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LIFE IS HARD

How Philosophy Can Help Us Find Our Way

KIERAN SETIYA

RIVERHEAD BOOKS NEW YORK 2022

Three

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GRIEF

In an unflinching stand-up set in August 2012, four days after being diagnosed with breast cancer, the American comedian Tig Notaro spoke about her mother's unexpected death just four months earlier. She described the aftermath to a shaken but still laughing audience at the Largo in Los Angeles:

My mother just died. . . . Should I leave? . . . I can't believe you're taking this so hard. You didn't know her. I'm okay. . . . I was checking my mail and the hospital sent my mother a questionnaire to see how her stay at the hospital went. . . . Hmmm . . . not great . . . did not go great. . . . I'll get that right to her. . . . Question one. During this hospital stay, did nurses explain things in a way you could understand? . . . considering you had no brain activity.

The emotional confusion of the listener echoes, with refraction, the ringing confusions of grief.

Grief is not a simple emotion. People in grief feel sorrow, yes—but also anger, guilt, fear, and moments of lightness as well as depth. The anger may be objectless or the guilt irrational. The fear may be quixotic, directed not at the future but the past. "I am suffering from *the fear of what has happened*," wrote the critic Roland Barthes in *Mourning Diary*, six months after his mother died. And then there are those—like Tig Notaro—who joke in the wake of tragedy. Grief is not static, but something that manifests in different feelings at different times. Grieving is something we *do*, if not

deliberately—as we perform, deliberately, the rituals of mourning—then in the way we scar when we suffer a bodily wound.

As we will come to see, there are at least three kinds of grief: "relational grief," which marks a fractured relationship; grief at the harm that befalls someone who dies; and grief at the sheer loss of life. These forms of grief may interact and coincide, but they are not the same. Each of them hurts in different ways and each says something different about love.

Grief's fluidity and polyphony make it challenging to discuss. It's risky to generalize from one's own experience. I was struck by this when I read Joan Didion's celebrated memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which records the bewilderment she felt in the wake of her husband's death. Toward the end of the book, Didion writes, as if for everyone:

> Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it. . . . We might expect if the death is sudden to feel shock. We do not expect this shock to be obliterative, dislocating to both body and mind. . . . In the version of grief we imagine, the model will be "healing." A certain forward movement will prevail. . . . Nor can we know ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.

The power of this passage partly turns on putting Didion's words in our mouths, but while "we" are placed in her conception of grief, it may not reflect our own. Speaking for myself: when I think of my wife dying, I find it hard to imagine how life would ever go on. I am expecting the void. (Bad news: my anxiety is predictive. In a longitudinal study of older people, "those who had earlier revealed this kind of emotional dependency did, in fact, suffer complicated grief reactions.")

As you can probably tell, I am reluctant to write about grief, predicting or prescribing for others. Unlike loneliness, which I know firsthand, I haven't

experienced grief of much intensity myself. For many, that comes first with grandparents. But I did not know mine on my father's side—not even their names, forgetting when or how they died. My maternal grandfather was dead when I was born, and my remaining grandmother suffered from dementia. I barely remember her, and my parents spared me her funeral—a mistake, I think. The closest I have come to grief is watching my mother sail into the darkness of Alzheimer's; but she is still alive.

For insight, I turn to social science. Over the last thirty years, psychologists have made substantial progress in understanding grief. Among their discoveries is that the Freudian notion of "grief work" as an arduous but necessary grappling with loss is not supported by evidence. The once-conventional wisdom that "you have to talk about it" risks being wildly counterproductive. In general, studies show, being forced to "debrief" traumatic events in their immediate aftermath has negative effects on mental and physical health that can last for years, cementing painful memories that one's emotional immune system would otherwise suppress. There is no evidence, either, that grief comes in predictable stages, often graphed in five neat steps: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. According to the pioneering grief researcher George A. Bonanno, grief comes not in stages but in waves: "Bereavement is essentially a stress reaction. . . . And like any stress reaction, it is not uniform or static. Relentless grief would be overwhelming. Grief is tolerable, actually, only because it comes and goes in a kind of oscillation."

It should be no surprise, then, that some of the most faithful documents of grief are fragmentary, nonlinear, episodic. Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary* was scratched out over months on quartered sheets of typing paper. At least as moving, to me, is the French writer Annie Ernaux's diary of her mother's Alzheimer's, written "hastily, in the turmoil of my emotions, without thinking or trying to marshal my thoughts." Like grief, the entries are somehow both repetitive and unpredictable.

Perhaps the most interesting attempt to capture grief in prose is by the British experimental novelist B. S. Johnson, who killed himself at forty. Published in 1969, four years before his death, *The Unfortunates* is a book in

a box: twenty-seven booklets to be read in any order, except for "First" and "Last." Its narrator is a journalist assigned to cover a soccer match in a city he last knew seven years ago, visiting an old friend, Tony, who later died of metastatic cancer. The visit triggers memories that arrive in random order, scattered through the day's events. As chance dictates, he is unable to shake an image, which appears in successive chapters—Tony's mouth, perhaps, "sallowed and collapsed round the insinuated bones"—or if the order differs, the image returns much later, as a cadence. In the longest chapter, the narrator wrestles a desultory soccer match into five hundred words of narrative sense. In the shortest two, he is late to Tony's funeral and he learns that Tony has died—the last in a single paragraph that occupies an otherwise blank page. Grief has no narrative order, the book in a box seems to warn; and any closure is temporary. Grief can be opened and reshuffled again and again.

What can we say in the face of grief's complexity, its resistance to narration? According to a long tradition in Western philosophy, the answer is that grief is a pathology, a problem to be solved. But grief is not a mistake; and philosophy should not disown it.

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DESPITE THEIR RIVALRY, the warring schools of ancient Greece and Rome—Academic, Epicurean, Skeptical, Stoic—agreed about one thing: grief is no good. Epictetus, a Roman Stoic who was born into slavery, gave brusque directions here:

With regard to everything that is a source of delight to you, or is useful to you, or of which you are fond, remember to keep telling yourself what kind of thing it is, starting with the most insignificant. If you're fond of a jug, say, "This is a jug that I'm fond of," and then, if it gets broken, you won't be upset. If you kiss your child or your wife, say to yourself that it is a human being that you're kissing; and then, if one of them should die, you won't be upset.

Good to know! Of course, it's not so easy, not even for Epictetus. But he believed that if we truly knew what it meant that what we love is perishable, if we could inhabit that truth, then we could outsmart grief. "Alas, my dear friend died." "Well, what did you expect? That she would live forever?" So Epictetus asks. But you might expect, or hope, that she would live another year. Isn't that what we want, as a rule, for partners, family, friends? It hurts when death thwarts that desire.

Stoicism was born in ancient Greece in the fourth century BCE; four hundred years later, it was the unofficial ideology of the Roman ruling class. The popularity of Stoic thought, both then and now, depends in large part on its sage advice for managing adversity. This goes beyond defeating grief to a promise of perfect happiness: the secret of self-help. As the Stoics recognized, there are two ways to avoid the frustration of desire. One is to hold your desires fixed and change the world to meet them; the other is to alter your desires to match the world as it's going to be. When the first path isn't open, because you cannot change the world—you want your wife or child to be alive; but they are dead—the second path remains. A fundamental axiom of Stoic philosophy, repeated ad nauseam in the "Handbook" of Epictetus, is that we should extinguish both aversion and desire for what is out of our control. Focus on what you can change; detach from everything else. If you don't want to be free, claims Epictetus, the fact that you're enslaved won't ruin your life.

If that conclusion makes you nervous, you are not alone. Reviewing a new edition of Epictetus in 1868, the novelist Henry James imagined with alarm how his maxim of serenity under slavery would sound in the pre–Civil War South. For all its appeal, the Stoic axiom is perverse. True: there's no point in attempting the impossible; and we shouldn't blame ourselves for what is out of our control. But to go beyond that, not to care about the things we cannot change, is akin to sour grapes: if I can't have it, then I don't want it. The Stoic attitude may dull our pain, but it does so by distancing us from things that really matter. Think of those who are conditioned to accommodate oppression, as when prisoners and battered wives no longer want the freedom they're denied. It's no good replying, as many Stoics do,

that freedom here is a "preferred indifferent": a thing to be desired, but only with detachment. For it's not irrational to rage against oppression—as at the death of one's wife or child. While grief brings pain, the pain is part of living well: it's inextricable from love.

