When Pam went through a three-hour long restorative dialogue encounter with the man who murdered her father, she herself was truly amazed by how much relief it brought her. Having unanswered questions answered and hearing genuine remorse on the part of the offender allowed, in her own word, a “cleansing to happen.” By way of contrast, her feelings of intense anger and mistrust at the start of the two-year restorative process were very evident to the two facilitators who initially met with her. Even on the morning of the scheduled dialogue meeting in prison, after lots of good preparation with Pam, the facilitators felt nervous about how the conversation might go. “Would she be able to handle this situation of coming face-to-face with the offender? Will we have to cut the conversation short for the good of both of them?”

According to Pam, the quality of preparation made all the difference in the world. It is true that her troubled and negative feelings were still active within her at the time of sitting down at the table for a restorative dialogue. But James, the offender who was serving 25 years in prison, was also on a journey toward something good, toward personal change and freedom. He carried a long history of anger and pent-up pain which had ultimately exploded in the episode of the murder. Being in prison gave him the necessary time to think about his past and to get reoriented in his thinking. In the end, this victim-and-offender encounter allowed both Pam and James to connect on a heart-to-heart level, and it became very meaningful to both of them. How is it, then, that such intense feelings of anger and personal pain could feed into a process that in the end yielded deep compassion and understanding? Specifically, how was Pam able to handle her own feelings in this face-to-face setting? Did some form of forgiveness happen that
Reflecting back on her process years later, Pam said she experienced a “moment of grace” that allowed her to handle her feelings in a way where she was in control of them rather than her feelings being in control of her. Forgiveness, for Pam, is not a matter of getting ‘over’ your feelings and moving on in life. From her perspective, hard feelings cannot be neatly tied up into a little package and put aside as if you are done with them. It is being able, over time, to honestly have them without acting on them. She recognized how the meeting with James allowed for elements of forgiveness to happen that were like gifts to her: her chance to tell her story in full, his chance to apologize, her chance to have questions answered and to learn about his past, his chance to understand her and gain more compassion. All of this bridge-building activity became “pieces of forgiveness” for Pam, even though according to her own definition of forgiveness, she could not forgive James for what he did. We will come back to this paradox later.

The story of the death of Pam’s father is a very tragic one. At a point where her family trusted James as someone to help out during the holiday season, an episode happened in the kitchen with just James and Pam’s father present. With uncontrollable rage, James beat the father on his head from behind and then brutally stabbed him 40 times. Leaving the house with stolen possessions and a checkbook, he left a thick trail of evidence that made the court trial, one year later, incontestable. Pam, along with her family members, were grief-struck and angry. She was fortunate to receive good support from a therapist known for helping police officers, and from a homicide victims’ support group.

Nearly 20 years after the initial crime, Pam learned about the restorative justice option for victims of serious and violent crimes. At her own initiative she pursued the opportunity to meet with the perpetrator of her father’s death. Understandably, trust issues were huge for her when facing the lead facilitator for the first time. She already had been with many therapists who, in her words, “had a look of horror on their face, rather than a look of empathy and
understanding." When telling her story once again, the last she thing wanted was to feel hurt again. But the two restorative justice facilitators provided a sense of empathy and understanding that helped her gain new trust. This was all the more important, as one of the facilitators recalled how Pam’s body-language and word choices spoke of more anger than the content of what she said verbally. This facilitator, over years of experience, had never before seen such a high level of anger and intensity in a victim client. Without question, this foundation of trust, along with many layers of good preparation, were essential in helping Pam transform the toxic emotional energy she had still been carrying within her into a new life-energy to help her move forward.

