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A Softer Soul

Life is meant to be shared. That's why God gave us marriage, children, grandchildren, and friends. It's why the average teenager sent twenty-five thousand text messages last year and why Facebook is the number one site on the internet.

Essentially, life comes down to the people in it. Think about it: if you could eat every meal at the finest restaurants, stay in the nicest hotels, sail on the biggest yachts, and travel to the most exclusive parts of the world, but you had to do it alone, what would be the point? It would all be empty. Meaning in life comes from sharing it with the people you care about. It's why my daughter calls my wife once a day, no matter where they are in the world, just to get an update.

Many years ago I toured the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, with my brother and a group of pastors. All the while we walked around this "wonder of the world," we saw a sharply dressed, European-type man taking dozens of pictures of himself. He wore a shiny suit coat with his shirt unbuttoned halfway down his hairy chest; his gold necklace and bracelet dangled about, and he seemed very impressed with himself. Now maybe he was on business and just took a side trip to see the Taj. But the way he was posing for himself made me think otherwise. I think he was alone. And when he looks at all the pictures he took of the Taj that day, he will be in every one of them just him. Only him. What good is traveling to great places, owning a big home, getting a new outfit, or making a hole in one if you have nobody to share it with? True joy is a shared commodity.

When I think of someone who has shared more of her life with me than I have with her, it's my mom. My mother has always been present for me, and my joy has always been her joy. But the opposite hasn't always been true; her joy has not always been my joy. I've often taken her for granted without giving much back.

When my dad died, it triggered in me a new desire to give back to my mom some of what she had given to me all my life. So I began to visit her after work, periodically bring her flowers, and invite her to join us for hamburgers on the grill on Friday evenings-little things. But I wondered what I could do that would fill my mom's joy bucket to the brim in a way that maybe she hadn't experienced since Dad died. The

idea came to me three falls ago.

For ten years, my mom and dad lived in a cabin that Dad had built on their favorite lake in northern Minnesota. It was a place filled with memories of fishing, snowmobiling, berry picking, and sitting in a little country church on warm Sunday mornings. There was nothing better than going to the cabin, waking up in the morning to the sound of gentle waves slap-ping up against the shore, and hearing Mom scurry around downstairs getting bacon and eggs ready. Her little kitchen table was one of the most inviting spots on earth-a complete stranger felt right at home while sitting at Mom's kitchen table. Coffee was always on, and her homemade sticky buns would've put most bakeries out of business if she had gone commercial.

But at summer's end when all the visitors left and the kids went back to school, Mom and Dad found their greatest joy in taking walks together on the logging trails that wove their way through Marvin Elg's 120-acre woods. Marvin ran an old sawmill and a gravel pit behind his house. He was a man of few words but a jack-of-all-trades right up Dad's alley. Marvin's wife, Elaine, was the church organist, and together there was nothing they couldn't do.

I think my mom and dad enjoyed those woods more than the Elgs did, and it kind of became their own. At first Dad would bring his shotgun on their walks in case they saw a grouse or two. But as they got older, he left the shotgun home and found joy in simply walking the trails hand in hand with his mate of more than fifty years.

After Dad died, the cabin was sold, and even though it was only a two-hour drive from Mom's new townhouse in White Bear Lake, she hadn't been back. She didn't know if her heart could take it, so she stayed away and rarely talked about it until three falls ago.

Giving Back

One day I mentioned to Mom that I was going on a hunting trip to South Dakota, and she said reflectively, "I would love to go hunting again." I didn't respond immediately, but I tucked it away and began running through my mental calendar for a possible day that I could make that happen for her. My one day off each week is precious to me, and that particular fall was extremely full with an international trip in October and a trip to Dallas in November. I had one possible window, but it would have to be a last-minute decision.

The window opened, I made the call, and I asked Mom if she'd like to go up to the cabin to hunt grouse in their old woods. I could tell by the emotion in her voice that

the very thought made her happy. She said she would love to go and that it would be a gift to her, but she ruled it out immediately because she was already committed to caring for my two-year-old niece and to serving on a committee at church. I told her my sister could find another babysitter and the church committee would be fine without her. So she made the calls, and we made our plans.

