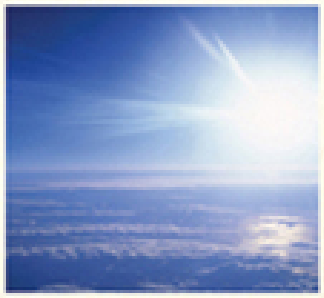
EDITED
AND WITH A PREFACE BY

Phil
Cousineau



beyond forgiveness

Reflections on Atonement

Healing the Past,
Making Amends,
and Restoring Balance
in Our Lives and World

More praise for *Beyond Forgiveness*

"Stay with it, and let this book open your heart, that best of all changings. Hard work, no question, but so worth it. The good and brave stories being told here—like the monk's tears on the head of the sullen teenager (that open this book), like James O'Dea's tears in the metro reading Thomas Merton (that close it)—will give you courage, heat for the leap, the phone call, the meltdown."

—Coleman Barks, author of *Rumi: The Big Red Book* and *The Essential Rumi*

"You cannot read this book without taking up a spiritual challenge; the challenge is to see even the most painful of the wrongs that are done to us in a larger, more transparent, and perennial context. This book is full of stories of spiritual courage and a transcendence that passes all cultural and religious boundaries, to show us the universality of what is truly spiritual about humanity. Phil Cousineau has a remarkable instinct for topics that pulse with the painful yet vital spiritual heartbeat of our time."

—Stephen Larsen, Ph.D., author of *The Fundamentalist Mind: How Polarized Thinking Imperils Us All* and coauthor of *A Fire in the Mind: The Life of Joseph Campbell*

"If we harbor thoughts of violence or hatred, or seek revenge or retribution, we are contributing to the wounding of the world; if we transform those thoughts into forgiveness and compassion, and then move beyond them to actually make amends or restitution, we are contributing to the healing of the world. This timely, powerful and compassionate book by Phil Cousineau helps show us the way."

—Deepak Chopra, author of *The Book of Secrets* and *The Path to Love*

"Nothing will help us survive the present age more than the realization that we must break the cycles of violence, when our souls long for healing, forgiveness often proves to be an inadequate solution to the soul's desire for longer lasting reconciliation. I've long believed another step is required for our transformation, one that Phil Cousineau reveals here as being on the other side of forgiveness, in the ancient ritual of atonement. I believe this book is the vital next step in the making of a strong modern myth of deep reconciliation. It is a profoundly important book and I give it my blessing."

—Robert A. Johnson, author of *He, She, Transformation*, and *A Slender Thread*

"*Beyond Forgiveness: Reflections on Atonement* is an inspiring, practical, and compelling book, relevant for our times. Cousineau provides a profound and provocative book that has us ponder where we might need to forgive ourselves and others; and to look at atonement and what it ignites in the human spirit."

—Angeles Arrien, Ph.D., author of *The Second Half of Life*

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Reflections on Atonement

Edited by Phil Cousineau

FOREWORD BY HUSTON SMITH

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Forgiveness is better than revenge.

—*Heraclitus (535–475 BCE)*

Find someone like yourself. Find others.
Agree you will never desert each other.
Understand that any rift among you
means power to those who want to do you in. . . .
This is the day of atonement; but do my people forgive me?
If a cloud knew loneliness and fear, I would be that cloud.

—*Adrienne Rich, "Yom Kippur 1984"*

How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. . . . It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.

—*Ian McEwan,* Atonement

To Bob Schnekenburger,
my foreman at Industrial & Automotive Fasteners, in Detroit,
whose stories about serving as a Green Beret in Vietnam
were my first painful lessons in the need
for finding truth and reconciliation
in all our wars

atonement as a spiritual path

HUSTON SMITH

Being persuaded to repent doesn't mean simply to feel sorry. It requires backing up—full speed astern—to reverse the human tendency to go one's own way, as the following story of a twentieth-century Zen monk shows.

