Forgiveness and child sexual abuse

A matrix of meanings

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The concept of forgiveness, along with notions of apology and atonement for wrongs, can constitute highly significant preoccupations for individuals and communities whose lives have been affected by abuse. People who have been abused, those who have acted abusively and members of their families and broader communities may all have concerns and hopes about forgiveness and atonement. In the aftermath of sexual abuse, concerns about forgiveness may range from, 'I'll never forgive' to 'Why can't I forgive?' and these concerns may be met with preoccupations like, 'I've said I'm sorry, surely it's time for her to forgive me' and 'You must learn to forgive and forget'.

Concerns and dilemmas about forgiveness are extremely wide-ranging and pervasive, perhaps because it is so frequently highlighted as an important virtue in most spiritual and secular philosophies, from traditional to new age.

Alexander Pope is credited with the influential maxim, 'To err is human to forgive divine'. Popular commentator, Stephanie Dowrick, has regarded forgiveness as transcendental or, 'the supreme virtue, the most virtuous of virtues, the apotheosis of love' (Dowrick 1997).

As virtues, the concepts of forgiveness and atonement can be inspirational. They highlight notions of choice as opposed to pathology and inevitability. Despite the levels of betrayal, harm and humiliation brought about by abuse, there is the possibility of release from suffering for the abused person. There are also the possibilities of remorse, responsibility, restitution and redemption for the person who has abused. These possibilities are extended to the communities in which these individuals live. Such options are proposed as possible and achievable choices.

However, the same concepts can be equally oppressive when they become experienced as mandatory obligations rather than possibilities and choices. Both forgiveness and atonement can relate to realisations which are freely made or to requirements and expectations which are enforced by judgemental ideologies and oppressive practices.

Notions of forgiveness and atonement can have many meanings for different individuals who have experienced abuse. A range of popular meanings inform the nature of possibilities and choices available to individuals and communities, as well as expectations and demands made by others. Meanings are often confused and conflicting, leading to dilemmas which hinder respectful outcomes, when attempts are made to address experiences of abusive behaviour.

We have attempted to deconstruct popular meanings associated with the concepts of forgiveness and atonement, in order to enable the drawing of distinctions between the range of concepts and ideas which are commonly used. This process can be helpful in informing respectful choices. To this end, we have compiled a matrix of popular meanings which may

be helpful in making sense of the 'journeys of realisation', undertaken both by those who have been abused and by those who have perpetrated abuse.

Popular meanings of forgiveness

There appear to be three major components of meaning in popular constructs of forgiveness, in relation to the experiences of those who have been subjected to abuse :

1. **relinquishment**: this component refers to notions of acceptance and letting go of undesired feelings and ideas. In popular concepts, particular emphasis is placed on:
   - a lessening or cessation of forms of suffering;
   - a lessening or cessation of resentment or ill-feeling;

   by the abused person, in relation to the experience of abuse or towards the abusing person. Notions of 'self-forgiveness' are sometimes considered in the context of relinquishment.
2. **pardoning**: this component refers to notions of absolution or pardon offered by the abused person, in relation to the abusive behaviour or the abusing person. Atonement or restitution may be regarded as necessary prerequisites but the consequence of pardoning generally means that no further acts of atonement by the abusing person are required.
3. **reconciliation**: this component refers to notions of re-connection, whereby the abused person is prepared to re-establish a relationship of significance with the abusing person.

Each of these components can have more or less salience within an individual's concept of forgiveness. However, no component is regarded as necessary or inevitable within the proposed matrix of meanings, despite the fact that specific components are frequently subject to judgements of essential importance and desirability.

Each of these components can be approached from a range of perspectives represented by the following extremes on a continuum of self-determination :

- **self-realisation**: this perspective is informed by a sense of self-discovery or spiritual awareness. It involves the experience of unsolicited or freely chosen decisions.
- **obligation**: this perspective is informed by a sense of expectation or mandatory requirement, imposed by requirements of others or fixed ideological positions.

When therapeutic intervention is first initiated, people who have been abused often appear to be overwhelmed by feelings of obligation, expectations and requirements by others to embrace various components of forgiveness. These 'obligations' may be associated with a pervasive sense of powerlessness, feelings of self-deprecation and a sense of limited possibilities about choices for the future.

This is not surprising given the political nature and context of abuse which constitutes:

- oppression and subjugation of individual's rights,
- violation of their bodies, achieved by deception or force,
- exploitation in a context of imbalances of power and privilege and betrayal of responsibility and trust,
- imposition of secrecy, whereby the abused person is coerced to silently carry a sense of responsibility and shame for the person who has abused.

In therapeutic counselling, the abused person may be invited to understand and challenge the politics which inform and maintain abusive behaviour and which promote such a sense of defeat and paralysis. The abused person is invited to consider new meanings, new attributions of responsibility and new possibilities for the future. This may constitute part of a 'journey of realisation' which entails a shift from obligation towards self-realisation.

Various positions, in a matrix of positions or meanings concerning forgiveness, are presented in Table 1.

These positions are not regarded as either fixed or discrete. They remain fluid, flexible and changing over time. No position or aspect of a position can be regarded as either 'correct' or 'incorrect', superior to any other or as a necessary requirement. When we invite individuals who have been abused to examine the positions they may hold, along with the ideas that inform them and the political context in which these ideas were developed, there is generally a shift from a sense of obligation towards self-realisation. We support notions of choice which accompany this shift but do not presume any right to determine the nature of these choices.

These positions are occupied in a political context and are informed by practices of power, at the time of the abuse itself and in all subsequent relationships of significance. The political context influences an individual's sense of freedom

Table 1 – A matrix of positions concerning forgiveness

	SELF-REALISATION	OBLIGATION
RELINQUISHMENT	**Realisations about possibilities enabling choice** Lessening of Suffering and Resentment – Possibilities: - to relinquish shame/responsibility for abuse - to lessen suffering/resentment but maintain outrage/sense of betrayal - to lessen suffering without relinquishing resentment - to 'move on' despite hurt & resentment	**Expectations and obligations** Requirements to: - cease feelings of suffering and resentment - pretend to feel no hurt or resentment - share responsibility for abuse in order to: - placate others - accommodate to other's needs - submit to religious/cultural ideologies - be ready to move on
PARDONING	**Choices about pardoning** Entitlements to: - relinquish suffering/resentment without pardoning - decline attempts at restitution - remain sceptical about attempts at restitution - be open to restitution without needing to pardon - freely decide whether or not to pardon either : - the abusing person - the abusive behaviour/betrayal - seek justice	**Expectations and obligations** Requirements to: - excuse abusive behaviour - be open to restitution attempts - accept uncritically attempts at restitution - reciprocate attempts at restitution/offer pardon in order to: - placate others - accommodate to other's needs - submit to religious/cultural ideologies - be ready to move on
RECONCILIATION	**Choices about re-connection** Entitlements to: - freely decide the extent of re-connection - relinquish or pardon without reconciliation - reconcile without pardoning - 'move on' without pardoning or reconciliation	**Expectations and obligations** Requirements to: - offer absolution - submit to practices of reconciliation/reclamation in order to: - placate others - accommodate to other's needs - submit to religious/cultural ideologies - be ready to move on

to choose certain ideas and actions and the possibilities which are available at the time.

