they become more aware of their reasons for forgiving as they go. It seems possible that it may only take a single motivation to cause someone to begin the process of forgiving, however, it seems unlikely that a single motivation, unless it is profoundly meaningful to the forgiver, will be enough to see them over all of the potential obstacles and pitfalls along the way. It seems more likely that a person may begin forgiving with only one motivation, but accumulates other motivations along the way.

Each participant had his or her own reasons for wanting to forgive their offender(s). Some were motivated by a desire to become something or because they wanted to keep something of their view of themselves. Others were motivated because

they wanted to free themselves from something such as anger, hostility, or a generational pattern of abuse. And others were motivated to forgive because they wanted to avoid certain uncomfortable emotions or dilemmas. This seemed to be the case for Ruth who confesses that she tried to quickly forgive her offenders so that she would not need to experience any kind of negativity towards them.

**Interviewer:** What motivated you to struggle?

**Ruth:** I don't know. I'm not good with conflict, and so part of that was not wanting to feel negative and really trying to figure out where that came from. And so more recently my sister and I were learning to like fight and be okay with that, and learning to sit with bad feelings too. So I think my need to forgive is about being able to get rid of these bad feelings.

Later on in the interview Ruth said:

**Ruth:** Because I just feel like I want revenge now. I just want to hurt them. And I don't like feeling like that, because I'm used to feeling more compassionate and wanting to help people and not used to feeling this towards someone. And so forgiveness is a way to get rid of that. I was saying to my counsellor this morning... (begins to cry). I'm sorry...

**Interviewer:** That's okay take as long as you need.

**Ruth:** I just don't want to become all bitter and cynical about the world. So if I forgive it's like I don't have to acknowledge that part of life that these two people have taken something from me and they don't care.

Now, four years later, Ruth is discovering the necessity of experiencing and acknowledging her anger, and she is finding it to be an uncomfortable yet liberating

experience. In terms of her motivations to forgive, Ruth has let go of her avoidant reasons for forgiving her offenders, but as of yet has not found any new reasons to forgive. Therefore, she has currently set her struggle to forgive aside, stating that life is pretty good right now. She did not say that she will never pick up this struggle again, but for the time being it seems that Ruth is more focused on experiencing the fullness of her life and the goodness within it. I wonder if this will actually prove to be an essential step for Ruth in her struggle to forgive.

For Oliver and Elliott, they too are attempting to forgive in order to avoid something; however, I believe their motivation to be very different to that of Ruth. Oliver and Elliott want to forgive their offenders because they want to avoid becoming something they believe will inherently follow should they decide to not forgive. It seems there may be attractions to forgiveness and repulsions away from unforgiveness. Perhaps if the consequences of unforgiveness are believed to be more uncomfortable than the struggle to forgive, one will find the will to carry on forgiving even when it becomes difficult and costly to do so. Oliver stated:

**Oliver:** If I didn't even try to forgive him, if I said that I'm never going to forgive this guy, I would probably just be really bitter and jaded about the world, and might end up becoming a guy that goes out and gets drunk and sucker punches somebody just because why not, which would never be me. But if I said to myself, "Look, this guy screwed me over and I'm never forgiving him," I think I would just be a bad dude, you know what I mean? I would be bitter. And I would show people that I am bitter. But that's not my style.

For the preservation of his soul, Elliott wanted to forgive his father and others who suspected he was being abused by the priest but did not intervene.

**Elliott:** I think forgiveness is absolutely essential to me to carry on productively. I think, if I harbour this hatred at these people it is soul destroying, it is absolutely essential that I forgive these people.

He goes on to expand his reasons to forgive to be for the very preservation of his life. Here we see something of the potentially preservative nature of forgiveness of things which are good in one's life - things which Elliott believed to be in jeopardy after discovering the offense of inaction his father had committed.

**Elliott:** I don't think I could even live. How would I be if I didn't try to forgive my father? I would just reside within that rage; I would kill myself or something. I would be consumed if I didn't try to forgive. I would be consumed with rage. I would go absolutely crazy. I wouldn't be able to live. I would probably kill myself, because the only other alternative is to harm other people if I was resigned to that rage, which I wouldn't do. So I think I would choose to kill myself. It's that, it's that important.

For others, the motivation to forgive is to find freedom from the anger, fear, and resentment that so heavily weighed upon each of the six participants after their victimization. Elin imagined what her life would be like when she feels she has fully forgiven her father:

**Elin:** I'll have some different kind of peace of mind then, and maybe, I don't know, maybe this is wishful thinking, but maybe that fear will be lost. Maybe that anger that I still feel towards him will be less.

Emmett imagined how he would feel once he forgave his late mother:

**Emmett:** I think I would just be a lot more settled in who I am. I think I would be less angry, I think the anxiety would settle down, I think I would come into my body more.

Later on in the interview he continued:

**Emmett:** I think I'll have more peace from it and be able to contextualize it and move through that. I don't think there's anywhere else to go with it, unless I can puke up more stuff in therapy. It has to have a resolution, and I don't want to be anxious or angry the rest of my days.

Kelli speaks of her anger; an emotion that has become a central part of her identity and a motivator for action. She believes that by forgiving her father she will be motivated to help others by more beneficial, less costly means.

**Kelli:** I think even though I've held onto it for so long, and I've been proud of it at different times, I don't want to be grounded in anger. I don't want that to be my fuel.

Elliott has experienced the damaging consequences on his own life of the anger he still holds for his father. Elliott admits that he has been transferring this anger onto other people in his life, and it has cost him dearly. He recently was let go from a good job for a fit of rage which he directed at his boss. I asked Elliott what he imagined would happen when he had fully forgiven his father:

**Elliott:** That's a good question. I won't harbour these resentments towards him. I won't feel rage towards him. And I won't copy that rage and substitute it to other people.

I asked Elliott what role his Christian faith played in his motivations to forgive:

**Elliott:** I think it's more of a help in the process, is my faith. I think a big motivator for me is that it's become debilitating for me in my life. I'm copying this rage onto other people, and it's really causing problems. I was fired from my last job. What I was telling my boss was no big deal, I think he has his own issues, but those things would never have emerged if I hadn't been copying my rage onto other people.

**Interviewer:** So how does your faith help you understand forgiveness or help you navigate?

**Elliott:** Maybe it's in being forgiven ourselves that we forgive, and it's in forgiving that we can be forgiven.

Later on in the interview Elliott expanded on what role his faith played in his motivations to forgive.

**Elliott:** Forgiveness is just a fundamental aspect of the Christian faith. We even say there is no forgiveness for us without forgiving others. So if we harbour hatred that is absolutely unacceptable. You have to forgive. You shouldn't be too quick to forgive, you should recognize what's wrong and take exception and say that's wrong and prosecute the offenders. You cannot accept wrong, but you cannot harbor hatred against another person.

Oliver believed forgiveness to be his best chance at finding peace and closure to the random act of violence that so intensely interrupted his life.

**Interviewer:** Is there any other way you could do that as far as you know, or is forgiveness the only way that you can have that kind of closure?

**Oliver:** I think that I could probably move to another city to get that kind of closure because the odds of him moving to the same place that I do are fairly slim. But I think forgiveness is the best way to really find that peace of mind.

Emmett had serious aversions to forgiveness for a long time. He experienced forgiveness as something that was pushed on him by people who didn't want to talk about the abuse he suffered. Emmett seemed to consider forgiveness as his last hope for peace.

**Interviewer:** You said that you feel you'll gain some peace from forgiveness. Is there anything else that is enticing you towards it? Is it just really believing that this is a strong option for peace for yourself?

**Emmett:** I think so, it's probably the only one left. I don't know what else.

I believe it is essential for one to know why it is they want to forgive before they begin. There may only be one reason to start with, and new motivations may be found along the way, however, to begin this journey without knowing why it has been chosen instead of revenge is doomed to fail. Also, it is important that one does not attempt to forgive in order to avoid feeling anger or hatred towards their offender, or to avoid having to recognize the presence of evil in the world. Forgiveness performed with such

motivations is not forgiveness but pseudoforgiveness – a mere façade to prevent the world or oneself from seeing the anger that still lies beneath the surface. Motivations such as the avoidance of bitterness, the release of anger, and the pursuit of peace seem to provide a much stronger pull towards the final goal.

#### 4.3.2 The Shifting Sense of Self

For all six participants of this study there appeared to be a very real shift in their sense of self occurring simultaneously, and in some cases, because of their struggle to forgive. For some this shift was profound and almost overwhelming, while for others it was in fact partly responsible for motivating them to want to forgive. I use the term “shift” because it contains most of the useful associations for understanding this part of the discussion. However, it should be noted that the participants did not present themselves as people in a state of crisis. In fact, in some cases the participants presented themselves as quite calm and resolved to the fact that their self-perception was changing. One such participant was Elliott.

Elliott told me a story from two years ago when he completely lost his temper and exploded in a fit of rage at his mother.

**Elliott:** Ever since two years ago, I had this blowup with my parents when we were playing mini-golf on holidays with my two kids. It was me and my mom and my dad and my two kids and my wife. I just got so mad at my mother, because of what she was saying about my daughter and I just started screaming. They took off and left, they were gone, the holiday was over. They were gone. I was left holding my daughter who is still three, my son was crying, just weeping, so confused, so disappointed that his

grandmother and father had left. It was my fault. I realized I had a rage inside of me; there are little bits of rage, residual rage against my father. It was a bit of an epiphany to me at that point that I have this rage.

For Elliott the existence of this residual rage inside of him caused a shift in his sense of self because he viewed himself as a calm and peaceful person – two characteristics that came across as soon as I met him. For Elliott, therefore, the shift in his sense of self was part of his motivation to forgive as an attempt to maintain his character and ultimately the view of himself that he previously held.

A similar type of shift occurred for Oliver. After suffering a random act of violence while walking down the street one night, Oliver discovered that he could no longer do the things he had once done with a carefree attitude - being out in public, riding the bus, and especially walking outside at night, caused anxiety in Oliver that had not previously existed. While Oliver's anxiety is completely understandable as a natural response to a traumatic event, the anxiety caused a shift in his sense of identity as he could no longer view himself as the carefree, easygoing person he once was. Oliver describes his experience of his own anxiety:

**Oliver:** It's something that's with me all the time. I don't walk down the street the way I did before, and I never will. I'm very suspect of people, and it's easy to spook me, and that's going to be with me forever because I don't know who did it.

Oliver went on to describe how he hoped by forgiving his offender he would be able to return to his former self. I find it interesting that he accepted that he would never be the same in the previous statement, but then seemed to express a desire to be the way he was.

**Oliver:** I would like to be back to the way I was before the event happened, which was to go out on a Friday night and be carefree. I think when the average person goes out for drinks on a Friday night and comes out on the street you don't even think that anything will ever happen to you and you're carefree, whereas I'm not. I'm fine, but I'll be watching to see who's coming from where, what's going on. So until I'm back to where... I think if I can forgive him totally then to me that comes hand-in-hand with just being the way I was and just being whatever. I never gave a second thought to anything I did really when it came to walking around on a Friday night. Walk down Granville, no problem, go to Hastings, whatever no problem. Now, I'll still do it, but I probably look shady because I'm always looking around and very aware. But I don't want to do that, because it's not as free and relaxed as I should be.

It is interesting that Oliver believes he will know he has fully forgiven his offender when he is the way he used to be, and that he is not as "free and relaxed" as he "should" be (emphasis mine). This would seem to imply that Oliver's ultimate goal is to forgive in order to return to the way he was before the offense occurred. However, he has suffered a serious offense that has taught him something significant about the world and humanity, and his new anxiety is merely his brain operating with new information. I don't know if Oliver's desire to return to his former self is realistic or helpful as he has suffered a psychological injury which may not be healed by forgiveness alone. If in fact the offense has changed him forever, then he may be limiting his ability to forgive. Therapeutic enactment, or some other form of trauma therapy, may help him overcome

the trauma, but I wonder if he will ever feel the same walking down the street at night. Perhaps he could believe that even though he will never be the same, and will always carry the scars of the offense, he will choose to forgive his offender for his own reasons. He begins to explore this possibility later on in the interview.

**Interviewer:** So what will it mean if you come to discover that you'll never get back to that place? Will you be able to forgive him then?

**Oliver:** Yeah, I think so. I think that I'm already at the place where I already know I'll never go back to that. I really think that it's possible, but I really think that I can't go back. I've been pushed too far to return back to the way I was, so, but I still think that I can forgive him. I don't know. It's so tough. Maybe I just want to think that I can forgive him. I don't know. I don't know if I can. I like to think that I'll be able to, but deep down in me there's something that's saying, maybe you won't. So maybe time will tell.

Here again Oliver seems to be trying to accept that he will never be the way he was, yet there is still a glimmer of hope that he could return to his previous self. Notice the paradox of, "I really think that it's possible, but I really think that I can't go back." He now states that he could still forgive even if he never makes it back, but there is an element of doubt in his words. He is not sure if he'll be able to forgive his offender, but it does seem like he truly wants to. It seems possible that his ability to forgive his offender is dependent on his ability to grieve and let go of his former self, and eventually to discover and become comfortable with his new sense of self.

Oliver goes on to raise an important aspect of the shifting sense of self caused by the consequences of the offense – getting to know yourself again:

**Oliver:** I wouldn't say it's embracing what's happened. It's more... It's almost like getting to know yourself again, because in my situation, I feel like I became a different person. So I have to get used to the way I am now, because you're very used to the way you are, where as I really didn't know how I would react in certain situations. So, you almost have to get to know yourself again.

The idea that you need to get to know yourself again after a serious offense seems to be an important one. The mention of it would also tend to imply that on some level Oliver knows that he has been permanently changed by the offense, as he would not feel the need to get to know his changed self if he was not going to remain changed. It may be that he is grieving the loss of his former self and is in the process of coming to terms with the fact that that person no longer exists. While this may eventually be a gratifying process of discovery for some, it seems more likely that for a period of time following the offense, this will be a painful process of grieving as victims discover the loss of parts of their identity due to the offense. The contradictory statements that Oliver makes at various points in the interview, stating that the changes will be with him forever but that he hopes he can return to the way he was before, would seem to imply that a tension still exists for him surrounding his self-identity. Oliver continues:

**Oliver:** I would much rather be the person I was before, because on an even keel you know what's going to happen. You know what your reaction will be, whereas now I shy away from certain situations

because... I really don't want you to think I'm a volatile person. I'm afraid of what I will do if people challenge me or if I see people taking advantage of people the way I was, but I don't know what I'll do.

It seems likely that as life goes on for Oliver after the offense, and he gets to know his new self, the tension he expresses will subside. This same tension appears to be much more present and uncomfortable for Ruth.

Ruth confesses to initially trying to forgive her offenders because it made her feel good about herself, and presented a strong and gracious character to those around her. However, as she discovered the futility of such an endeavor, she has learned that she too will need to get to know herself again as a person capable of feeling anger and considering revenge.

**Interviewer:** In the beginning, it seems from the start you were motivated to try to forgive. Even when other people around you felt anger, you said that you expressed anger that you didn't know if that's how you were really feeling if you were actually feeling that angry. And just as I listen to you, it seems like you wanted to be able to forgive. What motivated you to want to do that from the start?

**Ruth:** I don't know, I think it's because I think of myself as a good person.

The fact that Ruth's offenders expressed no remorse created a massive conflict for her. With the view of forgiveness she had, Ruth could see no way for her self-perception to survive. Ruth believed that she was a good person and that good people forgive. But in order for her to forgive the perpetrators must first be sorry, and since they are not sorry she cannot forgive and, therefore, cannot still view herself as a good person. With this

rationale surrounding forgiveness, Ruth was unwittingly putting total control of her self-perception in the hands of her offenders.

**Ruth:** Yeah, he's not sorry. How do you forgive someone who doesn't want to be forgiven and doesn't care? And I think I was forgiving because I needed to say this is my background, I can forgive, I can be compassionate towards them and I prided myself on being able to forgive them. And all of a sudden I'm like "No." In the last few days I'm like, I don't want to forgive them anymore. I don't want to be compassionate anymore and don't care if I come across as harsh.

It seems that Ruth's view of herself has come under serious attack due to her own emotions and response to the boys' lack of remorse. This is not in line with whom she believed and wanted herself to be. She continued later on in the interview:

**Ruth:** I don't know about forgiveness... being able to let go felt good, and to pat myself on the back for having such compassion – wow look at you, you were able to forgive these people. But I'm realizing now that it made me feel good, it made me feel like a superior being or something, and now it doesn't feel good anymore, because I don't think that was real, but it does feel good in the sense of letting go.