This monk lived as a recluse in a hut on the side of a mountain. His only possessions were his robe, his straw sandals, and the bowl with which he begged for his food in the nearby village. The evening after a thief stole his sandals and bowl, he wrote:

> *The moon still shines*
> *in my window. Unstolen*
> *by the thief.*

His freedom from attachments, as demonstrated in this haiku, was one of the reasons the villagers revered him.

One day, as the monk was on his daily walk seeking food, a mother invited him into her home to share the noonday meal with her and her son, whom (she explained before they entered the house) she hoped the monk could straighten out, for the lad was a delinquent and was clearly headed for trouble.

When the son was called, he barely acknowledged the monk's presence, and he stared sullenly at the table throughout the meal. The monk too remained silent as they all ate. But as the monk was preparing to leave, the son did deign to do his duty. As he stooped to tie the monk's straw sandals, he felt

a drop of warm water fall on his head. Looking up, he saw tears streaming down the monk's face. The monk's compassion for what was in store for the young man prompted him to mend his ways.

This true story offers a beautiful example of the "power made perfect in weakness" that St. Paul extolled in the New Testament, and it sets the right tone for the interpretation of atonement I am attempting to give. Apart from God, who *is* love, love is a response to incoming love. And the most powerful demonstration of the sender's love is to let the receiver know that the sender suffers the pain the recipient suffers—in God's case infinitely, for there is nothing halfway about God.

In the Zen story, when the tear fell, the son realized—and actually experienced—the sorrow, the pain, in the monk. The weeping of the monk was a salvific act because it opened the heart of the son and kept him from being totally self-centered. The monk's tear brought into the son's heart the pain of another.

This story illustrates how compassion allows us to feel what someone else feels, which in turn allows us to forgive them, and to forgive ourselves, as we travel on the spiritual path.

What the wisdom traditions tell us is that we are in good hands. Out of gratitude, we are called to relieve each other's burdens, and to forgive each other, which is why there is an emphasis on forgiveness and atonement in all the world's religions.

I recall a former student of mine, Douglas George-Kanentiio, a member of the Iroquois tribe, telling me at the 1999 Parliament of World's Religions, in Cape Town, South Africa, that the great gift he had received from our time there was his encounter with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission organized by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. He said he was so inspired by what the South Africans had accomplished through their acts of forgiveness and restitution and commitment to nonviolence that he wanted to try to apply their recommendations to his own people's situation. The

Iroquois had experienced violence, discrimination, and racism similar to what the black South Africans had endured, and now it was important for his people to reach new ways of forgiveness and restitution, as well as reviving traditional forms of restorative justice. To bring together people who need reconciliation requires a recognition and acceptance of our own shortcomings, our flaws, our imperfections. At the heart of atonement, which has at its root the idea of *reconciliation*, is the recovery of our wholeness.

The power of the acts of forgiveness and atonement is the recognition of the flaw in all of us, without exception, as well as the realization of our ultimate unity. When we are "at one," we are united, side by side, and together. Our sense of ourselves as separate is illusion, what our senses report. As the ancients told us, the senses are false witnesses. In poetic idiom, "Life is real, life is earnest / And things are not as they seem."

It is as if we were gazing on a cloudless sky through a transom in which nine panes of glass are held together by two horizontal and two vertical bars. Looking through that transom, we see the sky as consisting of nine pieces. But of course the sky itself is not so divided. And neither are we.

Welcome to Phil Cousineau's important book.

the next step in forgiveness and healing

PHIL COUSINEAU

Throughout history people have had to make difficult, even heartrending decisions about how to respond to the suffering they have endured at the hands of other human beings—or to the pain they themselves have inflicted upon other people.

Over and over, we are confronted with the dilemma of how to respond to the cruelty and suffering that can pervade our lives. Do we forgive, or do we retaliate? Should we make peace or exact revenge? Can we live alongside our enemies, or do we seek retribution? And what about the harm *we* have caused? Is it possible for us to ever undo or make up for the damage we may have wreaked on the world?

From the earliest times different cultures have resolved their conflicts and meted out justice in their own way. Traditionally there have been two widely diverging paths—punishment or reform—which are rooted in retribution and forgiveness, respectively. The first is antagonistic and adversarial; the second, compassionate and cooperative. The difference between the two is dramatic. As the Chinese proverb has it, "If you are hell-bent on revenge, dig two graves"—one for your enemy and one for you. Revenge buries us in bitterness; hate immerses us in anger.