The next morning Mom packed a picnic lunch, I loaded the dog and hunting gear into my truck, and we took off for the two-hour drive straight north. It was a beautiful October day-the birches and poplars matched the yellow sun, the maples were ablaze in reds and orange. Seeing any grouse would be secondary, and a mere bonus, to the real gift of walking the same trails behind the old sawmill that Dad and Mom enjoyed during their last and best years together. This was more than a hunting trip; this was a return to former days of falling leaves, fresh coffee, and gentle waves splashing up against the rocks. This was their woods, their walk, and this was Mom's day. I could have been doing a dozen other things at home, but I was glad I was where I was, and I hoped something magical would happen.

About thirty minutes into our walk, I heard the unmistakable wing beat of a flushed grouse, and then another. Quickly, I turned toward the sounds with all my senses on alert. Another one flushed, but I couldn't get a shot, then another, and this time I found a brief opening as the bird darted through the trees. The shot rang out through the hardwood forest, the dog bounded into the tag alders, and her tail went wild with fresh scent. It was a great moment, one I had lived many times before a heart-pounding flush, the first shot, the wonderful smell of a spent shotgun shell, and the soft feathers of Minnesota's most wild game bird. And my mom loved it; she loved everything about it.

I wanted to follow the birds into a swampy thicket, so I told my mom to walk higher on the ridge and stay within eyesight. I would go through the thicket and swing around to rejoin her in ten minutes. When I caught up with her, she didn't notice me right away, and it seemed like her thoughts were elsewhere. She was walking up a favorite trail that was canopied by tall maples and oaks, a trail that she and my dad walked dozens of times. I could see she was in a different time and a different day.

I gently came up behind her, and I heard her say, "Dad and I...", and that's all she could say. So I put my arm around her waist, and we walked slowly up the hill together, mother and son.

In that moment, I sensed that Mom could feel Dad's love through my love, his strength through my strength. And we walked in silence, side by side up the hill, reconnecting with precious moments of earlier days.

After an hour or so, we stopped at Dad's old deer stand, which brought a few more tears. Then we continued on and found a big log, which we sat on for lunch. I prayed a short prayer before we ate our sandwiches and drank coffee from Mom's old thermos. She tossed the dog a few choice morsels, stroked Bear's head, and praised her for being such a good hunting dog. We got three birds with three shots-a near miracle for any grouse hunter.

The next day Mom brought over a grouse and rice dish served in wine sauce, and I overheard her say to my wife, "Yesterday was like a dream to me; it was magical. I can't even believe it happened."

And this is the reason for life: to share it with the ones you love most. If one day I return to the woods behind the old sawmill without my mom, I will always have that day, and that memory, and that joy. On that day, my mom's joy became my joy, and it was a gift that I will treasure for the rest of my life.

Maybe it's my age, or maybe I've seen enough of life to finally realize that life comes down to relationships-and not just any relationships, but the ones that have the most potential to last long and go deep, the ones that help you build a great life. These days I'm living my life with a softer soul toward people, and it's brought a new kind of joy to me that, frankly, had eluded me for most of my life.

For a large part of my life, I unknowingly looked at people for what they could do for me, how this person could help me, benefit me, support me, help me get things done. I'd come into a meeting or arrive home after work, and I expected other people to bring energy and joy to me while I just soaked it in. I wasn't doing my part to bring energy and joy to others. I sometimes wondered why I had a lot of acquaintances and not many real friends, but I never made the connection. It took some time in front of a counselor to sort some of that out, but now I make a conscious effort to bring some life to my spouse, family, staff, and friends. I try to bring energy and interest to the conversations I have, even with strangers. I try to look up from my computer when someone comes into my office with a question and give them my full attention. This communicates that "I'm listening, you're valuable to me, I'm fully engaged." These days I'm trying to give more than I take, and it's making all the difference in my own joy.

Relational Integrity

This final chapter is titled "A Softer Soul," and it's about relational integrity, which is simply treating people as fellow human beings instead of treating them just as store clerks, waitstaff, or employees. It's seeing every person as an equal, created in God's image, having infinite worth-yes, marred by sin but loved and valued by God. It's

understanding that every human being is a person just like you who has a real name, real fears, real needs, and a real soul that God wants to redeem, regardless of gender, race, or social status. Relational integrity is when you embrace Jesus's words in Matthew 7:12-"Do to others what you would have them do to you" and live them out in the workplace, classroom, neighborhood, and at home. It's that simple to treat every person you encounter exactly the way you'd want them to treat you, with kindness, generosity, patience, and forgiveness.