Young children, for example, will tend to have an extremely limited range of options and possibilities available, given their high levels of reliance upon family structures and family resources throughout the time of childhood. Young children must rely on significant adults in their lives to develop and maintain high levels of accountability to their experiences, feelings and needs, in order to have access to a broad range of possibilities.

To be prescriptive about 'correct' or preferred positions involves re-establishing an aspect of the political context and tactics of abuse; a context which requires the abused person to provide something for a therapist, rather than to discover their own understandings and meanings and choose and develop their own courses of action.

Accordingly, if we attempt to urge or encourage a person to relinquish suffering, this may only serve to discount their own experience of pain and promote a greater sense of limitation and helplessness.

Popular meanings of atonement

Persons who have abused may also relate to these components of forgiveness. Their ideas, expectations and actions are likely to have a significant influence on the positions occupied by others who have been abused. There is a significant interaction between meanings associated with forgiveness and meanings associated with atonement for abusive behaviour.

The concept of atonement is equally confused by a range of attributions of meaning, as is the concept of forgiveness. Popular notions of atonement generally relate to notions of *acknowledgement* of abusive behaviour, *restitution* to the abused person and *resolution* or moving on.

Positions regarding all three concepts may be occupied from a perspective of *self-centred thinking*, whereby the person who has abused is primarily pre-occupied with his[2] own theories and notions regarding the abused person's experience and his own concerns, fears and hopes about his future.

At the other end of a continuum of consideration, is the perspective of *other-centred thinking*, whereby the person who

has abused is primarily concerned with and seeking to understand the experience and effects of abuse upon the abused person. This perspective is informed by an understanding of the political context of abuse and an appreciation of the need to be fully accountable to the experiences and needs of those who have been subjected to the abuse.

As the person who has abused develops his 'journey of atonement', which may involve acceptance of responsibility and restitution for his actions, he may begin to invest in processes and practices of :

- **realisation,** which when approached from an *other-centred* perspective leads to acknowledgement concerning the nature and inevitability of the abused person's feelings of hurt, betrayal and resentment. From this perspective, he is prepared to face (rather than avoid) feelings of shame and remorse concerning the impact of his abusive actions upon the abused person and others. This 'taking on the burden' of shame and responsibility may complement the experience of relinquishment of suffering by the abused person.

  Alternatively, he may maintain a *self-centred* pre-occupation with the desire for release from feelings of guilt and responsibility for his actions. In this context, he may expect or require the abused person to cease or lessen feelings of hurt, suffering or resentment. He may promote 'quick fix' solutions which do not require him developing a deeper understanding of the nature and effects of his abusive actions. Self-centred feelings of personal loss are confused with remorse. In this way, he may actively contribute to the context for obligation for the abused person.

- **restitution**, which when approached from an *other-centred* perspective, concerns an unconditional preparedness to take whatever steps may be necessary to make amends to the abused person or community for abusive actions. There is no expectation of receiving pardoning or requiring anything else in return. This kind of restitution is an act of extending oneself towards understanding the experiences of others, with 'no strings attached'. Restitution is a self-determined duty or responsibility which is based on a political understanding of abuse and its effects upon others.

  From a *self-centred* perspective, the person who has abused may expect the abused person to accept his apologies, to provide a pardon for him or to 'forgive and forget' the abusive behaviour. There may be a preoccupation with making an apology which is seen as a pathway to pardoning and absolution, rather than a self-determined duty or responsibility to the abused person and to the community.

- **resolution,** an *other-centred* resolution is informed by the knowledge that respect, trust and desire for reconnection may be irreparably destroyed by abuse. The desire for reconnection or reconciliation is not an expectation that the person who has abused has any right to entertain or hold. The capacity to 'move on' is informed by a sense of responsibility to make amends to the abused person and the community, by extending oneself without having to get something back and the knowledge that abusive behaviour cannot be undone or ever forgotten. This constitutes a form of ongoing restoration through acceptance of the realities of abuse and the letting go of unrealistic hopes.

  A *self-centred* perspective is informed by a primary focus on the need for absolution and the desire for reconciliation and reclamation of former relationships. The person who has abused may feel entitled to expect or require the abused person to grant absolution and resume a relationship of significance. Restitution attempts may be seen as having earned the entitlement to reclaim past relationships.

Various positions, in a matrix of positions/meanings concerning atonement, are presented in Table 2.

We frequently draw attention to shifts in meanings associated with forgiveness and atonement as individuals and members of their communities develop understandings of the nature and politics of abuse and invest in 'journeys of realisation'.

Individuals who have been subjected to abuse and who at first experienced a sense of obligation to 'forgive', may discover a desire for relinquishment that can maintain a capacity for protest against abuse and a refusal to pardon abusive behaviour or to re-invest in an undesired relationship. Those who have abused may experience a shift in focus from preoccupations with apology, pardoning and reconciliation to acknowledgement, restitution and understanding the realities of the effects of abusive behaviour upon others.

Table 2 – A matrix of complementary goals in atonement

	OTHER-CENTRED	SELF-CENTRED
REALISATON	**Acknowledgement of the effects of abuse** A commitment to face responsibility by : - trying to fully understand and respect the abused person's feelings and experience - accepting culpability for the effects of abusive actions - facing and carrying feelings of shame and remorse which are informed by the effects of abuse upon others - having no expectations, requirements or demands for relinquishment by the abused person	**Desire for release from guilt and responsibility** Preoccupations with : - self-centred desires and hopes for the abused person to relinquish suffering and resentment - 'quick-fix' solutions which involve avoidance of responsibility - self-centred feelings of personal loss which are confused with remorse
RESTITUTION	**Focus on restitution** A commitment to restitution for abusive actions by : - being prepared to acknowledge full responsibility - attempting to understand the full impact of the abuse - recognising that abusive behaviour is 'unforgivable' - making restitution unconditional – 'no strings attached' - having no expectations, requirements or demands for any form of acceptance or pardon regarding restitution Restitution – involves expressions of extending of oneself, through consideration of others' feelings and experiences	**Focus on apology and desire for pardoning** Preoccupations with : - apology as a means to achieving pardoning and absolution - reciprocity, whereby attempts at apology carry implicit or explicit expectations or demands for acceptance and pardoning by the abused person Apology – a means towards achieving self-centred goals of absolution and pardoning
RESOLUTION	**Focus on acceptance and restoration** A commitment towards acceptance and understanding that : - restitution is a self-determined duty that earns no entitlement to re-connection or reconciliation - abuse may permanently destroy trust and desire for re-connection - the abused person is entitled to determine the level of any re-connection An understanding that 'moving on' is achieved via restoration through extending oneself by considering others	**Focus on absolution and reconciliation** Preoccupations with reclamation and resumption of relationships linked with : - requirements for abused persons to 'forgive and forget' - premature desires to achieve 'happy families' - a sense of entitlement to resume relationships following restitution attempts/apologies An understanding that 'moving on' is achieved via obtaining absolution and the reclamation of relationships

