

Things we should let go

By [Scott Alan Johnson](#)

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Legend has it that when he was asked to preach in chapel at Luther Seminary years and years ago, Prof. Gerhard Forde walked to the podium with a thick file folder, dropped it loudly on the surface and told his hearers, "These are all the letters I've received as a pastor and teacher over the years. I just want you to know what being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ might get you."

I've been a pastor for almost ten years now. Most of my stuff is now digital, but I still do my best to get some written correspondence out and about for various reasons. As I've received things over the years, whether by e-mail or letter, I've filed them in a file labeled "Correspondence," in a similar vein to what Dr. Forde kept of his own correspondence. Until recently, that is.

See, here's the thing: I kept everything. I kept thank you letters from people in my first congregation, but I kept unsigned letters from folks also. I kept the letters from people I'd upset and from people who felt I'd done a good job. I kept a thick packet of e-mail correspondence from one person who had embarked on a campaign that was both bizarre and a little frightening, enough so that I'd printed them all out and asked a trusted mentor to go over them with me so I could make heads or tails of what was going on. It was a record of the good and the bad in my career, and occasionally I'd leaf through it. Thankfully, the file was filled with far more gracious responses than angry attacks, but there were some doozies in there.

But when I received a thank you card recently, instead of just filing it and shutting the drawer, I took it out again and leafed through it. As I did, I came across one of those negative letters, and as I read it I thought to myself, "Why, exactly, am I reminding myself of this episode? What possible good can come from returning to this old wound again and again?"

So I culled the herd. I went to the beginning of the file and sorted the whole thing. Good stuff stayed. Bad stuff got recycled. [The first unsigned letter I ever received](#) went into the recycling bin. [The hate mail I got](#) for a letter to the editor supporting a Muslim congressman's right to be sworn in on a copy of the Quran went into the

recycling bin. The post about how I'd deleted the angry post responding to [a late night e-mail](#) went into the recycling bin. The thick packet of bizarre e-mails went into the bin, with my mentor's notes and all. Gone. Donezo. Kaput.

We Lutherans believe that when God forgives sin, it is removed from us as far as east is from west. If God sees fit to absolve me of my mistakes, it makes sense that I should also absolve myself from those errors I've made. Not that all of this mail came from errors, mind you; most of it came from me doing my job and people responding poorly. Yeah, I've messed up, and sometimes people called me on it. Usually it happened in a healthy way, but not always. However, learning from a thing and dwelling on it are two very different actions. I've learned from my mistakes. I don't think anything good can come from continuing to berate myself for things that are long in the past.

What's in your correspondence file? If you've learned what you can from those moments, is it time, perhaps, to clean out the file and move on? These are things we should let go—and if we can let go of these things, we can let go of the opportunity for those people to continue hurting us also.

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