

1<sup>st</sup> July 2023

## Backwards

**“That's the effect of living backwards,’ the Queen said kindly.  
‘It always makes one a little giddy at first.’”**

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Today I stood in the rain and waved goodbye to the guests with whom I'd spent this past week in Iona Abbey. It's always a poignant moment, as parting from one another always is. As their ferry left the jetty, many of the passengers on board looked back. They waved at those of us staying behind; they took their final photos; I have no doubt that some shed a tear. And all as they were looking back, realising that they were leaving so much, and so many loving and loved people, behind.

They had to go, of course, for they had journeys to make, plans to fulfil, work to do, people to see, things to organise. But looking backwards was part of their leaving, for they wanted to hold on to their attachment to Iona for as long as possible. I know what that feels like, for I've looked backwards at Iona from the departing ferry often enough before.

Lewis Carroll's Queen is right. The effect of living – or even looking – backwards “makes one a little giddy at first”. There's a wistfulness in there, maybe some regrets, and hopefully some good memories. There will be confusion too, a jumble of thoughts and emotions. There may be darkness, things that would be better not remembered. And there will almost certainly be light, moments of joy and wonder, good people, creative experiences, even life-changing moments. But how are we going to know any of that, and make some sense of it, unless we look back, and remind ourselves that we have a story to tell about what's back there?

That story may remain private, or it might be shared with a loved one, or it could require time and space to be articulated. It may, indeed, make us feel “giddy at first”. But looking backwards is still so necessary.

The biographer Harald Høffding summed up the work of the Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in a single sentence:

*We live forwards, but we understand backwards.*

Might it possibly be that Kierkegaard had been looking backwards at Iona from the island's ferry when he worked that out?

### **A prayer for today**

*Lord, I have no control over what tomorrow will bring. But I trust that, as I look back, if I recognise your presence on the journey, I need not fear what the future holds. Amen*

*An original reflection © Tom Gordon*

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