

Your Concrete Weekly Devotionals

February 2018

by Rob LoAlbo

Join us in spirit every Thursday at 9:00 PM, and pray with us for 10 minutes. These devotionals are posted on Facebook every week to assist in that prayer and commitment. For those not on Facebook, below are those posted weekly devotionals. Use them with us as a way to join our prayer group. We look forward to “seeing” you there!

February 1 – *Prideful Rants and Pointless Competitions*



Proverbs 29.11 says: “Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end.”

The following is a word-for-word email exchange I had with a Brooklyn art gallery who specializes in pop-art.

Earlier that morning, I received a promotional email, stating that they were having a “mystery tube” sale, where 5-7 artwork pieces would be randomly put into a tube for the cost of one painting. It was a steal, and I was really excited to buy one. Since it was a timed release, first come first served, I made sure I was online at exactly the correct time, put one in my virtual shopping cart, got a text message confirmation

number, and hit the “finish transaction” button, but a screen came up that said, “Your cart is empty.” No purchase, no tube, nothing. I quickly emailed the gallery:

Wondering what happened. I had it in my cart, I got texts with an authorization code, and then it was gone when I completed my order.

A couple of minutes later, I got an answer.

Recommend not to use that option, uncheck the option in the last page of checkout for next time, it slows you down.

I was incensed. Not only did I not get it or any offers of help, he seemed to be blaming me. I returned with:

So, I lost the tube because I didn't check out fast enough?!?!?

I figured that the excessive punctuation would properly display my emotional state. His response:

Yeah unfortunately, it's a limited release.

Maybe it was the aloof “yeah” or the total lack of any offer to help that did it, nevertheless I was enraged.

Why is there not a timed countdown to checkout out, like most other places, where you have a certain amount of time to complete the purchase? I'm calling bs on you guys. I logged in, had it in my cart, and didn't get through the checkout page fast enough, apparently.

That's a (lousy) way to treat us past customers who bother to have an account and have bought from you in the past.

I patiently waited for an answer. When three minutes went by, I emailed again:

I had the tube in my cart and someone stole it out of my cart. Do you realize the absurdity of that sentence? If we were in a physical store, that would not be allowed by any party present.

I would like this situation fixed before I post my Yelp review about what happened.

Ah, let the looming threat of negative social media press hang over them. I figured I had them cornered. Yet:

No one stole it out of your cart, our website is first come first serve on checkout, you weren't quick enough and the item sold out before you were able to check out.

No need to threaten with a Yelp review, we aren't a restaurant. If you were nicer to us, we would remedy a situation, doesn't look like that's the case.

Now he was getting sarcastic with me. Well then...I could give as good as I could get!

It was most definitely there. Semantics, I suppose.

I'll be sure to include this information in the Yelp review. Despite your lack of faith in the Yelp system and social media, a reputation is everything, even in the art world. My statement was to give you a chance to fix this situation before I made it a public matter. I suppose you do not care for your reputation as much as I thought you did.

At let's be honest here: you never had any interest in remedying the situation or you would have mentioned it sooner when I first emailed you.

Oh, and your timing couldn't have been more perfect with this email. I just read our conversation aloud to my class of high school art students right here in New York. (There were two art students sitting next to me, but it sounded better written this way)

However, you're not a restaurant. I'm sure it won't sway their opinion of your gallery in the slightest.

After I wrote this email, I sat back with such an immense amount of satisfaction. I had him at every turn! I had won!...As long as he didn't write back, which of course, he did:

You could've emailed nicely and asked, "is there any way you guys have an extra" or "if someone cancels, can I please purchase," instead you went on to threaten us with a negative Yelp review, yet expect us to help and work with you on a remedy? That makes no sense, we rather help customers who are polite and acknowledging of the fact that they missed out on a mystery tube due to traffic and demand.

Have a good day, no need to order from us in the future.

The nerve! I'd show him. Then a new person (a manager, maybe?) emailed me with this comment:

This is what you discuss with your High School students? Can I leave a Yelp review with your superintendent as well?

Now that was personal! Argh! And then this from him, too:

I think going for this purchase during class time might be an issue when you should be teaching.

Don't worry about future purchases. Added to the list.

Have a great new year!

Sarcastic and smug! How dare he! I wanted to throw my laptop. So, I sat down for the next 20 minutes and wrote a great, angry, biting review about how I was being treated, how this all went down, everything. I'd destroy them! I completely wrote the piece, sat back, and suddenly realized how stupid and meaningless this all was. I breathed, rethought, and wrote the following email back to them:

I just spent the last 20 minutes writing (what I thought was) a scathing Yelp review about your gallery. After finishing it, I took some time to get perspective.