I find this to be an incredibly interesting and complicated statement. She felt good for letting go because it confirmed her self-identity - that she was a compassionate and forgiving person - and it felt good because the sheer weight of the anger was gone. Now as she struggles to forgive again, not only is the anger back, but her self-identity is being challenged. Ruth confessed that the worst thing for her is feeling such negativity

towards another human being. She is not used to such emotions and doesn't seem to know what to do with them. In recognizing that these emotions are not going to go away any time soon, Ruth seemed resolved to learn to deal with them. Here she touches on a similar aspect of Oliver's struggle to forgive - getting to know her new self.

**Ruth:** I think it's just changed because of my natural developing. I'm at a place now where I am examining myself, and I want to figure out who I am and be more real, and so part of this forgiveness is part of that.

She continued:

**Ruth:** Yeah, it's really uncomfortable because I've never had to do it before. I've been doing it a bit through counselling. I started getting counselling in September to start to get to know myself more and have been doing that in other areas of my life too, not just in this. Looking at some of the whole thing, instead of just the positives, and it sucks. But I do feel like if I do this something good will come of it.

Eventually Ruth concluded that for the time being she does not want to forgive.

**Ruth:** I still feel a bit bad for not forgiving. When I say that I want to believe it, but there is this little voice in my head that says, "That's not good." But I guess I just have to deal with that.

Here Ruth seems to emotionally abandon the process. This may not be in fact what she is doing and may actually be a helpful step in the process. She may be freeing herself to fully experience her anger over the situation, thereby actually allowing herself to move forward in a manner that will produce a lasting change. Also, by considering not forgiving as an option, she will have an opportunity to seriously consider whether or not

forgiving is what she really wants to do, and what the consequences of unforgiveness may be.

**Ruth:** Weird. It feels very selfish to me right now. I feel like I'm putting out all of the stuff that is not socially desirable, about feeling angry at them, and saying this is about me, and feeling like a superior being, and all that stuff is not a nice thing to say. But right now I just don't care. I'm just tired of putting on this façade which I think I was doing, and so now I'm like, "Okay let's really look at this."

Ruth has found that her view of herself is now more real. She states that it felt good to show her negative side to friends and to express her anger. She says it has made her feel more whole. She confesses that needing to forgive was an attempt to avoid her 'negative' side that gets angry and wants revenge, but she's okay with that now. It makes her more real and more whole and gives her more depth.

For Emmett, his shift seemed to be very profound and complicated; however, his expression of the process was rather calm and resolved. One of the most significant aspects of his changing self-perception was wondering if his sexuality would be different if he had not been sexually abused by his mother at such a young age and for such a long time. This wonderment began six years ago when he started to talk about the abuse with his therapist.

**Interviewer:** You touch, very briefly in your writing, talking about wondering how the abuse has affected your sexuality. What is that like for you? What is it that you have wondered about and what is it like to wonder?

**Emmett:** I think her interference changed the whole path. It did, no matter what, especially for the three of us. I think my other sister was abused as well. She doesn't talk about it. She had a lot of shock therapy. It just sent us on a path. I think there is a correlation but it's something I want to study more. I think the experience really does turn you off women. It did, the fact that Stuart and I are both gay. I know there are other people who have been abused by their mother and aren't, but there is a higher incidence of homosexuality among people who have been abused by the opposite gender. The damage is done. I look at Stuart, never had a relationship, couldn't have sex with someone, he would run out of the room. It didn't matter, men or women, he couldn't do it. I find it quite difficult wanting to be intimate with someone. I'm scared to death of that. I mean you can't change it, I can't change, and, but you wonder, right? It could have just been an entirely different life being raised without that. Who knows?

Emmett was 27 years old before he or anyone else acknowledged the abuse he had suffered. His brother, Stuart, who was also abused, mentioned it over the phone, but Stuart said he would never mention it again for fear of their mother's reaction. Ten more years of silence followed until Emmett could handle it no more and sought his own counselling.

In Emmett's case, his own identity was a source of the unknown. He wondered if he would be a different person on some fundamental levels if he had not suffered the abuse that he did. I wonder if part of his ongoing struggle is to establish his own control

and autonomy over his own identity. If his mother exerted unwanted control over who he became, then how does he as an adult and as a powerful individual exert control over who he becomes? Emmett confessed that he did not see himself as a powerful individual, but rather feels ‘damaged and inadequate.’ He wondered how he could exert control over who he becomes.

I found Emmett’s story and his wonderings about his own sexuality incredibly moving. While he stated that he was happy with his life now, and does not regret his homosexuality, he wondered what his life would or could have been like without his mother’s constant and pervasive interference in every aspect of his development. We continued:

**Interviewer:** Do you feel that in trying to forgive your mother you're trying to return to something, or do you feel like this is something completely new?

**Emmett:** It's new; there is nothing to return to. There's nothing to reestablish, there's nothing that I want to salvage from that.

There appears to be a profound difference in the crises of identity in those participants who suffered a single abusive act as an adult versus those who grew up in an abusive environment – as the former forgive, they are attempting to recover their sense of self as they existed before the offense; however, for the latter they are attempting to discover a completely new sense of self. For Ruth and Oliver who suffered a single offense as an adult, part of their struggle to forgive seems to be in recovering, but ultimately grieving, the loss of their former self-perception. For the rest, however, their struggle to forgive involves letting go of the parts of their character that were necessary

in order to survive the abusive environment, but that now exert an unwanted, unhealthy force in their current relationships. This experience is illustrated well by the struggle of Kelli.

Kelli confessed to feeling most motivated and grounded by her anger – a necessary emotive response to the violently abusive environment her father created for her and her siblings growing up. I asked her how she felt about seeing herself as an angry person.

**Kelli:** But I don't want that to be me. I don't want to be angry. My boyfriend last night, a situation happened at the school where my face flared up, and I was talking to him about it, and I said it's not good that I had that reaction, and he called me hot-headed. I thought okay, I recognize that yes, but I don't want to be that person. I don't want to be a hot-headed person. Even though at the same time, it defines who I am in some circumstances.

I asked Kelli if her anger ever served a valuable purpose for her.

**Kelli:** At times, yes. I don't let people get away with stuff. It comes from that place, it comes from me and my crusade. I hear my sister talk like that sometimes. And I think, no that's not where it should be coming from, but when I listen to myself and look at my own actions, I think I do the same thing.

Kelli seemed to want to let go of parts of her identity, and she believed forgiveness to be the key to this letting go, however, she also recognized the risks involved with this letting go. Her anger and pursuit of justice serves a valuable purpose

in society and at times in relationships, however, it seems to come at a considerable cost to her at other times. Also, if her anger is like her anchor chain, not allowing her to drift into unsafe relational waters, then to let go of her anger by forgiving could cause a serious shift in her sense of self. Kelli seemed to have a keen sense of this possibility, and was aware that she would need to find a new emotion with which to engage in relationships and a new paradigm with which to view humanity. A more acute version of this experience was shared by Elin in her relationship with her abusive father.

Elin's shift began as soon as her father acknowledged the abusive mistakes he had made in raising her and asked for her forgiveness. By humbling himself and asking for her forgiveness, Elin's father was in fact empowering his daughter – something he had failed to do in her life until that moment. By taking his request seriously and beginning to consider forgiving him as an option, Elin was forced to leave behind her victimized self-perception and take on instead an empowered and capable view of herself.

It seems that for each participant, a significant hurdle in the struggle to forgive involved some kind of shift in their sense of self. This shift may have been profound for some and manageable for others, and it may have come as a consequence of the offense and be solved by forgiving or, as in the cases of Emmett, Kelli, and Elin, it may in fact have been caused by the struggle to forgive itself.

#### 4.3.3 The Shifting View of Humanity

A consistent theme in the struggle to forgive for two of the participants was the fact that after the offense the victims could not continue to operate their lives with their previously held view of humanity. A change was required and this change did not come easily. Those who previously believed that people were fundamentally good, yet

experienced a consequence of evil at the hands of another person, were forced to recognize that humanity was not as they believed it to be.

Of all six participants, it was Ruth who struggled with her view of humanity the most. She herself stated that her altered view of humanity was the most difficult thing for her to come to grips with after witnessing the lack of remorse displayed by her fiancé's killers. Ruth says that her offenders' lack of remorse shattered her belief that people are good and not inherently evil. She finds it impossible to understand, based on her previously held view of humanity, how someone could kill another person and not be sorry. Ruth believes that if it were she who had inadvertently killed two people, she would be sorry. However, based on the evidence available to her, she has no reason to believe they are sorry in any way. In fact, Ruth has only heard stories of perpetrators relishing the praise of their peers for killing 'two pigs' and attempting to sue the court system in order to get out of jail prematurely. I asked Ruth about her experience of their lack of remorse:

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah. And then you talk about some of the stories that you heard about the youth, about when they went into the hospital they were cheered by their friends. Where did you hear these stories from and what was it like for you to hear them?

**Ruth:** I heard them from some of Peter's friends who escorted them into the hospital because they went in the ambulance. And so when I just first heard them I was devastated. It was so appalling I was already dealing with what was going on, and then I was like, "Can people really be that evil?" And it is put on top of everything else.

Here we witness what Ruth describes as the biggest part of her struggle. She claims that their response shattered her beliefs that people are good and not inherently evil. She wondered how she could trust again, and how she could possibly help anyone again. Ruth described more of this struggle:

**Ruth:** I just don't want to become all bitter and cynical about the world.

So if I forgive it's like I don't have to acknowledge that part of life - that these two people have taken something from me and they don't care. And I don't know how to reconcile that with my view of people. This is the first time I've ever really thought about it. I've just created this picture in my head about who they were, and all of a sudden I'm like, wow they're pretty nasty. And so it distresses me because, what do I do with that?

It seems that the offenders' lack of remorse and pride in their crime has given Ruth an unwanted insight into part of the truth of humanity that she did not have before, and it is clear that she did not know what to do with this insight. She didn't know how to make this piece of the puzzle fit with her previously held beliefs of humanity.

The struggle to reshape one's view of humanity after suffering a serious offense is anything but simple, and those mired in the struggle or those observing someone else in this struggle should be aware of the consistent presence of contradictions and paradoxical thinking. Ruth is no exception, and I believe these contradictions to be a sign of the uncomfortable, messy change towards a new world view that is taking place. During our initial interview, after stating how she is struggling to still believe that all people are inherently good, Ruth makes a comment that reveals the direction she may be heading in her view of humanity.

**Ruth:** I can still believe the majority of people are good. And that's when it comes back to talking about the youth, and I don't believe they're born inherently bad. They got to this state because of their upbringing, but it's my belief that people can change. How do you commit something like that and not change. I can't wrap my head around that. And so forgiveness helped me not have to wrap my head around that.

I questioned Ruth further about what she really believes about the boys and their parents, who also refused to take any kind of responsibility for the deaths of Peter and Jason.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel like there's anything in the youth or the parents that wants to be forgiven or wants to take responsibility? I guess that's a hard question, because you haven't seen anything.

**Ruth:** When you say that I have this belief that underneath it all that people are not inherently evil, that they do want to be good. And so, I do believe that there's something, a tiny nugget, buried under this huge layer that wants to be forgiven.

Here we begin to see the understandable contradictions in Ruth's thinking. She believed that her offenders were actually sorry and truly wanted to be forgiven, but were unable to show it because of 'this huge layer.' I can only imagine by this she meant the layers of ego, peer pressure, and expectations her young offenders had taken on in order to keep up appearances. Yet we also see Ruth struggling with what she knew of the boys which is that they were not sorry and had boasted about killing two police officers. Ruth appeared to be in the midst of a crisis as she attempted to settle upon a new view of humanity that takes into consideration her experiences of people before and after the

death of her fiancé. Ruth was formulating the angle from which she would approach her interactions with other human beings in the future.

Three months after our initial interview I conducted a follow-up interview with Ruth. Ruth described how she managed to make sense of her new view of humanity - by believing that the boys may be evil because of what they did and how they responded, but that not everyone is evil. Just because the boys were capable of such callousness and insensitivity does not mean that everyone is capable of such an attitude. Ruth now seemed to believe that human beings are capable of evil, but that not everyone is in fact evil. She admitted that it took her a considerable amount of time and effort to arrive at this new view of humanity which takes into consideration more of her life experiences. She also described what a vulnerable experience this was for her to be in between her old view and her new view of humanity. She was like a hermit crab that had grown too big for its shell and had to venture out, unprotected and vulnerable, in search of a new shell that would allow her to continue to grow. Ruth admitted that she had become more jaded and cynical about humanity – a place that she did not want to arrive at. She felt she had lost something in this process as she had to include elements of evil in her view of humanity. Ruth stated that her ‘happy little bubble has burst.’

Indeed a more cynical and jaded view of humanity was an unwelcome gift for Oliver, the young man who was punched in the face by a stranger as he walked down the street. In fact, Oliver counted his new more cynical view of humanity as something he will need to forgive his offender for, along with the physical pain and suffering. In our initial interview Oliver stated:

**Oliver:** When someone changes your entire outlook on society it's hard to forgive that person for making you a little more negative or a little more jaded or cynical than you were before. It's kind of hard to forgive, not to mention what he put me through. It was extremely painful. So it's kind of hard to forgive him for that.

Later on in the interview Oliver qualifies his new view of humanity to deal more with people who have been drinking, as his attacker was known to be drunk at the time of the assault.

**Oliver:** It's changed my worldview in that I think I'm more skeptical of people, especially if there's alcohol involved. If I know people have been drinking then I'm very aware if people are walking down the street and I'm very cautious and very alert. It's changed my worldview. I just think that people walk around assuming that the world is a safe place to be and by and large it is. But I don't feel that people even consider the fact that something could happen to them, when really it could any second.

I questioned Oliver about whether or not he felt his new view of humanity was more accurate than the one he had before the offense.

**Interviewer:** So do you think something that you've gained from this experience is a more accurate worldview?

**Oliver:** Well, when you look at the number of people in the world, versus the number of times something like this happens, having it happen to you is very rare. So I don't think it's a more accurate worldview and that this happens all the time, but I think it's a more accurate worldview to think

that it can happen and it does happen. But I don't think you should go around thinking this is going to happen to me. There are dangers out there and there are people that are off-balance that do this kind of thing and you should be aware.

Oliver suggests that his new world view is more accurate than the one he had before, however, he also feels that he over-focuses on the potential for harm. This is understandable considering the traumatic and unexpected nature of the offense Oliver suffered. It seems that in this case, his new worldview may in fact be a more accurate one, however, what is most often in his awareness or his consciousness may not be helpful. It seems he would like to change the fact that the potential for danger is often at the forefront of his mind. The fact that Oliver did not know, or even see, his attacker, and has no ongoing contact with him, makes his struggle to form a new view of humanity a more simple one. This is not to say, however, that his struggle is necessarily easier than that of Ruth.

As I began to analyze the six interviews with the six different participants, an interesting pattern emerged. I found that the topic of one's view of humanity came up frequently with Ruth and Oliver, two people who had suffered an offensive event in adulthood, but grew up in stable, loving homes. However, this topic did not come up at all for those who were struggling to forgive ongoing abuse from childhood. Elin, Emmett, Kelli, and Elliott had all suffered in abusive family systems growing up, and did not seem to be struggling to develop a new view of humanity as they struggled to forgive their offenders. This would seem to suggest that the struggle to create a new view of humanity is the job of those who grew up believing the world was a safe place, and that

the people in it were good to each other, but discovered otherwise later in life. Elliott, the only participant currently struggling to forgive ongoing childhood offenses who touched on the topic of humanity, describes the view of humanity he has grown up with:

**Elliott:** I don't have an expectation that people won't be fucked up. There are people out there that are sick, and I accept that. I can get beyond that.

How Elliott manages to “get beyond that” he did not say. My suspicion is that a lack of problems is not an expectation he has of people in general. Therefore he does not experience others’ problems as an offense upon himself.

For Ruth and Oliver it seems that part of their struggle to forgive is the struggle to create a new view of humanity that accounts for the offense they suffered at the hands of another human being. It seems they must also forgive their offender for forcing them to adopt a new more cynical and jaded view of humanity. For the others, however, it seems that their struggle to forgive involves breaking free of the view of humanity they were forced into because of the abusive situation in which they grew up. A belief that all people, or at least all grown-ups, are potentially dangerous is one that helped Elin, Emmett, Kelli, and Elliott survive their childhoods. Now grown-ups themselves, many of them are finding that this view of humanity is not helping them be successful in their relationships, families, and careers. It serves to prevent them from being open and vulnerable to people who are actually safe and relationships that could be fulfilling and intimate. Therefore, forgiveness to them may serve as an opportunity to develop a new view of humanity that is less threatening, thereby allowing them to let their guard down and experience a deeper level of intimacy with those around them.

