

TEMPLETON REPORT

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Forgiveness and the Resilient Survivor

“The bottom line is that you survived and you do the best, and you tried everything to help . . . but if you can’t help, you have to live with it—you accept it and go on, and go on, and go on.” That is how one Holocaust survivor described to Roberta Greene his attitude toward building a new life after the trauma of World War II. Greene, who holds the Louis and Ann Wolens Centennial Chair in Gerontology and Social Welfare at the University of Texas at Austin, interviewed 133 men and women who had survived the concentration camps, ghettos, service in partisan groups, and long stretches in hiding. Her research, supported by a three-year grant from the John Templeton Foundation, is intended to learn more about personal resiliency, especially in relation to forgiveness—that is, an individual’s capacity to let go of feelings of anger, resentment, and revenge.



Ian Waldie/Getty Images

A Holocaust survivor’s tattoo.

Greene and her colleagues conducted extensive conversations with Holocaust survivors now living in California, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Texas, and Washington, D.C. The average age of her subjects was 80, and most came originally from Poland, Germany, or Hungary. Unlike previous researchers, who have largely viewed survivors as victims, Greene wanted to learn how so many of these men and women had gone on to form meaningful and productive lives after the trauma of the Nazi era. “Many survivors are willing to abandon feelings of resentment and negative judgment toward others,” she told the *Templeton Report*. “In fact, many appear to sustain a positive outlook and hope for the future.”

Greene was particularly interested in the details of her subjects’ lives before and during the war. She found that a warm and cohesive family background was a key “protective factor.” No less important was the readiness of survivors to try to exert some control over their lives even during their time in concentration camps. Many of them exchanged black-market goods, bribed guards, set up informal schools, or engaged in the arts. As one subject recalled, “We learned to survive by our wits. We learned to scrape and save whatever we could barter with others.”



Roberta Greene of the University of Texas at Austin.

In terms of attitude and disposition, a readiness to forgive turned out to be a crucial factor in the resilience of survivors and their ability to transcend their trauma. According to Marilyn Armour, an associate professor of social work at UT Austin and a co-investigator in the study, “forgiveness is not something that just happens. It is an intentional act by the victim.”

Greene, who previously studied older adult victims of Hurricane Katrina, believes that her research on Holocaust survivors points to broader lessons about how to care for an aging population in which adverse events and trauma are common. As she told *The Utopian* (a magazine published by the School of Social Work at the University of Texas), “There needs to be a shift in geriatric practice to models that help maintain the independence and well-being of older adults.”

Kimon Sargeant, vice president for human sciences at the John Templeton Foundation, praised Greene’s work for framing the issue of forgiveness so broadly. As he told the *Templeton Report*, “we tend to think of forgiveness as an isolated emotional release that may not have much other significance.” By “tying it to survivorship and resiliency,” Greene and her colleagues have demonstrated its “transformative role as an active virtue.”

NOTEBOOK

Stolen Lives

Approximately 700,000 people—the majority of them women—are the victims of human trafficking every year. It is a \$32 billion-a-year business, with sex trafficking alone accounting for \$19 billion. Can the young women who escape from this brutal world find a way to get past their trauma? In many cases, the answer is yes, according to a new report, *Stolen Lives: Dignity, Forgiveness, Hope, and Future-Mindedness for Victims of Sex Trafficking in India*.



With a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, the educator and human-rights activist Victor Joseph, a native of India, conducted interviews in Mumbai and New Delhi with 100 victims of sex trafficking between the ages of 14 and 22. Joseph, who worked for more than seven years at the Office of Religious Freedom at the U.S. Department of State, says that when he first visited briefly with these young women five years ago, he concluded that they “had no future.” But their stories stayed with him, and ultimately he returned for more extensive conversations.

In the report, Joseph carefully analyzes the psychological stages through which these young women pass during their ordeals. He was surprised, he told the *Templeton Report*, by “how often they would say, ‘We are trapped, we have been tortured, we have been through all of these things. But we want to live. And unless we forgive, we have no future.’ In spite of all the negative things that happened in their lives, many of them are able to keep a measure of optimism and to look ahead to the possibility of better days.”

The study is intended as a tool for NGOs, universities, governments, law enforcement, and other agencies who wish not only to tackle this global issue but to help the victims restore their “stolen lives.”

In Character: the Wisdom Issue

The fall 2009 issue of *In Character*, the Templeton Foundation’s “journal of everyday virtues,” has just been published and is devoted to the subject of wisdom. Features include:



- Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Jack N. Rakove of Stanford and the Claremont Institute’s William Voegeli on how the wisdom of America’s Founding Fathers compares to that of today’s politicians
- Jerome Groopman, the Recanati Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School, on the various kinds of understanding and insight necessary for the best practice of the doctor’s arts
- An interview with the political philosopher Michael Walzer about prudential calculation on the battlefield, military ethics, and the moral questions raised by torture
- Irish author and classicist William Desmond on the demotion of wisdom in the transition from ancient to modern philosophy

For more information, write to communications@templeton.org.