



## SERVANT-LEADERSHIP, FORGIVENESS, AND UNLIMITED LIABILITY: FATHERS AND SONS

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*In the following brief personal essay, Keith Allan reflects on the difficult work of turning a lifestyle of resentment into one of unconditional forgiveness, revealing one man's initial journey toward understanding the nature of healing embattled family relationships.*

I don't pretend to be an expert about forgiveness. In fact, most of my life I have nursed bitterness against my own father. Recently, however, I have begun to be convinced about the interior depth of the servant-leader and how far I've been from that depth at certain crucial times in my life. In noticing this distance, and wanting to close the gap and become more whole and more loving as a man and as a leader, I've recently been led to consider my life in relationship to the life of my father.

I also don't claim to be mature about forgiveness. In fact, I'm just beginning. I feel confident that the overexacting or linear way in which I describe the work of forgiveness and reconciliation in this essay is unlikely to be the form the actual work will take. I did, however, feel led to make a beginning of the work and wanted to make a record of these first steps toward the possibility of something good both in my life with my son and in my life with my father.

To describe and interpret justice and forgiveness from a personal perspective is not only foreign to our modern way of life, but often also brings about an intense nexus of fear, anxiety and lack of hope. The desire for forgiveness to be asked for and simultaneously the unwillingness to forgive



provides a poignant backdrop to the need for fathers and sons to seek restorative justice rather than retributive action.

I will provide an account of my relationship with my father in order to detail a history of events that throughout my life have left me void of respect, honor, and regard for him. My intent is not to discredit him; rather the introspection and catharsis as a result of my readings and thoughts around the idea of unconditional forgiveness have opened my heart. Where there was once a heart that was bruised and torn, there are now openness and the desire to understand. Parker Palmer expressed his own personal pain, sense of woe, and broken heart. He stated, "To grow one must experience profound disappointments" (Palmer, online mentor gallery). In the case of my father, his profound disappointments seemed never to result in personal growth; the only growth that occurred was almost by chance. The profound disappointments he lived through, which I witnessed, motivated me to avoid the mistakes he made and to create a home environment that was built on love, appreciation, nurturing attention, and harmony.

I have looked back many times in my life searching for moments of love, caring, and commitment. My father provided a home, meals, and education through high school. I recognize that there are others who had far less; thus I am grateful for what he did provide. I now recognize that the occasional searching for moments of love, caring, and commitment represents my internal desire to forgive my father without his needing to ask me for forgiveness, although for forgiveness to be whole, each of us must extend forgiveness accordingly. Ferch (2004, p. 1) states: "One of the defining characteristics of human nature is the ability to discern one's own faults, to be broken as the result of such faults, and in response, to seek a meaningful change." In this essay I hope to recognize my own side of the equation, and how, despite my father's weaknesses, I am at fault for nurturing the schism that exists between my father and me. In addition, to recognize alone is not enough. As a leader, I hope I can express my shortcomings, ask for forgiveness, and persevere by walking the difficult road the future asks of me.



I grew up in an upper-middle-class neighborhood with a middle-class income. The disparity between the two served as the platform for alcoholism, abuse, neglect, fear and confusion, and lack of personal guidance. All of this was compounded by the fact that our extended family and community were acutely aware of my father's inadequacies. I remember thinking at an early age that I needed to protect him personally and professionally. After holiday dinners my uncle would drive us home, but not before Dad fell into the bushes. "He's just tired," I was told. Once home the physical abuse would start, with my mother being the object of his attention. As I turned thirteen, Dad turned his violent attention on me. This typically occurred if he had lost his job, wrecked the car, or in one case, suspected that I was using drugs. I remember thinking how ironic this was, being falsely accused as a substance abuser by a substance abuser who was presently *over* the influence. I summed it up as moronic. Yet I do remember being awakened late that night by my father. He was sitting on the edge of my bed. He whispered, "I am sorry." I turned away from him in the dark, not saying a word.

Retributive justice extended? Yes. His ability to ask for forgiveness was forever lost that night as a result of my rejecting his apology. "Thus to forgive is indeed the best form of self-interest since anger, resentment, and revenge are corrosive of that summum bonum, that greatest good, communal harmony that enhances the humanity and personhood of all in the community" (Tutu, 2000, p. 35). I am an adult now with my own family, working hard in a fast-paced industry. It has been some decades since I left home. Holidays are spent apart and phone conversations serve as the only communication, limited at best, between my father and me.

