

NO REGRETS

*A Ten-Step Program for
Living in the Present and
Leaving the Past Behind*



HAMILTON BEAZLEY, PH.D.



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Praise for *No Regrets*

“*No Regrets* is . . . destined to take its place alongside the other great self-help guides of our time. Hamilton Beazley is a remarkable writer who has the distinct ability to understand the most complex inner workings of the human spirit and mind. With insight and respect, Beazley compassionately depicts the strategies and tactics that can help others change the architecture of regret to improve virtually every aspect of their being. In his inspired ten-step program, Beazley failed to mention that very first step to having no regrets is to read this book.”

—Howard J. Shaffer, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Director,
Division on Addictions, Harvard Medical School

“We spend much of our lives fruitlessly wishing we had made other choices. We somehow believe that when we are not pleased with the consequences of our decisions that an alternative would have been better. The reality is that if we had made another decision we would have had different results. We have no assurances the results would have been better. In *No Regrets*, Hamilton Beazley has provided a truly outstanding process for dealing with our self doubts that result from second guessing our decisions. This is a much-needed process that will help many to accept their human condition in greater comfort.”

—Pia Mellody, author of *Facing Codependence*,
Facing Love Addiction, and *The Intimacy Factor*

“A boon to anyone struggling to let go of the heartache caused by regret.”

—Susan Anderson, author of *The Journey
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“This book is about the dynamics of inner life—anyone’s. It brilliantly exposes how people have moved or can move beyond regret to health and vitality.”

—The Rt. Rev. Claude E. Payne, D.D.,
Episcopal Bishop of Texas, Retired

“*No Regrets* carries the hopeful message that we can rid ourselves of the regrets that nibble away at our vitality, competence, and joy in the world. Whether the regret is an angry exchange we can’t seem to forget or something as shattering as the death of a child, Beazley’s ten-step program can release us from bondage into freedom.”

—Martha Hickman, author of *Healing After Loss*

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To Judith Nowak, whose insights, love,
and laughter on the road less traveled have
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Deo non fortuna.

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significantly influenced the general framework of the Ten Steps and contain many of the same spiritual principles. I am especially grateful to AA members who generously shared their time with me, explaining the Twelve Steps and the spiritual principles on which the AA program of recovery is based. Their selflessness in helping me understand the Twelve Steps and their willingness to be of service to me and to each other has been truly inspiring.

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INTRODUCTION

SOMETHING REMARKABLE IS POSSIBLE

“ONCE UPON A TIME” captures the fairy-tale hope that many of us once had for our lives. As dolls and dragons gave way to dating and driving, the world became more complex, time and events piled up, and the innocence that used to characterize us slipped away. “Once upon a time” gradually dissolved into a different, darker view of our experiences: “If only I had . . .” we would say to ourselves. Sometimes over and over. Or perhaps: “If only I hadn’t . . .”

We all have regrets. As we grow older and more fully appreciate the mistakes we have made and the opportunities we have missed, the more there is to regret, at least potentially. Many of us ignore these potential regrets and let the real ones go. But not all of us. Some of us hold onto deep and consuming regrets that burden our lives, cripple our relationships, and hobble our future. They may torment us with the slow drip of remorse or the sudden agony of a memory that springs to life and leaves us cringing. Or they sap our strength with painful memories of what once was or might have been. Intermittent or constant, these regrets tie us to a long-dead past, leaving us guilty or ashamed in the present, unable to touch the joy of life or to regain our own sense of preciousness. On the days when such regrets come back, they suck the life out of us and turn us into the walking wounded, into the near-dead.

Regrets can take many forms: a lost love, squandered assets, years of

addiction, a failed career, an illegitimate child given up, an abortion, a public disgrace, children who were not well nurtured, financial ruin, a friend's betrayal, missed career opportunities, an alcoholic parent, inadequate schooling, an extramarital affair, the horrors of war, or any other past event or series of events that continues to have a negative impact on the quality of our lives. Perhaps our regrets cluster around one or two devastating experiences: the sudden death of a child or a bitter divorce. Or perhaps they form a constellation of memories collected over time that stab us repeatedly in our present lives: the pain of an orphaned childhood or the agonies of an abusive father.

For some people, it isn't a simple regret but many regrets that continue to hound them. They regret every major decision they have made, convinced that it was wrong. They can't let go and move on. Even in an affluent society—perhaps especially in an affluent society—many people have deep regrets about their lives, regrets that haunt them and hold them prisoner to a past that is no longer real.

But the same regrets that linger as ghosts from our past can be transformed into guides for the present and mentors for our future. They can serve us rather than torment us, lead us to happiness rather than away from it. They can be answers to our prayers rather than drivers of them. Regrets can be opportunities for spiritual and psychological growth that lead to a greater sense of mastery and joy rather than debilitating memories spawning feelings of hopelessness and grief. We can learn to face the past without fearing it, indulging it, or denying it. We can accept it without regret and move on to a rich and productive life. But how?

