

The path of forgiveness

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 15, 2015](#) issue



I've been reading a book by Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho Tutu. Desmond Tutu is the former Anglican archbishop of Cape Town. He chaired South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was created by Nelson Mandela's government in 1995 to help South Africans come to terms with their apartheid past.

Mpho Tutu, also an Anglican priest, is working on a doctorate in forgiveness studies. In their book, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, they include accounts of injustice, torture, and murder endured by blacks under the racist apartheid system, as well as amazing examples of aggrieved South Africans who decided to forgive rather than retaliate.

The Tutus criticize retributive justice and advocate instead for restorative justice. Retributive justice, reflected in most of the world's judicial systems, is based on the assumption that those who do harm must be punished. The Tutus insist that restorative justice is the way of Jesus because it is based on redemption, and on the assumption that no act is unforgivable, no person unredeemable.

Jeanne Bishop seconds their convictions in her book *Change of Heart: Justice, Mercy, and Making Peace with My Sister's Killer*. Jeanne is a member of a congregation I served; I am familiar with the story she tells. In 1990, Jeanne's pregnant sister Nancy and her husband Richard were brutally murdered. The killer broke into their suburban Chicago home while they were out to dinner, waited for them, and then forced them into the basement and shot them. After six months, police arrested David Biro, a high school junior.

Jeanne describes Biro's trial, his lack of remorse, and his insistence on innocence despite the evidence—a murder weapon, handcuffs, glasscutter, and a notebook full of press clippings about the murders. Biro was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Jeanne remembers: "I had gotten what I hoped for—a conviction and life sentence for David Biro—but somehow it didn't seem enough."

The trauma of the murder led her to reexamine her own comfortable life. She gave up her lucrative practice in international law and began working for the Office of the Cook County Public Defender, frequently defending young men who reminded her of Biro.

Already active in gun control advocacy and in opposition to the death penalty, she encountered other people who were involved in penal reform and restorative rather than retributive justice. She began to personally experience the truth that "hatred is like drinking poison and expecting the hated person to die." She forgave Biro and said his name in public for the first time. She studied Christian theology and scripture, rediscovering the stories of Moses, David, and Saul of Tarsus—murderers who were forgiven and restored. "God didn't throw them away," Jeanne writes. "God redeemed them and used them for good."

Finally, Jeanne wrote a long letter to Biro and received a response that included his first acknowledgment of his guilt. After visiting him in prison, she decided that she could no longer support the Illinois policy of life sentence without parole for juvenile offenders. She began to lobby against the law and testified before the Illinois state legislature.

Both books testify to the incredibly hard but hopeful work of forgiving in the most difficult and trying circumstances. Near the end of *Change of Heart*, Jeanne reflects on the parable of the sower and the seeds: "The seeds are sprinkled. My part is to be obedient to God's call to forgive. I cannot change the heart of the killer. But God can."