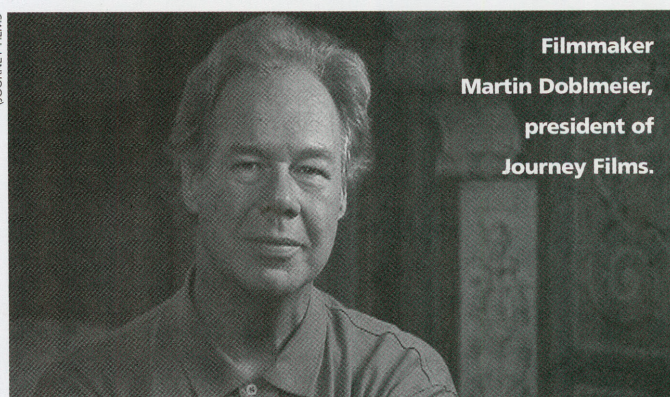


Filmmaker Martin Doblmeier Talks about Forgiveness *An Award-Winning Documentary* Editor Explores a Universal Theme | AN INTERVIEW BY BONNIE DWYER

JOURNEY FILMS



Filmmaker
Martin Doblmeier,
president of
Journey Films.

Documentary filmmaker Martin Doblmeier made a film last year called *The Power of Forgiveness*, which won critical acclaim—and got people talking. The film examines the role forgiveness can play in alleviating anger and grief, as well as the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits that come with forgiveness. *The Power of Forgiveness* won Best Film award at the Sun Valley Spiritual Film Festival in 2007.

Doblmeier talked to *Spectrum* about the impact of his film.

Questions and Answers

Spectrum: *The Power of Forgiveness* features seven stories about forgiveness from a variety of traditions. I'm sure you considered many stories. What criteria did you use to choose the final ones and the people whom you wanted to interview?

Doblmeier: Several years ago, a friend invited me to attend a conference where scientists were presenting the results of groundbreaking new research on the topic of forgiveness. Science, especially the field of health science, is uncovering mounting evidence that letting go of grudges and forgiving the transgressions that happen in our lives is undeniably good for our health. It lowers blood

pressure and heart rate, and can even stem depression.

For the past twenty-five years, I have made films on topics of religion and spirituality, so I knew the value the various faith traditions afforded forgiveness. But here was a moment when the faith communities and the scientific communities were in sync around a common theme: forgiveness. For us, that was the makings of a great film.

In doing the research, we had over one hundred ideas for stories. We knew we wanted to include stories from a variety of faith traditions—Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and so forth, as well as stories from the scientific/health world.

Also, a number of the scientists turned out to be terrific stories themselves—stories we wanted to include. Once those critical decisions were made, it was almost as if the stories began to select themselves.

Q: For Rose Foti, the mother of a firefighter lost on 9/11, forgiveness was a very difficult concept. Her struggle with it enriched the film. What was her response to the completed film? Did viewing it affect her concept of forgiveness?

A: Rose Foti is one of the most open and honest people I have ever met. When I went with her on the day we filmed at the garbage dump that is now home to the remains of her son and hundreds of others who died on 9/11, I could feel the intensity of her suffering. What mother would not share that pain with the way her son's remains were treated?

Rose has been a big supporter of our film because she sees it as one more way to gain attention for the injustice that has been done to her and the other victims of 9/11. But it is difficult to say there have been a conversion and a move toward forgiveness. In many ways, she is like so many people I know who find forgiveness for a deep wound a near-impossible task.

Q: Azim Khamisa and Ples Felix were major heroes in the film for the friendship they formed after one of their sons murdered the son of the other. I believe they spoke at Virginia Tech after the tragedy there. Can you tell us about that event?

A: My family and I live in Virginia, and because of our teenage son's sports activities we know many parents of Virginia Tech students. The shootings last spring wounded our nation—but they devastated Virginia.

