

Unforgiving Anger

“Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness forces you to grow beyond what you were.” -- Cherie Carter-Smith

Just remembering the story, he could feel the anger rising up in him again. The betrayal of a friend from years ago still hurt just as much as if it had only happened yesterday. It would come sometimes from out of nowhere, a memory of words she had said, the way she had treated him, and he was pulled from enjoyment of the present back into the pain of the past. As many times as he had tried to let go of it, it seemed impossible. How could he “forgive and forget” when what she had done had cost him so much? It was inexcusable, unforgivable surely.

He walked on across the park, pushed by the chilly autumn wind. A pile of leaves crunched under his feet, and he tried to get his mind off the past. Instead, his thoughts turned distractedly to the fallen leaves covering his yard at home. With an annoyed sigh, he thought to himself what a chore it would be to rake them all and bag them up. Why couldn't they just stay on the trees? Wouldn't it be nice, he thought, if all those dead leaves didn't fall? If the trees could just hold onto them, then he wouldn't have to rake the yard, and the gutters wouldn't get clogged, and –

He stopped in his tracks as he realized what else it would mean. No new growth. If the trees held onto all their dead leaves, there would be nowhere for tender green shoots to push through in spring. He suddenly saw himself in the picture of this imaginary tree clinging to ugly, dead leaves. What new things had he been unable to take hold of because his hands were clinched in anger over the past? It wasn't her he had been punishing all these years by not forgiving. For the first time, he asked for God's help to let go, and opened his hands.

Dear God, forgiveness is so hard for us. The unkind words of coworkers, the thoughtless actions of friends, and the large and small betrayals of people we love wound us, and we respond in anger. Help us to see that we are only hurting ourselves when we carry that anger. Grant that we may be more like you, “slow to anger and abounding in love.” Give us the wisdom to see that forgiveness does not mean excusing the other's actions, and that forgiveness is not weak, but in fact takes so much strength that we can't do it alone. Please help us today. Amen.

--- Chaplain Stacy Sergent

An Affirmation for Those Who Have Lost, by Dr. James E. Miller

I believe there is no denying it: it hurts to lose.

It hurts to lose a cherished relationship with another,

Or a significant part of one's own self.

It can hurt to lose that which has united one with the past

Or that which has beckoned one into the future.

It is painful to feel diminished or abandoned,

To be left behind or left alone.

Yet I believe there is more to losing than just the hurt and the pain.

For there are other experiences that loss can call forth.

I believe that courage often appears,

However quietly it is expressed,

However easily it goes unnoticed by others:

The courage to be strong enough to surrender,

The fortitude to be firm enough to be flexible.

I believe a time of loss can be a time of learning unlike any other,

And that it can teach some of life's most valuable lessons.

In the act of losing there is something to be found.

In the act of letting go, there is something to be grasped.

In the act of saying "goodbye", there is a "hello" to be heard.

For I believe living with loss is about beginnings as well as endings.

And grieving is a matter of life more than death.

And growing is a matter of mind and heart and soul more than of body.

And loving is a matter of eternity more than of time.

Finally, I believe in the promising paradoxes of loss.

In the midst of darkness, there can come great Light.

At the bottom of despair, there can appear a great Hope.

And deep within loneliness, there can dwell a great Love.

I believe these things because others have shown the way –

Others who have lost and have then grown through their losing,

Others who have suffered and then found new meaning.

So I know I am not alone:

I am accompanied, day after night, night after day.

-- from the book Seasons of Grief and Healing

God, we remember those who are not here to enjoy this moment with us. Please comfort our hearts when we miss them most deeply. Grant us courage, strength, and patience in our grief. And teach us to live again on this side of loss. Thank you for others who show us the way toward hope and love again, and most of all thank you that you yourself, God, accompany us each step of the way. Amen.

-- Chaplain George Rossi

God of the Arts

One of the things I love about living in Charleston is the Spoleto USA Festival. Every year I look forward to this celebration of music, dance, theatre, and other art forms that takes place all over Charleston in late May and early June. We are fortunate to live in a place where some of the best the artistic world has to offer comes to our very doorstep. The arts have power to move us deeply and speak to our souls in a unique way. From the earliest human history, people have expressed themselves through these media, in cave paintings, songs of joy and lament, and stories passed down from one generation to another.

During a visit with a dying patient and her family recently, the patient's son told me that she had not recognized any of them in some time. "But she still knows every word to her favorite hymn," he said. The day before she passed away, she had been singing it, and in her final hours on earth, her family gathered around her bed and sang it to her. The familiar tune and the words of peace and comfort, of the presence of God in times of trial, of the promise of life after death, brought solace to the family just as they had to the patient. I have seen other patients express themselves through writing poetry or blogging, drawing or painting, and all of these creative outlets were an important part of their journey, allowing them to channel emotions they may not otherwise know how to convey.

