

“Control-Z”
Sermon by Rev. Amanda L. Aikman
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Zinedine Zidane is one of the all-time great international soccer players. It is difficult for us Americans to appreciate the esteem in which an athlete like Zidane is held. Not only his current skills, but the cumulative triumphs of a 20-year international career, make him one of the world's most famous and admired athletes. It would not be off base to compare him to Michael Jordan, only on a global instead of a national scale. The son of Berber immigrants to France from Algeria, Zidane represents the success of marginalized minorities.

Besides being idolized by soccer fans all over the world, Zidane of course holds a very special place in the hearts of French fans, as the captain of the French national team which for the first time won the World Cup in 1998. Immediately after that victory, a million and a half people mobbed the Champs Elysées and Zidane's face was projected on the Arc de Triomphe.

In 2002, the French team (with an injured Zidane) was eliminated from the World Cup in the first round. In 2004, Zidane retired from international play. But then, when the French team was having trouble qualifying for the 2006 World Cup, Zidane rejoined the team as its captain. He announced that he would retire permanently from professional soccer after the World Cup was over.

In the 2006 World Cup, in June and July of this summer, the French team steadily advanced, winning the quarter-final against defending champions Brazil, then the semifinals against Portugal, to face Italy in the final. This would be the last game of Zidane's illustrious career.

I, who drop everything and become temporarily insane every four years during the World Cup, stupidly had arranged a preaching date in West Seattle on the day of the final game, which meant I would miss the first half. As soon as the service was over, I sped out of church to the pub where Nancy had staked out a table near the TV. I had missed two goals. Zidane had scored on a penalty kick in the first half, answered shortly afterwards by a header by Italian player Marco Materazzi.

The 1-1 tie took the match into overtime. With ten minutes left in overtime, in the last game of Zidane's career, the inexplicable happened. Zidane and Materazzi became involved in a dispute as Zidane objected to the Italian's grabbing of his shirt. Materazzi said something to Zidane as the French player walked away. Whatever he said evidently inflamed Zidane, who turned, walked back to Materazzi, lowered his head, butted Materazzi hard in the chest, and the Italian went down flat on his back. When the referee became aware of what had happened, he strode up to Zidane, showed him the red card, and Zidane was out of the match. He walked off the field and down the tunnel to the dressing room, walking past the actual World Cup without a glance. The game went

to penalty kicks, and without Zidane's brilliant skills, the Italians outshot the French to win the glory and the fame that is like the Olympics, the World Series, the Super Bowl, and a group coronation all rolled into one.

And the questions that were on everyone's mind, as they contemplated this inexplicable sacrifice of Zidane's chance at final glory, were – what did Materazzi say to Zidane? And – what was Zidane thinking?

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The video of this bizarre, peculiar, and incredibly public incident instantly become viral on the internet. Millions of people around the world were fascinated by the mystery. Endless parodies were made and posted on Youtube. And newspapers hired lipreaders to try and discern what it was that Materazzi had said that so incensed Zidane. The most likely theory is that Materazzi made a sexual slur regarding Zidane's sister – the standard trash-talk that athletes everywhere use to try and get their opponents to lose their cool. The speculation has been endless. My favorite theory is that Materazzi said, "French philosophy has been pathetic since the death of Foucault."

The French condemned Zidane's act as stupid, but instantly forgave him, as a beloved hero. Philosopher Bernard-Henry Levy hypothesized that in that fatal moment on the field, Zidane's rough immigrant street-fighter self had momentarily conquered the demigod identity that had been foisted upon him by an adoring public. I think it's worth quoting from the actual essay by Levy:

...even if we knew the whole story...no reason in the world explains the desperate act of a man — no provocation, no nasty remark, will ever tell us why the planetary icon that Zinedine Zidane had become, a man more admired than the Pope, the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela put together, a demigod, a chosen one, this great priest-by-consensus of the new religion and the new empire in the making, chose to explode right there, rather than wait a few minutes to settle the quarrel on the sidelines.

No. The truth is that it is perhaps not so easy to stay in the skin of an icon, demigod, hero, legend.

The general attitude was summed up by President Chirac, who, welcoming the team home, said to Zidane, "You are a virtuoso, a genius of world football. You are also a man of heart, commitment, conviction. That's why France admires and loves you."

Zidane himself apologized – sort of, especially acknowledging that his actions had been a deplorable example for children. "It was inexcusable. I apologise," said the 34-year-old Zidane. "But I can't regret what I did because it would mean that he was right to say all that."

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On the computer, on a PC anyway, when we make a mistake, we just hit Control-Z, and the mistake is erased. Everything returns to the way it was before. Everything is restored. What if there were a Control-Z for our lives? Would Zinedine Zidane press Control-Z and return to the 9th minute of overtime in the World Cup final, and leave his illustrious career in a cloud of glory instead of a red mist of rage and mystery?

