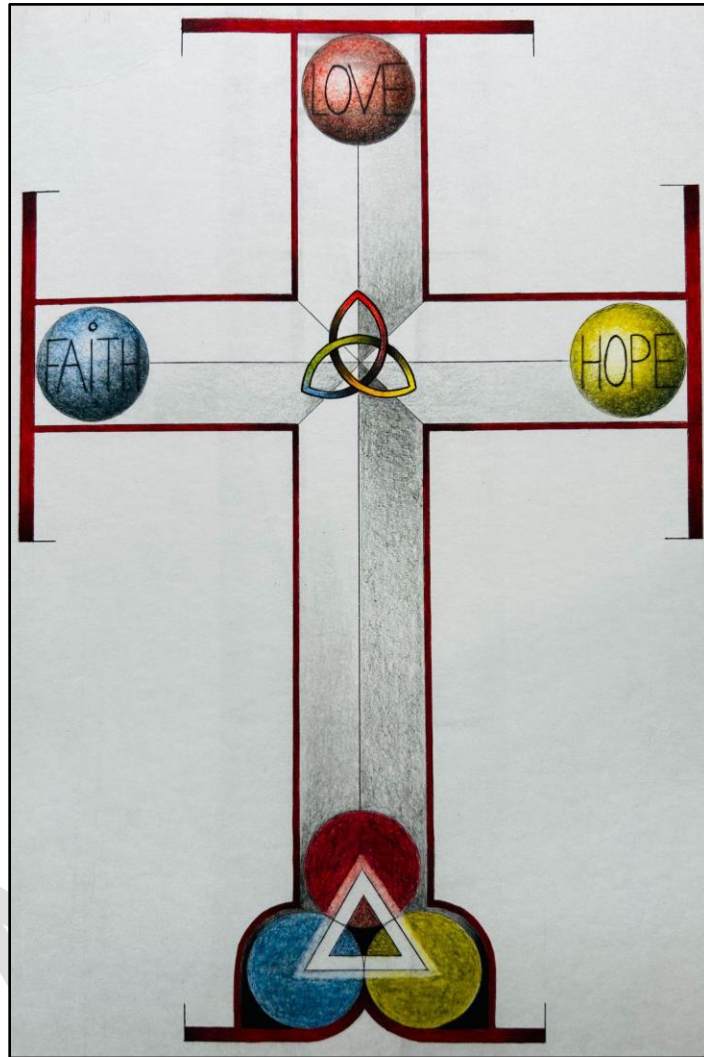


# Your Values



“Faith, Hope, & Love” by George T. Wilkerson

We all have things that matter more to us than others. Whether it's a person, group of people, activity, or concept (like freedom, human rights, etc.), we value some things in our lives more than others.

One way to become aware of our values is to look at what we do each day. Do you shower regularly? You value hygiene. Do you read books? You may value education, literacy, imagination, entertainment, and/or escapism.

Of course, sometimes, our actions don't always reflect our actual values. Maybe you value family, but you don't talk to them often. Or perhaps you value health, but you eat a lot of junk food. We can work to better align our actions with our values.

What we value can depend on our upbringing, people we know, our personality, our environment, society, our culture, and many other factors. But, in our experience, it's not as important to know *why* we value something than to make sure we are following what we *actually* value, what is important to *us* and not others. Honoring our authentic self, with its quirks, strengths, blind spots, interests, and more, is our best bet to having the kind of life we want and that makes us content.

### Exercise 1:

First, let's think about what we value. Pick out what matters most to you from the list below. Or, come up with your own.

authenticity	autonomy	balance	beauty	compassion
justice	honesty	integrity	cooperation	spirituality
stability	humility	adventure	courage	health
creativity	curiosity	kindness	love	peace/harmony
dependability	patience	self-control	religion	faith
humor	fun	wisdom	respect	money
friends	family	romance	power	freedom
rules	authority	trust	commitment	personal growth
consistency	dignity	ambition	hard work	entertainment
challenges	achievement	success	intellect	education
intelligence	courtesy	bravery	gratitude	leadership
integrity	responsibility	safety	loyalty	efficiency
teamwork	comfort	hygiene	_____	(fill in the blank)

Kat: My values are authenticity, creativity, compassion, personal growth, humor, responsibility, lifelong learning, nature, and introspection.

