

LOOK WHAT'S INSIDE:

LAST LAUGH

CHRISTIAN LIVING

MENTAL HEALTH NEWS

UNDERSTANDING THE WHOLE PERSON

The Letter That Changed My Mind

by Elizabeth Ross

My relationship with my son had been poor for years. Now I was entering my eighth decade with no hope for resolution of our difficulties. On his part, I believed my son felt a long-held resentment that he had grown up in a "manse." As a P.K. (preacher's kid), he felt burdened with unrealistic expectations put on him by other people. Painful vignettes from the past would sometimes afflict my mind as I recalled my troubled nine-year-old boy coming home from school and asking: "Mum, am I an example?" "No, you're a little boy - why do you ask?"

"Well teacher said that because Dad's a minister I should be an example."

Or an outburst one day, the cause of which I have forgotten: "Why can't we be a normal family?!"

On my part, I allowed myself to feel a victim to him acting out his pain. Eventually I too carried much resentment and my self-justification inevitably became: why doesn't he

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True & False Forgiveness



"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

— Colossians 3:13

by Dr. Bruce Narramore, Ph.D.

Forgiving is one of the most important things a human being can do, yet it is also one of the most misunderstood. At its root, unforgiveness is essentially hanging on to resentments and the belief that we have the right to get revenge on those who have hurt us or done us wrong.

An Eastern proverb says, "He who

harbors a grudge should dig two graves." The point? When we hang onto our resentments we may hurt others, but we also hurt ourselves. Resentment is a two-edged sword. It cuts both ways. Unforgiveness disrupts relations, hurts ourselves and is a violation of the way God created us to be. And forgiveness is often the only way out of resentment.

Pseudo Forgiveness

Unfortunately, many people seriously misunderstand the true meaning of forgiveness and miss out on its benefits. *Some believe that forgiveness is*

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FORGIVENESS, continued from cover

simply forgetting or repressing wrongs that have been done to us or denying our hurts. By pushing the pain of wounds we have received out of our awareness, we try to convince ourselves that things really aren't so bad. We deceive ourselves by thinking we have no reason to be resentful because nothing really bad has happened.

Others believe forgiving is making an excuse for someone who has hurt us. "He couldn't help it," we say. "He was having a bad day." Or, "He didn't mean it." But the fact is, he could have helped it and he probably did mean it! We just don't want to face the facts—and the feelings we would experience if we did admit the facts.

Still others believe that forgiveness is something we can do all at once by a simple choice, an act of our will, or an intellectual decision. As someone put it, "I forgive him by faith." But what he really meant was, "I still resent him but I know I should forgive him, so I will say some spiritual words like 'faith' and try to convince myself and others that I have forgiven him." Underneath this spiritual veneer, however, the resentments lurk. Making a decision to forgive is one important step in the process of forgiveness, but by itself an intellectual decision

to forgive usually falls far short of true forgiveness.

Others put on a superior air under the guise of forgiveness. "I really don't expect more from someone like him," we say.

All of these substitutes for real forgiveness are designed to avoid the full impact of our pain, anger or resentment. They try to explain away, repress, excuse or minimize the damage others have done to us instead of feeling its full force. True forgiveness faces our hurts and resentments completely and honestly. Then it works them through and ultimately resolves them.

Many people are afraid to forgive because they think forgiving means excusing or condoning the person's actions or, worse yet, implying that we will let them do it again. Melissa, for example, carried deep resentment toward her father because he abused her sexually when she was a child. His abuse destroyed Melissa's self-esteem, made her fearful, depressed, angry with men, and undermined her marriage.

For years Melissa fantasized about what she could do to get even with her father. She dreamed of physically maiming him, humiliating him in public, ruining his reputation, and seeing him go to hell. All of this was natural, given the severe and degrading abuse she suffered

at his hands. Unfortunately, as natural as her anger was, it didn't release her from her father's control. In fact, it kept her tied to him. Her resentment was like a rope that bound the two of them together.

Melissa gradually realized that her angry resentment toward her father was serving several purposes. In one way it was protecting her. By being angry with her dad (and most other men) she was assuring herself that she would never be abused again. This is a very common (and usually necessary) step for victims of abuse. It is a self-protective mechanism.

