



LIFE OF JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS

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As an only child, I grew up in a home where love, compassion, forgiveness, and understanding were frequently observed and practiced, but very rarely put into words. Despite the fact that their marriage ended after several years of consistent arguing, my parents made a very concerted effort to raise me in an environment that embraced these unspoken truths. It was not uncommon for a disagreement between me and my parents to be resolved with nothing more than a subtle nod of the head, few brief words, and a hug. To me, growing up in the midst of these intangible notions of acceptance and love was very liberating as it allowed us to air our grievances and vent frustration in what seemed like a consequence-free environment. As adults, my wife and I have worked very hard at developing this same environment in our relationship with each other and our children. Like many marital relationships our marriage relies heavily on love, compassion, and understanding to help us navigate through the troubles of everyday life. However, the realities of adulthood have illuminated the fact that no matter how much we wish for a consequence-free environment, actions and words spoken out of anger carry with them hurt, frustration, and disappointment that must be vocalized for healing to begin. This realization was not discovered without effort. Initially, I was resistant to the notion that my childhood understanding of love and forgiveness might be flawed and searched to discover how another perspective could improve upon a notion that I've always considered to be unimpeachable. During my search I came across a passage written by Robert Greenleaf, in which he describes a lesson learned during a sociology lecture. While discussing the role of man and institutions, Greenleaf's professor stated that one can "stand outside and criticize and bring pressure; but nothing constructive will happen until someone who is inside and has her or his hands on some of the levers of power and influence decides to change something" (as cited in Spears, 1995, p 18). After reading this passage,



I came to the realization that by resisting an opportunity to see myself from another perspective I was in fact standing on the outside and criticizing, and that nothing constructive would occur. At that moment I decided that I would place my hands on my own levers of power and allow myself to be vulnerable to change. To this end, I would like to examine how an argument between me, my wife, and my mother has forced me to confront the value of justice and forgiveness.

BACKGROUND

In many ways my wife Rachel and I conform to the stereotype of a military family. We both pride ourselves on being ferociously independent, and have learned to cope with both the stressors of extended periods apart and the sudden crash of emotions associated with my return from sea. In the past seven years my occupation has forced us to move several times, twice to cities where we were complete strangers. The act of packing up all of our worldly possessions and moving to a new town, where I would assume a new position, exposes us to stressors for which a coping mechanism has not been developed, as they do not exist in our everyday lives. Over the years I have harbored a great amount of guilt about forcing Rachel to move so frequently and even more guilt about the additional stress that these moves place on her and our relationship. As a result of my guilt, the additional stress, and our lack of coping skills our most aggressive and boisterous arguments tend to occur during these periods of transition. Unfortunately, it has become a standard practice that during these arguments we both say very petty and hurtful comments in the heat of the moment that we both know are not true. Much like the conflicts of my childhood, these arguments are over as quickly as they started and are frequently forgotten in what feels like a matter of moments.

One such argument occurred shortly after our last relocation to my current duty station in Rhode Island. In our previous moves the role of unpacking has been Rachel's responsibility as I have spent the majority of my time learning my new job and fulfilling my at-sea assignments. Historically, my mother would visit us shortly after the delivery people had left, to assist Rachel with the process of unpacking and turning our house into a home; however, this move was different. This duty assignment would be the first time during our ten-year relationship where I would be assigned to a shore facility where I would be home every night, and as such I would be a full participant in



the unpacking of our new home. At the beginning of our move-in day we all fanned out across the house working independently in separate rooms. We were making great progress and were very pleased with what we had accomplished in a short period of time. I finished unpacking my room first and decided to start working on the kitchen, where I hastily found a home for our dishes and dry food goods without first consulting with Rachel. When Rachel joined me in the kitchen she innocently questioned why I had chosen to place certain items where I did. Unfortunately, I responded to her questioning with a quick jab and an insult that was made out of frustration. This unprovoked verbal attack spiraled into a full-blown argument where words spoken in anger were delivered by both of us. We hurled insults and profanities at each other for several minutes, all in full view of both my mother and our eighteen-month-old son. The argument concluded with me storming out of the house saying something to the effect of “Why don’t we settle this in divorce court?” Consumed with both frustration and anger, I got into my car and did laps around my new neighborhood until I was in a much calmer state of mind. I returned home about an hour later, where when I walked through the door we fell into our usual routine. Rachel and I shared a quick hug and a round of short apologies and started to work again as though nothing had happened. Later that evening in the privacy of our new bedroom we both expressed our sincere remorse and confessed our desire to develop a more mature and healthy means of resolving our differences. I told Rachel that my greatest regret was that our infantile behavior gave my mother an inaccurate impression of how we relate on a daily basis. I intuitively knew that I should apologize to my mother; however, I chose not to because the thought of verbally rehashing this incident seemed uncomfortable and was not in keeping with our family way.

In hindsight, I believe that my insulting comment and frustration were formed out of a sense of competition. At the time, I felt as though I had in a way earned the right to decide how our kitchen was to be organized because I had finished my assigned room the quickest. When considering this thought now, I must admit that even to me this sounds childish at best. As a leader hoping to embody the spirit of a servant-leader, I should have realized that “serving and competing are antithetical; the stronger the urge to serve, the less interest in competing” (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 51). Unfortunately, my ultimate goal of serving my family had been overshadowed by my compulsion to feel both right and justified. As an aspiring servant-leader, I should have realized that a true servant would be “concerned with the consequences of his or



her actions: those being served, while being served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to themselves become servants” (p. 51).