George: What matters most to me from that list: peace/harmony, personal growth, education, authenticity, justice, creativity, dependability, humor, friends, intelligence, cooperation, honesty, humility, family, dignity, courtesy, consideration, respect, balance, kindness, self-control, wisdom, trust, safety, hygiene, faith, courage, love, hard work, gratitude, loyalty, diligence, honor, compassion, and health.

### Exercise 2:

Think about what you spend your time doing each day or week. Answer these questions:

- What activities do you do regularly?
- Do these activities reveal your values? Why, or why not?
- How can you better live according to your values?

Kat:

- Daily activities: shower, pet my cat, spend time with my husband, listen to music, work on computer, check email, play WordFeud and Minesweeper on my phone, eat/sleep/drink water, watch TV, take medicine, walk outside, do things for my friends in prison (give them feedback on poetry, etc.)
- Weekly activities: read, write poetry, do chores, journal, see a friend, talk to my sister and Mom
- I think these activities do embody my values. Reading = lifelong learning. Writing and journaling = personal growth and introspection. Checking email, doing chores, etc. = responsibility. Humor is involved when I spend time with my husband, friends, and family. I'd like to do more reading and spend more quality time in nature to live out those values more.

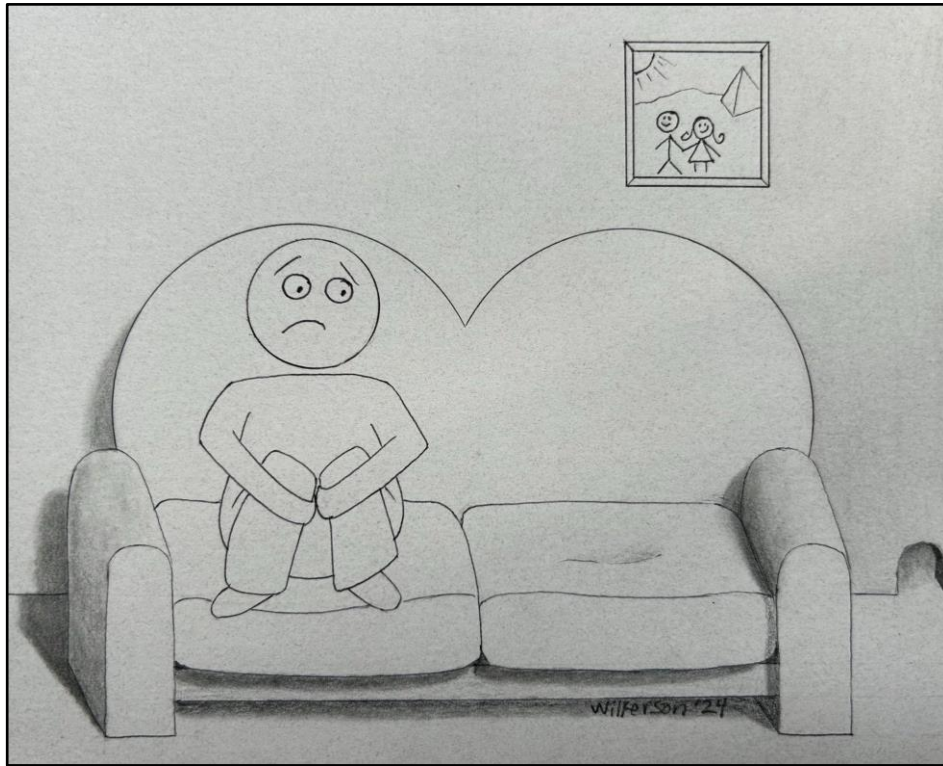
George:

Activities I do regularly:

- pray, study Scripture, and meditate on how to apply it to my daily life
- exercise
- clean/do chores
- carve out time for friends and family
- minister to others' needs
- work on creative/constructive projects
- laugh, joke, play

I believe these activities *do* reveal most of my values. For instance, just the fact I have done these things near-daily for more than a decade demonstrates my devotion to personal growth, education, dependability, friends/family, balance, self-control, faith, hard work, loyalty, diligence, and health. I think constant and *honest* self-reflection is a great tool for making adjustments — to better live according to my values.

# Grief & Loss



“Loveseat for One (with a Mouse Hole)” by George T. Wilkerson

Death and change are inevitable. That’s why grief and loss are common feelings we don’t need to feel shame about.

