

Letting Go and Moving Forward

By Tom Massey, Ph.D.

*“I am still not all I should be,
but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing:
Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead.”*
- Saint Paul

Perhaps you have heard the story of the man who owned an old hunting dog that fell gravely ill. He loaded up his lifeless companion and headed for the local veterinary clinic. Upon arrival the vet’s assistant instructed him to carry his dog to the examining room and lay it down on the table. When the vet came in, she checked its vital signs and said, “Sir, I’m sorry to have to tell this, but your dog is dead.”

“Why that’s preposterous,” the man demanded, “I want another opinion!” A Labrador retriever then entered the room, sniffed the dog from one end to the other, and nodded, “Uh-huh, this dog is dead.”

The man refused to believe it. “I want another opinion,” he cried. Next, a cat came into the room, jumped up on the table and carefully inched her way up one side of the dog and down the other. She looked up and nodded in concurrence with the vet and the Labrador retriever, “This dog is dead.”

The man still refused to believe it. He picked up his dog and stomped out, muttering something about another opinion. The vet’s assistant handed him the bill on his way out the door. When he looked at his bill he couldn’t believe it. “Three hundred dollars?” he shrieked, “Just to tell me my dog is dead?”

She looked at him, shook her head apologetically and replied, “Sir, your bill would have been only fifty dollars, but we had to charge you for the Lab report and cat scan.”

Like the man in this story, many of us carry around old dogs that need to be laid to rest. Those old dogs may be regrets from failed relationships, career choices, or other plans that didn’t pan out. For whatever reason, we continue to carry those feelings or memories, toting them around like a smelly old carcass, deceiving ourselves into thinking they are still useful.

Regret is a thief that will rob you of health, happiness, and success, if you allow it. You may be experiencing the pain of regret right now, but face it, the chances of going back and reclaiming the past are less than stopping the sun from rising tomorrow morning. It just isn’t going to happen!

How do you respond to failure or disappointment? Are there some old dogs that you need to lay to rest? Begin by turning around and looking in the right direction. Instead of bemoaning your past repeatedly saying, “If only....If only....If only,” begin asking

yourself smart questions such as, “What did I learn?” “What shall I do differently next time?” “How am I wiser because of this?” and affirm, “Next time I will make a better choice.”

This is not an admonition to ignore the past. If you ignore the past you are destined to repeat it. Instead, glean the lessons you have learned and apply them to the future. Neither does this message imply that you should give up on a relationship or endeavor when the going gets tough. Instead make a deliberate, calculated decision to take the best course of action, without guilt or a sense of failure.

Mend your fences....

Many years ago I worked as a caretaker on a cattle ranch. One morning I was awakened by a telephone call and the voice on the other end of the line asked, “Have you looked outside? Your cattle are loose.” I rushed outside to see almost a 100 head of Hereford cattle, meandering down the road.

I ran to the barn, grabbed a bucket of feed, and took off in pursuit of the herd. A bull was in the lead and I stuck the bucket of feed up to his nose enticing him to turn around. As we ambled back down the road with his nose in the bucket, each cow we met turned and followed in single file. I felt like the Pied Piper of cattle.

After securing the herd, I found a small break in the fence and quickly mended it to prevent future escapes. The break seemed tiny compared to the size of a cow. It surprised me that such large beasts were able to slip through, as I shuddered to think of the havoc that might have been caused if they had made it to the interstate highway less than a half-mile away.

I have pondered that moment throughout the years as other fences have required mending in my life. Small, seemingly harmless rifts in personal relationships can cause beastly chaos to ensue. Perhaps there are some fences that need mending in your life. Is there someone with whom you have had a longstanding disagreement or misunderstanding? Are you avoiding them or holding a grudge? Holding a grudge against someone else is like swallowing poison and expecting the other person to die.

It doesn't matter who started the rift, it is in your best interest to mend it if possible. Let go of the notion of “who is right” and “who is wrong.” Make a phone call or send a card to that person and offer an olive branch of peace. If that person is dead, write a letter and burn it, or create some other ritual that will allow you to have closure. The issue is not about whether the other person deserves it or not. Your personal health and well-being depend on it. Don't ride the fence...mend it!