

No Regrets

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
April 12, 2026

Rev. Craig M. Nowak

There's a familiar saying that goes, "Life is hard and then you die."

I was going to refer to this as an old saying, but in looking into its origin I discovered it's a relatively recent, sanitized version, of a quote coined in 1982 by one Tony Daniels, aged 15, from a piece run in the Washington Post. Rather than "Life is hard...", Daniels claimed, "Life is a..." Well, I think you can guess his choice of five letter word.

Whichever version of the saying you prefer, I imagine few would claim it carries no resonance to one's experience as a human being. Life is indeed hard at times even for the most insulated or privileged among us. And, of course, all of us, regardless of who we are or what we've done or not done, will one day die. Part of what makes life hard is that it consists of an endless torrent of decisions to be made ranging from the trivial to those proving life altering. To make matters, if not worse, at least more challenging, the decisions we must make aren't always obvious or simple binary choices. Mistakes will be made. Such is the wonderful and woeful condition of that family of beings to which we belong known as humans.

When inclined to characterize our vulnerability to error as a woeful part of being human, we might take some solace in our capacity for reflection and indeed perhaps claim it as a wonderful part of being human. Religion, at its best, having recognized our capacity for reflection, has long elevated it through rituals and observances designed to encourage recollection or confession of our mistakes, atone for them, and to offer and accept mercy and forgiveness.

And while we may commonly associate these religious practices with making amends where our mistake was (or involved) hurting another, often innocent party, we'd do well to remember they apply equally to instances where our mistakes have offended or harmed simply ourselves alone. Indeed, whether one has broken a promise to oneself or ate those unidentifiable leftovers found in the back of the fridge, it is far better to admit the error, forgive oneself- or take some Pepto-Bismol - rather than suffer needless self-castigation or worse.

But, what, you may be wondering, could be worse than suffering needless self-castigation?

(I'm glad I asked).

One of my favorite poems begins, "Some time when the river is ice ask me mistakes I have made. Ask me whether what I have done is my life."

It seems to me that with these words, their author, William Stafford, is inviting our reflection on more than the occasional slip up or poor choice of late night snack. Indeed, Stafford seems to be inviting us to pause and consider a special kind of perceived mistake, our regrets. That nagging feeling the choices we've made, didn't make, or refused to make seem in retrospect to be have been the wrong ones.

Regret has a long history. Even the biblical god had his regrets, as expressed in the Jewish and Christian scriptures (Genesis 6:7), "Then the Lord said, "I will wipe out mankind whom I have created from the face of the land; mankind, and animals as well, and crawling things, and the birds of the sky. For I am sorry that I have made them."

Apparently God watched cable news in the 5th Century BCE.

And so it is, for deity and human alike, life carries an ever present possibility for regret. Sometimes regret is born out of the consequences of a decision that didn't pan out as expected: Money lost in an investment. A Marriage that collapses after having a child. The end of a career after a hard truth is shared.

Other times regret may emerge as a response to a perceived missed opportunity: Not taking a job with that fledgling start up whose stock options could have made you rich. Turning down an invitation to something others later describe as the time of their life. Or not expressing one's love or appreciation for someone while they were still living.

And once in a while regret emerges from both the consequences and sense of missed opportunity related to a decision we've made or not made.

Think tattoos.

In the 2013 film "We're the Millers", viewers are introduced to a young carnival worker who goes by the name "Scotty P." Scotty P sports a large tattoo across his chest, a saying he claims is his credo, "No Regrets". The problem is the tattoo actually reads, "No Ragrets" that's, R -A- G- R -E -T- S.

Another character, David, who finds Scotty P dim-witted is amused by this and sarcastically inquires, “No regrets, huh?”... “Like, not even a single letter?” Scotty P replies, “Naw, I can’t think of one. I love all the letters.”

Now, I don’t know if the filmmakers intended for this exchange to be anything more than one character making fun of another’s seemingly absurd mistake but as is true with much of popular culture, it does invite some deeper spiritual exploration if you’re willing to spend some time with it.

In the scene from the movie I described I imagine many, perhaps most of us, may identify, at least initially, with David. To David, a misspelled tattoo would indeed be cause for regret. For one thing, it’s quite visible and not easily removed. Secondly, we can imagine he’d kick himself for not proofreading the tattoo before a needle ever touched his skin. There’s no doubt about it, David would regret having to walk around with a tattoo that reads, “No Ragrets.”