In the years since this altercation Rachel and I have been very successful at not allowing ourselves to devolve into unproductive verbal jousting as a means of conflict resolution. We have both become more comfortable at expressing our frustrations and fears in a manner that is neither offensive nor antagonistic. Our newly discovered compassionate approach to one another has also extended to my mother. Since the day of our move my mother has had several positive visits with us, where she has had an opportunity to observe the loving and forgiving couple that Rachel and I know ourselves to be on a regular basis.

SEEKING FORGIVENESS

For me, this quest to embrace the art of servant-leadership is much more than an academic venture into the world of self-responsibility, human dignity, and the restorative powers of forgiveness and atonement. This quest has challenged me to venture into emotional waters that have scarcely been charted. In many ways the mere thought of calling my mother to seek her forgiveness seemed like an insurmountable task; however, it was a task I needed to accomplish.

At the beginning of our conversation, I told her that I wanted to discuss the argument she had witnessed and that I genuinely wanted her to be an active participant. We discussed some of the tenets of servant-leadership and how forgiveness is important, because “the past, far from disappearing or lying down and being quiet, has an embarrassing and persistent way of returning and haunting us unless it has in fact been dealt with adequately” (Tutu, 1999, p. 28). During our conversation I worked hard to resist the temptation to rationalize my actions, opting instead to sit in silent observation as my mother discussed the feelings, fears, and emotions she had experienced while in our kitchen. She described to me how at first she was disappointed in me, Rachel, and herself. Her disappointment at Rachel and me stemmed from the fact that we conducted ourselves in an extremely immature manner, and that we were setting a bad example for our son. She described how she felt disappointed in herself as a mother, for having failed to raise a child who can express himself in a disagreement without resorting to insults and profanity. She also described how being present for our argument caused her to recall the uncomfortable memories of the later years of



her own marriage, and how those memories made her feel defenseless and exposed. She stated that in many ways she felt the same anxiety and concern for my marriage as she did for hers, and that those thoughts had troubled her for a long time. What surprised me the most was that she said that during the argument she had a strong maternal need to protect both me and my son. She described how the maternal instinct to protect our son was so strong that at one point she picked him up and embraced him, somehow hoping that her body would shield him from the hostile atmosphere. Throughout our conversation, I admitted my culpability and acknowledged my actions without an attempt to justify or mitigate them. Near the end of our conversation, and with very little fanfare, she offered her forgiveness, which I happily accepted. In a way that I hadn't anticipated, this exercise was extremely cathartic for me, as her forgiveness "represents a letting go of the sense of grievance, and perhaps most importantly a letting go of the role of victim" (Wiesenthal, 1997, p 189).

PERSONAL INSIGHTS AND CONCLUSION

As I stated earlier, this attempt at seeking forgiveness has forced me to step out of my comfort zone to address thoughts and emotions that I've rarely considered. This is not to say that I've never experienced remorse or regret, because I certainly have; however, I've never felt compelled to act on that remorse to ask for forgiveness. To this end, I've also never felt the need to grant forgiveness to others, clinging to my belief that those who were in my intimate circle of friends and family were already aware of the blanket of forgiveness that encompasses our relationship. In hindsight, I believe that by not expecting others to ask for forgiveness from me I was in a way granting myself permission to not ask for forgiveness from others. By granting myself permission to not ask for forgiveness from others I was seeking the quickest most efficient means to an end. While this path is the quickest means to an end, that does not necessarily mean that it is conducive to building long-lasting and emotionally mature relationships. As an aspiring servant-leader this hard work cannot be avoided for "at its core, servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work, in essence, a way of being that has the potential to create positive change throughout our society" (Spears, 1995, p 4). In some ways, I, like many of my family members, was using our intangible sense of forgiveness as a shield to protect me from having to confront what are in many ways very sensitive and confusing



emotions. In the past I've chosen to repress the memories of my misdeeds and the misdeeds of others, wholeheartedly believing that if they were forgotten they were forgiven. I now understand that as a responsible, mature adult I "should be aware and remember these experiences so that efforts can be made to check the reoccurrence of such atrocities in the future" (Wiesenthal, 1997, p. 129). An unintentional by-product of my efforts to avoid uncomfortable feelings and situations was that my growth was sabotaged. Prior to this experience I would have considered the act of rehashing an uncomfortable experience as extremely unproductive, as it focused my energy on the past instead of looking forward to the future. I now see that "the real enemy [to productive growth] is fuzzy thinking on the part of good, intelligent, vital people, and their failure to lead...in short, the enemy is servants who have the potential to lead but do not lead" (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 40). Choosing to no longer repress the memories of my misdeeds will not only benefit me as a father and husband, it will inevitably benefit the community that I serve.

One of the greatest insights I've gained from asking for forgiveness came the day after I had my conversation with my mother. My mother called me just to say how much better she felt after having an opportunity to express her feelings in an atmosphere where there was no threat of reprisal. We only spoke for a few minutes, but during our conversation she told me how for her this had been such an invigorating experience that she would like me to help her seek forgiveness from other family members on my next visit. As liberating and beneficial as this experience has been, I still contend that there are some instances where forgiveness should be felt versus vocalized; however, I'm now able to see that the opposite is true as well. Through this experience I've discovered that "the servant prepares himself or herself to lead by a process of growth through experience guided by a self-image as a builder and within a conceptual framework that suggests the strengths that will emerge if allowed" (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 41). I'm still learning to process the thoughts and feelings associated with asking for forgiveness, as these are still very new to me; however, I can now see the therapeutic benefits and healing that can occur when I'm willing to experience them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Greg Smith is an active duty naval officer currently stationed in Newport, R.I. His most recent assignment is as an instructor at the Surface Warfare Officers School where he provides a continuum of



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