

Chapter 6: Rat Poison (or, why forgive)

Kat and I never let our friend, Lita, live down the time she crashed her parents' purple station wagon. We were driving home early from one of our weekend camping trips to snag tickets for the Lilith Festival in Camden, NJ. Patty Griffin and the Indigo Girls were on the roster and we all agreed that the advertisement we had seen for \$10 tickets would be worth packing up our campsite one day early. The only problem was that we weren't *quite* sure where we were supposed to go to purchase these \$10 tickets. I convinced Lita to follow the signs for Camden, sure that we'd see a sign for tickets along the way.

It was somewhere in the middle of Camden that Lita pulled out onto a major highway and braked. Right there in the middle of the road. Have you ever parked your car in the middle of a highway? It's an odd sensation, even if it lasts for mere moments. Lita claims that she saw a stop sign in the far right lane and thought it was signaling to her. Turns out, it wasn't. Within seconds, a truck plowed into us from behind, shattering the rear window of Lita's parents' purple station wagon (lovingly nicknamed "the Purple People Eater") and canceling our plans to attend the concert.

We pulled over to the side of the road and were soon met by a gaggle of cops. They informed us that Camden – especially the part of Camden we were in – wasn't a safe place to park, on the highway or anywhere else for that matter.

When the cop wouldn't let us use his phone to call our parents, Kat and I sidled our way down the dangerously thin shoulder of the highway towards a glassed-in gas station office. We knocked on the window, pleading with the bedraggled attendant to

allow us to make a phone call. Through the thick glass we heard a New Yorker's muffled,

“No way am I lettin' you's in hea' And I'm not comin' out! Go around the corna' to find a pay phone!” Suspicious old man. Any guy who is that frightened by two hippy-wanna-be high school girls must have been wounded somethin' awful in life.

When we were finally driving home with a green plastic bag duct-taped across the rear window, I announced that we were “that car.” You know “that car” – the one you point to and cluck your tongue at, saying obvious things like, “must've gotten in an accident.” The way I figure it, every camping trip needs a good story and this accident rivaled any spun yarn about running into bears or surviving ferocious midsummer thunderstorms.

Anyway, it was earlier in this camping trip that I learned a valuable camping lesson: when sitting around a fire, keep the smoke from blowing in your face by chanting “I hate rabbits” over and over again. Mysteriously, the smoke will hear your sentiments and blow in the opposite direction. Believe it or not, this actually works. No kidding. Of course, you'll never hear this in your typical Girl Scout meeting, but maybe you should.

The next time I used this handy tactic, I was riding my bike -- not anywhere *near* a campfire – six years later. I was pedaling toward several construction workers on the side of the road when I found myself instinctively muttering the words, “I hate men, I hate men, I hate men” in order to divert the their gaze from me, to “blow it in the opposite direction” like the smoke from a campfire. This subconscious chant was packed with bitter sentiments: *Leave me alone. Don't you dare hurt me. Don't even look at me. I hate you.*

Honestly, I wouldn't have thought twice about the incident if the following morning's church service hadn't played a 5-minute Promise Keepers promo video. My blood boiled with hatred when I viewed the masses of fat, balding, blubbery men praying and singing. Again, my subconscious reaction was packed with bitterness: *I don't trust any of them! What a sham! Just look at them acting like they love God! I hate them.* I gasped as I recognized the intensity of my anger. Any woman who is that angry over a handful of construction workers and middle-aged Promise Keepers must have been wounded somethin' awful in life, wouldn't you say? I had to admit, my pain was slightly out of control.

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I broached the topic of my newly discovered issue with my friend, Caroline, over a bowl of Chinese noodles.

"I seem to have developed a severe hatred of men," I blurted out as a mess of noodles slipped off of my chopsticks. "The thing is," I continued, jabbing at the escaped noodles, "it feels so instinctual that I'm not sure I'll ever kick it."

"Nah," she said, gracefully slurping her noodles off of perfectly poised chopsticks, "You don't have to live with that." She said that she knew from personal experience that God transforms mindsets that seem so natural and strong -- even if we can't imagine life without them. She suggested that I give Renee, our pastor's wife, a call. Apparently, Renee, the Chuck Norris of prayer warriors, prayed with people about things like this all of the time.

A week or so later, I met up with Renee in our church's prayer room where the temperature is never regulated, the walls are decorated with posters of cuddly animals

posing atop Scripture verses, and the scent of diapers drifts in from the nursery. That day, if you were a fly on the wall, you would have seen two people sitting in metal folding chairs across from one another for two hours. Nothing spectacular. Yet, it was one of the most monumental days of my life. Here's what happened:

Renee started the whole thing by asking God to protect us and to accept our desire to honor Him. Then, we both spoke out-loud that Jesus Christ is God's son and that He died and rose again, victoriously. Renee explained that even though God knows our thoughts, speaking them aloud is actually quite powerful; partly because neither angels nor demons know our thoughts and partly because God created our voices to speak the truth; chances are that we have no idea how powerful our words really are.