When I was invited to go to Virginia Tech, present the film, and speak, it was only five months after the tragedy. I was both honored and concerned. Was it too early to talk about forgiveness? Would there be a backlash at the very idea? There were a lot of anxious moments.

I asked Azim Khamisa to join me for the presentation—first, because I admire Azim for the courage he showed in forgiving the man who murdered his son. But secondly, because although I felt I had learned a great deal in making the film, I did not have the experience of losing a college-aged child to a random act of violence. Azim did.

The event was shown in the downtown movie theater that is the center for cultural activities in Blacksburg, Virginia. The house was full, and the conversation direct and frank. Later, many people, including the parents of a young girl who had been killed, came up and thanked me.

I don't believe the value of these kinds of events is in an instant conversion, but rather in the planting of a seed of hope. I felt the same way several weeks later when I was asked to present at the United Nations. Now plans are underway to include forgiveness training in UN educational materials. These are hopeful signs.

Q: The name of your company, Journey Films, prompts a question about your journey with the concept of forgiveness through the making of this film. How was your personal view of forgiveness changed by the stories that you have told?

A: One of the themes I came to during the process of making the film was the theme of self-forgiveness. Now I see how important a role self-forgiveness plays in how we relate to others in the world around us.

Later, as I started to look at the film through those eyes, I could see how the theme of self-forgiveness was there in almost every story.

It was lack of self-forgiveness that propelled the young man to go into the Amish schoolhouse and shoot those girls.

So one of the things that will stay with me from making the film is I have begun to look more seriously at self-forgiveness and recognize how it plays out not only in my own life but in the lives of others—even in the lives of nations.

Q: What do you see as the most powerful motivator for forgiveness: moral obligation or personal benefit?

A: Part of the interest in forgiveness today comes from the discovery that forgiveness is good for our health. Scientists are saying if we want to live longer, healthier lives, forgiveness may be a key—not an answer, but a key.

But while I see that as a value, I also recognize that, as a person of faith, I am called to change the world around me for the better, and that is where the concept of forgiveness as a tool for transforming the “other” is key.

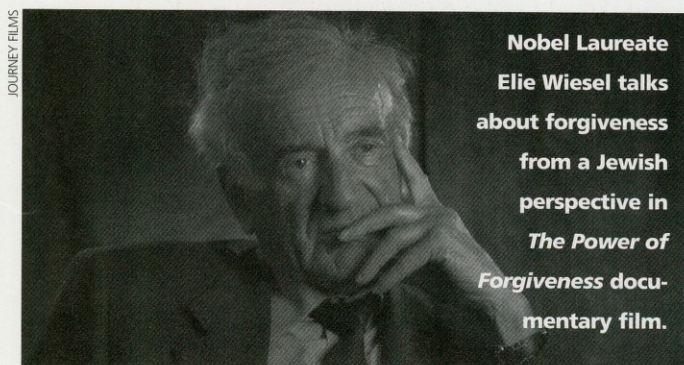
From a Christian perspective, I don't think Christ spoke about forgiveness from the cross as an act of self-help. He didn't do it to lower his blood pressure. I believe he did it as an example of how we are called to transform the world and that is the example I try to follow.

Q: You have said that the climate for spiritual talk is very different today after 9/11, the Iraq War, and so on. What effect do you see the political campaign this year having on spiritual talk?

A: Forgiveness is not a word you will hear very often during an election year. That's because forgiveness is too often considered an act of weakness. I believe it should be seen as exactly the opposite—forgiveness takes enormous strength. But the word *forgiveness*, and the spiritual talk so many of us hope will make its way into political conversation, will not begin to emerge unless the people demand it.

The great mistake is believing politicians are those in the forefront, whereas time and time again we see politicians only mirror what people call for.

If we want change, we have to demand it of our politi-



**Nobel Laureate
Elie Wiesel talks
about forgiveness
from a Jewish
perspective in
*The Power of
Forgiveness* documentary film.**

cians, but more importantly, as Gandhi said, we have to "be the change we want in the world."

