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Redeeming Mr. White

Forgiveness in *Breaking Bad* from a Christian perspective

Abstract

This thesis offers an analysis of how *Breaking Bad*'s anti-hero Walter White can be viewed through the lens of forgiveness within Christian theology.

The theories used for the theological approach are those presented by Magnus Abrahamson (Th. D), Desmond and Mpho Tutu, and Per Arne Dahl. The first part of this thesis provides the reader with an overview of what the aforementioned authors communicate in their books, and explores forgiveness from mainly a theological perspective. Following that is an analysis in which this theological perspective is applied to the character of Walter White. A conclusion is then reached, which states that if Walter White were a real person, he would *not* be unforgivable — contrary to popular belief.

Key words: breaking bad, walter white, forgiveness, christian theology

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Introduction

Statement of Purpose

In an interview with Vince Gilligan, creator and showrunner of the television series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), he stated that he originally pitched the show in one line: "This is a story about a man who transforms himself from Mr Chips into Scarface."¹ In the pilot episode of the show, we are introduced to the high-school chemistry teacher Walter White (Bryan Cranston), who is also forced to work a second job at a car wash in order to make ends meet. In the series finale, we say farewell to a dying Heisenberg: a killer and former manufacturer of the finest methamphetamine in southwestern USA. Thus, the transformation is complete.

Some would say that Walter White is unforgiveable. The intention of this study is to question that statement, and perhaps prove the opposite. More specifically; if Walter White and all the other characters of the series lived in our reality and the events depicted in the show were real, would/should the remaining members of his family be able to forgive him, and would God be able to forgive him (from a Christian point of view)?

In addition to this, I intend to show how one can argue that *Breaking Bad* illustrates certain Christian, theological concepts connected to forgiveness. These include struggling with guilt and the human yearning for paradise. I will show how these concepts are manifested through the character of Walter White.

Previous Studies of *Breaking Bad*

There are various instances of academic writing about *Breaking Bad*. For example, Andy Peters has written about the linguistic construction of Walter White's masculinity², and J. J. Clark has written a thesis in which he argues that *Breaking Bad* is a modern western.³ Moreover, a book edited by David P. Pierson contains different essays about the show which he has categorized in the following way: the contexts, the politics, the style, and the reception of *Breaking Bad*.⁴ I have found a few articles touching on morality aspects of the show as well. However, the specificity of what I intend

¹ Paul MacInnes, "Breaking Bad creator Vince Gilligan: the man who turned Walter White from Mr Chips into Scarface", *The Guardian* 2012-05-19

² A. Peters, 'Beyond Good and Bad: The Linguistic Construction of Walter White's Masculinity in Breaking Bad', B.A. Thesis, University of Michigan, 2015.

³ J. J. Clark, 'Breaking Bad as a Modern Western: Revising Frontier Myths of Masculinity, Savagery, and Empire', M.A. Thesis, Colorado State University, 2014.

⁴ David P. Pierson (ed.), *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series*, Plymouth: Lexington Books 2014.

to do seems somewhat unprecedented. To my knowledge, no studies applying theories of forgiveness on the characters of *Breaking Bad* have been done in quite this way. In *Breaking Bad and Philosophy*⁵, the authors deal with the philosophical, psychological, and sociological issues behind the show — the philosophical of which I will also, to an extent, consider in this thesis — but my intent is to focus on forgiveness in particular. I have chosen the Christian perspective due to personal interest, but also due to the fact that the cross specifically represents forgiveness and thus salvation for over two billion people around the globe.⁶

Sources and Material

The primary material of interest for this thesis will be select moments in select episodes of *Breaking Bad*. I will focus on scenes that somehow show Walter White struggling with guilt, regret, personal and/or moral dilemmas; moments that I believe can be viewed as illustrating certain theological problems. I believe that one could very well study many of the show's characters from a perspective related to forgiveness, but that would most likely result in a far larger document than the one I intend to produce. Therefore, as a means of delimitation, I am narrowing my focus to only include Walter White and only a certain amount of moments across the 62 episodes.

As secondary material I have mainly chosen to use Magnus Abrahamson's theorizing about forgiveness in relation to serious crime, as well as Desmond and Mpho Tutu's guide to forgiveness. I will also refer to some writing by Norwegian bishop Per Arne Dahl. Magnus Abrahamson (Th. D) currently works as a prison pastor in Borås, Sweden. He believes that no one is a hopeless case, and that everyone has a chance at being forgiven. I find his book particularly relevant to my study as he discusses forgiveness in relation to people who have committed serious crimes, which would apply to Walter White.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a patron of The Forgiveness Project⁷, and in his book (co-written by his daughter Mpho Tutu) he discusses the positive outcomes of forgiveness, not only for the individual, but for society. Per Arne Dahl also discusses the positive aspects of forgiving one another, and the subtitle of his book⁸ is (translated by me) *Forgiveness as a Life Force*.

⁵ David R. Koepsell & Robert Arp (ed.), *Breaking Bad and Philosophy: Badder Living Through Chemistry*, Chicago: Open Court 2012

⁶ www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/

⁷ www.theforgivenessproject.com

⁸ Per Arne Dahl, (swedish translation by Ulla-Stina Rask), *Allt som är värdefullt har ett pris: Förlåtelse som livskraft*, Örebro: Bokförlaget Corida AB 2004

As a compliment to the aforementioned literature I will also use the books *Breaking Bad and Philosophy* (edited by David R. Koepsell and Robert Arp) and *Wanna Cook?* (by Ensley F. Guffey and K. Dale Koontz). The latter one is particularly helpful as a quick guide to, and overview of, all the episodes of *Breaking Bad*. The authors of the book also provide some of their analysis of individual episodes as well as the show as a whole.

Theory and Method

I will close read moments from *Breaking Bad* that I have selected based on the criteria that they should deal with anything related to forgiveness, such as regret, guilt, or confession. In addition to this, I will examine Walter White's character arc as a whole, but in a general sense rather than in detail. Then, I will apply mainly the writings of Abrahamson, Tutu and/or Dahl and discuss the outcome from a theological perspective.

Abrahamson argues that in terms of forgiveness, society can be metaphorically viewed as consisting of three places: the City Square (where we all start), the Prison Cell (where those in need of forgiveness find themselves) and the City Gate (outside which those who are banished from the community of society end up). I believe it is possible to track Walter White's journey through these metaphorical places.

Further, Tutu tells true stories of people who have been able to forgive in spite of terrible circumstances, and indeed, many of the characters in *Breaking Bad* find themselves in terrible situations. I will draw parallels between Tutu's writing and *Breaking Bad*.

Per Arne Dahl illuminates how one can view life using Christian theology, which is relevant to this thesis since I have chosen the Christian perspective as my point of view. In his book, he starts off the first chapter with the provocative question: "Is there a life before death?"⁹ Dahl continues by sharing his experience of viewing *The Celebration* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998, original title: *Festen*) and concludes that this film is a dramatic narrative about the consequences of deceit and lack of reconciliation. Dahl points to forgiveness and reconciliation as the way of truly revitalizing one's life, rather than trying to forget and move on or deafen emotional hurts through abuses of any kind. In my opinion, *Breaking Bad* contains a whole lot of "trying to forget and move on" and deafening emotional hurts through abuses of various kinds.

⁹ Dahl, p. 13 (my translation)

Forgiveness — In Theory and Practice

Overview

In the following chapter I would like to give an overview of some of the aforementioned authors' work and hopefully provide some deeper knowledge in regards to forgiveness. Both Abrahamson and the Tutus have had quite some proximity to the practice of forgiving, given their line of work. Desmond Tutu writes in his book *The Book of Forgiving — The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* that forgiveness as such has received increasingly more attention in the academic world lately, whereas it previously was regarded solely as a religious matter.¹⁰ However, as stated, that seems to have changed, with forgiveness now not only being studied by theologians, but by philosophers, psychologists and medical scholars alike. Even neurologists have taken interest in the effects of forgiving, in their case from a biological standpoint. As it happens, there are scientists devoted to searching for what would be considered a forgiveness gene within the human DNA.¹¹

Tutu continues, that what all the research leads up to, is that giving and receiving forgiveness has very positive effects on the person who is subject to it. Using a quote from psychologist Fred Luskin, Tutu argues that forgiveness transforms people in all ways — mentally and spiritually, and even physically.¹² Practicing forgiveness alleviates depression, mitigates anger, strengthens ones emotional confidence, and provides a fortified sense of hope. Furthermore, scientific research has also shown that people who are more forgiving tend to exhibit a lower rate of physical, stress-related symptoms. Conversely, the cost of not forgiving can be fairly gruesome. To carry anger and acrimony on one's shoulders, which most likely is the consequence of not forgiving, can lead to one running a greater risk of developing heart diseases or having high blood pressure.¹³ Medical and psychological studies have also demonstrated that people who hold high amounts of anger within them run a higher risk of getting stomach ulcer, back problems, sleeping disorders, depression, and even cancer. To forgive can be a way of letting go of such anger or bitterness, that may cause aforementioned health issues.

