

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Amish Grace

By David L. Weaver-Zercher, Donald B. Kraybell, and Steven M. Nolt

Introduction

On Monday morning, October 2, 2006, a gunman entered a one-room Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. In front of twenty-five horrified pupils, thirty-two-year-old Charles Roberts ordered the boys and the teacher to leave. After tying the legs of the ten remaining girls, Roberts prepared to shoot them execution style with an automatic rifle and four hundred rounds of ammunition that he brought for the task. The oldest hostage, a thirteen-year-old, begged Roberts to "shoot me first and let the little ones go." Refusing her offer, he opened fire on all of them, killing five and leaving the others critically wounded. He then shot himself as police stormed the building. His motivation? "I'm angry at God for taking my little daughter," he told the children before the massacre.

The story captured the attention of broadcast and print media in the United States and around the world. By Tuesday morning some fifty television crews had clogged the small village of Nickel Mines, staying for five days until the killer and the killed were buried. The blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor when Amish parents brought words of forgiveness to the family of the one who had slain their children.

The outside world was incredulous that such forgiveness could be offered so quickly for such a heinous crime. Of the hundreds of media queries that the authors received about the shooting, questions about forgiveness rose to the top. Forgiveness, in fact, eclipsed the tragic story, trumping the violence and arresting the world's attention.

Within a week of the murders, Amish forgiveness was a central theme in more than 2,400 news stories around the world. The Washington Post, The New York Times, USA Today, Newsweek, *NBC Nightly News*, *CBS Morning News*, *Larry King Live*, *Fox News*, *Oprah*, and dozens of other media outlets heralded the forgiving Amish. From the Khaleej Times (United Arab Emirates) to Australian television, international media were opining on Amish forgiveness. Three weeks after the shooting, "Amish forgiveness" had appeared in 2,900 news stories worldwide and on 534,000 web sites.

Fresh from the funerals where they had buried their own children, grieving Amish families accounted for half of the seventy-five people who attended the killer's burial. Roberts' widow was deeply moved by their presence as Amish families greeted her and her three children. The forgiveness went beyond talk and graveside presence: the Amish also supported a fund for the shooter's family.

AMISH GRACE explores the many questions this story raises about the religious beliefs and habits that led the Amish to forgive so quickly. It looks at the ties between forgiveness and membership in a cloistered communal society and asks if Amish practices parallel or diverge from other religious and secular notions of forgiveness. It will also address the matter of why forgiveness became news. "All the religions teach it," mused an observer, "but no one does it like the Amish." Regardless of the cultural seedbed that nourished this story, the surprising act of Amish forgiveness begs for a deeper exploration. How could the Amish do this? What did this act mean to them? And how might their witness prove useful to the rest of us?

(barnesandnoble.com)

About the Author

Donald B. Kraybill, Ph.D., is senior fellow at the Young Center of Elizabethtown College. Among his many publications, he has authored or coauthored numerous books on Amish society. The Young Center fielded hundreds of media calls in the week following the shooting.

Steven M. Nolt, Ph.D., is professor of history at Goshen College. He has written extensively on Amish history and culture.

David L. Weaver-Zercher, Ph.D., is associate professor of American religious history at Messiah College. His books on Amish life explore outsiders' fascination with and perceptions of the Amish.

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Reviews

"This intelligent, compassionate and hopeful book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on forgiveness."— *Publishers Weekly Review*

"While the reader will gain important glimpses into the grit and grime of daily Amish life, broader understanding of Amish practices of forgiveness will enable reflection on the meaning and value of it". — *Library Journal Review*

"At times difficult to read, this anguished and devastating account of a national tragedy and a hopeful, life-affirming lesson in how to live is itself a marvel of grace."— *Booklist*

(novelistplus and amazon.com)

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Further Reading

Finding Home: an imperfect path to faith and family by Jim Daly

Naked on God's Doorstep: a memoir by Marion Duckworth

No Atheists in Foxholes: reflections and prayers from the front by Patrick J. McLaughlin

(*novelistplus*)

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Possible Discussion Questions

Chapter 1: The Nickel Mines Amish

1. Prior to the tragedy at Nickel Mines, what were your perceptions of Amish people? What were the sources of those impressions?
2. How did the Nickel Mines tragedy change your views of the Amish?
3. Chapter 1 provides some cultural background on the Amish community. What was your biggest surprise in learning about Amish faith and life?
4. What do you consider the most significant or biggest difference between Amish culture and mainstream American values?

Chapter 2: The Shooting

1. A number of Amish people compared the school shooting to the September 11 attack on the twin towers in New York City. In what ways were these two events similar? Or is a comparison inappropriate?
2. As you reflect on the horror that visited the schoolhouse on Monday morning, October 2, how might you have responded if you had been the teacher? If you had been the parent of one of the children?
3. How was the response of the Amish community on the afternoon of the shooting different from or similar to the response you think non-Amish parents would have had if this tragedy had happened in a public school?
4. What might have been done to prevent the tragedy at Nickel Mines? What might be done to prevent similar tragedies in the future?

Chapter 3: The Aftermath

1. An Amish man who lived near the school said, "We were all Amish this week." What did he mean?

2. What most surprised you about the Amish response to the tragedy?
3. What most surprised you about the larger society's response to the tragedy?
4. What do we learn about the Amish view of death and children in the song "I Was a Little Child," which was read at one of the funerals?
5. The Amish destroyed the school building soon after the shooting. Would it have been better to save it as a memorial, or at least create some type of memorial at the site, rather than turn it back into a horse pasture?
6. What do we learn about the Amish view of life and God's providence from their reaction to changing the security in their schools as a result of this tragedy?

