

Regret Self-Forgiveness

Remember that I promised you a sermon on self-forgiveness? Let me remind you. Forgiveness is not a simple, once-and-its-done. Forgiving is more than either will-power or strategy. We need to take it to our communities, whether it is family, friends, FUSW, or all three. We need to accept the pain of facing that we have very real, intense emotions about very real, intense destructive events. Feelings of hurt and anger must be uncovered repeatedly. We need to understand how a terrible wrong alters our hope of being fairly treated. There is grief in realizing that our expectations will not be met, but also freedom to have new hopes. We need to feel whole in the present and hopeful for the future. Forgiveness is not just a therapeutically useful technique but a process of developing a sense of another person's potential goodness. There is, in that sense of potential, a humility that everyone makes mistakes, but redemption is possible. Forgiveness is for others, and ourselves, in all humility. Only then can a decision to forgive be honestly considered. That decision will be made and reconsidered many times but signals a changed direction. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

“We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”

The only problem with that sermon and that quote is that some of you said you doubted your potential for goodness or did not think you could forgive someone—an old boss, a romantic partner, a parent, your next door neighbor. Today, let us examine the process of self-forgiveness. It is easy to turn the energy of judgement on ourselves when we find it hard to forgive others. You are tempted to yell at yourself inside your head, berate yourself for not being able to grant another person their full humanity or still begrudge a slight from 20 years ago. You may remember your major flaw or mistake from yesterday or last year that renders you full of regret, and therefore unfit for forgiveness. This is that sermon on self-forgiveness I promised you.

I recently read an article about the latest anniversary of the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which began by detailing the immense damage, and mentioned as a kind of throwaway that President Truman regretted his decision to destroy hundreds of thousands of people. As he liked to say, “the buck stops here,” and he made that decision. Regret is about choices with profound emotional consequences. Regret is defined as a deep sadness or remorse for an act, fault, or disappointment in oneself. If you Google images of regret, almost all feature someone with their bowed heads in their hands or hands on their faces, as if hiding themselves. That looks like the grinding, stomach-turning anguish of shame, of wanting to drop through the floor, disappear, or otherwise become invisible. When ashamed, we see ourselves as basically flawed, unacceptable, and worthy of rejection. A frequent synonym for regret is remorse, a deep pain for wrongdoing, stemming from the Latin “to bite again.”

The sadness over what we did, or did not do, is both prospective and retrospective. Regret is triggered by the inescapable necessity of choosing among options. Humans not only make choices, but construct stories about choices. This story-making means that sometimes we go into the past, imagine what would have happened if we stayed in school or went to school, took another job or traveled for a year, or married another person and things would have been preferable in the present. Then we re-evaluate the choices later and imagine how our lives might have been more fulfilled, affluent, or loving. Our regretful stories usually involve going into the future, then going into the past, while feeling anguish about the present. Plenty of research claims that regret is the most distressing of painful emotions, edging out sadness, contempt, and guilt.

When we write our life stories, we also usually compare the outcome we wanted with what we got, be it the education we didn't get or the person we didn't ask out. We think we can tell how things might have been different, because this is the choice WE made so we know exactly who to blame—ourselves. Daniel Pink's research found that “a whopping 82 percent [of 4,500 people] say that this activity is at least occasionally part of their lives, making Americans far more likely to experience regret than they are to floss their teeth.” (pg 24. Daniel Pink, THE POWER OF REGRET)

Regret can be instructive. When we realize that we did not behave as we think we should, when we recognize that we did something we should apologize for, and when we feel badly that the option we chose worked out badly for someone else, we are being optimally human. Regret means that we have standards to which we are faithful. Regret is a signal that we need to change. When it lingers and causes us to constrict our lives, hurt ourselves, or act out apologies far beyond all realism, then it has done us harm.