Working with concepts of forgiveness with people who have been abused

> *When matters are serious - life shakingly serious - they can rarely be forgiven either directly or conclusively. Such events may take most of a lifetime to assimilate and most of a lifetime to forgive.* (Dowrick 1997)

Forgiveness is not a necessary concern for all people who have been abused. Whilst most people want to relinquish suffering, interest in pardoning or reconciliation may receive little or no consideration, especially in relationships which lack special significance or a history of connection. However, people who were abused by a loved family member or carer commonly experience and may express, directly or indirectly, the desire to forgive. When assisted to understand this desire and the ideas and motivations which inform it, in a political context, a shift in the nature of the person's journey, from 'obligation' to 'self-realisation', is likely to be undertaken. This shift towards self-determination can enable :

- relinquishment to be considered as an issue quite separate from pardoning,
- motivations for specific aspects of pardoning to be delineated and clarified,
- issues of relinquishment and pardoning to be considered separately from reconciliation.

The desire for relinquishment – obligation to self-realisation

Interest in forgiveness can stem from a personal desire for relinquishment from suffering or from feelings of resentment. However, 'obligations' or 'requirements' often

complicate movement towards self-determination. The desire for relinquishment and the 'need' to pardon often become intertwined and confused.

Some people experience a need to understand or make sense of the motivations of the abusing person, in order to pardon and then to be able to 'move on'. This 'need' can lead to paralysing preoccupations. People who have been abused may initially be highly preoccupied with a search for reasons as to why the loved one may have done such a thing: Were they sick?; Were they abused themselves as children?; Was the abuse caused by something over which that person had no control? Under these circumstances, the abused person may feel an obligatory prerequisite for relinquishment. 'Moving on' is thought to be possible only by being able to pardon after having discovered 'forgivable' motivations or reasons for the abusive behaviour. This preoccupation may be reinforced by the abusing person's or other family members' attempts to excuse or justify the abusive actions. Sadly, this desperate need to make meaning by searching for causality often contributes to the attribution of self-blame through the ubiquitous preoccupation, Why me? – Was it something about me that made him do it?; Did I deserve it?

A political understanding of abuse

When considerations about forgiveness are informed by a political understanding of abuse, responsibility can be clearly attributed to those who have perpetrated or supported the abusive actions. Understandings about the nature and abuse of power relations and privilege lead to realisations about the politics of deception, the taking of unfair advantage and the construction of realities in which the abused person is obliged to feel some culpability. The actions of the abusing person and significant others whose responses or presence were important at the time, may be viewed from a different perspective which in turn allows for a re-evaluation of the abused person's beliefs about culpability and self-worth. The relinquishment of feelings of responsibility and shame and a lessening of suffering become possibilities.

A political understanding can enable clarification of the desire for relinquishment in the context of the nature of forgiveness. It then becomes conceivable to lessen suffering by relinquishing a sense of responsibility and feelings of shame concerning the abuse, without having to let go of feelings of outrage and a sense of betrayal. It becomes possible to consider relinquishment without necessarily choosing to pardon. A political understanding of abuse enables the drawing of important distinctions between 'forgiving' and 'excusing', in relation to the abusing person and the experience of abusive behaviour.

Understanding the desire to pardon

The meanings attributed to 'forgiveness' are always determined by the context in which the person who has been abused lives and relates to others. In a context of obligation, the 'need' to pardon is often seen as a requirement for relinquishment of suffering and resentment and the ability to 'move on'. An examination of the political context of obligation and the nature of and motivations for pardoning, can enable independent consideration of both relinquishment and pardoning.

At the very beginning of Mary's first meeting at a sexual assault counselling service, she handed the counsellor a letter and asked her to read it before engaging in any conversation. It was a thoughtfully written letter to her uncle who had sexually abused Mary during childhood. The letter did not name abuse as such, but referred to 'events of the past' that were now forgiven by her. He was being offered a pardon. She enquired after his health and wished him well. She mentioned the importance of goodwill between family members. There was no suggestion at all of reconciliation. The letter was in an addressed envelope with a stamp, ready to be posted. However, she had made an appointment with a counsellor before sending it.

Understanding the desire to forgive

The counsellor was intrigued by Mary's decision. What thoughts and ideas had led her to bring this letter to a counsellor before posting it? Mary was initially unable to describe the reasons for her decisions but she began to explore the history leading up to the letter being written.

Identifying a history of obligation

In recent years, Mary had come to believe that, in order to heal, she must forgive; 'The only way for me to move on is

to forgive him for what he did'. This belief was understandable in the context of the history which she related. Mary stated that she had managed to disclose the abuse by her uncle when she was ten years old. Her parents intervened and the abuse stopped, but no-one ever discussed it with her and until now she had received no counselling.

After more than thirty years of feeling pain and anger, she did find the courage to speak out to a few family members and friends about some of the ongoing effects of the abuse upon her life. Although supportive, the common responses she received were that; it happened long ago; her uncle was now an old man; she must find it in her heart to forgive. Books on the subject of forgiveness were recommended for her to read.

Mary described the power and influence of these references to forgiveness. It was as though they confirmed some truth she had suspected all along, that she should *be able to forgive. She felt ashamed that she had held feelings of anger for so long, especially when others in the family seemed to have readily forgiven her uncle.*

Mary did not want to impose her burden upon others, especially those she loved. She feared losing their respect and friendship as a result of her intense needs and feelings. However, she was also sick of the emotional stress it caused in her life and wanted to rid herself of its influence. It was from this position that the letter was written.

Honouring ethics and values

Under these circumstances, the desire to forgive is generally driven by compelling obligations and fears and also by strongly held values and personal qualities.

Accordingly, Mary was assisted to draw distinctions between the obligation to forgive and her own desire to forgive. The personal qualities and values that supported her own desire to forgive could then be rightfully honoured and respected and these qualities were readily elevated over the fears associated with obligation.

Self-realisation through clarification

Mary turned her attention back to the letter and was able to consider it from a different perspective. She was asked whether she thought it would be important to make clear just what it was that she was forgiving her uncle for. Mary sat for a while in silence, looking at the counsellor before stating, quite calmly, 'I can't forgive him for that can I'.

This realisation was one of many which enabled Mary to reconsider her position on forgiveness and to begin a shift from 'obligation' towards 'self-realisation'. She realised that she could not pardon her uncle's abusive actions and began to feel some entitlement to feelings of outrage at his treatment of her. Mary gradually began to recognise possibilities whereby she could begin to relinquish some of her suffering and 'move on' without needing to pardon at her own expense. Her desire to forgive and its informing ethics could be honoured and respected without having these personal qualities further abused or taken advantage of.

