

MURDER

*Is there a chance for forgiveness ?*

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*When we lose someone to murder,  
it's like suddenly finding ourselves in the middle of a mountain range  
with impossible cliffs to scale, gaping canyons to cross  
and forests too thick and dark to navigate.  
Our sense of security is destroyed.  
We're blinded with the pain of grief and find ourselves alone in a dark place - lost.  
-- Wilma Derksen*

This essay is about murder : murder of a loved one or someone close. This essay is about pain, grief, darkness, loss and the lost, just as Wilma has written. Wilma lost someone close to her by murder. She dealt with that loss for a long time. Then one day, she found in her soul the means to forgive the murderer. Is that possible ? Can someone actually bring their self to forgive such an act. Somehow, Wilma did. It was suggested by her friends, that forgiveness was the only way Wilma could move to a more stable “sense of security.”<sup>1</sup> Confronting the offender, exposing and relating her deep hurt to that person, and then extending her forgiveness, was the only way she could move beyond all the emotions.

This essay will focus on the pain of the loss, the being lost, and the anger caused by murder. It will question whether others can do as Wilma did, forgive. Forgiveness of an offender is part of a process known as Restorative Justice. Generally, it is one which considers all elements of the event, involves more than the prosecution of the offender by the court system, looks beyond incarceration as right punishment, offers a means to provide a method for rehabilitation of the offender and their reintegration back into the community and, most importantly, it pursues the need for restoring wholeness to the victims and their community. Basically, Restorative Justice says, “there’s more than offenders, there are the victims.” Wilma’s forgiveness is not a state of mind equaled by other murder victim survivors. Her quote above offers a heart-hurting indication of why forgiving is questionable. The pain and the wrenching sense of the void that is present is a real emotion. The depth of that emotion, and others that coincide with it, will be exhibited later in a section of this essay devoted to journals written after grieving sessions. For now, Wilma has created a word-picture that fits well to those feelings. A second area to be considered is the nature of the crime. Was the homicide deliberate or accidental ? Was it technical murder, or another form of homicide ? Another area is the survivor’s faith tradition, and how closely they ascribe to it.

Some religions believe that forgiveness is essential, as in, “turn the other cheek.” Some look the other way, and believe compensation for the death is essential. Religion and the other factors will be weighed as part of this discussion.

Basis for the propositions to be developed in this essay is the experience of observing families and friends of murder victims, through a grief counseling agency. “Families and Friends of Murder Victims” is an agency funded by county and city governments of the Rochester region of western New York State. The clients for the services it delivers are directly identified by its name. These are people who seek the help of trained counselors who are also survivors. There are three levels of support rendered by this agency : at the time of the murder; the period following and anytime thereafter; and, at the trial of any charged offender.

Many people lose loved ones and friends to death. Some deaths happen during what could be considered “normal” circumstances. Some are anticipated, like health and age related events, or life-threatening surgery. Others are not anticipated, but their understanding is absorbable, as in, accidents on the highway or on the job, and during natural catastrophes. All these, it is proposed, are deaths that could be hesitantly but logically accepted : because they are by “natural” or “accidental” causes. Then there are deaths caused by violence, either intentional or unintentional. This is especially hard to comprehend, because these are caused by deliberate means. These are the deaths that fall under the legal term, homicide.

Homicide is defined in civil criminal law as the killing of one human being by another human being, under any circumstance. Homicide, as defined in civil criminal law, is broken into several different grades : murder; manslaughter; and, involuntary manslaughter. Murder sits at the top. To be categorized into one of these grades requires a test of the circumstances. Murder requires an unlawful killing of a human being with “malice aforethought.” Technically, the definitions and requirements are :

Murder in the first degree ( aggravated or predetermined ) -

- (a) unlawful killing, (b) one person by another, (c) with malice aforethought,
- (d) with deliberation, purpose, design or premeditation;

Murder - (a) unlawful killing, (b) one person by another,  
(c) with malice aforethought;

Manslaughter - (a) unlawful killing, (b) one person by another,  
(c) intentional killing but with adequate provocation,  
committed in heat of passion;

Involuntary Manslaughter - (a) unlawful killing, (b) one person by another. 2

The initial operative test for any one of these grades is whether the act was “unlawful.”

Meaning : was the death as a result of an offense of criminal law, or was it by some sanctioned, legalized action as in penal execution. war, or similar condition, such as, an ordered strike within a S.W.A.T. maneuver.

Then the defining test is whether it was done with “malice aforethought.”

Meaning : was it intended, planned, desired, or even ordered.

Homicide, then, could be by someone who runs a red light and strikes another car killing the other driver, or hitting a pedestrian in the crosswalk.

Or, someone serving too many drinks to an already intoxicated partygoer, who subsequently dies from alcohol-poisoning. It might be someone who sells or gives illegal narcotics to a user who overdoses.

Or, it could be a licensed physician who assists a willing patient to commit suicide.

These are unlawful acts in which one human is responsible for the death of another.

But, to the lay person, these may not be deaths caused with malice aforethought.

Then there are deaths caused, say, in a fight in a bar or in a dispute over property, or in the commission of a crime, like a robbery of a convenience store with a handgun.

The death may be without malice aforethought, but resulted because of a deliberate act.

Then there are deaths caused because the offender chose to cause the deaths - murders.

These examples are offered by conjecture, without certain professional legal validity.

The definitions above give the lay person some basis in order to consider the examples.

Assessing lawful and unlawful death is left to criminology and law professionals.

Whether the examples are defined correctly, the idea of a death by violent means is now introduced into the word-picture of this essay, for discussion purposes.

Actual true examples from the stories of agency clients will be elaborated upon later.

