

## Economic Prospect

### The Fifth Letter

#### On Memorial Day What Will We Remember?

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Edward, an 80-year-old man is in such good health that his children and friends throw a party for him at a son's home. At the party there is time when five letters are read. The first letter was written 30 years earlier by his mother, now deceased, who loved Edward very much. The second letter was from a close friend who is in fact still alive and tells of how Ed often helped him and actually rescued him twice over the decades. The third letter is from a former business partner who admired Edward's ability to close the deal with clients; Ed really cared for them. The fourth letter is from his only daughter who admired her father though she acknowledged some painful times.

The final letter is from his former wife. They were divorced when they were 50. Her letter is brief, but she let it be known that Edward was not the same man at home that he presented himself to be. After raising the children, she was through. The anger may (or may not) be gone, but she still feels abandoned and uncared for: the scars remain.

Which letter tells the truth? They all are true. Which letter do you think has the most credibility? If you were Edward, who's letter would you think told the whole story best? Let's ask ourselves: who's letter would we like to have read at our 80<sup>th</sup> birthday? Does discovering the real Edward require all five letters? Or....

**Add a wrinkle: Edward has grandchildren**, of course, and they, in turn, will someday want to tell their children about Edward. Will they bury the fifth letter? The grandchildren all knew their grandmother, Edward's former wife. They knew her a long time. A couple of the grandchildren are especially sympathetic to her.

Here are the options: a) Destroy all five letters. After all what do we know about people many generations back? Nothing. b) Keep the two most positive letters...or c) keep all of them. But what about d) just keeping the fifth letter? It is an accurate part of the picture, but is it right; is it fair; is it honorable to the family to limit the heritage of Edward to just that fifth letter?

**I think you can see where this is going.** America is an aging nation and there are five stories that can be told about us. Mom's letter is too ideal, too sweet. The ex-wife's letter is too stark and bitter even though both letters are accurate and honest. The other letters also tell good stories, even though some real pain is revealed.

Which story of America should be told? The version taught up to the 1950s was Mom's version. We have moved to either the daughter's or the friend's or partner's approach since then. Today, however, we are tempted to ignore those four letters in favor of the ex-wife's bitter letter.

"Edward's marriage vows were false as he looked into his bride's eyes on his wedding day, and he knew it."

**This metaphor is helpful to me** as a way to think about our nation. A father and a divorce are not the same as racial slavery. A few generations is not the same as 400 years. Stories of racism (the murder of Elijah Lovejoy in St Louis) and riots (Tulsa in 1921) that I read just this week are revolting. They are also true. Are there hatreds and events like those around today? I hope not, but some things linger. We have blind spots.

The question is, "What are we going to pass on to our children?" Reading only Mom's letter is an idea that has had its day. The daughter's letter and the letters from the friend and business partner are easy to overlook. The daughter's pain is worth acknowledging. The loyalty of a man who rescues a close friend is not to be forgotten. The productive career of a man of good will should not be ignored.

**The question is the fifth letter.** Some may want to burn the other letters and post the fifth letter on a banner that will fill the family dining room on Christmas day. Others would like to ignore or barely acknowledge the existence of the fifth letter.

Let's keep thinking. The issues of forgiveness and reconciliation as taught by Jesus and Paul must not be excluded or ridiculed. Emotional pain can make us dismissive toward doing the right thing. Sustained anger may seem and even be justified, but bitterness is not the path to a whole life. On the other hand, we can simply hide behind the words *forgiveness* and *reconciliation* without humbly seeking to do the right thing. I imagine that each of us has five letters that could be written about us.

And so, the question remains, "What we should we do with the fifth letter?"