

“No Regrets?”

The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
March 14, 2010

Back in elementary school when I was little,
we used to play this game called four-square,
where four kids stand on a grid of four squares
and bounce a gym ball back and forth.
There were lots of rules about who could hit the ball and when.
One of the best rules at our elementary school
was what we called a “do-over.”
Whenever there was any controversy
over whether the ball was in or out, you could call for a “do-over”
and play the point again.

Now that I’m a grown-up, I miss do-overs.
I wonder how many of us are going through our days
wishing we could go back and get a do-over
for the mistakes we’ve made,
the chances we didn’t take,
moments we would give an awful lot if we could go back to
and do something differently.
How many of us are weighed down with regrets
over things we did or didn’t do?

I can’t imagine there is anyone in this room
who doesn’t have *something* they regret.
Regret is a part of the human condition.
None of us is perfect.
None of us is gifted with perfect wisdom to see into the future.
So it is just about inevitable that we’re going to make mistakes,
some of which we will regret very deeply.
Yet, these days, we so often hear people say,

“I want to live my life so I can look back and say, ‘I have no regrets.’”

On the one hand I get what they’re saying.

I think when someone says that, what they really mean is that they want to feel at peace.

They don’t want to be tormented by thoughts of what might have been.

They don’t want their memories to be a source of suffering.

And I understand that, I really do. I think we all want that.

We want to feel at peace.

We want to feel good about our choices and let go of the constant script of self-reproach, self-criticism, that burdens us so heavily.

Yet I’m also fascinated with the literal meaning of this idea of wanting to live so that we have no regrets.

I’ve been asking myself, is that even possible?

I honestly don’t think it *is* possible to live life with no regrets whatsoever.

For one thing, you’d have to be 100% happy with every choice you’ve ever made,

and that sounds just too good to be true.

Nobody’s perfect. We *all* make mistakes.

For another thing, psychologists tell us feeling regret is just one of those things our brain does.

The psychologist Neal Roese has written a great book on regret called *If Only*.

He says our brains generate thoughts of regret automatically, almost constantly, as we move through our days.¹

We are constantly asking ourselves, “what if”— what might have been if only we’d done something differently.

This happens all the time with small things.

Say you miss the bus by just a few seconds. You might think,

¹ Neal Roese, *If Only: How to Turn Regret into Opportunity* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), p. 12.

“If only I’d left the house a minute earlier,
I would have caught that bus.”
And probably all of us have at least some regrets about *big* things.
About one in three Americans has regrets about their education—
maybe about not staying in school longer,
or maybe wishing we had taken a different path in school.²
We have regrets about our careers—the kind of work we do, maybe,
or the amount of time we have to devote to our jobs.
And of *course* we have regrets about our families and our loved ones.
Who doesn’t?
Who among us has zero painful memories about our relationships,
moments when we hurt someone we cared about,
whether it be through insensitivity or anger or ignorance,
or just carelessness, moments when we missed the boat entirely—
and moments when we ourselves got hurt.
It seems to me that regret is simply a part of being human.

And if that’s true—
if there is no such thing as a life lived with no regrets,
if regret is inevitable—we’ve got to ask, what do we do with it?
How are we going to work with our regret so that we don’t end up
endlessly reproaching and torturing ourselves?
How are we going to live “a life that’s full,” as the song says,
regrets and all, and still come out glad to be on the journey?

Neal Roese, the psychologist I mentioned a minute ago,
says, yes, regret is inevitable—it’s part of our nature—
but he also says our brain has an incredible gift:
the ability to make meaning out of our regrets—
to take the sad and disappointing and even tragic things
that have happened to us,
and weave them into a story of transformation for the good—
what he calls a *redemption story*.
A redemption story—such an evocative phrase!

² Roese, *If Only*, p. 40.

Imagine a young person who gets sucked into drug use
and struggles to get free of the addiction.
And now imagine they beat the addiction
and go on to become a substance-abuse counselor
working to help other young people.
You *know* that can happen, and that is a redemption story—
great good coming out of suffering and regret.

I'm reminded of a small story of my own
that has a lot of meaning for me.
I was born with eyes that were crossed.
Growing up I got teased a lot and felt very embarrassed.
Even after a couple of surgeries,
my eyes still have never worked quite like most people's.
I can see fine, except for 3-D,
but I have often felt self-conscious about it.
I've wished that my eyes were "normal."

