

The Good Ancestor

Ross Welcome to Renegade, Inc. In a world of short-termism and consumption, reputation and legacies are often defined by private number plates, flashy watches and overpriced real estate. But these small material trappings rarely satisfy a deeper yearning. So as we career, often unhappily, through the 21st century, we ask, what are we missing?

Ross Joining me to discuss how to be a good ancestor, is the public philosopher, Roman Krznaric. Roman, welcome. Thank you very much for joining us.

Roman Krznaric It's a pleasure.

Ross Famously, Martin Luther said that if the world was going to end, the first thing he'd do is plant a tree tomorrow. And really, in a sense, that theme or that thinking, gets a little bit toward the good ancestor. So how to think long term in a short-term world? Why sit down and write that book now?

Roman Krznaric I think that we all know that we live in an age of pathological short-termism that politicians can't see beyond the next election or even the latest tweet. market spike, then crash in speculative bubbles. Businesses can't see past the quarterly report. Nations sit around international conference tables, bickering away while the planet burns and species disappear. And, hey, as individuals, we're all pressing the buy now button, answering the latest text message, buying fast food. And I think that we recognise the need for more long-term thinking. We need it for public policy to plan for the next pandemic, which is on the horizon, to deal with the climate crisis, to deal with tech threats like from a controlled lethal autonomous weapons or from synthetic biology. Yet we don't really know what long-term thinking is. We don't talk a lot about it. We don't try and pull it apart. So I think it's one of these things where I feel there's like a conceptual emergency. We know we need it. We don't know what it is. What is it?

Ross Right. And what is it? Because we are paradoxical human beings. You know, we are able to do both things. So if you were to define it, how do you define being a good ancestor?

Roman Krznaric Well, that question of how to be a good ancestor comes from Jonas Salk, who was a famous immunologist who discovered the polio vaccine in the 1950s. He said, well, if you're going to be a good ancestor, you're gonna be remembered well by future generations. First thing you need to do is expand your time horizons.

Ross Right.

Roman Krznaric So we are focused on seconds, minutes and hours where we need to expand our time horizons to decades, centuries, millennia. But how long really is long term? Well, in this book, The Good Ancestor, as a rule of thumb, I say long term is 100 years or more, at least.

Ross Wow! But you're taking on a massive battle aren't you? You've got massive short termism, whether it's in business, whether it's culturally or whatever else and you're taking the fight. You're saying, actually, no, we've got to start thinking 100 years?

Roman Krznaric A hundred years is nothing in geological time.

Ross Yeah, but when you've got a smart phone, I mean you know.

Roman Krznaric When you've got a smart phone or when you're a government minister thinking about whether you're going to survive past the next election. But I like 100 years because it's the length of a long human lifetime. That means it's taking us thinking beyond our own mortality, the consequences of our actions when we're gone. And that's what we need to do, because we know that the carbon that we're pumping into the atmosphere is going to be around for generations or more. And we know that lots of cultures have this kind of long term vision. In Native American culture, the Iroquois have an idea of seventh generation thinking, well, that's 150, maybe 200 years. And just think there are long term thinking projects around which are really inspiring - the Svalbar seed vault in the Arctic Circle, which is protecting the world's plant biodiversity. They've collected over a million seeds from 6000 species, and it's designed to last for a thousand years. It's in an indestructible rock bunker. So human beings can do this kind of long-term thinking. It's just we're not very good at it. We don't focus on it.

Ross When it comes down to the individual, are you implicit in this book calling out the cult of being busy - the cult of busy-ness? Because it seems to me that every time you ask anybody anything, they say, how are you?, you say busy, busy, you know, and they're jumping onto the next thing, running, hurtling to the next thing. Are you at the individual level saying actually, is this the right way to be going about things?

Roman Krznaric Well, I think the curious thing about individuals is we have this constant tug of war going on in our times between the short-term drivers in our brain, which make us worry about meeting the next deadline and looking at our phone, and the long term drivers. So on the one hand, we might be thinking about parting today, but also saving for our pensions for tomorrow or upgrading to the latest iPhone or planting a seed in the ground for posterity. The way I think about this issue that you raise is that we've got these two parts of our brain, which I have in my pocket, actually.

Ross Go on.

Roman Krznaric One part of it is called the marshmallow brain. I call it the marshmallow brain. And that's the part of your neuro anatomy, which is focused on instant gratification and short term rewards. And it's named after the famous 1960s marshmallow psychology test, which you probably know about where a marshmallow was put on a table in front of kids. And if they resisted eating the marshmallow for 15 minutes, they're rewarded with a second marshmallow. But lo and behold, most of them snatched them away. But that is only part of who we are because we also have an acorn brain.