It is difficult to understand why someone deliberately causes a death of another. Psychiatrists and psychologists study killers to try to figure it out. This writer's neither. To incorporate the question of “why” into this essay, research sources are being used. One source is a research prepared by a court psychiatrist on crimes of passion. Another is from research by a military psychologist on the “anatomy of killing.” This is not to intimate that military personnel are innate killers - rather the opposite.

Investigation on that subject has been done in the past by this writer. 3  
The results of that work showed that soldiers are intensely trained to do such things. For example, over the centuries, from Cicero's Roman Empire-era onward, one military technique has been to ingrain hatred for the enemy, another has been, but no longer, leaving no option but defend or be defeated and, kill or be killed. In addition, the following of orders, legal orders, is the first rule of the military. To not follow orders, even to kill, results in punishment, which may include death. This technique existed from early times through numerous wars even to WW I. 4  
For this discussion, killing in war is considered a legal act, leaving the question of "malice aforethought" open for individual interpretation; ie. it is not murder. This same result, for this discussion, is applied to police action and penal execution. The examples offered above for unintended death will be called Manslaughter. The discussion is now left with Murder - unlawful death with malice aforethought, with or without deliberation, purpose, design or premeditation.

David Grossman, the military psychologist, has studied the anatomy of killing in the context of military personnel at war. His *On Killing* is primarily directed toward wartime activity. In the final chapters he applies what he has learned from soldiers to the more current "killing" culture in America. That relationship is found in three factors common to both combat and violent activity on the streets. One factor is the need to be accountable to and accepted by the comrades of a group, for example, a gang or a particular group involved in a certain criminal activity. Second, being in a group brings anonymity, reduces individual responsibility, and produces an emotional distance between victim and killer: "it doesn't matter anyway." The third factor is comrade-allegiance: an "I'll get that guy for you" mentality. In addition, some killers fear the actual act, but often go ahead without thinking on it. Some find the kill an exhilarating high, a personal success - doing it, or being able to. "Sometimes the killer is quite aware of their need for and use of rationalization." 5  
Psychologist Grossman attributes a good amount of the current ambivalence of killers to three sources. The first is classical conditioning which comes from the trivialization of killing as portrayed in entertainment media. The second is operand training, achieved by playing video games, or targeting on shooting ranges, even at carnivals. The third is social learning which comes from identifying with character-roles, as in the "blood and guts" or, as they are politely called, action-movies. One can see how Grossman equates the killing sources of wartime with civil crimes. He also includes other factors like drugs, racism, poverty, and availability of weapons. But, in Grossman's mind, some of these "other factors" have been existent in the past. Today, he believes classical conditioning, operand training and social learning factors

have “desensitized” society. “Killing in modern American society is the systematic process of defeating the normal individual’s age-old psychological inhibition against violent, harmful activity towards one’s own species.” 6

He believes this tendency showed its ugly self in training for Vietnam. He has found it in his interviews with veterans. Another researcher who’s seen the “Vietnam-killing syndrome,” Mark Baker, corroborates Grossman’s three sources. 7

In the homeland, Grossman stresses that conditioning starts innocently with cartoons, progresses to PG-13 movies, and on to more violent and gory sagas in R-rated fare. “Our society has found a powerful recipe for providing killing empowerment to an entire generation of Americans.” 8

He does not accuse the movie industry alone. He also adds the culpability of parents in allowing such training to go on. In other words, parents are not watching and learning the same things their kids are. He adds the concept of video games with their military killing scenarios, where anything is a target, combatant or innocent, and the consequences do not matter. It’s even in kid’s arcades (à la Chuck E Cheese) with games for toddlers where the object is to score points by hitting a monster with a rubber mallet - to win meaningless prizes. Then there are the “hero” character-role sources, as in movies and videos. These are guys like Rambo who inflicts deadly, gruesome violence on enemies; or, the Die Hard, Terminator, and Lethal Weapon movies ( all titles that tell the story ); or, the Dr Jack Ryan character in the Tom Clancy novels and screenplays - in one, even the US president is a hand-to-hand, enemy-killing, death-dealing hero. These are all heroes, who survive to fight another day, after dealing “legal” death, misery and destruction to all their adversaries, and then honored by their followers. ( Maybe it all started during the 1960s with Ian Fleming’s James Bond 007 movies.)

Is this affecting today’s culture ? For Grossman, and this writer, the answer is yes. Grossman adds that the family structure of American life has also seen degradation. The influence at home has become less powerful than the influence of peers. This of course includes the gang/family syndrome. It also includes the divisiveness of race, culture and, social and financial class which exist heavily in the United States. Grossman stresses that the one common thread between these segments is the media. His assessment : “We are reaching that stage of desensitization at which the inflicting of pain and suffering has become a source of entertainment : vicarious pleasure rather than revulsion. We are learning to kill, and we like it.” 9

In summary of Grossman, certain segments of our society have become so desensitized by the ambient culture, that value of life and respect for others has been reduced to a devolution in which killing is just another activity.

