



LEGACY LAW

Protecting the assets in your family tree

## **Legacy Law Book Club – “A Therapeutic Journey”**

**by Alain de Botton from the School of Life**

I read this over the 2024 Christmas break. I enjoyed his “Consolations of Philosophy” back in 2000 and observed his career appear to blossom over the following decades, especially after he set up The School of Life <https://www.theschooloflife.com/>.

It was initially a surprise to me that he was now writing about being unwell and imagining he has let himself and everyone down (from the back cover which I read in the shop). I imagined that if he had my mother, she would be crowing about his very public successes and pasting press reviews into a very large journal. It would be a Journal of Success, very different journalling to the Journal of Worry we are encouraged elsewhere to keep.

Then, I realised I do not know the first thing about the man or his life and was assuming that public profile = happy life. One second later, I realised that I do not really believe that but was allowing myself follow the herd, just like the teenagers I mock for following influencers. Oh dear!

So, my ego dented, assumptions shelved and attitude adjusted to “let’s learn something”, I dove into the book.

In the spirit of honesty, I was a little flat after a hectic Christmas seemingly always in the company of family and friends. I was hoping for more consolations from the man that wrote the book on them.

Firstly, great news, there are pictures – great and important pictures.

Secondly, the writing is good and, his otherwise intimidating vocabulary aside, the tone is that of a sensitive but supportive friend working hard to be honest and clear.

I am not usually one for doing exercises that are directed from the text but I found myself following the instructions to close my eyes and asking myself questions like “what am I really worried about right now?” and “what could I tell myself to make this less bad?” So, basic ideas but steps I usually skate over leaving unresolved things to fester like dried foods in the holiday home I am lucky enough to be staying in.

He points out that if we use our minds to try to make sense of emotions we do not really understand, we are fooling ourselves. We should sit with our feelings a while and let them have their way with us in private so that they can go in the bin with the crackers with last year’s BB date who are happily soft and harmless, if a bit embarrassing. This resonated with me because an enneagram test I did (ask me if you want to know more) suggested that my desire to avoid pain could lead me to making light of disappointments and missing their learnings to me about the world and myself. Oops, now I get it, I think.

I learned from my family systems course to be curious about my own family and less accepting of agreed family history. A bit like the polarising views we get on our phones all day long. One line is “get the saints out of heaven and the sinners out of hell”. De Botton even finds solace in how Richard Nixon seemed to enjoy time with his family after his most public of disgraces. Consolation is in the strangest of places.

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We should be more therapeutic in our attitude to people's blind spots and eccentricities and consider them as being as sensitive or fragile as us but about slightly different things (say how sheets are folded in the laundry of a holiday house). Perhaps we can use phrases like "I wonder if ...." to get people to see things differently too. Worth a try and cheaper and less time consuming than real therapy!

De Botton gently points out we have not evolved as fast as other creatures to our very recently technologically changed world. The world will tell us that we are not as important as the people we trusted told us we were. There will be many reversals and disappointments along the way. Our failures or low points (a poor google review by someone anonymous, bad hair, bad clothes, an angry remark) on the journey will now be quickly known worldwide (if we have a public profile).

I was pleased to learn about and tell our son (who is hating studying Shakespeare) that the Bard had a nemesis (Robert Greene) who was trying to publicly humiliate him early in his career and Sonnet 29 revealed, in around 1592, that everyone has anxiety and one cure is to seek out those few who are on your side.

While our shame can be seen by 8 billion people, the community we need to survive and thrive is probably very small, "the few". This does not mean we are misanthropic or lonely but rather picky. We need to find our people, our real community as opposed to "friends" we don't like. In my book "Be A Better Ancestor", I directed the book to outliers and credited the phrase "the few" to Winston Churchill – De Botton tells me he nicked the phrase from Stendahl. Who can you trust?!

He zooms in but more often out to give us perspective on our minor lives. He quotes Goya, Stendahl, Voltaire and others. He gives us their "greatest hits" without making us feel more stupid for not having read them. Hopefully this book review is consistent with that!

In a world where many people are outraged, he points out that the angry ones are outnumbered by those who lose their voice. We can choose to join the mob or not. We can choose to get in the habit of regularly expressing small anger at things rather than bottling it up. We can be less worried about causing offence like Victor Hugo.

We can choose to be aristocrats of spirit even if we do not own castles or cravats. I used to mock eccentric British Lords until I learned that they do not care a jot about what people think of them. After the French Revolution, Jules Barbey d'Aureville lost his lands but remained the self-proclaimed landlord of his mental refinement. With a name like that, you would have to own something substantial. Maybe I should put "de" in front of my surname or change my middle name from "Frederick" to "Fauntleroy".

To my shame, my eyes glaze over when presented with anything scientific. Yet, here I was reading about space and jumping onto NASA websites to find new (for me) awe at the universe- <https://epic.gsfc.nasa.gov/enhanced>. He even uses science to cure the fear of public speaking – the most distant known galaxy is 32 billion light years from the podium at which sweat so our meaninglessness is scientifically correct. We were right to feel a bit melancholic. Rather than picture the audience naked, picture them as very very small and insignificant! It is strangely life-affirming to all be so small and insignificant.

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There are gems on most pages. He points out the advantages of dancing badly and not recognising any of the artists playing at festivals. In short, instead of feeling out of date, we should celebrate our “late style” (you know like Bach, Matisse and Chekhov!) and be more direct and intense in making our mark. Watch out son, I can feel a cravat coming on as well as a top hat.



De Botton tells us that our pain is a teacher and can lead us to being more understanding, independent thinking, sensitive and smarter humans.

I already feel a bit better and can see the embarrassment I happily cause our son as being a gift!

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