

When Your Past Is Hurting Your Present

Sue Augustine



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Chapter 1

Yesterday

It is not the experience of today that drives us mad; it is the remorse or bitterness for something which happened yesterday.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!*

ISAIAH 43:18-19

YESTERDAY IS HISTORY. WE KNOW THAT. No one has to tell us there's no going back. We cannot relive any part of it or change one thing about what has already happened, nor can we make it go away. Yet even though we don't intend to dwell on the past, most of us continue to carry at least some fragment of yesterday in our hearts. With all its unique sorrows and joys, whether it's helped us to grow or not, and if we've learned much or nothing, our suffering has shaped who we are. We have been changed by it. We would not be who we are today had we not fallen or been pushed down, and learned to pick ourselves up again and again.

Consciously or not, past events can play over in our minds much like a video on auto-rewind. On one hand, there are some “good ole days” of yesteryear we’d return to in a heartbeat. On the other hand, we are haunted by experiences from ages ago that have left us dealing with heartache, remorse, bitterness, or humiliation. If you are like so many of us women, you’re attempting to go through life’s journey carrying around some pretty heavy baggage from days gone by.

Whether your bags are packed with resentment, regrets, fear, anger, unforgiveness, or doubt, my guess is you know intuitively that hauling all of that paraphernalia around everywhere you go is dragging you down—mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Whether your pain is close to the surface or hidden deep within your heart, what happened yesterday holds you back from becoming all you were intended to be today—crippling your hopes and dreams for a victorious tomorrow.

At times, it may seem as though you and your past are one. Sometimes we can fail to differentiate between what has happened to us and who we are today. If you have a hard time getting beyond that damaging mind-set, let me encourage you right now. *You are not your past!* Although you are changed and shaped by past experiences, who you were yesterday does not control the person you have the potential to become tomorrow. In fact, who you were when you began reading this book is not who you can be once you’ve finished. Events of yesterday do not have to govern today. Your past does not dictate your future. The time has come to lay that baggage down and leave behind all the struggling and striving. You can be set free as you journey forward into a balanced, healthy, and rewarding future.

In an old story, a man trudged wearily along the road, straining under a heavy burden on his shoulders. A pickup truck overtook him, and the driver stopped to offer him a ride. The man was relieved and happily accepted the offer to sit in the back of the truck. But after he climbed in, he continued to carry his load on his shoulders. When the driver arrived at his destination, he pulled over, walked to the back of

the truck, and asked his passenger why he had not laid his burden down. The man replied, “I felt it was enough that you would carry me. I could not expect you to carry my burden, too.” What a wasted effort! There was no need for him to continue hanging on to this heavy load. You and I often continue bending beneath the weight of what happened yesterday—tormented and plodding wearily through the present and on into the future.

Lightening the Load

Let’s start now to lighten your load as we travel together for the next three weeks through these chapters. For the best results, use the journal and pen I recommended you keep with the book to record your own personal “ahas” and insights as they occur to you. Find a comfortable spot, get cozy, snuggle up with a cup of your favorite tea or coffee, light a candle, and envision me there with you. On our voyage, we’ll be discovering 21 powerful and practical ways to change habit patterns and let go of this heavy load we needlessly lug around. Freedom from the past is our destination. Our ultimate goal is liberation from anything that hinders our progress, keeps us from reaching our God-given potential, holds us back from realizing our dreams, and stops us from fulfilling God’s purpose for us here on this earth.

So be prepared. From this moment on, your life may never be the same. You are on the threshold of a brand-new day, a bright tomorrow, and possibly an entirely transformed life. I believe there are no coincidences—it’s no accident you have picked up this book. Chances are there is something in your heart right now, telling you it’s time to leave your past behind because there’s a magnificent future waiting up ahead.

A familiar adage declares, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” Be on the lookout for your teachers—you never know in what intriguing form they will appear. My prayer is, because you are ready to relinquish the harmful aspects of your past and move beyond

all that has crippled your dreams thus far, the Holy Spirit will be your teacher, using the principles in this book to play an even larger role and fulfill a greater purpose in your life than either you or I can begin to imagine. The Bible describes a God, “*who by His mighty power at work within us, is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of—infinately beyond our highest prayers, desires, thoughts, or hopes*” (Ephesians 3:20 TLB). This moment in time could be your turning point.