I once talked to one of my mentors about those feelings.
I'll never forget what he said to me.
He said, "You know, if you were perfectly 'normal,'
you wouldn't be as able to help other people
feel OK about their own imperfections."
He said, "You know what it's like
to feel awkward and self-conscious and embarrassed,
and you *know* there are people out there who feel just the same way
about themselves, and you can help liberate them
from the weight of that self-judgement.
If you can get OK with yourself,
you will help other people relax and feel OK
about all those parts of themselves
that they label as bad or flawed or wrong or whatever."
And it was hard to hear—those words touched me
in a spot that had been very tender for a long time—
but I knew it was true. I knew he was right.

That became a personal redemption story for me.
I won't lie—I still wish I were perfectly “normal,”
but we all get to work with what *is*,
and it was so freeing to realize that I really could bring some good
out of something in myself that I had always hated.
For me, that was redemption—amazing grace.

And I believe we *all* have the chance to transform our regrets,
to heal our hearts and bring healing into the world beyond ourselves.
If there is something weighing on you, something you regret
and you're having a hard time making peace with,
I want to encourage you to ask yourself,
first of all, *who has been harmed* in this situation?
Sometimes when we regret something we've done, or not done,
the person who has been hurt most is ourselves.
Maybe you've been involved with someone
who didn't really care about you and treated you badly.
Maybe you've been neglecting your health
or treating your body with less kindness than it deserves.
Maybe you feel like you've let yourself down
and compromised your principles in some way.
Whatever it is, a really good starting point is to ask,
Can I forgive myself?
Can I be as kind to myself as I would be to a friend or a loved one?
You can try to hold yourself with some gentle care.
I'm reminded of some very wise words that tell us,
“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.”
That includes you too.
Be kind to *yourself* in this struggle to live as we mean to.

And then, after a while, you can ask yourself,
is there something I can learn here?
Our religious tradition has always told us, we're not perfect,
we're going to make mistakes, we're going to do things we regret,
but we don't have to get *stuck* there.

We can *learn* and change and grow.
We can transform our wounds into wisdom.

And from this foundation, we can reach out to heal other people.
Let me invite you now
to go back to the question I asked a few moments ago:
If there is something you regret, who is it that's been harmed?
Probably all of us can think of ways we have hurt other people
by something we've done, or maybe something we *haven't* done.
So many of us have regrets like this—
haunted by the careless words we spoke
that hurt someone dear to us,
by the shadows of things undone,
ways we failed people, however inadvertently,
opportunities lost to do something good and beautiful and just.

If this is true for you, please don't condemn yourself.
We are none of us perfect.
But please *do* ask yourself, how could I do better next time?
And even more important,
is there something I can do to make things right?
If there is, *go do it!*
The Alcoholics Anonymous program has some advice
that every one of us can benefit from:
If you have harmed someone through your actions,
make amends. Make it right, as best you can.
I know it can be really hard, but you will feel better
and this world will be a better place for it.

Of course, some things are easier to fix than others.
So many of us are deeply troubled in our hearts
about all the ways our society leads us to act in ways
that harm our planet and our brothers and sisters here with us.
Many of us are carrying deep regrets
about the lives we have been leading as Americans.
We drive cars that spit carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

We live in cities that hundreds of years ago were wild places,
home to wild creatures.

We buy clothes made by our brothers and sisters
laboring in sweatshops for pennies a day.
So much of what we call “normal life” in our country
is destructive, and we are swept up in it
right along with our neighbors.

The regrets that come with our way of life run deep.
And change is hard. We’re going to run into lots of obstacles.
We will come up against our deep attachments to our habits.
We will come up against the deeply-entrenched systems
of our society.
We will discover over and over that a life of pure virtue isn’t possible.
We can’t fix everything.
But we do not have to stay stuck.
We don’t have to give in to despair.
Some things we *can* change.
We can make different choices about how we’re going to live.
Together we can and we *are* changing the rules of our society.
This is a journey we’re all on together,
transforming those very deep and hidden regrets
into energy for living a life that sustainable and just and lovely.
This is the redemption story we are all living,
that our *society* is living,
and it is more than a story—
it is real, it is happening now, and it is powerful.

And I have something more to tell you: psychologists have found
that people who see their lives as a redemption story—
people who can accept their regrets,
all the things they wish were different,
and see how those things have been transformed into good—
those are the very people
who are most involved in their communities,

helping young people, helping to protect this beautiful earth,
helping to transform lives all around them.³
In other words, regret is an extremely powerful tool
for positive social change!

Henry David Thoreau once said:

“Make the most of your regrets;
never smother your sorrow, but tend and cherish it....
To regret deeply is to live afresh.”

So may your regrets give you strength and compassion;
may you live fresh and free,
devoted to the vision of what might yet be.

Amen.

³ Roesse, pp. 32–33.