

Dear England, neoliberalism and the fear of losing

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I watched *Dear England* last night, having previously been a big fan of the play

One of the central themes is that when Gareth Southgate took over as England manager, his team could not win because they were too frightened of losing.

On the surface, that is a comment about football. In reality, it is about something much more than that. What Gareth Southgate appeared to understand, with some encouragement from team psychologist Pippa Grange, was that England's problem was not a lack of talent. The country has produced world-class players for generations. The issue was psychological.

Players carried the burden of expectation.

They feared failure. They feared making mistakes.

They feared being blamed.

As a consequence, they became trapped by the possibility of losing, and that fear made winning much less likely.

The reason this idea resonates so strongly in the play, in a way that is, I hope, going to be replicated in the TV series, is that this seems to describe much of modern society. The neoliberal project has, in many ways, been built on the promise of perfection.

We are told that success is available to anyone who works hard enough.

We are told that every aspect of our lives can be optimised as if it were a social media post

We are encouraged to believe that there is a right career path, a right educational route, a right investment strategy, a right lifestyle, and a right way to live.

The implication is obvious. If perfection is available, then failure must be our fault. If we

do not succeed, we have only ourselves to blame. And this is deliberate. The neoliberal economy exploits and seeks to blame those being exploited for the fact that they are.

The consequence is a culture of anxiety. People become frightened of making mistakes. They become frightened of taking risks. They become frightened of appearing inadequate. They become frightened of failing.

In a world where perfection is the benchmark, ordinary human experience becomes a source of constant self-criticism.

Instead of being encouraged to explore possibilities, people are encouraged to avoid error. Instead of being liberated to discover who they are, they become trapped by fear of who they might be judged to be.

I was reminded of this by something Monty Don said last week when offering closing thoughts on the Chelsea Flower Show. In an implicit criticism of this neoliberal view, he suggested that nothing and no one that appears perfect is interesting. I think he is right.

Perfect gardens are dull. Perfect people are unbearable. Perfect stories are impossible.

What interests us in life is the flaws that reveal character, growth, vulnerability, discovery, and surprise. What interests us most of all is the evidence that something is really alive, and life is interesting precisely because it is imperfect.

A garden that develops in unexpected ways is more interesting than one controlled to within an inch of its life. The same is true of people and societies.

The neoliberal obsession with perfection denies this reality. It assumes that with sufficient effort, sufficient information, sufficient expertise, and sufficient control, uncertainty can be eliminated. But that is not true. Uncertainty is the condition in which all human beings live.

We do not know what tomorrow will bring. We cannot know whether our plans will succeed. We cannot know how other people will respond to us. We cannot know what opportunities or crises may arise. Life is lived amidst uncertainty, and any philosophy that promises otherwise is offering a fantasy.

That matters because I think we often misunderstand what is required to deal with uncertainty. That's because the opposite of fear is not courage. The opposite of fear is curiosity. Fear closes possibilities down. That is the challenge Southgate faced. Curiosity opens them up.

Fear demands certainty. Curiosity accepts uncertainty.

Fear asks what might go wrong. Curiosity asks what might be learned.

Fear narrows the horizons of our lives. Curiosity expands them.

Southgate's achievement was not simply to create a better football team. It was to create a culture in which players could become curious about their possibilities instead of being obsessed with their potential failures.

There is another contrast worth considering in this context. That is, the opposite of chaos is not control. The opposite of chaos is coherence.

Control is what neoliberalism claims to offer. Targets, measurements, audits, rankings, performance indicators, league tables, incentives, penalties, and endless monitoring are all intended to create order. Yet the result is often the opposite. People become overwhelmed by competing demands. Institutions lose sight of their purpose. Organisations become obsessed with processes rather than outcomes. Individuals struggle to make sense of the pressures imposed upon them. The result is confusion, fragmentation, and anxiety. In other words, chaos.

Coherence is something very different. Coherence comes from understanding who we are, what we value, and what we are trying to achieve. It comes from having a story that makes sense of our lives and our relationships with other people.

Control seeks to eliminate uncertainty. Coherence seeks to live with it.

Control attempts to impose order from outside. Coherence emerges when our values, actions, and aspirations align.

One is inherently fragile because reality will always disrupt it. The other is resilient because it accepts reality as it is.

What *Dear England* recognised is that success does not emerge from perfection. Success emerges when people accept that perfection is impossible. England began to perform better when its players accepted that a missed penalty was not a moral failing.

They began to perform better when they accepted that mistakes were part of the game. In other words, they stopped being defined by fear. The lesson extends far beyond football.

Our politics is trapped by fear.

Our economics is trapped by fear.

Our public services are trapped by fear.

Too many people are trapped by fear.

They are frightened of getting things wrong. They are frightened of failing.

They are frightened of being judged. As a result, they often become incapable of achieving what matters most.

What we need instead are curiosity and coherence. Curiosity allows us to engage with uncertainty rather than deny it. Coherence allows us to make sense of our lives without pretending that everything can be controlled. Both require us to reject the fantasy of perfection. The paradox is that once we stop trying to be perfect, we often perform much better. England's footballers discovered that. Perhaps the rest of us need to discover it as well.

I recommend watching the series.

It is entirely appropriate that I note that this piece developed out of conversations with Jacqueline, both before and after watching Dear England, based more on the play than on the television programme, just because the play is the one we have seen to the end, so far.