



ON  
NAVIGATING  
FORGIVENESS,  
REDEMPTION,  
AND  
REJECTION

**Alexandra Bell***A Teenager With Promise*(from *Counternarratives*)

2017

Ink on paper, wheatpasted to building

Alexandra Bell's *Counternarratives* series appropriates, annotates, and edits *New York Times* stories to reveal the underlying racism perpetuated by the news media's choices in images, headlines, and language. Bell wheatpastes her revisions in public spaces, encouraging passersby to look more closely at what they consume. She has said of the project, "Black communities, gay communities, immigrant communities feel a lot of media representations to be inaccurate, biased. There's a lot of reporting around police violence and Black men, and I realized a lot of the arguments that we were having were about depictions. I started to wonder, how different would it be if I swapped images or if I changed some of the texts... This isn't a grammar exercise. I'm really trying to see if I can disrupt subliminal messaging about who should be valued."



# Is Forgiveness Enough?

Lyle Ashton Harris

*Forgiveness is not really about the other person.*

*It's really about yourself.* —Jacqui Lewis, Senior Pastor,

Middle Collegiate Church

More than fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. embodied and espoused the philosophy that forgiveness is integral to liberation: one could not forgive another without looking at oneself. His central ethic of love required thinking about truth and reconciliation. As someone who has been in recovery for the past twenty years, I have had an opportunity to reflect on the act of forgiveness and whether this necessary healing work, repair of the psyche, is a way to deal with larger issues.

One almost has to forgive others in order to heal oneself. I find forgiveness necessary, especially for Black folks collectively, so that we don't fall into madness. It is difficult to accept major transgressions, especially around white supremacy violence (past or present), homophobia, xenophobia, and gender and trans violence. At the same time, accountability is equally necessary. My family has ties to Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, and I often reflect on the 2015 attack there. The congregation forgave even though no one took accountability for racialized violence and a past climate that encouraged a neo-Nazi to shoot up a historic church. Was forgiveness enough? Henry Louis Gates Jr., in his recent book *Stony the Road*, brilliantly charts the uncanny, disturbing link between the white supremacist reaction to the nascent political agency of newly free men and women during Reconstruction and the neo-white supremacist reaction to Barack Obama's presidency.

The history of Black familial, communal, and political life in the United States has been one of acceptance, healing, forgiveness, and activism. I don't think we would be here today if we did not have that healing as part of the core of what it means to be alive. The forgiveness mustered by the churchgoers at Mother Emanuel is in itself a radical political gesture of remembrance and bearing witness. Sacrificing private grief in favor of public memorialization requires deep emotional labor. What has been the cost of that emotional labor to our collective and personal bodies? Is there a way to transform that emotional energy into a beacon for the next generation? ▲

# Alexandra Bell

artist

# Lyle Ashton Harris

artist

# David Karp

scholar

FEBRUARY 11, 2019

**Isolde Brielmaier** In these trying times, an open conversation about rejection, redemption, and forgiveness resonates across all communities, cultures, and perceived boundaries. We all make mistakes. But how can we learn from them? What does it mean to live in the gray and to allow ourselves to take a more fluid approach to how we see others, to how we see ourselves? To whether or how we choose forgiveness?

Let's start with the basic concept of forgiveness. Is it a concept? Is it an action? It feels like a long and ongoing process that dates back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Is it passive or reparative? Does it set you free? Does it require redemption? Is it simply a process of letting go?

**David Karp** It's a huge concept. I would start with the simple cultural formula we all know: if I accidentally spill this glass of water on you, you say, "Ouch" or, "Ah." And then I say, "Sorry." And you say, "It's okay." That's the cultural script we all know. If we deviate from it, it's almost surprising. The forgiveness doesn't come if I haven't asked for it in some way. It's pretty easy to forgive me for a mistake or unintentional accident, one that wasn't particularly painful or didn't ruin your clothes and cause a terrible mess. That formula is pretty easy.

**IB** Does this formula extend across cultures, beyond the United States?

**DK** The way the ritual plays out will vary, but the necessity for humans to get through difficult moments is universal. Of course, it gets harder to forgive: the worse the transgression, the more complicated forgiveness becomes.

