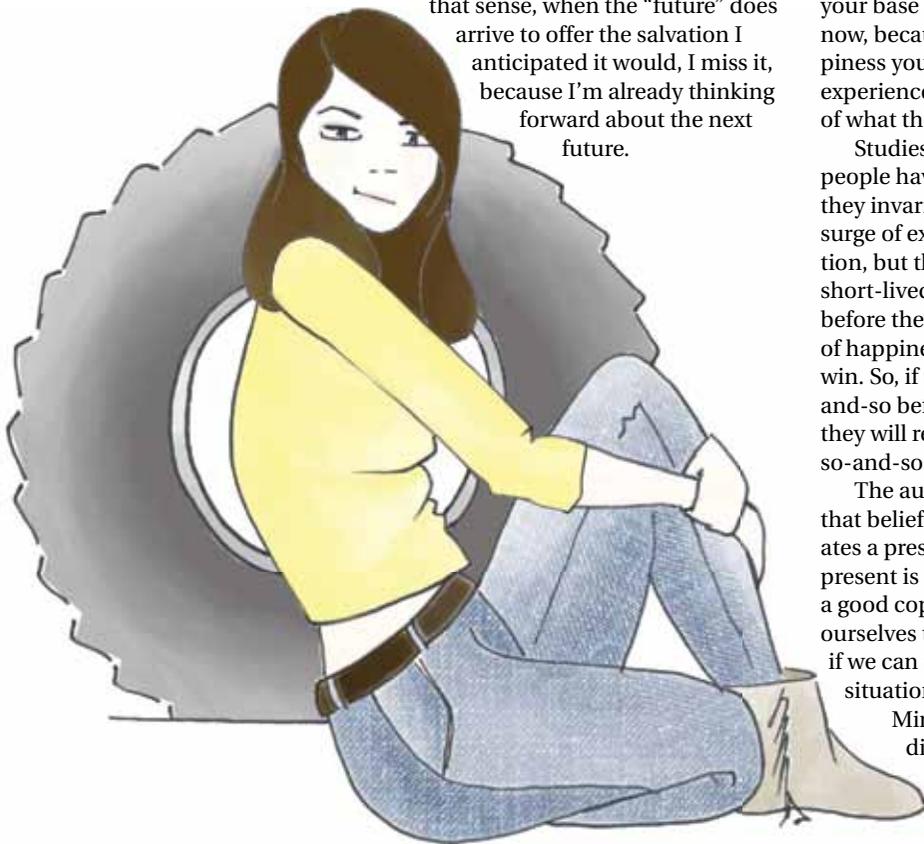


BACK *to the* FUTURE

By accepting the present, we are more likely to enjoy our future, writes **Fiona Hoban**



If you're anything like me, you may often look to the future for salvation: next week the workload will ease; next month the weather will be better; next year the house will be finished etc. Of course, what I forget (even though I teach this stuff!) is that when the workload eases and when the weather picks up and when the house is finished, my mind will be off again with another future-based list. In that sense, when the "future" does arrive to offer the salvation I anticipated it would, I miss it, because I'm already thinking forward about the next future.



We often treat the present moment as nothing more than a means to an end – get through this in order to get to that. In fact, we often treat the present moment as if it's an obstacle to our future happiness. But here's the thing: if you want to know what the future will hold, tune in to your base level of happiness right now, because whatever level of happiness you find, that is what you will experience in the future, regardless of what the future actually brings.

Studies have shown that when people have a big win in the lotto, they invariably experience a massive surge of excitement and celebration, but these feelings are relatively short-lived. It's only a matter of time before they return to the base level of happiness they had before their win. So, if they were a miserable so-and-so before their win, chances are they will return to being a miserable so-and-so shortly after their win.

The author Eckhart Tolle says that belief in a future heaven creates a present hell. But what if the present is like a living hell? Is it not a good coping strategy to remind ourselves that things will be better if we can get through our current situation?

Mindfulness has a slightly different take on this. It says that most of our "hell" is caused not by what

is happening right now, but by our non-acceptance of it. The mindfulness argument goes like this: there is nothing you can do about the fact that at this moment this is what is happening (eg, a flat tyre in the pouring rain) and this is how you feel (frustrated). Now, instead of wanting this moment to be different from the way it is, which adds more pain to the pain that is already there, is it possible for you to completely accept that this is what you feel, right now, towards the situation that is happening, right now?

If we're honest, at least half of our frustration about getting a flat tyre in the pouring rain is caused by our inability to accept not only the flat tyre, but the resulting frustration as well. In some way we're saying *no* to something that is already happening. Which, to be fair, is a bit daft.

When I can accept that I am feeling frustrated and do not try to get rid of the frustration, something really strange happens: the frustration eases. It doesn't mean I'm enjoying having a flat tyre or that I wouldn't prefer not to have a flat tyre. It simply means that I don't resist life as it unfolds. I don't make an enemy of a situation; I don't plough through this to get to that.

Try for yourself. The next time life throws you a curve ball, bring your awareness to whatever it is you're feeling. Don't judge the feeling, don't judge yourself for having the feeling – try, if you can, to fully accept that that is the feeling towards that situation. I can guarantee you that the feeling will subside. This in itself makes a huge difference to whatever the situation is. Acceptance of what is changes what is.

REGRETS

I remember working with a client once who told me that he spent at least 80 hours a week working, but because he enjoyed it so much, it wasn't really like work at all. I asked him if his family and friends shared this perspective. What was it like for them to have a husband/father/friend that worked those hours? Did they enjoy it as much as he did? He said he never thought of it like that before (he probably didn't have the time!). He went on to say that now was not the time to be cutting back on his hours, although he certainly planned to do so in the future. Just not now.

We all do it though, don't we? We promise ourselves we'll get to it – not now, but some time in the future. There's more salvation in the future!

There's been quite a bit of media coverage about a book recently published called *The Top Five Regrets Of The Dying*. It's written by an Australian lady who worked in palliative care for a number of years. When she questioned her clients about any regrets they had or anything they would do differently, common themes surfaced again and again.

Working too hard was a common regret. In fact, she

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says that every male client deeply regretted the amount of time they spent working. Women also shared this regret, but because they came from a different generation, many had not been breadwinners. Either way, when people reflected on their lives, it was apparent that working excessively, regardless of how enjoyable it was, was something that caused regret.

I think we all need to remember that the quality of our future depends on the quality of our now. Because if we are in the habit of saying no to whatever is now, or are so engrossed in work that we don't have time for the now, be in no doubt, when the future arrives, chances are we'll say no to that also. Why? Because our mind will be busy fixing its attention to some next future, convincing us that what is happening now is nothing more than something to get through in order to reach happiness in that future.

Paulo Coelho, in his book *Like The River Flowing*, sums it up when he says:

“We are in such a hurry to grow up, and then we long for our lost childhood. We make ourselves ill earning money, and then spend all our money on getting well again. We think so much about the future that we neglect the present, and thus experience neither the present nor the future. We live as if we were never going to die, and die as if we had never lived.” ❀

ABOUT

Fiona Hoban is as a counsellor in Westport, Co Mayo, and lectures with the National Counselling and Psychotherapy Institute of Ireland (NCPII). See www.fionahoban.ie