While I wrote it, I was so angry and vindictive, as our situation went from an exciting opportunity to purchase some art into a pissing contest that ended up with personal derogatory remarks about me. (I don't say this as a matter of resentment; I'm just point something out for the sake of this

email. Bear with me.) I believe, and I think you would agree, that our emails got into the realm of who was going to have the last word, and with my review, I was determined that it would be me. However, I have deleted the piece and ended up not posting it.

A cycle of anger and vindictiveness was created that involved so much emotion, that by posting, I would just perpetuate that cycle. What's the point, really? There's enough hatred and anger in the world. I don't need to create more or encourage you to feel more anger and hatred towards me. If I post, where would it end? You might feel the need to respond, then I would, etc. It's all just not worth it. Why should we care so much about something that is so trivial? I believe that we are all better than that.

I'm not trying to sound better than anyone else or that I'm taking the high road. I just wanted to let you both know that there's no need to continue. The truth is, I like your gallery, your artists, and your output. I'm just sad that I missed out on the opportunity.

You still get to have the last word and be right with your previous email if you want to. I don't mind. If it makes you feel justified, that's okay. You can even keep me on a "list" if you want. I just didn't want to be the source of any more ill feelings in the universe and be the cause of anyone's day to be marred, ruined, or darkened to any extent.

You can respond if you want, but don't feel the need to.

I sincerely hope your day improves and that your gallery has a successful year.

After I wrote that email, I felt lighter, as if enormous weights had been lifted off me. I had gotten myself so caught up in this battle, that I lost sight of myself. I closed my computer and walked away feeling relieved. It was over.

So, it was a great surprise to receive this email a little later:

I appreciate the email. No harm no foul. All good.

I'll send you an invoice for a mystery tube as we have an extra for you =)

Hope your day is better too!

Cheers

I was shocked. I quickly wrote back:

Wow. I really wasn't expecting that, nor did I intend for that to happen. I'm actually really moved.

That was very thoughtful of you. It's a real testament to your character.

Thank you. Truly. And not just for the tube, but for making the world just a little bit better today. It needs it.

His final response? Only this:



February 8 – *Avoiding Explosions and Reducing the Pressure*



My son, and admittedly myself, tend to giggle like idiots whenever we open up a bottle of seltzer and find that it's been shaken up too much beforehand. Laughing throughout, we failingly reach to tighten the cap as quickly as possible as we get covered in carbonated water. As a result of increasing pressure inside of the bottle with nothing to let out the pressure, the bottle was just waiting for our hands to get a hold of it while the pressure was temporarily contained.

Similarly, while a teenager, I made quite the wicked discovery that if I combine water, sugar and a certain common chemical in a soda bottle and shake it up, it explodes with quite a bit of force, as the reaction inside is stronger than what the plastic container can hold back. Inside this container, the pressure continued to build until it could either be contained or released, and since the bottle was too weak to contain the pressure inside, it would explode at great decibels. My friends and I had a number of misadventures with that discovery, with thankfully no repercussions in our lives or in the lives of others.

Pressure also builds up in our relationships and interactions, and just like these containers, unless something or someone comes along to release that pressure, it will continue to build until it eventually explodes when it can't be contained any further, and not always in the best of ways.

In my last devotional, I recounted a story about an email fight I had with an art gallery over a failed purchase that went from inquisition to threats to personal comments to almost public shaming. It was at that point, right before I was about to post my public review, that I saw how the pressure had built up in these interactions, how all parties were so concerned with being right and having the last word, that the pressure just kept building between us. We really seemed out to destroy one another, even though we had

never met, and I wasn't sure where it was going to end, either. False bravado, hubris, cockiness, whatever you want to call it.

Additionally, I noted the physical toll that these interactions were taking on me. I felt heavier, as if these words were physically weighing on my shoulders. Slouched over at my computer, I angrily typed, pounding down on the keys while furious grimaces crossed my face. The thoughts of what I wanted to do to these people, making them pay for their words, ran rampant in my head, and I'm pretty sure that the other party was feeling and doing the same exact things.

Thinking about how a tea kettle, as it builds up steam, needs to vent that steam or else it will explode, I was certain that at some point, someone had to let the pressure out of this situation. I suddenly realized that I had the power to do it, so I composed that final long email of unwarranted reconciliation. As I wrote, I felt progressively and significantly lighter, free of our words, as if they were being lifted off me. When I wrote, I wasn't expecting anything and didn't even think I would hear back from them. I just knew that I didn't want to carry that burden any more. I was tired of being angry.

Carrie Fisher once said that resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. Anger towards another does nothing but destroy ourselves. So, to break free from the cycle of anger, we need to find a valve, something or someone that lets out the steam. Unfortunately for Kim and Julia, they couldn't find one between the two of them.

