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Jennifer Horgan: Focusing on forgiveness would make our world a better place.

In every aspect of our lives and in how we run society, cutting back on blame and focusing on forgiveness and rehabilitation would make our world better.

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Reading stories collected through The Forgiveness Project online is an awe-inspiring experience.

Freddy Mutanguha was 18 when his entire family, bar one sister, was slaughtered in Rwanda. “It is so terrible to listen to your family being killed,” he shares. Of the man who organised the killing he says: “I don’t hate him, and I hold him no ill will.”

People like Freddy Mutanguha seem superhuman. Forgiveness is our most radical act, and nowadays it is in short supply. I cannot help but think of what that means for us all as we head into 2025.

The Forgiveness Project shares stories of forgiveness to build hope, empathy and understanding. Stories, big and small, reveal who we are to ourselves.

Which reminds me of a small story a friend told me on New Year’s Eve about an interaction she had outside a supermarket in the crazed run-up to Christmas. She accidentally brushed against a bumper as she squeezed into a space. Examining the car, she could see no damage. The marks and scuffs were the same, if not worse, on the unaffected side.

About to leave a note with her number, a man came up from behind. “I saw what you did. I’m staying here until you speak to that driver.” And so, they waited, until eventually the other driver arrived, quickly dismissing my friend’s apologies and concerns with a laugh and light wave of the hand. The car park hero scuttled away, disappointed not to observe the serving up of some just deserts to one stranger by another.

It’s a tiny story — but a working example of a wider issue.

So many of us walk around in defence mode now, aware of the hunt for blame that forgets an indisputable fact about every single human — none of us is perfect. None of us is perfect. It is a fact we are uncomfortable with

I attended a family funeral recently and I noticed how often the priest mentioned the word forgiveness. I sat with it for a good while.

The Catholic Church, throughout the last century, was built on judgement, not forgiveness. It was inflexible, brutal, and precise. A teenage hand straying beneath the sheets meant fire and damnation. Getting a sum or a spelling wrong at school and it was hands on the desk to be lashed. Forgiveness? Harbour even an impure thought and you were cavorting with the devil.

There is such deep irony in the church seeking our forgiveness now, calling us back to faith and understanding. It's a tall order considering how little training the church gave us in the practice of compassion. We were raised on judgement. It is our currency.

I'm not sure I'll ever forgive the church or return to it. It is too much. There was and is just too much.

But should I? Should we all? Would it finally put an end to the cycle of violence, abuse, hatred, and resentment?

I think my unwillingness to forgive has a lot to do with power, their abuse of it as well as us. It is hard to untangle.

I feel the same way about Sinn Féin, who has never really gone beyond expressing a kind of blameless regret for IRA violence. I watched the series *Say Nothing over Christmas*, a screen adaptation of Patrick Radden Keefe's wonderful non-fiction book of the same name. It was a difficult watch in its humanisation of the Price sisters, members of the IRA. Yes, it captures the murkiness of their actions, but the series also asks the question: what makes someone a soldier, and what makes someone a terrorist? What exactly is war, and who gets to decide?

I struggle with any humanisation of the IRA.

I'm not alone in this very human deficiency. Forgiveness is not something that comes easily to any of us. We seek justice over forgiveness, and this is reflected in our culture of blame, revenge, and retribution.

What scares me though, as someone who admittedly struggles with it, is how far modern society is straying further and further away from it.

Repeatedly, we call for tougher sentencing for criminals; we demand compensation for medical malpractice; and at the most extreme end of human behaviour, we wage wars against innocent people, to right past wrongs. As a species, we are forever and increasingly primed for the counterattack.

Where does it take us? To Gaza? To the worst atrocities imaginable? Look to how we label people 'monsters' and 'evil' in our headlines, and look to how the cycle continues, getting worse and worse, not better.

Look to New Orleans — Trump labelling the New Year's Day attack as a "pure act of evil." An understandable response, but most certainly a precursor to more violence, more anti-immigrant rhetoric, more hatred. Look to Ireland, where longer sentencing fails to reduce recidivism. It feels counter-intuitive, but punishment does not make us safer. More often revenge, though understandable, makes us less so.

When it comes to medical care, Ireland is imploding. Legal costs in Irish medical negligence cases are among the highest in the world. Doctors report leaving the profession because of the stress and anxiety they experience.

The delay in the procedures, according to the Medical Protection Society, is largely down to Ireland's slow legal process and a lack of mechanisms to facilitate early resolution.

Back in 2010, then Health Minister Mary Harney refused to step down in the wake of the Tallaght scandal where it emerged that nearly 60,000 X-rays went unchecked for over five years at the facility.

Her belief was that Ireland was unique in placing the blame for medical scandals directly at a politician's door. She refused to accept the calls for her resignation.

"I am not a clinician. I do not have any responsibility to read X-rays," Ms Harney said.

And what of the medics? Are they meant to be infallible? Is screening meant to be foolproof now? Is that where we have set the bar? Despite the fallibility of humans. This seems to be our expectation, despite knowing that our health system is under-resourced, under-staffed, and backlogged.

Ireland's health service paid out over €2bn in claims arising from medical negligence cases over a five-year period with the estimated outstanding liability for such claims rising from €2.8bn in 2018 to €4.6bn in 2022.

When is enough? As reported by this paper, Professor Rhona Mahony, chair of the working group tasked with examining the rising cost of health-related claims, warns that these claims are unsustainable and will directly damage the system, diverting much-needed funds away from future medical provision.

People deserve an apology. They deserve an assurance that things are getting better, that the same will not happen to somebody else. In medical contexts, they deserve compensation to cover the cost of caring for an affected person. But surely there must be some cap on what justice looks like.

People sharing their stories on The Forgiveness Project may seem superhuman but at least they offer us another possibility — an alternative way to look at the world.

Figen Murray's response to the death of her son, Martyn, one of twenty-two people murdered in the Manchester Arena suicide bombing, is remarkable. The attack was carried out by 22-year-old Salman Abedi, a radical Islamist. She writes: "I knew that to forgive the attacker meant not tapping into all the anger and darkness in my heart."

Forgiveness is the most radical act.

In every aspect of our lives and in how we run society, cutting back on blame and focusing on forgiveness and rehabilitation would make our world better. I am not saying we are all capable of it. I cannot even say I am. But this omnipotent F word should be used a lot more often. It should become a far bigger part of the conversation.