

In contemplating loss: the creative power and possibility of suffering

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Abstract

Even as the world continues to be rocked by new COVID-19 variants, everyday life is slowly returning to normal. The crazy stockpiling of groceries and the stay at home mandates seemed to have occurred a lifetime ago, revealing how quickly we have moved on. We muddle through the uncertainty, but by moving on too quickly, we slip back into old ways. By taking our everyday freedoms for granted, we overlook the opportunity to forge new paths. To linger in the suffering evoked by uncertainty, however, is to harness the power of change to craft a more timeless and expansive path.

Reverting to old ways

“Change is difficult, and lasting change is almost impossible,” my father mutters. Speaking softly into his chest, his mouth moving furtively and fingers nervously scratching his head, he would often repeat, “People rarely change.” Lasting change is difficult because tremendous persistence and courage is required to break away from our comfort zones. Fear and inertia overwhelm as we become creatures of habit, which makes every small change appear too difficult. Given time, even the smallest adjustments will eventually revert to how they were. “A zebra can’t lose its stripes,” was another of his favourite comments. Without its characteristic stripes, a zebra would no longer be a zebra. The pull of nature is too strong, and even if the world caves in, we may try to cling onto the familiar. “True,” I reply, thinking of the people I have conversed with, whose minds have felt like an impenetrable brick wall. Real and lasting change is always hard because we are creatures of habit. We feel safer knowing what we are doing and where we are going, and stepping out into the unknown can feel as frightening as jumping off a cliff. It is rare to find a person who can sit comfortably at a precipice, with their eyes directed towards the gaping abyss and ready to take the leap, willing to lose it all for what has yet to be discovered.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has become a unique catalyst for change by forcibly launching us off the precipice. We learnt to rapidly adjust to drastically different norms as we battled the fear of infection and carried on with our daily activities without leaving our homes. But as quickly as the virus and its various permutations spread through the world, its presence has subsided. With the uptake of vaccines, we have gradually regained our footing. Complacency now settles as we board trains and enter crowded shopping centres without masks, acting as if the lockdowns have never happened. We forget the difficulties we had once endured, untouched and unaffected by how the world recently came to a grinding halt. In our desperation to forget that the pandemic had ever occurred, we are prevented from doing the hard work of lingering in our losses to contemplate new ways to rebuild.

This call to linger at the edge of a precipice is the theme of the ICQI 2023 Congress “Qualitative Inquiry in Post(?)-Pandemic Times.” The opening paragraph of the Conference website describes the current state of play, in which the future appears dim (ICQI, n.d.). Uncertainty has eroded our hope and we are unsure of what the future holds. What happens when hope is lost? Uncertainty leads to helplessness, which in turn, generates apathy. Apathy can lead to neglect and can cause injustices to be overlooked. To hold our drastically changed world to account, is to overturn this tide of apathy by speaking out about our troubled times. It is to harness the fluidity within the uncertainty to envision a hopeful future, as “We need a rethinking of where we have been, and, crucially, where we are going—and how we will get there. Our inquiry must meet the demands of our hopeful—but evolving—future” (ICQI, n.d., para.3). This challenge

to rethink our trajectory reminds us that we cannot go back to what we once were, as by failing to learn from past mistakes, we continue to make them again and again. Such rethinking prevents us from mindlessly reverting to how we were pre-COVID times, in which we took our basic freedoms for granted. This strange inability to comprehend significance begs the question, “How do we find meaning in a world now defined by a seemingly out of control act of nature? What does a transformative paradigm mean under such circumstances?” (ICQI, n.d. para.5). To pose such a question is to ponder the value of a passing moment. If we were to take honest measures of these past couple of years, how else would we live?

Staying in-between

To linger in the loss is to remain in a state of flux; it is to stand within the cusp of change and to keep one foot in one door and out the other. This moment of leaving and arriving is a dynamic space of possibility, in which you can shift direction in any given moment. Like a projectile in motion, we can harness momentum to quickly enter what is *yet* to come. When it is about to rain, for example, I can smell a change in the air. I stay within the moment of shift to anticipate a possible future. With the hot sun beating down on my brow and the endless clear blue sky above, it is difficult to imagine the looming deluge. But if I pay close attention, I can smell and taste something faintly metallic in the air. The air is weighed down by a moisture that presses down on my forehead, and I can almost hear the rain falling from the sky. Sure enough, the sky darkens, and ominous clouds unleash their first droplets that quickly turns into a heavy downpour. These shifting phases can be easily identified if you know how to read the signs. The sky darkens, and perhaps there is the rumbling of thunder and the metallic smell of moisture in the air. These small details appear as the sky morphs from one state to another, revealing the fluidity of states, in which endings can swiftly transform into new beginnings. Contemplating this in-between space is to perceive glimmers of possibility and to imagine how something can *be* in all its variations.