Relational integrity is approaching every person you encounter as an equal who deserves your kindness and consideration. And it doesn't happen automatically, at least not with me. I have to remind myself and train myself over and over to treat others the way I'd like them to treat me. It's a discipline, because I can forget about relational integrity in an instant. All it takes for my humanity to go out the window is for someone to drive 35 in a 45 zone, or for someone to hog a workout machine that I'm waiting for, or for my wife to challenge a decision I make. Someone almost nudged me out of my spot in the yogurt line the other day, and it was as if they were about to commit a crime. How dare they? My natural response to these things is not to be patient, kind, and receptive but to be rude and snippy.

Last spring Laurie and I went away for a few days. We took a long walk together, and we ended up in some neighborhoods that were off the beaten track. One of the little differences Laurie and I have is that she's a stickler for rules and regulations, while I'm a little loosey-goosey. I certainly abide by the rules, but I've always believed that there's some wiggle room, some gray, some flexibility built into the system. And this has caused some interesting tension.

For example, I absolutely love fresh grapefruit, and I especially love free, fresh grapefruit. So on our walk, we found a grapefruit tree that was just loaded with beautiful yellow grapefruit. It was in somebody's backyard, but its fruit-laden branches hung well over the fence. There were even a few overly ripe grapefruit that had fallen onto the public sidewalk next to this person's property. Did you notice I said public? Is it really private fruit if it's hanging over a very public sidewalk? And truthfully, there was so much of it that there's no way the owner could have eaten it all. I've seen people just try to give it away in self-serve boxes.

So naturally I reached up to sample one, but my arm froze in midair when I heard Laurie say with disdain in her voice, "If you grab that fruit, you'll never have sex again!" That made me flinch, even though I knew she was exaggerating. If she would've said, "Touch that grapefruit and I'll be mad for a week" or "Touch it and you'll be in the doghouse," I might've gone for it and lived with the consequences. But then she said, "What do you think God thinks of that?" I hate it when she brings God into it. What

followed next was a spirited debate about values, sin, and each other's screwy upbringing, but it was playful enough that we both just started laughing. In fact, I laughed so hard I couldn't even defend myself any longer.

The point is that relational integrity gets tested every day by little conflicts and annoyances. And how one responds-with either kindness or rudeness-requires discipline. When I get annoyed, I have to remind myself to chill out, take it easy, give it up, rise above it, laugh it off, and just treat the person the way I'd like them to treat me. That's all.

Relationships for the Long Haul

So with that background in mind, here's what I'm learning about relationships that go long and deep. These are some steps that have contributed to my softer soul and given me a chance at sharing life with a few others.

Start with the People around You

Your best opportunities for long and deep friendships are not in another county, state, church, or workplace. They are with the people who intersect your life on a regular basis. These may include your classmates, neighbors, or workmates, people you see and talk to on a regular basis. It's hard to have a close relationship with someone who lives or works hundreds of miles away-not impossible but difficult. As I sat around our leadership team table one day, I thought, "Why not these people? Why not spend more time with and initiate closer friendships with these people? They're in my life at least five days a week. Why not take advantage of our close proximity and build something from that?" For you it could be a neighbor down the street who's the same age, has young kids, and would love to share some life with you. But month after month, year after year, she sits alone behind her four walls and you sit alone behind your four walls, and the possibility for a relationship is missed because you think there has to be a better opportunity in some other neighborhood. But what are the chances of striking up a relationship with someone you don't even know exists? Probably none. Your best opportunities to build deeper friendships are with the people closest to you.

If you're married, the person you need to invest in the most is your spouse, and believe me, this takes effort and forethought. If Laurie and I aren't careful, we can go through months on autopilot where even though we're in the same house, we're not sharing life with each other. She does her thing, I do mine, and soon the connection is gone. There are two things that have helped us stay connected: getting away at least once a year alone together for at least seven days and serving each other in some way.