#### 4.3.4 The Search for Meaning

As I begin this section of the discussion, for the sake of transparency I feel it is important that I explain something of my personal thinking around suffering and meaning. I do not believe that everything happens for a reason. I find this statement to be irrational and often times dismissive of human suffering. Rather I believe we search to find reason in everything that happens. I believe we as human beings have a fundamental need to make sense of the world and what happens within it, especially the things that happen to us directly. So when Oliver was punched in the face by a stranger passing him on the sidewalk one night, or Elliott suffered ongoing sexual abuse because his father was too weak to intervene, I do not believe these things happened for a reason. I believe Oliver and Elliott, along with anyone who suffers a serious offense, will struggle to find reason in the midst of their suffering. It is normal to ask 'Why?' when bad things happen to us. Unfortunately, for some this question seems to become an immense burden. For others, however, they seem to be able to leave this question behind and move forward in life. I believe this is because they have found meaning in the midst of unreasonable suffering.

When a person suffers a serious offense, it is as though they have been pushed into a deep pit from which there is no escape. They are indefinitely stuck in a place they despise, hopelessly caught in the emotional mud which is the life of a victim of a recent and serious offense. Over time, however, most victims manage to build some kind of makeshift philosophical ladder - built out of some logical reasoning, a bit of empathy for their offender, and enough time since the offense to slightly dull the emotions of it - to reach the surface and allow for an escape from the pit. Oddly though, many seem to not

climb out of the pit once the ladder is tall enough to ensure their freedom. This may be because they have not yet found enough meaning in the mire of the pit that makes it all worthwhile. It is as if each participant knows there are treasures buried in the mud of the pit, and if they're going to be suffering down there, then they certainly are not going to leave without taking with them something valuable they can use on the surface. The offense seems to steal meaning from one's life, and the struggle to forgive provides an opportunity to find new meaning. As someone struggles to forgive, it is as if they are digging in the mud in the bottom of the pit looking for the truths buried beneath their feet.

Two years ago, Oliver was violently thrown into his pit through a random act of violence committed by a man whose face he never even saw. And after a great deal of physical and emotional pain, and wrestling with the struggle that was so harshly forced upon him, Oliver has begun to climb his ladder out of the pit. I believe Oliver has begun to climb because he believes he has found enough meaning in the bottom of the pit to make it worthwhile. Oliver actually began to express some of the meaning he had found as I asked him about what the struggle to forgive his offender had cost him.

**Oliver:** It's cost me time, it's cost me stress thinking about it, it being in my head. I really feel like this guy took years off my life. Just the stress surrounding and the body healing so much. I think it's stress, most definitely it's cost me. It's given me a courage in a strange kind of way. If something like that can't stop me from continuing to live my life and achieving my goals in becoming a realtor like I wanted to, that kind of gave me a bit of strength in that way, that it's a hurdle in my way.

One way that Oliver has found meaning in his struggle is that he has learned something about his strength. As he discovered that even something as serious as the offense he suffered couldn't stop him, he gained a confidence and belief in himself. I questioned Oliver further on this topic:

**Interviewer:** Are there any good things that have come out of this experience for you?

**Oliver:** Yeah, I think, whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger, so I feel like I'm a stronger person for it. I think that I've had an experience. My worldview has always been that life is about experience, and I feel this is one more experience that I can call upon that helped make me wise in the future. I think those would be positive.

Oliver clearly knew what truths he had found in the bottom of the pit, and he believed these truths about life and himself were valuable enough to make the struggle to forgive worthwhile. This is not to say that the offense and the consequences of it had been erased or paid for. Rather it simply meant that Oliver would return to the surface of his life with something meaningful to show for his time underground.

Emmett suffered in silence and isolation for most of his life because he was unaware that anyone else suffered sexual abuse by their mother. He had created his own meaning in the midst of struggling to deal with the consequences of the offense he suffered by speaking publicly. We discussed this aspect of his struggle:

**Interviewer:** Do you feel like if you forgive, does that mean that you cannot serve that function anymore, of being a reminder, or a witness, or a survivor?

**Emmett:** No, that is still there.

**Interviewer:** So you can still do that?

**Emmett:** Yeah, I will still build a web site. I will still try to get this research study off the ground.

**Interviewer:** So there still can be a benefit to society as a whole from your experience, and you still be forgiving at the same time.

**Emmett:** Yeah, yeah, I have to teach about it and talk about it.

**Interviewer:** Is that part of you being able to create meaning from your experience and make it mean something?

**Emmett:** I think, so, yeah. If I got hit by a bus today that would be so awful because there is this whole working-through of it and it is still happening to other people. And if I don't publish or get it out there then the abuse is going to go on. It can't be for not. I can't have worked through so much stuff and then boom.

**Interviewer:** And will that make it easier for you to forgive? Do you think if something positive has come out of something so terrible, will that make it easier to move forward for yourself?

**Emmett:** Yeah, it would when it becomes a public story, and it's not just my atrocity, my solo suffering.

Here we see some of the meaning that has come for Emmett out of the offense. He inherited a new purpose and mission for his life in speaking about the offense. Perhaps this new meaning is partly responsible for allowing him to begin to forgive his mother.

Elliott found a very different kind of meaning in his struggle to forgive. He found that in struggling to forgive his father he opened the door to a greater level of intimacy with God.

**Interviewer:** But in actually trying to forgive him, in working through that, has that cost you anything?

**Elliott:** I don't think it has cost me anything. It I think has deepened my life.

**Interviewer:** So what have you gained from the struggle? Let's assume you haven't fully forgiven your father yet, what have you gained just from trying?

**Elliott:** I think the whole process has started to imbue my life with meaning.

**Interviewer:** What do you mean by that?

**Elliott:** Because the process and going through is within the ideas of my faith. So I see the God that I have a relationship with is the God that was born to die and died to give forgiveness to people. That was why he was born and lived as a human, is to give forgiveness to people. So that's the key meta-narrative of the Christian faith. So in struggling to forgive, I'm interacting with that whole idea, and it's imbuing my life with meaning.

In Elliott's case the meaning was found in the struggle itself. Because he believed the purpose of Christ's life was to provide forgiveness for humanity, he believed that as he struggled to forgive he was communing with God. By entering into this struggle to forgive, Elliott found new meaning in his life as his relationship with God deepened.

For some, however, it seemed the attempt to find meaning in the struggle to forgive was a much more complicated task. This may be caused by the fact that the meaning one is trying to create actually requires the participation of the offender to create it. This seemed to be true for both Elin and Ruth.

Elin had already found a great deal of meaning in her struggle to forgive her father. She was overcoming her anxiety and her difficulty feeling like a part of a community, and she felt more alive spiritually and emotionally. However, Elin was still trying to create a meaning that required her father's participation. That is, Elin wanted her father to completely change his patterns of relating with people in intimate relationships. She unknowingly believed this would give her struggle to forgive enough meaning to move on. Unfortunately, though not surprisingly, Elin's father had not completely changed his abusive patterns, though he had greatly improved – a fact that Elin witnessed first hand during a visit with her father and his girlfriend.

**Elin:** Yeah, and when I visited him last summer, at his girlfriend's place and they were both really, really nice. They really had made an effort. They were wanting to make me feel welcome and comfortable, but the interaction between the two of them and how my dad was talking to her at times - I could have just blown up. It was so disrespectful, and so nasty. This nastiness that he's the master of, and I just thought, "How can this woman put up with him?" This kind of behavior, and I don't want to be in those situations. No way, no way, so yeah, I don't mind having that power.

In this statement Elin was able to acknowledge the effort her father made for her visit and was truly thankful for it. This in itself was a sign that Elin had already covered a lot of ground in forgiving her father. However, she was almost personally offended by how her father treated his girlfriend. It is as if the fact that her father was still an abusive individual robbed her of the meaning she was seeking before she could completely move on. If the abuse she suffered as a child, and her subsequent struggle to forgive her father upon his request, led to his being changed into a solely kind and caring individual, then Elin's suffering would have served a great purpose. It would have meant something.

Upon discussing this fact with Elin, she came to realize how she was projecting her experience of being abused by her father onto all other women. This realization, which she came to on her own, allowed Elin to leave behind her search for a meaning that she knew would never be found, and instead continue to climb the ladder out of her pit.

A similar, yet much more painful experience, was evident in the testimony of Ruth. She too, like Elin, was attempting to create meaning in her loss and suffering by requiring a change in the character of her persecutor. Ruth's fiancé, Peter, a police officer, was killed by two teenage boys racing in a stolen car. Since the offense, the offenders have expressed no remorse for what they did. In fact, they have continued to misbehave in prison and just before my interview with Ruth began legal action to sue the prison system. I asked Ruth what it was like for her to see her offenders' actions since the death of her fiancé.

**Ruth:** Yeah. It was so important to me to picture them coming out, and I know it's not realistic, and when I say it's kind of embarrassing because

I know it wouldn't happen, but for them to come out and change their lives would make Peter's death meaningful.

Here we see Ruth struggling to create meaning so that she can move on. I imagined this struggle to be more difficult for her than for any of the other participants because this was not just for her – it was also for her late fiancé. If she moved on before something meaningful had come out of this tragedy, then she may have felt like Peter's death was a meaningless tragedy and his memory was not honoured. Ruth continued:

**Ruth:** If they were to say, you know, "I'm sorry for what I've taken from you guys." One little line, if they said it and I believed they were sincerely sorry, even if they were doing this, then I would be able to give them forgiveness.

The conditionality of Ruth's forgiveness was obvious yet not uncommon or surprising, especially in light of her desire to find meaning in the offenders changing their lives. With this thinking, Ruth could not decide whether or not she forgave. Instead the offenders ultimately decided if Ruth moved on or not based on whether or not they decided to change their lives and express remorse. Until that day, which Ruth admits will probably never come, Peter and his partner's deaths will have been a meaningless tragedy from which there will be no recovery.

As we discussed this topic further, Ruth quickly began to realize the impossible task she had set out for herself – she was trying to find a treasure in her pit of despair that could not exist. She realized that she needed to place within her own power her hope for finding something meaningful enough to allow her to move on from this tragedy.

**Interviewer:** Are you hoping that they will be forgivable or that they'll become forgivable and then allow you to be able to forgive them?

**Ruth:** I guess I was hoping that until this weekend, and I've just realized that that's not going to happen, and I need to do this process on my own, even if that means holding on to my anger to help me realize whatever. Then that's my own thing now.

We continued later in interview:

**Interviewer:** What's it like for you to start to get in touch with those kinds of things that you realize exist within you? Is that okay, is that uncomfortable, how does that change your view of yourself?

**Ruth:** Yeah, it's really uncomfortable because I've never had to do it before. I've been doing it a bit through counselling. I started getting counselling in September to start to get to know myself more and have been doing that in other areas of my life too, not just in this. Looking at some of the whole thing instead of just the positives, and it sucks. But I do feel like if I do this something good will come of it.

Here we see the alternative direction Ruth had taken in her search for meaning – one that holds much more promise of yielding something valuable than her previous direction. Ruth decided that in order to be sure that she could find meaning in the midst of such a meaningless tragedy, she had to take control out of the hands of her persecutors and hold it tightly for herself.

In our follow-up interview, Ruth described how she felt that she was at a fork in the road on her struggle to forgive – she could either pursue a change in the boys and the

social support system that failed to intervene in the boys corrupted lives, or she could invest in herself. Ruth decided to invest in herself by doing bereavement therapy and by beginning to explore her true emotions around the death of her fiancé. Ruth committed to creating meaning out of this experience so that it is not in vain.

To me, the struggle to find meaning is one of the most complex and elusive aspects of the struggle to forgive. Is the meaning we find, the meaning we were looking for? How much meaning do we require before we are willing to move on? Is it really about willingness or is it about ability? These are just a few of the many questions that remain unclear for me on this topic. However, it seems very clear that a fundamental aspect of the struggle to forgive is the struggle to find meaning buried in the pit we find ourselves in after suffering a serious offense.

#### 4.3.5 Overcoming the Consequences of the Offense

It seems one's struggle to forgive is greatly influenced by the struggle to overcome the consequences of the offense committed against them. If the offense has little lasting consequence on the life of the victim, it stands to reason that their struggle to forgive will be short and relatively painless. In the cases of the participants of this study, however, this equation is much more complicated as the consequences of the offenses they suffered may be felt over their lifetimes. Each participant to some degree has undeserved permanent psychological, emotional, and or physical scars that were a direct result of the offense they suffered. Some participants reported experiencing the consequences of the offense multiple times a day, while others felt the effects less frequently.

Elin described her feelings of intense insecurity when she stood in front of the classes she taught. This caused her to behave in ways that were beginning to threaten her job security.

**Elin:** I think that insecurity is always there, and the less supportive the environment the more insecure I become. And then I go through a state of paralysis where if something went wrong and I needed help how I wouldn't be able to ask for it, and just feeling like I'm going to explode, and so that's a daily thing that I have to deal with. The other one is an inability to feel like I belong to anything. But it's also larger than just the abuse. I grew up in a family that had some dynamics that made it difficult for me to feel like I belonged.

Elin went on to describe how her father's abuse caused her to struggle in fundamental areas of her relationships.

**Elin:** Maybe it's that fear again to become vulnerable. And also be vulnerable and the inability to love or be loved.

Emmett also described how he carried with him consequences of the abuse he suffered that had to be managed on a daily basis. I asked Emmett to describe the greatest consequence he still experienced:

**Emmett:** Anxiety, I have an anxiety disorder, which is not my usual state. I went away for a month on vacation and then actually felt calm. So I know it's not the usual. It's been worse since I dredged this up. When I started to think about this in counselling is when my anxiety got worse.

It seemed that one of the most significant consequences of the offense Emmett experienced was his ever-present anxiety. He described how he spent a great deal of time and energy keeping this unwelcome partner at bay. In retrospect it seems that every participant's offense had caused some level of anxiety in their life about one or more situations. Emmett described how he struggled to keep his emotions in control, but had learned some tools that helped him accomplish this task.

**Emmett:** I have a lot of trouble sleeping or settling down. I tend to be an overdoer, I think I disassociate that way, I just overdo. I've had panic attacks, less so lately. I'm more able to see that coming and manage that. I used to swing a lot between depression and anxiety and most of the time the mood swings are gone. I've learned a lot about reframing and stuff.

Oliver suffered physically from the offense he suffered walking down the street one night. Oliver's scars were not noticeable to me, a stranger, so I asked him if he felt he still had any visible scars and if his physical appearance affected his struggle to forgive.

**Oliver:** ... To me I have an obvious, lasting scar. When I look in the mirror I can see it, and I feel like I do have a lasting scar, and I do have one. You can see it here and when I feel my nose I can feel it. So I feel like I do. It's not a horrible disfiguring, but I feel like I do. I don't think it lessens [the struggle to forgive] or makes it more difficult.

While Oliver, and his mother he claims, are still able to see how the offense he suffered has affected him physically, he doesn't feel it makes his struggle to forgive any more or

less difficult. What appeared to affect his struggle more significantly was the trauma he suffered due to his offense.

Oliver expressed a state of hyper-arousal when he was outside in populated areas at night. He felt unsure of his own reactions to different situations and at times felt his heart race.

**Oliver:** I would like to be back to the way I was before the event happened, which was to go out on a Friday night and be carefree. I think when the average person goes out for drinks on a Friday night and comes out on the street you don't even think that anything will ever happen to you and you're carefree, whereas I'm not. I'm fine, but I'll be watching to see who's coming from where, what's going on. So until I'm back to where... I think if I can forgive him totally then to me that comes hand-in-hand with just being the way I was and just being whatever.

I wonder if Oliver will lose his sense of heightened awareness if he is able to fully forgive his offender. I think some kind of trauma therapy might help him reach a level of comfort when walking down the street that he is more familiar with. In Oliver's case, I doubt if forgiveness alone will be able to heal the psychological injury he suffered when he was attacked without any warning.

Kelli also expressed signs of trauma as she retold a story from her childhood.