Ross Right.

Roman Krznaric This is the long term thinking part of our brain, which is up here in the frontal lobe, particularly a bit called the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. That's the bit which enables us to think and plan for the long-term. That's what's enabled the building of medieval cathedrals and the Great Wall of China and the space program's voyaging to the stars. And other animals have an ability to plan for the long-term, like a chimpanzee might take a stick from a tree, strip off the leaves and make a tool to stick into a termite hole. But they'll never make a dozen of these tools and stick them aside for next week. But that's what human beings do because we are brilliant at long term thinking.

Ross So the human being long and short-term. But what you're saying is these things aren't mutually exclusive. However, you've got to engage both?

Roman Krznaric We've got to engage both. And remember, we have this amazing ability to become part time residents of the future. We need to build our political institutions and economic systems around a capacity for long- term thinking.

Ross What's a part time resident of the future?

Roman Krznaric That's exactly those times where we are thinking long-term, where just think, one moment you can literally be worrying about what you're going to have for lunch and the next moment be thinking about whether you're saving enough for your pension, right? That is a capacity to be experts of the temporal pirouette, you know, this ability to just scan across the time horizons that humans can do.

Ross Using the acorn as an icon on this book is fitting insofar as you use forests a lot and you talk a lot about forestry and to demonstrate, you use them really as a metaphor to demonstrate long term thinking. And there's one bit of the book where you talk about the Japanese and benign dictatorship. When you talk about the political process, when we look at parliament today in the UK and across the world, you know, really nothing gets done. And with this representative or so-called representative democracy that we have, are you calling for a load of benign dictators to come in or philosopher kings - you might be one of them - to come in and say, you know what, we've got this. Don't worry. This is what we should be doing?

Roman Krznaric I think that question whether we need benign dictators is an absolutely key one. I am not one who holds that position. In fact, the very opposite.

Ross Right.

Roman Krznaric A lot of people - in fact, a growing number of people - are calling for, for example, a kind of eco authoritarianism. The only way we can deal with the long term challenges of our time, the climate crisis or dealing with A.I. and other things, is if we have these enlightened despots who can get beyond all these squabbling democratic politicians. And basically what people are saying, is we need to become more like China. Or need to become more like Singapore - be willing to trade off democratic and civil rights for governments which seem to have capacity for long term planning.

Ross Do you think that?

Roman Krznaric Well, I did. You know, I used to think, well, maybe they've got something in it. Maybe we should be more like China. Look at someone like China with their investment in renewables and investment in technology. Amazing. But so I decided to look at the empirical evidence. And what I've done in this book is I've worked with a statistician called Jamie McQuilken, and we've created an index called the Intergenerational Solidarity Index, which rates 122 countries on their long-term policy performance in environmental areas and investment in health and education economic variables. And we plotted that against how democratic countries are. Are they democracies or autocracies or somewhere in between? And as political scientists have developed very good measures of that. And what do you find? You find that the more democratic a country is, the more likely they are to be good at long-term public policy.

Ross Right.

Roman Krznaric And autocracies, dictatorships of various hues, are more likely to be bad at long-term thinking. So countries like China and Singapore are kind of outliers because you've got all those other countries like Saudi Arabia and other places where, you know, they're not drawing on democratic means and they're not getting the long term policy results. Actually, I think, I hope in this book I buried that argument that we need benign dictators. But this doesn't mean that democracies can sit back and relax. Every democratic government could be doing better. Even the ones that do very well in this index, like France or Switzerland and so on, countries like the UK do really badly - becomes 45th, the U.S., 62nd - because they are so short-termist in a lot of their environmental and other policies.

Ross A glaring omission from the Intergenerational Solidarity Index is Norway. And you talk a bit in the book about Norway, but they don't feature in this. And ordinarily, you look at the Nordics and they're always top three of everything - education, happiness, well-being and all the rest of it. Why haven't they arrived in this - in the top 10 even - of the Intergenerational Solidarity?

Roman Krznaric Well, Norway is right down the rankings, not even in the top 25. Why? Because they are international drug dealers.

Ross What? Explain that.

Roman Krznaric By drug dealers, I mean, they are dealing in the export of oil and gas.

Ross Clarification. Perfect.

