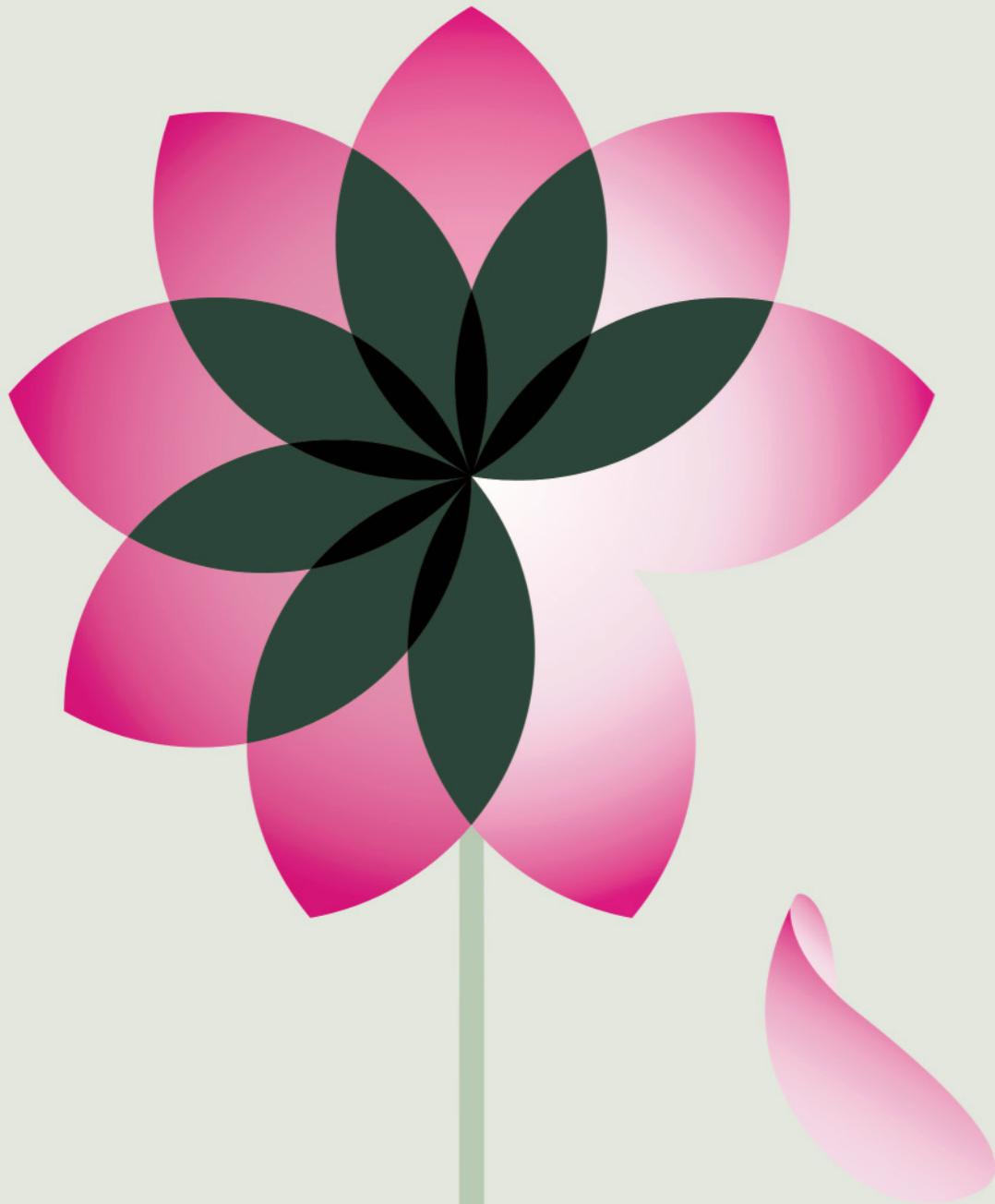


LOSING LIKE A STOIC

# NewPhilosopher



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**MICHAEL CHOLBI**  
Transformative grief

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**MARINA BENJAMIN**  
Losing heat

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**TOM CHATFIELD**  
The game of life





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Zan Boag  
Editor-in-Chief  
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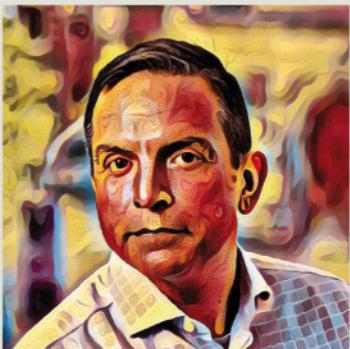
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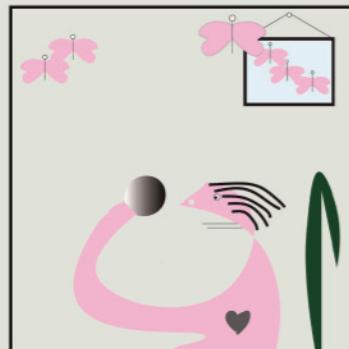
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Michael Cholbi is Professor and Personal Chair in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. He has published widely in ethical theory, practical ethics, and the philosophy of death and dying. His books include *Suicide: The Philosophical Dimensions*, *Understanding Kant's Ethics*, and *Grief: A Philosophical Guide*. Cholbi is the editor of several scholarly collections, including *Immortality and the Philosophy of Death*, and the *Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Suicide*.

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## Nigel Warburton

Nigel Warburton is a freelance philosopher, podcaster, writer, and the Editor-at-large of *New Philosopher*. Described as “one of the most-read popular philosophers of our time”, his books include *A Little History of Philosophy*, *Thinking from A to Z*, and *Philosophy: The Classics*. The interviewer for the Philosophy Bites podcast, Warburton was previously Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the Open University and Lecturer in Philosophy at Nottingham University.

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Mary-Frances O'Connor is an Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry and Director of Clinical Training at the University of Arizona. Her research focuses on the physiological correlates of emotion, in particular the wide range of physical and emotional responses during bereavement, including yearning and isolation. O'Connor is the author of *The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss*.

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Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore lived in China from 2009 to 2014 during which time she worked as the associate editor for *Time Out Beijing*, the art editor for *Time Out Shanghai*, and as an op-ed columnist for the *International New York Times*, reporting from China. She writes for *The Guardian*, *The Economist*, *Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, *Womankind*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New Statesman*, *New Internationalist*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Time* magazine.

## Marina Benjamin

Marina Benjamin is a writer and editor. As a memoirist, she is best known for *The Middlepause*, which offered a poetic and philosophical take on midlife. Benjamin is also the author of *Insomnia* and her new memoir *A Little Give*. She was arts editor of the *New Statesman* and deputy arts editor at the *London Evening Standard*, and is a senior editor at *Aeon*. Her book *Rocket Dreams* was shortlisted for the Eugene Emme Literature Award.

## Tom Chatfield

Tom Chatfield is a British writer, broadcaster, and tech philosopher. He is the author of six books, including *Netymology*, *Live This Book!*, and *How to Thrive in the Digital Age*, and speaks around the world on technology, the arts, and media. Chatfield was launch columnist for the BBC's worldwide technology site, BBC Future, is a Visiting Associate at the Oxford Internet Institute, and is a senior expert at the Global Governance Institute.

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André Dao is a Melbourne-based writer, editor, and artist. His debut novel, *Anam*, won the 2021 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript. He is also the co-founder of *Behind the Wire*, an award-winning oral history project documenting the stories of the adults and children who have been detained by the Australian government after seeking asylum in Australia.

## Matthew Beard

Matthew Beard is a moral philosopher with an academic background in applied and military ethics. He is the Program Director of the Vincent Fairfax Fellowship at the Cranlana Centre for Ethical Leadership, and previously was a Fellow at The Ethics Centre in Sydney. In 2016, he won the Australasian Association of Philosophy Media Prize. He is the resident philosopher on the ABC podcast *Short & Curly*, an award-winning children's podcast.

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# LOSS AVERSION

We humans don't like to lose, and that's not just in sport or other games. We suffer when we lose almost anything – money from a poor investment, possessions from a break-in, or a partner from divorce. Economists have a name for it, "loss aversion", and evolutionary scientists attribute this heuristic to the survival instincts honed by our ancestors. In our evolutionary past, the cost of making a mistake or loss were far more detrimental than the benefits of an equivalent gain. Losing a day's food could mean starvation, a risk far outweighing the benefits of acquiring an extra day's food. So, our brains evolved to be more sensitive to potential losses than to potential gains, a trait that has persisted into the modern day.

Our aversion to loss explains many things about us, such as why we'll hold on to a losing stock, and prematurely sell a winning one; or why we're more inclined to buy products with "money-back guarantees" or return policies, regardless of quality. Insurance companies leverage loss aversion, knowing that we're generally willing to pay a premium today to avoid the potential for losses in the future. And sports people will take fewer risks when winning, fearful of giving up a temporary head-start, even though a more conservative approach could in fact cause them to lose in the end.

Our aversion to loss, apparently, grows the more we have, too; the richer we become, the more loss-averse we get; indeed, great wealth can be immobilising. Realising how sensitive we are to loss, Stoic philosophers taught to temper the pain of loss by trying to imagine that the precious possession (or person) was never owned in the first place – you can't grieve for something you've never had.

Conversely, one can learn to appreciate what one has by picturing what it would be like for it to disappear right at this very moment. This thought experiment, indeed, sheds a warm glow of light over the many aspects of our lives, from our myriad possessions to those we love.

# Winning and losing

We often speak of arguments in competitive terms. We win arguments and lose them, score points and concede defeat. Adversarial legal systems, such as exist in places like the United States, Britain, and Australia, are built on the idea that argument is carried out in the service of competing parties with opposed interests (and even opposed views of the truth itself). Something similar is true of politics.

This competitive type of argument has been around a long time. In the dialogues of Plato, Socrates is at pains to distance himself from the Sophists, who were the professional arguing class of ancient Athens. The Sophists were highly trained in the arts of *eristic*, the sort of argument you engage in when you want to win a dispute, such as in a political debate or a lawsuit. The Sophists valued rhetorical skill, which makes sense when your ultimate

goal is to persuade the listener to agree with you. It's an argument aimed primarily at victory, not truth.

Socrates' method of argument, the *elenchus*, was different. He wasn't arguing for the sake of winning, but arguing with the aim of discovering what's true. He engaged in forensic cross-examination of the people he encountered, a process that could get quite heated, but did so as a sort of shared inquiry into the truth rather than trying to win the exchange or bring people over to his side. Socrates' interlocutors may not have enjoyed the experience as much as Socrates did, but they came away knowing more – or at least less misinformed – than they went in.

That's the unexpected happy result of this approach: when you argue this way, you can't actually lose an argument. Even if something you previously believed turns out to be completely wrong, you've 'won' in that you now know the truth.

*Touch Of A Vanished Hand*, 1888, by Walter Langley





Johannesburg, South Africa, by Hennie Stander

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well.

**Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence***



"O proud philanthropist, your hope is vain  
To get by giving what you lost by gain."

– Ambrose Bierce

# Sitting and forgetting

**T**here's much in life we'd prefer to forget, but the human mind tends to remember the bad and forget the good, which partly explains why negative thoughts are so hard to quash. We'll keenly remember a heated argument with a friend, but struggle to recall the details of an idyllic picnic with family. It's uncommon for people to visit psychologists for persistent and unrelenting positive thought patterns ("another great day to be alive...") – it's the negative thoughts, the unpleasant memories, the unwanted personal desires that hold ground in human consciousness. It's therefore understandable that there's an ancient

Taoist practice called 'sitting and forgetting', which is about learning to forget the disappointments, regrets and loss, or 'unlearning' what you know, so as to get closer to the flow of life, or the Tao.

Humans do, it's true, forget many things. German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus graphed human memory loss on a chart, entitling it "the forgetting curve". Ebbinghaus memorised lists of nonsensical words, like SIJ and WOZ, and then tested, with timer in hand, his ability to recall them days and weeks later. He found that, typically, we lose at least half of newly acquired information in short order, unless that material is

reviewed again. Some studies suggest that our rate of forgetting could be steeper still, in that we forget almost 90 per cent of learned material within a month.

But for Taoists, in the practice of 'sitting and forgetting', the loss of one's preconceived ideas, conventional wisdom, and judgements is seen as a gain, not a loss. "The perfect man uses his mind as a mirror. It grasps nothing. It regrets nothing. It receives but does not keep," it says in the Chuang Tzu, one of the foundational texts of Taoism. "To forget the years, to forget righteousness, to forget wisdom, and to forget distinctions, this is to be transformed into the Infinite (Tao)."

"Grief is a response to an irreversible loss... To generate grief rather than sadness, the thing lost must carry great emotional weight, and it must pull back the veil that covers a transcendent aspect of the world. Breathe out to push the fog away from a brilliant pinpoint of light."

All moments of our lives are immensely rich, with many – perhaps infinitely many – variables we could notice.

We can view our lives as trajectories, parameterised by time, through story space.

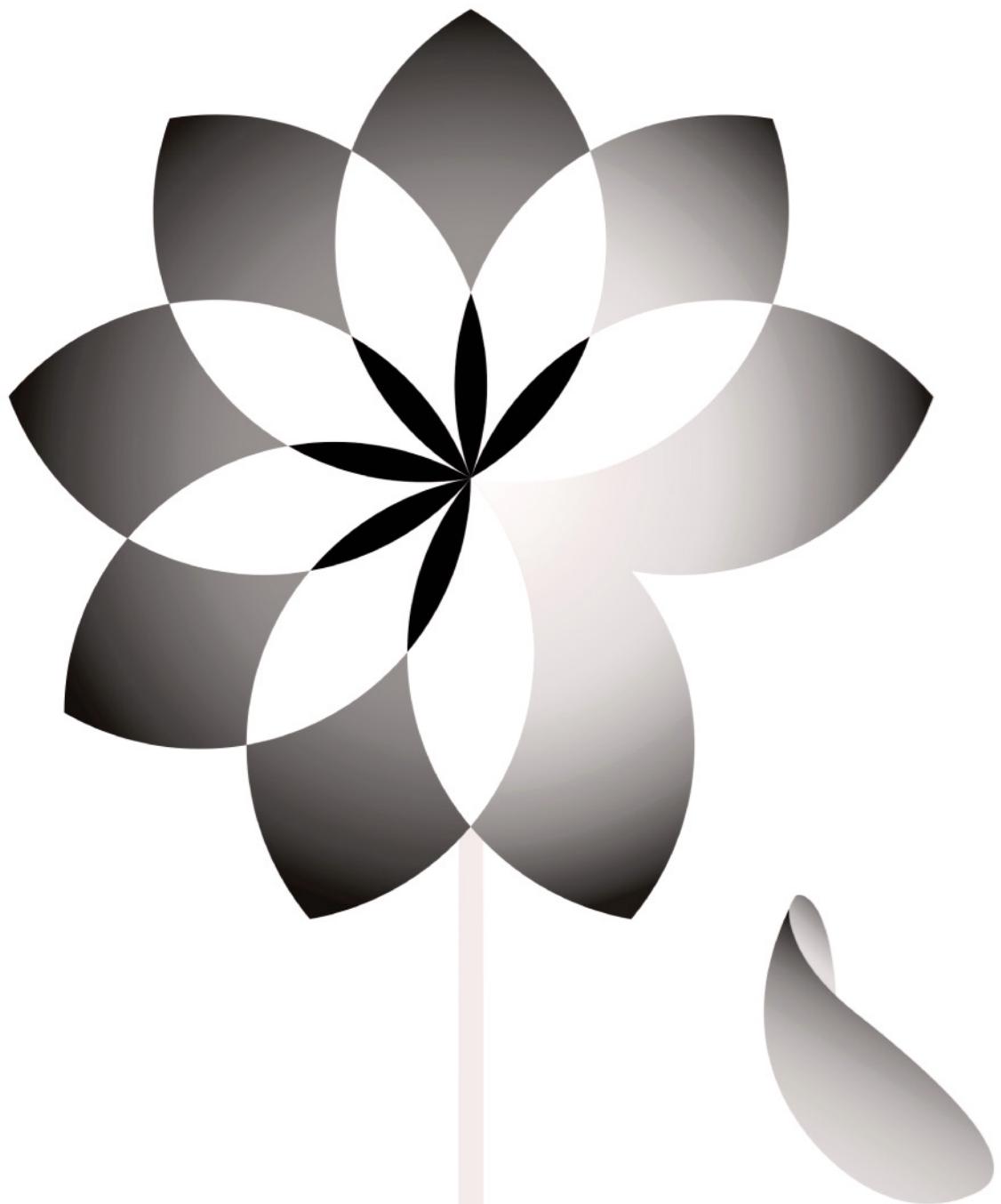
We can never simultaneously view all of the possible variables; rather, we focus on a few variables at a time, restricting our attention to a low-dimensional subspace of story space.

Our trajectories through these subspaces are the stories we tell ourselves about our lives; they are how we make sense of our lives, but always they miss some elements of our experiences.

Irreversible loss appears as a discontinuity, a jump, in our path through story space.

By focusing on certain subspaces, by projecting our trajectories into these spaces, we can reduce the apparent magnitude of the jumps, and consequently find a way to confront the emotional loss and perhaps reduce its impact."

– Michael Frame,  
from *Geometry of Grief: Reflections on Mathematics, Loss, and Life*



# IT'S ONLY MONEY



**T**here's a story told about the late Australian billionaire media mogul Kerry Packer's encounter with a Texan braggart who boasted that he was worth \$100 million. Packer simply replied: "I'll flip you for it."

It's fitting that this exchange took place in a casino; Packer was an enthusiastic gambler who both won and lost eye-watering sums at the table. In his poem "If," Rudyard Kipling famously included the ability to "make one heap of all your winnings" and lose it without complaining as a sign of being a 'man'. Kipling's sexism aside, it may seem there's something quite admirable about calmness in the face of financial loss: after all, it's only money. Sometimes it is even less than money: stock markets can lose billions of dollars in a single crash, amounts so disconnected from real economic production as to seem almost meaningless.

Yet amounts that can be a mere rounding-error to one person can be life-changing to others. (Packer was notorious for leaving enormous tips that sometimes cleared the mortgages of the casino staff who received them, while barely troubling his accountants at all.) In part this is a result of what economists call 'diminishing marginal utility'. Ten dollars will be more subjectively valuable to someone with an empty bank account than it will to a millionaire, even though the exchange value of ten dollars is exactly the same for both.

Kipling's test is whether you can lose all your money without complaining, so we might think diminishing marginal utility doesn't come into play. But in the context of a life that includes rich periods, it may be that the wipeouts are balanced out by other periods of prosperity. Not everyone has that luxury of knowing they can recover from financial loss. It's only money, but money makes a difference.

"A son could bear with great complacency the death of his father, while the loss of his inheritance might drive him to despair."

- Machiavelli

*Death of Sir Tristram, 1864, by Ford Madox Brown*

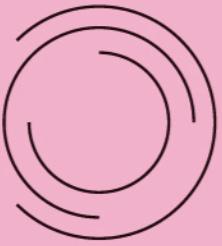
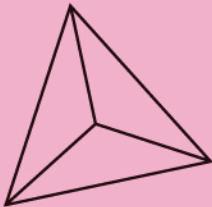


"What you lend is lost; when you ask for it back, you may find a friend made an enemy by your kindness. If you begin to press him further, you have the choice of two things – either to lose your loan or lose your friend."

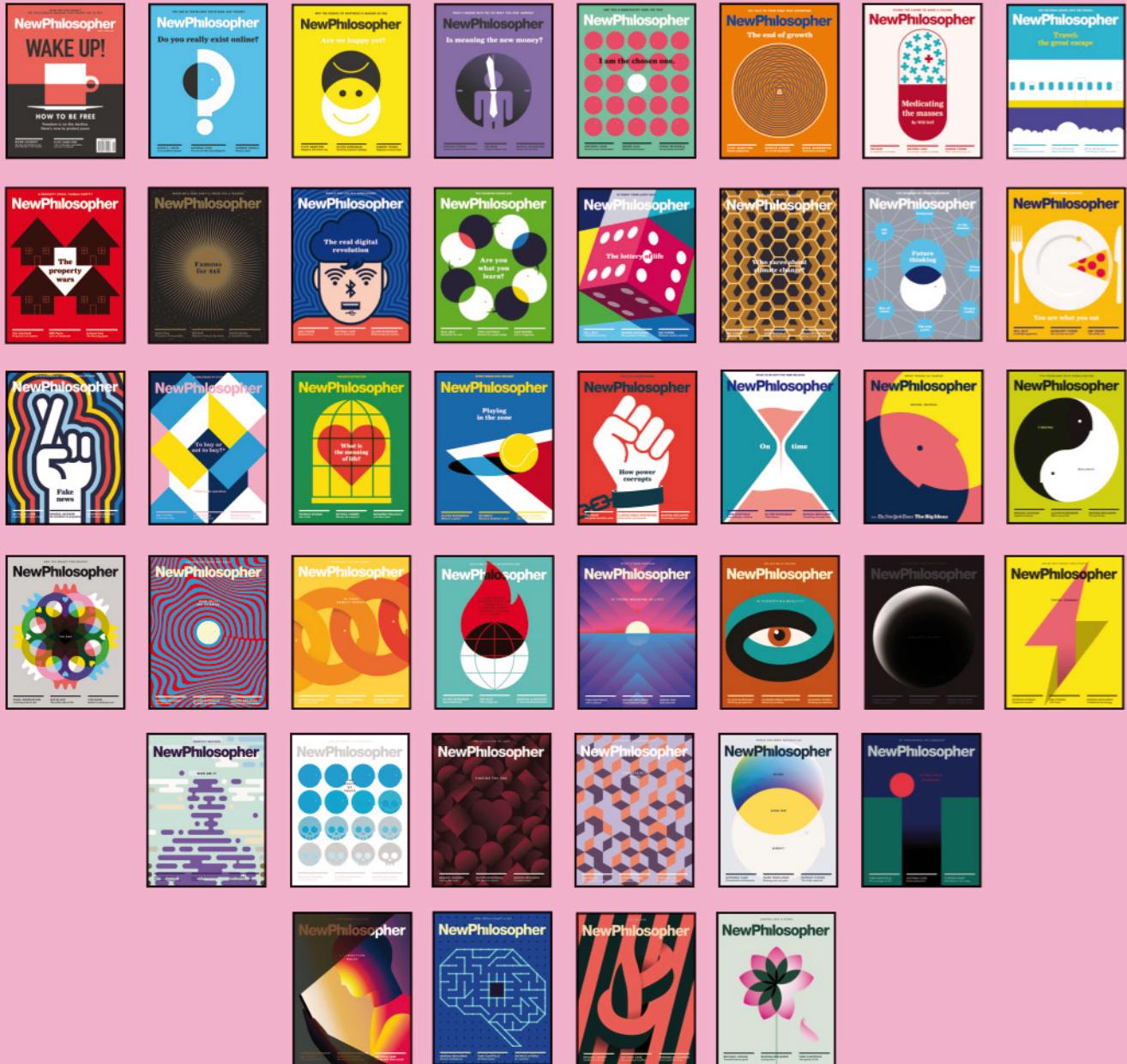
- Plautus

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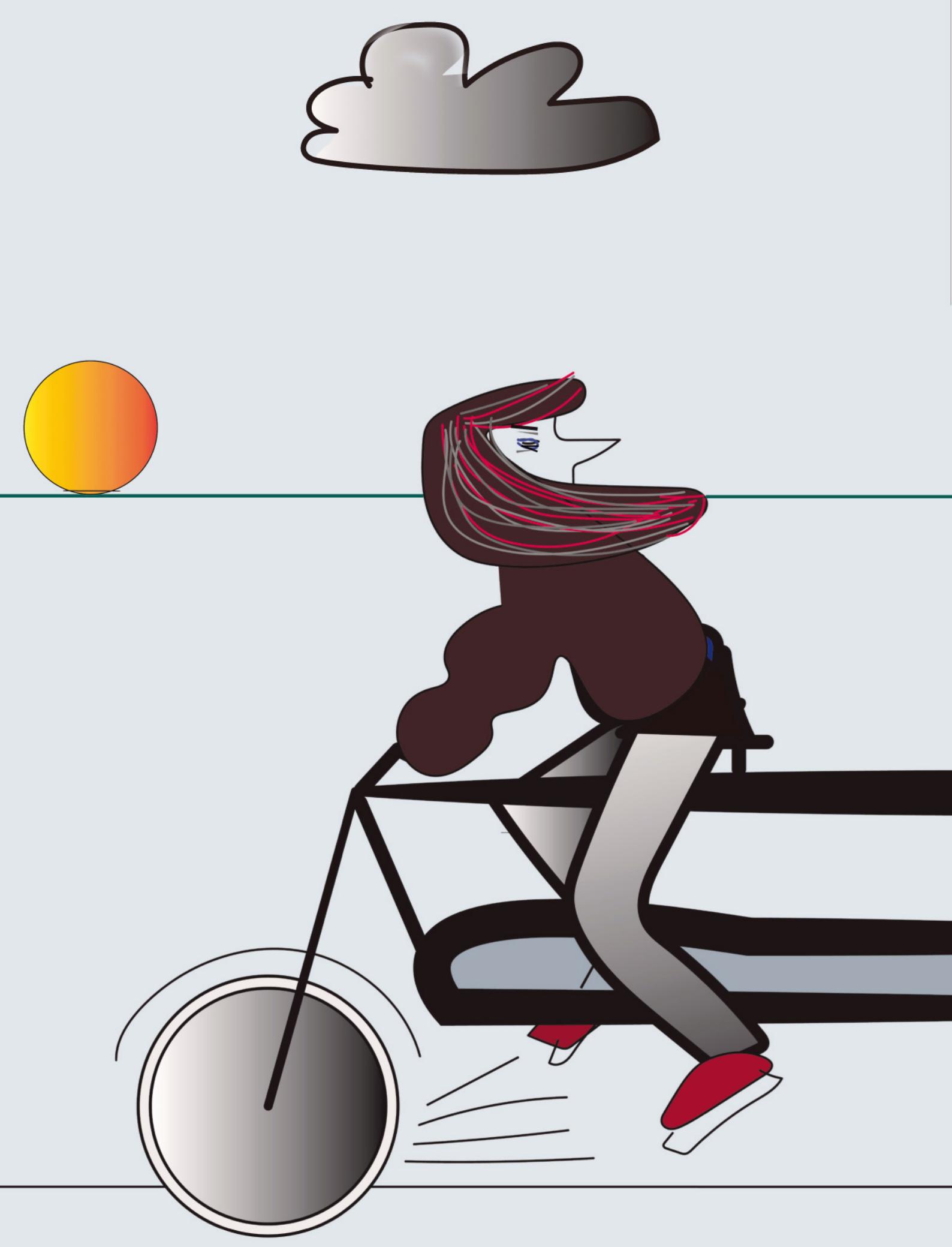
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*Hope Comforting Love in Bondage*, 1901, by Sidney Harold Meteyard



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# Losing heat

by Marina Benjamin

Simone De Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* is as shocking to read today as it was half a century ago in surfacing our latent disgust with the aged. Prompted by a visceral antipathy, writes Beauvoir, we invigilate 'the old', deeming any show of love or jealousy among them (especially between them) 'revolting or absurd'; any evidence of sexuality, 'repulsive'; any display of violence, 'ludicrous'. By demanding the old remain 'serene' in the face of innumerable challenges and losses, we rub out their individuality – their yearnings and regrets; achievements and prickliness – and dehumanise the entire elderly population.

