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People Q&A

Margaret Heffernan: ‘I would take potential hires to lunch to see how they treat people serving them’

The bestselling author, business mentor and professor on what makes her ‘seriously angry’, her return to playing piano, and how she beats writer’s block



Margaret Heffernan: ‘I’m happy quite a lot ... I don’t do regret a lot’

 **Tony Clayton-Lea**
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How agreeable are you?

It depends on the topic and the time of day. I’m a great deal more agreeable in the morning than in the evening. I’m often thought to be quite scratchy because I’m permanently dissatisfied with received wisdom and the status quo, so I tend to ask a lot of questions and challenge basic assumptions.

What is your middle name and what do you think of it?

My middle name is Anne. I think nothing of it. I’ve never used it, and I don’t know if I was named after somebody. Before I got married, my maiden name was Windham, and I liked the fact that my initials were MAW, which is an Old English word for a stomach. I thought that was quite funny.

Where is your favourite place in Ireland?

I’m very fond of Inch Beach, [Kerry](#), which I closely identify with my second husband, whose parents I knew before I met him. After my first husband died, they were fabulous neighbours. We became great friends, and one year, they went on holiday to [Dingle](#) and asked if I would like to join them. I did, and that’s where I got to know the man who would subsequently become my second husband.

Describe yourself in three words.

Sceptical, unconventional, inconsistent.

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When did you last get angry?

In terms of things I get seriously angry about, the last time was when I went to a very posh business dinner, where we were being served very nice food by very nice people. However, none of the guests at my table thanked their servers, and this always makes me incandescent with rage. Here we are, very privileged people in a very swanky venue being waited on, and everybody thinks they’re too important to say ‘thank you’. Whenever I was considering hiring someone for an important job in one of my companies, I would often take them to lunch to see how they treated people serving them. It was a test, and if they didn’t say ‘thank you’ to the wait staff, they didn’t get the job. How people treat people and, in particular, how very privileged people treat the people on whom the ease of their lives depends – I care about this probably much more than anybody would say is rational.

What have you lost that you would like to have back?

I would love to have back my capacity to play the piano. I have recently returned to it, and it is so difficult. All the fluency I had in playing is really clunky, and my co-ordination isn’t what it used to be. But I wish I could go back and just play the pieces I used to play – I adore Chopin – never mind learning new ones. I haven’t played in 20 years, but what drove me back was recently hearing Farewell to Stromness, a piece of beautiful, simple music by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. It’s a lot more complicated than it sounds, of course, but if I practice it every day ...

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What is your strongest childhood memory?

I was born in [Texas](#), and my best childhood memory is waking up really early when everybody was asleep and going outside when the day was still cool. Behind our house was a gardenia bush, and the flowers would be opening. Gardenias have the most incredible fragrance, and to this day I can remember the magical combination of stillness, everybody in the house still asleep, the coolness of the morning, and the scent.

Where do you come in your family’s birth order and has this defined you?

I am the youngest. I have only one sibling, a sister, and I think it has defined me in some ways. It was a great piece of luck for me not to be the firstborn, because I could watch how my parents dealt with my sister, much of which I didn’t like very much. It also meant that I had the great fortune of an older sister who was utterly inspirational. She introduced me to Bach, to modern art, she drew beautifully, and got me really interested in clothes. I was super happy being the younger sister.

What do you expect to happen when you die?

Nothing. When I die, the problem is not going to be my problem because I’ll be gone. What worries me is the sorrow it will cause my family and the notion of my children being upset. That said, my idea of eternity is that we pass trace elements of people from one generation to another. I think of very close friends, particular people, my parents, as a little bit like ghosts in the sense that they feel very present to me, and I’m very grateful that they’re still with me.

When were you happiest?

I’m happy quite a lot. One particularly happy memory, an extremely intense one, was immediately following the birth of my daughter, my second child. When my first child, my son, was born, it was an excruciatingly difficult birth, and quite dangerous, so I didn’t feel anything except grateful we were both alive. When my daughter was born, it was a very safe birth. I felt fine, she was fine, and I felt incredibly happy, grateful and obviously relieved. I had a profound sense that I had a family I loved beyond anything I’d ever imagined. Until I was 30, I was absolutely determined that I didn’t want children. My first husband died before we had any, and suddenly, here I was with a second husband whom I loved and two healthy children whom I loved. That happiness was absolute and pure.

Which actor would play you in a biopic about your life?

The other day, my son suggested [Tilda Swinton](#). And I thought, wow, that’s the greatest compliment I think I’ve ever had, so I will definitely settle for her.

What’s your biggest career/personal regret?

I don’t do regret a lot. When I first went to university, I really wanted to be a theatre director, but I just didn’t have the confidence. All the other jobs I’ve done have been fantastic and deeply rewarding. I’m still striving, however, to write books that are more creative than the ones that came before.

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Have you any psychological quirks?

If I’m writing, when I’m stuck, I may sit for a long time being stuck, but I know that if I get up and go for a bike ride, within a matter of minutes, I will either become unstuck or do something else and come back to it later. The stupid thing is that I didn’t do it earlier – I’ll sit there doing nothing for an hour and then I’ll think, oh, for God’s sake, Margaret, just get on your bike. This has been true for years, so I should know by now.

– In conversation with Tony Clayton-Lea