Keeping her resentment alive was also Melissa's way of believing that somehow, sometime, she could finally convince her father to admit the horrible things he had done to her, say he was sorry, and ask forgiveness. Her resentment kept her from facing the fact that her father would never change and that there was absolutely no chance for a restored relationship with him. In that way, she would not have to face her terrible grief and give up hope that things may eventually get better.

Holding onto her resentment toward her abusive father also kept Melissa emotionally connected with her dad, even though in a very destructive way. That is an interesting thing about anger. As long as we harbor resentments we

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LAST LAUGH



"My therapist says I can't blame my problems on my wife, my boss, or my parents...so that just leaves you!"

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keep a mental connection with that person. You see this in many divorced couples who keep fighting years after their marriages are over. They keep an emotional connection with each other by fighting; trying to prove the other is wrong or continuing the same destructive patterns they had when they were married. Fighting seems, for them, better than letting go and losing connection with the person entirely.

Others fail to forgive because they mistakenly assume that forgiving someone means that the relationship must be restored. A woman who has been repeatedly abused by her alcoholic husband, for example, may think that forgiving him means that she must move back in with him and endure the chance of being abused again. That is not the case. We can have forgiveness without placing ourselves back into a destructive relationship. The abusive husband or ex-husband, of course, usually does want reconciliation. But all the abused spouse needs to say is, "Yes, I forgive you, but I am not willing to be in a relationship with you because I do not want to be abused again." And if he replies, "But I won't do that again." All she has to say is "You have said that so many times that I can no longer believe you or trust you."

True Forgiveness

What then, is true forgiveness? If God's forgiveness of us is a model, we can immediately learn three things about forgiveness. **First**, it doesn't ignore the sin and damage done or minimize the problem. Quite the opposite. God's forgiveness calls us to be completely honest about our sins and failures. "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Second, true forgiveness is undeserved. God does not forgive us because we deserve it. The Bible tells us "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Third, God's forgiveness comes from His character, not from the merit of the recipient. Forgiveness is never based on reward. It is freely given to someone who does not deserve it by someone who is strong and gracious. It takes a mature person of character to offer true forgiveness.

In a nutshell, forgiveness means giving up our desires or our belief that we have a right for revenge on someone who has done us wrong. Unforgiveness means that we want to hurt the other person, and if we can't, we hope that someone else will! But the Bible tells us, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay," says the Lord (Romans 12:19). When we harbor resentments we are stepping into a place that God has reserved for Himself. He knows that in our finite and sinful ways of thinking, we would continually be passing out punishment to people that He is already dealing with. So he specifically tells us that vengeance is reserved for Him alone. If you are like me, you may have times that you are very angry and tell the Lord, "I would be happy to help you with this one!" but He always replies, "No thanks, I can handle this just fine."

Contrary to what some think, forgiveness is rarely an instantaneous event. Instead, it is a process that takes place over time. When we realize that forgiveness involves overcoming our anger and resentment toward a person, we can see why that takes time. We first have to be honest about our hurts and pain since that is where most of our resentments begin. This doesn't happen overnight. Once we face our wounds fully, we need time to process them—often with other people who can comfort and encourage us. Moving beyond deep emotional and physical wounds takes time.

If we are hanging on to our resentments as a form of self-protection, we have to grow strong enough to know that we can stand up for ourselves and protect ourselves if a similar circumstance arises again. Abused women have to learn emotionally (not just intellectually) that not all men are like the ones who abused them. So do abused men who were somehow mistreated as children and young adults. We have to have a strengthened attitude toward ourselves that enables us to shift from feeling like a victim to seeing ourselves as competent to survive and succeed. This can take a significant period of time. Only then can we risk giving up the safety that holding onto resentments is intended to create.