While retaliation has earned the lion's share of attention over the centuries, more measured responses to both personal and collective conflicts have also been practiced. The instinct to be vindictive may be as old as stone, but the impulse toward

reconciliation runs like an ancient underground river. And like water dissolving stone, if it flows long enough, so too can acts of compassion dissolve anger, the showing of remorse prompt forgiveness, and the making of amends alleviate guilt.

None of these paths is easy.

Nor do we find much encouragement, in a world riven by seemingly endless cycles of violence, to ask for forgiveness, still less to offer our own to someone who may have hurt us. But if we miss the moment for real reconciliation, we miss the chance to heal and move beyond the bitterness or guilt that can suffocate our lives.

Despite all the injunctions to exact revenge, from the hijacking of religious beliefs to testosterone-driven media violence, an impressive range of alternatives remains. Many distinguished scientists and philosophers now call into doubt the long-held belief that human beings are hardwired for violence, doomed by what anthropologist Robert Ardrey infamously called "the territorial imperative," victimized by what has been named "the demon seed phenomenon," or paralyzed by the "selfish genes" that reputedly determine our fate.

Instead there is ample and encouraging evidence that "Trend is not destiny," as the eminent microbiologist René Dubos boldly concluded in *A God Within*.

Antonio Damasio, professor of neuroscience at the University of Southern California and director of its Brain and Creativity Institute, believes that our early ancestors were far more likely to survive if they were able to respond to a friend who needed help, or felt compassion for an enemy who was writhing in pain. Similarly, cultural historian Susan Griffin believes that strong research reveals that human beings can and do change even their most deeply engrained violent and selfish behavior. In her Pulitzer Prize–winning book *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War*, she writes, "It is perhaps a choice each of us makes over and over, even many times throughout one day, whether to use knowledge as power or intimacy."

Indeed evidence is mounting that the urge to act selflessly and live cooperatively was among the transcendent forces that helped our ancestors wrench themselves away from the grip of brute instinct, and bound us together into tribes and communities. In our own time, many political and spiritual leaders have exhorted us to practice forgiveness because it helps to cultivate the powers of empathy that helps solidify our relationships with others. While anger and violence may have spilled the most ink, from Homer's epics to Cormac McCarthy's novels, sophisticated forgiveness practices based on compassion, reprieve, amnesty, clemency, mercy, absolution, restitution, and restorative justice have also commanded great attention and exacted enormous influence. In ancient Greece the word *metanoia* referred to a sudden change of mind but also to *repentance*. *Change* is the operative word, the heart of the drama that reveals how we might creatively and compassionately respond to violence.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha said, "Anger will never disappear so long as thoughts of resentment are cherished in the mind. Anger will disappear just as soon as thoughts of resentment are forgotten." "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," Christ said as he died on the cross. The Koran states, "Hold to forgiveness, command what is right; but turn away from the ignorant." To Mother Teresa we owe, "People are illogical and self-centered. Forgive them anyway." Dag Hammarskjöld, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, said, "Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is again made clean." In the spring of 2009, Zainab Salbi, an Iraqi-American who works with women victims of war, said, "I think we need to forgive for our own health and healing. Without forgiveness, it's hard to move on." Recently, Huston Smith, the beloved historian of religion, wrote, "So the power of the act of forgiveness is the recognition of the flaw in all of us."

And yet there lingers a disturbing feeling. To forgive is noble; to be forgiven can be a reprieve. But surely there must

be more to reconciliation between aggrieved peoples; otherwise, individuals, families, and entire cultures wouldn't have been whiplashed by cycles of violence throughout history. As indispensable as forgiveness has been to the healing process, another equally profound action is needed for real reconciliation, which Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mohandas Gandhi, calls "the other side of the coin." Turning over the coin of forgiveness, we discover *atonement*, the semi-hidden, much overlooked half of the reconciliation process. Atonement is the act that *proves* the depth of our desire to be forgiven, or to forgive; it is the process of making things right, the restoration of some semblance of balance in our lives.

