

# European Network of Research on Religion, Spirituality and Health

Newsletter Spring 2018

Volume 13 • No. 1

## Editorial

### Dear colleagues, dear friends

The preparations for the 2018 European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health are in full swing. This year's topic is forgiveness and health. We believe that it is going to be an exciting conference with some of the world's leading forgiveness experts presenting their latest research. The two main articles of this newsletters are teasers for the conference. In the first article, Everett Worthington Jr. of Virginia Commonwealth University offers a preview of what he will be presenting at the Coventry conference's public lecture. The second contribution by Anthony Bash offers a historical overview of the development of the term forgiveness, including theological reflections.

We hope to see many of you in Coventry in May. **It is still possible to register!** For those who will not be able to attend, please check our website [www.rish.ch](http://www.rish.ch) in June for material on the various lectures and presentations (slides and audios).

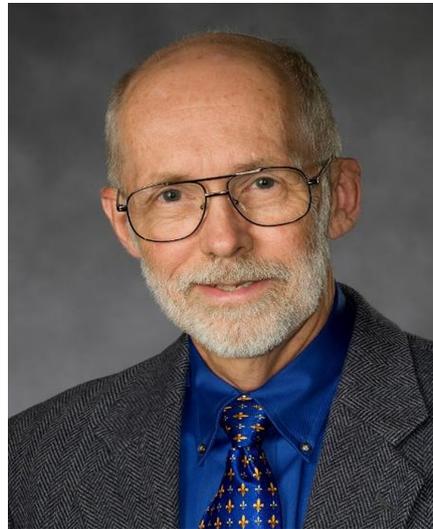
*Thomas Wartenweiler  
René Hefti*

## Dimensions of Forgiveness - An Overview

### A Preview on This Year's ECRSH / BASS Public Lecture

In the joint meeting of the 6th European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health and 5th International Conference of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality, I will give The Coventry Lecture, a public lecture on "Dimensions of Forgiveness: A Comprehensive Overview." My purposes are to discuss in an easily understood way, four types of forgiveness, and their effects on health. I describe a case study to kick off the talk about a few ways that unforgiveness can affect people's health. It

is an almost unbelievable story about professional rivalry among the discoverers of anaesthesia that results in the death of almost every one of the doctors involved. With that light story to get us going, I describe four dimensions of forgiveness. Both Divine forgiveness and self-forgiveness are more about being an offender, and person-to-person forgiveness and societal forgiveness are more about forgiving people who have hurt or offended us. Religion and spirituality plays a role in all four dimensions of forgiveness, and those roles affect physical health. That forgiveness-health connection is well established. A recent edited book by Loren Toussaint and his colleagues have brought together many researchers to describe the literatures on forgiveness and various types of health, including physical and mental health, relationship health, and spiritual health.



I focus on person-to-person forgiveness the longest, using a stress-and-coping model of forgiveness to describe the mechanisms by which any unforgiveness can damage our physical, mental, relational and spiritual health. That model sees transgressions that hurt or offend us as stressors. We praise those by evaluating their threat and also the amount of injustice we have experienced, called the injustice gap because it evaluates the gap between the way we feel at the moment and the way we would like the injustice resolved. Based on the evalu-

ation, our bodies react and so do our emotions and thoughts—a stress reaction. That reaction often involves unforgiving emotions like bitterness and resentment. We have many ways that we might cope with the stress reactions. Some are direct attempts to adjust the injustice gap, like seeking revenge or seeing the justice system enact justice. Others are to appeal to God for Divine intervention or simply relinquish the matter into God's hands. Still other ways we might cope include forbearance, acceptance, and moving on. But yet another way we might cope is to forgive. There are two types of forgiveness, making a decision to act toward the person as if he or she were a valued and valuable person and emotionally forgiving. Decisional and emotional forgiveness are two different types of forgiveness, often related to each other, but not necessarily related to each other.

Finally, I will look at how we might help people forgive, drawing from a meta-analysis to draw three take-away lessons. Many of the randomized clinical trials that were meta-analyzed involved the REACH Forgiveness method of promoting forgiveness. Besides encouraging decisional forgiveness, the REACH acronym delineates the more difficult process of leading a person to emotionally forgive the transgressor. R stands for Recall the hurt but do so without blaming or whinging. E stands for Emotionally replacing negative with positive other-oriented emotions. A stands for giving an altruistic gift of forgiveness that the person does not deserve. C stands for Committing to the emotional forgiveness one experiences. H stands for Hold onto forgiveness when you doubt.

In the process of the talk, I hope to treat the basic and the clinical science in a way that we can all understand (and by the way, get a few laughs out of). By the end of the lecture, I'm hoping that everyone, whether lay person, or experienced researcher or clinician, will have something new to walk away with and that their understanding of forgiveness will be stretched to new dimensions.