You may have heard of “the stages of grief”: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This is based on old research that isn’t accurate. The truth is, grief isn’t predictable. It doesn’t follow a neat set of stages. We may not feel it when we think we will, it may be more or less intense than we think it will, and it can affect us in ways we can’t predict. Grief is different for everyone and in every situation.

A sense of loss can be part of grief, but grief can include a lot of other feelings: longing, sadness, bitterness, anger, remorse, guilt, shame, anxiety, helplessness, and feeling lost or purposeless. We don’t just feel grief about people who die or abandon us. We can also feel grief about other things we lose: who we used to be, the way things used to be, the way we used to see things (perspective or worldview), our self-esteem, trust, possessions, and more.

The best way to deal with grief is to acknowledge our feelings and share them with others who will really hear us. Honoring our grief, as well as who or what we’ve lost, also goes a long way in our ability to cope with loss. You don’t need to try to get rid of your grief. You can work to let it find its place in your life.

### Exercise 1:

Think of a person you feel a sense of loss for. Maybe they died, maybe you just grew apart, or maybe they abandoned you. Then, answer these questions:

- Who were they?
- What was your relationship with them like?
- What did you love about them?
- What feelings arise when you think of them?
- How did they affect you and your life?
- How can you honor them now?

Kat: I feel a sense of loss for my friend Bonnie. We were *best friends* in college. I'd never been as close to someone as I was to her at that point in my life. She introduced me to the term "kindred spirits," and she *was* one to me, a part of my heart and soul. We liked to journal together, and listen to music and sing to it, and laugh and be silly together. We'd often laugh until we cried — our laugh-crying fits would last for several minutes, sometimes almost half an hour! We also kept a quote wall, where we wrote down funny things we'd say.

I loved her good nature, her innocence and childlike spirit. I feel so, so sad when I think about how I never hear from her anymore. After she moved to Arizona right after college, we kept in touch for a little while, and we saw each other a couple times out there, but it was never the same. Sometimes, I've reached out to her since then, and I'm lucky to get a response back. She's just so *in her life* where she is now, but I guess that's part of what made her who she was before: she total immersion in the NOW.

Bonnie showed me what a true friendship can be like — where neither person holds resentment or bitterness or jealousy, only love and what is best for the other person. She was pure light, and she helped me see that a friendship like that was possible.

I have friends now who are like that, too. Bonnie was the first, but maybe she paved the way for me to let in the others who are like her. Now, to honor her, I can think of her every time I journal (such as now!). She loved the color purple, and napping, and soft fuzzy fabrics. I will continue to care for myself like she cared for herself, because that's what she would do. ❤️

George: I miss my little sister. Before I was arrested, we were really close, and bonded over our shared love of art. I was her protector, and she is the only person I have ever been close to and NOT have any arguments with. My arrest traumatized her, because it was akin to me dying. I disappeared from her life. She was 14 at the time, and our parents kept her from interacting with me until she turned 18. By then, she had developed a social life and was busy with college, so connecting with me was not a priority.

I am nine years older than her, and we share three brothers. I had always wanted a sister, so when she was born I was ecstatic. I loved playing with her, making her laugh, teaching her how

to walk, etc. I have no children, but I imagine my feelings are similar to how a father feels toward his child.

I still experience lingering guilt, remorse, and shame that I hurt her by getting arrested, sadness and grief that we are no longer close. But I also feel joy when I remember what we had. I try to honor her by respecting her space. She knows I would like a closer relationship, but I let *her* decide how frequently we interact: I'll call if she asks me to, and always respond to her text messages, but I refrain from calling and messaging otherwise.

#### Exercise 2:

Now, think of *something* you feel a sense of loss for. It can be who you used to be, the way your life used to be, a perspective or worldview you used to have, trust you had for someone, a beloved possession, or something else. Then, answer these questions:

- What do you feel you've lost? Describe it.
- What did you love about it?
- How did it affect you and your life?
- How can you honor it now?

Kat: I *really* miss being a kid. After my mom remarried and had my sister, we moved to Kingswood Drive, in the suburbs. There was a forested lot across the street from our house, and I convinced my sister and our nextdoor neighbor/best friend to help me rake a path through the woods so we could ride our bikes through. We also loved to rollerblade on the street in front of our houses, with a boombox plugged into an extension cord, and we'd pretend we were ice skaters: Michelle Kwan or Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding. We'd play video games together, and I'd kick ass at Mario Kart. We started a babysitting club and branched out to include a neighborhood newsletter (*The Kingswood Gazette*) and we did an American Girls play for a small fee in my backyard. I *loved* pretending like the blue hydrangeas in our front yard were "magical energy crystals" that we could sprinkle on our bikes to go faster.

