

NON! JE NE REGRETTE RIEN

Up to about a year ago, I was a happily married man with a good job, good friends and much to keep me occupied. Then, for no reason I could fathom, everything changed. I made a series of decisions that eventually cost me my wife, kids, friends and my well paid job. While I am still relatively well off, I spend most of my time either alone or in pursuit of hedonistic diversions, without experiencing any pleasure. Like Camus's stranger, I am always on the outside looking in. These feelings of alienation are newly shared with many of my fellow citizens. I mention all of this, to set the scene for the extraordinary events that occurred about a week ago.

It was one of those summer weekends. I was faced with a long day with nothing to do. I spent the morning contemplating my options. I was between female companions and all my male buddies were or pretended to be occupied with theirs. It seemed I would have to make do with my own company, something I was getting tired of.

I could listen to my favorite music. I could go to a movie. I could read or catch up on correspondence, something I hadn't done in quite awhile. I could take a long walk. I could cook myself a gourmet meal. I had a plethora of choices. None of them appealed to me. Then I remembered that I had been invited to a cocktail party. Normally, I avoid them like the plague. They are nothing more than an endless babble of many voices, all attempting to be coolly cynical but succeeding only at superficial foolish prattle. Everyone talks and no one listens. However, while the food is customarily poor the liquor is always plentiful, allowing one an opportunity to make out with a desirable member of the opposite or same sex, depending upon one's inclinations.

I decided to attend so that shortly after 2.30 PM I found myself in the midst of the usual group of familiar types. I wandered listlessly through the hot and perspiring bodies, consuming as much of the nectar of the gods as I could while desperately searching for a crony or, hopefully an agreeable companion. I was just about ready to concede defeat in my quest and leave, when I noticed a group of guests listening with rapt attention to someone I hadn't noticed. While he looked familiar, I couldn't place him. He was a man of indeterminate age, of medium height with no special physical attributes except for his eyes, that were translucent, of uncertain coloration and other worldly. His voice, eerily resonant, suggested he had weathered some very strange experiences.

When I joined the group, he looked at me with some bemusement and for my edification recommenced his discourse.

"Who I am and where I come from is of no account, except that it is from a very different place than here. This will shortly become evident. I do not know to what extent each of you has examined your life, ascertaining those deeds that really benefited you and/or others and divining what actions or non-actions you regret. It is my view, that the only regrets anyone can have are about decisions, deeds and endeavors assumed by oneself. It is childish or paranoid to blame others or outside circumstances for one's regrets. I have many regrets, too many. I have always passionately wished that I had none. I am constantly reminded of this by a famous song of Edith Piaf, titled, 'Non! Je ne regrette rien!', which literally translated asserts, 'No! I regret nothing.' This song, her theme song, allowed her to reiterate this refrain despite really having much to rue in her life. Oh! If only I could sing the same song.

These were the first words I heard from this stranger. In light of my own circumstances, they resonated with me rather strongly. I too, had many regrets and I suspect, so did all the others who were captured by his discourse and so do all others currently alive. The odd thing about him was that he seemed to be simultaneously imbued with a strength of character, an air of vulnerability, a taste for irony and misanthropy, a measure of integrity and honesty and an aura of being totally disreputable. In other

words, he was a bundle of contradictions. He was also the most fascinating person I had ever met. He continued to mesmerize us.

“As you can see, I deeply wished to live a life with no regrets. I always wondered what my life would have been like if all my regretful actions had never occurred and all my decisions had been the right ones. To that end, I attempted to obliterate the harm I had done by striving to reverse those actions I had come to regret. Every such effort failed miserably.

Then I stumbled into an area of science that I had heard about because its latest speculations were of a spectacular nature. They had made the front pages of the leading scientific journals and popular media. Having to do with the latest advances in astro-physics, and celestial and quantum mechanics, the existence of an infinite number of parallel universes was being postulated. While it was not really original with me, I slowly came to the realization that if there were an infinite number of universes, than amongst them could be found all possible scenarios of life on earth, including those where I had either very few or no regrets. You must understand that since I had no scientific training, I was wholly unaware of the supposed impossibility of my dream.

The more I thought about this revelation, the more obsessed I became with the idea that there must be a way to observe these various universes which included me and to find a way into the one that, I believed, would suit me the most. I then embarked upon a scientific career. It is amazing what one can accomplish when consumed with certain desires. I rapidly obtained all the necessary academic and scientific credentials, opening to me that exalted world of frontier physics. Very quickly I acquired a reputation of being one of the leading, if not the most prominent figure in the field. This allowed for the unlimited reception of moneys that made my research possible. I am not sure I would have received any support if the true nature of my endeavors had been known by the granting powers. In any case I was allowed to proceed unimpeded.”