**Alexandra Bell** Interpersonal forgiveness is one category, that is, if I tell a secret of yours or something like that. I can apologize, and you can accept that apology. As we start thinking about institutions, we get to a different place. I think the word *forgiveness* should not really be part of the conversation. I'm starting to think more about acknowledgment and engagement, because when I think of forgiveness, I think about absolution: "It's okay," "Let it go," "I'm moving past that," or "I'm working past that." I don't think that that's the case when you're thinking about bigger transgressions like, for instance, racism.

**Lyle Ashton Harris** I want to share a quote on forgiveness. I'm reading from Caroline Myss's *Defy Gravity: Healing beyond the Bounds of Reason*:

Forgiveness is a mystical act, not a reasonable one. Forgiveness is a challenge meant to cleanse the windows of your mind, particularly those through which you can see only your need for personal justice. You can't see anyone else's pain through these windows, because, like mirrors, they reflect only you: you are the center of the universe, yours is the only pain that counts, and all that is just and fair should be based on what serves your life.

Also, a minister, Jacqui Lewis, at the progressive church I attend on the Lower East Side, has said that forgiveness is not really about the other person. It's about yourself. You might not accept a major transgression, like a deeper level of historic violence, but one almost has to forgive as a way to heal one's own self.

- IB** That segues into the next question: What is this first step? David, your work has spanned a broad range of situations.
- DK** It seems to me that there are parallel pathways for forgiveness. One is interactive, like I described. The other is personal and private, which is not about the other person or the system that was being unjust. It's about your own personal process and coping and transformation, whatever that may be. First steps can really vary depending on what the goal is. Some people are motivated by that personal healing journey that's independent and has nothing to do with the other side—the side that caused harm—and everything to do with either an inward journey or an affinity group, your own community that you do the work with. So that's one first step. Another first step would be interactive: I can't move forward unless I hold you accountable in some way. I can't forgive you unless you deserve the forgiveness.
- IB** How much does accountability play into forgiveness, particularly when you're talking about larger issues of racism, extreme violence, genocide? Can accountability and forgiveness occur simultaneously?
- LAH** I don't think we live in a world where those two are separate or one can make a distinction between them; as Martin Luther King Jr. said more than fifty years ago, it is integrated. One could not forgive the other without actually looking at oneself. That was the ethic of love in his platform. Think about truth and reconciliation in South Africa, Rwanda, Tibet. How do we do the necessary healing work as a way to reimagine, let's say, being prepared to deal with these larger issues?
- AB** The word *forgiveness* is a struggle for me because it feels like this final thing, like a period. And I always hear that if you forgive someone, you're freeing up yourself, and I wonder, in the absence of forgiveness, isn't there something else, another emotion that may be sustainable? It's not outright contempt or hate, it might not be fully active rage, but it doesn't mean that there's forgiveness. Accountability is a continuous, active thing. I don't know if forgiveness is required for accountability to exist.
- IB** Alexandra and Lyle, how do these ideas relate to your artistic and scholarly practices?
- LAH** I grew up in the 1970s, and, as a child, I had the opportunity to live in East Africa after my parents divorced. My mother took my brother and me to live in Tanzania, in Dar es Salaam, for a couple of years. There's something about being an African American in a Black African country—you cannot imagine what that meant for someone like me as a child, despite the fact that I come from a robust family. There is a particular sensibility that has resulted—having an openness around the heart.
- There's an anecdote I'd like to share. On the desk in my living room is a letter from my late father's wife's lawyer. It addresses a small inheritance to my brother and me, and it relates to forgiveness in a certain sense. After my parents' divorce, my father and I didn't see each other for at least twenty years. I attempted to go see him about ten years ago, and he wasn't

able or he wasn't willing to open the door. So we had a difficult relationship, and a lot of my difficulties in life have been about that primary relationship. I was resurrecting and sacrificing the "father" in my relationships with other men through aggression, etcetera, with my own self. I had to go through the act of forgiving myself as a way to open up my heart to accept my own self and to accept other people, particularly Black men. That's a life process, a life journey. When my father died, I was in Paris for a show at the Pompidou, and I called my mother in South Africa. We didn't have any expectations, but we learned there was an inheritance. What did it mean to be open to that? I wouldn't have been ready without having done the necessary healing work on the psyche.