Discussion of Grossman’s observations has taken on the cloak of disassociation :

those that kill and those who are killed are “strangers” ( this writer’s observation ). As indicated above there is often a disconnect, a distance, between the two parties. There is no emotional attachment, such as, in gang rivalry, bad illegal business deals, retaliation, or just plain settling of a score. There is a contrast to this conjecture. It’s brought out by the court psychiatrist, Martin Blinder. In the preface of his research, *Lovers, Killers, Husbands and Wives*, he writes, “most killers and their victims have a preexisting relationship, usually a close, caring one.” He adds, “In America, the bedroom is second only to the highway as the scene of slaughter.”<sup>10</sup> This is borne out by the shelters which offer sanctuary and counsel for domestic abuse victims. The constant appeal offered by the director of a shelter for the Rochester region is, “when you think you are in danger, get out of there.”<sup>11</sup> Many do, just in time. Blinder interviewed a variety of killers, some from high profile cases in California. In all cases, passion - of love and hate, of jealousy, of enmity - plays a role. Some of these offenders attempted to use insanity defenses. Some were insane. Blinder defends the necessity to interpret the saneness of killers at the time of killing. He reiterates much of what was said earlier in the discussion of homicidal grades. One can follow his logic when he endorses insanity defenses in respect to the grades. In essence, the insanity defense is based on not knowing “the nature, quality, or wrongfulness” of the act, or lacking “the capacity to either appreciate the criminality or conduct, or to control the action.” There is also diminished capacity, which puts an impairment into the formula, with an “ inability to premeditate, harbor malice, or form intent.”<sup>12</sup> This last element suggests the state of rage. One might find determining the killer’s state of mind and their use of insanity defense as aligned with the Restorative Justice concept. This would include consideration of all elements of the case, and the finding of the best resolution, outside of incarceration.

In the area of passion crimes, psychiatrist Blinder brings in the concept of an emotional segregation and isolation by one of two parties who are usually “self-integrated in thought, feeling and behavior.”<sup>13</sup> He calls it disassociation - in similar fashion to psychologist Grossman, but his involves two close-knit parties. In this case, the killer goes beyond their own ultimate level of coping ability. When the coping anxiety gets too high, the person reaches a disassociated state. When this state is entered, the mind may become, “freed from control (where ) unmitigated rage may execute a solution the conscious mind would otherwise reject. A sudden, lethal eruption ensues.”<sup>14</sup> The mind goes blank. The deadly altercation, although grisly, offers the mind an escape from the rage.

These mental health professionals offer two different scenarios

for the type of person who commits murder. One driven by their upbringing, and their exposure to an non constructive, destructive ambient. The other driven by an uncontrolled emotion, which involves someone they otherwise have respected. Both types of these killers will show up in the journals written during sessions with the murder victim survivors at Families and Friends of Murder Victims.

The above two health professionals have been referenced in order to discuss why a person can become a killer. Still, there must be an answer as to how someone can walk up to a stranger, friend, enemy, loved one, anyone, and put a weapon into their own hand to kill the other.

Is the answer found in a religious or morality arena? Is this a battle of good and evil?

Killing is certainly an evil. According to social psychologist Roy Baumeister, "evil is in the eye of the beholder, especially in the eye of the victim."

His research on evil contends that if there were no victims there would be no evil, because, "many people who perpetrate evil do not see it as evil."<sup>15</sup>

Thus, it's in the mind of the victim to ask why, and not a question for the perpetrator.

Baumeister refers to Saint Thomas Aquinas who espoused evil as

the greatest obstacle to Christian faith and doctrine: "If God is all-good, then how can God allow evil to happen?"<sup>16</sup> (If one reads Augustine of Hippo, all evil, sin, comes from "The Fall," the Original Sin of Adam and Eve.<sup>17</sup>

No, not in eating the apple, but in their carnal knowledge; their sex-act was the source.)

For Baumeister, evil has an intentional purpose. There is a reason someone does it.

Maybe his idea is like yin-yang. This states, there are imperative dualism in life, like, good and bad, right and wrong, light and dark, male and female, God and Satan.

There cannot be good unless there is evil. They must work together in a dialectic.

Maybe evil is only something less than good. Good being the lesser of two evils.

Choosing to make decisions that are right or wrong is based on moral judgment.

It is difficult to assess moral judgment until after it can be determined whether the action was successful or unsuccessful. That is, did it bring about an action of the "approved kind," or did it bring an action of the "condemned kind."

In this regard, the measure of success must be weighed with consideration to the character and circumstance of the maker of that judgment.<sup>18</sup>

The measurement of evil acts is not equal for both victims and perpetrators.

Baumeister's research revealed that for victims, measurement was made in definite black and white, right and wrong terms; for perpetrators it was a grey blur.

Perpetrator responses included a level of rationalization and justification.

Perpetrators often indicated victim complicity, such as, fending off their attacks.

Victims often described the events as indifferent, immoral, deliberate and intentional.

Baumeister contends that it is the "blurred line" which gets crossed and begins evil.

This grey area can come from the intent of the group to which the offender belongs. This is followed by questionable directions set by peers or leaders of that group. Or, from the slippery slope which rolls from one small criminal event to another. He also refers to the “here and now.” This is the state of mind where the perpetrator is so engrossed in an activity that the activity comes before anything or anyone. This is a matter of self-control, or loss thereof. “There is a tendency for people to shift to low levels of meaningful thought while carrying out morally, problematic acts.” 19 In the commission of crime, and murder, perpetrators often focus on the technique, rather than the act and its broader consequences. “Focusing on how to do something forces the mind to stay at a low-level of meaningful thought.”20

Reading through Baumeister’s research, it is noted that he includes many of the same factors of causality for violence and killing as does military psychologist Grossman. He validates Grossman’s proposed transference of military factors to society factors. Baumeister, Grossman and Blinder have all based evil, criminal activity and murder, in an evolutionary spiraling upward in which an initially minimal group participation grows to a greater more intense level of individual violence. Each has presented rationalization and justification as a defense mechanism used by perpetrators in order to explain their criminal acts upon victims. In addition, the factors of drugs, ingrained violence, and dissociative states have all been entered into this discussion as the origins and the why of murderers. Is this the reason Wilma Derksen brought herself to offer forgiveness to a murderer ? Did she assess these factors, just discussed, and find their existence as an adequate excuse for the actions of the person who killed her loved one ? This is unknown. The “known” is in the emotions and feelings of other murder victim survivors, as told in the journals that will follow. These observations tell the stories of people who have experienced the loss, grief and isolation, as did Wilma ( refer to her quote ). It will be up to the reader to determine whether these survivors can do as Wilma did.