I think married couples have to get away alone together at least once a year, and it has to be far enough away so that you can't run home to mow the grass, sift through the mail, or take care of little projects. You have to disconnect from your daily life so you can reconnect with each other. And I say at least seven days because it takes awhile to detach emotionally from the dog and the kids. It also forces you to find things to do together-you can't just wait it out until you get home, because you'll go nuts. It takes awhile to slide into a rhythm where you're relating again and where you're comfortable being alone with each other. We're out in Palm Springs for ten days as I write this. After day three it began to feel long; on day four we started to ease into a rhythm, and now the days are going way too fast.

The other thing that helps Laurie and me stay connected is serving each other. In his book *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman identifies five ways people give and receive love: through receiving gifts, acts of service, physical touch, words of affirmation, and quality time. Laurie feels most loved and most connected to me when I do an act of service for her.

Laurie has always found tremendous joy in having a nice-looking yard, so for fifteen years she dragged the water hoses all over our one-acre yard to keep it green. She mentioned numerous times how much she'd love a sprinkler system, but I thought it was too expensive and frivolous. Finally, an "experienced" friend of mine offered to help me put one in on the cheap, and when I told Laurie about it, she couldn't remove the smile from her face. Steve and I managed to cut our phone line, cable, and electric dog fence, and our one-day project turned into four. But we got it done, and that sprinkler system is the gift that keeps on giving. Every time the little sprinklers pop up out of our yard, Laurie gets a little jolt of joy that even causes her to feel romantic toward me. I never should have waited fifteen years. I even sneak out of the house sometimes to turn it on just to see what might happen. Start investing in the people who are closest to you, beginning with your wife and family.

Stop Looking for Perfect People

Second, you need to stop looking for perfect people because they don't exist. I never put it into words, but somewhere in the back of my mind I kept thinking that somewhere out there was the perfect set of friends who would always gel with me: people who were confident but humble; conversant but quiet; strong but gentle; happy but not over the top; creative but not weird; and spiritual but not religious. In addition, they would be athletic, competitive, balanced, fun, and able to talk sports and theology in the same breath. These people don't exist. Every human being has at least one quirk, habit, or flaw that drives other people batty.

I remember the exact moment when I looked around the table during our leadership team meeting and said to myself, "Why am I looking for anyone else? These people are not perfect, but they're about as good as it gets." I knew that every one of our leadership team members has flaws. And they could point out my flaws. What's more, there are times when each one of them really gets on my nerves, and I really get on their nerves. We've had our moments, and we'll continue to have moments. That's because no matter how spiritually mature each of us is, we're still sinners who occasionally say and do things that irritate each other. We all have a dark side that needs to be constantly managed and forgiven.

But I made a conscious decision in that moment that these are the people with whom I want to do life. These are the ones whom, for whatever reason, God has placed in my life and with whom I want to share life. And that single decision has brought more joy and goodwill to my daily relationships than anything else.

Whom has God placed in your life, and what's preventing you from investing in them? If you have an expectation for perfection that is causing you to withhold your friendship, then it's going to be a long and lonely life.

Bring Some Energy to It

Every relationship takes energy to sustain and feed it. That's why you can't have more than a few friendships that go long and deep. At some point you have to draw a line and say, "I'd like to have a friendship with that person, but if I start sharing life with him or her, that means I have to limit or stop sharing life with someone else." Each of us has a finite amount of time, which means you have to put a limit on the number of people with whom you wish to go long and deep.

And when you share a friendship with someone, you need to bring energy to it; you need to bring some life and joy to it. As I mentioned earlier, for a long season in my life I wasn't doing my part to add life and joy to others. I took far more than I gave. And when you take more than you give, people look for ways to pull away from you.

What I've learned is that being energetic and joyful is often a choice. You can either choose to be energetic and joyful, or you can choose to be a lifeless slug.

I was lying on the couch one day when my son, who was seven years old at the time, came up to me and asked me to play ball with him. My immediate response was, "Dave, I'm tired." I said it without thinking because that was my habit. I'll never forget what happened. He dropped his head, walked away, and said "You're always tired." Now that boy is grown and gone, and we're separated by ten states and thirteen hundred

miles. I would give anything to have that day back and be able to throw pitches to David. I'd love to pick him up and feel his suntanned arms around my neck, to kiss his cheek and have him kiss mine back. Those days are long gone. But that day I made a choice to change my words and bring some energy to my son no matter how tired I felt. I began to see that I could actually talk myself into being more energetic and joyful.

