



243: How to Move Through Regret

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 243.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. In our last episode, we dove deep into what we really mean when we say we're afraid of choosing wrong. That's episode 242. Today, we'll carry that question all the way out and continue to explore what to do when we did choose wrong or when the consequences of our choice led to something unwelcome or unwanted. Listen in.

I've been wanting to do an episode about regret for a while now, mainly because it's something that people ask about a lot. But I've hesitated, because I'd already did an episode on regret. And I wondered, "Do I have anything to say different?" Well, when I look back, I realized that episode was from the spring of 2019. It was episode 79. It was called Find Relief From Regret. And at that time, we asked the question, "what if you do what you think is your next right thing, but later you look back and realize it wasn't the right thing after all? What do you do when your next right thing turns out wrong? How do you handle the regret?" And so, in that episode, I shared two specific stories, personal stories, to illustrate some of my own moments of regret. And also, I shared how my faith has helped me to deal with it.

Well, I figured, in those three years, we've probably, or I've probably, hopefully learned a few things. And so, today, I wanted to bring in another layer to coping with regret, a practice that has helped me, not only move through it, but also find peace on the other side. It's not a perfect peace, I'll admit. But it is a settled one. I hope it's helpful for you as well. But first, a story. Recently, I found myself steeped in what can only be described as a cloud of regret. It's the kind that arrives like a rubber band snap in your stomach, that pops a cloud filled balloon, silently spreading through your whole body, gray vapor pouring out, filling every limb from the inside. If my body were to somehow instantly disappear, in its place would stand a cloudy me shaped shadow of regret. As we know, regret can show up for all kinds of reasons.

We made a bad call. We failed to see the signs. We did something against our better judgment. Or maybe we did all of our homework and we did all the research in advance and we made the best choice available to us at the time. But the outcome wasn't what we hoped for. And we find ourselves wishing we would've chosen differently. We have all probably experienced various degrees of regret. From leaving the house without our wallet to saying words we can't take back. From choosing a career path that just wasn't a fit to causing real harm in someone else's life. Regret can also show up though as a result of something we did not do, an action we wish we would've taken, a move we wish we would've made, or a word we could have said, but chose not to, for a million unknown reasons. And this is where I recently found myself, surrounded by the smokey regret of having not taken action where action was needed, resulting in an acute

sense for me of failure.

This is a recurring regret for me, like a dark dreaded rerun, on the screen of my mind. The disembodied smoke of regret is nearly impossible to contain, corral, or neatly repackage and conceal. Once it is released, it sticks to the fibers and hangs on for days. Perhaps you can relate. When we find ourselves here or some version of here, what do we do? We could wallow in it, and I have done this, but it doesn't help. And generally makes it much worse. We could distract ourselves and try to forget about it. I've done this too, but the regret sticks around beneath the surface, waiting for something else to trigger a fresh release. We could engage it, rehearse it, beat ourselves up for it, make strong and rigid statements about how this will never happen again, summoning willpower, we hope is strong enough to overcome.

As much as we try to avoid it and limit it, the reality is regret is part of life. Even if we embrace every next right thing practice and discernment tool available to us, it's impossible to fully avoid the experience of regret. We are people who are always in the process of becoming. And the very meaning of transformation is a change in form. We are always being formed. We grow, we learn, we unlearn, we discover something about God we didn't know before, something about ourselves or our neighbor, that's new to us. And these new discoveries inform our knowing, our being, and our doing. As long as we live, I hope we continue to grow, but as long as we're growing, we'll look back at past choices and probably be confronted with areas of regret. So how can we move through this cloud, especially when it's dark and dense and unmoving? The answer for me has been found in turning all the way toward one of the foundational virtues of my faith, the virtue of compassion.

When I say the word compassion, I would be curious to hear what comes to your mind for me. I initially imagine something soft and fluffy, something benign and warm, not threatening, and kind. As nice as that picture is, it seems a concept too weak to be a tool for transformation. Surely something more harsh with sharper edges and a stronger bite is needed. One place where we can learn more about true compassion is in the person of Jesus, as described in the book of Matthew. In chapter nine, Matthew tells the story of Jesus as he traveled through all the towns and villages. Verse 35 says he healed every kind of disease and illness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were confused and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Later, in chapter 14, Matthew writes that Jesus heard the news about the murder of his friend and what we think to be his cousin, John the Baptist.

And so, he tried to go away to be alone, but the crowds met him on the shore with their sick loved ones. Instead of anger or frustration, Jesus was moved with compassion. And another time, in Matthew 20, Jesus came upon two blind men on the roadside who were begging for mercy. And Jesus asked them, "What do you want me to do for you?" They said they wanted to see. And Jesus was once again moved with compassion and they received their sight. In all of these scenes, the same English word is used. Compassion. This is a translation of a form of the Greek word *splagchnizomai*, which is a verb, which means to be moved in the inward parts. And this inward parts, one concordance refers to it as the nobler entrails. And that would be the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys. These gradually came to denote the seat of the affections.

