

Sliding Doors and Lives We Didn't Live

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On the recommendation of the NYT "Watching" column, I recently began viewing a BBC TV series out of Canada called "Being Erica." In this *dramedy*, a 30-something Toronto native named Erica Strange has hit the wall. Her career in publishing has not taken off, her love life is stalled, and she still lives in a walk-up flat. So, she's wondering what she did wrong and whether it is too late to fix all the wayward pieces of her life.

One day, while ordering a latte, she is handed the business card of a therapist named Dr. Tom. He isn't your average therapist, mind you. When Erica opens elevators or her bathroom door, she magically enters his Harry Potter-esque office through some time and space warp. And what exactly does he offer her? An opportunity to list her regrets, and then decide whether to travel back in time to make other decisions and change the outcomes.

Erica returns to some predictable moments – whether to fight for a romance with her best friend Ethan, a chance to be more loyal to her college roommate, another stab at telling her sister what a jerk her fiancé really is, and touchingly, moments with her deceased brother, Leo, who dies in a fire as a teenager. Our heroine doesn't actually change the outcomes in every instance. She discovers that she can't play God or rewrite every failed script. The theme that emerges is that we all have regrets, they aren't always negative, and we can most definitely learn something from those moments with a more seasoned and humbled hindsight. This gives her an acute case of BEING Erica, rather than a curated version of her past or a fixed narrative about her future.

I'm pretty stoked that there are three more seasons to this series. I like this sweet, smart spitfire of a character and what she represents. First, she symbolizes an all too common tendency to rewrite our regrets with a new narrative with happier (possibly mythic) ending, when in reality it could have been a far worse outcome.

And, the series illustrates that the more imagination we have about that rewrite, the more acute the regret. If I had only married so and so....if I had just taken that job at (fill in the blank), why didn't I study computer science rather than poetry?

Ugh. Why do we torture ourselves with believing what might have been would have been better? Yes, it's possible. No doubt. Who knows? All speculation, right? Yet, the "I could have made better choices" narrative is true only when we are talking about profound regrets or we're having these musing from prison

because we're asking, "Why did I kill my boss?!" Why did I bamboozle millions of dollars? Why did I traffic underage girls? You get my drift. Otherwise, its all projection and conjecture, isn't it?

We root for Erica, but not that she will experience endless happy endings. That feels false and shallow and not the writer's intent. Rather, we root for you and empathize with her because of the deepening, the growing acceptance of herself and her choices, and how Dr. Tom's time-travel therapy is building resilience and confidence in her to make future choices, even if they might transform into regrets later on.

Interestingly, Erica is Jewish (*Sidenote*- the name Strange was probably some unpronounceable Polish name in the old country like Strangfarbowitz that was rebranded at Ellis Island). Her former hippie father has become a mid-life career-switching Rabbi. Her Mom likes designer handbags. Yes, there is tension in the Strange household, and some molecule deep guilt and regret. In spite of this, "Being Erica," doesn't glorify or even satirize this tribal trait. On the contrary, the show asks us to reckon with our regrets, as a process of healing. How have we been wounded (even self-wounded) in our moments of regret?

Can we heal through self-responsibility, self-forgiveness, sincere repentance to others, and a new understanding that what might have been *wasn't* and that we can endure, grow, and begin again from a new standpoint? Yes, I believe we can. During this prolonged pandemic, we've had ample time to muse about our lives, our choices and our priorities. And this is not a cruse. I can be a blessing, depending on which doors we open and walk through.

I wonder where your mind has wandered as I've talked about regrets. We all have them. Some are headliners of our inner dialogue and endless toxic chatterbox head loop. Some pop up more gently but they are persistent little buggers.

In a memorable TED talk entitled "Don't Regret, Regret," the journalist Kathryn Schulz launches her presentation with the story of getting a tattoo at age 29 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Schulz, who calls herself "the world's leading *wrongologist*," notes that tattoo-getting is one of the Universe's foremost regrets among 30-somethings who got inked in their late teens. If only she had known. Hmm...does Erica have a tattoo? Not that I've noticed...yet.

Schulz tells us her tale:

"I regretted it instantly," she admits. "And by "regretted it," I mean that I stepped outside of the tattoo place and I had a massive emotional meltdown in broad daylight on the corner of East Broadway and Canal Street. Which is a great place to do it because nobody cares. And then I went home that night, and I had an even larger emotional meltdown."

“And this was all actually quite shocking to me,” Schulz continues, “because prior to this moment, I had prided myself on having absolutely no regrets. I made a lot of mistakes and dumb decisions, of course. I do that hourly. But I had always felt like, look, you know, I made the best choice I could make given who I was then, given the information I had on hand. I learned a lesson from it. It somehow got me to where I am in life right now. And okay, I wouldn't change it.”

“In other words, I had drunk our great cultural Kool-Aid about regret, which is that lamenting things that occurred in the past is an absolute waste of time, that we should always look forward and not backward, and that one of the noblest and best things we can do is strive to live a life free of regrets.”

