



2022

## On the Necessity of Loss

Shamae Budd

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

 Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Budd, Shamae (2022) "On the Necessity of Loss," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 61: Iss. 2, Article 9.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol61/iss2/9>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## On the Necessity of Loss

*Shamae Budd*

The second night in the hospital after our son was born, I crept out of bed, hobbled a few feet across the linoleum, and curled up on the stiff pleather couch where Daniel was sleeping. Our son was in the NICU with a mild case of pneumonia, so it was just he and I in that little room. My body hurt. My heart, too. Daniel pulled me close on the little green hospital couch, and I wept. It felt like nothing would be good again—like we would never be the same.



Those early weeks after having a baby were like living in a fog. The outlines of everything blurred: day and night, self and other, waking and dreaming, happiness and sadness. I would wake in the night and fumble around in the dark, hallucinating that a pillow was my baby's head (despite never having slept with him). I was everything at once. I was nothing, and I was also, somehow, a demi-god: giver and caretaker of life. I was anything but myself.

It was not until my son was two months old and I stepped into a Starbucks, finally alone, laptop bag slung over my left shoulder, that I felt momentarily crystalline again—my edges properly defined.

Maybe it was the crisp December air, or the flakes falling slowly—cleanly—through the black night onto the black asphalt. Maybe it was the slick feeling of a keyboard beneath my fingers when I sat down, the sharp click of each key. The letter “t,” the letter “k.” Whatever it was, I felt myself snap back into focus almost in the very moment that I returned to my craft—to words.

The feeling didn't last. But that evening spent writing in a coffee shop two months into motherhood was a turning point. I began feeling like myself again, figuring out how to be both: a parent and a person.



I remember a conversation we had several months after our son was born. We were sitting on the patio beneath a zigzagging string of lights, two mugs of peppermint tea steaming on the table between us. It was still early springtime—the mosquitoes had not yet arrived in force, so we could sit there in the dusk without swatting, serene. The baby monitor was roaring dully in the background, and there was a book of essays open in my lap.

Daniel had a book in his lap, too, but he wasn't really reading. At some point, he started talking. After a few long pauses and false starts, he expressed a feeling of deep loss—the sense that he didn't know who he was anymore.

All the things that had once defined him, all his hobbies and passions, seemed to be impossible now that we had a child. We had not been rock climbing or cycling in over a year because of my pregnancy. Neither had we attempted camping or backpacking or hiking, which seemed imprudent with an infant in the winter. And his full-time job required very few of the problem-solving skills he had developed in school while studying to become an engineer. He was in despair. (More straightforwardly, he was experiencing postpartum depression—but neither of us could see it for what it was.)

I had begun feeling like myself again, despite the added complexities of parenthood, but he had not. He felt farther from joy than ever before.

*Maybe I just need to accept it, he said. That my life is over now. That it will never be the same again.*

I didn't know how to help him, despite having so recently experienced similar feelings. I was by then mostly happy—I had enough time and energy to read and write, I was practicing yoga again, I could walk the dog in the afternoons, and I had a breathtakingly beautiful little son who smiled whenever I entered a room. I couldn't understand why Daniel wasn't happy, too. Why he was still living in that fog.

I tried offering solutions, which is not what he needed. *Why don't you go rock climbing without me?* I asked. *Why don't you start running? You probably just need to get out of the house.*



Before Quincy, Daniel had always been the one who *wanted* children, more than I did. Before Quincy, he could only see the glimmering

promise of what we might gain: the idyllic Saturday-morning pancake breakfasts and fishing trips and Christmas mornings with small, funny, tenderhearted people who orbited us with complete devotion, like little moons.

For me, the prospect of parenthood had always seemed to carry with it the promise of sweeping and inevitable loss. I knew my body would be changed, I knew our life together would become more exhausting and complicated and difficult, and I knew that my trajectory as a writer and an educator would stall—at least for a time. When I was being honest, I could see very few pros amid the cons.

When we decided—four years married, almost a year out of my master's degree—to try for a baby, I felt like Eve resolving to leave her Garden of Eden. I knew it was the right choice for us, for *me*; I also knew it would mean a huge amount of toil and sweat and tears. A harder existence.



