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Redeeming Negative Emotions: A Review of The Power of Regret

Abstract

"Pink defines the growth potential from regret in terms of improving decisions, boosting performance, and deepening meaning."

Posting about the book *The Power of Regret* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/redeeming-negative-emotion-a-review-of-the-power-of-regret/>

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Redeeming Negative Emotion: a review of *The Power of Regret*

Donald Roth

May 11, 2022

Title: *The Power of Regret: How Looking Back Moves Us Forward*

Author: Daniel H. Pink

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I have a playlist of memories that I can summon at will.

Sometimes my brain hits “play” on the playlist even when I don’t tell it to: that time I was merrily running around in the sand, oblivious to the fact that I was creating a dust storm that was blowing straight in my grandpa’s face; that time I totally misread a girl’s attempt to connect over a fantasy book, demurring that my interests were dorky and frivolous instead; the many times I’ve blathered on when people weren’t interested anymore. The list is extensive, and the specifics of almost every memory bring back a flooding, sickening sense of shame and regret for the way I acted—or failed to act.

Maybe you have a similar playlist. I suspect that most of us do. While the length of our playlist and the frequency with which we hit “repeat” on it likely varies quite a bit, my guess is that there are times where many of us wish we could hit “delete” instead. Perhaps we could at least limit new additions to that playlist by embracing a life creed of “no regrets”?

In *The Power of Regret*, Daniel Pink argues against this latter response. He starts with the advice of everyone from Bob Dylan to Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who urge us to reject regret as a waste of time. He builds on this with tales ranging from small town mechanics to major movie stars getting “No Regrets” tattooed on their bodies. Pink then rejects this advice in strong terms: “What the anti-regret brigades are proposing is not a blueprint for a life well lived. What they are proposing is—forgive the terminology, but the next word is carefully chosen—bullshit.”¹

Why does Pink respond to the condemnation of regret with his own emphatic counter-condemnation? He continues, “Regret is not dangerous or abnormal, a deviation from the

steady path to happiness. It is healthy and universal, an integral part of being human. Regret is also valuable. It clarifies. It instructs. Done right, it needn't drag us down; it can lift us up."

I think Pink is largely right in his conclusion, and, as a Christian, I think a critical engagement with Pink's short book can provide us with a better approach to negative emotions like regret.

Daniel Pink

The Wonder of Regret

Rather than starting with responses to regret, Pink begins by stopping and noticing what a cognitive marvel is involved with feeling that way in the first place. In order to feel regret, we need to be able to mentally rewind into the past, alter a decision, then mentally project forward into an alternate future where we believe life would be better in some way. Regret isn't merely about bad things that happened to us. We regret when we assess our past and assign ourselves some degree of blame for our less-than-desirable present. We weave memory and imagination into something that can then be evaluated from a narrator's perspective. It's a fantastically cognitively complex thing to do.

Pink points out that this mental machinery takes time to develop, showing up sometime between the age of 5 and 7 for most of us. Interestingly, this roughly lines up with the "age of reason"² that Western society has long used as a starting point for altering standards of legal accountability. Likewise, an inability to judge which situations would produce more regret is a reliable indicator of a number of mental and physiological diseases. As Pink argues, regret is a hallmark of being a healthy adult.

Before jumping to what to "do about it," I think it's important for Christians to learn to pause and wonder. Psalm 139 praises the Lord for the fact that the psalmist is "fearfully and wonderfully made,"³ and so we are. Even when we are uncertain of what to make of God's gifts, we should take note of their richness. Regret is a wonder-inducing human capacity, one that ties our moral evaluation viscerally to our bodies. Our God didn't just make us as brains on sticks, and He didn't leave us purely at the whim of animal instincts. Mind and body are intimately interwoven in a way that not only links us to the Fall but provides us with a physiological impulse to seek to do better in the future.

Of course, it would be better if we'd never made a mistake in the first place, but that same physicality that lured me to eat way too much last night also offers up a physical tool that I can potentially use to make better choices next time.

The Power of Regret

This connects to Pink's key thesis: there is substantial potential good that we can make from regret. Pink compares our emotions to our stock portfolio. Diversification is good for stable investments, and Pink argues from this that we should learn to leverage negative emotions for significant long-term growth rather than seeking to divest ourselves of them. Pink defines the

growth potential from regret in terms of improving decisions, boosting performance, and deepening meaning.

