

Regretting things done and left undone

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When writer Philip Caputo was almost 69, he took a road trip across the country—diagonally, from Florida to Alaska. The United States seems to be fracturing politically and socially, and Caputo wanted to ask people along the way what holds us together—what makes the *pluribus unum*? He wondered at first whether such a trip was madness. But “if I’d learned anything,” [he writes](#) in his recent book about the trip, “it was that the things you do never cause as much regret as the things you don’t.”

I have some sympathy for this perspective. A few years ago I filled up several pages in my journal with regrets from my life. Mostly they were things I didn’t do, rather than things I did. Many of them had to do with my shortcomings as a parent.

I have a college professor friend who says she doesn’t like the language of regret. She observes her students trying to do too many things, for fear they’ll regret not having done them. She prefers using the word only when she’s done something that is hurtful to other people.

I don’t think we can give up the language of regret anymore than we can give up the language of conflict. Good, bad or indifferent, regrets are a part of our human experience. We can’t experience everything in life. Sometimes we don’t seize opportunities right in front of us. And sometimes we hurt other people by things left undone: not asking for forgiveness, not saying “I love you,” not taking the time to listen to another’s painful story.

Typically as Christians we make two kinds of confessions: we ask God to forgive us for the things we did which we shouldn’t have done, and for the things we left undone but should have done. But not all of our regrets have to do with sins of either commission or omission. Sometimes they’re about missed opportunities.

One of my regrets is never having completed a Ph.D. I was in a doctoral program, but I dropped out. For these kinds of regrets the hardest thing is to forgive ourselves, to let go, and to find peace in knowing that God accepts us as we are—even when we find it difficult to accept ourselves and the choices we’ve made.