It is hard to argue with Beauvoir's observations when the recent pandemic saw governments across Europe effectively imprison the elderly at home. Though ostensibly for their own protection, such 'shielding' effected a wholesale erasure – like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang's child catcher cleansing the city streets of children. It's little wonder so many of us harbour a profound aversion to growing old.

Ageing has long been defined by loss. Aristotle thought bodies aged as a result of losing heat, which led Galen to recommend that the elderly should be heated and moistened, using

hot baths. Paracelsus thought ageing was due to kind of auto-intoxication, caused by harmful toxins released as our tissues broke down. Our modern catalogue of losses is more extensive: with each passing year we lose muscle mass and flexibility, bone density and brain function. The quantity of metabolically active tissue falls with fatty degeneration. A slowing in protein synthesis causes skin to lose elasticity. Our joints grow stiff; our spinal discs degenerate. Our skeletons become spongy and fragile, so shoulders slump and pelvises broaden. Arteries harden, organs start failing, while our cells are



prone to cancers and our brains to neurological dysfunction.

There is much more. Beauvoir's thorough documentation of the bodily deterioration that accompanies ageing runs to a full ten pages. And who can forget Shakespeare's pitiful portrait of dotage and senility: '*sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything*'. I struggle to avoid taking any of this personally. As I approach my seventh decade, I am acutely aware of loss. I take medications to improve bone strength, lower cholesterol levels, aid sleep, and minimise the likelihood of infection. I swallow hormone supplements and vitamins to keep my energy up, and I submit to annual flu jabs, even knowing all this safeguarding will merely slow not halt the inevitable slippages that ageing brings.

I'm painfully aware of what lies ahead on the not-too-distant horizon, for as my mother's designated carer-in-chief I occupy a front row seat from which to observe her decline. From this close-up vantage point, I find the inveigling psychology that underpins my mother's staunch denial of loss – and my collusion in it – a source of endless annoyance and strange fascination.

Next spring, my mother turns 92 – though another year of life is

hardly something she relishes. She won't be punching the air with joy or proclaiming her nonagenarian credentials to all and sundry. Each of the last few birthdays has, along with the requisite candles and cake, brought with it some new and unwelcome debility: a further loss of hearing; more pain in her arthritic knees and hands; a perpetual wobble in her gait – a succession of diminishments that slice up her confidence by a thousand tiny cuts.

She was once a formidable character, a dynamo of activity who maintained house and family as well as the business end of my late father's couture studio. She cooked and cleaned, did the accounts, arranged everyone's schedule, entertained my father's clients, booked our holidays, and did all the driving. Now her world has been shrink-wrapped.

Day by day, she exists on a kind of low-energy cycle, or conservation mode that sees her descend from her bedroom via a stairlift to spend her waking hours moving between the kitchen (for meals) and living room (where she pretends to watch TV). She and I both know (but politely evade acknowledging) that she no

longer follows a narrative: suspense leaches out of every drama, news is bled of cause and effect. It is yet another way her life is held on pause.

Still, the TV is company and sleep aid. At the press of a button, my mother's comfy reclining chair eases her into a supine pose, and from there she snoozes away the hours, the too-loud voices from the box filling her overheated house. It's not much of a life. But it's all she's got. I rather think she hopes death will come for her in this chair, and steal her quietly, leaving the television blaring into the void.

Lately I've become aware of the way I perpetually leap into the breach for my mother, helping her 'mask' her losses and letting her believe continuity is still a fair proposition: if she can keep coping with what age throws at her, then maybe (at least, to her mind) she need not give its depredations any ground.

Of course, this illusion is dangerous, because in order to sustain it my mother must believe that my propping her up is not really happening. And so I become complicit in the erasure of my own work – which over the years has ballooned to the point where I now oversee almost every aspect of her life:

**I'm painfully aware of what lies ahead on the not-too-distant horizon, for as my mother's designated carer-in-chief I occupy a front row seat from which to observe her decline.**

---

**Our bargain is desperately strained, since my mother's losses are multiplying... though she doesn't know it, she has dementia too. It's a classic zero-sum game.**

I liaise with her doctor, engage her carers, and manage her house; I get her cash, help her shop for food and clothing; do her tax returns and deal with her correspondence. Our bargain is desperately strained, since my mother's losses are multiplying: she's almost wholly deaf; she can barely walk; she's short of breath; her heart is slow; she wheezes; she's crippled by arthritis; and though she doesn't know it, she has dementia too. It's a classic zero-sum game.

Watching her decline is exquisitely painful for I keenly feel her losses on her behalf. It's a kind of perverse transference. Meanwhile, because my mother pretends not to comprehend what is happening – because she lives inside a bubble of denial – she has become a child.

I want to ease her through whatever time she has left, keeping her relatively pain-free and healthy, though I recognise my complicity in her denial comes at a cost. Knowing she cannot admit that I routinely exhaust myself in attending to her needs (on top of running my own life, complete with husband, work, and a university-age child) I cannot complain. Nor disclose how in putting her first I neglect myself, leaving my hair dirty or eating junk food on the fly, so I can show up ready for action.

If I mute my own life, the bubble stays intact. I have developed a studied neutrality around my mother. Whenever I feel desperately overstretched, or crotchety and resentful, I try to remember Iris Murdoch urging

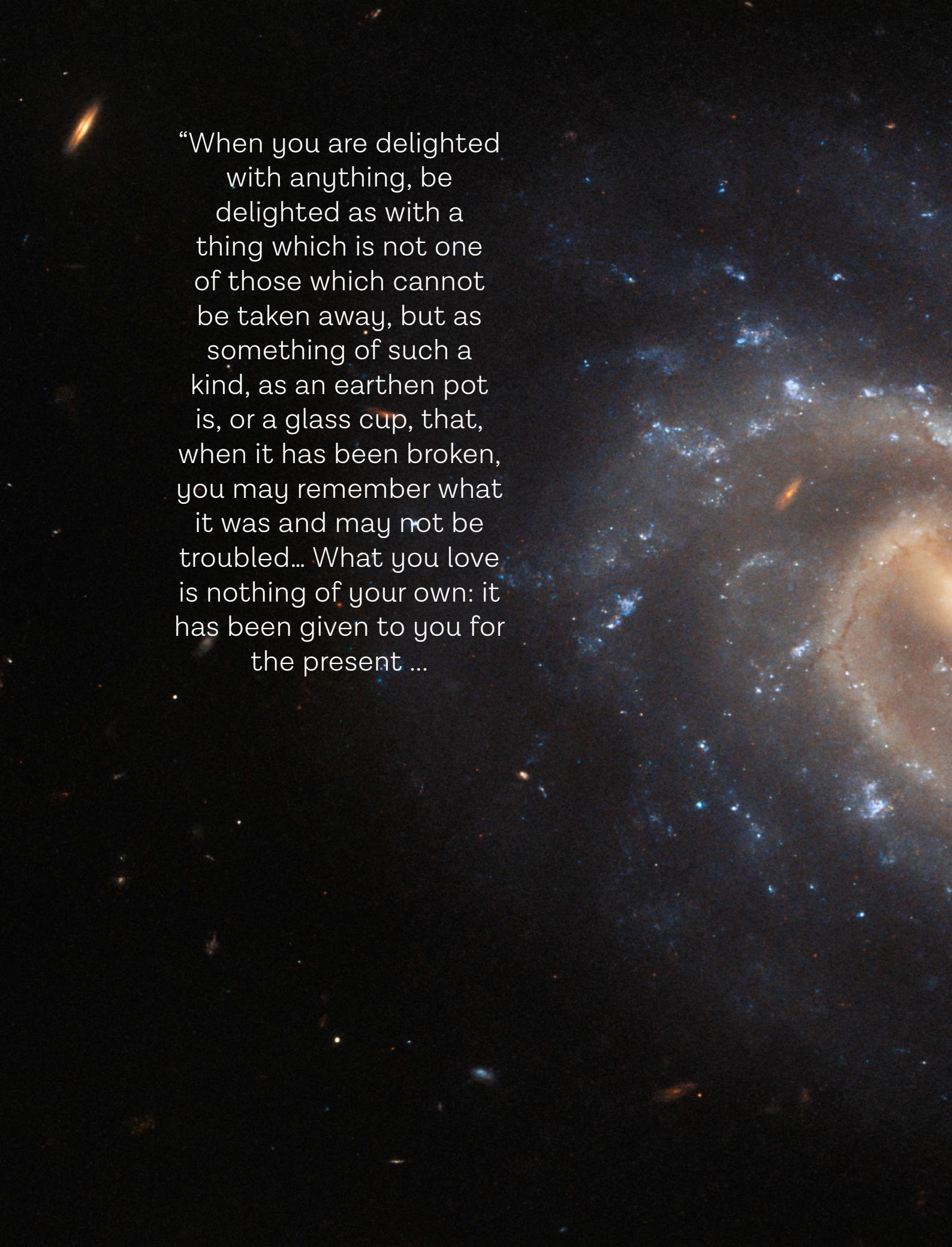
the higher state of 'unselfing' – not so much a suppression of self as its transcendence. As I understand Murdoch, it's not unlike an out-of-body experience: a way of being present and accountable, while also being absent.

Perhaps the most profound loss in my relationship with my mother is the loss of intimacy. The bulk of our interactions are now purely functional. Stripped of a vitality-giving two-wayness, our involvement misses the emotional exchange that nurtures empathy.

In *The Outsourced Self*, Arlie Hochschild put her finger on this sorry dynamic of give and take. For if I perpetually jump in to deflect any external demand that threatens to burden my mother, I effectively aid her to outsource sympathy itself. This loss of humanity shrink-wraps her life in a different way: it shuts her heart against human feeling. It means I've little to look forward to or enjoy when I'm around her.

I tell myself I will approach things differently as I age. That I will not burden my child as my mother has burdened me with her helplessness. I will make my own arrangements. But of course, agency is another thing that old age pilfers. Moreover, its loss is stealthy: by the time you realise it's gone, it's too late.

Ageing is both fast and slow, visible and invisible. It is the consummate enemy. What, I wonder, would happen if we could override disgust and somehow make old age a friend? ■

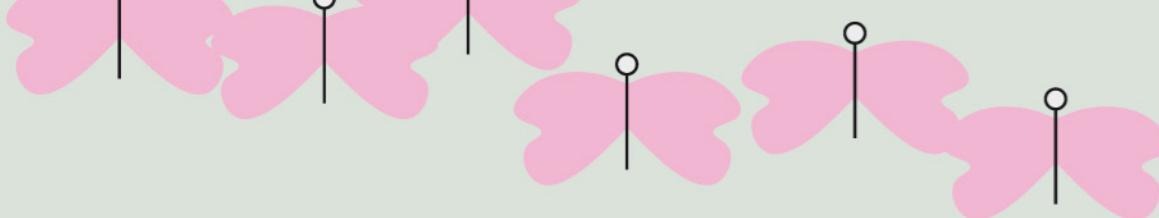


“When you are delighted  
with anything, be  
delighted as with a  
thing which is not one  
of those which cannot  
be taken away, but as  
something of such a  
kind, as an earthen pot  
is, or a glass cup, that,  
when it has been broken,  
you may remember what  
it was and may not be  
troubled... What you love  
is nothing of your own: it  
has been given to you for  
the present ...



... not that it should not be taken from you, nor has it been given to you for all time, but as a fig is given to you or a bunch of grapes at the appointed season of the year. But if you wish for these things in winter, you are a fool. So if you wish for your son or friend when it is not allowed to you, you must know that you are wishing for a fig in winter."

Epictetus



by Patrick Stokes

# The asymmetry of loss

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While on holiday in Vienna in 1833, the English poet Arthur Henry Hallam died suddenly of a cerebral haemorrhage, aged just twenty-two. Over the next seventeen years, one of his close friends and fellow poets worked on an elegy in his honour. "In Memoriam A.H.H." was published anonymously in 1850; later that same year, its author, Alfred Tennyson, was appointed Poet Laureate.

Tennyson's poem is a remarkable work of mourning, one that perhaps predictably struck a chord with the most famous mourner of the era, Queen Victoria herself. The poem's most enduring legacy however is one specific phrase from Canto XXVIII, which has become familiar to the point of cliché. Here it is, in its original context:

*I hold it true, whate'er befal;  
I feel it when I sorrow most;  
'Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved at all.*

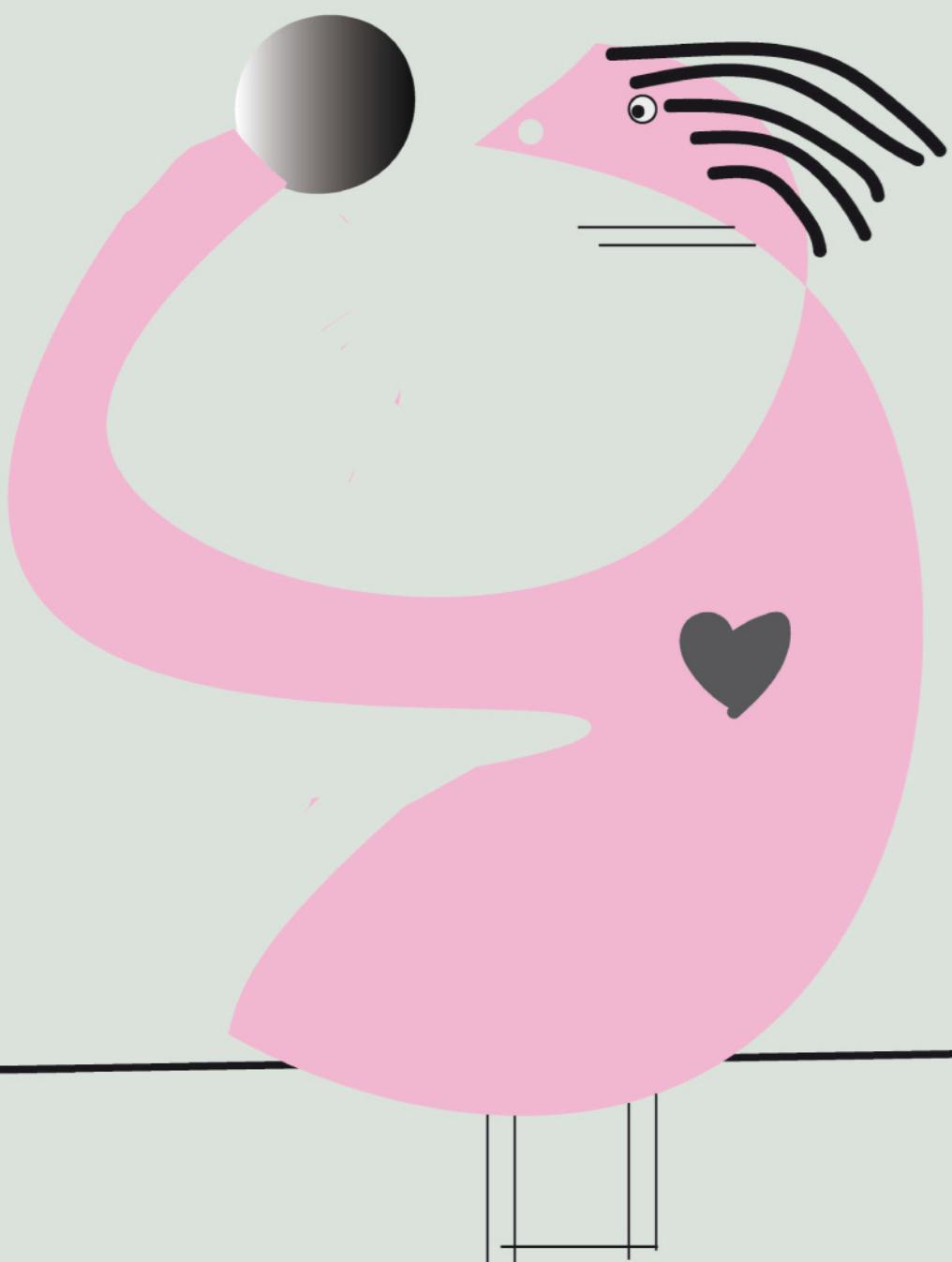
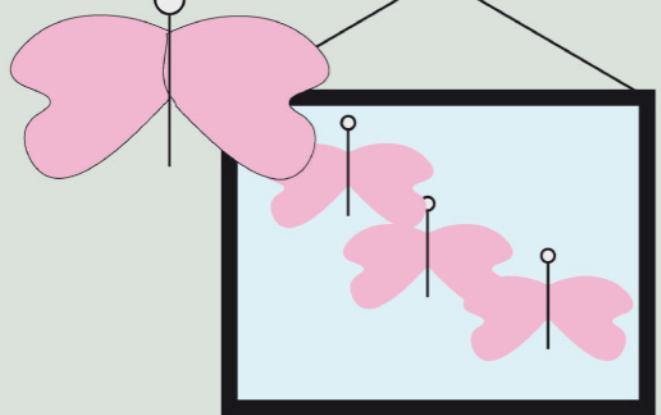
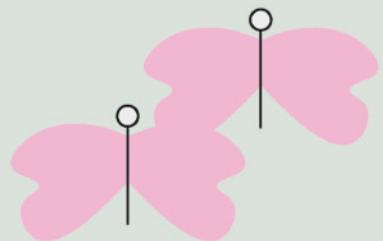
Seventeen years is a long time to process grief, but this is the sort of wisdom that takes a while to arrive at: loss knocks the wind out of us, and we need to get our breath back before the reflection can start. Once it does, Tennyson's claim starts to seem reasonable. The intensity of pain is an index of the enormity of what we've lost; it stands to reason, then, that provided grief doesn't actually outweigh love, our life would have been drastically worse off had we never loved at all. Presumably that doesn't just apply to death either, but to all the things we lose throughout the course of our lives.

Tennyson's consolation, however, assumes that we can compare having love and then losing it with never loving in the first place. It asks us to compare two possible worlds and determine which is more valuable. To put things in hideously reductive terms, if loving someone adds 10,000 units of good to your life, and losing them adds 3,000 units of bad, then a life in which

you love and lose is still (all else being equal, which of course it never is) 7,000 units of good better off than a life in which you never love them at all. Your life contains more good things, even if those good things are now in the past.

But once we start comparing things we've lost with things we never gained, a funny thing happens. Imagine a famous singer, whose incredible talent brings profound joy to themselves and others – until disease or injury suddenly costs them their singing voice at the height of their powers. This is, unarguably, a tragedy. Still, we might try to console the singer with the thought that at least they did have that gift, did enjoy their time in the limelight, and so on. If losing the talent is a deprivation, then it seems that never having had that talent in the first place would have been an even greater loss – precisely Tennyson's point.

But if that's true, then what about those of us stuck with our decidedly sub-par singing voices our whole lives?





Aren't we, just by lacking that same talent the singer has lost, suffering a terrible deprivation too? Yet if we are, few of us seem to be bothered by this fact, or countless others like it. We don't walk around commiserating with each other for not having outstanding gymnastic ability or not being born into royalty. There are no '*Sorry you've never won the lottery*' or '*Sorry you've never met the right person*' greeting cards. Intuitively, I'm not harmed by never having had something in the same way I'm clearly harmed by losing it. There's an implicit asymmetry here: losing things is worse, somehow, than never being benefitted in the first place.

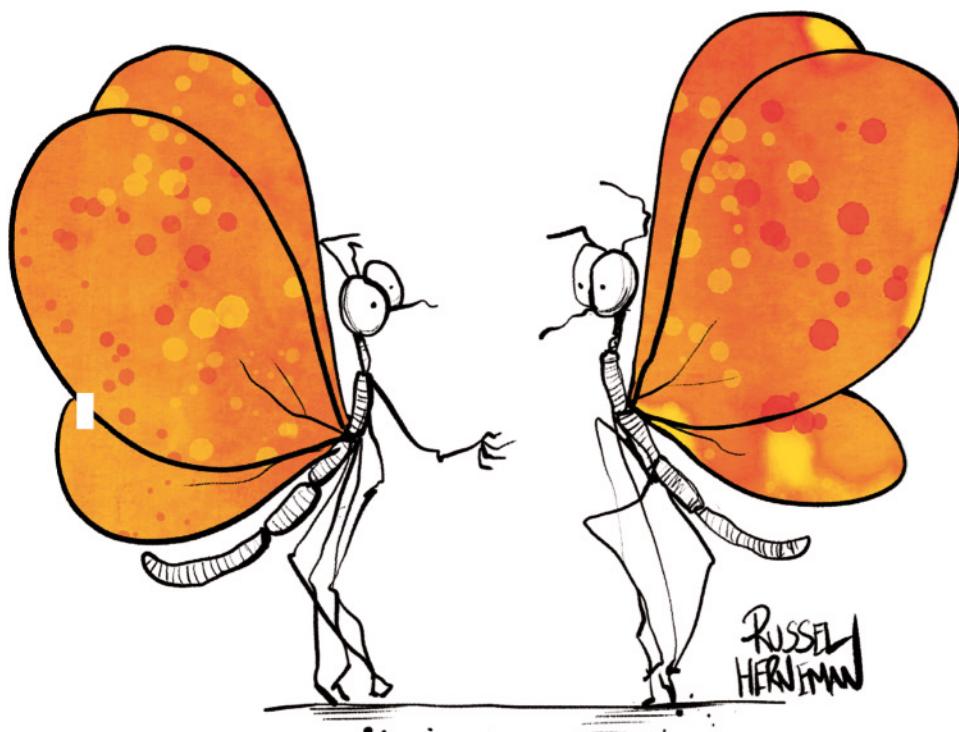
Perhaps this is just as well. If there wasn't such an asymmetry between

losing and never-having, then it seems there would be no end to the catastrophes that have already befallen each and every one of us. Your life would already be blighted by your tragic inability to fly, read people's minds, or be the world's greatest juggler. Are you really harmed by such things? It's true that medieval theologians acknowledged a whole category of metaphysical evils, the inherent imperfections that blight human life such as mortality and finitude. But it seems silly to suggest you're harmed by not being omniscient or omnipotent.

Tennyson might agree that you can't miss what you never had, and so you can't mourn for a love you never knew. You might regret never loving

at all, given most people get to experience love at least once. But we're talking about the loss of particular persons, not love per se. Who would trade having had the chance to love this person just to save themselves the pain of losing them? Tennyson asks us to compare a world in which a specific love is lost with a world in which it never begins in the first place. Surely, Alfred might say, we can see that the former world contains more good than the latter?

But strange things happen to moral mathematics when you start to compare things that exist and things that don't, and the asymmetry between good and bad things, and so between harming and benefitting, can lead us down some very dark alleyways.



*"I do miss being a caterpillar."*

# It's a reasonably complex argument, but the end result is stark: it would be better, morally speaking, if nobody was ever born.

The South African philosopher David Benatar has argued that all lives, even the best of them, contain a significant amount of pain. It's not just that we love and lose; we also stub our toes, embarrass ourselves, contract diseases, and so on.

Hopefully, most people's lives are a net benefit – that is, their lives contain more good things than bad, and are worth living. But the bad bits are, for all that, still bad.

