

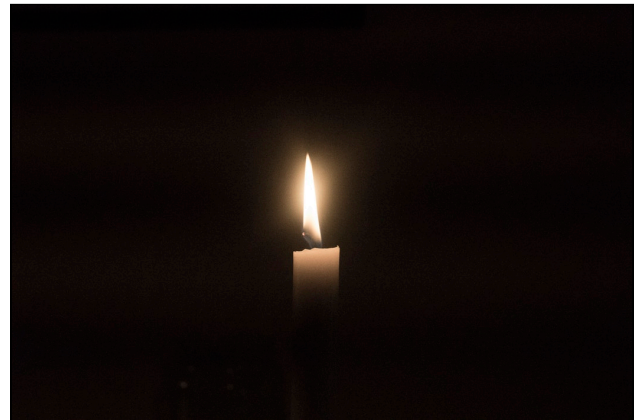
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# Can Forgiveness Play a Role in Criminal Justice?

By Paul Tullis  
2013

*On March 28, 2010, Conor McBride shot his girlfriend Ann Grosmaire in the head. Ann died a few days later after being taken off life support. Conor was charged with first-degree murder, which usually results in mandatory life in prison or the death penalty in Florida. However, despite the severity of Conor's crime and the loss of their daughter, the Grosmaires didn't support Conor being sentenced to life in prison or death. The Grosmaires decided to forgive Conor and went through a process of making amends with him.*

- [1] At 2:15 p.m. in the afternoon on March 28, 2010, Conor McBride, a tall and sandy-haired 19-year-old wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and New Balance sneakers, walked into the Tallahassee Police Department and approached the desk in the main lobby. Gina Maddox, the officer on duty, noticed that he looked upset and asked him how she could help. "You need to arrest me," McBride answered. "I just shot my fiancée in the head." When Maddox, taken aback, didn't respond right away, McBride added, "This is not a joke."



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Maddox called Lt. Jim Montgomery, the watch commander, to her desk and told him what she had just heard. He asked McBride to sit in his office, where the young man began to weep.

About an hour earlier, at his parents' house, McBride shot Ann Margaret Grosmaire, his girlfriend of three years. Ann was a tall 19-year-old with long blond hair and, like McBride, a student at Tallahassee Community College. The couple had been fighting for 38 hours in person, by text message, and over the phone. They fought about the mundane<sup>1</sup> things that many couples might fight about, but instead of resolving their differences or shaking them off, they kept it up for two nights and two mornings, culminating in the moment that McBride shot Grosmaire, who was on her knees, in the face. Her last words were, "No, don't!"

Friends couldn't believe the news. Grosmaire was known as the empathetic listener of her group, the one in whom others would confide their problems, though she didn't often reveal her own. McBride had been selected for a youth-leadership program through the Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce and was a top student at Leon High School, where he and Grosmaire met. He had never been in any serious trouble. Rod Durham, who taught Conor and Ann in theater classes and was close to both, told me that when he saw "Conor shot Ann" in a text message, "I was like: 'What? Is there another Conor and Ann?'"

- [5] At the police station, Conor gave Montgomery the key to his parents' house. He had left Ann, certain he had killed her, but she was still alive, though unresponsive, when the county sheriff's deputies and police arrived.

1. **Mundane (adjective):** commonplace or dull

That night, Andy Grosmaire, Ann's father, stood beside his daughter's bed in the intensive-care unit of Tallahassee Memorial Hospital. The room was silent except for the rhythmic whoosh of the ventilator keeping her alive. Ann had some brainstem function, the doctors said, and although her parents, who are practicing Catholics, held out hope, it was clear to Andy that unless God did "wondrous things," Ann would not survive her injuries. Ann's mother, Kate, had gone home to try to get some sleep, so Andy was alone in the room, praying fervently<sup>2</sup> over his daughter, "just listening," he says, "for that first word that may come out."

Ann's face was covered in bandages, and she was intubated and unconscious, but Andy felt her say, "forgive him." His response was immediate. "No," he said out loud. "No way. It's impossible." But Andy kept hearing his daughter's voice: "Forgive him. Forgive him."

Ann, the last of the Grosmaires' three children, was still living at home, and Conor had become almost a part of their family. He lived at their house for several months when he wasn't getting along with his own parents, and Andy, a financial regulator for the State of Florida, called in a favor from a friend to get Conor a job. When the police told Kate her daughter had been shot and taken to the hospital, her immediate reaction was to ask if Conor was with her, hoping he could comfort her daughter. The Grosmaires fully expected him to be the father of their grandchildren. Still, when Andy heard his daughter's instruction, he told her, "you're asking too much."

Conor's parents were in Panama City, a hundred miles away, on a vacation with their 16-year-old daughter, when they got the call from the Tallahassee Police. Michael McBride, a database administrator for the Florida Department of Transportation, and Julie, his wife, who teaches art in elementary school, knew one of them would need to stay with Conor's sister, Katy, who is developmentally disabled. It was decided that Michael would drive to Tallahassee alone.

- [10] "I put the car in reverse" to pull out of the driveway, Michael told me, "and the last thing Julie said to me was: 'Go to the hospital. Go to the hospital.'" At the freeway on-ramp, he says he thought he should stop to throw up first. He had to pull over and vomit five more times before arriving at Tallahassee Memorial.