Would we ourselves undo things that we have done in a mad moment, in the throes of passion, of rage, of stupidity, of compulsion, of ignorance or laziness, of self-absorption or short-sightedness?

The root of our word regret is a Germanic word meaning “to cry.” Regret is a feeling of sorrow or remorse for a fault, act, loss, disappointment, etc. Regret denotes mental distress. *Regret* has a broad range of meaning, from mere disappointment to a painful sense of dissatisfaction or self-reproach.

I’d like to invite you now to take a slip of paper, and a pencil if you need one, and as these are being distributed, think of something you’ve done, or something you didn’t do, in your life that has caused you regret. Something important, something significant. And just make a little note of it on that piece of paper. Perhaps just one letter, or one word, that represents something for which you feel regret. You’re not going to tell anyone about it, and no one is going to ask you about it. If you don’t want to write anything down on that piece of paper, that’s fine, maybe you can just imagine writing that regret on that piece of paper. Take a moment to look into your heart. Remember something significant that you regret. And when you’ve made that little note, put the piece of paper in your pocket, or your sock, or your purse. Just let it be there.

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There’s a lovely, sad song by the Norwegian pop duo the Kings of Convenience. The song is called “Failure,” and the chorus goes, “Failure is always the best way to learn.”

Indeed, this is the thesis of the book *Success through Failure* by Henry Petroski. Petroski is a professor of civil engineering who in this book writes about how all our successful designs – from bridges to automobiles – are successful precisely because of prior failures. In fact, he says, failure is more to be trusted than success, because success leads designers to be complacent.

Good design always takes failure into account and strives to minimize it. But designers are human beings first and as such, are...subject to all the failings of the species, including complacency, overconfidence, and unwarranted optimism. Given the faults of human nature...it behooves us to beware of the lure of success and to listen to the lessons of failure.

Petroski interprets the 1940 collapse of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge as a cautionary tale for designers. That bridge failed because engineers made it by enlarging a previously

successful idea. Wise designers, Petroski insists, must always contemplate the possibility of failure. Indeed, it is usually failure that spurs designers on toward improved blueprints. The potential for failure shows itself before the event, to those designers blessed with the ability to imagine the future, but very often, improvements are only implemented in the wake of actual failures.

George Packer, writing about Sudan in *The New Yorker*, looks at the many failed experiments in government that Sudan has suffered through: nationalism, socialism, and Islamism. It is out of these failed experiments that reform might occur, Packer concludes. “Great turns in history seldom come because someone writes a manifesto or proposes a theory. Instead, concrete experience, usually in the form of catastrophic failure, forces people to search for new ideas.”

Our country is enmeshed in a tragic war that shows every sign of continuing for years to come. I have heard bitter despair and hopelessness expressed by many folks. But if the Iraq invasion and occupation and all that has sprung forth from it, from the Patriot Act to Guantanamo, is indeed evidence of a catastrophic failure in our government, will we not be forced to search for new, creative ideas in the future, as George Packer suggests? Will we not insist on changes in our government, in our foreign policy, so that adventures such as the Iraq disaster will result eventually in positive, creative new approaches? Is not the bitter regret of failure the precise spur that humans need in order to be motivated to make the painful and necessary changes that bring more wholeness to the world? Look at history. After World War I, the British and French imposed exorbitant reparations on Germany. The humiliation and the economic effects of those reparations led directly to the establishment of the Third Reich. After World War II, the victors adopted a different plan – the Marshall Plan – to rebuild the defeated countries, to enrich them instead of impoverishing them, and as a result we now have allies in Germany and Japan, instead of enemies.

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Let’s play with this idea. If in the world of engineering and in the world of politics, failure is a necessary precursor to success, is the emotional and spiritual equivalent also true? Is the regrettable deed a necessary precursor to happiness, integration, growth? Is the incident noted on that slip of paper in your pocket actually a key to your present or future fulfillment? Is “sin” – which in the Greek is an archery term meaning “to miss the mark” – is sin a necessary precursor to redemption and wholeness? Is the heart-wrenching, the weeping experience of regret the key to a fuller humanness, a richer life?

In our Jewish and Christian traditions, when someone has broken right relationship with the group or with the Divine, there are set rituals by which that person can confess, express regret, and be welcomed back into full relationship with the group. In our own Unitarian history, the Unitarians of 16th-century Poland were widely admired for their peaceable society in the midst of a continent torn by religious conflict. One of the powerful rituals these folks adhered to was the Lord’s Supper, communion, which was shared only four times a year. To participate in communion, everyone had to be in right

relation with the whole group. Anyone who had fallen out of right relations with the group would make a heartfelt and sincere confession of regret, be forgiven, and was then welcomed into the circle again as if the transgression had never happened.

