A calculus of loss

I could hear the clouds forming in the back of my mind. In an exchange between my friend, I learned that ringing in the ears had a serious medical name: "tinnitus". That night, the volume of that cloud kept me wide awake. In my insomnia, I searched for tinnitus online. I don't know what I expected in my search, but I found articles saying "lifelong condition" and "linked to suicide". There were many personal stories on online forums, in all caps, and I remember seeing one person's posts with symptoms similar to mine. I desperately looked through their post history, hoping that they their experiences would offer me a glimpse of a silent future.

I focused on the sound, and started to hear it when I was driving, walking, and sitting. I can tell you that my sounds were blinding and in flashes. When ever I briefly idled, I couldn't help but focus on listening to the sound, and hearing the crashing sounds of metal sheets. I no longer had a clear moment in my mind. Every time I sat down to work, I began obsessing over the sound while searching online for the potential causes and treatments. The most important cause: noise. Treatments? None. I went to an ENT, and they gave me a flyer that said "reduce life stress". I had a laugh about it with my friends I confided to, but deep down cursed these useless medical professionals.

Introspection and mental space is what makes me whole. My career as a researcher, I believe, is complemented by my who I am and vice versa. Because of my loss, I considered switching to a number of service based jobs that could keep me sane. Why did God (if there is a God) put me in a personalized hell? I thought that I understood that motorcycles could kill you, and I rode them anyways. Now, I hypothesized what I would do if my sounds got louder. I weighed my death, considering to hold my own until my parents died, or at least until I finished my PhD. I told my parents how to distribute my little bit of money and possessions if anything were to happen to me. Faced with real death, I wasn't ready.

I maximized my time inside my 35db room, and I minimized my time outside. I turned my volume down to 1 for my zoom meetings, and scrunched my forehead to follow on

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(we were still in a pandemic). I ruminated when ever the loud exhaust of a car drove past me, noise now a cardinal sin. I blamed my genetics. I blamed the vaccine. I regretted everything. I wore earplugs everywhere I went. I sold my motorcycle. A new experimental treatment costing hundred of dollars, backed by some weak observation from Stanford scientists? Fuck me, I'll try it. When I walked the same path to grab lunch at my local subways, I remembered how I walked the same path before but happy, and envious of a life I could never return to.

About this time, I injured my shoulder as well. I thought about the researchers and athletes I looked up to. Did so-and-so researcher get lucky and not have any health issues, to get to where they are now? Well, fuck you. Did so-and-so athlete never have a shoulder injury, so they could always push 100%? Well, fuck you too. Among all this, somehow I found the strength to tell myself that it would be worse if my sounds were louder. I hobbled through social events, and no one questioned my earplugs. I even fell in love a little bit. I confessed to my advisor that tinnitus was holding me back, which he accepted. While I lied to my parents how badly this was affecting me (which I had never done before), my best friends never failed to ask me how I was doing every time.

Then the Youtube algorithm recommended me a video, which I now believe was crucial to my healing and, healing, a cosmic inevitability. A complete lecture on the only effective technique to managing tinnitus: habituation. r/tinnitus hates habituation. In some ways habituation tells you to "deal with it". Bullshit isn't it? We'd all hope for a cure. I didn't find a single comprehensive resource until that lecture. But look for the truth: habituation is based on the premise that the brain can adapt to constant stimuli - as you don't see your nose or feel your socks, can we apply it to tinnitus? Habituation tells us that the only way to train your brain to phase the sounds out of your life, is to live your normal life while listening to them.

On a beautiful sunny day, I decided I wanted to live (LA offers plenty of these revelations). No more earplugs. No more hiding. No more obsessive online search for a cure that would make it would go away. I demanded a refund on my unscientific, experimental treatment. I started to count every second with my sanity as a blessing. I would never let tinnitus take me, because I would develop the mental tools to cope. Going outside without earplugs made me anxious, but I decided if tinnitus were to get

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louder, I would grab it by the balls and transition my computer science career into a medical one. At first, I counted the days from that moment. I have since stopped counting, but I promise to never stop making the days count.

I studied agnostic buddhism, and saw the parallels in habituation and their philosophy. I started wondering: why did I learn so much in school but didn't learn how to manage my anxiety? I asked friends to read it and walk the path together. There was some random story about a wannabe monk dousing in a cold shower on a cold mountain. What the fuck? He claimed that pain was more acceptable when you focused on it rather then avoiding it. Then, I went to study accepting pain. I learned about neuroplastic pain. The story makes more sense now. I am on a continual journey to understand myself, and always hope that others can benefit similarly.

And in my present time, I write this essay now, to finalize a few thoughts on tinnitus.

First, the calculus of loss is not an intuitive one. Thinking back, I'm grateful for how little I lost to gain so much. I live life more fully knowing the hardships it can offer. I understand the necessity of mental health and developing the tools to protect ourselves, instead of trusting that I'm "tough". Second, I have more compassion for others. I used to think chronic pain suffers, and those who pursue alternative healing, as heresy, until I walked the path myself. I genuinely believe that all loss can be gains, we just have to have the courage to change our perspective. Finally, I developed a compassion for myself. I learned that the balance of aspiration and suffering is a life decision, and the most difficult and defining of your life. On the other hand, I know that everyone deals with their own unique pain, even the ones we look up to, and that inspires me. There are heights I want to reach, but my acceptance of the realistic keeps me happy. But for now, I'll count my wins as wins.

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