Now you can see the steps in the process. First we must honestly face the pain and hurt that we have suffered at the

hands of another. Then we must face the anger that we have toward the person. Then we must grow emotionally and spiritually strong enough so that we no longer need to protect ourselves by holding onto our anger. This enables us to clearly and firmly (but not angrily) say no and set boundaries so that we won't be wounded by the person again. Then we need to grieve our losses or the important things we needed as children or young adults but did not receive because of the mistreatment. Only then are we ready for the final step in the process of forgiveness.

Releasing people from our desire to punish them for their failures is the final step. In that stage we accept the fact that God is ultimately in charge of settling issues of justice, abuse, mistreatment, etc. We give those who have wounded us or sinned against us over to the Lord and trust Him to take care of them as He sees fit. We stop playing judge, jury and God and let go of our desires to set things right so that we can get on with our lives and God can deal with the other person. We may need to focus on scriptures like "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" and memorize them and bring them to mind when our feelings of resentment and unforgiveness return. It helps to make this very clear commitment even though we are likely to "forget" it and want to take the retributive reins out of God's hands on occasion. But when we do, we need to catch ourselves, let go, and let God. In time this process will become a natural habit.

We also need to remind ourselves that we, too, are sinners and that we often fail (although perhaps not in such obviously destructive ways as the person who failed us). We need to deeply experience God's grace and forgiveness of us and respond with gratitude. "There but by the grace of God go I" is not a trite phrase. It is true. We are each who we are today because we are recipients of God's grace and we need to humbly acknowledge that. We too do not deserve God's forgiveness, but we have received it. Only as we become grateful for the depth and breadth of God's forgiveness to us will we be able to extend true forgiveness to others. Then we can live out the Apostle Paul's instruction to us to "Forgive one another as God has forgiven you." †

Peace In My Chaos

by Christine Casselberry*

Rounding the corner on a late afternoon walk, I notice an abrupt drop in temperature as the wind suddenly changes directions. Off in the distance lightning bolts from the menacing storm clouds, causing my pace to quicken.

I need to find shelter soon, I tell myself, but I'm too far from home to make it back in time. "I know where I can go," I whisper.

Just as the skies open in a heavy downpour, I step inside the familiar tiny wooden chapel. As I slide into a pew I feel a familiar touch; a touch I remember from a long time ago.

I grew up in a Christian home and knew Jesus, not only as my Savior but also as my friend with whom I could always talk when things got rough.

My early childhood was almost idyllic, but as I approached my preteen years the veneer was removed from the frame I used to hold everything together. I didn't know what was happening in my parents' life, but I began walking on eggshells afraid that a single word spoken the wrong way might cause an eruption. My father dealt with the atmospheric change in our home by staying late at work each day. When he made it home, my mother was often sleeping. Sleeping was a good thing because at least while she was sleeping, I had a little peace.

Mother grew more emotionally unstable as the months passed, and my father, unable to handle her withdrawal, became very childlike, seeking attention and approval by telling off-color jokes and drawing attention to himself. My mother, too, became more childlike, hanging out with my friends, and dressing more like a teenager than a parent. Out of necessity, I assumed more of the adult role in our household.

Like the child of an alcoholic, I never knew what I would encounter when I came home from school. I could have a fun-loving, albeit childish mother, or perhaps she'd be in tears, claiming she couldn't go on with life. One time I



found her slumped on the bed, having taken a half-bottle of pain pills. Another time I found her in the neighborhood, wandering around in the rain, trying to gather her courage to jump in front of the oncoming traffic.

I read anything I could put my hands on that would give me guidance in helping my parents. Many nights I sat on the edge of my parents' bed, using the things I'd learned to help them see beyond their own views to the needs and feelings of the other. But above all, I sought the guidance and comfort of my Best Friend. I knew Jesus was the only one who knew the things that happened behind closed doors in my home. He knew my parents and their individual longings and fears. He knew better than any magazine, book, or daytime talk show how to help my parents. He also knew me.

My girlfriends shared secrets and enjoyed sleepovers, but I never felt comfortable leaving my mother overnight or sharing with anyone the turmoil I lived in. I had only one

friend in whom I could trust. All of the songs I grew up singing about Jesus being my friend and refuge in times of trouble now became my anthem. While my girlfriends had arguments with their friends, I grew to trust my Best Friend as someone who was always there, always understanding, and always trustworthy. I read in my Bible that He chose me, not as His servant but as a friend, and that He loved me more than any girlfriend ever could (*John 15:13-16*).

