THIRTY-TWO YEARS INSIDE THE BLACK BOX

RAY COLTER

MINIMIZE REGRET

THE QUIET METHOD FOR RELEASING WHAT'S BEHIND YOU AND CHOOSING WHAT'S AHEAD



ODIN PRESS

Minimize Regret

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Preface

For thirty-two years I did one job. When an aircraft came down, I went out with a team and a notebook and put the last ninety seconds back together — the voices in the cockpit, the numbers off the recorder, the small decisions that chained one into the next until there was nothing left to decide. It was backward-looking work, all of it. But I never looked backward to grieve, and I never looked backward to blame. I looked backward for exactly one reason: to find the single thing that would have changed it, and write it into the checklist, so the next crew lived.

You already do the first half of that job on yourself. You look backward constantly — at the choice you made or did not make, the person you let go, the years you gave to the wrong thing. What you almost never do is the second half. You reopen the same ninety seconds night after night, and it never changes a procedure, because you were never doing it to change anything. You were doing it to bleed.

That is the problem this book is about, and it is a bigger problem than it looks, because it has a twin. The same person who cannot stop replaying the past usually cannot decide anything about the future. They are haunted behind and frozen ahead — and the two are not separate troubles. They are one faculty, regret, aimed the wrong way in both directions. Aimed backward, at a past you cannot move, it becomes a wound that never closes. Aimed forward, at a future you can still shape, the very same faculty becomes a compass. Almost everyone has it pointed the wrong way, and does not know that this is a thing that can be turned.

There is no shortage of books about regret. Most of them do one of two things. They tell you to have none — no regrets, live your best life, let it go — which is a slogan, not a method, and no one who has actually lost anything believes it. Or they catalog the regrets of the dying and leave you moved and empty-handed. This book is trying to do the thing those leave undone: hand you a method. Not a way to feel better about the past, and not a way to stop feeling — loss is a fact, and it stays a fact on every page here. A way to change the aim.

I am not going to tell you what to do with your life. I ran that kind of investigation on other people's worst days for three decades, and the one thing it taught me is that you cannot refly the flight; you can only change the checklist. So this book states findings and offers recommendations, the way I wrote reports, and then it stops. It will not exhort you, and it will not promise you that it is not too late. It will show you where the aim is wrong, and how to turn it, and then it will leave the turning to you, because the turning was always going to be yours.

The book comes in two halves. The first takes the backward regret apart, piece by piece — the life you never lived, the younger self you keep convicting, the storm you keep signing your name to, the wound you will not let close. The second hands you the forward instrument and teaches you to read it: the eighty-year-old on the porch, the lean toward trying, the plain fact that there is no perfect time. It ends where it begins, at a kitchen table late at night, with the two kinds of regret finally named and the arrow ready to reverse.

I ran this investigation on my own life late — in a hospital bed, at sixty-one, after my heart stopped in a parking lot and a checklist team brought me back. I am telling you what I found, in time for it to be of some use to you, which is the only reason a man writes any of this down.

— R. C.

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Part I

The Phantom

1

Two Kinds of Regret

For thirty-two years my job was the last ninety seconds of other people's worst days. An aircraft came down, and I went out with a team and a notebook and put the final minute and a half back together from what the machines remembered — the voices in the cockpit, the numbers off the recorder, the small decisions that chained one into the next until there was nothing left to decide. I was always looking backward. That was the whole trade. But I never looked backward to grieve, and I never looked backward to blame. I looked backward for one reason: to change a procedure so the next crew lived.

You cannot re-fly the flight. I learned that early and I never unlearned it. The flight is over the moment it is over. What you can do — the only thing you can do — is find the one thing that would have changed it and write it into the checklist, so the next person to sit in that seat has it in front of them before they need it.

I am telling you this because you already do the first half of my job and none of the second. You look backward constantly. You reopen the same ninety seconds of your own life night after night. And it never changes a procedure, because you were never doing it to change anything. You were just doing it to bleed.

