

Softened hearts: Community and forgiveness

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

Hardness of heart. Scripture uses this image to describe those who are impenetrably stubborn, those who are unwilling or unable to see God's glory or to reorient their lives to God's call and claims. But what causes hardness of heart? Is it always human sin, those things which we have done which ossify our hearts and rigidify our minds? Do tragic accidents sometimes harden us in ways that make it difficult, if not impossible, to remain open to transformation, to sustain a mental, emotional and moral agility? Do the effects of systemic sin, as well as the effects of personal sin done *to* us rather than *by* us, cultivate wounds that may harden us and erupt into further destructiveness?

I wrestled with these questions as I read two books recently. Dara Horn's daring and beautiful novel *In the Image* retells the Book of Job in a contemporary context. The narrator describes a teenager's life: "Most of the time, the clay that forms a young person's life is kneaded and prodded slowly, gradually, by him and by others, until a shape is coaxed out of it, and it is only after many years, long after the clay has hardened, that one can go back and trace the polished surface, searching for the fingerprints of those who helped to mold it long ago. But sometimes, often by accident, a dent will be made so deep, in clay just beginning to dry, that no amount of prodding will cover it up again."

Horn suggests that these dents leave us marked in ways that we can't change, overcome or rework. She suggests that it often happens by accident. But it can also happen as a result of personal and systemic sin, as Gene Cheek narrates in his poignant memoir *The Color of Love*. Cheek describes his early life in the 1950s with an alcoholic, abusive father and his parents' subsequent divorce. He tells how when his mother, a white woman in North Carolina, developed a relationship with a wonderful, gracious black man, Gene's father used antimiscegenation laws to ask the court to send Gene to a foster home because his mother was "unfit" to raise him.

Gene describes the experience of going to court as a 12-year-old in 1963 and learning that he will be taken away from his mother and Tuck: “A part of me that had been dormant had surfaced. A hardness had been shaped by watching Dad drink himself into abusing Mama and me. My softer, finer nature had been forged into hardened steel . . . ground and polished . . . into a razor’s edge.”

Sometimes it is a dent that has hardened and left an imprint of wounds on the soul (and sometimes literally the body); at other times it is steel polished into a razor’s edge that can cut and destroy others. In either case, the hardness in the soul becomes manifest in painful and destructive, especially self-destructive, ways. In Cheek’s case, racism and a court system that reflected racism colluded with and even caused a hardening of Cheek’s life.

Hardened hearts also develop from our own inability to discover alternatives to destructive spirals of vengeance, harshness and callow carelessness. We can become indifferent, believing that no one can hurt us if our hearts are impenetrable. We learn to see the world cynically and with suspicion. If we then live in ways that reinforce our estrangement from one another, we discover in the larger social world a similar hardening: a loveless indifference that carries within it seeds of explosive bitterness that erupt to rupture relationships.

Is such hardening inevitable and irreversible? At the heart of the Christian faith is the proclamation of God’s forgiveness in Christ. But this proclamation cannot be heard, much less learned and lived, in isolation. We all need the gift of others who will patiently and lovingly bear with us through time and nurture in us patterns that help to thaw our hearts, heal our memories and repattern our thoughts, feelings and actions in Christ.

We are not likely to be able to offer or receive such gifts without robust communities that are committed to patience and the centrality of faith, hope and love in bearing witness to the life-giving and transforming power of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. Too often churches proclaim God’s forgiveness rhetorically without offering social contexts in which that forgiveness can be learned and lived through friendships and practices. Hard shells of bitterness, anger and despair do not disappear magically. It’s even more difficult when congregations and pastors reflect, and even intensify, the isolation and estrangement and destructiveness of the wider world.

By contrast, faithful Christian communities provide powerful holding environments for us to learn and embody Christ's forgiveness. Such communities are lights unto the nations, shining into the darkness of our personal and collective lives. The hymn "Spirit of the Living God" invokes the Spirit to "fall afresh"—to melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. The Spirit creates space in our thoughts, feelings and actions for Christ's forgiving love, and works through the friendships and practices that shape the body of Christ.

Hardened hearts need not always stay hardened. Gene Cheek's adult life has been marked by a great deal of pain, yet he concludes his memoir with these words: "This book started as an act of vengeance. I wanted revenge on those—long since gone—who brought pain to my family and me. It changed from revenge to understanding and finally to forgiveness. I can't pinpoint the exact time because it moved over me like the changing of a season, slow and deliberate. It wasn't until this process was near the end that I even noticed, but I'm grateful for it."