¹⁰ Desmond & Mpho Tutu (Swedish translation by Maria Store), *Förlåtelse — Den fyrfaldiga vägen till helande för oss och vår värld* (original title: *The Book of Forgiving — The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*), Örebro: Libris förlag 2014, p. 25

¹¹ Tutu, p. 25

¹² Tutu, p. 25

¹³ Tutu, pp. 25-26

Whereas Tutu's book can be viewed as a fairly pragmatic and practical guide for those in need of giving or receiving forgiveness (which would include us all, at one point or another), Abrahamson's book focuses more on the theories of forgiveness from a theological, Christian standpoint. It provides the reader with suggestions as to how one might approach someone who, for example, has committed a serious crime. Abrahamson begins his first chapter with the provocative question: "Does God forgive murderers, rapists and pedophiles?"¹⁴ Later, he states his belief in that God wants to forgive all people, and investigates what this statement actually means. This constitutes the central question throughout the book. Towards the end of his book, Abrahamson concludes: "It is my belief, that no human can do anything that God would not be able to forgive."¹⁵

What Is Forgiveness?

Desmond Tutu makes it clear that the act of forgiving is not something easy or simple. Regardless of who you are, regardless of your faith, some deeds can seem unforgivable. In the Tutu's book, Mpho tells the story of when her family's domestic helper Angela was found murdered in their own home.¹⁶ Quite expectedly, there are moments when Mpho cannot imagine forgiving the person who stole a life, and in doing so, hurt many others at the same time.

One might view the act of forgiving as a sign of weakness. Taking revenge, on the other hand, might be seen as a way of exhibiting power. Tutu wishes to argue against these assumptions. He states that forgiveness is not a sign of weakness, but of power. For example, we admire the parents who forgive the person who murdered their children. We presume that the woman who forgives the person who raped her possesses a fair amount of courage. The person who truly forgives whoever tortured him or her, is viewed as a hero, not as someone weak.¹⁷

Tutu gives us an example of someone who has managed to show forgiveness in spite of being treated in horrible, inhuman ways. The person in question is bishop Malusi Mpumlwana. He was arrested for protesting against the Apartheid in South Africa, and was then subject to torture from the police. Tutu quotes bishop Mpumlwana, regarding an insight he had had while he was being tortured: "These people are God's children, and they are losing their humanity. We have to help them regain it."¹⁸

¹⁴ Magnus Abrahamson, *Brott och förlåtelse*, Stockholm: Verbum Förlag 2013, p. 9

¹⁵ Abrahamson, p. 95 (my translation)

¹⁶ Tutu, pp. 39-40

¹⁷ Tutu, p. 41

¹⁸ Tutu, p. 42 (my translation)

Another example that Tutu gives us of the ability to forgive regardless of the circumstances, is that of Bassam Aramin. At the age of twelve, he witnessed a boy of his own age being shot by an Israeli soldier. Instantly, he felt a great need to take revenge, and joined a group of freedom fighters. While some would consider Aramin a terrorist, in his mind, he was simply fighting for security, his home, and his right to be free. However, at the age of 17, he was arrested while planning an attack on Israeli troops. A sentence of seven years in prison followed. A prison, in which Aramin was tortured by the guards and where he learned to hate even more. But things began to change when he started having conversations with an Israeli guard. Initially, they both saw the other as a terrorist, but soon they understood how much they had in common. Aramin recalls this as being the first time he ever felt empathy. It was when they both saw each other as human beings rather than enemies that Aramin realized violence would never lead to peace. In 2005, he co-founded a group called Combatants for Peace and he has not carried a weapon ever since. The significant act of forgiveness was shown when Aramin's daughter was murdered in 2007 by an Israeli soldier outside her school. Aramin says that while one Israeli soldier shot his daughter, hundreds of former Israeli soldiers laid down a park outside the school where she was murdered, in memory of her.¹⁹

Tutu writes that forgiveness does not inhibit justice. He continues, that there are those who believe that an injustice can only be corrected when the wrongdoer in question pays the price of what he or she has done, so to speak.²⁰ The underlying theory that governs such a way of reasoning is called *retributivism*. Abrahamson covers this in his book. Plainly speaking, it means that you get what you deserve.²¹ When you do something good, good things should come to you. Conversely, when you do something bad, bad things should come to you. Therefore, when you commit a crime, you should be subject to legal repercussions such as a penalty. Abrahamson writes that there are many different types of retributivism, but one concept that they all have in common when it comes to legal issues, is that the scope of the penalty should be determined in proportion to the scope of the crime committed.²² From a retributivistic standpoint, the purpose of a penalty is to restore the balance that was disturbed when the crime was committed. A debt was created that must be repayed.²³ However, Tutu points out that even though justice has been done, many people will not necessarily feel closure, or perceive the situation as being resolved. Forgiveness is the only real way

¹⁹ Tutu, pp. 42-43

²⁰ Tutu, p. 44

²¹ Abrahamson, p. 26

²² Abrahamson, p. 26

²³ Abrahamson, pp. 26-27

out, as it were.²⁴ Tutu puts the word "justice" in quotes (as I just did), which — to me — signifies that he perhaps questions the common definitions of justice. Further, he argues that regardless of legal repercussions, and regardless of whether someone is forgiven or not, people always have to live with the consequences of their own actions.²⁵ He gives us the example of the perpetrators in South Africa, who stood before the courtlike Truth and Reconciliation Commission, confessing what they had done. They were granted amnesty and immunity from penalty. But nonetheless, Tutu states that they were not "let off the hook too easily". The fact that they have publicly confessed their crimes against humanity will forever affect their position within their families and within society, he concludes.²⁶

It is important to make a distinction between forgiveness and justice. They are not related to or dependent on each other. (In a later section, I will go over different ways of viewing the concept of justice, and why it still can matter but in a different context.) Tutu writes about the problem with not keeping these two separate, letting justice be a condition for forgiveness. He admits that it often is easier to forgive someone who shows regret for what he or she has done, and offers to compensate you in some way.²⁷ However, when you state the conditions for forgiving someone, you continue to be the victim of that person. If that other person is not willing to fulfill your conditions, he or she holds the key to your chains, as Tutu words it.²⁸ In these cases both parties are stuck in an endless circle. This is why unconditional forgiveness is preferable. Through this, both parties are set free. The person who is forgiven does not have to worry about potential revenge or fulfilling certain conditions, and the person who grants forgiveness can move on in life without carrying the burdens of the past on his or her shoulders.²⁹ This may very well be one of the most important reasons to forgive.

At first glance, it might seem as though forgiving requires forgetting. Tutu ensures the reader that this is not the case. Nor does the act of forgiving lead to denial of what has happened. On the contrary, Tutu states that real forgiveness can only occur in absolute truth and honesty.³⁰ He writes, that in order to forgive it is necessary that we put what has happened to us into words, which

²⁴ Tutu, p. 45

²⁵ Tutu, p. 44

²⁶ Tutu, p. 44

²⁷ Tutu, p. 28

²⁸ Tutu, p. 28

²⁹ Tutu, p. 29

³⁰ Tutu, 45

therefore is the first step of the Fourfold Path to forgiveness (which I will cover in a later section). Once again, forgiving is not forgetting. However, it does help us live with our past, and view it in a different light.

