

Along the track

What Might Have Been

Do you remember the song, made famous by Frank Sinatra, *I did it My Way*?

Regrets, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention. I did what I had to do and saw it through without exemption.

Well, it seems that Frank was not alone in feeling regret - a new study indicates that rats feel regret, the first time it has been shown that mammals other than humans experience this emotion.

Scientists have completed an experiment using treats to entice rats into a food station where they could either wait for a meal or go to the next stop. The ones that decided to move on, and then had to wait even longer, showed signs of regretting their hasty decision to move to an even worse deal.

Often the human experience of regret is not the things we did not get but rather the things we did not do. It is about what might have been ... the feeling that I could have/should have done that. Or it may be that I have made a mistake, an error of judgment, a wrong turn, as it were.

Regret is sometimes called the most corrosive of the emotions - it can be 'crippling', it can cause us to become obsessed by things not done, things not said, decisions made or not, our lack of action and so on. It can affect our judgments, our outlook on life. It can make us feel insecure, anxious, angry, resentful and perhaps even inadequate. But regret is inevitable. We never do everything right and sometimes we wish we hadn't done this or that. Recognising that is healthy but, more importantly, is recognising that we have a choice to wallow in it or to move on.

Remorse is not the same as regret - we can and ought to feel and express remorse, sorrow for things done, things not done, hurts caused - whatever may have caused regret. We are called to repentance, to new beginnings, to reconciliation with others, to 'metanoia', a change of mind and heart, to forgiveness of others as well as ourselves. That begins with remorse - that is its cornerstone. If we cannot express remorse, we cannot move on, we cannot use past experiences to better ourselves, to improve our choices, our way of relating to others and to life itself. That is one reason why stiffer penalties are usually handed out to those who exhibit a lack of remorse for crimes committed.

While rats may feel regret, what separates humans from other animals is our ability to look forward, to 'put things behind us' and begin again, to dream of better things, to wonder, to question - in other words, our capacity for hope. That can define the quality of our lives. Hope is not some kind of delusional optimism. Hope is not just about building the future; it is grounded in the ability to remember the past with new understanding. Sometimes that can involve a real struggle, but a necessary one if we

are not to lead lives free from the crippling effects of regret. Our memories are the seedbed of our hope.

Hope is an extraordinary virtue. While it finds its roots in the past, hope finds its expression in the everyday now and it firmly believes in the future. Pope John Paul II likened it to putting out into the deep, which asks us "to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm, and to look forward to the future with confidence" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 1). Hope is not a denial of reality nor is it some kind of spiritual opiate or elixir.

Hope calls us to look deeper, to discover the sacred moments of our lives, those times when we have come to discover something of God's presence and purpose in the events, the people we have met, in those things or people or places that have nourished our spirits. Hope helps us to look deeper and deeper into what it means to talk about life as sacred. Hope reminds us that God still loves our world, God is still with us.

In the words of Pope Francis:

I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life. God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else - God is in this person's life. You can - you must - try to seek God in every human life.

Hope looks to the future. St Augustine defined hope in this way: "Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are." Hope lies in the 'fires' we cultivate within. It is not by coincidence that the Holy Spirit came to us at Pentecost in the form of fire! What makes us disappointed about our world, about its injustices, at the way things are rather than how they ought to be? What fires us up - what calls us to courageous action, to commitment? Hope is about being transformed into the person we were meant to become.

Hope can change our lives, not by one, great miraculous event but rather in the series of small actions and decisions that transform us daily - that lead us beyond ourselves. Hope is putting one foot in front of the other when we may feel out of our depth, when we feel we lack courage but we know that 'something needs to be done'!

Hope reminds us that God companions us as we go. We are never alone, never abandoned. God in Jesus has given us in this unfinished world a glimpse of what might be and walks with us, giving us possibility, giving us hope.

Regards
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