If all lives involve suffering, then it seems that you harm someone, to some extent at least, just by bringing them into existence. To bring a child into the world is to guarantee them at least some quantum of misery and pain. Doing so also makes it possible for that child to experience joy, pleasure, and satisfaction, too. Recall, however, the asymmetry we discussed above: it's bad to be harmed, by losing things for instance, but it's not necessarily a harm not to be benefitted. In Benatar's version, the asymmetry tells us that the absence of pain is a good thing, even if there's nobody there to feel pain, whereas pleasure is only valuable if there's someone there to experience it.

Putting all this together yields the chilling conclusion that we harm someone by bringing them into existence and thereby exposing them to suffering, but we don't harm them by not

bringing them into existence and so depriving them of the joys of life. We're morally obliged not to create unhappy people, but we're not obliged to create happy ones. It's a reasonably complex argument, but the end result is stark: it would be better, morally speaking, if nobody was ever born.

This position, known as antinatalism, is far from popular (though a few environmentalists endorse it for other, less philosophically arcane reasons). It's one of those arguments that people deeply want to believe is wrong. There are moments in his book *Better Never To Have Been* when Benatar himself expresses a certain regret that this is where his argument leads us. For many lay commentators, if philosophers are saying things like this, then the problem is not with having children, but with philosophy itself.

I maintain that philosophy can indeed teach us much about the nature of loss. At its best, philosophy can even console, even if it sometimes speaks its words of comfort in a stilted and awkward way. But there are other times when those who know the pain of loss would be justified in rebuking the philosopher in Tennyson's own words:

*Behold, ye speak an idle thing:  
Ye never knew the sacred dust:  
I do but sing because I must,  
And pipe but as the linnets sing* □

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# GREAT MINDS like to think

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TOM CHATFIELD  
The game of life

by Tom Chatfield

# The game of life

When I was growing up in the 1980s, my family and I sometimes played a board game called ‘The Game of Life’. Rather than throwing dice, you spun a central wheel to determine your move, yielding a number between one and ten. The playing pieces were coloured plastic cars which meandered through an idyllic landscape towards the Day of Reckoning: a final choice between either the Country Cottage or Millionaire’s Mansion. Despite these names, money was the only thing that mattered in either scenario. You waited until every player had finished, either drawing a pension (Cottage) or speculating on the stock market (Mansion) in the meantime, then totted up your gains to determine the winner.

Along the way, you made certain choices and passed certain milestones. Both marriage and employment were compulsory. There were tiny holes in each car, into which blue and pink plastic pegs were inserted to represent a spouse and children. Each child was worth £20,000 at the end of the game, so it paid to be fertile. You got to a pursue a career based upon a choice of two initial paths: University or

Business. Business offered a short-cut to a salary while University offered greater risks alongside the allocation of one of five professions: physicist, teacher, lawyer, journalist, doctor. For reasons best known to the game’s designers, the most lucrative profession was journalism, bringing in a salary of £20,000. I still wonder how many disillusioned journalists curse The Game of Life for suggesting they’d be out-earning lawyers.

The version of the game I played dated back to 1960, when it was released by the Milton Bradley games company as a centennial reimagining of its founder’s 1860 creation ‘The Checkered Game of Life’. Boasting squares such as Idleness, Disgrace, Poverty, Crime, and Prison, Bradley’s original offered a harsher playing experience. According to his patent application, the game was “intended to forcibly impress upon the minds of youth the great moral principles of virtue and vice”. Despite these objectives, its practical message seems to have been identical to that of the game my brother and I played until its detachable plastic buildings rattled in their slots and the flapper on the

Wheel of Fortune snapped off. Winning at The Game of Life meant amassing more money than anyone else, and every single decision could and should be measured in terms of its contribution to this objective – while remembering that blind luck could derail even the soundest strategy.

Much like Monopoly – which began as a tool for illustrating the evils of capitalism, but ended up demonstrating how fun it is to render your friends and family destitute – The Game of Life has sold millions of copies thanks to some crucial ways in which it isn’t like real life. For a start, it’s socially acceptable to ignore moralising and set about winning. Then, when it’s finished, you tidy up the pieces, redistribute the spoils and start again. All losses are temporary, all victories inconsequential.

In fact, the prominence of chance means that The Game of Life is fair in a way that life isn’t. Everyone plays by the same rules and starts with the same opportunities. You don’t win or lose thanks to who your parents are or what colour your skin happens to be; you can’t pretend you deserved a particular spin of the wheel. As long as you can stomach



Medea, 1868, by Frederick Sandys Greek, Birmingham Museums Trust



the heady heteronormativity, it's a level playing field. If you play enough times, you'll live any number of lives: fortunate, destitute, triumphant, hopeless. You may even learn one of childhood's handiest lessons; how to lose with at least a semi-convincing simulation of good grace.

Despite its simplicity, *The Game of Life* looks from a certain angle like one of the 20th century's most famous philosophical thought experiments: the "veil of ignorance" proposed by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. How might we wish to structure a society, Rawls asked, if we didn't know in advance what position we were going to occupy? What principles would we be willing to endorse if we knew that, upon awakening tomorrow, we would be randomly allocated one of all the possible lives within it? For Rawls, the principle that follows from this is "justice as fairness", focused upon an equality of basic rights. A society defined by such a principle would still have its winners and losers; its conflicts

and vagaries of fate. But these would not be attributable to inequalities of access to opportunities or advantages. Anyone could in principle become a doctor, a lawyer, a physicist or – if they were very fortunate – a journalist. Everyone is spinning the same wheel.

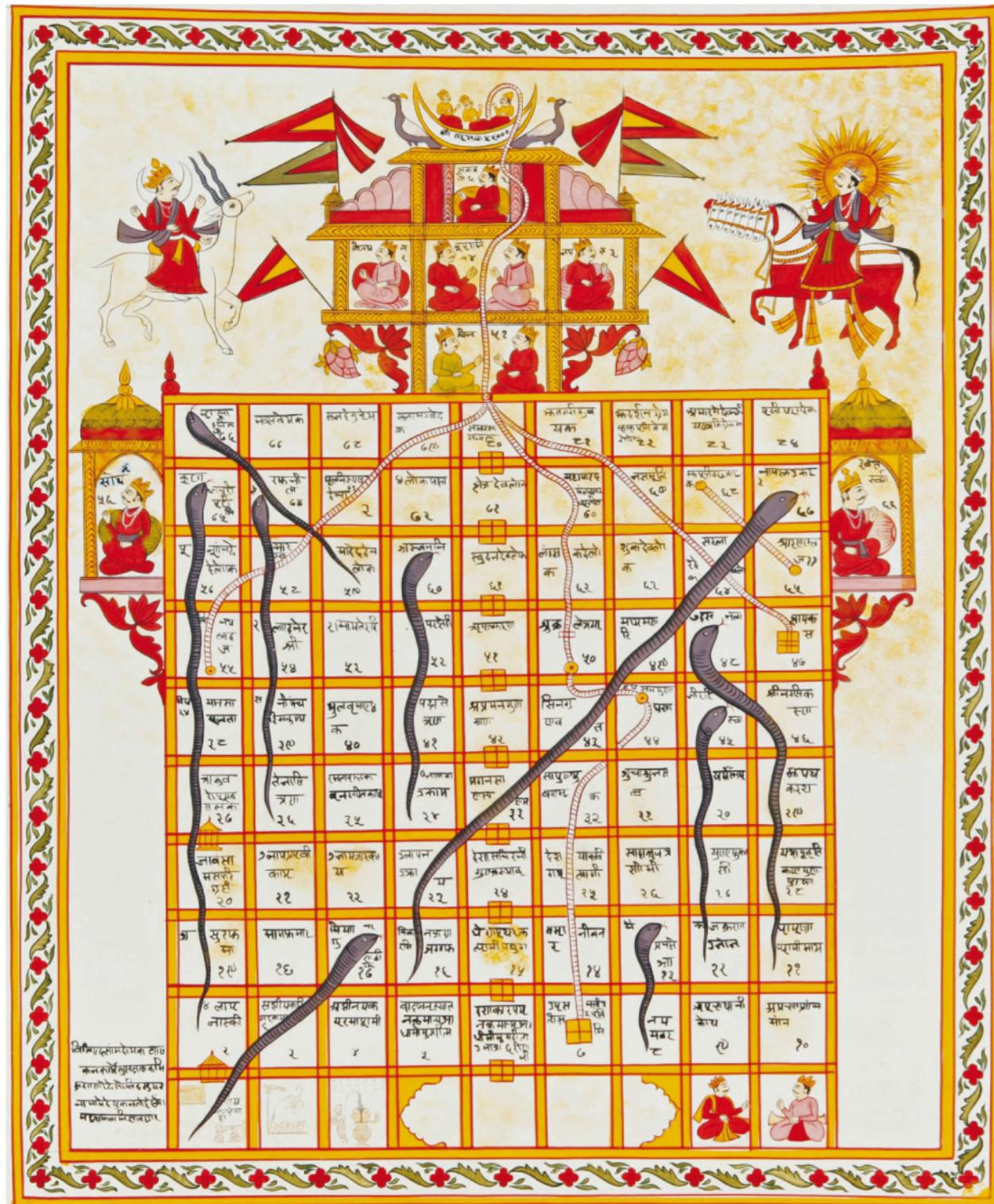
Life itself isn't a game. Yet games shed an intriguing light on how people have thought about living, striving, and losing over the last few millennia. If you're interested in keeping score, money is one contender, but more impartial or altruistic alternatives are also available (just ask the utilitarians and longtermists). Hedonism lends itself to a game-like framing – go for broke when you get a shot a pleasure! – while reminding us that there's no replays or reshuffling. Unless, that is, you believe this world's losses will be redressed in the next: that, like some kind of divine scoreboard, a transcendent Day of Reckoning awaits.

In earthly terms, one of the few things most people can agree upon is that we come from and return to

nothing. There's only one stop after the Country Cottage and the Millionaire's Mansion, and it's the same for everyone. Nobody wins or loses; the final result is always a draw. Or rather, the chance to spend some time at play with others is the only shot you get at making and finding meanings; at bringing the possibility of loss into existence.

"To be playful," James P. Carse argued in his 1986 book *Finite and Infinite Games*, "is not to be trivial or frivolous, or to act as though nothing of consequence will happen. On the contrary, when we are playful with each other we relate as free persons." A game that isn't freely chosen isn't a game – and this makes the fact that we can and do choose to play together a defining form of freedom. No matter who you are or how far you've come, anything and everything can be taken away by one spin of Fortune's wheel. And sooner or later, everything will be. What, then, does it mean to live and love in the meantime: to aim at the kind of success worth losing for? ■

**Hedonism lends itself to a game-like framing – go for broke when you get a shot a pleasure! – while reminding us that there's no replays or reshuffling.**



Jain version Game of Snakes & Ladders called jnana bazi or Gyan bazi, India, 19th century

“We are, by some providence, alive, and hope to remain so.  
These matters are in the hands of a blind fate whose decrees it  
is perhaps well that we cannot foresee.”

Freeman Dyson



*Dejected Brazilian players at the Women's World Cup soccer final, 2007, by Jonathan Larsen/Diadem Images*





Caleb Williams reacts after losing a NCAA football game, 2023, by Charles Baus/CSM

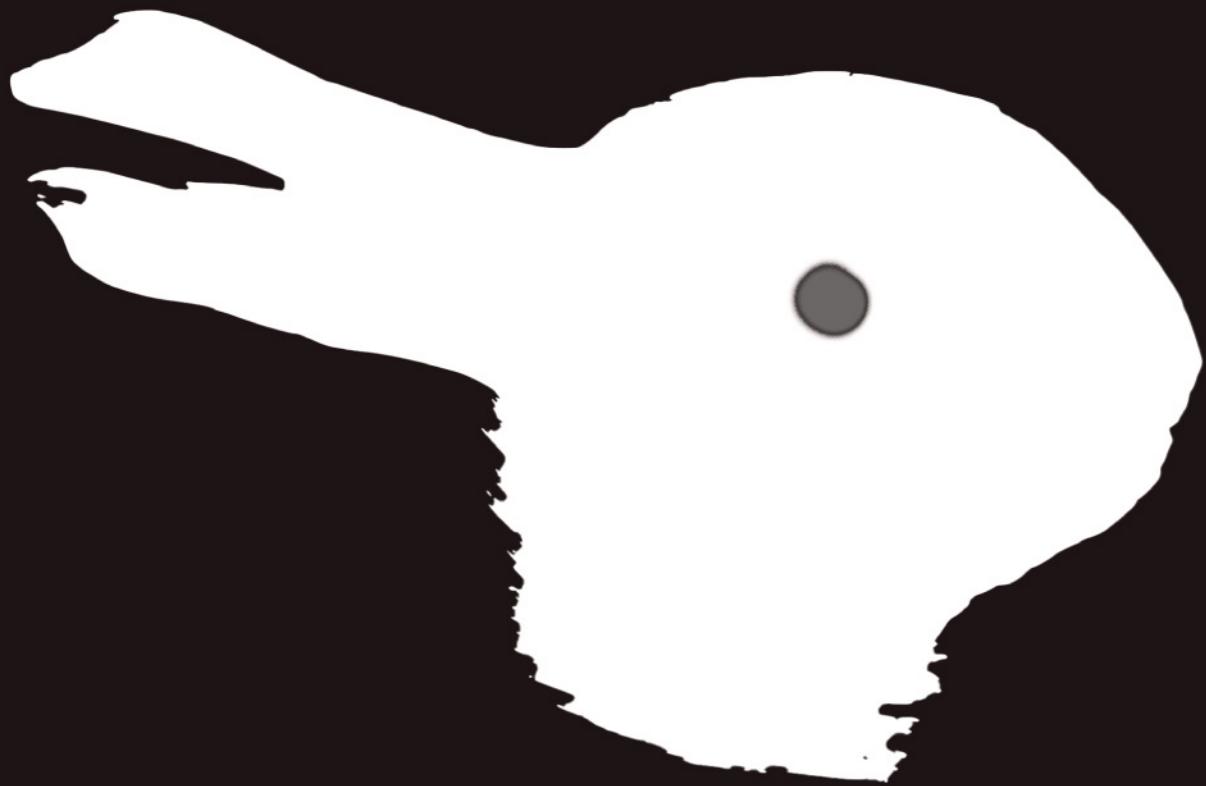


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by Nigel Warburton

# Outsourced memories

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There is a tradition in philosophy that makes our memories the core of our personal being, essential to what we are, and the basis of our personal identity over time. This stems from John Locke's discussion in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (first published in 1689), and his famous thought experiment where a prince and a poor cobbler wake up with memories exchanged. According to Locke, if the cobbler (who now has the prince's memories) had committed a crime, we should hold the person with the prince's body (and the cobbler's memories) responsible, and vice versa. For Locke, memories and memory continuity make us who we are, and it is only a contingent fact that our memories are usually tied to a particular body over time. He even contemplated the possibility of there being more than one person within a single body – a person who lives by day and one who lives by night, for example, with their memories entirely encapsulated, the one opaque from the other, unaware of each other's existence. On a Lockean view, if we lose enough of our remembered continuity, perhaps through dementia, then we literally become a different person, or perhaps not even a person at all. And if we really can't remember our moral failings or crimes, we shouldn't be held responsible for them because in an important sense we didn't do those things – same body perhaps, but a different person.

Probably many of our memories aren't so easily separated from aspects of a particular body. Memories of how to do things, rather than of facts or past events may be far more embodied than Locke and his followers suggest. I'm thinking of memories like the memory of how to drive, or ride a bicycle, or play a musical instrument. And character traits of warmth or generosity can persist even when individuals have almost completely lost a sense of who they are and can't recall key events of their past. There is a sense in which something of a person can remain even when their mind has been reduced to almost nothing by memory loss. As we grow older, we don't only increase the risks of gradually losing ourselves and those close to us through the memory loss and perseverations of dementia, but we also risk losing our own memories when those dear to us die. They can take our memories with them when they die; not just their own. Philosophy can shed some light on this.

It is twenty-five years since Andy Clark and David Chalmers published their first paper on the extended mind thesis. This rich hypothesis suggests a way of understanding what we are that can clarify what it is we stand to lose when our friends and family die before we do. We can lose not just a person dear to us, but potentially our own memories, which are part of what we are, even though it was in someone else's brain

that the memories were held. Clark and Chalmers originally wrote about how someone whose memory was unreliable but who used detailed notes to himself as a way of navigating a city could be thought of as using his notes as an external memory. When they used the word ‘memory’ here they did not mean this as a metaphor. In place of the prejudice that the mind resides within the skull, or at least within the individual’s body, they presented a picture that allowed us to make parts of the world parts of our minds. The argument rests on the function of the external tool or memory device, its readiness to hand, and its reliability.

The philosopher of mind Ned Block quipped that this view of the mind was false when first stated but has subsequently become true – because of the advent of the smartphone. Smartphones hold our memories of telephone numbers and addresses, and much else besides, and they can plausibly be thought of as extensions of our mind, even though saying the same about a notepad may have been seen to be more like a metaphor back in 1998.

Some philosophy leaves everything as it was, but simply redescribes it so that we see it in a different way. This is what Ludwig Wittgenstein was getting at when he wrote about ‘the dawning of an aspect’. He used the puzzle picture of a duck-rabbit that could be seen either as a duck or a rabbit. To see it as

one not the other required no new sensory input. It was the result of a Gestalt shift – the same information perceived differently. This is very much how I see the extended mind thesis. We haven’t learned something new from it, rather it is a catalyst to think about what we already know in a new way. Chalmers has described this as being like a Necker Cube. Previously we might have seen the mind as basically within the head; now we can see the mind as potentially including the items that we carry with us that extend our memories and other sorts of perceptions of the world. This has great explanatory force.

My memory for past social events is not capacious or reliable. There are parties and dinners and meetings that I can’t easily recall or distinguish between when I try to recall them. My wife, however, remembers the ones we’ve attended together with a startling accuracy. She can recount who was there, what they said, what they were wearing, where we were. Sometimes it’s uncanny how much she remembers and a little disturbing how much I have forgotten. Within a couple it’s quite common for there to be some division of labour – in this case, she is far better than me at preserving our joint memories of occasions like these. Once she gives me a few hints, something of the memory returns. Without her memories, mine would be irretrievable and a blurry mélange of multiple occasions. One way



of thinking about this is to say that I have outsourced some of my memories in her memory.

The extended mind thesis explains why the death of someone very close to us, with whom we have many shared memories, can be felt as such a loss. We don’t just lose what we value about that person and the possibility of future meetings and interactions, we don’t just lose the person we valued and loved; we also lose something of ourselves. When parents or spouses or very dear friends die, they take a part of us to the grave with them. We really do die a little when they die, and we are quite literally diminished in the process. ▀

**My memory for past social events is not capacious or reliable. There are parties and dinners and meetings that I can’t easily recall or distinguish between when I try to recall them.**



*Kenneth Whitley, 1939, Library of Congress*

“A wise man loses nothing,  
if he but save himself.”

Michel de Montaigne



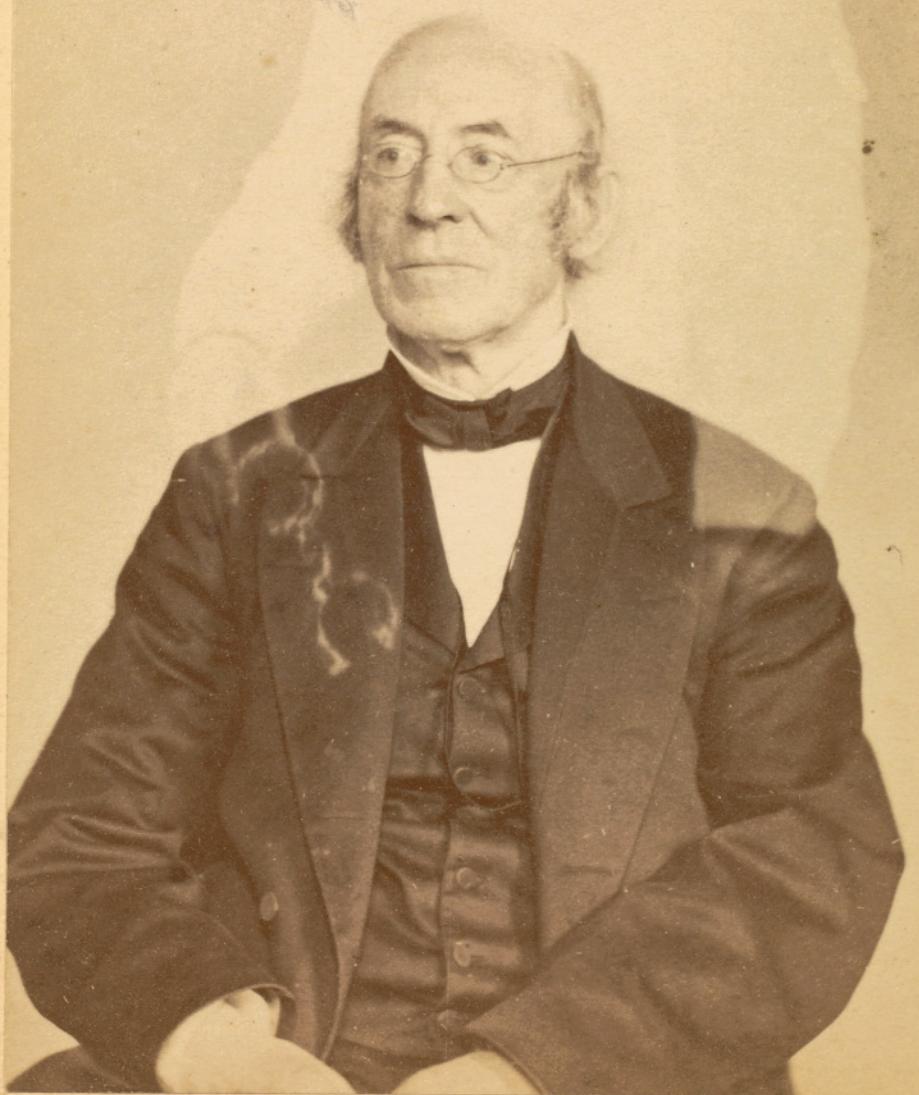


# Remember the dead

In the late 19th century, Boston photographer William H. Mumler posed his subjects by a window in his studio – grieving fathers, distraught lovers, even Mary Todd Lincoln, the widow of Abraham Lincoln. Mumler's customers paid good money (\$10, or around \$370 today) not just to see their own portrait, but also their loved ones, the dear departed hovering above them in the backdrop of the photograph. When Mary Lincoln received her portrait from the spirit photographer, framed behind her was the spectral figure of her husband, Abraham Lincoln, his hands lovingly resting upon her shoulders. “What peace and comfort to the weary soul! To know that our friends who have passed away can return and give us unmistakable evidence of a life hereafter – that they are with us,” declared Mumler, whose techniques using harsh chemicals in a dark room gave grieving parents and spouses a physical connection to the dead. While spirit photography was a comfort for mourners, not everyone was convinced that spirits could be recorded on photographic plates. Eventually, Mumler was taken to court and tried for fraud and larceny, where a series of experts presented myriad techniques he may have used to create his ghostly apparitions. Despite the damning evidence against him, Mumler was acquitted. Nonetheless, for those who visited Mumler’s studio, grieving the loss of dearest friends and relatives, the solace to be had from viewing the false images was priceless.

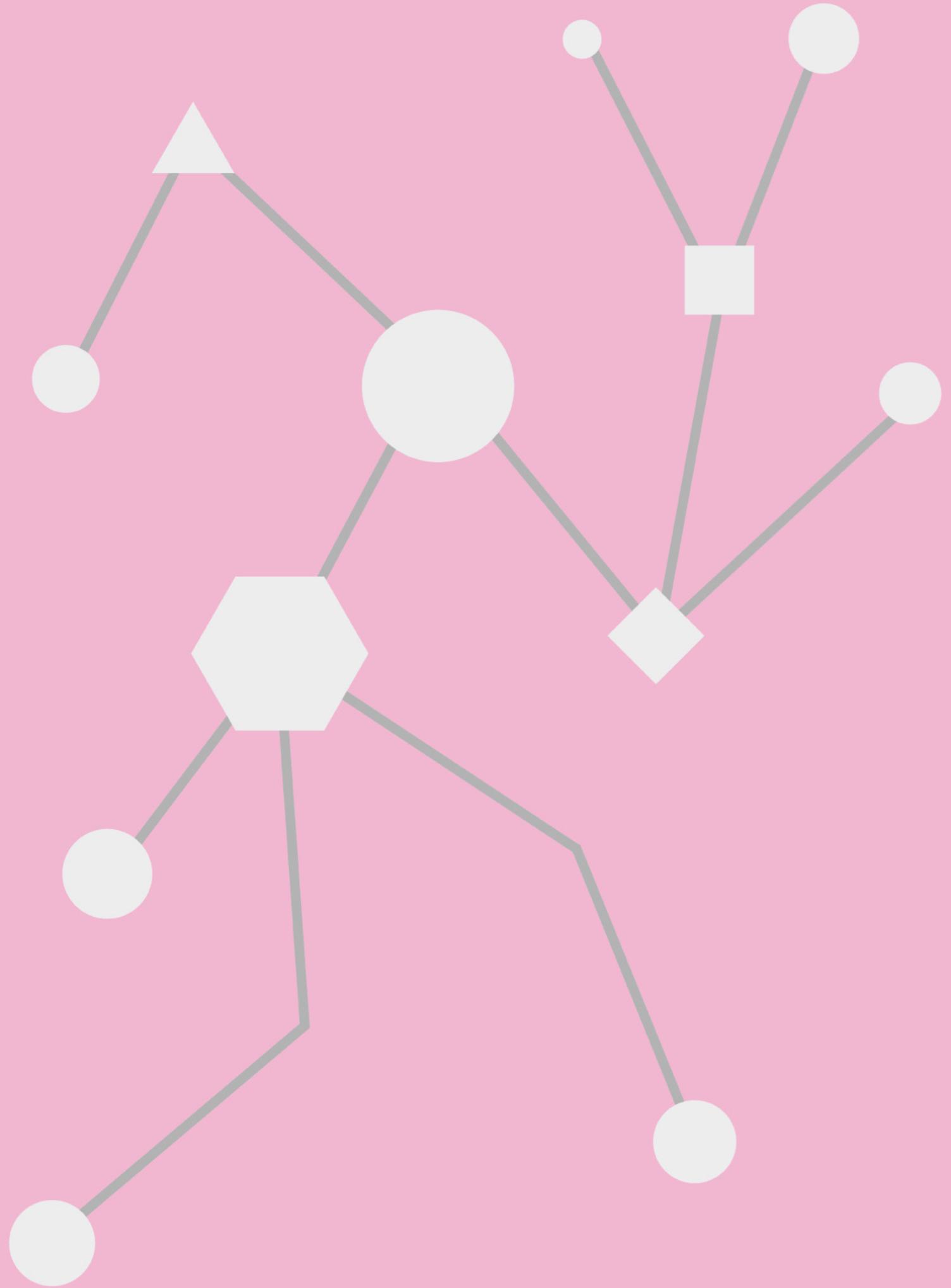
Photos by William H.  
Mumler











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by André Dao

# Losing faith

All around the world, young people in their twenties and thirties are losing faith in democracy. According to one mega survey of surveys, comprising some five million respondents, 55 per cent of millennials in their mid-thirties are dissatisfied with the way democracy is functioning. That's double the dissatisfaction of Gen Xers at the same age, while a majority of Baby Boomers have consistently reported their satisfaction with democracy over the years.

