

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

December 31, 2013

Merry Christmas 2013/Happy New Year 2014

I originally intended to write a blog about how I spent Christmas in Stanley this year and then I was going to write a New Year's blog about how many lifers have been in prison longer than I have (one guy came to prison in 1960 at age 19 and is still in. He is now 72). But instead, I want to talk about forgiveness.

Christ said if we forgive, then we will be forgiven:
"Be ye therefore merciful, as your father is also merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven." Luke 6:36-37

I used to be a man made of grudges. I held a grudge and swore a vendetta against every person who ever wronged me. I nursed these wrongs, sometimes for decades, waiting for my chance to get vengeance. In the 1990s, when I first began to make changes in my life, I received a letter from a guy who set me up to be busted for selling drugs. He was on my "list." In his letter, he told me what he had done and asked to be forgiven.

I didn't know what to do. How could I let him get away with what he did to me? I couldn't let anyone do that to me and not pay for it. Everyone would lose all respect for me. I struggled over this for weeks.

Finally, I decided that I received his letter for a reason. It was my chance to leave behind my old ways and do things differently. So I wrote him a letter telling him I forgave him. I don't know if my forgiveness did him any good but it sure changed me! I felt a huge weight lifted off me when I let my vengeance go. I had no idea that forgiveness would benefit me. I did it for him, so he could get some closure and be free of his guilt for betraying me.

It taught me a valuable lesson. When you hold on to grievances, it invests a lot of emotional energy. The more grudges you have, the more of your energy is tied up and unavailable to you. After my first episode of forgiving, I began to review all the other grudges I was holding. Slowly, as each incident came to mind, I would review it and forgive others for wrongs - both real and imagined.

I had held grudges against those witnesses at my murder trial whose lies put me in prison for life. Those were some of the hardest grudges to let go of. But I did. I told myself that God had a plan for me which involved coming to prison and those people were just tools God used to work His will in my life. Looking at it this way made it much easier to forgive.

All this came to mind recently when I received an angry comment on one of my blogs from an anonymous friend or relative of the guy I was sent to prison for stabbing. That person was angry because I was not owning up to what I was convicted of and seeking forgiveness for that crime.

Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself. It has nothing to do with the person you forgive. You can forgive someone regardless of whether that person is remorseful or not. I think most of the family and friends of Dick are basically decent people who want some closure after 29 years. I don't blame them for wanting that. But it appears that the only way they can get it is if I admit to a sequence of events that never occurred and seek forgiveness for something I didn't do.

I am 5'8", 150 pounds and have a crippled leg. I was attacked without provocation by a man I did not know who outweighed me by 85 pounds. I pulled a knife with a 3" blade and stabbed him numerous times. Dick continued to attack me until he received so many wounds he literally had no further strength left and collapsed - trying to pull me to the ground with him. I broke his grip and fled. Dick subsequently bled to death.

His brother, Ron, claimed that I started the fight by shoving Dick and lured him down a darkened hallway where I got him down on the floor and stabbed him to death as I straddled him. Lies - all of it. I have spent over 29 years in prison based on those lies. I pray that God will touch Ron's heart so that Ron will come forward and tell the truth.

I can well imagine how much guilt Ron has endured over the last 29 years. He persuaded his brother to go with him to Shirley's apartment under false pretenses. He got Dick to attack me believing no one could stand up to Dick. Then he had to lie to his family and friends about what happened to cover up what he did. He has everyone believing he was the hero who tried to save his brother from a vicious murderer when in fact he was the one who got Dick to attack an innocent bystander which ultimately cost Dick his life. What a burden that must be for Ron.

That's why I pray to God to touch Ron's heart. Without God's help, no one could come forward and tell the truth under these circumstances. I urge all of you who read this to come forward and forgive someone who has wronged you. You'll be glad you did.