

November 2006

# Virtue In Action

Forgiveness Transcends Violence

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



“The hurt is great, but they don’t balance hurt with hate.”

GERTRUDE HUNTINGTON, A MICHIGAN RESEARCHER

## VIRTUE IN ACTION



AP photo

**After learning about reports** of the shootings that took place at an Amish school in Lancaster County Pennsylvania, our initial reactions were most likely sadness and grief for the families of the victims. We may have also expected the families of the victims to lash out at the family of the murderer or threaten a lawsuit and demand justice. Fortunately, the enduring story of this senseless act of violence will not likely be the killings themselves, but rather the forgiveness expressed by the victims' families along with the rest of their Amish community.

As they have struggled with grief over the deaths of five of their children, they have turned the other cheek, urging everyone to forgive the killer. Rarely, have we witnessed such a simple, yet powerful expression of forgiveness in the face of tragedy. The response of this Amish community offers all of us lessons for our own lives.

### **Tragedy Strikes**

On the morning of October 2<sup>nd</sup>, Charles C. Roberts IV, a 32-year-old married milkman and father of three, entered a one-room schoolhouse in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, brandishing a 9mm handgun. After sending away the adults and all of the male students, their teacher, Emma Mae Zook, raced to a nearby farm and called 911.

When state troopers arrived on the lane outside, Roberts called 911 on his cell phone and told the dispatcher, "If you don't get these police out of here, I'm going to start

shooting." Police traced the phone and called Roberts, who didn't answer. Before police could take any further action, Roberts fired one shot after another in rapid succession. After shooting ten of the girls, Roberts turned the gun on himself. Five girls—ages 7 to 13—died in the tragedy.

While Roberts' actual motive is not clear, suicide notes left to his wife and children indicate his grief over the 1997 death of an infant daughter and guilt over events from his past. Relatives of Roberts say they had no hint that he would commit such violent acts. Others who knew him described him as troubled.

### **An Unexpected Response**

This terrible tragedy has, of course, received global coverage. Yet to the world's amazement, Amish leaders issued a statement that they forgave the killer and offered condolences to his family even before they made the

funeral arrangements. According to a Roberts family spokesman, an “Amish neighbor came that very night, around 9 o’clock in the evening, and offered forgiveness to the family.”

A grieving grandfather also used this as an opportunity to teach his remaining grandchildren a lesson in forgiveness. Rev. Robert Schenck who was with the family after the shootings said that “As we were standing next to the body of this 13-year-old girl, the grandfather was tutoring the young boys, he was making a point, just saying to the family ‘We must not think evil of this man.’ It was one of the most touching things I have seen in 25 years of Christian ministry.”

### Heroism Amid the Horror

Still another story of grace under fire was yet to emerge from Lancaster County.

According to a report from a wounded victim, one of the older other students, Marian Fisher, asked the gunman to shoot her first. Another of the older girls said, “You can shoot me second.”

A Mennonite housewife explained they were probably hoping the younger girls would be spared, or rescued in time, adding “It really showed a tremendous amount of courage. It’s really amazing that girls of that age would offer themselves up. I know a lot of adults who wouldn’t do that.”

### Days of Mourning

The Amish are descendants of German immigrants of the Anabaptist faith. They reject most modern conveniences, even automobiles, in an effort to live out their religious beliefs in simplicity and to encourage a greater sense of community.

Four days after the shootings, a horse-and-buggy Amish funeral procession headed down Mine Road toward Bart Cemetery. In the bright October sunshine, preceded by two mounted police officers, a procession of dozens of dark horse-drawn carriages made their way in somber dignity through the tranquil countryside to a hilltop graveyard.

When the cemetery route passed by the gunman’s house, a Roberts’ family member did not retreat within, but sat outside in silent tribute to their neighbors who had so quickly offered them words of forgiveness. But the charity of the Amish community went far beyond words.

### Forgiveness in Action

Backing up their words with action, the Amish community manifested the depth of their charity. In an initial neighborly gesture, the grieving Amish families offered food to Roberts’ survivors “because they too had suffered a loss.” Additionally, parents of the murdered girls invited relatives of Roberts to their home. On the night of October 3rd, Marie Roberts and her family accepted, and were met with embraces.

Dozens of Amish neighbors came to the funeral of the quiet milkman who killed five young girls and wounded four more. When Roberts was buried in his wife’s family plot behind a small Methodist Church, over half of the 75 mourners were Amish. Rhita Rhoads, a midwife present at the births of two of the five girls who were killed, explained, “If you have Jesus in your heart and he has forgiven you... [how] can you not forgive other people?”

Despite Amish reluctance to accept financial aid, a world-wide collection has been established to aid with medical expenses, and has attracted a wide divergence of contributors: large corporate donors such as Wal-Mart, and one-dollar donations from 20 churches in



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**Vocabulary**

**brandishing**-a shaking or waving as of a weapon.

**Compassion**- feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help.

**Descendants**-a person whose descent can be traced to a particular individual or group.

**Diocese**-the churches or district under the jurisdiction of a bishop.

**Divergence**-the spreading out from a common point or cause.

**Fateful**-having momentous significance or consequences.

**Forgiveness**-the act of forgiving a mistake or an offense.(we need to define this outside of the word itself)

**Justice**-the upholding of what is just especially fair treatment and due reward or punishment in accordance with honor, standards, or law.