I've created different types of work. I have explored issues of identity and sexuality, but there was something about the healing, the interior work, that allowed me to be there for others and not to annihilate others because of my own primary sense of fraction.

**IB** Thinking about this in relation to some of your earlier work is eye-opening.

**LAH** Isolde is referring to work that explores issues of the body, sexuality, gender. In 1994, I was in a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art called *Black Male*, curated by Thelma Golden, who is the renowned curator and director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. The work was highly controversial.

What did it mean to be young and queer as part of a show and to still be the personification of a faggot, if you will? Do I take that energy of violence and turn it on the self, or how do I transform that energy as a way to be a beacon for the next generation? I think about Thomas Lax, the young Black curator at the Museum of Modern Art. What did it mean for him to go to the Whitney and see *Black Male* and see a queer Black man in full glory on the wall? So although I might have experienced trauma, what does it mean to pay forward through the act of making work, through the act of the sacrificial?

**AB** My work actually deals a lot with rejection. I'm interested in looking at language and imagery and media and deconstructing dominant narratives around marginal communities.

I have two series right now. *Counternarratives* involves me marking up and reworking headlines and articles from the *New York Times*. The second series looks at the Central Park Five. In April 1989, a twenty-eight-year-old investment banker was jogging in Central Park in the evening, and she was raped and attacked. Five young boys were sentenced to jail. They served between seven and thirteen years before the real perpetrator, Matias Reyes, a serial rapist, came forward. We now know that the confessions of these five boys were coerced. And many of us knew then that their confessions were coerced. But later, the convictions were vacated.

I'm looking at a lot of the reporting around that. The boys are referred to as a "wolf pack." So my work isn't at all about forgiveness: it is really about rejecting these narratives. I'm not interested in forgiveness or absolution in that sense. My work is oftentimes either a pushback at something or a protective gesture toward members of a particular community.

I'm interested in creating, through art, ways of equipping people to be able to critique media in a responsible way. There's this idea that something happens and it's over and done with. But looking back and digging through certain events and drawing connections between then and now is interesting. You see a lot of repetition in the way things are reported.

What's been difficult for me is to think critically about whether forgiveness has a place in my practice. The healing is very much in feeling that I have agency to say that this does not apply or there's something wrong with this or this is incorrect. I can do that at institutions. The first work of *Counternarratives* features Michael Brown. I'm trying to deconstruct the original *New York Times* article on Michael Brown and Ferguson, Missouri. Michael Brown and the officer who shot and killed him, Darren Wilson, had parallel articles on the front page of the *New York Times*. This was a problem for me because it suggested that they were peers. The work that I'm doing is trying to turn that on its head. When I strip that piece down, I leave people with: there's a white cop who killed this Black kid, there's a Black kid who was killed by a cop. It's the bare bones.

When I hung up a large print featuring this story, I did it anonymously. When people found out it was my work, they said to me, "I needed that." They didn't forgive the *Times*; they needed to feel like somebody hijacked the page and rejected what had been such a dominant, aggressive, and repetitious narrative about Black youth and police violence. The work that we can do doesn't involve forgiveness; it is about sifting through things and finding a way to see them differently.

- IB** **The materials of Alexandra's work, news stories, are persisting and continuing to unfold. The Central Park Five, now the Central Park Exonerated, settled with the City of New York in 2014 for more than \$40 million. I'm not sure of the impact of spending ten years in jail. But the narratives are ongoing, and if one case closes, there's another case or incident or story that we can expect to unfold.**
- AB** Although I've never really thought about my work in the context of forgiveness, or at least not with that word, it has been important because the work is about race and race relations. People want a moment of apology. The *Times* has the Overlooked series, where they're publishing obituaries of people who have been overlooked. I commend this active excavating. You have to continue to do these things.
- Newspapers used to have festive articles about lynching. They're referred to as "Negro barbecues" or "lynching went off as planned." They're very passive; they didn't take an active stance against lynching. So you now have papers writing these editorials, saying, "We did these bad things." The *Montgomery Advertiser* published an apology about how they reported on lynching. That's great, but I don't necessarily think it requires that I forgive those past actions. In fact, the onus is on the paper to continue to do better. What good are the best apologies unless they change the behavior?
- DK** I want to throw out one concept that a colleague writes about: earned redemption. It speaks to the notion of a newspaper losing the trust of the community through the way that they control a narrative and earning

