

Give resentment the brush-off

By Ruth Ostrow

The only salvation for relationship decay is in forgiveness

A FAVOURITE old aunt used to say to me in a heavy European accent: "I forget, but I never forgive." Given that she used to call toes "fingers" and would refer to the big toe as the "foot thumb" I would often tease her about her upside-down view of the world.

"But aunty, if you forget, how can you remember not to forgive?" I'd giggle, explaining that the saying was actually: "I forgive, but I never forget."

"No," she would argue emphatically each time the saying came up - which was often because she was always upset with someone. "I do forget. But I keep the bad deed locked in my heart. Forever!" she'd say ominously, shaking her finger at the world.

Nowadays I understand the point she was making. By holding anger towards someone in our hearts, we silently create a wall of plaque - much like teeth plaque - that slowly solidifies inside us.

Even as we continue to be friendly, chatty and happy, our hearts are silently forming a barrier of protection that we believe will stop us being vulnerable, hurt, or exposed to behaviour that is painful for us.

We can also unknowingly allow hurtful deeds to accumulate, not realising that they are slowly hardening into brittle spears that will suddenly halt access to our hearts. And those on the receiving end never see it coming either. Forgiven and forgiven again, they don't realise that there is residue from their actions that will eventually prove fatal.

My late aunt's philosophy became a point of discussion last week when a girlfriend and I went to lunch. She's a marriage guidance counsellor and we were discussing mutual friends who are separating because the woman has grown so angry with the man over the years, she's unable to have sex with him.

I shared my view, gleaned from years of working as a relationships writer and broadcaster, that any marked decline in sexual activity seemed to be an indicator of unresolved rage.

"I agree," my friend said. "Sex often stops because the woman has hardened her heart. And there is nothing more tragic and heartbreaking to a man than trying to make love to a woman who has closed her heart yet continues to go through the motions of married life, dutifully.

"A woman's greatest gift is in her capacity for tenderness, forgiveness, nurturing and love. But when she can no longer forgive and her heart is no longer soft, it is the cruellest, bitterest blow."

I offered my analogy of gooey, emotional plaque slowly hardening around people's arteries. For readers and listeners have taught me that without regular

cleaning of our relationships, anger builds up until it either suffocates the relationship or needs to be jack-hammered off.

This is equally true of relationships with parents, siblings and our dearest friends. Resentment is the killer. We use it as some sort of punishment or protection, and yet ultimately it's toxic to our own health and happiness.

My counsellor friend I both agreed that the only salvation for relationship decay is in forgiveness. Not at a superficial level, but at the deepest core of our being. For we do often harbour plaque from childhood wounds or former situations that can cause us to continually overreact to present misdeeds.

It's interesting to note that international healer Brandon Bays, in her recent national lecture tour, talked about curing herself of a tumour by concentrating on the damaged part of her body and letting go of the pain held there. This she did by profoundly forgiving those who'd wounded her - a process which is now taught in some UK hospitals.

Which is the equivalent of going to the "emotions" dentist for the big, painful super-clean. And there are many methods for deep, internal release including psychotherapy, yoga, reiki, acupuncture, meditation which all help loosen deep emotional hurts and angers we've held for years in our limbs and organs.

My friend believes that having been professionally cleaned and scaled, our hearts need a regular maintenance program. During relationships counselling, she advises clients to identify their hot spots and communicate clearly to partners and friends along the way - what I'd term the regular flossing, gargling and brushing of the heart.

But she cautions that if things don't improve it's always okay to remove yourself from the source of decay, as long as it's done with forgiveness. Because pardoning someone is not about admitting you're wrong. It's about cleaning away damage and allowing energy and love to flow.

I've worked out something my favourite aunt never could. Holding on to grievances is self-defeating. And while "To forgive ..." may or may not be "divine", it certainly feels that way in the aftermath!

www.ruthostrow.com

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