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BY REV. CHRISTINE LESLIE

I recently heard something for the first time that has helped me to address a life-long struggle. Until I heard this statement, being able to forgive myself and others has always been something I have had to work really hard to do. (Yes, clergy people struggle with this, too.) This new definition of "forgiveness" actually helped me to resolve a number of feelings I have held in side of me, some of them for a very long time. The list includes things I have done to others, and things others have done to me. I have simply put them on the proverbial "back burner" where they have simmered for months and sometimes years.

This has not been helpful or healthy for me. Unresolved feelings of hurt, anger, guilt and shame (just to name a few) can literally eat us alive when left to simmer beneath the surface of our everyday lives. Like festering wounds, unresolved feelings of hurt, anger, guilt, and shame related to negative experiences in our lives can become real sore spots, that when bumped into, can cause

Faith Matters &
Forgiveness Matters

us to behave in ways we often only live to regret, which only serves to make things worse.

My inability to forgive easily has always bothered me and has added insult to injury making my dilemma doubly painful. Receiving this concept has been very healing, freeing, and helpful to me. I can't imagine I am the only person who has struggled with this dilemma, so I thought passing it along to those who read "Faith Matters" might find it helpful, too. This concept of forgiveness goes like this: Forgiveness is giving up all hope that we will ever have a better past.

I don't know about you but when I heard this and then began to survey all of the unresolved feelings inside of me every last one of them had to do with something I wish I had never done or something I wish had never happened to me. As I began to apply this concept of forgiveness to each of them, I could feel the old, tired places in me breathe deeply. The tears began to flow as I finally was able to get it that the past is never going to change. Those things I did and those things that were done to me that I have never forgiven are never, ever going to be anything but what they were: painful, terrible, unfortunate negative events in my life.

Holding on to the painful feelings about them has done nothing but keep a part of me miserable and bitter. I believe the tears that I was finally able to shed about the unresolved hurts and regrets in my life have to do with my need to grieve. Grieving is what we do when we finally let ourselves feel just how sorrowful we really are about what we did to hurt others. It also means we finally feel sorrowful, or sorry, for ourselves about the terrible things that were done to us.

Yes, feeling sorry really is the operative process for coming to terms with legitimate suffering. Until I was able to say to myself, "Chris, I am so sorry that happened to you...it wasn't your fault" and "Chris, I am so sorry you did that...I am glad you are finally accepting responsibility for what you did," I wasn't able to give up hope that these events would ever be different. Until I did this, I wasn't able to stop nursing my grudges, resentments, guilts, and shames. Until I did this, I wasn't able to live fully in the here and now of my life.

Nursing grudges, resentments, guilt and shame is what we often do to avoid the grief work of feeling our sorrow inside and out. Not grieving keeps us stuck in the past with all kinds of feelings that keep us from living in the here and the now. We often choose to

stay stuck in the past, because somehow we think on some magical level that we if we do we can somehow make it different from what it was. The past cannot be different from what it was. Only we can be different by whether we choose to forgive or not to forgive.

And what a difference forgiveness can make in our lives. When we give up all hope that we will ever have a better past, then we are free to build a better future. Wounds that have been healed through this process become sources of wisdom on which we build better futures, and sources of compassion within us for people who carry similar wounds to our own from whom we used to run and hide.

It will probably come as no surprise to hear me say that forgiveness and faithfulness go hand in hand. Being faithful has to do with trusting in processes that don't provide pre-determined answers. Its no coincidence that practicing forgiveness is a process for which there is no pre-determined answer. We just don't know the outcome of practicing forgiveness until we do it.

I had no idea when I began to integrate this new concept of forgiveness into my soul that a dam in side of me would break and I would feel long-buried pain and anguish gush out of my soul like flood waters through a levy. Where grudges, resentments, guilts and shames used to roam in herds in side of me, I am now finding a fertile plain on which I am building a better future for myself. I am even beginning to have healing pools of wisdom where old, emotional wounds used to lie in stagnant puddles. Now that I know just how much faith matters and forgiveness matters, I can't imagine nursing grudges, resentments, guilts and shames the way I used to. Giving up all hope that I will ever have a better past really does make it possible for me to have a brighter future.

Rev. Christine Leslie, the first openly ordained lesbian in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is the founder and director of Triangle Ministries, A Center for Lesbian & Gay Spiritual Development near Burlington, VT. She is available for individual and couple counseling, commitment services, grief counseling, workshops, and retreats. She specializes in the integration of sexual-identity formation and spiritual development. Contact her at 802-860-7106 or email her at revcsl@aol.com. Visit the Triangle Ministries web page at <http://members.aol.com/revcsl>

Freedom to Marry Task Force Tables at the Fair

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fear displayed by this young person as she stepped back from the table. Her body language indicated an unwillingness for dialogue. We smiled and gently stated our respect for her religious beliefs while handing her our 3 pages of support signatures from ministers and rabbis in the state of Vermont for her to peacefully peruse. She tried to hide her surprise when she recognized the name of a minister on the support list.

Just that "one" seed of recognition might open this young woman's mind to the reality of a Vermont Constitution committed to freedom and equality for its citizens. And under this deep commitment, "we seek only the freedom to enter into the civil marriage recognized by the state, and to take on the legal responsibilities and benefits that accompany such marriages." She thanked us and left the scene, but not the experience behind.

The next day some of our neighbors came over to show their friendliness by engaging us in general conversation. One woman who had been watching us for several hours from her booth used her break time to approach our table (actually she walked past us four times) and then immediately took one of our task force pamphlets and proceeded to read through it. Once completed she concentrated on viewing our same gender couples photos on display on the back wallboard. Finally, she

looked at us and protested quietly by stating, "...but, I'm a woman!!"

(I wondered what she thought we were?) Then she added, "If this thing passes, will ALL of you get married? I don't think you should use the word 'marriage,'" she pleaded. This is where my heart always goes out to the uneducated and the misinformed. We had the correct approach and knew how to dialogue an answer of an ever-evolving institution explaining how change can improve and not threaten humanity in one of its cultural institutions, but the person expressing such misguided thinking was at that very moment undergoing fear that immorality was involved in the recognition we were seeking. She was careful not to use the usual accusing phrases and we could detect a glimmer of interest to learn what we could possibly say to help her understand. At the same time, all of us were hurting on both sides of the table as we explained civil rights for all under the law.

When we were met with fear, we felt pain and when we were met with anger, we felt sadness. We did our job out of dedication and excited interest, but the emotional "hits" were continuous. There was even shock when a community figurehead knowing us well walked past without stopping to acknowledge us and sign the signature of support list. One of our colleagues was verbally attacked by

a religious extremist screaming how he was a sinner going straight to hell. Was it worth it? You bet it was, because we know our "Gay 101...diversity in the g/l/b/t/q community mirrors diversity of society as a whole; we are everywhere, and are an important part of Vermont community." Vermonters are committed to equality and we experienced their commitment.

How do you think it feels when a grandfather hurries over to sign our support list while his two grandsons watch? Wonderful! One 13 year old grandson asked why his grandfather was signing a paper. The 7 year old grandson listened with his brother for the answer. The grandfather stated, "This is a paper showing the signature support of all the people like me who believe that same gender people should have the same civil rights as we do."

A mother, with her husband and two daughters, came to sign her support and explained openly to her two daughters saying, "I am signing to support homosexuals and their right to marriage just as we have this right." She directed her daughters to "look at the lovely photos". Then she thanked us for this privilege of what is "just and right". And her two daughters thanked us, too.

It was John F. Kennedy who said, "Peace is a daily, a weekly, a