Roman Krznaric So the index I've created, the Intergenerational Solidarity Index, punishes governments for being fossil fuel exporters. It also rewards them for having renewable energy use, domestically. And Norway does really well on that because they got a lot of hydroelectric power. But they really fall down because of their fossil fuel export economy. And in many ways, Norway is a really inspiring, long-term thinking country. They've got the Svalbar global seed vault. They've got their sovereign wealth fund worth over a trillion dollars, more than two hundred thousand dollars per person in Norway, which is earmarked to be invested for future generations. But they're getting that money from creating problems for future generations, both in Norway and outside Norway through fossil fuel exports.

Ross And when you bring this back to the individual, because we can talk about the nation state all day long and people listen to it again and go yeah but why does it apply to me? And another thing that you touch on and you talk about is the man who planted trees in the book. And again, we're back to forests. And in this book, which is a wonderful little book, there's a theme that comes through this book which is dedicating yourself to a cause greater than yourself. You talk about Viktor Frankl in your book. And he was big on this, really. When you relate this back to the human being at the individual level, being a good ancestor, is it good for your well-being?

Roman Krznaric Absolutely it's good for your well-being. Why? Because we are relational creatures. And anybody who has a child or a nephew or niece or there's a young person in their life they care about, they can sit and do a simple, imaginative thought experiment. If you just imagine - I've got an 11 year old daughter - if I imagine her when she's 90 years old, as I sometimes do, I imagine her at her 90th birthday party surrounded by family and friends and her community. And I imagine someone putting a tiny baby into her arms and it's her first great grandchild. Well, that tiny baby, when you think about it, could live well into the 22nd century. And if I care about that baby's life, that's only a couple of steps away from my own, then I need to care about not just that baby's life, but all life, because that baby is embedded in relationships, in human relationships, in the communities that will support it and make it survive and thrive. But also the living world, the air it will breathe, the food that it will eat. So I think almost anybody, if they allow their imaginations to work at it, can really make this jump to what I think it is a transcendent sense of legacy. That's about caring about the universal strangers of the future. It's about more than egoistic form of legacy, like, you know, an oligarch who wants the wing of of a national gallery named after them. It's something bigger even than familial legacy - just caring about the legacy for your own progeny, for people in your own bloodline, like an aristocrat who wants to protect their land at a state and pass it down to their children and children's children. It's bigger than that. And I think this gives us existential sustenance. It gives us a sense of meaning in life. We are part of something bigger. It's a bit like, you know, in Maori culture, there's this concept of Bucker Puppa, spelt with a W.H, though W.H is pronounced with an F in Maori. And this is the idea of genealogy. It's the idea that we're all in a great chain of life, whether the living, the dead and the unborn are all here in the room with us. And we tend to, in our culture, shine the light on the present moment. And what Bucker Puppa helps us do is shine that light more broadly to realise that we are connected to those future generations. And that gives us a kind of a cultural depth to our lives.

Ross Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more with the public philosopher Roman Krznaric about how to be a good ancestor, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc. index. First up, is from Sadhguru: 'In pursuit of happiness we have ripped the planet apart. But still, we are not any happier. It is time to stop and look. Because all human experiences happen within you, not outside of you. True or false?'

Roman Krznaric Well, I think happiness is a dangerous concept to work with partly because it means different things to different people. But I absolutely believe we are ripping the planet apart. This is the great intergenerational justice issue of our time.

Ross Next from Aled Jones: 'What if we judged our actions by how we believe people will judge them in the future? We move towards more equality and better management of our planet. Maybe we should judge our actions today as if we're cared about our legacy'.

Roman Krznaric That question, I think really, and that statement is at the heart of what I'm talking about. It's about we need to sit and think about how we are going to be judged by future generations. If we think about it 7.7 billion people alive today. Over the last fifty thousand years an estimated 100 billion people have been born and died. Over the next fifty thousand years, if this century's birth rate remains constant and levels out, nearly 7 trillion people will be born. We have to be thinking about how they are going to judge us for what we did or didn't do when we had the chance.

Ross Next, we have a tweet from the President of Ireland: 'The unprecedented accumulation of greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere, a legacy of a mere two centuries of industrial civilisation, which now threatens a four and a half billions year old planet must concern us all'. Now, Michael Higgins, the president of Ireland, is big on philosophy, as you well know. And what he's trying to do here is to get us to question, requestion, what we're really doing.

Roman Krznaric But he's missing something there. It's true, in the last couple of hundred years, we have been destroying a world that's taken four billion years to evolve. But let's not just think about deep time in the past. There's also deep time in the future. And if you think about all those generations who are going to be living or any creatures who may be around when our sun dies and five billion years time will be as different from us as we are from the first single cell bacteria. But here we are, part of this great chain of life. Who are we to break it?

