

REMORSE & REGRET

Differences and Moving Beyond

2016 Auction topic chosen by Dwane Milnes

The differences between Regret and Remorse are fairly simple to describe after one gives it a bit of thought and study, but the roles of each in our lives and in the world currently are not only more complicated but also more important to consider. Most everyone regrets getting caught in a bad or illegal action, but not everyone feels remorse for the ways that our actions have harmed others. Remorse, taking responsibility, making changes and seeking forgiveness create a far different pattern than merely regretting an action. Too often in modern life, we only get regrets.

Regret is good, for it shows an awareness at a rudimentary level that we shouldn't have done something, or at least that there are consequences that we probably did not anticipate for doing that thing. Regret can be a great learning device to help us refrain from doing certain things or at least doing things in the ways that led us to have regret. But regret does not necessarily lead us to consider the meaning and impact of our actions.

Remorse is better, because it is relational. If we are feeling remorse, it is because we recognize that we have caused harm to another by our actions. Remorse takes us deeper than mere regrets can do, causing us to reflect upon and contemplate our actions, and hopefully to apologize sincerely and to ask for forgiveness. Remorse follows a break in relationship that is recognized by the offender, but it really depends upon that person being sufficiently self-aware to understand the way one's actions have harmed another.

In this current cycle of events in the public eye, there have been many who have regrets, but probably too few who are genuinely remorseful over their actions. Narcissistic personalities probably can't understand enough that they may have harmed another so as to actually feel remorse. At best they might be

engaged at a transactional level to perhaps change future behaviors mostly so as to avoid getting caught and prevent future problems.

Empathy and understanding in the complex interplay of relationships, will tend to make some people immediately remorseful over actions that have caused a break in a relationship. The importance of the relationship may be a decisive factor in how far someone will go to act upon that remorse to work to restore the relationship, but those who have greater empathy will more readily understand the need to change one's actions and seek forgiveness to restore the relationship.

Those with certain personality disorders and narcissism may not even understand the harm that has been done to the relationship by whatever action inspires regret and remorse in others, so there may be no awareness of a problem until some future transaction may be thwarted by mistrust. Thus even regret may be lacking, while remorse would be highly unlikely with such persons. Certain persons also may very quickly blame the other for whatever transactional problems may develop while being entirely unwilling or even unable to look within one's own shadow to consider any responsibility for such failures. One may even notice such issues among persons with a very high public profile. Unfortunately, there may be great danger when high profile public persons are unable to see their own responsibility and fall into the pattern of blaming the other. This is one of the most serious consequences of the failure to feel and express remorse. Surprisingly, many voters and political pundits have become convinced that remorse, responsibility, thoughtfulness, and the seeking of forgiveness are weaknesses. In this reversal of reality, frightening outcomes are not just likely, but almost assured.

The harassment and sexual abuse that have recently been brought out of the shadows by the courageous reporting of a few of the victims, have caused many of us males to look into our own shadows to see where we may have failed to be aware, failed to support victims, and even perpetrated harassment and sexual abuse ourselves toward those women with whom we have worked. This is the working of remorse as well as regret. Many of us have not believed

the harm done to women in our society, and many of us have failed to do enough either in our personal relationships or in our societal actions to make the situation better.

We are not all completely Tone-deaf and Clueless, nor malicious or predatory, but few of us have done all that we could to make sure that women and LGBTQ persons are safe in our workplaces, schools, and congregations. Even those of us who have had our awareness awakened have lapses or forget to do all that we can to keep such areas safe for women, persons of color, and LGBTQ persons. I understand those who would like to turn back the clock to some imagined good old days, when life was simpler, but I also understand that those of us whose awareness has been awakened carry an even greater responsibility to treat all persons as valuable and to feel remorse and seek forgiveness when we fail to be our best selves.

Twelve Step programs teach responsibility along with abstinence from alcohol, drugs, and problematic behavior, but also encourage participants to take life one day at a time, and to keep working the program even if they slip up and fail on any particular day. Rather than being brought down by overwhelming mountains of regret that result in nothing, they encourage remorse and ongoing efforts to make behavioral changes, seek forgiveness, and to accept the help and encouragement of a higher power which could be God or the community.

