

Nancy DeBacker on the power of forgiveness to change a life

My name is Nancy DeBacker. I'm a Baby Boomer, born in the UP (Upper Peninsula of Michigan). I was raised in a typical Catholic family of the 50's and 60s. I attended Catholic schools with wonderful nuns and grew up to become a teacher myself. I met my husband, John, also a cradle Catholic, at a Bluegrass Festival in Hillsdale County. I fell in love with this farmer, and we married less than a year later. I expected to live happily ever after with my cowboy and our kids on the family dairy farm.

I didn't realize what I was getting into.

For one, John and his siblings and parents all lived on the same piece of land. As a partner in the farm, John was expected to devote himself to the family business—an operation with 400 cows milked twice a day, baby calves to birth and raise, a 25,000-bird chicken house, and 800 acres for growing our own feed.

But even so, John's parents were the majority partners, with the controlling interest. They made all the decisions. They ran the show. Actually, John's mother ran the show. John's dad, a depressed WWII vet who only spoke in monosyllables, rarely interfered in her decisions. Neither of them was good at listening to us and letting us share in decisions . . . and neither John or I were good at standing up for ourselves. Early in my marriage, I was handed a schedule and ordered to work. It was only the family working the dairy farm, no cowhands, just sons as slaves and daughters-in-law badgered into doing work they didn't want to do. We were bullied and we never talked back.

When I married John, I had thought I would be a wife, a mother, and hopefully still a teacher, if I could swing it. But, no. I was not just supposed to care for my kids, cook and clean. I was also expected to work 12-16 hrs days as a farmhand, even though the wives were not partners, deliberately left out—in case we ever got divorced. Never mind that I was allergic to chickens and sniffled and sneezed every time I was sent to the henhouse. Never mind that I was periodically pregnant or postpartum, working with a two-week-old baby in the backpack. If I ever asked for a break, my MIL would say things like, "We're running a business here" or "If you didn't want to work you shouldn't have married a farmer."

Of course, this put stress on our marriage. My dear husband John has always played the role of the peacemaker, in his challenging family, trying to please everyone. He wore himself to a frazzle trying to placate his parents and me.

The strain and stress and pressure made him distracted and more and more accident-prone, a trait that his parents had chided him for since his boyhood. His dad would say, "If John didn't have bad luck, he wouldn't have any luck at all."

Well, one day he had the bad luck that would change our lives forever.

John was responsible for maintaining and repairing all the farm equipment so that the family would not have to spend money on it. On a fall day, he was out in the farmyard cleaning and oiling the bristle bars on the corn chopper to get it ready for winter storage. A chopper features a giant brush similar to what you see on a street sweeper, only with 1' steel tines like spears. John's dad ordered him to climb into the machine to work on it, even though you're not supposed to do that. When John was done with the chore, he ordered his brother to turn off the machine, but his brother just geared it down instead. While the bristles were still moving, John, in a hurry, threw his gear over the roller . . . and it caught his sleeve. It began pulling him up and feeding him into the chopper.

He fought to twist his body so that his legs would go in first instead of his head, yelling all the while for his brother to turn the machine off. His brother finally did, pulled John out, then ran inside to call 911. My mother-in-law rushed out with her homeopathic remedies, minimizing the extent of the injury. My father-in-law came running out, looked at John lying there, and barked, "What the hell did you do that for?"

When they called me on the phone, they simply said, "John's had an accident; meet us at the hospital. I didn't think much of it; I was on a first-name basis with the ER staff because of John's clumsiness. When I got there, he was covered from the waist down with a white sheet. He said to me, "I really did it to myself this time." Then he uncovered the sheet and I saw his leg and pelvis torn open. You could see the bones.

The small hospital decided not to ship him out 2 hours away to the University of Michigan Hospital, and instead just to stitch him up. That proved to be a big mistake. The doctor, we realized later, was in the early stages of dementia. They missed his cracked ribs. They couldn't get his pain under control. His healing was difficult and agonizing and the suffering persisted.

In the months that passed, John became addicted to pain medication. Laying in bed, looking out on his land was agonizing to this once-active man. But it was really guilt, shame, and accusation that, in the end, that broke him down, and his parents piled it on. My mother-in-law would tell him, "You know your accident was your own fault."

His mental health faltered. He suffered from constant panic attacks and lay awake crying at night. His parents pressured him to start working again, so he tried, only to fail.

The financial mess that ensued is a nightmare that I cannot even go into: let's just say that his parents did not help or even show any sympathy for our situation. They actually made it harder for us. His brothers and sisters divided up his pension. Workman's Compensation blacklisted him for "refusing favored work"—which meant that this man who had worked outdoors all his life and was now having daily panic attacks just wouldn't perform as a telemarketer. Getting any sort of disability pay wasn't happening without a lawsuit.

Eventually, we moved back to my hometown to get away from it all, but there's that saying, "Wherever you go, there you are." My bitterness followed me. I was angry at John for rushing on the day of the accident—he had been in a hurry to finish the day's work and go out hunting. I was angry with him for not standing up for himself and for me and the kids. I was angry with him for getting addicted and being so depressed.

