

PHYSICIAN WELLNESS

REGRETS, RECKONING, AND FORGIVENESS

By *Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP*

NO ONE CAN LIVE BOTH honestly and without regrets.

All of us fall short, make mistakes, do things we know we shouldn't have done, or, conversely, don't do things we know we should have. Any fair and thorough review of a year or even a day is bound to yield plenty of errors of omission and commission.

Yet, just as a basketball player aims at sinking every shot and a tennis player at placing every stroke, we, too, can imagine a kind of idealized life, so focused and aware that we get it right every time. Hah! Such a world exists only in our imagination.

Three processes serve to counterbalance regret: reckoning, perspective, and forgiveness.

With reckoning, we do hold ourselves to account for a mistake for which we should or could have known to avoid. In a primary care medical practice such as mine, it might be an insensitive explanation, a rushed diagnosis, a lab abnormality dismissed as non-significant, a failure to review drug-drug interactions, a forgotten order, or a failure to double-check a previous EKG. A practice is a wellspring of opportunities to improve — and what is improvement if not to face an error with regret and a determination to improve?

Perspective gives you the chance to avoid going overboard with self-criticism. It may be that on your best day you would have caught that subtle opacity on the previous CT scan and initiated treatment earlier. But you're not at your best every day. No one is. You didn't document that the patient had had an extreme allergic reaction to that same antibiotic 10 years ago and now you've gone and prescribed it again with a repeat in their liver enzymes jumping by a factor of 10. But the patient did adamantly deny any medication allergies and you've only just learned that the new EHR didn't properly transfer the allergy section from the old system. And so the regret is at least lightened by these considerations.

On the far other side of regret is forgiveness. Forgiveness can come after a strict critique, a balancing of all the facts, or — somewhat less usefully — after a flimsy excuse. In any case, without forgiveness (of ourselves, others, fate, God) we would be crushed by the sheer weight of accumulated regrets.

This rhyming poem, "Without Regrets," which I finished in time for the recent New Year, is really about forgiveness. For us humans, that is the ultimate path beyond regret. +

Without Regrets

Looking at a year gone by
This part struts, that part frets
All of me keeps wondering why
If I might live without regrets

Staring through the sky's expanse
The endless blue and contrail jets
I long to see our lives enhance
And not crushed down by dark regrets

The beach fog seems to coalesce
God's face from cloudy silhouettes
Instruction comes to my address
"Thou shalt aspire for no regrets"

I know that in the end we cease
Death's the joke each human gets
But might there be a bend toward peace,
Some newfound calm from old regrets?

At the plaintive close of day
Its arc complete, the great orb sets
Might the fading light convey
That darkness needn't bring regrets

As I make a reckoning
Assembling lists of all my debts
I find forgiveness beckoning
My sums resolved without regrets

Searching for a final clue
Drawn from dreams one most forgets
There's that true north worth pointing to
The compass mark of no regrets.

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