In a video interview done after the meeting with James, Pam recalled the many ways in which she was well prepared before coming to the joint meeting. The facilitators met with her about a half-a-dozen times, interspersing those meetings with separate meetings with James in prison. This allowed, with permission, information about James’ readiness to be passed on to Pam in successive bits. Things that would be said or questions that would be asked were all placed ‘on the table’ in a way to diminish any unexpected surprises. At the same time, Pam recounted how she was not led to have high hopes for what would come out of meeting with James. The facilitators prepared her with low expectations, and thus she knew that any other positive outcomes would be a gift to her. This long two-year time of preparation also gave Pam the time to know if she really wanted to go through with the meeting.

Along with touring the prison ahead of time, one very important preparatory exercise was for Pam to write down every question she wanted to ask James when they would meet. The court trial did not allow for all questions to be aired, since it mostly revolved around the defense attorney’s agenda. Over several weeks, Pam kept adding more and more questions to her list, things that had been bothering her for years like ghosts in her mind that lacked good closure, seeking a final resting place. She recalled how writing this list had a lot of value by itself. “That alone was a healing process for me -- to look at this and see how much I was carrying around. And it may not get resolved, but I’m going to try. There has to be a process for me to close that
This list of questions, with Pam’s permission, was then shared with James, who in turn shared a list of questions back with Pam. It was a powerful way to build trust before even meeting together. In a sense, a violent crime robs a person of the positive energy of trust within the bank of their heart. Pam knew that “you are never the same” after being impacted by the murder of a loved one. “You’ll never trust others the same way as you did before.” For this reason, the restorative process, hard as it is at first, works to create a credit of trust that can fill into an existing debit of trust. This new credit of trust, aided by the relationship with the facilitators, can later be drawn upon in finding trust with the other party.

One of the biggest lingering questions for Pam was, “Once he gets out of prison, will he come and hurt me or my family?” The force of this concern can be felt in the context of the original crime which involved James’ unpredictable explosion of anger and rage. Even though Pam felt very prepared for the visit, and felt comfortable with the facilitator and her husband who was present for support, this concern about James hurting someone again was very palpable to her. In her mind, however, she already was able to live with the tension between wanting him dead and wanting something profoundly good to come out of the meeting for both her and him. These two things did not cancel each other out; they co-existed in her mind.

The day finally came for her, after a two-hour drive, to meet with James in the prison. Both facilitators and Pam’s husband were there as supports. Looking back, the most helpful thing that happened was for her lingering questions to get answers, every one of them. One question had to do with a matter about Pam’s father who, according to the defense attorney, provoked James. This scenario was also put into the news press. James, however, was able to explain exactly what happened, giving more truth than what came out in the legal process, and this greatly helped Pam to know that her father had not done as the attorney had said. In addition to getting answers, it was also very helpful for Pam to talk through the countless impacts to herself and the family, and she noted how this had a two-fold benefit. It was good for
her to recapture the entire story and tell it to him in a way that validated how hard the impacts truly were. Secondly, it was good to see James’ reaction to hearing the whole story and respond in a genuine way. During the trial, he seemed unresponsive, showing no emotion. This time he was more open and understanding, and that made a huge difference for Pam.

Far beyond what Pam had initially expected, the three-hour meeting created a space for listening, sharing, honesty, understanding, assurance, all of which amounted to a deeper connection that would have seemed unimaginable to her in earlier years. “We looked each other in the eye and just talked.” A high point of the conversation came when James said to Pam, “I will never hurt you or a member of your family.” He wanted her to know that, plain and simple, and this exchange was a big moment for both of them. At another point Pam asked James to talk about his childhood, and while it was hard for him to name the sources of his anger, it became evident to Pam that James was “a victim of his own life.” He even said that it was just a matter of time before he would kill someone. “Hearing this truth,” said Pam, “was healing for me.” She knew it was no longer about her father but about James’ pain. In a strange way, this gave her more compassion for him.