The desire to forgive may be informed by ethics which concern the expression of valued personal qualities such as caring, concern, compassion and loyalty, along with the desire for mutually respectful relationships. It is vital that we help draw distinctions between such ethics and personal qualities and obligatory expectations and requirements by others. Valued personal qualities can easily be inadvertently dismissed, mis-labelled or pathologised in the context of challenging 'obligations'. When this happens, counselling attempts can be profoundly disrespectful and can re-create a context which is abusive in itself.

A political understanding of the nature of abuse enables the ability to discriminate between 'excusing' and 'pardoning'; the requirement felt as a '*must*' that is associated with obligation and the sense of *choice* which is associated with self-realisation.

The context of childhood

These are extremely difficult understandings and realisations for adults who were abused as children to consider. However, they are even more challenging for children at the time when the effects of abuse are first experienced. Children are generally in an extremely vulnerable position, when it comes to these considerations. Their abilities to understand the politics of abuse, to attribute responsibility accordingly and to make free choices concerning forgiveness will be influenced by their levels of cognitive and emotional development and by high levels of reliance upon adult family members for survival, nurturance

and a sense of belonging. Children face similar demands concerning forgiveness to those they face regarding disclosure of abuse; they are confronted by the likely effects of their choices on the adults of significance in their lives.

Bruno was sexually abused, between the ages of 8 and 9 years, by an older male cousin. This abuse took place at extended family gatherings where the children were encouraged to play on their own whilst the adults enjoyed card games. Bruno was a boy lacking in confidence and he put up with the abuse for a long time before disclosing to his older sister. Bruno's parents also lacked confidence and status at family gatherings where they were treated as 'poor cousins' by other family members. Bruno was attuned to his parent's feelings and he put off disclosing the abuse 'so that Mum and Dad wouldn't be picked on'.

Following his disclosure, Bruno and his parents were accused of lying. When his cousin eventually made a partial admission, the abuse was minimised along with any effects it might have upon Bruno. Bruno was pressured by his grandparents to forgive his cousin, with assurances that it would never happen again. Bruno's parents also felt obliged to encourage him to forgive. He was expected to continue to attend family gatherings and to maintain an ongoing relationship with his cousin. In this context of obligation, forgiveness is a requirement, as the restoration and maintenance of family connectedness is pursued at the expense of Bruno's feelings and needs.

Considerations about forgiveness by children, following sexual abuse, are highly influenced by the attitudes and positions taken by significant adults in their lives. Children rely upon adults to make decisions and take action in (the children's) best interests. When adult caregivers are themselves struggling to balance others' expectations and obligations with their own feelings, their children's needs and feelings can be overlooked and sacrificed, for the sake of family harmony, to placate others, to avoid personal distress or to submit to religious or cultural beliefs. In this context, accommodation to adult caregivers' expectations and hopes may be the only effective choice for many children. As a result, they are likely to form enduring beliefs about culpability and the obligation to forgive which may persist long into adulthood and limit a sense of choice.

A life-long journey

'Journeys of realisation' tend to be life-long, beginning in childhood and continuing into adulthood. The balance between self-realisation and sense of obligation, at a particular time, sets a context for the nature of investment in a range of ideas about forgiveness.

Anna is currently 23 years old and has experienced a range of demands, hopes and confusions, in relation to aspects of forgiveness, over the past 13 years. Both Anna, and her older sister Tanya, were sexually abused by their father. He commenced this abuse when Anna was 8 years old and her sister was in early adolescence. He subsequently served a two year prison sentence for the abuse.

At ten years old – a context for obligation

When Anna was 10 years old and just prior to her father's release from prison, she was referred with her mother and sister for counselling. Sadly, they had received no counselling help prior to this time. The family was experiencing conflict regarding the father wanting to return to the family home. This was the mother's preference. She spoke of having little extended family support and felt incapable of coping with the demands of being a single parent. Anna's mother was also concerned about deterioration in her health and was quite despairing about coping in the future. Two younger male siblings were reported as missing their father terribly and wanting him home. Tanya, the older daughter, was raising strong opposition to her father returning home. The mother was feeling extremely hurt that Tanya seemed unable to understand or appreciate her position and needs.

Anna was highly sensitive and attuned to both her mother's and her sister's positions. She appeared to be quietly weighing up all family members' feelings and positions before tentatively expressing support for her mother's preference. Anna did express disgust about her father's abusive behaviour, naming it as 'dirty'. However, she was extremely concerned about her mother's and brothers' feelings of grief, in relation to the father's absence from the family. She was hopeful that the help her father had received in prison would mean he wouldn't do it again and she was prepared to accept as reassurance

the promise that both daughters could have locks on their bedroom doors.

Anna's journey began in a context of obligation to forgive (relinquish, pardon and re-unite with) her father in order to support and protect her mother's and her brothers' needs.

At 14 years old – realisations and hopes for restitution

When Anna was 14 years old, she sought counselling on her own initiative. She had begun to think and feel differently about her father's past actions and current circumstances within the family, once her father returned home. She had decided to leave home when she was 12 years old. Anna was taking significant steps in a shift in thinking and action, from obligation towards self-realisation. She was now more able to consider and explore the personal and political nature and implications of her father's abusive behaviour. Anna began to experience an increased sense of outrage as she spoke of realisations that her father's abusive behaviour was sexually motivated; 'I thought it was a dirty thing he did but I wanted to forgive him, but now I know what he was thinking and feeling'. She began to identify ways that her father had tricked, manipulated and silenced her. Anna was now in a position to acknowledge and appreciate her own needs and feelings separate from those of family members. This allowed for honouring of her personal qualities including courage, determination, sensitivity and protectiveness towards others, as well as expressions of outrage and strong statements about her rights to safety and respect.

From this perspective of self-realisation, Anna took significant steps to relinquish a sense of responsibility for the abuse whilst maintaining strong feelings of outrage. She used this perspective to inform important life choices. However, alongside this, she also experienced strong feelings of grief and concern about her family. Ideally she wanted circumstances to change so that she could live at home. She wanted her mother to take a stronger role in the family, 'Why does she always go along with him as though he's the most important one in the family?' She wanted her father to show remorse and open himself to understanding the effects that his abusive behaviour had on her life, instead of, 'acting as though nothing ever happened'. In this context, Anna had hopes and was open to the possibility of pardoning and reconnection with her father.

At 23 years old – choices regarding forgiveness

Anna sought counselling again when she was 23 years old. At this time she was in a secure relationship with a child of her own. She now had no interest in reconnection with her father and did not want him in any way part of her life. Anna was now concerned with her relationship with her mother. She wanted a close relationship with her mother but felt extremely angry and frustrated and daunted by the intensity of her feelings about certain responses and behaviours by her mother which she experienced as contributing to experiences of abuse by her father. She felt unable to 'forgive' her mother but wanted to explore the possibility for reconnection.