Then, with Renee's prompting, I asked God to reveal areas in my life that He wanted to address and heal. I thought about all of the memories I had been working through lately: the abuse, the sweet little girl on the bus, and those pesky empty cisterns. Although I had worked through a lot of it personally, this seemed like a good opportunity to abandon the secrecy of it all. So, I spilled my heart out to Renee. Admitting some of the junk sure dealt a doozy of a blow to my pride (imagine admitting to your pastor's wife that you won't trust any man because you suspect he wants to harm you sexually), but I had a hunch that being vulnerable was my best option at this point. Amazingly, Renee didn't act surprised about anything that I confessed or prayed about; instead, she comforted me when I was upset, reminded me of the truth when I was confused, and encouraged me into deeper areas when I didn't think I could go any further.

The most difficult part came when Renee said,

“Well, we’ve addressed a lot of the junk... the abuse, your bad choices, the lies that you’ve been believing... now, it’s time to respond with forgiveness.” *Forgiveness? Here? Now?! Can a person force something as emotional as forgiveness? Besides, how could I ever forgive an abuser?* Apparently I could. And would. Even though I knew better, I had to be reminded that forgiveness didn’t mean I was condoning what anyone had done; it simply meant that I was releasing them to God. It meant I wouldn’t concoct retribution and that I wouldn’t dwell on hatred any more. But, I had become accustomed to my captives and wasn’t sure that I could trust God to punish them as well as I could -- if given the opportunity.

Renee said that when we don’t forgive, we are not only disobeying God but also destroying ourselves. She said unforgiveness is like a woman who thinks the best way to kill a rat is to drink the rat poison herself. Of course, Jesus didn’t mention anything about rat poison in the gospels, but He *did* say that if we forgive other people, God will forgive us, and if we don’t forgive other people, God won’t forgive us. I remember considering how a swig of rat poison pales in comparison to the awful chance of God not forgiving us. Since God lays down such a hard line about it, forgiveness must be one of those things we simply can’t live without.

“We should go ahead and do it, then,” I sighed, acknowledging that because God has forgiven my huge debt of unworthiness, it would be selfish and foolish for me not forgive the smaller debts of my abusers. My throat clenched into a lump and my eyes stung as, one by one, I forgave the people who had hurt me sexually. I prayed, “Father, I forgive so-and-so for doing such-and-such” for each and every person: “muffie man,”

Mountain Man, and Jason. As I spoke each person's name, I felt a lightness enter my spirit... as if my release of the offense, released me in return.

Things were looking good; I was even feelin' the love. I smiled at Renee. Until, of course, she recommended that I ask God to forgive *me* for the sins that *I* had chosen. My smile faded as I retreated back into my burdened heart and took a long look at my past. My tears flowed in torrents.

Gradually, I confessed every moment of selfishness, rebellion, and revenge that I could think of. I confessed my belief that God couldn't and wouldn't protect or forgive me. I confessed my secrecy, deceit, and disobedience. Renee passed tissues to me; I'd blow my nose, launch into another confession, grab another tissue, launch into another confession... I hated looking at these choices that had broken God's heart. I hadn't loved Him like I wanted to.

When my heart was finally emptied of every burdensome sin and I couldn't squeeze out another tear, a small smile appeared across Renee's face as she asked,

"Are you ready to receive God's forgiveness?" She gently pried open my sweaty fingers until my palms lay open in my lap. Then, as if it were her dearest friend, she recited from 1 John,

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness".

I tried to take God up on His offer; I tried to say to Him,

"God, I accept your forgiveness," but my jaw felt like it was locked shut. I desperately looked up at Renee.

"Try again," she encouraged.

“God,” I began, “I... I am *so sorry* for everything I’ve done...” I looked up at Renee again.

“That sounds more like a confession,” she grinned.

“Right.” I replied, shocked at my inability to speak these seemingly simple words. “God, I...” my jaw was locked, *again*. What was it about God’s forgiveness that I couldn’t accept? That it was free? That it was final? That it would eradicate all of my reasons to punish myself? To this day, I’m not sure why it was so difficult to accept. Maybe it was because God’s forgiveness is so *unhuman*, so far out of my expectations and so unlike my personal justice system that I just didn’t know how to accept it. Maybe it was because God’s forgiveness is so intensely loving that it’s hard to receive, considering how faulty my own love can be.

Renee held my hand and said,

“Sometimes, we need to *choose* to do something even if it doesn’t correlate with our emotions. If God says that He forgives you, then it is true, no matter how you feel.” Finally, I looked down at my open palms, the fingernail marks still fading from my previously clenched fists, and spoke,

“God... I *choose* to accept your forgiveness.”

In a silent little room, in a church, in the middle of State College, Pennsylvania, I sat in a metal chair and simply breathed, while God – *God* – swept me so far away from my sin - *so far away* - and we keep on going.

Get Your Hands On: Patty Griffin's "Forgiveness"

Sarah Kelly's "Forgive Me"

Jennifer Knapp's "Lament"

John Newton "Amazing Grace"