These two senior students had been bickering with one another for a day or so. Towards the end of my class, it started up again, but was increasing in intensity. For every biting comment one had, the other had an even stronger one. It would go back and forth until each of them was yelling at the other. Thankfully, being the end of the period, the bell rang and acted as the steam valve. However, it started right up again the next day, right at the beginning of the period. From snarky looks, to sniping comments, to hostile body language, to screaming insults, I finally stepped in to let the steam out and release the pressure. I excused one from the room and relocated the other to a different part of the room, telling each one not to talk to the other. It worked, for the moment, so I met with each of them later that day to help them let out more steam and pressure. After talking reasonably with them and imbuing some patience, they calmed down and realized how each one's comments and actions were escalating the situation, and how they needed to learn to deescalate, or else ensuing disaster and self-harm would follow: each one was getting so worked up over the other that it was starting to take a personal toll on their individual selves, not each other.

Proverbs 16:32 teaches us that it is "better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city." To conquer a world, anyone with enough strength and armies can do that, but to be patient, listen, and calmly go about life takes special finesse and skill. The latter is much more difficult as it involves craft and aptitude, whereas the former just takes brute force. So, the next time you find yourself escalating to anger, look for that steam valve and choose patience. It won't be easy, as everything in you will want to bring forth anger, so create preexisting paths to help you calmly go about your way. Find what helps to let out the pressure and deescalates the situation before the containment explodes. When angry, some count, others visualize something pleasant, some seek out other people, and others flip the situation around to create an empathetic standpoint. Whatever works for you, seek His guidance and His model for how to approach the situation, and you will find yourself conquering not worlds but your own emotions. Amen.

February 15 – *The Ferocious Grace of the Protective Parent*



I once heard someone say that he didn't think he was ever capable of murder until he had children and learned otherwise. At first, I misunderstood this person's concept, thinking that he was referring to the idea that children can really drive a person insane to the point of wanting to remove them from this earth. God knows every parent has felt that way at one time or several. However, what that person was actually expressing was that he never thought himself able to actually kill someone until he felt the protective nature of being a parent. I then understood and now agree: if anyone ever did anything to my child, I would most likely murder them in cold blood.

Now, I write that previous sentence with a slight bit of humor and a tongue-in-cheek tone, but there is a great amount of truth to it in the sense that being the parent and protector of someone, you really feel that there is no end to the amount

of protection you would provide. When you become a parent, you don't really realize the protective nature that is suddenly invoked within you until someone crosses your child's path. I've heard hypothetical stories in debates about the death penalty, and the argument of "well, if someone did something to your child..." and I have always considered the high road of what was allowable morally, and how God's law doesn't permit murder, etc. However, everything changes when you become a parent, because your love for them is no longer driven and garnered by reason and logic but instead by pure animal nature. Someone does something to them, mama (or papa) bear instincts kick in, and that person better watch out.

I especially felt it kick in once when my son came home one day with a prize that he had earned in class for having repeatedly excellent behavior. He went into the prize box and took an item of his choosing as a reward, and when he returned to his desk with it, he was met with a number of jealous glances from his classmates. Later that day, he confessed to my wife and I that one of his male classmates was so jealous of this prize, that he told my son that he was going to come to his house at night and kill him in his sleep. Being in 4th grade, the likelihood of that actually happening was somewhat minimal at best, so we weren't so concerned with an impending homicide, but we were upset about the fear that was now instilled in my son.

Through gritted teeth, I attempted to calm my child, letting him know that he had done the right thing in telling us, and that we would work to rectify the situation, but on the inside, I wanted to go out and break that other 4th grader's legs. My instinct to protect my son and destroy anything that was hurting him was so fierce, that I seriously considered hobbling someone one-fourth my age.

My father used to always tell me that, "no one will ever love you like your mother," a phrase I repeat to my own son often. The concept there is that whoever my son's mate ends up being in life, no one will feel as protective or willing to suffer for you as much as the people who raised you. I can remember my mother, when I was sick, wishing that it was her instead of me who had fallen ill. I see that now in myself, when I spy my son sick or in pain, that my desire to not have him suffer is so great, I wish I could take his suffering upon myself.

And if our desire to take on the suffering of our children is that great, one can only imagine God's desire to care and relieve our suffering, as we are His children, a title that we have been given. Repeatedly, we are proclaimed as such: "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3.1). Based in love, we are His children just as He is our Father, and given the protective parental nature we feel, His protective nature must be eons more strong and caring.

Just how caring? To the point that our identity is no longer our own and we are named heirs to His kingdom in the same way that our blood-related children are heirs to our own homes and money. The author of Galatians 3.26-9 writes about how we are now one in Him and are inheritors of His riches: "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." We are so much His child that we are deemed the offspring of Abraham, as if we were of His actual blood and flesh. So if we are truly children of God, then the desire as Father to protect us and take on our suffering makes sense, and is evidenced in how He sent Christ to suffer for us.

