

**1 February, 2009 * Regrets, Do-Overs, and Giving up Hope of a Better Past
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Here's something I did during my three weeks of study leave: I finally saw *Casablanca*. I'd never seen it before, and I hope you agree with me that, given the film's iconic status, watching it definitely counted as...let's call it "cultural studies."

"Who can forget the scene at the end?," asks Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert.¹ He elaborates,

Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman are standing on the tarmac as she tries to decide whether to stay in Casablanca with the man she loves or board the plane and leave with her husband[.] Bogey turns to Bergman and says: "Inside we both know you belong with Victor. You're part of his work, the thing that keeps him going. If that plane leaves the ground and you're not with him, you'll regret it. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But soon and for the rest of your life."²

As commentary, Gilbert then remarks,

This thin slice of melodrama is among the most memorable scenes in the history of cinema... because most of us have stood on that same runway from time to time. Our most consequential choices – whether to marry, have children, buy a house, enter a profession, move abroad – are often shaped by how we imagine our future regrets ("Oh no, I forgot to have a baby!").

Regret, in other words, doesn't just color the past. Regret can be so painful, so haunting, that our experience of it shapes our approach to the future. The word *remorse*, at its roots, means "to bite back," and indeed, many of us know what it's like when your past actions (or *inactions*) follow you like one of those annoying little dogs, more fur than anything else, nipping at your pant leg as you try to move forward. Once bitten, twice shy, the saying goes.

Regret, remorse, ruefulness – call it what you want – we feel these emotions only about situations that center, to some degree, on our own agency: situations in which we played a role, and wish that the Universe could grant us a "do-over." In this sermon, I want to examine the scale of potential regrets that we human beings carry within us, and how regret shapes our relationship with ourselves and with other people.

First, although it may be impossible to measure regret, and the degree to which we hunger for a "do-over," let's say there's a 10-point Scale of Regret: ten degrees of kicking ourselves for something we did, or didn't do.

I find the territory especially fertile at the bottom of the scale (let's call it "1"), where it's barely possible to even use the word *regret*. There's no self-recrimination, no guilt, just wondering about What Might Have Been. It might not be useful – but personally I find it irresistible – to travel back to moments when, like Ingrid, I've stood on the tarmac, making a choice that would cut off a thousand possibilities. I don't have to understand quantum physics to believe that there are countless parallel universes out there, discrete threads in the rippling fabric of the space-time continuum, in which other choices were made, and other futures lived into. That wondering – the bittersweet acknowledgment that it might have been otherwise – allows me to be more fully present in *this* life.

As we move up the scale of regret – from 1 to the 3 or 4 range – it becomes harder to be at peace with the ways that we've severed ourselves from possibility. These are the regrets where, in retrospect, we understand that we allowed a small reward to slip away too easily, or we introduced unnecessary friction into our lives. They're not necessarily *mistakes*, but coins tossed into the fountain of Life Lessons.

As a college student, I wasn't yet mature enough to construct a sense of self around my own needs and wishes. Instead, I allowed myself to be guided by what others thought of me, how they evaluated me. On a scale of 1 to 10, one of my level-5 regrets is that I dropped out of calculus because I was afraid I wouldn't get an A. Without calculus, I had to drop my pre-med major. Not going to medical school is one of those level-1 regrets: *Would I have made a good doctor?*, I wonder. *Would I have been fulfilled?* And of course: *Would I have found Unitarian Universalism?* But over the past two decades, I've been bitten, from time to time, by sharper teeth of remorse: knowing that I sacrificed my own interests and confidence for a number – a GPA – that now seems empty.

I believe that there are people whose regrets never rise above the midpoint of our imaginary ten-point scale. (I *must* insert a parenthetical note: while researching this sermon, I accidentally discovered a book called *No Regrets*, subtitled *The Best, Worst, & Most #\$\$%*ing Ridiculous Tattoos Ever*.³ The book cemented my suspicion that a "no regrets" mentality has a strong genetic component. If having a pair of technicolor unicorns copulating on your back or a smiling portrait of Dr. Phil on your behind doesn't trigger any regrets later in life, then the good Lord bless you and keep you, but we are Very Different People.)

But seriously. I admire people who can cheerfully admit that they don't regret anything more than, say, a failure to play the piano or speak Spanish. People who aren't haunted by remorse use forward-leaning language: they "put it behind them;" they "don't look back;" they've "moved on." Perhaps they just haven't made many mistakes. (I am not one of those people.)

