

Two Words to Avoid and Two Words to Remember

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Nothing in life is more exciting and rewarding than the sudden flash of insight that leaves one a changed person – not only changed but changed for the better. Certainly, some moments are rare, but they do come to all of us..... sometimes from a book, a sermon, a line of poetry and sometimes from a friend.

That wintry afternoon in Manhattan, Peter was waiting in a restaurant feeling frustrated and depressed because of several recent losses caused by miscalculations. A project that he had started and which was of considerable importance to his life had fallen through. He suffered huge losses and his savings were wiped out. He was not only facing a severe financial crunch but the prospect of confronting his creditors frustrated him to no end. Peter sat there frowning at the checkered tablecloth while chewing the bitter cud of hindsight.

It was at that time, his dear friend, an old doctor, crossed the street and headed towards the restaurant. He was in an ancient overcoat, a felt hat pulled down over his bald head, looking more like an energetic gnome than an eminent psychiatrist. His office was nearby. Peter knew he had just left his last patient of the day.

The doctor was close to 80 but still carried a full case load, still active as director of a large foundation and still loved to play golf whenever he could. By the time the doctor came over and sat beside Peter, the waiter had brought his invariable bottle of ale. Peter was so busy with his project that he had not seen the doctor for several months, but the old man seemed as indestructible as ever.

The doctor studied Peter for a few seconds and asked him without any preliminaries, “Well young man, what is troubling you?”

Peter had long since ceased to be surprised at the doctor’s perceptiveness. So, he proceeded to tell him at some length just what was bothering him. With a kind of melancholic pride, he tried to be very honest. He blamed no one else for his disappointment, only himself. Peter analyzed the whole thing, all the lead judgements, the false moves, and went on pouring out his heart for a full 15 minutes while the doctor sipped his ale in silence.

When Peter finished his outpouring, the doctor got up abruptly and said, “Come on, let us go back to my office.” for which Peter said, “Your office? Did you forget something?” The doctor mildly said, “No, I want your reaction to something. That is all.”

Peter went along with the doctor. The office was warm and comfortable with book-lined walls, a long leather couch, a signed photo of Sigmund Freud, and a tape recorder by the window. The secretary had already gone home and they were alone.

The doctor took a tape and put it into the machine. Then he said to Peter, “On this tape are 3 short recordings of 3 persons who came to me for help. Of course, they are not identified. I just want you to listen to the recordings and see if you can pick out the two-word phrase that is the common denominator in all the three cases. Peter, don’t look so puzzled. I have my reasons.”

Patiently, Peter listened to the 3 recordings for some time and found out that all the 3 owners of the voices on the tape had one thing in common – deep unhappiness.

The man who spoke first on the recording evidently had suffered business loss or failure; he berated himself constantly for not having worked harder, for not having looked ahead. The woman who spoke next had never

married because of a sense of obligation to her widowed mother; she recalled bitterly, in detail, how she had let all marital chances go by. The third voice belonged to a sad mother whose teenage son was in trouble with the police; she blamed herself endlessly about the choices she had made as a parent.

The doctor switched off the machine and leaned back in his chair and asked Peter, "Tell me Peter, many times in those recordings, a phrase was used that is full of subtle poison. Did you spot it?" Peter replied, "No, I don't think so." Well," replied the doctor, "perhaps that is because you used that phrase 3 times down there in the restaurant, a little while ago. "Can you remember the phrase that you used?", he asked Peter again.

The doctor picked up the tape from the recorder and tossed it over to Peter and said, "Peter, there they are, right on the label of the tape, the saddest words in any language." Peter looked down and saw printed neatly in red ink were the words: 'if only'.

The doctor continued. "You would be amazed to know Peter, how many times I have sat in this chair and listened to woeful sentences beginning with those 2 words 'if only'. They say to me, "if only I had done it differently... or not done it at all. If only I had not lost my temper... or said those cruel words... or made that dishonest move... 'If only' I had not told that foolish lie... 'If only' I had been wiser... or a little more unselfish and has more self-control. You know Peter; they go on and on until I stop them. Sometimes, I make them listen to the recordings which you just heard. If only, I say to them you would stop saying those 2 words, we might begin to get somewhere!"

Then the doctor stretched his legs and added, "Peter, the trouble with 'if only', is that it does not change anything. It just wastes our time. In the end if you let it become a habit, saying those words can become a real roadblock; it's an excuse for not trying anymore."

