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Befriending Regret

The monks found their abbot in the archives, weeping over a crumbling manuscript. After a lifetime of hand-copying copies of ancient texts, he had grown curious and decided to research the monastery's originals. Through his tears, he told the monks, "It says 'celebrate,' not 'celibate!'"

I invite you to join me this morning in a reflection on regret.

If I were to look at my life through the lens of regret, I would see a trail of regrettable words and deeds; words spoken and unspoken, deeds done and undone. Gratefully, I haven't maimed or killed anyone, but let's address that high-wire regret, so we can move quickly into the less draconian field of regret – that "if only" place of could have, should have, might have – where most of us wander.

I'm thinking of two men I know, both of whom accidentally killed their wives. The first experienced a psychotic break and, believing he was saving his wife from a home invasion, threw her from the balcony. The second, in a dead drunk, drove his truck into a tree. His wife had been riding shotgun, and died on impact.

When the first man regained his sanity, and the second his sobriety, they were filled with regret. Both did their time in long periods of incarceration, the first in a mental hospital and the second in alcohol rehabilitation and prison. Still, there is not a single day in which they do not live with others' lack of forgiveness. And to this day, every day, they make choices based on their deep and abiding regret. But here's what's different about their reactions from each other.

Despite effective medications and excellent therapeutic intervention, the man who lost his mind lost all faith in himself, and in life. He was once a professional athlete and spiritual seeker; he had a big life. Now, he works in a sheltered workshop, and lives in a group home. His mind is healed, but he cannot integrate his regret; it prevents him from

saying yes to his spiritual life and to the career he loved. To most choices, he says no.

When the second man regained his sobriety, he made the decision to dedicate his life to the memory of his wife by helping others live free of the ravages of alcoholism. He attends at least one meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous every day. He sponsors many, many people in the program, and participates in interventions. He is a regular speaker at both the local treatment center and prison. He never says no to an invitation to tell his story, and he never tells it without crying. Every day, his regret guides him in making life-giving, life-affirming choices. He is living a big life.

To have regrets, but not to let regrets have us: this is what I call befriending regret.

Life coach and author Martha Beck writes, “[Regret] is a difficult companion ... and it changes you, leaving you both tougher and more tender. You get to decide, however, whether your toughness will look like unreachable bitterness or unstoppable resilience.... Regret can be your worst enemy or your best friend.”¹

Columnist Lisa Kogan wrote a beautiful piece called *Lisa Kogan Regrets to Inform You* that starts out vapid, as she catalogues regrets like getting her hair permed or not eating more lasagna before her diet, and then, suddenly, comes down like a ton of bricks, as she recounts the extraordinary, no-regrets lessons of her five-year best friendship with Mark Carson, who died with AIDS. Lisa Kogan writes, Mark “taught me everything I know about grace and courage and authenticity.... [He was] my partner in crime, my in-case-of-emergency-call guy, my whip-smart, deeply honest, very brave, infuriatingly optimistic, darling friend.... He liked bright lights and big cities. He cared about justice and art. And in my dreams, he's always there, dragging me to the best Turkish restaurant in Astoria or playing some ... obscure albeit amazing indie rocker, or simply racing forward to offer me sanctuary within his incredibly generous embrace....

“My only regret is that we didn't get to grow old together....

“I memorized the clipped cadence of his voice and the geography of his gorgeous face,” she continues. “I was keenly aware that Mark and I were on borrowed time, and it made me sit up and take notice of every bittersweet second. When time is of the essence, you get tickets to the show, you splurge on Christmas dinner and birthday presents, you stay up talking a little later, you don't let anything go unspoken, you pay attention....”

¹ Martha Beck, *Who's Sorry Now*, at Oprah.com, 5/30/08

“I think back to the sea of people that filled his memorial service; they all looked exactly the same. They looked as if they'd lost their best friend.”²

Before his death from pancreatic cancer, in his final lecture to his students at Carnegie Mellon University, forty-seven year-old Randy Pausch spoke about the beauty of life. “Never underestimate the importance of having fun,” he said. “I am dying soon, and I am choosing to have fun today, tomorrow, and every other day I have left.”³

Over twelve million people have viewed that lecture online. How many of us have taken Randy Pausch's words to heart? *Choose to have fun.* If we haven't, what's stopping us?