Sentences and Justice

When someone breaks the law, he or she is subject to a set of reactions from the society of which he or she is a part of. Abrahamson divides these reactions into two separate categories: reactions of the *state* and reactions of the *public*.³¹ State reactions include legal procedures. They are official and legalistic in nature, and center mainly around deciding and executing penalties. The public reactions, however, constitute a larger category than the state reactions, and form the attitudes and opinions citizens of the state may have about the crime and the person to blame. Media portrayals, small-talk around coffee tables, and the ways in which those involved in the crime are treated by other people are all indicative of the public reactions. While most people, allegedly, agree that the state *should* indeed react when a crime is committed, Abrahamson points out that it is not necessarily obvious *what* that reaction should be.³² Nor is it totally clear *why* there should be a reaction at all. He gives us the example of a person who is charged with a crime of violence, and sentenced to three years in prison along with an order to pay for damages. The reason for the payment is to compensate the victim, but what actually motivates the time in prison?³³

From a retributivistic standpoint it is important that the state takes a stand when someone has done something wrong. The legal actions of the state serve as a declaration to its citizens of what is not acceptable.³⁴ Since the penalty should stand in proportion to the crime (according to retributivism), an answer to the question above could be that the time in prison shows to what degree the crime committed is not acceptable. I view it as trying to prevent crime through setting an example of what happens to one who chooses to break the law.

Once again according to retributivism, penalties are given to convicts because they *deserve it* and it would be morally wrong to *not* punish them in any way. It is through the penalties that the state can define what actions are considered immoral.³⁵ In light of this, I would not consider Desmond Tutu a retributivist. During the apartheid years in South Africa, there were people who

³¹ Abrahamson, p. 25

³² Abrahamson, p. 25

³³ Abrahamson, p. 25

³⁴ Abrahamson, p. 27

³⁵ Abrahamson, p. 27

acted in ways that many would still consider immoral, even though many of the accused received amnesty and immunity from penalty. However, as stated before, Tutu still argues that the perpetrators "got what they deserved" when they had to confess the bad things that they had done and live with that reality for the rest of their lives.³⁶

Abrahamson also provides his critique of the retributivistic way of reasoning. He reacts against its lack of love and consideration. The goal when punishing someone from a retributivistic point of view is to inflict the "right amount" of pain on the accused, regardless of the consequences of the penalty.³⁷ Further, the notion of the penalty being proportionate to the crime is also problematic. This would mean that someone who has taken a life should also lose their own, but such a definite action leaves no room for forgiveness or reconciliation. The accused would never be able to return to society. Abrahamson points out that for someone who believes in every person's worthiness as a human being, a death sentence hardly seems appropriate.³⁸

A question I find interesting, in the context of retributivistic justice, is: what legal repercussions would be appropriate for someone who was guilty of all the things Walter White has done? According to Ensley F. Guffey and K. Dale Koontz, Walt kills at least 24 individuals directly.³⁹ He has also caused a lot of trouble for people around him through his lies and his manipulative manners. After all the accumulative damage that Walt has caused, how could one possibly inflict the resulting amount of pain on someone like Walt? It seems impossible. For situations like these, Abrahamson suggests a form of relative proportionality. The scope of the penalty should reflect the scope of the crime (or crimes) committed, but the amount of suffering that the penalty causes does not necessarily have to be comparable to the amount of suffering that the crime has caused. When following this way of reasoning, achieving absolute proportionality is not the highest priority.⁴⁰

One might argue that *Breaking Bad* as a whole illustrates the very premise of retributivism: *you get what you deserve*. After all the harm he has caused, Walter White loses his family, his money, and dies, all alone. I will discuss this further in the next chapter.

³⁶ Tutu, p. 44

³⁷ Abrahamson, p. 29

³⁸ Abrahamson, p. 29

³⁹ Ensley F. Guffey & K. Dale Koontz, *Wanna Cook?: The Complete, Unofficial Companion to Breaking Bad*, Toronto: ECW Press, 2014, p. 416

⁴⁰ Abrahamson, p. 29

Another way of handling the repercussions of crime is through the lens of *restorative justice*. This sort of theorizing has gained popularity since the 1990s.⁴¹ Proponents of this theory would argue that retributivistic justice does not pave a way forward so to speak, if the whole point is to solely inflict suffering on the convict. Abrahamson refers to criminologist Howard Zehr as he states that there is a risk with strong prison sentences, in that it may cause the convict to focus more on his or her own pain rather than contemplate on the pain he or she has caused others.⁴² In terms of restorative justice, one of the aims is to prevent further damage from being caused. An analogy I find appropriate here is to say that something has been broken, and instead of breaking it more, it is now time to repair it.

Relationships are important to consider, as far as restorative justice is concerned. Many relationships are affected when a crime is committed. For example, it is important to not forget the families of the culprit and the victim respectively. The goal when deciding what the appropriate repercussions should be is to be constructive and focused on how to move on from here. The victim should be compensated, and the culprit should be aware of that what he or she has done is wrong. Moreover, he or she should ask for forgiveness and make an effort to not commit any further crimes.⁴³

Abrahamson notes that when restorative justice is practiced, the victim receives more attention than he or she would in a case of retributivistic justice. The victim is given an opportunity to put his or her experience of the offence into words.⁴⁴ This goes hand in hand with Tutu's path to forgiveness, in which the first step is to tell what has happened. This seems to be a good segue into the next section of this chapter:

Following the Fourfold Path

Desmond and Mpho Tutu have divided the process of forgiving into four steps, which they refer to as 'The Fourfold Path'. These four steps are as listed below:

- Telling the Story
- Naming the Hurt
- Granting Forgiveness
- Renewing or Releasing the Relationship

⁴¹ Abrahamson, p. 33

⁴² Abrahamson, p. 33

⁴³ Abrahamson, p. 34

⁴⁴ Abrahamson, p. 34

The first step, Telling the Story, consists of exactly that. Simply stating what has happened. This should not be an emotional account. Instead, the goal here is to focus on facts.

In neurology, memories are divided into two separate categories: *explicit* memories and *implicit* memories.⁴⁵ When you actively remember something, and you can account for it, you are dealing with an explicit memory. However, sometimes we experience things that are stored as memories in our minds, but we do not consciously know that we have these memories and thus we cannot account for them. These are the implicit memories. Tutu exemplifies this as he tells the story of when his granddaughter Nyaniso (Mpho's daughter), at the age of four, was attacked by two big dogs. For many years to come, Nyaniso would wince at the sight of dogs. She had no explicit memory of the attack she had been subject to in her early days, but nonetheless, she had an implicit memory of it and that memory provoked a reaction in her. Years later, when Nyaniso and her family were talking about things they had experienced in their lives, she managed to convert this implicit memory into an explicit one, through the retelling of events. This proved to be an important step for her to take in order to heal from the traumatic experience in her childhood. Tutu argues that this is true for all human beings; when we tell what we have experienced, it is easier for us to assimilate our implicit memories, and begin to heal.⁴⁶

Psychologist Marshall Duke initiated a research project at Emory University during the 1990s, with the purpose of studying childrens psychological resilience. The work of Duke and his colleague showed that the children who knew a lot about their respective families' histories, both the good and the bad, had stronger psychological resilience than those who had little knowledge about their families pasts. The conclusion was drawn, that the most important variable for joy and psychological well-being was knowledge of one's family history. Furthermore, after 9/11, when Marshall Duke followed up with the children who had participated in his study, it became clear once again that those who had deeper insight into their respective family's background had an easier time recovering from stress and traumatic events.⁴⁷ Tutu argues that the conclusions drawn from Duke's study can be applied to everyone, in terms of healing from bad experiences. It is through knowing what has happened to us, and being aware of our place in a bigger picture, that we can recover from traumatic events and deal with stress. We have to be able to tell our own story in order to heal.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Tutu, p. 80

⁴⁶ Tutu, p. 80

⁴⁷ Tutu, pp. 80-81

⁴⁸ Tutu, p. 81

The second step is called Naming the Hurt. Once we can tell what has happened to us on a factual level it is time to state how it made us feel. Tutu quotes Father Michael Lapsley: "We cannot let go of feelings that we do not have."⁴⁹ Furthermore, Tutu writes that the reason for voicing what is hurting us is to free ourselves from the bitterness and anger that will start to grow within, should we not come in contact with the pain we truly feel.⁵⁰ It might seem easier or safer to not confront our emotions, to simply "shake it off". But when we bury our feelings like that, they will not cease to exist. Quite the opposite; the pain will grow. As Tutu writes, we must pull up the pain by its roots. And this can only be done by being truthful as to what one actually feels.⁵¹

The stages of grief have been studied quite comprehensively. Tutu points out that the majority of what has been written about grief has been aimed towards people who have lost someone dear to them. However, grief or sorrow arises not only when someone dies, but in a more general sense whenever we lose someone or something. Understanding the role that grief plays is important for the second step of the Fourfold Path.⁵² The final stage of grief, acceptance, leads us to what Tutu refers to as a key insight for us to have in order for us to forgive: the acceptance of our own vulnerability. It is that which we have in common as human beings, our losses and our grief, that helps us connect with the world around us.⁵³ "We are hurt together, and we heal together."⁵⁴

The third step on the Fourfold Path is perhaps at first glance the most central, even though they all are connected and the point is that you have to go through them all. Regardless, this step is called Granting Forgiveness.

