

Ideas for modern living: regret

David Whyte
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Regret is a short, evocative and achingly beautiful word; an elegy to lost possibilities even in its brief annunciation. It is also a rarity and almost never heard except where the speaker insists that they have none, that they are brave and forward-looking and could not possibly imagine their life in any other way than the way it is. To admit regret is to understand that we are fallible, that there are powers beyond us; to admit regret is to lose control not only of a difficult past but of the very story we tell about our present; to admit sincere and abiding regret is one of our greatest but unspoken contemporary sins.

The rarity of honest regret may be due to our contemporary emphasis on the youthful perspective; it may be that a true, useful regret is not a possibility or a province of youth, that it takes maturity to experience the depths of the emotion in ways that do not overwhelm and debilitate us but put us into a proper relationship with the future. Except for brief senses of having hurt another, having taken what is not ours, youth is not yet ready for the rich current of abiding regret that runs through and can even embolden a mature human life.

Sincere regret may be a faculty for paying attention to the future, for sensing a new tide where we missed a previous one, for experiencing timelessness with a grandchild where we neglected a boy of our own. To regret fully is to appreciate how high the stakes are in even the average human life; fully experienced, it turns our eyes, attentive and alert, to a future possibly lived better than our past.

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