Forgiving Jaskiram Sidhu

Who deserves absolution, and when, is one of humanity’s most vexing questions—one families devastated by the Humboldt Broncos tragedy can’t seem to avoid. By Aaron Hutchins

Scott Thomas reached for his necklace. It felt like it was choking him as he struggled to fall asleep. With his fingers, he traced the contours of the pendant with the number 17 engraved on one side and the Humboldt Broncos insignia on the other. The markings represented the number his son Evan wore in hockey, and the last team for which the 18-year-old had laced up skates.

This would be Scott’s last restless night’s sleep before he and his wife, Laurie, drove to a courtroom in Melfort, Sask., and came face to face for the first time with Jaskiram Singh Sidhu, the truck driver who had cruised through a stop sign in rural Saskatchewan and crashed into the Broncos’ bus while it was en route to a junior hockey playoff game. Sixteen people, including Evan, died in that crash on April 6, 2018. Thirteen were seriously injured.

Scott took off the necklace. “I always think about what Evan might be thinking,” he says. “I worry that I don’t talk to him enough. I worry that I don’t think about him enough. I worry that I’m not representing him well. I worry that I’m not standing up enough for him. There are times when I wonder if I should hate Sidhu. There is no blueprint for this.”

The Thomases had their victim impact statement ready for the court proceedings, written in the form of a letter to Evan from his mother and father. It was an open-hearted accounting of all the ways and places and times that they miss him—an expression of love for their only son.

But on the morning of day three for the sentencing hearing, the day after the Thomases read that letter aloud before the court, the couple couldn’t shake a haunting thought: their 18-year-old son would forgive the truck driver. They were certain of it.

So in their hotel room, they sat down with pen and paper and wrote another letter, this time to Sidhu, saying as much. Then, as a gesture of forgiveness, they placed the pendant in the envelope with the letter and gave the package to a lawyer on the defence team. Later that day, one of Sidhu’s relatives approached the couple, proposing that they meet in private with the man responsible for Evan’s death.

Scott and Laurie acknowledge feeling some residual hostility at the time toward Sidhu, even as they felt the capacity to forgive. But mostly, they felt grief. So Scott walked into the police-protected room reserved for the defence and his family. Sidhu was down on
one knee, tears dropping onto the floor. Scott held both his hands, pulled him up to his feet and hugged him close, as if he were comforting a weeping child. Both men wept.

“What happened?” Scott asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” Sidhu replied. “I’m so sorry.”

“You must have got the letter,” Scott said.

They talked about what the Thomases had written, about Evan, about faith. Scott didn’t doubt Sidhu’s sincerity, and gave voice to the message in the letter: that he forgives him. Sidhu took a step back, reached under his shirt and pulled out the No. 17 Broncos pendant. “I’ll wear this for the rest of my life,” he told Scott.

Today, Sidhu looks back on these fleeting moments in the anteroom of a Prairie courthouse as a minor miracle—as pivotal in setting the course of his life as the sentencing itself. The arc of pain and outrage set off by the Humboldt tragedy seemed at the time as though it would never bend back. The scale of loss was too great, the anger too raw for a single one of the victims’ families to extend a hand of forgiveness.

“When I close my eyes, I can see myself standing in that room with Mr. Thomas and it gives me the energy to move forward,” Sidhu told Maclean’s in his first interview since the crash, speaking from Bowden Institution, a medium-security prison near Red Deer, Alta. “The pendant reminds me of my mistakes—and it reminds me of the power of forgiveness.”

Many of the loved ones of other Broncos killed in the collision may never reach the place the Thomases have, and some speak of feeling an unwelcome pressure to forgive. Yet none who agreed to be interviewed for this story slammed the door on the possibility, and their reasons for withholding it are every bit as considered and heartfelt as the Thomas family’s reasons for extending it.

The result, only three years on from heartrending trauma, is a surprisingly open conversation about the limits of grief, and the usefulness of a deceptively simple-sounding word. What is forgiveness? Who does it serve? What purpose does it serve?

“From where I’m standing,” Sidhu says, “forgiveness means everything.”