**Kelli:** I remember this one time my sister locked me out of the house. And I was outside the door. I was five or six, and I was crying. My dad said later something from his childhood got triggered and this is why he did it. He ended up bursting into the house, taking off his belt, and

beating the shit out of her until his hands bled because he was holding it so tight. I had this moment of thinking good, because she locked me out of the house. But then I thought, “Holy shit, I just got my sister beat up.” He was able to justify that. When I was, he said, “When I was a kid my mother kicked my brother out of the house and I was reminded of that.”

(Long pause) This is something else that I do. When I start to get stressed I trail off. When I get stressed my brain shuts off.

It seems likely that trauma caused by an offense may make it more difficult for the victim to forgive their offender. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that trauma caused by an offense, if not recovered from, may make it more difficult for a victim to feel like they have forgiven their offender. Most participants in this study equated a reduction in their experiences of the consequences of the offense they suffered with progress in their struggle to forgive. An unhealed psychological wound may serve as a potentially severe trigger that could bring intense thoughts and emotions associated with the offense flooding back. For Oliver, his reaction to the trigger of being on the streets of Vancouver at night seems moderately severe but completely manageable. For Kelli, however, she seemed to disassociate rather severely while simply retelling the traumatic story. Both participants may find it helpful to address their psychological trauma directly in order to help overcome the consequences of the offenses they suffered.

Perhaps one of the most significant consequences experienced by victims of a serious offense is pain – both emotional and physical. This pain at times can be excruciating and debilitating and can seem to completely halt a victim’s progress in forgiving their offender. It seems possible; however, that in order to struggle to forgive,

one must make themselves available to the pain that is inherently present in their offended experience of life. Emmett and I discussed this part of the struggle to forgive.

**Emmett:** Yeah, it is [scary]. It's not easy. It's not just the decision, it is a painful process. I don't know how to quite go about that.

Emmett wondered what part if any his pain might play in his struggle to forgive.

**Emmett:** There's a lot of damage. I think I would have to be able to move through the pain of the damage that was done, to be able to get to the forgiveness side of things.

I found it interesting how Emmett spoke of “moving through the pain” in order to “be able to get the forgiveness side of things.” I wondered how one moves through pain and I wondered if perhaps it is actually forgiveness that would allow him to move through the pain to a place of peace.

Emmett responded to my thoughts in his email response to me:

I feel I've got to go through the suffering and grief over what happened (move through the pain) in order to ever reach a place on the path of forgiving her. But yeah, perhaps it is the forgiveness that would allow me to move through the pain to a semblance of peace. Yet I know that I'm not ready to push the forgiveness button because I feel it would be a false start. There's stuff that I need to finish processing first. That was an insight I gained from reading the transcript – I use the word ‘stuff’ often and I think I do so in order to avoid giving you graphic details.

While every participant experienced various forms of pain as a consequence of the offenses they suffered, Ruth experienced a form of pain somewhat unique to the rest

of the participants. Ruth experienced a pain caused by her offenders' attitudes towards the offense. Ruth described hearing stories about how her offenders gloated about killing two police officers, one of whom was her fiancé.

**Ruth:** I heard them from some of Peter's friends who escorted them into the hospital because they went in the ambulance. And so when I just first heard them I was devastated. It was so appalling. I was already dealing with what was going on, and then I was like, "Can people really be that evil?" And it is put on top of everything else.

These stories not only served as an insult to her already severe injury, they also served to further shatter Ruth's view of humanity. This seemed to cause an all new form of pain for Ruth which she struggled to overcome as she struggled to forgive.

Anger also seems to be an ever-present byproduct of a serious offense. And while struggling to forgive may require struggling to overcome one's anger, it also seems likely, based on the literature and the accounts of these participants, that struggling to forgive an offender helps one overcome their anger. Elliott described his anger towards his father as the most extreme and ongoing consequence of the offense.

**Elliott:** Anger, I still have problems with anger. I have to deal with it and my rage.

Based on Ruth's experience, I wonder if it is in fact necessary to become fully aware of the full extent of one's anger towards their offender in order to truly forgive. Ruth avoided the anger she felt towards her offenders for almost four years until she could handle it no more.

**Ruth:** ... For the first time probably that I can think of I'm really and truly angry, and it's not just because of this interview it just so happens.

I wonder if Ruth's new found ability to be angry will in fact free her to begin forgiving her offenders in time, even though she described feeling further away from forgiveness now than she did prior to acknowledging her anger.

Embedded in each of the stories of my participants I found offenses which were indirectly caused by the initial offense. These "secondary offenses" may have been caused by the initial offender themselves or someone whom the victim came into contact with within the context of the initial offense. For example, Oliver told of a doctor's inappropriate and insensitive remarks when the doctor saw Oliver's disfigured nose.

**Oliver:** Then one guy came in and stopped and said, "Hey." And I said, "Hey, what's up?" And he just looks at me and was like, "Wow! Cool. I've never seen anything like that." And I was like, "Wow, really fucking cool." ... It felt like it was kind of adding insult to injury, and it wasn't really cool. I couldn't believe that he did it. I thought, "Where's the bedside manner?"

Oliver also described his outrage when his cousin suggested that karma had caused him to suffer this random act of violence because of something he had done in the past. Ruth was offended by the court system's failure to acknowledge her and by her offenders' lack of remorse, Emmett was offended by people who still befriended his mother after learning about how she abused him, Elliott was offended by other people who knew about the abuse he was suffering but did nothing, Kelli was offended by her

uncle's pressure to contact her father again, and Elin was offended by her mother's indifference towards her father's abuse.

While these offenses obviously added to an already heavy burden, each participant seemed to find it less difficult to forgive these secondary offenses than the original offense. In fact, many participants seemed to move past these secondary offenses rather quickly. This may be because within the context of the initial offense, these secondary offenses seem less significant, and therefore are not worth dwelling on. Victims may also believe that if they were to fully consider the offensiveness of these secondary offenses they would not be able to continue to struggle to forgive the offender who started it all.

During my interview with Oliver, he raised what I believe to be an important aspect of the struggle to overcome the consequences of an offense. He said:

**Oliver:** I still don't know what [my offender has] done to me. I haven't been through all of the experiences that I can. And so I think, "How can I accept what they've done to me when I fully don't know what they've done to me?"

I found Oliver's question to be incredibly profound - can you fully forgive an offender until you have fully experienced every consequence of the offense they committed against you? I believe the answer is, no. I do not believe that we can fully forgive until we have fully experienced every consequence of the offense. I believe we forgive the person who offended us and not to the consequences themselves, however, I also believe that it is the consequences of the offense that we forgive the person for. If someone commits an offense against us that has no consequence for us (i.e. does not

shatter our view of ourselves or humanity, does not fail our expectations, does not cost us anything) we will not actually feel the offense and, therefore, we will not feel the need to forgive the offender. However, if we will continue to experience the consequences of the offense committed against us for the rest of our lives, then we will need to continue to forgive our offender for the rest of our lives. This may be due to the fact that, as Oliver stated, we cannot experience every consequence of the offense at the present moment. There may be consequences that we cannot experience within the present set of circumstances. For example, Elin could not forgive her father for the fact that his abuse of her as a child caused her to feel intensely insecure in front of the class she taught until she experienced this consequence. And if Elin continues to experience this emotion when she stands in front of a class, I believe she will need to continue to forgive her father. It seems reasonable, however, that the ease with which she is able to forgive him will become greater and greater over time, possibly reaching the point where she is unaware that she is actually continuing to forgive him.

It seems that for those who are able to completely overcome the consequences of the offense they suffered, the end of their struggle to forgive their offender will be reached within their lifetime. However, for those who suffered so serious an offense that the consequences will be felt for the rest of their lives, it appears that their struggle to forgive will also extend over time.

#### 4.4 Struggles with the Offender

##### 4.4.1 Sculpting the Offender

When a human being suffers a serious offense, it is as if they inherit a lump of clay which they must sculpt into the image of their offender. The victim must give shape

to the one who offended them by using every tool in their kit – memory, emotion, rationale, empathy, philosophy, insight, and imagination. The job of the victim is to create from a lump of clay a flawed and complicated human being that is capable of committing the offense they suffered. Every offender must have parents, a childhood, motivations, wounds, successes, and failures, and it is up to the victim to discern as much as they can in order to sculpt their offender with as much detail as possible.

Some victims seem to be incredibly skilled sculptors while others struggle to establish even the most basic form of an offensive human being. Often times their offender ends up looking more like a monster from another planet than a member of the human race. At times this is understandable as their offender may have behaved more like a monster than a human being, however, in the long run this may not be a helpful point of view. We cannot forgive a monster because we cannot come to understand and empathize with it.

It is clear that some victims possess more tools than others. Elliott seemed to have more ways with which to empathize with his father than Kelli did with hers. This is apparent in the fact that Elliott's interview was peppered with statements wherein he was attempting to understand or empathize with his father more deeply. Kelli's interview, however, is completely void of empathy for her father. This may be due to their differences in character, stages of life, or simply circumstances.

It also seems clear that the more accurately a victim sculpts their offender the more likely they will be able to find a reason to forgive. I use the word 'accurately' in order to imply the need for the truth to play a part in the process. I do not believe the truth exists in a purely objective state. The truth when it comes to an offense is surely as

subjective as it is objective. No offense exists that is not subjectively experienced by a victim within an objectively definable set of circumstances. The important factor in this is the paradigm from which one views their offender, as this can influence the degree of truth (objective or subjective) involved in the sculpting process. The true nature of an offender and the offense cannot accurately be shaped by our subjective experience or by the objective measurement of its context – both are needed.

For a victim who is struggling to forgive their offender, there appears to be a desire to shape them in a way that emphasizes the aspects of them that are more forgivable, perhaps even more forgivable than they actually are. When Ruth wanted to forgive her offenders she said of them:

**Ruth:** They had 42 convictions and they keep getting turned out.

Obviously no one gives a crap about them otherwise someone would have intervened, so I see why they were out robbing, what got them to that point.

Also, if a victim's forgiveness is conditional, they will create surfaces on their offender on which their forgiveness can stick. However, should these surfaces ever be removed due to new information or insights, the forgiveness will fall away causing the victim to return to a state of anger and resentment. This was Ruth's experience after she realized that her offenders were attempting to get out of prison early. A victim who is not yet ready to forgive their offender, however, will shape him or her in a way that emphasizes their less forgivable traits. This is what Elin found herself doing in regards to her father for a period of time. She convinced herself that he was waiting indignantly for her to forgive him because she was not yet ready to forgive him.

The process of sculpting one's offender appears to be very different for those who were offended by a stranger versus those who were offended by someone they knew well. Those who were offended by a family member may have a lifetime of experiences which can be drawn upon to create incredible detail. However, this detail may add to the weight of the offense thereby making it more difficult to forgive. This sculpture also seems to be very stable as the victim will have been working on it since their relationship with their offender began. There may be layers and layers of hardened clay over the unforgivable parts making the image incredibly rigid and brittle. It seems possible that these sculptures require a life stage transition on behalf of the victim in order to allow for new insight to alter its shape. The participants in this study who were offended by a parent and who were in or had passed mid-life seemed to be in the process of slowly reshaping their offender. This was the case for Elin, Emmett, and Elliott. Kelli, still in her early twenties, seemed to be working on altering her understanding of forgiveness, while her sculpture of her father remained relatively static.

Those who were offended by a stranger (Ruth and Oliver) seemed to have had much more choice in how they sculpted their offender. They had fewer experiences of their offender and therefore knew very little about them (especially in Oliver's case as he never even saw his attacker). This allowed them the privilege of using what little insight they had, along with their imagination, to create a three dimensional human being. And when there were a number of rational motivations for their offenders' behaviours, they were able to choose the one that to them made their offender the most forgivable. The burden of this circumstance, however, is that the sculpture is very unstable and can

crumble under the weight of some new piece of information or new insight into the offender. This was the case for Ruth.

I asked Ruth how her previous work as a youth advocate affected her experience of hearing about the two boys who killed her fiancé and his partner.

**Ruth:** I could see where they were coming from. It made it really hard to believe. I felt compassion for them. I felt bad for them because I don't think they're inherently evil or anything. And I'd seen so many at the advocate's office. People would call some of the youth and they were so down and out and no one would help them. And I felt like that's where these youth came from, and when I heard about their parents it kind of put their behavior in perspective. It kind of explained how they had gotten there. They had 42 convictions and they kept getting turned out. Obviously no one gives a crap about them otherwise someone would have intervened so I see why they were out robbing, what got them to that point.

Ruth felt compassion for the boys as their social worker told stories about their lives growing up in the home of heroine addicted parents.

**Ruth:** Yeah. But I mean, I feel like I can't really remember anymore, but at the court when the social worker was on the stand talking about their life and more of the details. I think it made it easier in a way to feel like I could forgive them because I heard that the parents were heroin addicts and all these things. And I kind of felt hope for them and it helped me feel compassion for them. So I would love to know more about them.

The social worker may have been affirming the sculpture of the boys Ruth had already created. One that implied they would assume a posture of humility as they did their penance, planning to emerge from prison as if butterflies from a cocoon, changed individuals intent on contributing to society. This sculpture allowed Ruth to forgive her offenders as quickly as possible, thereby avoiding any anger or desire for revenge. This sculpture quickly fell to pieces, however, when Ruth heard that one of the boys was suing the court system in an attempt to get out of prison early.

**Ruth:** Well now, I was talking to Peter's aunt on the weekend and it's funny timing how I wrote this and then now I found out that the guy who was driving is suing the court system for some sort of breach of his rights. I'm not quite sure of all the details, and I don't even know if that's true again because I get this information secondhand. But he's suing the prison system with ten other prisoners. And if he wins then he walks and gets a bunch of money. And all of a sudden it has blown everything else and I'm like, "Okay." It's like if I find out that they're not remorseful, then I don't know if I can forgive them. And I'm like, "Oh my God!" He's sitting there thinking of ways to get out, and my little picture was that he was sitting there in prison doing restitution and sorting out his life. I know that's not reality, but also this has meant he thinks he has a right to make money out of this. And all of a sudden now I'm like he has this understanding of where he got to and how he got to this point because of his upbringing, but I can't forgive him any more. And so I was just talking with my counsellor about that. And now I feel like that's split again

between wanting to have compassion about how he's got there, and what he's doing now needs to fit. It's very confusing.

The emotional consequences of having her sculpture of her offenders smashed to pieces were obvious as Ruth spoke with me. Her anxiety was clear in her voice and her anguish was reflected in her tears. We spoke further about how this new information changed things for her.

**Interviewer:** It's very complicated and it's deep so I'm not expecting simple answers. You've kind of addressed this part already in sitting a few feet away from them in the courtroom and them not really looking remorseful. You wrote, "This is probably the single most important part of my forgiveness process, the part that's been the most difficult. Seeing them get sentenced was of little comfort. I think what I would really like is to sit down across from them and tell them about what they've done, what they've taken from us. Tell them about Peter and what a gentle, fun soul he was and that he was more than just a cop. But I fear that I will see something in them that will make me realize that they are not sorry, and then I probably wouldn't be able to maintain my forgiveness. I can only forgive if I feel like they are remorseful, and not just sorry about getting caught, but truly sorry for taking away Peter and Jason's lives." There's sort of a real vulnerability in there that this is something that you want, to forgive them, but it's quite dependent on them. How does that feel? Does that seem accurate?

**Ruth:** That's a good way of putting it. It's what I really, really want. I want them to fit into this nice picture of them doing restitution and feeling remorse. But that's not realistic, and that's what crashed this weekend. I was like, "Oh, my God, my little picture blew up." And I can't believe he's suing the system and that just flies in the face of any remorse. And I know he has eight years to kill in there, but as far as I'm concerned that to me says that neither of them are sorry. The passenger was supposed to get out but he's got another two months for using a cell phone. And both of these behaviours just fly in the face of being sorry. They're not remorseful. I just don't think they care.

As we discussed this further, the conditionality of Ruth's forgiveness came through. That is, she was able to forgive them as long as they were remorseful, or perhaps more accurately, she was able to forgive them as long as they allowed her to maintain her view of them as remorseful.

**Interviewer:** You said, "In writing this I realize that a huge factor in my choice to forgive them is about believing that they would take responsibility for their actions. And as part of my process to forgive, I've had to convince myself that they feel remorse." And it seems like it's hard to convince yourself of that anymore after what you heard this week.

**Ruth:** I don't think they do. It started to make me very vulnerable. It would be so much easier if I could just forgive them based on myself without having to connect it to their behavior, but it's totally dependent on their behavior.