In the news recently, we have seen so many examples of people from politicians to movie stars, caught, in one way or another, with their pants down, issuing statements of explanation, apologies; sometimes even the word “regret” is used. More often, it seems, old demon rum is blamed: I used anti-Semitic slurs to that policeman, I wrote dirty emails to that underage page, because I was drinking. Rehab takes the place of confession, and a round of the talk shows or the publication of a book takes the place of atonement, until the sinner – oh, we don’t use that word – the addict – is gradually admitted back into society’s good graces. We all know it’s phony. As phony as a president who says he never makes mistakes and has no regrets about a war that was initiated based on lies. We know that the expression of regret is phony when no change results. Because regret is not something just to be expressed. It has to be felt, it has to be transformative, an experience of rebirth. Change has to be earnestly desired before the spiritual transformation of new wholeness can occur.

Perhaps our country is so sick at heart, so violent, so punitive, because as a nation, as a society, we have never fully expressed, let alone felt, regret for the two great sins on which this country’s history rests: slavery, and the genocide and robbery of the native people. We have never as a nation expressed heartfelt regret and never sincerely offered to make amends.

Heaven knows, no religion is perfect, and Unitarian Universalism is no exception. Our denomination has been as racist, for example, as any other liberal denomination. At our General Assembly in 2005, to cite a recent example, youth of color were treated shabbily by white adults. But UU’s have not only expressed regret for such incidents, our leadership on the national level has taken earnest steps to make amends. One small step is that all UU congregations have been asked to do at least one worship service this year about racism and classism. Would we be so aware of the need for white people to educate themselves about white privilege if it were not for awareness of, regret for, our failures? I don’t think so. Far more harm is done when we are complacent and think everything is going along just fine, than when we are forced to confront our failures.

From this painful confrontation comes new life, creative new approaches, redemption.

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Turning our attention again to that little slip of paper in our pockets – that thing we regret – unless the regret is that we didn’t buy downtown Seattle real estate 20 years ago – chances are that the regret has to do in some way with the breaking of a relationship or of a covenant. Chances are, the regret is about some way we let ourselves or someone else down.

The regret that's written on my slip of paper has to do with my regret for the way I hurt someone I loved, 23 years ago. We have since become reconciled and are in fact lifelong best friends. I have felt and expressed regret. I have made amends. But the pain of that particular regret stays alive in me, as a solemn vow never to hurt someone in that way again. I have learned how to love better, how to open my heart to myself and others better, precisely because of that regret, and because I had the humility to face and experience my sorrow and pain. I have a long way to go, but I am a more successful human being, a more compassionate person, because of my failure.

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Growth in the spiritual life comes not with the acquisition of knowledge, of activities, of practices, but by the stripping away of our defenses, by the letting go of our own precious self-images, by our relinquishment of our comfort and control. I believe that we can let the Divine more fully into our lives and consciousness by becoming increasingly aware that *everything belongs*. Every creature, every person, belongs in the universe; every deed and thought and memory belongs and makes our lives precious and beloved. Our regrets, even more than our successes, make us who we are today. They are not to be rejected and denied, but embraced, used, like grass clippings in the compost bin, broken down into nutritious fertilizer through the slow transformation of natural processes. Our regrets are not to be held at arm's length through the addictions of substance abuse or busy-ness, but gently faced and befriended

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If we really did have a "Control-Z" button for our lives, if we could erase the regrets of our lives, if the slip of paper in our pocket were blank because our regrets had been wiped out utterly and completely, would we be enhanced -- or diminished? Would we be the same person we are today?

As we interact with other people, and see them acting out of their pain and confusion, perhaps it would help us have compassion and understanding if we knew that, symbolically speaking, every single person has in her or his pocket a slip of paper just like the one in your pocket – a secret regret that they may or may not have had the courage and the humility to confront and integrate. And when we see people we admire, people we experience as successful, people of deep wisdom and compassion, we might ask them if they have any regrets about their life. Chances are, they don't just have one little slip of paper in their pocket, they have a fistful. But they have learned how to make their regrets part of their life, mulch and compost for their garden.

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I don't know how Zinedine Zidane feels today about head-butting Marco Materazzi in front of the whole world. While he may truly feel that he would do it all the same way if it happened again, that Materazzi had provoked him beyond his endurance, he must also at some level regret that the incident of three seconds threatens to overshadow his

glorious career of 20 years. I believe Zidane is a good man. Supposedly he has political ambitions, perhaps to run one day for the mayor of Marseilles. I believe that the day will come when his regret over this incident will become integrated into his life, so that he will be able to make ever more positive contributions to the world precisely because of his ever so visible fallibility.

None of us will ever be as famous as Zidane. None of us will ever, I pray, have as dramatic and public a reason to contemplate regret. But each one of us, in the quiet, private, humble realm of our heart, has the power to confront and befriend our own regrets. Only then can we accept our own belonging to the great family of all that is, only then can we accept and, in the fullest sense, give love.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by guest speaker, The Reverend Amanda Aikman at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on November 5, 2006. Rev. Aikman is a playwright and spiritual director living in Everett who serves the Northlake Unitarian Universalist Church in Kirkland as Consulting Minister. She has been a guest of QUUF several times in the past.)