Meanwhile, in the Anglosphere – and elsewhere – trust in mainstream media is at historic lows. And in 2016, Michael Gove, then Lord Chancellor of the UK, announced that the public had “had enough of experts”. His

assessment seemed to be borne out by British voters, who later that year voted to leave the European Union, against the advice of many legal and economic experts. The same dynamic has been repeated in elections worldwide: populist leaders have profited at the polls from their denigration of ‘elites’ and ‘expertise’.

In the longer term, this collective loss of faith in modern institutions seems to reflect the slow ebbing of faith in what has, historically, been the most significant institution of all: organised religion.

So are we moving, inexorably, towards nihilism and anarchy? Or is there something we can do to prevent this steady erosion of authority? The

obvious course is to double down on faith: for some, this means insisting that the only way forward for humanity is a wholesale return to the certainties of organised religion. Others intone various mantras about the importance of a free press and of investigative journalism – sunlight being the best disinfectant, and all that – while the numbers show that misinformation and invective is going viral, not painstakingly researched exposés. Still others defend democracy as, in Winston Churchill's words, the ‘worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time’. Which amounts to saying: we know things aren't working – but believe us, there is no alternative.



Is this not a rather futile attempt to turn back the clock? At the very least, it feels like shutting the gate well after the critical horse has bolted. Take, for example, debates about science and expertise. Throughout the long economic boom following the World War II, faith in the authority of science, at least in wealthy western countries, peaked – aided, no doubt, by spectacular demonstrations of scientific achievement during the Cold War, including atomic energy and the Moon landing. This faith lasted into the 1980s, when conservative leaders including Margaret Thatcher and George Bush Senior were willing to accept the scientific evidence of climate change. As Bush put it, “1988 is the year the Earth spoke back.” Taking action to prevent global warming, he said, was “just plain common sense”.

Looking back, it’s sobering to think that this may well have been the high-water mark for global political consensus on climate change. What happened, in the succeeding years, to that “plain common sense”?

One way to understand the tragedy that followed is to go back to the Enlightenment, when the foundations for both the extraordinary technologies of the twentieth century, and the widespread faith in the processes that produced them, were laid. It was during the ‘long’ 18th century that faith in reason began to replace

faith in religion. And the central tenet of this new faith was that one had to question everything.

Enlightenment philosophers developed new techniques for this radical questioning. Most notably, Immanuel Kant questioned reason itself in his work (one might also think of René Descartes’ method of radical doubt, or Bishop Berkeley, who argued that reality is nothing more than minds and their ideas). The cumulative force of these attacks shifted the location of authority from one set of institutions – the Church, and the royal court where the monarch ruled by divine right – to another set of institutions based on reason, argument, and critique: parliaments, the free press, universities, and laboratories. Over time, people became less and less willing to receive wisdom from their supposed betters. They demanded proofs, conducting their own investigations, and engaging in their own debates.

So in one sense, the spirit of the Enlightenment set up the scientific and political consensus of the mid-twentieth century. But in another sense, this drive to debunk and demystify also eroded the authority of the very institutions that the Enlightenment had helped make authoritative. How democratic, really, are parliaments that are comprised always of the same set of people, drawn from a tiny sliver of the population? How free is a press owned

by a handful of billionaires? And how reliable is the knowledge produced in universities and laboratories afflicted with all the biases and blind spots of western philosophy, not to mention the personal and professional ambitions of their staff, the indeterminacy of language, and the provisional nature of all propositions?

Now, much of this debunking and demystifying was carried out in good faith. You could even say that when so-called post-modern philosophers questioned the possibility of truth, they did so as inheritors of the Enlightenment tradition – they just pushed critique towards its logical extreme. But not all criticism of our institutions has meant well: climate change denial is a case in point. After the apparent political consensus of the late 1980s, fossil fuel companies and their allies took up the critical cudgels to cast doubt on the science. Suddenly, the essential uncertainty of knowledge became a talking point on cable TV. Climate scientists’ emails were hacked to show that their supposedly objective processes were riddled with strategic and professional considerations and negotiations. Science and scientists were, in other words, said to be political – and therefore no more authoritative than a politician, or, for that matter, a corporate spokesperson.

The response from the scientific community has generally been to insist, once again, on their objectivity – often

## **How democratic, really, are parliaments that are comprised always of the same set of people, drawn from a tiny sliver of the population?**

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by providing more numbers and more data (a.k.a. shutting the gate). But the curtain has long been pulled back. Can we really say that the results of science are unaffected by money and politics, by cognitive and social biases? (That's the horse, bolting.)

What, then, is to be done? Perhaps, counter-intuitively, we should keep pulling back the curtain. That indeed was the course chartered by Bruno Latour, the French philosopher who contributed as much as anyone to the demystification of scientific knowledge. In a series of famous – and controversial – studies, Latour showed how facts are not simply out there, waiting to be found. Rather, facts are made. Importantly, Latour argued that the making of a fact always involves a great deal of persuasion – in the case of a scientific fact, that will involve a scientist persuading first their peers, then the wider world, that a particular finding amounts to a fact. Latour's distinctive contribution in this regard was his insistence on the role played by myriad people, processes, and objects – what he called actors – in the making of any single fact. For instance, in his study of Louis Pasteur, Latour argued that Pasteur's 'discovery' of microbes was not as simple as 'scientist uncovers fact'.

Instead, the facts of microbial life were produced by a complex collaboration between Pasteur the scientist, fellow researchers, an array of technical equipment, sources of funding, linguistic norms, popular conceptions of disease, and the microbes themselves. Latour

called this complex web a network. And the strength of a fact, according to Latour, lay not in how closely it corresponded to some ground truth, or 'reality', but rather on the strength and complexity of the network that produced it. In short, the stronger the network of verification, the more reliable the fact is likely to be (and the less likely that it is total fantasy).

Coming back to our under-threat institutions, Latour would say that the health of a democracy or a media landscape or a community of experts lies precisely in the strength and depth of its fact-making networks. Rather than trying to shore up faith in their mystical authority, Latour would have these institutions become radically transparent. That would mean, first, acknowledging that yes, these institutions are political and subject to biases. But, when well designed and well maintained, these institutions have extraordinary mechanisms for ensuring the reliability of the facts they produce.

For climate science, that would mean, in Latour's words, making a virtue of "the large number of researchers involved in climate analysis, the complex system for verifying data, the articles and reports, the principle of peer evaluation, the vast network of weather stations, floating weather buoys, satellites and computers that ensure the flow of information". No appeal to blind faith here. But there is, perhaps, an emerging form of authority – the authority of the network. □



“No person can lose  
what they never had.”  
– Izaak Walton

“One often calms one’s grief by  
recounting it.”

Pierre Corneille

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“Light griefs are communicative, great  
ones stupefy.”

Seneca

---

“Grief tears his heart,  
and drives him to and fro,  
In all the rageing impotence of woe.”

Homer

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“My grief lies onward and my joy behind.”

William Shakespeare

“Every highly privileged group develops the myth of its natural, especially its blood, superiority.”

Max Weber

“Why wilt thou add to all the griefs  
I suffer  
Imaginary ills, and fancy'd tortures.”

Joseph Addison

“There is no grief which time does not lessen and soften.”

Cicero

“Grief is the price we pay for love.”

Elizabeth II

“Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
That has been and may be again.”

William Wordsworth

“Happiness is beneficial for the body but it is grief that develops the powers of the mind.”

Marcel Proust



Interviewee: Michael Cholbi  
Interviewer: Zan Boag

# Transformative grief



**Michael Cholbi** is Professor and Personal Chair in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. He has published widely in ethical theory, practical ethics, and the philosophy of death and dying. His books include *Suicide: The Philosophical Dimensions*, *Understanding Kant's Ethics*, and *Grief: A Philosophical Guide*. Cholbi is the editor of several scholarly collections, including *Immortality and the Philosophy of Death*; *New Directions in the Ethics of Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia*; and the *Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Suicide*. He is the co-editor of *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives* and his work has appeared in the scholarly journals *Ethics*, *Mind*, *Philosophical Studies*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, and *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*.

**Zan Boag:** I'd like to start with the various ways that one can grieve. I'd like to get a definition of the grieving process, if I could, from you.

**Michael Cholbi:** I would say that grief is our response – usually it's fairly emotionally rich – to transformations in our relationships with other people or possibly other things, where those are the kinds of relationships that we've invested our identity in, that are central to how we think of ourselves, that are sources of our reasons for doing what we do day-to-day in the world. So in my view, there's a wide range of different kinds of events that can prompt grief.

My work tends to focus on bereavement, grief related to the deaths of those we've invested ourselves in. But I think we can grieve breakups, divorces, retirement from the workforce, and other kinds of

transformations in our relationships with other people.

*It's interesting you talk about transformations. I remember interviewing a philosopher by the name of L.A. Paul, who spoke about transformative experiences. I wonder how grief fits in, whether the grieving process itself is a transformative experience for the individual who experiences it?*

Let me first say that there's a very good article by a philosopher, Jelena Markovic, who actually argues for the claim that grief is transformative. I do think that we should approach grief with the expectation that it's probably going to change us in some way. There can be episodes of grief where we're grieving someone in whom our identity is invested, but maybe the investment isn't all that great. Maybe a favourite pop star of ours died, and we



*Inconsolable grief*, 1884, by Ivan Kramskoi



feel some grief, but it ends with our being essentially the same as we were before they died. But I think in the cases of more momentous grief, we should definitely expect that we're going to come out of it slightly different than we came in. My hope is that the changes can be positive for us, that it can be a source of self-understanding or self-insight. But I do think grief tends to alter our conception of ourselves in the world. It alters how we relate to the world in the broadest sense of ethical. It can change what we care about or what we're attached to, and even the day-to-day patterns in our lives.

*Staying on this idea that the changes can be positive – is there something to be gained from loss, through the process of grieving? Can you be in a better position after having gone through this grieving process?*

I don't want to be Pollyanna-ish here and say, "Well, we should be so glad for grief," or that we should be

immune or indifferent to loss. We humans are creatures that have a sense of ourselves in time and a sense of the contingency of the things that matter to us. We know that much of what we care about is likely – at some point – to no longer exist. So, on the one hand, we have to recognise that we do lose things in the course of our lives. But on the other hand, I would describe my own view about grief as a kind of guarded optimism, that we can gain a certain kind of self-knowledge or self-understanding from grieving. We can, in the course of grieving, lose our way in the world. Grief is an indicator that we've lost something that anchored our experience in the world and we're struggling to figure out how to continue in light of that loss. And grief registers that loss. It helps us make the loss visible to us. But I also think grief is a resource for figuring out how to find our way again, a tool for reorienting ourselves to the world after loss. So I think there's something to be gained from grief, but I'm not

suggesting that we should maximise our opportunities for grieving by losing as much as we can or creating as many chances for loss as the world will afford us.

*It's part and parcel of being human. It's inevitable that we're going to experience such a loss throughout the course of our lives. In some cases, it may be something that is to be expected, as in the loss of a parent, but then you come to those other types of losses where it's unexpected, and, potentially they're a little bit more difficult to deal with, say the loss of a child, the loss of a friend at a young age, a life transformation of some sort, such as losing a job you didn't expect to lose. How does this differ from an expected loss?*

There's probably something more traumatic or upsetting about the losses of things that we don't expect to lose. But one of the deeply puzzling things about grief is that we do know that the things that we are attached to are vulnerable to being



destroyed, and in particular, that our relationships with others can erode or disappear. And yet we seem unable, I think, to be fully prepared for that loss, even though we know it's coming. Certainly we know, let's say in the case of our parents for example, that there's a very good chance that we will outlive them, that we will lose them. We can deliberate about that, we can reflect upon that, we can try to ready ourselves for that. Yet even with the best preparation, we nevertheless feel grief. We can't emotionally or psychologically outrun grief in the end.

In this respect, all of the losses that prompt grief are losses for which we're rarely fully prepared. Of course though, the ones that are abrupt and come out of the blue, we're less prepared for.

*You talk about not being able to outrun grief, but at the same time, after losing someone close to us, there is a grieving process, of course, but life tends to go on just after this has happened. The person about whom one has been grieving fades into the background and the sadness tends to dissipate. Why do you think we're able to adapt so quickly when we've lost someone who at the time was so precious to us?*

I'd ever so slightly contest the premise of your question: There are people who don't adapt. It's not completely uncommon for people who suffer particularly intense forms of grief, say the grief that a widow or a widower is feeling after the death of a long-term spouse, to experience shock so great that it immediately causes health problems, and they end up dying not long after their spouse. And of course, perhaps even more sadly, some people engage in suicidal conduct in the course of grieving. So,

I think it's worth noting that sometimes people don't really recover. Fortunately, that's not the norm.

As to the question of why we adapt so quickly, we should be careful as to what the presuppositions of that question are. There are philosophers that have made much of how quickly we seem to 'recover' from grief in the sense that we don't feel sadness as long as we might expect, or the loss seems to diminish in that we don't feel that same sense of anguish as time goes on. Yet I would underscore there, that we shouldn't identify or equate the diminishment of that sadness or anguish with adaptation. There are other things that go on in grieving. People try to figure out what their lives are going to look like and what the central concerns of their future lives are going to be. That's also part of the adaptation process. And even when we do adapt, this does not amount to nor necessarily entail anything like forgetting. It's not the case that we forget our loved ones, even though that sadness that tends to characterise the early stages of grief does tend to dissipate over time.

*You argue in Grief: A Philosophical Guide that we have a duty to ourselves to grieve, and I'm quoting here, "... because we have a duty to pursue self-knowledge, and grief is an opportunity for self-knowledge." Could you expand a bit on this point? What sort of self-knowledge can we hope for from the grieving process?*

One of the things to say about grieving is that it tends to be a very emotional experience for people, very emotionally intensive. One of the roles that our emotions play in our lives is that they disclose to us what we value. So, when you, for example, feel sadness in the course of



Michael Cholbi

grief, that's an indicator to you that you have lost something of value. Of course, in the process of grieving, you might feel other emotions. You might feel, say anger. That tells you something about what you've lost too. It's an insight into the relationship with that person who's now deceased. So too, I would say you gain insight from other emotions. You might feel guilt or anxiety in midst of grief.

The fact that grief tends to be such an emotionally rich experience indicates how it is that it can be informative to us about what we value. Our emotions tell us what we care about. So, in undergoing these emotions, I think we are put face to face with a powerful set of resources that inform us what we care about, and also inform us about what we want to care about. What is it that we want to retain in



our relationship with the deceased, and what in that relationship might we want to jettison or set aside? The kind of self-knowledge that we can get from grief then, is, if you will, ethical self-knowledge. We can learn about our own values, concerns, and commitments. Grief, I think, is an experience that brings into relief our own practical identities, brings into relief what we care about most and allows us to see these with a kind of richness and urgency that we might otherwise struggle to achieve.

*You talk about different emotions, such as anger or guilt. I think guilt is a huge part of the way people grieve in that they remain, while the other person is not there anymore. But they also have a guilt that perhaps they don't feel as much as they should or they're not feeling in the right way. Now, grief appears to be a set of emotions, rather than just a single way to feel. In what way does it adapt and change as the grieving process progresses?*

One model that psychologists have developed that I think is very plausible for thinking about the grief process is what's known as the dual process model. And essentially what the dual process model says is that our grief experiences can roughly be split into two categories. On the one hand, there are grief experiences that are concerned with the loss, and they're backward-looking. We're

trying to process or figure out what we've lost. Then the other category of experiences is forward-looking, where we're trying to identify how we're going to live in the world with this loss.

And on this model, we oscillate between these. Earlier stages of grief tend to belong more to the first category, engaging with the loss. And then as grief continues, it tends to shift more to that second category, where we're adapting to the world without this person that mattered to us in a special sort of way. We shouldn't think of grief merely as a set of emotions. It's affectively rich, but I defend the idea that rather than view grief as an emotion or a set thereof, we should instead view grief as a kind of activity oriented around attention to loss. Over the course of a grief episode, whether it's a week, a month, a year, what have you, we're giving attention to this person and to this relationship disproportionate to what we would otherwise give it. Along with this, the other concerns that play a role in our lives thereby recede.

*Another interesting point that I think you delve into here, is that grief in of itself tends not to be what we would classify as being rational. You talk about how philosophers venerate reason and rational thinking, and that grief initially may be viewed as irrational and*

*emotional, that it might, in your words, make us feel like we're losing our grip on the world. But you argue that grief can be rational. How can this be the case?*

One very common feature of grief, and something that I've worked very hard to make sense of in my own research on this topic, is the ways in which it can feel, as you say, like we've lost our grip. Grief feels very disorienting or puzzling for many. One of the few memoirs of grief written by a philosopher is C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, and he describes his own grief experience as a situation where he experienced the world as if he was separated from it by a blanket that prevented him from engaging with it in the ordinary way. He didn't feel at home in the world. Instead, he felt alienated or out of place.

That's one way in which grief can be an experience that confounds us. To return to a theme from a moment ago, grief can at the same time be a source of disclosure for what we care about because it's so emotionally rich. On the one hand, grief signals to us what we've lost. But because it is so emotionally rich and informative about what we value, it can help us reorient ourselves, to find a new situation in the world that takes account of the fact that we can't relate to this person in the way that we did before. The dead can't play the same role in our lives that they had before. In a

**On the one hand, there are grief experiences that are concerned with the loss, and they're backward-looking. We're trying to process or figure out what we've lost.**

way, a grief is a tribute to the human capacity to be resilient, to figure out how to live in different sets of emotional and evaluative circumstances.

*It's interesting that you've written a book on this topic, because for the most part, philosophers haven't really focused on grief, it has been an emotional process that has been relegated to the background in our lives, something we don't tend to discuss. It's not something we will dwell on too much. By writing about it, you're bringing it into focus. Why do you think it is such an important topic to discuss?*

In part because grief raises explicitly philosophical questions that philosophers shouldn't outsource to other kinds of experts. Certainly psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental health professionals have said plenty about grief. And I greatly respect their contributions to our understanding of grief. But I do think there are questions here that the philosopher is particularly well situated to answer. For instance, one of the central problems that has motivated my work is the problem I call the paradox of grief. On the one hand, in and of itself and considered in abstraction from one's life, grief doesn't seem to be a very worthwhile thing. It involves a lot of painful and difficult emotions and stress and so forth that most of us would tend to prefer not to undergo. But at the same time, it seems to be the kind of experience that most of us would think that if you didn't undergo it, there'd be something crucial missing in your life – that your life would be less than fully human.

And to address the paradox of grief, you have to be well-equipped to think about values. And of course, it's philosophers that are purportedly experts in thinking about values. So I think that's one reason why I think the topic merits philosophical attention. I'm not trying to be directly therapeutic in my own work. I'm not thinking that I'm going to solve anyone's problems around grief. Yet what philosophers can do here, and what I've tried to do, is to give people a vocabulary for thinking about their experience of grief that allows them to relate to it in ways that make it less mysterious and maybe a little less daunting. I'm also trying to offer a vocabulary that is non-pathological and doesn't invite us to think that in the course of grieving, we're undergoing something that indicates sickness or psychological deficiency. The vocabulary in which I couch my own work aims to help us to think about the grief experience as normal and tractable, as part of the ordinary trajectory of human life.

*So you're normalising the idea of grief – it isn't an issue to be 'dealt with', but rather something that we will all go through. Now, you speak of loss in a number of different ways in your book and how we experience loss, such as what the deceased has lost by no longer being alive, the loss of the person who is grieving and the loss of the person himself or herself. Now, how do these losses differ from one another? In what ways are each one of these important?*

There's a robust philosophical literature on the question of what (if

anything) we lose via death. There's the view held by Epicureans that we don't lose anything to death, captured famously in their slogan, "Death is nothing to us." There are other philosophers who've thought that we can be harmed via death because we're thereby precluded from having longer, better, and more satisfying lives.

The kind of loss that I connect to grief isn't the loss of one's existence in this sense, even though it can be a threat to our identities. We don't literally cease to exist in grief, but it can be, as we were discussing earlier, quite transformative or wide-ranging. And for some people, grief experiences come to represent a very significant pivot in their biographies.

*Well, one thing that you've touched on, you've discussed the idea of a loss of a relationship. I don't know if you've read any of Kenneth Gergen's work, I interviewed him about 10 years ago now and he spoke about his ideas about relational being, that we are the sum of our relationships with others. Do you think that's what we grieve most, the loss of our relationship that we have with that person?*

I would agree with that claim, but with a very important qualification. I would say that what we grieve most is the loss of our relationship with that person as it was or as we assumed it to be. I don't think that in grieving what we are doing necessarily is figuring out how to live without this relationship with the deceased person. We may do that. We may try to, if you will, cut the cord with the deceased and have no meaningful relationship with them.

But it's more common that what people are doing is, in the course of grieving, changing their relationship with that person, because the relationship is not going to be able to continue in the same way that it had prior to the person's death. There's all sorts of facts and realities about that person's death that necessitate a transformation in your relationship with them. You can't plan a holiday with your spouse. You can't go to your weekly poker game with your friend once they've died. And so on.

Hence, I don't think we end our relationship with the deceased by grieving. Instead, we're trying to figure out what kind of relationship we can have with them and what we value about our relationship with them, given that, again, their deaths mean that the relationship can't continue on the same terms as it had before.

*What might we be able to learn from loss? This isn't just in terms of the loss of a person, but losing in general in life, for example some sort of personal loss that most might regard as a failure of some sort. Is this kind of loss or failure important for humans to progress and learn about themselves?*

That's not a topic I've thought through quite as deeply as I've thought through grief. So I'll just say that my answers will be somewhat more tentative. I would say that, of course, we do want to learn from failures. I would not consider the grief

that we undergo in response to the deaths of others, the deaths of those who we invest our identity in, as any kind of failure. After all, human beings are mortal, and it's just a fact about those that matter to us that we can lose them. So it doesn't reflect badly on us that they've died.

That said, obviously there are situations where loss and failure can perhaps be more entangled or intertwined. For instance, there's some very interesting philosophical work afoot by people thinking about grief in connection with romantic breakups. And maybe that's a case where the loss and the sense of failure can't really be disentangled, because you might both, on the one hand, be lamenting the relationship that you've lost with this individual, but you might also be trying to figure out how to do this better.

So perhaps you feel a kind of blow to your sense of self-worth or self-esteem in that kind of case.

*Potentially this is the case with a breakdown of some sort of relationship, say it may be between a parent and a child, or the relationship ceases to work, so there's a loss of some sort. I wonder, can you grieve while the person is still alive?*

Oh, indisputably. I think that the important thing in my view about grief is that it tracks disruptions in our relationships that in turn generate wide-ranging and dramatic transformation in the relationship itself. Now,

in some cases, the transformation is in effect a kind of destruction. If you think about a romantic breakup where the parties decide they're just never going to have any contact with one another, they're going to do everything they can to forget one another (maybe one moves to the other side of the globe), that would be, I suppose, the extreme end of the spectrum of a relationship that you are deciding to literally bring to its end rather than permitting it to transform or change in some way.

Grief responds to death, but it also happens in response to ordinary alterations in people's relationships with one another that involve loss, alterations with a grief like character to them. Most parents will attest that there's a sense of loss associated with the maturation of one's children. They go through various stages of maturation, and just as you're comfortable with and accustomed to one of their stages, they grow out of it. It's natural, I'd say, to think of that as a kind of loss because we're deeply invested in the person, the child, as they are in the moment. And then just as that sort of investment becomes stable and well-grounded, it can go away. The child moves from being a tween to a teen, a teen into early adult. And I think people do experience those things as losses. Here too though, grief presents us with opportunities to learn about ourselves and acquire some measure of self-knowledge. ■



*Death and the Woman*, 1894, by Edvard Munch

“Future love does not exist. Love is a present activity only. The man who does not manifest love in the present has not love.”

