

The Healing Power of Forgiveness

By Bill Pelke

I learned how to put my faith in action November 2, 1986. I realized that night that my faith was calling me to compassion and forgiveness. It had been almost a year and a half since my grandmother, Ruth Pelke, had been murdered. We called her Nana. Four teenage girls were involved in her murder and the state of Indiana had sentenced Paula Cooper, who was deemed to be the ringleader, to death for her role in the crime.

Four months earlier on July 11, 1986, I sat in the courtroom as the judge sentenced her to die in the electric chair. I had no problem when the death sentence was given, because I knew other killers were being sentenced to death for crimes of murder. I felt that if the judge did not give Cooper the death sentence, then he was telling me and the rest of my family that Nana was not important enough to merit the perpetrator being sentenced to death. I thought Nana was a very important person, and for that reason alone I supported the judge's decision. The fact that Cooper was only fifteen years old at the time of the crime did not matter to me.

On November 2, 1986 I had been thinking about Nana. I was at work at Bethlehem Steel, where I had been employed as an overhead crane operator for about twenty years. It was a slow time at work and as I sat alone in my crane cab fifty feet above the mill floor, my mind drifted to thoughts about her life and death. I began to think about Nana's faith. Nana was a devout Christian and I was raised in a Christian family. I recalled how Jesus said that if we wanted our Father in Heaven to forgive us, we needed to forgive those who had wronged us. I also remembered Peter asked Jesus how many times were we supposed to forgive someone. Peter wondered if seven times were enough. Jesus told Peter that we should forgive seventy times seven. I knew that did not mean to forgive four hundred and ninety times and then we could stop forgiving, but Jesus was saying that forgiveness should be a habit, a way of life. Forgive; forgive; forgive and keep on forgiving. I also recalled when Jesus was being executed and how from the cross on which he was hanging, said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing." I thought that I should probably try to forgive Cooper for what she had done to Nana. I figured that maybe some day I would because it would be the right thing to do.

The more I thought about Nana, the more I became convinced that she would have been appalled by the death sentence given to Paula. Paula's grandfather had been evicted from the courtroom when Paula was sentenced to death because he was wailing that they were going to kill his baby. I knew Nana would not have wanted this old man to have to go through what a grandfather would have to endure to see his granddaughter strapped in the electric chair and the volts of electricity put to her. I knew Nana would have had compassion for this old man.

I also felt that Nana would have had compassion for Paula Cooper. Nana taught Bible lessons in her home and when Paula and her friends knocked on the door wanting to take her lessons, Nana invited them into her house. I knew Nana would rather someone from the community, church or family be more interested in sharing the faith that Nana tried to share and have compassion for this girl rather than seeking to have her executed.

I was convinced that Nana would have had love and compassion for Paula Cooper and her family, and I felt she wanted someone in my family to have that same kind of love and compassion. I felt like it fell on my shoulders. Even though I knew forgiveness was the right thing, love and compassion seemed out of the question because Nana had been so brutally murdered. But so convinced that it was what Nana would have wanted and not knowing any other way to achieve it, I begged God to give me love and compassion for Paula Cooper and her family and to do that on behalf of Nana.

It was just a short prayer, but I immediately began to think about how I could write Paula and tell her about the kind of person Nana was and why Nana had let her into the house in the first place. I wanted to share Nana's faith with her.

I realized that the prayer for love and compassion had been answered because I wanted to help Paula and suddenly knew it would be wrong to execute her. I learned the most powerful lesson of my life that night. That was about the healing power of forgiveness. When my heart was touched with compassion, forgiveness took place. When forgiveness took place, it brought a tremendous healing. It had been a year and a half since Nana's death and whenever I thought about Nana during that time I always pictured how she died. It was terrible to think about the horrendous death she suffered. But I knew when my heart was touched with compassion and the forgiveness that it brought, that from that moment on whenever I thought about Nana again, I would no longer picture how she died, but I would picture how she lived, what she stood for, what she believed in and the beautiful, wonderful person that she was.

Forgiveness did not mean condoning what Cooper did, nor does it mean there should not be consequences for her act. It surely did not mean to forgive and forget. I will never forget what happened to Nana, but I can let any desire to get even with Paula go. I can wish for good things to happen to her.

Before I left work that night, I made two promises. I promised God that any success that came into my life as a result of forgiving Paula, that I would give Him the honor and glory, because it was not something I had done, but because God touched my heart with compassion and made the forgiveness possible. The second promise I made was that I would go through any door that opened as a result of forgiving Paula. I thought I might have the opportunity to speak to a Sunday school class about forgiveness or maybe write an article about forgiveness because I had seen its power. In other words, I promised to put my faith in action. That was over 18 years ago, and I can say to this day I have kept both promises to God. You don't have to be a Christian to forgive. Forgiveness is the cornerstone of all major religions. Forgiveness is letting go of the desire for revenge and moving forward, in all areas of your life.

Paula was taken off of death row in 1989 and is now serving a sixty-year sentence. She has been in prison for over twenty years. She will be eligible for parole in about ten years. Paula is not the same person who committed that terrible crime back in 1985. She has accepted God into her life and is working to improve herself spiritually. She received her GED after getting off death row and several years ago obtained a college degree by taking correspondence courses.

Many of the doors that opened for me after November 2, 1986 were in the abolition movement. Today I am the Chairman of the Board for the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and President of the Journey of Hope...from Violence to Healing, an organization that is led by murder victim family members who are opposed to the death

penalty. The abolition movement has provided me the opportunities to put my faith in action by talking about love and compassion for all of humanity and the healing power of forgiveness and applying it to the death penalty.

[Note: **The Journey of Hope...From Violence to Healing**, an educational speaking tour led by murder victims' family members who oppose the death penalty, will travel throughout the state of Texas from October 12-28, 2007. Participants in the NWFA can support the Journey in a number of ways, no matter where you live. Please contact Bill Pelke at bpelke@gci.net, or visit www.journeyofhope.org. You can purchase a copy of Bill's book via the Journey website.]