These journals were written from observations of the clients at Families and Friends of Murder Victims grieving and counseling sessions. This group met every two weeks. There were often ten or more participants; mainly female, mostly mothers, and once in a great while a male. Among this group there were usually four participants who were frequent visitors. Some would return after several weeks, some after more than a year. The first journal introduces many of the core participants. The true client names have been changed.

(2/25) “ I Don’t Want To Hurt Anymore !”

Jennie broke down and cried. Her emotions and her anger could not be held back any further. “ My son is dead. I just don’t want to feel like this anymore.” Jennie’s emotion stopped all conversation. Cake and beverage had just been served. Now, no one was eating. The silence allowed Jennie to go on. Her emotion surprised me; open, not so private, and not held back. One would think that after two years she could better handle the loss of her son Carl. That was wrong thinking. It was a display that would not allow any of us to hold back our emotions.

Her reaction was brought on by Gloria’s explanation of emergency room procedures with murdered victims’ bodies. The explanation was attempting to help Mary, who had just spent a dozen minutes railing against procedure, as she described how she was not able to see her dead son. This chain reaction was unexpected, although not uncommon. As Mary shook and wept at her place, Jennie’s composure had been coming unglued. Reverend Karyn, the session counselor, caught the rising situation. Stopped the talk. Then, asked Jennie if she would share with the group what she was feeling. She didn’t hold back; son Carl’s murderer was still at large, unidentified, unknown. Two years of a mother’s pain was being shown to us - honestly, sadly.

Mary’s story was of a different kind. Her son Paul had not been squeaky clean. She openly admitted that. He’d been involved with drugs, gangs, and more. But, he was her son.

The saddest part of Mary's story was her anguish over his dying on a street corner. His death-wound was a screwdriver to the neck. As his life flowed onto the sidewalk, no one came to his aid. They just watched. Those with him were his associates, his "friends." Their fear: retribution. The image drives Mary to tremors. Mary was also dealing with "survivor guilt." She believes she didn't do enough to keep her son away from his "deadly" lifestyle. Reverend Karyn tried to draw out Mary's understanding of survivor guilt. Unfortunately, Mary's feelings of guilt have been driven by one or more of her other children's claim that her allowing her dead son's lifestyle is to blame. Her son died in 2002. His killer is now in detention waiting to be tried.

"Three years. Three years!" That's a long time. For Ellen the loss of her son David to murder three years ago still plagues her daily. Although she is doing reasonably well with the sorrow of her loss it's not the same for her daughter. At sixteen her daughter Molly is "acting out" in a most rebellious way. Ellen has no answer on how to stop it. Doctors, therapists, counselors, none have helped. Molly will not discuss the murder, her feelings, or accept help to alleviate the effects of her brother's death. Ellen is at a standstill with Molly. She comes to these sessions to help herself, and hopefully find some clue to reach into the mindset of Molly.

Jane was a most unusual case. Her aged grandmother was murdered in a gruesome way three years before. This was a local high profile case. The murderer was a neighbor. He had raped the aged woman, beat her to death, and then burned the house. What made Jane's story unusual was that she had come by herself for three years, all the while there was no one arrested for the crime. Her grief has deep roots. After those years of no facts, but much suspicion, a bizarre twist brought the arrest. Jane laughed as tonight she told about the parole letter her family recently received stating the convicted murderer's parole hearing was June of 2032. There was a cheer. Ellen was quick to add to the delight, as her son's two murderers are in jail for life.

Lana was the last to speak. Her story was most infuriating. Her son Andy was killed last year. Her son's killer has been out on bail since then. She often sees him on the street. Lana has no faith in the justice system. She seems to have left the final disposition of her son's killer in the hands of God. These two feelings have made her decide not to attend the trial. It's next month. Reverend Karyn, two social workers, and other survivors in the room,

offered numerous reasons for Lana not to abandon her son's memory at trial. It was clear that Lana could not see past her lack of faith, and anger, compared to the benefits of her attending the trial in order to "speak" ( symbolically ) for her son. Lana's anger had kept her away from these sessions for a month. For some reason, she came tonight. It was easy to see her pain. It was also interesting to observe that when Jennie began to cry out with her pain, Lana's own anger turned to compassion for Jennie.

Three years. Two years. One year.

Reverend Karyn's original statement to me that "survivor grief" lingers on, eats at the personal spirit, and never goes away, all were displayed right here at this table. What had seemed previously to be just words by Reverend Karyn, were now verified. Death by homicide is too broad a term for the losses discussed tonight. Some were random shootings. One an execution. One an event of demented rage. Director Reverend Karyn told me later that not all that was said, said it all. Meaning : some of the incidents were not as innocent as they sounded. Whichever, these survivors were heartbroken. Mary's story really brought my wondering thoughts. Not only did she lose her son Paul, but there were others in her immediate and extended family, across the nation, who had been victims of homicide. My thinking wonders how it must be to live in a world where murder and violence is your companion. Beyond that, I wonder how one can live in ambient environs that have opportunities to kill so often. In Mary's case, I wonder if she ever wonders if the violence and death swirling around her will close in like a whirlpool, eventually swallowing her, either in grief or in violence. ###

(3/11) "It's A Life Sentence."

