

## **Lesson 2: Overcome Negative Past Experiences**

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“Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles, which have been overcome while trying to succeed.”  
Booker T. Washington, (American, leader and educator, 1856-1915)

### **A Neglected Weed**

I grew up like a neglected weed. I didn't know anything about freedom. I never learned to read or write. Little slave children didn't go to school, we went to work. Nobody that I worked for and stayed with cared if I was hungry, sick, or cold. I didn't have hardly any clothes and no shoes.

I remember that morning I was first sent away as if it was yesterday. I was about six years old and it was early in the morning when this white woman came and loaded me in her wagon and took me away. The master told me to call her Miss Susan. I thought for sure this was the last time I would see my family. My heart was broken. I was scared to death of this evil looking woman who I thought came to take me down into the Deep South. She wore her hair up in a ball and she had this wrinkle across her forehead that never went away. She was a mean woman who never smiled. Although she wasn't rich, she had enough money for a little slave. She didn't just want a slave to care for her baby; she wanted someone to clean her house too.

Miss Susan's house was a real house. I had never been in a house before. Where I lived was just an old one-room shack with a dirt floor. In Miss Susan's house, there was a room for everything. She had a room for cooking, a room for eating, a room for the beds, and they had real beds. Then there was a room for sitting she called it the parlor.

Now, folks, when you live in a shack, with dirt floors, you don't have much to clean. But, Miss Susan didn't think nothing about the difference in what kind of place I lived in and her house. She said, "Sweep the floor and dust the furniture." Now when I was leaving, the last thing my Mama said was "Minty, you do what you're told to do and don't ask questions." I always did what my Mama said. So, I was trying to do what she ordered me to do without asking how to do it. When I got finished, Miss Susan came in. She took her finger and wiped it across a table. Then that wrinkle in her head got tighter and she said, "You stupid girl! Can't you do anything right?" She grabbed her cowhide whip and hit me across my back and arms. I cried, but she didn't care. She said, "Do it over!" I did it over. Miss Susan came back and whipped me for not doing it right. I did it over again, and again. She whipped me five times, and got meaner with each time. I was getting more and more scared and worried about her killing me.

Then her sister Miss Emily came from upstairs. She had been hearing all the screaming and crying. I don't know how she stood up there listening so long, but, I was glad she finally came down. She said, "Susan, what are you doing? Beating her is not going to get the work done right. Don't you think if she knew what to do, she would do it right so that you would stop beating her? Leave her with me."

Miss Susan frowned at me and left the room. Miss Emily wasn't so scary. She looked like her sister, but without the wrinkle in her forehead. She told me to show her what I was doing. Then when she saw what I was doing wrong, she said, "Open the window, and sweep the floor. Then go to the dining room and set the table for breakfast. Come back and wipe off the tables." That is what I did, and it worked.

Miss Susan never acted sorry for being stupid herself. But, you know, she didn't know no better. Her folks taught her that slaves are dumb and you have to beat them to make them work, like an animal.

Now that woman was going to make sure she got her money's worth of work out of me. If I was not cleaning house, I was sitting somewhere holding her baby. At night, I had to keep the baby sleep by rocking his cradle. Now if I fell asleep and stopped rocking, the baby would wake up. If he cried and woke his mother, I was in trouble. His mother had her whip by her bed so she did not have to reach far to get it. She would take that whip and hit me around my neck. Oh, I tell you, I was so scared of her I would shake whenever she came in the room.

I remember one time I had to run for my life because of a cube of sugar. I was standing watching as the family was starting to eat their breakfast. Miss Susan was arguing with her husband. I hadn't eaten since noon the day before and I was so hungry. I was standing close to the sugar bowl, and I slipped my hand in it just to get one cube. She caught me and said, "Get your hands out of my sugar. I'll teach you not to steal from me!" She jumped up and grabbed her whip. I ran out the back door and down the road, and they came after me. I ran to a pigpen and I climbed in and hid. The pen was just big enough for the big grumpy mother pig and her fifteen hungry babies. I was scared of that mother pig, but not as scared as I was of that whip. I stayed there three days. I was starving, so I had to go back. Yes, I got my whipping. I cried myself to sleep every night, lying on the hard cold floor. I felt like a motherless child.

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30 Lessons In Love, Leadership and Legacy from Harriet Tubman

### **Lesson Learned: Humility and endurance are survival skills**

Minty felt like a neglected weed. How lonely and unimportant she must have felt to think of herself as a weed. A neglected weed is an unwanted plant, no attention or caring for its life. People do not allow weeds in their garden to grow freely and strong.

They stop them as soon as they start to develop. If you water and fertilize the garden, you don't waste any water on the weeds. It's left to die. In our program, my husband sings the Negro Spiritual, "Motherless Child." I can imagine Minty singing this to herself. The songs were in her mind and heart. Freedom begins in the mind. To overcome negative experiences, you have to free your mind of any bitterness. Forgiveness frees the mind and brings peace. This is the first step to overcoming the past.

### **Overcome Negative Past Experiences**

#### **Discussion questions:**

1. Are you harboring unforgiveness toward someone who has wronged you?
2. Are you willing to forgive that person?
3. What do you enjoy doing that could help you cope with difficult times?