Leo Tolstoy





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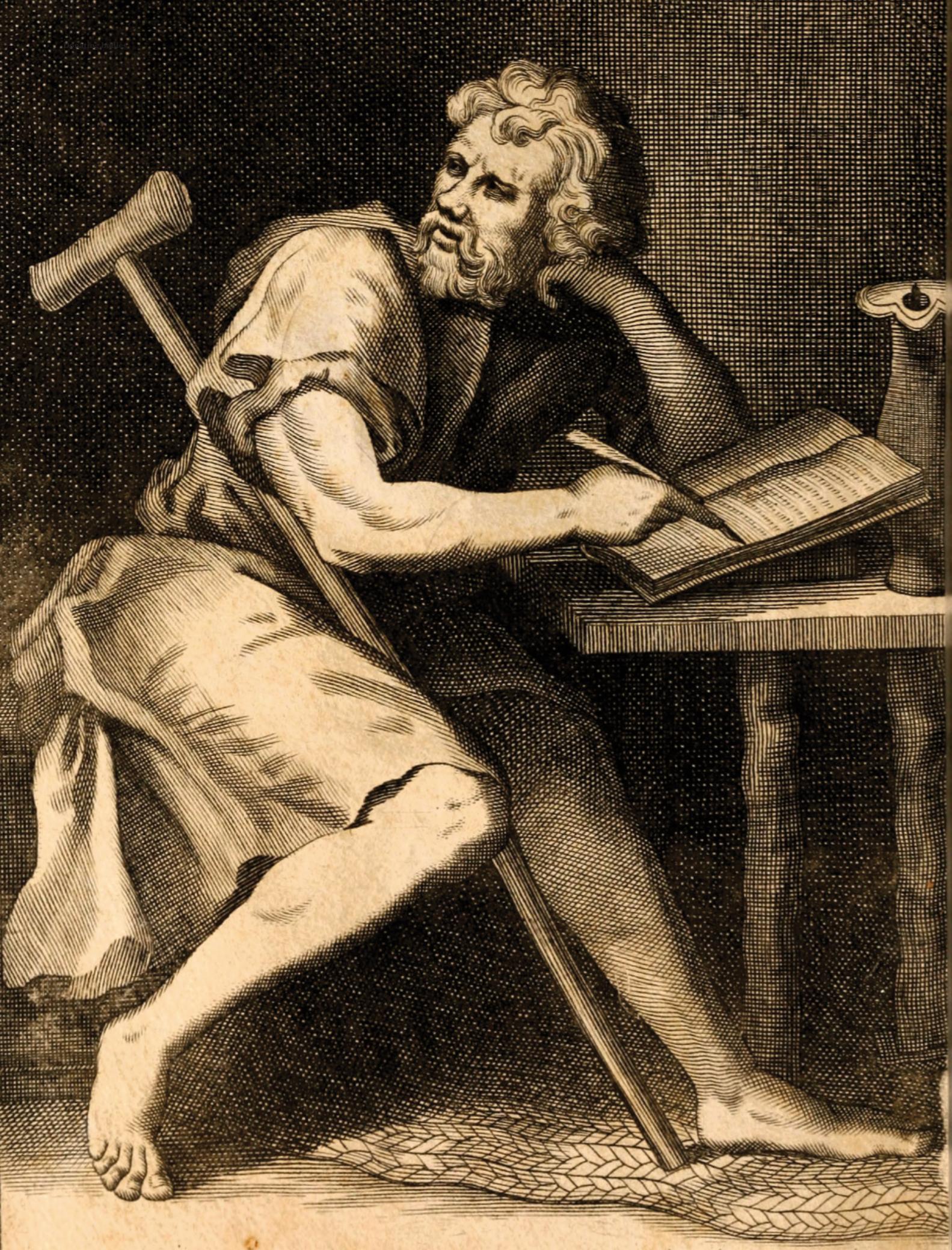


# Orpheus and Eurydice

Accompanying the words with the lyre, Orpheus sung, "O deities of the underworld, to whom all we who live must come, hear my words, for they are true! I come not to spy out the secrets of Tartarus, nor to try my strength against the three-headed dog with snaky hair who guards the entrance. I come to seek my wife, whose opening years the poisonous viper's fang has brought to an untimely end. Love had led me here, Love, a god all powerful with us who dwell on the earth, and, if old traditions say true, not less so here. I implore you by these abodes full of terror, these realms of silence and uncreated things, unite again the thread of Eurydice's life. We all are destined to you, and sooner or later must pass to your domain. She too, when she shall have filled her term of life, will rightly be yours. But till then grant her to me, I beseech you. If you deny me, I cannot return alone; you shall triumph in the death of us both."

As he sang these tender strains, the very ghosts shed tears. Tantalus, in spite of his thirst, stopped for a moment his efforts for water, Ixion's wheel stood still, the vulture ceased to tear the giant's liver, the daughters of Danaus rested from their task of drawing water in a sieve, and Sisyphus sat on his rock to listen. Then for the first time, it is said, the cheeks of the Furies were wet with tears. Proserpine could not resist, and Pluto himself gave way. Eurydice was called. She came from among the new-arrived ghosts, limping with her wounded foot. Orpheus was permitted to take her away with him on one condition, that he should not turn round to look at her till they should have reached the upper air. Under this condition they proceeded on their way, he leading, she following, through passages dark and steep, in total silence, till they had nearly reached the outlet into the cheerful upper world, when Orpheus, in a moment of forgetfulness, to assure himself that she was still following, cast a glance behind him, when instantly she was borne away. Stretching out their arms to embrace one another they grasped only the air. Dying now a second time she yet cannot reproach her husband, for how can she blame his impatience to behold her? "Farewell," she said, "a last farewell," and was hurried away, so fast that the sound hardly reached his ears.

By Thomas Bulfinch



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by Mariana Alessandri

# Losing like a Stoic

On the day my 84-year-old mother was told that her cancer had come back after six months of radiation and a year of chemo, she sent her eight children the same text: "Hospice." Some of us countered with "No!" And since I was the only one in physical proximity to my mum, siblings texted me their hope that she would fight. In one ear I heard my mum making 'the call' to friends, who yelled at her: "You can't give up!"

In my other ear I heard the Stoic philosopher Epictetus whispering, "You are foolish if you want your [mother] to live forever." This is one of three phrases to live by if you plan to handle death stoically. Wanting our loved ones to live forever is an example of "wanting things to be up to you that are not

up to you, and things to be yours that are not yours". My mother was Catholic in practice but Stoic in spirit, and she agreed with Epictetus that we've got to be realistic. In true New Yorker fashion, she scolded her friends: "I've been in pain for two months! Do you want me to keep going this way?" But they weren't there last year: they didn't drive her to the hospital every week for treatment, sometimes twice a week, sometimes five times. They didn't see her grow smaller and frailer with each passing month. So, when the cancer returned, it wasn't theirs to decide whether my mother should get permanently hooked up to 'Peter', her chemo bag. "I called to tell you I'm dying, not to ask your advice." It was my mother's

way of calling her friends foolish for wanting her to live forever.

Epictetus warned us not to forget what humans are made of: skin that rips, tumours that grow, organs that fail. He would say that the loss I feel today, five months after watching my mother die, stems from the fact that I didn't treat her body as destined for the grave. "If you are fond of a jug," Epictetus advises, "say 'I am fond of a jug!' For then when it is broken you will not be upset." Closer to home, "If you kiss your child or your wife, say that you are kissing a human being; for when it dies you will not be upset." By keeping our eyes cast on mortality, we can blunt the pain of grief. For ten years, I have been teaching this to my students, many

# Epictetus reasoned that if we acknowledge death as a fact of life – “the lot of a human being” – we won’t cry “Alas! Poor me!”

of whom live in multi-generational homes alongside ageing *abuelos*. Epictetus’ advice is a good start: lose the wishful thinking. The person you love most dearly – whose death you cannot contemplate without shuddering – will surely, undeniably, 100 per cent die. Grief is among the most devastating effects of what Stoics call the “storm” of life, but if we correct our expectations, we can limit the damage to our ship.

My mother never said of life what Epictetus said we should never say: “I have lost it,” but instead, “I have given it back.” This is the third Stoic way to prevent outsized grieving. It was as true about her own life as it was about the life of her nine-year-old child, the brother who died in 1972 before I was born. “As long as he gives it,” Epictetus said and my mum agreed,

“take care of it as something that is not your own, just as travellers treat an inn.” My mother understood Epictetus’ logic: there is no loss. The feeling that we’ve lost someone comes from confusing ‘mine’ with ‘not mine’. My mother’s son was never hers, and my mother was never mine. Both briefly stayed at the inn that I am still checked into. Epictetus reasoned that if we acknowledge death as a fact of life – “the lot of a human being” – we won’t cry “Alas! Poor me!” My mother had no ‘poor me’ button.

But I do, and my prolonged grief is evidence that I am foolish and stupid, according to Epictetus. I would like to ask him something as a person who “gave it back”. What about those of us who kiss our loved ones like they are mortal? Does the tragedy of death really come down to unpreparedness? Is accepting that human life is out of our control, fragile, and on loan, sufficient to blunt the pain of grief?

My sense of loss does not come from surprise, confusion, or irrationality. I am not sad because I didn’t see it coming; I don’t cry because I mistook my categories. I obeyed Epictetus, who ordered me to “let death and exile and everything that is terrible appear before you every day, especially death”. But he didn’t keep his end of the bargain: “You will never have anything contemptible in your thoughts or crave anything excessively.” I “learn[ed] the will of nature,” and yet I crave my mother.

My sense of loss stems from the unrelenting fact that there is one less blunt person staying at my inn. One less small and subtle sharpshooter.

One less fireplace fire, burning to keep me warm and show me what I can’t see in other lights. One less haematologist who faced sexism and who quietly earned her corner office anyway. One less mother who gave a presentation in her hospital hours after giving birth to her seventh child. One less scientist who zoomed in on A1c3 and who saw AIDS in New York City when it was still the flu. One less champion of reason and reading. One less spiritual counselor to friends and strangers. One less grandmother who cross-stitched angels when she was not composing theological essays. One less woman who was “bad at math” but who made a monthly budget when her husband’s brain went loopy. One less daughter-in-law who knew how to make the family birthday cake. One less Chilean to make me *fricasé* and *pastel de choclo*. One less deferential wife who somehow maintained her dignity. One less *comadre* to talk through her diagnosis with. One less warm soul who slept beside me when I broke my arm at age nine.

Epictetus: I knew my mother was mortal. I knew she wasn’t mine. I rooted for her to die and congratulated her on her last breath. I am not upset because I’m foolish, but because death ejected a Very Important Person from my inn. So, while I have largely evaded the guilt that often accompanies a non-Stoic attitude toward death, I carry the weight of loss, of the world’s impoverishment, of my own void. I grieve because I know precisely who I have given back. ■



*Field Day* (poster), by the WPA recreation project, Library of Congress

“The joy of losing consists in this: Where there are no expectations, there is no disappointment.”

Charles Krauthammer



# LOSS

/lɒs/

noun:

1. the state of no longer having something or as much of something; the process that leads to this;
2. money that has been lost by a business or an organization;
3. the death of a person;
4. the disadvantage that is caused when somebody leaves, or when a useful or valuable object is taken away;
5. a person who causes a disadvantage by leaving;
6. a failure to win a contest.

Origin:

Old English *los* ‘destruction’, of Germanic origin; related to Old Norse *los* ‘breaking up of the ranks of an army’ and *loose*; later probably a back-formation from *lost*, past participle of *lose*.

Source: Oxford English Dictionary



Uncertainty

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by Maggie Jackson

# Loss of certainty

Why struggle to recall a fact or event when our devices easily offer terabytes of data? Neatly captured and then easily accessed: docile information is becoming the ideal. Yet crucial meaning making takes place not only when we encode memories but also in the process that scientists call retrieval – and, most intriguingly, in its failures. Recollection is no more a neat downloading than learning is rote replication. In remembering, the mind is haunting itself, reconstructing associations, replaying, and reconsolidating experience once again. And the more lost in the corridors of memory we allow ourselves to be, the more understanding we can reap.

In one series of experiments, scientists slyly set people up for failure by testing them on simple word pairs that we rarely associate with one another, such as whale and mammal. One group was first asked to wrack their brains for the other half of the pair before being given the answer, while another set of participants initially

saw the full pairing outright. Those who had tried, almost always in vain, to dredge up the associated word later proved to be up to 40 per cent more adept at recalling the pairs. In their futile searching, they did not find the exact answer but wound up exploring related branches – large, intelligent animals? – of their knowledge. They revitalised corners of their memory architecture, strengthening context, concepts, and new future pathways back to remembering.

Failures of memory often are not the cognitive defeats that we take them to be. Instead, they can be victories cut short or triumphs not yet ripe, memory scientists increasingly believe. Forgetting details of an event can pave the way for seeing the parallels to a different experience. An inaccurate remembrance that floats into awareness may in fact be a gleaning of gist. Scientists cannot yet fully decipher the intricacies of memory work. But its unfolding secrets underscore the importance of being

willing to let our minds saunter down ever-shifting and even futile paths to learning and insight.

Today, are we welcoming chances to reap the gifts of an uncharted mind? The very act of searching online brings to life neural networks related to locating information rather than those involved in probing our long-term memories, as chancy as that effort can be. The information is out there, we seem to assume, waiting to be neatly plucked from the digital sphere. But there may be steep costs to perpetually sidestepping the messy work of remembering. In the long run, “using the internet may disrupt the natural functioning of memory by interfering with mechanisms responsible for adaptive forms of forgetting, misremembering, and reconsolidation,” writes researcher Benjamin Storm.

If we redefine memory as something to be managed with a click, we may wind up narrowing our minds. By instead struggling to recollect, we

# **Memory is not a quick, easy process of preserving and retrieving a frozen past but rather a part of us – linked, honed, evolving – whose acquaintance we must continually endeavour to renew.**

can see knowledge as it truly is: a living thing. One midsummer morning, I found an unexpected guide to the fertile work of what scientists call memory's evolution.

Chris Gustin raises his hand to the wall of a massive pot, a year's work hanging in the balance. Standing in a dusty corner of his studio in an old Massachusetts barn, he and I are talking about how ideas develop when he falls silent, struck by a new thought on his work in progress. One of the foremost ceramicists of his day, Gustin spends his life pursuing the hidden promise of knowledge lost and found.

I first encountered Gustin at the opening for a gallery show of his latest

work, tall and stately vessels that are painstakingly built by hand. Glazed in shades of blue, brown, white, or green, they are the very archetype of a pot and radiate the quality of presence that potters call breath. That night and in subsequent conversations, he spoke of the copious time demanded by his art form and of the ultimate rewards that he has found in stepping back, in relinquishing control, and in forgetting. "It's the not-knowing that makes a work good," says Gustin, whose pieces are held in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and other major collections. "It's the not-knowing what the future entails . . . that can lead you to places you never thought you'd get to, you've never even imagined, in terms of your own understanding."

All ceramics is a waiting game. Once formed, a piece must be dried to "leather-hard" strength before it may be given a first bisque firing, then glazed, then a final firing in a kiln that may take a full week to cool. "The evolution of the clay . . . cannot be forced," writes legendary potter Daniel Rhodes.

This is particularly true in hand-building, where each addition of clay must dry before the work can hold the weight of the next. Throwing pots on a wheel is quick and direct, a product of channelled gravitational force. In contrast, constructing a pot by hand from coils of clay is an incremental process. A bit like nest building in the wild, handwork inspires pieces that have

"a sense of becoming rather than of finality" writes Rhodes.

This is the lifework that Gustin has chosen. As a young potter, he turned out platters and urns that at first he could not even give away. It was only when his pace of production slowed that his reputation began to soar. Bulbous, twisting teapots that one critic called "impertinent" gave way to the curvaceous pots, some as high as several feet tall, that I am watching take shape in his studio. At most, he can finish twelve such pots a year.

His art is an unending cycle of leave-takings and returns. And this summer, the interims between progressing on any one piece were further lengthened after he broke his hip in a fall while putting up an exhibition. Since May, he had only once touched the pot before him, part of an attempt to create a wholly new cantilevered form.

As I watch, Gustin places a short rope of damp clay along the pot's raw upper edge. A barrel-chested man with unruly red-gold hair and ice-blue eyes, he has the look of a surfer and the haunted intensity of an artist. Kneading and tamping the fresh piece into the vessel wall, he works to meld something new from thousands of muddy bits. Periodically, he takes up a small flat metal tool called a rib and scrapes down the pot's body as if brushing a horse's flank. His rhythmic motions belie a lifetime of learning. Yet within, he is struggling to work

his way back into understanding the pot he had put aside months ago. He is reconciling himself with the metamorphosis of what he knows.

"You may have one sense of reality when you are working on a piece, and you move [away] and it gets lost in memory," Gustin once told me. "And by the time you get back, . . . it's like you are seeing it for the first time. It's like 'I know you – but I don't know you.'" I ask him about this transition again, and he looks up. "You were intimately engaged and then you leave, so you have to find your way back in. . . . It's about where I am now, not where I was three months ago."

Take heed of a changing world. Look and look again: the pot has dried and changed, the storm has shifted direction, the virus mutates. But what is evolving as much or more as the evidence around us is the knowledge that we hold within. This is the promise and the challenge of the double-edged work that Gustin both endures and rever-

ently seeks: letting our minds digest experience, then struggling and often stumbling to catch up with our shifted knowledge.

"It's hard to stand back, hard to let things progress and let things happen, let the natural consequences take hold," he says at one of our talks at his studio and at his nearby home a few miles from the sea. But the cycles of quiet, anticipation, and then reconciliation make the work come alive for him. "When you keep approaching it from a place of newness and possibility, that's a place of un-knowing. . . . In that is the risk. That's the edge."

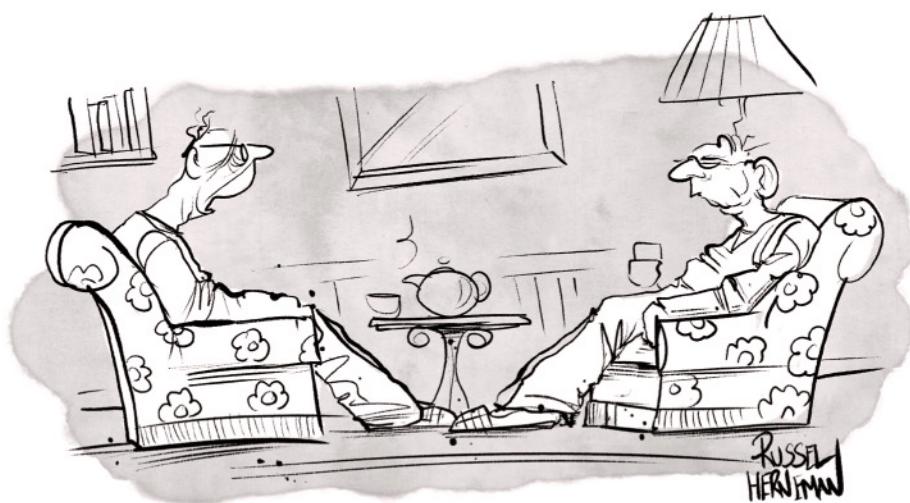
Memory is not a quick, easy process of preserving and retrieving a frozen past but rather a part of us – linked, honed, evolving – whose acquaintance we must continually endeavour to renew. By shelving and reclaiming knowledge, we affirm that we are willing to be changed by life and to adapt to memory's evolution. Falling silent once more, Gustin seizes a scalpel-like knife and holds

it to the neck of the pot. An hour after pausing and seeing the work anew, he slices away weeks of effort, casually tossing the spent earth aside.

"Okay, that makes more sense," he says, softly slapping the pot, then to me, "However I may see the piece early on, I am not locked into it." Across the morning, he destroys as much as he builds. The work "evolves only because you evolve."

Do we dare to explore the back roads of memory, seeking truth in knowledge yet seeing stumbles in remembering as sometime victories in disguise? Are we willing at times to let a bit of the past go to gain a new point of view? Failures, wrote Rhodes, are merely "searches in the byways." Gustin's reconciliations with the work that he has set aside should remind us of what we miss when we short-change the messy work of memory evolution. What do we expect of the past? □

Adapted from *Uncertain: The Wisdom and Wonder of Being Unsure*



*"I've forgotten how much I've forgotten."*





*Blue Man*, photo by K. Mitch Hodge



Artwork and words: Phil Tyler

# LOST AND FOUND

*Tell us a little about your background as an artist. What prompted you to start a career as an artist, and what has kept you there over the years?*

I grew up in a typical working-class family in East London. My grandad was a bricklayer, my uncle a plasterer, my brother an electrician, my dad repaired sewing machines in sweatshops, and my mum was a cleaner.

The idea of being an artist and going to art school never occurred to me until I went to secondary school. I was blessed with two fantastic art teachers, Trevor Sowden and Chris Taylor, who made me think beyond the job prospects that seemed to be possible at 15. The initial seed that was planted was to become an art teacher. It was only towards the end of the first degree that the idea of being an artist was seen as a real possibility.

I have taught ever since leaving art school in 1986, but always maintained my art practice.

I did however grow up with a working-class chip on my shoulder and felt privileged that this art world was special. I've always worked hard at

everything I do, and challenged myself to go beyond what I already know.

I can only take responsibility for what I have put into my career. Some artists seem to have had charmed lives and have reached stratospheric heights, but I doubt very much that will happen to me now. But I can face my death bed assured that I gave it a really good go and never gave up.

Nothing gives me as much pleasure as seeing my work in an important show alongside really great work by artists I respect.

*Of course, your practice includes painting, drawing, printmaking, and photography. Which of these media do you find the best outlet for expressing your ideas?*

That's like asking me what my favourite piece of music is. This changes of course depending on one's mood. Sometimes you want to listen to Steve Reich or Nils Frahm and sometimes you want to sing along to Elbow. Each media offers its own quality and can hold onto an idea in a different way. I'm passionate about

drawing and whether this is on the iPad or in a sketchbook is irrelevant as the process of looking and responding is enthralling.

Measured drawing allows me to slow down and precisely map the position of a figure in space, losing myself in the exactitude of angles and distances. The gestural bravado of the brush-mark summarising the moving figure can be knife-edge stuff and make you fully aware of the moment.

I've made about 40,000 drawings from observation and get lost in the process of seeing and translating that experience.

I love etching which I find suits my mentality best. The intensity and richness of the black ink, and the nuances of the plate produce a compelling image. The way in which one inks and wipes the plate too is a very physical act which is very messy but is countered by the reveal of the image. Each process in printmaking suggests new ways to develop an idea and I'm very proud of the work we do on the Fine Art Printmaking Degree at the University of Brighton where I am course leader.



*Head*, acrylic on card, 20 x 20cm, 1994, by Phil Tyler



*Hear No Evil*, oil on board, 40 x 40cm, 2023, by Phil Tyler

Photography informs everything I do and is usually the embryonic starting point for most of my ideas but is never an end point in itself. The process of sifting, cropping, collating photographs and then drawing from these consolidates the idea and allows it to move into paintings. Painting takes me to somewhere else though and I feel a complete sense of connection with the world – almost losing myself in this other space. It seems best suited to encapsulate the emotions I want to express, so I think it's fair to say that I'm a painter as well as being a prolific image maker.

*Loss and grief are themes that are present within your work. What drew you to these themes?*

My mother died 30 years ago this December from a heart attack (exactly one week before Xmas and three weeks before her 61st birthday). I was 29 and whilst I had lost my grandparents on both sides of my family this did not have a significant impact on me.

The shock of seeing my mother's corpse, open mouthed and with open dead eyes as if she was screaming silently had a deep impact on me. Whilst my brother stood beside

me in the darkened ward where they had left her body, he blotted it from his memory.

*How do you express loss and grief through your work? Conveying such complex emotions isn't an easy process.*

The inability to express 'grief' through words resulted in me painting over 900 naked self-portraits. The body, its pose, colour and its relationship to space offered a motif that seemed to capture this weight of feeling. A raised arm, a figure staring into the void said more than I could describe to others around me. When

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seen from the front, the dead eyes of these nudes mirrored what I had seen in the ward.

Both my father-in-law and mother-in-law died next and the tragic circumstances of her death had a significant impact on our whole family, which saw me return to the self-portrait in 2010.

My brother died from a heart attack in 2013. I felt numb after his death and wanted to find a motif that enabled me to have a conversation with myself about our sibling relationship. 'Silver objects' were in part a homage to William Nicholson, yet enabled me to talk about loss.

These still lifes, their black backgrounds and reflective surface seemed to capture this quiet reflection but also mirrored my own growing sense of mortality.

A year after my brother's death, my dad tried to kill himself by taking a bread knife to his throat. He eventually died a year later in 2015, slowly withering away.

Walking the dog in the landscape allowed me space to mourn and to ponder the distant relationship my dad had with his two sons and the palpable tension I felt as I child.