From the beginning he was, in every sense, an equal partner. When my parents visited us in the hospital, even my father—who raised four kids as a full-time stay-at-home dad—was impressed by Daniel's attentiveness.

"He is so involved," he said. "I was never so attentive with our newborns."

In the NICU, where our son stayed for the first couple of days of his life, Daniel carefully checked his temperature, secured his sock monitor, and fed him milk through a little syringe. The nurses were impressed. "This dad's got it down!" they crooned.

After we returned home, we traded night shifts—I took the first half, and he took the second. He warmed up bottles and changed diapers in the dark, rocking a crying baby alone—sometimes for long stretches—while I slept with earplugs in another room. Even when he returned to work, we continued sharing nights. Often, he took more than his share of the caretaking load, especially when I was struggling.

I have never coped well with loss of sleep. (In fact, I have never coped well with loss of anything.) In the first couple weeks, Quincy cried a lot at night. He had "day/night confusion," and he didn't like to sleep in the bassinets. More than once, I woke Daniel early because I was frustrated and desperate, at my wit's end because of a midnight blowout or a case of inexplicable crying. And Daniel—determined, affectionate—always stepped in to pick up my slack, even with a twelve-hour work shift looming.



Perhaps it is little surprise that in those first sleepless months after our son was born, our outlooks began to reverse. Perhaps it was because of his optimism that Daniel felt so blindsided, becoming discouraged by

the lack of sleep, the repetition of feeding and burping and changing and cleaning and waking and crying and waking and crying, the loss of our former life together.

I had been so focused on what would be lost that I failed to anticipate the joy, which is probably why it struck me so deeply. I was wholly enraptured by my new son, astonished by the gift of his velvety skin and milky breath, his small body curled against my own, his soft coos, and his sleeping smiles.

After the first couple of weeks, I began feeling pleasantly surprised by parenthood, but Daniel felt trapped, pummeled by it. What fascinates me now is how we were both right about what parenthood would entail—how we were each only seeing half of the bigger picture. There is plenty of magic in parenthood, but there is also plenty of loss.



As the months passed, I couldn't understand his lingering sadness. Often, it made me angry. I wanted my old husband—the one who was endlessly good-humored and optimistic and patient and hardworking, not this man who sighed and sighed.

Of course, we had moments of connection—a laughing conversation in the shower when we officially dubbed that year “The Year of Regret.” A brief date night at a thrift store. I stood on the back of a shopping cart, and he pushed me through the aisles, cracking jokes. The fluorescent lights and endless racks of clothes we didn't want to buy felt like heaven. It was like waking up and discovering the world was unchanged, after a bad dream.

But those moments of togetherness only seemed to amplify the pain of what we'd lost, especially for him.



When Quincy was three months old, Daniel said he didn't want any more children—one was enough. And I felt enraged. I had built this incredible little body—a *person*, with his own voice and lungs that could breathe and gray-green eyes that could see, and perfectly miniature ears and fingers and toes. How could he say he didn't want more, now that we had this one exquisite little child? Now that I knew I wanted more?

I didn't understand until much later how alone he felt, especially in those first few months. I was in love with our son—in love with his soft, doughy throat and the dimples at his elbows. My love for him seemed to fill every tiny space inside my body, every cell. There was hardly room for anything (or anybody) else. Daniel began to feel irrelevant. And for

all his fatherly efforts, he didn't seem to be getting the long-anticipated emotional rewards. I held our son and felt totally, blissfully complete; he held our son and felt nothing.

*Like holding a loaf of bread*, he once said. *Only it's screaming.*



He told me much later, after the fog had dissipated, about a night he spent alone in the kitchen. It was the farthest room from ours, on the opposite end of the house, where Quincy's crying was less likely to bother me, asleep in the bedroom.

It was the middle of the night. Daniel was exhausted, and the baby was crying, but he had already been fed and changed and burped and rocked. There seemed to be no explanation for his earsplitting unhappiness. Daniel, wearing fat, noise-canceling headphones over earplugs, finally just sat down and gave up. He was flooded with anger and sadness and resentment and guilt; he cried like a baby, as the saying goes. He said it was strange, feeling his body convulse with so much emotion and hearing only silence. And in a cruel trick of irony, his convulsions are what finally soothed our baby to sleep in his lap.

