

# The *F* Word:

## *Vikki Reynolds on the Politics of Forgiveness*

CONDUCTED BY  
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**V**ikki Reynolds is an activist and therapist who works from a Decolonizing and Justice-doing framework. As a consultant, facilitator, and supervisor she has worked with refugees, survivors of torture — including Indigenous survivors of state violence in Canada — mental health and substance use counsellors, rape crisis counsellors, frontline and housing workers, and QT2SB1POC communities. Her specialties include ‘Trauma’ and Witnessing Resistance to Violence and Oppression and a Supervision of Solidarity. Vikki is the author of *Justice-Doing at The Intersections of Power: Community Work, Therapy and Supervision* (Dulwich Centre Publishing, 2019). She conducts her work on the unceded territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səl̓ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

On August 2, 2022, *subTerrain* spoke with Vikki on Zoom about forgiveness. What follows are excerpts from our conversation. Catch the full video interview at <https://vikkireynolds.ca/media/>

**subTerrain:** In your experience, what makes forgiveness possible?

**Vikki Reynolds:** I remember being taught by Johnella Bird from New Zealand, she said forgiveness is the ‘F’ word in therapy. So much of therapy was about sending people – in particular women and non-binary people who’d been harmed by, for the most part, men – to therapy was about getting them ready to go back into the world and face more abuse and shit and violence, and forgive the perpetrators; that that was the goal of therapy. And a lot of the talk was if you don’t forgive, they own a part of you and all this stuff. So I started off not being very enamoured of the idea of forgiveness. But, aside from being a therapist, I’m a prison abolitionist, and I worked against the death penalty. And that really informed my thinking, not necessarily about forgiveness, but about repair, and restoring humanity to people, and to the complexity of seeing people beyond just being perpetrators. Forgiveness itself is pretty problematic when it’s decontextualized and weaponized against really oppressed and harmed people. It’s very political, who is required to forgive and who is allowed to withhold forgiveness as a virtue. That’s always gendered, classed, racialized. When you can have accountability and repair, then I believe people can have something that might smell like forgiveness.

**subT:** What does a genuine apology look like?

**VR:** I’ve been really informed by the transformative justice folks, women of colour in particular; I’m thinking about Mariame Kaba,

Angela Davis, groups like INCITE! Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans people of Colour Against Violence, and Mimi Kim of Creative Interventions, and Rachel Herzig of Creative Resistance. So all of what I’m going to talk about is really informed by direct action activism and all of these brilliant people. The first thing I do in moving towards an apology, is you’ve got to acknowledge the structural violence that incident happened in. No guy I worked with ever invented violence. We need to start with the context. People need to be accountable for their actions. I believe 100% in accountability, but people are *not* accountable for the contexts in which those actions occur. Meaning poverty, colonization, racism; we need to think about necro-politics, about Mbembe’s work about policies that actually kill people – that’s the real violence and strategic abandonment of people, what abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes as organized abandonment. I’ve given you a long answer, but to get to a real apology, the first thing is you have to *name what you did*. In real language. The second thing is you have to take responsibility not just for what you did but for *the potential impact and consequences that you made possible in this world*. If a man hits a woman and her head hits the table, she could be dead. He’s not only responsible for hitting her, he’s responsible for very potentially killing her. You have to really map out all those potential consequences. It’s very tender to do that work because that’s where I worry that, in particular, men who are trying to take responsibility might think about suicide. Because if you truly map out how much consequence there is here, it’s enormous. That’s what we have to repair. And I’m willing to walk alongside men to repair all of



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that. When you involve the police and you go to the justice system, they're only responsible for that one act. And it all becomes about punishment, there is no repair. So that third piece is about *working to make repair*. How do we start to repair, and we start with, ethical practice, for me, means, you track vulnerability. Say "Who's the most vulnerable?" and centre those persons. Often people want forgiveness. That's not up to you. It's up to the person who has experienced the harm to decide whether forgiveness is a piece of what's important for *them*. We've all been in experiences, whether it's a person talking to us or whether we've transgressed and just go, "Oh you have *got* to forgive me! My way back to my humanity, to my picture as a decent person integrated in society, is all hinged on your forgiveness" — that's not okay. That's an abuse of power. That's actually demanding something of someone that you harmed; you don't get to make the demands now. They might make demands of what is required for a repair. But that's not hinged on "And then I'll forgive you." They might never forgive you. A lot of the men I've worked with have often really hurt their children and female partners — and their kids never want to see them again. Then part of the accountability is making sure you're never near those people again.

So you do the work to make repair. Then you have to *have a real plan to not do it again*. The fifth one is *you have to not do it again*.

**subT:** What kinds of power and privilege relations need to be kept in mind when we forgive, or choose not to? Or when we want to be forgiven?

**VR:** If we move with forgiveness, what happens is in our society under patriarchy and all those other power structures is — you have to forgive *and forget*. I teach young women to *not* forget. Young women have a knowing in the bones — a wisdom of the body that comes from experienced violence. I don't want them to forget that. I want them to hold on to everything I call their 'spidey sense.' Everything that let's you know this is not going okay. When we do forgive and forget, we never talk about this stuff again, pretend it didn't happen — that's gaslighting. Especially the imperative, you know, young women and non-binary people — especially of colour, poor, Black, Indigenous — are really *required* to forgive. That's your big job, you start forgiving before you even understand oppression or have any analysis of that. And in that forgiving, how much is forgotten? That actually sets people up again. We've got to make sure the real work is being done so that forgiveness doesn't happen at the cost of moving in a just way. Again, if we're going to use an ethical map and centre most vulnerable people, forgetting is a really dangerous act that doesn't centre people who've been harmed.

**subT:** Who is forgiveness for? What's its value and potential?

**VR:** I think when forgiveness is weaponized it's always to stop repair, to stop accountability, but also to stop transformation of our societies, right? Like the imperative to forgive as young women, in particular, stops us fighting rape culture and stops us from the creation of a consent culture which benefits everybody. That's the real cost of the weaponization of forgiveness. But for some people — as a therapist I know this, I've worked with survivors of torture, right — for some of them, they wanted to forgive the people who'd harmed them. I'll give you one example. I was seeing a guy who was a political activist, he was a Communist, he was a direct-action activist, he had risked everything, and he ended up going to jail and was tortured. He needed to forgive those people. Because of his own political analysis which said they were also just workers. His thing was, if he continued to think of this torturer as his Satan — that he was letting the oppressive state apparatus off the hook. So forgiveness *can* make space to hold *more* accountability, know what I mean?

**subT:** What are some of the biggest lessons you've learned about forgiveness, doing the work that you do?

**VR:** How it's weaponized. It's absolutely devastating to be with so many young women, who are harmed in so many ways, and yet they are informed, by social workers, probation officers, family members, all these other things, that they are *required* to forgive. And they come to therapy doing everybody else's work. And just the load that is carried by oppressed people.

But the other thing I would say is — 'cause it's lovely to speak about that one man who was a survivor of torture — you know, that experience humbled me. *I* wasn't willing to forgive any torturer. And it was absolutely liberatory for him. In my own life, I'm sixty-one now, I've moved to forgiveness for people who haven't done the hard work to do repair. Because *I* didn't want to be angry anymore. It was good. But it didn't change anything. Because people don't do the work, it's not a *transformative* forgiveness. A forgiveness that is tied to accountability and people having done the work, *then* you can forgive with an open heart, thinking "I'm actually part of transforming the world"; that's really something to celebrate. »



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