

Book Review

Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct (Hardcover). McCullough, Michael E. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008. 298 Pages, \$24.95.

An article by the Rev. Dr. John Bauman about forgiveness, which appeared in the *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* last year, prompted me to buy Michael McCullough's book about revenge and forgiveness. I had heard good things about it and I had been meaning to buy it, so I finally did.

In it, Dr. McCullough, a psychology professor at the University of Miami, explains the probable reasons why revenge and forgiveness evolved in our human ancestors and their evolutionary roots in lower animals. If you think that is not particularly relevant to you or your work as a care provider, think again. It contains compelling real-life stories of revenge and forgiveness.

The first two chapters explore how revenge and forgiveness are both inherent aspects of human nature, and the role of revenge in wars, terrorism, and homicides; the last of which has been best-documented in school-based killings over the years. The next two chapters explain how and why revenge probably evolved, and McCullough does an excellent job of concisely explaining the important evolutionary concepts of adaptation, inheritance, selection, and variation in layman's language. He describes three adaptive functions of revenge, two of which are related to deterring aggression from others, which made obvious sense to me. The last one surprised me, however. It is to get other people to cooperate within a society—to make sure everyone plays by the rules.

Chapters 5–7 discuss the functions of forgiveness, why it probably evolved, the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation, and psychological and physiological research on forgiveness and revenge. McCullough believes forgiveness evolved because it was adaptive for at least two reasons. One was to maintain cordial relationships with our relatives, since seeking revenge against relatives who have harmed us reduces inclusive fitness. The second was to encourage cooperative relations among unrelated individuals, because living in social groups was critical to the survival and fitness of our human ancestors.

I found the discussion of mathematical models of evolution intriguing, but if you are not like-minded, you can skip pages 99–103. But, do not skip over the “three strikes rule” or the section on gossip. Being a “dog person,” not a “cat person,” I was wildly amused when I read (in Chapter 6) that of all

the animals studied (apes, monkeys, goats, sheep, dolphins, and others), only domestic cats fail to display reconciliation after having a conflict with a member of their own species.

The last few chapters are about how forgiveness works on a day-to-day level, the cues that can elicit forgiveness (including the “universal” elements of an apology), restorative justice, reconciliation within and between countries, and religion’s influence on the instinctual tendencies to forgive or to seek revenge. The story of how forgiveness saved the Waorani Indians of Amazonian Ecuador is fascinating. It is a great book and a good read, and you will learn a lot about human nature from it. It appeals to scientists and people of all stripes.

Kevin J. Flannelly, Ph.D.
HealthCare Chaplaincy
kflannelly@healthcarechaplaincy.org