



I hate to admit it, but I am learning from my husband. Mac has been teaching me for a very long time, subliminally, sometimes in matters of fact, and lately in ways that are completely by his example. This should not come as any surprise to me. Mac is a clinical therapist. He reads incessantly. He has studied theories of human behavior and teaches people methods to identify flaws or character defects, gently prompts them to consider the benefits of changing, and provides a variety of tools to enable a person to begin and then sustain a better manner of living.

My new year got off to a rocky start. My mom had expectations of my husband and me that neither of us felt obliged to meet. Misunderstandings ensued, positions were taken, and eventually, time trudged on just because it does. Wounds close but hairline scars rise up on the skin of relationships and remain. I know this is all a bit vague, and out of respect for the people I love, I am choosing to leave it that way. But here is the rub. My husband's ability to forgive, to let go, and demonstrate what I might characterize as a certain nobility through the discomfort of human friction, has left an impression on me.

Not too long ago, I watched *Public Speaking*, an HBO documentary by Martin Scorsese on Fran Lebowitz, a social commentator and New York author of

*Metropolitan Life*

and

*Social Studies*

. Of Jewish descent, Lebowitz made some interesting and personal observations in the film on the God of the Jewish faith versus the Christian God. She said (and I am paraphrasing) that, with Christianity, came the concept of forgiveness, and that forgiveness belongs to the New Testament God, not the stern and judgmental Old Testament God. The simplicity of this distinction has merit. I was raised as a Christian. The definition of forgiveness is an act of giving up resentment or foregoing retaliation. If I could truly clothe myself in the daily act of forgiving and accepting forgiveness, how would my life change?

On the first Friday night of the new year, the three of us – Mom, Mac and me – went out for a movie and dinner. Returning to the table after administering an insulin injection in the ladies room at The Sandbar and Grill, my mom sat down to eat sliders and struggled with a mayonnaise packet. Mac reached for the Hellmann's and said, "Irene, let me help you with that." I watched in silence, in awe of the care and attention given by a son-in-law for his mother-in-law. I remember thinking, "This is what forgiveness looks like." Mac showed me that letting go gives a person the freedom to become.

The day after this article is published, I will have a birthday. My husband has mentioned that the dogs have a surprise party planned, to include party hats, balloons – the whole works. For a long time, I have considered my birthday as my personal New Year's Day. By January 20, I have usually left behind lofty resolutions and tend to take a more realistic look at who I am, and what I can truly change. I am working on weight and physical fitness; same old, same old. The greater goal is to reshape my character in my sixth decade.

This very evening, as I sought quiet and solitude to write this essay, I hurt my mom with words. I could have said things differently, asked instead of demanded, used a softer tone, helped instead of giving orders. I was set to let things remain as they were, my mom heading off to her bedroom, angered and hurt by my tone and temperament. I thought about my husband, reading in our bedroom, probably hearing my exchange, although he is known to put earplugs in at night. I wondered what he might be thinking, if he immediately recognized the flaws in my unwise approach. As I thought about Mac as a third party to my interactions with my mother, and the suggestions he might offer for more productive communications, I knew I had to get up, apologize to my mom, and explain that I know better than to speak as I had. So that is what I did. I apologized. I quickly administered first aid to a wound with a kiss and hopefully prevented a scar. She forgave me. We moved on.

I wish myself a Happy Birthday. I am not happy about my saggy knees and neck. I am not happy about the efforts required to maintain tone and strength. I am not happy with time and its refusal to slow down and let me catch my breath. This year, a good portion of my happiness and gratitude rests with Mac. I know he has consciously dealt with the critical changes to his life and our marriage by accepting my mother into our home. Even greater than this unselfish deed, he is teaching me how to be a better daughter and what boundaries I need to set to take care of myself. It is not easy and growing up and older never ceases. Learning to forgive, to soften the edges of words and accept forgiveness, cannot be wrapped in birthday paper.

Mac, thanks for the early birthday presents. I hope they do not break or get tossed away and forgotten.

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