

Remorse is not the same as wallowing in one's mistakes. To say so is another clever defense against true remorse [...] Remorse shifts perspective from ego to the soul.

Thomas Moore, 1988

RESOLVING RESENTMENT THROUGH REMORSE

Chapter 10

True remorse creates a forgiving heart. In spite of that shared wisdom, there's much in the literature that treats remorse as an undesirable pathology, and I suspect that is so because many don't know the nature of true remorse. We certainly don't seem to embrace it as a culture.

We do know a great deal about regret. And we are severely guilty, individually and as a society, certainly in our culture's view, and as a species.

In the process of discussing the nature of remorse, I'm hoping it will become evident how it resolves resentment and brings about a forgiving heart. It seems a formidable explanation.

First, remorse is usually a spontaneous reaction to a moment of painful enlightenment. Well, you might argue, guilt, whether short-lived or long lasting, is equally reactive. So, if I use Stern's (1989) explanation, we might get some clarity. He says the difference is that remorse is a response to the larger moral and ethical concerns. See the difference? Let me give you an example.

We have a woman who overhears a conversation in a crowded restaurant and learns through her eavesdropping that someone she has gossiped about has found out about it and is quite hurt. She feels an instant strike of guilt accompanied by fear of what repercussions may ensue and an additional stroke of regret for having gotten herself into such a petty situation. That's guilt. And regret.

Though it's painful and it might curtail her behavior in the future, however, it is *self* focused and the pain of it is enforced by her pride. Her guilt is about protecting herself from future humiliation and embarrassment. And she may continue to protect herself from humiliation by avoiding the friend, perhaps with noble justifications, but most often with fabricated accusations or inflations of the other's faults. Stern says:

Guilt, expressed as mere self reproach, thwarts conscience. From a psychological perspective, rectitude can never occur in the face of self-condemnation alone. A broader scope is necessary.

Stern, 1989.

Remorse broadens the scope of guilt and regret into a sense of purpose (Stern, 1989) as can be seen when we look at another woman in the exact same situation, eavesdropping on a conversation in a crowded restaurant. She, too, finds out that someone she has gossiped about has found out about it and has been terribly hurt. But she is instantly struck by a realization of how *hurtful* her behavior was *to the other* person.

She, too, feels an instant strike of guilt and it might even be accompanied by some measure of fear of what repercussions may ensue. But it will be the guilt of acknowledged responsibility.

She will also have the additional stroke of regret, but her regret will be focused on the effect she has had on the other. And, it may also include regret for herself.

At the strike of remorse, she will be sitting in a moment of total enlightenment about her past behavior and the present effect in all the people around her who have been affected by her betrayal of her friend. It's painful, and it will not only change her behavior in the future, but it will change her behavior in the present. She will feel conciliatory, and will want to set right not only the wrong that she did her friend, but whatever the situation was that served as a catalyst for the gossip in the first place.

The experience will pierce her spirit. She will not get locked into being totally "me" focused, nor will she be completely "other" focused. She will be "all" focused. At a minimum, she will have a diffuse understanding of the interchange, and most likely this will be accompanied by self acknowledgment of responsibility rather than self-condemnation.

You will see in remorseful people a *condition of concern which stems from, but ultimately transcends guilt and regret* (Stern, 1989). In sharp

contrast to the guilt / regret position, remorse births integrity and rectitude. "As it transcends both guilt and regret, remorse acknowledges the wisdom of relational experiences" (Stern, 1989).

I would go so far as to add that it doesn't just acknowledge the wisdom of our relational experiences; I believe that it reveals them. I believe that in that moment when one is stricken with the total awareness of what she has done, a shield is removed from her eyes and her horizons are cleared to reveal the greater picture of life.

Regret, though fundamental to regression, stays focused, primarily on self and remains focused backward in time to what could have been. "Left on its own, unfettered regret leads to rampant narcissism" (Stern, 1989).

