

# Shaken awake

When life gives you lemons, writes VICTOR MACGILL, it pays to have a recipe for lemonade on hand.

**W**e live in Nelson. A few months ago, my partner and I went out on a Sunday afternoon and came back to find our house had been red-stickered. In an instant, our regular routines ground to a halt. Our plans for the future, which we previously measured in years, immediately shrank to days. We were able to make temporary arrangements, but anything after Christmas is a total void.

Despite this fear and insecurity, a part of me felt more alive, shaken out of my humdrum life. I had to appreciate the present, because that was all there was. The gaping void I spent so much time ignoring while I brushed my teeth, watched TV and ate my meals could not be ignored. I came closer to seeing the real me; not the confident, intelligent and adaptable person I like to see myself as, but vulnerable and helpless when faced with huge forces over which I have no control.

We are brought up to see life as a journey that gets better and better. We grow stronger. More capable and intelligent. We learn to take control of our lives and achieve. We find purpose and a place of belonging in our family and community. Sooner or later, it becomes apparent that this endless search for success is an impossible dream. When my wife died around 20 years ago, my biggest lesson was that everyone dies with things not done. There will always be the dream that never happened. There will always be the quirk of fate, the job we did not get, the relationship that never happened, the genius that was not recognised. We all necessarily fail to reach our full potential.

That is not to say we should stop trying to achieve. Not by any means. That is how we have developed our civilisation, but we need to remain mindful that worldly success cannot be the end

goal. If we measure ourselves by our achievements, we will always fall short, so finding our sense of peace must include accepting and acknowledging the darker parts of ourselves.

This becomes particularly poignant as I reach my late 60s and more of my life is behind me and less is in front. My past is full of lost opportunities that might have unfolded differently. Zen Buddhist teacher Shunryu Suzuki Roshi said, "Life is like stepping onto a boat which is about to sail out to sea and sink." Everything we start will end. Everything we gain will be lost. Pain and suffering are caused by clinging to the boat as it sinks.



Natural disasters, such as the flooding in Nelson this winter, are reminders that many aspects of our lives are far beyond our control.

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can we find the peace that Albert Camus talks about when he writes, "In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger – something better, pushing right back."

It is only when I am comfortable with my own imperfections and my own incompleteness, and the world's imperfections and incompleteness, that I will one day allow myself to go gently into that good night. ■

Victor MacGill is the author of *When the Dragon Stirs* and *Gonna Lay Down My Sword and Shield*.

**M**y life so far has been full of clinging desperately to what seemed important, or letting go of that which should have been held. I need to accept myself as I am, with all my faults and errors.

If I were to die tomorrow, the epitaph on my grave would read: "Life is crap, and that's OK." I do have some control over my life, and what control I have I should exercise. But in the end, the more I pretend that I can be in control and make life do what I want, the more I will end up frustrated.

By facing the crap and going right through, you will come out the other side into something new and freeing. Only then

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