Clarifying desires for forgiveness

Anna was assisted to name the behaviours and responses of her mother which concerned her and to have the stories associated with her experience listened to and honoured. She described numerous occasions when she had tried to disclose the abuse to her mother, but felt she had not been listened to or taken seriously. When her mother did eventually acknowledge her disclosure, she minimised it and seemed reluctant to involve outside help. Anna detailed how she and her sister had tried very hard to support their mother by doing chores and assisting with the care of their younger brothers, whilst her father was in prison. She recalled her extreme feelings of disappointment at her mother's decision to have her father return to the family home. Anna acknowledged the early context of obligation, whereby she had supported her mother in this because she was afraid of losing her and at the time it seemed selfish to deny her younger brothers their father.

Considerations for pardoning

At no stage was any attempt made to excuse or justify any of Anna's mother's behaviours or responses during this process. However, Anna was invited to name specific reactions, responses and actions that she might consider for forgiveness or pardoning. These included, her mother:

- *allowing her fear to stop her from listening,*
- *allowing her fear of coping alone to influence a decision that put the children at risk,*

- *lacking the confidence to believe in herself,*
- *making choices that put adults' needs before those of children.*

Possibilities for relinquishment, pardoning and reconnection

In naming these considerations, Anna was able to examine in detail her concerns about her mother and became aware of intense grief associated with them. Some relinquishment of anguish and suffering is possible when these considerations are explored from a grief perspective with ideas such as; 'If only my mum had the confidence to believe in herself' which might be extended to include, 'then she would most likely have decided not to have dad return when he did'. Anna was also able to examine the concept of pardoning in terms of deciding the grounds to determine which considerations might deserve pardoning and which may represent ideas or actions which should not be pardoned.

Anna did not hold unrealistic hopes that her mother would be interested in acknowledging or addressing these considerations. In this context, 'forgiveness' involved relinquishment of suffering and resentment along with specific pardoning of certain of her mother's actions and responses. Possibilities for reconnection needed to be examined in the context of Anna finding within herself the ability to accept her mother's inadequacies alongside the qualities she valued, and to adjust her expectations accordingly. Anna stated that she was committed to continue this journey because, 'She is the only mother I have and I want to forgive her'.

When the adults significant in a child's or young person's life act in ways which are accountable to the child's needs, feelings and experiences of the abuse, possibilities for relinquishment, pardoning and reconciliation can be enhanced and are more readily accessible and achievable. However, the accounts of abused people who present for counselling demonstrate that the desire to 'forgive' is seldom matched with an equal commitment to atonement and restitution.

The following example, however, highlights the relationship between aspects of forgiveness and atonement in a family where there is mutual commitment to address abusive behaviour and its effects.

Renata was sexually abused by her father, during adolescence. When she was 19 years old she returned home after a 3 year absence. On returning home she discovered that her mother had empowered herself with information and political understandings about abuse and her father had made a commitment to address his abusive behaviour in ongoing therapy. Renata was encouraged by the individual commitments and achievements of her parents and had invested, over a twelve month period, in re-establishing a relationship with them.

Renata was feeling positive about her decision, however, she had recently felt increasingly agitated and confused in relation to feelings concerning forgiveness towards her father. She felt that he deserved her forgiveness because of his commitment to address his abusive behaviour. She believed that her desire to forgive was genuine, yet 'secretly' she also experienced resentful feelings which she regarded as 'unforgiving'. This caused her discomfort and a sense of shame.

Renata was invited to examine, make meaning of and name aspects of what constitutes 'forgiveness' and why she might be pursuing these ideas.

Clarification of the desire for forgiveness

The counsellor enquired about factors that may have led to a decision to forgive. Renata quickly responded with a description of her father as someone who contributed positively to her life in many ways and who had demonstrated that he loved and cared for her, prior to the abuse. She also considered his expressions of remorse, evidence of his commitment to address his abusive behaviour and his attempts to atone for the hurt he had caused her, as further evidence of his love for her. She was able to respect her father for these things and felt love for him. She explained that she had been able to forgive him in many ways but now wanted to 'truly forgive'.

Considerations for pardoning

Renata was then assisted to name aspects of her father's behaviour and qualities that she had been able to forgive. She described having made painful realisations 'about weaknesses' in her father, when she was addressing the effects of the abuse on her life. As she came to terms with the disillusionment associated with the reality of these

characteristics, she felt able to pardon him for them, particularly in light of her father's changes. These 'weaknesses' included:

- *falseness*
- *patheticness*
- *sneakiness*
- *self-centredness*
- *double standards*

Possibilities for pardoning and relinquishment

When asked to name what she has felt unable to forgive, Renata was able to draw a distinction between her father as a person and his abusive behaviour. She felt able to forgive her father for what she considered his weakness of character but considered there to be 'no excuse' for his abusive behaviour. The abusive behaviour she decided was inexcusable and therefore unforgivable or unable to be pardoned. After some time for reflection, Renata commented about a growing sense of entitlement, to take a strong position around abusive behaviour, that was replacing the sense of shame which had originally concerned her.

Specific enquiries about the nature, purpose and meanings of forgiveness, when interest in pardoning is a consideration, are frequently enabling for individuals who have been abused and who are worried or confused about direction in a 'journey of realisation'.

- What is this journey about; desires for relinquishment, pardoning or reconciliation?
- What or who is to be forgiven/pardoned ; the person? the abusive behaviour? specific qualities about the person?
- What forms of restoration are required or desired?
- Has the abusing person demonstrated signs of remorse or responsibility?
- Are there remembered qualities about the abusing person that might be addressed separately from the abusive behaviour?
- What makes such a journey worth the effort?

A clarification of the nature of and motivations for specific aspects of forgiveness can enable specific self-determined investments in pardoning and reconnection to coexist with a strong position of outrage and protest regarding abusive behaviour. The clarification of issues of pardoning can then inform further relinquishment of feelings of shame and responsibility in relation to the effects of abuse.

Such considerations concerning pardoning involve intense and painful reflection about intricate details of relationships which have been and may still remain of major significance. A 'journey of realisation', which includes aspects of pardoning, requires intense self-examination in terms of beliefs, values and hopes about relationships of significance as well as questioning about the ethics and motivations of others. In this context, relinquishment and pardoning inevitably become incorporated into the experience of intense grief. Betrayal is characteristic of child sexual abuse. The sense of security and faith in the abusing person and in the relationship is shattered and new realities need to be established. This involves a sense of loss and a yearning for valued aspects of the relationship which were apparent prior to the abuse and for the lost potential of what the relationship could have been without the abuse.

There may be a desire for some form of restoration that does not necessarily involve pardoning or reconnection. A struggle is required to take new steps and make new meanings that will enable some form of positive connections, despite past experiences, as part of a new reality. This involves an arduous journey which requires determination and commitment to holding on to values concerning love and connection, in the face of having been let down and betrayed in the past.

A fluid understanding of forgiveness

Events taking place in a person's life often influence long-held beliefs and positions regarding 'forgiveness'. Age, experience and new circumstances lead to the discovery of new information and ideas which can promote revisiting a position about 'forgiveness'.

An incident or interaction can serve as a reminder of past betrayal and hurt or as a 'last straw' leading to self-realisation.