I miss my imagination from that time, my sense of play, and having few commitments. I also miss my friends, who would be up for almost any idea I had.

I still have dreams about that house and that neighborhood. I was so lucky to live somewhere I could go outside often and feel safe. The woods were right across from my bedroom window, so I could look out and see the glowing blue of twilight behind the silhouettes of the trees. I'd stare at Venus, the first "star" to appear. I felt such a connection to myself and to God and nature.

I can honor that period of my life by going outside to my deck more often and basking in the twilight glow, with the tall trees all around. I can spend time with friends more often and keep a sense of play and innocence in my heart. I can write about that time of my life (a book?) to convey the significance of it all to me.

George: I've lost the *chance* to help my family in practical ways, especially my mom. She is elderly now, lives alone, and struggles to maintain her house: clean it, tend the lawn, fix things that break, etc. It hurts me that I can't be there for her.

It's not that I helped her a lot when I was free. Rather, it was always a goal of mine to take care of my parents when they aged. My dad died during my trial, and my stepdad a few years later. I never wanted any of them to need to hire a caregiver or be put into a nursing home. I felt it was my duty to care for them in the comfort of their own homes.

Genuinely wanting to take on this responsibility made me feel like a good and respectable son, and that I could redeem myself for all the pain and trouble I caused them growing up. I honor it now by doing what I *can*, like offering sound advice to her when we talk on the phone, as she finds it difficult to navigate this modern tech-dependent world. I also try to prod my siblings into doing more for her — and I take vicarious pleasure when they follow through.



# Compassion & Forgiveness



“Rose” by George T. Wilkerson

There’s a lot of misunderstanding about what compassion is. We like what researcher Brené Brown says about it in her book *Atlas of the Heart*:

“Compassion is fueled by understanding and accepting that we’re all made of strength and struggle — no one is immune to pain or suffering. Compassion is not a practice of ‘better than’ or ‘I can fix you’ — it’s a practice based in the beauty and pain of shared humanity.”

Compassion is a practice that involves empathy. We sit with others in their pain without trying to *solve* their pain. To do this, we don’t have to have the exact same experiences they do. We just have to connect with the feelings they have by remembering what it’s like to feel them, too.

Pity and sympathy are not the same as compassion and empathy. We might say we feel “sorry” for that person and what they’re going through. We might see their suffering as inferior to or separate from ours. And we might avoid trying to share in that person’s suffering. With pity and sympathy, we aren’t trying to see from the other person’s perspective; we’ll still seeing through our own.

Compassion also doesn’t involve trying to one-up the other person. “You think that’s bad? Wait til you hear what happened to me...” This is an example of comparative suffering. It’s when we compare our own suffering to someone else’s and think that ours is worse than theirs — and therefore somehow “better.” It’s a selfish way of thinking and doesn’t involve compassion or empathy.



Why should we practice compassion? First, it's a more accurate way to view others: their pain isn't less than our own. Second, it's a more accurate way to view ourselves: our pain isn't worse or somehow "better" than others' pain. Third, it actually helps *us*. People who practice compassion are healthier, happier, have less stress, have a greater sense of well-being, and have better relationships.

And this is where we come back to our inner critic and self-talk: When we show *ourselves* compassion, we are also improving our health, happiness, stress levels, well-being, and relationship with ourselves.

Compassion to ourselves and to others can involve forgiveness. Forgiveness is when we recognize our own humanity and our shared humanity with others. We let go of our anger, resentment, bitterness, and other emotions. We let go of our grudge.

We don't have to *forget* or *dismiss* how someone treats us in order to forgive them. We just have to recognize that they are people too, with blind spots and past mistakes. We can forgive someone but decide to keep them out of our lives.

Interestingly, forgiveness helps *us* the most. Just like with compassion, it can cause us to have better health, happiness, stress levels, and well-being. However, forgiveness might have to happen in its own time, and that's okay. Depending on our level of hurt, it can take years for us to forgive someone for what they did to us. Some people go to their graves without forgiving others. But, for our own sake, it helps to at least try.

#### Exercise 1:

Think of something you've done that you regret or think was wrong. Or, think of some inadequacy you feel you have. If you're doing this exercise for the first time, you might want to start with something small.