Chapter 4: The Surprise

1. What was unique and distinctive about the Amish response to the shooting?
2. Why, do you think, did Amish people who were not directly wronged feel responsible to express forgiveness to the killer's family?
3. How did the Amish express forgiveness in ways other than words? What does this say about the Amish understanding of forgiveness?
4. How did the Amish find meaning and solace in the deep sorrow and pain that they experienced in this tragedy?

Chapter 5: The Reactions

1. The Amish showed little public anger or outrage to the killings. What is your response to the columnist who asked, in essence, "Do we really want to live in a society in which no one gets angry when children are slaughtered?"
2. We may think we know what forgiveness is until we have to define it. How would you define it?
3. Should forgiveness be dependent on a perpetrator saying "I am sorry" or requesting forgiveness? Or is forgiveness a gift, regardless of the perpetrator's response?

Chapter 6: The Habit of Forgiveness

1. The authors describe the Anabaptist tradition and Amish culture as supplying a repertoire of responses that shape life, particularly in times of stress or in situations that demand immediate responses. How would you describe your own culture and cultural values? What repertoire shapes your responses to tragedy?

2. Which of the stories in this chapter surprised you? Inspired you? Disturbed you? Made you angry?

3. In two stories, those that occurred in Monroe County and Mondovi, Wisconsin, the Amish participated in judicial processes through which the state sought to punish criminal wrongdoing, but then distanced themselves from the outcomes, substituting forgiveness as their response. How do you view this distinction between consequences and revenge?

Chapter 7: The Roots of Forgiveness

1. Why are the Anabaptists described as having a “discipleship tradition”? What does that mean? From what you know of other Christian traditions, how distinctive are Anabaptist emphases?

2. The authors contend that “the Amish believe if they don’t forgive, they won’t be forgiven.” Does this sentiment surprise you? Resonate with your own beliefs? Trouble you? Consider “The Lord’s Prayer”.

3. How do the Amish understand what the authors call “the cross stitch between divine and human forgiveness”?

4. At this point in your reading, has the Amish approach to faith either challenged or reaffirmed your own beliefs and values?

Chapter 8: The Spirituality of Forgiveness

1. In your own words, describe the concept of *Gelassenheit*, or *uffgevva*.

2. How is *Gelassenheit* different from fatalism?

3. What do you imagine to be some of the implications of *Gelassenheit* beyond those the authors mention as examples?

4. Does the Amish understanding of submission clarify your understanding of their gender roles, or does it raise new questions for you?

5. What is your own understanding of the meaning of martyrdom?

Chapter 9: The Practice of Forgiveness

1. An Amish minister noted that “sometimes it’s harder to forgive each other than it is [to forgive] someone like [Charles] Roberts.” Why might this be the case? Have you ever had similar feelings? Or opposite sentiments?
2. How are the rituals and practices of the Amish “communion season” similar to or different from rituals and practices in other faith traditions with which you are familiar?
3. What are the implications of the communal dimension of Amish worship, as opposed to an approach that views worship as something that simply connects an individual to God?
4. Community relationships and church rituals keep Amish people talking to one another, even if they are at odds. What social structures in your society encourage people who disagree with one another to remain in conversation? What things discourage such interaction?

Chapter 10: Forgiveness at Nickel Mines

1. How would you define forgiveness? Do you agree (with psychologist Robert Enright) that forgiveness does not, and should not, depend on the remorse or apology of the offender?
2. The authors make a distinction between “forgiveness” and “pardon.” Do you agree with that distinction, or should pardon always be an aspect of forgiveness?
3. Why would collectivist societies find anger less acceptable than societies that are oriented toward the individual?
4. Everett Worthington makes a distinction between “decisional forgiveness” and “emotional forgiveness”? Is the distinction between making a decision to forgive and the emotional process helpful for understanding the task of forgiveness?

Chapter 11: What About Shunning?

1. What is the purpose of Members Meetings in the life of the Amish church? Are you aware of other religious communities that pursue the same purpose in a different way?
2. What rationale, biblical or otherwise, do the Amish have for disciplining wayward church members? Do you find their rationale convincing?
3. Although the Amish do not equate the *Ordnung* with divine law, they nonetheless discipline church members who do not abide by it. What is their rationale for enforcing rules that are not, even in their view, divinely given? Is that a justifiable rationale?
4. What, according to the Amish, is the goal of shunning?

5. Should religious communities discipline members who don't abide by their rules? If so, how can this be done in a way that is both loving and effective?
6. This chapter outlines the process of excommunication and the practice of shunning. How does this description square with popular perceptions of Amish shunning?

Chapter 12: Grief, Providence, and Justice

1. All communities practice particular grieving rituals. What is unique about the grieving rituals practiced by the Amish? How do their rituals compare with what you've witnessed in your own community?
2. Did anything about the memorial poem (quoted in this chapter) that catch your attention?
3. The authors identify three general answers posed by Christians to the problem of evil. Which of these three answers, if any, do you find most attractive? Why?
4. One Amish person asserted that the school shooting was a part of "God's plan," but also said that God didn't "will it" to happen? Are those two assertions contradictory?
5. What do the authors mean by the Amish "two kingdom ethic"? Do you think it's appropriate for people to accept the state's authority to use force (e.g., in restraining criminals) yet refuse to participate in those coercive practices themselves?

Chapter 13: Amish Grace and the Rest of Us

1. The authors write that, for the Amish, the willingness to forgive others "is absolutely essential to the Christian faith." Would that be true of most North American Christians?
2. The authors contend that many commentators writing in the aftermath of the shooting "missed the countercultural dimension of Amish forgiveness." What do the authors mean by that?
3. Have you had experiences of forgiveness in your life—either extending it to someone or receiving it from someone? Was there anything in this book that helped you understand that experience?
(*amishgrace.com*)