

## INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT ENRIGHT, PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon*

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### EXCERPTS:

- “Academia prides itself on being cutting-edge with freedom of thought. I challenge that view. Many academics are most comfortable being in the mainstream, asking the questions for the moment that are safe to ask. Yet, mainstream ideas come and go and [may] not improve the human condition.”
- “I began to ask myself: What in the area of moral development might make a major impact on the lives of adults and children, families, and communities? The idea of forgiveness kept coming up for me. Forgiveness occurs when people are treated unfairly by others. Might forgiveness be a way of people working their way out of resentment and hatred to reclaim their psychological well-being?”

### Would you describe where you work, and some of the particularities of your university?

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is a large public university in the Midwestern United States. It offers a very wide array of degrees throughout the academic spectrum. I am in the Department of Educational Psychology, which focuses on the themes of human development, learning, school psychology, and statistical methods. I also founded in 1994 the non-profit International Forgiveness Institute dedicated to the dissemination of information about forgiveness ([internationalforgiveness.com](http://internationalforgiveness.com)).

I was the first person to publish an empirically-based journal article on the psychology of forgiveness in 1989. I decided to do research on forgiveness because I had been trained in moral development at the University of Minnesota. At the time in the 1970s the field of moral development was centered on questions of justice, or how adolescents and adults think about moral dilemmas in which the story characters needed to make decisions that could impact others in a fair or an unfair way. I, as with the majority of the academics who were interested in moral development, centered my research on a justice theme, particularly distributive justice, or how people think about the fair allocation of goods and services in communities.

### Box 1: Interview Series

**What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website?** The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

**Why a series of interviews?** Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

**What is the focus of this interview?** In this interview, Robert Enright, a Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, shares insights about the work that he received an Expanded Reason Award for and about life in academia, with a particular emphasis on his contribution to understanding forgiveness.

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I even received tenure while studying this topic and I was receiving one or two grants each year for my efforts, primarily because I was in the mainstream of academic thought and universities seem to reward mainstream thinking.

Yet, I woke up one day and asked myself this question: "Who am I helping with my research questions?" The truthful answer was this: I am helping a few of my research colleagues to better understand distributive justice; we get together each year at professional meetings, pat each other on the back for our achievements, and then we happily go back to our research labs, having helped no one in any society. It was at that point, in early 1985, that I decided to "throw all of my research over a cliff." I then began to ask myself this question: What in the area of moral development might make a major impact on the lives of adults and children, families, and communities? The idea of forgiveness kept coming up for me. Forgiveness, I reasoned at the time, occurs when the opposite of justice happens: when people are treated unfairly by others. Might forgiveness be a way of people working their way out of resentment and hatred to reclaim their psychological well-being?

**You are a recipient of the Expanded Reason Awards. What was your contribution for receiving the Award?**

Dr. Richard Fitzgibbons, a psychiatrist in private practice, and I teamed up on the book *Forgiveness Therapy* published by the American Psychological Association in 2015. This book is interdisciplinary in that it focuses on six themes: a) What is forgiveness from a theological viewpoint?; b) What is forgiveness from a philosophical viewpoint and what are the major philosophical views regarding why forgiveness might be seen as an appropriate response (by some philosophers) or a highly inappropriate response (by other philosophers) when treated unfairly by others; c) the description of a pathway or model of how people forgive; d) case studies of people who have worked through *Forgiveness Therapy* following this pathway; e) empirical evidence of the validity of this forgiveness pathway through randomized experimental and control group clinical trials; and f) what forgiveness education is and the validity of such programs with children and adolescents.

**How easy or difficult is it for you to share your values with students when teaching?**

It is easy to share the moral virtue of forgiveness with students because this now is a legitimate area of scientific investigation. I teach courses on the psychology of forgiveness to undergraduate students and to graduate students in a doctoral seminar focused on the philosophy and social science of forgiveness.

**What have been some challenges you faced in focusing your research on forgiveness?**

As soon as I started studying forgiveness as a possible research agenda, a fire-storm erupted within academia. My grants dried up. Scholars started to severely criticize me, even telling my students that they should no longer work with me because I have ruined my career with such a research agenda and I will ruin these students' future prospects for success in academia if they stay with me on this. Yet, the courageous students stayed despite the criticism and as soon as we started to publish empirically based journal articles on the psychology of forgiveness, to the credit of open-minded academics, other researchers from across the world started to ask questions about forgiveness. There now are thousands of researchers studying the psychology of forgiveness and countless mental health professionals using *Forgiveness Therapy* in helping clients overcome the psychological effects of being treated unjustly. I had many opportunities to abandon the quest for knowledge on forgiveness. I am very glad that I did not listen to the critics, but instead continued to explore forgiveness for the good of hurting people.

**What is your advice for students who may be Catholic and are contemplating doing graduate work or a PhD?**

I would say this: Academia prides itself on being cutting edge with freedom of thought. After four decades in academia, I challenge that view. In my experience, many academics are most comfortable being in the mainstream, asking the questions for the moment that are safe to ask because academia has implicitly approved those ideas. Yet, mainstream ideas come and go and too often do not necessarily improve the human condition. So, be aware of the pressure to conform and try to resist this, lest you end up boring yourself over time with your mainstream and safe questions. Ask, instead, the question: How might my ideas improve the human condition? This is a more exciting way to appropriate your doctoral degree.

**Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?**

After my deep questioning about my academic pursuits about justice, and switching to the psychology of forgiveness, I started in 1985 what I called the *Friday Forgiveness Seminar* at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It still runs to this day. The first *Friday Forgiveness Seminar* consisted of students and some faculty from a wide variety of cultures: Brazil, Korea, Taiwan, and the United States, for example. We sat around trying to figure out answers to three questions: What is forgiveness? How do people go about forgiving? What are the psychological consequences when people forgive? These three questions formed the basis of our

research. We have been addressing these questions for over three decades. Our research has centered on Forgiveness Therapy in drug rehabilitation centers, with people who are in Hospice, cardiac patients, women who were in emotionally-abusive relationships, incest survivors, and men in maximum security prison, among others. We have centered on forgiveness education in Northern Ireland, a challenging area within a United States city, Pakistan, and Iran.

**Finally, could you share what you are passionate about?**

I am most passionate about planting forgiveness within schools. It seems to me that if the point of education is to prepare children for the rigors of adulthood, what better way to do that than to give them the tools for confronting deep injustices against them, which invariably will come to visit everyone. If children become adept in the virtue of forgiveness, then as adults, they should be able to forgive those who treat them badly and so show resilience in the face of others' cruelty. We have professionally developed forgiveness education curriculum guides for educators of students from age 4 to age 18 available on the International Forgiveness Institute website.

Another passion is planting Forgiveness Therapy in correctional institutions. Our studies show that far too many who are incarcerated have been treated deeply unfairly by others when the now-imprisoned person was a child or adolescent. Helping those without homes, who have been crushed by others in the past, is another passion because we may be able to help such people become resilient and basically get their lives back. This hurting world needs an antidote to the resentment and discord that too often follow injustice. That antidote is forgiveness and the world has yet to awaken to this reality.



Click on the logo to access the website of the International Forgiveness Institute