We live with the illusion that we have all the time in the world to make it right, to get it right, to get around to it, to just do it. We may and may not be given that kind of time; all we have for sure is the gift of the present. Chances are, people who love us will agree with us about our regrets: there is always a sympathetic audience for the would-have, could-have, should-have of “if only.” This is great news, but only if we enjoy misery. Best to consider deeply the heart of our regret, and either let it go, knowing there is absolutely nothing in the world we can do to make it right, or dream up a productive way to befriend it.

Dr. Abigail Stewart, a psychology professor at the University of Michigan, has proven that people who take action in response to their regrets “score higher on both physical and psychological measures of well-being later in life.”⁴ The magic trick, writes Martha Beck, is to “call on regret – not as a burden that [we] still have to bear, but as a motivator that can forcefully remind [us] not to make choices that will feel awful in retrospect.

“If [we've] grieved our losses;” Martha Beck continues, “reclaimed [our] dreams; and articulated [our] anger; regret will have made [us] the right kind of tough-and-tender: dauntless of spirit, soft of heart, convinced by experience that nothing based on fear – but everything based on love – is worth doing. Living this way doesn't guarantee an easy life; in fact, it will probably take [us] on a wondrously wild ride. But ... [we]

2 Lisa Kogan, *Lisa Kogan Regrets to Inform You*, at Oprah.com, 3/15/07

3 Please see youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo

4 As quoted in Sara Reistad-Long, *Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda*, at Oprah.com, 1/15/06

won't regret it.”⁵

One of the most powerful spiritual teachings I ever received was from a friend who said we should stop doing things we'll regret. Stop doing things you'll regret: what an extraordinary frame, to see ourselves as agents of our own regrettable choices! Yes, bad things happen to good people, but much of what we regret comes from choosing badly. As long as we're alive, it's not too late for a do-over. Maybe the same players are no longer on the field, but we can begin to make amends by making better choices in the present.

I'll close with one of my favorite stories, told by an anonymous woman to Ram Dass and Paul Gorman:

It started with an ad in the paper: “If you love animals, come volunteer at the zoo.’ I went,” she says, “and I became a guide....

“We started an outreach program, to bring animals to people who could never come to us. [We'd bring birds, mammals, reptiles.] ... The snake we'd show next to last. We'd end with a dove.

“We'd take them to nursing homes, hospitals for incurable diseases, children's wards, burn units, mental hospitals. Places where people are very sick, or lost, or dying.... They've lost interest, given up on life itself. I was ... shocked by that; it hurt me.

“But I witnessed things I'd never dreamed of when I answered that ad.

“In one mental hospital.... I had a ferret.... [A] boy came running, yelling, 'Touch! Touch! Touch!' I said, 'You can touch him later.' But when we got around to it, the feeling had left him. I just wanted to die. Tears streamed down my face. I'd missed it. Oh, did I miss it! But I've never missed it again.

“In a cancer ward, a man refused to come out of his room. He was bitter and angry.... He heard there were animals, so he was just a little curious. ...This time, right away, I said, 'Would you like to touch?' 'Oh, sure, sure,' he said sarcastically.... [thrusting his hands] into my face; there were no fingers left. Then he just looked down at the floor. I felt terrible, but I said, 'Here, then – with your palms.' And he began to let us help. With each animal, he became softer. For once, there was something beside his

5 Martha Beck, *op cit*

illness. He began to cry. 'This is so beautiful,' he said. 'I will never forget this.'"⁶

My spiritual companions, may we befriend our regrets, and let them guide our best choices. We are all on borrowed time. Let's not miss it! And if we missed it, let's not miss it again. Let us choose well, choose to live with as little "if only" as possible, trading in "would-have, could-have, should have" for the gift of the present. It says celebrate!

6 Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help?*, pp. 238-239