



The Power of Forgiveness

By Steven L. Anderson, Ph.D., MBA

I had intended to write about emotional intelligence this month, but I heard a beautiful story from a former client, Phil, that I felt compelled to retell instead. This is a story of forgiveness, which I feel we can all learn from in a world torn by violence.

Phil came to me two years ago struggling with relationship problems. He is a very sensitive, intelligent high school student. Through the course of our work, he realized that because of his sensitivity, he had difficulty setting boundaries on others because he was concerned about hurting their feelings. When we stopped working together about a year ago, he had a good sense of how to maintain his independence in relationships, while still remaining close to others. I was very proud of his progress.

Last fall Phil, who is Jewish, became the victim of anti-Semitism in his school. Three classmates were leaving notes on his locker with sayings such as "Jew Boy, Go Home". These classmates would also heard mutter anti-Semitic remarks under their breaths when Phil was nearby. Phil was understandably disturbed by these comments, but unsure how to react. He wanted to become angry with them, but did not feel that would improve the situation. After much thought, he decided to confront one of the members of the group. I'll call this person Joe. While Phil confronted him, Joe began to feel remorseful and apologized to Phil, assuring him he would never do this again. Phil felt relieved and proud of himself. He thanked Joe for listening to his concerns.

Tragically, last fall, shortly after this exchange; Joe was killed in a car accident. This tragic event shook everyone in his high school, including Phil. Phil was very saddened by the death of this young man, but also relieved that he had cleared the air before Joe's untimely death. However, even amidst his relief, Phil had a difficult decision to make. He wanted to attend Joe's funeral, but Joe was the best friend of the ringleader of the anti-Semitic behavior. After more soul-searching, Phil decided to attend the funeral.

At the wake after the funeral, which was attended by many of Phil's classmates, Phil saw the ringleader with his back turned toward Phil. Phil felt a great tension within him. Unsure of what to do, he decided to approach this young man. All of the students around them fell silent, expecting a confrontation. To their surprise, Phil tapped the ringleader on the shoulder. When the young man turned around Phil said to him, "I just wanted you to know that I can't imagine how much pain you must be in, having lost your best friend. I just wanted you to know I feel very badly for you." With that the young man's eyes welled with tears and he thanked Phil. From that point on, all of the anti-Semitic behavior stopped, and many classmates expressed admiration to Phil about his ability to forgive under very trying circumstances.

Wow! I was blown away by this story, and shed tears as I listened. What courage and wisdom this young man showed. I can't say for sure if I would have acted with as much bravery. I wish that all of our leaders could hear this story and act accordingly.

I want to close by thanking Phil for showing such a great example for the rest of us and for allowing me to retell this story. Lead on young man!