At this point he seemed to become aware that he was losing us, as he was. None of us had ever heard of science, let alone astro-physics and quantum and celestial mechanics. While this talk made little sense to any of us, somehow he still managed to radiate an aura of mystery that fascinated and kept us captivated. It was not the concept of an infinite number of parallel universes that we could not fathom, since our literature, poetry, and visual and dramatic arts had thoroughly explored that notion. But what was this strange new word, ‘science’ all about? With a smile of chagrin, he continued.

“I perceive that what I claim is unknown to you. Please bear with me a little longer. I think the puzzle will soon sort itself out.

After about ten years of unalloyed and uninterrupted work, I made a major breakthrough. I was able to confirm that there was indeed an infinite number of universes. I then proceeded to work on means to select and view the desired ones, that is, those in which I existed. After another ten years I succeeded. One final achievement was necessary. I needed to be able to enter the fabric of any selected universe. Again, I succeeded but only partially. While able to enter any universe, we were not able to leave it, as attested to by the five members of my staff who are now permanent residents in five different universes. I am the sixth.

‘How and why am I here, in this particular universe,’ you may well ask. As I have already stated, I was able to select for view any universe I wanted. Also I had a predilection for those with me in them. Well, when I found this one, I was immediately attracted to it. It contained this planet where not a single person had any regrets, where there was complete harmony and peace, where life had a most desirable, pastoral and aesthetic quality and where most people were engaged in activities designed to

enhance the quality of life. I had often forgotten the original aims of my labors. This place brought them back to me with an irresistible force of attraction. I had found my philosopher's stone, or so I thought.

I made my decision to enter this new universe, dispose of my other self by murdering him and then take his place. All this was easily accomplished. I have been here for about eighteen months. At the beginning, everything was as I expected it to be. I had stepped into the life of someone with no regrets. He was a composer famous for his beautifully harmonious and melodic music. He was blessed with a beautiful family, a gorgeous, loving and nurturing wife and a coterie of friends that were completely faithful to the ideal of amity.

Some of you may wonder why I am recounting this tale to you, especially since I had seemingly attained my goal. Well, the first problem was that I had no musical ability, let alone an aptitude for composing the stuff. I then discovered that, in this most desirable of worlds, science, as a way of ascertaining truth, simply did not exist.

Here it is the artist who most compellingly and aesthetically asserts or describes any entity or natural event that determines what is true. This is a place where fables, myths, poems, music, heroic literature, works of visual art, etc. reign supreme. It is also a place where what is veritable has a chameleon like quality. It changes with the artist's easel, the written word, and the musical tone. Yet, despite this, existence here has a constancy, and a never changing quality. It seems that truth does not really matter. Beauty does!

Well, this world and its philosophy is totally alien to me. My way of thinking and of perceiving the world was an anathema here. I discovered that I desperately needed what I had given up, my profession as a scientist. What seemed so alluring soon became suffocating. I became devastatingly bored. I was reminded of a line from a movie called 'The Third Man' in which the villain, beautifully played by Orson Welles, in explaining his villainy, exclaims, 'In Italy during the middle ages, there were inter-city wars, the Borgias, the inquisition, all sorts of intrigues, mendacity and hypocrisy. Yet that period of Italian history produced the Renaissance, one of the greatest intellectual periods in all of human history. 800 years of peace and tranquillity in Switzerland produced the cuckoo clock.

I tried to adapt. That failed. I tried to introduce thoughts that would create a stir. Like a small pebble dropped into the ocean they created small waves that quickly dissipated. I grew increasingly frustrated. I needed to be intellectually challenged and to return to my way of viewing the universe. I then realized that while I had eliminated one series of regrets, they had been replaced with new ones. Furthermore, I was no longer living in a universe with a no-regret planet in it. I must be responsible for an irreversible change here, one in which all of you have suddenly discovered that you have many regrets. I regret that. You will have to learn to make the most of your regrets, now that you have them. Answering your questions will only confuse you more."

He then made a quick exit. We all sat there stunned. The degeneration of our world view had started about a year before as our mystery man had intimated. Had our experience with him been real or was it a sort of collective hypnosis dreamt up by one of our more imaginative cohorts? In any case, the deed was done and our world had been irrevocably altered. Up to then, questions demanding consistent answers were simply never asked. Everything had been accepted as a given. Nobody had ever challenged anyone else's assertions. The words 'why, and how' had virtually never been used because nobody had ever thought them necessary.

I now have many regrets and I want to know why I have them, where they have come from and what I can do to eliminate them. I realize that to accomplish this requires a more careful examination of myself, others of my kind and the world in which I exist. I have discovered 'curiosity'. We have taken our first bite from the fruit of the tree of knowledge. "What is to become of our world?" I ask with an

inordinate degree of apprehension. "Will it be one in which there is no beauty in truth and no truth in beauty?"

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