

Living with less regret

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The Guardian featured a [good article on people's regrets yesterday](#). I recommend reading it. There are lessons to be learned, and many of them are pretty simple.

It also made me think about the time I was writing my book 'The Courageous State'. That includes a chunk of economic theory that I suspect most people never read. I was seeking to explore what our real economic goals are and why we do, and don't, achieve them.

The goal I thought, and think, is to fulfil our material, intellectual and emotional potential and in the process (they are, I suggest, all related) achieve our purpose.

I suggested in the book that our material potential is limited. We are constrained by the capacity of the earth to sustain human life, which is both an absolute and relative constraint, the latter imposed by the rate of change. The duty we have, I suggested, is to impose no more change than that which lets succeeding generations survive without threat from our actions.

But what about constraints in other areas? Why can't we just achieve what we want? Why is it we all (I am generalising, but I suspect it is true) are unable to achieve our full potential? That I suggested is because others impose constraints upon us.

Some are material: I talk often enough about the burdens of debt, rent and interest here.

Some are systemic: these financial burdens are backed by an oppressive society that favours some over others.

But those favoured still seem constrained. Why is that? That's because of what we do to each other. The teacher or parent who put us down has a big burden to carry. The sex abuser has a greater one still. That's because what those who harm us do is reduce our capacity to be who we truly are. And as much as we struggle to achieve they are a countervailing force that says, in the most powerful of ways, that we can't.

I would suggest it's not possible to live a life without regret. I'm not using this space to discuss my own. What I am suggesting is that we should recognise the enormous potency of regret, including that from being unable to address abuse. And that we should encourage those with regrets to talk about the issues, and if possible to confront them in ways that help them.

The idea, so long embedded in too much of society, that there are distasteful issues best suppressed is wrong. We need to let the abused talk.

But we also need to accept the remorse of the abuser, if it is genuinely offered. As South Africa once knew, there is little more powerful than forgiveness genuinely offered. That does, of course, require real reform.

The world is having an appropriate moment of revelation at present. Many will regret it did not happen sooner. They will be right to do so. Removing oppression is key to freedom, and so much of that is unseen and unheard that the world has suffered too much torment.

But it is only by real reform that people will be set free. Some individuals will, of course, need to pay the price for what they have done. But it is only if the structural mechanisms that permit oppression are removed that real change will happen.

And then we can live with less regret.