GENEROSITY GRANTED to the wrongdoer is an idea that has resonated through the centuries in religion, ethics, politics and modern psychology. In Canada, few cases have thrust it to the fore as surely as the disaster in Saskatchewan. As Sidhu’s case passed through the justice system—as he pled guilty to 29 counts of dangerous driving; as he was sentenced to eight years in prison; as he awaited a Canada Border Services officer’s report recommending whether he, a permanent resident of Canada but not a citizen, should be deported to India upon his release—the survivors and families of the dead were asked the question again and again. Do they forgive? Will they? Ever?

Some of this interest arises from Sidhu’s inadequacy as a villain. He never sought to minimize his personal responsibility, nor did he intend to kill or injure. (Indeed, he came within a fraction of a second of losing his own life.) He has expressed remorse for his actions, repeatedly. With less than one month on the job at the time of the crash, he is now viewed by many as a trucking novice who was unready to be sent out solo behind the wheel of a B-train tractor-trailer unit pulling 22 tonnes of peat moss.

But the interest on the part of the media and public in the families’ answers also speaks to our collective stake in the conditions under which forgiveness is granted, because Sidhu’s case highlights the real-world consequences of offering or withholding it. For the offender, gaining forgiveness can affect the length of their sentence and the availability of parole. It can have a profound impact on their mental health.
Thomas (above), whose son Evan was killed in the crash, gave a pendant bearing his son’s hockey number (below) to Sidhu in an act of forgiveness.
For those harmed, offering it can be no less life-altering. “When you hold onto a grudge, [the perpetrators] are the ones responsible for your suffering,” says Fred Luskin, director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Projects, a research initiative on interpersonal forgiving. “When you give up the grudge, you are now again responsible to give yourself a good life. And that’s really hard.”

The concept of forgiveness dominant in modern Western cultures is strongly influenced by religion, especially Christianity. Common expressions for the idea, like “wiping the slate clean,” are found in the Old Testament. Jesus is quoted as saying: “If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

A more modern understanding would emerge, though, shaped by social scientists and secular thinkers studying its impact on victims, offenders and society as a whole. They tend to frame forgiveness not as a matter of faith but as a factor in the psychological recovery of the individuals involved. Or, on a societal level, as a way of relieving social and political tension. (Sometimes, the old and new lines of thinking converge in a symbolic way, as when the Black Anglican cleric Archbishop Desmond Tutu chaired South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.)

Scientific study of forgiveness, meanwhile, only began in the last few decades. In a groundbreaking 2009 study, researchers screened patients at a Wisconsin veteran’s hospital, identifying those who’d suffered deep and unresolved psychological injuries. One group went through interpersonal forgiveness therapy sessions; a control group did not. Four months later, when the subjects were asked to recall the person who hurt them, the people who had completed the program showed markedly greater blood-flow improvement than those who had not.

“It was the only study that showed a cause and effect of learning how to forgive, reasonably, and there being improvement in a major artery of the body,” says Robert Enright, a co-author of the study and a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who is considered a pioneer of forgiveness science. “Forgiveness therapy is for the client, to get better [after] being pulled down psychologically by the injustices against them.”

On a population-wide level, forgiveness is seen as essential to a functioning society. "Forgiveness as a kind of social lubrication. If there was no forgiveness, the gears would grind to a halt. But if it is dispensed too easily, no one is ever held responsible for the terrible things they do to others.”

Pittaway struggled to forgive her father, who she describes as a narcissist, a bully and someone who would say awful things to people. His children were not exempt from his behaviour. Pittaway coped with that by moving 1,500 km from Moncton to Toronto. “We are immersed in a culture that sees forgiveness as a kind of saintly state—that a good person forgives, a bad person doesn’t forgive,” says Pittaway. “I’m a fan of grudges. Grudges protect people. There’s a difference between being consumed with hatred and holding a sensible grudge against someone.”

She maintained minimal contact with her father for decades, because he was still married to her mother. But when her mom turned 75, she left Kim’s father. Pittaway, who had moved back to the East Coast, agreed to help him with the occasional banking or apartment crisis. Otherwise, she would go long stretches without talking to him. He wasn’t going to change his behaviour, and he wasn’t going to apologize. She never forgave him.

