I've been thinking about forgiveness lately. It's a word we hear a lot and know it's something that is supposed to be good for us. We want to be forgiven, but how easy is it to forgive?

About a year ago, Samuel, a fifth grader, sat on the floor in my office drawing. He's a highly intelligent boy with a gift for art, and he hated school. He told me that he had no friends, got picked on everyday and couldn't help but explode when he couldn't take it anymore. He'd break pencils, pull his hair and scream in class. The other kids found him strange and a little scary. He was unpredictable in his anger. The bullies loved to see him lose control. It reinforced their attitudes that he was a freak and deserved to be teased. He has been seeing me in counseling once a week. He no longer loses his temper in class, breaks his pencils or screams. He's learned a lot about emotions and how to control them. We use the image of a volcano and how it will explode under pressure

As long as he stays aware of his feelings, he can keep from exploding. He knows that he can kick a ball around or talk to his teacher, the school counselor or the playground supervisor. Just by being heard helps him calm down. Instead of reacting to the bullies, he comes up with his own witty comebacks. If anyone lays a hand on him, they get reported and are in trouble. They no longer get away with being cruel without punishment.

Samuel has a few friends now. We've worked a lot on social skills. He is better at initiating conversations and less likely to take offense if nobody wants to play his game his way. He is learning about give and take, but he refuses to forgive those that have hurt him in the past. Words like "Never!" and "No Way!" are his response to the idea of forgiving what he calls his "enemies."

He doesn't understand the emotional weight that unforgiveness carries. He doesn't realize that it is himself who suffers when he doesn't forgive. The other kids don't care. They may not even realize that Sam has strong feelings of resentment towards them. It is Sam who pays the price.

It isn't just his age either. I know adults who think the same way. I know a woman close to fifty who hasn't talked to her own brother in twenty years because of a sarcastic comment he made that hurt her feelings. She didn't tell him that it hurt her feelings. She stuffed the hurt down while she spent the day with him and his new family. Then, she cut herself off from him. She gave excuses not to attend family functions where he would be present. She missed out on seeing his children grow up. She missed out on so many things, but she doesn't see it that way. She holds her anger close to her chest determined that she is justified in owning it.

She may be right about the anger, but at what cost?

I'm interesting in hearing how others have dealt with forgiveness. I believe it's a gift we give ourselves. What do you say?

Colleen