The hallway outside Ann's room was "absolutely packed with people," and Michael became overwhelmed, feeling "like a cartoon character, shrinking." During the drive, he hadn't thought about what he would actually do when he got to the hospital, and he had to take deep breaths to stave off nausea and lean against the wall for support. Andy approached Michael and, to the surprise of both men, hugged him. "I can't tell you what I was thinking," Andy says. "But what I told him was how I felt at that moment."

"Thank you for being here," Andy told Michael, "but I might hate you by the end of the week."

"I knew that we were somehow together on this journey," Andy says now. "Something had happened to our families, and I knew being together rather than being apart was going to be more of what I needed."

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2. **Fervently** (*adverb*): displaying a passionate intensity

Four days later, Ann's condition had not improved, and her parents decided to remove her from life support. Andy says he was in the hospital room praying when he felt a connection between his daughter and Christ; like Jesus on the cross, she had wounds on her head and hand. (Ann had instinctually reached to block the gunshot, and lost fingers.) Ann's parents strive to model their lives on those of Jesus and St. Augustine, and forgiveness is deep in their creed.<sup>3</sup> "I realized it was not just Ann asking me to forgive Conor, it was Jesus Christ," Andy recalls. "And I hadn't said no to him before, and I wasn't going to start then. It was just a wave of joy, and I told Ann: 'I will. I will.'" Jesus or no Jesus, he says, "what father can say no to his daughter?"

- [15] When Conor was booked, he was told to give the names of five people who would be permitted to visit him in jail, and he put Ann's mother Kate on the list. Conor says he doesn't know why he did so — "I was in a state of shock" — but knowing she could visit put a burden on Kate. At first she didn't want to see him at all, but that feeling turned to willingness and then to a need. "Before this happened, I loved Conor," she says. "I knew that if I defined Conor by that one moment — as a murderer — I was defining my daughter as a murder victim. And I could not allow that to happen."

She asked her husband if he had a message for Conor. "Tell him I love him, and I forgive him," he answered. Kate told me: "I wanted to be able to give him the same message. Conor owed us a debt he could never repay. And releasing him from that debt would release us from expecting that anything in this world could satisfy us."

Visitors to Leon County Jail sit in a row of chairs before a reinforced-glass partition, facing the inmates on the other side — like the familiar setup seen in movies. Kate took the seat opposite Conor, and he immediately told her how sorry he was. They both sobbed, and Kate told him what she had come to say. All during that emotional quarter of an hour, another woman in the visiting area had been loudly berating an inmate, her significant other, through the glass. After Conor and Kate "had had our moment," as Kate puts it, they both found the woman's screaming impossible to ignore. Maybe it was catharsis<sup>4</sup> after the tears or the need to release an unbearable tension, but the endless stream of invective<sup>5</sup> somehow struck the two of them as funny. Kate and Conor both started to laugh. Then Kate went back to the hospital to remove her daughter from life support.

"Unfortunately, I have a lot of experience talking to the parents of dead people," says Jack Campbell, the Leon County assistant state attorney who handles many of North Florida's high-profile murder cases. Sheriff's deputies who were investigating the case told Campbell that the Grosmaires' feelings toward the accused were unusual, but Campbell was not prepared for how their first meeting, two months after Ann's death, would change the course of Conor's prosecution.

Campbell had charged Conor with first-degree murder, which, as most people in Florida understand it, carries a mandatory life sentence or, potentially, the death penalty. He told the Grosmaires that he wouldn't seek capital punishment,<sup>6</sup> because, as he told me later, "I didn't have aggravating circumstances like prior conviction, the victim being a child, or the crime being particularly heinous and the like."

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3. a set of religious or guiding moral beliefs  
4. the process of releasing a suppressed emotion and experiencing relief  
5. insulting or abusive language  
6. the death penalty

[20] As he always does with victims' families, he explained to the Grosmaires the details of the criminal-justice process, including the little-advertised fact that the state attorney has broad discretion to depart from the state's mandatory sentences. As the representative of the state and the person tasked with finding justice for Ann, he could reduce charges and seek alternative sentences. Technically, he told the Grosmaires, "if I wanted to do five years for manslaughter, I can do that."

Kate sat up straight and looked at Campbell. "What?" she asked. Campbell, believing she had misunderstood and thought he was suggesting that Conor serve a prison term of just five years, tried to reassure her. "No, no," he said. "I would never do that." It was just an example of how much latitude<sup>7</sup> Florida prosecutors have in a murder case.

What Campbell didn't realize was that the Grosmaires didn't want Conor to spend his life in prison. The exchange in Campbell's office turned their understanding of Conor's situation upside down and gave them an unexpected challenge to grapple with. "It was easy to think, Poor Conor, I wouldn't want him to spend his life in prison, but he's going to have to," Kate says. "Now Jack Campbell's telling me he doesn't have to. So what are you going to do?"

"He's so sorry he said that," Kate says now, of Campbell. "I mean, it opened the door for us."