While I painted on a happy face to attend school, and appeared confident and in-control at home, Jesus knew the frightened little girl underneath the facade. He also knew my deepest desire to one day see my parents happy and at peace.

Although I prayed unceasingly, as I had been taught, I also found great comfort in the little wooden chapel at my church. With its stained glass windows, wooden pews, and red carpet runner down the center aisle, it was a cozy place to feel God wrap

Katrina's Impact on Mental Health and Faith

His loving arms around me. When I couldn't handle the tension any longer, or felt the weight of the situation crushing the life out of me, I found myself in that tiny chapel.

Walking up and down the aisles, I would talk out loud to my Best Friend. Sometimes I would tell Him about my day and how overwhelmed I felt. I would tell Him of my fears and my hope that something I would say could somehow make a difference. Often I would yell at God, pouring my heart out to Him, knowing that He was big enough to handle my frustrations and anger.

I always ended my chapel time by thanking Him for faithfully being there and for hearing my prayers. Even though I could not see answers to my prayers, I knew He was working on the answer. How did I know this? I just knew deep in my heart. Maybe it was more of a hope, a desperate hope because there didn't seem to be much hope in anything else. My parents were heading for divorce and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

One night, as a raging storm brewed outside, I was once again pouring my heart out to God in my chapel paradise. "God, I don't know how much more I can take. You know my heart and what I desire. I need you to take this pain from me." As my tears turned to sobs, I felt a peace wash over me that I had never experienced before. It was as if God said, "I have heard you, and your prayers have been answered."

Somehow I knew He didn't mean things would instantly improve, and they didn't. In fact, my parents' rush towards divorce gathered speed. But I knew my Best Friend was telling me He had my parents, the situation, and me under His control. Through that knowledge I could have peace in my chaos.

My mind is now racing with memories of the years I spent clinging to God as the only refuge I could find from the storms that raged in my life. As I look around at the furnishings in the chapel, I am touched by how little it has changed in the five years since my par-

ents' divorce, and in contrast, how much my life has changed. As if no time had passed, words begin to tumble from my mouth as I pour out my heart to my old Friend.

I praise God for the wonderful man He gave to me in my marriage, and for answering my prayers for my parents' peace and happiness. I am grateful that He brought two people into both my father and my mother's life with whom they are now married. I rejoice over the peace He gave me as I watched the joy my father and mother expressed on their wedding days, a peace that could only come from God.

As He promised, Jesus had been there through the years healing my parents' hearts, minds, and emotions. By His grace He was able to meet their deepest needs for companionship and love. Peace had come, though not the way I expected it. The answer did not come soon, for it took many years of counseling to put those years of chaos into proper perspective, but the gift of answered prayer did come.

I can hear the rain now pelting the stained glass windows, and the wind howling through the long-leaf pines outside, yet in here I know I am safe. "Thank you, Lord, for the answered prayer, and for providing this place of refuge." I feel God wrap His arms around me as He did that night so long ago. And then, as if whispering in my ear, He gently says, "When the storms rage, I am always here for you, my child. I am and always will be your Best Friend." †

*Christine Casselberry is a pen name for Cheri Lynn Cowell. Christine, now married to her husband for 21 years, still enjoys worshipping God while a storm brews outside. She hopes that by sharing the story of her stormy teenage years and the peace that only God can bring, she may encourage others to hold onto Jesus as the anchor of their soul (*Hebrews 6:19*). "My heart's desire is for others to know Jesus as their Best Friend who gives peace in their chaos, and turns storm clouds into bright sunshine."

Hurricane Katrina has been called the deadliest hurricane in the United States in 70 years. Undoubtedly it has been the most costly. More than 1600 people died as a direct result and more than a half million were evacuated. One thousand people are still missing. Survivors have experienced nearly twice the rate of serious mental health illnesses following the disaster.

