



By
G. Raymond McCullough

I have been pondering the subject of regrets very intensely over the past several weeks and moderately over the past several years. Just the other evening, I lay awake in my bed cataloguing all my regrets in my mind. I must admit I have always been amazed and somewhat befuddled when hearing people say they don't have any regrets. This declaration for me is like being punched by a champion heavy-weight boxer. It absolutely dazes me into a state of incomprehension.



What is regret? The Webster Dictionary definition is to be very sorry for, as in "I regret my mistakes."

I want to clarify that I am not talking about people who dwell on their regrets—as in keeping one's attention directed towards past behavior. I am talking about being sorry for one's actions and choices because they harmed you or someone else. Trust me, I am not a saint and I have made innumerable decisions that have hurt others and myself. This statement prompts another question: Is it possible to regret an action and not regret all of the outcomes of that action?

Regrets can affect so many areas of life. Here are some typical regrets. They usually begin with I wish I had:

1. Studied harder in high school or college.
2. Been a better parent/spouse/friend.
3. Been more attentive.
4. Listened to...
5. Applied myself more in...
6. Never taken that job.
7. Never used drugs.
8. Never lied about...
9. Never married.
10. Been more disciplined.

I think you get the point.

I may be premature in drawing the following conclusions about regret:

- The key is to learn from your regrets and move on by behaving in a way that diminishes the likelihood that you will have the same regrets.
- Do not to allow others or ourselves to be defined by regrets.

I truly believe at this moment in time—as I write this article—that when people say they don't have regrets they are: delusional, in denial (I use this term broadly), have led a perfect life, or they have led a life devoid of risks that have resulted in failure and feelings of disappointment, despair, sadness, frustration, etc.

The following should not be considered evangelization on the behalf of the 12-step community or religion. I am only attempting to explore a premise about regret. In the 12-step community of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, there is recognition of the implications of regret as indicated by Steps 4 - 9:

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Furthermore, I believe regrets are a canon of belief in the major religious philosophies. I did a Google search on the phrase "regrets as viewed in religion", and 26 verses from the Bible came up. Many of the verses were beyond my immediate comprehension, but that's not the point.

Also, in Dharma Wisdom of Buddhism regret is addressed as follows:

Many of us are haunted by regret yet aren't fully open to experiencing it. Regret can be triggered by something you did or didn't do, or something someone else did or didn't do, or a combination of these. It may be something bad that happened to you or some regret you had for an action you took. Bad memories or deep sorrow do not have to lead to clinging.

This last sentence takes us full circle to dwell on regrets. I suspect the wise mind would say if you have regrets you are clinging to past bad memories and sorrows. Hence, in other religious philosophies I suppose the role of self-forgiveness will absolve oneself of any regrets. Intellectually, this makes sense. However, on an emotional level the jury is still out.

Have you ever seen the movie "Rudy?" For many years, I could not watch this movie without crying. My tears were about my missed opportunities and the regret that accompanied it. If you remember the story line, Rudy was a young man short on talent and physical stature when it came to the game of football. Nevertheless, he worked very hard to make the Notre Dame football team.

"You'll only regret the chances you didn't take, relationships you were afraid to have, and the decisions you waited too long to make."

Unknown

It was his sheer drive and determination that enabled him to accomplish his goal. When I reflect on my life in this regard, I had the talent and physical capability to potentially reach great heights in the sport. However,

I squandered my talent by taking it for granted. My tears were about regret.

Nonetheless, here are 20 suggestions from a variety of people on how to deal with regret:

1. Do not allow regrets.
2. Think of all of the positives that came out of the situation.
3. Treat each experience as a lesson in the journey that you have chosen to embark upon.
4. Don't allow yourself to be defined by the emotions.
5. Be patient with yourself.
6. Forgive yourself and move on.
7. Resolve to do it differently the next time.
8. Understand that regret is a waste of time.
9. Find something better to replace it.
10. Having some regrets is not a bad thing.

11. Accept that life gives you circumstances that simply have to be grieved.
12. Never hold on to regrets.
13. Feel it, review it, learn it, shed it.
14. Think of regrets as visitors in the guest house of the mind.
15. Every time a regret crosses your mind, put something positive in your life.
16. Flirt with the idea that even the worst decision can be rectified.
17. Understand and accept that feelings are related to survival.
18. Understand that the time spent regretting leads to more regret.
19. Dispense with the “what ifs.”
20. Live by the wise mind, an equal partnership between thoughts and feelings.

I plan to make a list of my regrets immediately and dispatch them post haste. Never too old or wise to learn on this journey we call life.



I will acknowledge that I have learned some things for myself by writing this article. Primarily, I now understand what people mean when they say they don't have any regrets. It means they have truly let their regrets go. I humbly modify my earlier assertion in this article about people who don't have regrets. I guess I have some work to do.

This article is dedicated to my son Davin on his 21st birthday. My hope is that he will live a long, fulfilling, and prosperous life that is filled with many rewards and few regrets.