Death is a Life Sentence. So is the grief of losing a child to murder. That's the way Cora explained it as she looked at the Kübler-Ross "Wheel of Grief." "I sometimes feel like a 'freight train' speeding through all these emotions." Five years after losing her son to murder she says, "I would think the racing of emotions would slow down. But, it takes just one little thing that sets it off, like remembering his silly giggle." And then, there are the anniversaries. "It's a life sentence. It never stops." Jason was twenty-two the night Cora last saw him drive away from a ski party. Both mom and son were ski patrol members. He left the party and never returned. In fact, it was his own roommate who beat Jason to death in what was deemed a love triangle. Cora had not been to group sessions in a while. She came in from Buffalo to attend this night's meeting because Jason's anniversary is Friday. "I just needed to be with someone who could understand."

That's the reason Donna returned to the session for this night. Tomorrow would be the second anniversary of her fiancé's death by violence. I've met her before, on my first night of Community Response Team, as my partner. The Team goes to neighborhoods after homicides. Its purpose is to sense the existence of any traumatized residents. I remember Donna saying she was involved with the Team because of her fiancé. On the street that night, which happened to be one year ago exactly, Donna never gave any inkling that the current anniversary troubled her. Apparently, from speaking with director Reverend Karyn, Donna has not always been as calm as she was tonight. Her past anger was only slightly noticeable. "Why? Why did such a beautiful man of thirty-three years have to die?" "Why couldn't I have gone with him? Sometimes I can't stand the pain." "I try to get my strength, to keep going." Cora chimed in with the same thought.

Strength to carry on became the second theme expressed by those at the table. That is, how did these people find the strength to endure their "life-sentence." Ellen has been coming to sessions for years. This night she finally opened up. In the past she talked about the hospital, or about the trial. Reacting to Reverend Karyn's use of the Grief Wheel, she started talking about the experiences of finding out about the murder. Then she talked about the funeral, and seeing her son in the casket at the funeral home, and then the funeral procession. Then it was knowing that seeing the casket going into church, would mean it was

the last time she would be near her son. “I didn’t want to go in there.”  
“It felt so cold; the church felt so cold.” Tonight Ellen’s story offered new dimensions.

It was a similar case for Ava. She had not been to sessions for a while. Something brought her back tonight. She did not really want to talk. Reverend Karyn offered her a few questions to try to get her going. Ava held back. According to Reverend Karyn, later, Ava has been holding far back for a long time. She sees Ava as borderline depression, and has suggested professional therapy. Tonight, Ava finally talked about what was going on in her household at the time she found that her son Dan had been murdered at school in Atlanta. The tough part of this scenario was that Dan’s friend had called with the news, before the officials did. The Medical Examiner had an unidentified body. It was Ava’s phone call to the Atlanta police and ME which identified Dan through the tattoos on his body. Up until that description, Ava and her husband were in denial that Dan was dead.

Ava talked about her difficulty in finding strength. She used the experience of the funeral day to explain. It was hard for her to get out of bed that day. She did not want to face it. It was her close friend who came to her aid. The friend had lost a young daughter to cancer several years before. Ava’s most striking comment was the retelling of her question to that friend: “How do I do this ?” How was she to get through this. She has difficulty in remembering details of that morning. She wants to forget them.

Tonight was interesting. Some of these stories I had heard before. At the outset, I wondered if tonight would be a repeat of that last session. As it turned out, Reverend Karyn’s use of the Kübler-Ross “Wheel of Grief” brought about new themes in the group’s discussion. I asked Reverend Karyn if she was surprised. She too feared that tonight could have been, “same old-same old.” We talked about her frustration that some members were not honest with themselves. She was referring to the fact that some of the stories about the reasons for the deaths did not reflect reality. It was this modification which was keeping those members in a stalled grief pattern; that the “cover-up” halted the true grieving process. Reverend Karyn does not reveal the true details of these cases.

As for herself, Reverend Karyn’s sister was murdered several years ago. The anniversary is this Saturday. I asked if her being a homicide survivor was

good or bad when dealing with others like herself. My question was about emotions. “ I almost lost my composure with Ellen’s emotion. I caught myself,” she said. ”I feel it is important to understand what these people are going through. They come here month after month because the people in this room understand directly what they are feeling.” “There are times when I have my own struggles So, I call on my own support system, when I need it. That’s a story for another time.”

I asked Reverend Karyn if she gets frustrated when she sees the cover-up getting in the way of the healing. “ I can only wait for them to find reality themselves. That’s why I keep asking them to tell us what they remember : ‘what did you think’ ?” “ I have to be careful, because I have found my body language is sometimes revealing. I see Mary’s partner ( the only male that comes ) watching me. He’s quite intuitive. At the same time I watch the body language of everyone in the room, no matter who is talking. It tells me what’s going on with them.” I commented about the lack of fathers, of males. The response was expected : “ they come the first time, show no emotion, and never come back. It’s a male thing.” I asked if doing this type of counseling is in itself a healing process for Reverend Karyn. She thought, then, “ maybe. I never thought I would be doing this type of work. In fact, I refused several times, and struggled to stay away.” I suggested this was a stop on her path to something else. I then related something I had heard elsewhere, I know not where.

Life is like a train going to a far destination.  
It stops at each station and you can get off to look around at what’s there.  
Then, you can get back on and continue to your final destination.

