

Childhood regrets – the mother of reinvention

What if you want to live a different sort of life – one that is fuller, more satisfying?



Chong Siow Ann

For *The Straits Times*

A friend recently sent me a Financial Times (FT) piece by British writer Lucy Kellaway. It was about how, after 32 years at the Financial Times, at the age of 57, she chucked in her cushy columnist job to be a teacher.

Ms Kellaway had been a popular columnist who, in her own words, “was paid to interview famous people” with “a technique that involved handing my subjects a noose and waiting for them to put their heads into it – which they nearly always did, if I waited long enough”. And she added wryly, “I was mean about almost everyone”.

She made the career change to teaching – described by the Sunday Times as the “most harassed and underpaid of professions” – because she was fed up with her job, and with herself.

The theme of her FT piece was reinvention, and at the start of it,

she offered herself “as living proof that at the end of your sixth decade, it was perfectly possible to change your life entirely – to move house, split with your husband, stop dyeing your hair and quit being a journalist to become a teacher”.

UNLIVED LIFE

Most of us, at some point, might wish to change some fundamental parts of our life we are dissatisfied with.

We might have come to dislike the person that we have become, or we resent the people we share our lives with, or we agonise over the tedium and meaninglessness of our job.

We might have even clambered up the ladder of achievement in our career. But, perched on the top rung, we look to other ladders unclimbed. Given that we have just one single life of limited span, it becomes even more desperate that we must not just survive, but also thrive and live life to the full.

And we might spend a considerable part of our mental and emotional energy fantasising about the transformative changes we would like to make – creating an alternate unlived life that we imagine to be better, fuller and richer.

As a psychiatrist, and in the earlier part of my career when I practised psychotherapy, I’d encountered many patients who were profoundly unhappy about their life, presenting with what we would call “existential issues”.

Some of them didn’t know exactly what was absent in their lives, but they felt keenly that deep ache of discontent. What was certain to them was that intense wish of wanting to get out of something – out of their present self, out of a relationship, out of a job or some other commitment.

Some had repeated a pattern of opting in and out and finding no sense of lasting satisfaction, let alone contentment. These failures were first seen as mere setbacks in the progress of their life, but as they accrued, they become their whole unhappy life – and which also defined them.

There were patients who at first blush seemed confident and were indeed successful in their jobs, but they lacked that secure sense of self-worth and assurance one would imagine. Their successes rang hollow to them, while their failures were devastating.

They craved to be respected and admired by all, but nothing they did seemed to be enough. And there were patients who repeatedly embarked on one disastrous relationship after another; others who were obsessed with people who no longer loved them or had never loved them in the first place; and others who would not leave an abusive relationship despite wishing to do so.

In the diversity of the manifestation of their various problems, there was this common theme of a yawning, unrealised and unfulfilled yearning. More often than not, the root of their difficulties turned out to lie in their childhood.

Our childhood experiences exert a powerful and lasting influence in shaping the adults we become.

There is the concept of the “good-enough mother” – the mother (though this could also be the father or any significant caregiver) who sometimes responded promptly to most of the child’s needs and sometimes, not at all. She is not “perfect”, but she is “good enough”, so the child could feel some amount of frustration at times, and from this sort of experience, the child learns an important truth about the reality of life, which is that he will get satisfaction on some occasions only, and the wider world does not bend to his wishes.

However, in the childhood histories of some patients who came for psychotherapy were instances of parental deprivation, neglect and even abuse. Bereft of that assurance of unconditional

parental love and care, these patients carry this inner and profound sense of insecurity, worthlessness, desire and anger residing at varying levels of awareness in their psyche – some patients are entirely unconscious of this – and which exert a powerful influence on their thoughts, emotions and behaviour.

As a therapist, I would think of how my patients were with other people and of the subterranean conflicting forces that led them to hurt themselves and others.

Identifying, describing and interpreting their hidden motivations and conflicts could, in some instances, help them understand that they could live a different sort of life – one less haunted by regrets, misery and rage. But to turn such insights into action demands the will to assume responsibility, courage, resolve and energy.

And that is the same of anyone who wants to make radical changes in life. Ms Kellaway had the initiative, courage and steely resolve to step out of a familiar and exceptionally rewarding career into something quite different and to stick to it. From her piece, she had clearly gained something of inestimable value.

But many find it difficult to make such changes because they are hamstrung by deep ties of commitment and binding responsibility to others and by their reluctance to afflict pain on

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others, or by lack of money, or because of increasing age which whittles down one’s options and possibilities, or any one, or some, of life’s curveballs that strike and constrain us.

In therapy, I see that often in patients. They and I can see what should be done, but they simply can’t or won’t carry it out, but continue to cling to their fantasies of a better life, which can be all consuming.

And I cannot help but see that they are setting themselves up for disappointment because with the passage of time, their life would be filled with regrets and angst for those broken dreams, aborted hopes and futile expectations.

REGRETS ARE USELESS

At the age of 89, Ms Diana Athill, the distinguished book editor and memoirist, wrote that “anyone looking back over eighty-nine years ought to see a landscape pockmarked with regrets”.

However, while admitting blithely that she does have a “large number of regrettable events”, she says they have largely vanished from her sight. Reflecting that this “invisibility may be partly the result of a preponderance of common sense over imagination”, she concludes that “regrets are useless, so forget them”.

Unrealised and unrealisable fantasies – like regrets – are useless; and we should turn away from them and turn back to reality. And do what practitioners of mindfulness would tell us: Focus on the here and now, on what we have done and will do, rather than on what we might have done.

We should just live, as gratifyingly as possible, the one singular life we have and experience life as it is happening.

This is what I try to tell some of my patients. Some might give up their fantasies, almost like emerging from a dream, but most still clutch on to some shreds of their fantasies.

And I can empathise with that – after all, these fantasies are a distraction and a temporary respite and comfort from more painful thoughts and situations. And, when all is said and done, who among us doesn’t go there, too, in our dark and lonely moments.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Professor Chong Siow Ann is a senior consultant psychiatrist at the Institute of Mental Health.