This book is about the two directions a life can look, and about the fact that almost everyone has them exactly backward. There is a kind of looking back that is a phantom, and a kind of look-

ing ahead that is a compass, and most people spend their years drowning in the first and never once consulting the second. I did it too. I ran the investigation on my own life late, in a hospital bed, and I wrote the same finding I had written a hundred times about other people. This is that finding.

Eleven O'Clock at Night

It is eleven o'clock at night and you are sitting at the kitchen table. The house is quiet. Whoever else lives here is asleep, or you live alone and there was never anyone to keep quiet for. There is a cup of something going cold in front of you. You did not come down here to eat. You came down here because you could not sleep, and you could not sleep because two things are eating you, and you have been carrying both of them so long you no longer notice they are two different things.

The first one is behind you. It is a choice you made or did not make, years ago, and you have been over it so many times the edges are worn smooth. The job you turned down. The person you let walk out the door. The house you sold, the offer you took, the years you gave to something that turned out to be nothing. You know exactly how it went. You could recite it. And knowing it exactly does not help at all, because every time you recite it you arrive at the same place, and the place is a wall.

The second one is in front of you. It is a decision you have to make and cannot. You have been not-making it for months. There is a door open and you are standing in front of it and you cannot walk through and you cannot walk away, and every day you do neither, the ache gets a little heavier. You tell yourself you are being careful. You are not being careful. You are frozen.

Two aches. One behind, one ahead. You have never once suspected that they are the same thing.

Let me make it specific, because a thing this ordinary hides inside vague words and only shows itself when you name it plainly.

Say it is the job. Eleven years ago you were offered a position in another city — more money, more risk, a real step up, and it meant pulling the kids out of school and leaving the street you knew and betting the whole shape of your life on a company you had met twice. You said no. You had reasons. They were good reasons. And the company you said no to did well, and the man who took the job instead of you is doing the thing you can picture yourself doing, and you have spent eleven years re-reading that no under a light it never had at the time. That is the ache behind you. You run it at eleven o'clock at night, and each pass it costs you a little more, because each pass you know a little more about how it turned out, and you keep sentencing the younger version of yourself with information he did not have and could not have had.

And here is the other one, and notice it is the same shape. Right now, tonight, there is another door. A different city, or a business you keep sketching on the backs of envelopes, or a hard conversation you have rehearsed forty times and never had. You are standing in front of it exactly the way you stood in front of the last one eleven years ago. And the reason you cannot move is the ache behind you. You are so afraid of adding a new no to the pile of old ones — or a new yes that goes wrong the way you are sure the old ones did — that you have decided the safest thing is to keep standing still.

The regret behind you is freezing the choice in front of you. They are not two problems. They are one faculty, aimed two ways, and aimed wrong in both.

Before I explain anything, I want you to do one small thing, and I want you to do it in your own words, out loud if the house is empty enough, or under your breath if it is not.

Name the two aches. Not the way a book would name them. The way you would.

Say the backward one first. Not "I have some regrets about my career." That is the language you use to keep it at arm's length.

3

You Weren't a Fool. You Just Weren't a Prophet.

Every accident report I ever wrote had a moment in it where the reader — some pilot in a training room a year later — would shake his head and think, how could they not see it. The stall was right there. The fuel was right there. The weather was right there. And every time, my job was to stand in front of that room and explain the one thing the shaking head could not feel: that the thing which is right there in the report was nowhere in the cockpit. In the report it is circled in red on a clean page, with the ending known. In the cockpit it was one of forty things happening at once, in the dark, with no one to tell you which of the forty was the one that would kill you.

You do this to yourself. At two in the morning you sit in the clean, well-lit report of your own past and you shake your head at the person in the dark cockpit, and you call him a fool, and you issue the verdict again — how could I have been so stupid. This chapter is about that verdict, and about the fact that it is unjust, and not in a soft, forgiving, let-yourself-off-the-hook way. Unjust in the exact, technical way an investigator means it: you are convicting a person for not knowing something that had not happened yet. You were not a fool. You could not see the ending, because the ending had not been written. You weren't a prophet. No one is.

