The corrosive power of regret

What does it take to find self-compassion and embrace self-forgiveness?

by Marina Cantacuzino in the July 2023 issue

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As the founder of the Forgiveness Project I've spent nearly 20 years talking to people about what forgiveness means—in terms of both its indisputable transformative power but also about the obstacles and resistance that people face when attempting to forgive. In these conversations I've discovered that one thing seems to be hardest of all: forgiving ourselves.

I've long been interested in the corrosive power of regret. It strikes me that regret, while sometimes necessary in order to achieve accountability, can blight individual lives.

This bubbled up a few months ago for me when I was telling a friend about something I'd done as a mother which I deeply regretted. I had gone into the

bathroom to hand my ten-year-old daughter a towel, and as she stood up to get out of the bath I heard myself saying, “Darling, I think you need to lose weight.” She gave me a horrified look, grabbed the towel, and ran out of the bathroom to her bedroom, where she locked the door and proceeded to howl in despair. I knew at that moment that I had said something I would never be able to take back and which had very possibly caused damage beyond repair. My daughter felt humiliated. Her first experience of body shaming came from her own mother.

If I have forgiven myself all these years later for that moment of acute insensitivity, it is only because my daughter has forgiven me too. Self-forgiveness should include a resolution to change and to behave differently in the future, which I have tried to do. I have at least learned that issues around food are binding and that we mothers hold deeply rooted responsibility for our daughters’ relationship with their bodies. But I recently told my daughter about this particular regret, and she said, “Interestingly, I had mostly forgotten, but your regret keeps bringing it up and reminding me!”

While we might make a distinction between guilt and regret—regret is for something you haven’t done or said, the what-ifs and if onlys of life, while guilt is for harmful things you have done or said—I felt both. I regretted that in that moment I failed to be a wise and compassionate mother, and I felt guilty that I hurt my daughter’s feelings. It’s a useful distinction because it helps us think about what we haven’t done along with what we have. But in the end, regret and guilt require a similar interior response: self-compassion.

It is notoriously hard to come by. Neale Donald Walsch, author of the best-selling *Conversations with God*, grapples with a classic human dilemma. “I try not to cheat, steal, lie, hurt, damage, or destroy. And yet I *have* cheated, stolen, lied, hurt, damaged, and destroyed,” he writes. Walsch spent many years trying to forgive himself for things he had done to others—until something in his consciousness shifted, and he found compassion for his younger self.

This breakthrough began with a project of the imagination. He tried to imagine how he might feel if he were to miss a really important party because the friend giving him a lift arrived too late. He concludes that if that friend were brazenly unapologetic, he might be angry and then have something to forgive. But if his friend explained that he had gotten terribly lost and was genuinely sorry, then there would be very little to forgive—and it would be rather a matter of understanding and

compassion.

“And so that’s what I did with myself and my own past,”’ he explains. “I was, I realized, hopelessly lost. It’s worse than that. I didn’t even know where I was going.” This recognition allowed him to treat his younger self with compassion. His compassion was “born of a deep understanding of why I did what I did during those years past. . . . Step One in being friends with myself was complete! I could ‘let go’ of all that guilt I had been carrying around.”

Therapist Randy Janzen writes in *Forgiveness: A Giant Step on the Path of Healing* that as a teenager he missed his dying mother’s final conscious hours on earth because instead of visiting her hospital bedside he chose to go out with friends. He had no idea, of course, that in doing this he would lose forever the opportunity to say good-bye. For many years after, the consequences of his decision left him with a pervading sense of both guilt and regret: guilt for choosing to be with his friends and regret at missing the chance to say good-bye. The fact that he had been a loving and dutiful son all through his mother’s terminal illness made no difference to his sense of defeat:

> No one else would fault me what I did. I would not fault anyone else who told me that story. But I was haunted by guilt for years over my actions that night. Also, the decision to consider my needs first and the result of doing that, set in stone a belief of not being deserving and a pattern of self-denial. The stress of my mother’s illness on our family brought to light everyone’s limitations, something a teenager does not want to confront. And in the end, that is what I needed to forgive myself and others for, having limits. At a deeper level, I knew that I could not say good-by to her. Neither my mother nor I expressed our love openly, and, knowing who we both were, I cannot imagine either of us breaking that pattern on that night. All I could do was walk away and, years later, learn to forgive.