their way back into that trust. Restorative justice is about people getting to tell their stories and not have their stories told about them or for them. It's about creating the conditions where it's possible for someone to take responsibility for harm they've caused. Almost everything in our culture is designed to ensure that someone denies responsibility. In every context, we're told, "Say nothing, because if you do admit it, you're just going to get hammered for it." There's no real incentive to take responsibility. We see this every day in the #MeToo movement—denials because no one can accept the label that comes with being a sex offender or around racism. People go into this denial mode because they can't entertain rejection, another word in tonight's panel title.

- IB** **People skirt around or deny because they're afraid of being rejected. That's maybe at more of a one-on-one level or a group and community level. But then I think back to history, to racism or genocide. One of the first times I heard about restorative justice was with Rwanda. Is it denial because they're fearful of rejection?**
- DK** Rwanda is a perfect example where, postgenocide, thousands and thousands of people were incarcerated for horrible, horrible crimes. At some point, the government had to let people go; they just couldn't afford to incarcerate in the way that they did. They were terrified about what would happen if they released people back to their villages or if the conflict resurfaced because of retaliation. They needed a mechanism to reintegrate people into the community. Gacaca courts were the mechanisms to create conditions where it was possible for someone to say, "This is what I did." To ask, "Is there a place for me in this community?" The courts offered people a way to navigate coexisting. They don't have to be friends and they don't have to forgive and forget. There's still accountability that's needed. But it's a huge undertaking.
- LAH** There's illness, so there's pathology. Racism has consequences, such as what happened in Charleston, at the Mother Emanuel AME Church, in 2015. We have to look at the models where there has been healing. If you think about the history of Black familial life in this country, it has been one about acceptance, healing, and forgiveness. We wouldn't be here today if we didn't have that as part of the core of what it means to be alive today.
- Looking at the horror of all the people who were killed in Charleston, I see there is a direct link to my family as my grandmother attended Mother Emanuel until 1923 before moving to New York. I'm interested in an analysis of what it took to summon the forgiveness to be able to go on, to be able to resurrect a healing modality as opposed to total chaos. It's important to acknowledge that force.
- DK** The church was acting out of faith through a personal journey of forgiveness. That's independent of the shooter, Dylann Roof. They weren't asking anything of Dylann Roof in their forgiveness journey.
- LAH** They were asking the country and the world to witness in a similar manner to Emmett Till's mother, who sacrificed her son to ask the world to witness. That's not personal; it's political, a radical political gesture.

**DK** We're pretty good at holding resentments and letting them build. And right now, we mostly don't have ways for people to work through these issues. I teach about restorative justice and do research, but I'm also part of a team that works with different communities, campus communities, K-12 schools, to use restorative practices. We got a request from a Texas university where a fraternity member was in a chat with his friends, which was meant to be a private chat, but it got out because of social media. He's a white guy, and the things he was saying were awful: how it would be great if Trump would allow people to hunt illegal immigrants and they could buy hunting licenses and that would generate revenue for the government. It feels pretty unforgivable.

Step one was the behavior. Step two was the outrage. There were demands that the university take action and expel this student to demonstrate that the university does not tolerate this kind of hateful speech. The university consulted their lawyers, who said that the chat was First Amendment speech. It's offensive speech but not a direct threat toward anyone in particular. Under the university policies, they couldn't do anything—they were stuck. And they were looking for some other mechanism to address the community outrage and search for accountability.