I suggested that this is where she is now. She considered it. ###

### (3/23) Murder on Jefferson Avenue

The first homicide in many weeks took place this past Tuesday on Jefferson Avenue in the Genesee Section of Rochester's Southwest Quadrant. The victim was a young male, shot on a busy street. It must be spring. I found out about it via a call from the CRT, Community Response Team. The next call I received about this homicide was from Reverend Karyn. In fact, she related three homicides and two shootings from Tuesday thru Friday. She was calling to note that there were two events in which I might participate. One, a planned prayer vigil at the site of the homicide - which has become common - the other was a home visitation to the victim's mother. On Saturday, today, Reverend Karyn called again to indicate that the family had not yet become interested in meeting with her. Reverend Karyn is called by Rochester Police Department's Family Crisis Unit when there is a homicide. She often arrives at the scene to deal with the survivors, along with the RPD's social workers. She also attends the family's vigil at hospital. I asked Reverend Karyn if, at times, families see her presence as an intrusion. There are occasions when she becomes the focus of a grieving party's anger. Another ask : does that hurt you ? "Yes, sometimes," was her response. Considering that Reverend Karyn is also Chaplain for two state youth correctional facilities, where she spends much of her weekends, I asked, do you wear down from all these negative influences ? "Well, I went to a movie last night." I understood. It must be reminded that as a homicide survivor - her sister - she sometimes has need to find her own therapy. After seeing so much emotion from others, at sessions, phone call follow-ups, and at the incident sites, I wonder how a therapist in this work cannot have their own emotions become worn down.

### (3/25A) ARDMORE STREET

Ardmore Street is behind St Mary's Hospital and next to an elementary school. It's here an eighteen year old male was killed Sunday evening in a drive-by shooting. This is where this night's group session began. Reverend Karyn asked the core group to attend the on-street prayer vigil. She had been asked to lead the prayers. Prayer vigils of this type have become a standard feature in the neighborhoods of the city's "killing crescent." It is part of the culture. Killing crescent is what the police call the city's three high murder zones. I rode with Reverend Karyn to Ardmore Street. She asked me to find a prayer in her book called "Ambushed." Its theme is the evil that ambushes our people. It was interesting how she read the prayer, then went into an evangelical exhortation. I never realized she had merged the two parts until she read the same prayer again without the exhortation at the beginning tonight's group session. There were about thirty people from the neighborhood at this vigil. Candles, flowers, a poster with a picture of the boy, and prayers being offered. I was looked at with curiosity, as I was the only person of light skin. The vigil was part spiritual, part support, and part social connection. It was a new experience to witness such public display of grieving by the family. When it was done, the candles were laid at the "memorial," and we left. ###

### (3/25B) YELLOW CRIME TAPE

The War in Iraq is on. The Yellow Ribbons for Peace are up. The war against Jane's emotions is continuing, sparked by the color yellow. "All I see is yellow crime tape. It triggers my memories of that day." That is the day when Jane's grandmother was found dead in her home. The death was not what one would expect for a ninety-plus year old woman. She had been beaten, abused, killed, and then torched inside her home. The house burned nearly to the ground, It was not until the fire that she was found by fire crews. Autopsy showed she had been dead for days before the fire. The perpetrator had returned after her death to set the house ablaze.

The yellow crime tape ( yellow peace ribbons ) had been kicking Jane's memories back to the events of that day. Jane is usually quite quiet in sessions. Tonight, something completely unexpected happened to her. Already suffering from the yellow "markers" or, as one of the session's attending social workers called them "anchors," Jane was thrown a curve.

Two students from MCC's human resource studies had come to observe tonight. One, Kristen, turned out to be Jane's best friend at the time of the death. They hadn't seen each other since, as Jane had retreated from friendships. As Kristen introduced herself to the group, emotions within both women erupted. Apparently Kristen had called Jane that fateful night to talk to her. Jane never returned the call. Reverend Karyn asked Jane to talk. What flowed forth was a stream of word-pictures of her arriving at the scene: the fire crews, the sheriff deputies, the Yellow Crime Tape. She also related the subsequent family "interrogation," as is common in such cases. After about twenty minutes of Jane's recollections, it was now evident why Jane had been coming since the event in August 2000. Up until then, it had been difficult to understand why she was involved. Tonight, it was an open display of the continuing grief that exists within "survivors." This grief is even more pronounced when the family has to endure the trial. Her case's perpetrator was charged and convicted about one year after the crime. Ironically, he had been charged with the crime while serving a prison term for another crime. He is serving a twenty-five to life sentence for the murder.

It was this trial's conversation that set Donna off, this night. After the last session, two weeks ago - days ahead of the two year anniversary of her fiancé's death - one would have thought Donna would return to her seclusion. Apparently some of the emotional drains on Reverend Kayrn this past weekend, which she related to me this past Sunday, were many conversations with Donna. In Friday's newspaper was a story about an appeal trial for the convicted murderer. Donna had not been notified by the District Attorney that the appeal was granted, and more so, that a story was to appear in Saturday's paper, given by the D.A. Donna related that she spent the entire weekend in total emotional chaos. Her friend Laurie, another survivor, was her support over the weekend. Laurie also came with Donna to this night's session. "I was ready to jump in the river. How can this person be given another chance?" Donna was still beside herself. "It's the laws. They favor murderers. I'm now on a campaign to get the laws fixed. That's what I've finally decided." Donna related going to her church prayer-meeting, and deciding that she needed to take care of herself, not to grieve but to advocate for change. "I've surrendered myself to the mercy of God. I will not let myself be destroyed by this evil person, who took Wil's life. I'll leave his fate in God's hands." It is clear the fires of anger are still burning, even as she accepts the reality.

Because of the prayer vigil, this session did not allow much time for others.