The Verdict You Keep Issuing

We set the photograph down. The road not taken is in the drawer, and your hands are empty, and you have stopped grieving a life that was never lived. But the backward regret has a second lie, and it is meaner than the first, because it does not ask you to mourn a fantasy — it asks you to convict a real person. Yourself, younger. The lie goes: you should have known. A smarter person, a more careful person, a less foolish person would have seen it coming and chosen right. That lie is the subject of this chapter, and we are going to try it in open court and throw it out.

Here is the verdict the way it actually gets issued, because it does not come as a calm thought. It comes at two in the morning, and it comes with contempt.

You are lying there and the old choice surfaces — the money you put where you put it, the person you trusted, the job you took or left, the warning you did not heed. And your mind does not review it neutrally. It prosecutes. It says: what were you thinking. It says: anyone could see that coming. It says the word idiot, or stupid, or fool, in your own voice, aimed at your own younger face, and the contempt in it is total, the kind of contempt you would never allow yourself to feel for another living person. You would not call a struggling stranger a fool for a hard decision made in the dark. You reserve that particular cruelty for one person only: the younger you, who cannot defend himself, because he is gone, and because the only evidence admitted at his trial is the ending he never got to see.

And notice the contempt does not soften with repetition. You would think that after a thousand nights of calling him a fool you would run out of scorn, or start to pity him. You do not. Each night the verdict lands fresh, full-strength, because each night you re-issue it with all the knowledge you have gathered since, and the gap between what you know now and what he knew then is the exact size of your contempt. The more you learn about how it turned out, the more of a fool he looks, and so the very passage

of time — which should be bringing you mercy — brings you instead a hotter and hotter verdict on a person who did nothing but stand in the dark and decide.

Let me name the specific sentence, because it is almost always the same five or six words, and you know yours.

How could I have been so stupid. That is the one. Or: I should have known better. Or: what was I thinking. Whatever the exact words, it is a verdict, and it is issued nightly, and it has the form of a rhetorical question — how could I — that is not actually asking anything. It is not looking for an answer. If it were looking for an answer it would get one immediately, because there is a very good answer, and the answer is: you were so stupid because you were not stupid, you were uninformed, and the information you are now using to convict yourself did not exist on the day you decided. But the sentence does not want that answer. It is not a question. It is a gavel, coming down, again, on the same defendant, who has been found guilty every night for years and is somehow re-tried the next night anyway, as if the conviction never sticks, which it does not, because a verdict issued on false grounds never quite closes the case, and so the trial runs forever.

Marcus Aurelius — the same Roman writing his night-notes — kept reminding himself of one thing about people who do wrong, and it is the first crack in the verdict. He wrote that when people err,

> *"it is against their wills that they offend"*

Sit with how strange and how true that is. He is saying that no one, or almost no one, does the wrong thing while clearly seeing it as the wrong thing and choosing it anyway in cold blood. People err against their own wills — meaning they are aiming at something that looks good to them, reaching for what they take to be right, and they miss, because they cannot see clearly, because the thing that looked good was not good, because the information was bad or thin or the future was hidden. The offense is not a

You already do half of an accident investigator's job on yourself. You look backward — at the choice you didn't make, the person you let go, the years you cannot get back — constantly, night after night. What you never do is the second half: take the one lesson and change the checklist, so the next flight is different. You just reopen the same ninety seconds and bleed.

There is a reason for that, and it is the reason this book exists. Regret is one faculty, and almost everyone has it aimed the wrong way. Pointed backward, at a past you cannot move, it becomes a wound that never closes. Pointed forward — picture yourself at eighty, looking back, and ask which choice you'll regret less from there — the same faculty becomes a compass. It is the question a young man once used to walk away from a safe job and build something. It is the one the dying wish they had asked sooner.

Ray Colter spent thirty-two years reading the black boxes of other people's worst days, then ran the investigation on his own life — too late, and in a hospital bed. Here is what he found, in plain sentences you can use before you decide anything else today. You cannot re-fly the flight. But the next decision is still yours.

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