

# ***LeaderPerfect Newsletter***

**November 1, 2002**

## **The Liberating Power of Forgiving**

**by Dr. Mike Armour**

In case you haven't noticed, life is sometimes unfair. No matter how good you are, no matter how hard you try, life occasionally leaves you holding the short end of the stick. Perhaps a very short end.

When that happens, bitterness and resentment are persistent temptations. Especially when the hurt is deep. Or when you've been wronged while striving to do the right thing. Or when betrayal comes at the hand of a friend.

### **A Look at the Options**

How do you respond to the wrong inflicted? How do you deal with the injustice? Fundamentally you have five choices.

First, you can FUME about it. You can stoke your anger by riveting your attention on the injustice you've suffered. You can frame your mistreatment in a victim's song and sing it loud and often. It's a great strategy for nursing your wrath to keep it warm.

The problem is, fuming does little more than continue to ruin your day. So, a better approach might be to FIX it by addressing the injustice in a healthy, mature way and correcting it. But fixing it is not always an option. It's often impossible to put Putting Humpty Dumpty back together.

In which case you've got the option to FORGET it. You can brush aside the wrong you've endured. You can chalk it up as one of life's inevitable misfortunes and move on. Forgetting, however, is much easier when the wound is superficial. More piercing wounds may be too painful to forget. And making a concentrated effort to forget them only etches the memory more deeply in your psyche.

Which takes you to a fourth possibility, to FILE it. When you file your hurt you choose not to forget it. And you also choose to quit fuming about it. But you put it away, where it can be retrieved on command. After all, you might get a chance to even the score someday. And should that occasion present itself, you want all the ammunition you can get.

A friend of mine has an interesting metaphor to describe this hoarding of grievances. He compares it to tossing rocks in the back of a dump truck. There's only one reason for collecting rocks in a dump truck, he says. Someday you intend to dump the whole load on somebody.

## The High Cost of Bitterness

Unfortunately, filed grievances do great personal harm. They amount to unresolved hostility. And countless studies document the damage done to the human spirit, to our physical bodies, and to long-term health by unresolved hostility.

Let me give you an example by sharing the story of a man I'll call Jack. Years ago Jack joined a group I was facilitating for victims of chronic pain. Members wanted to discover if unresolved anger either caused or aggravated their discomfort. During Jack's first night in the group we discussed a way to uncover the deepest roots of a given anger.

Jack drove home that night vowing to try the method. And he knew just where to begin. For more than two decades he had harbored bitterness toward a friend who cheated him and drove him to financial ruin. The betrayal was not a problem that Jack could fix. And he had quit fuming about it long ago. Still, it was something he could not forget, given the damage it did to his family and his reputation. So he merely resorted to filing it.

Sadly, this only added to Jack's misfortune. The unresolved grievance took unkindly to being filed away. With no other way to express itself, the grievance turned its anger against his body and racked him with excruciating pain. Jack recognized none of this, of course. It all took place beyond his conscious awareness. He only experienced relentless pain and occasional reminders of his bitterness. Until that night.

About 1:00 a.m., still working on the exercise, Jack was probing his innermost thoughts. He was particularly troubled that he had never been able to forgive this episode, even after trying for 22 years. "Why do I keep clinging to this bitterness?" he asked himself. And then he heard it – an almost inaudible inner voice that whispered incessantly, "If you forgive him, he gets away with it."

What happened next was a life-changing breakthrough. "I suddenly realized," Jack told me later, "that he has been getting away with it for 22 years. So he's going to get away with it, whether I forgive him or not." Armed with that insight, Jack chose to turn loose of the bitterness and to forgive. Genuinely forgive. Right then and there.

Amazingly, his pain began to recede within hours. Over the next few nights he learned anew the joy of sleeping in peace. A week later he was exuberant as he rejoined the group. For the first time in 22 years he was largely pain free. Jack had learned the liberating power of forgiving.

## Myths About Forgiving

Forgiving is then the fifth option when life treats us unfairly.

- FUMING about it does no good
- FIXING it may not be an option
- FORGETTING it is often impossible
- FILING it invites emotional sabotage
- FORGIVING it offers us freedom

So why don't we forgive more readily? Beneath our reticence is often a misleading belief, a myth, so to speak. For Jack it was the false notion that forgiving means "he get's away with it." Here are some other common myths:

- If I forgive, I'm condoning what happened. Wrong!! Forgiving has nothing to do with approving or condoning. (When God forgives, does He condone?) Forgiving is about freeing yourself from the needless weight and emotional drag of resentment, bitterness, and anger.
- I haven't forgiven unless I forget. Wrong again!! The most vital things to forgive may hurt so profoundly that we can never forget them. Besides, if we could forget, we wouldn't need to forgive.
- If I forgive, I must act as though it never happened. Nope, not at all. We forgive actions. We remember character. I may forgive the kleptomaniac who pilfers valuables from my house. But I won't allow him unfettered access to my home again.

Have you paid an emotional or physical price for refusing to forgive? Are lingering grudges a drag on your mood and energy? Life demands too much of us to haul around such needless weight. Shed the weight. Quit fuming. Forgive.

Forgiving is a choice. Not always an easy choice. But always a liberating one. Where do you need to practice it this week?

© 2002, MCA Professional Services Group, LLC

*This article may be posted to your web site so long as all copyright notices are preserved, along with an associated link to [www.leaderperfect.com](http://www.leaderperfect.com). You are also free to circulate this document in hard-copy form so long as the copyright statement and this notice remain attached.*