

AN ATTITUDE TO THE PAST THAT CHANGES THE FUTURE

By Gabriel Moran

The wonderful movie *Philomena* tells an engaging, true story that comes to an emotionally wrenching final scene. Philomena has spent fifty years wondering what happened to her son, Anthony, who was taken from her in an Irish convent and given to a rich couple from the United States. The movie had painted a picture of an odd couple: a pious old woman who gets the help of a secular journalist who agrees to help her because he is in desperate need of a good story to sell. Along the route of their journey to the United States and back to Ireland they develop a wary respect for each other.

The journalist cannot understand how and why the woman remains a faithful Catholic. The movie script seems to be on his side in seeing this little, old lady as naïve and easily manipulated by the Catholic Church. He has some choice things to say about Catholics which draw laughter or murmurs of approval from movie audiences. (The fact that *Philomena* is played by Judy Dench makes it difficult to believe that there isn't more depth to her than is indicated by her naïve behavior). The journalist is skilled and also lucky in tracking what happened to Anthony but the exhilaration of discovering the trail of his life is quickly replaced by sorrow when they find that he has died.

There is a striking scene in which they find out that Anthony was gay. As this knowledge begins to surface, Philomena appears not to be listening to what is said. The audience's assumption is that she is refusing to admit a reality that would be too shocking for her to grasp. Then suddenly she says that she is not surprised that he was gay; she suspected it when he was an infant. She readily embraces the man who had been her son's lover although she is disappointed to learn that her son apparently had had no interest in his Irish background. But what eventually surfaces is that when he was sick he went back to Ireland and was buried in the cemetery of the convent where he was born.

The stage is thus set for Philomena and her partner to confront the nuns who through the years had maintained that they had no record of what had happened to her son. There is one old and crippled nun who was there fifty years ago and has refused to speak to them. The journalist barges in on her and lets loose a furious stream of curses at the woman and her religious hypocrisy. In response she is not the least apologetic and lays all the blame on the promiscuous young women that the nuns had only tried to help. Her attitude understandably makes him even angrier. The movie audience cannot but feel that she is getting what she deserves and that every name he calls her is justified.

At that point Philomena catches up with him and confronts this woman whose lies have caused her fifty years of grief. And even at that moment the old nun keeps denouncing Philomena for having been an irresponsible young woman who was the cause of her own problems. At that point Philomena says "I forgive you." Her journalist friend is shocked and says "it is easy for you to say that." To which she answers, "No, it is not." Some in the audience probably continue to feel that she is a simpleton who is easily manipulated by her religious belief. But it is difficult to hold on to that simple picture when what is evident at the end of the movie is that she is finally at peace while he is still twisted by anger and hatred of the nuns. At the least, one is forced to

consider whether there is wisdom underneath the simple formulas and pious rituals that structure her life. The journalist's reaction was entirely understandable and the old nun is a study in hypocrisy. But the key to Philomena's life and her own peace of mind was the power to forgive.

Forgiveness is indeed a power, one of the most powerful forces in the world. As Hannah Arendt argued, it is one of the few activities that can effectively change the future of the world. At the same time it is a philosophical idea that has been of almost no interest to philosophers. Arendt was the exception although the brief analysis in her great book, *The Human Condition*, is almost the whole of what she said on the subject.

When forgiveness appears, it is a near miracle, impossible to predict or understand. I do not refer to the forgiveness that is a response to someone's apology and contrition. In that case, forgiveness is – relatively – easy. The test of genuine forgiveness is when a person is not apologetic and contrite, but continues to manifest hatred and self-delusion. Our first reaction to forgiveness in that situation is likely to be the same as the journalist's in the movie: "What are you, crazy? This person does not deserve to be forgiven. You are just being deceived by your feelings and not seeing what justice demands." And there is a possibility that the forgiveness is premature and will not change things. But the forgiving party may recognize that at some point an act of forgiveness is the only power on earth that can free both the offending party and the party who has been offended.

Forgiveness is an activity that is needed within families, between friends or colleagues, within nations, and between nations. There are very few families in which longstanding feuds or slights do not exist in the relations between parent and child or between siblings or with other relatives. It is often difficult even to get the problem out in the open. Ideally, there is an apology that is answered with forgiveness but often it is not clear who is the one that is at fault. If the parties cannot agree on who is at fault, then the healing may have to start with forgiveness rather than apology.

At the risk of stereotyping, I would suggest that there are differences among groups when forgiveness is the issue. Women are more ready to forgive than men; blacks are more likely than whites, the poor are more likely than the rich, and Christians are more likely than Jews to be ready to forgive. This last contrast deserves further comment because it is often an unacknowledged difference in Jewish-Christian conversations. Christians may secretly judge Jews of being hard-hearted and lacking compassion. Jews may find Christians too quick to express forgiveness before there is a righting of wrongs. The difference goes back centuries and each side has valid concerns. Christians ought to take seriously the Jewish resistance to quick forgiveness. In South Africa there were attempts at reconciliation by church ministers in the 1980s that were premature and did not work out. One might even argue that Mandela moved too quickly with forgiveness, leaving in place the terrible economic inequality that still dominates the country.

Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* has always rankled Jews because of the stereotype of the Jew that Shakespeare had absorbed and portrayed. But what the play says of mercy and forgiveness has a validity apart from the context of the Jewish stereotype. In high school, I memorized the play's most famous passage but I had no idea of its profundity:

“The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
‘Tis mightiest in the mighty. It becomes
The thronèth Monarch better than his crown....
Mercy is above this scepterèd sway.
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings.
It is an attribute to God himself.
And earthly power doth then show likèst God’s
When mercy seasons justice.

In this description, Shakespeare may have had in mind Machiavelli’s *Prince*. Machiavelli has been the mainstay of United States policies called “realistic.” Machiavelli’s advice to the leader is: “It may be said of men in general that they are ungrateful, voluble dissemblers, anxious to avoid danger, and covetous of gain....and men have less scruple in offending one who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared; for love’s obligations are broken whenever it serves men’s purpose; but fear is maintained by a dread of punishment which never fails.” The assumption is that people and nations have a choice between trying to be loved or simply being feared.

It cannot be denied that people are sometimes ungrateful and covetous. But to announce that selfishness is the only motive for people’s actions flies in the face of history and experience. Political experts dismiss forgiveness as naïve or fraudulent. They prefer reliance on the domination of others as the only way to succeed. Warfare has been the consistent result of nations trying to have more firepower than their neighbors.

One category that dominates economics and politics is the term “self-interest.” Most people – including economists and politicians – would probably be surprised to know that the term was invented in the seventeenth century. It was a vain attempt to give economics and social science a unit of measurement that would produce the same kind of precision that had recently been attained by the mathematical sciences. The crude version of “economic man” who acts only to amass more wealth has not held up well in recent decades but the term self-interest shows no signs of disappearing. The first principle of international relations is still “nations act only out of self-interest.”

The concept of self-interest is intellectually confused and it is a practical obstacle to recognizing any experience that does not fit “realism.” As an explanation of personal activity, self-interest fails to take account of the complexity generated by the tension of various desires that a human being has. At the national and international level, the reduction of everything to “national self-interest” makes dialogue impossible about what are the many interests a nation and its people have. And what are interests shared with other nations. What, for example, are the interests that Iran and the United States share?

Interactions between nations are always shadowed by the slights, offenses and attacks that one nation has delivered to another. Sometimes the past offenses of one nation may seem

exaggerated to the other nation. There is no impartial judge to set up a measurement for what should be put aside as trivial and what needs to be confronted by both parties. The saying “forgive and forget” misstates the case. One must remember to forgive; forgetting does not work. The judge in a court does not say “forget the last comment” but “disregard the last comment.” Nations have to learn to disregard. Remembering terrible things from the past has the danger of perpetuating an attitude of revenge. The war memorials in Washington, D.C., with the possible exception of the Vietnam memorial, are part of Washington’s preparation for the next war. Only memorials of forgiveness break the cycle of vengeance for vengeance.

Most nations have long memories. A European writer once defined a nation as a group of people with a false idea of their origin and a hatred of their neighbor. The United States has the problem of burying its past in a mythical view of itself. The United States thus finds it difficult to understand why Iranians are still angry about what the U.S. did in 1954 or why Cubans distrust the United States for what it did in 1898. Furthermore, the United States government and its people are oblivious to the forgiveness that has been generously accorded to the United States for wrongs done to those countries.

I have sometimes asked Koreans: Why don’t you hate us for what we have done to your country throughout the twentieth century and for the unstable situation which still exists. The only thing the U.S. news media know about Korea is that a crazy guy in the North is a threat to us. Koreans had been fighting for their freedom since the 1930s when in 1945 the U. S. Secretary of State drew an arbitrary line across the thirty-eighth parallel and paid off the Soviet Union for jumping into the Pacific war in its last days. The Soviets were given the north; the United States took the south. Korea was part of the U.S. plan to rebuild Japan. When the United States in early 1950 publicly said that the south of Korea was not in its perimeter of defense, the north took that as a signal to invade the south; it feared the combination of Japanese and U.S. power in the region. General Douglas MacArthur immediately ordered the firebombing of every city in the north and so began a war which has never finished. Most U.S. people have no clue as to what that war was about or even that there was a war. U.S. government officials showed their amnesia in that they repeated every mistake in Korea when they intervened in a civil war in Vietnam.

Japan and the United States managed to reach a mutual forgiveness after World War II. The chances of U.S. and Japanese reconciliation seemed unlikely at the end of the war. Each nation, of course, thought that the other had committed the worse atrocities. Japan’s war crimes were given thorough coverage but FDR’s prediction that December 7th would live in infamy fortunately proved inaccurate. The United States’ firebombing of sixty-three Japanese cities culminating in Hiroshima and Nagasaki had as its aim to burn to death as many people as possible. All wars are immoral but some activities within war are still horrific. The United States and Japan cannot undo the horrors of the war and most of their citizens now alive are not responsible for those horrors. But today Japanese and U.S. people should be grateful that their countries found a way to mutual forgiveness