Another contrast between remorse and regret / guilt is that regret and guilt can easily be excluded from one's conscious awareness. You might be feeling incredible guilt and be manifesting it through abusive behavior (toward yourself or someone else) and not have a clue about the real source of your feelings.

Regret can even evoke self-despair, self reproach and rebuke. But once again, they are me-focused; they trap one in the past and never produce healing in spite of the fact that it may prevent the repetition of the behavior that initiated it.

When people apologize from a place of guilt and regret, their apologies tend to present themselves as me-focused excuses instead of honest explanations. Significantly, and toward the point of this discussion, there is no attitude of forgiveness of whatever actions the other may have done as part of problematic situation in the first place. "Regret and guilt which fail to jell into remorse become avoidances of responsibility and authentic obligation" (Stern, 1989).

Like the woman in the first example, a regretful guilt-ridden person may cringe at the memory of the painful experience for the rest of her life, and she might really suffer as a result of her feelings of humiliation. And she may remain trapped in hatred toward the other person through projection and through failure to resolve the initial conflict in the first place because of the lack of forgiveness on her part.

In sharp contrast, the concerns of remorse are integrity and rectitude. "As it transcends both guilt and regret, remorse acknowledges the wisdom of relational experiences" (Stern, 1989).

Remorse has the unique attribute of being able to mature our own experience and in so doing, it celebrates the sacredness of the acts of contrition and restitution. What results is a propitiation with that which is central to our very existence. Some will experience it as God. Others as a

connection with the universal. All will be changed by it. "Remorse peaks beyond its foundations, making meaningful use of both guilt and regret" (Stern, 1989).

If, as psychologist Stern (1989) says, emotional growth is contingent upon remorse, we have an explanation about the condition of our crime-ridden culture.

Stern (1989) says that the transcendence of guilt and regret to remorse is both a challenge and a mystery. Yet if you hang out around 12 Step programs where the members are actually working the program and living by the principles, the experience, though sacred, is common. Sacred experiences *are*, in fact, fairly common within the 12 Step community. Their achievement is no less challenging, nor is it any less a mystery, but they are more common.

It seems that the process of dealing with resentment by surrendering to some kind of higher power (which has the effect of making you take your seat with the rest of humanity) and accepting *full responsibility* for your part in everything down to and including your very nature, opens us to experiencing a kind of wisdom that is punctuated with the very sharpest awareness of cause and effect. Thomas Moore (1988) calls this the initiation of the soul. And as he says so succinctly, initiation hurts!

So, some therapists are diagnosing patients as incurably or pathologically remorseful, when in fact they are really trapped in a narcissistic cycle of guilt and regret. Remorse is not something to be overcome. It is something to be sought and “integrated as fruitful to the human condition” (Stern, 1989).

In looking at the challenge and mystery of remorse, I think it is beneficial to look at the extremes of those who seem to have no remorse, guilt or regret whatsoever, and those who wallow in their guilt and regret to the point of becoming obsessive and nonfunctional.

Neuroscientist, Laurence Miller, (1988) talks about these extremes between the psychopath (impulsive) who has no capacity for remorse and the compulsive who is unable to let go of guilt and regret. He hypothesizes that these extremes result from neurocognitive deficits that leave each with diminished capacities for experiencing true remorse.

The left hemisphere of the psychopath or impulsive personality seems to have diminished capacity for generating the self-directed inner speech which would normally guide the frontal-lobe mechanisms responsible for behavior, self-evaluation and self-control. Without that central core experience of “self,” created by this interchange, their life experiences are not fully integrated or reflected upon. Actions which would ordinarily elicit

some degree of guilt and regret fail to do so because there is no real "self" present for that experience; there is no integrated value system; in fact there is no "code" to be violated in the first place. Even the more utilitarian aspects of "learning from experience" seem to be absent in impulsive psychopaths; they characteristically fail to profit from their previous mistakes, long past the point where others would have had the "sense knocked into them" (Miller, 1988).

