

An Acute Case of the Present Tense
On Not Regretting Regret
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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 its 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 Potteresque 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 give her, as my title suggests, an acute case of her present tense (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, that we tend to rewrite our regrets with a happier ending, when in reality it could have been a worse outcome.

And, the more imagination we have about that re-write, 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? Why do we torture ourselves with believing what might have been would have been better?

Yes, it’s possible. No doubt. Yet, this 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?!” 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. Rather, for deepening, acceptance of herself and her choices, and how Dr. Tom's time-travel therapy is giving her resilience and confidence 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 Strangowitz that was rebranded at Ellis Island). Her former hippie father has become a mid-life career-switching Rabbi. Her Mom like designer handbags. Yes, there is tension in the Strange household. So, Erica, along with Jews the world over, would be observing The High Holidays of her faith, beginning tonight, the Eve of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year).

The Days of Awe...those 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (on September 19th) are all about how we contextualize and process our moments of regret. Although it can be mighty challenging to our hearts and our egos, we can only succeed during this interval when we confess, ask for forgiveness from others, and offer it ourselves.

The Jewish wisdom text, the Talmud, explains that on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, God opens up three books: one for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous, and one for those in-between. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed in the Book of Life. The completely wicked are immediately inscribed in the Book of Death. The average, or "in-between person," (a description that likely fits most of us here at UUCM) are kept in suspension until Yom Kippur.

They (we) have ten days, known as the Days of Awe, to make amends, to experience *teshuvah*, or turning. A key passage from "The Gates of Repentance," the Yom Kippur liturgy book explains: "The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange," it reads. " The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the south. The animals are beginning to turn to store in their food for the winter."

"For leaves, birds, and animals, turning comes instinctively. But, for us, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face. It means starting all over again. And this is always painful. It means saying *I am sorry*. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do."

And, in keeping with "Being Erica," it means being with our regrets, as a process of healing. How have we been wounded (even self-wounded) in those 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.

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) We all do it 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, for the *teshuva* of the Days of Awe – 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 that "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. And for those of us who are control freaks and perfectionists this is really hard, because we want to do everything ourselves and we want to do it right, without regrets."

So how do we not regret, regret? 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 converts 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, 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.

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 (and the science) on this one – we'll regret it.

Shana Tova and Blessed Be.

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