This guy was quickly ostracized. We're talking about rejection after rejection. It was a social death. He was a big man on campus—fraternity guy, Interfraternity Council president—and he had all kinds of access to senior administration. Then he lost all of his friends, his position. He had something like three thousand death threats. He went from everything to nothing. He was pretty shattered, so when the restorative justice opportunity was offered to him, he saw one possible pathway toward redemption. He was willing to do whatever he could to make amends for what he had done. My colleagues organized a restorative process that would bring him together with people who were harmed by his speech. Groups of students and representatives of communities went around the circle and talked about the impact that his behavior had on them.

His mother was sitting next to him through this process. One young woman said the night that she read the chat, she had a nightmare that her parents were murdered. These students talked about how they were simply frightened not just by that incident but by everything else that's happening—frightened of white people, frightened to cross paths, frightened of being accused of being an illegal immigrant. They were able to share some significant stories of harm, and he was able to respond and take responsibility for his actions. It's not direct as in, "Okay, you did that but we forgive you." It was along the lines of, "We want to know who you are, and we want you to demonstrate that you understand." We crafted an agreement.

One of the more powerful moments, as this was told to me, was that members of the Latinx community said, "We want you to come to our clubs. We want you to experience our community the way we experience it." And he said, "I'm game, but I'm scared. If I go, people are going to beat the crap out of me. I'm not going to survive if I go." They said, "No, because you're going to come with us. We will be in solidarity because it's a learning journey that you're on, and we're going to make sure that you understand." He was up for that.

One other thing that I thought was meaningful was that the students were saying that they did not feel like they had access to the administration in the same way his white fraternity did. They wanted him to help facilitate the kind of access that he had. So their engagement was about changing the nature of the relationship between the administration and students as well as about more personal changes.

**IB** I think that many of us who hear these stories are not surprised. This has been our lived experience, that a chat gone wrong hits social media. How does it work when you're an individual or a community that time and time again experiences oppressive situations like this? When we talk about racism, sexism, homophobia—these things aren't going away. In this situation, there's a part of me that questions who's doing the work, the emotional labor.

**DK** The model is not to put the offender in the center of the circle, where we all point and say, "This is what we're going to do to you for the thing that you did." It's to put the issue or the incident in the center of the circle, where we all speak to it from our individual perspectives: "This is how this affected me," "This is what's hard about this for me," and "This is what I want to see happen."

The question for the circle is: What does each individual want? What might we get out of this situation? We always ask about what's not working and what could help, and then people give voice to their own answers. When we have a chance to put out what we each want, we're not just signing on or being tasked with something that was imposed on us; rather, we have the agency to decide for ourselves whether this is what we want.

Usually in these kinds of situations, the question involves affinity circles first. So the Latinx community would have a circle about what it wants for its own healing and for its own steps forward, and then they would bring that to some kind of intergroup dialogue and decision-making process. It's important to consider the narrative problem: who controls the narrative? If we can decide that this is the story we want told, which might include the fact that we're tired of having to tell this story, then we put it to the group. Usually, it's a downhill slide. It's painful and hard. But when we get to collaborative decision making, it can get creative, which builds energy from something that felt hopeless before.

**IB** This model may be relevant in the context of a university or a smaller group. But what about when we're dealing with big, systemic issues, issues that have been around for hundreds of years?

**LAH** It's important to not have these great divides. I'm thinking of Eve Ensler, the author of *The Vagina Monologues*, who wrote an editorial addressed to white women in *Time* magazine on the eve of the Kavanaugh confirmation vote. She wrote, "I couldn't help focusing on the women behind [Donald Trump] who cheered and laughed" when he mocked Dr. Christine Blasey Ford. She said she was laughed at in the past, and, as a child, her mother sided with her father over her. The mother would not acknowledge that she was raped and would rather be in alignment with the patriarchy

than protect the sanctity of her own daughter. Eve was telling white women to start having a level of accountability.

**AB** Part of what stands out about the situation in Texas is that it's about an individual. It's much easier when you're dealing with a smaller space to force someone's hand through ostracism or the like. I am from Chicago, and I went to an all-Black magnet school where we celebrated Kwanzaa and we were very pro-Black. The school I went to was about reclaiming our roots. We weren't interested in redemptive narratives; instead, we were finding our own little segregated space. As a gay Black woman, there are other hierarchies and things within my community that I want to overcome, and I don't have time to pull someone along.