Loss. When we first encounter it, a loss can floor us. For instance, I can observe its impact on my eldest son, who senses a loss looming in the distance. With only a year left of elementary school, he mourns the end of the daily rhythms that have shaped his childhood. Having remained in the one house and school, he is unfamiliar with change, but by being just a little bit older, he can contemplate its complexities and strangeness. Loss is no longer the simple and straightforward sensations of the last melted spoonfuls of soft ice cream or the final day of a vacation. Instead, it evokes the emptiness of an irrevocable past, and of a childhood slipping away. Waves of loss overwhelm as he realises that a *big* separation is coming, and he braces himself against the pain. Although a small part of me registers the sadness of his awareness, I wish he would simply accept and move on. I tell myself that there is little time for sentimentality or pointless yearnings as life is a series of losses. Through writing this paper about loss, however, I am beginning to realise that by moving on too fast, he may lose the ability to linger in his losses. A loss that is quickly passed over becomes forgotten, and we may lose the opportunity to rebuild something truly meaningful by moving on too fast. To linger in the loss of childhood is to appreciate the beginnings and the endings that underpin the process of *becoming*, and by contemplating this moment of transition, we may perceive possibilities for growth.

When do our losses start passing by unnoticed, without leaving a mark? Maybe it happens during the same time that we start rushing through life. We forget to stop and appreciate the simple pleasures

because our focus is consumed with trying to keep up or stay ahead of others. We think that there is no time to linger as it may lead us to fall behind. Perhaps, my son will also learn to accept life's losses without protest as he rushes through life with the urgency of a ticking clock. His life may become the accumulation of moments that inch forward until the landscape finally plateaus to *a much of a muchness*. Like others before him, he might eventually learn to accept the drudgeries of time. *Should I go out this evening or stay at home? Should I buy this brand of bread or try another?* Each minute detail that adds up to make a life will eventually feel like a heavy weight that wears him down. After hitting life's major landmarks, he will find himself contemplating moving on yet again, but this time he faces a loss unlike any other. In confronting his mortality, he will realise that there are no surprises to come. Just as life begins with birth, it also ends with death. If he only took the time to linger in the losses before this final one came, how would it have changed things?

What is the value of lingering in our losses? The pandemic has taught us that the loss of basic freedoms may be just around the corner. Having experienced these losses seemingly overnight, I question the value of my work and wonder what I could be doing instead. Manheimer (2008) explores this loss of work through retirement. Retirement in old age, or the loss of one's livelihood, can represent the ultimate loss since there is no clear trajectory ahead. This makes the decision to retire a difficult one. Manheimer (2008) describes how this decision to retire is often intuitively felt, recalling the famous Japanese oboist, Fumiaki Miyamoto, who surprisingly announced his retirement at the age of 58. He describes how Miyamoto's decision to exit at the height of his career was lauded by his peers as being a "graceful" way to retire. For Miyamoto, the moment to retire had come when he could visualise his decline. The decision was existential as he was bound by the moral obligation to perform to his optimum capacity, as Manheimer (2008) states, "We have the existential mandate to be the best that we can be. . . otherwise need to vacate space for another person" (p.87). In Miyamoto's view, we owe it to our existence to live to our fullest capacity at every moment. I contemplate Miyamoto's story of retirement through the lens of the losses incurred by the pandemic, and the potential lessons they hold. Does it take an earth-shattering loss, such as the deprivation of basic freedoms, to remind us to live to our fullest capacity? But what happens when this moment of loss passes? Do we simply return to how things once were, and if so, what purpose does our suffering hold?

