

On Losing My Mind
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I was sitting on a leather couch in my small apartment where I live alone. This was about ten days ago as I write this. It was about 7:00 in the evening, a Friday. I had the weekend free. All my weekends are free. My appointment book lay open in my lap. An email that day from a dentist had reminded me that I had a teeth cleaning appointment the next Wednesday at eleven in the morning. I thought to myself, I'll enter the dental hygiene appointment in my appointment book--eleven o'clock and hygienist's name, next Wednesday. I'd been going this hygienist for years and had a cordial relationship with her, and I highly respected the thoroughness and care she brought to her work. I had an up feeling about the appointment: it was going to be really nice to have my teeth smooth and clean and my mouth feeling fresh. My home care hasn't been up to par, I've got to get on it. This scaling and cleaning will give me a new start. Every day without fail, I'm going to floss, brush, and use Listerine. It's going to be really good. A new start. OK, eleven on Wednesday into the appointment book, and . . . what's her name? I had no idea. It's like my head was just a blank, nothing. I've been going to this hygienist for years, she tells me about her daughter who's in high school and I tell her about my ten-year-old daughter who lives on the west coast with her mother. What's her name? . . . I can't remember her name. This is odd, I have no idea what her name is. I'll put down "11:00 cleaning"; I don't need her name. But what's her name? I can't remember her name. . . . I can't remember her name. I feel a bit unsettled, queasy.

On the coffee table in front of me was a coffee table book on Meryl Streep I was going to give as a present to one of my audiologists; I am seriously hearing impaired. My audiologist looks just like a young Meryl Streep, remarkable. I can't get over how much she looks like Meryl Streep used to look. She'd been so great working with me with my hearing problem. I wanted to give her this coffee table book as a present--a really handsome book, new, just published. Let's see, what should I write as an inscription? . . . What's her name? To whom do I inscribe the book? I just saw her last Monday, four days ago. Nothing comes to me, no name, blank. I've worked with her all this year trying to get a hearing aid that

works, emails back and forth, and she finally found a good hearing aid, she was so diligent and patient getting that hearing aid. She'll like the Meryl Streep book. Young as she is, I bet she doesn't know what Meryl Streep looked like young, and how much she looks like Meryl Streep did back then. I page through the book—pictures all the way back to Meryl's teenage years, and her theater training at Yale, and her early movies. My audiologist looks just like Meryl did in the "The Deer Hunter," and "Kramer Versus Kramer." But what's her name? I can't write an inscription if I don't know her name. What's her name? A kind of ominous feeling arises. I'm sitting alone on my leather couch with this ominous feeling and my stomach starts to churn.

My secretary at the university, I picture her, I've worked with her for years—what's her name? I had no idea. My department chairman. I didn't know. What's going on? What's happening to me? What's happened to me? What's going on?

I'm seventy-four-years old now. It's hard for me to believe, but that's a fact; really, I'm seventy-four. I've had my share of physical problems, deafness, and my back is really bad--do I have surgery as they are recommending or not?--and I don't recognize the geriatric in the photos I have on my laptop, but I know it has to be me; third from the left, that's me alright. But my mind, that had always been sharp. I'm still working at the university, and the writing's stayed up to standard. I haven't as much as thought about losing it mentally—oh, a little, but not much at all. My body has deteriorated, that's for sure, but it's always been the same me inside, my consciousness, my mind. But now I can't remember my department chairman's name. My department chairman! And what's my dean's name? I don't know. What is this? I'm sitting here alone. It's dark outside and pretty much dark inside, just one table lamp on. I feel utterly alone and somehow things were closing in on me. What is this?

My former realtor, who's been so great helping me plan my move from Vermont when I retire either this year or next. I can't remember his name either.

My head feels like it's full of cotton, blank, sort of white, there seems to be a pressure, like it is stuffed sort of, do I have slight head ache?, or maybe I'm just self-conscious because of what's happening and it really doesn't feel any different than before. I don't know.