Do You “Have a Past”?

For starters, what if I were to ask you if you have a past? Sounds scandalous, doesn’t it? Of course you have a past. We all do. Your past includes everything that has happened to you right up until yesterday. Minute by minute, the past is being created. It’s always catching up to you. Just when you think you’ve got yesterday taken care of, another “past” creeps up, and you must decide how you will deal with it.

When your past is hurting your present, it’s nearly always caused by one of two things:

1. remorse or regret over something done by you
2. bitterness or fear caused by something done to you

In other words, either you’ve been a victim of circumstances and external conditions beyond your control—your environment, your upbringing, the actions of others, religious or cultural customs, societal traditions, or natural causes—or you are experiencing the consequences of your own choices, decisions, behaviors, and actions. The past that’s hindering you now could be something as recent and clear-cut as words spoken in anger to your child yesterday that you wish you could take back, or the hurt you are feeling because of the gruff way your husband treated you in front of company the other night.

That past may be further back, such as last week when you abruptly lost your temper at work, an embarrassing moment you endured at the

dinner party a month ago, or dreadful memories of the times you were teased in school for being overweight, awkward, slow, or shy. A hurtful past for you may be as deep-rooted and complex as the demeaning and soul-destroying things you were told while growing up, the abuse you suffered as a child, an adulterous affair that ruined your marriage, the shame of having to declare bankruptcy, the dismay of losing your job, or a horrible accident that took the life of someone you loved. In any case, hurts from your past can linger, coming back out of the blue to interrupt your present life and rob you of joy without any warning.

From interviewing hundreds of women internationally, I am convinced each one of us has something from yesterday we wish we could erase or recreate because its lingering regrets and disappointments are having an adverse effect on us today. If you have ever fallen flat on your face, totally blown it, or felt your life has been botched up completely by external circumstances or other people, then you know the past can still be affecting your present. If you've ever put your foot in your mouth—or, like me, if you do it often enough that you need to get yourself some chocolate shoes (my friend reminds me that a closed mouth gathers no foot!)—or humiliated yourself in some embarrassing situation ages ago, you might still be mortified today whenever the memory of it comes flooding back to haunt you. Whether you've been the victim of another's inappropriate, immoral, or illegal actions, or you are living with the consequences of your own mistakes or flawed choices, the past may still be hurting you.

Moving Out of the Rut

Our past consists of the good, the bad, and the ugly, and the ideal thing to do is savor the best and forget the rest. It's probable you are yearning to do just that, but even though common sense says it's simple, it's not always easy. Maybe you're ready but don't quite know how to get started. It could be fear, doubt, or anxiety holding you back. I can tell you I know firsthand what that is like. The things I was afraid of kept me stuck in a rut for years. But by implementing the same principles in this

book, I was able to get beyond those fears and see my life dramatically transformed.

When I think about my past life compared with today, the contrast seems incredible. My former existence was filled with apprehension, loneliness, and despair. Yesterday I was a victim. Today I am a survivor. Yesterday I was shy, insecure, and pessimistic, and made poor choices for myself. Today, I am confident and feel assured I can walk hand in hand with God through any trial or adversity life puts in my path. Yesterday, I endured domestic violence and lived each day with a dire sense of hopelessness. Now, I am healed and able to go out and encourage others to make positive choices that will transform their lives.

My dilemma began like that of so many other young girls. With extremely low self-esteem, I had virtually no confidence, doubted my abilities, had little faith in my potential, and questioned my personal worth. In school, if I achieved good grades I attributed them to luck. If my marks were poor, I took the blame and believed it was because I lacked intelligence. Although I made friends easily at first, I often sabotaged those friendships because I was convinced that once someone really got to know me, the relationship wouldn't last anyway. When things were going well for me, I believed I must have simply been at the right place at the right time. When they weren't going well, I assumed I had brought it on myself. It's not surprising I found it difficult to accept any compliments, acknowledgment, or words of appreciation, and longed for the approval of others.