Q: The climate for documentary film is very different today than when you founded Journey Films twenty-five years ago. What is your assessment of the role of documentaries in today's culture?

A: The documentary film world is very different today than it was twenty-five years ago, when I made my first film, *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, the story of Jean Vanier and his homes for mentally handicapped people based on the Beatitudes.

Back then, only a few people had access to the equipment needed to make a film. Today, with the advent of digital technology, the equipment is much more affordable and available.

In the 1980s, television still believed it should serve the "common good," but with deregulation, television has become a for-profit free-for-all. That is why so many programs on the air appeal to the lowest common value.

The film theaters are all becoming multiplex theaters so the chance to get a smaller "art-house" documentary into theaters is getting more difficult.

We had great success with our film *Bonhoeffer* (the story of German theologian/Nazi resister, Dietrich Bonhoeffer) but a success like that is becoming more the exception than the rule.

I am asked to speak at a number of colleges and universities—especially around the topic of faith and filmmaking. So I know there are many young people out there who see documentary filmmaking as a possible career that allows for the creative expression of their faith. I try to encourage them in every way I can, sometimes offering internships, but also I try to alert them to the changes.

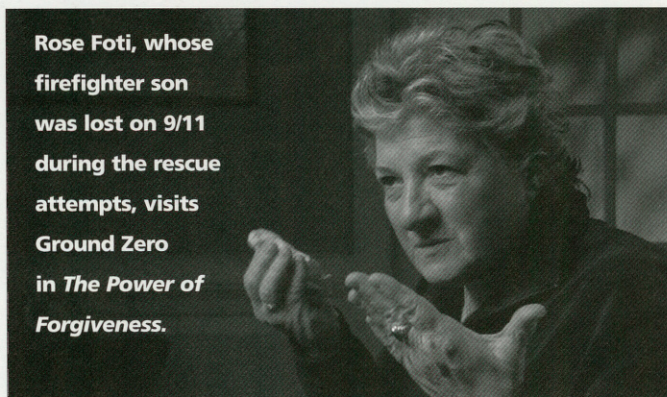
I continue to do this work because I continue to believe that good films that speak to the core values of our faith will always find an audience.

Q: Films on spiritual subjects can often come across as preachy or sugary. How do you keep your movies from those traps?

A: I consider myself less a teacher and more an explorer of ideas. I approach each film as a chance to learn, not preach about what I think I already know.

While these last twenty-five years have been an extraordinary first-person education, I continue to be criti-

Rose Foti, whose firefighter son was lost on 9/11 during the rescue attempts, visits Ground Zero in *The Power of Forgiveness*.



cal of my own beliefs. I try always to challenge and question. I think it makes me a more faithful person, more understanding of a God I grow more and more confident in, and ultimately I think it makes for better films.

Q: Did anything happen during the making of this film that you felt you needed to ask forgiveness for?

A: I have done forty showings/presentations of *The Power of Forgiveness*, before probably twenty thousand people, and never been asked this question.

Yes, I needed to ask forgiveness of my wife because in accepting all the invitations to present the film and speak, I was away from home too much. I have been home now for many months—things are well at home again—mostly because Jelena, my wife, is so forgiving.

Q: I understand that you are considering making a film about the Seventh-day Adventist journey with the concept of health. What is the latest on that project?

A: We have been developing a new film on the Seventh-day Adventist Church—with a particular focus on the theology of health care. We hope it will be in production by the end of the year.

I think it is a great story—truly an American faith that has so much to say to the wider nation about how to think of our bodies not as our own, but God's.

It would be nationally released to PBS stations through our partner, South Carolina ETV (as with *Bonhoeffer* and *Forgiveness*), and several Adventist hospital groups have already committed support, but we continue to raise the remaining funds. I think it could be a terrific film. ■