Eve sought counselling when she was 30 years old. Throughout her childhood her father had physically and emotionally abused both her mother and herself. She believed that she had long 'forgiven' her father for his abusive behaviour but was shocked at her reactions to a recent telephone call with him. He had been rude and dismissive towards her and as a consequence she felt

terrified. Eve began to recall distressing memories of her father's abusive behaviour. She was both outraged at her father's treatment of her and surprised that this behaviour would still have such an effect upon her.

Eve was determined to address these issues and to change the relationship with her father. She wrote to him setting out her current views about forgiveness.

> *'When I was growing up, as a child and teenager, every time you hurt me physically or with words, I always forgave you, and my forgiveness and love was* always *unconditional. I have never discussed our past before with you, and don't feel any great desire to do so now. However I do want you to consider what it might have been like for me growing up with you and mum the way you were. I want you to consider the impact of our last conversation, when you say to me that you've been putting up with my shit all your life.'*
>
> *She added:*
>
> *'I have never set down any conditions on our relationship in the past but I know that if we're going to forge any sort of good relationship then old patterns have to end. I* never *want to be spoken to by anyone, particularly someone I love so much, like you spoke to me on the phone. I don't deserve it. I hung up on you in shock and fear with that familiar blind rage in your voice.'*

Eve realised that she had previously, always been prepared to pardon her father, unconditionally, and even to re-connect with him, after incidents of his abusive behaviour. Eve had never felt entitled to expect her father to consider the fear and hurt he had caused her. As a child she was not in a position to expect or require anything from her father who had never demonstrated any understanding concerning the effects of his abusive actions towards her and her mother.

His recent abusive phone call brought back memories and feelings associated with his abuse which she believed she had long left behind her. Her reaction shocked her and led to several realisations:

- *a desire to relinquish feelings of fear and distress,*
- *a sense of entitlement to feel outraged at her father's present and past behaviour,*
- *that her father was never entitled to gratuitous pardoning,*
- *a desire to re-connect with him, with the expectation that he take steps to make restitution by considering and understanding what he had put her mother and herself through.*

Eve recognised that her father might not be prepared to make efforts towards restoration or restitution in their relationship but was determined to no longer tolerate or excuse his abusive behaviour.

When those who have abused make sincere efforts to understand and fully appreciate the hurt their abuse has caused, a sense of restoration or restitution may be experienced by the person who has been abused. This experience can assist aspects of relinquishment without requiring pardoning or reconciliation in return. It can result in a broader sense of restoration of faith in the potential goodness or capacity for redemption of other people.

Working with concepts of forgiveness and atonement with men who have sexually abused

When abuse is first disclosed and made public, counsellors are frequently confronted by the initial reactions and responses of men who have perpetrated the abuse. These reactions and responses often include a range of highly self-centred and desperate pre-occupations concerning forgiveness. At this time the man is likely to experience intense panic about likely criminal justice consequences, along with fears of loss of significant relationships and of reputation and self-respect. He may engage in an intense struggle to avoid pervasive and overwhelming feelings of shame. In this context, self-centred preoccupations with aspects of forgiveness and insensitive ideas about atonement, are likely to be evident.

The desire for a 'quick fix'; seeking release from feelings of guilt and responsibility and reassurance that no-one has been seriously harmed by a 'never-to-be-repeated' lapse of judgement, may accompany any acknowledgements of abusive behaviour.

Feelings of self-centred, personal loss tend to be confused with feelings of remorse concerning the suffering of others. At this time, preoccupations with forgiveness can appear to be primary objectives with men who seek counselling.

When the plea for understanding and forgiveness appears to be associated with a self-centred desire for release

from guilt and responsibility, this places even more demands and responsibilities upon those suffering as a result of the abusive actions and serves as a further abuse of power and privilege.

Steven approached a counsellor following the disclosure of his sexual abuse of his grand-daughter. He professed high levels of concern for the wellbeing of his daughter, the mother of the child he had sexually abused. He was particularly concerned that, 'she could not forgive' him for sexually assaulting her daughter. He went on to explain his position that, 'Her anger is eating her up and destroying what we have as a family'; 'She must learn to put it all behind her and move on – for her own good'.

Steven clearly felt that his daughter was under some form of obligation to him to relinquish her outrage and resentment, to pardon his actions and to include him in her family, to safeguard the wellbeing of all family members.

Not surprisingly, Steven's ideas are likely to provoke outrage in the face of the apparent injustice in his expectations and demands of forgiveness from his daughter with no obvious expectations or demands for accountability upon himself. Counsellors may be tempted to experience feelings of contempt and a sense of intolerance, to the detriment of assisting him to examine the nature of his ideas more closely. If we regard Steven's attitudes and expressions only as further reflections of his controlling and abusive thinking, we can miss opportunities to assist him to discover and explore ideas about forgiveness and atonement which might be fair and enabling.

It is vital that we do not lose sight of possibilities and choices available for Steven to make other-centred realisations. If we take seriously and explore his stated concern for his daughter's wellbeing, we may discover ethics which relate to genuine caring and a desire to understand her experience. He can be assisted to look beyond his self-centred fears and feelings of desperation. This may provide a motivational link to assist him to consider questions like:

- *What would it mean if you sought forgiveness without really understanding the hurt you have caused?*
- *In whose interests would you be acting, if you sought to have your daughter forgive you, without you having this understanding?*

By challenging our own intolerance and the inevitable tendency to marginalise men like Steven, we may discover that there is more to him than abusive behaviour and insensitive demands. We may be able to assist him to discover and name ethics which enable interest in a broader understanding of the nature and effects of abuse and investment in a 'journey of atonement' which becomes increasingly other-centred.

Beyond apology – towards restitution

Men who have abused may initially be highly preoccupied with desperate desires to make apologies in order to gain instant pardoning and absolution. The co-operation of a counsellor may be sought to support or give credibility to these notions of apology. Such self-centred presentations involve minimisation of the nature and effects of abuse and various forms of excusing and justification.

I just want the opportunity to say I am sorry. It is just not like me to do what I did. She has to know that I'd never do it again.

Apologies are frequently offered in the absence of any real understanding of the experience and feelings of the abused person. However, the abusing person may regard such attempts as sufficient to justify a pardon. Such conditional apologies are often followed up with bewilderment and self-righteous demands, when pardoning is not forthcoming.

I have owned up to it. I am coming to counselling. I have said I am sorry. She should forgive me. What more is she expecting?

It is helpful to draw a distinction between the desire to make an apology – which tends to function as a means towards establishing self-centred goals of absolution and pardoning, and the desire to make unconditional restitution – which involves extending oneself through consideration of other's feelings and experiences as a result of being subjected to abuse. Restitution involves a self-determined duty towards restoration but one which requires nothing in return from those who have been affected by the abuse. When atonement is informed by the desire to make restitution, the journey is understood to be ongoing and life-long. Abusive behaviour can never be ignored or forgotten and efforts to understand the experience of others can never reach a point where they are complete or no longer necessary.

