

Loss Changes Everything

I had one of “those days” recently – the kind of day when I feel a subtle but pervasive discomfort, uneasiness, agitation. Trying to feel better, I searched through the whole forest of my brain to determine what was wrong. It could be any number of things. Did I forget to pay a bill, or call someone, or complete a work task? Did I make someone mad and feel I have to make up for it somehow? Did I leave some permission slip unsigned, some kind person unthanked?

I went through all of that, and the answer to each question was no – no, no, no, no to every one. At the bottom of the question barrel, underneath all the rest, was one last question that I ultimately had to ask: Is it that my brother is gone?

Yes. Yes, it is.

That loss changed everything.

There are moments in your life that create a definitive boundary like a line of fire, moments before which one world stretches back and after which an entirely different world stretches forward. The two worlds meet at the line but never overlap. Once you move into the new world, you cannot go back through the fire to the old. In fact, it may seem like the old world begins to diminish almost instantly as you set foot in the new. If you are lucky, you have some photographs of how life was before, but even as you stare at them you might ask yourself: Did that really happen? Was I really there? The flames of the fire line moment are so high and hot that they can obscure your view of the old world, even as they bring new surroundings into sharp focus.

Examples come to mind: The birth of a child. The deaths of Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy. September 11, 2001. It is probably no coincidence that these moments all have to do with the beginning or ending of a human life.

My brother Frank died nearly two years ago, suddenly, unexpectedly, too young, killed by a drunk driver. But a death doesn't have to be sudden, or unexpected, or caused by someone else for it to change everything. Even a loss of someone who died at an advanced age or someone who has lingered for years with a terminal illness can set the fire line ablaze.

A cousin wrote me a note a while ago, saying that she felt that the world had changed irrevocably when Frank died, and that there was something not right now that would never be right again. That's exactly how I feel. The not-right-ness of the world is an undercurrent of unease for me, more or less noticeable depending on what else is going on, but always there. My father says that sometimes when he is having fun and laughing, he suddenly wonders: How am I having a normal happy moment? Am I forgetting what happened? As he asks himself these questions, he realizes that of course he isn't normal in the way that he was before his son died, and won't ever be again. He can find laughter and joy on this side of the fire line, but it comes with that undercurrent, like an endless field of mud that makes it tougher to move forward than it used to be.

If we who have lost someone we love seem different, we probably are. Being different doesn't mean we cannot live and love and laugh. However, we may do it differently than we used to, and differently than you expect. Sometimes we may cry when you expect us to have ourselves under control. Sometimes we may laugh and have fun when you expect us to be somber and tearful. Sometimes we can handle things that you would expect to incapacitate us, and sometimes the tiniest things will devastate us. This is the way it is when loss changes everything. We may not be able to go back to the way we were, or to what normal used to mean to us – but we are doing our best to continue walking on in this new muddy world.

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