

Real Life Stories

How the Amish Community Taught Me About the Power of Forgiveness

After her son committed a horrific crime, Terri Roberts expected rage and calls for vengeance. What she was greeted with instead healed an entire community.

On October 1, 2006, my son Charlie, his wife, Marie, and their children came over to our house in Strasburg, PA. Later, as we said our farewells, Charlie seemed quieter than usual. It would be the last time I'd see him alive.



The next day, on my lunch break at work, I heard sirens and wondered what could be happening in our small rural community. Just as I got back to my desk, my husband, Chuck, called. He asked me to come immediately to Charlie and Marie's home. As I hurried down the stairway from my office, a sense of foreboding squeezed my stomach.

The drive was only 10 minutes, but I heard on the radio that there had been a shooting at an Amish schoolhouse nearby. Children were among the dead and injured. Charlie drove a truck for his father-in-law's business collecting milk from area dairy farms, and he often parked right near the school. Fear clutched at my heart. Could he have intervened to help and been killed? As soon as I got to his house and pushed through the crowd of police and reporters, I asked a trooper if my son was alive. "No, ma'am," he responded somberly.

I turned to my husband. With pain in his eyes, he choked out, "It was Charlie. He killed those girls."

All I recall is falling to the ground in a fetal position, wailing. Eventually, we were walked to the police cruiser and driven home. My husband is a retired police officer. I could not imagine his feelings as he was escorted out like a perpetrator after 30 years of being the one who did the escorting.

Absorbing the truth

Chuck sat at our breakfast table, crying. I had not seen my strong, protective husband shed tears since his father passed away years before. Now he could not even lift his head. He'd covered his face with a dish towel to control the flow of tears, his eyes sunken and dull.

I had no answers. Even after hearing from police what the survivors saw, I struggled to accept the reality: My beloved son had walked into the schoolhouse with an arsenal of guns, boarded up the windows and doors, bound and shot 10 girls, ages 6 to 13, then killed himself. Five of the children died.



Later, anger set in, mixing with my pain. Where were you, God? I found myself screaming out in my head. How could you let this happen? I didn't understand how Charlie could leave his children fatherless, to face the shame and the horror. And the gentle Amish families—what darkness had so possessed Charlie that he would want to rip away daughters as precious as his own? And I felt enormous self-doubt. I didn't know what kind of mother could bear a son who could perpetrate such horrible deeds.

The first miracle

As we sat and sobbed, I looked through our window and caught sight of a stalwart figure dressed in black. It was our neighbor Henry Stoltzfoos, whom we'd known for years. He is an Amishman, and was dressed in his formal visiting attire and wide-brimmed straw hat. Striding up to the front door, Henry knocked.

Mind you, Henry had friends and relatives whose daughters had died in that schoolhouse, at the hands of our son. Like all the Amish, he had every reason to hate us.

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As I opened the door, I saw that Henry didn't look angry. Instead, compassion radiated from his face. Walking over to Chuck, he put one hand on his shoulder. The first words I heard him speak took my breath away: "Roberts, we love you. This was not your doing. You must not blame yourself."

"We had never needed curtains, because we live in the country," says Terri, "But we had to hang up sheets in the windows."

For more than an hour, Henry stood by my husband, consoling him and affirming his love and forgiveness. Chuck kept saying that we had to move away from the people Charlie had hurt, but Henry reassured Chuck that there was no reason for us to move. The Amish did not hold our family responsible for Charlie's actions. "I think the devil used your boy," Henry said.

By the time he left, my husband was sitting up straight, some of the burden eased from his shoulders. To this day I call Henry "my angel in black." He was far from the only one to show tremendous grace and forgiveness in the face of loss. The next day, a group of Amish leaders walked into the yard of Marie's parents' house. Every one of them had a family member who had died in the schoolhouse, but they did not raise fists in fury. They reached to pull Marie's father into their embrace. Together, the families of the victims and the father-in-law of their killer wept and prayed.

Forgiveness in action

While I was grateful for the reaction we received, I can't say I understood it. "If we will not forgive, how can we be forgiven?" a spokesman for the Amish said on the news shows covering the shooting. "Forgiveness is a choice. We choose to forgive," another spokesperson added.

These were not just words. The Amish insisted that part of the funds donated to help the victims' families go to Marie and her children—for they'd lost a husband and father. One grieving father of a girl Charlie had killed visited us. I shared how brokenhearted I was that our son Zach would not attend Charlie's funeral—he couldn't forgive him. I asked him to pray that Zach would have a change of heart.

"Of course," he said. Then, "Would you like me to call him?"

The Amish don't keep phones in their homes and have a distaste for such technology, so his offer deeply touched me. He left a message asking Zach to forgive his brother and come support his family.

A few days later, Zach was there. He told us later that our pleas had softened his heart, but his turning point had been that message.



Lesson learned

There was still more kindness. After my son's service, at the grave site, the media jostled to take pictures. All at once, at least 30 Amish emerged from behind a shed, the men in their tall, wide-brimmed hats, the women in white bonnets. The group fanned out into a crescent between the grave site and the photographers, their backs offering a solid wall of black to the cameras. They did this to show compassion for the family of the man who had taken so much from them.

Fresh anger shook me then. I could think only of the terrible wrong Charlie had done. At that moment I was not sure that I could ever forgive the unspeakable evil he'd perpetrated on these young parents, his own children, our family. Yet, neither could I stop loving Charlie. He was my son.

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I held on to my composure as our Amish guests stepped forward to express their condolences. Among the first to approach us were Chris and Rachel Miller, whose daughters, Lena and Mary Liz, had died in their arms. Murmuring a greeting to Chuck and me, they added softly, “We are so sorry for your loss.”

Sorry for our loss. I could barely choke out a response. Our son had taken the lives of their daughters, and here they were comforting us!

It was a moment of sudden, healing clarity for me. Forgiveness is a choice. The Amish had made that very clear, but now I knew what it meant: Forgiveness isn't a feeling. These sweet parents were as grief-stricken as I was, their hearts broken like mine. I did not have to stop feeling anger, hurt and utter bewilderment at the horrific decisions Charlie had made. I only had to make a choice: to forgive.

And, I understood the other part of what the Amish had said: If we cannot forgive, how can we be forgiven? I am not a murderer, but I have committed wrongs as well, and I was forgiven! How can I, in turn, not offer the forgiveness I've received—even to my own son? Especially to my own son.

Over the last decade, the love our family was given has inspired me to spread the message of forgiveness wherever I can, often hand in hand with the Amish families my son had harmed. October 2, 2006, brought a tsunami to my world, but I've learned that without storms, there'd be no rainbows. I don't know what is coming, but I am not afraid. I've come to trust my life to the God of both storms and rainbows.

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