Harvard researchers, however, have found something surprising in the midst of this difficult time. While serious mental health illnesses such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression and anxiety have doubled, thoughts of suicide have actually decreased from recorded levels prior to the hurricane. Researchers have remarked that the survivors have had an unexpected "high level of optimism and resiliency" in the face of overwhelming desolation. Some of the findings are:

- Most respondents (60.4 percent) said their life was about the same as before the hurricane, 25.5 percent said worse and 13.5 percent said better.

- Most (88.5 percent) respondents said that their Katrina experiences have helped them develop a deeper sense of meaning or purpose in life.

- About three-quarters said that their experiences with the hurricane made them more spiritual or religious.

The uncertainties of the post Katrina era drew many closer to loved ones and they found community with fellow sufferers. Though the researchers apparently did not query specific religious beliefs, believers are not surprised by the refuge found in spiritual things and in fellow sufferers. Our journeys in life are sprinkled with times that leave us no other options than our Lord and fellow sufferers. We ask of our Father as David writes in Psalm 57:1, "Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, For my soul takes refuge in Thee; And in the shadow of Thy wings I will take refuge, Until destruction passes by." †



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LETTER, continued from cover

change...why doesn't he appreciate the good values that were the fabric of his upbringing.

One evening, three years ago, I shared my feelings with my daughter. She listened intently but said very little. However, after she had returned to her own home, despite the lateness of the hour, she emailed this letter to me.

Dear Mother;

I have been trying to think what is the one single thing that you could do to enhance your relationship with John. I think it is this. Approve of him.

As long as you focus on the things about his life that make you sad, or wish that his life was different in some way, you will convey to him a sense that he has failed. That he isn't good enough. That he's let you and Dad down. This isn't what you mean, but it might be what he feels. Because he feels this, it's easy for him to interpret your attempts to help him as criticism or as proof that you don't yet feel he's good enough.

Instead, start thinking of John as a success. Start thinking about what a fine man he is. Call to mind not the life you wish for him or the person you'd like him to be, but the fine, upstanding, good-hearted person that he is. Think how loyal he is to his friends (for example, looking out for his mate who was in the car accident). Think of his exemplary fidelity to his partner over much longer than some

marriages last. Think how generous he is (like giving away the car he didn't need, and sharing the beach house with so many people). Think about his enterprise in building the beach house, and his labor and patience in making it into a lovely retreat.

Think how responsible he's been with money. Think how he's been able to turn his hand to so many jobs and do them well. Be proud of John. Think of him as a good person and a success. Understand that the difficulties he talks about are real and important to him, whether they seem right to you or not. Remember that we love God because He first loved us (1 John 4:10, NIV).

Remember that it was while we were yet sinners that God came to save us. That is, first of all God thought that we were valuable and lovable and good, and then the miracle happened; by and by we became so. By accepting John as he is, by already thinking he is great, you can do what is in your power to set him free.

It's not necessary for you to tell him any of these things. All that is needed is for you to think them (Romans 12:2). I know he and you will both benefit from this attitude.

Love, Catherine

This letter was sent to me three years ago. My relationship with my son has improved out of sight. Thank God for the truth that sets us free, and the loving people who have the courage to speak or write it to us. †

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When Christians Become Mentally Ill

by Mart De Haan

Soon after our marriage, my wife and I were faced with the needs of a family member whose inner world was deeply troubled.

Sometimes this loved one heard voices no one else could hear. Sometimes there were fears that the government was spying on her through her television set. Sometimes she accused us of trying to kill her.

For a while she lived in our home. On other occasions she was able to care for herself in government-subsidized housing. More than once she ran away in an attempt to avoid a world that frightened her.

With the help of local mental health services, we did everything we knew how to do. Through it all, we loved and laughed and prayed. Sometimes she went to church with us. One Sunday evening, she expressed a desire to accept Christ as her Savior. For a while, her state of mind improved. But within a few months the voices and hallucinations returned.

Over time, we developed a deep appreciation for the doctors, mental health community, and social workers who helped us. On occasion, we needed the help of law enforcement officers and judges to obtain involuntary admission to a mental health facility, or we needed the oversight of a financial conservator. Her troubled life ended in a state hospital.