What's your most common response when someone asks how you are? Is it "I'm good; I'm great; I'm ready to go," or is it "I'm tired; I'm stressed; I'm in a rotten mood"? Maybe you are tired, stressed, or in a lousy mood, but nobody wants to be around that. Have your pity party and then snap out of it. Bring some energy and joy to the table, and you'll be amazed how that will affect you and those around you. It's a choice!

The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk was at the end of his rope. He was tired and beaten down by ruthless men who were inflicting violence and wickedness on him and his people, so he poured out his woes to God.

The trees have no blossoms,
The vines have no grapes,
The olive crop has failed,
The fields are barren,
The flocks are gone,
And the cattle are dead. (Hab. 3:17 paraphrased)

You talk about a bad day; everything around him had either failed or died. But then at the end of the prayer, he said this:

I will rejoice in the LORD!
I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!
The Sovereign LORD is my strength!
(Hab. 3:18-19 NLT)

Habakkuk made a choice that, while pain and loss are inevitable, misery is optional. Some of us need to make a choice that in spite of our disappointments, we can still be joyful by trusting in God's sovereign plan. It really is a choice.

There's a father of three energetic teenage boys in our church, and every time I ask Scott how he's doing he says, "It's always a sunny day in my life." I can assure you that Scott has just as many pressures and disappointments as anyone else, but he has made a choice not to let those things define him. And every time he says, "It's always a sunny day in my life," I smile. Just hearing those words makes me a little happier.

Bring some energy to your relationships.

Limit Your Time with Drainers and Downers

Relational integrity is a two-way street. If you're trying to relate to someone with honesty, kindness, and generosity, but they have no interest in returning the same to you, then by definition it's not a relationship. Life is too short to spend it with drainers and downers. If you're not experiencing much joy in life, check your relationships, because people can either enhance your life or put a damper on it.

Proverbs 15:30 says, "A friendly smile makes you happy" (CEV). Psalm 133:1 says, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" Do certain people make something inside you light up when you see them? It could be your spouse, a relative, hopefully a friend or two. I urge you to spend more of your time with those people and less of your time with people who are what Erwin McManus calls "emotional leeches." These are the people who suck the life out of you because no matter how much you pour into them, they just take and take and never give back.

The hard truth is that there are people in your world and mine who are somewhat toxic. No matter how much love and attention you give them, they refuse to take responsibility for their lives and instead blame you for all their problems. So they say things like, "You make me mad," because they think you're responsible for their happiness. Or "You ruined my day," because they think you're responsible for their failures. These people think it's everybody else's fault that they are miserable.

The truth is this: people are responsible for their own life and happiness, not their parents, family, friends, or even their spouse, if they're married. These people can certainly add or subtract from their joy, but ultimately, each person is responsible for his or her own happiness. At some point, joyless, lifeless people need to take responsibility for their life and pursue healing, pursue God, or take medication and get professional help if needed. Only then can they expect to enter into life-giving relationships.

At the same time, we need to love joyless people the best we can; we need to be patient and tolerant as we're able. But we also need to be careful not to allow them to drive or drain our life. We may even need to limit our exposure to them.

Some of you might be thinking, "But what if it's my spouse who is joyless?" Well, they may be joyless because your marriage is joyless. So what are your options?

Have you talked about it? Have you made them aware of your feelings? Don't assume

that your spouse knows how you feel, because they might be clueless. Have you read any good books together that can open up a dialogue? Have you done something or gone somewhere lately that brings you both joy? Have you worked on your own relating patterns? Ultimately, the only person you can change is you, and when you improve your own patterns, this can have a positive effect on your spouse's joy.

Have you gone to counseling? I believe that every human being needs to go to counseling at some point in their life because we all have negative stuff that we can't see about ourselves. Everybody else sees it, so why not do yourself and everyone else a big favor and ask a professional to help you? You can't fix things that you can't see or don't know about. There are always options.