At its milder levels, regret can be healthy. It's a sign of maturity – both emotional and spiritual – because of its implicit admission that we played our cards wrong (this occurred

to me as I listened on Friday to Rod Blagojevich try to bluster his way out of impeachment). Regret means that we're willing to examine ourselves for how we led ourselves, or others, astray. It forms a threshold not just for learning, but also for asking forgiveness.

As we enter the 7 to 8 range on our Scale of Regrets, we're now entering prickly territory (as maps of yore summarized the gaping ocean between continents, "Here Be Dragons"); my friend Dana calls them "the kind of regrets that make you want a time machine." I say, if you're making jokes about time machines, you haven't reached the top of the scale yet. The 9s and 10s are nothing to joke about. These are the ghosts that haunt our dreams, as well as our waking hours. Almost certainly they're the choices or actions that hurt not just us, but people whom we care about. Sadly, they might be mistakes that led to losing someone we cared about.

It can take years just to acknowledge this depth of remorse, and stop wishing that we could re-write the past; our souls, often, would rather forget, or blame someone else. Once we allow regret to surface, there are more than a few dangers. Regret becomes unhealthy when it soaks us in bitterness, or when it cripples us so that we stand frozen on the tarmac, unable to make any decisions whatsoever. Regret also becomes dangerous when it prevents us from forgiving ourselves.

Many of us here have, through our own choice, parted ways with religious traditions in which the language of "sin" and "confession" figures prominently. To mock that language, or live in reaction to it, is to overlook its potential for spiritual depth.

As Unitarian Universalists, we don't believe that human beings are tainted or unworthy of life's gifts; we believe some version of what Hosea Ballou professed two centuries ago, when he gave voice to our Universalist theology: "there is nothing in heaven above, nor in the earth beneath, that can do away with sin – but Love." We live in relationship with one another, and on a good day, we do so lovingly.

That being said, some of our actions and inactions remove us from the loving care of other people. We know, too, that it's not enough to *want* to live a life of greater integrity: we need help to be the people that we strive to be. Some of us draw encouragement and inspiration from a Larger Presence, from a God whose grace allows us to begin again when regret stops us in our tracks. I would suggest that UU's are unique in our need for (also) receiving this encouragement and strength *from each other*. I believe that, as people of faith who are held together in covenant, we call each other back into relationship with each other.

For me, right relationship is at the heart of why it's so powerful to reflect on, and admit out loud, that we fall short of our expectations. When our humanness and our mistakes *do* push us off balance, we can bear witness to the mis-step in a manner that **restores**

balance, not brings more disorder to it. When we can admit, and name, the qualities that make us human, we free ourselves to be more real, and to be more available to one other.

As good as humankind is, we're meant to keep getting better. Each time we name a regret, *we are really naming our hopes*. To say, "I didn't handle that very well" is to say, "I'm not done as a person," which carries the hope of growing in that direction.

How do we grow, then? In concrete terms, is there any way to outwit regret, and make choices that safeguard against it? Why, yes. And it goes beyond the simple wisdom of thinking carefully before getting a tattoo.

Since science has something to teach us about our own psychological blind spots (and since only in a UU congregation could science trump religion), I'm going to return to Daniel Gilbert, the Harvard psychologist. He explains that in making decisions, most of us expect that we will "regret foolish actions more than foolish inactions."⁴ We hold back when an enterprise seems risky; we choose safe inaction rather than plunge ahead. Nine out of ten people, in fact, anticipate that "I shouldn't have done that" regret will be more painful than "I *should* have done that" regret.

"But studies also show," says Gilbert, "that nine out of ten people are wrong... [P]eople of every age and in every walk of life seem to regret *not* having done things much more than they regret things they *did*." Why? It has to do with our "psychological immune system," which

has a more difficult time manufacturing positive and credible views of inactions than of actions....Because we do not realize that our psychological immune systems can rationalize an excess of courage more easily than an excess of cowardice, we hedge our bets when we should blunder forward. As students of the silver screen recall, Bogart's admonition about future regret led Bergman to board the plane and fly away with her husband. Had she stayed with Bogey in Casablanca, she would probably have felt just fine. Not right away, perhaps, but soon, and for the rest of her life.

As you move forward into your journey, here are some questions to orient your attention: Which of your fears are holding you back from blundering forward? What regrets do you need to let go of, to move through life with greater ease? For what might you begin to forgive yourself? And where might you repair a broken relationship with others?

May we move forward with confidence,
both in ourselves and in the Larger Love that holds us.

Endnotes

1. In *Stumbling on Happiness*, pp. 195-6.
2. M. Curtiz, *Casablanca*, Warner Bros., 1942.
3. By Aviva Yael and P.M. Chen. Do *not* go reading this book unless you're prepared to laugh and be supremely disturbed.
4. Gilbert, p. 197.