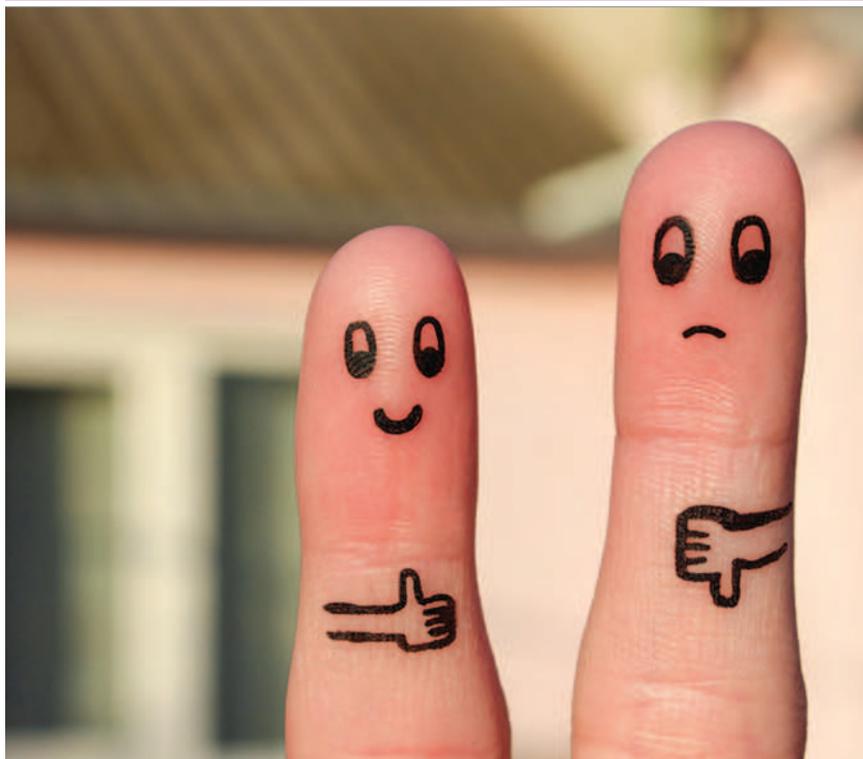




# EVERYDAY GAINS and losses

Coping with the constant changes in our lives

BY LEONARD CARR



**THE SUBJECT OF DEATH REMAINS ONE OF THE** great unspeakable taboos in our society. The implicit knowledge of death is a constant companion in everyday life from the time in early childhood that we first become aware of the notion. It is often an unrecognised, unconscious cause of anxieties and certainly a major driving force behind many health supplements and beauty fads. It is hard to think of the death of a loved one; how much more so contemplating our own ultimate end. Yet death is with us all of the time. Our cells are continuously dying and replaced by new ones. Every few months our bodies have been almost entirely renewed. So too is it with

our psychological being. Death and renewal are continually recurring motifs that make up the backdrop of our lives.

Most people live unconsciously, metaphorically sleepwalking their way through life, only noticing the long-term, obvious, cumulative effects of changes and losses, the mini-deaths that happen all throughout our lives. They may not easily become aware of what, why, or when changes actually took place. People mostly like to live in the illusion that life is or should be consistent and unfold in a continuous and predictable flow. If we pay attention only to the consistencies, we become surprised or even outraged when things do

not turn out the way we imagined or believed that they would, could, or should have, but did not. If we only focus on and count what we gain, welcome, and celebrate as we move through stages of life, then we might miss what we are also losing and being forced to give up in the process. The converse is also true. Sometimes terrible losses bring unexpected benefits or advantages. The truth is that loss and gain are two inseparable sides of the same experience. Beginnings and endings both come with many losses and gains.

When we are born, we give up the comfort and safety of the womb. From then on, every step of growth involves gains and losses. The examples are endless. Childhood is an identity and world that we lose when we become teenagers, and the same thing happens upon our entry into adulthood. We lose the benefits of being single when we get married or the latitudes of a student when we qualify. When children are born, so much is lost in the marital relationship that some marriages never recover unless we recognise the losses and realign our needs and reclaim our closeness and commitment to each other separate from our devotion to the family. We lose the benefits of nuclear family life when the nest empties. We lose the role and status of a spouse with a partner's death or divorce. We lose the safety of an older generation being ahead of us with the death of our parents. We lose the illusion of invincibility and identity of being healthy or able-bodied when diagnosed with an incurable illness or disability.