Most modern justice systems focus on a crime, a lawbreaker, and a punishment. But a concept called "restorative justice" considers harm done and strives for agreement from all concerned — the victims, the offender, and the community — on making amends. And it allows victims, who often feel shut out of the prosecutorial process, a way to be heard and participate. In this country, restorative justice takes a number of forms, but perhaps the most prominent is restorative-justice diversion. There are not many of these programs — a few exist on the margins of the justice system in communities like Baltimore, Minneapolis, and Oakland, Calif. — but, according to a University of Pennsylvania study in 2007, they have been effective at reducing recidivism.<sup>8</sup> Typically, a facilitator meets separately with the accused and the victim, and if both are willing to meet face to face without animosity,<sup>9</sup> and the offender is deemed willing and able to complete restitution, then the case shifts out of the adversarial legal system and into a parallel restorative-justice process. All parties — the offender, victim, facilitator, and law enforcement — come together in a forum sometimes called a restorative-community conference. Each person speaks, one at a time and without interruption, about the crime and its effects, and the participants come to a consensus about how to repair the harm done.

[25] The methods are mostly applied in less serious crimes, like property offenses in which the wrong can be clearly righted — stolen property returned, vandalized material replaced. The processes are designed to be flexible enough to handle violent crime like assault, but they are rarely used in those situations. And no one I spoke to had ever heard of restorative justice applied for anything as serious as murder.

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7. freedom of action

8. the tendency to return to criminal behavior

9. **Animosity** (*noun*): strong hatred or hostility

The Grosmaires had learned about restorative justice from Allison DeFoor, an Episcopal priest who works as a chaplain in the Florida prison system (and before that worked as a sheriff, public defender, prosecutor and judge). Andy, who is studying to become a deacon,<sup>10</sup> heard about DeFoor from a church friend and turned to him for guidance. When Andy told DeFoor that he wanted to help the accused, DeFoor suggested he look into restorative justice. “The problem,” DeFoor says, “was the whole system was not designed to do any of what the Grosmaires were wanting.” He considered restorative justice — of any kind, much less for murder — impossible in a law-and-order state. “We are nowhere near ready for this in Florida right now,” DeFoor told me. “Most people would go, ‘huh?’ And most conservatives would go, ‘ew.’” But as a man of the cloth, he said he believed there was always hope. He suggested the families “find the national expert on restorative justice and hire him.”

By midsummer, Andy Grosmaire was meeting Michael McBride regularly for lunch. He knew that, in a way, the McBrides had lost a child, too. At one of these lunches, he told Michael about restorative justice. Maybe this could be a way to help Conor. Julie McBride, who wasn’t sleeping much anyway, started spending late nights online looking for the person who might be able to help them change their son’s fate. Her research led her to Sujatha Baliga, a former public defender who is now the director of the restorative-justice project at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency in Oakland.

Baliga was born and raised in Shippensburg, Pa., the youngest child of Indian immigrants. From as far back as Baliga can remember, she was sexually abused by her father. In her early teens, Baliga started dying her hair blue and cutting herself. She thought she hated herself because of her outcast status in her community, in which she was one of the few nonwhite children in her school. But then, at age 14, two years before her father died of a heart attack, she fully realized the cause of her misery: what her father had been doing was terribly wrong.

Despite the torments of her childhood, Baliga excelled in school. As an undergraduate at Harvard-Radcliffe, she was fairly certain she wanted to become a prosecutor and lock up child molesters. After college, she moved to New York and worked with battered women. When her boyfriend won a fellowship to start a school in Mumbai, she decided to follow him while waiting to hear if she had been accepted at law school.

- [30] Baliga had been in therapy in New York, but while in India she had what she calls “a total breakdown.” She remembers thinking, Oh, my God, I’ve got to fix myself before I start law school. She decided to take a train to Dharamsala, the Himalayan city that is home to a large Tibetan exile community. There she heard Tibetans recount “horrific stories of losing their loved ones as they were trying to escape the invading Chinese Army,” she told me. “Women getting raped, children made to kill their parents — unbelievably awful stuff. And I would ask them, ‘How are you even standing, let alone smiling?’ And everybody would say, ‘forgiveness.’ And they’re like, ‘what are you so angry about?’ And I told them, and they’d say, ‘that’s actually pretty crazy.’” The family that operated the guesthouse where Baliga was staying told her that people often wrote to the Dalai Lama<sup>11</sup> for advice and suggested she try it. Baliga wrote something like: “Anger is killing me, but it motivates my work. How do you work on behalf of oppressed and abused people without anger as the motivating force?”

She dropped the letter off at a booth by the front gate to the Dalai Lama’s compound and was told to come back in a week or so. When she did, instead of getting a letter, Baliga was invited to meet with the Dalai Lama, the winner of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, privately, for an hour.

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10. a minister ranking below a priest

11. the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people and Tibetan Buddhism

He gave her two pieces of advice. The first was to meditate. She said she could do that. The second, she says, was “to align myself with my enemy; to consider opening my heart to them. I laughed out loud. I’m like: ‘I’m going to law school to lock those guys up! I’m not aligning myself with anybody.’ He pats me on the knee and says, ‘O.K., just meditate.’”

Baliga returned to the United States and signed up for an intensive 10-day meditation course. On the final day, she had a spontaneous experience, not unlike Andy Grosmaire’s at his daughter’s deathbed, of total forgiveness of her father. Sitting cross-legged on an easy chair in her home in Berkeley, Calif., last winter, she described the experience as a “complete relinquishment of anger, hatred and the desire for retribution<sup>12</sup> and revenge.”

