

Regrets ? We all have more than a few

By **Tony Pearson**

They say that memory is a terrible liar. I suspect that's true. For example, the older I get, the better I remember being. But if I check photographs and old reports, they don't support my recollections that I was a brilliant scholar, a silver-tongued orator, a savvy political operator, a near-Olympic level athlete, and a poetic genius. They show a perfectly respectable but hardly astonishing person. In fact, they show someone who wasn't always respectable (and actually a really bad poet).

If we look carefully into our past, we can all find things we wish we hadn't done and things we wish we hadn't said. But sometimes we're told to ignore this. Marilyn Monroe repeatedly said "Regrets are stupid." "As of today," she asserted, "I have absolutely no regrets." Yet a couple of years later, she ended up taking her own life.

The song "My Way" proclaims "Regrets ? I've had a few - but then again, too few to mention." I don't think that's true of its singer Frank Sinatra, or its writer, Paul Anka. If The Godfather gives a fairly accurate portrayal of Sinatra in his earlier years, then Ole Blue Eyes had a ton of regrets.

Whatever the case with Frank, most of us have things that we ought to regret. Life doesn't come with instructions, no matter what your parents told you. In fact, someone once said that life is like trying to learn to play the violin while you are already on stage. So you hit wrong notes; you're bound to. Life is sometimes like a confused teacher; it gives us the test first, and the lesson afterward. I'm sure most people have been through times when they wish their life had a re-wind button.

Nonetheless, you can find tons of quotes about the importance of not having regrets. Fair enough, if it means not dwelling on them. But not too smart if we don't study them enough to learn from them. Forgetting the past is the way to repeat what we should know are mistakes. If we continue to do that, they're no longer mistakes, but conscious choices. It's said that the height of foolishness is to repeat and repeat our actions, expecting a different result each time.

Certainly that's the constant case with history. One lesser-known tragic example in the First World War (of many similar tragic examples from that time of slaughter) came on the Italian-Austrian front. The Italian commander, Luigi Cardona, had two central ideas: that a frontal charge was the best way to attack, and that the Isonzo River was the place to attack. He did so not once, not twice, but 11 times ? most often for no result but thousands of dead and wounded Italian soldiers. In the end, a single counter-attack by his opponents nearly destroyed the Italian army.

Which brings me to politicians. I have said before that they have my sympathy. One reason is that they are constantly torn between the past and the future. They try to look ahead, to find new solutions to old problems. But if they get too far ahead, they are soon under attack from those who never want anything done differently. Often, they choose the political path of least resistance ? the path of inaction. Later, when caution proves detrimental and even destructive, those who held them back don't tend to apologize.

A classic case is now staring the entire world in the face: climate change. A lot of people like to pretend it isn't happening. Others admit its existence, but aren't willing to endure the changes necessary to effectively combat it ? like carbon caps and taxes, more emission controls, and other reductions in the use of fossil fuels. With out-of-control weather on the horizon, with massive droughts and flooding, with a constantly bleary polluted atmosphere, eventually everyone may experience the feeling of regret.

In this case, the regrets from continuing to ignore the problem may be as nothing compared to the anger of future generations who look at those of us who had the chance to change things, but didn't.