God gave us a great gift in the arts. We have a very creative Creator, and our own creativity is one of the ways I believe the image of God in which we were all created is most clearly displayed. That is why I always find it so moving to see someone share the passion of their soul through art, or to find ways to do so myself. God is present with the artist in a special way, inspiring (literally "breathing into") him or her. I hope you will take the time to enjoy some of Spoleto when you can, and to find your own ways of creating art for God to enjoy.

God, thank you for your creativity displayed all around us, in rainbows and sunsets, bird songs and seashells. Your world is so full of beauty for us to enjoy. And you have allowed us to create beauty as well, through art. We pray that you would be pleased with our creative efforts, as we use them to express the deepest feelings of our souls. Amen.

-- Chaplain Stacy N. Sergent

A Patient's Best Friend

This past week I had the blessing of meeting one of our hospital's pet therapy dogs. His name is Lucky. I wonder how many dogs are named Lucky? I would guess that it is one of the more common names for dogs, especially the ones that become adopted from the pet shelter. Either way this particular Lucky was on his rounds passing through the Pediatric Emergency Department with his owner who is a hospital volunteer. Both Lucky and his owner do their work on a volunteer basis and they both seemed to be enjoying what they do best: giving a friendly and caring presence to staff and patients in the midst of stressful circumstances. What a great way to be a blessing to patients, families and staff at the hospital! Seeing Lucky and petting him in the Pediatric ED was a nice distraction to an otherwise stressful day for me. I was one of numerous patients, families and staff who took a minute to say hi to Lucky and his owner. I appreciate all of our volunteers and their pets who give their time and love to those who may need a reminder of God's gentle and caring love.

Lucky is a Schnoodle: part Schnauzer and part Poodle. He is solid white and has the softest hair. His owner said that he has just gone to the pet groomer so he was all dressed up with somewhere to go. I know that many people in the world really enjoy their pets. Some have dogs and some have cats and some have hamsters and some have canaries. All of them provide a friendly and caring presence to some very "lucky" people, and each is truly a best friend to the patients, families, and staff in the hospital and at home.

Lord: Thank you for our volunteers who give of themselves and their animals to cheer and encourage those who are patients and those who work at MUSC. We truly thank you for all of your creation. Amen.

-- Chaplain George M. Rossi, BCC

Changes

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that change is the only constant. It often feels that way in our lives. We may be wearing short sleeves today when we needed a sweater yesterday. The patients we visit today may no longer be in the hospital tomorrow. Just when we replaced all our VHS movies with DVD, stores are selling Blu-Ray discs. Friends move away or drift out of our lives, and new acquaintances become dear friends. Children we clearly remember as toddlers are now graduating from high school. Trusted colleagues are transferred to a different unit, or move on to another job altogether.

Some of these changes are good, while others are painful. We may find ourselves struggling to keep up, wondering if there is any solid ground on which we can stand. At times, even God can appear inconstant. When I pray with patients for physical healing, I don't know how those prayers will be answered. One patient may leave the hospital healthy; another may die. So what does this mean? In a world of constant change, can we not even count on God?

My faith and the evidence of what I experience every day tell me that God can be trusted fully. This does not mean that God is at our beck and call or will always do what we expect, but that God's nature never changes. The wisdom of many religions affirms that the nature of God is love, and everything God does flows from that attribute, although we may not always be able to see that from our human perspective. William Cowper's 1774 hymn *God Moves in a Mysterious Way* sums up this idea beautifully. According to tradition, Cowper wrestled with depression and religious doubt. One night, he called a carriage to his home in London and asked the driver to take him to the River Thames, where he planned to drown himself. But a thick fog rolled in, and the driver became so hopelessly lost he could not find the river. They drove in circles for some time until finally the driver let Cowper out, back on his own doorstep. After that experience, Cowper penned these words:

"God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform. / He plants His footsteps in the sea / And rides upon the storm. / Ye fearful saints fresh courage take / the clouds ye so much dread / Are big with mercy and shall break / In blessings on your head. / Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, / But trust Him for His grace; / Behind a frowning providence / He hides a smiling face. / His purposes will ripen fast, / Unfolding every hour. / The bud may have a bitter taste, / But sweet will be the flower."

God, with so many changes happening around and within us all the time, thank you for your love that never changes. You were and are and always will be gracious, compassionate, and abounding in steadfast love. Help us to adapt to the inevitable changes in our lives, and give us grace for the especially difficult ones. Thank you for being with us, whatever else may change. Amen.