For this exercise, write a letter to an imaginary friend who has done the same thing or who has the same inadequacy, and feels the same as you do about it. What words of encouragement, support, and compassion would you give them?

After writing the letter, go back and re-read it, applying the words to yourself. Then, answer these questions:

- What did you write about?
- How did it feel to write the letter?
- What kinds of things did you say?
- What encouragement and support did you offer them?
- How did it feel to re-read your letter and apply the words to yourself?

Kat: I wrote about cutting off a friendship in high school because I'd been told they were a bad influence on me since they were very cynical and sarcastic. So, in the letter, I wrote to someone

who had done the same thing. I told them things like “You were young, you were still figuring out friendships and who your real friends were,” “You feel bad for hurting your friend because she didn’t deserve it,” and “Hindsight is 20/20.” I gave them reassurance that anyone would feel that way, and everybody makes mistakes. I also told them, “It’s not like you did it out of spite or meanness.”

It feels really, really good to see the situation a little more objectively. Saying things like “anyone would feel that way” and “everybody makes mistakes” made me feel less alone in my error. I hadn’t realized before this exercise how isolating regrets like this can make me feel. It helps to know others have probably betrayed friends by cutting off friendships, too. It’s not like I didn’t have a reason. It’s just that I know now that the reason was dumb. I wish I’d stayed friends with her back then, and I regret losing out on what could have been.

George: I visualized a new guy entering prison, feeling his life was over. He is suicidal because although he believes in God, he does not think God can use him right here. He feels aimless and without purpose, so he wants to die. That was the mindset I had when I got here.

It felt therapeutic to write the letter. I tried to use a blend of Biblical and practical examples to encourage him, like:

- “God *can* and *will* use you right here in prison — if you let him! Look at the New Testament. Much of it was written by the apostle Paul. And Paul wrote it *from prison*, on death row, waiting to be executed by Nero. How many billions of lives have been touched by his words, inspired by God? We have the SAME God now, and He still wants to speak to the world. And we have even more access to basic supplies like pen and paper than Paul ever did.”
- “Besides, God cares about people in prison, and often mentions it all throughout Scripture. God wants everyone to love their neighbor, and in doing that we do God's work. And in prison, are we not surrounded by neighbors? You can share your commissary with an indigent guy. You can teach someone how to read, and you can circulate the books and magazines you get. You can help break up a fight. There are countless little opportunities to show God’s love right here and serve a higher purpose.”

The letter brought tears to my eyes because I wished someone had shared such encouragement with me when I first arrived. I didn't learn these things until more than ten years of grappling with suicide-level depression. It is amazing how much a little compassion can accomplish.

## Exercise 2:

Think of a time someone showed you their pain and suffering. Answer these questions:

- What happened?
- How did you respond?
- Did you give them encouragement and support? Why, or why not?
- Did you try to fix or solve their problems? Why, or why not?

- How did the other person respond?
- What can you learn for the future?

Kat: A friend of mine gets depressed pretty frequently. His depression is different from mine because his can include anger, irritability, and rage. For the most part, I follow his lead in terms of what he needs; sometimes he wants to talk, sometimes not.

Recently, he wanted to chat, so we talked on the phone to catch up. That's when I learned he was depressed. I wanted him to share as much as he wanted, and I tried to reassure him by saying I understood. I shared what I thought was a similar experience I'd had, but it seems like every time I do, he finds a way to see that it *isn't* the same and that I *don't* understand, and he gets irritated that I tried to find a way to understand. That's what happened this time, too. I wish I hadn't brought it up.

It's hard, sometimes, to talk to him because I feel like I say the wrong things. I don't really know how to just listen without adding anything, or trying to share something that happened to me to try to make things better. I'm a natural fixer, which doesn't go over well when he only wants to vent and be heard.

In the future, I can offer support to him by just listening, asking questions when appropriate, and saying other things, like "That sounds hard," or "That sucks." Rather than saying I understand. I also need to temper my desire to offer solutions — that's gonna be hard, but I can learn. It's okay if I repeat myself, too. If I say something more than once. I try not to, which is probably why I venture into problem solving (to think of new things to say), but it's okay to repeat reassuring things if I want to. It seems like that would go over better with him, anyway.