In the middle of our experience, we became aware of other church and neighborhood families who were also dealing with similar heartbreak. They too were praying for spiritual help, while reading mental health literature for medical answers.

Along the way, we saw why doctors often refer their patients to counselors and why counselors refer their patients to doctors. The human body and mind are so interwoven that physical symptoms can mask spiritual roots, just as emotional and mental confusion can obscure organic causes.

Like the body, the mind sometimes heals itself. Sometimes it doesn't. Often there is a place for medication to provide relief while wise counselors offer perspective and new ways of dealing with confused thoughts. There is a time for both doctors and counselors. Persons struggling with mental

health issues may respond to either, to both, or to neither. Sometimes the pain is softened only by sedation.

Such complexity calls for wisdom so that we can offer spiritual answers with gentleness rather than presumption. Jesus' offer of forgiveness, love, and truth provides a foundation for good mental health. Many have found their inner world of anxiety and hopelessness calmed and strengthened by personal faith through reading the Bible. Some have a story that is similar to those who have found deliverance from spiritual oppression in the presence of Jesus. Prayer in Jesus' name should not be ruled out. But our humility needs to be as real as our faith. There are countless people who suffer from depressive and compulsive thinking that does not respond to prayer, Bible reading, or spiritual correction.

On more than a few occasions, I've been deeply troubled by the apparent unwillingness of God to answer prayers for those who live in such inner confusion and anguish. I see families who are barely surviving in their effort to care for loved ones tormented by autism, Alzheimer's, or other conditions that affect not only the body but the mind and emotions as well. But then, in the face of such brokenness, I'm reminded that the Bible doesn't ask us to believe in a God who fixes everything in this life.

Those of us who believe that the Bible is all we need to treat mental and emotional problems usually allow for exceptions rooted in organic causes. We recognize that we must leave room for thoughts and emotions altered by the real effects of brain cancer, thyroid disease, or chemotherapy. What we sometimes forget, though, is that bodies and minds that are fearfully and wonderfully made can be tearfully and woefully broken.

Mental and emotional health and illness are a matter of degree. No one but God fully understands the complex interplay between body and mind.

We might wish that life were simple enough to say, "Think right, do right, and you'll feel right." While such advice works for some people some of the time, it can add even more pain to those who are already hurting the most. The apostle Paul gives us a more thoughtful approach when he writes, "Warn those who are unruly, comfort the

fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all" (*1 Thessalonians 5:14*).

Note the varied responses. Warn some. Comfort some. Hold up some. Be patient toward all.

The need for such patience is easy to see in a child or adult struggling with profound mental or emotional impairment. In such cases, we are inspired by the gentleness and patience of a caregiver who loves in ways that are not returned. We wonder at the compassion that tenderly makes room for limitation while always looking for undeveloped potential.

But it's important to see that Paul's words are not just addressed to those with obvious impairment, or even with the kind of diagnosed schizophrenia that my wife and I saw in our loved one. Paul urges, "Be patient with all."

All of us live with a complexity that is not easily understood by others or ourselves. This is one of many reasons the Bible encourages us to relate to others with a spirit of thoughtful patience and firm gentleness rather than with a spirit of judgment and condemnation. If we are followers of Jesus, filled with His Spirit, we will be more than moral drill sergeants. Guided by His Spirit, we will give others the consideration we want for ourselves.

If troubled people need our help, we don't do them a favor by ignoring or indulging unhealthy thinking when there is reason to believe they could be making better choices. Love needs to be strong, and sometimes even tough, in dealing with those who are profoundly impaired. But this is where we need to use wisdom and patience rather than the presumption of ignorance.

Father in heaven, there is so much we don't understand about others and ourselves. Please help us to know when to warn, when to comfort, when to hold up, while being patient toward all. †

Mart De Haan is the grandson of Radio Bible Class founder, Dr. M. R. De Haan and the son of former president Richard W. De Haan. He is a contributing writer for the *Our Daily Bread* devotional and the *Discovery Series Bible study* booklets. This article is from a monthly RBC column on timely issues called "Been Thinking About." He is married with two grown children.



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