After the group session, Al, who attends the trial visits with survivors, spoke to me about his experiences with the emotions of survivors at trials. They often ask him, why he's not as angry at the offender as they are. His response : " I know you and your family, and I know their family." He expressed how often the families do not understand the process. Many times, all they can see is "get the conviction." ###

#### (4/01) HABLA ESPAÑOL ?

Tonight's group session was held on North Clinton Avenue at the Salvation Army Center, in a neighborhood heavily populated by Hispanics. It is the weekly session for homicide survivors of the Spanish-speaking population. Reverend Karyn is not fluid in Spanish, so a Roman Catholic priest attends to assist. In addition, a Hispanic social worker from the Rochester Police Department's Victims' Assistance Division also helps lead the sessions, his name is Elias. Most of the dozen attendees have a working use of English, but Spanish is preferred. In addition, some use "Spanglish" - a mixture of both languages.

These sessions are similar to those held on the off Tuesday, with one difference. There is a heightened level of passion in these survivors' conversations. The attendees also tend to talk among themselves; more than the non-Hispanic group. There is a significant amount of group-care going on here. Even though my understanding of Spanish needed help, with its small vocabulary, observation of the discussion made it clear what they were talking about. At this moment, it seems that much of their grief turns to anger against the criminal justice system. They believe they are being neglected, and under served. These survivors represent lost loved ones who were sons and brothers. Reverend Karyn expressed dismay afterwards, because they do not deal with the grief. "They always turn it to anger at the system, and keep the grief away from themselves."

There's not much difference between these stories and the other group. What was quite impressionable was the fervor in the presentations. One brought tears to my eyes, and a lump in my throat. I was not alone. It was Katia who spoke, after her mother had spent fifteen minutes pleading her heart to Marla, another survivor. Katia's words in Spanglish spoke of her concern for "mi madre." The mother had been failing in health since the loss of her daughter, Katia's sister.

Katia broke down as she talked about how she might lose her mother to bad health. It was not clear what was driving this situation until Katia told the story of her sister. It was a high profile case. Her sister had been abducted, stabbed, left on a railroad bed, and her corpse torched. The body was difficult to identify, and it was Katia who did it. Tears flowed around the room. It was hard to hear this and keep a composure.

The session went on much longer than the other group. After the session, I asked Elias why this group talked so much between themselves. Was it part of their culture to assist the others? He couldn't say for sure. He did believe that it could be attributed to the fact that they know each other better, from the neighborhood and from church. One thing is clear, these survivors attend because they need each other. They brought some great baked goods for dessert! ###

#### (4/22) THIS WAS NOT IN MY LIFE'S PLAN

"I thought my life plan was working pretty well. This was not in my plan." These are the words of Anna. Her son is one of the five young men killed in one week, earlier this month. As she told her story, she acted at ease, even flippant. Then it was clear this was a façade. The shell crumbled as she sat there and listened to two other mothers whose children were also among this newest group of five. As a psych-nurse, I suspect she'd thought thru the methods of dealing with her grief. At the end of the evening it was clear she needed and wanted the support. Anna was accompanied by her friend Terry, also a survivor. Maybe it's only those with the same grief who can best understand it. That is why a friendship has developed between Jennie and Ellen.

The two other mothers were Julie and Dorothy. Also in attendance was Eve, a local resident whose sister was murdered in Ithaca, NY. The geographical distance has added to her frustration, and to the pain she is feeling. The trial period for her is just beginning. F & F can help her with this support. Besides, Ellen and Jennie, Jane and Ava were again present.

Instead of relating all the stories as in previous journals, this one will make comment only to Ellen. This night was most troubling for her. Her son was killed four years ago, a few days after Easter. Easter has just passed. After four years, the pain that riddles her well-being is most evident. She has broken down before. She has been strong before.

She has been supportive of others. But, she is still a survivor.  
And, tonight she was totally not composed: “ this is not a good day for me.”  
She cried for minutes. In Ellen, one can watch the grief-cycle go round and round.  
It touches one’s emotions.           ###

#### (4/26) COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT CONFERENCE

One Saturday at the end of each school year, Monroe Community College’s department of social work holds a conference for its students. Local organizations are invited to present workshops for the students’ benefit. Family and Friends was among those presenters. The other workshops included : Family and Neighborhood Empowerment; Faith-Based Communities; Sexual Offenders: Rape Crisis; Young Victims.

The first group of workshops included a faith-based discussion. It was meant to be “The Role of ...,” by these groups. The Islamic Center and several Christian church organizations were represented. My good friend Father Bill Donnelly discussed the activities of his St Mary’s. He is a real blessing for the marginalized population of this city. Another minister from an AME congregation in the hard core urban center, talked about how they’re working to help the impoverished in the poorer areas, to reduce poverty as a source of violence. Both these clerics had good messages. The Islamic Center person talked about their community programs, and stated, “these should be done without a missionary focus.” This is something I agree with. His comment was aptly exhibited by the last two presenters from Interfaith Action. Their presentations centered on biblical scripture as a source of empowerment. These two were apparently from conservative fundamentalist churches. The group’s neighborhood activist quoted scripture throughout her presentation. For me, this was loathsome. I may be a Christian theologian, but I am also a pluralist. How can there be a belief in “community empowerment” when one is proselytizing their faith among those of other faiths ? The result is boundaries and suspicion. I have encountered Interfaith Action before, in my own community work. They are obstinate, extremely parochial, and steadfastly non-collaborative.

The second group of workshops included Family and Friends. Reverend Karyn’s presentation was stellar. I was somewhat surprised. She has been telling me that she does not do this often, and is not good at it.

