

Regret is the Perfect Emotion for Our Self-Absorbed Times

BY Judith Shulevitz

- 1 We are a nation gnawed by regret. The most visible symptom of this condition is celebrity regret, which sloshes through nearly every news cycle. "I regret the use of that word," said Tom Perkins, co-founder of a powerhouse venture-capital firm, after comparing verbal attacks on America's richest 1 percent to Kristallnacht, the Nazi pogrom against German Jews. "I deeply regret accepting legal gifts and loans from a diet-supplement executive," said Virginia's ex-governor, Bob McDonnell, after his indictment for corruption, though he didn't say what there was to regret if the gifts and loans were legal. "I am sorry that so many people have been making insincere apologies," wrote *The Washington Post's* Dana Milbank in a recent sardonic column. "I hasten to add that I am not to blame for these terrible apologies, but I regret them deeply, all the same."
- 2 These public shows of regret come off as cringe-worthy because they fall short of apologies and stink of self-justification, but in fact they express a real emotion and reveal a plain truth. Regret is what we feel when we realize that we've hurt ourselves — damaged our careers, tarnished our reputations, limited our options. Regret is not remorse, which is what we feel when we've hurt others. Remorse — from the Latin *mordere*, to bite — implies the nip of conscience. It's remorse that we want from our public figures after they misbehave, and remorse that they'll almost never admit to.
- 3 For one thing, their lawyers advise them not to. But the current explosion of self-absorbed self-criticism reflects more than just American litigiousness. We rue our actions 20 we don't have to apologize for them. Personally, I'm convinced that regret is the dark counterpart to American optimism, as widespread and characteristic. It's certainly what I feel most of the time, and while I realize that that makes me sound neurotic, I refuse to regret the confession.
- 4 Psychologists suspect that we regret more than we used to, because we make more choices than we used to. Economists spend a great deal of time nowadays trying to quantify both regret and 'regret aversion', because second thoughts, and the fear of having them, can have a volatile effect on markets. And yet, although the list of choices required of even a minimally functional person is now very long and very tiresome, its lengthiness alone doesn't explain the psychic torment it can occasion. So here are a few theories about that. First, regret hurts because we venerate competence. Personal success is as much an American fetish as freedom of choice, so we feel duty-bound to make the kinds of decisions that lead to the best possible outcomes — to maximize our utility, as the economists say. If you subscribe to the cult of competence, it will feel like

a bigger sin to sabotage yourself than others. The shame you suffer when caught doing something wrong will have less to do with having violated someone's trust than with knowing you now look stupid or crazy.

5 Second, regret is the product of a simple but discomfiting contradiction. Though we have near-infinite options, we have a finite amount of time to sort through them. Given how much we prize proficient decision-making, this puts us in a bind: We can never obtain enough information to choose wisely. And that leads to a paralysis akin to the learned helplessness that experimental psychologists like to induce in dogs and rats through the administration of random, unavoidable shocks.

6 Here are two more findings about regret that psychologists have repeatedly replicated. One, we deplore loss more than we enjoy gain, just as we remember unhappy experiences more vividly than happy ones. And two, in the heat of the moment, we brood more obsessively about the dumb things we did, and as we age, we grieve more about all the things we failed to do. Finding number two strikes me as the more disheartening. I have come to see it as the lifelong tyranny of the counterfactual. I can never stop dreaming of what might have been, because it will always be better than what is. And this turns regret into a sort of existential tragicomedy. The regret I'm afraid of being pierced by, right here and now, traps me inside the farcicality of a detergent commercial. At some inadmissible level, I really do fear that buying the wrong product will lead to the wrong me — and so do you, because the brand-makers have always already outsmarted us both. But the regret we endure when we look back at everything we didn't do, perhaps because we wasted so much time not being stupid, is the stuff of despair.

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