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Grudges Can Be Great!

'People believe that in order to live a happy life that they enjoy, they have to be delusional and sugar-coat everything. They pretend that bad things aren't bad, that mean things aren't mean, that people are good for them who really aren't. It's better to be realistic, and find a way to cope with the negative stuff. Don't sugar-coat anything – recognise the problem and deal with it. People think that to forgive and forget is the healthiest thing. It's not.'

Phoebe Jones, age 16

Secretly we all hold grudges, but most of us probably think we shouldn't, and many of us deny that we do. To bear a grudge is too negative, right? Instead, we should forgive and move on?

Wrong.

Actually, it's not exactly wrong. It's kind of right, but in the wrong way. Confused? Then read on and you'll soon understand what I mean.

Of course it's essential to think positive if you want to live a happy life, but even more crucial is how you get to

that positive. Denying your negative emotions and experiences in the hope that they will disappear from memory and leave you feeling and thinking exactly as you did before they happened will lead only to more pain, conflict and stress in the long term.

So what should you do instead? The short answer is: you should follow the Grudge-fold Path.

‘What the hell does that mean?’ I hear you ask. Read on and you will soon know. For the time being, though, I’ll give you a different short answer (which is actually the same answer but expressed normally rather than in weird jargon I’ve invented): you should hold a grudge, and *then* forgive and move on, *while still holding your grudge*. Does that sound like a contradiction? The mission of this book is to explain why it’s not, and to lay out in simple steps what it means to follow the Grudge-fold Path.

Am I seriously going to encourage you to hold grudges? Yes, I am. And I’m going to start by asking you to consider these questions: what if everyone who has ever told you, ‘Don’t hold grudges because it’s bad for you and not very nice’ was wrong? What if our grudges are good for us? What if they’re the psychological equivalent of leafy green vegetables that nourish and strengthen us? What if we don’t have to accept the traditional definition of the word ‘grudge’ – the one with negative connotations – but can instead create a better and more accurate definition that takes into account the full power of grudges? What if grudges can ward off danger? What if we could use them to help ourselves and others?

I’ve got some great news! It’s not a case of ‘What if?’ All of these things are true. Holding grudges doesn’t have to fill

us with hate or make us bitter and miserable. If you approach the practice of grudge-holding in an enlightened way, you'll find it does the opposite: it makes you *more* forgiving. Your grudges can help you to honour your personal emotional landmarks, and you can distil vital life lessons from them – about your value system, your hopes, needs and priorities – that will act as a series of stepping stones, pointing you in the right direction for the best possible future.

Read on if you'd like to learn how to hold great grudges for a happier and more enlightened life . . . or even if you think my theory is probably wrong (I'll convince you by the end of this book – you see if I don't!) but you still quite fancy reading some entertaining and occasionally jaw-dropping true grudge stories.

The Grudge-holding Type

Some people admit, proudly and happily, to being the grudge-holding type. Others don't. When I announced on Twitter that I was writing this book, the reactions were varied and fascinating. Author Joanna Cannon said, 'I feed and water my grudges as if they were small, exotic plants, and I CANNOT WAIT to read this.' Another woman, Jules, said, 'Me and my sister specialise in "hold againsts". Our hold againsts are legion.'

I suspect that Joanna, Jules and I relate to our grudges in a similar way: we enjoy them and are proud of them and, since we feel that they have positive value for us, we see no reason to pretend we don't have them or to try to get rid of

them. Personally, I don't believe it's possible to mix with other human beings on a regular basis and not collect some grudges – and it's not desirable either, unless you're one of those lucky people like Rachel, who responded online to the news of this book with the comment, 'I am a hopeless grudge-keeper. I struggle on for an hour at most. I think I'm basically too lazy. I hope this isn't a life-threatening condition.'

My son shares Rachel's laziness in relation to grudges. If someone is horrible to him, he just wants it to be over – not only because it's unpleasant but also, and mainly, because any kind of problem, anything that's made him angry or upset, is something he's fundamentally not interested in. All he wants is to stop thinking about it – not in a denial kind of way but in a 'who even cares? Just go away' way. Unpleasantness, the second it's over, rolls off him like rain-drops off the waxed bonnet of a car.

I'm different. I've always wanted any present-moment meanness or poor treatment of me (or anyone else) to stop so that I can *start* thinking about it – because what could be more gripping, right? Is the person who did me this particular wrong dangerous, or was it a one-off? What should I think about them from now on? How should I treat them? Every time, it's a mystery that needs to be solved, and I'm a mystery addict. (This probably explains why my day job is writing crime fiction and my hobby is reading it.)

My daughter is exactly like me. She gets very upset if someone is mean, spiteful, neglectful or unfair to her or anybody she cares about – far more upset than my son does – but she *is* interested in nastiness and all the bad things people do, because they're part of human behaviour, which is the main thing in life that fascinates her. She likes to analyse

it, and to try to make it fit into a coherent overarching narrative. So do I. I think this explains why my daughter and I are dedicated and passionate grudge-holders, while my son can't be bothered and genuinely doesn't seem to have any grudges at all.

My son's way of not holding grudges is, I suspect, the only healthy and harmless way to hold no grudges. In grudge-holding terms, I see my son as a tree trunk with no concentric circles in it. Those grudge rings simply aren't there – that's just how that particular tree has grown, and that's fine.

What Would a Grudge Look Like?

