

Cultural Daily

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When the Self Has Gone

Zaji Cox · Wednesday, February 16th, 2022

When the Self Has Gone

by Zaji Cox

What is it to grieve the loss of a self? Of the self?

With the loss of another, grief comes naturally. Unique to the person, it moves through the body and mind in waves, in bursts, in shadows and clouds. It rests in corners, ready to rise when you are not prepared.

When you say goodbye to the person you once were, when does the grief arrive to introduce itself? And where does it hide when not reminding you that you were once *not like this*? Where does it hide, so you can be prepared for those moments it emerges? Before it hones in on an element of your day to remind you that it's still there, and you are still feeling things for the You that you once were?

You hover in this loss of your previous self who did not know this kind of world: Where is the You of before to guide you in this terrain, this unexplored territory through the eyes of the You of now? Because the You of before did not know this existence, did not know this new self and how to navigate. And this new self feels like a set of clothing that does not fit right.

Either way, the grief reveals itself, and you will feel different in this set of clothing. Different this second versus a second before and you have to stop, think, and process. Different today versus yesterday because you are comprehending the division of your life into Before and After. And, of course, different now in the After.

I would dwell on these ideas when the capital-E Event happened for the first time some years ago. I was living on my own for the first time at college and doing just fine by myself. I took care of myself with no concerns in mental or physical health. Or so I thought.

Three months into the formation of routine and comfort, at a time where nothing was going differently, the Event happened. It would send off a chain of events and render me unrecognizable to myself. Out of nowhere, I went backwards: from solo living to, eventually, being a dependent once again. Since when, I thought, did I have medical issues at this level—medical issues of which

no one knew the cause?

Waking up on the ground surrounded by concerned strangers after that first seizure, I floundered without the Me of before. I did not know how to navigate—the overachiever, the athlete, the healthy person, the One Without Problems had gone. At the time, I denied that my other self was gone, convincing myself that she was actually just hiding; so, when I quickly recovered after a hospital stay and carried on, I thought I had found her again and felt safe.

But the Event returned. And then it returned again, and again. Each time, no one really knew what was going on, family and medical professionals alike; each time, my former self slipped farther and farther away, confirming a final absence. Through family concern and a school term cut short, my identity shifted.

I would often think about what it was like before. The word *when* became prominent: When I knew my body and my mind well; when I identified as a person without major problems; when I was someone who didn't need others to feel safe. When I lived without fear.

I mourned the loss of myself.

Before, I was someone healthy, a gymnast-turned-dancer who had never had any extended hospital stays. Someone who didn't have to monitor activity for health reasons. Someone who didn't have to constantly worry about another Event.

She's gone, my mind whispered. *And you can't have her back.*



Some people move through the stages of grief, and they do it in order; some don't. I know that I experienced Denial so strong that it lived with me for months. Maybe years. *This is not you*, it repeated, each and every day. *This is temporary, and you are still here. You do not bookend your days with medication times. You are not a hospital bed person. You are not the one who goes*

unconscious during dance class. You are not someone to be monitored.

You wonder why. Always, you will wonder why.

When this grief comes, it resembles the grief of a loved one. The two griefs intertwine, teal and turquoise ribbons that dance away from each other.

You can try not to define yourself by the new After, but when everyone else sees you as you are now, how is it possible?

You reach for the self that you were before but that person has disappeared. They will never return, because they have never experienced the Event. And so you think about them, dwell on them. Move into Anger, let it replace Depression. No Bargaining is done because you cannot time-travel. There can be other stages, more than five, and maybe you will feel them or maybe you will not, but the time arrives when you learn to move into this new self.

A sense of Acceptance flows in slowly. You might notice it, or you might not, but eventually, the realization comes that you are wearing you of After like a set of new clothing. Once it was uncomfortable, but you soon learn how to move within the fabric.

(The Gresham House, a memoir in micro-essays by Zaji Cox, coming in 2023 from Forest Avenue Press)

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