Looking back at our past actions, it is easy to be ambushed by the limits our regrets reveal. Prospero’s advice in *The Tempest*—“Let us not burden our remembrance with a heaviness that’s gone”—suggests that regret becomes a heavier burden to carry as we grow older. Richard Holloway acknowledges in *Waiting for the Last Bus* that the view from the summit of life can be challenging at times. Describing how as a bishop in the Scottish Episcopal Church he frequently attended to the old and the

dying, he writes: “I have sat at the bedside of people eaten up with regret because of mistakes they made in their lives. Wrong roads they took; relationships broken and still unrepaired; troubled children who blamed them for their own failures.”

Regret may be mild, like an occasional twinge triggered by old injury. Or it can be immense, forever lurking in the shadows of our lives and shaping our destiny. An overload of regret is likely to ignite feelings of shame—the shame of failing and not being able to move on in our lives. And while we most likely don’t want to live in a world where everyone forgives all the harmful or malevolent things they’ve ever done—because surely then anything goes—nevertheless if we’re carrying around too much regret and shame, it will create feelings of self-loathing and exacerbate cycles of self-destructive behavior.

Holloway has become convinced that the only way to change the direction of the regret narrative and to free oneself from becoming a victim of consequences is through self-compassion and self-forgiveness. So how can we find self-compassion, the ability to be gentle with ourselves for our regrets and failures? And how can we embrace self-forgiveness, recognizing that we have caused harm to ourselves or others and still making peace with our past?

Henry David Thoreau offers some counterintuitive advice: “Make the most of your regrets; never smother your sorrow, but tend and cherish it till it comes to have a separate and integral interest. To regret deeply is to live afresh.” The suggestion is that the greatest antidote to self-blame is to welcome our mistakes by accepting that we humans are fallible, that life is morally complicated, that good people do bad things, and that bad things happen to good people.

I wanted to understand more about regret. So one cloudless July morning I took the train to meet Jane Parker, a slim, athletic 57-year-old who lives alone with her dog in a rented town house on the south coast of England.

Parker claims she has never regretted anything in her life.

In 2015 Parker’s parents died within six months of each other. Both had suffered from a chronic disease. She’d been exceptionally close to them and throughout her life had wondered how she would cope when they died, but when it finally happened she felt strangely elated because, she says, “their death came at the right time for all of us.”

After nearly three decades of working in product packaging, at age 49, Parker sold her London home and bought three studio apartments in the northern city of Leeds, living in one and renting the others. She has moved four times since, living off the rent of all three. Does she regret no longer living in a home she owns, especially since she was the first of her college friends to buy her own place? “No, not at all. It’s given me freedom,” she says. “Sometimes you have to make sacrifices to live the life you want. At the age of 49, I thought to myself, why work if I don’t have to, and I found a way round it.”

Her longest relationship was with a fitness instructor from Manchester. It lasted three years, “but it nearly broke me,” she laughs, pointing at her bald head—she has alopecia. “My hair was thinning for about five years, and my greatest terror was that I might lose it. But then I did lose it, every bit of it—even my eyebrows!—and it’s really strange because now that the worst thing has happened, I find myself curiously at peace with it.”

Other than caring for her dog and volunteering twice weekly at a local charity, Parker has few responsibilities. Her love life has been sporadic and perhaps by most people’s standards disappointing. She is an expert in unrequited love, knowing what it feels like to watch from the sidelines, unable to impress the person you most want. She has no partner, though for many years she longed for one; she is not a mother, though she adores children; she can’t afford to live in any of the properties she owns; and she has no hair.

Parker’s life is as imperfect as the next person’s. But when the conversation turns to regret, she maintains that she is completely contented with her life, despite the fact that many might find it lacking. She is adamant that she has nothing to regret. For Parker, the key to living without regret is to understand who you were when you made the choices you made. “I made all my choices in good faith, so how can I regret anything? How can I regret something which I wanted even if it did lead to heartache?”

Before I leave, Parker looks uncomfortable, seeming to acknowledge a memory that has suddenly shimmied to the surface. “You know, there is one thing I do regret. I need to be perfectly honest here,” she concedes. “I regret saying something to my father once during a particularly bad time of high stress when my mother was so ill, when he should have been looking after her at home but had gone to the shops. ‘Do you not understand English?’ I said very sharply, trying to instill in him how

important it was that he stay home. I still cringe now at being so rude to him. He looked so humiliated and crestfallen. I apologized later of course, but it has never left me—and with a good dose of grief to pile on top of it, I don't suppose it ever will. To most people this probably sounds so trivial, but to me it is not. It's something I will never forgive myself for and regret to this day."