It is easy to overlook our losses whilst we are busy trying to get ahead. But when our body and pace of life slows down, and there are more losses than gains, there is greater time and space to contemplate loss. This awareness of temporality causes suffering as we recognise that the more we live, the less life we have remaining. The suffering that ensues triggers a protest that affirms our humanity, as Schweitzer (2000) declares, ". . . would it then not be inhuman to reduce a person to pain by denying him his suffering, that is to say, by denying him the language and desire and protest implicit in suffering" (p. 238). An awareness of mortality causes us to suffer, which further leads us to revolt against our suffering and to ask the question, *how shall we approach this end?* In posing this question, we can begin the process of undertaking the lasting work that contributes to our being and becoming. Academic writers can go a step further by asking how they can apply these skills to the craft of writing. How can an awareness of mortality and loss enrich their work? For example, they may practise the craft of loss as they think about how to enter and conclude their stories. By remaining in the loss, they can also become open to the various possible openings and endings to become receptive to rich new stories.

To begin a new story, we become receptive to what resonates and slow down to contemplate what draws us. We capture the emerging sensations or feelings into an opening line, which establishes a mood that engages. Poulos's (2008) opening words, for example, "A light breeze, barely noticeable, kicks up as the mist begins to lift on this new dawn," reveals how he has entered into a contemplative space to engage in expansive and tacit (p.47). Likewise, the introductory sentence, "They never come at you all at once, more like in fits and starts over extended periods of time, small isolated events that seem to be unrelated either to each other or to anything else," implies that the writer is exploring the deeper recesses of their subconscious to uncover what is hidden from sight (Frentz, 2011, p. 798). The writer delves into this unknown to piece together fleeting glimpses of *something* into a meaningful picture. They pay close attention to their sensations and feelings to craft what has yet to be discovered, and then they artfully pass on the narrator's role to another as they bring their story to an end. They acknowledge that each ending is never a final end, as every article provokes further dialogue, as Frentz (2011) concludes his paper by stating, "Even so, and even given the current anxieties and old memories that telling this tale seems to have unearthed, if to stay in the conversation means to stay human, then I think that's an important place to stay" (p.803). They are familiar with the craft of loss, which is to explore and bring to surface glimpses of new beginnings. The value of contributing to this ever-evolving conversation is captured in Poulos's (2008) closing words:

In a sense, these are not stories of particular people at all but of all of us. All families have secrets; all families feel pain and loss and trauma. If we can open our hearts to the power of story and begin to read the clues that stories offer in our quest to follow the mystery of human life, we may well transcend the dark powers that threaten to buckle our floorboards. And, in that sense, to tell the story may well be the only ethical thing to do (p.65)

We all carry stories, some of which may be too difficult to tell, but by expressing the hidden stories within our suffering, we may offer a bright light that illuminates. Sensing this potential for light and warmth, we continue telling our stories despite not knowing where they will take us. These stories make transparent our ways of perceiving and existing, opening us up to the possibility of critique and change, so that we can expand our perspectives and break free from limited tellings. We can learn to let go without stubbornness or regret, drawing on the tacit to explore the mysteries of being human, as well as continually refining our skill of crafting clear and vivid accounts.

Loss and suffering

How do we write about loss when it is an inevitable and an often overlooked part of everyday living? Days pass by like sands passing through an hourglass, and we cannot stem its flow. Like Schweizer (2000), I feel the weight of existence, in which "One day adds itself to another without rhyme or reason" (p. 234), living out seemingly endless days just because. Moments pass by like dust accumulating on a mantel piece, piling up one on top of the other, and without being able to make sense of them, suffering intensifies. To write about our formless suffering is to both give shape and to remain open to possibility, as Schweizer (1995) relates:

The unknown causes suffering, staying in the unknown means to remain in the suffering. To stay in the unknown is to remain open to the 'what else.' It is to move beyond easy and superficial answers and to remain open or to stay within the loss (Schweizer, 1995, para. 9)

To attribute a meaningful form to chaos is to stay within the uncertainty of loss. Schweizer (1995) describes this paradoxical reality through the story of a young girl who tries to give an account of the horrific burns to her body. By giving expression to the shadowy self that suffers, she brings it into being, as “By the very act of speaking she thus gives herself a meaning to the very absence of meaning” (Schweizer, 1995, para. 20). She is *present* to her suffering and is subsequently able to give it *presence*. Suffering, in this sense, is a profound form of “spiritual receptivity” since it entails accounting for and being fully present to the moment (Schweizer, 1995, para. 18). The girl is fully attentive to her suffering and how it manifests through her body. She demonstrates her spiritual receptivity by acknowledging the ontology of suffering and by speaking her ‘I’ through her woe. The young girl’s suffering conveys the intensity of experiences, enabling “voice and words create an order over the chaos of her pain . . . but rather than to him, she speaks to the *other* she has become through her suffering. By the very act of speaking she thus gives herself a meaning to the very absence of meaning” (Schweizer, 1995, para. 20). She speaks her suffering into a coherent form to convey the poignancy of what it means to be human. She crafts a meaningful account by creating something tangible from her solitary encounters of suffering, as “Rather, the desire of the question is that she would speak and thus affirm the possibility of speaking, so that at this moment speaking itself would remake her world” (Schweizer, 1995, para. 21). This capacity to construct a story through our raw embodied sensations, even in the face of unspeakable suffering, becomes a vehicle for being and becoming. In this way, our losses and suffering constitute a powerful mechanism for growth.