Even wealth, which people believe will bring freedom, causes us to lose the free-

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dom of the simple unencumbered life we had before we had the complex and demanding responsibilities of looking after wealth and all the assets we acquire with it. Death is the final relinquishment, when everything we achieved in the material sense will need to be renounced. Staying attuned to this reality allows us to live wholeheartedly – to fully show-up in our lives, as opposed to being stuck in the past or escaping into an imaginary future. One can be stuck in a past that was not even his. For example, ancestral grief can be passed down to us through the stories that we heard from parents or grandparents or, for the more sensitive, even through learning about our ancestral past at school and through vivid movies. Ancestral grief can also be passed down through the silence of locked-in, unprocessed pain that was caused by suffering that was unspeakable. Children, who sense and absorb trauma, cannot name or process it because it was passed to them as formless, wordless, unbearable psychic fall-out. It is also the pain caused by loved ones who could not emotionally engage or be present or responsive because their hearts froze in some desolate nightmarish past on a distant continent.

Children also grow up with unspoken messages and beliefs about roles and responsibilities, some of which may have originated in their own imaginations. For example, we cannot fully parent our own children if we are still emotionally invested in a childhood role of protecting our eternally adolescent, irresponsible parents or now adult siblings, who may not even welcome or need our protection. We cannot be “Daddy’s little girl” or “Mommy’s best friend” and a fully-engaged spouse whose total investment of needs, energy, and attention is in our marriages.

We cannot be the head of the household and the baby of the family simultaneously. Because people have long-term relationships and even live together out of wedlock, they do not consider that break-ups can be as traumatic and scarring as divorce. The scars of past relationships get carried into new ones in the form of trust issues, comparisons, and well practised dysfunctional patterns of relating. We cannot still be carrying feelings of a jilted lover and be a trusting fully-invested partner at the same time. In short, we cannot have our heart in one place, our thoughts in another, and our actions somewhere else altogether. Other examples would be people who are married in thought and emotionally divorced, or vice-versa. Or someone who is physically alive to us, but emotionally as if dead, or the opposite.

The effect of these divisions within our own being or having parts of our being living in different stories is that our energy and attention get diverted and dispersed, detracting from our ability to be wholeheartedly engaged with and fully attuned to the demands of the present. This unfinished business creates an invisible psychic version of a computer virus that drains energy and programs to think and behave according to the rules of past episodes and relationships in our lives that are no longer relevant or useful. The informational scripts from old dramas playing out in the background of our awareness keep the past in the present. Scenarios in the present activate old memories so that, for example, a mildly sarcastic remark can evoke a memory of a

humiliation suffered at the hands of a cruel, sadistic teacher who seemed omnipotent and untouchable and made us feel small and pathetic. In such a case a harmless remark can cause us to blow up or implode as the unwitting person making the comment in our mind magically turns into that teacher and we instantaneously revert back psychologically to being that small child who, now with adult powers, is able to vent with impunity and stage our revenge.

Every loss that we experience affords us the opportunity to grow and to deepen our awareness of ourselves and of the human condition so that we can deepen our empathy and compassion for others. Loss forces us to draw deeply on our inner resources and become more resilient, richer, stronger, and wiser than we were before the experience. We will only be able to achieve growth from loss if we develop the awareness to constantly recognise what we are being challenged to let go of and relinquish that which is redundant or no longer useful and relevant. In so doing, we free our energy, attention, and resources and make them available to wholeheartedly embrace the present moment while remaining fully open to the promise of countless future possibilities.

In order to grow fully from these losses of everyday life, we need to acknowledge that they have taken place. This is possibly another angle on the wisdom behind the concept of “at the peak of our joy we remember our losses”. The first step is to acknowledge that even in a positive new stage some losses have taken place that need to be mourned. For example, if a newly married person does not acknowledge the loss of single life, he may hanker after it and feel held back and resentful towards his spouse who desires his company. We have to get in touch with and work through all of the losses, namely the concrete as well as the symbolic and intangible emotional ones. ■

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