But not being able to remember my secretary's name. What's going on?

I was increasingly focused on this issue. Everything else went away. All that was there for me was this, whatever it was, that had suddenly presented itself. I've had some problems pulling up names in the last few years, like ballplayers and such, but everybody has that problem as they age, no big deal. But my department chairman's name, this is different. I didn't really panic, get real hyper, anything like that. I was more quizzical than anything, or well, yes, I was troubled, concerned. What is this?

I know what I'll do, I decided. I've written emails to all these people, and their names are in my send box. I'll look them up. I did that, but somehow even though I was reading them I couldn't keep them straight, they'd kind of fade in and out; they'd be there, and then I wasn't sure if I had the right person, and the name would go away, and then it would come back but get mixed up with other names, and then it would be gone again. And when I closed the laptop I couldn't remember any of them. And then a name would pop into my head and I wasn't sure whether it was the audiologist I was giving the Meryl Streep book to or another audiologist I work with, the one who has an office at the university. No, that's not the university audiologist's name, or I don't think it is. I have two audiologists; I need two names. And now the name that just popped into my head is gone. Or was that my secretary's name? What's the name of the audiologist at the university? I don't know. Cotton. Pressure. Or is it the same as always. I looked up my secretary's name again in the email list and now I can't remember it again, and I not sure I had it in the first place.

As I write about this now, ten days later, I don't know if anything was wrong with me beside the names, because this episode, I'll call it that, passed in a couple of hours, and I didn't do anything for those couple of hours, like read or write, and I was alone and didn't talk to anyone. I did lie down for a bit. Pretty much, or all I remember anyway, I just tried to remember names, and the few times a name came to me I'd try to attach it to a person, and do it with some certainty. But I couldn't get to certainty about any of these people. I could picture them in my mind clearly. Though come to think of it, I had some trouble picturing my secretary; it would be there and then it would be gone, and was that her? I went back to my email several times to try to get the names straight, but

they would be there and then they wouldn't, and I'd mix up names, even while I was looking at the emails this happened, and after I closed the laptop it was no better than before the email review. I remember having a couple of names in mind and trying to decide which of them was my secretary, or was neither of them my secretary? I could remember my daughter's name, and her mother's name, and I felt good about that.

I remember thinking, "I'm not going to be able to teach my classes at the university like this." And, interesting to me now, rather than being alarmed at that prospect, I had a sense of relief: now I don't have to teach those classes; I won't have to go through that anymore. A calm came over me, and I'm never calm. I thought, "I won't be able to write anymore," and there was that sense of relief again: I won't have to write anymore. I was calm, and at peace; I'm never calm and at peace. I remember thinking, I can go live with my daughter and her mother and just be around the house. I don't have to keep this university thing going. I don't have to be in this alien town, this community where I don't fit, where they don't take to people like me, hiding out in this little rented two room apartment, just treading water, my life going by, anxious all the time, fearful. I don't have to fend off criticism for what I am, what I believe, what I express, I don't have to do that anymore. I don't have to be on guard, ready, all by myself, to take on harassment and attacks, keep them from doing me in, injuring me even more than I am. At that moment, I wasn't wary and afraid. I'm always wary and afraid. There I was--was I losing my mind?--and I was in a state of comfort, ease—I'm never comfortable, I'm never at ease. At that moment, I didn't care what they did. They could do whatever they wanted, I didn't care. Go ahead, do whatever you want, I don't care.