"Peter, now take your own case. Your plans did not work out. Why? It's because you made certain mistakes. Well, that is alright; everyone makes mistakes. Mistakes are what we learn from. But, the problem is when you were telling me about them, you were lamenting this... regretting that. So, you were not really learning from them."

Suddenly, Peter became defensive and annoyed to some degree. He asked tersely, "How do you know?" The doctor said, "Peter, you never got out of the past tense. Not once did you mention the future. And in a way – be honest to me, Peter – you were enjoying it. Do you know something Peter, there is a perverse streak in all of us that makes us like to hash over old mistakes. After all, when you relate the story of the chief character, you are still at the center of the stage."

Peter by now was slightly rattled and shook his head ruefully and asked the doctor pertinently, "Well, what is the remedy?" The doctor promptly replied, "Shift the focus, man; change the key words and substitute a phrase that supplies 'lift' instead of creating a drag."

Peter who was hearing all this finally asked the doctor, "Do you have such a phrase to recommend?"

"Certainly, Peter," replied the doctor. "Strike out the words 'if only' and substitute them with 'next time'."

Peter was surprised and said, "What? 'Next time'?"

The doctor said, "Yes, you heard it right. Two powerful words: 'next time'. Believe me, Peter; I have seen those two words work minor miracles right here in this room. As long as a patient keeps saying 'If only' to me, that patient is in trouble. But, when the patient looks me in the eye and says 'next time', I am 100% sure that that person is on the way to overcoming the problem. It means that the person has decided to apply the lessons learned from experience, however grim or painful they may have been. It means pushing aside the roadblocks

of anger and remorse by moving forward to take action and resume living. Peter, try it yourself and you will see.”

The doctor stopped talking. Outside Peter could hear the sound of rain against the window pane. Peter tried sliding the phrase ‘if only’ out of his mind and replaced it with ‘next time’. It was of course fanciful at first. But he could feel the new words lock into place.

The doctor then went to the book case and opened a diary and read out the contents to Peter. The diary belonged to a woman from the doctor’s generation. The lady had jotted down her frustrations in the journal. The doctor insisted that Peter hear it out.

She was Jane, a school teacher who worked hard to provide for her family. Her husband, Jonathan, an amiable charming man, was totally inadequate as a provider. He was in and out of jobs and was never good at anything that he did even though he was kind and good to all. Jane had to raise their children singlehandedly, pay the bills, and keep the family together. Her diary was full of angry references to Jonathan’s inadequacies. Then one day Jonathan died and all the entries stopped except for one several years later. It was this: ‘Today I was made superintendent and I suppose I should be very proud. But, if only I knew Jonathan was around and if only I knew how to manage him properly, I would go to him tonight and be happy.’”

The doctor closed the journal and gently told Peter, “You see what she is saying is ‘If only’. If only, Jane had accepted him with all his faults... if only Jane had loved him while she could.”

The doctor put the diary back on the shelf and said, “Those sad words are the saddest of all when it is too late to retrieve anything.”

The doctor stood up stiffly and announced cheerily to Peter, “Well, Peter, class is dismissed. It has been good to see you, young man. Now will you please help me find a taxi? I should probably be getting home.”

Both came out and spotted a cruising cab and walked quickly towards it. But, another pedestrian was even faster. The doctor said with a sly smile, “My, my, if only we had come down 10 seconds sooner, we would have caught that cab. Right, Peter?”

Peter looked at the doctor, laughed heartily and picked up the cue and answered, “Next time, I will run faster.” He did not use ‘If only’. The doctor was of course testing him. “That’s it!” cried the doctor and raised his hat at Peter and said again, “That’s it, young man. You are already on your way.”

A few seconds later, another taxi appeared next to them. The doctor got in, smiled and waved as it moved away. Peter never saw him again because a month later the doctor died of a sudden heart attack, in full stride, so to speak.

Much time had passed since that rainy afternoon in Manhattan. But to this day whenever Peter finds himself thinking, ‘if only’ he automatically changes the two words to ‘next time’. Then, he would wait for the perceptible and reassuring mental click. And when that happens, he fondly thinks of the doctor who put him on the road to recovery; it was a small fragment of immortality left behind by the doctor, the way the doctor would have wanted to be remembered by all.