During the researching and writing of this book, I thought a lot about what grudges might look like if they had a physical form. I started to picture grudges as if they were concrete things. A ring in the trunk of a tree was the first image that came to mind; then a cactus (lots of spikes), then a small square box wrapped in beautiful coloured paper with a bow around it. I asked people to send me their drawings and ideas about what grudges might look like. I was sent two pictures that I loved. One was a round red ball or sphere cupped in someone's hands. Words and phrases were dangling from the fingers of the hands: things like 'broken hearts', 'forgotten birthdays' and 'unfair dismissal'. The other was a kind of cloud-shaped grumpy grudge creature. (You can see both on the 'How to Hold a Grudge' page of my website!)

I suspect that the person who drew the grumpy-little-

creature grudge would feel and think differently about grudges than me, given that the image I finally fixed on was a gift-wrapped box. I didn't ask my son to draw me a picture, but if I had, I'm sure he'd have rolled his eyes and said, 'Nah. CBA.' That stands for 'Can't be arsed.' Of course he can't – he is fundamentally not interested in grudges.

That's absolutely fine. I'm not even going to cut him out of my will or accuse him of being no son of mine or anything like that. And it's fine for my son – and anyone like him in this respect, anyone whose mind spontaneously and effortlessly ejects all bad things the moment they're over because they find them as dull as I find anecdotes about the history of the steam engine (my fault – I'm not blaming steam engines) – to hold no grudges at all.

But what if, like most people, you have a mind that still remembers every detail of the time your supposedly best friend told your deepest secret to the postman without permission? What if you find yourself secretly thinking 'Fuck you' every time your cousin comes to visit, because she once fed chocolate to your dog and made him ill? If you're that sort of person – and I believe most of us are – then trying not to hold grudges when all your instincts are screaming, 'No, really, I'm pretty sure this is grudge-worthy' is a very bad idea.

'That sort of person'? What sort do I mean?

Why, an ordinary person, of course. A perfectly regular person of the everyday kind. Regular, ordinary people get upset when people upset us. We feel betrayed when those we trust betray us. We get angry when we're wronged, slandered, poked in the eye with a sharp stick or unreasonably imposed upon. Denial or repression of our natural grudge-holding

instinct is bad for us and it's bad for the world. (Chapter 6 of this book explains why, but please don't skip ahead – that's an author–reader grudge waiting to happen right there. You need to read the book in the right order, or the arguments won't make sense.)

Trainer, mentor and therapist Anne Grey agrees that trying to suppress our emotions is not advisable. She said: 'It's a natural response to feel emotions like hurt, sadness, anger. Allow the intense emotion to be there without judging it.'

Many of us have been trained from a young age to think that holding grudges is a petty, compassionless and horrible thing to do. This means that as we go through life and every so often find ourselves on the receiving end of treatment that's somewhere on the shoddy-to-heinous spectrum, we are ill-equipped to deal with it in the best and wisest way. One of the responses to my announcement of this book was: 'Ooh! How does this grudge-holding work?! I think of them as mean, grim obstacles to moving on and letting go!' I loved this response, because it neatly set out for me the challenge I faced: convincing people who've been trained to think that holding grudges is a negative and harmful thing to do that a) it's not, it's the opposite, because b) they've been thinking about grudges, and using the word, in the wrong way all these years. The purpose of this book is to give you a more psychologically accurate definition to work with – one that will make you a) think about grudges in a different and more optimistic way for ever and b) want to start collecting your own.

Once I had committed to writing this book, I asked people

to send me their grudges if they wanted to. So many people I asked looked mildly alarmed and said, ‘I’m not sure I have any. I don’t think I hold grudges.’

‘Oh, okay, that’s fine,’ I said. ‘So let me ask you a different question: is there anyone who you feel differently about now, because of something they once did?’ At that point, almost everyone perked up and said, ‘Oh, yes! My mother wore white to my wedding’, or ‘My stepmom bought the coat I wanted . . . and then never wore it’, or ‘A girl from the B team deliberately tripped me up and injured me so that she could get my place on the A team.’

Over and over again, people told me they didn’t hold grudges and couldn’t think of any at all, then went on to offer something that they claimed wasn’t a grudge but that, according to my definition, was *exactly what a grudge should be*.

We’re going to look in more detail about what grudges are, aren’t and should be in Chapters 2 and 3. For now, all I will say is: if you think of grudges as ‘mean, grim obstacles to moving on’, then when someone asks you if you have any, you’re obviously not going to leap up enthusiastically, hand in the air, and say, ‘Yes! Yes, I do! Let me give you a full, walkaround tour of my grudge collection!’ Who wants to think of themselves as mean or grim? I’m going to show you that grudges are protective, life-enhancing and fun. I hope that once you’ve read this book, you will understand that sending yourself and your loved ones out into the world with a strong grudge-growing ability is as essential as putting on a helmet and not drinking four bottles of vodka before getting onto your motorbike and zooming off down the motorway. Trust me: it’s true.

And now I want to ask you a question: if someone were

to ask you to name your top five grudges, could you? I could, though I'd probably come back ten minutes later to announce that I'd already revised the order, and numbers three and four had swapped places in my chart. I might also try to start a discussion (because, yes, I *am* that kind of weird person) about what 'top' means, in this context. Most serious? Most enjoyable to hold?

Wait – enjoyable? Some of you will be wondering, 'How could holding a grudge ever be enjoyable? How could it be anything but bitter, hateful and corrosive?' If that's what you're thinking, then you've come to the right place. You are the very person I had in mind when I first became aware of a burning urge to write this book, because you're the person I need to convince that, handled correctly, grudges can be good for you – and not only good, but great. If, on the other hand, you're grinning and saying to yourself, 'Of *course* grudges can be fun – who could doubt it?' then you are my kindred spirit and I've written this book for you too (and you, especially, will love it. Unless you enjoy your grudges for the wrong reasons, which we'll come to in due course).

Let me start with a grudge story that will always have a special place in my heart, for a very particular reason . . .