In fact, there is a gulf between the worldview of ancient Stoicism and that of its recent imitators. For the Greek and Roman Stoics, indifference to what is out of our control draws on a vision of the cosmos as divinely ordered: the world has a mind of its own—for which "Zeus" is a name—and its agency ensures that what seems bad is for the best. In other words, it rests on a theodicy, not on a platitude about desire. If you believe that Zeus is on your side, I can see why you might be reconciled to what you can't control. If not, adapting what you want to what you can get should seem more petulant than wise. As Virginia Woolf admonished, "Never pretend that the things you haven't got are not worth having."

If there is consolation in philosophy, then, it won't derive from killing grief but in knowing how to grieve the way we should. Grief has its reasons: the many forms of loss we mourn, truths that it makes sense to grieve. Even if we focus on lost people—deferring "climate grief" and grief at the injustice of the world—our grief is multifaceted: we don't just grieve the dead. The goal is to grieve well, not to extinguish grief.

I was introduced to grief myself at age fifteen, when my first girlfriend, Jules, broke up with me. We'd been together for about six months and we had not gone far. Kissing was strictly rationed by Jules "so that we won't get bored of it." I think she'd had some bad encounters with boys; I was comparatively tame. But I didn't know how to talk to her and I was prickly and jealous from the start. When Jules got sick of that, she ended things—and I went slightly mad. Though it seems mundane in retrospect, I found the breakup unintelligible. Why? Why? Why? I called her incessantly, demanding answers. Jules declined to justify herself. She stopped picking up. I kept calling. Eventually, I got over it. The cathartic event was making out with her best friend, whose name I don't remember, at a party I can't otherwise recall. She reported to Jules that I was useless; in my defense, I had limited practice.

The point is that as well as grief around bereavement—which may be what first comes to mind—there is the grief of abandonment. "You die at heart from a withdrawal of love," writes the unreliable narrator of Iris Murdoch's novel *The Sea, the Sea*. He is fooling himself, and at fifteen, I did, too. I knew that I would love Jules forever, and that I'd never love again. I was only partly wrong.

We can learn a lot from the comparison between romantic and mortal grief. Romantic grief is about the death of a relationship, not its other half: it's a form of what I called "relational grief." When Jules broke up with me, it wasn't for her sake that I grieved, but mine. (She was better off without me.) Other forms of relational grief depend on other relationships, familial or friendly, and have distinctive characters of their own. At the same time, grief can be almost purely non-relational, as when we grieve for those we've never met. In *Baseball Life Advice*, the Canadian author Stacey May Fowles mourns the death of Miami Marlins pitcher José Fernández in a boating accident that took his life at twenty-four: "There is no real roadmap for dealing with the kind of inexplicable grief that comes with the death of someone we didn't know." No road map, either, for grief at the death of strangers en masse in a pandemic raging out of our control. Most often grief is both relational (directed at a relationship) and non-relational (directed at the person one loves)—as in the death of a close friend, a partner, parent, or child.

These distinctions matter because they refute one of the charges laid at grief's door, sometimes even by the grieving: that it's a form of self-indulgence. Didion's book begins with what might be free verse:

Life changes fast.
Life changes in the instant.
You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.
The question of self-pity.

Self-pity is Didion's first thought, after the facts. But while self-pity may be part of grief, we don't grieve only for ourselves: we grieve for the sake of the

dead and what they have lost. Grief is not weakness but a token of persisting love.

Even grief that takes in a relationship is not exactly self-centered. If my wife died, I would worry about myself: How will I deal with loneliness or bear the practicalities of parenthood, and daily life, alone? (The question of self-pity.) But I would also grieve for her and for everything she could not be. And I would grieve for *us*, for the loss of what we have together. So much of what I do that matters is what *we* do, impossible without her. Even in my breakup with Jules, what I valued, and lost, was not just someone to make out with or the affirmation that resides in being loved but my relationship with *her*. I may have misread the meaning of that relationship, but it wasn't just about me.

When grief is relational, as it almost always is, grieving well is working through the change that the relationship undergoes. Change, that is, not end. In an essay on the death of friends in older age, the American philosopher Samuel Scheffler introduced a wry vocabulary for relationships that are no longer active. In "completed" relationships, like my relationship with Jules, the other remains alive; in "archived" relationships, he or she has died. Even completed relationships are not entirely over: I have a different relation to Jules than I have to perfect strangers. I would say I love her, still, in the way one loves a friend one hasn't seen for years.

Scheffler's point is that archived relationships, also, are not over: they continue to exert a force in our lives. They place demands on us we are compelled to meet, requirements of reverence and respect. We have a relationship with the dead, even if that relationship must change. In almost every account of bereavement I have read, the bereaved has an uncanny sense of the continued presence of the one they have lost. "This is what those who haven't crossed the tropic of grief often fail to understand," writes the novelist Julian Barnes in an essay about his wife; "the fact that someone is dead may mean that they are not alive, but doesn't mean that they do not exist." In one sense, they do; in another sense, not. "I talk to her constantly," he goes on. "This feels as normal as it is necessary."

In grieving a relationship, one has to walk the line between a desperate desire that the relationship go on just as it was—that the dead exist just as they did—and a hopeless alienation in which one tries to forget the relationship altogether. It can be difficult to know exactly where one stands. When her son died suddenly, the poet Denise Riley wrote about the temporal dislocations of grief:

Whenever I need to mention to someone that "my son died," it still sounds to me like a self-dramatizing lie. Tasteless. Or it's an act of disloyalty to him. For I don't experience him as in the least dead, but simply as "away." Even if he'll be away for my remaining lifetime.

The risk is that maintaining a relationship with the dead—as it were, long distance—pulls one out of engagement with life. For Riley, time stood still. "By what means," she asked, are we ever to become re-attached to the world?" And yet the cost of recovery can seem "intolerably high": "The dead slip away, as we realize that we have unwillingly left them behind us in their timelessness. . . . You would not have wanted this second, now final, loss."

To grieve well, one must navigate this dilemma: abandon the dead and be disloyal, or cling to them as they were and suffer. The way through, however hard, is to accept that one's relationship must change without conceding that it's over. In a memorable rant, the philosopher Palle Yourgrau castigates authors who dedicate their books to the memory of the dead: "It's your mother who taught you to love music, not your memories of your mother, your father who first took you to a poetry reading, not your memories of your father. . . . What could be more different from a *dead* parent than a *living* memory?" We should dedicate books to the dead themselves, not to our recollection of them. A fact of metaphysics—the dead are not unreal; we can still speak of them, have relationships with them—easily misplaced in the fog of grief.

I have no guide for how to alter one's relationship with the dead—or, for that matter, with the living, when they leave. Each relationship is particular, its own world, and generalities are out of place. Nor is anything I've said

intended as a cure. My point is that there need not be disloyalty or betrayal in accepting change. One can do things to memorialize the dead, alone or in the company of others, but one cannot do things *with* them. That's not abandonment, any more than one abandons one's child when one does less for them as they grow up or betrays one's parents in taking care of them where they once cared for you. But it sometimes feels that way.

Reflecting on the death of his wife, C. S. Lewis called bereavement a "universal and integral part of our experience of love. It follows marriage as normally as marriage follows courtship or as autumn follows summer. It is not a truncation of the process but one of its phases; not the interruption of the dance, but the next figure." It's more difficult to assume this attitude toward the death of a child than it is with partners and friends—one does not expect to see one's children die. But to find a way through grief is to sustain a relationship on new terms. That costs us pain, but it is not only painful. Those who recover well from grief find pleasure and comfort in memories of the loved dead. Lewis wrote: "The more joy there can be in the marriage between dead and living, the better. . . . The better in every way. For, as I have discovered, passionate grief does not link us with the dead but cuts us off from them." That the dead cannot be happy is hard to bear; to think of them without happiness is worse.

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WE GOT HERE BY DRAWING a distinction. There is grief at the fracture in a relationship; and there is grief for the sake of the dead, what Barthes called "Pure mourning, which has nothing to do with a change of life, with solitude, etc. The mark, the void of love's relation." Dealing with the first grief leaves the second grief untouched. But here, again, the ancient schools agree: death does no harm to the one who dies and so it makes no sense to grieve for *them*.

It would be nice to think that death is harmless and therefore nothing to fear. But the arguments for this conclusion are unfortunately weak. The

hedonist Epicurus, a self-help guru who set up a compound for disciples in Athens called "the Garden" in 306/7 BCE, argued that death cannot harm us because we cease to be conscious when we die and thus do not feel pain. "So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us," he continues, "since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more." But this is sophistry. While nonexistence saves you from certain evils—pain, in particular—you don't need to exist in order to miss out on life. The harm of death is the harm of deprivation, of pleasures forfeited, relationships unraveled, projects incomplete. When one is dead, one's activities are circumscribed. (This is true even if one continues to exist in some spiritual form: one does not get to carry on one's mortal life.) We are harmed by death in that it would be better to live on, if we could live well. Grief may register this harm: "Look what *she* has lost, now that she has lost life," writes Barnes on the death of his wife. "Her body, her spirit; her radiant curiosity about life."