Ruth was left in an incredibly vulnerable place as she lost not only her preferred sculpture of her offenders but also her precarious hold on her forgiveness of them. As her forgiveness slipped away she seemed to simultaneously experience her anger and resentment.

**Ruth:** Yeah. It was so important to me to picture them coming out. And I know it's not realistic, and when I say it it's kind of embarrassing because I know it wouldn't happen, but for them to come out and change their lives would make Peter's death meaningful. But instead they're in there sitting there feeling sorry for themselves and suing the system, and so I realize that it's a good point that I feel so reactive to this information because that's what my forgiveness hinged on. And I needed that forgiveness to let go.

Ruth realized that her forgiveness was dependent on her being able to maintain her view of the boys as remorseful. I asked Ruth if she was looking for ways to hold onto her sculpture and forgiveness of the boys.

**Ruth:** Yeah, I'm looking for some way that they could want to be forgiven. So I was trying even though I wasn't looking for ways. I had this little picture, and now they're bombarding my picture with all the ways that they don't care.

We continued:

**Interviewer:** It's much more complicated than you initially thought.

**Ruth:** Yeah. I had my pretty picture that if they can behave themselves, then I could forgive them.

Throughout our discussion Ruth often used the word 'picture' to describe her view of the boys. I had initially titled this section 'A Preferred Picture of the Offender,' however, during our follow-up interview, Ruth said that the word 'picture' no longer fit for her. It did not convey the depth and dimensionality of this struggle to compose the offender. I decided a sculpture better represented this notion and also allowed for the victim to choose different views of the offender at different times throughout the struggle to forgive. This is surely a process experienced in three dimensions.

Oliver's struggle to sculpt his offender was paradoxically simplified and complicated by the fact that he knew very little about him. Oliver was struck in the face late one night by a man as he walked past him on the sidewalk. Therefore Oliver's experience with his offender does not extend past the offense itself which occurred in a split second. The only information Oliver ever gained about his offender was from a police officer who told him that earlier that night a large, drunk, Native man was thrown out of a bar in the area for trying to start a fight. While this limited information allowed Oliver to sculpt his offender rather freely, it has made it very difficult for him to overcome the anxiety he now experiences whenever he is in public at night. Oliver explained his process of sculpting his offender:

**Interviewer:** I imagine it would be difficult to have a sense of closure because you don't know if he's in jail and you don't know where he is.

**Oliver:** But because of that you have to create your own closure. I've healed but he's probably had a shitty life his whole life.

**Interviewer:** Is part of you creating closure for yourself deciding what you're going to focus on or trying to imagine what his life was like?

**Oliver:** Yeah, I just tried to create closure for myself because I know I can't have it if I don't do that on my own. So yeah, part of forgiveness for me is being able to do that. So that I can't justify what he did, but I can justify me of letting it go. He's had his own crazy life. I'm sure he's had his own trouble.

**Interviewer:** So to be able to make sense of it you have to try to imagine what would cause someone to do that?

**Oliver:** Yeah, I assume that his past is worse than anything he could've done to me - which maybe it's not that. I presume he's mentally unstable, and that usually stems from abandonment or whatever issues he would have. So anything I could do to him probably wouldn't be as bad as what's already been done to him.

Oliver drew on his past experiences as a bar tender dealing with violent drunks to sculpt his offender in more detail.

**Oliver:** I've seen that guy, not literally that guy but guys like that and I've probably had him thrown out of bars before. And so I assume that if that's the way he is it's likely what's happened. And he's a native guy, and I'm definitely stereotyping, but I think probably he did not have a good upbringing, probably from a poorer family not a good economic class, but none of these are facts. He could've come from the best family, but I just don't feel that way.

**Interviewer:** So based on your previous experience and what little you know about that guy, this is the best picture you can come up with based on, as far as you can tell, what's most accurate.

**Oliver:** Yeah, because when something like this happens to you and you don't know anything about him... I spent a long time wondering, "Who is this guy?" And this is the kind of composite that I came up with.

**Interviewer:** Do you think it makes it easier or harder to forgive him knowing so little about him?

**Oliver:** It's hard to say, because if I knew him, and I knew he was from a good family and that he had a charmed life and still did this to me, I think it would be very difficult. But if I knew that for sure he came from the worst upbringing and was tortured as a child then I could forgive him a lot easier. So maybe not knowing I guess then, I kind of want to forgive him, and so I project these ideas onto him that he's a scum bag and had a rough life. So is it easier? I don't know. Maybe it is because I can kind of construct my own reality.

Oliver shows an incredible ability to rationally and objectively consider the facts in order to create a probable, and perhaps preferred, sculpture of his offender. He is in a somewhat privileged role as he knows very little about his offender and will never encounter him again. Therefore, he can rest assured that his sculpture will never be challenged. This could also be a curse, however, because he will always be struggling to forgive an almost theoretical person, rather than a real person with a face and a name.

Emmett's experience of sculpting his offender is almost the polar opposite of Oliver's. Emmett knew his offender very well as she was his mother. He had a lifetime of experiences, volumes of information, with which to create an accurate representation of a mother and abuser. Emmett even used deductive reasoning in an attempt to establish a possible reason for his mother's obsession with incest.

**Emmett:** It just never ends all this incest talk. Somewhere in my mind I thought, "You have to have experienced that." She was schooled at a convent which meant it could have happened there, but that didn't make sense. It must have been at home, it must have been her father. I don't know anyone else who was around. But she always talked about him in a happy light, as a dreamer.

Emmett eventually found himself in the position of being able to read his mother's diaries. This proved to be a valuable tool for him as he continued to sculpt his mother even after her death.

**Interviewer:** And when you see yourself moving forward and exploring forgiveness as an option, do you feel like what you've learned in the diaries is a tool that will help you, or do you think it will hinder you?

**Emmett:** I think it helps. Jane insists up and down that she was just mean and cruel and that she wasn't ill. But I think she was borderline personality, and some of the literature supports that kind of history in borderline patients. At least, that's an explanation.

I was unable to find any statements from my interview with Kelli that illustrated her struggle to sculpt her father as a flawed human being. There were no points in the

interview when she wondered or imagined about her father's motivations. I believe this was caused by a few different factors. Firstly, I believe Kelli was still in the very first stages of forgiveness. That is, she was still contemplating whether or not she wanted to forgive her father and, therefore, had not yet begun the work of sculpting him. Secondly, Kelli had some very real concerns around trust and vulnerability (topics which will be explored later) with her father, and relied upon her anger with him in order to keep herself safe from him. It seems possible that if she began to see him as a flawed human being, rather than simply a man whose very existence is an offense, she may not be able to use her anger in such a way as to maintain her boundaries. And thirdly, Kelli is in her early twenties. I believe this to be an incredibly important factor for the reasons outlined at the beginning of this section. Her sculpture of her father is very rigidly composed and may require a series of life stage transitions in order to become malleable once again. I do not view this as a shortcoming on Kelli's part; rather I view it as a consequence of years of abuse by her father.

Elin too experienced years of abuse at the hands of her father, however, her struggle to sculpt her offender has been a very different one. Elin was much further along in life than was Kelli. Also, Elin's father had shown profound changes in his character as demonstrated by him asking for Elin's forgiveness ten years ago. He also suffered a near fatal illness which has forced him to humbly be more dependent on the help of others. Elin still struggled, however, to create an accurate representation of her changed father. This was due to the fact that when Elin was young her father would force her to ask him for forgiveness after she misbehaved, even if she didn't believe she had done anything wrong.

**Elin:** I think that you just said it - the fact that I had to ask for forgiveness of something that I didn't do. And I would still be blamed for it. I think that's where that association is and if I go and tell him that I forgive. I feel like that's what he's been waiting for 15 years to happen and that's what he's expecting that I'm supposed to do. And he's right again.

In Elin's case the preferred sculpture was a negative one because it allowed her to not forgive more easily – that is to hold onto her anger. She associated forgiveness with unfair blame and vulnerability, therefore, sculpting her father as sitting smugly waiting for her to 'do the right thing' allowed her to defy him, maintain her control and independence, and not forgive. The situation was not this simple, however, as part of her wanted to forgive her father for her own sake and for his sake. Her confused associations with forgiveness were very understandable considering the demands of her father growing up. I asked her about her mental image of her father waiting.

**Interviewer:** So that's the image you have of him right now that he's waiting for you to do the right thing and forgive him?

**Elin:** Yeah, I have that image. Every time I speak with him I am feeling that he is waiting for that, waiting for me to say that. But whether he really is I don't know. It may just be my fantasy.

I asked Elin to clarify how her father had asked for her forgiveness ten years ago. Upon hearing the sincerity and vulnerability with which he asked I questioned her about her view of him now smugly waiting for her forgiveness.

**Elin:** Definitely, he did ask for it very humbly. He was quite shaken by what I said. And the thought that he might be expecting me to forgive and

say that explicitly - that's my thought. He hasn't done or said anything that I should, and that he's waiting for it. He's done nothing like that. I would say now in the past, in the past year, because a year ago he had emergency surgery and he almost died. But he didn't die, and since then he's been a different person. He's so mellow. It's awesome. I said in the writing he tells me, "Thank you for calling. It makes me so happy." And I wonder, "Who was that talking?" It's hard to believe it's the same person. And so now it's totally my idea that he might be secretly waiting there, thinking the next time I call, "She might say that I'm forgiven."

Elin sincerely wanted to forgive her father and, therefore, quickly removed this aspect of the sculpture she had created of him. This allowed her to sculpt her father more accurately and ultimately freed her to move forward in him.

Elliott was also at a similar stage in life to Elin. His offender, who was also his father, was late in life. His father's weakening health caused a transition for Elliott in how he related to his father, thereby allowing his sculpture of his father to be changed. Also, the fact that Elliott's son had reached the age that Elliott was when his father failed to prevent the abuse by the priest provided new insights for Elliott.

**Elliott:** Now that my son has reached the age that I was when the abuse started. I just can't imagine someone abusing my son, and not wanting to protect him or stopping that or intervening in some way.

**Interviewer:** So you are gaining insight now about the kind of father that your dad was when you were your kids' age. When you were 11 you had

an idea what your father was like. But now that your kids are 11 you see the need that they have and you see what it's like to be their father.

**Elliott:** Kids just need so much encouragement.

**Interviewer:** So would you say it's getting easier or harder to forgive your father with this new insight that you are gaining?

**Elliott:** I think I'm gaining insight that there's work that I need to do and forgiveness that I haven't done. I'm becoming aware that I haven't forgiven him for his lack of parenting.

It is clear in Elliott's case, as in Ruth's case, that new insight into the shape of one's offender may make forgiving more difficult. I asked Elliott about his view of the priest who abused him.

**Elliott:** I think I just see him as sick. I think he was just sick, and because of that I can not be as angry. I'm more angry at his bishop. I have quite a bit of anger at his bishop, who I think had some suspicions himself about what was going on... I'm very angry at him, and angry at my dad, a little bit of anger at some of the people at the church. Some of the people knew what was going on and chose to do nothing, but I'm not very angry at the priest strangely enough.

Because Elliott sculpted the priest in the shape of a sick individual without any form of consciousness or guilt about him it made it much easier to forgive him. I rhetorically asked Elliott why he didn't choose to view his father in a similar fashion. I was surprised by his answer.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like it was easier to forgive the priest because you view him in a certain way. You view him as being sick. So why don't you choose to view your father that way and make it easier for yourself?

**Elliott:** Maybe I'm starting to. I'm realizing now that maybe he had an anxiety disorder.

We spoke further about how new insights were changing the way Elliott shaped his father.

**Elliott:** Yeah, he is a bit narcissistic, I thought that before.

**Interviewer:** What's it like for you to consider that as an option for your father, something that he may suffer from. Is that a welcome thing?

**Elliott:** Yeah, it's helpful to name it, then I can modify my expectations. Maybe he was abused by his mother. Maybe he wasn't fathered that well by his father. I reduced my expectations that I had for him. I think it's helpful.

By beginning to expand his sculpture of his father to incorporate elements of illness, Elliott found it much easier to forgive his father. This might have been an unhealthy and ultimately unhelpful exercise if it had not actually created a more accurate shape of his father. Elliott balanced his sculpture of his father by considering who he was outside of the family.

**Interviewer:** What's it like to ask those questions about your father? I guess you're starting to shape your picture of your father. Is that a difficult process?

**Elliott:** No, it's helpful to name the things that would describe who he is, maybe a bit narcissistic. It's interesting though, I know he was quite liked. He seems like this hideous person to me in the way that he treated me, but for six or seven years he was a very successful priest in southern Manitoba. His parishioners really loved him. He cared for them so much, they liked him so much. But in his family environment as a kid, he seemed very self absorbed. He never really would think about his kids. It's very odd.

Here Elliott described his father as experienced by other people, the parishioners, who found his father to be a likable man. This contrasted with Elliott's experience of him, but gave his view of his father a broader context and scope. It is as if there were two sides to the man - priest and father. Both sides were useful for sculpting an accurate, multi-dimensional view of Elliott's offender; however it was clear and reasonable that the side that influenced Elliott's process the most was the offensive father.

Due to the circumstances of the abuse Elliott suffered, he had to create multiple sculptures - one who abused him, and the many witnesses who did nothing to prevent or stop it. This was also true for every other participant in this study, and possibly every victim, as most offenses also involve secondary offenses by others involved in the system or circumstances surrounding the initial offense. The topic of secondary offenses will be discussed later.

The struggle to sculpt one's offender is clearly a difficult and arduous task. It requires empathy, insight, and imagination – utensils which may come at a considerable emotional cost for those who employ them. And once a sculpture has been created there

are no guarantees that it will survive the possible barrage of new insights and actions by the offender. Sometimes the sculpture requires alterations due to changes in the offender, and sometimes it requires alterations due to changes in the victim. Ultimately, it seems that accuracy and stability seem to be important traits for any sculpture of an offender in order for a victim to be able to use it to orient themselves towards forgiving the real person.

#### 4.4.2 Empathy for the Offender

Perhaps the most powerful tool a victim can use when sculpting their offender is empathy. Empathy allows the victim to put themselves in the shoes of their offender and imagine what could have motivated them to commit the offense they did. For those who were offended by a stranger as well as those who were offended by a family member, empathy allows them to fill in the gaps between what they know for sure about their offender and what they need to know in order to forgive. Empathy creates a connection between the offender's experience of the world and the victim's experience of the offender.

Throughout these interviews I witnessed incredible expressions of empathy performed by participants for offenders. Some empathic expressions seemed to come quite easily for the participants while others appeared to require significant effort on their behalf. It seems possible that empathy may at times require the dismantling of parts of their sculpture of their offender so that a more accurate and empathic shape may take its place. In these moments participants typically presented as anxious and nervous – as if they recognized the risk associated with such an exercise. There would be a period of uncertain orientation towards the offender while the reconstruction took place.

Empathy also allows for the creation of context to surround the offense. It brings a corrupted and broken world into view as a backdrop to a flawed and complicated human offender. It allows for the consideration of the offender's family of origin when discussing the offense committed. This context did not appear to lessen a victim's experience of the consequences of the offense or their pain or anger caused by it. It did, however, seem to create an opportunity for a conversation that facilitated the struggle to forgive. None of this is to say that empathy in any way excuses the wrong that was committed; rather it simply allows for the creating of a rational and meaningful explanation for what happened. Empathy creates cracks in the membrane of the irrationality of the offense so that rationality and meaning can begin to seep in.

This was an incredibly important part of Emmett's struggle to forgive his abusive mother. Emmett was in the unique position of being able to read his mother's diaries which she wrote throughout various stages of her life.

**Emmett:** I thought it was a rare chance. You don't ever expect to have someone's diaries. Even a friend of mine who knew about the incest said, "Oh, you're going to read them? Diaries are so personal." And I was so shocked because my mother invaded every aspect of my life I thought I had full right to read them. I knew she was a hypochondriac and was very anxious, but I didn't know that long history of it. Why would a 10-year-old have symptoms like that: delusional thinking and sex? She wrote, "I'm a real whore all the time," which explained things better with the incest having come to light. I asked why, why would she do that with her kids? She had sex constantly with other people in town, but with relatives

too. She was always flirting with my father's brothers, and had sex with Uncle Glen certainly. And I found out others as well. And so there was this interest for her of sexual activity with relatives which to me sounded like she had experienced it as a child.