There are many great stories about forgiveness, and the Tutus' book contains a lot of true accounts in this category. We admire those who are able to forgive in spite of how grim the circumstances might be. Quite inspirationally, Tutu comments that the people who have been able to forgive to such an extent are human beings just like you and me. If we practice forgiveness, and forgive small things in our everyday life, we will be ready, in the event that we should need to forgive something that many perhaps would consider "unforgivable".⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Tutu, p. 103 (my translation)

⁵⁰ Tutu, pp. 103-104

⁵¹ Tutu, pp. 104-105

⁵² Tutu, p. 110

⁵³ Tutu, pp. 112-113

⁵⁴ Tutu, p. 113 (my translation)

⁵⁵ Tutu, p. 127

”It is by choosing forgiveness that we cease being victims and instead become heroes.”⁵⁶ When we forgive, we are no longer bound by the chains which held us and the perpetrator together in captivity. Tutu writes that it is through seeing that which we all have in common that we can forgive. We are all vulnerable, and we are all capable of doing cruel things. No one is born evil. It is not possible for us to separate the saints from the sinners, as we all have the capability for doing both good and bad deeds.⁵⁷ As we examine the offence that we personally have been subject to, we can place it in a greater context. The perpetrator always has his or her own story, and although there is no excuse for what they did, it helps us see the bigger picture and realize why he or she might have done what they did.⁵⁸ Seeing what unites us is key to forgiving each other. In the previous step of the Fourfold Path we accepted *our own* vulnerability. Now we have to accept that of our perpetrator’s.⁵⁹

Tutu warns against trying to skip the first two steps of the Fourfold Path and go straight to Granting Forgiveness. One might do this in an effort to avoid the pain and reach peace of mind immediately. But there are no shortcuts. Even though one utters the words ”I forgive you”, that does not mean that true forgiveness has actually taken place. Assure yourself before telling someone that you have forgiven them, that you actually have done so.⁶⁰

Finally, after Granting Forgiveness, it is time to decide whether to Renew or Release the Relationship. The healing process does not end when we forgive. Even if you never speak with the person who has harmed you, even if you never meet him or her again, or perhaps they are dead, you still have a relationship to this person and that can affect your life.⁶¹ Whatever deed that stands between you and your perpetrator is what binds you together. Either you forgive him or her and peacefully walk away, or you forgive and choose to renew your relationship so that it no longer is clouded by the past. Tutu points out that *renewing* is not the same as *restoring*. You do not create a copy of your previous relationship — you create a new one. He thus writes that renewing a relationship is a creative act, and he also states that it is always possible to build a new relationship regardless of what the previous one looked like.⁶²

⁵⁶ Tutu, p. 129 (my translation)

⁵⁷ Tutu, p. 133

⁵⁸ Tutu, p. 133

⁵⁹ Tutu, p. 135

⁶⁰ Tutu, pp. 135-136

⁶¹ Tutu, p. 155

⁶² Tutu, p. 156

The City Square, the Prison Cell, and the City Gate

Abrahamson draws up an analogy for our western society using the places mentioned in the header for this section.⁶³ The City Square is where we all meet and interact with each other. It is the public place in which democracy once was born and where justice is served. It used to be so, that people were not only sentenced in public, but their penalties were also executed there. That is no longer the case. Referencing the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Abrahamson writes that a shift in mentality occurred during the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, when the goal was no longer to inflict pain on the convict's body, but rather their soul.⁶⁴ Public torture or hanging faced a decline, and longer prison sentences started to increase.

Whereas the City Square is a place where people meet, the Prison Cell is where people are alone. It is the difference between community and isolation. The Prison Cell is still located in the City Square, but its prisoners are not part of the community that the square provides. In medieval Stockholm, those convicted were held captive inside a low log house, on the roof of which there was a pillory. This was used for public torture.⁶⁵

The third and final place that Abrahamson lists in his analogy is the City Gate. This is where those are brought, who are no longer welcome or wanted in our society. It is where so called "outsiders" are, and it is a place of involuntary solitude. But whereas the Prison Cell also holds loneliness, the one presented outside the City Gate is of a greater kind. It is more definite. Out here, it is not even a matter of being punished by society; you are simply not part of it.⁶⁶

Abrahamson states that he advocates a judicial and theological mindset in which both the victim and the convict can return to the City Square as free people. He also takes a stand against ideas that lead to, or the practice of, sending people outside the City Gate.⁶⁷

Asking For Forgiveness

Abrahamson notes the importance of being able to differentiate shame from guilt.⁶⁸ Tutu writes that guilt is always connected to something that *you have done*. Shame, on the other hand, is connected to *who you are*. Feelings of guilt derive from the creation of a debt, be it of a moral or a financial

⁶³ Abrahamson, pp. 19-20

⁶⁴ Abrahamson, p. 21

⁶⁵ Abrahamson, p. 19

⁶⁶ Abrahamson, p. 20

⁶⁷ Abrahamson, p. 24

⁶⁸ Abrahamson, p. 60

kind. You regret what you have done and feel an obligation to pay for it. When you are ashamed, however, you feel not only that you may have done something wrong but that there is something wrong with you as a person. You might believe that you do not belong in this world, and that you do not deserve to be forgiven.⁶⁹ Thus, guilt and shame may accompany each other, but they are two separate things. Abrahamson gives his definition: "[guilt is] a negative inner experience that is the result of one having done something morally wrong and [shame is] a negative inner experience derived from one not viewing oneself as worthy."⁷⁰

Abrahamson also points out that certain debts are impossible to pay back, and therefore the guilt that accompanies them can be seemingly impossible to get rid of. You may be able to return money that you have stolen, but what are you to do if you have stolen a life?⁷¹

Ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness is the way of being freed from guilt, and of eradicating the debt. It is important to note that forgiveness deals with just that, guilt, and not with shame. Both a victim and a convict might feel ashamed for various reasons, but the convict is the person *guilty* of the crime.⁷² Abrahamson writes that we do not forgive an *action*, we forgive a *person*.⁷³ This ties nicely into Tutu's statement that forgiving does not mean forgetting, or denying what happened or "toning down" how painful it was. Quite the opposite. Forgiveness can only occur in the absolute light of truth.⁷⁴

A key factor in asking for forgiveness is expressing regret. Admitting that you have done something wrong, rather than denying it. Confessing this to yourself can be just as hard as to someone else. When you admit your wrongdoing, you are making it potentially easier for the person you have hurt to forgive you. Once again, as Tutu claims, forgiveness requires truthfulness. It is also important that you not only admit what you have done, but that you also take responsibility for your actions. Abrahamson points out that there is a difference between asking for forgiveness and taking responsibility for the pain you have caused, as opposed to asking for forgiveness while claiming that you could not help what you did.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Tutu, pp. 215-216

⁷⁰ Abrahamson, p. 59

⁷¹ Abrahamson, pp. 59-60

⁷² Abrahamson, p. 60

⁷³ Abrahamson, p. 61

⁷⁴ Tutu, p. 45

⁷⁵ Abrahamson, p. 62

Walter White Yearning For Paradise

From Diagnosis to Death

In the very first episode of *Breaking Bad* we are thrust into what is commonly referred to as a "cold open", in which we meet Walter Hartwell White hurtling down a dirt road in an old RV. He is accompanied by three bodies, either dead or unconscious, and all are wearing gas masks. Eventually the RV comes to a dramatic halt as Walt crashes into a ditch. Sirens are blaring in the distance... It is quite clear that Walt has done something of questionable legality.

