Stories of regret and fulfilment from the Class of ‘73

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Students from a 1973 Ontario high school yearbook. Over five decades, Paul Axelrod and Paul Anisef followed the lives of a group of people who were in Grade 12 in Ontario that year. ILLUSTRATION BY STUDENTS FROM A 1973 ONTARIO HIGH SCHOOL

Paul Axelrod and Paul Anisef are retired York University professors and co-authors of The Story of a Generation: Life Course Pathways of the Class of ’73, along with Carl E. James, Wolfgang Lehmann, Karen Robson, Erika McDonald, and Erica Fae Thomson.

Regrets. Do you have a few? Did you travel the expected or unpredicted road to adulthood? If you could go back, would you choose differently? If you are in your sunset years, are you disgruntled, satisfied, or fulfilled by the course your life has taken?

For some 50 years, we listened to one particular group answer those questions: people who were in Grade 12 in Ontario in 1973. Through surveys and face-to-face interviews, they told their stories, shared their joys, and disclosed their regrets. Their lives evolved during an economically turbulent, technologically revolutionary, and socially transformative time. Their pathways were products of social structures – class, gender, race, the economy – over which they had no control, and individual choices – partners, career selections, retirement strategies – through which they asserted personal agency. Their individual and collective experiences from the 1970s to the 2020s reflect a half-century of Canadian (but not just Canadian) social history.

From the perspective of their mid-60s, when we last interviewed them, most participants expressed satisfaction with their lives. More than anything, they had continued to cherish the treasured moments of family life. This, more than their work, their education, their travels, and their accomplishments, provided the most enduring personal rewards.

But a rich family life did not mean that their pathways were easy or free of disappointment. Many had complicated, often challenging lives that unfolded in non-linear ways. Those who were despairing or destitute were not part of our study – they would have been unwilling or unable to answer survey questions or participate in interviews. But among those with whom we did engage, regrets were openly considered, even if addressed in qualified, nuanced ways. In their mature years, many participants reinterpreted the questionable choices they made in their youth, often softening earlier self-criticism and finding meaning in the paths they ended up following.

Raised by poor immigrant parents, Jack was spurred on by family and teachers to pursue his education. He studied engineering before switching to law, a field he found uninspiring, only to pivot and become a remarkably successful entrepreneur. Despite the happy ending, and all the paths he took, he still reflects on those he didn't take: "You're always going to regret the opportunities you don't take, but you will rarely regret the ones you do, because with the ones you do, at least you know the way it turned out. So, I've had many other opportunities I did not take that I wish I had, but in the scheme of things, I did pretty well."

Sophia, a librarian, pushed back against the idea of dwelling on regrets at all. She admitted that, "If I did do something, I probably would have got my teaching degree," but immediately weighed that against what would have been lost. "I don't think I would have picked that over getting a master's in library science. I would have had less time with my kids if I had a career like that. I liked the fact that my husband had a big career, and I had some work, but I could be at home and manage the house." Her calculation reflected the gendered realities of her generation, but it also showed how regret was often braided together with values – here, the value placed on family and domestic stability.

Some framed their lives as a balance between curiosity about alternative paths not taken and acceptance of the ones they chose. James, who took a tool-and-die apprenticeship and worked for a large automobile manufacturer, said he was happy with how his life turned out, but did wonder sometimes how else it could have gone: “I’d often thought that I would have liked to have gone to university and done something different. I sometimes wonder whether, if I’d taken courses to become a doctor or a lawyer, that would have worked out for me. I was never that sort of person. But the way I see doctors and lawyers today – especially lawyers – it’s like wow, I wouldn’t mind some of that.”

Opinion: What it really means to enter old age

Joseph, who worked in various computer-related jobs before becoming a real estate broker, struck a similarly measured note: “I’m not disappointed. On various occasions, I might have been better off pursuing another area of interest. I thought of potentially going into law, but we can’t look back and regret that decision. I’ve no complaints.”

For some, the timing of education was the main source of second-guessing. Olivia, who went to school later in life to earn her accounting designation, told us: “I think if I really had one regret, it would be that I should have gone back to school before I did to get my accounting designation instead of working for a while and waiting until I was 40 to go back to school. And I guess, one regret was that my mother passed away before I got my CGA – she had always been quite a big supporter of me going back to school. So that was hard – on graduation day, not to have her there.”

Some simply refused to lament the past, however challenging it had been. Robert, who had Graves’ disease as a child and worked in a series of diverse jobs – from making tin cans to managing a golf course’s turf to managing parks and cemeteries – focused on the positive. “I was just so fortunate that I had some opportunities at the right time. And sometimes, if you fail forward, failing isn’t so bad. And if you learn from those failures, you’re better for it at the end of the day. So, I don’t beat myself up too much over some of my past failures … No, I can’t really say I’ve got any regrets.”

Like Robert, some Class of ’73 members bore crushing health burdens, their own or those of loved ones. Willow’s son was gravely injured in a factory before age 20 and has lived as a paraplegic ever since. She worked when she could, but his care became her central duty. Marked by tragedy yet refusing self-pity, she embodied quiet resilience, self-sacrifice, and steadfast devotion. “You just keep going,” she told us. “You do what needs to be done, and you try to find small joys where you can.”

What of those who hoped to have had children, but didn’t? Charlotte, an actor, acknowledged that this was a source of regret. “But simultaneously, I don’t know if I would have been such a great mom … I don’t know if I’d have the effort to put into it. I mean that’s why we didn’t do it when we were in our 20s – because we were concentrating on our different careers.”

Jack also regretted not having children, noting the barriers that existed for aspiring gay parents when he was younger. “Now, gay people can do it, through IVF, etc.” But he was

not sure that people in their 60s should follow this course. “It’s not the best time to be there as a dad because you could get ill when you get older and are not as active. That is a regret, but it’s a regret I didn’t really have much control over.”

Opinion: I would rather regret not having children than regret having them

Nor were he and others who encountered bigotry and discrimination (Jack contended with homophobic attitudes in business) able to control such hostility. While growing up, Ella, the daughter of Japanese-Canadian parents, learned little about her family’s arduous past, which included forced internment during the Second World War. She recalled instances of schoolyard racism in her childhood. But she did not dwell on the pain of these regrettable experiences for herself and her family, even as she developed a deeper interest in her heritage. In retirement, she began studying Japanese and spent increasing time at a Japanese cultural centre. She pursued new interests and looked back on her life with satisfaction.

While our work was informed by sociological and historical approaches, our findings were consistent with psychologists’ understanding of how people construct and reconstruct their pasts. One theory contends that young people, oriented to the future, are inclined to take risks that might lead to regret, while older people seek “emotional regulation” by prioritizing the positive and strengthening social connections. Cognitive dissonance allows us to turn past hardships into life learning narratives that shape our identities as we age. And, according to psychologist William Damon, through “life review” (formally or informally conducted), we may arrive at “an acceptance of the events and choices that have shaped our lives, reflecting gratitude for the life we’ve been given rather than self-doubt and regret.”

What lessons might current youth draw from these baby boomer experiences and memories? Your own lives will unfold in a rapidly changing social and economic landscape that requires resilience and adaptation. The Class of ’73 navigated the invention of the internet and digital technology; you will face the relentless spread of artificial intelligence and a more unpredictable world of work. Equip yourselves with advanced education and the commitment to continuous learning beyond formal institutions. Allow yourselves to make mistakes and “fail forward.” Work will, of course, matter immensely, but nurture strong personal relationships – these, in the end, will matter more.

Regrets? You’ll have a few. They’ll likely stem from moments that unsettle rather than define you – but they will also become stories future generations will be keen to hear.