

Moments: Take 'em and make 'em

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—For a number of months I've found myself having frank-but-comfortable conversations with old friends, new friends and in-betweeners about the errors we've made as we've passed through the years of our lives.

Even the most successful have regrets of one sort or another. A few think they didn't make as much of their lives as they should have. Many of us made big mistakes. We are lucky that life presents opportunities to make new mistakes as well as repeat the old ones. If it didn't, we wouldn't appreciate the occasions when we do something right.

Everybody thinks that we learn from our mistakes. Possibly. But I think there's less learning here than we count on, because it's hard to change our genes and almost as hard to change our experience and personalities. We may learn more from easily diagnosed mistakes, and not so much from the ones that come out of our deep interiors where we are hard-wired.

Regret is the handmaiden of mistake. Regrets soften over time. I'm on pretty good terms with my regrets, but I still beat myself up over old mistakes.

Most of us have had to deal with misfortunes that were not of our own making. Misfortune can be easier to accept than mistakes. Some ask of bad luck, "Why me?" Others say, "Why not me—I didn't get a free pass." With misfortune, I think you have to both accept it and fight it where you can.

Many of us in our 60s seem to be unhappy with choices we made in circumstances not of our choosing. Not infrequently, it was a matter of choosing the most palatable of several unpalatable options.

The smallest free choices turned out to have had huge consequences.

Had I not been a groomsman at a wedding reception at the Yale Faculty Club, I would not have met the date of a friend of the groom who eventually became my first wife, a choice that became all three—mistake, regret and misfortune for both of us.

Others I've talked with are uncomfortable with how we find ourselves in the world. Several said they have little confidence in the future and suspect that a big something -- a dreadful disease, personal financial catastrophe or a macro-economic collapse -- will turn our "golden years" into base meddles.

None of us expected cosmic guarantees of prolonged good health and sufficient wealth. But we did bank on reasonable economic predictability and a functional government that was able to solve at least as many problems as it created.

Dare I speak the word that cannot be spoken: malaise?

My conversations often turned to the dopey existential question: Are you happy? (And if you are not happy, are you, at least, at peace with yourself as you are?)

I'm not sure what happiness is. Maybe it's something that individuals can get to through achievement. But I doubt that happiness is like an attic nirvana, which you access by a ladder that drops down when you pull the right handle.

Happiness seems to be mostly a matter of declaration, of recognizing that things could be a lot worse and aren't. I know very poor and marginal people who say they are reasonably happy, though they wouldn't turn down a few upgrades. I also know wealthy and "important" people who can't stop scratching the scabs of their own making.

Maybe the elusive happiness is one of those things that can be found if you look for it relative to where you've been, or what you were or what has not befallen you.

When Superstorm Sandy knocked out our griddy power for three days, my wife and I found outsized delights on Tuesday night in tiny comforts—a handful of candles, a battery-operated radio and -- from Junior's general store in Blue Grass -- the fixings for two fried bologna sandwiches, which neither of us have tasted for at least 50 years.

Those evening hours were long and dark. Lincoln may have educated himself by reading in the flickering light of a fire, but I kept falling asleep, flickers notwithstanding.

Wednesday...I sought a grander level of happiness. I can report that I got our new, any-idiot-can-start-this-thing-by-pushing-a-button generator to fire up after only 30 minutes of repeated instructions-reading, fiddling and swearing. I also threatened to blow up Costco and all Chinese manufacturers of anything mechanical and electrical.

The instructions warned me in writing, drawings and diagrams in three foreign languages not to set up the generator in either a wet place or a dry place, which, as you might expect, limited my options. I was also warned not to place the generator either outside where it might get a sniffle from moisture or inside where its carbon monoxide would kill me in seconds.

The generator's starting protocol required that the resident idiot open two valves, activate two switches in correct sequence, stand on his right foot with four toes of his choice pointed toward the North Pole while adjusting a choke the instructions neither pictured nor mentioned that was conveniently hidden from human view until you sprawled on your belly and looked up in a way that fused your neck vertebrae backward.

Still, the generator made Wednesday evening a festival of small pleasures with two working electric lamps, television (which we watched out of habit even though it offered nothing worth watching) and the comforting hum of refrigeration. Western civilization was not back all the way in Blue Grass, but we had clawed our way out of our most recent dip into the Dark Ages, which was brought to us by our second once-in-a-lifetime weather event in four months that has nothing to do with global warming.

The smallest joys helped out—a 100-watt bulb, a fire in the woodstove, mayonnaise. We made these moments.

In addition to appreciating each grain of happiness when I find it, I'm a firm believer in gallows humor.

Making fun of things that cause our sense of -- yes, I'll say it, MALAISE -- diminishes them even if it doesn't change them. They're a little less scary. It's a way of fighting back even when the fight is hopeless. Gallows humor affirms the human spirit.

On Friday morning, the sun is shining. That's good. Many Americans are hurting. That's bad. But the sun is shining—right here, right now.

A moment to be taken.

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