

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
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Good Grudge

“Ronna’s grandmother practiced anger. During the last thirty years of her life, she carried on a nonspeaking feud with Ronna’s mother. The feud continued even as her memory dimmed. One day, very near death, the old woman asked Ronna, ‘Do you recall why I’m angry at your mother’ Ronna *did* recall, but she decided it wouldn’t be helpful to bring it up again. ‘No,’ she said, ‘I don’t remember.’

“‘Neither do I,’ said [her] grandmother. ‘But I remember that I’m angry.’”¹

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Marcus Aurelius, the second century Roman emperor and philosopher, instructed generously, if hilariously, “Begin each day by telling yourself, Today, I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will, and selfishness — all ... due to the offenders’ ignorance of what is good and evil.” *Grudges happen.*

And Ronna’s grandmother notwithstanding, in the interests of not burying the lead, I’ll say there is such a thing as a good grudge. A good grudge can serve as the foundation of an appropriate boundary and it can make us more empathetic toward ourselves and others.

When asked for a definition of a grudge, a woman identified only as Hilary responds, “Oh, a grudge is when something from ages ago is Still a Thing — [with] capital letters. It might have happened years ago, but you know it’ll never be Not a Thing.”²

Sophie Hannah, a self-proclaimed champion grudge-holder and author of *How to Hold a Grudge*, writes, “When we speak of grudges, we use words like ‘hold,’ ‘harbor,’ ‘bear.’ ‘Hold’ suggests tenacity or clinging; ‘harbor’ implies something

¹ Sylvia Boorstein, *It’s Easier Than You Think*, p. 36

² Sophie Hannah, *How to Hold a Grudge*, p. 53

hunted and vulnerable to which we have offered refuge; ‘bear’ has connotations of pregnancy and motherhood. Is a grudge an unfortunate affliction or a prized possession?”³

Some of you will remember the Tamagotchi craze — little handheld, egg-shaped “digital pets” that originated in Japan and were one of the biggest toy fads in the 1990s and early 2000s. Someone tweeted from the *New York Times* account that grudges are “petty Tamagotchis in our emotional pocket,” possibly a nod to Reese Witherspoon’s character in the HBO show “Big Little Lies,” who says, “I love my grudges. I tend to them like little pets.”

And actress Anna Kendrick, Tweeting as herself, asks “Can I petition to make holding grudges an Olympic event? ’Cause I’ve been in training my whole life.”

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Journalist Tim Herrera writes, “One of my favorite party games is to ask a group of people this simple question: What is your oldest or most cherished grudge?”

“Without fail,” he continues, “every person unloads with shockingly specific, intimate detail about their grudge. Career slights (intentional or not), offhand-yet-cutting remarks, bitter friendship dissolutions; nothing is too small or petty when it comes to grudges.”⁴

Here are a few, culled from many, many responses. Just to be clear, none of these is mine:

“I have a terrible grudge toward a girl from school. When I was in the bathroom, she tore up my beautifully colored-in picture of Elmer the Elephant and threw it in the trash. We were around six years old at the time, so this is currently a twenty-year grudge.”

“[One morning,] my dad was awakened too early for his liking by a Salvation Army brass band. He held a grudge against the Salvation Army for decades, possibly until he died.”

³ Hannah, *op cit*, pp. 37-38

⁴ Jim Herrera, “Let go of your Grudges. They’re doing you no good,” 5/19/19, *The New York Times*. Please see [nytimes.com/2019/05/19/smarter-living/let-go-of-your-grudges-theyre-doing-you-no-good.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/19/smarter-living/let-go-of-your-grudges-theyre-doing-you-no-good.html)

Someone “described me as “so *Sound of Music*.”” It wasn’t a compliment. I’ve held it against them ever since.

And then there are the famous grudges:

Actress Debbie Reynolds’ husband, Eddie Fisher, divorced her to marry Elizabeth Taylor. Debbie Reynolds claimed to bear no grudge — and, indeed, she married Harry Karl the next year — but at Elizabeth Taylor’s funeral, she said, “No one could equal Elizabeth’s beauty and sexuality. Women liked her and men adored her — my husband included.”

Bette Davis and Joan Crawford did their best to work together harmoniously, but the attacks and counter-attacks between these Hollywood giants were legendary. Bette Davis installed a Coke vending machine on the set of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, allegedly because Joan Crawford’s late husband had been the CEO of Pepsi. In that scene where Bette Davis has to drag her across the floor, Joan Crawford had filled her pockets with rocks to make herself as heavy as possible. This went on and on. And when news came of Joan Crawford’s death, Bette Davis reacted, “You should never say bad things about the dead.... Joan Crawford is dead? Good.”

And, my favorite: A 2014 poll by YouGov concluded that 13 percent of Americans still feel negatively toward Great Britain as a nation, “because it tried to prevent the United States from becoming independent.” That was, of course, in 1776.⁵

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“We hold grudges when ... [remembering] a negative or hurtful incident ... feels important to us. Maybe we’re going to learn a lesson from it, or maybe it changes [us], or it made us feel such strong feelings when it happened that it would be personal-history vandalism to allow ourselves to forget it....”⁶ But, Sophie Hannah writes, “A grudge is, and should be, something lasting but not necessarily obtrusive or constant, and definitely not something rage-inducing, debilitating, or harmful.... Most of my grudges [are] things I [think] about very rarely.... Some I [enjoy] and [find] quite hilarious....