The harms of deprivation are real: it's bad not to get what would be good. But it's not as simple as that. For we do not grieve when we're deprived of good things that no human being gets. In my book *Midlife*, I wrote about a friend who wanted to be Superman, faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Who wouldn't want that? But I imagined him in pain, agonized by his merely human powers, as we are agonized, at times, by the prospect of death. His response seems disproportionate, irrational: it makes no sense to weep at the absence of capacities that go beyond the human frame. Does it make sense, then, to weep at our mortality, which belongs to the human condition? Why grieve for someone who has lived their four score years and ten, any more than we grieve our inability to fly?

When a loved one dies young, what they miss is not a superhuman life but an ordinary one. We should feel grief at that. It's different when they die at ninety, peacefully, after living well enough. That is no misfortune: it's about as good as it gets. We may be sad that they missed out on more, but we shouldn't grieve that fact the way we grieve an early death. Grief when a

grandparent dies is not the same as grief when a child does. And yet we grieve. For what? What is the object of our grief, if not the deprivation of a good-enough life? It is the bare fact of oblivion.

Just as grief divides into grief for one's relationship and grief for the sake of the dead, so grief for the dead divides into grief at the harm of dying—the years they should have had—and grief at the sheer loss of life. All three forms of grief are expressions of love: to value a relationship; to want what is good for the one you love; and to cherish their existence. Love, like grief, is complicated.

I can feel its filaments begin to fray as my mother fades. I recall the summer in the Cotswolds when she started to repeat what others said as if it had occurred to her unbidden. "England's green and pleasant land," my wife had mused, as the countryside flowed by the passenger window of the car. A minute later, my mother in the backseat: "This reminds me of that poem, you know—'Jerusalem'—our green and pleasant land." I'd always found the poem sinister. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's some twelve months later, seemed stable enough for several years, then began to slip last Christmas. It's hard to tell how she is doing now when I talk to her on the phone. She still remembers me, comments on the weather and on going for a walk. She remembers where she is, and that her memory is failing—but she does not know what the day has held or what it will, and she can't sustain a conversation. Her life has contracted, diminished. My father, once a doctor, is her full-time caregiver. I want her to live; but there may come a time.

I've been reading Annie Ernaux's *I Remain in Darkness*, a book named for the last words her mother wrote, suffering from Alzheimer's, before she was moved to the hospital in which she died. Ernaux writes unsparingly in what were private notes, published without revision a decade later. The month her mother is hospitalized: "This morning she got up and, in a timid voice: 'I wet the bed, I couldn't help it.' The same words I would use when I was a child." Ten months later, her mother begins to know she won't recover. "It breaks my heart," Ernaux writes. "She is alive, she still has desires, plans for

the future. All she wants is to live. I too need her to be alive." Another year or so, less than a month before she died:

I hand her an almond bun; she can't eat it on her own, her lips suck wildly at thin air. Right now, I would like her to be dead and free of such degradation. Her body stiffens, she strains to stand up and a foul stench fills the atmosphere. She has just relieved herself like a newborn baby after being fed. Such horror and helplessness.

Even wanting her mother dead, saved from indignity and suffering, Ernaux is "overcome with grief" when her mother dies. "That's it. Yes, time has stopped. One just can't imagine the pain."

Not easy words for me to read, but I want to know what the future holds. For Ernaux, love fragments: she wants the best for her mother, to be "free of such degradation" and so to die; and yet she grieves her death, not just, I think, for the relationship wrecked but for the value of her mother's life—the dignity affirmed by love, which recoils from death. We found this value at the root of friendship. It is also at the root of grief at the sheer loss of life.

There is a kind of comfort in this bleakness, that we are never wrong to grieve. Even where there is no relationship to reshape, no special misfortune to mourn, love registers a fact that tells us how to feel: the fact that a particular human being is no more. Unhappiness is part of living well, of facing the truth and responding as we should. If we did not grieve, we would not love.

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THESE FACTS GIVE RISE to a puzzle that is as much emotional as philosophical. If the fact that a loved one is dead is a reason to grieve, that fact is permanent. It never goes away. Should we then grieve forever?

Thankfully, most of us don't. According to empirical research on grief, more than half of those who lose a partner or child are "emotionally resilient," rebounding after two or three months; others adapt in a year or eighteen months; only a small proportion experience prolonged or chronic grief. They may need exposure therapy or cognitive behavioral intervention.

In one way, the news is good: "Most bereaved people get better on their own, without any kind of professional help," the psychologist George Bonanno writes. "They may be deeply saddened, they may feel adrift for some time, but their life eventually finds its way again, often more easily than they thought possible." In another way, it's disturbing. Does our resilience mean that we no longer value the life of the one we've lost or that we never really did? Two months after his mother died, Roland Barthes asked himself: "Does being able to live without someone you loved mean you loved her less than you thought . . . ?" The philosopher Berislav Marušić echoes Barthes in a moving essay on grief:

I was surprised that only a few weeks after my mother's death, I could lead my life more or less exactly as I did before her death: I hardly missed a beat! . . . The grief seemed to disappear almost completely. . . . In grieving, it seemed to me that my grief would continue for as long as her death was a reason to grieve—that is, as long as she continued to matter to me. . . . When we anticipate the diminution of grief, it seems to us that, in time, we will no longer care about our loss.

We may not want to grieve forever; but we don't want this. We don't want to stop loving the dead, to stop caring about them, to stop registering their loss for what it is. If the reason for grief is that someone we love is dead, and they stay dead, why should we cease to grieve? That they've been dead for years, or that we've grieved for months: these facts don't diminish their loss. The nonexistence of the dead remains as absolute as ever. How can we make peace with the fact that grief subsides?

Like other emotions, grief is a response to reasons: facts that seem to justify the feeling. Anger balks at insult or injury; fear registers potential

threats; and grief represents loss. Perplexity at grief's subsidence turns on the premise that reasons alone dictate what we should feel: that how it makes sense to grieve is settled by the facts to which our grief responds. If that were true, we should never cease to grieve for those who die. But that isn't how grief works. As time passes, grief alters not because the reasons for it change—we don't react to news about the duration of our own grief, as if to say, "Now a year has passed, it doesn't matter so much that she's dead"—but because grieving is something we do, in time, as part of human life. It's not an emotional state but an emotional process, one whose shape is not fixed by the reasons to which it responds.

Grief is not unique. The same thing goes for love. Love grows and deepens over time: what was fondness can become the bond of decades. Though it isn't bound to happen, and it isn't always a good thing when it does, this development makes perfect sense. But why? Is the fact that we've loved someone another year another reason for love, as though putting in the time makes them more lovable? No. It's not that, in loving someone, we attend to facts about the history of love, tracking its duration in our lives and so adjusting our affections. (Our focus is directed outward, at those we love, not at our own experience.) It is that love, like grief, is an emotional process, not a state. Love's evolution is a part of what it is.

This means there is a way in which the waning of grief, and the increase of love, will always seem unintelligible from within. They can be understood as phases in the course of human emotion, but they don't respond to changes in the object of love, or grief. The dead stay dead and neither time nor tears will make that better, even if they make it easier to bear. It is, I think, the elusiveness of reasons for diminished grief that makes the rituals of mourning so essential. The practices by which we process grief, in private and in public, fill the rift that reasons leave.

One of the first funerals I attended was in my first year teaching at the University of Pittsburgh. Rob Clifton, a beloved philosopher of physics, died of colon cancer at the age of thirty-eight. I remember vividly two things about his funeral, a Christian service at the Church of the Ascension in Oakland, close to Pitt's secular Cathedral of Learning. The first was a

note Rob left to be read aloud, expressing impish delight at having forced his atheist colleagues to attend a religious ceremony. The second was the community that visibly encircled his grieving wife and kids: the Sunday school class, the families joined by something more than simple friendship. As research attests, resilience in grief correlates with social support, as well as personal and financial flexibility. But there was more to it than that. What I envied was the air of knowing what to do when someone dies, knowing how to structure days that might otherwise be directionless.