It is not entirely clear in the film if Scotty P actually knows his tattoo is misspelled. He seems unfazed or unaware that David’s inquiry is pointing out and making fun of the error. Curiously, either way, it validates his assertion that “No Regrets” is his credo.

While few watching “We’re the Millers” would walk away remembering Scotty P as a teacher of wisdom, his credo, “No Regrets”, which he lives by proudly bearing it misspelled across his chest, places him in good company.

In the Bhagavad Gita, a religious text from the Hindu tradition which famously features a conversation between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna concerning moral dilemmas, duty, righteousness, and spirituality, Lord Krishna says to a reluctant Prince Arjuna, “You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action.” (Bg. 2.47) In short, Krishna’s advice is to do your best without attachment to outcome. As in Buddhism, attachment to outcomes, according to teachings in the Bhagavad Gita, inevitably leads to suffering.

And indeed, by its very nature a regret we harbor is an attachment to an imagined or actual outcome often accompanied by a mournful wish to change what cannot be changed.

Wisdom, however, lies in acceptance of what cannot be changed.

Perhaps this why Dorianne Laux’s poem, “Antlamentation”, our reading this morning, opens with the bold exhortation, “Regret Nothing.”

And she means nothing, “Not the cruel novels you read...the insipid movies that made you cry in the dark...the lover you left quivering in a hotel parking lot...Not the nights you called god names and cursed your mother, or sunk like a dog in the living room couch, chewing your nails and crushed by loneliness....” A list of things to which one could surely add, misspelled tattoos.

Laux’s poem emphasizes acceptance over attachment.

Crucially, acceptance does not mean one ought to completely ignore the past or pretend we’ve made no mistakes. Rather it invites us to differentiate between reflection and regret.

Reflection is a practice in which we uncover, explore, and appreciate our deeper selves...the complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes that make us who we are and shape our decisions and actions, which in turn further shape us. As the poet observes, “You were meant to inhale those smoky nights over a bottle of flat beer, to sweep stuck onion rings across the dirty restaurant floor, to wear the frayed coat with its loose buttons, its pockets full of struck matches.

You’ve walked those streets a thousand times and still you end up here. Regret none of it, not one of the wasted days you wanted to know nothing, when the lights from the carnival rides were the only stars you believed in, loving them for their uselessness, not wanting to be saved.”

Her words are an ode in praise of our woeful and wonderful humanity and the messy task of each human being to discern what and if, as William Stafford asks, “whether what I have done is my life.”

In the end, what Laux and Stafford’s poems and Lord Krishna’s advice to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, is really getting at is authenticity. Living your life, not someone else’s.

In her book, The Top Five Regrets of the Dying, professional care-giver Bronnie Ware, notes the number one regret of the people she cared for at the end of life was, “I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.”

And here again Lord Krishna’s advice to Arjuna comes to mind, “You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action.”

The “prescribed duty” of every human being is to faithfully live the life that is theirs to live. You cannot truly do this if you are attached to its outcome.

In our story for all ages today, we're introduced to "Penelope perfect" who perfectly exemplifies a person attached to the outcome of their decisions and actions. She does everything in her power to ensure perfection and avoidance of error. The problem is, she's a human being and as much as we try to deny it, we're not really in charge as an electrical storm reminds poor Penelope.

The mere loss of electricity for a couple hours proves enough to turn her whole life upside down, demonstrating how brittle a life constructed around outcomes can be. As it turns out her problem, that's she's a human being, is also cause for relief. Because she's not in charge, she discovers she can ease up on herself and learn to let the life within her emerge rather than work so hard to control its manifestation from without. And that's what she does, closing the story by sharing, "They called me Penelope perfect. That was once who I wanted to be. But now I think it's better to just be Penelope."

How many of us can say the same for ourselves?

Penelope learned early on that our mistakes don't define us. But they do shape us in that they are integral part of our becoming. Authentic doesn't mean infallible. Reflection on our mistakes can help us see and accept that we've, as Laux, writes, "...traveled this far on the back of every mistake." But we need not cling or identify ourselves with them. Make amends, seek, or offer forgiveness, then, as she advises, "Relax.", which is to say, let go...attend to your "prescribed duty"...no regrets.

For in the end, to live with no regrets is not to excuse or deny the mistakes we've made, but rather to claim and embrace the life that is ours to live appreciative of its complexity and infinite possibilities, and to live it, "emptied of expectation."

May it be so

Amen and Blessed Be