I suspect we all at times fail to be compassionate. When my mother-in-law came to live with us, I certainly failed to continue to be the kind and loving daughter-in-law that for three decades I had so effortlessly been. Pressed up close against each other, and with all the stress and worry of her dementia and physical needs, at times my irritation got the better of me and I just wanted to run away. I imagine Parker felt much the same. Perhaps, therefore, we all need to recognize that we are fallible human beings capable of letting ourselves down, of not being the morally sound, compassionate people we imagine ourselves to be. And if the dead could speak, I am certain they would say, "Forgive yourself."

Arno Michaelis, a former violent White supremacist turned peace activist from Wisconsin, told me recently how self-forgiveness had been imperative to him becoming a valuable and peace-loving member of society. He also made it very clear that self-forgiveness was not about letting himself off the hook. "My main driver for self-forgiveness is that if I am hating myself for the harm that I have done, I'm not going to be able to help other people stay out of hate groups. I'm not going to be able to help people along the same path that I have taken," he said. "It by no means even implies that the harm that I have done is okay or that it's forgiven or that it's off the table. I'm going to carry the harm that I have done to my grave, and I should."

But, Michaelis says, the key is not to let the pain he has caused continue in a path of harm. "If I let that harm continue to harm me, I don't believe that I'm honoring my victims. I think the way to honor the people that I've hurt and the people who've been hurt by the broken White kids that I set loose on society is to fix broken White kids and give them a lesson that there's a better way to live their lives. And I can't do that if I beat myself up." Michaelis's realization that self-compassion is compassion for others is crucial to his work. Harm to himself is harm to others. Forgiveness is the only path that allows him to do the healing work he does.

But some reformed perpetrators emphatically reject the notion of self-forgiveness for precisely the same reasons that others embrace it. When I asked Manwar Ali, a

former jihadist in Afghanistan turned respected Islamic scholar, if he could ever forgive himself for the harm he had caused, he told me, “Maybe I don’t want to forgive myself, because if I did, then what would motivate me to carry on? If it’s all washed off and cleansed, then how do I carry on helping others make reparations? Or stop them from making the same mistakes I made?”

Michaelis and Ali have contemplated the same question and come to opposite conclusions about the nature of forgiveness. Both want to heal the harm they’ve done. One believes the best route to do that is through self-forgiveness. The other wants the lack of self-forgiveness to serve as a constant warning sign.

The question of regret would often come up when I helped to facilitate Restore, the Forgiveness Project’s prison program. Prisoners were encouraged to share their personal narratives through a lens of self-compassion. Many were utterly demoralized from feelings of guilt and regret. But sometimes I’d hear a comment to this effect from a participant who was in the process of turning their life around: *I don’t regret anything because I like the person I’ve become. How can I have regrets when everything I’ve done in the past has brought me to this much better place that I’m in now?*

These prisoners had accepted who they used to be while celebrating who they had become, and this new perspective meant they were no longer weighed down by the burden of regret and shame. Their lack of regret wasn’t callousness but rather a way of making meaning out of their violent past—and taking responsibility for both the good and bad of their lives.

In a 2002 study into autobiographical narratives of forgiveness and unforgiveness, researchers Jeanne S. Zechmeister and Catherine Romero found that self-forgiving offenders were more likely to report attempts to apologize or make amends to their victims than other offenders were. They also found that offenders who forgave themselves reported fewer lasting negative consequences of the wrongdoing—and more positive ones. Jeffrey Blustein, a philosopher and medical ethicist, argues, “One cannot forgive oneself for what one has done if one is not prepared to take responsibility for it.” Certainly, in my experience of working in prisons, offenders who took responsibility for their crimes were better able to reach a point of self-forgiveness.

This owning of guilt is relevant for all of us; it is about accepting our bad behavior without continually ruminating over it or allowing it to overwhelm us. Accepting

ourselves and forgiving ourselves means taking responsibility for our own contribution to a painful or problematic situation and vowing to make amends. This plays an important part in the healing process, in helping those we've hurt to move on but also in helping ourselves transform the corrosive power of regret. As Richard Rohr says, "If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it."