Each culture makes its map of the terrain through which we stumble, uncertainly, in grief. There is the Jewish tradition of sitting shiva, mourning in the company of friends for seven days. The Dahomey of Western Africa celebrate the life of the deceased with drinking, dancing, singing, and dirty jokes. The Saramaka in Surinam hold communal "rites of separation" that culminate in the exchange of fantastic folk tales, allegories of the human condition. In China, the legacy of polytheism survives in rites that emulate the burial of kings beside their servants and possessions with the use of paper replicas; practice matters more than belief. In the West, the regulation of grief goes back at least to classical antiquity. The historian David Konstan quotes a funerary law from ancient Rome on which "parents and children over six years of age can be mourned for a year, children under six for a month. A husband can be mourned for ten months, close blood relations for eight months. Whoever acts contrary to these restrictions is placed in public disgrace."

Konstan speculates that Aristotle—who is exceptional among ancient philosophers in not condemning grief—omits it from his theory of emotion in the *Rhetoric* because, unlike anger or fear, it has no natural resolution. In anger, one avenges or accepts insult or injury; in fear, one flees or faces a potential threat. And then it's over. Grief isn't like that, at least when it's about the loss of life. There's nothing you can do to extinguish the reasons for grief short of bringing the loved one back to life. That's why we need practices of mourning and the direction they provide. Map in hand, we navigate what reason can't.

For much of Western history, not just grief but death itself was ritualized. There were conventions for dying at home with family, friends, and neighbors. Children were included in the rites, which were at once routine and profoundly serious. Death became more private through the nineteenth century. According to the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, a further shift took place in the First World War, when the rituals of mourning were defeated by the numbers of the dead. By the late twentieth century, death outside the home—in a hospital or hospice—had become the norm; dying is a process overseen by doctors and nurses. I am not here to pass judgment on these changes, only to state a problem that many confront, which is the relative absence of meaningful social practices through which to experience grief. We are given only skeletal structures of mourning and have to construct the body for ourselves.

There's something similar in love. As the conventions of the marriage plot lose authority, fewer people feel the need to marry at all; those who do are free to make up rituals of their own. I don't disparage it—I did it myself—but I do think something's lost: the off-the-shelf intelligibility that tradition brings. When my wife and I got married, we had difficulty finding an officiant. The first person we asked turned out to be an evangelical radio talk-show host. (Long story.) He did not want to participate in a "pagan" ceremony. The parting was mostly amicable and entirely mutual. Cautioned, we began to search for someone with both gravity and flexibility. We found Bob Epps, a retired campus minister at Indiana University. (The wedding would take place at my mother-in-law's house in Bloomington.) Our meeting with Bob was reassuring. A placid barrel of a man, he had seen everything. Leaning over the table toward us, he made a pyramid of his hands and stated his few provisos: he was happy to do whatever we liked, but no livestock or drugs *during* the ceremony. We were willing to go along with that. At last, we reached the sticking point: it wouldn't feel like a wedding to me, I told him, unless we used the Book of Common Prayer—but I didn't want "God" to be there. "Whether you mention him or not," Bob smiled benignly, "God is going to be there." That felt right.

When I think about mourning my mother or, God forbid, my wife or child, what I want is the equivalent of this: as much of the tradition I recognize as I am able to accept. Grief is not naturally narrative. It comes in a chaos of waves and fluctuations, undetermined by reason. No wonder we find comfort in the dubious theory of stages. But what we need is not a theory; it's a practice. Conventions of mourning give a structure to grief it would not otherwise have. They make the possibility of grieving well more legible.

While I was writing this book, in January 2021, my father-in-law died suddenly of an apparent heart attack. Edward Gubar was laid-back, loyal, smart, and intellectually omnivorous, a sometime writer and journalist who taught in the Honors College at Indiana University. He loved his students, poker, and progressive politics, and he had turned his gambling itch into a fruitful sideline in cryptocurrency. We hadn't seen him since the pandemic started and his death still seems unreal. The weeks after he died were a scramble of activity for my wife, Marah; her sister, Simone; and Edward's partner, Christine, everything complicated by Covid-19. Only Christine could be there in person, managing a welter of logistics.

Mourning was disrupted by distance. We sat shiva over Zoom, but disembodiment makes it hard to measure the loss of a concrete human being—and impossible to share the comfort of a hug. Meanwhile, the planning of the Zoom memorial, tracking down lost friends and family members, seemed to put Marah's grief on hold. The event itself was something to cherish, despite the occasional audio glitch: a communion of far-flung friends and family that would not have taken place in ordinary times, eliciting stories about Edward from kindergarten and high school, his time as a taxi driver in New York and as the coach of Marah's softball team, his boundless gift for hanging out, lingering endlessly after meals in restaurants or chatting on the phone. Some told funny anecdotes; others wept: grief's polyphony played out. When we looked at the recording afterward, we saw that a handful of friends had stayed on, sharing memories, when we had gone: hanging out in honor of Edward.

It was only after the memorial that Marah really cried, grieving in ebbs and flows. She is visited by the ghosts of Sunday phone calls that she will not make. But it is hard for her to feel that Edward is really gone, when he was virtual for months. Her grief is in suspended animation. It is harder for others. The pandemic disrupted not just mourning but the rituals of death itself. Patients were forced to die alone, watched by their loved ones on computer screens. There is a great mass of suspended grief. Even before Covid-19, for many, the rituals of mourning were fragile or vague in ways that limit their efficacy: we're not sure what to do when someone dies.

To mourn when rituals are absent or disrupted is to improvise. One has to lean much harder on the logic of relational grief, shifting one's relationship with the dead in ways that honor their existence. Deprived of familiar rites when Edward died, we were forced to invent our own. We watched women's college basketball—the Indiana Hoosiers in the NCAA Tournament—for the first time in years, and talked about Edward's love of college sports. On what would have been his birthday, we bought a lottery ticket in his memory, and lost. More lastingly, Marah vowed to keep in closer touch with distant friends, inspired by Edward's gift for friendship. In one of her crystalline microfictions, the writer Lydia Davis asked "How Shall I Mourn Them?" and answered with more questions: "Shall I keep a tidy house, like L.? . . . Shall I hold many grudges, like B.? . . . Shall I wear only black and white, like M.?" It is up to those who grieve to ask such questions for themselves, finding ways to mourn that echo the lives of the lost. These personal modes of mourning bear more weight when impersonal modes are out of reach.

Nor is tradition or practice an antidote to grief. Our situation may be harder without ritual, but it is never easy. Even as it heals, the scar of loss may open again. Grief has no permanent solution: there is perpetual ambivalence. "For here is the final tormenting, unanswerable question," writes Julian Barnes: "What is 'success' in mourning? Does it lie in remembering or in forgetting? A staying still or a moving on? . . . The ability to hold the lost love powerfully in mind, remembering without distorting?" Sometimes a question is unanswerable not because it's hard to know the

answer but because the question presupposes something false. The premise, here, is that we can succeed or fail in grief once and for all. But the desire for narrative closure is at odds with grieving well. While the conventions of mourning lend structure to grief, it's not the structure of beginning, middle, and end. It's an atlas for the hardest stretch of grief that leads into uncharted but habitable terrain. If life is a story, grief reminds us, then it does not have a happy ending. Perhaps it's not a story, after all.

Four

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FAILURE

Failure is a many-splendored thing. We fail at work, in love, in our obligations to one another. But there is a special dignity to those who fail in sports. Nowhere is failure more well defined, more irrefutable. Sports are often pressed upon the young as a place in which to learn how to cope with failure, how to handle it with grace. And yet they are home to the most incurably catastrophic moments of inadequacy and error.

Consider baseball, a sport that is both philosophically resonant and linguistically well served. Here we find "Merkle's Boner": in 1908, Fred Merkle of the New York Giants fails to touch second base and is tagged out by Johnny Evers on what would have been a winning hit in a decisive game. There's the "Snodgrass Muff": Fred Snodgrass drops an easy catch, costing the Giants the World Series in 1912. And there's Bill Buckner, struck by "the Curse of the Bambino," the near century of frustration allegedly caused by the sale of Babe Ruth's contract by the Boston Red Sox in 1918. Sixty-eight years later, an easy ground ball trickles through Buckner's legs and the Red Sox lose the championship to the New York Mets. Perhaps the greatest failure of them all is Ralph Branca, who gives up the "Shot Heard 'Round the World": the Bobby Thomson home run that wins a crucial playoff game for the New York Giants, sending them—and not the Brooklyn Dodgers—to the 1951 World Series.

How does one live with conclusive failure? It's a question for everyone, even if it cuts sharper and deeper for some. Projects worthy but frustrated or forgotten are endemic in life. "If we remembered even a fraction of our million tiny plans," writes the poet-aphorist James Richardson, "our whole lives would be regret at their failure." There is comfort to be found in the

sheer pervasiveness of projects gone awry. In a self-described "book of solace," the British social critic Joe Moran regales us with narratives of failure great and small, culminating with an artist "who neither learnt from his failures nor wished to learn," who completed few paintings, and whose most famous fresco began to flake before he died, the result of a failed experiment. The artist was Leonardo da Vinci.