--Chaplain Stacy N. Sergent

Desiderata

by Max Ehrmann

“Go placidly amid the noise and haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence.
As far as possible without surrender
be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others,
even the dull and the ignorant;
they too have their story.
Avoid loud and aggressive persons,
they are vexations to the spirit.
If you compare yourself with others,
you may become vain and bitter;
for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.
Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.
Keep interested in your own career, however humble;
it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.
Exercise caution in your business affairs;
for the world is full of trickery.
But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;
many persons strive for high ideals;
and everywhere life is full of heroism.
Be yourself.
Especially, do not feign affection.
Neither be cynical about love;
for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment
it is as perennial as the grass.
Take kindly the counsel of the years,
gracefully surrendering the things of youth.
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.
But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.
Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.
Beyond a wholesome discipline,
be gentle with yourself.
You are a child of the universe,
no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.
And whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.
Therefore be at peace with God,
whatever you conceive Him to be,
and whatever your labors and aspirations,

in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.
With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams,
it is still a beautiful world.
Be cheerful.
Strive to be happy.”

Dr. King

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” -- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1955, Dr. King was not yet the strong, charismatic figure we know from history. He was a young man, age 26, only a year into his first pastorate. In later years, he would say that he never set out to be a civil rights leader, and if he had known what it would entail, he might have turned down the job. In 1955, all he knew was that he was being asked to organize a boycott of segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama.

During the year-long boycott, Dr. King was assaulted, arrested, and his home was bombed. He had many doubts along the way about his ability to be a leader, whether he wanted to or was capable of leading a movement like this was becoming. But somewhere along the way, Dr. King decided that the movement needed him, that God had chosen him for leadership whether he felt like a leader or not. He realized that he was part of something much bigger than himself, and eventually, he was able to embrace the burden of leadership. There is no way to know what the state of civil rights would be in this country if he had made a different choice. Without his commitment to non-violent resistance, would the nation have had to endure an even longer and much bloodier battle for civil rights? We can only wonder.

What we do know is that race relations in this country are far improved from what they were in 1955, and that Dr. King’s leadership played an integral part in getting us here. If he had decided to stay out of the fray, to remain in situations where he felt comfortable and safe, he may have lived to a ripe old age, but he would not have fulfilled his calling for the greater good. He would not have been obedient to God, and we would not commemorate a holiday in his honor. The reality is that living out our highest callings often involves sacrifice. Fortunately, it will almost certainly not cost us as much as it ultimately cost Dr. King. But we may have to give up some comfort, some pleasure, the approval of certain people in our lives, material wealth we hoped to have, or other things. We may have to overcome our fears that we are not good enough or cannot do it. Our individual needs sometimes have to take a back seat to the needs of others. If Dr. King had not heeded God’s calling to do what he felt inadequate to do, where would we be today?

God, thank you for the sacrifices of those who came before us so that we might have a better life. We are still not fully living the dream you gave Dr. King, but we have come a long way. Help us to continue to pursue freedom, dignity, and justice for all of your children, no matter how different they may look from us. And give us the strength to live out the often difficult callings you have placed on our lives, so that we, like Dr. King, might impact the world with love. Amen.

-- Chaplain Stacy N. Sergent

Grief

“The truth is – for every one of us – that there is no way to avoid the trauma of loss if we love even a little. This is what makes the task of learning to handle grief so important.” – John Claypool

Not long ago, I lost a beloved teacher and friend, a man not much older than myself who died without warning. The shock and sadness have not yet worn off, and I know I will feel the loss of him for a long, long time. What do we do with such tragedies? Sooner or later, they impact us all, whether we lose a family member, friend, coworker, or patient. Because we have loved that person, we grieve for him or her, and we cry out against the unfairness of the situation. It shouldn't be this way. He was so young. Why did God let this happen?

Preacher John Claypool endured a similar crisis of faith when his eight year old daughter was diagnosed with acute leukemia. Throughout her illness, and her death two years later, he came to a new understanding of faith, which he wrote about in *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*. He concluded that he could see three possible paths out of grief. The first is what he calls the road of unquestioning resignation. Many people told him that he must not try to understand, must not question God. He came to believe that honest faith demanded questions, that a true relationship with God meant continuing to seek answers even when there were no satisfactory ones to be found. The second path he called the road of intellectual understanding. This was the belief that complete comprehension of the situation must be attained, or everything must be declared absurd. He found this road as unsatisfactory as the first, because while there were aspects of his life that made no sense to him, he also saw “countless other experiences that were full of love and purpose and meaning.” The other option, the one he finally embraced, was the road of gratitude. He found that as he looked back on the ten years he had with his daughter, it was self-defeating to dwell on the time he did not get or all the ways he wished it had been better. Instead, he made the difficult choice to be thankful that she had been part of his life at all. He also decided to trust God that his happiness did not have to die with her, that the God “who has given us the good gifts of the past can be depended on to continue to give meaning to our lives.” This did not mean the loss of his daughter was not still terribly painful, or that his grief journey was easy. But the choices he made led him to a deeper relationship with the God who created him, and out of his tragedy came writings that have helped countless people in their own grief. I am trusting God as well to bring beauty from ashes in my life, to work good out of tragedy, even if I can't immediately see it. I know from experience that God is very good at that.

