

On nostalgia, purpose and progress

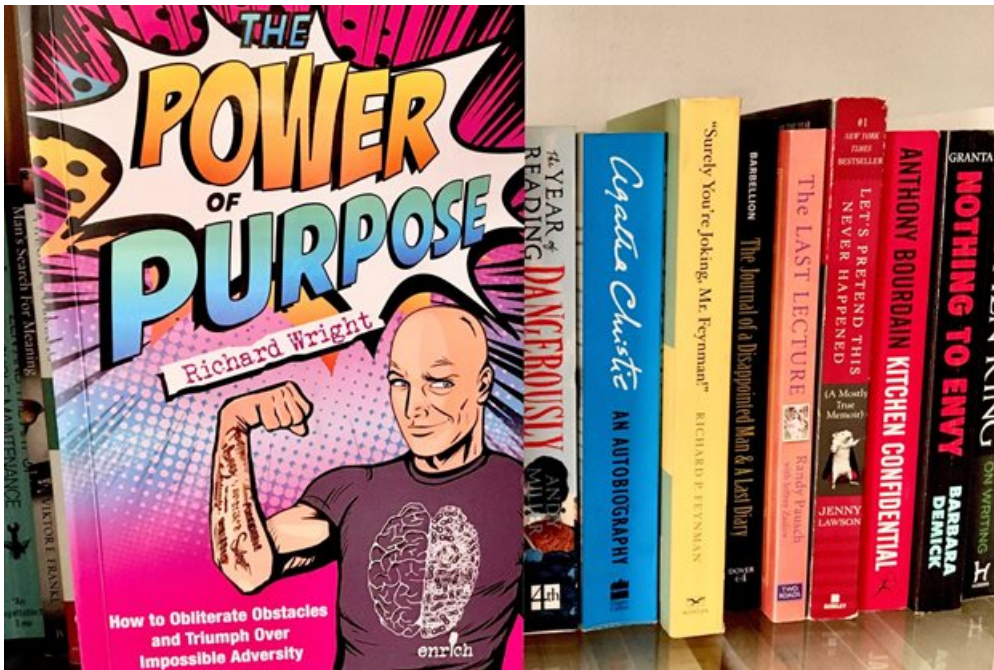
By [Bronwyn Williams](#)

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Bronwyn Williams says we have two choices, between the dangerous and prevalent nostalgia, abandoning ourselves to the present or progressing towards the future with purpose...

It's hard to look ahead when we are trying to survive the present. It's hard to imagine enjoying standing outside in the refreshing summer rain when we are in the middle of cold, dry winter. It's hard to think about what the world could - and more importantly should - be like when we eventually emerge from the all-encompassing cocoon that has enveloped the world in 2020.

However, if we want to have a say in what that new world will be like, we need to have an idea of what it is that we actually want.



The plague of nostalgia

In my work, as a trend analyst and futurist, I have become increasingly aware of the dangers and prevalence of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a term coined by the science fiction writer William Gibson. Nostalgia is similar to nostalgia, only while nostalgia is a longing for the distant and disappearing past, nostalgia is an abandonment to the present. Nostalgia sets in when we start to believe that this, the here and now, is as good as it gets. Nostalgia is dangerous in that it is essentially nihilist. If you believe that tomorrow will be no better, or worse, worse than today, there is no point in planning for the future, and no point in living for anything other than short-term amusement.

As such, societies plagued with nostalgia turn to escapism - be that through substance abuse, doomscrolling on social media, or virtual reality - rather than on conscious future plans for progress. Nostalgia can affect individuals who lose faith in their own futures; businesses who seek to extract short-term value rather than investing in long-term returns, and nation states that perpetually steal from the future to placate the needs and demands of the present population.

In other words, nostalgia can be seen to set in when we lose our purpose; that is, when we no longer have anything worth progressing towards.

The power of purpose

I had these ideas in mind as I re-read the newly-released *The Power of Purpose: How to Obliterate Obstacles and Triumph Over Impossible Adversity* by Richard Wright this week. (I had the privilege of reviewing the manuscript when it was still in its first-draft format, but this was my first look at the finished product). In the book, Richard shares his (very personal) story of how he managed to find a purpose to get up and work towards every morning, even as he was (successfully, spoiler alert) battling stage for brain cancer. In Richard's case, the primary purpose that got him to push past the nostalgia and the nostalgia and keep progressing towards an uncertain future was his family (he has two young daughters). More symbolically though, Richard also found a tangible purpose to push towards, by pursuing a series of gruelling Iron Man races, and giving new meaning to the metaphor of getting back onto the proverbial bike, no matter what life throws at you. And the bike is a poignant metaphor indeed; to ride a bike you have to keep moving forward, you cannot stay still (or you'll fall over).

And that is really the point. We have two choices: we can get stuck in today, in the endless present and end up in a future that we did not plan, participate in or choose; or we can look to the future with purpose and arrive there on our own terms. The choice is ours. Nostalgia or purpose? Which do you choose?

ABOUT BRONWYN WILLIAMS

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