

Last Chances

Andrea Abbott

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I'd like to start by telling you a story. It's either a sad story or a hopeful story, depending on your point of view. Like most things in life, it's probably both. Here it is.

A friend of mine, someone I'd known for a long time, had always had a difficult relationship with her father. I knew her family. I'd babysat for her half brothers and sisters from her father's second marriage, and I knew what a harsh and abrasive a man he could be. Though I liked her stepmother, a woman only a few years older than my friend, I certainly didn't like him and finally I gave up babysitting for them because he could be so odious to me as well. I was completely sympathetic to her complaints about him. No matter what she tried to do, she could never please him and, it seemed to me, he'd go out of his way to pick a fight with her, coming down on her for trivial things as well as giving her contradictory information so she'd be sure to violate one or another rule he'd set up. But I didn't realize the full extent of his cruelty until she came to visit us a few months after he had died.

It turned out that, of all his nine children, products of three marriages to increasingly younger women, when he became very ill and it was clear that he would not live long, my friend was the one who agreed to take him in. the other

children, all adults now, felt that a nursing home was the best solution. Indeed, most were not even speaking to him and his ex-wives certainly had no interest in his care. Everyone had had enough. But, for some reason, when he balked at the idea of going into a hospice home, my friend agreed to have him come and live with her. I thought she was crazy. Why in the world would she open her home, a place that she was happy at last, and let this monster in. But she did.

At first it was just as anyone could have told her it would be. He was demanding and demeaning, pointing out to her all her faults and her failures, insisting that she wait on him while he told her how she had disappointed him. And there was more. It turned out that what she had never confided in me was that he had been physically as well as mentally abusive to her all her life. He had physically abused her as long as she could remember, really severely, throwing her against walls, hitting her, dragging her around by her hair. This was the man who was still being as hurtful to her as he could be, though he was at the end of his life.

Now, it's easy to say that none of us would have done what my friend did. It's easy to say, and I suspect I did say it, along with her other friends, that this was masochistic, that she should let him go, that he richly deserved to die among strangers. But who knows what reasons there are in the human heart? Who knows

what forces compelled her to keep trying to find some kind of relationship, to not give up?

Then, one day when she'd had enough, she sat down with him and asked him why he had always treated her so badly. For a change, he sat quietly. And then he began to cry. And, she said, he did something she'd only thought was in the Bible. He beat his breast and he tore his hair. He told her that she was right. He had always hated her. He hadn't wanted another child at the time she was born and from the beginning, he said, she had defied him. She had refused, no matter what he did, to obey him in the ways he wanted to be obeyed. He said she was too much like him.

Now, this was a man who had been remarkably successful in his chosen field. He had been given honors and was well respected. With nine children, he wasn't rich, but he had enough and some to spare and yet he had always felt like a failure and he had found it easy to blame all his frustrations on his children, particularly her.

But now he cried and mourned his treatment of her and admitted how unjust and cruel he had been. He wished he could go back, he said, to be a father to her but he could not and all the honors and prestige he had were dust and ashes in his

mouth. He begged her forgiveness and said he would understand if she couldn't give it to him. At the end of a very long evening, she forgave him.

He lived for six more weeks. For those six weeks, my friend said, he was everything she could have wanted in a father. He asked her about her day when she came home. He sympathized with her when she had problems at work. He listened to her plans. They planned meals and small outings that he was able to do. They told each other things about his life she had never known and she confided things she had never told him about her past. He often gave good advice and encouragement. And when he died, she sincerely mourned at his funeral. She said that the six weeks that they had together made up for the fifty or so years that had gone before.

I noticed that her stories about her past changed as well after her father's death. She was able to remember good times as well as bad, able to see her life in a more positive way. Now, some part of me thought he got off too easily. Some part of me turns out to want there to be more accountability, wants there to be lakes of fire and imps with pitchforks for those who transgress as he had done. But perhaps the old Universalists were right. We make our heaven and our hell here on earth and there is always time for redemption.

My friend is gone now, as well as her father. Whatever the life after this holds, they have found out. I'd like to think that they are there, in the Elysium fields together, the tragedies and sadness of this life forgotten in the immensity of eternity. But I don't know. I know we have this life and in this life there are a surprising number of chances, if we are willing to see them and to risk taking them.

What are the risks that we are so afraid of taking? What are the risks we take when we play it safe? There truly is a lot to fear, particularly when we try to repair our damaged relationships. We risk making more mistakes, making a situation worse. We risk being misunderstood. We risk our sense of ourselves. Especially when we try to see things from the other person's point of view, we risk not seeing ourselves in a flattering light. We risk giving up old grievances, grievances that have sustained our picture of ourselves as the victim, as the wronged party. Those are a lot of things to risk. And, as time goes by, it becomes harder to take those risks and people's positions harden. As time goes by, people become less able to take the steps that may lead to reconciliation. We say, it's too late now.