Pam knew that if James had made no apology, it would have been very sad. But James apologized over and over for different ways that Pam and her family had been affected, and she knew he wasn’t faking it. To her “it was a gift.” But she also recognized that “it was a gift for both of us. It also unburdened him, too.” James’ sorrow for what he did was real, and Pam could sense this. At the same time it was clear to Pam that James had suffered much internally for what he had done, and this also led her to feel sorrow for him. “That sounds terrible,” she later reflected, “but that helped me to see he was a human being and not a monster.” Altogether, this encounter amounted to an enormous shift of emotional energy from intense toxic anger and pain to an equally strong sense of release and good will.

On leaving the prison that day, Pam experienced a set of feelings that were very memorable. “I felt so much relief, as if a cleansing had happened. My questions had been
answered and I was jubilant that I wouldn’t have to worry any more.” She also felt degrees of sadness, sadness for the family loss, sadness for James’ life, and even sadness that she had not done this dialogue earlier. “It would have reduced years of worrying about all this stuff!” Part of the paradox in Pam’s experience was that there was a very real sense of journeying forward and not being stuck in the feelings of her past, and yet she also had a very real sense of owning her feelings and not wanting to disregard them by moving on. It was as if her feelings, born out of her experience as a victim, could be traded in for something that was meaningful to her.

When asked about whether her experience with James involved forgiveness, Pam reflected the same paradox in how she dealt with her feelings. “The murder is not mine to forgive; there are some things that are unforgivable….He shouldn’t even be breathing right now.” On the other hand, Pam described her encounter with James as “a moment of grace” that allowed for connection and compassion to grow for both of them. “It seemed like God had a hand in it.” Are these contradictory perspectives? This tension makes perfect sense to Pam “if you are comfortable with who you are and with your emotions.” What it really came down to was her recognition that feelings stemming from the death of a loved one just don’t go away or get neatly resolved. It is not a matter of whether you have the feelings or whether you move on in life; it is a matter of how you handle those feelings.

This orientation fits well with a rejection of forgiveness as a social expectation to “let bygones be bygones,” or to say, “That’s water under the bridge.” Pam said that she didn’t want that kind of peace where there is almost a pressure to forgive. In contrast, Pam sought elements of forgiveness that helped her heal not away from her feelings, but with and through her feelings. “I’m not going to change or mock how I feel so that others can feel comfortable with it, or others can say, ‘Oh good, she’s able to let it go.’” Instead, she visualizes her feelings in a box that is placed on a shelf in her closet, and whenever she wants to take that box down and open it up, she knows that it is ‘okay’ to have a ‘bad night’. “That doesn’t mean I’m a bad person for feeling what I feel, and it doesn’t mean that because I don’t forgive James that I’ve done
something wrong or haven’t completed my process.” Rather, it means to her that she can handle things as she chooses to handle them, knowing well that she will not act on these feelings in hurtful ways. Significantly, the restorative dialogue process was a key aid in her personal growth to control her feelings, though earlier therapy also set her in this same direction.

Even though the word ‘forgive’ did not come into play in the restorative dialogue, it is clear that all that happened took place, as Pam phrased it, “along the lines of forgiveness.” A true expression of this was the lean to a positive future. Toward the end of the meeting Pam told James that she bore no ill will toward him in the future, and that she wanted him to not hurt anyone else, but to be successful. Similarly, Pam’s husband wished him the best, and assured James that no revenge of any sort would happen. These intentions for a positive future are hallmark signs of any act of forgiveness where people have shifted the focus from the past to the future.

Perhaps the most profound discovery for Pam was how her encounter with James led to her moment of being able to forgive herself. For years she felt somewhat at fault for her role in connecting James to her father. By facing James face-to-face, and sensing first-hand his change of heart, this “moment of grace” gave her the therapeutic space to forgive herself by letting go of that inner weight. It may be that using the word ‘forgive’ in this context confirms how real forgiveness can be when it comes to managing one’s own feelings. This fits well with a concluding statement Pam made about James: “I’m not ready to forgive him, but I can say that I don’t feel the same way I did before about him either. I feel much different about him.”