After law school at the University of Pennsylvania, Baliga clerked for a federal judge in Vermont. “That’s when I first saw restorative justice in action,” she says. The second part of the Dalai Lama’s prescription would be fulfilled after all.

[35] Early in 2011, Julie McBride called Baliga, who patiently explained why restorative justice wasn’t going to happen for her son. “This is a homicide case,” Baliga told Julie, “it’s in the Florida panhandle, we don’t know anybody who does this level of victim-offender dialogue, and I don’t think there even is victim-offender dialogue in Florida, period. Just forget it. This is never going to happen.”

“We want to hire you,” Julie insisted.

“We do burglaries, robberies,” Baliga protested. “No gun charges, no homicides. No rape. There’s no way. There’s never been a murder case that’s gone through restorative justice.”

But Julie wouldn’t let it go. “I think you’ll just fall in love with the Grosmaires,” she told Baliga. “You just need to talk to them.”

“I’m not going to cold-call them,” Baliga responded.

[40] “Oh, no, no,” Julie said. “They told me about restorative justice. They want all this to happen. I’m just doing the legwork because they lost their daughter.”

“O.K. So wait, what? You’re talking to them?”

Baliga says she thought that Julie McBride was maybe a little deluded, traumatized, as she must have been, by what her son had done. She agreed to speak with the Grosmaires only if they called her, and within minutes of hanging up with Julie, her phone rang. Kate was on the other end.

Kate told her how Conor almost immediately turned himself in, and about Michael’s coming to the hospital before going to see his son in jail. At first, Baliga says, “I had mistrust of the potential for people to be this amazing.” After a few minutes of talking with them, though, she says, “I just couldn’t keep saying no.”

A conference call was quickly arranged that included the McBrides, the Grosmaires, Baliga, DeFoor and Conor’s lawyer, and a capital-crime specialist named Greg Cummings. Baliga was asking questions, trying to figure out how her diversion process might work in Florida, where nothing like it existed.

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12. **Retribution** (*noun*): punishment inflicted on someone as vengeance for a wrong

[45] Then DeFoor had an idea: “What about the pre-plea conference?” Right away the lawyers knew this could work. A pre-plea conference is a meeting between the prosecutor and the defendant’s lawyer at which a plea deal is worked out to bring to a judge. Anyone can attend, it’s off the record and nothing said can be used in court. All of those conditions would also fulfill the requirements of a restorative-justice community conference.

The only obstacle that remained — and everyone knew it was a big one — was the prosecutor, Jack Campbell.

The Grosmaires’ request was not without risk to Campbell. He is ambitious and approving an alternative-justice process brought by a woman from California that might result in a murderer receiving a lighter sentence would most likely make him appear soft on crime. On the other hand, “opposing a church deacon asking for mercy for his daughter’s murderer has its own problems,” DeFoor says. “But the safe course was for Jack Campbell to say ‘no.’ The circumstances did not lend themselves to him being bold.”

Campbell did his own research, and once satisfied that the conference wouldn’t violate his oath or, he says, “the duty I owed to every other parent and every other child in this town,” he called Cummings, Conor’s lawyer, whom he knew and respected, to work out the details. Campbell told Cummings that he would not necessarily abide by whatever wishes the other parties had regarding sentencing. “Just because I’m participating,” he told Cummings, “doesn’t mean I’m going to sign off on the product of this meeting.”

The day of the conference, June 22, 2011, was hot and humid. Baliga and the Grosmaires arrived first at the small room inside Leon County Jail where the meeting would take place. Baliga felt it important that Ann be represented at the conference, so while she arranged the molded plastic chairs in a circle, the Grosmaires placed a number of Ann’s belongings in the center of the room: a blanket Ann’s best friend had crocheted for her; the Thespian of the Year trophy she won during senior year; a plaster cast of Ann’s uninjured hand. After the McBrides, the lawyers, a victims’ advocate, and the Grosmaires’ priest, the Rev. Mike Foley, from the Good Shepherd Catholic Church, arrived, Baliga asked the jailers to bring in Conor.

[50] Kate and Julie rose from their chairs. Conor stood awkwardly, not sure where to go or what to do. “Conor,” Baliga said, “go hug your mother.” Jail policy is that there be no physical contact between inmates and visitors, but Baliga had persuaded the sheriff to make an exception. He had not touched his parents in 15 months. He hugged them and then turned to the Grosmaires. Kate and Andy had continued to visit Conor periodically — Kate particularly wanted to be with him on Ann’s birthday. Now, he hugged them, too.

Baliga laid out the ground rules: Campbell would read the charges and summarize the police and sheriff’s reports; next the Grosmaires would speak; then Conor; then the McBrides; and finally Foley, representing the community. No one was to interrupt. Baliga showed a picture of Ann, sticking out her tongue as she looks at the camera. If her parents heard anything Ann wouldn’t like, they would hold up the picture to silence the offending party. Everyone seemed to feel the weight of what was happening. “You could feel her there,” Conor told me.

The Grosmaires spoke of Ann, her life, and how her death affected them. “We went from when she was being born all the way up,” Andy says. He spoke of what Ann loved to do, “like acting, and the things that were important in her life. She loved kids; she was our only daughter who wanted to give us grandchildren.” She had talked of opening a wildlife refuge after college. “To me she had really grown up, and she was a woman,” Andy says. “She was ready to go out and find her place in the world. That’s the part that makes me most sad.”