Suffering is a form of ontology because it has no pragmatic purpose nor a “reference, nor object, nor utility” (para. 27). There is no rhyme or reason as to why suffering may occur. It is a mystery that can only be spoken of rather than mastered or controlled. Our suffering is entwined in how we perceive the world and how we occupy our bodies; it is a reality of our own making. Through speaking out about our nameless suffering, we can consequently attain a sense of personal integrity. Schweizer (1995) asserts that through speaking of one's suffering it is possible to create an ‘I,’ who speaks to the ‘I,’ conveying, “Even if one says nothing else, to utter “woe” is to say “I.” “Woe” speaks “I” (Schweizer, 2000, p. 233). To express our suffering is to create a subject who speaks, and the other who is spoken to. The ‘I’ both speaks and listens to cultivates empathy within a dialogical space, since “Subjectivity as otherness enables empathy; it is fundamentally moral. The ability to recognise the *other* comes from the otherness of subjectivity. You can empathise with the other only if you are one too” (Schweizer, 2000, p. 233). The sufferer has an ontological and existential responsibility to respond to their suffering, whilst the observer has an equal responsibility to be “present to the text, to witness so that the speaking can take place, so that the sufferer’s appeal can be heard: “go” it says” (Schweizer, 2000, p. 235). To respond to one’s suffering is to bring the self *who suffers* into being. This act of expression captures the redemptive possibility of suffering, which is to draw on its devastating power to transcend the chaos of pain. And as we draw higher meaning from our suffering, it can become a creative force for crafting timeless works of beauty.

Suffering can subsequently be both a destructive and a creative force. It is destructive when it makes us mute, as our misery weighs us down so heavily that we cannot express it in a meaningful form. Through creatively expressing our suffering, however, we can shed light on the mystery and richness of our human condition. This allows us to transcend our struggles, rather than being broken by it. It also allows us to alleviate the hardships of others by providing them with a voice. Such work has universal and eternal value since it elevates us out of the darkness of everyday drudgery and the painful awareness of mortality. It expresses our hunger for something beyond the realm of the physical and material to a realm outside of

time's flow. The works of great artists and poets exist within this timeless plane as their spiritual themes lift us out of the darkness of ignorance, as "The likes of the great artist and poet is their intimation of immortality— knowing that their works will outlive them and, at least vicariously, enabling them to overcome the vortex's pull towards oblivion" (Manheimer, 2008, p. 97). To express and transcend human suffering is to be freed from the senseless flow of time through transforming our suffering into works of timeless relevance.

Writing and reading as lingering in suffering

Writing as inquiry can give expression to our suffering. It is a creative and expressive means of exploring the unknown, such as the formlessness of suffering. By writing to construct what has yet to materialise, we can embrace the possibility of *being*, as Schweizer (1995) relays, "Perhaps the very language of the aesthetic, a language without any meaning other than its own occurrence, might echo the mysterious occurrence of suffering. Perhaps the mystery of art has its origins in the secrecy of suffering, the keeping of which is the purpose of the work of art" (para. 5). The aesthetic craft of writing as inquiry reflects the mystery of suffering; in other words, suffering is like art since both are unknowable and can only speak for themselves (Schweizer, 1995). Art seeks to capture essence because it is something that can only be appreciated rather than explained. It is also intensely subjective, which means that any attempts to explain its meaning are merely interpretations. This means that an artwork can exist in multiple different ways depending on the beholder, so like suffering, it is entirely unique. Moreover, since it seeks to capture the essence of matter, it is deeply spiritual. As we endure the uncertainty to unlock the deeper meaning of our suffering, we can acquire greater courage and personal integrity.

