

I recently read an article about forgiveness. Included in the article was a story about an incident that occurred shortly after the Civil War had ended. Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky woman who was enraged over the damage Federal artillery fire had done to a once beautiful tree in her front yard. She insisted the tree was a casualty of the war and wanted Lee to condemn Northern forces for what she called their senseless attack on her property or at least sympathize with her over what she considered a great loss. After a brief silence, Lee said, "Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it." I have no way to verify this story, but it struck me as being especially profound during these difficult times. We human beings like to hang on to our grievances. It is not easy for any of us to "forgive and forget."

Just a month ago I officiated at the funeral service for a woman who was 100 years old. I had known this woman for the past ten years – so our relationship began when she was already quite an old woman. Other than severe hearing loss, she was very sharp for a person of such advanced years. A tiny woman, she was always dressed stylishly and her hair was perfectly quaffed. She took pride in her appearance, a quality that did not diminish with age. She enjoyed being with people and although she didn't always hear what was being said, she always looked engaged with the conversation. Always smiling, always personable, she was a pleasure to spend time with. In the years that I knew her, she seemed a person that life had treated well and I thought perhaps that contributed to her longevity.

In speaking with her daughter before the service, I discovered quite the opposite. This woman had had a very difficult life, she just never spoke about it. She had been orphaned at a young age and sent to live with distant relatives. Her childhood was painful and lonely. Many other personal tragedies followed including the premature death of her only son at age 30. Throughout it all, she remained optimistic and hopeful. She was, in her daughter's words, the best mother anyone could ever have. At one point her daughter had asked her mother why she never spoke of the unhappy events of her life or the injustices that had befallen her. Her mother's reply, "Don't dwell on the past, move on." Her ability to forgive and forget served her well.

We can all learn a great life lesson from this woman. Holding on to our anger can affect our health in very negative ways. If we have a goal of living to 100 years, having an attitude change for the positive will go a long way. Robert E. Lee's advice to the woman holding on to her anger over her damaged tree was right, "cut it down." Get rid of it. Put it aside. Remember that the longer we live, the more opportunities we have to mess up. But we also have more opportunities to forgive – not only others but ourselves as well. "To err is human, to forgive divine." And it makes you feel so much better too.