Self-centred apologies tend to invite others either to experience a sense of accommodation and obligation to pardon or alternatively, a sense of outrage, insult and offence. As counsellors, informed by a strong sense of social justice, we may feel compelled to confront and condemn the abusing person. However, accepting this invitation serves only to reproduce the politics of abuse and further marginalise the man who is likely, in the face of our attack, to cling more tightly to his self-centred views.

The desire to apologise may be informed by respectful ethical qualities as well as self-centred hopes and fears. A conversation which challenges abusive behaviour, however, can commence when we listen and look beyond the desire to apologise to seek forgiveness and enquire about ethics which may support making amends for a wrong or doing something to help the person who has been hurt.

What difference would it make if you took a really close look at what you did and how it may have affected (the abused person) before you tried to apologise?

Men who have abused and who have been initially preoccupied with the self-centred desire to apologise in order to achieve forgiveness and absolution, can gradually be assisted to discover a capacity for empathy and restitution. They can be invited to find and name an ethical basis which supports a desire to understand the nature and effects of abuse and to make amends without expecting any form of acceptance or pardon in return.

Todd was 19 years old and a tutor when he sexually assaulted two adolescents who were 15 years old. When he was 25 years old, he was charged by the police for his abusive behaviour and he began to attend counselling. He was fearful of justice consequences and he initially tried to challenge the younger people's accounts of the events and to minimise the effects of his abuse upon them.

Todd expected his partner, Jenny, to support him and 'forgive' his 'indiscretions', despite her own feelings of hurt and betrayal and her worries about the meaning and implications of her husband's behaviour for the future. She felt worried and trapped in a dilemma regarding her love for and sense of obligation to Todd and her loss of trust and respect for him.

Whilst initially appearing to take Jenny's love and support for granted, Todd was invited to look beyond his desire to hold onto the relationship with Jenny and he began to explore the nature and meanings of caring in this relationship. He began to find the courage to examine and understand the ongoing impact of his actions, first upon Jenny and later upon the two young men and their families. This involved a significant shift from seeking pardoning and absolution to facing abuses of power and privilege and the ongoing effects of abuse, both within and outside of his relationship with Jenny.

In making these realisations, Todd began to change his outlook and he made a number of decisions that, for Jenny, were more characteristic of the respectful person that she had fallen in love with. He decided that he was not entitled to ask for or expect forgiveness or absolution. He had already taken advantage of two young people and had also taken his partner, Jenny, for granted. He did not think it fair to ask or expect anything more of them.

In order to address his abusive behaviour and avoid imposing even more upon others, he decided to acknowledge fully his abusive actions and to plead guilty. This meant going against the advice of his lawyer who was encouraging him to plea bargain. He began to acknowledge some understanding of the levels of hurt and betrayal that his actions would have caused. He began to understand and appreciate as justified, the feelings of humiliation and betrayal expressed in victim impact statements by the young men he had abused.

The response of the young men and their parents to the stand that Todd was taking surprised him. They did not want the court to incarcerate him but instead to sentence him to a process whereby he would continue to take responsibility for his abusive behaviour.

Todd's example illustrates the possibilities for shifts in a 'journey of atonement' from self-centred preoccupations to other-centred perspectives which can then have significant implications for others affected by the abuse.

Beyond reclamation – towards restoration

Self-centred atonement practices often request forgiveness in the form of granting absolution and reconciliation with the person who has been abused. The offering of acknowledgements and apologies is regarded as sufficient to justify the entitlement to reclaim former relationships. The abused persons are expected to 'forgive and forget' the abuse and accommodate to an expectation to

resume as 'happy families'. This may be regarded as the appropriate way for all family members to 'move on' from their experiences of hurt and suffering.

This attitude is reflected in the following excerpt from David's attempt to apologise to family members by letter.

> *I am really sorry. I will never treat any of you like this again. I think we can make it work if you'll just give me another chance. We can put this behind us and have the family we have always dreamed of.*

David's self-centred concept of resolution is clearly influenced by an understanding that the ability to 'move on', following a superficial attempt at atonement, is achieved through obtaining absolution from family members and the entitlement to then reclaim former relationships. Such notions can place an enormous sense of obligation upon family members to accept the man's understanding of resolution and can further traumatise those who have already suffered greatly from the abuse.

David's initial understanding can be contrasted with other-centred concepts of resolution which are based on concepts of accountability which requires understanding and acceptance of the experiences and feelings of family members. In this context, 'moving on' is achieved via concepts of restoration through a commitment to extend oneself by considering the experiences and needs of others. It is understood that restitution is a self-determined duty that does not earn any entitlement to pardoning, absolution or reconnection. The abusing person is committed to trying to understand the potential impact of his abusive behaviour and the likelihood that trust or a desire for reconnection may have been permanently destroyed. The abused person is in fact entitled to determine the level of reconnection sought to be undertaken.

Statements of realisation – towards other-centred perspectives

Men, like David, who have abused, can be invited to consider more deeply their ethical positions, the nature and politics of abusive behaviour and the experiences and feelings of those whom they have hurt, through examination and critique of draft statements of realisation.

For example, the following excerpts from Terry's statement of realisation, regarding his sexual abuse of his daughter, have been annotated to highlight aspects which might add to a context of obligation for family members. The statement of realisation was not written as an apology nor was it shown to Terry's daughter. It was part of an exercise to assist Terry to examine and critique aspects of his own thinking and ideas. In this exercise, as Terry's respectful intent to acknowledge and address the impact of his abusive behaviour is highlighted and honoured, he is also invited to discover and challenge potentially disrespectful ideas and expectations (see annotations below) which are likely to further traumatise or promote a sense of obligation.

> *I am so sorry and ashamed beyond words for doing this to you. I shamefully got sexual gratification from my own daughter which is terribly wrong and my fault completely. You mustn't ever blame yourself for what happened.*

- locates his own fantasies of sexual gratification with the abused person,
- raises the suggestion that she might regard herself as responsible,
- gives advice as to what she should or shouldn't feel.

> *I think you did the right thing in telling and not keeping it secret any longer. It must have been hard for you but I hope you can let go of the burden because it is something that I must carry.*

- raises the suggestion that carrying a burden might be an expected or 'normal' obligation,
- makes a request of her to relinquish feelings and experiences.

> *I have been thinking a lot about why I did what I did. I was also molested by a school teacher when I was a child and I think I have never learned to show love and caring in a proper way to anyone in our family. I have let all of us down and cannot forgive myself for this. I will carry sorrow and regret in my heart for the rest of my life.*

- raises a justification or excuse for his abusive actions,
- creates a suggestion that the experience of being abused may lead to the perpetration of abusive actions,
- creates a context for the induction of guilt and pity.

> *I am truly sorry. I hope that we can eventually put this behind us and have a better relationship in the coming years.*

- raises an expectation for forgiveness and reconciliation.

In a context of honouring Terry's respectful intent, he was able to challenge aspects of his thinking and ideas in unprecedented ways which led to him taking significant steps towards an other-centred concept of atonement.