We may suffer discomfort as we go out on a limb by writing to inquire. Despite this, we continue writing expressively to refine our skill of crafting meaning as *it is*, understanding that embodied writing, like suffering, cannot be explained, but can only be experienced and beheld. We recognise that, just like suffering, the aesthetic and poetic is unfathomable and needs to speak for itself, so as not to be undermined. Through writing out our suffering, we attribute form to chaos and give it the dignity of presence, bringing it into being without diluting it, as Schweizer (1995) conveys, ". . . to enhance our understanding of suffering by letting it appear as the unexplained" (para. 10). Likewise, we suffer through slow and contemplative readings as we suspend the impulse to escape the discomfort of not knowing, since "Slow and repeated readings, such as are required in much literature, are to prevent the idea that the silences of a text do not speak, even if they speak of things we can hardly hear or understand" (Schweizer, 2000, p. 237). We pay homage to these silent moments of suffering where we express what it means to live in time, without adding labels to minimise any pain. Such writing is ontological since it is imbued with an embodied awareness of how we exist in time. It may help us to ride out the weariness of passing time by breaking us free from its binds.

By reading on an ontological level, we can equally witness the suffering of writers who bravely attempt to craft the unknown into being. Such intimate and embodied acts of reading involve listening to the sufferer who speaks to "hear, far back beyond our desire for knowledge and closure, and beyond our hermeneutic of doubt, the authority of the sufferer, to hear the odds against which the sufferer speaks" (Schweizer, 2000, p.238). The reader discerns the deeper meaning behind words to appreciate their beauty and richness. Schweizer (2000) asserts that poetic and aesthetic words hold authority, which means that their message is not "paraphrasable . . . but as the secret and necessity of a speaker whose extensions and

complications in literature are meant to do justice to the urgency of its cause” (p.238). The reader’s task is to bring this act of speaking into *being* so that “the speaking of suffering would not cease and that we would not cease to be the witnesses of such speaking, lest the sufferer recede into the mute materiality of her pain” (Schweizer, 2000, p. 239). To read on an ontological level is to witness the writer’s suffering and to attribute it with dignity by acknowledging its fullness and possibilities, rather than minimising it. We do not let the sufferer become mute and alone in their suffering, but we witness it to affirm its rich presence.

The spaces we leave and enter

The spaces we leave. Throughout our lives we are constantly leaving one place to go to another. We fumble our way forward as we leave childhood to enter adolescence, leave friendships, workplaces, homes and marriages, often moving on mindlessly, unsure of where we are going and afraid of being left behind. Eventually we become too fixated on getting ahead to imagine another path, causing the same terrain to pass us by. We suffer the tedium of passing time by swallowing our losses and eventually feeling numb. Moving on too quickly to comprehend significance, we live a life half-lived, sleep-walking through our days, chasing superficial and blind ambition. In this same desperate way, we attempt to put the pandemic behind us without considering what it means to have lived through these uncertain times. We do not linger within the uncertainty nor take the opportunity to step off the precipice to consider alternate paths. We let the moment pass, like a non-occurrence, unable to unlock its secrets.

Crafting new worlds. Knowing that there are only a few more precious minutes of warm sunlight left, we can linger in and savour the fading light. The awareness of loss opens our eyes, and we begin to consider alternative possibilities. We take a moment to pause and to contemplate the *new* as our lives crack open, rather than simply skipping over or overlooking past our suffering, as Holman Jones writes in the 2023 ICQI Conference keynote abstract, “The task at hand is for qualitative inquiry to cooperatively push against languishing grief, narrative fatigue and cultures of denial to make the life-altering nature of the pandemic not an ending, but instead the beginning of hope” (ICQI, n.d. para.10). The task of qualitative inquiry is to let go of any denial about our suffering or those of others, and to break free from our mindless compulsion to move on. It is to linger within the losses to perceive the possibility of a new beginning. These attempts to embrace the unknown is exhilarating as it leads to continual discovery, as Manheimer (2008) declares, is the “journey to authenticity and wholeness, if not immortality. Stepping back, and even falling off the edge, while disconcerting, may be exhilarating if not rejuvenating” (p. 97). This hope of rejuvenation drives us write to inquire at the precipice, so that we are not stuck in a state of apathy or fear but are able to continue embracing uncertainty to cultivate dialogue, as Frentz (2011) states, we must “stay in the conversation” as this is what it means to be human (p.803). Or as Poulos (2008) declares, telling our stories “may well be the only ethical thing to do” (p.65) as by doing so, we can engage in the rich spaces of loss and suffering to envision a brighter future.

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