Failure is typically more mundane. When their plans fall flat, my kid likes nothing better than to hear about the wreckage of mine: romantic fiascos, flunked tests, athletic defeats. A particular favorite: my failure to make it out of the DMV parking lot the first two times I took my driving test, when their mother was nine months' pregnant with them. I was able to drive her to the hospital to give birth only because she was in the car with me, meeting the terms of my learner's permit. I passed my driving test the third time around, in the company of my bemused but supportive father-in-law. He distracted me from nervousness with failures of his own, as when his car got stuck in reverse and he had to drive his date home backward.

Not much is at stake in failures like these. In others, the world turns upside down—or fails to. One of the great studies of social failure is *The Experience of Defeat*, by the British historian Christopher Hill. The execution of King Charles I in 1649, at the height of the English Civil War, opened prospects for social democracy that were previously unthinkable. The Levellers pushed for the redistribution of wealth and the extension of rights to the poor. The more trenchant Diggers, led by Gerrard Winstanley, embraced communism two centuries before Marx. Winstanley proclaimed Earth "the common treasury of all" and ignited an experiment in practical utopianism, cultivating the wasteland of St. George's Hill, Surrey, and nearby Cobham Heath, without claim to ownership, on behalf of anyone in need. Winstanley hoped that others would follow suit, that landowners would lose their serfs and be forced to join his ad hoc community, that private property would simply fade away. That is not what happened. The Diggers were crushed by local landowners, who sued them in the courts and burned the houses they had built on the commons. A radical vision of the future failed with them.

Failure is so prodigious, so multiform, so widespread that it's impossible to survey comprehensively. In that sense, this chapter is bound to fail. It focuses on personal failure—the failure to achieve ends or goals that are important to you—setting moral and social failure aside. (They will resurface as we go on.) It is in personal failure that you risk defining your life, becoming a loser. This definition takes place, refined and purified, in great moments of failure in sports.

What is it like to be synonymous with failure? And what does that tell us about the ordinary failures of our lives? Having given up the Shot Heard 'Round the World, Ralph Branca suffered his fate with little protest for fifty years. Anyone who knew anything about him knew that he threw the fastball Thomson hit; many knew nothing more. In *The Echoing Green*, the journalist Joshua Prager unwinds the knot that binds Branca and Thomson together. What he tells is not a story of redemption, of failure expunged; it is too late for that. Instead we learn what we knew all along: how much more there was to Branca's life, and to Thomson's, than the moment that connects them. Prager interrupts the season right before the playoff to narrate in synchrony their prior lives: Branca's huge and happy family, Thomson's supportive brother and taciturn father. The intermission takes up a fifth of the book. The final game itself is paused as Thomson steps into the batter's box before the pitch—the swing—Russ Hodges's call: "The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant!"—to begin the day: "Pitcher and hitter had both awakened that morning at 7:30 in the home of parents," Prager writes. "Both had eaten eggs prepared by his mother, Thomson with a side of bacon, Branca a side of ham."

No one's life can be reduced to one event, one enterprise, or one ambition. Each is made of facts and facts and facts. Nor is there any fate to be discerned in what transpires. As we relive the season, the at bat, we see how differently things could go, the sheer contingency of failure and success. More than that, we see how tempting and how dangerous it is to tell the stories of our lives as if they had some hidden teleology, driving onward to predestined ends. Prager fights the inertia of retrospection that sees each episode as what was going to happen all along. He contests it in

the structure of his book—doubling back on his protagonists' lives in detours that suspend the sequence of events—and in the structure of his sentences, which explode or invert expected syntaxes, as if to step outside of time. From the first few pages:

Thus did a bloody digit and enflamed appendix now convene Durocher [the Giants' manager] and Horace Stoneham [their owner] in New York's center-field clubhouse. . . . Durocher was obnoxious, would from short instruct his pitcher to throw at opposing batters. . . . All about [Brooklyn] were starting nines, and the consequence most embraced of its newfound proficiency was the overtaking of New York.

There are dozens more like this throughout the book: verbs, prepositions, subordinate clauses, scattered through sentences to surprise the reader. You never know how it will all turn out.

Prager's play with form puts failure in perspective. "The foundational myth of failure is that it's our own fault," writes Joe Moran. We can be at fault for failure, but the chaos of contingency in life—the pitch that dips or doesn't, the catch that bounces from the heel of a glove—reminds us that control is never absolute and often limited. Whatever your mistakes, moreover, there is more to you than the failures they explain, more than any project you pursue. The tendency to miss this, or obscure it, turns on how we narrate our lives, pared down to pivotal moments, and on the kinds of narrative we are encouraged to give. The experience of failure and the stories we tell about ourselves are as closely entwined with each other as the lives of Branca and Thomson. To loosen the hold of failure, we need to ask how far life is, or is not, narrative.

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THE IDEA THAT WE NARRATE our lives to ourselves, and that doing so is part of living well, is sufficiently commonplace that its most

vocal critic, the philosopher Galen Strawson, could describe it as "a fallacy of our age." He lists an impressive roster of advocates, including the neurologist and author Oliver Sacks ("Each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative' . . . this narrative *is* us"), the psychologist Jerome Bruner ("We *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives"), and a murderers' row of philosophical big hitters: Alasdair MacIntyre, Daniel Dennett, Charles Taylor, and Paul Ricoeur. For Taylor, a "basic condition of making sense of ourselves [is] that we grasp our lives in a *narrative* . . . as an unfolding story." And for Dennett, "We are all virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behaviour, more or less unified . . . and we always try to put the best 'faces' on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography."

It sounds appealing, in a way. Who doesn't think they have a brilliant memoir in them? But the question isn't rhetorical: many of us don't think that and a lot of the rest are kidding themselves. "I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form," Strawson writes. And yet he seems to be living quite well.

Strawson's biography is a useful case study. His father was P. F. Strawson, the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford, one of the most eminent philosophers of the late twentieth century. Strawson senior is known for his humane defense of freedom and responsibility and for a conception of ourselves as fundamentally embodied beings. His son Galen was precocious, gripped from the age of four by puzzles of infinity and death. After a detour through Islamic Studies at Cambridge, Strawson junior went to Oxford to read philosophy, becoming a well-known author and professor. What is he famous for? A strident attack on the possibility of freedom and responsibility and an insistence that we introspect ourselves as something distinct from the human beings that bear our names.

The irony is perfect: Galen Strawson, arch critic of Life as Narrative, lives one of the oldest stories in the book—a philosopher's rendition of "killing the father." We can use this irony to separate three elements in Life as Narrative and to extricate ourselves, a little, from the grip of failure. The first

element is the conjecture, nicely verbed by Strawson, that we are bound to "story" ourselves, presenting our lives as coherent narrative wholes. The other elements are ethical: that a good life must form a coherent narrative, and that it must be one whose subject tells that narrative to himself. Strawson's own example pulls the last two elements apart. His life can be told as a story, more or less, but I know from correspondence with him that the story isn't one that Strawson tells. If we trust his testimony, he does not story himself at all. Strawson is an exception to the psychological conjecture that we are bound to tell our lives in story form. If his life is good, he shows that the subject of a good life need not tell its story—even if there is a story to be told.

Now, one example is just that. But there are plenty more. Like me, you may be one of them, living from day to day and year to year without much sense of narrative direction. Strawson cites illustrious forebears, among them Iris Murdoch and the mercurial pioneer of the personal essay, Michel de Montaigne. To these we might add Bill Veeck, who served in the army, managed baseball clubs to failure and success, and fought to integrate the American League. All three had lives that were dense with things worth doing, some done exceptionally well, along with miscues, misdirections, swerves. That's enough for a good life, without the need for a story that ties it all together. To see one's life as a narrative arc, heading for a climax that it may or may not reach, is to see it as a potential failure; but one need not live that way.

