

## The Frenemy Factor

Friends. Enemies.

Put them together and you get ...“Frenemies.”

A frenemy can be an enemy disguised as a friend. It can also be a close acquaintance who is a competitor or rival.

Think of Batman and Catwoman in DC Comics.

Frenemies.

These relationships can be mutually beneficial, but they are also highly competitive and saturated with risk and mistrust. For Frenemies you need only look at our Nation’s capital and the politicians.

The Bible is filled with frenemies, starting with the book of Genesis. Think of Adam/Eve. Cain/Abel (they’re brothers and — one would think, ipso facto, friends — and yet one turns out to be the enemy of the other). Abram/Lot. Sarah/Hagar. Esau/Jacob. Jacob/Laban. Now Joseph and his brothers.

Notice how often these frenemies are members of the same family. I can identify with that as the middle child of seven. I loved my siblings but there were days!

Thomas Mann, a minister in North Carolina, begins an article in a biblical journal by saying, “Genesis is a book about dysfunctional families.”

Amen to that.

Families seem to breed frenemies.

The frenemy factor becomes especially evident near the end of Genesis, when the 12 sons of Jacob fall into a bitter rivalry. Jacob loved one of his sons, 17-year-old Joseph, “more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves.”

You can easily imagine how this favoritism went over with Joseph’s brothers. Genesis tells us that “when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.”

No brotherly love in this situation.

They were frenemies.

This antagonism boils over one day, when father Jacob sends Joseph to some distant fields, to see how his brothers are doing with the flock. The brothers see Joseph from a distance and immediately conspire to kill him. But even within their ranks, they cannot come up with a unanimous opinion — brother Reuben convinces them not to kill him, but merely throw him into a pit. So, they grab Joseph, strip him of his precious robe with sleeves and throw him into a waterless pit.

Then (as families are prone to do) they sit down to eat.

As the brothers are munching their lunch, they see a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, carrying a load of gum, balm and resin to Egypt. Brother Judah says, "Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." The brothers nod in agreement, draw Joseph out of the pit, and sell him to the Ishmaelites for 20 pieces of silver. And the traders take Joseph off to Egypt.

What drives this exchange is the power of the frenemy factor. Joseph was their own flesh, but his brothers hated him. They were part of the same family, but resentful and competitive. Selling Joseph into slavery made perfect sense because their father loved him more than all of them, and they despised him because of this.

Hate can make us do some outrageous things.

According to psychologists who have studied the social science behind hatred have found evidence that people are hard-wired to judge each other. Researchers at the University of New Hampshire have concluded that the ancients were making personality judgments as far back as 1,000 B.C. The Greek philosopher Theophrastus identified 30 personality types, some of which were determined to be totally undesirable.

That pretty much sums up the opinion of the brothers toward Joseph: totally undesirable.

We know this because we do this. We make judgments of people all the time — coworkers, neighbors, classmates, strangers, friends, enemies, frenemies. Often, our judgments are harshest toward the people closest to us because we resent or envy the advantages they seem to have over us. We label them totally undesirable and try to knock them down in order to build ourselves up. "Hate can feel so good," says journalist Monica Hesse. "It's pure and clarifying." But it's also "a fast-burning emotion, and the residue it leaves is dark. Deep down, we know it's corrosive."

Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed. "Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity. Hate destroys a man's sense of values and his objectivity. It causes him to describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful, and to confuse the true with the false and the false with the true."

So, what can we do to quench the destructive flames of hatred? Water won't do it, nor will foam, dry powder or carbon dioxide. We cannot blow it out, nor can we smother it.

The only fire extinguisher that will work on hate is forgiveness.

Joseph discovers this many years later, after he has risen to power in Egypt. In a time of great famine throughout the region, people from many neighboring countries come to Egypt to buy grain — including 10 of Joseph's brothers. They do not recognize Joseph, who is now governor over all the land. But Joseph recognizes them, and initially he treats them like strangers, speaks harshly to them and accuses them of being spies.

Can you blame him? After all, they had stripped him, thrown him into a pit and sold him into slavery.

The frenemy factor had definitely tipped toward enemy.

Joseph decides to test them by asking them to return home with a load of grain and fetch their youngest brother Benjamin. He says, "Bring your youngest brother to me, and I shall know that you are not spies but honest men." They do this, and then Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, saying to them, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

Joseph discovers that there is a power at work in his life that is bigger and stronger than hatred. Although the brothers clearly intended to do harm to Joseph, God intended it for good — in order to preserve the people of Israel.

God transformed an act of hatred into love. He took a horrible misdeed and used it to start a chain of events that would save a large number of people. And when Joseph sees that this has happened, he quenches the hatred between himself and his brothers with an act of forgiveness. Joseph realizes that the rule of God is much more important than his own rule as the governor of Egypt.

Through the power of God, the frenemy factor suddenly tips toward friendship and wholeness.

Forgiveness can work as a fire extinguisher today as well. We can use it when a coworker undermines us, a friend disappoints us, a classmate gossips about us or a romantic partner hurts us. The truth about the offense must be named, such as Joseph did when he said to his brothers, "You intended to do harm to me." But it is equally important to release them from the offense, as Joseph did when he spoke kindly to them and said, "Have no fear." To tell the truth and release from guilt — these are the actions that can douse the flames of hatred.

Forgiveness is usually private, but it can be very public. In June of 2009, the city of Detroit was focused on an amazing performance in a baseball game between the Tigers and Indians. A pitcher for the Tigers, Armando Galarraga, was throwing a perfect game and needed just one more out to become the 21st pitcher in the history of Major League Baseball to pitch one. Then Jim Joyce, an experienced 54-year-old umpire, made a horrible mistake. He incorrectly declared that a batter from the Indians was safe at first base, ruining Galarraga's perfect game.

The crowd at the ballpark began to boo, and for a moment Jim Joyce was the most hated man in Detroit. And it was not just baseball fans who despised him — Joyce hated himself. "I did not get the call correct," said the ump, with tears in his eyes. "I took a perfect game away from that kid."

The frenemy factor was tipping toward enemy, but it did not stay there for long. Joyce had made a bad mistake, but he was not a bad guy. He apologized to Armando Galarraga - the pitcher accepted his apology and the two men hugged.

Suddenly, the flames of hatred were extinguished, and two potential enemies were reconciled. Baseball fans discovered that hate is not the only emotion that feels pure and clarifying — forgiveness does as well.

Galarraga and Joyce discovered this. As did Joseph and his brothers. We can do the same.

Forgiveness has the power to turn frenemies into friends.