

The final form of love

Simon Smart | 04 February 2022

How are your New Year's resolutions going? One that probably didn't make the list was: *forgive more*. But maybe it should have. I recently met a couple, Danny and Leila Abdallah, who have a compelling story to illustrate that, while challenging, forgiveness offers unexpected rewards. I interviewed them for a [podcast](#) and can't stop thinking about them.

Two years ago this week, this couple's lives were irrevocably altered. Three of their six children, Antony, aged 13, Angelina 12, and Sienna, 8 along with their cousin Veronique Sakr, 11, were walking along a street in Oatlands in Sydney's West on their way to buy an ice cream when a drunk and speeding driver lost control of his ute and ploughed into the group. All four children died at the scene. Battle hardened police officers were brought undone by what they witnessed at what's become known as the Oatlands tragedy.



These days it's not unusual to be exposed to such unthinkable news stories (although this was a particularly harrowing one). What made this event

really stand out was what happened next. In the days immediately following the incident, the Abdallahs offered a very public gesture of forgiveness and said they refused to hate the man responsible for their heartbreak.

A grieving mother reflexively offering forgiveness to the man who had so recklessly caused her loss made us all lean forward in our chairs. *Guardian* columnist Paul Daley wrote: 'Wherever that love and forgiveness came from, millions of people ... are pondering the beautiful, provocative mystery of it all.'

Forgiveness doesn't come naturally to us. Revenge is much more instinctive. In her book *Wild Justice*, Susan Jacoby argues that revenge stems from 'a need to restore 'something missing' – a sense of physical and emotional integrity that is shattered by violence.' For Jacoby, revenge is natural and self-satisfying, and needs to be acknowledged as the legitimate response of the victim.

'Danny says they were determined that their surviving three children would not feel that the day they lost their siblings was the day they lost their parents too.'

Revenge and unforgiveness might be natural but are they desirable? Martin Luther King Jr felt the answer to breaking a cycle of destruction lay not in seeking revenge but in love and, importantly, forgiveness. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf helpfully explains that forgiveness is not about condoning, excusing, or forgetting wrongs committed against us. It is rarely a single act and more often a process. But it does involve finding ways to overcome attitudes of resentment and anger. Volf argues that forgiveness is a release from its enslaving opposite.

'The first and often the only person to be healed by forgiveness is the person who does the forgiving'

This is what Danny and Leila Abdallah want others to know. They truly believe that enacting forgiveness as momentous as they experienced, is a life-giving act. And having met them, they really do embody it. 'It allowed us to heal and grow together as a family,' says Leila. '[It] has given us the freedom from anger'

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Danny believes it was forgiveness that gave them a platform on which to rebuild their lives. 'What it gave us was the best possible place we could be in order to get out of this valley of grief,' he said. 'The longer it [goes on], the more you understand the power of forgiveness. You know, when you have an unforgiving heart, you're actually harming yourself more than the person you're not forgiving.'

For Leila, forgiveness has brought her to a healthy place. 'If you're holding grudges and you can't forgive, it takes away your joy, your happiness, your ability to heal, and if you have a family around look at your kids, if you can't forgive it's going to be passed on to your kids.' Recognising the potential to descend into an understandable fog of grief and despair, Danny says they were determined that their surviving three children would not feel that the day they lost their siblings was the day they lost their parents too.

Out of their tragedy, as remembrance of the children and to encourage others who have similarly suffered, Danny and Leila Abdallah created i4give week.

Danny and Leila say that their long-held Maronite Catholic faith is the source and inspiration for their ability to forgive. They follow the one who radically called his followers to 'love their enemies' and famously prayed forgiveness for the people torturing him to death. They have experienced what they interpret as divine help in their quest, and it's hard to ignore their mysteriously serene demeanour even as they talk about their ordeal. 'Our strength comes from God,' says Leila.

But the Abdallahs insist that forgiveness is a gift that applies to people of any faith or none. It's simply good for us, and this month, as they promote 'i4give' in honour of the four children lost in Oatlands, they hope others will be inspired to talk to families and friends about the power of forgiveness and its universal application. 'What would it look like if I forgave my wife, or my brother or friend? How would I feel? How would it impact my family? These are questions we want to leave with people this year,' says Danny. 'It's time to search your heart, find someone to forgive and [also] to ask for forgiveness,' adds Leila.

Described as the 'final form of love' by Reinhold Niebuhr, forgiveness remains the most powerful antidote to bitterness, destructive patterns of pay-back and recrimination, and paralysing resentment. It is a vital element of much-needed change in the lives of both individuals and communities. And if Danny and Leila Abdallah can do it, maybe we all should give it a try.

Simon Smart is the Executive Director of the [Centre for Public Christianity](#) and the host of [Life & Faith](#) podcast. [I4give week](#) culminates in [i4give Sunday](#) on 7 February.

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