The steps men take in this journey often continue to shock and surprise them as they discover and challenge the pervasive and ongoing influence of self-centred ideas.

Peter, a 16 year old young man, was committed to acknowledge his realisations about his abuse of his younger sister and prepared a statement of realisation. He declared that he was not attempting to ask for her forgiveness nor did he expect it. Peter tried hard to avoid any statements or ideas that might suggest that he felt she should be obligated to feel or to respond with forgiveness. He attempted to acknowledge the wrong he had done, that he was fully responsible for the abuse and that he respected the steps she had taken to stop the abuse by telling their mother. Peter's sister decided she wanted to hear his statement.

However, Peter was astonished at his own reaction, when his sister responded by saying, 'You know I do not forgive you'. He was surprised at her remark and then surprised at his own realisation that at some level he had still expected her to say that she did forgive him. He reacted this way, despite all his preparatory thinking and understanding that he had no right to expect anything from her.

He was able to reflect upon and acknowledge this discrepancy and to challenge the sense of entitlement that led to his expectation. This discovery enabled Peter to develop a deeper understanding of his sister's experience of the abuse and to appreciate more fully her entitlement to hear his realisations and new understandings but maintain outrage at his actions and refuse to pardon them. He understood more fully his responsibility to assist his sister by carrying the burden of responsibility for his abuse on his own shoulders.

The following excerpts are from a statement of realisation, which highlights other-centred realisations and attempts to make restitution, by Larry who sexually assaulted his 7 year old half-sister, when he was 15 years old. These excerpts are taken from a longer statement (shared with Larry's mother) which Larry prepared after some 12 months of therapeutic intervention, during which he was invited to examine his abusive actions and their potential impact.

Dear Mum,

I am writing to say that I'm heaps sorry for what I done to Susie, and what I did to you and David.

I sexually abused Susie and I let all of you down in the worst way. Susie was only seven years old when I started on her and I was fourteen. She trusted me heaps and looked up to me like a father. All the things we went through with Barry and I used to look after her and protect her. She didn't have a Dad who loved her and I was her big brother and I just went and abused her.

She didn't know what I was doing because I tricked her into it. I told her it was a game. She was little and didn't know what was going on but I did know. I knew I could have got her to do anything I said. I conned her and told her it was OK and just part of the game, and don't worry, it will be fun.

I know you want to know why I did it. I thought I must have been sick in the head. I've been talking about it in counselling and I think I picked on Susie because she was easy to pick on and I was only thinking about what I could get and I didn't think about her feelings. I abused Susie lots of times. I used to think about it a lot. Sometimes I felt guilty but then I would just lie to myself and say it doesn't hurt her and it's not such a big deal. She was a little kid and didn't know much and I just picked on her because of that. I feel heaps angry at myself for doing it.

I feel heaps disgusted and so sorry for what I have done to you all. I've caused you hurt and I know this will last a long time and that you won't trust me for a long time. Saying sorry won't make it go away. You all have a right to hate me. In counselling I'm trying to understand what I have put you all through and try to change so that I think of other people's feelings. I will never treat you or anyone else like this again.

When critiquing these excerpts, we must be mindful of Larry's age and the enormity of the task, particularly given that he had not had such consideration shown to him in relation to abuse he was also subjected to in his own family. Larry is attempting to take an ethical position in restitution which is other-centred and which also makes clear that he stands for respect and not exploitation. In focussing on political realisations about the nature of abuse and causality along with the inadequacy of 'saying sorry', he is trying to accept the realities of his abusive actions without an excessively self-centred focus on absolution and

reconciliation. Larry is attempting to privilege desires for restitution and restoration over hopes for absolution and reclamation.

The following excerpts also highlight an 'other-centred' focus, with respect to resolution in a 'journey of atonement'. These excerpts are taken from a statement of realisation by Felix, who had physically, emotionally and sexually abused his ex-partner, Sue, over many years. Felix is attempting to clarify the nature of his desire for atonement and a need for resolution. He did not reunite with Sue but did maintain a relationship with their children. The statement from which these two paragraphs are excerpted was written as a clarification exercise and not as a message for Sue, however, she did ask to see it at a later stage.

Felix is beginning to understand a need for him to extend himself through consideration of other's experience and acknowledgement of his realisations, in order to be able to 'move on' in life. This desire has spiritual and personal meanings for Felix and concerns restitution but is not based on an attempt to reclaim a relationship with Sue or to seek absolution from her. Felix is becoming increasingly focussed on restoration by studying the impact of his actions upon others, especially his children, in order to prevent further abuse and maintain mutual respect.

I know you've asked why I treated you this way, many times. I've thought of lots of reasons but I know they are only excuses and justifications. The truth is I have been very selfish. I've thought only of myself and what I want and never taken the trouble to think about your or the kid's feelings and what is important for you. I tried to control you for my own selfish reasons. I tried to make you take on my ways of doing things because I couldn't handle you being yourself and living your own life. I thought I could bully you into submission. I killed off your love and respect and trust of me in trying to control you.

I am not writing this as an apology because I realise that I have made too many false apologies in the past and saying sorry can mean nothing any more. It won't undo the past or change the terrible hurts I have done to you all. I know I must think more about what I have done and how it has affected you all because I only thought of myself in the past. I am determined never to abuse anyone ever again. There are no excuses for what I did to you. I am disgusted with myself but I don't intend to wallow in self-pity. I will make sure I understand as much as I can about the hurt I have caused you. I know the best thing I can do is to stay away from you and let you live your own life. I know I have got a lot of changing to do and I won't do it by harassing you. I can't undo what I have done but I can stop being so selfish and think of the people I have abused and betrayed for a change. I can make sure I never treat anyone like this again.

Conclusion

We are continuing to learn about forgiveness and atonement and the enormous levels of courage required to embark on a 'journey of realisation', from the broad range of people troubled by abuse who consult with us.

The matrix is a representation of a range of positions, regarding meanings associated with forgiveness and atonement, that our clients have shared with us. It can provide a means of mapping experiences and has been helpful in making sense of the challenges and dilemmas which confront those who have been subjected to abuse as well as those who have perpetrated abuse, along with members of their families and communities.

We have found the matrix a helpful guide for reflecting on and examining ways that our contributions may promote self-determination in the journeys of those who have been abused and 'other-centredness' for those who have abused.

However, no schema should be imposed upon people's experience and there are considerable risks in using concepts like the matrix to interpret and especially to judge the reactions and responses of others. The matrix is a guide to understanding and we regard it as a 'work-in-progress' which is modified and updated over time. We welcome feedback and critique from others.

Notes

1. Alan, Rob and Maxine can be contacted c/o Nada, 1 Mary St, Hindmarsh SA 5007, Australia, phone (61-8) 8340 2240, fax (61-8) 8346 6115, email: nada@senet.com.au
2. We refer to the person who has abused as a male person throughout this article because our experience and research demonstrates that males perpetrate the majority of sexual assaults.