Letting Go of Regret

This book describes a practical program of ten steps for moving beyond the past and the regret it holds into the present and the rich life it promises. *No Regrets* is about coming to terms with—and then embracing and, finally, releasing—the regrets of our lives so that they can be used productively for our own growth and for the benefit of others. It doesn't matter

whether the regrets are constant or intermittent. It doesn't matter whether they are about something we did (or didn't do) or something someone else or fate did (or didn't do). It doesn't matter whether the regrets are about something from yesterday, last year, or a quarter century ago. No matter what our regret and no matter how painful or devastating it has been, something remarkable is possible. That something remarkable is the gift of freedom: freedom from regret.

Letting go of our regrets does not mean denying them or minimizing them. Rather, it means coming to terms with them, releasing the painful emotions they cause, and ending the distortions they are creating in our lives. When regrets interfere with our happiness, when we are more consumed by the past than enriched by the present, it is time to take stock of our regrets—and what they are costing us.

But we can't change the past.

Or can we?

While we cannot change a past event, we *can* change our reaction to it, our understanding of it, and what we do with it. In other words, *we can change the psychological effect of that past event on our lives*. And when we change the psychological effect of something, it is like changing the thing itself. After all, it is the *psychological effect* that determines how the *event* influences us emotionally in the present. So for all practical purposes, we *can* change the past.

Something remarkable *is* possible. We can make the past work for us rather than against us. Whatever our regret, we can come to terms with it. Whatever our regret, we can learn to use its lessons and its gifts. Whatever our regret, we can let it go.

Ten Steps to Letting Go of Regret

The ten-step program described in this book is based on extensive research, including the psychological literature on regrets, resentments, and their healing; spiritual literature on prayer and meditation, forgiveness, and acceptance; interviews with psychiatrists, members of the clergy, and

other experts in psychological and spiritual matters; and the methodology of the Twelve Steps originated by Alcoholics Anonymous and used by dozens of other self-help groups. In the process of writing this book, I have spoken with hundreds of people who have wrestled with burdensome regrets, some of whom overcame them and others who did not. Some of their personal stories are told in the following pages, but of course the name of each person has been changed.

The Ten Steps described in the book use spiritual and therapeutic practices that include visualization, journaling, self-examination, cognitive analysis, affirmations, prayer, meditation, and sharing with others. It is possible to be a spiritual person and to practice spiritual principles without being religious, because spirituality is not necessarily the same as religious belief. While established religious traditions provide a structured way to a deeper faith and greater spirituality, it is possible to begin a spiritual journey with no faith in the God of traditional religions. A willingness to trust in something greater than ourselves, whatever that may be, is helpful at the start but not essential. A willingness to come to believe in something greater than ourselves will speed our journey but again is not essential. Atheists and agnostics, devoted followers of a religious tradition, and those whose sense of the spiritual embraces no specific form of worship will all find that the Ten Steps will work for them. All that is required is willingness. Or a willingness to become willing. And the steps can supply that much willingness.

For some of us, however, willingness is not the primary obstacle to letting go of our regrets. A lack of understanding is. We don't know *how* to let go of our regrets and move on. We don't understand the process involved, the steps we need to take in order to find the freedom we seek. *No Regrets* was written to provide that understanding. It will explain how to open the door to a new life—a life without the regrets that burden you. By understanding what you can do and applying that knowledge to your life, you will come to terms with your regrets—and let them go.

This book will lead you in an orderly fashion through each of the Ten Steps, one step at a time, allowing you to proceed at your own pace. *No Regrets* is an interactive book that asks you to participate in certain structured

exercises and activities. It is an encouraging book because encouragement is warranted and needed and because a growing sense of mastery and joy should be part of what you are doing.

The Journey

With this book and a willingness to change, you can embark on a great adventure down a road of wonder. Miracles, love, and healing await you. As you travel this journey of discovery, of letting go, and of spiritual growth, you will not be alone. Unanticipated resources will materialize to assist you. Surprising “coincidences” will happen at the precise moment you need them. New acquaintances and old friends will cross your path at just the right time with just the right words. You will find love, support, and guidance in unexpected places and from unexpected individuals. Powerful forces will be mustered on your behalf. If you give yourself to the work of the Ten Steps, you will be protected and led, and you will experience a sense of joy, freedom, and belonging that you could not have imagined. All of these things are not only possible, they are promises.

I began this book as a project to help a friend find a way to let go of a burdensome regret. As always seems to happen when we set out to help someone else, we are helped most of all. In considering the problem of my friend’s regret, I had to come to terms with three big regrets of my own that I had not been able to release, including a death I had never been able to grieve. Each of my regrets clearly met the criterion of a burdensome regret: interference with my enjoyment of the present and with the future I wanted to claim for myself. Yet I didn’t know what to do about them in a practical way. I couldn’t seem to let them go. In researching and writing *No Regrets*, I found a way to do it. I worked the Ten Steps described in this book on my own regrets, and I have let them go. I am amazed by that. And very grateful.

What I have done, you can do, too.

No Regrets will show you how. It will explain how you can let go of burdensome regrets and how to keep new ones from forming. Beyond

that, its Ten Steps will enable you to build a richer and more rewarding life, to reclaim the present for yourself, and to shape the future in accordance with the dreams you have for it.

The road to freedom from regret beckons. Come join me and others who have traveled it. We'll show you the way.

PART I



PREPARATION FOR
LETTING GO