The psychopathic example of our gossiping analogy would be a woman who experienced no concern whatsoever for having gossiped about a friend, nor any concern that it had been discovered. This person, having no self talk from which self evaluation would emerge and no ideal against which to measure herself, would not have the capacity to ever reach the experience of remorse. Terribly tragic!

". . .without a coherent self-system, the personality remains a barren expanse upon which the lessons of life can find no purchase"
(Miller, 1988)

The compulsive person, on the other hand, is *too sharply focused* on the *details* of experience to allow her experience to sink all the way into the personality structure. She, like the psychopath, is "unpierceable." She seems to have an absence of functional context, which in recent years has been determined to be a primary function of the right brain (Ornstein,

1997). As a result, she will experience an overemphasis of analysis and control. Miller's hypothesis is that this is engendered by an overly active-left-hemisphere (or if you follow the current thinking, vis a vis Ornstein, perhaps by an under-active-right-hemisphere) which leaves no ability to form a more passive, affective assimilation of experience and the resulting insight. She can't "let go" of the details of a regretted act. The fragments of guilt and regret remain ever sharp and fresh, to be ever more concentratedly examined and analyzed. They remain unreflected upon in a way that would permit their resolution if she could find the grace of remorse.

Looking at the neurocognitive aberrations helps me see the ways in which genetic diversity and cultural diversity can and have worked hand in hand to create (and reinforce) a broad spectrum of human responses and reactions to life. There is a possibility that this neurocognitive approach might provide some clues as to how we might deal more effectively with the extremes of personality.

It has been suggested (Miller, 1988) that the impulsive (psychopathic) person would require a more structured and directive form of intervention that leads him to identifying the links between behavior and its consequences. At the outset, this probably would have to be done in a

fairly concrete manner, with progress, if it ever happened, evolving toward generalization of the process later on. The degree to which this is successful will be entirely predicated upon the extreme to which the personality suffers from real structural deficits.

Obviously, if there is absolutely no capacity for self examination in the individual, there would be no motivation for learning and adopting new behaviors and ways of thinking.

Miller (1988) believes that the compulsive personality may be most beneficially assisted in the direction of true remorse by taking advantage of her predilection for verbal analysis and over focused control by engaging her in "cognitive therapy" approaches.

I think, however, that it is interesting to note that the personalities of many alcoholics and drug addicts seem to fall into either end of this cognitive spectrum, and the one approach that has been most successful in dealing with both has been a focus on surrendered self responsibility and amends. It is a highly cognitive approach.

Nurture and re nurture seem to have some beneficial effect on whatever genetic or social disturbances a person may have once there is sufficient external motivation for adopting new disciplines. Sobriety, for many, serves as that motivation.

Now, what does all this have to do with forgiving? We're all somewhere on that continuum either neurologically or socially. Those at either of the extreme ends are going to have a difficult time forgiving or ever feeling remorse and making amends. The goal of both would seem to be the centeredness that comes from achieving a balance between the two extremes.

Since the addict with his extremes of compulsive or impulsive tendencies, achieves the spiritual experience of centeredness, balance and vision as a result of being forced to focus on surrendered responsibility and amends in order to gain the emotional growth and serenity he requires for sobriety, and since that process produces both a genuinely remorseful countenance and attitudes and behaviors of forgiving, it seems safe to hypothesize that remorse is yet one more of the faces of the wisdom of forgiving.

Through remorse, once again, we bring ourselves to a place of surrendered self-responsibility, where we are neither superior to nor inferior to anything or anyone. Through whatever faces or facets of loving surrender we approach this loving wisdom, we are left with a recognition that life is infinitely more complex than we are ever able to comprehend, and the answers to living in the complexity are infinitely more simple than

we would ever begin to imagine. The interplay of one upon the other shapes our spirits in ways we would never have planned.