

July More Voices: Loss

Category: Loss

written by Paul Gross | July 1, 2025

"I'm a fool," Jack Kerouac writes in Visions of Cody, "the new day rises on the world and on my foolish life: I'm a fool, I loved the blue dawns over racetracks and made a bet Ioway was sweet like its name, my heart went out to lonely sounds in the misty springtime night of wild sweet America in her powers, the wetness on the wire fence bugled me to belief, I stood on sandpiles with an open soul, I not only accept loss forever, I am made of loss..."

Dear readers,

Loss is a fact of life. In fact, one might argue that this life itself is a prelude to loss.

The first big loss I experienced was the death of my surrogate grandmother, Mrs. Slattery. As my mother's parents lived in Belgium and my father's in Cuba, I didn't have any biologic grandparents on hand while growing up. But I did have Mrs. Slattery, an elderly Irish friend of the family. Mrs. Slattery loved me unconditionally, unlike my parents, who had a few strings attached. She loved to laugh, was always up for a game of cards or checkers and was always delighted with my company. I loved her back in equal measure. She was a buddy and best friend.

When I was thirteen, and perhaps starting to outgrow my attachment to her, Mrs. Slattery had a stroke in my presence. She slumped in her chair, her false teeth suddenly protruding from her mouth, and we couldn't rouse her. An ambulance rushed her to the hospital, where she regained consciousness. For a few days, she talked. and laughed with us. But then, on the morning of her planned discharge, she died. Like that.

Teenage boys didn't cry back then (I'm guessing that they still don't), and I didn't cry. I don't recall feeling bereft. It was as if I had fallen down, but the pain hadn't arrived yet. I felt shaken, puzzled and a bit numb, thinking I should be feeling something but not sure what that feeling was or where it was located.

It took years before I began to appreciate how much Mrs. Slattery had meant to me. She left an empty space when she passed on, and at the same time she'd nourished me with something that persists to this day.

Another loss: At age thirty, during my first months of medical school, I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. While taking care of that illness would become a lifelong burden—or nuisance, depending upon the day—my immediate experience was that of loss: I was no longer a healthy young man, but now an invalid. It hit me hard—the fact that I'd forever be dependent on gadgetry to test my blood sugar and inject myself with insulin—and that without this gadgetry I would die.

Last year I retired from my medical practice. In the months leading up to my last day, I anticipated a newfound freedom from responsibilities that had often weighed on me.

At the same time, my departure meant bidding farewell to patients I'd known for decades, breaking a sacred bond that had joined us for years. It also meant coming to terms with my own aging. When I was a boy, I associated the word "retirement" with another word: "death." I was now beginning that final chapter of my life story.

In some ways I handled this loss similarly to the loss of Mrs. Slattery: I didn't cry. Once again, I couldn't quite wrap my arms around the enormity of what was taking place. "Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?" Bob Dylan sings in *Ballad of a Thin Man*.

No, I didn't quite know what was happening. And I think I'm still trying to understand it. Loss is like that. A part of you gets removed, and it may take awhile to figure out what's been taken out: a chunk of your heart? A sliver of your soul? An aggravating splinter? An appendix you'll never miss? Maybe my retirement is some combination of the above.

This month's *More Voices* theme is [Loss](#). What's been your experience of loss—as a patient, a health professional, a caregiver or a student?

Share your story using the [More Voices Submission Form](#). For more details, visit [More Voices FAQs](#). And have a look at last month's theme: [Hospitalized](#)

Remember, your story should be 40-400 words. And no poetry, please.

We look forward to hearing from you. And thanks for being a part of the *Pulse* community.

Sincerely,

Paul Gross
Editor