“People who refuse to forgive, who just continue to bear witness to horror and tragedy and a wrong that was done, play an important role in reminding us that these things should never happen,” says Alice MacLachlan, a York University philosophy professor whose research includes the nature and limits of forgiveness. “One way to say ‘never again’ is to keep insisting that we sit with the discomfort of horrible things.”

All of which suggests the circumstances under which forgiveness is offered, or denied, says much about a society—even in instances as wrenching and traumatic as the Humboldt bus crash.

When Jaskirat Sidhu’s sentence is over and his buddy that he forgave him. They grew up later in the garbage. Evan was upset, but one of his friends didn’t, however, and in his anger stole Evan’s track suit. It turned up later in the garbage. Evan was upset, but his brother was going through a divorce, they told him, and it’s hard to imagine how tough that could be. Evan went back and told his buddy that he forgave him. They grew up to become best friends.

It’s a memory Scott and Laurie Thomas look back upon fondly. Sometimes those principles last well into adulthood, as was the case with Darcy Haugan, Evan’s coach with the Humboldt Broncos, who was also killed.

Unforgiving victims can ensure a domestic assailant faces stronger consequences. They can prevent groups of people from being further victimized in a cycle of abuse. They can spur much-needed changes in the law.

“If Rosa Parks forgave and moved to the back of the bus, a lot of things wouldn’t have changed,” says Kim Pittaway, a journalist from Halifax and author of her forthcoming memoir Grudge: My 10-Year Fight With Forgiveness. “Forgiveness is a kind of social lubrication. If there was no forgiveness, the gears would grind to a halt. But if it is dispensed too easily, no one is ever held responsible for the terrible things they do to others.”

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in the crash. Partway through that fateful season, someone slipped a letter under Haugan’s office door. It said Haugan should quit as coach—that he should not be here, so just pack up and leave—only in less kind words. Why the writer felt that way was unclear; the Broncos were having a pretty good season. It was left unsigned.

Christina Haugan read the note later that day, and was dismayed by the vitriol on her husband’s behalf. But when she asked Darcy how he felt, she recalls him saying: “You know what? Someone obviously needed to get that off their chest. I can’t take that personally.”

Says Christina: “Instead of being angry, he had that instant, forgiving mindset.”

It was a mentality partly rooted in Christian faith, which they shared. But when Darcy died, forgiveness was far from instant for Christina. She was angry and hurt, and no long-remembered Sunday school precept could change that on its own. “I’ve been taught my whole life that you should forgive other people,” she says. “It’s a little different when you’re faced with having to do it.”

Haugan’s children were nine and 12 years old when their father died in the crash. She knew they’d be influenced by what they heard, and she didn’t want them to witness anger that wouldn’t subside.

After Sidhu’s conviction, the court invited the survivors and the families of the dead to submit victim impact statements for sentencing. Christina’s first draft came out mostly as a rant, she says, until it struck her that it was not her place to appraise someone’s errors or sins. The consequences of human wrongdoing vary widely, from trifling to tragic, but she looked back at the times she’d been forgiven for her mistakes. How could she not do the same? And like the Thomases, she thought of how the person she’d lost would react. Darcy Haugan would want her to forgive, she decided.

So she did. “I don’t think we would be
doing Darcy justice if we weren’t modelling things that were important to him,” she says.

RAELENE AND RUSSELL Herold had yet to bury the ashes of their son Adam, a 16-year-old playoff call-up for the Broncos, when a reporter outside the courtroom at Sidhu’s sentencing hearing asked them about forgiveness. Raelene looked at Russell, who looked back at her. “Put yourself in my shoes,” she replied to the reporter through tears. “Tell me what you would do.” She doesn’t remember any questions after that.

The Herolds didn’t fault other Broncos family members who had chosen to forgive; those gestures didn’t make their pain any worse. But Sidhu’s sentencing was the first time they’d even heard anyone raise the issue. Now they wished each person’s decision on the matter wouldn’t be treated as a public event.