There is bona fide science at work here too, folks. “Because the inability to experience regret is actually one of the diagnostic characteristics of sociopaths. It's also, by the way, a characteristic of certain kinds of brain damage. So people who have damage to their orbital frontal cortex seem to be unable to feel regret in the face of even obviously very poor decisions.

Schulz brings it home here, saying: “ So if, in fact, you want to live a life free of regret, there is an option open to you. It's called a lobotomy. But if you want to be fully functional and fully human and fully humane, I think you need to learn to live, not without regret, but with it.”

The scientist Eric Barker underscores Schulz's points in his article, “ How to Overcome Regret...according to Science.” He lays out the six biggest shared areas of regret ...and spoiler alert...money is not Numero Uno. “The six biggest regrets, Barker tells us,” fell into the following domains, in descending order: education, career, romance, parenting, self-improvement, and leisure. (If you're curious, the next six were finance, family, health, friends, spirituality, and community.) He expresses some surprise that education was the number one regret, but muses that "Opportunity breeds regret. Feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment are strongest where the chances for corrective reaction are clearest."

So, what can we really learn here? What do these things have in common that causes that terrible gnawing? The research shows we consistently regret missed opportunity. Education, career, relationships... our errors in these domains loom so large because of all the possibilities that might have changed our lives. And, bingo, that's where the BBC series transports Erica – to these key moments of decision about her formative life.

Yes, she regrets the things she did. But, much more frequently, and like us (according to the research) she holds more regret for the things she DIDN'T do. Why are these missed opportunities so much more painful than the failed attempts that just didn't work out? Barker provides the answer:

“You have a psychological immune system,” he explains. Your brain doesn't want you overwhelmed with regret 24/7. So it conspires to help you. What does it do? It rationalizes. We humans are rationalizing machines. So when you do something stupid, you feel bad but part of your brain immediately starts digging for silver linings:

“I should have left that terrible job sooner... but staying there I really learned a lot about myself.” *“The marriage didn't work out... but otherwise I wouldn't have had these beautiful kids.* (Check and check from here in the pulpit, by the way) Let's not forget the butterfly effect. Choices and outcomes do not exist in isolation.

We all engage in some fantasy musings, and it helps us get by. But what happens when you don't do something stupid? When you don't do anything at all? Here's the punch line and the pebble in your shoe from this sermon: “It's hard to learn from experience *when there is no experience*. It's harder, if not impossible, to generate silver linings for things you never did.”

If we ask ourselves why we let certain opportunities pass us by, we might discover that we were brash or naïve or afraid. And then it can be our time for turning - the cold shower of radical truth telling about ourselves followed by a warmer bath of self-love and radical acceptance of what was and what is, and your name inscribed in the Book of Life once again.

Erica also discovers through the magic of 42 commercial free minutes that she has both more control over her thoughts and attitudes than she realized, even if she has remarkably little control over re-scripting how each moment of her life has unfolded. I love how Shulz describes this in her TED talk when she lifts up our Control-Z culture (Control-Z like the computer command “undo”). She laments “the problem is that there are certain things that happen in life that we desperately want to change and we cannot. Sometimes instead of Control-Z, we actually have zero control.”

My colleague the Rev. Alicia Forde reminds us that we've been living these past two years in a kind of liminal time. She writes: “The future is always unknown. The present moment is one in which things are forever falling apart. Always shattering. Always seeking new ways to be reimaged, reconstructed, reoriented. We live in the betwixt and the between...that is our reality. Our real. Life is eternally in process. We (individuals and communities of faith) can be assured of at least one thing: there is much that we do not know. Our not knowing is a gift that can allow us to stay open to possibility and the emerging world. We need not fear liminality, but rather embrace it as a source of wisdom from which we can create community and respond to the question: what would “love” do here?”

For those of us who are control freaks and perfectionists, this letting go into this gift of not knowing is really hard, because we want to do things right and

without regrets. So how do we not regret, regret? As I've said, we can move through a labyrinth of self inquiry to the center and back out again. There will be time travel involved, even without magical Dr. Tom. Ask yourself: What can I learn from this regret to apply to future behavior or decisions? Then consider: How could it have been worse? This transforms disappointment into gratitude.

Here's the hard part and our charge— even when there has been heartbreak or betrayal, may we not regret being willing to love; even if our cause was not advanced or our love reciprocated, may we not regret taking a stand; even if the world seems doomed to division or decay, may we not regret carrying a banner of hope, and even if our professional ventures fall flat, may we not regret taking a risk and following a dream.

And, finally, how can we diminish the number of future regrets in our lives? Say “yes” to opportunity. And this includes saying a very big robust YES to the opportunity to keep building on our successes in this third year of interim ministry together. And a very big yes to supporting Beacon during our Stewardship campaign.

Let's spend less time on our fears and mythical do-overs, and more time considering what stories we wish to craft in the here and now. Watch “Being Erica” for inspiration – its available on Amazon Prime AND Hulu. May we each contract an acute case of the present tense. “Carpe momentum ” *Seize the Moment*. Or, as Nike urges us: “Just Do It.” If we don't – and trust your minister, Erica Strange, and the science on this one – we may live to regret it.

Blessed be. Blessed we and Amen.

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