Is anything really too late? As long as we are breathing, it's probably never too late. Even after the people with whom we are angry are gone, it may not be too late. We are still alive and we need to come to terms with what our life has been in order to go forward.

Am I saying that we should forgive the unforgiveable, that right now, this minute we should seek reconciliation with people who may not have change, who may not have even wanted reconciliation? No, I'm not. For one thing, I'm not in favor of forgiveness on demand. I'm not saying that there may be many, many reasons, valid reasons, why people may not be worthy of forgiveness. I'm not saying that people don't do other people wrong and then walk away unscathed. But I am saying that a working toward some point of reconciliation with the demons that live in our minds is very well worth doing. A real reconciliation, a real peace within ourselves, is well worth the effort no matter how old we are, no matter what circumstances we are in. However close we get to that goal, chances are we will feel freer, lighter, better able to live happier lives, no matter how long those lives may be. My friend and her father had six weeks but they were six weeks that changed the past as well as the future.

There are other ways in which we are given last chances, ways that do not involve our relationships with others but do involve our relationship with ourselves. How do we think of ourselves? What ways do we limit ourselves? How do we let what we think of as other's view of ourselves circumscribe our lives? Families are often very good at telling us who we are and what are limits are. Children are told, often at an early age, that they are the smart one or the pretty one or the dumb one or the ugly one and those labels, as well as all the other labels,

stick for a lifetime. Families label themselves the same way and say that they are a family that works hard or a family that has bad luck or a family that follows in certain occupations or has certain educational attainments or are a family that is looked up to or a family that is despised. I remember visiting a farm family when one of the girls announced she was trying out for cheerleading. Her father glared at her and said, 'don't you know you're a Jones?' (not their real name) 'Jones don't get picked for cheerleading.' Children believe these labels. We go on believing them long into our adulthood and we are afraid to take chances, chances that might expose us to ridicule or failure. We set our course early on and feel safe in the grooves we have worn in our road.

One of the best discoveries of modern brain science has been that we are not as limited by age as was previously thought. We are able to learn and change long after we have come to maturity. The brain is more plastic than what we thought and it goes on being so for a much longer time. Or, the short version, you can teach an old dog new tricks. But, emotionally, it's hard to believe that, hard to put ourselves outside the limits in which we feel we belong. It's hard because failure and humiliation are tools that have been used on people for a long time to make sure that they are kept in their place. What would happen if everyone wanted to develop their full potential? It might be a pretty scary world. People might be more demanding of life. People might not be as willing to put themselves down. And

because people might feel more fulfilled in their own lives, they might not be as interested in tearing other people down. So maybe it is all about relationships with other people after all.

What is it you have always wanted to do? What are the secret dreams of your heart? Where do you hold back? Where do you hear those voices that tell you you aren't able, aren't good at this or that, aren't talented or aren't leadership material or aren't so smart? And whose voices are they anyway? Parents? Teachers? Peers?

No, it may be too late or too hard if you're 4'9" and 65 years old to make the NBA. You may not become a Hollywood star. But there are many other ways in which we can all surprise ourselves. There are mountains higher than Mt. Everest, mountains of our own making within ourselves, you and me, and those mountains, when we challenge them and come to the top of them, are the mountains that really matter.

Yes, life has loveliness to sell. Sometimes we need to remember that. Sometimes we need to be convinced that we have enough for the purchase. We need to be convinced that we are worthy of the purchase. It is too easy to say, "It's too late. It's too much effort. Why should I have happiness?"

We all need help going forward, help in becoming who we want to be, help in relating to each other, in relating to ourselves. We need encouragement because it



is hard to find courage. We need a little push sometimes because our own power doesn't always seem to be enough. But each time we do, each time we heal breaches between ourselves and others, each time we heal the breaches within ourselves, we make the world a little better. I hope this is a church in which people can make some of those steps, find some opportunity to try things out, find helping hands in the hard process of change.

As we take the challenges to make our lives more enjoyable, richer and fuller, as we take the challenges that let us live in harmony with one another, we don't just make things better for ourselves. If there is some kind of calculator of happiness out there, we also add to the sum total of world joy. It's less likely that people will want to bomb each other out of existence when they are enjoying themselves and the world around them. Now is the time, maybe a close to last chance, but still a chance, to build a world that is healed and whole with all her people one.