I felt betrayed: "This isn't what I signed up for"; "I thought I was marrying John, not the farm." I ruminated with resentment on all the years of being discounted, and disrespected: "I'm an adult—I shouldn't have been treated that way." I felt used, unappreciated. "After all I did . . ."; "I came in with a willing spirit." I was self-righteous: "How could a man's own parents treat him this way?" I was outraged at the way John's parents only valued us for our work, how they tossed us away once we were no use to them on the farm. I blamed the family for all our financial struggles. I wallowed in self-pity. I justified myself and I justified my intense anger. After all, my in-laws had broken my husband's heart.

One day, our youngest son helped me realize it was past time to get help. He was 11 years old at the time. I came home from work and when I walked in the door my husband said to me, "Adam says the funniest things."

I answered, "What did he say?"

John answered, "When you pulled into the driveway, he said, 'Take cover, here she comes.'" My protective Mama Bear instinct had become generalized. Anger had such a hold on me now, that I was Mama Grizzly, not just defending my loved ones against injustice, but reacting to everything with overblown, out-of-control fury. I would have multiple fits of temper each day, spewing and ranting and verbally abusing anyone in my vicinity.

So I went to counseling at Catholic Charities. I renewed my faith, and went to daily Mass, healing services, and frequent confession. I tried to change by willpower, by making resolutions. I hoped all the praying would help.

Life got better slowly. We struggled by. I worked several jobs to make ends meet, and our kind neighbors helped us, leaving sacks of potatoes and other groceries on the doorstep. John got off of pain meds after ten years of addiction. In public, I could keep up appearances pretty well but I was still pretty miserable to live with . . . especially inside my own head.

Eventually, we moved back to Hillsdale County. Visiting a church in Ann Arbor one day, I saw a flyer which read, "Are you stuck in the same patterns of sin? Confessing the same thing over and over? Do you feel powerless to change?" That resonated with me, especially that word, *STUCK*. So I signed up for the conference that the flyer was advertising.

There, John and I were led to understand our Little Story within the framework of the Bigger Story. Through the message of freedom in Christ, I came to realize it wasn't what happened to me and how I perceived it that mattered

so much as how I responded. I was responsible for my attitudes and my choices. I came to understand that forgiveness is a powerful weapons to break the strongholds of the enemy and open the door to grace. I recognized that unforgiveness is real bondage. Unforgiveness—not John, not his parents, not bad luck— was the source of my torment.

As I worked through the process of deliverance with the prayer team, I was able to truly forgive John, his parents, his siblings, the doctors, the social workers, and anyone else who had contributed to our hardships. I totally let it go.

I was also able to let go of my shame, guilt, and self-condemnation when I understood how the root of my anger: fear. Anger was my way of taking control. So the Holy Spirit helped me surrender control to my Good Heavenly Father in a way I never had been able to do with my own father.

Immediately afterwards, there was a huge change in me. I was happy. I felt free of resentment. I stopped telling my sad story over and over. My angry outbursts disappeared for the most part. But not long after, the enemy challenged my freedom: He doesn't like to give up comfortable living quarters where he has been settled in for a long time.

John had another accident. He was working on a motorcycle that our kids gave him. They had come to visit with their brand-new baby, a long-awaited adopted child. We were planning to enjoy a precious week of celebration together, starting with Mother's Day, the first one for my daughter.

John knew the bike was too big for him, so he planned to sell it. He had just finished fixing it up himself, making some necessary repairs. But he couldn't resist getting on it, and it blew up while he was riding down the road. He was burned very badly.

I wasn't there at the time, so I got a call (again!): "John's had an accident; meet us at the OR." I thought, "Oh, my gosh, he's done it again." I was furious at first. I could not find one shred of sympathy for him in my heart. When I got there and saw him writhing in pain, I refused to go back with him to the OR. I told the attendants, "Just take him. I can't believe this is happening. I'm so angry right now, I could just . . . I don't know what. Since he's not dead, maybe I'll just kill him."

The nurse, who knew me well, took me into her office. She said, "Nancy, I'm going to pray with you right now. I had to reassure those people out there you didn't mean what you said." Afterwards she asked, "Is there anything else I can do?" I answered bitterly, "You can have him."

This time, they took John to the U of M Burn Center from Hillsdale, but I wouldn't go. I couldn't stand being with him, seeing his suffering. And when he called me from U of M to tell me he was "feeling fine now," all loopy with morphine, I knew I couldn't stand to see him hooked up to pumps dumping narcotics into his bloodstream after all the work he'd done to get off of them.

The next day, I stayed home all day and took time to think. And this thought came to me, "Let love win." Over and over, "Let love win." I realized that I was in a battle for my new freedom. I had stepped out of Satan's trap, and he was trying to draw me back in. The bait was powerful, but I decided, "I don't want to go there again."

So I knelt down and forgave. I forgave my kids for giving my husband that motorcycle. I forgave John for riding it. I forgave my parents-in-law for the bad luck they had cursed John with, so that we could never enjoy a good moment without a catastrophe.

The next day I went to see my husband. He looked at me and said, "I know you're scared." So I knew he forgave me for my reaction. Then I let him know that I forgave him, too. Afterwards, we called the people who had put on the conference there in Ann Arbor just one month before; they came to the room and prayed with us. They reminded us that we were not alone. And so, by the grace of God, we got through that experience without going downhill. John healed, and he didn't get hooked on pain medication again. But even more important, I didn't get hooked on anger.

One of my favorite authors writes, "Love is an endless act of forgiveness." Daily we can just look to the Crucifix and remind ourselves of that. We can choose every minute of every day to live in the freedom and power of forgiveness. I thank God for that.