So how do we realize this potential? Pink argues that it starts with abandoning strategies that either ignore emotions or simply dwell in feelings. Instead, Pink argues that “feeling is for thinking, and thinking is for doing, regret is for making us better.”⁴ I have some quibbles with this formulation, but I think there’s more good than bad to it, particularly when paired with some of the analytic tools that Pink offers.

The principle tool that this book offers is a classification of the types of regrets that might beset us, and a pairing of these types with different strategies of action in response. Based on extensive research through the world regret survey,⁵ Pink breaks down the types of regrets we suffer into four broad categories:

1. Foundation Regrets – When our decisions earlier in life rob us of stability or a solid foundation later in life.
2. Boldness Regrets – When we regret a chance we didn’t take.
3. Moral Regrets – When we have behaved in a way that compromised our beliefs about ourselves.
4. Connection Regrets – When we neglect the people who help make us feel whole.

Using Pink’s approach, we can start with the feeling of regret, trace it back to one of these core sources, and then evaluate and act upon it based on some of the suggestions he offers that pertain to each core type. I won’t rob the author of all the value he offers in terms of these action strategies, but I will highlight a few helpful points.

First, Pink reminds his readers to think carefully about whether we have properly assigned blame to ourselves. In discussing foundation regrets, Pink reminds his readers of the “fundamental attribution error,” a powerful cognitive bias that favors personal blame over contextual explanations for failures. This helps us differentiate disappointment from regret and not judge ourselves by unrealistic standards. Pink offers a cognitive tool to help counteract this error: assess your past self as if you were one of your friends. I tend to be unforgiving with myself in a way that radically differs from how I view others, so this was particularly helpful for me.

Second, Pink does a wonderful job of tying his deep regrets to how they speak to what humans need. He ties foundation regrets to our need for stability, boldness regrets to our need for growth, moral regrets to our need for goodness, and connection regrets to our need for love. It’s an easy jump from many of these needs to a Christian anthropology that finds satisfaction of these desires in God. It also reveals the instructive pattern of negative emotions: what we lack underlines what we desire, and what we desire highlights who we are.

The Redemption of Regret

There is more that could be said about this short little book, but I will use this last point to transition. Contemporary narratives often reject negative emotions as if they were themselves the bad things that they connect to. I'm aware of the painful, malforming effects that excessive or poorly rooted shame, guilt, anxiety, fear, or anger can have, but targeting these emotions themselves, rather than what they respond to, is an overreaction. Maybe that's not even strong enough language; if negative emotions like regret ultimately point to our need for and connection to God, then excising them is cutting ourselves off from that testimony.

This is especially true with regret for one last reason: regret powerfully emphasizes our longing for redemption. Pink offers this in general terms, recommending using "at least" statements to find silver linings and growth narratives in mistakes we've made. He also makes some reference to the positive benefits of telling ourselves redemption stories, a reference to a book by Dan McAdams that I've previously reviewed.⁶ However, our deep longing for redemption points to something ultimately beyond our personal grasp.

This is part of the riddle of negative emotions: they are often connected to something that is undeniably bad. That is, finding a silver lining just isn't enough to really overcome some of the bad things I've done. Redemption is a lesson learned, but it's also a longing that the evil could be undone. To use an old analogy, if I insisted on touching a hot stove, I may have learned a powerful lesson that will inspire me not to do it again, but I might also have a burned and permanently disfigured hand. No amount of silver lining overcomes the reality that it would have been better if I'd just trusted the word of the person who told me not to do it.

I suspect Adam and Eve felt similarly, but the damage was done. No amount of promising to do better could undo the pain and alienation that original sin brought about. Even the way God uses the Fall to enter into His Creation in a deeper way does not erase the terrible, regrettable tragedy that it was. What we need in redemption is re-creation: a complete renewal that restores and transforms everything, not back to what it was, but to what it could have been. We need a Savior to bring down the heavenly city that might have been, pulling us into that better future in spite of the darker road we've walked.

There is power in regret, and there is deep value in coming to terms with all of our negative emotions, but that value is for a season. Our negative emotions help us join in the groaning of Creation, but our abiding hope is in the promise that there is something better breaking in. We get some foretaste of better when we use regret to spur us on to better living, but that is just a shadow. We need the full reconciliation of all things in Christ our King, and regret teaches us to cry out for that.

2. <https://www.scholastic.com/parents/family-life/social-emotional-learning/development-milestones/age->
3. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+139&version=ESV>
4. p. 55
5. <https://worldregretsurvey.com>
6. <https://inallthings.org/american-christians-a-review-of-the-redemptive-self/>