

[Culture](#)

[Book Reviews](#)



Not So Sorry takes a sweeping look at the way forgiveness has been portrayed as a necessary element of healing; healing for victims, yes, but even for abusers.
(Unsplash/Bailey Burton)



by Colleen Connell Mitchell

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

August 24, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Kaya Oakes

**Not
So
Sorry**



**Abusers, False Apologies,
and the Limits of Forgiveness**

Not So Sorry: Abusers, False Apologies, and the Limits of Forgiveness

Kaya Oakes

214 pages; Broadleaf Books

\$28.99

"Is forgiveness that's forced on us true forgiveness?"

This question from the film "[Women Talking](#)" is quoted by Kaya Oakes in her latest work, [Not So Sorry: Abusers, False Apologies, and the Limits of Forgiveness](#), striking to the heart of the book's central question about forgiveness. Oakes' purpose in the book, according to its introduction, is to explore whether forgiveness as it is defined in American Christian society, has limits. Could a peaceful unforgiveness ever be the best outcome for the victim?

Not So Sorry goes on to take a sweeping look at the way forgiveness has been portrayed as a necessary element of healing; healing for victims, yes, but even for abusers. Oakes writes that our American notion of forgiveness is infused with the influences of philosophy, psychology and religion, leading us to the assumption that forgiveness is always virtuous — the good and right thing to do — and that unforgiveness is a sin and moral failing.

Working from the perspective of large-scale institutional abuse scandals, Oakes crafts a new narrative about the "virtue" of forgiveness and its shortcomings as a performative action that placates abusers' consciences far more often than it heals the collective and individual damage.

Advertisement

Indicting institutions such as the Catholic Church, the largely unmonitored evangelical pastor network and American society as a whole, Oakes posits that these entities have relied on the notion that simply asking for forgiveness for their harm is enough — not only to merit forgiveness, but equally, to place the onus of responsibility on the moral aptitude of their victims and, by default, the general public. The idea that forgiveness is earned by simply being asked for passes over the complexities of trauma, the need for space to adequately grieve a tragedy and the right to restitution for those affected by violence and abuse.

"We need a more forgiving definition of forgiveness," writes Oakes near the end of the book, and that becomes the retroactive map of her comprehensive appraisal and compelling evidence that forgiveness in America is tied to the preservation of power, at the expense of victims who are viewed as heroic if they forgive and morally defective if they choose not to.

Oakes poses an interesting comparison between the Christian interpretation of Jesus as all-merciful and the Jewish concept of forgiveness that he was more likely operating from. Relying on the wisdom of several Jewish theologians, Oakes describes a Jewish framework for forgiveness that is less about individual absolution and more about communal care, allowing the person on whom violence was enacted a path back into the community through repair and reparation.



(Unsplash/Nick Night)

Oakes refers to the oft noted example of Jesus forgiving those who crucified him as evidence that he would universally demand the same from his followers. She points out an important and overlooked part of his words: "Father, forgive them, for they

know not what they do." What, then, do we do with the ones among us who well know what they do, but gloss it over with a simple "mea culpa"?

Oakes proposes that a more comprehensive healing is achieved when these individuals and institutions are held accountable for repairing the damage they have done through restorative justice. With justice rather than forgiveness at the heart of the intention, victims are centered and perpetrators' narratives rightly become the backstory.

The work of restorative justice moves our concept of healing beyond the binary of punishment/forgiveness and into a more nuanced consideration of the kind of justice that allows communities affected by violence to heal. Pursuing paths of justice and the practice of making atonement are both valuable, since they allow for forgiveness to be considered as one possible outcome of the process, not the exclusive requirement for healing. Ultimately, notes Oakes, adopting models that focus on atonement, amends making and collective repair leads to deeper transformation than the forced acceptance of disingenuous apologies.

With justice rather than forgiveness at the heart of the intention, victims are centered and perpetrators' narratives rightly become the backstory.

[Tweet this](#)

In drawing toward a conclusion of this intriguing work, Oakes offers her readers the following invitation: "When someone hurts us and says, 'Please forgive me,' we need to get comfortable taking time to reply. Maybe even years. Maybe lifetimes. Maybe never." Herein lies the permission that victims of violence and abuse need yet are scarcely granted. Victims deserve the agency to decide how, when, where and to whom they grant forgiveness — and, perhaps most importantly, if they do so at all.

I'll admit that there was a point in reading this book when I began to wonder if the conclusion would be a saccharine answer. Refreshingly, and true to Oakes' journalistic track record of moving forward the discussion of difficult topics, I instead closed the pages with a freeing notion to consider further. For those readers who relish a deep consideration and unique perspective on what can feel like a worn-out conversation, *Not So Sorry* is worth your attention.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 27-Oct 10, 2024** print issue under the headline: New book from Kaya Oakes explores the limits of forgiveness.