⁵ Thanks to Sophie Hannah for these!

⁶ Hannah, *op cit*, p. 53

“I wouldn’t want to be without any of my grudges,” she continues. “Each one is an important lesson I’ve learned from my own life story. None of them involves a shred of anger or unhappiness (though I might have felt those feelings in the immediate aftermath of the sparking incident), and I’ve never ... wreaked a terrible revenge....

“Any grudge that leads to ... revenge or even revenge-planning is a dangerous grudge and should be deactivated immediately.... Good grudges that harm neither the holder nor the grudgee, on the other hand, are part of a balanced and healthy psychological diet.”⁷

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Here’s a story about Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein nipping a grudge in the bud.

“I was late getting my boarding pass and therefore obligated to choose a middle seat on my ... flight to San Diego,” she writes. “As I squeezed by the woman in the aisle seat, I [saw] that the man in the window seat looked like a former linebacker.... He was holding his Kindle tidily in front of his chest, but even so, his arm lapped over into my space....

“My mind started grumbling to itself about every possible grumble-able aspect of my situation: my tardiness, my having forgotten that my ear buds were in the pocket of my jacket, now stowed in the overhead rack, the ‘ridiculous’ size of economy seats.... [Then] I remembered that the title of the talk I was scheduled to give that evening was, *Befriending Our Lives: Healing the Divisiveness in Ourselves, Our Relationships, Our Communities, and Our World*. I almost laughed out loud. Instead, I turned to the man on my left and said the magic word: ‘Hello!’

“In less than a minute, the conversation we started caught the interest of the woman on my right, who shut her laptop and joined in. We talked about our families and politics and books we were reading and I don’t know how it was for them, but ... I was a bit disappointed when we got to our gate and needed to go our separate ways because I was interested in all their ideas.”

Sylvia Boorstein concludes, “I think I’ll use that title for everything I teach this year.”⁸

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⁷ Sophie Hannah *op cit*, pp. 52-53

⁸ Sylvia Boorstein, “‘Hello’ can be a game-changer,” 3/8/19. Please see sylviaboorstein.com

A little humor might just help to turn it all around. And maybe in this example we can see that it's probably a lot easier to walk around in the world unburdened by grudges. When interrupting a grudge in the making isn't available to us, though, the next-best option is not to be undone by our grudges, but to see them as "valuable souvenirs from our past — ... important artifacts of our emotional and psychological history."⁹

Sophie Hannah writes, "... Negative emotions are unavoidable, especially in the immediate aftermath of someone having wronged or wounded us, but we don't have to hard-bake them into [a] grudge. We [can] allow ourselves to feel all the emotions that arise naturally within us — and then let them pass. Very soon, the grudge we are left with has ... nothing to do with negative emotions. It's simply a story we want to remember about a lesson learned; a story that has some significance for us.

"Forgiving somebody," she continues, "... does not mean forcing your thoughts about them, or your behaviors around them, to be exactly the same as they were before the grudge-sparking incident ... occurred. A lot of people think forgiveness ought to mean turning back the clock (impossible) and pretend the thing that happened never happened (possible, but silly....).

"We've all heard someone say something like, 'Oh, I'm not angry anymore — in fact, looking back, I think it's hilarious — but I'll never trust [so-and-so] again,' or 'I'm totally over it, but I certainly wouldn't put [them] back on my Christmas card list.'"¹⁰ This is the best way to hold a grudge: as a reminder of good boundaries.

On the other hand, we've all met people — or are people — whose elementary school music teacher told to mouth the words when singing. But to hold onto that, and not to sing...?! Sylvia Boorstein overheard this lunch table conversation at a conference: The person passing up the vegetables said, "When I was a child, my mother forced me to eat vegetables." The person next to her said, "That was a long time ago."¹¹ Bad grudge!

⁹ Hannah, *op cit*, p. 41

¹⁰ Hannah, *op cit*, p. 50-51

¹¹ Sylvia Boorstein, *Invisible Signposts in the Mind*, 2/9/16. Please see sylviaboorstein.com

In the end, journalist Tim Herrera wonders what holding onto grudges really gets us. He posed the question on Twitter, asking if people had ever given up on a grudge, and if so, how it had made them feel. Here's a selection of responses:

“Yeah, pretty much most of them since entering my 30s. It feels cleansing to free up the brain space.”

“Literally not one!”

“I felt neutral. Like I just couldn't be bothered anymore. But I didn't feel relieved or anything; just indifferent.”

“Great! Really free.”

“Only after getting my revenge.”

“Liberated. Most of the time, if they've got my hatred, they kind of own me.”¹²

English actress Anne Grey says, “... It matters when people harm us. Acting out of love, wisdom, and compassion for ourselves and others is the key to a better world.”

Beloved spiritual companions,

Grudges happen.

A good grudge is an important lesson.
Let it serve as the foundation of an appropriate boundary
and make us more empathetic.

But if we are holding, harboring, bearing a grudge,
say from 1776,
we might consider letting it go.

Or just ... saying hello.

Amen.

¹² Herrera, *op cit*