As a result of learning about forgiveness and justice, I feel I have come to a different place. I also recognize that the journey is far from over. Spears stated so eloquently, "Begin now to prepare for what can best be done in old age" (Spears, 1995, p. 19). I have a personal motto that is a result of my own life experiences: "Time is short; life is long." I believe I have a responsibility to my father to ask for his forgiveness for being a son who rejected



him instead of supporting him despite his personal problems. Life is long, but time goes by quickly, so my decision to reconcile needs to be acted upon in a nurturing way. Forgiveness can serve as the embodiment of restorative justice and true leadership. I never saw these qualities in my father, and yet I believe they may very well become evident as a result of developing servant-leadership roles with one another.

In my goal to forgive unconditionally, I will reflect on and implement a plan of action utilizing the ten characteristics of the servant-leader as referenced by Spears (1995, p. 4). This plan of action will incorporate the tenets of servant-leadership, personal introspection, and understanding of what specific strategies I hope to employ to nurture the forgiveness process.

**Listening:** As described by Spears, listening involves the ability to listen with one's body, spirit, and mind. In the case of my father and me, we rarely engaged in meaningful conversation. Perhaps my asking for forgiveness will encourage this. I will apologize for rejecting his apology that night long ago when he sat on the edge of my bed.

**Empathy:** I will identify those talents my father never had the opportunity to express or enjoy. I will recognize that his talents are innately expressed in me (he is currently 73 years of age) and that I am an extension of him. In essence, my achievements in life should be shared as our achievement together as father and son.

**Healing:** "There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share" (Spears, 1995, p. 5).

**Awareness:** I feel I have a strong sense of awareness as a result of experiencing "profound disappointments" in my relationship with my father. Awareness serves as an example of one of the gifts I received as a result of my relationship with him. This heightened sense of awareness is best used as a means to listen attentively and with compassion.

**Persuasion:** The building of our relationship needs to be recognized as our need to be whole. We cannot do it alone, as I have often strived to do



and my father has often resigned himself to doing. Rather, the concept of *ubuntu* can be a good initial ground: “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours” (Tutu, 2000, p. 35). *Ubuntu* will inform and surround a quality spirit of change in my way of viewing my father: no longer holding him in a dark light, refusing my own cynicism, surrounding myself with others to help and guide me along the way, and persevering in love as continued failures of our relationship ensue.

**Conceptualization:** Here it is necessary for both my father and me to see beyond our relationship and to that of my son. My son observes how I interact with my father. Despite the fact that I interact with my son differently than my father did with me, I need to consider how and to what extent my son will communicate with me after he becomes an adult.

**Foresight:** I try to refer to experiences in the past and apply correlations where applicable. Here again, the relationship I wanted to have with my father I currently have with my son. The lack of communication I have had with my father is not what I want with my son. Forgiveness and restorative justice is what I want for my son to witness between my father and me.

**Stewardship:** Unconditional trust will need to be established. I feel that listening will serve as the catalyst between us that will promote healing and the desire to serve each other.

**Commitment to Growth:** I will ask for his advice. This alone is a gift a son can give to his father. Acknowledgement that my father is recognized as valued and respected for his opinion and wisdom is a gift.

**Building Community:** Community for me and my relationship with my father is best represented by family. Through my nurturing a servant-leader relationship with my father, other members of my family will observe and respond with respect for our relationship that may result in harmony expressed among us all.

Every sense of accomplishment begins with a dream and a vision. I am encouraged by Greenleaf’s bright notion that behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams. The successful servant-leader dreams of visions that promote growth, understanding, and harmony. Before my father



dies I hope my gift to him will be what we could not attain between us previously: harmony.

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Keith Allan has worked to become both a good follower and a good leader in the pharmaceutical business for the past 20 years. Currently a director of sales training, he has been married 16 years, and has one son, Chase, 14. He resides in Napa, California, United States of America. Sailing, skiing, and attending his son's basketball games allow for family and friends to share life's experiences in a community that is as rich in diversity as is the soil of Napa Valley.

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