

Successful Aging: The Challenge of Regret and Guilt

Posted: 08/06/2014 11:47 am



Marc Romanelli via Getty Images

This is the second in a series of essays on the psychology of successful aging. [Click here](#) for the first.

Pride in the past is an essential element of successful aging. Robert Frost captures this well in "The Death of the Hired Man," a poem in which an old man who had been a farmhand and who is now sick and dying returns to the farm and asks to be allowed to stay. The husband and wife debate what to do. Pleading on behalf of the hired man, she describes him as having "nothing to look backward to with pride and nothing to look forward to with hope." What a sad state! A perfect description of a failed life.

Some people associate pride with doing something great or unusual, with something that distinguishes them from people who have lived ordinary lives. But we don't have to be extraordinary to take pride in our past. We can also take pride in having earned a living, having taken care of a family, having raised children, having been mostly honest, having loved, having made a contribution to our community, having tried to do something well -- our job, parenting, a hobby. Leaving a legacy is important to some people no doubt; but a simple life of decency can also be a source of pride.

I am reasonably sure, however, that no one looks back only with pride, that everyone looks back with bad feelings about the past as well as good. We all have disappointments and regrets. And we probably all have some lingering guilt about having been bad in some way.

For example, a friend of considerable accomplishment and fame recently told me that he sometimes wonders where he went wrong. What could he have done differently to have the great success he hoped for rather than the limited success he achieved?

His question reminded me of Tom Lehrer, a very funny song writer and performer who was quite successful when he was in his 30s. He used to observe, "When Mozart was my age, he'd been dead two years." It's really hard to measure up.

I, too, am disappointed in myself. I had wanted to be a person of historical importance -- like Plato in the days when I was a philosophy teacher. I chose instead to become a social worker. I made some minor contributions before I retired and even enjoyed the recognition of receiving a few awards. But, I'm unlikely to get an obituary in the *New York Times* -- a disappointment.

And sometimes, I dwell on moments of great embarrassment, on times I've been a schmuck and on situations in which I have hurt people. It gives me some comfort that it was generally from thoughtlessness and insensitivity rather than malevolence. Still, I cringe as I write this.

Does disappointment, regret, embarrassment and guilt doom me to a sad old age? I don't think so. I still look back with pride -- but not about everything.

This is obvious, right? Maybe, but I have come across a number of people lately who give advice about how to live without regrets, as if this were what we should aspire to.

Karl Pillemer, for example, recently wrote a [book](#) about the wisdom gleaned from interviews with over 1,000 older people. In it, there's a chapter on how to avoid regret. It includes nostrums such as we are more likely to regret what we didn't try than what we tried and failed at, we should be careful about who we marry, we should worry less, etc.

Maybe this reflects wisdom. It seems to me, however, that regret is inevitable. When we are young, we have great potential. As we grow up, we have to make choices, and each choice betrays one part of our potential in favor of another. We are bound to look back and realize that we could have had a different life.

One of the great advantages of aging is that once we retire and/or finish raising our children, we have another chance to define ourselves. Aging can provoke the kind of identity crisis most people have as adolescents and many people experience in mid-life, but now there may be time to make something else of ourselves. Parents, mostly fathers in my generation who were too busy with their careers to play with their children, can crawl on the floor with their grandchildren and be there for them when they have emotional or moral struggles they cannot share with their parents. Frustrated artists pick up paint brushes. Frustrated travelers see the world.

So in addition to pride in the past, older adults can have legitimate hopes of making up for some lost time. Indeed as life expectancy pushes into the mid-eighties for those who make it to their mid-sixties, there is quite a bit of time left.

But, lost potential, I suspect, is somewhat easier to deal with than guilt about shameful past acts. The past cannot be undone.

Human beings are morally frail, especially in the process of building a life, and we should, of course, forgive ourselves for being human. But that is far easier said than done for some of us.

So, having pride in the past may, as I believe, be an essential element of well-being in old age, but few -- if any of us -- reach old age without disappointments, regrets, feelings of betrayal of self and others, remorse and guilt about shameful acts.

How can we overcome such feelings? I don't know that we can. We can live with them, we can come to accept who we are for the most part if not totally, we can set out on new paths, we can make peace with ourselves, and we can live as well as we can in the time we have left. And, if we are really troubled, we can get help from a mental health professional, spiritual adviser or even a good friend.

Not very profound, I'm afraid. But I hope it's worth the observation that aging well does not mean aging perfectly.