Kate described nursing Ann. She told of how Ann had a “lazy eye” and wore a patch as a little girl. “We worked for her to have good vision so she could drive and do all these things when she grew up. It’s another thing that’s lost with her death: You worked so hard to send her off into the world — what was the purpose of that now?”

“She did not spare [Conor] in any way the cost of what he did,” Baliga remembers. “There were no kid gloves, none. It was really, really tough. Way tougher than anything a judge could say.”

[55] “It was excruciating to listen to them talk,” Campbell says. “To look at the photo there. I still see her. It was as traumatic as anything I’ve ever listened to in my life.”

Conor was no less affected. “Hearing the pain in their voices and what my actions had done really opened my eyes to what I’ve caused,” Conor told me later. “Then they were like, ‘All right, Conor, it’s on you.’ And I had to give an account of what I did.” He leaned forward, placed his elbows on his knees and looked directly at the Grosmaires, who were seated opposite him. It was difficult to get started, but once he did the story came out of him in one long flow.

Ann and Conor fought on Friday night. Conor was tired and had homework and things to do the next day, so he wanted to drive home and turn in early. This was a frequent point of contention:<sup>13</sup> Ann being “more of a night person,” he told me later, “was sort of an ongoing issue.” He promised to return to Ann’s house to make breakfast, but when he overslept the next day, the fight continued. They fought by phone and text and tried to make up with a picnic that evening. Ann was excited about a good grade she got in a class and brought Champagne glasses and San Pellegrino Limonata to celebrate. But Conor forgot about the grade, and he recalled at the conference how disappointed Ann was. “It just all fell apart from there,” he told me.

After sunset, they went back to his parents’ house, but Conor fell asleep in the middle of a conversation. “Sunday morning rolls around, and I wake up, and she’s already awake and just pissed at me,” he recalled. “The fight picked up from where it left off. At some point” — this must have been hours later — “it escalated to the point to where she got all of her stuff, walked out the door, and she was just like: ‘Look, I’m done. I’m leaving.’”

Conor and Ann met in chemistry class during their sophomore year in high school, and in some ways, their relationship was still adolescent. They were in love and devoted to each other, but there was also a dependence that bordered on the obsessive. They were spending so much time together senior year that Conor was fired from his job for frequently not showing up, and his father told me of “wild swings” in their relationship. There was also constant fighting. “They were both good kids,” Julie McBride says, “but they were not good together.” Kate Grosmaire put it another way: “It’s like the argument became the relationship.”

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13. **Contention** (*noun*): heated disagreement



[60] Conor was prone to bursts of irrational rage. Ann never told her parents that he had struck her several times. Michael now feels, with searing regret, that he presented a bad example of bad-tempered behavior. "Conor learned how to be angry" is how he put it to me.

"We never talked about it, you know?" Conor told me. "We never tried to be like, 'Why do you do this and why do you do that?' Or, 'This is how I'm really feeling.' That kind of communication just wasn't there."

When Ann got up to leave that Sunday morning, Conor says it wasn't clear to him if she was leaving him or just leaving, but in any case he noticed Ann had left her water bottle, and he followed her to the driveway to give it to her. He found Ann in her car, crying. As Conor related it to me, and to Ann's parents that day, Ann said to him: "You don't love me. You don't care."

Conor leaned his head through the car window, exasperated. "What do you want from all of this?" he asked. "What do you want to happen?"

"I just want you to die," she said.

[65] Conor went back in the house, locked the door, went to his father's closet, pulled his shotgun down from a shelf, unlocked it, went to another room where the ammunition was kept, and loaded the gun. He sat down in the living room, put the gun under his chin, and his finger on the trigger.

"I just felt so frustrated, helpless, and angry," Conor says. "I was just so sick and tired of fighting. I wanted us to work out just because, I mean, I loved the girl. I still do. I was so torn — this was the girl that just said she wants me to die. I'm sick of the fighting. I just want to die, and yet I love her, and if I kill myself she might do something to herself."

All these thoughts were running through his head when Ann started banging on the door. Conor stood up, placed the weapon on a table and let her in. They went into his bedroom, and a few minutes later Conor went to get her something to drink. When he returned, he found her lying on the couch, breathing in a way that seemed to indicate distress. Her mysterious behavior made him so angry that he started screaming: "Let me help you! Tell me what's wrong!" Conor says that he would frequently fall into this "wrathful anger," and on this day "there was so much anger, and I kept snapping." Ann started sobbing, saying that Conor didn't care and that she wanted to die. "At this point, I just lost it," Conor says. He left the room and got the gun. Ann started to follow him, but she may have stumbled or tripped, because when Conor returned with the gun, she was on her knees halfway between the couch and the door. Conor was frustrated, exhausted and angry and "not thinking straight at all."

He pointed the gun at her, thinking, he says, that he could "scare her" so that "maybe she would snap out of it."

"Is this what you want?" he yelled. "Do you want to die?"

[70] "No, don't!" Ann held out her hand. Conor fired.