In an institutional sense, it's difficult to have such a positive outcome. People don't understand that my work is not just about this Central Park Five reporting. In a book that I read, one woman said she was afraid to hire any kids from Harlem. These narratives reverberate, and they collectively impact my position in the world. Some of what's restorative in this story is that this student, having lost all his power, was willing to say, "Okay, you can have some, too." But what does restorative justice look like in other situations, with major institutions, like newspapers or the government? I just don't see that happening in the real world. What I see is me showing up and a bunch of people pulling me to the side and saying, "Oh, your work is magnificent." Then they're still where they are.

I went to a *National Geographic* storyteller summit. They were proud that the roster was diverse. Three of us were Black—and none was a *NatGeo* photographer. We were these external people that had been brought in. We were all artists, and we were all critiquing imagery. Every single person I engaged with who was in some position of stature was a white person. People want to be able to have their cake and eat it, too. You want to tell me something positive, but you don't want to acknowledge the fact that the portrayals that you've pushed forward have probably kept me out of a position at your organization. Some of it is giving up and letting go. It's easier to imagine that in a small, interpersonal space.

But when we start to think about sacrifice, that's what's wrong with a lot of white women—they don't want to sacrifice their position and proximity to white male power. So they don't vote the way they should. What I find really difficult and why forgiveness hasn't even entered the conversation for me is that there's that inability to say, "You know what? I'm going to have to give up something." I feel like it's in my best interest to find a way to shield myself as opposed to trying to elicit an apology, which is probably thin anyway.

Why were the people in Charleston so forgiving? How were they able to move forward? That's interesting to me. But I'm also interested in why the narrative around the young white guy who shot people wasn't naming him as a terrorist.

**LAH** Yes, it's an act of terrorism.

I want to be clear: I'm not suggesting or supporting the fact that they forgive. For me, that forgiveness is so that Black folks, collectively, don't go into the element of insanity. There's a necessary healing process.

One more quick excerpt, this one by Reverend angel Kyodo Williams from *Radical Dharma*:

Movements for Black liberation cast their bodies into resisting the systems and instruments of oppression. Our bodies take the shape of, and thus illuminate, the contours of the most insidious force of systematic dehumanization and destruction ever imagined, one which has led the global community into a downward spiral of self-annihilation... We are propelled by the essential human compulsion for freedom, but we can also be driven by centuries of pain and carry a burden greater than people should have ever known. Our healing cannot wait until the structures acquiesce, are dismantled, or come undone. We must take a seat.

The seat is in reference to healing oneself. This is critical.

**IB** **What if you are an individual who has historically been and currently is disenfranchised, and discriminated against violently? I'm talking about Black and brown people, LGBTQIA+, immigrants, Indigenous communities, victims of sexism... I think that Alexandra is saying that we can push and move and effect change and maybe a system will give or shift.**

**DK** I'd love to have the answer to this problem. From a restorative perspective, it starts with the premise of storytelling. That's what you're trying to do at the very beginning. We can't get engaged unless we share something about ourselves. And we can't trust one another unless we know one another at some level. So the first step to preventing the kind of dehumanizing policies that exist or structures that exist is to know one another. That's why I think stories are important, even if we're tired of telling them.

Even if it may have been triggering for the Latinx community, they dragged this guy in Texas to their events to say: "If you knew us, you couldn't say these things." If we're able to humanize what's been dehumanized, that's the first step. And that's interpersonal. This is a leap, but if there are people in positions of power, people who feel that human connection, it will be harder for them to maintain the policies that they try to deny. Or they may be more open to creating more seats at the table and have those policies challenged—if not by them personally, then by the people they've brought in. That's a hope.

**LAH** Could you give us an example in your life with a high position—how that has happened for you and what was the leap, what sacrifice? It's authorship that I'm asking you about: How has that experience ricocheted in your own life? What type of transformation has that work effected in your life and in relation to your family and your kids? How has that reverberated?