Storm clouds or sullen skies seen in my 'Cissbury Ring' work offered one solution but I also began making a new series of self-portraits - 'The Edward St' series were inspired by the cell-like toilets in one of the University buildings, which feel like being inside a Francis Bacon painting. These more complicated paintings create

a claustrophobic sense of space and a baroque narrative.

The 'Resident' series started during lockdown. As someone who was shielded, I became even more conscious of my own mortality and the imminent sense of death that surrounded us all. 'Myself' portraits continue to this day, especially as we enter the winter months. We are all living through troubled times.

*There's much talk about AI at the moment, how it will affect various industries, including art. What is it about art produced by humans that differs from machine-produced artwork?*

I think if you work in the creative industries at the moment using a digital process like Photoshop, Illustrator or even digital photography, your career might be seriously threatened by AI. After all the Sony World Photography Awards was won by an AI image. But I cannot see how AI can replicate the tactile physicality of a painting or an etching. It can only mimic the look of the image but not the surface, smell, or the haptic sense of touch.

When I visit the national gallery in London and look at Rembrandt's painting of Saskia, I am brought into an immediate connection with the man who made the painting. I can see exactly how he made that mark on the arm, its economy and mastery. Surely, it's like the difference between looking at any painting on your phone rather than in the flesh? On the other side of things, AI cannot teach someone how to draw, paint, think,

create, or problem solve and react to the ideas of a student and enable them to progress their own ideas.

*I imagine that over the course of your career, you have experienced loss and grief. How have these experiences shaped you as an artist and affected what you produce?*

My mum never saw me as a father and never met my girls. My dad died before I started working at University and never saw me publish my two books or see me on TV. I'm sure he would have been proud of his son although he would have struggled to say it if he did. My dad never really knew me nor my brother and looking back I feel a sense of loss for the relationship we never had.

Every death has felt different and had suggested different motifs and approaches to try to process those complicated feelings. However melancholy seems to pervade most things I do, whether it's the music I listen to, the paintings and images I make or love to look at. It's a very human condition.

*Which loss has had the greatest effect on you in your life, and has there been some positive that you've taken from this loss?*

Without doubt losing my mum at 29 changed my life after that point and prompted the start of my own family - I have three girls now. It enabled me to put emotion into my work and for the first time I think I discovered who I was as an artist. Death was the catalyst that allowed me to grow into adulthood. □



48 Heads, oil on board, 60 x 60cm, 2010, by Phil Tyler



*At Eternity's Gate*, 1890, by Vincent van Gogh

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by Matthew Beard

# A sense of oneself

I was recently discussing the British philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe's strong objection to Oxford University's decision to award US President Harry Truman with an Honorary Doctorate. Anscombe, appalled at Truman's decision to drop two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – and subsequently defend his decision – lambasted her colleagues for their moral complicity and cowardice. I was asked whether I would have stood alongside her, had I been there at the time.

The answer, I suspect, is no.

It's not because I think Anscombe is wrong. I don't. It's because I don't believe that – faced with the overwhelming social pressure Anscombe

faced, I would maintain my position. Staggering amounts of research tell us that, with few exceptions, we will choose conformity over conscience every time.

What should I take from this? That I would so quickly abandon my values in the face of adversity? Nothing positive, I suppose. And what should I do about it? What did Anscombe possess that I seem to lack? The answer to that question is complicated. However, one possible answer is that Anscombe possessed a uniquely strong 'sense of self'.

Today, a strong 'sense of self' sits alongside self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-compassion, and other self-related virtues as a key concept in the

modern pantheon of essential ingredients for happiness.

Having a strong sense of self means, in essence, knowing what makes you, *you*. What you believe, stand for, care about, and want to achieve with your life. It means not caving to the expectations of others for you to be different. If you've got a strong sense of self, you stand by your values, convictions, and choices in the face of pressure to sway. It means, in short, that when faced with hardship, you won't lose yourself – and all the existential and moral angst that entails.

This all looks well and good. The opposite, it seems, would be a disaster. To be someone who readily abandons

# The ‘backstage’ version of ourselves is more like what we regard as the ‘true’ self – who we are when nobody else is watching.

what's important to us at the first sign of pressure would mean being, well, nobody really. It would be to be someone who cowers in the face of social pressure and votes to praise someone they believe is worthy of condemnation.

A strong sense of self seems to give someone a chance to do other good, selfy, things – be self-determined, self-actualised, to have self-respect.

But looks can be deceiving. And I suspect that the relationship between the strength of our ‘sense of self’ and our ability to live a life that’s truly our own is a little more complicated.

Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman used the metaphor of the theatre to describe “the performance of the self in public places”. Goffman thought that there were at least two ways in which we could describe ourselves. The ‘on-stage’ self is the version of ourselves we perform to

others. Crucially, this version of ourself is curated to meet the expectations of the ‘audience’ – the people we believe are watching and assessing us. The ‘backstage’ version of ourselves is more like what we regard as the ‘true’ self – who we are when nobody else is watching.

It’s a useful metaphor, and a very popular one; one that lends credence to the value of a ‘strong sense of self’. The stronger our sense of self, the less difference there is between our on-stage and backstage self. It helps us live in a more unified, authentic, and integrated manner.

But the theatre metaphor only goes so far. An actor has an existing identity before they step into their role on stage. In contrast, we are born in the spotlight. Before we can walk, talk, or reason, we’ve been filled with the ideas, expectations, neuroses, and beliefs of other people. We learn our role, our lines, and our cues on stage, well before we ever have the chance to step off.

Here, our sense of self starts to resemble what Friedrich Nietzsche described – with his usual poetic flourish – as the “bad conscience”.

“This deprived creature, consumed with longing for the wild had to turn himself into an adventure, a torture chamber, an uncertain and dangerous wilderness – this fool, this yearning and desperate prisoner became the inventor of the ‘bad conscience’.”

The bad conscience describes the internalised guilt, responsibility, and anxiety that we feel to conform with social values. It is the pressure we experience to play our ‘role’ and meet the audience’s expectations. And the stronger it is, the weaker our genuine

sense of self becomes. Perhaps it is the ‘bad conscience’ that creates the desire for social inclusion that a strong sense of self is supposed to solve.

Where does that leave me in my quest to become more Anscombian? For advice, we can look to one of Anscombe’s contemporaries: philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch.

Murdoch believed that one of the core projects that each of us needs to undertake is to “unself”. “The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself... to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is.”

For Murdoch, there is no backstage self. As long as we are acting as a ‘self’, we’re on-stage. It’s only by losing our sense of self that we can live authentically, responsibly, and ethically. Murdoch would likely have described Anscombe as having unselfed. Free from the need to be liked, included, or popular – all things the self worries about – she could stand for something bigger than herself.

Ironically, the fear of ‘losing ourselves’ may itself reflect the very concerns that lead us to do so in the first place. We worry about becoming someone whose values, choices, and beliefs are inconsistent with those of our ‘true’ self: forgetting that those values are bigger than us to begin with.

In reality, they aren’t ‘our’ values at all. And that’s perhaps what makes Anscombe so unique. She wasn’t standing up for ‘her’ values at all. To assert herself, she first had to lose herself.

We must consider that if we can’t do the same, we might end up losing a great deal more. ■



From Lord Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King', by G.W. Rhead and L. Rhead, 1898, British Library

"If our inward griefs were seen written on our brow, how many  
would be pitied who are now envied!"

Metastasio



# Auguries of innocence

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour  
A Robin Red breast in a Cage  
Puts all Heaven in a Rage  
A Dove house filld with Doves & Pigeons  
Shudders Hell thr' all its regions  
A dog starvd at his Masters Gate  
Predicts the ruin of the State  
A Horse misusd upon the Road  
Calls to Heaven for Human blood  
Each outcry of the hunted Hare  
A fibre from the Brain does tear  
A Skylark wounded in the wing  
A Cherubim does cease to sing

By William Blake

by Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore

# Forever young

Students are told to remember their high school and college years as the best in their life. Supermodels and influencers have become power brands, with tens of millions of followers and the ability to move entire markets. There is always the next 'hot young' entrepreneur, actress, athlete to look out for. Media propels the idea of youth as an enviable, and profitable, commodity: the young adorn our magazine covers and tower over us on billboards.

Is it any wonder, then, that we acutely mourn the loss of youth?

This isn't new, but the intensity with which we idolise youth has increased. In the 1984 song "Forever Young", by German synth-pop band Alphaville, youth is cast as a diamond. It is dazzling, valuable, prized.

*It's so hard to get old without a cause  
I don't want to perish like a fading horse  
Youth's like diamonds in the sun  
And diamonds are forever*

In Bob Dylan's song of the same name, it is the young who reach for the stars:

*May you build a ladder to the stars  
And climb on every rung  
And may you stay  
Forever young*

The irony is, of course, that there is no forever young. We can never reach the stars. And while diamonds do last forever, youth does not. That is something that American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was aware of when he wrote "My Lost Youth" in 1855. Youth here is rooted in the pretty seaside town of Portland, Maine, in a (presumably simplified) idyllic past:

*Often I think of the beautiful town  
That is seated by the sea;  
Often in thought go up and down  
The pleasant streets of that dear old town,  
And my youth comes back to me.*

(Longfellow also wrote another poem, stating, wisely, that age teaches us not to reach for the stars but to observe and value them: "For age is opportunity no less/ Than youth itself, though in another dress, / And as the evening twilight fades away/ The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day.")

Today – for the first time in history – scientific breakthroughs mean we can chase youth in a more concrete, physical way. Anti-ageing products promise to remove wrinkles and restore our skin to its past radiance (it is the elastic skin of youth, not the lines of ageing and experience, that is sought after today, particularly for women). Facelifts can erase decades. Botox can freeze out wrinkles. Going grey is viewed as giving up or letting oneself go.

Some wealthy entrepreneurs are going further still. Tech executive Bryan Johnson is spending millions a year on trying to reverse the biological ageing process – from submitting to electromagnetic pulses to taking dozens of



Fragment of *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*, c. 1524, by Parmigianino

supplements a day and eating an increasingly strict diet. It is no surprise that anti-ageing is a billion-dollar industry. Susan Douglas, a professor of communication and media at the University of Michigan, calls this a “marketing juggernaut”.

“Who can avoid ageing? Nobody can avoid it. So, it’s really quite brilliant to take something that everybody is going to experience, and nobody can avoid and turn it into something you have to defy, something you have to fight,” she notes. “You just have a neverending, constantly replenishing market.”

As Douglas points out, we not only view the young as beautiful and appealing but the old as ugly and distasteful. Take Disney movies based on the classic fairy tales. Elderly female characters are portrayed as physically hideous, with their outward appearance reflecting moral bankruptcy. The sweet, innocent, kind-hearted characters (Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty), meanwhile, are always young and beautiful.

In *Snow White*, the wicked Queen turns into an old woman, lined with wrinkles and warts, to trick Snow White into eating a poisoned apple. Her eyes bulge, her hair is white, and she is largely toothless. Youth is something older women literally kill for: in the 1985 movie *Return to Oz*, one witch has a closet of severed heads that she puts on like a mask or a wig, switching her ‘faces’ daily. The heads are all young women – and she’d like Dorothy’s head too.

I am deep in the vortex of our age-phobic culture. I just turned 40 and am far away from being a ‘bright young thing’. I have two young kids. While not much is new for me anymore – and with that comes both comfort and sadness – I watch the world as it unfurls in

all its delight and amazement through my children. But with each passing year, I feel bitter-sweet. That their baby years will soon be gone, that my time with them, and with my own parents, is ticking away. I want them to grow and thrive; but I also want to stop the clock.

“I think it makes people more conscious, when you bring new people into the new family, of your own mortality. There’s some evolution of an awareness that we’re only here for a short time of life,” counsellor Dr Alan D. Wolfelt, author of *Healing Your Grief About Getting Older*, told me. “North Americans think we’re going to live forever. Then we wake up and say: I want to be conscious of my own ageing process.”

We are doing cognitive somersaults to try and avoid the inevitable: that from the moment we are born we are hurtling towards the day we will die. While death was once a common occurrence in all households (with early death unavoidable even for royalty and the rich) it is now by and large something that only happens to the old. In 1900, 40 per cent of all deaths occurred in children aged five or younger. Today, in the United States, 75 per cent of all deaths occur at 65 and older. This mortality shift has created enormous discomfort with ageing.

Death is something we fight; it’s for losers. And when it does, inevitably, happen, we sequester it away. We might go a lifetime without seeing a dead body. The elderly, too, who have become reminders of death and decay rather than sages of wisdom and experience, are institutionalised and ignored. “There’s so much shame in our culture around ageing and death,” Koshin Paley Ellison Sensei, a Buddhist monk and co-founder of the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care, told the *Huffington Post* in 2013. “When

they’re ageing [people] feel that there’s something wrong with them and they’re losing value,” he said.

“We as a culture try to go around ageing, illness, death, and grief,” agrees Wolfelt. That means people overwhelmingly “come naked to their grief” – around death, around the ageing process, around accepting that ‘forever young’ only exists in pop songs. It also means that, as American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson once wrote, that “lacking a culturally viable ideal of old age, our civilisation does not really harbour a concept of the whole of life”.

Yet death and ageing needn’t be feared. Other cultures deal with both more openly: the old are revered and the dying aren’t ignored or rendered invisible. In 1995, social psychologist and author Terri Apter, a fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge, told the *LA Times*: “We grew up on a cult of youth. We didn’t realise that older wasn’t optional.”

It isn’t optional. But we do have choices. To be grateful for every single day. To value age as giving us sagacity and worldliness. To not yearn for the impossible. Wolfelt believes that “you have to have courage in an age-avoidant culture to really age with grace... You can surrender to the fact that it’s just an honour to be alive and living and think that’s a privilege. I think ageing is a beautiful process if you allow it to be authentic.”

I am reminded of a friend of mine, a fellow mother who lives in Brooklyn, who recently said something that struck me as quietly radical. We were talking about how she needs to avoid the sun (she is fair-skinned) and I noted offhandedly that a bonus of staying in the shade is ageing well.

She looked at me genuinely perplexed. “I don’t care about ageing,” she said. “I just want to enjoy my life.” □



Beach cemetery, Santa Monica, by Nong C.

“Winter is come and gone,  
But grief returns with the revolving year.”

Percy Bysshe Shelley





Interviewer: Zan Boag  
Interviewee: Mary-Frances O'Connor

# Responding to loss



**Mary-Frances O'Connor is an Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry and Director of Clinical Training at the University of Arizona. Her research focuses on the physiological correlates of emotion, in particular the wide range of physical and emotional responses during bereavement, including yearning and isolation. O'Connor is the author of *The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss*.**

*Zan Boag: To begin with, I was wondering if you could explain the difference between grief and grieving, as you make the point that they're not really interchangeable terms.*

**Mary-Frances O'Connor:** I have found this to be very, very helpful, not just helpful in designing research studies, but more helpful for the people who are going through it to understand the difference. Grief is, as you just said, that natural response to loss. But grief is a human emotion, that wave that overtakes you with all its thoughts and feelings. Grieving on the other hand is the process of adapting to the fact that our loved one is gone. And importantly, it's the way that grief changes over time. For most of us, waves of grief become less intense and less frequent as time passes and as we understand what this loss means for our life.

But because grief is just the natural response, it means that we're going to have feelings of grief forever whenever we become aware that someone so precious to us has died. And that can be a

year later, two years later, 10 years later, 50 years later. The reason that's helpful is because if people assume that feeling grief means that they did something wrong, that their grieving hasn't worked, then they're going to be disappointed because they're going to feel grief again. That's just going to happen.

*We'll come back to the different stages of grieving and how it changes...For now, it's impossible to talk about grief without mentioning Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. I know you have great respect for her, but you mentioned that her five stages of grief, which is from some time back – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, finally acceptance – doesn't tend to fit many people's lived experience. Is it very much a personal experience? That there's not one way to grieve?*

I would say that's true. I would say both that the grief that arises in us in response to loss looks very different and grieving looks very different. Some people feel angry, and some people don't. For some people, it's primarily a lot of thoughts that just keep



Anguish, 1876–1878, by Friedrich Schenk

going around and around and around in their head. And for other people, it's breaking down into tears when they wish they didn't. What arises in us as grief looks different between people, but also then our grieving looks different as well.

The way that we adapt to the loss of this person also looks very different, where one person may really feel like they remain very connected to the person who has died and has internal conversations where they ask for advice and think about what the person would say to them. And for another person, they may memorialise that person in a very external way by creating a memorial fund or something. I think both are true: the grief that naturally arises looks different between people and also how we go about adapting to that loss looks different between people as well.

*I imagine this differs between cultures and it makes me wonder how important it is for us to have processes to deal with grief like societal structures, to deal with the grieving process. Obviously, you've looked at this from a neuroscientific perspective and also a psychological perspective, but I wonder how much you've looked at it from a cultural perspective. Does the grieving process differ greatly*

*among cultures or is there a common ground of some sort?*

Grief is very individual, and we can also see patterns in it. It's not so individual that every single person has a totally different experience. Something similar can be said about the fact that grief is universal. All human beings experience grief across history, across cultures. They all experience grief, but they express grief very differently. How one responds to the fact that they are feeling grief looks very different from the outside. And you can think about that in a few different ways. Because grief is so overwhelming and for many people – such an intense experience – cultures, societies, families, religions have come up with structures that help to support the grieving person, whether that is giving them information about what's expected of them during this time or more often not expected of them, but also offering rituals that allow us to honour the deceased and to some degree to answer questions that we're faced with when a loved one dies, about where do we go when we die and how do we understand what life is for.

One value in the rituals that culture develops, or religion develops, is there's also this feeling of continuity. I'm still Irish Catholic, right? I know that

when I go to my father's funeral, that generations of O'Connors have stood in this moment where they felt overwhelmed, and I know that they said the same words and put on the same clothes. And that somehow gives me comfort that I will get through this experience, that I will adapt in the same way that those before me adapted to it. And there's something about ritual that's very helpful, very supportive in that way, if you believe in the structures that that group gives you.

*I'm not sure that you necessarily even need to believe it. It could be helpful anyway because it gives you a structure, as you say, a process that you can go through that helps you deal with the grieving process. Now, I'd like to come back to see what neuroscience says about it. This type of research is relatively new, but I imagine that some of the research has yielded answers for you. What does neuroscience say about grief?*

One of the primary contributions that neuroscience has made is a shift in what we think is most important as a way to view grief. That is to say, we used to think about loss as another stressor, a stressor that was maybe harder than other stresses we experienced, but was sort of the same type: the stress of changing jobs or the stress

**When that person is gone, the brain has to understand how to function in the world when a piece of us has been amputated.**

of moving house. These are all difficult things to go through.

But part of what neuroscience has really pointed us toward is that it isn't just about something newly added onto our plate – when we have a bond with someone, we function in the world as a part of that relationship. And when that person is gone, the brain has to understand how to function in the world when a piece of us has been amputated. The idea that that bond is broken and our brain has to come to understand the world in a new way, that is something that we were not looking at as closely before we started doing neuroimaging studies.

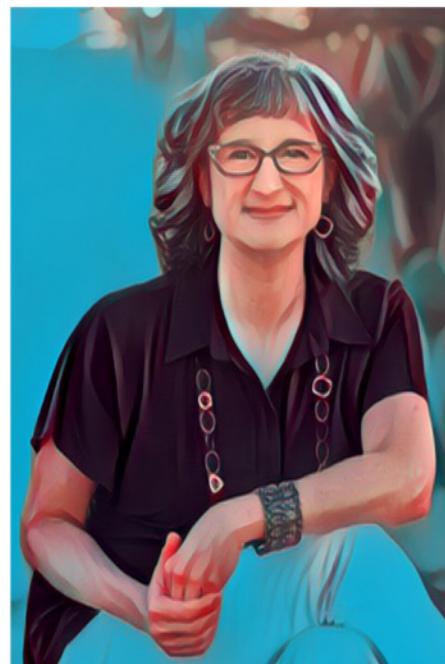
*Well, it's an interesting idea that we are the sum of our relationships. And I suppose one of these relationships, it changes. It doesn't stop altogether; it just changes because only one person is experiencing the relationship anymore. But because of this change in relationship, obviously, there's a change in the person themselves. A little piece of them has altered or disappears altogether, so they do have to readjust in some way. Perhaps it's like losing a limb. What sort of comparisons would you have when we're looking at loss and how we feel these things? How do people experience loss?*

I like to say that you can think of grieving as a form of learning. You have to learn how to function in the world now that you're one and not two. But that learning actually happens at a few different levels. On the one hand, we have to learn a whole new set of habits. You hear a sound at five o'clock and your spouse opens the garage door at five o'clock every day for years and years and years, and you feel that they're going to walk in the door. And then, of course, you re-

alise, oh wait, they can't. They're not going to walk in the door anymore. You suddenly realise, oh, no one's watering the plants, and now, I guess, I have to take care of the plants. There are many layers of just even habit that we have to relearn. And in a funny sort of way that's a little bit like we see in people who have experienced amputation.

They literally have to figure out, I can't do things in an automatic way anymore, I have to relearn how to do everything. But at another level, what you're saying resonates with me, which is that we have to think of ourselves as different as well. The example I use is that, for example, I use the word 'daughter' to describe myself. That's a part of who I am. That's a piece of me, but that implies there's at least two people in the world, myself and a parent. And if there are no parents in the world, then am I a daughter? How would I be a good daughter if they're not there? People describe the same thing when they become widowed. They think, this isn't the same as being single. What does it mean to be widowed – different from married, different from single? Those are ways in which we have to update an understanding of ourselves, our values and preferences, and that takes time to learn.

*I suppose there's a constant process of the updating of oneself throughout one's life. This is just a very extreme experience, a transformative experience in which we are forced to deal with this change. Something you touched on in one of your interviews that fascinated me was a study in which couples were recruited and one of them was over the age of 65, and this was done to randomly sample people who would*



Mary-Frances O'Connor

*eventually become bereaved. Now, I think this highlights that we're all going to experience loss in some way; we're going to have this sense of loss. Could you tell me a little bit about this study and what was discovered in the process?*

This was called the Changing Lives of Older Couples, which was abbreviated CLOC, like the CLOC study. Very clever name. And the CLOC study was very, very important because it was prospective and because it was randomly sampled the way you just said. What it allowed us to do was look at characteristics of a person or a relationship before the loss and see how those changed or predicted the grief of the person who survived, the surviving spouse. And the study went on for 10 years.

These are very difficult studies to do. You can't really predict when people are going to die. One of the primary and most important findings that came out of



that study was that human beings are more resilient in the face of loss than we thought. That is to say the majority of us actually don't end up having enormous dysfunction in our day-to-day life. And this was very difficult for even the psychology community to believe, but it's been replicated now quite a number of times. It really points to the fact that most of the time when we're doing grief studies, we advertise for people who are grieving, and it's the people who are struggling, who need help, who appear in our studies.

So we usually have a very particular group that we're sampling – that was one of the most important findings. But the question that I think you're pointing to is, does having some awareness that we are going to die or that our loved ones are going to die in advance, does that help with the grief? And what they did find was that having a philosophy of life, whether that's a religious view or an agricultural view, having a view that includes death as a part of life in an abstract or general

sense seemed to help when the individual had a specific loss, a specific death in their life, so the people who had this kind of view seemed to have less severe grief after the loss.

*In this instance, you have a group of people who are prepared for loss, they're aware that they're going to experience loss at some point in the future. But there are different types of loss. Sometimes loss can be totally unexpected. It could be a young person who dies in a car accident or due to war. It could be somebody who gets some form of rare cancer or has a heart attack at a young age. These things happen and you have that type of loss. On the other hand, you'll have the type of loss where you're prepared for it. Someone might get quite ill over a long period of time, so you're able to prepare yourself for the loss. They both have the difficulties, of course. Can we prepare for these types of losses in our life, and should we even try?*

It's even slightly more complex than you might think. Suddenness is a quality of the death itself. A heart

attack is sudden, AIDS is long – that's a long trajectory. But feeling that the death is unexpected can happen even when the person has been sick for a very long time. Unexpectedness is a perception of whether one is prepared for the death. I know many people who will tell me the story, they were in hospice care, and then they will say, "And then they died, and I was just absolutely shocked". Interestingly, the suddenness and the expectedness are slightly different things.

Having said that, it is often the case that sudden deaths increase acute grief. The fact that we had no preparation, that we hadn't contemplated it often, creates a more acute grief response, but it doesn't necessarily mean that grief is more prolonged over time. In addition to that, we know that caregiving in and of itself has a lot of stresses that come with it. And after a long period of caregiving, like with dementia, the person who is then bereaved is often so depleted that it makes grieving much more difficult.



*"On the upside, King Pyrrhus,  
you've coined a new phrase."*

## Facing some of those existential questions can also be helpful preparing us for a death.

There's a case where you are prepared in a sense, and yet the grieving is actually quite difficult. Usually their social network has shrunk, for example, and there's not the social support there that they might've had in a different death trajectory.

Can we prepare for it? We know, for example, that good hospice care predicts better outcomes in terms of grief. And one of the reasons that we think that is true is because hospice organizations are very good at creating closure conversations. There does seem to be something uniquely human about wanting to say goodbye, wanting to say, "I love you and I forgive you and thank you, and do you forgive me?" Those closure conversations seem to help when people are grieving and in a sudden death, it is usually the case that you did not get a chance to have that conversation.