Later in the episode, we learn what actions led Walt to the situation in which we found him in the teaser. We also learn the central reason for those actions: a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer. In the introduction to *Wanna Cook?* the authors introduce the reader to Dr. Lonnie Athens's (sociologist and criminologist) theory of "dramatic self-change". This theory "[...] describes the process by which all of us undergo significant and fundamental alterations in the way we view and interact with the world and society based upon personal experience and social reactions to those experiences."⁷⁶ Guffey and Koontz continue by presenting their analysis of how the stages in this theory is expressed through the different characters of *Breaking Bad*.

To summarize, when someone changes so utterly and dramatically, like Walter White during the course of *Breaking Bad*, it is usually caused by some sort of experience that is "[...] completely outside of our normal frame of reference [...]".⁷⁷ In Walt's case, that would be his diagnosis. When he is confronted with the reality of facing death, he suddenly feels no need to "play by the rules", as it were. Being an extremely talented chemist, he decides to partner up with a former highschool student of his, Jesse Pinkman, and manufacture methamphetamine. Their first cook out in the New Mexican desert is what eventually leads up to the events of the pilot's teaser.

Throughout the series, Walt claims that he always has his family in mind, regardless of his actions. During the first few episodes, that might be true. He cooks meth to leave money for his family when he is gone. He wants his special needs son and his soon-to-be newborn daughter to be able to go to college. I would argue, however, that these noble intentions progressively function as excuses, or justifiers, for Walt's escapades. At certain moments I sense that Walt regrets what he has done, but due to the consequences of the choices he has already made he feels forced to make more "bad" decisions, covering up lies with more lies, and killing others to save himself or his family.

⁷⁶ Ensley F. Guffey & K. Dale Koontz, p. 2

⁷⁷ Ensley F. Guffey & K. Dale Koontz, p. 2

Simply quitting and turning himself in seems completely crazy to Walt. I will highlight aforementioned moments of regret in a later section of this chapter.

During the final episodes of *Breaking Bad*, Walt's actions have essentially shattered his family. The last nail in that particular coffin would perhaps be when Hank Schrader, Walt's brother-in-law, dies because of him.⁷⁸ And in the series finale, Walt dies as well. But not from cancer, ironically. The terminal diagnosis that got him started on his journey through criminality is not what led him to his death. It was himself.

Getting What You Deserve

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that one might view *Breaking Bad* as a way of illustrating the retributivistic way of viewing justice, which (simply put) argues that you should "get what you deserve". The latin word *retribuere* (from which we got the english word *retribution*) means "to pay back".⁷⁹ And certainly, after Walt has destroyed so much around him, he pays a price: first in loosing his family and his money, and then as he dies alone in a meth lab. Some may say that he got what he deserved, while others could argue that Walt got an "easy out" as he did not have to face any legal repercussions. Depending on what you determine to be the "right price" for Walt's wrongdoings you might end up with an injustice that is impossible to correct, a balance that is forever disturbed. However, as I noted in the previous chapter, Tutu argues that forgiveness trumps justice, and that many people will not feel closure if forgiveness has not occurred, even if justice has been served.⁸⁰ I take this to mean that forgiveness is *the* way of restoring the aforementioned balance that was disturbed.

Further, one might wonder — from a morality perspective — would not Walt's lung cancer factor in when it comes down to judging him, morally speaking? Based on the information we have as viewers, it is hard to claim that the cancer was his own fault.

However, regardless of the cancer, Walt made his own choices. In episode five of season one, he explicitly expresses that all he wants is to make his own decisions, something he feels he has not been able to do throughout his life.⁸¹ This conversation happens when Skyler has gathered everyone for a family meeting. Throughout the series, Walt makes his own decisions, and I argue

⁷⁸ Episode 514: *Ozymandias*, September 15, 2013, written by Moira Walley-Beckett, directed by Rian Johnson

⁷⁹ Abrahamson, p. 26

⁸⁰ Tutu, p. 45

⁸¹ Episode 105: *Gray Matter*, February 24, 2008, written by Patty Lin, directed by Tricia Brock

that he (during certain moments) exhibits feelings of guilt as a result. And where there is guilt, there is a yearning for forgiveness, whether it is expressed or not.

A Moral Compass

Forgiveness is a way to *get rid of the guilt* caused by doing something morally wrong. If one is to play by that premise, one needs to have a way of defining what "morally wrong" means. Per Arne Dahl writes about what he refers to as a hallmark of mankind: our conscience.⁸² This can be seen as our *moral compass*. Dahl describes it as that which *makes us feel that something is wrong* when we have done something considered morally incorrect. Further, he notes that it is not obvious for us to define this feeling as derived from us being guilty of something. We are more inclined to view ourselves as victims of less than ideal circumstances rather than as people who occasionally make bad decisions. "Consequently, many of us are more motivated to work through our feelings of guilt with a therapist than to reconcile with God and our fellow people in a real way."⁸³ I would put it so, that when we do not like where our moral compass is leading us, we try to get rid of it and go wherever we believe is a better way forward. I wish to argue that Walt repeatedly tries to get rid of his moral compass throughout the series. There are moments during which I interpret Walt to be "facing the compass" (to continue the analogy) insofar that he expresses what I read as regret, but in general I would consider Walt a master of rationalisation. He always has a "reasonable" explanation for his actions.

After Walt's and Jesse's first meth-cooking session out in the desert they find themselves needing to deal with the disposal of one dead body, and quickly figure out what to do with another — Domingo — who is still alive. Emilio, whom Walt managed to kill (albeit in some form of self-defense) becomes Jesse's responsibility while Walt is given the job of "taking care of" Domingo. Jesse uses (as per instructions from Walt) hydrofluoric acid to dissolve Emilio's body. But instead of doing so in a plastic container he decides to use his bathtub. The acid dissolves the body, but it also eats right through the tub and the floor. The result is obviously a mess. A mess which Walt and Jesse need to clean up, and during this sequence the show provides the viewer with a flashback to a moment when Walt and the character of Gretchen are studying the chemical composition of the human body.⁸⁴

⁸² Dahl, p. 29

⁸³ Dahl, pp. 28-29 (my translation)

⁸⁴ Episode 103: *And the Bag's in the River*, February 10, 2008, written by Vince Gilligan, directed by Adam Bernstein

Darryl J. Murphy describes Walt as a materialist.⁸⁵ From a materialistic point of view, the form of moral compass that Dahl discusses is not really relevant. Murphy refers to the moment when Walt and Gretchen list the chemical composition of the human body. As they add up what they believe to be all the substances of a human, they realize that they are only able to account for 99.888042% of the body. Gretchen suggests that perhaps the final percentage is covered by the soul. Walt dismisses this idea, and states that: "There's nothing but chemistry here."⁸⁶ This statement is nicely aligned with a materialist point of view. Murphy writes: "Strict materialists believe that no one chooses to break bad. Rather, a series of chemical reactions in your body combined with chemical interactions between the body and the environment dictate our actions."⁸⁷ From this point of view, we are freed from responsibility of our actions, since they are *dictated* by that which we cannot govern over. If Walt truly is a materialist, the deaths he causes throughout the series would simply be the result of various events linked together by causality. Thus, Walt could view himself as a victim of unfortunate events, rather than someone who has done something wrong.

However, intercutting between this particular flashback and Walt and Jesse cleaning up the remains of Emilio's body suggests, to me, that Walt is rethinking parts of his (materialistic) life philosophy. As Murphy notes, the 0.111958 discrepancy that Walt and Gretchen arrive at, "[...] represents a tiny, but important, hole in the materialist point of view."⁸⁸ Murphy continues by suggesting that if there are things in this world that cannot be accounted for using chemistry, then that leaves us with the possibility that we are responsible for our own actions. I believe that Walt is troubled by this, as he flushes the remains of his murder victim down the toilet. This could be considered a moment of Walt "facing his moral compass", and thus regretting what he has done that resulted in this tragic situation. (I will discuss other moments of specifically regret in a later section.)