Ross And finally, we have a tweet from the Dalai Lama: 'Fundamentally, human beings are the same. Imagine being lost in some remote place and suddenly seeing someone coming towards you over the horizon. You wouldn't care about their race, nationality or religious faith. You'd be filled with joy of encountering another human being'. It gets to the nub of it, doesn't it? Because ultimately, we think we're all incredibly different when really we come from the same source.

Roman Krznaric Well, I'm wondering whether the Dalai Lama is even thinking far enough into the future. That person may be coming over the horizon in the present. But what about the people coming over the horizon in 500 years from now? Are they really in our minds? Maybe they are in the mind of a Buddhist who believes in reincarnation, okay. But what most of us have to make a bigger effort to see the horizon stretching not just through space, but through time.

Ross Our book of the week this week is *The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in A Short Term World* by none other than Roman Krznaric. Roman, why should we read this?

Roman Krznaric Well, I wrote this book because I spent most of my life thinking about empathy. How do we step into the shoes of people who are alive today but living on the social margins? And then I thought what we really need to do is step into the shoes of future generations. Never before of our actions had such huge potential impact on their lives. We need to learn to empathise through time.

Ross And what is the one thing that when you were writing it really surprised you - something that challenged a preconceived idea that you had and changed your mind?

Roman Krznaric When I write my books and start out, I always think I'm the crazy only person who's interested in this. But what I discovered writing this book is that there is a time rebel movement, a movement of intergenerational out justice out there in the world. It's the climate activists, the kids on the streets. It's the people making long-term art projects, you know, that piece of music that will last a thousand years. There's the people fighting for intergenerational justice, trying to be good ancestors and make our criminal justice systems respect the lives of future people. Put them altogether, and I suddenly see now that there is this rebel movement. We all need to join the time rebellion, shift from being just good samaritans to being good ancestors too.

Video clip We Homo sapiens are newcomers in the cosmic story. If the age of the earth is the distance from your nose to the tip of your outstretched hand. One stroke of a nail file, erases human history. But just as there's deep time behind us, there's deep time ahead. In six billion years any creatures that will be around to see our sun die will be as different from us as we are from the first single cell bacteria. And yet in an eye blink of just two centuries we've done untold damage to the living world. Hooked on short-term thinking, we urgently need a sense of a longer now. So how do we expand our time horizons for the decades and centuries to come? By realising that we are all part of a great chain of life stretching far into the past and long into the future. But we've been shining the light only on the present moment. We must now cast it far more widely so that we recognise the legacy we will leave for the generations to come. Just as we have received gifts from our ancestors, those who planted the first seeds founded the cities we live in, made the scientific discoveries that have ensured our survival, so we too, can pass on gifts to posterity.

Ross One of the concepts that you come up with in the book is, a thing called cathedral thinking. What is cathedral thinking?

Roman Krznaric So that's the idea of embarking on projects with very long time horizons - decades even centuries. We think of something like Ulm Minster in southwest Germany. In 1377 the citizens of Ulm decided to build their own Lutheran church with their own money, with their own hands almost. It took them nearly 500 years to finish that. It wasn't finished till 1890, probably the longest crowdfunding project in human history. That's what cathedral thinking is about. It's about embarking on things that may not be finished in your own lifetimes. And we do this. You know, human beings do this. Sir Joseph Bazalgette built the sewers of Victorian London and oversaw that in the 1860s after the famous great stink of 1858, when cholera was killing tens of thousands of people each year. Those Victorian sewers are still in use today because he made them twice as big as they needed to be. That's cathedral thinking. And we see it in social movements too. The Suffragettes started in the 1860s to get votes for women. It was nearly half a century until they achieve their aims. And I think in Black Lives Matters, there's a recognition that these are issues of racial injustice which are intergenerational, and these will be long social struggles to achieve those aims.

Ross If we come back briefly to the architecture bit, because Cathedral thinking is around that. If we look at the cathedrals of today, they're pretty much skyscrapers, shopping malls.

They're the cathedrals of capitalism, if you like. I doubt any of them will last the test of time and certainly not trying to build the biggest skyscraper in the world, which always happens on the cusp of a depression and often in a desert in Dubai or somewhere. And then someone has to build one slightly bigger and all the rest of it. It is the mark of our time isn't it, these glass and chrome cathedrals, which are there basically just to unlock land value.

Roman Krznaric I think that's absolutely right. And the old idea of cathedral thinking is really the idea of new investment in building stuff, the glass cathedrals, pouring concrete, Well, enough concrete has been poured by humankind to cover the whole of the earth in a giant spherical coffin two millimetres thick, even covering over all the oceans. That's not the kind of cathedral thinking that we need. What we need, though, is investment, for example, in long term renewable energy projects, in tidal power and all sorts of things where what looks like long-term isn't those gigantic edifices. It's actually building long-termism into public policy.

