

THE INNOCENCE OF LOSS

No, that title is not an editing error. This *is* about “the innocence of loss,” not the other way around.

Sometimes it feels as though life is like a big Lost and Found Department. We lose our heads; we lose our keys; we lose our friends; we lose our tempers; we lose our umbrellas; we lose our youth; we lose our perspective; we lose our crops; we lose our bearings; we lose our money; we lose our hope; we lose our common sense; we lose our jewelry; we lose our minds; we lose our pets; we lose our strength; we lose our standing; we lose our children; we lose our point; we lose our love; we lose our jobs; we lose our hearts; we lose our pens; we lose our reputations; we lose our faith; we lose our briefcases; we lose our trust; we lose our health; we lose our tools; we lose our way; we lose our books; we lose our places; we lose our will. In the course of life, we find some things again.

If we're lucky, and we're all born to be that lucky, what we find in the process of life transcends all our losses, and we find peace.

When we're thinking about what we've lost, life seems pretty grim. It can seem just as bleak when we've lost our keys, we're late, and something important is riding on our arrival as it can seem when we lose our faith, we're drifting, and nothing seems important enough to get us moving.

Loss is an internal experience that has nothing to do with what is missing and everything to do with the way we think about it when we realize it is gone. Loss is a moment-to-moment effect that has nothing to do with the time between the losing and finding or the losing and forgetting and everything to do with the way we use our gift of thought to make sense of it. We can mourn the loss of a broken heirloom as deeply as we can mourn the loss of a loved one. We can suffer the loss of a college sports tournament with a life-long heartbreak as intense as regret over the loss of a limb that forever changes our way of life. We have no choice but to experience any loss fully in the moment it occurs. After that, we are on our own with our thoughts. We can make the loss more important, ruminate about it, hang onto it forever, or leave it alone and allow ourselves to fully experience the next step along the fascinating journey of life.

Found is an internal experience, too, that has nothing to do with what is found or how it is found or how long it takes to find it. When we feel we've “found” something, whether it is as deep as a truth about life or as superficial as a candy from a pocket, we are in a completely different state of mind from “lost”. We don't like the feeling of “lost” because it's negative and reminds us of the impermanence of everything and how little

control we have over life's ups and downs. We like the feeling of "found", regardless of why we think we feel it, because it's positive and reminds us of all there is to discover.

Both feelings are equally elusive and equally illusionary. We can only "lose" what we think we should have had; we can only "find" what we think we should be able to keep. It is an innocent idea, the idea that there is anything outside of us in the temporal world that we should have had or should be able to keep. Lost and found are both expressions of a yearning for permanence that is neither universally true nor even possible, according to the laws of physics. Yet, in the innocence of the imagination, we engage in wishful thinking that it could be. And because our thinking looks so real to us, we often innocently think it might be.

The whole notion reminds me of an interesting discovery I made in the early 1970's, when I was a reporter for a newspaper in Florida. We had a quiet summer season the first year I worked there, and I spent a lot of time along the barrier islands and beaches on the West Coast, learning the area and finding features to write about. The next summer, we had many storms, and my work changed. I spent a lot of time writing about property damage, beach erosion, and shifting patterns of high tide lines. At one point, a fabulous home that had sat, the year before, on a point overlooking the Gulf of Mexico, with hundreds of yards of beach between it and the breaking waves, was surrounded by water. I went to a meeting organized by homeowners there, and actually had to wade through a saltwater mini-moat to get to the entrance to the house.

During the course of my research on these stories, I visited a county office that had an amazing collection of aerial photographs of one of the Barrier Islands, Anna Maria. The photographs had been taken once a year for 12 years. The shape of the island kept changing. No two photographs were alike. There was extensive beachfront in some that was completely gone in others; the northernmost "point" of the island disappeared, then re-appeared in a different shape, then disappeared again. Places where many homes had been built in a recent period did not even show up on maps from 8 years earlier, and places where the public parking currently was practically at the edge of the waves showed broad stretches of picnic area and beach between the parking lot and the water years before. At one end of the island, where there was a bridge between it and the next, the swiftly moving waters spanned by that bridge had once been a wet, sandy area, easily traversed barefoot by beachgoers moving from one island to the other.

Looking at those maps, I wondered how any homeowners could complain – and to whom ultimately they would complain – about "losing" beach-front. I wondered why anyone who found, all of a sudden one year, that a big beach had appeared before them could possibly expect to "keep" it. Would someone who had "lost" property sue the Gulf of Mexico and its partner Destiny for taking it away? Would they try to recover it from another barrier island, where it appeared to have been deposited? In the chaotic maneuverings of that summer between lawyers, builders, homeowners, engineers,

weather prognosticators, insurance companies and county and state agencies, I saw a huge cosmic joke. This did not endear me to my editors, so I persisted dutifully in seriously reporting all the news as though these issues could actually be resolved somehow. But in my heart, I couldn't see much news in it beyond the sound and fury of the human imagination, signifying nothing in this changing universe, yet innocently longing for stasis.

If people who wanted to live on a barrier island visited the office where the aerial photographs are displayed, they would realize you cannot own, nor can you keep, nor can you ever be certain of such terra firma. Like everything else in the grand scheme of life, it is neither terra nor firma.

And yet for people like me, who simply went there year to year to walk around, it was both serene and dynamic and endlessly intriguing. Watching the changes was like watching the earth in formation, the creative process at play. Long stretches of soft white beach where waves rolled slowly in one summer would turn into wide strips of steep drop-offs, where waves crashed against the edge of the island by the next. The Gulf would give, the Gulf would take away but the net result was always beautiful.

Many years later, I sat in awed silence for hours on a hot, windy day on a cliff in the Badlands of South Dakota, and looked out over a geological landscape that reminded me of that crazy summer of people trying to litigate the Barrier Islands to stand still. The only difference between the tremendous topographical changes too stunning to comprehend represented by the Badlands, and the shifting sands of Anna Maria, was the perception of the human mind. A year is meaningful time to us; in geologic time, it is barely one flutter of a hummingbird wing. Yet if we could grasp the changing universe in geologic time, it would look as restless and unpredictable as the changes we do see with our own eyes. When geologists find fish fossils deep in the dunes of the vast, dry desert and mollusk shells on rocky mountain promontories, they are looking at the same truth revealed by those aerial photographs.

We can only see what our mind can shape into thought, and we can only know as reality the picture our thinking paints. That is the innocence; our perception is so small and personal; yet we cannot see what we do not think. So we feel the pain of loss and the joy of finding as though it was all there was, and we know the fullness of our ever-shifting experiences through those little snippets of thought, like the cartoon books we used to get in cereal boxes, stacks of still pictures carefully drawn one at a time so that when you flip through them, the characters appear to be moving. No matter how swift the motion appears, it was created one frame at a time.

If we do not stop the magic of the movement, no frame can be so flawed and disturbing as to spoil our delight in the pattern of life, or to disrupt the peace of mind that comes

from understanding that beauty and pleasure is seeing the movement of all the frames together.

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