

A Forgiving Society is an Honest Society

It's hard to decide whether humans are worse at being honest, or worse at forgiving people for their honest faults.

It is clear that there is some essential link between a society's honesty and a society's ability to forgive. At our best, we sustain a sort of contract between a wrongdoer and the world. If a wrongdoer confesses their fault, they can trust that they will have the chance to redeem themselves (in that sense of "forgiveness").

We see the worst crimes when that contract breaks down. We seem to be in that world now. The smallest hint of bias or insensitivity online, for instance, can be enough to ruin someone's career. Honesty about those kinds of faults seems likely to bring condemnation, not any kind of forgiveness or chance for redemption.

Most great crimes begin with unconfessed small faults – things like bias. Those small faults can remain unconfessed because of greed or malice, but often enough it's a wrongdoer's fear that keeps them from confessing guilt. Without confession, guilt drives more guilt and more wrongdoing.

By the time we find out about someone's guilt anymore (especially with a public persona), it's seemingly beyond forgiveness.

What does it say about our society that these behaviors can persist with public individuals to that point? Lies are endemic. But would the lies grow so large if the liars were so afraid of what would happen to them for telling the truth?

There are always consequences and costs to honesty. But a forgiving society is one that rewards truth. And because trust is a requirement for any kind of healing social relationship, a truthful society will be one that will continue to forgive.

There's a virtuous cycle there.

We're in a bit of a negative one right now, seemingly unable either to tell the truth or to forgive a hard truth. We're going to have to start somewhere. For us, that can simply be rewarding the truthful confession of faults as a virtue in itself, instead of as an invitation to attack.

As we all slowly realize how much shit we each have to work on/get together, it will become even easier to forgive.