Emmett was imagining his mother's life as a child as it related to her behaviour as an adult. He seemed to be filling in the gaps in her diaries in an attempt to create a fully formed human-being who was capable of committing the offenses he suffered. This struggle seemed incredible to me. The graciousness and compassion required for such an expression of empathy for someone who violated him so extensively seemed to me to be immense. I was impressed with his strength to begin here, at the point of his offender's greatest vulnerability, as he attempted to sculpt the image of his mother.

Emmett explained the importance of creating a rational explanation for what was done to him.

**Emmett:** I guess anytime you can rationalize the irrational some kind of understanding is necessary. I guess if it was some kind of crime that didn't make any sense or had no context. You can see it as transgenerational, but that might be more difficult if I didn't have the diaries. Even though she doesn't talk about the abuse in there I still understood her a lot more.

I asked Emmett if there was anything he required in order to forgive.

**Emmett:** I suppose I do require that there is an explanation for what happened. With my dad's life I can see how with his father's early death and circumstances led to this. And then how awful she was to be married

to and what she must've been like. That explains a lot there. So, and then seeing her diaries and being able to look at that and say, "Okay, it wasn't some bizarre unexplained event."

**Interviewer:** In order to forgive, then there needs to be some kind of explanation.

**Emmett:** Maybe it's an ability to identify with the human suffering of the perpetrator.

**Interviewer:** That makes a lot of sense. Is it being able to see the perpetrator as a human being?

**Emmett:** I guess it is yeah, as opposed to this monster who did something. But meanwhile they're all part of humanity and related. This person went through life. I'm still angry that they didn't make proper choices, better choices in all this, and that's for me to undo.

I questioned Emmett extensively about what he required in order to forgive and he kept coming back to simply having an explanation – answering the question 'Why?' Empathy seems to be a necessary tool in order to answer this question.

Ruth also amazed me with her ability to empathize with her offenders. This was an incredibly difficult thing for her to do in light of the offenders' lack of remorse and her recent discovery that they were attempting to get out of prison prematurely. Notice her search for perspective and an explanation, similar to that of Emmett.

**Ruth:** I could see where they were coming from. It may be really hard to believe but I felt compassion for them. I felt bad for them because I don't think they're inherently evil or anything. And I'd seen so many at the

advocate's office. People would call some of the youth and they were so down and out and no one would help them. And I felt like that's where these youth came from. And when I heard about their parents it kind of put their behavior in perspective. It kind of explained how they had gotten there. They had 42 convictions and they keep getting turned out.

Obviously no one gives a crap about them otherwise someone would have intervened so I see why they were out robbing, what got them to that point. But now I kind of question. I think we could have prevented that but I don't know if I can forgive them any more. What was that question?

With the new information that Ruth had about her offenders, she was unable to explain not only their behaviours but also the attitudes which their behaviours reflect. She could no longer identify or find a context for this kind of experience of another human being, and therefore, she was unable to forgive.

**Ruth:** Yeah, that's true, I can't identify with them anymore. I can't understand anything about where they came from, and so again forgiveness is conditional upon them.

Notice that because Ruth could no longer identify with her offenders, she could no longer forgive. The offenders had moved even further away from what she believed to be rational human behaviour and she had reached the extent of her ability to empathize. I asked Ruth if this made her want to know more or less about the boys.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel scared to know all of the details about who these boys really are?

**Ruth:** No, I'd like to know more.

**Interviewer:** How come?

**Ruth:** I just need to understand them. Maybe it's a part of being able to identify with them. If I could find one piece that could help me understand.

**Interviewer:** The magic thing that explains it all.

**Ruth:** Yeah. But I mean... I feel like I can't really remember anymore, but at the court when the Social Worker was on the stand talking about their life and more of the details, I think it made it easier in a way to feel like I could forgive them because I heard that the parents were heroin addicts and all these things. And I kind of felt hope for them and it helped me feel compassion for them. So I would love to know more about them.

As Ruth continued, her desire to once again be able to empathize with her offenders became clear.

**Ruth:** I thought that if I could sit down and express how I was feeling.

And then also to be open to hearing their side of the story too you know.

How did you end up in the car that day?

For some, as in the case of Elin, the presence of positive behaviours reveals the victim's ability to empathize with their offender. This is not always possible or even appropriate for some victims; however, in Elin's case it was both. She had already done considerable work in forgiving her father and had begun to be able to experience positive emotions for him as revealed by her actions which she described.

**Elin:** I could not be in a confined space with him but thereafter I have been and I want to do that. So when I go to Norway I make sure I visit him.

Here we see Elin's empathy for her father in the fact that she desired to do good to him, even in the midst of her struggle to forgive. Perhaps through expressing her empathy for her father, as it is safe and healthy for her to do so, she will begin to experience further emotions and thoughts that go along with forgiveness.

I found Elliott's expression of empathy for his father rather similar to that of Elin. It is interesting to note that both Elin and Elliott are in similar life stages, as are their fathers. Elliott too felt compelled to express his empathy for his father.

**Elliott:** I remember a few years ago when my son was a few years old. I was reflecting on the fact about what it means to be a father and I was thinking about my father and how he was a pretty bad father, but it could have been a lot worse. I know that he has experienced a lot of that guilt over the fact that he failed me in so many ways, so I thought, "I am going to gift him with not experiencing this guilt anymore." So I said to him, "You are a pretty good father. You did okay." I was trying to help him feel better about the way that he interacted with me when I was a kid. So maybe that would be a part of it, helping him move on with what's left of his life.

Elliott expressed a desire to tell his father when he felt he had finished struggling to forgive him so that his father could move on with the rest of his life. Elliott explored his

father's childhood in an attempt to understand the man his father was, and thereby give context to the offense of inaction he committed.

**Elliott:** He has a very strange relationship with his mother. They used to sleep together. They would have naps in the middle of the day together. My mother would come over and he would be lying on the couch with her. It was very strange. I don't know if there was abuse going on there or not. It's possible, but it was a very bizarre relationship. He lacks a good relationship with his father. His father didn't know what to do with him. He was very different from my grandfather. My dad was a loner, very much into an imaginative play. He had no interest at all in playing baseball or sports, so my grandfather didn't know what to make of him. He was kind of a mommy's boy. His dad didn't really interact with him. I don't know if that has any origins to his personality or not.

As Elliott's son matured, however, Elliott was finding it more difficult to empathize with his father. Much like Ruth who discovered new information about her offenders which made it impossible for her to understand them, Elliott was gaining new information about his father as he became a father to a son that was the age that Elliott was when his father failed to protect him.

**Elliott:** Now that my son has reached the age that I was when the abuse started I just can't imagine someone abusing my son and not wanting to protect him or stopping that or intervening in some way.

It seemed that as Elliott gained further insight into his own life and heart as a father in relation to his children he found it more difficult to understand and therefore have empathy for his father.

Of all of the participants, Kelli expressed the least amount of empathy. I could not find a single expression of empathy or understanding for her father. I know that she is capable of empathy, however, because she expressed profound empathy for an ex-boyfriend and a former client who mistreated her. I feel I should be clear that in no way do I think less of or judge Kelli. I do not equate her lack of empathy with a lack of character or emotional fortitude. On the contrary I found her to be an articulate, thoughtful, and independent woman who has suffered a great deal and found a way to be successful in her life.

I believe Kelli's lack of empathy for her father was caused by a number of factors. Firstly, Kelli is still in her early twenties and does not have many years between her current experience of life and her experience of growing up in an abusive home. Therefore, her protective emotional mechanisms, which helped her survive her upbringing, may still be too active to allow her to feel safe enough to explore empathy for her father. It should be noted, however, that during our follow-up interview, Kelli expressed significant changes in her struggle to forgive and empathize with her father. Secondly, I believe Kelli was still in the very beginning stages of forgiveness. She was still considering whether or not she even wanted to forgive her father. Finally, Kelli not only knew very little about her father's life growing up, what she did know she was unable to trust. Throughout her life Kelli's father had told her lies about his childhood in order to gain her sympathy. I believe this made it very difficult for Kelli to empathize

with her father because she did not have any context within which to compose him. She may eventually need to empathize so deeply with him that she could imagine an experience of life which could cause a father to lie to his daughter about his upbringing. This will undoubtedly take considerable time and effort to accomplish.

Oliver knew very little about his offender, and therefore, needed to use both his imagination and his rationale in order to sculpt a human being that he could empathize with.

**Oliver:** Yeah, I assume that his past is worse than anything he could've done to me, which maybe it's not. I presume he's mentally unstable, and that usually stems from abandonment or whatever issues he would have. So anything I could do to him probably wouldn't be as bad as what's already been done to him.

Oliver also raised a very important aspect of empathy as it relates to victims of an offense – that is, they are able to empathize more deeply with other victims.

**Oliver:** I hear things on the news now, and I wish, “Oh, my God.” I wish I could just pick up the phone and call that person because I know what they're going through. And I don't remember the girl's name, but she was attacked by dogs. And I felt like calling her and saying, “You know what, I was attacked by a person, and I know you're frightened now, and I just want to say that really sucks.” And I just feel this empathy towards people that I didn't before. When I hear of anything, a home invasion in Surrey, I think, “Oh my goodness, people are changed forever.” Whereas before I only thought, “That really sucks. You know, they got stuff stolen and beat

up or tied to a chair.” But now I realize that's more serious than what happened to me and those people are changed forever. I'm more sensitive to these things now when people go through a traumatic offense. I'm more sensitive because I think you have more insight into the healing process, what happens to you and how it can change everything that you think about.

It seemed that Oliver had become more able to empathize with human suffering in general. It was as though he had become a member of a club to which pain and suffering were the membership fees. And as he saw others become members of the same club he longed to connect with them in some way – to share their common experience.

It is common experience that allows one to empathize with another. This would seem to imply that Oliver may be more able to empathize with the suffering his offender may have experienced which eventually caused him to commit the offense that Oliver suffered. Herein lays a profound paradox of forgiveness – the suffering the victim experiences at the hands of their offender may ultimately allow them to better empathize with the suffering their offender may have experienced and, therefore, forgive their offender.

#### 4.4.3 Offender Remorse

Perhaps the most significant thing an offender can do in order to help their victim forgive them is to express sincere remorse. This expression may remove some of the injustice from the offense, as well as, give the whole experience a sense of meaning for the victim. What seems certain, however, is that the victim experiences the expression of remorse by the offender as a positive thing. For some it may initiate their struggle to

forgive, while in others it may help to finish the process. For many, however, the possibility of an expression of remorse from the offender dies with the offender, as many victims watch their abusers pass away without ever having acknowledged the pain they caused. A lack of remorse on the part of the offender seems to only further the sense of injustice, and may initiate a kind of power struggle between the victim and offender. Unfortunately, this was the case for Ruth.

**Ruth:** If they were to say, you know, I'm sorry for what I've taken from you guys. One little line if they said it and I believed they were sincerely sorry. Even if they were doing this, then I would be able to give them forgiveness.

In this case the offenders never expressed any remorse. This was obviously a very difficult fact for Ruth to deal with in her struggle to forgive as she frequently spoke of it with intense emotion throughout the interview. This also seemed to create a kind of mental power struggle between the boys and Ruth. She may have been thinking that the boys believed you could catch them and lock them up, but you couldn't make them sorry. Ruth believed that she needed them to be sorry in order for her to be free to forgive. It seems quite likely that given the proper circumstances the boys may have expressed some element of remorse; however, the process thus far was not designed to create or allow for this to happen. I wonder if this not only makes it more difficult for the victims to forgive, but also makes the offenders more likely to re-offend.

Later on in the interview Ruth took a broader view of this aspect of her struggle to forgive and gained some powerful insights.

**Ruth:** I do believe that there's something, a tiny nugget, buried under this huge layer that wants to be forgiven. But maybe it's not about me forgiving them, maybe they need forgiveness from Peter or some higher power, but I'm unsure of their religion. I guess it would be nice if they wanted forgiveness from me, because then they'd be acknowledging what they took from me. It's kind of like I've placed myself as God, that they need forgiveness from me, but it's really about me needing them to ask me for forgiveness. Because then it's about them acknowledging, "Hey, this is really significant, and we've really hurt you."

Ruth discovered that even though she had seen no observable evidence for it, she believed that the boys did want to be forgiven. She also found that her condition of their remorse on her forgiveness was setting herself up as a kind of deity, and began to question why she needed them to be sorry and if that was a condition she wanted to hang on to.

Elin did receive an expression of remorse and a request for forgiveness from her father after she confessed to him the consequences she still experienced from his abusiveness. This served as a starting point for her struggle to forgive; however, it did not necessarily make things easy for her. It still took over ten years of conscious effort for her to feel like she had forgiven her father.

**Elin:** But the fact that he did ask for forgiveness, and that in that moment he realized something fundamental and he acknowledged the injustice, that was very important for me. And for me it was the turning point in terms of actually being able to be in the same home with him again, and

talk about usual stuff - politics and sports and stuff - which I had not been able to do. I could not be in a confined space with him, but thereafter I have been and I want to do that.

Another possible aspect of remorse as demonstrated by Elin's father was a change in his character. After emergency surgery saved his life, Elin observed a marked change in his behaviour and how he dealt with his children. It is possible that Elin experienced this as another expression of remorse from her father as she explains how it allowed her to forgive him more easily. It was as though his change was an admission that he had been behaving improperly before, but that now he was committed to doing better.

**Elin:** I would say now in the past, in the past year, because a year ago he had emergency surgery and he almost died. But he didn't die, and since then he's been a different person. He's so mellow. It's awesome. I said in the writing that he tells me, "Thank you for calling. It makes me so happy." And I wonder, "Who was that talking?" It's hard to believe it's the same person.

I asked Emmett, who never received even an acknowledgement from his mother of the abuse she put him through, if an apology from her would have made any difference to him in his struggle to forgive. His response was simply, "That would have helped." We spoke further about the lack of remorse from his mother, and I came to realize that part of the effect of expressed remorse by the offender is simply that it acknowledges the wrong done, and therefore, gives dignity back to the victim. It says that what I did to you was wrong and you deserved better. It creates a need and a place for forgiveness in the relationship that can then begin to be filled by the victim. If remorse is not forthcoming,

it then falls to the victim to find a way to have the offense acknowledged, their self-worth reestablished, find a place for forgiveness, and then begin to fill it. Surely, when the offender says they're sorry, the work to forgive becomes much lighter for the victim.

#### 4.5 Struggles with Outside Influences

As much as a victim may diligently work to overcome the pain brought on by a serious offense, there seems to be a number of outside influences that can help or hinder them in their struggle. The judicial system, family members, friends, counsellors, and strangers can at times exert considerable force over someone struggling to forgive. There is also the constant threat of being retriggered – an experience that some participants described as being almost as painful as the initial offense. And then on top of all of this is the mysterious, uncontrollable element of random, coincidental, or ordained timing – a factor that every participant in this study said contributed to their decision to participate.

There were only two participants who dealt at all with a judicial system because of the offense they suffered. Ruth sat mostly alone through days of court hearings after the death of her fiancé, and Elliott was contacted as an adult by a prosecutor who was putting together a case against the priest who abused him decades earlier when he was a child. It was then in talking to his father about the prosecutor that Elliott discovered that his father had suspected he was being abused but did nothing to intervene. I found it very interesting that Ruth found no comfort in seeing the two young men who were responsible for the death of her fiancé and his partner be sentenced to prison. For her the court proceedings were painful. She described the experience as 'appalling' and 'absolutely brutal.' She felt she was not acknowledged or recognized in any way, and

she found she had no control over any aspect of the proceedings. Ruth believed that had she been given a voice she could have moved on from her devastation less slowly and with less anguish.

There are very few offenses that are experienced in isolation, without any ripples extending to those around the victim. Every participant in this study had to navigate through their own pain and anger while occasionally or consistently bumping into that of their family and friends. At times the responses of others to the offense and the offender were helpful to the victim, while at other times their responses were unhelpful or even hurtful. In fact, according to the participants of this study, family and friends exerted considerable force on their experience of struggling to forgive.

For Kelli, Emmett, and Elin, those who grew up in abusive households, the experience of having siblings struggling to forgive seemed a potential help and hindrance. Kelli experienced considerable discomfort when she discovered that her sister and brother were once again in contact with their father. She described:

**Kelli:** I had that moment of, “Oh do I have to call him? I don't want to call him.” I think especially in some circumstances, if my brother and my sister were having a relationship with him, then it would make it awkward.

But at the same time I'm holding my ground.