We might be able to only fathom God's love and protective nature for us, but we can get a glimpse of it in the love that our parents have for us and in the love we have for our own children. It's a comforting feeling knowing that we are never alone, that there is always someone watching over us, desiring us to be pain-free and protected. This week, when you find yourself feeling low and alone, pray to Him who desires to comfort you in those difficult times, and feel the loving, watchful eye that looks over you and is preparing your inheritance even as we speak. Amen.

February 22 – *Regret - The Greatest Motivator*



I often ask my high school students, that if they could give words of wisdom to younger people, what would they tell them? Most have the same sentiment behind them, with messages of “be true to yourself” and “try your hardest,” but one that more frequently comes up, one that they seem to fundamentally misunderstand the concept behind, is the idea to “live with no regrets.”

Our youth culture seems to have adopted the idea that you should never regret anything you do, which is how my students misinterpret this statement. The idea that this concept is truly ushering in is that instead, we should make the correct decisions in life, not ones that we will be sorry for in the future. Regret can be the most horrible of feelings to live with, as it is connected to actions of the past, which are of course, unchangeable. Thus, regret means we live the rest of our life wishing we had approached a situation differently, unable to change the outcome of something that happened so long ago.

In my own life, I have two or three major regrets when I was in college. Of them, the biggest, the one worth mentioning, is that I wish I had spent a semester abroad in another country. I know many people who did, and they all had an amazingly memorable time. My wife went to Mexico and lived with a host family, immersing herself in the Spanish-language culture. My brother went to Belgium and worked with the world’s greatest cooks and chefs. With great jealousy, I’ve listened to my former students discuss their experiences in France, Spain, and Germany, and about how they soaked up every bit of art, music, theater and literature of the place, while I can only reminisce about my days in my dormitory.

It is said that we more often regret the things that we don’t do rather than the things that we ultimately do. To look back at lost opportunities is to live in a cycle of hellish present-day torture, one with seemingly no end to it. To repeatedly hear the words in our mind, that we should have done x, y, and z when we had

the chance, is to be filled with despair and helplessness at the missed situation that presented itself, the one we never took the chance to experience.

Regret is also not regulated to any group or individual; all are susceptible. Even the apostle Peter experienced it while Christ was being arrested, tortured, and headed for crucifixion on the cross. Jesus had previously mentioned to him that he would deny Christ three times, a suggestion at which Peter balked. Yet, when the time came to admit knowing Him, Peter denied Christ on all three occasions: “The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly” (Luke 22.61-2). This failure would haunt him for the remainder of his life, that he had the chance to publicly acknowledge Christ to a group of people who were rejecting Him, and he blew it.

But how do we know for sure that it haunted him? The answer lies in the actions that Peter put on display for the remainder of his life.

Although regret is a tremendously devastating feeling, it can also be one of the greatest motivators, pushing us to live differently. It can fundamentally change our course of action for the rest of our life, as we know that we missed out on something and never want that feeling to come ever again. For myself, I missed out on the chance to travel abroad and experience a different culture when I was in college. However, even though I still feel that regret, I have learned to transform my feeling of regret into a motivator for my future actions. As such, I now travel as much as I possibly can whenever I get the chance to. Each summer is spent in a different country, and I’ve had the opportunity to be immersed in a number of different cultures, more than I would have had I never regretted that initial decision in college. Similarly, Peter went from regretfully denying Christ three times to being one of the most outspoken apostles for Christ, the one on whom the church was built, the one who preached to enormous amounts of people following Christ’s death, regardless of the consequences. Because Peter had denied knowing Him and felt that regret, he decided to transform that regret into action and never deny Him again, preaching His name whenever and wherever who could.

The philosopher and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau was quoted as saying, “Make the most of your regrets; never smother your sorrow but tend and cherish it till it comes to have a separate and integral interest. To regret deeply is to live afresh.” The issue is not having regrets; it’s what we do with those regrets that matter most. The deeper the regret, the deeper the change in our lives there can be. If we learn to dismiss our regrets or try to live without any regrets, we are not really living but are just learning to be numb to life, accepting an existence with no impact on others or ourselves.

So, don’t dismiss your regrets or try to fix them: embrace them. Like pain, regret is a sign that something is wrong and in need of attention. Addressing your regrets doesn’t mean they will go away. In fact, it’s better if they don’t, because they will now be a daily reminder to live stronger and bolder as a result of them. Then, learn to transform them into actions that steer your life on a different course, one that doesn’t get rid of your regrets but instead course corrects your life into amazing opportunities, thus being motivated to truly live. Amen.