When I'm in the midst of experiencing an episode of regret, I feel confused and helpless, like the sheep without a shepherd. I feel unwell, like those on the shore asking to be healed. I feel blind about what to do next, like the men on the side of the road, begging for mercy. And each time, these needs are met with a compassionate response, one that comes from the innermost part, the gruesome organs of a living human body, from the inward parts that transfer life, blood, and air, that break down nutrients and transform toxins. This living response to a living need in the form of a compassionate presence. One more image. And we'll move into a practice, I hope, will help. Is it too soon to use vaccine related imagery? I'm going to risk it anyway. The general idea of a vaccine is to expose the body to a small amount of a germ on purpose, so that it will produce antibodies to protect against it.

That's my very non-scientific way of saying it. And then, later, when you're exposed to the germ in actual life, your body's going to recognize it hopefully and quickly destroy it before you become unwell. In essence, the problem is built into the solution. The solution isn't just a pure antidote. The solution contains the very thing we actually fear, but in order to fight against it, we have to invite the unwelcome entity, literally, into our body, so that we can learn to resist it. And when I think about that, I think about regret and how the opposite of regret isn't living a life of zero regret. Instead the resolution to regret, at least in part, is found in bringing the regret into the presence of compassion. And so, what this might practically look like, I have four movements. The first one is naming. Acknowledge the feeling of regret. Where are the places where you're experiencing regret? Name it and hold it up to the light.

Now I want to say that I recognize some regrets that we have are so acute, so painful, that the idea of naming and facing them are actually debilitating. And so, I want to acknowledge the importance of maybe being willing to do this in an environment where you will be supported. So if that means this practice feels too far outside of your own window of tolerance to do by yourself, consider inviting in a friend, a trained counselor, or therapist, or spiritual director to walk with you through the naming process. This could look like a time of silent prayer, where you name what happened, how it feels, what you wish you would've known, what you wish you could've done instead. Or it might be easier for you to write these things down, in order to keep focus and make it tangible. So that's naming. The next is timing. Give adequate time.

We are so groomed for solutions and we do not like discomfort, but my fear is, at least in our Western culture, we move too quickly past the hurt of failure and pain, cutting the grieving process short and in turn, the healing process as well. Giving ourselves adequate time for this is not permission to wallow. It is an invitation to grieve. You have a real and felt regret. This is painful and it brings up a lot of emotion in you, but here you still are breathing in and out. Here you are still a human person among human people. What can we do as we wait? Well, that brings us to the third movement of surrounding. Invite a compassionate presence. This may come in the form of, as I said before, an actual human. I also think it's important to access the compassion that lives in you.

Joyce Rupp says, "Self-compassion implies giving ourselves a worthy share of attentive care. It means staying with oneself in times of trouble, pain and grief." I'll confess to you now an awareness of the compassionate presence of my friend, Jesus, has been, for me, the most transformative practice I've engaged in in the last six months, particularly when I'm overcome with the relentless, unwavering fog of regret. Are you aware of a compassionate divine presence upon which this regret could be placed? Finally, number four, extending. Offer compassion to others as practice. In her book, *Compassion: Listening to the Cries of the World*, author Christina Feldman says, "I could never extend a boundless compassion to anyone, unless I know deeply what it means to hold myself in a compassionate heart." In addition to experiencing freedom from regret for ourselves, surrounding ourselves with compassionate presence is vital, if we want to be people who create generous space for those who are suffering around us. If you are lost in the fog of regret bound and wound up by what ifs and if onlys, then we can't reach you.

We can't receive from you. We can't enjoy your presence in our lives. We've all done things we wish we could take back. And we all have not done things we wish we could reverse. Take heart. You're not alone. You're not beyond reach. And neither is anyone else. As you work through your own experience of regret, and if you want to learn more about surrounding yourself with compassion, the book, *Boundless Compassion* by Joyce Rupp, I found to be helpful. Also, a daily practice of journaling and naming the things I can't control.

And finally, frequent prayer walks to acknowledge my smallness in this created world, to release some energy in the presence of God who is always with me, no matter where I am, who I'm with, or what's

gone wrong. So here's to you, my friend, as you wrestle with the regrets of life and the naming, the timing, the surrounding, and the extending. May you be ever aware of the compassionate presence of God with you, within you, and around you. And may you find the courage to do just the next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 243 of the Next Right Thing.

I hope this simple practice of embracing the virtue of compassion can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow, because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions. It's also true, our daily decisions are making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram at Emily P. Freeman or online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can also find a transcript of this and every episode. So much thanks to Leah Jarvis for making that possible and to the team at Unmutable for editing each episode for us. In closing, here are a few words from Diane M. Millis from her book *Conversation--The Sacred Art*, "Compassionate, abiding, like sacred holding, is a practice that encouraged us to go within before venturing out. If we're able to go within with what we find difficult or dislike, we're less likely to react impulsively when we venture out and more likely to respond compassionately." Thanks for listening. And I'll see you next time.