And that takes us back to Forgiveness, which can be offered as a free gift but can only be meaningfully received by those who come seeking to change with a remorseful heart. Life is full of hurts, wounds that we inflict upon others and wounds that we receive. The emotional wounds, the careless words and malicious actions do far more damage than most of the physical wounds, and we may regret many of those that we inflict upon others, but we will not improve our relationships until we feel remorse and actually desire to make things better. Many relationships of all kinds are broken by careless words and actions, but the intentionality of seeking and giving forgiveness to those who come with a remorseful heart may make relationships stronger and more durable through even the most difficult times.

Remorse and forgiveness help to rebuild trust when relationships are broken, especially if real changes in problematic actions and interactions follow the granting of forgiveness. And of course, as we all know, change is not easy. Many of us become set in our ways, especially those of us who are older and grumpier, but even the young can get caught up in patterns of interactions that are problematic. It takes a significant level of intentionality to make and sustain changes in behavior especially when those patterns are long established and when the consequences do not seem that serious.

On the political stage, when actions of an administration and most of congress are conducted solely for personal gain and with no remorse over the harm being done to millions of people, our society is at great risk of disaster. When there is no sense of the common good, and when the vast majority of the populace will be harmed by the failure to provide healthcare for all and to give trillions of dollars to the rich and corporations who do not need it at the expense of everyone else, there is no awareness of the harm that will be done. I hope that they will soon feel regret for their actions even if remorse may be beyond their empathetic capacity.

We may have many regrets for many reasons in life. We may regret that someone isn't interested in being our friend, or doing business with us, or going out on a date with us. We may regret that we make a decision or take an action or speak unkind words. We may regret any number of paths unchosen, but remorse comes from a deeper place, a higher awareness, a broader understanding. Most remorse is relational and interpersonal. It comes out of some kind of failure, some lack of Interpersonal respect. Whether the harmful actions are intended or accidental, some relational break has occurred in which we have failed to respect the other. I know that I am sometimes clumsy when I try to tease people—I intend to be playful, but sometimes I take things too far or choose poorly in timing, or let too much sarcasm infuse my comments. (And yes, I realize that for some people there is no such thing as too much sarcasm, but...). Some say that with age comes wisdom, but I suspect that we all can grow in awareness whatever age we might have attained! If people are important to us, treating others with respect is really important.

So all these matters are important: remorse and forgiveness, trust and respect, empathy and awareness. But they are just pieces of our interpersonal relationships with other people. Beyond these actions, there lies a higher truth about humanity and human interactions. Call it a vision of the meaning of human existence if you will. It is this vision of the purpose and meaning of life itself that sets the ultimate context for our behavior and beliefs. For some people this may be God or their religion, but for many UUs it is a conjunction of our first and seventh principles: the worth and dignity of the individual and the interdependent wholeness of being in the universe of which we all are a part. Within those principles there are two ideas which provide meaning and direction. Justice and Compassion are ideals for which we strive in our human actions and interactions, and it is our success in those two ideals which provides meaning for this thing we call life.

It is in our quest for Justice that we are able to transcend race, sex, and all the other isms to find true justice for all people. It is out of our commitment and intentionality in pursuing justice that we will find meaning as we bring about a more just society.

It is in pursuing compassion that we are able to build a harmonious, respectful and caring society starting with valuing all persons. Our seventh principle reminds us that we are all connected while our first principle reminds us that we are all of value.

Now, on the road to Compassion and Justice, we will find all too many detours and road blocks. We will experience failures of energy and failures of will. We will be distracted by pretty faces and pretty shiny things. We will stumble innumerable times as we seek to follow our path and our journey. We will do and say that which we regret and those things for which we will feel true remorse. We may be distracted for a time by the effort to make up for our shortfalls, apologize for the harm we cause others, and seek forgiveness. But each of these steps is a part of the human journey, and part of what we must each experience on the way to enlightenment.

Will we have regrets? Undoubtedly! Will we feel remorse? Hopefully yes, for without remorse we will not grow as human beings. Without remorse, we will not feel the depth of our connection with others nor come to an awareness of ourselves. Without remorse, we will not feel the pain and sorrow of love nor the wonder and blessing of forgiveness. Remorse really is a key to a deeper world of feelings and awareness. No matter how many or few regrets we might have, it is our remorse that will take us into new awareness!

May our remorse for words spoken and deeds done carry us forward to more meaningful life, greater awareness, and more success in bringing compassion and justice to our world! So may it be! Amen!