Consider Murdoch, who studied classics, worked in the civil service in World War II, became a philosopher for ten years, then quit to be a full-time novelist. Throughout, she was pansexual and polyamorous, despite her long marriage to John Bayley, an English professor at Oxford. There were plenty of hurt feelings. Murdoch went on to write twenty-six novels in forty-one years, but while that makes for consistency, to a point, it doesn't amount to a direction. She shifted as a novelist, trying different things, but there was no pattern of evolution—except that the novels got longer, until the last. They did not get better. I'm not alone in thinking her most successful was *Under the Net*; it was also her first. Nor can it be said that

Murdoch's two careers, as philosopher and novelist, merged happily. She resisted—I think rightly—any blurring of the lines between her often difficult work in philosophy and the "innumerable intentions and charms" of fiction. It's not that Murdoch's life was incoherent—though the web of her affairs isn't easy to unravel. But it didn't have the kind of narrative structure proponents of Life as Narrative approve, the sort that has "an Agent, an Action, a Goal, a Setting, an Instrument—and Trouble." Nor does Murdoch seem to have thought otherwise. Yet as I said in Chapter 1, I think she lived well enough. On the Life as Narrative view, a good life must form a coherent, linear story, one its subject tells herself. Murdoch is an exception to that—as are Strawson, Montaigne, and Veeck.

In light of such examples, you may wonder why the view is so widely held. I think the answer turns on the amorphous open-endedness of storytelling. A question that is now overdue: What do the advocates of Life as Narrative mean by "narrative," anyway? They gravitate to stories of the simplest and most linear form. "For centuries there's been one path through fiction we're most likely to travel—one we're actually told to follow," writes the critic and author Jane Alison in *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, "and that's the dramatic arc: a situation arises, grows tense, reaches a peak, subsides." It's in these terms that Life as Narrative is framed; they are what give it substance. The claim is that you should, and do, aspire to tell the story of your life as a single, integrated arc, "something that swells and tautens until climax." ("Bit masculo-sexual, no?" Alison jokes.)

As Alison observes, however, storytelling comes in countless forms, many of them nonlinear. Stories meander, spiral, explode, and branch, or divide into cells. Think of the telescoping pauses and prehistories of Prager on the Shot Heard 'Round the World, the repeated switchbacks and false starts. Or take Nicholson Baker's novella *The Mezzanine*, whose plot consists of a journey on an escalator during lunch hour, and whose interest lies in its delightful digressions, as the narrator reflects on shoelaces, straws, deodorants, urinals, paper towels, childhood memories, and escalators themselves. There are digressions within digressions, footnotes that run for

paragraphs or pages in a masterpiece of storytelling that goes precisely nowhere.

If Life as Narrative meant only that there is value in seeing one's life as a story with one or more of these endlessly various forms, it would be harmless enough. Hence its air of plausibility. But in practice, Life as Narrative means a need for unity and linearity, for incidents that build to a fulfilling climax, won or lost; that's what its proponents demand. The prospect of stories like the ones I've just recounted undercuts their principal argument: that telling the story of one's life is a path to self-understanding and self-formation. Perhaps it is. But there are countless ways to make sense of yourself, even through stories, without picturing your decades as a quest. Why not bricolage, the character study, the riff?

What's more, there is a downside to unified, linear narrative: it is by squeezing your life into a single tube that you set yourself up for definitive failure. Projects fail and people fail in them. But we have come to speak as if a person can *be* a failure—as though failure were an identity, not an event. When you define your life by way of a single enterprise, a narrative arc, its outcome will come to define *you*.

It's a tendency we should fight. Whatever story you tell about yourself, however simple and straightforward, there is endlessly more to your actual life. As Joe Moran insists: "To call any life a failure, or a success, is to miss the infinite granularity, the inexhaustible miscellany of all lives. . . . A life can't really succeed or fail at all; it can only be lived." The narrator of *The Mezzanine* is carrying a copy of *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic philosopher who was emperor of Rome. At one point, he recalls a sentence he has read: "Observe, in short, how transient and trivial is all mortal life; yesterday a drop of semen, tomorrow a handful of spice and ashes. . . . Wrong, wrong, wrong! I thought. Destructive and unhelpful and misguided and completely untrue!" What makes the narrator's life worth living is not some grand narrative, running from conception or birth to inevitable death; it is the countless little thoughts and deeds and gentle, joking interactions that occupy day after day after day. If you pay attention, Baker intimates, there's enough in a single lunch hour to fill a book.

The more you appreciate the sheer abundance of incident, the more you'll see any life as an assortment of small successes and small failures, and the less prone you will be to say, despairingly, "I'm a loser"—or with misplaced bravado, "I'm a winner!" Don't let the lure of the dramatic arc distract you from the digressive amplitude of being alive.

The point is easy to misconstrue. Am I saying you should renounce ambition, not embark on projects that will structure decades of your life? Should you think small, kick back, relax? That is not what I'm saying and I would be a hypocrite if I was. I spent two decades of my own life striving for success in academia. I don't regret that. What I do regret is treating my life as a project to complete: first earn a PhD, then get a job; tenure and promotion; teach a class, publish an article, a book, then another and another and another—to what end? Life held only more of the achievements and frustrations of the past, a mere accumulation of deeds; and the present felt empty. That is why I had a midlife crisis.

It's not inevitable. By reflecting on the temporalities of action, one can learn how to pursue a project, even the most ambitious, without subverting one's life or seeing it solely in the glare of failure and success.

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SOME YEARS AGO, I wrote an op-ed for *The New York Times* about the problem of "living in the present." We are often told to "seize the day," but it would be wildly irresponsible to live like there's no tomorrow. That's a recipe for recklessness. What gives? I had an answer—in the form of a positive vision of living in the present—that appealed to ideas from Aristotle. Despite being warned not to read the comments when the op-ed went online, I was too curious to resist. What I encountered were furious Buddhists, livid that I would cite Aristotle, not Buddhism, in unleashing the power of now. My first reaction was defensive: when you have only a thousand words, you can't say everything; I'm not an expert on Buddhism; and the relationship between my view and Buddhist philosophy is

complicated. My second reaction was that if Buddhism, for you, means leaving irate comments on op-ed articles, you may be doing it wrong.

My conception of living in the present turns on distinguishing two kinds of activity. On the one hand, there are projects to complete, activities that point toward a final state of failure or success. But there are also activities we don't complete, ones not defined by a terminal state—activities in which we don't succeed or fail. By focusing on the latter, we can make our lives less vulnerable to fate.

Similar ideas find expression not just in Aristotle but in Eastern philosophy, most explicitly the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu scripture that dates from the second century BCE:

motive should never be in the fruits of action,
nor should you cling to inaction.

Abiding in yoga, engage in actions!
Let go of clinging, and let fulfillment
and frustration be the same.

To explain what this could mean, and why it isn't exactly Buddhist, we'll turn to one of my favorite novels: *The Idiot*, written by Fyodor Dostoevsky over the course of a year, beginning in January 1868.

The history of *The Idiot*'s composition is not incidental here. In December 1867, Dostoevsky trashed what had been months of work on a projected novel about a criminal's moral conversion. His new plan was to write about "*a perfectly beautiful man*"—the Christ-like Prince Myshkin—throwing him into the chaotic, compromised world of contemporary Russia. He sent the first five chapters to his editor at *The Russian Messenger* on January 5, followed by two more on the eleventh, and continued to write from installment to installment with no clear plan.

How do we know that there was no plan? In part because Dostoevsky says so in his notebooks; in part because he wrote the evidence of indecision into the text. Key ideas are introduced and then forgotten. In Part One, Myshkin is attributed the power to read people's characters in their handwriting. But he never goes on to use it. We are told that, as an "invalid," he cannot marry. Yet he becomes romantically involved with two women and almost marries one of them. The later parts of *The Idiot* interpolate newspaper stories that Dostoevsky read months after he began to write. There is no way he could have planned around them—and he wants us to know it. The novel is as open-ended, unpredictable, and ultimately senseless as life itself. By the end, even the omniscient narrator gives up:

Two weeks went by after the events recounted in the last chapter, and the position of the characters in our story changed so much that it is extremely difficult for us to set out on the continuation without special explanations. And yet we feel that we must limit ourselves to the simple statement of facts, as far as possible without special explanations, and for a very simple reason: because we ourselves, in many cases, have difficulty explaining what happened.

In the critic Gary Saul Morson's virtuoso reading of *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky's aim was to write a novel that has no guiding structure at all. There is no linear arc, but nor does the story meander, spiral, radiate, or branch. Its unity is the unity of Myshkin's character, a saint set down among sinners in situations that have no pattern or plan. Myshkin harbors no great ambition or urgent quest. He simply tries to do what is right in whatever circumstance he confronts. His intentions mostly fail: things rarely work out as he hoped they would.

For all that, Myshkin lives—as Dostoevsky meant him to—a beautiful life. He is not defined by his many failures. He is defined instead by his refusal to condemn the despised, his unerring modesty and truthfulness, his generosity, his will to believe and expect the best of others. Things do not turn out well for him. Myshkin is forced to betray one of the women he

loves in order to save the other, who jilts him at the altar and is murdered by the man to whom she runs. But the fault is with the world. If Myshkin does not manage to live well, he responds as well as he can to dreadful events.