Relational integrity is a two-way street, and if you spend your whole life with toxic people, you will become a toxic person. That's not what God intends for you. God said, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1). So how good and pleasant are the people with whom you spend most of your time?

Practice Forgiveness Every Day

I've been working my way through the book of Matthew, and yesterday I came to chapter 18. At one point Jesus is very direct and says, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over" (Matt. 18:15). But he says that if this brother won't listen, you should take one or two others with you to confront him again. And if that doesn't work, you should bring the matter before the whole church. And if that doesn't work, then Jesus says, "Treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (v. 17). So Jesus is very direct about confronting sin this is part of the Christian life.

But a few verses later Peter asks Jesus, "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus responds, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (vv. 21-22). In other words, as many times as it takes to restore the relationship. So on the one hand Jesus instructs us to confront the person who sins against us, and on the other hand he instructs us to extend forgiveness as many times as it takes. Truth and grace always go together for Jesus, and both are needed in every healthy relationship.

But what caused me to look up from the chapter and think about my life was Jesus's parable of the unmerciful servant. In this parable, a servant is deeply indebted to his master, who says he's going to throw his servant into prison until he repays all his debts. But when the servant begs for mercy, the master takes pity on him, cancels his debts, and lets him go.

Then this servant goes out and finds a worker who owes him some money. But when the worker begs for mercy, the servant doesn't give it to him. Instead, he throws the worker into prison until he repays all the money.

When the master finds out that his servant did not extend the same mercy to another, he calls him a "wicked servant," throws him into prison, and keeps him there until he repays his debt. Jesus's final words are: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matt. 18:35).

How deep is my debt of sin? More than I could ever repay. How much of my debt has the Master forgiven? All of it-cancelled, forgiven, set free. So because the Master has for-given me, I must forgive all others. I am not given a choice. If I wish to live under the forgiveness and mercy of God, I must extend the same forgiveness and mercy to those who sin against me. I can be honest about and confront their sin for the sake of our relationship, but I can no longer hold a grudge, stay mad, and seek revenge if I wish to live under God's grace. Because I have been forgiven, I must forgive. How many times? Seven times? "No," Jesus says. "You must forgive the same person seventy-seven times," which means every time.

This is a major part of forming a softer soul. I run into someone who irritates me just about every day-a relative, staff member, church person, or some random person who happens to intersect my life. And I can form little grudges in my heart, little battle lines. I may even say something snippy or withhold a kind gesture to punish that person. But when I do, my heart gets a little harder, and I lose the chance to experience the goodness in that person. Jesus said we must extend forgiveness seventy-seven times, with our spouse, kids, neighbors, co-workers, random people who annoy us. Little forgivenesses all day long, "from your heart," Jesus says, is the key to a relationally rich life.

Shauna Niequist writes about her battle with forgiveness in her book *Cold Tangerines*. She likens it to keeping someone on the "hook."

When I'm trying to forgive someone I picture myself physically lifting that person off a big hook. I never want to. I prefer to stew and focus my anger on them like a laser pointer... I hope that they will get fat and people will talk about them behind their backs and their toilets will overflow and their computers crash. Earlier this year, a friend of mine made me really mad. Crazy mad. For a while, it brought me so much joy to be angry with her and to put her back up on the hook, over and over.. And I wanted her to apologize for what she did. Loudly. Publically. And give me a present too.... But nothing. No phone calls. No emails. No large, fragrant bouquets of flowers. Nothing. Why should I forgive someone who doesn't even think she needs to be forgiven? This is why. Because I want my neck and my back muscles to stop hurting. Because I want to sleep instead of having

endless imaginary conversations. Because I want my mind back. Because I want my life back. Because she's not the only one on the hook. Because every time I hang her up on that hook, the hook reaches down and grabs me, too.²

Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive some-one, and Jesus told him as many times as it takes. Partly be-cause when you and I let others off the hook, we let ourselves off the hook.

Niequist concludes:

So I let her off the hook. I let her off once, until someone brought her name up at lunch, and then I got mad all over again, which threw me for a loop. I forgave her. Why am I still so mad at her? I realized I had to take her off the hook every single time, not just one big time. I had to take her off the hook in the morning, and then again at lunch.... Over and over, all day, I had to keep letting her off the hook, because when I do, I can breathe again.³

Forgiveness is one of the hardest things to do, and it doesn't mean you have to forget what the person did to you. Forgetting can help free you from the painful memory, but sometimes it's not possible to forget, at least not right away. You might not be able to forget for a long time, maybe never, but you can still choose to forgive and let it go for your sake.