It was the damndest thing: I was all alone on that leather couch, unable to use a phone and call anybody because I can't hear well enough to use a phone, and I couldn't think of my department chairman's name, and I was seventy-four years old, and I was fine. I'm never fine, but I was fine, things were fine. I was settled, I'm never settled

All the names came back before I went to bed that night, and they are still there now. I even remember the name of the HR person at the university I saw just once over a month ago. I've taught classes this past week and been mentally sharp in them. I've done some

writing and that's gone well. I've re-read some of the writings on this site from back in 2007 and they do seem more complex, more layered, than what I can produce now; or maybe not, maybe I'm as good now as I was then, I'm not sure. Perhaps even the ones I wrote just a few months ago are better than what I can do now, I'm not sure. Whatever the case, I feel grateful that I've what I've written is on the site, on the record, if anyone ever wants to read it. But the big thing that's hitting me is that I really don't care if it was better before than what I'm able to do now. That's what I wrote at sixty-seven, and sixty-eight, and sixty-nine—the years click relentless by—and that's what I wrote a few months ago, and I'm able to do whatever I'm able to do now. So it was, so it is, and that's feeling OK with me.

The next day following my episode, I read one of the first thoughts I wrote for this site, in November of 2007, "On Man in the Holocene." *Man in the Holocene* is a novel by Max Frisch. It was about a very old man, alone, snowed in, in the Swiss Alps, I think it was. The site thought was made up of excerpts from the book. I could especially relate to the excerpts I chose to include from the novel over seven years ago, some of which are:

What would be bad is losing one's memory--- There is nothing to do but read. Today is Wednesday (or Thursday?).

Weakness of memory is the deterioration of the faculty of recalling earlier experiences. In psychopathology a distinction is made between this and deterioration of the faculty of adding new experiences to the store of memories, though the distinction is only one of degree. In the brain diseases of old age (senility, hardening of the arteries in the brain) and other brain diseases, it is the latter faculty that deteriorates first.

He cannot resist looking at his watch again; it reads seven minutes past six.

This evening will also pass. He has plenty of time.

Geiser knows the year of his birth and the first names of his parents, also his mother's maiden name, and the name of the street in which he was born, the number of the house—

That was seventy years ago.

Nature needs no names. Geiser knows that. The rocks do not need his memory.

Apoplexy, known popularly as a stroke, is a sudden loss of brain function, combined usually with paralysis and loss of consciousness, and often accompanied by loss of speech. The usual cause is the bursting of a cerebral blood vessel due to arteriosclerosis or hypertension, and the extent of the hemorrhage may be slight, or located in parts of the brain where its presence gives rise to little disturbance. Unless the vital areas of the base of the brain have been affected, in which case, death is likely to occur within a short period, a fair measure of recovery is possible. Another cause of the loss of brain function is the blocking of a cerebral blood vessel, preventing blood from reaching the brain. The paralysis usually affects only one side of the body. The paralyzed limbs are at first slack and immobile, but eventually they pass into a spastic stage.

In August and September, at night, there are shooting stars to be seen, or one hears the call of a little owl.

What am I left with after my episode?—was it a minor stroke, fatigue or stress, a reaction to something I ate? did I somehow make it all up, imagine it? Was it really nothing? I'm not going to a doctor—if it happens again I'll go, but not now. I don't want a CT scan, radiation, or seeming indifference: "Hard to say what it was. But it's all right now, right? Certainly if it happens again, come back in and we'll run some tests. Give these forms to the front desk on your way out." I've heard that kind of thing enough, no more of that if I can help it. Anyway, what I'm left with:

That it's OK to be however I am. Whatever is is, and it's OK. It was fine how I was seven years ago at sixty-seven and it's fine how I am now at seventy-four. And, if I'm still alive, it will be fine six years from now when I'm eighty. I don't have to be other than I am.

That it's all been an incredible gift—my body, my mind, my ability to experience, to create, my capacity to love, and it's all temporary, and it is all going to pass, I'm going to pass. But that's OK.

That I'm gratified with what I've done with my life. I've never quit trying to be responsible to the gift of life I was given. I've never

stopped trying to make something of myself and to be of worth to the world. Within reason, I've done my best with the opportunity I've been granted to live. That's all any of us can do, our best within reason; as human beings we aren't perfect.

That more than ever I feel it'd be OK to let go, to quit trying to make it happen, to quit running after it, after them, to leave the arena and just sit by the water. Relax your shoulders, R., let them fall. Get out of your boxer's stance. Retire from the ring.