If someone called Myshkin a failure, they would not be wrong, exactly, but they would miss the point. That's not the way to think about his life. Myshkin cares about the struggle to do what is right as much as he cares about its outcome. Fittingly, this theme comes out in an extravagant digression: an hour-long speech by Ippolit Teréntyev, a nihilist who is dying of consumption; his "confession" hinges on the life of Christopher Columbus:

Oh, you may be sure that Columbus was happy not when he had discovered America, but when he was discovering it; you may be sure that the highest moment of his happiness was, perhaps, exactly three days before the discovery of the New World, when the mutinous crew in their despair almost turned the ship back to Europe, right around! The New World is not the point here, it can just as well perish. . . . The point is in life, in life alone —in discovering it, constantly and eternally, and not at all in the discovery itself!

We find the same thought expressed in Dostoevsky's own voice, seven years later: "*Happiness lies not in happiness but only in the attempt to achieve it*."

I would say: not happiness but living well, and not only but also. Prince Myshkin surely cares about the effects of his actions, what he actually achieves; but he cares, too, about the process of attempting to achieve it—about the journey, as much as the arrival. There is an insight here that lies between platitude and paradox, one that we can make precise with help from Aristotle.

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle contrasts two kinds of action. Some are "incomplete," such as learning or building something, since "if you are learning, you have not at the same time learned" and if you are still in the process of building, the structure is not yet built. Completion comes later, if

at all. Then there is "that sort of action to which . . . completion belongs"—meaning that it's never incomplete. An example of this is *thinking*: the moment you're thinking of Aristotle, you have already thought of him.

Aristotle calls activity of the first kind *kinêsis* and the second *energeia*. Stealing jargon from linguistics, we can say that building a house and learning the alphabet are "telic" activities: they aim at terminal states, in which they are finished and thus exhausted. ("Telic" comes from the Greek word *telos* or end, the root of "teleology.") Walking home is telic: it's done when you get home. So are projects like getting married or having a child. These are things you can complete. Other activities are "atelic": they do not aim at termination, a final state in which they have been achieved. While you are walking home, you are also walking, as you can walk with no particular destination. That is an atelic activity. So are parenting, spending time with friends, and listening to music. You can stop doing these things, and you eventually will. But you cannot exhaust them. They have no limit, no outcome whose achievement brings them to an end.

We are always engaged in activities both telic and atelic. I am writing a book about the human condition—which I hope to finish—and I am thinking about the ways in which life is hard, an activity that has no end. You may be teaching your kid to tie their shoelaces—hoping they'll figure it out—but you are also parenting. The question is not which of the two you are doing but what you value. Dostoevsky's argument is that the value lies in atelic activities: in the process, not the project. That is what the Bhagavad Gita seems to say: "motive should never be in the fruits of action" means "do not invest in the completion of telic activities"; if one values only the process, one will still act but "fulfillment / and frustration [will] be the same." I think that goes too far: outcomes matter. Does your kid learn to tie their own laces? Does the doctor save a life? It makes a difference whether or not they do. Still, we are prone to care too much about telic activities—about the completion of projects—and to miss the value of the process. When we do that, we negate the present moment and set ourselves up to fail.

With telic activities, satisfaction is always in the future or the past. Your ambition is unfulfilled, and then it's over. Worse, your engagement with what you value is self-destructive. When you pursue a cherished goal, you aim to succeed, and so to end your engagement with something good. It's as though you're trying to destroy a source of meaning in your life. Meanwhile, it's projects like this that expose you to the risk of failure. You blow the interview for your dream job, mismanage your team, betray your ambition.

When you value the process, your relation to the present, and to failure, is quite different. Because they do not aim at terminal states, atelic activities are not exhaustible. Your engagement with them does not annihilate them. You can stop walking, or thinking, or talking to someone you love, but you can't exhaust those activities, leaving no more to be done. The other side of inexhaustibility is expressed by Aristotle when he insists, perhaps confusingly, on the "completeness" of atelic activities: "At the same time, one is seeing and has seen, is understanding and has understood, is thinking and has thought." Atelic activities are realized in the present as much as they can ever be realized. If you value thinking and you are doing just that, you have what you value right now. Nothing you have done, or will do, can imperil this.

Aristotle's insight was that living well is atelic: "But if you are learning, you have not at the same time learned, and if you are being cured you have not at the same time been cured. Someone, however, who is living well, has at the same time lived well." Myshkin, for instance, whose failures are hedged by the fact that he is living as he should, whatever the results.

We should follow Myshkin, insuring ourselves against failure through the value of the atelic. There are parts of life in which projects play a secondary role. We don't spend time with those we love in order to divide the labor more efficiently as we cook, complete a puzzle more quickly, or watch *Fleabag* on TV. We cook and do puzzles and watch TV together as a way of spending time with those we love. But even where projects loom large, as often in education and working life, in politics and society, chances are the process matters, too, unchained from failure or success. This value is easy to miss.

In early 1650, the Diggers' hopes for a communist future faltered. They had retreated to Cobham Heath where their homes were under threat of violence sanctioned by the New Model Army. Satellite colonies had been established in the Midlands and in Kent, but their survival was precarious. Gerrard Winstanley saw the writing on the wall. "And here I end," he wrote, "having put my Arm as far as my strength will go to advance Righteousness: I have Writ, I have Acted, I have Peace: and now I must wait to see the Spirit do his own work in the hearts of others." He went on to write a final book, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform*, which set out his vision for a new society, then lived out his days in peace. Winstanley may have been "exhausted and bitterly disillusioned," in the words of Christopher Hill: a political failure. But generations have found value in his failed attempt, a struggle for equality from the ground up, celebrated by later socialists and memorialized in a folk song called "The World Turned Upside Down." After the 2016 U.S. election, I listened obsessively to the British protest singer Billy Bragg, whose cover of the song, resolute and ringing, was the anchor of my soundtrack. Whatever Winstanley may have felt, his life was not a failure—not through posthumous success but because there is dignity in protest and protest is atelic.

In less exalted ways, the value of the process can insure us against failure. We only have to look for it, in atelic activities that matter to us—or correspond to projects that do. There is value in thinking through life's hardships even if this book is never published, value when a doctor struggles to save a life even if the patient dies. The insurance is not perfect. There is no way to eliminate failure in every form and no point pretending that results don't matter. But we can reframe how we live our lives so that our failures are less central.

The scope and limits of this shift in orientation—and its relation to Buddhist philosophy—are the subject of a classic film: the Bill Murray–Harold Ramis–Danny Rubin masterpiece, *Groundhog Day*. For those who do not know the plot, acerbic weatherman Phil Connors—played by Murray—is assigned to cover Groundhog Day in the Pennsylvania town of Punxsutawney. Each year, on February 2, the groundhog Punxsutawney Phil

is said to predict the weather: an early spring or six more weeks of winter, depending on whether or not he sees his shadow. It's as riveting as it sounds. Disaffected and eager to get home, Phil finds himself trapped in a time loop where every day is Groundhog Day. He repeats it with variations, first confused, then reckless, manic, suicidal, and eventually serene. When Phil learns to accept his fate and to love the people around him, he is finally liberated. A new day dawns.

Critics agree that *Groundhog Day* is one of the great philosophical comedies, though they don't agree on what its philosophy is. One can read it as a meditation on the value of atelic activities. Phil can act, but nothing he does is ever really done: his actions produce no lasting change. They are erased as the day repeats. Is his life a test of the atelic orientation? Can process alone make human life good? But if it is a test, it's not a fair one. All sorts of atelic activities are unavailable to Phil. He can't spend time with friends outside of Punxsutawney, if he has them; nor can he explore the wider world. These facts remind us that while atelic activities are insulated from one kind of failure, they are not automatically available to us or easy to perform. We can fail to live well, even if the failure is not that of a project with a final end.

What's more, Phil *can* effect change, if only in himself. He remembers each day of his imprisonment and whatever he learns in the course of living it. By the time he is freed, Phil can play the piano, is fluent in French, has become an expert ice sculptor, and knows how to flip a card into a hat from several feet. (How long did it take him to acquire these skills? According to Harold Ramis in the DVD commentary, Phil is trapped for a decade, but that is unrealistically brief. The most careful estimate puts his confinement at just under thirty-four years.)

