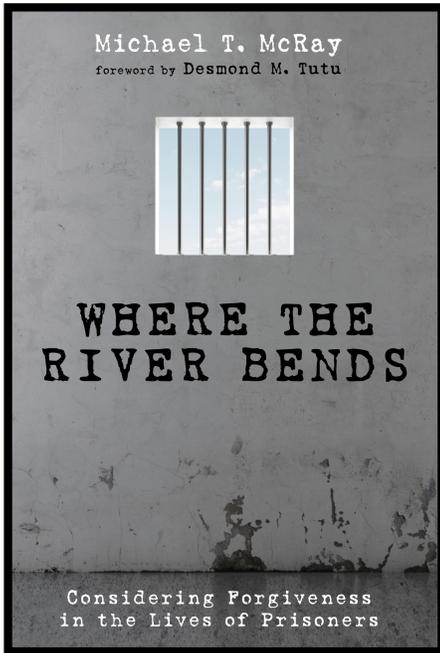


FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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New Title from Michael T. McRay
Where the River Bends
Considering Forgiveness in the Lives of Prisoners



Myriad works discuss forgiveness, but few address it in the prison context. For most people, prisoners exist “out of sight and out of mind.” Their stories are often reduced to a few short lines in news articles at the time of arrest or conviction.

But what happened before in the lives of the convicted? What has happened after? How have people in prison dealt with the harm they have caused and the harm they have suffered? What does forgiveness mean to them? What can we outsiders learn about the nature of forgiveness and prison from individuals who have both dealt and endured some of life’s most painful experiences?

Expanding on his MPhil dissertation *Echoes from Exile* (with *Distinction*) from Trinity College Dublin, Michael McRay’s important new book brings the perspectives and stories of fourteen Tennessee prisoners into public awareness. Weaving these narratives into a survey of forgiveness literature, McRay offers a map of the forgiveness topography, asserting that forgiveness might best be understood as a multi-stranded process of release, transcendence, goodwill, absolution, and reinterpretation. At once

storytelling, academic, activism, and cartography, McRay’s book is as necessary as it is accessible.

There is a whole demographic we have essentially ignored when it comes to conversations on forgiveness. What would we learn if we listened?

Michael T. McRay (MPhil, Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, Trinity College Dublin at Belfast) is a writer, advocate, adjunct professor, and storyteller. He served as a volunteer prison chaplain before being banned by the warden for organizing, is the cofounder of No Exceptions Prison Collective, and is founder and cohost of Tenx9 Nashville Storytelling. He is the author of *Letters from “Apartheid Street”* (2013).

Where the River Bends
Considering Forgiveness in the Lives of Prisoners

by Michael T. McRay

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Interview with Michael T. McRay

Why did you write this book? Aren't there enough books on forgiveness?

I wrote this book primarily for two reasons. First, I saw a gap in the forgiveness literature: few, if any, dealt in depth with the perspectives of prisoners regarding forgiveness. Given the nature of many crimes and the unforgiveness of the prison system itself, listening to prisoners reflect on forgiveness seemed logical, if not essential. Given that I had access as a prison volunteer in Tennessee, I felt I could make a contribution to filling that gap. Second, I believe it is terribly important to hear the stories of those we often ignore, even condemn. As Zadie Smith says, "every person is a world." What do we learn about forgiveness, society, punishment, suffering, trauma, etc. if we step into the world of those we've categorically condemned and exiled? I wanted to find out.

Why should I read this book?

Forgiveness affects everyone. We cannot live among other humans and not suffer and inflict harm. As Hannah Arendt noted, we need forgiveness to deal with the fact that life is irreversible. We don't get to take things back. Forgiveness offers an alternative to the destructive spirals of vengeance and hate. To be alive is to be in need of forgiveness. Additionally, nearly all of those 2.3 million people currently incarcerated will be released back to us. It matters what their stories are, what trauma they have suffered. Trauma that is not transformed is transferred. That's why so many go to prison, and why 50-70% return to prison after release. The research on forgiveness consistently demonstrates that authentic, responsible forgiveness improves our mental, emotional, even physical health. For the sake of our social health alone, then, we should care about the connections between forgiveness and prison. We should take great strides to reconsider how we might behave forgivingly toward those we originally threw away.

Isn't self-forgiveness just an easy out for people who have committed horrendous offenses?

Claims and pursuits of "self-forgiveness" can indeed become an escape hatch for some, a convenient way to let themselves off the hook for terrible wrongs. But the men and women I spoke with inside two Tennessee prisons did not approach self-forgiveness this way. For them, self-forgiveness was fire; it refined and burned, created and destroyed. For those who experience it, self-forgiveness owned the harm committed (and indeed named it *as* harm) propelled remorse, inspired repentance, and transformed identity. All of them sat in judgment upon themselves for what they had done wrong. Self-forgiveness was not an easy out of non-confrontation; rather, it was a way of realizing that they, like all of us, are not the sum total of the worst things they've done. Self-forgiveness, in the end, is the intersection of judgment and grace.

Interview with Michael T. McRay cont.

Why the title *Where the River Bends*?

One of the stories presented in the book is of Jacob Davis, a brilliant man in his late 30s who has been incarcerated since nineteen after killing a fellow high school student in the midst of a dysfunctional love triangle. Jacob is a wordsmith and a lover of metaphor. At the end of my conversation with him, he described forgiveness like a river: “Just as the course of every river changes with time, so does the flow of painful memory through our souls. If we allow them, the sands of grace accumulate day by day until slowly a bend in the river appears, and our hearts travel a new path across an old landscape to sink in to the rich soil of hope and renewal previously out of reach. That bend in the river that leads to life is forgiveness.” In honor of Jacob, and in reference to Riverbend prison where all the men I interviewed resided, I named the book *Where the River Bends*.