Murphy writes that the notion of being responsible for your actions (rather than a victim of unfortunate events) would leave Walt with a "[...] desire for a clean conscience, relief from the guilt he feels for his actions. In a word: redemption."⁸⁹ This desire for a clean conscience is what Dahl writes about in his book. As mentioned before, forgiveness is a way to get rid of the guilt one feels

⁸⁵ Darryl J. Murphy, "Heisenberg's Uncertain Confession", in *Breaking Bad and Philosophy: Badder Living through Chemistry*, ed. David R. Koepsell & Robert Arp, Chicago: Open Court 2012, p. 16

⁸⁶ Episode 103: *And the Bag's in the River*, February 10, 2008, written by Vince Gilligan, directed by Adam Bernstein

⁸⁷ Koepsell & Arp, p. 16

⁸⁸ Koepsell & Arp, p. 17

⁸⁹ Koepsell & Arp, p. 17

when one has done something morally wrong. The sequence of cleaning up Emilio's remains is what I consider to be one of the first moments where Walt truly feels he has *done* something *wrong*. (The murder itself occurred earlier, but now he has to face it in a very direct and impactful way and he has more time to contemplate it.) Note that I write "done something wrong", which indicates guilt specifically, or that a debt has been created. This, as opposed to feeling *shame*, which according to Abrahamson indicates that you believe you simply *are* a bad or lesser person in general.⁹⁰ Walt certainly might be feeling shame as well, but forgiveness is a way of getting rid of your guilt — not your shame.

To me, what follows in terms of Walt's actions further indicates that he feels guilt over what he has done. He needs to decide what to do with Domingo, who is locked up in Jesse's basement and very much alive. Walt really does not want to kill him, and thus add to his already guilty conscience. Dahl might say this is because Walt's moral compass tells him that murder is wrong. Walt explicitly expresses his dilemma in a line of dialogue (regarding whether to kill Domingo or not): "You keep telling me that I don't have it in me. Well, maybe. But maybe not... I sure as hell am looking for any reason not to, I mean any good reason, at all! ... Sell me! Tell me what it is!"⁹¹

While trying to figure out what to do Walt makes a list of pros for his two options:⁹²

Let him live

- It's the moral thing to do
- Judeo/Christian principles
- You are not a murderer
- He may listen to reason
- Post-traumatic stress
- Won't be able to live with yourself
- Murder is wrong!

Kill him

- He'll kill your entire family if you let him go.

Just by glancing at this list it becomes quite clear that Walt indeed has a moral compass. He lists Judeo-Christian principles, so referring to the moral compass that Dahl describes is apt. When Walt finally reaches the decision to let Domingo go, he — to his horror — makes a discovery while getting the key to the lock that is holding Domingo. This discovery indicates that Domingo has no friendly intentions after all. Finally, Walt does kill Domingo.

⁹⁰ Abrahamson, p. 60

⁹¹ Walter White in Episode 103: *And the Bag's in the River*, February 10, 2008, written by Vince Gilligan, directed by Adam Bernstein

⁹² Episode 103: *And the Bag's in the River*, February 10, 2008, written by Vince Gilligan, directed by Adam Bernstein

In summary, what I have discussed in this section are moments in the beginning of *Breaking Bad* that tell me Walt believes in some sort of moral code (perhaps derived from Judeo/Christian principles, given his list regarding what to do with Domingo). I have highlighted Walt's wish to do what is considered morally correct, at least when faced with the "drug dealer in the basement" situation. I have consciously not examined Walt's decision to manufacture methamphetamine, because I believe it warrants a deeper discussion of morality than I wish to engage in here. Given this is a study of forgiveness, the moments of Walt needing to deal with life and death (and especially guilt) have provided a more suitable arena for discussion than the meth-cooking.

In short, I have established that Walt has a moral compass. This means that he — at least at this point in the series — has a sense of what guilt means, because he feels it. And he wants to get rid of it. During the moments in which he faces his moral compass he feels regret over what has happened. I believe that even though he might not himself be able to crystalize it: he wants forgiveness.

Forgiveness For Murder

Emilio and Domingo are the first in a long list of Walt's murder victims. Let us consider these two victims specifically. After Emilio and Domingo are dead, whose forgiveness does Walt need in order to get rid of the guilt he feels? When the person whose life you have taken is dead, how can you ask them for forgiveness? You cannot.

From a Christian standpoint, I say that Walt would need God's forgiveness, and also the forgiveness of the victims' possible families and/or friends. Desmond Tutu describes situations like these in his book, where the family of someone who is killed by another person decides to forgive the one responsible. For example, Tutu writes about Lynn and Dan who lost their two daughters when their car was hit by another, whose driver Lisa was under the influence of drugs.⁹³ They have forgiven Lisa, and in fact, all three of them hold public talks — together — about what happened and their road to forgiveness.

Furthermore, Abrahamson writes about God's forgiveness. He states his belief that no one is beyond it, and if anyone who asks for it is granted it, there are no hopeless cases from a theological standpoint.⁹⁴ He writes: "When God is revealed in Jesus outside the city gate, God affirms that all people are created in God's image and have a dignity that must not be violated."⁹⁵ (I wrote about the

⁹³ Tutu, pp. 94-95

⁹⁴ Abrahamson, pp. 95-96

⁹⁵ Abrahamson, p. 96 (my translation)

analogy of the Square, the Cell and the Gate in the previous chapter.) That means that if the events of *Breaking Bad* were real, Walt would be forgiven by God if he asked for it in the name of Jesus Christ. In fact, he would already have been forgiven. I have chosen not to delve into a discussion of all the things the cross (and more specifically: Jesus being on it) means, because I think it warrants more text than I can afford at the moment, and the focus here specifically is *Breaking Bad* and forgiveness. Therefore, I will just stipulate that from the Christian point of view, Jesus death and resurrection means that Jesus paid the price of all wrongdoings of humanity, and thus opened the gates to eternal life rather than death, to all who believe in Him. Abrahamson uses his own analogy when he writes that the Bible first tells the story of when humanity exited through the City Gate, and ends with a vision of when humanity returns to the City Square.⁹⁶ The cross becomes a symbol of forgiveness and reunion.

If God is willing to forgive everyone who asks for it, do our actions matter? Could Walt simply have done everything he did with the excuse that he is forgiven regardless, referring to Jesus on the cross?

Abrahamson writes that whether one is forgiven or not, the external reality stays the same. If you have physically hurt someone they will still be hurt even if they forgive you.⁹⁷ By the end of the series, Walter Jr. will still feel betrayed. Marie will still miss Hank. Skyler will still feel that she was used, and all those other people will still be dead. So I would definitely say that our actions matter. Abrahamson continues by stating that while it is important for society to realize that people who commit crimes are human beings and not monsters, it is also important that society shows criminals that their victims *also* are human beings, with a dignity that must not be violated.⁹⁸ In terms of responses to crime (be they theological, legal or of other nature), Abrahamson promotes the City Square as the place everyone should be able to return as free people, regardless if you committed a crime or if you were subject to one.⁹⁹ It is thus important to keep all parties in mind when it comes to legal actions.

Abrahamson points out another question one might have: why does one need God's forgiveness if it is another human that has been harmed?¹⁰⁰ Here he once more refers to humans being created in God's image. When we hurt someone we are not only violating their dignity, but

⁹⁶ Abrahamson, p. 74

⁹⁷ Abrahamson, p. 96

⁹⁸ Abrahamson, p. 97

⁹⁹ Abrahamson, p. 96

¹⁰⁰ Abrahamson, p. 73

we are also causing destruction in God's creation.¹⁰¹ Thus, God's forgiveness is equally important compared to the forgiveness among people.