As Conor told the story, Andy's whole body began to shake. "Let me get this right," he said, and asked Conor about Ann being on her knees. Baliga remembers Andy's demeanor at this moment: "Andy is a very gentle person, but there was a way at that moment that he was extremely strong. There was just this incredible force of the strong, protective, powerful father coursing through him." Conor answered, clarifying precisely how helpless Ann was at the moment he took her life.

The Grosmaires remember that at this point, Campbell suggested a break. Campbell told me that he understood "the process was going to be horrific" and that he was the only one present with the power to halt it. During the break, he approached the Grosmaires in the hallway.

"You all had enough?" he asked. "I'm here for you all, and I don't mind being the heavy." Kate thanked him but declined his offer to end the conference early. As Campbell backed away, Baliga approached the Grosmaires. "I thought it was going to make sense," Andy told her. Later, Andy told me that he had fantasized or hoped that maybe it had been an accident, maybe Conor's finger had slipped — that he would hear something unexpected to help him make sense of his daughter's death. But Conor's recitation didn't bring that kind of solace.

When the group returned to the circle, Conor continued. He didn't try to shirk responsibility at the conference or in long conversations with me about the murder. "What I did was inexcusable," he told me. "There is no why, there are no excuses, there is no reason." He told Ann's parents that he had no plans to shoot their daughter. Still, he said, "on some subconscious level, I guess, I wanted it all to end. I don't know what happened. I just — emotions were overwhelming." He said he didn't remember deciding to pull the trigger, but he recognizes that it wasn't an accident, either.

[75] Conor said he stood there, ears ringing, with the smell of gunpowder in the air. The thought came into his head that he ought to kill himself, but he couldn't muster the will. Instead, he left the house and drove around in a daze until he decided to turn himself in.

Julie McBride was devastated. "I was sitting right next to him. It was awful to hear and to know: This is my son telling this. This is my son who did this."

When it was Michael McBride's turn to speak, sorrow overtook him and he told the group that if he had ever thought his shotgun would have harmed another person, he never would have kept it. Kate Grosmaire didn't bring it up at the conference, but she says she has thought a lot about that gun. "If that gun had not been in the house, our daughter would be alive," she told me.

When everyone had spoken, Baliga turned to the Grosmaires, and acknowledging their immediate loss, she asked what they would like to see happen to attempt restitution.<sup>14</sup> Kate looked at Conor and with great emotion told him that he would need "to do the good works of two people because Ann is not here to do hers."

The punitive element came last. Before the conference, Kate, who doesn't put much stock in the rehabilitative possibilities of prison, told Baliga that she would suggest a five-year sentence. Listening to Conor, however, she began to feel different, and when she was called on to speak, she said he should receive no less than 5 years, no more than 15.

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14. the act of making a wrong right

[80] Andy Grosmaire, sitting beside his wife, went next. He was so deeply affected by what he had heard, it was all he could do to say, “10 to 15 years.” The McBrides concurred. Conor said he didn’t think he should have a say.

All eyes turned to Campbell. A restorative-justice circle is supposed to conclude with a consensus decision, but Campbell refused to suggest a punishment. He only said he heard what was discussed and would take it under consideration. “I think the ultimate decision on punishment should be made based on cool reflection of the facts and the evidence in the case,” Campbell told me later. “I don’t think those conferences are the best prism for that.”

The Grosmaires were deeply disappointed. Andy in particular imagined that the end of the conference circle would be the beginning of the young man’s redemption. They expected a plea bargain<sup>15</sup> would be struck, and they could go on. Instead they had no idea where Campbell stood. “Had the circle really worked?” Kate asked.

Campbell would consult with community leaders, the head of a local domestic-violence shelter, and others before arriving at the sentence he would offer McBride. He told me that his boss, Willie Meggs, the state attorney, who Campbell once believed would never sign off on a sentence of less than 40 years for Conor, was “extremely supportive” once he understood the Grosmaires’ perspective. “He wanted to be sure I had gone through the proper analysis,” Campbell says, “and that it was for the right motivations. Because he knew there would be a backlash.”

Three weeks after the conference, citing Conor’s “senseless act of domestic violence,” Campbell wrote the Grosmaires to inform them he would offer Conor a choice: a 20-year sentence plus 10 years of probation, or 25 years in prison. Conor took the 20 years, plus probation.

[85] Campbell told me that in arriving at those numbers, he needed to feel certain that “a year or 20 years down the road, I could tell somebody why I did it. Because if Conor gets out in 20 years and goes and kills his next girlfriend, I’ve screwed up terrible. So I hope I’m right.”

In March the Grosmaires invited me to their home, on Tallahassee’s northern fringe. We sat down in their living room, near a modest shrine to Ann: items that represented her at the conference are there, along with her cellphone, and a small statue of an angel that Kate splurged for not long after Ann’s death that reminds her of Ann.

The Grosmaires said they didn’t forgive Conor for his sake but for their own. “Everything I feel, I can feel because we forgave Conor,” Kate said. “Because we could forgive, people can say her name. People can think about my daughter, and they don’t have to think, Oh, the murdered girl. I think that when people can’t forgive, they’re stuck. All they can feel is the emotion surrounding that moment. I can be sad, but I don’t have to stay stuck in that moment where this awful thing happened. Because if I do, I may never come out of it. Forgiveness for me was self-preservation.”