There are two examples of regret in the Second Testament of the Christian Bible. Jesus is celebrating Passover when Judas acknowledges that he will betray Jesus and later leads a crowd to identify and arrest him. “The one I kiss is your man; ‘seize him’; and stepping forward at once, he said, “Hail, Rabbi!” and kissed him.” (Matt. 26:48-50) The crowd dragged him away. That same night, Peter firmly tells three different people that he does not “know the man”, i.e. Jesus. Peter thereby avoided injury or possible death. At dawn, Peter remembered how Jesus had said, “Before the cock crows you will disown me three times.’ He went outside and wept bitterly.” (Matt 26: 74-75) Both of these disciples were burdened with regret but dealt with it in very different ways. We will return to Judas and Peter later.

“The first step in reckoning with all regrets, whether regrets of action or inaction, is self-disclosure. We’re often skittish about revealing to others negative information about ourselves. It feels awkward, even shameful. But an enormous body of literature makes clear that disclosing our thoughts, feelings, and actions—by telling others or simply writing about them—brings an array of physical, mental and professional benefits.” (pg. 169, Pink, THE POWER OF REGRET)

At least, sometimes sharing our anguish brings relief through others’ normalizing what we did, or putting it in a wider perspective of extenuating circumstances.

Judas did not reveal his pain at realizing his betrayal of Jesus to the other disciples. One story recalled that he tried to return the 40 pieces of silver to the authorities, who would not accept them. He hanged himself. Another story said that he fell to the ground and his guts split open—a graphic picture of regret. By

contrast, Kelly Corrigan wrote (in the New York Times) that recognizing her feelings helps to dissipate them: “I find it helps to invoke memories of my own crimes and misdemeanors. I have been late, lazy, unduly lucky. I have been the young solipsist, the cocky college kid, the judgy midlife Karen. I have drunk too much drink, spoken too harshly, been too harsh . . .” (pg.7, Kelly Corrigan, PLEASE PASS THE FORGIVENESS, The New York Times, 11-28-2021) It then helps to share with friends, family, or FUSW congregants, or at least to keep a journal in which one can trap those worrisome feelings in the little boxes we call words and put them in some order. Or you can write a letter to: “Dear Self-Blaming Part of Me, Then, addressing the voice inside you that berates and criticizes you, apologize briefly for the actions or inactions that were truly your fault, the things you did or did not do that could have changed the circumstances that wound up hurting you. . . .Next, in bold, capital letters, write, **BUT I HAVE PUNISHED MYSELF ENOUGH.**” (pg. 118, Sidney and Suzanne Simon, FORGIVENESS; HOW TO MAKE PEACE WITH YOUR PAST AND GET ON WITH YOUR LIFE)

William Carlos Williams said:” No defeat is made up entirely of defeat—since the world it opens is always a place formerly unsuspected. A world lost, a world unsuspected, beckons to new places.” Defeat is the place Jesus’ disciples found themselves in after his crucifixion. Of course, the disciples had talked over what had happened. Of course, there were accusations, self-blame, jealousy, and anguish. But several times Jesus appeared to the disciples and others. You might interpret these reappearances and the disciples’ reactions literally or metaphorically, but know that it was a deeply stressful time. And key to unsuspected possibilities was how Peter experienced Jesus asking him, three times, “Do you love me?” Peter responded enthusiastically and Jesus instructed him to “feed my sheep,” meaning that he should spread a message of caring compassion. Peter thus became the first pope and fulfilled Jesus’ prophecy that he was the “rock” on which Jesus founded a church.

Peter illustrates that self-forgiveness is built on a foundation of being loved and loving. We may deeply regret our faults, betrayals, and poor choices. We may share, apologize, and absolve ourselves, but it is going forward in devotion to our central values where we make self-forgiveness work in the world.

- Keeping faith with the love we experienced, we accept it as a step toward forgiving ourselves.
- Keeping faith with the love we felt, we give it to others; we pay it forward.
- Keeping faith with how we believe, we live in greater harmony with ourselves.
- Keeping faith with the central principles our reason and feeling ratify, we care for others less fortunate.
- Keeping faith with our community, we reason compassionately with others.
- Keeping faith with self-forgiveness changes the world one person at a time.

Our communities respond, incrementally at first, but with a critical mass that builds compassion in the world. Our self-forgiveness is felt by others, responded to, and spreads. Self-forgiveness is a stepping-stone on the path toward peace for all of us.