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Of Loss, Grief, and Love

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15301348>

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

My world ended that day. Sorrow, guilt, regret, amplified by blind devotion. Desperation, helplessness. All I see are memories, ghosts of the past. I cannot forget him, no matter how hard I try. I deleted his pictures, only to recover all 800 of them again, and for what? All they give me is pain. I need to write this down, tell him how I feel, like I used to do every day. Maybe it will change his mind. I had lost all self-respect; I did not need any – I needed him. It killed me to think of what could have been. He blocked me, yet I still write to him. I just wish he was there to receive them. I wish I could accept that this is all in vain, that he is not coming back, and I am to blame. But it is hard.

I have nothing but love for him. I did this to myself. I hate myself. These thoughts ring in my head as I watch my feelings bleed into words, but I am physically unable to express it all. I feel as if I am going to burst and all I can do is write – but my writing helps no one, not even myself. Not when the only thing I seemingly know how to do is done with trembling fingers – it gets very messy. I do not know what I am writing about. I do not even know why I am writing. I only feel worse as I do it. What right do I have to drag others down as I spiral in my own pain? Nonetheless, I do it, without knowing why.

“He was so good to me. He treated me so well. I was the one who pushed him away. It was my fault.”

Regret lingered in my words. Every letter laced with guilt as I reminisce about us. Why did I not demonstrate my love for him then? Why do I, only when it is too late, try so desperately to make my feelings known? To write even while fully aware that my intentions will never reach him as my audience - why do I do that? This question rings in my head as I struggle to find peace within myself. “Fear”, I write. I have been so afraid of losing my best friend and companion that I was driven to subjugate myself just to feign normalcy. Deep in my heart, I knew we were never going to see it through, but why was I so afraid to lose him?

As I try to find an explanation, I wondered why everyone else experiences the same thing. Why do we fear loss? More importantly, why do we so desperately hold on to what we have lost despite the painful reality that it is gone?

These thoughts echoed in my mind until I finally stumbled upon something that brought clarity to my incoherent ruminations: a TEDx Talk by Cole Imperi (2020), which sheds light on “shadow losses” – what she coined as a term to describe losses in life, but not of life. Examples of shadow losses include divorce, getting fired from your job, or in Imperi’s experience, being told she is infertile. Shadow losses are painful, yet they often seem less justified than actual bereavement. However, this is not always the case. According to Imperi (2020), our brains grieve shadow losses the same way it grieves deaths, as they cannot differentiate between the two situations in the moment. Do we fear loss because we fear death? Or perhaps we are so afraid of loss because, at our core, all we crave for is to be loved – and when we lose someone who loved us, we start believing we are unworthy of love.

We tend to forget the tasks we have completed as it no longer remains a pending need, yet become obsessed with things we can never have, such that it may even become a psychological need (Meinecke, 2018a). So, perhaps not expressing our love for someone before they are lost is a way that enables us to cling on to their presence after they leave (Meinecke, 2018a). As Meinecke (2018a) writes, “We read when we cannot be with the things we read about... We remember because we cannot be with each other all the time.” Whatever we write down becomes a dormant version of our thoughts, and when we cannot physically keep the tangible things that we so desperately need, we rely on the intangible that we know would never leave us. Perhaps in my futile writing lie my attempts at keeping a piece of him in my memory, even when he is physically gone, like an obsession to a task undone, or love unexpressed. After all, memories are nothing but endearing distributions, woven amalgamations of everything we hoped to never forget, which then become what we cherish more than the person themselves (Meinecke, 2018a).

This notion snaked a question in my head, “Why exactly do we tend to entertain these thoughts so much, even to the point of excruciation?” Maybe the very persistence of these thoughts is so deeply ingrained in our mental activity solely because it does not want to cease being needed by the vessel that it serves – us, our emotions, our thoughts (Meinecke, 2018b). This is evident in a study by Wiesel (1982, as cited in Meinecke, 2018b) where eye neurons that were left with no purpose relentlessly strive to find one anyway. This concept ties itself to the idea of object permanence, which refers to one’s learned ability to believe that things still exist even out of sight. This is present when our nervous system still reminds us of somebody’s

existence even when they are not physically in front of us, and these internal reminders transform into expectations that promise to never abandon us, keeping us company while we wait patiently for the return of even the people we have lost, and not coming back at all (Meinecke, 2018b). Maybe such expectations are really an attachment or preference formed, manifesting itself as a hopeful yearning of the return of someone we hold so dearly (Meinecke, 2018b).

As such, the memories and expectations we gained from repeated experiences of object permanence, like Mom always returning home from work, soothe our brain while keeping us company. This creates a cycle of cognition embedded in our mind that whatever leaves our sight is bound to return to us, and so disrupting this cycle of expectations creates a heavy cognitive dissonance within us, which occurs when our thoughts and beliefs do not align with the reality of our behaviour. After all, losing someone permanently contradicts every fibre of our being that believed in their return, and with such severe cognitive dissonance comes extreme discomfort, especially when we are unable to change reality to fit our beliefs and expectations. Do we really fear loss? Or do we fear losing that sense of stability in us, disrupting the mental process we spent our entire lives believing to be true? Are we more afraid of the discomfort that comes with loss, or losing the people themselves? If these are signs, what do they really mean?

Maybe we just want to be loved. Perhaps we are all desperately in search of our self-worth that we somehow think is nested within the love others give to us. Maybe we are so scared of losing people we love because we fear losing a piece of us in that person too, and we just do not want to perceive ourselves as unworthy. Maybe this is the object symbolized by the fear of losing someone; that a piece of us is gone and we seem to always feel empty and void, so we desire for the people we have lost to come back, even if in reality, they will not.

Nonetheless, however we perceive it, I now know that this is what it means to grieve so deeply — to fill my days drowning in bittersweet nostalgia that only serves as a painful reminder of what I let slip through my fingers; to spend my time pouring out my feelings and expressing my regret at the last moment, when it no longer matters. And most importantly, as I slowly begin to pick up my broken pieces, I have learned to let go of the hatred, regret, and judgement I once passed on myself for simply feeling this way.

After all, what is grief but love persevering? What is grief but love enduring?

Bionote

Wong Jing Qing Vanessa is an undergraduate student pursuing a degree in Psychology at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore. With a strong interest in mental health and emotional expression, Vanessa explores the themes of grief and loss through her writing. She believes in the power of storytelling as a means of reflection and healing. Beyond academics, she enjoys spending time with animals and listening to music, and she hopes to continue crafting pieces that can resonate deeply with others on an emotional level. Her work is inspired by her lived experiences and a genuine desire to understand the human mind.

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