The choices I made at that time reflected my poor self-image. While in my teens, I attracted a man with the same low self-esteem. In spite of his volatile temper and an extremely rocky dating relationship, I married him right after high school. I still remember standing at the back of the church, a teenage bride about to walk down the aisle, when my Dad leaned over to whisper, "Sue, it's not too late. You don't have to do this. You can change your mind." My parents knew what a terrible mistake I was making.

Within weeks, I knew it, too. We were both young and emotionally

immature, and did not have the skills to handle the stress and pressure of a new marriage. Arguments escalated into abuse, and for the next several years I was a battered wife. Much of the time, I had to creatively cover my bruises, swollen lips, and black eyes with cosmetics. I was hospitalized with more serious injuries on numerous occasions. Some of what I endured included a ruptured kidney, fractured jaw, and broken nose. Because I did not give in easily but fought back, the episodes intensified. Eventually I realized I was turning into a person even I couldn't like, let alone love or respect. My life eventually became a blur of police sirens, doctors' reports, hospital visits, and family court appearances. Yet I continued to go back to the relationship time and time again, desperately wanting it to work and hoping against odds that our relationship would somehow improve.

Why I Hesitated to Leave the Past

You might wonder what drew me to that marriage in the first place and kept me returning to such an explosive and harmful situation. Often during interviews and at women's retreats where I share my story, I get asked why I stayed. If you have been in a similar situation, I am certain you will be able to relate. If you have not, it may be difficult to understand. Many of my audience members vow they would leave after the very first incident. One thing I have discovered through my own experience is we cannot make a judgment until we are actually in the situation. We really don't know how we would respond, only how we plan to or hope we would.

Besides, each situation is unique in so many ways. Some women I've talked with have had the good sense and courage to get help after the first incident. I stayed, attempting to handle it on my own, for a number of reasons. For one thing, my life wasn't bad all the time. As with most difficult relationships, there were good times mixed in, which sometimes gave false hope that the situation would improve. As well, I had learned from necessity to make a life for myself within the marriage, with simple pleasures and innocent delights—designing and

sewing my own clothes, baking bread, doing crafts with the children, spending time with friends, oil painting, and reading good books. And like the weather forecast, “cloudy with sunny breaks,” there were just enough intervals of sunshine—love, passion, laughter, and joy—in our home to keep the hope alive.

Also, I took my wedding vows seriously and was committed to making the marriage work in spite of what I mistakenly felt was merely a relationship problem. I saw the abuse as being the “worse” part of *for better or worse*. Further, in those days (the late 1960s), separation and divorce brought disgrace to families and were not openly discussed in society.

Aside from that, this man was my childhood sweetheart and the only man I’d really been close to. Although we’d had a troubled dating relationship since I was 13 years old, and even though I often witnessed the consequences of his fierce temper, especially when he became jealous, I somehow had a warped and distorted view of these outbursts of rage. I saw them as a form of extreme passion and intense love, resulting from his jealousy and the fear that he might lose me. (With my own low self-esteem and my longing to be needed, this made sense to me.)

I believed also that, once we had a family, all this would change. Because my husband had had a difficult childhood, I felt he simply needed to feel secure within a loving family and home of his own. Add to that the religious teachings I had received growing up and the deeply imbedded beliefs from childhood that couples marry *’til death do us part*, and it may become a little easier to see why I was willing to tolerate this behavior. I saw these outbursts as being a type of sickness. I was ready to fill the role of nurse. It didn’t seem appropriate to leave someone who was not well. Of course, there were always his promises that the cruelty and violence would never happen again, and I desperately needed to believe that was true. Yet deep down inside, I knew intuitively this was not the case. Eventually, I had to resign myself to the fact that, should I choose to stay, my options were limited...and this was going to be my future.