Although Phil protests "I am happy now," his life remains a kind of living hell. As I have acknowledged, projects matter, and if Phil's do not exactly fail, they never really succeed. An alternative reading of the film treats life in *Groundhog Day* as an allegory for samsara, the cycle of suffering conjectured by Buddhist philosophy, in which we live life after woeful life according to the law of karma. The goal is to be free of this cycle, no longer

reborn, in the nothingness of nirvana. Thus Phil escapes from repetition to mortality.

Whatever its merits, the Buddhist interpretation of *Groundhog Day*, and of human life, is not the same as mine. For Buddhists, the power of now is about the transience and emptiness of reality, overcoming attachment to persons and things, the liberation of disengaging from what is fragile, perishable, shifting. For me, it's the opposite. To value the atelic is to attach oneself to the present. It's not about emptiness but fullness, not about detachment or liberation but engagement with, and attention to, what is happening now. Phil's life is impoverished in the loop: when it comes to actions that affect other people, he can't get anything done. But he can make the best of it, learning how to live a better life, one less mortgaged to success and failure, attuned not just to project but to process.

How can we make this transition ourselves? We may not be so lucky as to fall out of time, with thirty-four years to figure it out. And as I learned in midlife, you can't simply choose what you care about. I saw that two decades of academic striving had turned philosophy, for me, into a series of projects, each one painfully pursued or in the past. I had lost my love for philosophizing with no end, atelically. That is why my days felt hollow and my future like a sprint to stay in place. But I couldn't just change. I had to work on myself and the work is still in progress. In *Midlife*, I wrote about meditation as a way to reorient oneself to the atelic. To focus mindfully on breathing, sitting, listening to sounds, detached from future goals is to learn to appreciate the present; it nurtures an ability to find atelic value that transmits into everyday life. I still believe all that. But I didn't say enough about the cultural forces that make it both urgent and difficult to transform ourselves. In that respect, I failed. As we will see, these forces are bound up with ones that reduce our worth to wealth.

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THE IDEA THAT PEOPLE, not just projects, can be classified as failures has a history. In *Born Losers*, the historian Scott Sandage traces it back through the Great Depression to the mid-1800s, when "failure" as a noun for people enters the dictionary. That one could not simply fail but be a failure was the upshot of social and economic changes. The U.S. understood itself to be a land of entrepreneurs, the triumph of the businessman measured by high profits and good credit. Credit came to define Americans as individuals through the invention of the credit report. "More than a bank balance or a character reference," Sandage writes, "a credit report folded morals, talents, finances, past performance, and future potential into one summary judgment. . . . First-rate or third-rate, good as wheat or good for nothing, credit reports calibrated identity in the language of commodity."

Add to this an individualist ethos in which success or failure in the market is attributed to the person, not to social circumstance. The essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson reflected on this attitude in 1860, noting: "There is always a reason, in the man, for his good or bad fortune, and so in making money." It was not just capitalists like Andrew Carnegie who fostered the belief that character is measured by success—as Carnegie preached in "The Gospel of Wealth" in 1889. Thirty years earlier, Frederick Douglass, an abolitionist who was formerly enslaved, gave what was to be his most popular lecture, "Self-Made Men." "I do not think much of the accident or good luck theory of self-made men," he proclaimed. "Opportunity is important but exertion is indispensable."

> When we find a man who has ascended heights beyond ourselves . . . we may know that he has worked harder, better and more wisely than we. He was awake while we slept. He was busy while we were idle and was wisely improving his time and talents while we were wasting ours.

Allowing "only ordinary ability and opportunity," he concludes, "we may explain success mainly by one word and that word is WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!!! . . . Give the negro fair play and let him alone. If he lives, well. If he dies, equally well. If he cannot stand up, let him fall down."

The more one's life is understood in terms of a single enterprise in which one succeeds or fails on one's own merits, the more tempting it will be to identify as a loser or a winner, a failure or a success. Through the nineteenth century, Americans' self-worth was increasingly measured by prosperity. The financial panics that crashed the U.S. economy engendered not just poverty and material hardship but spiritual collapse in those who failed. "The land stinks with suicide," Emerson wrote during the crash of 1837, as men who were unable to support themselves or their families took their own lives in shame.

The "deaths of despair" recorded by economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton in present-day America thus have nineteenth-century precedents. These deaths are not explained by poverty alone. Since 2015, U.S. life expectancy has fallen, and virtually all of the decrease is among non-college-educated Whites. Although they earn more on average than similarly qualified Blacks, they are 40 percent more likely to die from suicide, alcohol abuse, or overdose. Case and Deaton argue that the difference lies in the internalized belief that hard work yields success, in a refusal to admit systemic obstacles, and in a deficit of social solidarity. In other words, the explanation lies in seeing oneself, and not society, as a failure.

Black Americans are understandably more attuned to structures of injustice that impede prosperity. Some of these structures are historical, like the system of slavery Douglass railed against. Others are contemporary, like those anatomized, in part, by the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I came to see the streets and the schools as arms of the same beast. . . . Fail in the streets and the crews would catch you slipping and take your body. Fail in the schools and you would be suspended and sent back to those same streets, where they would take your body. And I began to see these two arms in relation—those who failed in the schools justified their destruction in the

streets. The society could say, "He should have stayed in school," and then wash its hands of him.

The language of "personal responsibility" is a language of structural exoneration and self-blame. It turns away from patterns like the one described by Coates: from the "school-to-prison pipeline," and the injustice and social waste of mass incarceration.

Behind these failures lies the power of the capitalist economy that drove rapacious colonial expansion and enslavement from the seventeenth century onward—seeking new markets, new materials, and captive labor—and which drives the contemporary decline of manufacturing in the West. The trend has not reversed; if anything, it's accelerated. Employment is increasingly polarized: the bad jobs get worse—more precarious, more consuming, less remunerative—while the best jobs get better; the middle evaporates. Economic inequality has soared. No wonder millennials spend more time on schoolwork than any generation before them: investment in their own "human capital" seems like the only path through competitive college admissions to the dwindling supply of rewarding work. Life is a win-lose proposition and it is ever more perceived as one.

It is hard to know whether private ownership of the means to survival and flourishing can be reconciled with a world in which everyone's needs are met. Perhaps our only hope is to follow Winstanley and the Diggers, denying that Earth itself can ever be owned. (It is a puzzle, on reflection, how one could lay unqualified claim to land, or sea, or sky, whatever the needs of people to come.) But it is easy to see, and to say, that any program of reform must speak not just to material need but to the ideology on which human worth is gauged by productivity, and productivity in terms of wealth. So long as self-esteem is tied to the production of market value, some will be "failures," at best indebted for their living—through social insurance or a universal basic income—to the economic victories of others. The possessive individualism that portrays us as acquisitive social atoms may not be responsible for loneliness but it plays a critical role in the origins of failure.

This is no more than a chapter in the history of the telic mind-set under capitalism. Other chapters might explore the origins of the "work ethic," how avarice was transformed from private sin to public good, or how economic relations that pit us against one another in a competition for primary goods conflict with social solidarity. These days, economic modes of thinking, structured by accumulation and repetition, infiltrate most parts of life. We count our online "friends" and compete for "likes" on social media, commodifying our relationships. A teenage love for philosophy becomes an adult obsession with climbing the rungs of the academic ladder, adding lines to a CV—no longer a means to philosophizing but an end in itself. Mindfulness may be one way out: if not to throw the ladder away then to reframe it as the instrument it is. But it won't affect the roots of the ideology that shapes us—let alone the social and economic structures with which it's symbiotic.

Nor can we free ourselves from the myth that failure is our fault simply by observing when it's false. In the speech I quoted above, Douglass begins with a concession:

> Properly speaking, there are in the world no such men as self-made men. That term implies an individual independence of the past and present which can never exist.
>
> Our best and most valued acquisitions have been obtained either from our contemporaries or from those who have preceded us in the field of thought and discovery. We have all either begged, borrowed or stolen.

Yet he goes on to say what he says. Knowing that success turns on inequities of fortune that go beyond "fair play" is not enough to shift its cultural meaning. As social animals, we care how we are perceived by those around us—as winners or as losers, say—and we can't just step outside society. Instead, we have to change it.

With failure, then, the personal is political. We have to acknowledge the structural causes of social and economic inequality and of our damaging self-conceptions. At the same time, I can hear a skeptical voice. It's easy to

see how structures like these harm those of us perceived as losers. Those seen as winners may not care; and those who care may wonder what to do. How does injustice matter to the lives of those who are not directly subject to it? Remember Phil Connors, trapped in a temporal loop. What liberates him is only in part his orientation to the process; it's also his selflessness, his love and respect for others. Is there a lesson there for us?