Regret

I have established my belief that Walt in the first few episodes of the series exhibits guilt and a desire for forgiveness. I will now move forward through the show and highlight three moments where I argue Walt regrets his own actions. He faces his moral compass, which tells him that he has made bad decisions. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, expressing true regret is important if one wishes to ask for forgiveness. Regret acknowledges that one has done something wrong, and that one's actions has caused feelings of guilt. As stated before, the way of getting rid of guilt is to be forgiven. There are arguably more moments of regret that would merit a place in this section, but due to limitations I have decided to focus on the specific moments that now follow:

First off, in the pilot episode, Walt holds a short speech to a video camera. Chronologically, this happens after his and Jesse's first cook-out in the desert has taken an unfortunate turn. However, in terms of plot, these are the first words that we as an audience hear Walt speak, and they immediately grab our attention. Walt states the following to the camera in his hand: "My name is Walter Hartwell White. I live at 308, Negra Arroyo Lane, Albuquerque, New Mexico. 87104. To all law enforcement entities, this is not an admission of guilt. I am speaking to my family now... Skyler... You are the love of my life. I hope you know that. Walter Junior. You're my big man. There are going to be some things that you'll come to learn about me in the next few days. I just want you to know that no matter how it might look, I only had you in my heart. Goodbye."¹⁰²

Walt says that this is not an admission of guilt. However, I would argue that it *is* an admission of guilt, but of the emotional kind rather than the legal. And since he directs that statement to all law enforcement entities, I interpret that as something he says from a purely legal standpoint rather than emotional. Given his emotional state at the time, I suspect all that he has in his mind regarding the legalities of his situation is that he wants to consult an attorney before disclosing anything relevant to the case, and so he does not want to go any deeper into that at the moment. What appears to be of vastly greater importance to him is to inform his family that however things may seem, he always had them in his heart. Walt knows he has done things that he himself considers morally wrong, and he knows his family will also consider them morally wrong. Given his desperation it becomes clear to me that he wishes all of this would just go away. He

¹⁰¹ Abrahamson, pp. 73-74

¹⁰² Walter White in Episode 101: *Pilot/Breaking Bad*, January 20, 2008, written and directed by Vince Gilligan

regrets what he has done, but he wants his family to know he had the best of intentions. He feels guilt and wants his family's forgiveness and understanding.

The next moment I wish to highlight comes later in the series, namely in the ninth episode of the second season. In this episode, Walt and Jesse spend four days straight out in the desert, with the intention of cooking meth in their RV for an extended period of time. However, when Jesse suggests they take a break for the night, they realize that the battery of the RV is dead. Previously, Jesse put the key in the ignition without realizing it accidentally got slightly turned, causing the battery to run out.¹⁰³ Walt is infuriated with Jesse. This, in addition to the fact that they have no cell phone reception out in the desert, results in quite a big problem for them.

They try everything they can think of. But all seems lost. The fact that Walt has got lung cancer does not make this physically easier for him. At one point, while they are lying exhausted on the floor of the RV, Walt says the following: "I have it coming. I deserve this." Jesse defends him by saying that everything Walt did, he did for his family. Jesse obviously has some empathy for Walt. But Walt continues: "All I ever managed to do was worry and disappoint them. And lie. Oh, God... All the lies. I can't even keep them straight in my head anymore."¹⁰⁴ The lying in particular is something that Walter White becomes fairly known for throughout *Breaking Bad*. At least at this point, he clearly regrets it.

Finally, there is an episode that sticks out a bit from the rest. It is the tenth episode of the third season, called *Fly*, and it takes place almost entirely in the same location: the Superlab in which Walt and Jesse now manufacture methamphetamine for Gustavo Fring.

Rather than pointing to specific strings of dialogue I will borrow a more overarching analysis of the episode as a whole, done by Ensley F. Guffey and K. Dale Koontz. They write: "For us, 'Fly' is all about Walt trying desperately to find a new rationalization for everything he's done and what he's continuing to do. [...] Walt repeatedly claims to be engaging in illegal activities for the benefit of his family, but now he's signed divorce papers and moved out. If that justification is now revealed to be completely hollow, then how can he live with what he has caused [...]"¹⁰⁵ They point out all the deaths that Walt is behind, and in this episode, Walt indeed has regrets.

One interesting thing I wish to point out is that in both this episode and in the one I mentioned previously (*4 Days Out*), Walt is physically low on energy when expressing his remorse. In *4 Days Out* he was dehydrated and exhausted and in *Fly* he is sleep deprived. Perhaps it is so,

¹⁰³ Episode 209: *4 Days Out*, May 3, 2009, written by Sam Catlin, directed by Michelle MacLaren

¹⁰⁴ Walter White in Episode 209: *4 Days Out*, May 3, 2009, written by Sam Catlin, directed by Michelle MacLaren

¹⁰⁵ Ensley F. Guffey & K. Dale Koontz, p. 207

that when his conscious mind starts losing its grip, his sub-conscious mind gets to express his inner feelings more freely.

Walter White in Abrahamson's Metaphorical Society

In this section I will share my view on how one can apply Abrahamson's metaphor for society on *Breaking Bad*, or more specifically, the character of Walt and his journey through the series.

In the show's first episode, Walt starts out in the City Square, as Abrahamson would put it. Walt is viewed by others as someone who is part of society. He supports his family through working two jobs, and seems to be well-respected both as a husband and as a father. Abrahamson describes the Square as a public place where people meet to do business, converse, and freely associate with one another¹⁰⁶, and as a law-abiding citizen, you can enjoy these communal aspects of society. At the beginning stage of *Breaking Bad*, this would apply to Walt as much as anyone else.

Abrahamson phrases it so, that the Cell is where community meets isolation. Geographically speaking, the Cell was traditionally placed within the Square, so that those who were imprisoned were in a way within the public eye, but they were still all alone inside the actual Cell.

I believe that Walt feels a sense of loneliness when confronted with the news of his cancer diagnosis. It is *his* illness, and his alone. He cannot share this experience with the people around him. And for some reason, he initially chooses not to even tell anyone about the cancer. (I will not delve deeper into potential reasons for this, as I think it is beyond the scope of this thesis.) When Walt's family find out about the cancer, I argue that he finds himself in another form of loneliness, as a result of carrying a dark secret: he is a meth-making murderer. The only person he can turn to who knows what he has been through is Jesse. But Jesse does not have the kind of family obligations that Walt has, and the two of them still have quite different points of view. At the end of the day, Walter White is the only one walking in his shoes.

Abrahamson writes that the Cell has traditionally been a place where one would await a sentence and/or its execution, and today, detention cells in particular are still places of waiting.¹⁰⁷ Walt is given a death sentence in the first episode of *Breaking Bad*, though not a legal one. In a way, the following episodes could be viewed as portraying Walt locked up in the Cell of his mind and body, awaiting his death. Not only because of the cancer, but (perhaps primarily) because of the bad decisions he makes. And in this particular Cell, he is all alone. Although, throughout the series he makes an effort to take control of the remainder of his life and tries to "break free". He does not

¹⁰⁶ Abrahamson, p. 19

¹⁰⁷ Abrahamson, p. 23

want to play by the rules. He rationalizes the choices he has made. This can be viewed as him trying to get rid of the moral compass that I have discussed earlier.

However, Walt never seems to reach a point where all is "smooth sailing". Instead, things get worse. And Walt is still all alone in the Cell of his mind and body. He is not *technically* alone — there are always people around him that see him (which ties into the concept of the Cell being situated within the Square) — but he is still mentally imprisoned in some way. When he tries to talk about his situation, no one seems to understand him. Or agree with him.

Finally, there is the question of the City Gate. To Abrahamson, this is the opposite of the City Square; a symbol of alienation.¹⁰⁸ I would argue that Walter White exits through this City Gate towards the end of the final season, when he spends months all alone in a cabin in New Hampshire with no access to the outside world.¹⁰⁹ His family does not want anything to do with him anymore. He is alone in a more profound way than when he was in the Cell. One could argue that he is still within the public eye — which would position him in the Cell — as he is all over the news and one of the most wanted people by the DEA, but technically speaking, he is very much alone in his hiding place. Cut off from society, and probably also despised by society. He is no longer welcome in the Square, that is for sure.

Confession

I will now jump to the final episode of *Breaking Bad*. In it, there is a scene in which the following excerpt of a conversation between Walt and Skyler takes place:¹¹⁰

WALT

Skyler. All the things that I did, you need to understand--

SKYLER

If I need to hear one more time, that you did this for the family--

WALT

I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really... I was alive.

