

# Systemic Forgiveness: A Possibility for Afrikan Americans?

by Wanda Lofton

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The question in the title of this article was put to me recently by a very pleasant, bright European American woman who seemed genuinely interested in getting an answer. Just hearing the suggestion that there may be the opportunity for Afrikan Americans to forgive European Americans on a systemic level set off many emotional fireworks. For instance, to return the question that White people are always asking, "What do they want? How can they have the effrontery to ask to be forgiven after all the atrocities and abominations they have committed against us?"

Upon reflection, I realized that the question was irrelevant. I believe that Afrikan Americans have long ago granted systemic forgiveness to European Americans. Of course there are many individual Afrikan Americans who have not forgiven and who act out of their racial hatred, and it seems natural that the media would focus most attention on these incidents. This focus, however, distorts reality by greatly exaggerating the proportion of these incidents in the Afrikan American community. In his recent book, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, Peter J. Paris identifies several Afrikan and Afrikan American moral virtues. His description of "forgiveness" is as follows:

*After centuries of racial oppression one can rightly ask why African peoples seem to exhibit such little racial hatred in return for the misery they were forced to endure.*

*Even during the most intense periods of resistance to slavery, segregation, colonialism, and apartheid, they have rarely been consumed by the spirit of hatred. How did they escape such a destiny? This is an important question, worthy of the most careful investigation . . . Suffice it to say that the commitment of African peoples to the goal of community is one of the principal reasons for the lack of racial hatred among them. The goal of their life is to build relationships, rather than prohibit them, which has had an enormous effect on their moral formation.*

*The virtue of forgiveness is essential for the ongoing life of community. For countless reasons, humans inevitably fail to do the good that they are capable of doing. The results of those failures can and often do threaten the well-being of others. Traditionally Africans faced such circumstances by seeking effective means for the restoration of the spiritual balance upset by the pernicious activity. Only then could reconciliation occur between the parties involved.*

The entire history of the relationship between European Americans and Afrikan Americans has been dominated by the virtue of forgiveness on the part of Afrikan Americans. While the attempts by some Afrikan Americans to assimilate and emulate European American values and culture are manifestations of internalized oppression and a necessity for survival, they have resulted in the increased normalization and the building of relationships between the

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two communities. Even the creation of a mixed race of people, born of African women, accepted and nurtured by the Afrikan American community, is an act of forgiveness

and relationship/community building.

The greatest human rights movement in American history, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, had as its raison d'être hatred of the evil, not the evildoer. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. demonstrated the ultimate in forgiveness as he tried to build relationships between Black people and White people through the process of creating an integrated society.

Raising the question about the possibility of systemic forgiveness occurring within the Afrikan American community might have some merit, however. Perhaps it signals a breakthrough. Perhaps white people, in the tentative asking

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for the possibility of being forgiven, are holding out the possibility that they might be considering the most important issue: *systemic repentance*.

Thus far, European Americans have given little indication that they are ready to repent and acknowledge their culpability in creating and maintaining racism in America. The few notable exceptions have been presented to the community of the oppressed with the clear caveat that there is a strict time value attached (i.e. Affirmative Action: "Okay, you've had enough time to make it, we've given enough!").

This brings us to the second part of the process of forgiveness, namely, reconciliation. Dr. James Cone, noted theologian, says in his book, *God of the Oppressed*, that every encounter the Afrikans have had with Europeans and their descendants has been detrimental to the interests of the Afrikans. He further warns us that reconciliation must occur as those who have been offended (oppressed) deem it so, and that

every member of the community so offended must agree to the reconciliation. In this, Dr. Cone recalls both the Biblical model of reconciliation as well as the traditional Afrikan model. In the Biblical model, it is we, humankind, who have offended God. God, as the offended party, sets the terms of reconciliation. He sent his son, Jesus the Christ, to die for our transgressions, and we become reconciled to God, through our faith in Jesus the Christ. As Dr. Paris points out, "restoration of the spiritual balance upset by the pernicious activity" must take place before reconciliation can occur between those at odds. All activities in traditional Africa have a spiritual nature and all are related to every aspect of life, therefore all grieved parties must be included in any reconciliation.

After forgiveness comes the reconciliation. Afrikan Americans have been living, growing and developing in a culture of forgiveness, both systemically and individually. It is time for European Americans to challenge themselves and their communities to repentance, their first step toward reconciliation. •

## The Process of Forgiveness— An Exercise

by Larry Dunn

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Many people's "common sense" understanding of forgiveness is different than their more "academic" or learned ideas. This exercise is designed to engage participants with the issue of forgiveness and to facilitate the emergence of some of these questions for further discussion after the exercise.

It is important to note to participants that an exploration of forgiveness might focus on any of three things: the forgiven (the one making reparations), the forgiving (the one extending grace) or the relationship between these two and the process which unfolds. Participants are encouraged to release their imaginations and to use words creatively. Following the two-step exercise, the entire group discusses what they discovered, new awarenesses about their own thinking, new insights from others, commonalities and differences with the ideas of others, etc. Following are the instructions for the exercise:

### Step 1—Individual Reflection

In the space provided below [on the handout to participants], arrange the words in the following list in a sequence or pattern that helps you make sense of the process of forgiveness. You may place them in order, set-up a flow chart, create groupings, etc. Use as few or as many of the words listed as you like, or add some of your own.

acceptance	grief	reflection
amends	hatred	remembering
anger	healing	remorse
apology	helplessness	repentance
blame	injury	restitution
celebration	manipulation	revenge
confession	mistrust	ritual
confrontation	protection	sin
denial	punishment	validation
grace	reconciliation	withdrawal

### Step 2—Sharing Reflections in Triads

Now turn together with two other persons to form a triad and discuss the significance of your arrangement. Why did you choose/leave out certain words? Why did you arrange the words the way you did? How was the order or grouping important to you?