The effect of such moments, say the Herolds and others who have experienced it, is an unspoken yet discernible pressure—and a fear of appearing ungenerous, even self-involved, if they can’t forgive, as if they’re letting down society by failing to let go of their anger.

Experts say that’s because forgiveness has become part of a script for public tragedies. “Chances are you’ll be asked by someone, like the media, ‘Do you forgive this person?’” says Myisha Cherry, a philosophy professor at the University of California, Riverside and author of the forthcoming book *The Failures of Forgiveness.* “So they’re immediately presented with this question: are you going to be a forgiving victim or an unforgiving one?”

That confluence of private decision-making and public interest exposes another problem. We have no common understanding of what forgiveness means. Is it letting go of anger? Is it absolving the wrongdoer? Is it extending grace, in the Biblical sense? Is it setting terms for how severely an offender should be punished?

“Forgetfulness is not excusing. It’s not forgetting. It’s not abandoning justice. It’s not letting them out of jail,” says Myisha Cherry, a philosophy professor at the University of California, Riverside and author of the forthcoming book *The Failures of Forgiveness.* “They can stay in jail and you can still forgive them by seeing them in their full humanity, beyond just those behaviours.”

To Luskin, the Stanford psychologist, it means relinquishing the idea that the past could or should be different. “Forgiveness is making peace with the word ‘no,’” he says. “What you’re doing is accepting the totality of one’s life experience, both the blessings and the suffering.” That does not, he adds, necessitate reconciling or giving someone who harms you a hug: “Forgive your ex, but still go to court and get child support.”

Other scholars hesitate to define forgiveness, noting that those thinking about it most are often doing so in the wake of extraordinarily painful experiences and have differing understandings of what the word means. York’s MacLachlan, for one, cautions against getting caught up in its perceived societal benefits. “I don’t think forgiveness is always required, an obligation or even a good idea,” she says. “Victims have a lot of autonomy in deciding whether or not they get to forgive. As a society, we sometimes pressure victims to forgive too much, too fast. And this can be really dangerous.”

Cherry calls it the “hurry and bury” ritual: the public expects a Hollywood-style plot line, where they feel uncomfortable for
a certain period before things get settled. It
could be part of a narrative about reconcilia-
tion, Cherry says, “but we also want to know
that it’s been resolved so we can go about our
lives. We quickly ask and expect for them to
forgive. And these individuals are usually
gender minorities and racial minorities.”

She points to some of the best known “moral
exemplars” who suffered greatly and forgave—
individuals who minorities are asked, implicitly
or explicitly, to emulate amid injustice: Gandhi,
Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr.

“What do all these people have in common?
They are Black or brown folk who have suf-
fered under racial colonial oppression.”

In such cases—even the ones with storybook
endings—the public can be left wondering
whose interests forgiveness has served. There’s
a 2016 segment from 60 Minutes, the American
current affairs show, about a crooked white
drug dealer who falsified a report in a drug-
dealing case to send an innocent Black man
to jail. Years later, it was revealed the officer
had falsified many reports, and he was sent
to jail for a year and a half, while the Black
man was exonerated and released after four
years behind bars.

Coincidentally, the duo later found work
at the same small-town café. The ex-officer
apologized, the one who lost four years of
his life behind bars forgave, and they became
friends. The segment ends with the narrator—
blithely, as if there were some equivalency
between the men’s experiences—asking the
viewer: “If these two guys from the coffee
shop can set aside their bitter grounds, what’s
our excuse?”

WHEN SOME FAMILIES started to offer their
forgiveness at the sentencing hearing for
Sidhu, it was Chris Joseph’s first inkling that
the 29 Broncos families didn’t all align on the
matter. It was less than a year after the tra-
gedy, and Joseph hadn’t had time to process
his thoughts about Sidhu. He and his wife,
Andrea, were angry, he says, and that’s how
they appeared in the media. A number of
news outlets made headlines out of a quote
from Andrea’s victim impact statement: “You
don’t deserve my forgiveness.”