Kelli's statement that she is holding her ground would tend to imply that someone or something was attempting to move her somewhere she didn't want to go. I wondered if she felt pressured by her siblings, her father, or a higher power to do something she was not ready or willing to do. There seemed to be a tug of war going on and I wondered if it was actually Kelli herself pulling on both ends of the rope. Perhaps she was both

envious and resentful of her siblings moving on without her, or even moving on prematurely. It also seems possible that she was afraid of being left alone. Their joint suffering may have been a point of connection for them and Kelli may have believed this connection to be in jeopardy.

Emmett was the youngest of seven siblings and one of three who were abused by their mother. The fact that he was not the only one hiding such a secret for so many years made it possible for his story to eventually come out in a conversation with his brother, Stuart, who was also abused. However, the unfortunate benefit for Emmett of having other siblings who were abused is experienced only in his relationship with his sister, Jane. This is because Emmett and Jane's responses to the offenses they suffered were rather similar, while Stuart's response was drastically different. Emmett and Jane were very angry and therefore put considerable distance between themselves and their mother, completely removing her from their lives towards the end of hers. Stuart, however, continued to live with his mother and care for her until she passed away, claiming he had forgiven her years prior to the abuse becoming public. This created a rift between Emmett and Stuart to the extent that they do not discuss the abuse, and Emmett plans not to tell his brother should he begin to forgive their mother. It seems possible that a similar experience of the struggle to forgive is a more unifying and intimate one than is the experience of suffering a common offense.

Ruth experienced the influence of others on her struggle to forgive by allowing herself to be concerned with what they thought of her. Ruth described her difficulty in knowing how to respond to the anger of Jason's family and friends – anger she was

unable and unwilling to match. She also worried about what Jason himself would think of her attempting to forgive the unrepentant boys who killed him.

**Ruth:** Yeah, I think about forgiving, I kind of touched on it before, was that when I forgave them the first time that Jason might be disappointed in me. I wondered if he was looking down on me saying, “You're too damn nice.” When I went to the victim services he would say, “You're too compassionate in volunteering your time for these strangers.” And I think he'd be looking down saying, you know, being pissed at me for being too nice about it. I can laugh about it, but then it was distressing because I wondered what would he be thinking? What would he have done, if he would be disappointed in me? And so that was kind of hard.

Ruth's experience would tend to suggest the possibility that victims may resist forgiving so as to not be perceived as unsupportive or unsympathetic to other victims of the same or a similar offense.

Over time, however, Ruth realized the decision she had to make – continue to keep up the appearance of forgiveness for the sake of her reputation with those around her, or leave it all behind in order to pursue her genuine experience of the struggle to forgive. Fortunately, Ruth chose the latter.

**Ruth:** I don't think I care what other people think anymore. Now I'm just looking at myself, and my anger, and my pain in the circumstances of my life, and that is independent of other people... It's more about me now. I don't really care about what other people think four years on.

**Interviewer:** And what's that like?

**Ruth:** It's kind of lonely, because it's myself I have to reconcile with.

That's what it's about. This is about me. But it's kind of freeing too because it's about me taking a look at how I feel. I'm feeling angry towards them.

Here Ruth raised an interesting and possibly common aspect of the struggle to forgive, feelings of loneliness. It seems likely that following a serious offense the victim may attempt to surround themselves with people who will agree with and encourage their emotions towards the offender. Over time, however, the victim may come to realize that the path they are treading can only be walked alone. This too would tend to support the notion that the struggle to forgive is an incredibly personal one. I asked Oliver if he too felt lonely in his struggle to forgive. He responded:

**Oliver:** I wouldn't say it makes me feel lonely, because lonely has a negative connotation to it. It makes me feel maybe alone, but not lonely.

I know I'm the only one experiencing this, but I'm not lonely.

I posed the same question to Emmett and he said:

**Emmett:** It's my responsibility. One of the biggest frustrations is that it's all up to me. No one is going to fix this for me. That's a reality of everyone's existence in life... ultimately I'm responsible.

During my follow-up interview with Ruth she too expressed a lack of resonance with the word 'lonely.' She said she did not experience sitting by herself in the courtroom or her struggle to forgive as lonely. She said she preferred the term 'alone' as she did not experience it as a negative thing. "It was just the way it was," she said. It seems the struggle to forgive is an undertaking that cannot be shared with another person. Others

may help or hinder along the way, but ultimately forgiveness must be achieved by the victim alone.

That being said, there are people to whom a victim struggling to forgive can turn to for help in the process, and counsellors seem to be a common choice. Every participant in this study had been to see a counsellor regarding the offense they suffered. Some participants had been as few as one time, while others had spent years in therapy to deal with the consequences of the offenses they suffered. Some found counselling incredibly helpful; while others said it was of little use to them. I will not attempt to comment on what distinguishes helpful from unhelpful counselling, as that is a topic far beyond the scope of this study. I will, however, simply say that no participant regretted going for counselling. In fact, when I asked each participant if they could change anything about their struggle to forgive what they would change, all six of them wished their struggle was either easier or shorter. Elliott even stated that he wished he would have gone for counselling much sooner, rather than waiting for 20 years. It is interesting to note that at the time of the follow-up interviews, five of the six participants were receiving counselling to address issues related to the offense they suffered, and three of those five decided to begin counselling because of the insights they gained from participating in this study.

Perhaps the most uncomfortable outside influence experienced by the participants of this study was retriggering – when they experienced an event or a situation which caused the thoughts and feelings associated with the initial offense to come flooding back. Some said being retriggering was almost as painful or unsettling as the initial offense was. Ruth described the pain she experienced after being mugged

by a young man not long after Jason's death. She associated this young man with the two boys who had killed her fiancé and found her pain and turmoil came flooding back. She found it came back still, albeit with less force, whenever she heard anything about her offenders. Elin described riding on a bus with two loud and drunk middle-aged men sitting in the row behind her. Her heart began to race as she heard the tone of their voice, one similar to that of her father's when he was angry. Elliott found he was repulsed and easily angered by men with a similar body type to the priest who abused him. His anger was also nearly unmanageable at times when he found himself interacting with men who shared his father's traditional, conservative values. Kelli's heart raced, her face became flushed, and she struggled to think clearly when she heard or saw any kind of injustice towards a woman. Oliver became hyper-sensitive to his surroundings when he was walking outside at night, and felt nervous around people who had been drinking. Emmett felt nauseous after speaking about what his mother did to him as a child. As terrible as the experience of being retriggered is for a victim, what seems most unsettling about it is its unpredictability. There is little a victim can do to ensure they will never be retriggered. Ruth found considerable benefit in moving back to Canada from Scotland after her offenders were sentenced. She believed the articles about the offense in the newspapers, the young men similar to her offenders walking past her on the street, and Jason's family, would have consistently retriggered her. Unfortunately, however, even an ocean and a continent could not prevent her from being retriggered by the news of the offenders' attempts to get out of prison early. Elin, Kelli, Emmett, and Elliott all moved considerable distances away from their abusive parents; however, they too found themselves retriggered at unexpected times. While

they all seemed to experience their triggers as painful, they also had a clear sense that the pain was less than it was, that the thoughts and emotions were beginning to 'dry out' as Elin said. It seems possible that even as these moments of retriggering are to be avoided, they also serve as a landmark or milestone from which those struggling to forgive can gauge their progress.

The final outside influence I observed on the participants of this study was timing. Each one of them described some sort of event that seemed to occur at an unusual time, and many of them referred to the timing of their participation in this study as curious. Elin noted how when she found out about this study she was already planning to be in Vancouver during the initial interviews. This was also the case for her follow-up interview. Ruth had planned to participate in this study for some time, but found out about the actions of her offenders in prison just two days before our initial interview. Elliott had planned to participate in a parenting course shortly after our initial interview and found it incredibly helpful in his struggle to forgive his father. While it is unclear whether or not the timing of these events is random, ordained, or simply noticed because of the participants' frame of mind, what is clear is that it exerted some degree of force in their struggle to forgive.

Every victim experienced their offense within a complicated, ever-changing context that often exerts considerable force over their struggle to forgive. From justice systems, family, friends or counsellors, to the randomness of triggers and timing, a victim struggling to forgive may at times feel as though they have little control over how fast or how far they move in their struggle.

#### 4.6 Struggles with Reconciliation

For about half of the participants in this study (N = 3) the issue of reconciliation was of central importance mostly because it was misunderstood. I found that those struggling to forgive an offender with whom they still had an opportunity to have a relationship, hesitated in their struggle to forgive due to issues surrounding a misunderstanding of reconciliation. All participants were heading in a helpful direction with respect to understanding reconciliation; however, very few seemed to be able to articulate reconciliation's place within the struggle to forgive. In this section I will first explore participants' understandings of reconciliation as it relates to forgiveness, before exploring issues of power, control, vulnerability and trust – themes which seem to be at the core of reconciliation.

When asked to define or explain their view of reconciliation, these were the responses I received:

**Elin:** If I right now think of the two [forgiveness and reconciliation], for me in respect to my father they are different because reconciliation is mutual. But in this forgiveness issue there is that possibility that I'm still being accused. It still seems to be me who has to somehow give more in my perception of the two.

**Ruth:** I don't know if reconciliation... is that like sitting down with them and talking with them? That's how I viewed it. I thought that if I could sit down and express how I was feeling. And then also to be open to hearing their side of the story too you know.

**Oliver:** Let me think about it for a second. I mean forgiveness... I don't think that they're the same. I mean reconciling myself to what's happened is faceless, the weight is on me, whereas forgiveness is about me forgiving somebody else, a person... They're tied together somehow because reconciliation might be about forgiving yourself.

**Emmett:** When someone says, "We committed atrocities. I'm sorry. What can we do to carry on together and make amends for that?" Like what they tried to do with the apartheid.

**Kelli:** I think it would be disclosure on his part. I think it would be him coming to the table and saying, "This is what I have done, and these are the steps that I'm going to take to ensure that it never happens again." I don't know. I think that sense of reconciliation; I also equate forgiveness with relationship. I think that if I forgive him I have to have a relationship with him.

**Elliott:** Reconciliation would be the other side of the coin. It would be my father and his experience of forgiveness when I forgive him. I think that's maybe the other side of the coin, finding reconciliation with the person that you have wronged, or maybe it's both things at the same time.

What seemed clear for every participant was that reconciliation involves both the offender and the victim. It requires the participation of both parties in order to take place. However, what seemed unclear in most of their responses was where reconciliation overlaps with forgiveness and where it stands alone. Enright, Freedman, and Rique (1998) distinguish reconciliation from forgiveness in the following manner: "Forgiveness

is one person's response to injury. Reconciliation involves two people coming together again. The injurer must realize his or her offense, see the damage done, and take steps to rectify the problem." While every participant touched on the two people coming together aspect of reconciliation, what was often missing was the preliminary and mandatory realization by the offender that they have done damage to the victim. This realization should then be followed by a commitment to rectifying the damage and ensuring it doesn't happen again. Emmett's response to my question regarding reconciliation is the only one that seems to accurately capture this essence. Perhaps this is due to the fact that he has done considerable reading and exploration of the topic of forgiveness, in large part because of his therapeutic work with the elderly. Below is our conversation on the topic.

**Interviewer:** I'm just interested in what your view of reconciliation is.

**Emmett:** When someone says, "We committed atrocities, I'm sorry, what can we do to carry on together and make amends for that?" Like what they tried to do with the apartheid.

**Interviewer:** And how does forgiveness play into that, or does it?

**Emmett:** It does. I guess that the reconciliation can speed its necessity. It is often not forthcoming, and it wasn't there and it isn't in most situations, and therefore what to do. You look at Milosevic, and you can rage and rant and be angry the rest of your days, and then spill that over to everyone else you know and your family. You have to do something with it eventually. Yeah, reconciliation is ideal I'm sure, having both parties together.

**Interviewer:** That makes a lot of sense. So reconciliation requires the offender to change and acknowledge the offenses that they've committed. Does that sound right?

**Emmett:** Yeah, it doesn't undo anything, but it certainly helps to heal.

**Interviewer:** In order for both parties to reconcile, does the victim have to forgive the offender? Is that part of the equation for you?

**Emmett:** I don't know if it needs to happen then, but I think there is a mutuality to it. It certainly begins with the offender apologizing. I don't think it happens right then so that all is well.

**Interviewer:** But at some point forgiveness comes into play?

**Emmett:** Yeah, it has to.

**Interviewer:** And can forgiveness exist without reconciliation?

**Emmett:** Yeah.

Presenting Emmett as an exception, it is my suspicion that the generalized lack of understanding of reconciliation, and its confusion with forgiveness, causes many struggling to forgive to actually fear forgiving their offender. If a victim believes that if they forgive their offender they have to once again be in a relationship with them, and if their offender is still perceived to be a threat to re-offend, then it seems logical and reasonable that the victim would in fact fear forgiveness. This creates a no-win situation in which the victim is trapped between re-entering an abusive relationship and being permanently stuck with their anger. This dynamic was observed in the interviews through expressions of power, control, vulnerability, and trust.

When Elin's father asked for her forgiveness for the abuse he put her through as a child, for the first time in her life Elin experienced a sense of power and control over her relationship with her father. Understandably, this was a feeling she did not want to give up. Her father had humbled himself to her and for the first time she felt she had an opportunity to exert some kind of force on her relationship with her father other than exclusion and cutoff for the sake of her own safety. The process of discovering what she wanted to do with this new power was anything but short and simple for her. Her father had asked for her forgiveness ten years prior to our initial interview and Elin was still wrestling with many significant issues.

**Elin:** I've had it with him. Never calling him gives me the power again.

And if I forgive him, and the fact that I'm thinking that if I forgive him that it's an admission to something I didn't do, that I'll give him power because he would have the power of accusing me again. That's true. It's true, but I don't mind at all having this power over him in a way, you know, I do want to be able to control my interactions with him.

Definitely, what I'm hearing is how he's treating my siblings, because he needs help and they help him, but the way in which he's returning thanks for this help and all that, it's just terrible. He's still abusing them, and I don't want to make myself vulnerable to be in those situations.

Even though Elin's father had changed significantly for the better, he still exhibited abusive tendencies, thereby making Elin very hesitant to be vulnerable to him again. By not forgiving, Elin could hang on to the power that he gave her when he asked for her forgiveness. Elin, however, was very motivated to forgive for her own sake, but also for

the sake of her father who is getting older. Elin recognized the choice she had to make – forgive and relinquish her control over her relationship with her father; or not forgive, hang onto the control, but also hang onto her anger and resentment.

**Elin:** Yeah, I don't know if [forgiveness] is empowering in terms of me getting more power. Maybe it's actually relinquishing power. It's hard. I think the bigger the crime the harder it is.

Elin's perception that forgiveness involves letting go of power seems to me to be an accurate one, however, her confusion about forgiveness and reconciliation made this decision much more difficult for her.

Kelli also had great fears about forgiving her father because of her lack of clarity regarding reconciliation, but also because of her difficulty in trusting herself in her relationship with her father. In the past Kelli had repeatedly been fooled into trusting her father prematurely, thereby relaxing her boundaries, becoming vulnerable to him, and eventually being re-offended when he broke her trust. Therefore, in order to protect herself, Kelli used her anger to remind herself not to trust her father.

**Kelli:** I know anger isn't a good emotion to hang on to, but I feel that it's safe. And if I can hang onto that then I am safe.

For Kelli it seemed her anger was what allowed her to be sure she would not become vulnerable to her father once again. Her anger served a paradoxical purpose in her life – it kept her safe from harm, however, it also limited or negatively altered her experience of life. She experienced her anger as a costly emotion and motivation for many of her actions, but she felt she needed her anger in order to prevent herself from making foolish mistakes in her relationship with her father.

It seems possible that growing up Kelli felt little control over her own choices in her relationship with her father – that is, if he was manipulative, as she describes him to be, she may have often experienced her own boundaries being crossed, and been unable to help herself. She may then have felt ‘sucked in’ to a relationship with her father. While she probably wanted a real relationship with him, she may not have felt appreciated or respected in the relationship they had. So by eventually cutting him off from her life, she may have been standing up for herself and been asking to be respected.

Perhaps as she considered forgiving him she wondered if she would still be able to keep her boundaries and be respected if she had let go of her anger. In this context it seemed that she also struggled to trust herself. Perhaps her struggle to forgive her father involved her struggle to trust herself without her anger. She may have wondered, “If I’m not angry at him any more, will I still make good choices for myself? Will I remember to maintain my boundaries with him?” If he was a manipulative individual, then I would tend to understand her struggle to trust herself – especially if she had been fooled into letting her guard down with him in the past.

