

Forgiveness

By T. Dean Adams Lofton

A kind stranger called a few days after our house was robbed. He'd found my husband's credit card in a dumpster near the mall when looking for his own wallet stolen from his car. In one of a series of surreal moments I soon climbed up the side of a dumpster. Mixed in with papers, oil cans and garbage bags of rotting food I was surprised to see my curlers. Discarded as not valuable their soft pink sponges and blue clamps no longer promised glamour. I had not even missed them yet.

My husband, then boyfriend, and I had only lived together a month when I came home to the crime scene aftermath of cabinet doors open, contents of drawers emptied onto the floor, everything hurriedly inspected for resale value. Soon, like the television shows I hate, there were two cops in my house with guns on their hips, notepads in their hands and curt questions. Their uniforms were so tidy that I'm still surprised at the mess they left behind with the black fingerprint dust. I've never really trusted cops, and their bedside manner was not so comforting.

But I appreciated their smarts to look in the woods behind our house. There I found my computer, monitor and television on the forest floor of pine needles. And the rage began. How dare someone enter my new home full of hope with my new love and root through my stuff and then stash my sacred computer full of my stories on the ground in the woods?

My husband, neighbors and the police assured me this was very unusual, the neighborhood was quiet and safe. It was obviously juveniles, "not a professional job," one police officer said. I noticed nobody left their any lights on at night, a sign of a safe neighborhood to me. Still every new house-noise tensed my shoulders. Even changed locks and an alarm system didn't help. I scrutinized every kid I saw in my new neighborhood.

The thieves' lack of logic was oddly infuriating as over time we discovered the inexpensive, little things they stole. Yet, almost insultingly, none of my jewelry was gone. And it never seemed to end. The first cold day of winter, and where are my gloves? Sigh. Some juvenile delinquent has my leather gloves.

Some friends saw a spiritual message of what to value in life - not stuff, but time with loved ones, peaceful moments... but not me. I hung out in anger. I sulked and romanticized my former city loft apartment and questioned my decision to move to my husband's house in a subdivision on a cul-de-sac.

Then the only president I've ever really trusted saved me. President Bartlet on The West Wing, where I reunite weekly with some of my liberal friends (so few live in South Carolina), visited an injured soldier in the hospital. The soldier asked, "How about a prayer, sir?" And I sighed, as I usually sigh, when religion creeps in, even into fiction, and blurs my adamant line of separation of church and state. But my dear president bowed his head and began, "Our father who art in heaven..." It'd been so long since I'd heard that prayer, but I knew every word from a childhood of church going.

I tuned out to admire the cinematography and think sadly of our non-fiction soldiers at war for fictitious reasons. Then I heard, "... and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us..."

Forgive? Forgive those punk little kids? I started to cry and then did what any wise woman would do. I turned to the internet and my journal.

On the internet I found www.forgiving.org, A Campaign For Forgiveness Research, which has funded 46 research projects on forgiveness. Charlott Witvliet, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology at Hope College, wrote, "In our research, reliving a past hurt and holding a grudge

prompted negative emotion and stress responses in sweat, heartbeat and blood pressure. But when the same people forgave, focusing on their offender's humanity, and wishing them genuine good, victims experienced positive emotion and reduced their stress."

So I focused on the humanity of the little punks by writing in my journal. I wondered what their lives were like to lead them to steal. As I wrote I soon discovered a slew of people I had not forgiven: an employer who betrayed me, a friend who disappeared when needed most, and a former lover who became surprisingly mean spirited. I could not avoid the things I had not forgiven myself for either. A string of regrets came pouring onto the page: bad relationships, impulsive moves and the comforting hiding place of denial where I'd curled up for too long, too many times.

A year later black smudges still mysteriously appear on my hands. I retrace my steps searching for the overlooked spot. What little corner, what tiny edge have I not scrubbed trying to remove proof this happened? As if it's really possible to ever clean up all the dust or the anger. I sometimes lean on the saying, "The best way to get even with your enemies is to forgive them." But I don't want to have enemies; I know there's no getting even. I cling to the last half of the word "forgive" ... give, and try to give others empathy and give myself a break.

In this season of giving, no matter what religion you practice, or which presidents you've trusted, I recommend the gift of forgiveness for yourself and others. No box can contain its healing power.

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