Chris Joseph believes there is now more logic
to their position. While Sidhu apologized, they
feel he took a chance at that intersection by
running the stop sign. That gamble, they say,
cost the Josephs their son Jaxon, a 20-year-
old centre on the Broncos. Chris notes that
Sidhu submitted the paperwork to stay in
Canada after his sentence is served, instead
of accepting deportation. “To Joseph, that in
itself suggests a lack of remorse, a denial of
rightful consequence.

Joseph thinks about Sidhu someday getting
back behind the wheel of a vehicle in Canada.
(Sidhu is under a court order that prevents
him from driving on any public road, street
or highway in Canada for 10 years from the
end of his imprisonment sentence.) He thinks
of Sidhu raising a family in Canada after dev-
astating Joseph’s. He thinks of Sidhu’s name
popping up in the news—whether he moves
to Nova Scotia or the Yukon. He thinks about
Sidhu living in a nearby community in Alberta.

If he returns to India, says Joseph, and the
couple never hear his name again, that’s one
less trauma for them to endure: “Why does
he have to stay? You can still forgive, no mat-
ter where he is.”

Joseph says he doesn’t feel burdened by his
anger, and he doesn’t feel a need to “release”
it. “I’m comfortable in my lack of forgive-
ness right now,” he says. More concerning to
Cherry, a philosophy professor, says forgiveness has become part of the script for public tragedies.
submissions to the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA), where an officer will recommend whether he should be allowed to stay or if his case should go to a hearing before the Immigration and Refugee Board. “If they send him to a hearing, the deportation order is automatic,” says Sidhu’s deportation lawyer, Michael Greene. “They just have to prove he was convicted of a serious offence. There’s no doubt that this is.” Sidhu cannot appeal the order, but he could challenge the CBSA’s decision in Federal Court; if successful, his case would be sent back to another officer.

All of which makes Sidhu’s current submissions to the CBSA vital to his hope of remaining in Canada. Included in them are letters from Scott and Laurie Thomas, as well as Christina Haugan. “I believe in forgiveness and I believe in second chances,” Haugan writes. “A man who took the harshest sentence for a crime of this nature without appealing or defending himself in an attempt to ease even a small amount of pain for those he hurt is someone I believe deserves a second chance.”

Expressions of forgiveness help his chance of staying, says Greene. “In a case like this, where you have all kinds of different families affected by it, you’re going to have a spectrum of reaction, from total forgiveness to absolute anger,” he says. “It’s very courageous of these people to take that stand.”

But Sidhu is at pains to say he isn’t seeking forgiveness. He respects the decisions of Broncos families who don’t forgive him, he says, whether they say they need more time, or that they never will. “I cannot calculate the anger they have inside them. I can’t judge it. They have every reason to not forgive me.” He’s open to speaking in person with any of them should they wish to, he adds, if it might do anything to ease their pain.

Under the circumstances, trying to stay in Canada seems the tougher path—more difficult, conceivably, than returning to India and leaving the entire tragedy behind. But after all Tanvir has been through since the crash, Sidhu says he feels obliged to at least try to build their life in Canada, where they dreamed of settling down. Sidhu speaks of strangers from across the country who’ve written him letters in prison to say they are thinking about him, or praying for him, or lighting a candle for him. He reads those letters in his cell, again and again, and cries.

“Who doesn’t want to be a part of this community?” he asks. “And if I do get deported, my wife would come with me—and I’ve already caused her so much pain, so she’d have to go through more.”

They haven’t seen each other since the start of the pandemic. Weeks have passed between their calls due to COVID-19 outbreaks in the prison, when inmates were not always able to use the phones. When he does reach Tanvir, Sidhu calls their conversations his “medicine.” They don’t talk about the crash because those memories are haunting enough. Instead, they try to focus on the future, wherever it may take them, and how they might make a positive impact on the lives of others. Tanvir has placed the Humboldt Broncos pendant—that simple token that a grieving Saskatchewan father once wore close to his heart—in a special box for safekeeping, waiting for the day Sidhu comes home. It is their lasting symbol of the forgiving spirit of others, and one small comfort to a man who does not know whether he’ll ever forgive himself.