Being abused by a loved one sets up two conflicting natural instincts: the impulse to hide out in what should be a safe and secure environment (the family home), and the gut feeling to want to flee a dangerous situation. Naturally, with the fear of the unknown, I was torn. Most of my days were spent learning new ways to cope with my former husband's fits of rage in order to survive the predictable bumps and bruises. Periodically I tolerated nearly unbearable episodes of abuse. Numerous times I was strangled—on several occasions, I was left for dead.

My physical constitution was being damaged by all the stress I was enduring, and eventually I became infected with a rare blood disease that nearly took my life. My own emotions became so out of control that I said and did things that were out of character for me, and that made me feel responsible for the resulting violence. Deep in my heart and soul, I accepted all blame for most of the incidents and went on a perpetual journey to improve myself.

After we had our two little girls, there were times when the only thing that got me through the night was having those chubby little arms wrapped around my neck, pudgy cheeks pressed up against mine, and precious toddler voices whispering, "It's all right, Mommy. Everything will be okay." But I knew that it wasn't going to be okay. I knew I had to make changes—if not for myself, then to protect my little girls.

The beautiful marriage and family life I dreamed of as a young girl had turned into a veritable nightmare. We were heading for divorce. It took several years before I finally found the courage and wisdom to make the break from the past that brought me to where I am now—a happily remarried mother of two and grandmother of four, traveling the world as an author and conference and retreat speaker. What a difference between yesterday and today!

Your Time for Renewal

Now I am free from the past and able to share with you the steps I took to recovery, with complete healing and total forgiveness. You may

not be in a state of crisis as severe as mine. Or maybe your situation makes mine pale in comparison. In any case, each of us must deal with some heartache, grief, or other stumbling block from our past that hinders our future. There is a way to stand tall, take charge, and refuse to let the past cripple your dreams and hold you back from living a victorious life. Whatever challenges you are now facing, I want to offer you the hope that things can improve. I want to bring you comfort and encouragement during your time of renewal.

There are so many variables when it comes to identifying elements from yesterday that continue to haunt us today. Perhaps you can identify with some of these heartbreaking circumstances, traumatic events, and difficult situations others have shared with me. They have endured these over the years and, in some cases, continue to struggle with them today:

- rejection in childhood
- being teased or bullied in school
- feeling inadequate around your family
- having a domineering or alcoholic parent
- feeling like a failure or an outcast
- suffering abuse of any kind (emotional, mental, physical, verbal, or sexual)
- being an unwed mother
- giving up a child for adoption
- having an abortion
- living with a demanding or controlling spouse
- being deceived by a loved one
- undergoing separation or divorce
- suffering miscarriage or the death of a child
- enduring the loss of a loved one—a family member or friend
- suffering from lost dreams and crushed expectations
- attempting suicide
- having an unfaithful spouse
- being raped

- going through an adulterous affair
- living with drug or alcohol addiction
- performing criminal activity
- losing a job or home
- being falsely accused of something
- being stood up at the altar
- declaring bankruptcy
- feeling like a failure as a parent
- going through depression and hopelessness
- letting someone else down
- being abandoned
- suffering betrayal
- being robbed

These are just a few of the experiences that can bring heartache and cause us to get stuck in the past. Most of us have experienced some of these tough times. Nearly everyone I spoke with could identify with at least one, and in many cases, several of the above. In some strange way, it is comforting to know that we are not alone in our suffering. But now, the past is not yours anymore. You have today and tomorrow ahead of you.

How thankful I am for the miraculous way I have been so completely healed of the past! How glad I am that I have this awesome opportunity to share that with you! Although I can still remember what happened and how much it hurt at the time, the memories are merely scars. And as a dear friend once pointed out to me, scars don't hurt. They're what's left behind after the injury is healed. With each scar, I can recall exactly how, when, and where the wound happened, and even how much it hurt at the time, but the pain is gone. These scars don't hurt anymore. Come with me now out of a hurtful past and into a place of complete healing, restoration, and total renewal!

I appreciate what Ralph Waldo Emerson said when he very wisely encouraged,

Finish every day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and some absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense. This day is all that is good and fair. It is too dear, with its hopes and invitations, to waste a moment on the yesterdays.

Hold on to the promise of hope for tomorrow. You can be free from the past—at last!