



Art by Julie Lonneman

by Carol Luebering

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Memories are treasures in our later years. We often sit and sort through them, like the nursery-rhyme King of Hearts in his counting house. Some of them bring a tear or two to our eyes as we reach back for something or someone who is now beyond our grasp. Most of the precious moments we relive bring happy memories that warm

our hearts.

Other memories, however, carry only bitterness into the present moment.

One woman I know seems to prefer lingering on this kind of recollection. She trots out ancient injuries in an attempt to win my disapproval of the perpetrator. She recites the latest slap her daughter has delivered or the insensitive remark someone made a few days ago. I have to admit I don't take great pleasure in her company.

Does she really find pleasure in constantly ripping the scab off every scar? I doubt it. Rather, she seems to be trapped in past affronts, both real and imagined, because she cannot bring herself to make peace with what has long since passed under the bridge of time.

We pray with the people whom we visit. Often our prayer includes that terrible phrase that came from Jesus' own lips: "Forgive us as we forgive" — a bargain that strikes terror in my heart! Forgiving is not something I find easy. I doubt if anyone else does, either. Yet it must somehow be possible, or the Lord would not have taught it so insistently.

Lent is a good time to tackle the question of how forgiveness can be achieved. Trying to include the people who have inflicted injury on either of you in your shared prayer is a good place to begin. Begin by admitting the difficulty of your own struggles to forgive another person.

Don't fall into the trap of asking God to change someone else's heart. Ask instead for the grace to see that person as God does. In this season especially we need to come to terms with the fact that none of us is perfect — a difficult truth to face in any season. The hard truth is that even our worst enemies are but flawed human beings like the rest of us and, also like the rest of us, bathed in God's faithful and redeeming love.

It is no coincidence that the people who can hurt us most deeply are the very folks we have loved, for love is exactly what makes us vulnerable. Make an effort to bring the love that has been strangled by resentment to mind; explore just what it was that made that person so dear.

In your prayer, try to keep the focus on the wounds inflicted by the estrangement rather than on the injury itself. That can help any of us realize that nurturing anger

only keeps the pain alive and imprisons us in an unpleasant but long-past time. Pray together to be freed from those chains.

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Some of the people we resent have not really injured us but are just downright annoying. With them, the hurdle is less to forgive than simply to find a way to value them as they are. *Why* they bother us so is an interesting matter to explore. Possibly they reflect to us the very qualities we most fear and dislike in ourselves. Or perhaps it is just that we fail to see the flip side of their faults. The way our faults and our virtues are inextricably intertwined has long fascinated me. When one of our daughters was born quite prematurely, the doctor told us that her chances of survival depended a lot on what kind of person she was. It didn't take us long to discover that she was incredibly stubborn — so stubborn that I often wanted to wring her neck! Yet the same strong will that kept her alive has also enabled her to move through life with flying colors. (We call it perseverance now.)

Another person, a dear friend with a quick temper, harnessed her capacity for anger in the interest of racial justice and was an inspiration to me. See what I mean?

Forgiving another is no simple matter. We complicate it even more when we expect it to feel good. To be sure, making up is sometimes a warm and fuzzy experience. But letting go of long-held bitterness can just as well feel a lot more like the drastic measures taken to rid a stomach of poisonous substances. And that, in truth, is what the process of forgiving someone is — an emptying process that leaves more space for God's loving grace.

This Lent, join the people to whom you minister in the effort to free yourselves from past grievances with the help of that grace. And let me know which of you is richer for the effort.

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the March 2006 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Lenten reflections](#).*

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