**DK** Personally, I like to live pretty emotionally safe. I'm a social scientist. I can be behind my computer, and I've sat in enough restorative circles to recognize the limitations of that and the value of vulnerability.

One example that is coming to mind is a circle where a young guy had just vandalized somebody's car wash. It was a dialogue with the car wash owner and this kid regarding a couple of thousand dollars of damage to the



car wash. The kid didn't have the money. Instead of there immediately being a sentence to pay restitution and being put on probation, the owner wanted to hear the kid's story. Then they entered a collaborative decision-making process. The owner said, "I want you to pay me back. But I want you to put the money into a bank account. If you go to college, I want that money to go toward your tuition. And if you don't go to college, I want the money to pay me back for the damage that was done."

That kind of solution says that there's accountability. It's not saying, "Don't worry about it"; you have to do something, but now there's reinvestment in the kid with this creative solution that could never happen in a criminal courtroom. What's moving for me is the power of the circle process to generate solutions that no one would come up with otherwise. It was a form of forgiveness, but it wasn't just forgive and forget. It was forgive, but you have to earn it. That's the earned redemption piece.

**Audience** A question that has come up quite a bit with my family and friends is: Can ignorance be forgiven? In terms of earned redemption, can someone earn their redemption by learning? I'm thinking of situations that have horrible consequences where there are violent acts of racism or sexism. People sometimes say, "It's the community they grew up with. They didn't know any better. There was no way they could have known any better." What would you say to situations like that?

**AB** Ralph Northam is the governor of Virginia who appeared in blackface in 1984. As opposed to him stepping down, his advisers and his staff are having him read *Roots* by Alex Haley and a book by Ta-Nehisi Coates. I was watching a clip of an interview he did with Gayle King, and he's having this very proud exchange, and he refers to 1619, when slaves arrived in Virginia, and he calls them "the first indentured servants from Africa." And she sits for a second, and then she says, "Also known as slavery." He answers, "Yes."

I think there's a point where—*forgiveness* is not the word—you earn back a particular kind of redemption. But it's on you. If there's something you didn't know, it's on you to gain that knowledge. It's not on me to teach you about blackface. If we're talking about forgiveness in the sense of forgiving someone who is in office, I think that you can stay in office and also do that work—though that isn't necessarily the case for Northam, given the constituents who voted him into office. You have a duty as a public official to understand, learn about, and represent the interests of the people. You can't do that when you don't know and you don't have that knowledge.

**DK** For me, there are two issues. One is, if you caused harm, what can you do to repair that harm? There are steps to try to address that harm directly even if you can't fix it fully. The other issue is trust: it might be a different set of steps that you need to do for me to regain trust in you. Part of it might be around learning and knowledge: I don't trust you as long as I think you're ignorant on this issue, but it might be reassuring once you demonstrate to me a full understanding of this issue. Or maybe, unless you address these issues in treatment in some way, I won't trust you.

Or maybe it's about being isolated or disconnected from the community: if you are engaged and contributing in a positive way, I might trust you again. So there may be many separate pathways.

Northam has done damage to the governor's office. Stepping down might be an appropriate way to acknowledge that this harm is irreparable—having someone else step into the office might be an appropriate thing to do. That's more about the harm; that's not necessarily about my trust. So I think there are many things to do, and something that might work for me is not going to work for you. Maybe there's something else that is meaningful for both of us.

**IB** **Also, some things may just be unforgivable. Is it okay to just say that that was reprehensible and it's unforgivable to me? Must the end goal always be about forgiveness and redemption?**

**DK** Then what? If I'm not forgiving you, what does that mean? Does that mean you have to be excommunicated or punished?

**Audience** I'm interested in the origin of the social script David talked about, where you do something wrong, you say you're sorry, and you're forgiven. For me, forgiveness and redemption have a strong association with Christianity. Does the social script come from Christianity and it being so widespread as a result of colonialism and imperialism?

**DK** There are some anthropologists who will say that this predates any current organized religions. I think it is a universal necessity: for humans to have social cooperation, they need methods of conflict resolution. Whatever it may be, there's got to be some mechanism to resolve a transgression other than all-out violence. ▲