For Elin and Kelli, the struggle to forgive was drastically complicated by the misunderstanding that forgiveness required reconciliation – that if they forgave their respective fathers they would have to be in a vulnerable, trusting relationship with them. Forgiveness, however, does not require reconciliation. In fact, forgiveness does not require any participation on the part of the offender whatsoever. There are things the offender can do to make it more or less difficult for their victim to forgive them, but ultimately forgiveness is in the hands of the victim. And in cases where the offender has not repented for their transgressions and committed to not re-offending in the future, the

victim should not put themselves in a vulnerable position where they can be harmed again. In fact, it seems to me that a victim's refusal to knowingly and voluntarily put themselves in a potentially harmful situation is a sign that they have come to realize their own self-worth. They know that how they were treated is not how they deserve to be treated, and they are taking steps to ensure their own health and safety for the future.

At the end of my interviews with Elin and Kelli I asked if I could suggest something of my own thinking to them about reconciliation and forgiveness. They agreed and so I outlined my thoughts as above. And as I spoke to Elin I witnessed a profound change in her posture and expression. She became noticeably more relaxed and light, and her facial expression projected relief.

Later Elin described how this insight allowed her to become 'unstuck' in her struggle to forgive her father. She realized that she could in fact forgive and still establish her boundaries with her father in whatever manner she would choose them to be. She now realizes that forgiveness does not mean relinquishing total control and making herself vulnerable to a still somewhat abusive man.

Kelli, on the other hand, was still somewhat skeptical and I did not observe the same immediate change in her that I did with Elin. However, in our follow-up interview she described how she had begun to alter her thinking of reconciliation as it relates to forgiveness. She said she felt freer to forgive her father because she was beginning to believe it did not mean having to trust him again. She described herself as calmer, less anxious, more accepting, and less conflicted about her struggle to forgive because she believed forgiveness does not require a close relationship or vulnerability.

The differences in Elin and Kelli's immediate responses to my suggestions about reconciliation were interesting to me. It taught me something about resonance and how some people are ready to move in step with the song you're singing, while other people need some time to consider if this is the tune for them. It also established in my mind the importance for victims struggling to forgive to clearly understand the differences between forgiveness and reconciliation, and that in forgiving they are not required to once again become vulnerable to someone they may not trust.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

In this chapter I will discuss the results of this study as they relate to established literature on forgiveness. I will also discuss the significance and limitations of this study, as well as the implications for future research and counselling practice.

#### 5.1 Comparison of Findings with Literature

The themes revealed and explored in this study seem to also appear in previous studies on forgiveness outlined in the literature review. It is necessary, however, to acknowledge the fact that there are very few studies that share a common purpose with this study - to explore the human experience of the struggle to forgive. The vast majority of previous studies on forgiveness were quantitative in nature and very few focused on the lived experience of the person doing the forgiving.

In considering Enright, Freedman, and Rique's (1998) Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness (Figure 2.), it seems that each of the participants demonstrated characteristics described in various stages of the model. The phases of this model are: (a) Uncovering, (b) Decision, (c) Work, and (d) Deepening.

Ruth seemed to be in the "Uncovering Phase" as she was just beginning to confront her anger, had become aware of her catharsis, and had gained insight into her altered "just world" view. Previous to our initial interview, Ruth described traits common to the "Work Phase." Unfortunately, however, Ruth found she had passed over many necessary steps in the struggle to forgive and, therefore, discovered herself back at the beginning four years after the offense.

Kelli also seemed to be in the “Uncovering Phase” as she was just beginning to examine her psychological defenses. She had become aware of the negative effect these defenses that were once needed to keep her safe from her abusive father were now having on her current relationships. During my follow-up interview with Kelli she seemed to be demonstrating a willingness to consider forgiveness as an option, part of the “Decision Phase.”

Emmett seemed to be working his way through the “Decision Phase” as he had come to realize that his previous attempts to overcome the offenses he had suffered were not alleviating all of the consequences he still experienced. He seemed to be having a slow change of heart and was becoming more willing to consider forgiveness as an option, though he had not yet committed to this process. Emmett also seemed to be reframing his mother as he considered the insights he had gained from reading her diaries. This is an element of the “Work Phase.” Emmett had also found new meaning for himself and others, an element of the “Deepening Phase,” as he worked to make sexual abuse by mothers a more discussable topic.

Oliver demonstrated traits common to both the “Work Phase” and the “Deepening Phase.” He had reframed his view of his offender repeatedly, demonstrated empathy towards his offender as he imagined him to be, and had come to accept and absorb much of the pain he had suffered because of the offense. In deepening his process of forgiveness, Oliver had found new meaning in his struggle as it allowed him to more deeply empathize with the suffering of others.

Elliott appeared to have all of the signs present in the “Work Phase” as well as many of the traits of the “Deepening Phase.” He had found meaning in his struggle

because it brought him closer to God, he saw his own need for forgiveness, he had realized a new purpose in his role as a father, and he was aware of his own negativity towards his father decreasing.

Elin was certainly the furthest along in her struggle to forgive and had been struggling desperately for ten years. During our initial interview she demonstrated almost every characteristic of each one of the phases. This may suggest that victims struggling to forgive may not move through the phases of forgiveness, leaving traits behind as they gain new ones, but rather that they express characteristics of one struggling to forgive as they go. During the two-month period between our initial and follow-up interviews, Elin made significant strides in her struggle to forgive her father. She managed to come to a place where she was ready to tell him that she had forgiven him – something he had asked for ten years prior. So on the day of the summer solstice, Elin phoned her father and gave him her forgiveness. In an email she wrote to me afterwards she said she felt “freed” – the final phase of Enright et al.’s Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness, “internal emotional release.”

A significant element of agreement between this study and the previous literature is found with Enright et al.’s 1989 study, entitled “The adolescent as forgiver.” This study demonstrated a strong relationship between the variables of age and the degree to which one practices their faith with an understanding of the constructs of forgiveness. Generally speaking, the older participants in this study seemed to have a firmer grasp on what it was they were trying to accomplish by forgiving their offender, as did those participants who were committed to a faith. I am speaking specifically of Elin and Elliott. They are both middle-aged and are practicing an expression of spirituality – Elin

with a mixture of shamanism and Christianity, and Elliott as an Anglican. This is not to say that the other participants did not demonstrated clarity and understanding in regards to forgiveness. Rather, I am merely presenting Elin and Elliott as the two most senior and spiritual participants who also demonstrated a more in-depth understanding about forgiveness – a fact that would tend to support the results of Enright et al's 1989 study.

The results of this study are consistent with other studies outlined in the literature review. Subkoviak, Enright, Wu, & Gassin's study (1995) tested the validity and reliability of the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI), and found that forgiveness correlated strongly with a decrease in anxiety. The participants in this study who appeared to be further along in their struggle to forgive, such as Elliott and Elin, also seemed to demonstrate a lower level of anxiety as they spoke about their offender and their own relationship with forgiveness.

The results of this study were inconsistent with the 1998 study by Mullet, Houbine, Laumonier, & Girard, which attempted to discover laypeople's views of forgiveness. Their study found that most people did not equate forgiveness with the cessation of anger towards their offender, a thought inconsistent with the common sentiments and hopes of the participants of this study.

Hill's (2001) article suggested that, based on conceptualizations in previous publications, forgiveness is more a process of discovery than a process of will. Hill also reported the ineffectiveness of forgiveness interventions which attempted to reduce forgiveness to a single, specific, forced act. Though the researcher in this study did not examine forgiveness interventions, the common sentiment amongst the participants was that the struggle to forgive is a process, often longer than initially thought or ever desired.

Perhaps the strongest agreement between this study and previous research is with Ferch's (2000) study in which he concluded that the ultimate step in the process of forgiveness is the need to overcome, "the emotional barricade of forgiveness," and that, "the struggle to forgive is primarily an internal struggle." Based on the experiences of the participants of this study, the struggle to forgive does appear to be an almost entirely internal struggle to find a way over the emotional hurdle created by the offense they suffered.

#### 4.2 Significance of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the human experience of the struggle to forgive, and thereby contribute a sense of story and personality to the growing literature on forgiveness. I am aware that research by its very nature can tend to be cold and clinical - cause and effect in the pursuit of objectivity. However, in that forgiveness is a phenomenon that only exists between people, and we understand people within the context of story and struggle, it seems imperative that the study of forgiveness regularly take an objective look at the subjective experience of one's story of struggling to forgive. I believe this to be one of the most significant contributions of this study.

This study brings to the literature on forgiveness six stories of real people struggling to forgive significant offenses. There are very few stories of this kind present in the forgiveness literature thus far. I believe it is in identifying with stories that those working through their own forgiveness and those helping someone else work through forgiveness, know what the struggle to forgive looks and sounds like.

This study helps to clarify the notion that the struggle to forgive is actually made up of a number of struggles, each one of which occurs internally within the forgiver.

From overcoming the consequences of the offense, to sculpting the offender and searching for meaning, the struggle to forgive requires the forgiver to work through a series of internal conflicts simultaneously. This idea of the struggle to forgive being a layered process appears to be a unique finding. Based on the results of this study, it appears that while external circumstances may serve to increase or decrease the difficulty to forgive, ultimately forgiveness is born within the heart and mind of the forgiver through a number of simultaneous processes.

#### 4.3 Limitations of Study

The most obvious and significant limitation of this study is the number of participants. Due to the fact that only six people participated in this study, generalizability is negligible. This limitation is important to this study as it is attempting to explore the personal and universal experiences of the struggle to forgive. This means that any common themes discovered between the experiences of the six participants will not necessarily apply to the rest of the population; however, it should be made clear that generalizability is not an intended purpose of an interpretive phenomenological study. Rather this study attempted to explore more deeply than broadly in order to uncover the essences at the foundation of the struggle to forgive.

This study also only serves as a still picture of a long-term struggle. The initial interview served as a window into the state of the forgiver at that moment in time, but could not attempt to follow the forgiver through their struggle. The follow-up interviews did tend to reveal the vector on which the forgiver was traveling; however, it was not intended to be used to project a path into the future. Rather, the follow-up interview was

designed to allow the researcher an opportunity to hear the participants' thoughts on the themes developed from the initial interview.

#### 4.4 Implications for Future Research

This study has highlighted the fact that the struggle to forgive is actually made up of a number of different internal struggles. It would seem appropriate, therefore, to explore these various struggles to greater depths and with a larger number of participants. A separate study for each internal struggle could be performed in order to shed more light on the personal and universal aspects of the process of forgiving.

First-hand accounts and personal stories, rather than just surveys, play an important role in the study of forgiveness. Current and relevant stories are essential so that we are able to see how individuals live out their struggle to forgive within society. What may have been an appropriate, acceptable, or common way to live out the struggle to forgive yesterday may not be so today or tomorrow. Therefore it is necessary that those pursuing a greater understanding of forgiveness are given an opportunity to see how forgiveness is lived out within modern culture. This study has touched on the effects of context on how an individual struggles to forgive, and I believe it is imperative that context is never separated from the study of forgiveness, for it is story that gives context to a phenomenon such as forgiveness.

This study has also highlighted other issues such as the effects of age, pain, and offender remorse on a victim's struggle to forgive. Also, a victim's abilities to find meaning in their struggle, to establish a new view of humanity and themselves, and to accurately empathize and sculpt their offender, appear to have a significant impact on their ability to forgive. Finally, the type of offense the victim suffered, ongoing abuse or

a one-time offense, appears to have a significant impact on the victim's struggle to forgive. Each one of the aforementioned issues could be isolated and studied further in order to more deeply understand their influences on the struggle to forgive.

#### 4.5 Implications for Counselling Practice

People pursue counselling in hopes of receiving help in dealing with a wide range of issues. It seems likely, however, that for most clients, somewhere in the course of therapy they will come across an offense from which they must move forward. This offense may have been committed by someone else, or it may have been an offense they committed against themselves. Therefore, it is necessary that counsellors have an understanding of the multiple and complex constructs involved in the process of forgiving - what helps and hinders someone struggling to forgive, and what is going on beneath the surface of forgiveness.

Based on the results of this study, it seems important that counsellors understand that a client's struggle to forgive involves many difficult, internal struggles. Counsellors, therefore, may help their clients much more if they not only speak about forgiveness, but also about the client's view of themselves, the world, their offender, reconciliation, finding meaning, and numerous other topics swirling beneath the surface of forgiveness. Many clients may not be able to identify the complicated things they are struggling with themselves, and may need the therapist's help to do so. Clarity in determining the tasks at hand will undoubtedly help a client accomplish them.

The participants of this study seemed to demonstrate a higher degree of connection between themselves and someone struggling to forgive in a similar manner, than they did between themselves and someone who suffered a similar or even the same

offense. A similar experience of the struggle to forgive is a more unifying and intimate one than is the experience of suffering a common offense. This would tend to suggest that group therapy could be a beneficial option for many victims struggling to forgive. Group members, however, may be better suited for each other if they are selected based on the nature of their struggle to forgive rather than on the nature of the offense they suffered.

For each participant there appeared to be a change in their struggle to forgive between the initial interview and the follow-up interview, and in each case I believe it was a change in a positive direction. Each participant seemed to have made steps forward in their struggle to forgive. It is possible that this change was due simply to the effects of time; however, every participant suggested that their participation in this study helped them move forward in their struggle. This raises an interesting point in that this study did not intend to provide the participants with new insights or tools to use.

However, somehow it seems they were able to find meaning and insight from their participation that enabled them to make progress. This is significant for counselling practice because it means that counsellors do not need to have answers for their clients. Rather, I believe this means counsellors simply need to have the right orientation towards their clients – one that allows the client an opportunity to wrestle with the best and most helpful questions in a safe and empathic environment. This may have been the source of the benefit the participants described receiving from their participation in this study – an opportunity to safely dig in the mud of the pit as they searched for meaning in their struggle to forgive.

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Table 1. Levels of Forgiveness Development

Level 1	<p>Revengeful Forgiveness.</p> <p>I can forgive someone who wrongs me only if I can punish him or her to a similar degree to my own pain.</p>
Level 2	<p>Restitutorial or Compensational Forgiveness.</p> <p>If I get back what was taken away from me, then I can forgive. Or, if I feel guilty about withholding forgiveness, then I can forgive to relieve my guilt.</p>
Level 3	<p>Expectational Forgiveness.</p> <p>I forgive if others put pressure on me to forgive. It is easier to forgive when other people expect it.</p>
Level 4	<p>Lawful Expectational Forgiveness.</p> <p>I forgive when my religion demands it. Notice that this is not level 2 in which I forgive to relieve my own guilt about withholding forgiveness.</p>
Level 5	<p>Forgiveness as Social Harmony.</p> <p>I forgive when it restores harmony or good relations in society. Forgiveness decreases friction and outright conflict in society. Note that forgiveness is a way to control society; it is a way of maintaining peaceful relations.</p>
Level 6	<p>Forgiveness as Love.</p> <p>I forgive unconditionally because it promotes a true sense of love. Because I must truly care for each person, a hurtful act on his or her part does not alter that sense of love. This kind of relationship keeps open the possibility of reconciliation and closes the door on revenge. Note that forgiveness is no longer dependent on a social context, as in level 5. The forgiver does not control the other by forgiving; he releases him.</p>

Subkoviak, Enright, Wu, & Gassin (1995).

Table 2. The Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness

**Uncovering Phase**

1. Examination of psychological defenses.
2. Confrontation of anger; the point is to release, not harbor, the anger.
3. Admittance of shame, when this is appropriate.
4. Awareness of catharsis.
5. Awareness of cognitive rehearsal of the offense.
6. Insight that the injured party may be comparing self with the injurer.
7. Realization that oneself may be permanently and adversely changed by the injury.
8. Insight into a possibly altered “just world” view.

**Decision Phase**

9. A change of heart, conversion, new insights that old resolutions strategies are not working.
10. Willingness to consider forgiveness as an option.
11. Commitment to forgive the offender.

**Work Phase**

12. Reframing, through role-taking, who the wrongdoer is by viewing him or her in context.
13. Empathy toward the offender.
14. Awareness of compassion, as it emerges, towards the offender.
15. Acceptance, absorption of the pain.

**Deepening Phase**

16. Finding meaning for self and others in the suffering and in the forgiveness process.
17. Realization that the self has needed others’ forgiveness in the past.
18. Insight that one is not alone.
19. Realization that self may have a new purpose in life because of the injury.
20. Awareness of decreased negative affect and, perhaps, increased positive affect, if it begins to emerge, toward the injurer; awareness of internal emotional release.

Enright, Freedman, & Rique (1998).