Forgiveness also doesn't mean you have to be friends with that person. It doesn't mean you have to spend time with or begin trusting that person. Those things are earned. Some people haven't earned the right to be trusted. You may need to create some specific boundaries between you and them until they've proven they can be trusted.

Love gets tested the most when someone crosses you or of-fends you. Jesus says that it's easy to love those who love you; anybody can do that. The real test of love, the real show of forgiveness is when you choose to let someone off the hook, even when they've wronged you.

Stop Waiting to Start Loving

It's easy to breeze past people and take them for granted-especially the ones closest to you. It's taken me a long time to realize that the people God has put into my life every day at home and at work are the people God wants me to love. And the truth is that this is the only day you and I have to love. We don't have tomorrow promised to us. So don't wait. Don't let the words maybe and someday determine your life and love. Make plans, send the email, arrange the lunch, spend some money, book the

flight.

Several years ago an article appeared in the Los Angeles Times. A lady named Ann Wells wrote words that have never left me:

My brother-in-law opened the bottom drawer of my sister's bureau and lifted out a tissue-wrapped package. "This," he said, "is not a slip. This is lingerie." He discarded the tissue and handed me the slip. It was exquisite: silk and trimmed with a cobweb of lace. The price tag was still attached.

Jan bought this the first time we went to New York, at least eight or nine years ago. She never wore it. She was saving it for a special occasion. Well, I guess this is the occasion.

He took the slip from me and put it on the bed with the other clothes we were taking to the mortician. His hands lingered on the soft material for a moment, then he slammed the drawer shut and turned to me.

"Don't ever save anything for a special occasion. Every day you're alive is a special occasion."

I remembered those words through the funeral and the days that followed when I helped him attend to all the sad chores that follow an unexpected death. I thought about them on the plane returning to California from the Midwestern town where my sister's family lives. I thought about all the things that she hadn't seen or heard or done. I thought about the things she had done without realizing they were special.

I'm still thinking about his words, and they've changed my life. I'm not "saving" anything; we use our good china and crystal for every special event-such as losing a pound or getting the sink unstopped.

"Someday" and "one of these days" are losing their grip on my vocabulary. If it's worth seeing or hearing or doing, I want to see and hear and do it now. I'm trying very hard not to put off, hold back, or save anything that would add laughter and luster to our lives.

And every morning when I open my eyes I tell myself that it is special.

We all live frantic lives filled with work, commuting, exercising, grocery shopping, bill paying, and unexpected crises-nobody is exempt. But I hope you can begin to see that every day God gives is special and that we need to stop waiting to start loving. After all, life comes down to the people in it. Every single day is a gift. Every single day you and I are faced with the choice to love. Jesus said, "And this is my command, that you love one another." Not tomorrow, not next year but today-this day.

C. S. Lewis wrote wise words regarding this choice:

Every time you make a choice you turn into something a little different than you were before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either into a creature that is in harmony with God and others, or into someone who is in a state of war with God and others. To be one kind of creature is joy, peace and power. To be the other means madness, rage and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.⁵

A few months ago I was walking through O'Hare airport with a pastor friend from Minneapolis. I'm fifty-three, and Jerry is sixty-three. So I said, "Jerry, you're ten years older than me. What advice would you give me for my next ten years?"

Without hesitation he looked at me and said, "Enjoy it." He went on to say that the last decade of his life flew by-like it was just a month. He said that he failed to enjoy it like he should have.

I've thought about his words many times, and I think he's right-barring any tragedy or pre-mature death, sixty-three is going to come in my life, and if it's anything like the last ten years, it's going to come some-time next week.

What will the next ten years be like for you? Will you express daily love to those God has brought into your life? Will you forgive others as Jesus has forgiven you? And will you try to see the joy in every day God gives you?

The choice to become more of a heavenly creature than a hellish one is available to each of us. And with God's help, we will make the right choice for our sake and for God's glory.