God our Sustainer, give us your grace in our brokenness. Help us to deal honestly with you in the depths of our sadness and anger, and grant that in time we may come out on the other side to a place of gratitude. Thank you for the gifts you give us every day, and teach us not to take them for granted, for we do not know how long we will get to keep them. Amen.

-- Chaplain Stacy N. Sergent

A Heavy Burden

"I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." – Psalm 139:14

Ministering in a hospital, I sometimes feel I've seen about everything. But I learned just recently from Fred Craddock in Georgia of a case of surgery so extraordinary that I assumed it was a singular case. I asked a surgeon who assured me it was not. Rare, yes, but unique, no.

The story in brief is this: a man in his mid-fifties was rushed to the Emergency Room of the nearest hospital. He complained of inability to breathe. Examination revealed that the cause of his shortness of breath was a growth, a large growth, on his upper back, between his shoulder blades. The man's mother said she first noticed it when he was a teenager. She repeatedly urged him to have it attended to, but he never did. The growth was small when she first noticed it, and on subsequent occasions she could tell it was growing. Her urgings moved from cosmetic (it was becoming unsightly) to medical (it will put pressure on your heart).

When her son became an adult he moved away so she worried but did nothing more. The patient himself gasped to the doctor that the growth had enlarged very gradually and had been accepted as a part of his life. He grew unable to imagine himself without it; it became a part of his identity. It caused little or no pain; that is, until recently.

The growth had to be removed; there was no alternative to surgery. A team of surgeons began at 7:00 a.m. and finished at 3:30 p.m. One or two follow-up surgeries might be required, but the patient would live. Barring unexpected complications, he should enjoy a life free of unnecessary weight; a new life, one might say.

How much did the growth weigh? Everyone was curious to know. Slightly more than 40 pounds! How was he able to carry it, day and night? Because it grew so slowly. Would it have been fatal if not removed? No question. Did you send it to the lab for analysis, I asked? Of course, we always do. What was it? A grudge.

What if we were to give up all the feelings that we carry around that fester and grow and become a fatal weight in our lives? Maybe it's a grudge, or anger, or jealousy, or bitterness, or fear, or lust, or doubt, or pride; something that weighs you down and keeps you from being the fully alive human being God created you to be.

Give up that unnecessary weight. Your step, and your spirit, will be noticeably lighter.

O God, your loving hand has made us in your own image: reach out your hand again and heal us that we may respond in kind, offering your hope and healing to all who are broken in body or spirit. We pray this in your holy and precious name. Amen.

-- Chaplain Reggie B. Rowell

Holiday Blues or Bliss

The holidays bring a lot of things. The magic, delightful decorations, homemade pies, cakes with extra toppings -- and then the extra unwanted weight gain. Not to exclude annual family conversations, "the good, the bad and the ugly," which always seems to last longer than heartburn. So when the holidays are here, what do you do when you have experienced a loss during the past year? When a family member is serving in our military, and will not be home for holidays? Or what will you do when you realize the chair once filled is now empty, where last year, dad, mom, sister, brother, child, or spouse sat and this year that loved one is not here and not coming home?

Grief now fills the chair and your heart. The lights seem dimmer, tears replace laughter, boxes of decorations remain packed. A newborn nursery remains empty. One can wonder if constant sadness is normal, or "will I ever feel normal again?" These emotional roller coasters are indeed normal. A traditional name is grieving.

I am so sorry you have experienced a loss and are feeling overwhelmed and maybe out of place while others around you are joyfully celebrating. You do not need to apologize nor do you need to feel obligated to participate as usual. These are a few suggestions for you to take care of yourself this year. Plan ahead; be prepared for unexpected grief attacks or detours. Change the routine; offer to bring dinner rolls instead of your famous casserole. Purchase a special candle just for your loved one and light it when you think of them. Shop less, and make a memorial charity contribution (a good tax write-off). Keep things simple. Enjoy a good comedy and laugh out loud, even if it's not that funny. Keep breathing; the tide will change. Whatever way you choose to participate in the holidays to remember your loved ones, remember their laughter, smiles, stories, touch, the previous holidays they were with you. For new parents, when "hello means goodbye," your pain is also very real; whisper a gentle lullaby. During the holidays, and very special days, give yourself permission to cry, laugh, participate or just to be.

God of compassion, we seek your comfort when we cannot be comforted. We seek your wisdom when we do not understand. We seek your peace when we are restless. We seek your presence when we are lonely. Amen.

--- Chaplain Lynn Brown Conklin