*Everett L. Worthington, Jr.*

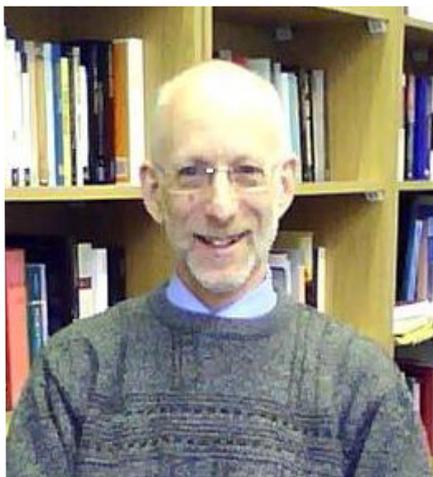
### Bio sketch

Prof. Dr. Everett Worthington is a pioneer and expert in the field of scientific research on forgiveness and reconciliation. He is a clinical psychologist and professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. Prof. Worthington will present this year's ECRSH public lecture in Coventry.

## On Forgiveness

### A Historical Perspective

Everyone seems to have an opinion about forgiveness and reconciliation – and the terms we use seem so elastic that they can mean almost anything that we want them to mean. Some talk of forgiving as if they intend little more than shrugging their shoulders, and forgetting about the past.



Others mean that they don't hold against someone the wrongs that person has done – and the forgiver models an extraordinary measure of courage and moral integrity. In the past, forgiveness was thought of as something for 'religious' people – it was seen as a characteristic Christian virtue, and many thought that forgiveness was a uniquely Christian virtue. Today, people from all sorts of cultural and religious traditions are thinking about forgiveness. It is a civic virtue in the 21st century – the interest of politicians, psychologists, lawyers, as well as theologians – and a virtue that is sometimes talked about in all walks of life.

Careful work and research in recent years means that people now realise that the origins of forgiveness are not exclusively religious. The ancient Greeks were interested in 'reconciliation' as an aspect of the aftermath of conflict, and complex social and political rituals existed for bringing

about reconciliation. It is true that forgiveness was not much thought about, and was not regarded as a virtue, but people clearly were forgivers, and forgiveness was a known and practised pattern of behaviour.

In the West, Christianity established forgiveness as a moral virtue – perhaps even a moral duty – though in early Christianity when and why people should forgive were heavily circumscribed: only those who were repentant could be forgiven, and the idea of 'unilateral forgiveness' was not known or practised. Widely misunderstood and misinterpreted in the modern period have been Jesus' words on the cross, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' – these are not the words of unilateral forgiveness.

Increasingly, people have argued that it is a moral good and an example of laudable spirituality to forgive unilaterally, that is, to forgive those who do not regret their former actions. There is clearly a place for doing this – for example, in the case of forgiving the dead or forgiving those whose identities are not known. But is it right to forgive an unrepentant abuser who is known to the victim, for example?

Another modern development of forgiveness has been 'political forgiveness' – expressions of forgiveness following statements of apology made by politicians about national wrongs of the past. Famously, the former British Prime Minister has apologised for Britain's involvement in the second Iraq war. In which senses can forgiveness be asked for or offered in such situations?

In recent years, I have been attempting to trace the origins of forgiveness and reconciliation in western thought, and to identify their origins and development in Judaeo-Christian traditions. I have also looked at the development of thought to do with forgiveness and reconciliation outside the Judaeo-Christian traditions, and in particular to see how they have become to be regarded as 'secular virtues'. Lastly, I am exploring what we mean by the 'spirituality' of forgiveness and reconciliation, both within and without religious traditions.

*Anthony Bash*

### Bio sketch

Prof. Dr. Anthony Bash is an honorary professor in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University. He will be a keynote speaker at the ECRSH conference in Coventry.

## Announcements

### Meetings & Conferences

#### 2018 Conference on Medicine & Religion

Examining the Foundations of Medicine and Religion. [www.medicineandreligion.com](http://www.medicineandreligion.com), April 13 - 15, 2018; St. Louis, Missouri

#### 6<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health and 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality

On the topic of forgiveness and reconciliation in health, medicine and social sciences May 17-19, 2018; Coventry/England; for further information see [www.ecrsh.eu](http://www.ecrsh.eu) or download the [first announcement](#).

#### Pre-Conference Research Workshop with Prof. Harold G. Koenig and other experts

May 13-16, 2018; Coventry, UK; for further information see [www.ecrsh.eu/ecrsh-past-conferences](http://www.ecrsh.eu/ecrsh-past-conferences) or contact [rene.hefti@rish.ch](mailto:rene.hefti@rish.ch).

#### 10<sup>th</sup> World Research Congress of the European Association for Palliative Care

24 - 26 May 2018; Bern, Switzerland.

#### Oskar Pfister Forum

On the topic of Integrating Depth Psychotherapy and Christian Faith June 29 - 30, 2018; Lausanne, Switzerland. For more information contact [septtbipact@aol.com](mailto:septtbipact@aol.com)

### Publishing Opportunity

If you are interested in publishing a paper on the conference topic (or a paper you presented at the conference) in *Religions*, please check out their [special issue website](#).

### Imprint

This Newsletter is published by the Research Institute for Spirituality and Health, Langenthal/Switzerland.

Editorial board: René Hefti, Thomas Wartenweiler, Nathalie Ndawe-Leerch

Research Institute for Spirituality and Health RISH  
Weissensteinstrasse 30  
CH-4900 Langenthal / Switzerland  
Phone +41 (0) 62 919 22 11  
Fax +41 (0) 62 919 22 00  
[info@rish.ch](mailto:info@rish.ch) / [www.rish.ch](http://www.rish.ch)