

Forgiveness

By Jeannine Brenner

“Jeannine.....Jeannine!” I heard my husband’s aggravated voice.

Although I was about to lose my companion of almost 50 years, I continued to sit silently in the hospice lounge, praying for strength to answer his call. His impending death and the strain of his last weeks was taking its toll. I felt helpless and inadequate. I wanted desperately to comfort the one I loved, but my seminary-learned bedside words did little to console him.

My husband, who was known by his middle name of Ed, was not ready to give up his life, and so he expected me to somehow work a miracle that would change what was happening. He believed that if I tried, I could hold back death’s call. How I wished I had that power! But the end of Ed’s life was near, and drugs were clouding his mind, leaving him angry and confused.

As an ordained minister, I have often sat with families in times of crisis, offering words of hope and comfort. Where were my words for Ed?

I really wanted to have one last memorable conversation with my husband, to express my love and the hope we shared that a time would come when we would be together again. But any allusion to his life ending only caused him more apprehension.

Ed had fought so hard for five years to regain control over his life after a major stroke crippled him severely, both mentally and physically. Giving up the battle was more than his bewildered mind could grasp.

It was heartbreaking and frustrating for both of us. I was exhausted, and it was only after his third call that I got up slowly and returned to his side. And so his last conscious moments passed, and likewise the opportunity to share what was in my heart. I was never able to tell him one last time how thankful I was for the life we had together.

Now, in the days since his death, I have asked myself repeatedly: “How could I have been so callous to sit there while he called me? Why didn’t I respond more quickly? Shouldn’t my love have given me more patience with his emotional turmoil during the last days of his life?”

When a loved one dies, one of the most common emotions accompanying grief is guilt. All too often there are regrets; things that we wish could have been different: *If only I had stayed home that day... If only we had gone to the emergency room sooner... If only we had not quarreled the night before...* I had my share of “if only” thoughts. Regrets hung over me like a heavy burden I could not cast off. I wanted to change those last days, but it was too late. The past could not be revised.

Nevertheless I continued to browbeat myself endlessly. Hoping to hear something that would free me from my guilt, I relived my miserable failings again and again. I prayed the same prayer of confession a thousand times, but found no release or solace.

I find it easy to excuse the failures of others; to assure them that we all make mistakes, and when we do, we must forgive ourselves. I can quote scriptures promising

forgiveness, and I know that much mental anguish is caused by false guilt – guilt for which there is no good reason. But in spite of my reasonable approach to the shortcomings of others, I could not accept my own humanness. Instead, I continued to chastise myself for that which could not be changed.

Why was it impossible to let go of my own remorse? The probable answer is that the set of rules I have for myself differs from my expectations of others. My own rules do not allow for compassion or leniency. A price must be paid, and only self-condemnation will settle that score. So, I tried to tear down my own good standing with others by randomly repeating mistakes to anyone willing to listen.

While it is certainly therapeutic to acknowledge wrong, it serves no purpose to recount one's faults randomly to anyone who will listen. Such indiscriminate sharing helps no one. This is not forgiveness. True forgiveness means the slate is wiped clean; nothing is going to be done or said to make the offender look or feel bad. With forgiveness, there is complete release not only from the guilt but also from any memory of it.

Yes, I wish I could have better met my husband's needs during his last days. I wish I had been more patient with his limitations. I wish I could have brought him comfort. However, I know he would never hold any of my inadequacies against me. That was not his nature. I also fully believe that there is a gracious God who loves unconditionally and who will pardon all who come to Him with their remorse.

Now, it is time for me to accept the forgiveness that is mine and to release myself from the burden of my own guilt. No more rehashing those things that I wish I could

change. As these thoughts surface, and surface they will, I must make a conscious effort to replace them with happier memories.

The road through grief is a journey. If I let it, my remorse will be a stumbling block to my recovery. Instead, I choose to fix my mind on the good and treasured memories, for these thoughts will bring the healing I am trying to find. And as I do, I will be able to dream and hope again.

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