



SENIORS CONNECT



Why Forgive? By Lori Knutson

An Awfully Heavy Burden

Do you want to be right or do you want to be light? Throughout life and especially as we age, we need to decide if we'll release the burden of the past and forgive or if we'll keep carrying our pain around. Either way, it's difficult. It's hard to lug through life all our hurts and resentments that grow heavier with time. It's challenging, too, to open our hearts, accept our pain, and to forgive and move on.

In a cardboard box downstairs in my house, the house that belonged to my grandmother, there's a trove of cards and letters that my grandmother collected over the years. In that cardboard box, I found and read several warm and caring letters written in my mom's graceful hand to her mother-in-law who openly could not stand this young woman married to her son. So consumed by her feelings toward my mother, Grandma expressed them to me, long after my mother was dead and gone.

My grandma chose the narrative that supported her resentment, those poisonous perceptions. No one forced her to sustain it. There is always a small payoff to carrying grudges and resentful attitudes: we get to feel we're right, that we hold the truth and see situations as they actually are. It is a very small payoff compared to the repeated stabs of resentment we experience each time we review our treasured memories of slights and insults, real or imagined.

The Gift We Give Ourselves

Feeling justified often keeps us from forgiving. We tell ourselves, "They don't deserve my forgiveness." We hold our anger close so that it scorches us, but instead of dropping that hot coal, we clench our fists and hold our hate tightly. We clutch our memories of situations that hurt us then and now are over. Why don't we let go of our suffering? Perhaps we feel that we shouldn't give up our view of being right, of being the victim in all this. Our resentment and the stories surrounding it are part of our identity. Sometimes, we become our pain. If we didn't hurt anymore, who would we be?

That's why forgiveness is not for the other but only for us. It's the forgiver who changes, not the forgiven. The forgiven don't even have to know they been forgiven for forgiveness to work. Heck, they've probably forgotten all about us. They're wrapped up in their own stories, just like we are.

To forgive means to take control of our own minds and of our own lives. This isn't easy, either. But as long as we judge ourselves and blame others, these negative feelings are in charge. The more we forgive, the more power we have over our lives. Counterintuitively, the more we release, the more we gain. There is strength in forgiveness, more than in bearing a grudge and holding close our old hurts.

It seems strange to me that forgiving is often interpreted as weakness. If you've tried it, you know it takes much more determination to forgive than to hate. We can slide into resentment like slipping down a hillside, slick with

mud. Forgiving is like climbing that same hill while the rain is still coming down.

A Path to Peace

There's no way around it that I've found. There can be no personal peace without forgiveness. That's too bad because not only is forgiving one of the most difficult things we do, it's also never ending. We will never forgive one final time, wash our hands and say, "Well, I'm glad that's done" as if we've just finished painting a room or cleaning the garage.

As Martin Luther King Junior said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a constant attitude." And he would know.

Forgiveness is an ongoing, high-maintenance project. The moment we've successfully let go of one hurt, another one pops up to take its place. But when it does, we know how to release that hurt and to forgive. Of course, it's still not easy, but the skills we're developing help.

Yes, forgiveness is a lifetime's worth of work, but it may be the most worthwhile work we choose to do. In the end, it's up to each one of us to decide if we will carry our heavy burden into old age or if we'll gently lay it down and continue along a path to peace.

Of course, it's too late for my grandma to feel the soothing balm of forgiveness. But it's not too late for me to remember her painful and heavy burden, and to use her story to encourage myself to undertake the lifelong and urgent work of forgiveness.

Lori is a writer, author, and editor living in central-east Alberta.

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