In one sense, we can prepare when there's an opportunity by actually having those conversations. That's a little bit different than preparing by confronting existential questions like, *What is a good life?* and *How do I treat my loved ones if I know that they're going to die someday and that I don't really know when that will be?* Facing some of those existential questions can also be helpful in preparing us for a death. Although I am always amazed that grief often feels very different than people are expecting it to feel.

*We've been speaking a lot about the loss itself and dealing with the loss, preparing for the loss, but there's a lot that happens after the fact, after the loss itself happens. There is an expression that time heals all wounds, but in practice, this is rarely the case. Although we may deal with loss and we may deal with grief better than expected, it's still difficult for us to move on. We still carry that grief. Even*

*though it is known to us that we are going to experience loss, that we're going to experience grief, why is it so difficult for us to move on and get on with life?*

That really in part hinges on what you mean by "move on". There is very much a cultural belief, very unique to western culture, that there will be a closure, that there will be a time when grief ends, and that is not at all reflected in many cultures. *Dia de los Muertos* celebrates exactly the idea that they're going to come back every year and we're going to feel those same things, and that's just totally normal. And in fact, it's so normal. We have a whole celebration around it. I live about an hour from Mexico, so we have a lot of that in our area.

What that means to me is that with time, we can learn to create, to restore, a life that is meaningful, that also includes grief and also includes an awareness that we're carrying the absence of someone. It depends on how you phrase the question. In order to build a meaningful life, again, that may take a very long time and longer than many people expect. But if there is no getting over it, then, of course, how long does it take to get over this doesn't make sense. It's somewhat about the expectation.

*I agree with that wholeheartedly, I don't think that grieving has a time limit. I feel like it is always there. It's a matter of how we process it and how we are able to move on with our lives. But there are some people who experience prolonged grief disorder. They're unable to get back on their feet. Other people are able to function and deal with this process, but there are those who are unable to do so. What is it about them that causes this to happen that makes it unlikely for them to be able to get back on their feet again?*



We have a few different theories as to what's going on there. And it is exactly what you said, that prolonged grief isn't that there's some time point where grief should end for anyone, but rather prolonged grief means we haven't seen much change over time. In most people, we are seeing a decrease in the intensity and frequency of waves of grief, but in this group, we're just not. And the yearning for having that person back remains preoccupying in that person's life. There are a few different things that are probably going on. One is that many of us have to come to understand how to accept the waves of grief that are going to happen and not get into that rumination about, "Am I grieving too much?", "Am I not grieving enough?" Some of it, in terms of intervention, is about helping people to simply understand how grief works and to give them skills to tolerate waves of grief that happen and don't derail their entire day, for example.

Another thing that we know is likely happening is it isn't just about the loss of a loved one, it's also about our relationships with living loved ones. When we think about yearning, wanting our loved one to be back, it also suggests that there's something about our life right now that isn't good, because otherwise, looking back would simply be reminiscence instead of wanting it to be the way it was then. Often it is about restoring activities that feel meaningful, relationships that feel fulfilling, and intervention really focuses on strengthening those aspects of our present moment.

*We have been speaking here about grief being a personal experience that we all experience in a different way. At the same time, you spoke earlier about how across cultures, it is actually a shared experience is something that we as humans all do experience in various ways. Can grief make us closer to others in that we understand others better after having experienced the same emotion that they have?*

This also is partly a matter of perspective; it's what we focus our attention on. Many people do describe feeling greater empathy for others who are going through loss, a greater understanding of their experience. And because you can understand it, you can feel more compassionate about it. There are others who feel very isolated in their grief. And for them, the experience of "you just don't understand what I'm going through" makes them feel disconnected from the people around them. It can vary, but I certainly think that focusing in on this moment when you feel so alone because your loved one is gone, understanding that other people also feel alone, can be a bridge to feeling connected again.

*And perhaps this ties in again to the idea that you mentioned earlier about grief as a form of learning. And I know that in an interview you said that it is a form of learning, but that learning takes a long time. And in your book, you write, "You're not crazy, you're just in the middle of a learning curve". What is it that we're learning through the grieving process?*

At some level we're learning: "How do I live? How do I have a meaning-

ful life given that this person is gone, even in the most basic way? What is retirement supposed to look like if I was going to retire with this person?" But there's more to it than that as well. When we're talking about the death of someone with whom we're very close, that attachment bond, even the brain encoding that attachment bond, actually gets in the way of our learning that they're truly gone. This is what I call the 'gone but also everlasting hypothesis', where you have a stream of information, that's the memory.

You know the reality, you have the memory of them dying, but you also have this attachment neurobiology that comes with this implicit belief that says, "You'll always be there for me, and I will always be there for you." And this works incredibly well when the person is alive. Your partner doesn't have to be in your presence for you to believe that they are out there and that shapes your behaviour. You go home to them, and you expect them to come home to you. It works very, very well when they're alive. After they've died, when they're not in your presence, that same motivation to seek them out remains because of that neurobiological bond. Well, of course, them being everlasting can't be true if they're also gone. That makes it hard to learn. It's really genuinely getting in the way of learning. They're gone, they're not coming back, and I need to construct a life now that is still important.

*You have gone through loss. As a human, it is inevitable. You've lost parents, as I understand it, you lost a partner.*

*What have you learned about yourself through the process of dealing with your own grief? This way, you are looking in internally at yourself, and I suppose at times, it must be hard to take off the psychologist hat or the neuroscientist hat and actually feel it and experience it yourself. What have you learned through dealing with your own grief?*

I'm a divorced person, so my partner didn't die. But nonetheless, it's similarly a loss of a bond.

*Well, it's interesting. Earlier you were talking to me before about losing a limb, and I thought that death and divorce are almost interchangeable. The one difficult thing about divorce is the person is still there, but not accessible in the same way.*

And also for many people, there's either a strong sense of guilt or blame that is different in divorce from when we have a death-related loss. But anyway, this is the thing about learning: you just keep learning things as time passes. One of the things that I had to grapple with early on after my mother died was that I realised I was terrified of dying myself. And her death made it abundantly clear that it was going to happen someday. And over enough time and thinking and reading how other philosophers have thought about "What is a meaningful way to spend our life?", I feel like I have grappled with the fact that I have a limited time here. And honestly, that is a lot of what makes me a much happier person than I used to be, because if this is all we have, then we might as well enjoy it.

*So the grieving process has helped you make better decisions about your life. Would that be true?*

I think so. And not even just make better decisions, but feel better about all the things that are happening inside and outside of my control.

*I'd like to go somewhere completely different here. One thing that has always interested me is the grief that we feel from the loss of someone we don't know, such as a celebrity. It could be a sports star, or someone you admire in the same field. This is the loss of a celebrity relationship, which is termed as parasocial grief. How can we feel an intensity of grief with someone we have never met?*

If you think about where grief comes from, it's because you have a bond with someone. And obviously the kind of bond where you're nursing a baby or you're intimate with a partner, that's an obvious kind of bond, but there can be internal bonds as well. The way that a poet speaks to you specifically, really deeply, they seem to understand exactly how you feel, or a politician who really exemplifies everything you value, that you think is important in the world, that those are then a type of bond that you have with that person because you know something of who they are, even if it is not who they are personally.

And because it resonates with something in you, of who you are, then the loss of that person can be the loss of a dream, the loss of being able to turn on that celebrity's television show week after week, and can be the loss of a piece of our history. Many of the celebrities or musicians that we feel deeply connected to are the ones who were famous when we were emerging adults, that we went to their concerts, and we listened to their album over and over again. There's also sometimes a piece, a little loss of ourselves at that age. For all of those reasons, the bonds that we have – even in our mind – with celebrities result in real grief.

*That's an interesting point you're making there. It ties back into what you were saying earlier, that we are the sum of our*

*relationships, and even if the relationship's only one way, one loses a part of oneself through the death of this person.*

Yes, exactly.

*You've studied grief for some time, both from a neuroscientific perspective and also as a psychologist. In the end, it seems to be about human relationships, human emotions, the stories of people's lives. Is there a moment or story that stands out from all of the people that you have studied?*

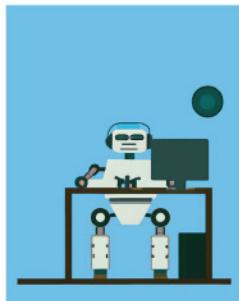
There are so many that stand out, but one that stands out that I think of often, I tell his story often, is an older man I interviewed for a research study. I asked him to tell me the story of how his wife had died. And he told me that they were high school sweethearts, and they got married and had two kids and a dog and a cat; it just sounded idyllic.

And then he told me the story of her getting breast cancer and him caring for her when she was very, very ill, when she was terminally ill. And he told me about her dying, and he got upset and he cried when he told me about that, which is very moving from an older man who you don't necessarily expect that emotion from. And then he told me that his wife had died about three years earlier, and he told me that he had started going out to dinner with a woman who was very different from his wife, but that he was really enjoying going out to dinner with her. And she was funny and brought out different parts of his personality, and he was just really enjoying it.

And then he said something to me that just always really stuck, which was, "The thing is, it was really good then and it's really good now." And that to me is mental health in grieving: that he could get upset, that he could remember all of those wonderful and difficult things, and also be in a moment where he was fully engaged in his present experience and the people around him now.

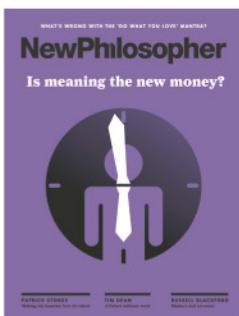
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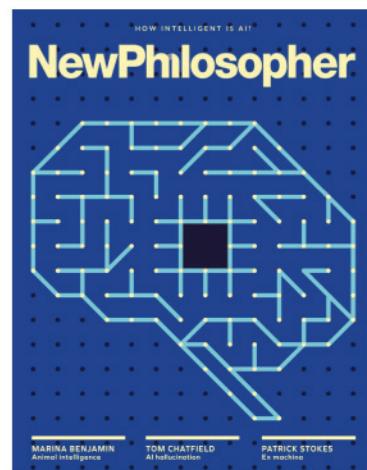
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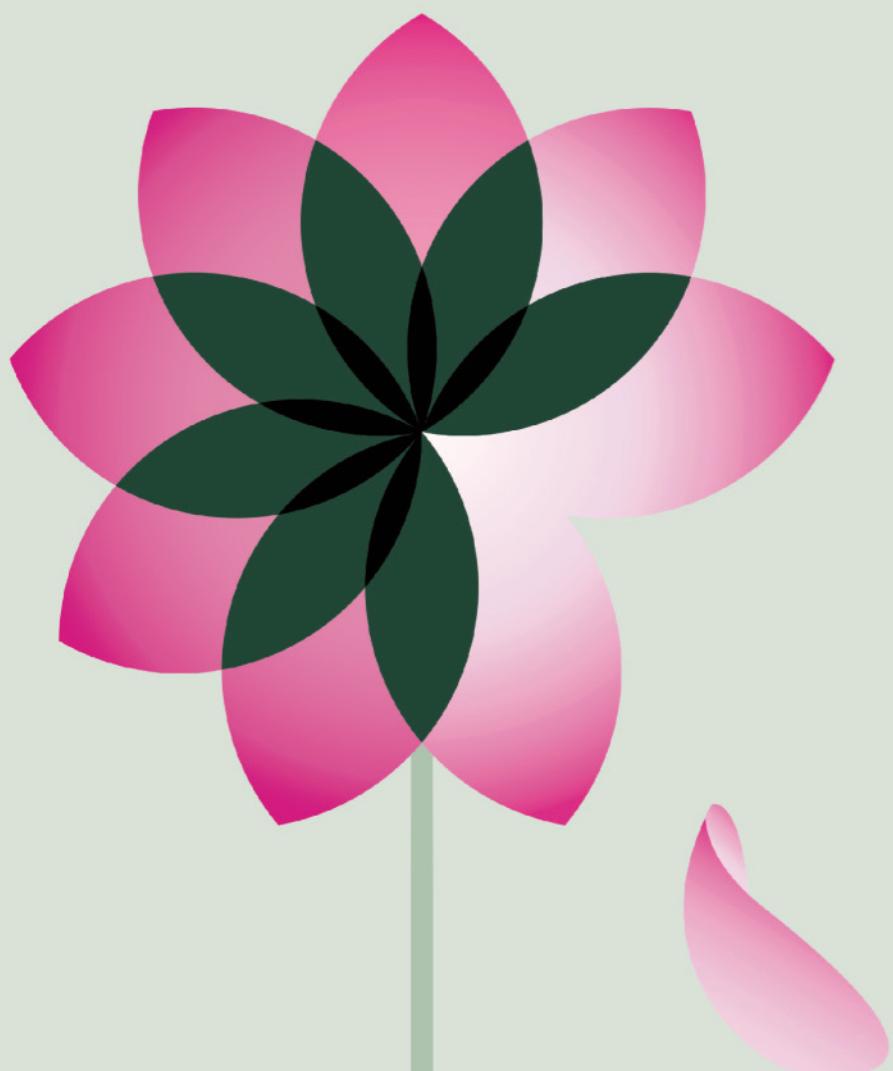
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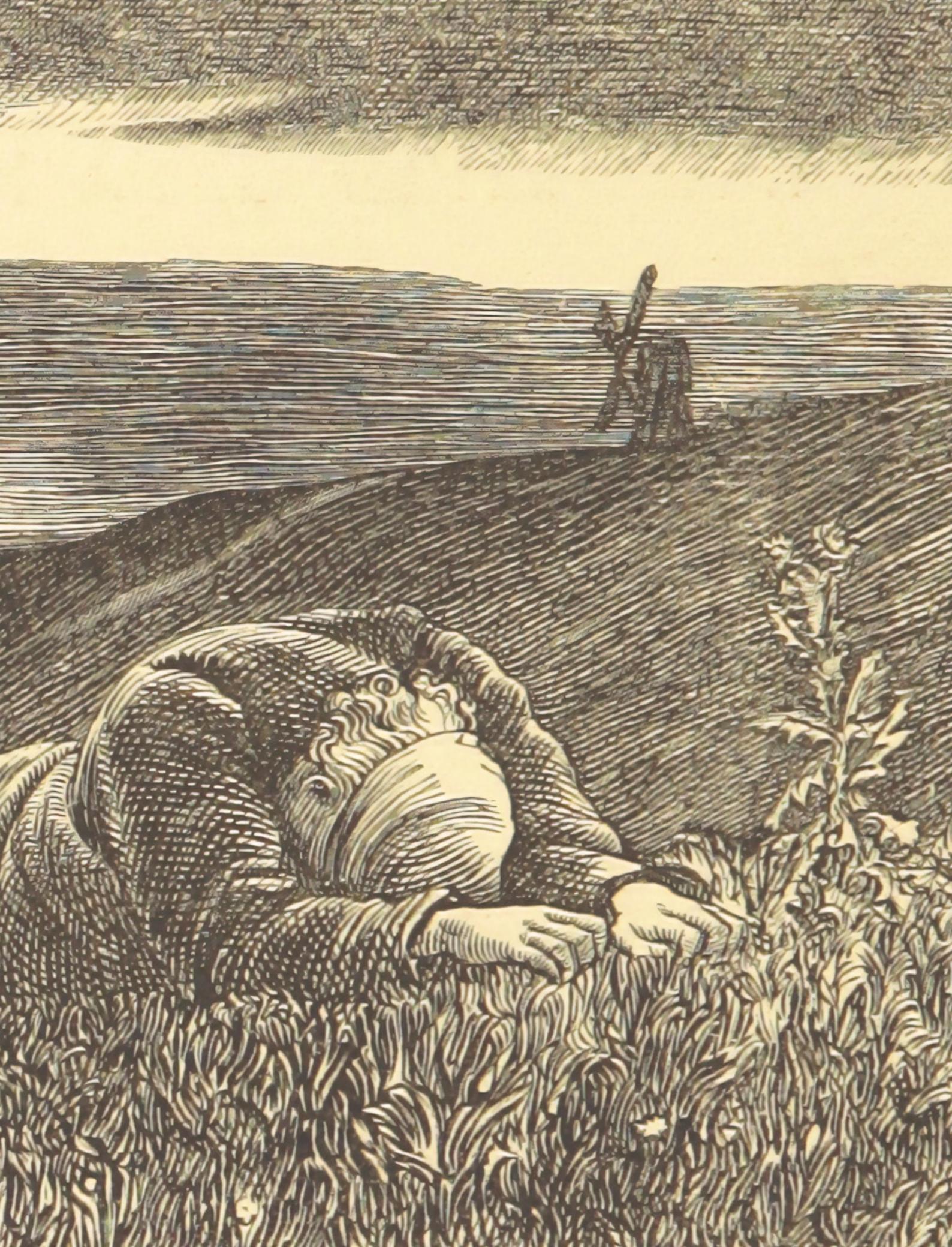
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Losing heat

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TOM CHATFIELD  
The game of life







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By Seneca

My best of mothers, I have often felt eager to console you, and have as often checked that impulse. Many things urged me to make the attempt: in the first place, I thought that if, though I might not be able to restrain your tears, yet that if I could even wipe them away, I should set myself free from all my own sorrows: then I was quite sure that I should rouse you from your grief with more authority if I had first shaken it off myself. I feared, too, lest Fortune, though overcome by me, might nevertheless overcome some one of my family. Then I endeavoured to crawl and bind up your wounds in the best way I could, holding my hand over my

own wound; but then again other considerations occurred to me which held me back: I knew that I must not oppose your grief during its first transports, lest my very attempts at consolation might irritate it, and add fuel to it: for in diseases, also, there is nothing more hurtful than medicine applied too soon. I waited, therefore, until it exhausted itself by its own violence, and being weakened by time, so that it was able to bear remedies, would allow itself to be handled and touched. Beside this, while turning over all the works which the greatest geniuses have composed, for the purpose of soothing and pacifying grief, I could not find any instance of one who had

offered consolation to his relatives, while he himself was being sorrowed over by them. Thus, the subject being a new one, I hesitated and feared that instead of consoling, I might embitter your grief. Then here was the thought that a man who had only just raised his head after burying his child, and who wished to console his friends, would require to use new phrases not taken from our common every-day words of comfort: but every sorrow of more than usual magnitude must needs prevent one's choosing one's words, seeing that it often prevents one's using one's very voice. However this may be, I will make the attempt, not trusting in my own genius, but

# LETTER TO MY MOTHER

# Let those whose feeble minds have been enervated by a long period of happiness, weep and lament for many days, and faint away on receiving the slightest blow.

because my consolation will be most powerful since it is I who offer it. You never would deny me anything, and I hope, though all grief is obstinate, that you will surely not refuse me this request, that you will allow me to set bounds to your sorrow.

## II.

See how far I have presumed upon your indulgence: I have no doubts about my having more power over you than your grief, than which nothing has more power over the unhappy. In order, therefore, to avoid encountering it straightway, I will at first take its part and offer it every encouragement: I will rip up and bring to light again wounds already scarred. Someone may say, "What sort of consolation is this, for a man to rake up buried evils, and to bring all its sorrows before a mind which scarcely can bear the sight of one?" but let him reflect that diseases which are so malignant that they do but gather strength from ordinary remedies, may often be cured by the

opposite treatment: I will, therefore, display before your grief all its woes and miseries: this will be to effect a cure, not by soothing measures, but by cautery and the knife. What shall I gain by this? I shall make the mind that could overcome so many sorrows, ashamed to bewail one wound more in a body so full of scars. Let those whose feeble minds have been enervated by a long period of happiness, weep and lament for many days, and faint away on receiving the slightest blow: but those whose years have all been passed amid catastrophes should bear the severest losses with brave and unyielding patience. Continual misfortune has this one advantage, that it ends by rendering callous those whom it is always scourging. Ill fortune has given you no respite, and has not left even your birthday free from the bitterest grief: you lost your mother as soon as you were born, nay, while you were being born, and you came into life, as it were, an outcast: you grew up under a step-mother, whom you made into a mother by all the obedience and respect which even a real daughter could have bestowed upon her: and even a good step-mother costs every one dear. You lost your most affectionate uncle, a brave and excellent man, just when you were awaiting his return: and, lest Fortune should weaken its blows by dividing them, within a month you lost your beloved husband, by whom you had become the mother of three children. This sorrowful news was brought you while you were already in mourning, while all your children were absent, so that all your misfortunes seemed to have been purposely brought upon you at a time when your grief could nowhere find any repose. I pass over all the dangers and alarms which you have endured without any respite: it was but the

other day that you received the bones of three of your grandchildren in the bosom from which you had sent them forth: less than twenty days after you had buried my child, who perished in your arms and amid your kisses, you heard that I had been exiled: you wanted only this drop in your cup, to have to weep for those who still lived.

## III.

The last wound is, I admit, the severest that you have ever yet sustained: it has not merely torn the skin, but has pierced you to the very heart: yet as recruits cry aloud when only slightly wounded, and shudder more at the hands of the surgeon than at the sword, while veterans even when transfixed allow their hurts to be dressed without a groan, and as patiently as if they were in someone else's body, so now you ought to offer yourself courageously to be healed. Lay aside lamentations and wailings, and all the usual noisy manifestations of female sorrow: you have gained nothing by so many misfortunes, if you have not learned how to suffer. Now, do I seem not to have spared you? nay, I have not passed over any of your sorrows, but have placed them all together in a mass before you.

## IV.

I have done this by way of a heroic remedy: for I have determined to conquer this grief of yours, not merely to limit it; and I shall conquer it, I believe, if in the first place I can prove that I am not suffering enough to entitle me to be called unhappy, let alone to justify me in rendering my family unhappy: and, secondly, if I can deal with your case and prove that even your misfortune, which comes upon

you entirely through me, is not a severe one. The point to which I shall first address myself is that of which your motherly love longs to hear, I mean, that I am not suffering: if I can, I will make it clear to you that the events by which you think that I am overwhelmed, are not unendurable: if you cannot believe this, I at any rate shall be all the more pleased with myself for being happy under circumstances which could make most men miserable. You need not believe what others say about me: that you may not be puzzled by any uncertainty as to what to think, I distinctly tell you that I am not miserable: I will add, for your greater comfort, that it is not possible for me to be made miserable.

...

### XVIII.

Since, however, you require something to lean upon until you can reach that haven of rest which philosophy offers to you, I wish in the meantime to point out to you the consolations which you have. Look at my two brothers – while they are safe, you

have no grounds for complaint against Fortune; you can derive pleasure from the virtues of each of them, different as they are; the one has gained high office by attention to business, the other has philosophically despised it. Rejoice in the great place of one of your sons, in the peaceful retirement of the other, in the filial affection of both. I know my brothers' most secret motives: the one adorns his high office in order to confer lustre upon you, the other has withdrawn from the world into his life of quiet, and contemplation, that he may have full enjoyment of your society. Fortune has consulted both your safety and your pleasure in her disposal of your two sons: you may be protected by the authority of the one, and delighted by the literary leisure of the other. They will vie with one another in dutiful affection to you, and the loss of one son will be supplied by the love of two others. I can confidently promise that you will find nothing wanting in your sons except their number. Now, then, turn your eyes from them to your grandchildren; to Marcus, that most engaging child, whose sight no sorrow can withstand. No grief can be so great or so fresh in

any one's bosom as not to be charmed away by his presence. Where are the tears which his joyousness could not dry? Whose heart is so nipped by sorrow that his animation would not cause it to dilate? Who would not be rendered mirthful by his playfulness? Who would not be attracted and made to forget his gloomy thoughts by that prattle to which no one can ever be weary of listening? I pray the gods that he may survive us: may all the cruelty of fate exhaust itself on me and go no further; may all the sorrow destined for my mother and my grandmother fall upon me; but let all the rest flourish as they do now: I shall make no complaints about my childlessness or my exile, if only my sacrifice may be received as a sufficient atonement, and my family suffer nothing more. Hold in your bosom Novatilla, who soon will present you with great-grandchildren, she whom I had so entirely adopted and made my own, that, now that she has lost me, she seems like an orphan, even though her father is alive. Love her for my sake as well as for her own: Fortune has lately deprived her of her mother: your affection will be able to prevent her really feeling the loss of

**I shall make no complaints about my childlessness or my exile, if only my sacrifice may be received as a sufficient atonement, and my family suffer nothing more.**

the mother whom she mourns. Take this opportunity of forming and strengthening her principles; nothing sinks so deeply into the mind as the teaching which we receive in our earliest years; let her become accustomed to hearing your discourses; let her character be moulded according to your pleasure: she will gain much even if you give her nothing more than your example. This continually recurring duty will be a remedy in itself: for when your mind is full of maternal sorrow, nothing can distract it from its grief except either philosophic argument or honourable work. I should count your father among your greatest consolations, were he not absent: as it is, judge from your affection for me what his affection is for you, and then you will see how much more just it is that you should be preserved for him than that you should be sacrificed to me. Whenever your keenest paroxysms of grief assail you and bid you give way to them, think of your father. By giving him so many grandchildren and great-grandchildren you have made yourself no longer his only daughter; but you alone can crown his prosperous life by a happy end: as long as he is alive it is impiety for you to regret having been born.