**Impoverished**-poverty-stricken

**Midwife**-a person trained to assist women in childbirth.

**Reluctance**-unwillingness.

**Somber**-gloomy, depressing, or extremely serious.

**Tranquil**-free from commotion or disturbance.

**Tribute**-a gift, testimonial, compliment, or the like, given as due or in acknowledgment of gratitude or esteem.

an impoverished African diocese. Amazingly, the Amish have also set up a charitable fund for the family of the killer.

Is it any wonder the world sat up and took notice of this simple Amish community?

“It’s the love, the forgiveness, the heartfelt forgiveness they have toward the family. I broke down and cried seeing it displayed,” commented Bruce Porter, a fire department chaplain from Morrison, Colorado, who had come to Pennsylvania to offer help and attend the burial.

Shortly after the shooting, Marie Roberts summed up the impact of this profound witness of charity. “Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. The forgiveness you’ve given has touched our hearts in a way no words can describe... Your compassion has reached beyond

our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you.”

**Lessons for All of Us**

One fateful October morning, evil shattered the outward peace of an Amish community, but it could not destroy the internal peace of a community of people willing to accept the challenge to forgive. As Gertrude Huntington, a Michigan researcher who has written a book about children in Amish society, stated, “The hurt is great, but they don’t balance hurt with hate.” While it is hard to imagine the pain and sorrow the Amish of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania must have felt after seeing their loved ones die in this tragedy, it is even more remarkable to learn that this community’s first instinct was to forgive the person responsible for their loss. In doing so, they have taught us all an important lesson in the power of forgiveness amidst the suffering that occurs in all of our lives.

[WWW.VIRTUEINACTION.ORG](http://WWW.VIRTUEINACTION.ORG)

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### Virtues Highlighted

Forgiveness, Compassion

### Lesson Goals

- Help students understand the virtue of forgiveness, and its power in healing both those harmed and the party enacting the harm
- Develop awareness that out of horrible events, goodness can come through the actions of those involved
- Inspire students to live out the virtue of forgiveness in our own lives: in school, within our families, and among our peers
- Encourage students to evaluate our present culture in terms of attitudes and responses when a party is harmed in some way

## Virtue In Action

*Connecting Virtues to Our World*

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### Discussion Question Options

1. Discuss Gertrude Huntington's quote regarding the Amish: "They don't balance hurt with hate." How difficult do you think it has been for the Amish families who have had loved ones murdered to forgive the killer and to reach out to his family, as opposed to expressing hatred?
2. Do you believe that our larger society and within our peer groups we live out forgiveness as this Amish community has?  
 Why is it so hard to forgive?  
 Do you think the culture of our society promotes or works against forgiveness?  
 What are some examples of simple events that occur almost daily and require us to forgive others? (peers who say hurtful things about us, a student who doesn't do his or her fair share of a group project, etc.)
3. How could forgiveness impact our peer group, school, or community?
3. Many observers attribute the forgiveness of the Amish to their strong sense of community. In what ways, does being a member of a community make it easier to forgive others?
4. In Marie Roberts' letter she said the forgiveness and compassion of the Amish community "changed the world." What does this statement mean? Remind students of the worldwide coverage of the initial tragedy and how it might have been covered had it not been for the actions of the Amish community.
5. The Amish believe in living out the virtue of forgiveness based on their Christian faith. What do other religious traditions teach about forgiveness?  
 Does forgiveness make sense from a secular, or non-religious perspective?
6. When confronted with a situation in

which you have been wronged, what are “the positives” that forgiveness brings? Does forgiveness only benefit the betrayer or does it also benefit the betrayed?

7. The community of West Nickel, Pennsylvania recently tore down the one-room schoolhouse and plan to replace it with a quiet pasture. Discuss the symbolism of this “memorial” to those who have died. What values does this reflect about the Amish community? Are these values different from our own?
8. What do you think of the simple lifestyle of the Amish people (no cars, no electricity, and strong sense of community)? Why do you think they deprive themselves of things we consider to be basic necessities? Are there any lessons we can learn from this?
9. Justice is defined as fair treatment, and due reward or punishment in accordance with the law or standards of society. . . . In what ways are forgiveness and justice related? Is it possible for us individually, and as a society to enact both justice and forgiveness?

### Journal Writing Options

1. Describe a situation in your life when you decided to forgive someone who had offended you. How did extending forgiveness make you feel, and affect you the one forgiven?
2. Describe the “ripple effect” of an act of kindness you have experienced in your own life, and also an act of cruelty that you have experienced or read about. .

### Extended Learning Projects

1. Ask students to conduct research and report to the class on

the history and culture of the Amish community. If such a community exists in your area, consider taking a field trip.

2. Watch *The Witness* (1985), a 1985 film that depicts a big city detective that is sent to live in an Amish community. Discuss how the secular values of the detective conflict with the traditional values of the Amish people. Does this movie make any valid critiques of our societal values?
3. Organize a speech contest within your class on violence prevention. Speeches should explore the extent of the problem of school violence and propose viable solutions.
4. Ask students to design a conflict-resolution program in your school to train students as conflict managers to help others resolve conflicts non-violently.

### Internet Resources

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1018/p09s02-cogn.html>

Christian Science Monitor: Marie Roberts' Letter of Thank You to the Amish Community

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in\\_pictures/5400616.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/5400616.stm)

BBC News: Pictures from the Amish Community

<http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/gallery/0,22010,5011600-5006020-1,00.html>

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