"If someone steals my pen and uses it for a year," Archbishop Desmond Tutu said in 1987, "but being contrite, comes to me and returns my pen and begs for forgiveness, my response is to ask for compensation for the use of my pen, for the ink used and for some indication of contrition/repentance by the offender."

To paraphrase Tutu's famous injunction in the fight against apartheid, "Forgiveness makes the future possible," while atonement makes the *present* possible. A gesture as simple as replacing a stolen pen or as complex as war reparations makes the present moment not just better but *tolerable*. Without offering those who wrong us, however seriously, the chance to make amends, or granting ourselves the opportunity to atone for any hurt we have caused, we remain stuck in the past; we suffer from a kind of "soul rust" and are unable to live fully in the present moment. The real work in conflict resolution is bringing these two practices of forgiveness and atonement together, whenever they have been split apart like cordwood, until we can say, in the spirit of the Irish bard Van Morrison, that "the healing has begun."

Or as the soul singer Sam Cooke sang, plaintively, sorrowfully, and yet hopefully, after witnessing the first civil rights marches, "A change is gonna come."

Reconciliation

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan's "symphonic novel of love and war, childhood and class, guilt and forgiveness," an elderly novelist attempts, through the alchemy of her storytelling, to atone for a tragic mistake she made as a thirteen-year-old girl:

> How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. . . . It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.

When I first read those lines, shortly after the book was published, I was immediately catapulted back in time to 1975, to the six months I spent working as a volunteer at Ashdot Ya'akov, a kibbutz in Israel's Jordan Valley. Every two weeks a large contingent of German students arrived at the kibbutz to work with us in the date groves, banana fields, and chicken coops. I was told by the *kibbutzniks* that the students had been sent there by the German government to ensure that the next generation would better appreciate Jewish culture, and never again demonize it. When I asked an old kibbutznik named Udi, who worked with me in the very date groves he had planted in 1909, how he felt about working alongside young German volunteers, he gritted his teeth and revealed to me that seventy out of seventy-two members of his family had perished in the grisly concentration camp at Auschwitz. "It is very, very hard for me to forgive, but this is a beginning, a hard beginning, but a beginning. . . ."

Since then Germany has continued its efforts to atone for the horrors of the Holocaust. It has paid out billions of dollars in reparations, returned thousands of items of stolen property, and made other amends, such as passing laws against political extremism and making it illegal to display symbols of Nazism.

Fifteen years after my stint on the kibbutz, in the winter of 1990, I received a phone call from a filmmaker from Mill Valley, California. Gary Rhine told me he was making a documentary film about the Wounded Knee massacre and its aftermath among the Dakota Sioux. Would I help? (How could I say no?) I gladly looked at the rough cut and was deeply stirred by the footage, but I had to know something before I signed on. *Why* was he making the film? Without hesitation, Gary told me that he was Jewish and that his family in Europe had been decimated by the Nazis during World War II. There was nothing he could do about that now, he confided, but he *could* do something about what he called the "American Holocaust," the wanton destruction of American Indians and their culture. He could help them tell their stories, and over the course of a few documentary films, he wanted to try to train some young Native Americans to tell their own stories with cameras. Together, over the next thirteen years, we made six films about the American Indian struggle for religious and political freedom. In his own remarkably selfless way my friend "Rhino" was offering to atone for the entire culture—a powerful act of reconciliation offered to the Five Hundred Nations for the transgressions of the past five hundred years. As he was fond of saying, "People don't change when they see the light; they change when they feel the heat." And the most effective heat, he believed, came when people shared their stories because it was the most effective way to realize that we have more in common than we ever dreamed of.

The Root Meaning of "At-One-Ment"

Early in the fourteenth century the word *atone* appeared in print for the first time. At that time it simply meant "to be in accord with, to make or become united or reconciled." Or as the mystics said, "To become one again with our Oneness." Two centuries later, the word was adapted and expanded by William Tyndale (1494–1536), a leader of the English Reformation