George: On the rec yard recently, an older buddy approached me and started telling me about his medical problems. He'd been seeing doctors for a couple years, had surgery, and was suffering a lot of pain and discomfort while he tried to recover. I mostly just listened and sympathized. Anyone who's been incarcerated knows what it's like trying to get medical attention — and the low-quality results.

There really was no way to encourage him, and it wasn't what he needed or wanted. He'd been through an ordeal and was clawing through the other side of it. It seemed he was trying to show me how hard he'd been fighting — like a war story. I basically *oooooed* and *aaaahhhhhed*, scrunched my brows, shook my head or nodded, and showed outrage at the right places in his story. He was simply sharing part of his life with me, because A) he has no real friends or family left alive on the outside, and B) he doesn't trust many people around us, and it can be dangerous to show vulnerability in here. But I am as close to family as he has, and it was safe for him to describe his pains and frustrations with me.

It seemed that being fully present, giving him my undivided attention, and listening was all he really needed and wanted.

### Exercise 3:

Think of a time when someone hurt your feelings. If you're doing this exercise for the first time, you might want to start with something small rather than the worst thing someone has ever done to you.

For this exercise, write a letter to the person that you do *not* send. It's important for this letter to be just for you. Feel free to destroy the letter after you write it.

In your letter, tell them what you feel, why they hurt your feelings, why you think they did what they did, and whatever else you want to say to them.

Then, after you've written your letter, answer these questions:

- How did they hurt your feelings?
- What kinds of things did you say in your letter?
- What do you need to say to *yourself* now to show yourself love, support, and compassion?
- Can you forgive this person now? Why, or why not?
- How does it feel now that you've written this letter?

Kat: I wrote to a friend from high school who really hurt my feelings during my senior prom. A week prior to prom, my boyfriend dumped me. But we had tickets to go to his prom *and* mine, so after getting advice from others, I decided to carry on with the plans. To me, it meant proving that I was mature and not letting the hurt from the breakup really get to me.

But at the after-party at someone's house, I took refuge in a bedroom and cried my eyes out. My friend came in and soothed me, tried to reassure me. After she left the room, I continued crying. It's like I couldn't stop it.

After a while, she came back and seemed impatient and disdainful, like I just needed to snap out of it and come join the group. I felt so hurt and betrayed because she was usually like our group's "mom," very nurturing, and I trusted her.

In my letter, I told her all of this. I couldn't figure out at the time why it was so important for me to come join the group. It felt good to tell her how I felt. I said, "This was not my best moment, obviously, but why couldn't you continue sympathizing with me?" I also said, "I felt *grief* for the loss of our friendship and who I thought you were....You have no idea what I was going through. Your callousness was strange and hurtful. I don't know how to forgive you or if I ever will."

Soon after I wrote that, I felt my heart soften, and I forgave her. I felt better by seeing things from a bigger perspective. "Friendships come and go," I wrote. "You didn't like me or weren't on my side for some reason. You didn't see things from my perspective. It's okay. I just hate we didn't keep being as good of friends as we were freshman year."

I also realized that I know *now* who my real friends were in high school. And even though this particular “friend” mistreated me, I do still miss her and what we had.

George: In my letter, I reminded this person of when I was 11 or 12, sitting on my stoop with no shirt on, hunched over to strap on my rollerblades. That's when he, a random stranger, strolled by, glanced down at me, and casually teased, “Boy, look at them rolls of *fat*!”

I was not actually fat or even chubby, but being hunched over like that did make finger-thick rolls on my belly. In the letter, I explained to him that though it seemed he was joking, somehow he also seemed serious and disgusted and cruel. I felt such shame and humiliation, thinking, “I'm FAT!”

I had never been self-conscious about my body before, but I did know that many people looked down on people who had a lot of fat. My mom never hid her contempt at my dad's obesity; neither did I, for that matter. Because of that man's words, in an instant I saw myself as FAT. Suddenly self-conscious, I put on a shirt and never again walked around without one on unless going swimming. Even then I felt that people found me unattractive and gross, and was extremely uncomfortable.

I said in the letter that it has taken me thirty years to learn that it's okay and *normal* to have fat. Nevertheless, I would give him the benefit of the doubt. I know he meant no harm. He was just teasing me. But even if he did mean to sting me, he could not have known the 30-year ripple effect of his barb. So, it's easy for me to forgive him.

It makes me sad to know that so many people wrestle with body image issues and self-consciousness because of our fat. It also makes me cautious about how I tease people, because I can't predict the damage I might accidentally inflict.