## XIX.

I have hitherto said nothing of your chief source of consolation, your sister, that most faithful heart which shares all your sorrows as fully as your own, and who feels for all of us like a mother. With her you have mingled your tears, on her bosom you have tasted your first repose: she always feels for your troubles, and when I am in the case she does not grieve for you alone. It was in her arms that I was carried into Rome: by her affectionate and motherly nursing I regained my strength after a long period of sickness: she enlarged her influence to obtain the office of quaestor for me, and her fondness for me made her conquer a shyness which at other times made her shrink from speaking to, or loudly greeting her friends. Neither her retired mode of life, nor her country-bred modesty, at a time when so many women display such boldness of manner, her placidity, nor her habits of solitary seclusion prevented her from becoming actually ambitious on my account. Here, my dearest mother, is a source from which you may gain true consolation: join yourself, as far as you are able, to her, bind yourself to her by the closest embraces. Those who are in sorrow are wont to flee from those who are dearest to them, and to seek liberty for the indulgence of their grief: do you let her share your every thought: if you wish to nurse your grief, she will be your companion, if you wish to lay it aside she will bring it

to an end. If, however, I rightly understand the wisdom of that most perfect woman, she will not suffer you to waste your life in unprofitable mourning, and will tell you what happened in her own instance, which I myself witnessed. During a sea-voyage she lost a beloved husband, my uncle, whom she married when a maiden; she endured at the same time grief for him and fear for herself, and at last, though ship-wrecked, nevertheless rescued his body from the vanquished tempest. How many noble deeds are unknown to fame! If only she had had the simple-minded ancients to admire her virtues, how many brilliant intellects would have vied with one another in singing the praises of a wife who forgot the weakness of her sex, forgot the perils of the sea, which terrify even the boldest, exposed herself to death in order to lay him in the earth, and who was so eager to give him decent burial that she cared nothing about whether she shared it or no. All the poets have made the wife famous who gave herself to death instead of her husband: my aunt did more when she risked her life in order to give her husband a tomb: it shows greater love to endure the same peril for a less important end. After this, no one need wonder that for sixteen years, during which her husband governed the province of Egypt, she was never beheld in public, never admitted any of the natives to her house, never begged any favour of her husband, and never allowed anyone to beg one of her. Thus it came to pass that a gossiping province, ingenious in inventing scandal about its rulers, in which even the blameless often incurred disgrace, respected her as a singular example of uprightness, never made free with her name, — a remarkable piece of self-restraint among a people who will risk everything rather than forego a jest, — and that at the present time it hopes for another governor's wife like her, although it has no reasonable expectation of ever seeing one. It would have been greatly to her credit if the province had approved her conduct for a space of sixteen years: it was much more creditable to her that it knew not of her existence. I do not remind you of this in order to celebrate her praises, for to take such scanty notice of them is to curtail them, but in order that you may understand the magnanimity of a woman who has not yielded either to ambition or to avarice, those twin attendants and scourges of authority, who, when her ship was disabled and her own death was impending, was not restrained by fear from keeping fast hold of her husband's dead body, and who sought not how to escape from the wreck, but how to carry him out of it with her. You must now show a virtue equal to hers, recall your mind from grief, and take care that no one may think that you are sorry that you have borne a son. □



“There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power.”

Washington Irving



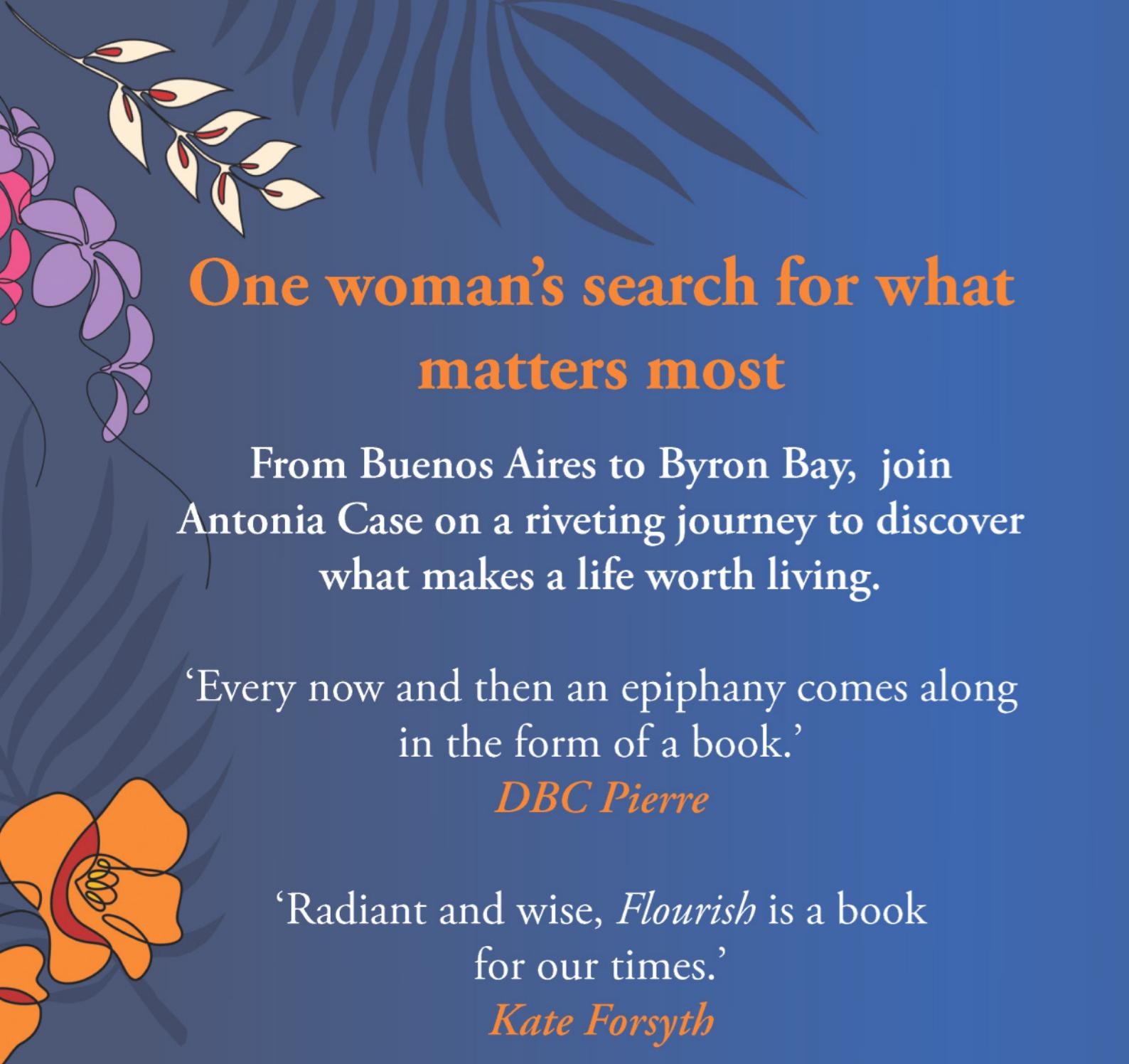


# The young man and the lion

By Aesop

A certain rich man, lord of a great estate, had an only son, of whom he was dotingly fond. The Young Man delighted in hunting, and went every day into the forest, in chase of wild beasts. His father believed firmly in dreams, omens, prognostics, and the like, and, dreaming one night that his son was killed by a Lion, resolved that he should not go to the forest anymore. He therefore built a spacious tower, and kept the Young Man there closely confined. That his captivity might be less tedious to bear, he surrounded him with books, music, and pictures; and on the walls of the tower were painted in life-size all the beasts of the chase, and among the rest a Lion. The Young Man stood one day gazing for a long time at this picture, and, vexation at his unreasonable confinement getting the mastery over him, he struck the painted Lion a violent blow with his fist, saying, "Thou, cruel savage, art the cause of all my grief!" The point of a nail in the wainscot under the canvas entered his hand; the wound became inflamed, festered, and mortified, and the Youth died from its effects.





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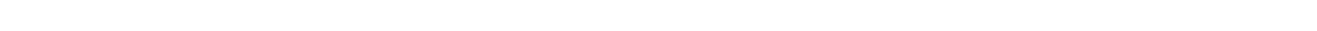
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By Costica Bradatan

# Designed to fail



When they seek to determine someone's cause of death, doctors often speak of "organ failure" – the failure of an essential system in the body (cardiovascular, renal, etc.) – or even of "multiple organ failure" – the loss of function of two or more such systems. No matter how old one is, one never dies of old age (technically, age cannot by itself be the cause of death), but because of some failure that takes place within the body. Such language is revealing. It suggests an unspoken, perhaps unconscious belief that our organs are meant to work indefinitely, and, by implication, that we are supposed to last indefinitely as well. We – this line of thinking goes – are not "exhaustible" (meant to burn for a while and then flicker away), but designed to live forever. Should we somehow manage to find better parts, or more expert maintenance, our mor-

tality problem would be all but solved. It is largely such a belief that lies behind the transhumanism project.

What this belief betrays, more deeply, is that we are not properly equipped to think about death. In an important sense, we don't get death. We can certainly train ourselves to think of it, and some of us may succeed, but it doesn't come naturally. For the most part, nature has programmed us to ignore our own demise. Thrust into existence as we are, our main business here is to survive and reproduce, and not to ponder such unsettling issues as death, nothingness, or annihilation. Life knows how to take care of itself. This is what Goethe must have had in mind when he said, "It is entirely impossible for a thinking being to think of its own non-existence, of the termination of its thinking and life." For Vladimir

Jankélévitch, to think death is "to think the unthinkable" (*penser l'impensable*). "There is utterly nothing to think about death," writes Jean Améry, in a similar vein. The genius and the simpleton are "equally thwarted in confronting this subject." To think of death in an adequate manner – to fully take it in – goes against our fundamental instincts as living creatures.

Yet death never fails to take us in. No matter how fulfilled our lives turn out to be, the same destination awaits us all: ultimate, biological failure. The existential threat of that failure has been with us all along, but to live in a state of relative contentment, most of us remain blissfully unaware of it – or at least manage to pretend. This pretence, however, has never prevented us from moving toward our destination, faster and faster, "in inverse ratio to the





square of the distance from death,” as Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich expertly describes the process.

When it came to death and dying, Leo Tolstoy was more than a distant observer: he was a consummate insider. The big question that ate at him all the time was, as he puts it in Confession: “Is there any meaning in my life that wouldn’t be destroyed by the death that inevitably awaits me?” To find an answer, Tolstoy never took his eyes off death; he observed it unceasingly, from multiple angles and in different circumstances, as his writing – and perhaps especially *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* – attests. All his life Tolstoy sought to understand the extraordinary power that death holds on our existence: how our fear of death, the anxiety or even terror caused in us by the thought of our mortality, shape the way we live and conduct ourselves. This was, for him, not navel-gazing, but a shattering, immersive experience, which he hoped would cure him of his own fear of death. Tolstoy prepared himself for the ultimate failure by dying, again and again, with every one of his characters that perished. He feared their fears, felt their pain, and was paralysed by their anxieties. Long before his own end at some obscure railway station in 1910, he had experienced his own exquisitely portrayed deaths as Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, Anna Karenina, Hadji Murat, and Ivan Ilyich.

Life may be hard, the cliché goes, but death is even harder. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* gives us some insight into the difficulty. Suffering from an unspecified terminal disease, Ivan Ilyich eventually admits to himself, after much self-deception, that “something new and dreadful was happening to him, something of such vast importance that nothing in his life could compare with it.” Even at this late hour he was afraid to call death by its name. Naming it, he must have feared, would have somehow conjured it up and brought it to life, as if death hadn’t been there all along. At one point, he refers to it as “that horrid, appalling, unheard-of something that had been set in motion within him and was gnawing away at him day and night, ineluctably dragging him off somewhere.”

Firmly rooted in life, as any living creature is, Ivan Ilyich just could not accept his nonexistence, imminent and inevitable though it was. “In the depth of his heart he knew he was dying,” observes Tolstoy, “but not only was he unaccustomed to such an idea, he simply could not grasp it... It simply was not possible that he should have to die.” Ivan was neither equipped nor prepared to accept his mortality. That he should do such a thing remained, to the very end, alien to him.

Ivan Ilyich died alone, as we all do. Tolstoy is too good a writer to insinuate himself into his hero’s death – that

narrow, custom-made space that was meant for him, and him alone. “He drew in a breath, broke off in the middle of it, stretched himself out, and died.” For all the indignities Ivan Ilyich had to suffer before he died, his end has a quiet solemnity about it. There is something of a professional undertaker’s velvet-like courtesy in the way Tolstoy describes his passing.

*The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is an account of one man’s desperate struggle to stick to life, even as death is snatching him away. Much of the book is about death, but if you want to learn how to approach this last great failure – how to face it, how to own it – poor Ivan doesn’t have much to tell you. A slightly better model is Antonius Block, from Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*. A Swedish knight returning from the Crusades and plunged into a crisis of faith, Block is faced with the grand failure in the form of a man in black, which is how Death chooses to appear to him. The valiant knight does not hesitate to engage Death head-on. He doesn’t flee, doesn’t cry, doesn’t beg for mercy – he challenges Death to a game of chess. “The condition is that I may live as long as I hold out against you. If I win, you will release me. Is it agreed?” the knight asks boldly. Taken aback, Death agrees.

Block cannot succeed in his game with Death – no one can – but victory is not the point. You play against the grand failure not to win, but to learn

**Tolstoy prepared himself for the ultimate failure by dying, again and again, with every one of his characters that perished.**

how to lose. Bergman teaches us a great lesson here: We will all die, but that's not the most important thing. What really matters is how we die and what we gain in the process. During his brief engagement with Death, Block must have experienced more than he did all his eventful life. He examines his life and his conscience and touches the limits of his earthly existence, and in so doing he gets to know himself a little better. He keeps searching for meaning even as he knows that the quest is largely in vain. He makes new friends, and befriends Death himself, which is no small feat. Without that final game of chess, the knight's existence would have been significantly poorer. In the end, even as he loses, Block accomplishes something rare: he turns failure into a fine art and

manages to make the art of failing an intimate part of the art of living.

Yet, just as in the case of Ivan Ilyich, Antonius Block's encounter with the grand failure only shows how difficult it is to go against our survival instinct and come to terms with our mortality. Block is defiant, philosophical, and a joy to watch, but it is not at all clear that he exits this world at peace with himself. What he wants to find out from Death is above all an answer to some burning existential questions. When Death finally comes to take him away, he goes reluctantly, giving no sign that his questions have been answered. His final prayer says it all: "From our darkness, we call out to Thee, Lord. Have mercy on us because we are small and frightened and ignorant." For all we

know, the prayer is addressed to a God in whose existence Block is unable, or unready, to believe.

But who says that dying is easy? Managing to extricate yourself from existence – with ease and grace, and without regret and agony – may be the most difficult thing to accomplish in life. It takes a long time and hard work and punishing self-discipline. It's not for nothing that such training – learning how to die, to get ready, to exit – is central to virtually all religions and to any spiritual tradition worthy of the name. ▀

Excerpted from *In Praise of Failure: Four Lessons in Humility*, by Costica Bradatan, published by Harvard University Press.

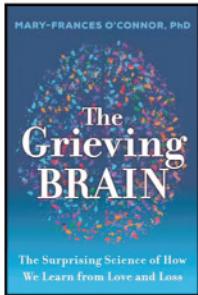


*"Daddy, what did you do in the Culture War?"*



# Our library

## The Grieving Brain

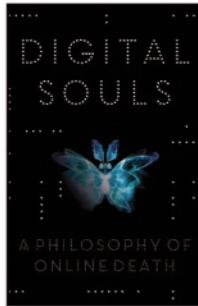


Mary-Frances O'Connor

*Throwing out the map*

Fortunately, the brain is good at solving problems. In fact, the brain exists for precisely this function. After decades of research, I realised that the brain devotes lots of effort to mapping where our loved ones are while they are alive, so that we can find them when we need them. And the brain often prefers habits and predictions over new information. But it struggles to learn new information that cannot be ignored, like the absence of our loved one. Grieving requires the difficult task of throwing out the map we have used to navigate our lives together with our loved one and transforming our relationship with this person who has died. Grieving, or learning to live a meaningful life without our loved one, is ultimately a type of learning.

## Digital Souls

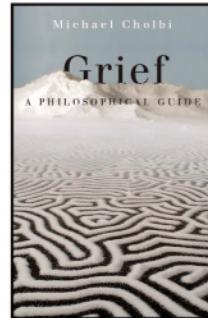


Patrick Stokes

*The visibility of death*

Where once we died at home, and our bodies often stayed there until burial, from the early decades of the twentieth century onwards we increasingly died in hospitals. Yet the internet has drastically changed the visibility of death, or at least of certain deaths. On Friday 15 March 2019, a white supremacist armed with assault weapons livestreamed himself entering two mosques in Christchurch and murdering fifty people. The New Zealand police asked media outlets not to show the livestream footage; many nonetheless did. Two days later, the website Reddit took down a subreddit (discussion page) called r/watchpeopledie for violating Reddit's 'policy against glorifying or encouraging violence', after it posted the gunman's footage.

## Grief: A Philosophical Guide



Michael Cholbi

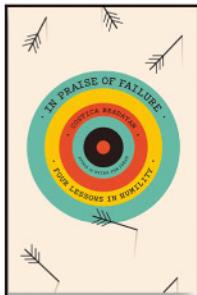
*A vicious killing*

According to the US Central Intelligence Agency, about 55 million human beings die each year. That works out to about 152,000 deaths each day, 6,300 per hour, 105 each minute, and two each second.

I imagine that you do not grieve many of these deaths. (I readily concede that I only grieve a minuscule handful of them.) Of course, others' deaths – even those we do not grieve – can elicit other emotional responses in us besides grief. We are outraged when we hear of a vicious killing or of the killing of an especially vulnerable person. We are horrified upon learning about acts of genocide. And we can pity the deaths of those who are close to those we know (as when we learn that a friend's parent has died).

Food for thought from the *New Philosopher* library. We discover books that can change the way you view the world.

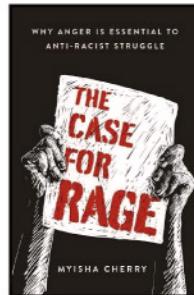
## Designed to Fail: Four Lessons in Humility



**Costica Bradatan**  
*Suffer the consequences*

Clumsiness is a peculiar form of failure: one that is at once yours and not yours. It is yours because you are the one who does the failing: owing to poor motor coordination, you are unable to accomplish something that most people have little trouble accomplishing. And yet since this is due to a part of yourself that you can't fully control – indeed, a rebellious part that is not you – it's not exactly your failure. You suffer the consequences – shame, embarrassment, humiliation, or worse – just as Weil did throughout her life, without much fault of your own. This failure, which gradually colonises the clumsy and determines the contours of their lives, is not properly a human failure; it belongs to the things of the external world.

## The Case for Rage



**Myisha Cherry**  
*Dangerous behaviour*

People often make a distinction between being angry and behaving angrily, telling you that there is nothing morally wrong with being angry. The problem lies in behaving angrily – acting on the feeling of anger. Behaving angrily is often made synonymous with behaving badly. The angry person behaves badly by burning down buildings, screaming at the top of their lungs, and slashing people with their ruthless words. So while nothing is wrong with feeling rage, anger, and fury as long as you keep them to yourself, the problem is that doing so isn't easy. These feelings have the power to ignite dangerous behaviour. Along this line of thinking, maybe we'd be better off not having these feelings in the first place? After all, angry behaviour is seldom productive behaviour.

## Becoming Beauvoir: A Life



**Kate Kirkpatrick**  
*Unalterable security*

Beauvoir described her earliest years with a feeling of 'unalterable security' broken only by the realization that eventually she, too, was 'condemned to be an outcast of childhood'. She loved to be outdoors exploring nature, relishing in running through lawns and examining leaves and flowers, seed pods and spiders' webs. Each summer the family spent two months in the country: one month at Georges' sister Hélène's house (a turreted nineteenth-century château called La Grillère) and another at his father's estate, Meyrignac. The château at Meyrignac was set in a large property of more than 200 hectares, providing ample opportunity for Simone to lose herself in the beauty of nature.

# Documentaries

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[www.newphilosopher.com/videos/](http://www.newphilosopher.com/videos/)

## Companion for the dying



Johanna Klug, 27, works as a companion for the dying, and dealing with death has had a positive influence on her life. At the age of 20, she began spending time with people in the final months of their lives. "Since then, the topics of dying, death, and mourning have never left me," says Johanna. "It was the need for direct,

sincere and genuine encounters with people." She finds this intensity in her hospice work, where she spends time with, among others, an old woman and a young woman with a heart condition. She also finds it during outings with a girl who is mourning her deceased sister, as well as when she goes out partying with her friends.

## The lost generation



Greenland has been rocked by a scandal revealing a Danish campaign to curb its growing Inuit population from the mid 1960s to late 1970s. Now being officially investigated, about 4,500 women had an intrauterine device, commonly known as a coil,

inserted – often against their will. *BBC 100 Women* goes to the heart of the scandal, meeting women who've begun piecing together reasons behind the physical and mental trauma that they'd endured for decades in silence.



“That loss is common would not make  
My own less bitter, rather more:  
Too common! Never morning wore  
To evening, but some heart did break.”

Alfred Tennyson

*The Travelling Companions*, 1862, by Augustus Leopold Egg

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## What our readers say:

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In a country so defined by the shallow, crass propaganda and cognitive conformity coming out of its papers, magazines, and broadcasters, yours is a true gem. You have no idea how happy I was to discover it, it has given me hope for the future of this country's media landscape and for the public discussion emanating from it.

I have to say that it is a tremendous relief and joy that your publication has arrived. Your magazine provides oxygen to the soul. I have often felt alone, alienated or old-fashioned in my outlook but now know I have a soulmate to reflect and take action with, namely *New Philosopher*.

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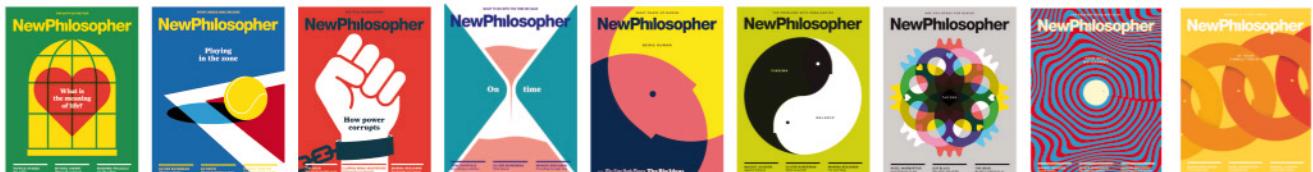
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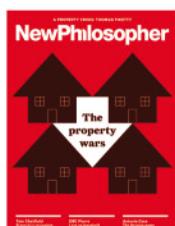
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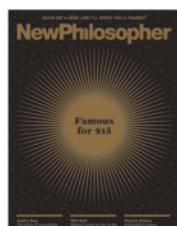
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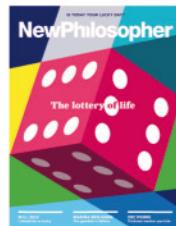
#9 'property'



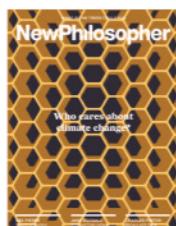
#10 'fame'



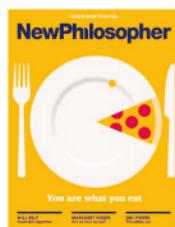
#11 'technology'



#13 'luck'



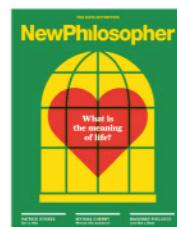
#14 'nature'



#16 'food'



#17 'communication'



#19 'life'



#22 'time'



#23 'being human'



## 13 questions:

# Vincent Cespedes

In conversation  
with Zan Boag

**Vincent Cespedes** is a philosopher, novelist, essayist, artist, and composer.



### What is your demon?

My demon is digital distractions, serving as a modern mind's junk food, masking the deeper malaise of societal indifference and disconnection.

### What is the most important part of your education?

The art of unlearning, like mental gymnastics, has been essential, helping me to dismantle ingrained capitalist narratives and forge a path of critical thought.

### Which 'thinker' has had the greatest influence on your life?

Henri Lefebvre, the philosophical harbinger of May '68, who foresaw the emergence of the 'cyberanthrop' – a visionary in understanding the intersection of humanity and the cybermodern world.

### What do you doubt most?

I often doubt the philosophical competence of auto-correct, mirroring my scepticism of leaders in our profit-driven world.

### If you could change one thing about the world, what would that be?

I'd install an empathy chip in every smartphone, a symbolic gesture towards dismantling the inequality fostered by our capitalist structures.

### What is love?

Love is like unlimited wi-fi connectivity, a radical force against the transactional nature of our contemporary society.

### What does it mean to be human?

Being human is to navigate the fog of existence, like the only species paying rent on Earth, while striving for emotional authenticity.

### What would you never do, no matter the price?

I would never sell my soul for a trending hashtag, a metaphor for resisting the moral bankruptcy of our capitalist era.

### If you could choose, what would you have for your last meal?

A simple fusion meal, a tribute to our mixophile century, defying the isolating consumerist culture.

### Your favourite word?

Philarchy – my concept – the power of love, not just 'likes', encapsulating my vision for a world governed by empathy and solidarity.

### What is a good death?

A good death is logging off life after a fulfilling session of living purposefully against the dehumanising forces of capitalism.

### What do people accuse you of?

Having too much optimism in my coffee, a light-hearted admission of my unwavering pursuit of a just world.

### What is the meaning of life?

Crafting a narrative of resistance and hope in a world that can feel chaotic, a blend of 42's whimsy and deep existential pursuit. □



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