¹⁰⁸ Abrahamson, p. 20

¹⁰⁹ Episode 515: *Granite State*, September 22, 2013, written and directed by Peter Gould

¹¹⁰ Episode 516: *Felina*, September 29, 2013, written and directed by Vince Gilligan

There are two things that I argue are of importance here. First off, Walt is finally confessing to Skyler the *true* reason for him cooking meth: he liked it. He is not lying anymore by saying what he has always said before, that he did it for their family. Instead, he is being completely honest. This could be of help to Skyler, if she decides to venture down the path of forgiveness. As Tutu writes, forgiveness can only happen in the light of truth and honesty.¹¹¹

Secondly, when Walt claims that he did it for himself and that he liked it, a suspicion that I have had throughout the series is, to me, confirmed: Walt was addicted to cooking meth (never using, but cooking). He produced the most chemically pure methamphetamine the DEA had ever seen, and he *felt alive*. Per Arne Dahl writes something of relevance here. First, he states that: "The fundamental communion between man kind and He who has created us is our fundamental freedom and the purpose of our lives."¹¹² He continues by stating that our divorce from God has forced us to try to compensate by looking for other things to depend on and trust. Further, he writes: "The yearning of man kind for the ability to return to paradise is a central theme in all forms of addiction, whether it is addiction to drugs, alcohol, sex, work or something else."¹¹³ Try as we might — we are not able to return to paradise on our own. That is why Jesus is central in the Christian faith, as he defeated death and thus opened up the gates to paradise for those who believe in Him. Using Dahl's way of reasoning, one could argue that Walt's way of dealing with his innate yearning for paradise (whether he believed in it or not) was to do that which provided him with the most earthly satisfaction: being the Master of Meth.

¹¹¹ Tutu, p. 45

¹¹² Dahl, p. 68

¹¹³ Dahl, pp. 69-70 (my translation)

Conclusion

In the *Forgiveness For Murder* section of the previous chapter I stated that from a Christian perspective, Walter White would be forgiven by God if he asked for it. From a Christian standpoint, forgiveness is an essential part of reuniting with God. Therefore, the answer to the question of whether Walter White can be forgiven or not, is: yes. It should be noted that the perspective I have chosen (Christian theology) will of course affect the conclusions that I draw. Had I viewed the question through a different light I perhaps would have landed on a different answer.

Without question — Walt has done some really bad things. We all do, occasionally (hopefully the vast majority of us have not done the sort of things that Walt has done). This is not a matter of defending Walt's actions, it is a matter of defending him as a person, and Abrahamson points out the importance of separating a person and their actions. I will reuse a quote from him: "When God is revealed in Jesus outside the city gate, God affirms that all people are created in God's image and have a dignity that must not be violated."¹¹⁴ A central theme in the Christian faith seems to be God's wish to reconnect with all human beings, regardless of their actions.

Viewing *Breaking Bad* through Abrahamson's analogy of society, I have established that Walter White takes a journey which leads him from the City Square (being a part of society) to the City Gate, through which he exits. He is no longer part of society. But he is not beyond being forgiven. Not by God, and not by the people around him. It would most likely be hard for them, but the real-life stories that the Tutus share show that forgiveness is possible even in the most terrible of circumstances.

So, from a Christian standpoint, God is willing to forgive. Abrahamson, Tutu and Dahl would all agree on that. And if we are created in God's image¹¹⁵, and God is able to forgive even someone like Walter White, we should be as well.

¹¹⁴ Abrahamson, p. 96 (my translation)

¹¹⁵ Abrahamson, p. 98

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(The three digits before the title of the episode refer to the Season and number of the Episode. For example, 101 means Season one, Episode one. Further, 309 would be Season three, Episode nine, etc.)

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High Bridge Productions & Gran Via Productions in association with Sony Pictures Television for American Movie Classics (AMC).

Produced by Melissa Bernstein, Vince Gilligan, Mark Johnson, Karen Moore, Gina Scheerer. Cinematography by John Toll. Film editing by Lynne Willingham. Music by Dave Porter. Bryan Cranston (Walter White), Anna Gunn (Skyler White), Aaron Paul (Jesse Pinkman), Dean Norris (Hank Schrader), Betsy Brandt (Marie Schrader), RJ Mitte (Walter White, Jr.).

Breaking Bad, episode 103: ‘And the Bag’s in the River’, January 20, 2008, written by Vince Gilligan, directed by Adam Bernstein

High Bridge Productions & Gran Via Productions in association with Sony Pictures Television for American Movie Classics (AMC).

Produced by Melissa Bernstein, Vince Gilligan, Mark Johnson, Patty Lin, Stewart Lyons, Karen Moore.

Cinematography by Reynaldo Villalobos. Film editing by Kelley Dixon. Music by Dave Porter.

Bryan Cranston (Walter White), Anna Gunn (Skyler White), Aaron Paul (Jesse Pinkman), Dean Norris (Hank Schrader), Betsy Brandt (Marie Schrader), RJ Mitte (Walter White, Jr.), Max Arciniega (Krazy-8/Domingo), Jessica Hecht (Gretchen Schwartz).

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High Bridge Productions & Gran Via Productions in association with Sony Pictures Television for American Movie Classics (AMC).

Produced by Melissa Bernstein, Vince Gilligan, Mark Johnson, Patty Lin, Stuart Lyons, Karen Moore.

Cinematography by Reynaldo Villalobos. Film editing by Kelley Dixon. Music by Dave Porter.

Bryan Cranston (Walter White), Anna Gunn (Skyler White), Aaron Paul (Jesse Pinkman), Dean Norris (Hank Schrader), Betsy Brandt (Marie Schrader), RJ Mitte (Walter White, Jr.), Adam Godley (Elliot Schwartz), Jessica Hecht (Gretchen Schwartz).

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High Bridge Productions & Gran Via Productions in association with Sony Pictures Television for American Movie Classics (AMC).

Produced by Melissa Bernstein, Sam Catlin, Vince Gilligan, Mark Johnson, Stewart Lyons, Diane Mercer, Karen Moore, John Shibana.

Cinematography by Michael Slovis. Film editing by Kelley Dixon. Music by Dave Porter. Bryan Cranston (Walter White), Anna Gunn (Skyler White), Aaron Paul (Jesse Pinkman), Dean Norris (Hank Schrader), Betsy Brandt (Marie Schrader), RJ Mitte (Walter White, Jr.), Bob Odenkirk (Saul Goodman), Krysten Ritter (Jane Margolis).

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High Bridge Productions & Gran Via Productions in association with Sony Pictures Television for American Movie Classics (AMC).

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Cinematography by Michael Slovis. Film editing by Kelley Dixon. Music by Dave Porter. Bryan Cranston (Walter White), Anna Gunn (Skyler White), Aaron Paul (Jesse Pinkman).

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High Bridge Productions & Gran Via Productions in association with Sony Pictures Television for American Movie Classics (AMC).

Produced by Melissa Bernstein, Sam Catlin, Bryan Cranston, Vince Gilligan, Peter Gould, Mark Johnson, Stewart Lyons, Michelle MacLaren, George Mastras, Diane Mercer, Andrew Ortner, Thomas Schnauz, Moira Walley-Beckett.

Cinematography by Michael Slovis. Film editing by Skip Macdonald. Music by Dave Porter. Bryan Cranston (Walter White), Anna Gunn (Skyler White), Aaron Paul (Jesse Pinkman), Dean Norris (Hank Schrader), Betsy Brandt (Marie Schrader), RJ Mitte (Walter White, Jr.), Jesse Plemons (Todd), Steven Michael Quezada (Steven Gomez), Michael Bowen (Uncle Jack).

Breaking Bad, episode 515: 'Granite State', September 22, 2013, written and directed by Peter Gould.

High Bridge Productions & Gran Via Productions in association with Sony Pictures Television for American Movie Classics (AMC).

Produced by Melissa Bernstein, Sam Catlin, Bryan Cranston, Vince Gilligan, Peter Gould, Mark Johnson, Stewart Lyons, Michelle MacLaren, George Mastras, Diane Mercer, Andrew Ortner, Thomas Schnauz.

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Music by Dave Porter.

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High Bridge Productions & Gran Via Productions in association with Sony Pictures Television for American Movie Classics (AMC).

Produced by Melissa Bernstein, Sam Catlin, Bryan Cranston, Vince Gilligan, Peter Gould, Mark Johnson, Stewart Lyons, Michelle MacLaren, George Mastras, Diane Mercer, Andrew Ortner, Thomas Schnauz.

Cinematography by Arthur Albert and Michael Slovis. Film editing by Skip Macdonald.

Music by Dave Porter.

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