

## A Short Note On Loss

The all-consuming fact of death. It is so dark and wide and tall that when we lose a loved one, it is all we can see. The name of the deceased becomes synonymous with the word "loss" and the most prominent details of that life -- the clear points of light that dot the blackness like stars -- are the details of death. What was the cause? How much did he suffer? What were her last words? The waxen face, the slack features, and our own keening sobs are burned into our memories forever. Such is death.

The ironic thing is that someone can bring joy and love into our lives for decades and yet, when we lose them, every recollection of them is tainted with loss and pain. I say this is ironic because one year of life is 365 days. Death occurs on one day. Think of someone you lost, grab your calculator and tally up the number of days of his or her life and then stack it up against the one, final day. Surely, logically, all of those days of life count for more than the dying. So why does the day of my mother's death loom larger in my mind than all the years in which she drew breath?

The answer lies in a quirk of the human mind. Jonah Lehrer, in his book The Decisive Moment, explains the concept of "negativity bias":

"for the human mind, *bad is stronger than good*. This is why in marital interactions, it generally takes at least five kind comments to compensate for one critical comment... People believe that a person who's been convicted of murder must perform at least twenty-five acts of 'life-saving heroism' in order to make up for his or her one crime. There's no rational reason for us to treat gains and losses or compliments and criticisms so differently. But we do. The only way to avoid loss-aversion-generated mistakes is to know about the concept."<sup>1</sup>

It's true, isn't it? Thinking back on the triumphant moments of my life, I am always amazed at how quickly my euphoria faded. Give it a day, maybe two, and then I'd start coming down from it. Conversely, the last time that I got stuck in a rut of writer's block, it amounted to two solid weeks of lethargy and depression. It is so much easier to feel bad than it is to sustain a good mood. And it is so much easier to ache for a lost loved one than it is to think on them and smile.

However there is, as Jonah Lehrer notes, a way to avoid this. We must recognise the impulse within ourselves and alter our response. Ok. Let's give that a go.

Today I wanted to ask my mother a question and got as far as picking up the phone before I remembered that she was gone. In that moment I was so frustrated and angry; and I ached for her. That is the negative bias -- her absence dominates my thoughts of her.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonah Lehrer, The Decisive Moment: How the Brain Makes Up its Mind (London: Canongate; Kindle edition) 74.

So the answer is what? To stop and conjure up another, happier memory? All right. How about an afternoon in Bloomsburg? It was fair week. The Bloomsburg Fair is so massive that they let us off school for the week and like other kids I spent the time working at one of the food stands there to earn some extra pocket money.

For some reason my mom decided to meet me at the gate and walk me home when my shift ended. I don't remember what we talked about; I don't think it was anything important. And then it started to rain.

It was late September and the rain was cold -- an apt glimpse of the coming autumn and we shivered as we walked. And then mom started to hum the first few bars of "Singing in the Rain."

I started to sing and she, in her thin and thready voice, joined in. In another moment we were twirling around lampposts, kicking puddle water at each other and tap dancing up the sidewalk. People in passing cars looked at us like we were nuts. We arrived home soaked to the skin and chilled to the bone and laughing hysterically.

It is, I think, one of my best memories of her. That moment has helped to shape my philosophy. After she died, I put a framed sign next to the coffee and tea in the kitchen -- basically in a spot where I'd see it everyday. It reads:

*Life isn't About Waiting*  
For the storm to pass...  
It's about learning to  
*Dance in the Rain*

Sitting here now, I have to admit that the recollection of that day has helped. I'm not feeling angry anymore. I feel warm. I can look back and smile on a moment I shared with my mom and recognise it for what it was ... a gift.