There were sixteen students in attendance, and four Family and Friends survivors. In the audience were four homicide survivors who've not been involved with F & F. As they related their stories, it was clear that this type of grief counseling is important. One of these survivors lost a sister twenty years ago, when the survivor was eleven. The parents were alcoholics and passed off the death. The eleven year old was never allowed to grieve. She never was told what happened. It was clear the hurt had lingered. It's not easy to watch a grown woman cry in front of a room full of strangers. It was honest.

The morning keynote speaker was boring. The continental breakfast was great. The lunch was pretty good. The luncheon speakers were mostly boring, except one. She was a retired school counselor tasked with finding one issue that could correct today's society. She spoke on the loss of "civility" in society. I agree with her completely. I have preached this word for years. Amen to civility.

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## FINDING WILMA'S FORGIVENESS - a conclusion

After reading these journals and the emotional experiences of these survivors one wonders how Wilma Derksen could forgive the murderer of her loved one. The pain from the loss of those survivors just depicted is so intense and so deep it seems there is little room for anything else but anger. This anger is often seen before, during and after the trials of the accused murderers especially, if the victims' families feel they are being left out of the process. These journals had to leave out some details of the offenses, investigations, and background of the prosecutions - that information was not for repeating. Some of those details would illuminate why the victim-side often gets frustrated. As Al ( the trial escort ) relates, the victim-side gets to a place where conviction and punishment are their only goals. In addition, when the victim's members are in court, they are expected to not speak, make any remarks, or show any emotion. This is a requirement, as the courts believe these actions would bias the jury. Controlling their emotions is very hard for these families. Often, they have to leave. Considering the reasons and methods of the murders, especially when repeated before and during the trials, one could understand why. Is there any room here to say, " I forgive you " ? This writer cannot see it happening.

There is another dimension which is beginning to show up in the courtroom. It is an overt exhibition of animosity between offender and victim families. There actually have been courtroom shouting matches, even fist-fights, Offenders' families have become overtly vociferous, if their member is convicted. They tend to hold the victim-side responsible. There have been threats of retaliation. Recently, Bill Cosby, entertainer turned philosopher, has been speaking out on this trend, to certain minority groups. In a recent speech, he chided those who are now taking this road. " I'm surprised by families of convicted offenders who bemoan seeing their son in that 'orange suit' ( jail-house garb ). I do not hear them asking their son, 'where did you get the gun ?' Or, asking, 'why did you pick it up and use it ?' Families are at fault; please, become parents !" 22 The reader can imagine that Cosby's position and rhetoric is not being well received. Cosby's remarks bring a reminder of the earlier discussion, here, of why and how someone becomes a killer. Those reasons are the key elements to be addressed. This is where the concept of Restorative Justice should actually be instituted. That is, if the Restorative Justice ultimate goal is to "heal" the community, then the causes of the "killing culture" should be the focus, in order to eliminate its effects.

The result would be not a restorative methodology but a restorative prescription. There is more to a satisfying justice than determining whether incarceration is correct. It is in the correcting of the culture. It is in good decisions of what is best for all parties. Restorative Justice is already the process of assessing the what, when and why before punishment is decided, and the what and when after it is finished. For this writer, the most important decisions to be made are those which decide how to stop these crimes from happening. If there was no crime, murder, then there would have to be no decisions on punishment and healing of victims.

This is where Wilma's forgiveness comes in. This writer believes Wilma's ability to forgive the murderer is an aberration. That is, in the cases reported in the journals, forgiveness does not seem possible. It would be a strange grieving session if Reverend Karyn introduced this potential. Considering the pain and the anger that already exists, this writer contends, such a proposal would shut down the entire process.

Even so, a certain type of forgiveness could be introduced. This would involve the families and friends of both the offender and the victim. There must be, between each side, the recognition that each has incurred a loss. The murder victim is gone. The offender-side has lost that individual to prison. They have also lost their own rapport and credibility with the community. They may have lost their own pride. All these develop a stigma that is destructive. After the event, the victim- side must go through public scrutiny and sympathy. The professionals call this "grieving in public." The survivors call it intrusive. If there could be a developed mutual sympathy from both sides for each other, and a mutual concern for the future of each, there might develop a mutual concern for a change in society. There are no better initiators of this direction than those who have lost the most. Embracing both sides' pain and loss, and recognizing each sides' anger, might produce the power to find the right formula to change the "killing culture." In this fashion, justice would not be "restorative and reparative," it would be "preventative." Then there would be a "Wilma's Forgiveness," and a true Satisfying Justice.

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## END NOTES

- 1 Wilma Derksen is a close acquaintance of Reverend Dr Pierre Allard in Quebec Canada. He has related her story on several occasion, especially in regard to Allard's efforts in the field of Restorative Justice.
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- 6 Grossman 304.
- 7 Baker, Mark. Nam - Vietnam War in the Words of Men and Women Who Fought There, ( New York : Wm Morrow Publ 1981 ).
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- 10 Blinder, Martin MD. Killers, Lovers, Husbands and Wives, ( New York : St Martin's Press 1985 ) 2.
- 11 Kathy Mazzota is Executive Director of Alternatives for Battered Women.
- 12 Blinder 6.
- 13 Blinder 16.
- 14 Blinder 53.
- 15 Baumeister, Roy. Evil - Inside Human Violence and Cruelty,

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16 Baumeister 2.

17 St. Augustime. The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love,  
tans by JF Shaw ( Chicago : Regency Gateway 1961 )

- 18 Termotto. Taken from “Moral Development” section 8, Killing as A Duty.
- 19 Baumeister 269.
- 20 Baumeister 269
- 21 These journals were recorded with the approval of the agency’s director. Only a selection of pages from the entire journal is included.
- 22 Bill Cosby’s speech was reported on NBC television News, July 4, 2004.

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