NEWS LESSON

Would You Reply to Your Former Captor?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What makes a story about a real person stay with you?
2. Can you understand someone's actions without forgiving them?
3. When does replying to an unwanted message make things harder?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**acquaintance**	☐	A	the feeling that a painful matter has finally ended
2	**correspondence**	☐	B	letters or messages sent between people
3	**motives**	☐	C	kindness shown by not punishing someone as harshly as you could
4	**closure**	☐	D	a person who is accused of a crime in court
5	**mercy**	☐	E	the reasons why someone does something
6	**narrative**	☐	F	a story, or a way of telling events
7	**prosecutors**	☐	G	a person you know a little but who is not a close friend
8	**defendant**	☐	H	lawyers who try to prove that someone is guilty

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A friendly Facebook message from a former captor drew Michael Scott Moore into an FBI operation that ended in a 30-year sentence. Can justice and forgiveness exist side by side?

1 In November 2014, a few weeks after reclaiming his freedom, American journalist Michael Scott Moore received a Facebook message from a man who had helped oversee his imprisonment. The sender, Mohamed Tahlil, addressed him with the familiarity of an old acquaintance. Moore had spent 977 days in the hands of Somali pirates, enduring violence, isolation and deep uncertainty. Yet the man contacting him seemed to imagine that their relationship could simply resume as a friendly exchange. The correspondence eventually drew Moore into an FBI operation against his former captor.

2 Moore went to Somalia in January 2012 to report on piracy and was kidnapped within days. He was held in several places, including a hijacked fishing vessel. Tahlil sometimes spoke gently and claimed to belong to a less brutal group, but Moore could not rely on those distinctions. He was released in September 2014 after a ransom funded by family and supporters.

3 The unexpected messages presented both an emotional challenge and a professional opportunity. Moore wanted to reconstruct parts of his experience for a book, and Tahlil could supply details unavailable during captivity. Their correspondence continued even as Moore questioned his former guard's motives. Tahlil eventually asked for help reaching the United States, saying he feared for his safety in Somalia. Moore had already tipped off federal investigators about the communication. He subsequently helped facilitate an operation through which Tahlil travelled to New York, where FBI agents arrested him in August 2018.

4 Moore's participation left him profoundly ambivalent. He wanted those responsible for the kidnapping held accountable, but he was uncomfortable with the possibility that a seemingly subordinate guard might face a severe punishment while more senior figures remained beyond reach. Trial evidence complicated that sympathy. Prosecutors demonstrated that Tahlil had exercised greater authority than Moore had understood, including responsibility for weapons used by the pirates. A second defendant, Abdi Yusuf Hassan, had used his government position in ways that facilitated the hostage-taking operation. Both men were convicted in 2023 and received 30-year prison sentences the following year.

5 The case might appear to offer a narrative of justice eventually catching up with its targets. Moore's account is more unsettled. He does not dispute the seriousness of the crimes, but he questions the assumption that punishment automatically supplies psychological closure. During captivity he had found that loosening his grip on anger could preserve a measure of independence in circumstances designed to strip him of control. That private understanding of forgiveness was quite separate from acquitting a captor of responsibility, or agreeing that every participant deserved an identical sentence.

6 His experience challenges the assumption that sympathy for a captor always reflects manipulation. Victims may distinguish between individuals, change their assessments as evidence emerges and still resist the desire for vengeance. None of those responses necessarily diminishes the harm they suffered. The Facebook correspondence forced Moore to confront uncomfortable questions about trust, complicity and mercy, but it did not bring about a tidy reconciliation. Sometimes the struggle to understand the past continues long after the legal case has ended.

Sources: The Guardian. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. Moore's unease about the sentence was partly that more senior figures might escape punishment. T F NG
2. The FBI first heard about the contact with Tahlil through the trial evidence. T F NG
3. Moore treated letting go of anger as the same thing as excusing his captors. T F NG
4. Moore has campaigned for shorter sentences for his captors. T F NG
5. Moore's sympathy for Tahlil became harder to sustain once the trial evidence emerged. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

complicity **diminishes** **facilitated** **oversee** **profoundly** **reconstruct** **resume** **vengeance**

1. The announcement left the whole community _____ shaken.
2. Historians had to _____ the course of the battle from a handful of letters and diaries.
3. A corrupt customs officer _____ the smuggling by quietly ignoring suspicious cargo.
4. Years of humiliation had hardened into a thirst for _____ against those who had wronged him.
5. Her generosity afterwards in no way _____ the damage she had caused.
6. The inquiry uncovered the company's _____ in the cover-up.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The committee questioned the _____ of the witness's account. (RELIABLE)
2. The decision caused growing _____ among the prisoners' families. (RESENT)
3. The prosecution stressed the _____ of the defendant's role. (SIGNIFICANT)
4. The sentence seemed wholly _____ to the harm that had been caused. (PROPORTION)
5. The inquiry accused the officials of _____ in handling the evidence. (NEGLIGENT)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level, test the adjective or verb against the noun: only one partner in the box sounds natural.

broker	fraught	harbour	levy	lodge	unanimous	wage

1. The jury returned a _____ verdict after only two hours.
2. The defence has said it will _____ an appeal against the sentence.
3. Some victims _____ doubts about whether prison brings any peace.
4. Hostage negotiations are often _____ with risk for everyone involved.
5. Mediators struggled to _____ a settlement between the two sides.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Should someone who has suffered a crime feel any pressure to forgive?
2. What do journalists owe people when they retell a painful story?
3. Can a court judgment give a story a clear ending?

9 Role-play: should I reply?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the person who got the message

An old classmate who treated you badly has sent you a friendly message after many years. You are curious and want to reply. Explain why, and say what worries you.

Student B · the friend

You think your friend should be careful. Ask questions, give your opinion, and suggest what to do. You can say reply, ignore it, or reply with conditions.

Useful phrases

I've just had a message from someone I haven't heard from for years.

Part of me wants to find out why they wrote.

I'd think twice before answering.

What if they're only after something?

Maybe you could reply, but keep it short.

I'm still angry, but I don't want to be bitter.

Afterwards, tell the class: what did your pair decide, and why?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 G · 2 B · 3 E · 4 A · 5 C · 6 F · 7 H · 8 D

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 profoundly · 2 reconstruct · 3 facilitated · 4 vengeance · 5 diminishes · 6 complicity

6 Word forms

1 reliability · 2 resentment · 3 significance · 4 disproportionate · 5 negligence

7 Language focus

1 unanimous · 2 lodge · 3 harbour · 4 fraught · 5 broker

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