Ross So away from skyscrapers and shopping malls. Let's go to the Duomo in Florence. The guys and girls, but predominately guys, who worked on that knew that it wouldn't be finished in their lifetime. But they still did it because they were back to Viktor Frankl dedicating themselves to a cause greater themselves. I think that there will be a lot happier by doing that because it does create a fulfillment. Now, for them, they were working for God and they knew the finish was absolutely right because it was Godly. Are you saying that to get back to that multigenerational thinking that actually it's good for our own meaning, purpose and our own wellbeing?

Roman Krznaric I absolutely do think it is. If you look through the last 50 years of history, hundreds of thousands of environmental groups have emerged around the world and they all actually have religion at their heart, even though it may not be written into their mission statements. Well, what kind of religion? Well, they all worship Mother Earth. There's a sense of the sacredness of the planet that needs to be protected - a sense of ecological stewardship. So I think religion, in that sense, is something that's really central to long-term thinking. And in fact, while I was writing this book, I happened to ask probably the world's most famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, what he thought about this idea. I said to him, I said: 'Don't you think that at this moment of ecological crisis, that developing some kind of spiritual, almost religious connection to the earth is something that could be galvanising? And I completely expected it to say, 'oh, that's complete rubbish' because he's that kind of person. But no, you know what he said? He said: 'I don't really like the idea of worshipping Mother Earth or Gaia. You know, I'd prefer to meet the scientific arguments about climate change'. But then he said: 'But I can see instrumental reasons for creating a kind of a spiritual connection with the planet as a way of encouraging people to care about it'. So I think there's a kind of even the most rational people can recognise something larger than that is needed to connect us with the future. Human beings, once they reach midlife, start thinking about - psychology evidence shows - wanting to keep the fire of their light burning beyond death. But we do tend to do that in different ways. But I think that big picture of ecological stewardship and why not technological stewardship as well? Who are we to be dumping dangerous synthetic biology on future generations without having the systems in place to keep it safe? Nanotechnology, A.I. We've got enormous obligations to future generations. And the way I think about it is that we have colonised the future. We treat the future as a dumping ground for ecological degradation of technological waste, nuclear waste as well. And all those things.

And it's a little bit like the way when Australia was colonised by the British in the 18th and 19th century. They drew on a legal doctrine known as terra nullius - nobody's land - to treat the land as if there were no indigenous people there. Of course there were and they took it for themselves. I think we've shifted from terra nullius to tempus nullius. We tend to see the future as nobody's time and uninhabited territory that is ours for the taking. The tragedy, really, is that what can future generations do? They can't throw themselves in front of the king's horse like a suffragette. They can't block an Alabama bridge like a civil rights protest or go an assault march like Mahatma Gandhi to defy their colonial oppressors. We need to fight for future generations on their behalves.

Ross People watching this will be thinking, okay, I get it. And I want to be a good ancestor. Give us three things that we can do, practically, to begin on that path.

Roman Krznaric Well, the first thing you can do is what my partner and I did during the last UK general election. We gave our votes to our 11 year old twins because they're not enfranchised, yet our actions will impact on their future. So we sat around the family dining table, debated the party manifestos, even the electoral system. Then they told us where to put the X on the ballot sheet. And in case you're about to ask - because I know you are - they didn't exactly vote how their parents would have voted themselves. So I think that's one practical thing to do. I like to see a movement of grandparents giving their votes to their children. I think second thing is collective action. There are extraordinary movements around the world that we should be supporting. There are movements in the United States fighting for the rights of future generations to a clean and healthy atmosphere. In Japan, there's this extraordinary movement called Future Design. It's like a citizen assembly movement where people are brought to make plans for their cities. And they are split into two groups. The first group are told they're residents from the present. The second group are given these ceremonial kimonos to wear and told they're residents from 2060. And lo and behold, the residents from 2060 come up with much more radical plans for their city's environmental policies or health policies and things. We can all support those movements. And a third thing you can do is go down to the beach, find a fossil like I do with my kids every year, and we find a hundred and ninety five million year old fossils on the beach on the southwest of England, hold a little Belemnite in your hand and get that sense of deep time into your bones.

Ross Roman, congratulations on the book. It's a cracker. It's out, just out and we wish you all the luck with it.

Roman Krznaric Thank you very much.

Ross Thanks for coming by.