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15. an arrangement between a prosecutor and a defendant in which the defendant pleads guilty for a lesser sentence

Still, their forgiveness affected Conor, too, and not only in the obvious way of reducing his sentence. “With the Grosmaires’ forgiveness,” he told me, “I could accept the responsibility and not be condemned.” Forgiveness doesn’t make him any less guilty, and it doesn’t absolve him of what he did, but in refusing to become Conor’s enemy, the Grosmaires deprived him of a certain kind of refuge — of feeling abandoned and hated — and placed the reckoning for the crime squarely in his hands. I spoke to Conor for six hours over three days, in a prison administrator’s office at the Liberty Correctional Institution near Tallahassee. At one point he sat with his hands and fingers open in front of him, as if he were holding something. Eyes cast downward, he said, “There are moments when you realize: I am in prison. I am in prison because I killed someone. I am in prison because I killed the girl I loved.”

Conor got a job at the prison’s law library. He spends a lot of his time reading novels by George R. R. Martin, the author of the *Game of Thrones* series. He enrolled voluntarily in the anger-management class offered at the prison and continues to meet with his classmates since completing it. He told me that when he gets out he plans to volunteer in animal shelters, because Ann loved animals. As a condition of his probation, Conor will be required to speak to local groups about teen-dating violence. His parents visit him regularly, and they talk on the phone almost every day. They talk about his sister, Katy, baseball, and food, Michael says, as well as the issues he needs to focus on to come out a better person than he was when he went in. “As long as I’m self-motivated enough,” Conor says, “I can really improve myself.” The Grosmaires come, too, about once a month.

[90] “I’m not worried about him getting out in 20 years at all,” Baliga told me. “We got to look more deeply at the root of where this behavior came from than we would have had it gone a trial route — the anger issues in the family, exploring the drama in their relationship, the whole conglomeration<sup>16</sup> of factors that led to that moment. There’s no explaining what happened, but there was just a much more nuanced conversation about it, which can give everyone more confidence that Conor will never do this again. And the Grosmaires got answers to questions that would have been difficult to impossible to get in a trial.”

Not everyone felt comfortable with the restorative-justice circle or how it resolved: there were angry letters on local news sites denouncing the sentence as too light. Ann’s sisters supported their parents’ decision to forgive Conor and seek restorative justice but declined to participate in the process (they also declined to speak to me). In hindsight, Kate sees the restorative-justice process as a sort of end in itself. “Just being able to have the circle made it a success,” Kate said.

Andy felt a little differently. “Hearing Conor,” he said, “I made sounds I’ve never heard myself make. To hear that your daughter was on the floor saying ‘no’ and holding her hands up and still be shot is just — it’s just not...” He tried to explain the horror of such knowledge, but it’s not easy. Even experiencing the deaths of other family members, he said, has given him “no context” to understand what happened to Ann. Andy doesn’t attribute Ann’s death to “God’s plan” and rolls his eyes at “God just wanted another angel” sentimentality. But not being “stuck” in anger seems to give the Grosmaires the emotional distance necessary to grapple with such questions without the gravity of their grief pulling them into a black hole. I talked a lot to Kate and Andy over several months. They don’t intellectualize what happened or repress emotions — I saw them cry and I heard them laugh — but they were always able to speak thoughtfully about Ann’s death and its aftermath.

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16. a number of different things that come together to form a whole

As much as the Grosmaires say that forgiveness helped them, so, too, has the story of their forgiveness. They've spoken about it to church groups and prayer breakfasts around Tallahassee and plan to do more talks. The story is a signpost in the wilderness, something solid and decent they can return to while wandering in this parallel universe without their youngest daughter.

Kate Grosmaire keeps asking herself if she has really forgiven Conor. "I think about it all the time," she said. "Is that forgiveness still there? Have I released that debt?" Even as the answer comes back yes, she says, it can't erase her awareness of what she no longer has. "Forgiving Conor doesn't change the fact that Ann is not with us. My daughter was shot, and she died. I walk by her empty bedroom at least twice a day."

*Correction: January 20, 2013*

An article on Jan. 6 about a form of criminal justice that emphasizes reparation by the offender to the victim or to those connected to the victim referred incorrectly to Andy Grosmaire, whose daughter Ann was shot to death by her boyfriend, Conor McBride. Grosmaire is studying to become a deacon; he is not yet one. The article also misstated the name of a school in Tallahassee, Fla., attended by McBride. It is Leon High School, not Leon County High School.

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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
  - A. Restorative justice is less effective when it is used to address serious crimes because some crimes are unforgivable.
  - B. When offenders are forgiven by victims through restorative justice, the victims can heal and the offenders can understand their actions and better themselves.
  - C. Young people should have more opportunities for restorative justice, as they are less in control of their emotions and more likely to act impulsively or violently.
  - D. While restorative justice can help the victims, it's important to use punishment and rehabilitation to ensure that offenders don't commit another crime.
  
2. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Ann's face was covered in bandages, and she was intubated and unconscious, but Andy felt her say, 'Forgive him.' His response was immediate. 'No,' he said out loud." (Paragraph 7)
  - B. "Visitors to Leon County Jail sit in a row of chairs before a reinforced-glass partition, facing the inmates on the other side — like the familiar setup seen in movies. Kate took the seat opposite Conor, and he immediately told her how sorry he was." (Paragraph 17)
  - C. "The processes are designed to be flexible enough to handle violent crime like assault, but they are rarely used in those situations. And no one I spoke to had ever heard of restorative justice applied for anything as serious as murder." (Paragraph 25)
  - D. "Conor says that he would frequently fall into this 'wrathful anger,' and on this day 'there was so much anger, and I kept snapping.' Ann started sobbing, saying that Conor didn't care and that she wanted to die." (Paragraph 67)
  - E. "'Because we could forgive, people can say her name. People can think about my daughter, and they don't have to think, Oh, the murdered girl. I think that when people can't forgive, they're stuck.'" (Paragraph 87)
  - F. "Still, their forgiveness affected Conor, too, and not only in the obvious way of reducing his sentence. 'With the Grosmaires' forgiveness,' he told me, 'I could accept the responsibility and not be condemned.'" (Paragraph 88)
  
3. Which statement best describes the author's purpose in the text?
  - A. to show how two families affected by a horrible tragedy were positively affected by restorative justice
  - B. to prove that offenders are less likely to reoffend when they go through restorative justice and are forgiven
  - C. to help readers understand why restorative justice is rarely used in serious cases such as murder
  - D. to help readers understand humans' ability to forgive and encourage them to be more forgiving in their daily lives

4. PART A: How was Andy McBride affected by Conor's account of Ann's murder?
- A. Andy felt like a huge burden was lifted from him after he learned the details of what happened to his daughter.
  - B. Andy felt reassured that Conor felt guilty for his actions, as he was distraught while describing what he did to Ann.
  - C. Andy lost his faith after hearing Conor's account of events, as he had convinced himself that it was all an accident.
  - D. Andy was shocked and horrified to hear the details of how Ann was killed and felt her loss more deeply.
5. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "Andy is a very gentle person, but there was a way at that moment that he was extremely strong. There was just this incredible force of the strong, protective, powerful father coursing through him." (Paragraph 71)
  - B. "Later, Andy told me that he had fantasized or hoped that maybe it had been an accident, maybe Conor's finger had slipped — that he would hear something unexpected to help him make sense of his daughter's death." (Paragraph 73)
  - C. "Hearing Conor,' he said, 'I made sounds I've never heard myself make. To hear that your daughter was on the floor saying 'no' and holding her hands up and still be shot is just — it's just not...' He tried to explain the horror of such knowledge, but it's not easy." (Paragraph 92)
  - D. "Andy doesn't attribute Ann's death to 'God's plan' and rolls his eyes at 'God just wanted another angel' sentimentality." (Paragraph 92)
6. PART A: How does the author's discussion of Sujatha Baliga's own experiences with abuse and forgiveness contribute to the text?
- A. It emphasizes how much more difficult it is for people to forgive offenders who are close to them, as opposed to strangers.
  - B. It suggests that forgiveness and restorative justice are not always the right course of action for victims and offenders.
  - C. It shows how sometimes restorative justice isn't necessary between an offender and a victim; forgiveness is enough.
  - D. It shows how forgiveness can free victims from the painful emotions that they often continue to carry with them.
7. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "Despite the torments of her childhood, Baliga excelled in school. As an undergraduate at Harvard-Radcliffe, she was fairly certain she wanted to become a prosecutor and lock up child molesters." (Paragraph 29)
  - B. "Baliga wrote something like: 'Anger is killing me, but it motivates my work. How do you work on behalf of oppressed and abused people without anger as the motivating force?'" (Paragraph 30)
  - C. "'I'm like: 'I'm going to law school to lock those guys up! I'm not aligning myself with anybody.' He pats me on the knee and says, 'O.K., just meditate.'" (Paragraph 32)
  - D. "Sitting cross-legged on an easy chair in her home in Berkeley, Calif., last winter, she described the experience as a 'complete relinquishment of anger, hatred and the desire for retribution and revenge.'" (Paragraph 33)

8. How does paragraph 90 contribute to our understanding of what restorative justice can accomplish?
- A. It shows how the communication used in restorative justice can help all parties better understand the crime and prevent it from happening again.
  - B. It emphasizes how offenders are less likely to reoffend when they feel like they're supported by friends and family.
  - C. It reveals that the family of victims are less likely to be upset about a crime when they fully understand why it was committed.
  - D. It suggests that the lighter sentences decided on through restorative justice make offenders more motivated to prove that they won't reoffend.
9. What connection does the author draw between victims forgiving the people who have hurt them and a feeling of inner peace?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In the text, the Grosmaires say that they have forgiven Conor for killing their daughter. How are the Grosmaires and Conor affected by the reconciliation between them? Do you think you could forgive someone for such a crime? Why or why not?
2. In the text, the author describes how Conor is working on himself while in prison and helping others. Do you think this is enough for Conor to be redeemed? Why or why not?
3. While the Grosmaires suggested Conor spend between 5 and 15 years in prison, he got 20 years and 10 years of probation. Do you think this a fair punishment? Why or why not? Why do you think the Grosmaires asked for such a short sentence, considering the severity of his crime?
4. In the text, the author discusses how the Grosmaires share their experiences with others. How do you think other people can learn from their experiences with restorative justice and forgiveness? Do you think the Grosmaires' experience with restorative justice is proof that it's better than punitive justice? Why or why not?