Are you advocating that we just forgive all prisoners and set them free?

Having spent time as a volunteer chaplain in maximum security prison, I will be among the first to argue that some of us require social separation. Some minds and bodies are so broken and ill that healthy interaction among others is temporarily, or perhaps permanently, impossible. Social separation has its place. But I think this should be significantly re-envisioned. I believe forgiveness is vital to our health, both individually and socially. I believe that forgiveness means releasing all claims for reciprocal suffering and retribution. This does not mean that social separation must be eliminated; safety is important. But we cannot forgive and still try to “get even.” The two are mutually exclusive. Instead, if we value our health and integrity, we must surely find a way to restructure our society into one of forgiveness rather than retribution.

An Excerpt from *Where the River Bends*

From Chapter 17

Forgiveness is “as mysterious as love”; it is a complex, courageous endeavor in human life. People continually perpetrate harms on each other that create corpses, permanent scarring, and disfigurement, both physically and emotionally. Damaging events can neither be reversed nor often avoided, and some impact us so profoundly that full recovery is impossible. Thus, the enthusiastic “boosterism” surrounding forgiveness can create a pressure to forgive that may increase trauma and spark feelings of guilt for those who cannot forgive, especially when forgiveness is defined with singularity and simplification. Forgiveness is complicated and confrontational—if not relationally then morally, as it often counters one’s intuition regarding just course following a violation. Though much effort is rightly exerted to render forgiveness attainable for most people, forgiveness cannot become simple or easy. It is—to a degree—scandalous, as it offers grace when both instincts and a retributive culture demand otherwise. Essentially, forgiveness faces down “the specter of suffering,” as Jacob put it, and interrupts the destructive spiral of reciprocity, offering a way to address pain and loss by reinterpreting life in the context of one’s altered reality.

While the men and women [prisoners] featured above hope for forgiveness from their victims and for their own offenders, the struggle to forgive themselves remains constant—in no small part due to their confinement. The prison system is adversarial, deliberately denying possibilities for expressing forgiveness and pursuing reconciliation. It imprisons bodies and, without deliberate resistance, identities. As Jacob passionately acknowledged, “The man I am today didn’t do it!” The logic of retribution, though, aims to hold him captive in that tragic moment his senior year of high school. For the prison, Jacob’s identity—as well as all those above—is offender. There is no complexity; only simple categories. Forgiveness, though, recognizes and embraces complexity, releasing so as to transform and move forward. This is antithetical to the mission of the prison system that seeks daily to remind its captives that they are defined by a moment, by a set of harmful actions, by the things they have done wrong. Seeking forgiveness in such a context is challenging, as the imposed identity of “forever an offender” and the impossibility of reaching out to those one has harmed causes frequent setbacks. To quote Jacob yet again, “Forgiveness in Christian theology tries to offer new garments, but this system just chains you to the mud in them. It really makes it impossible to fully forgive yourself.”

... I am interested in social forgiveness for prisoners. If unforgiveness corrodes our health and sanity at the individual level, it stands to reason it also poisons us socially. To function as cultures of violence, retribution, vengeance, and shame is to compromise our social health. To begin this journey toward social and personal forgiveness and cultivating a healthier society, we must get proximate to those we have categorically condemned and listen to their stories. If we tell and hear different stories—ones of remorse and redemption, transformation and broken humanity, forgiveness and reconciliation—we may come to imagine a different world, where even the prisoners are forgiven and set free.

Praise for *Where the River Bends*

“[T]his book is important. . . . We cannot encounter these pages and remain unaffected. But what will happen to us if we listen to those we tend to ignore? This book is one way to find out. I encourage us all to listen.”

—**Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, from the foreword**

“Where the River Bends . . . offers depth of insight and perspective that is rare yet essential if we are going to move to higher ground.”

—**Michelle Alexander, author of the best-selling *The New Jim Crow***

“Michael McRay shares the stories that should make the headlines, but usually don’t. . . . [He] proves that our wounds have the power to hold us hostage to the past or to compel us to build a future where grace gets the last word. . . . Don’t just read this book—let it move you to become an agent of mercy in a merciless world.”

—**Shane Clairborne, activist, abolitionist, and author of *Executing Grace* and the best-selling *Irresistible Revolution***

“Michael McRay has written an extraordinary book. It tells the grand narrative of how justice, forgiveness from God, seeking and receiving forgiveness from others, and struggling with forgiving the self come together like a turbulent river. The origin of this particular river is in McRay’s understanding of forgiveness, and McRay draws most heavily upon the superb theology and psychology of theologian Miroslav Volf, and peacemakers John Paul Lederach and Desmond Tutu. Then, fourteen prisoners’ personal stories form ‘tributaries’ that arise from the turbulent river. Those stories recount crimes, address justice, and describe self-recrimination. It is forgiveness that often bends the flow of narrative into the grand narrative that forgiveness of self and others changes lives. This book could actually change your life.”

—**Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Author of *Moving Forward: Six Steps to Forgiving Yourself and Breaking Free from the Past***

“This book stands tall among the tomes on forgiveness. McRay takes us deep into the souls of prisoners, who explain the hard work of releasing rage. Their stories make it clear: the recipe for forgiveness is not simple or easy. Yet the gritty work of letting go opens the door to freedom, even behind bars. Caution: reading these heart-wrenching stories may change your life.”

—**Donald B. Kraybill, coauthor *Amish Grace***