I didn't take care of Daniel as well as I could have. I know that now. I was so focused on myself and the baby, our health and wellbeing. I didn't consider what Daniel might feel, what he might *need*, as a new father.

Sometimes, now, when I read about Adam and Eve—that brief, sketchy outline of a story—I wonder what's missing. I imagine Adam, weeping in the wilderness.



I have spent my fair share of time feeling exhausted, harried, frustrated, bored, or lonely during the last two years of motherhood. I have grieved the loss of friendships that have dwindled as a result of competing nap times, and I have endlessly craved intellectual *adult* conversations, and I have missed writing for hours in the afternoon with bright, crisp light at my back that slowly stretches toward the mellow gold of evening, and I have felt strange in my own (once-familiar) body, and I have wanted desperately to sleep past seven on the weekend, and I have missed summertime backpacking trips in the Uintas and regular date nights, and I have swiped past my favorite music in order to play Blippi's "Excavator Song" for the hundredth time on the way to the grocery store. I have grieved those losses—I have cried over many of them.

But I have gained so much in return. I have watched my son discover the world, watched him discover the falling yellow leaves of autumn

for the very first time. I have crouched beside him as he follows a black cricket through the grass. And I have heard his little voice in the darkness saying, “I just love you mommy, always always.”

I could not have had all those little glimmers of bliss, without the loss of my former, easier life. And there are so many people in the world who *want* what we have and cannot get it. I am lucky. I am blessed beyond measure.



Perhaps I finally understand something which seems obvious, but which I have never really been willing to *embrace*, until now: that loss is a *necessary* part of living. Something that makes our lives better—richer. That it is something we *need* to fully experience joy.

2 Nephi 2:22–23 says: “And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end. And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery.”

Looking back, I understand that parenthood (and life) is a rich and beautiful experience, precisely *because* it is full of loss. Grief and joy are two sides of the same coin, driven by the same principle that orchestrates the seasons: lose the warmth of summer, gain the color of autumn; lose the silent, chilly beauty of falling snow, gain the early morning bird-song of spring. You cannot have everything at once, but you can have everything in its season.

The gift of having something beautiful also means the grief of losing something beautiful—someday.



Since Daniel’s monthslong depression as a new dad, we have discovered that his experience is more common than either one of us would have guessed. I have friends whose husbands also suffered from postpartum depression, but it isn’t something I learn until *after* I mention Daniel’s experience. It’s not something many people talk about.

Maybe this is a symptom of lingering “mental health” taboos, but it seems like more than that—I was very aware that I was at risk for postpartum depression and anxiety. I had no idea my husband was *also* at risk of living in that debilitating fog. Perhaps we feel it’s shameful to respond with deep sadness when you aren’t the one birthing a baby and

undergoing wild hormonal swings. It's something we don't seem to want to acknowledge, maybe because men are supposed to be "strong." But his strength—his persistence—was part of the problem. He wouldn't quit. He wouldn't take a break for himself because he was so focused on taking care of *me*.



Things are better, now, and they have been for a while. By the time Quincy turned one, Daniel had mostly returned to his usual self. But I still worry that he has not found himself completely—has not fully embraced this new version of joy. And I worry about how to take care of him—how to do better—if we choose to have another baby.

But we have gone camping a handful of times, both with and without our son. We have taken the dog backpacking in the Uintas, and we have taken turns carrying our boy in a pack on summer mountain trails. Last fall we strapped a baby carrier to the back of Daniel's bike and felt the wind in our faces as we pedaled down the river trail through falling leaves.

That doesn't mean we don't miss the old joy. Not all the time, but sometimes. Sometimes, when we are alone, we will reminisce about how uncomplicated our lives together were, before. How beautiful and easy and happy and wrapped up in each other.

We have lost an incredible, beautiful thing, but we have also gained an incredible, beautiful thing. And maybe this is what we come here to learn: how to let go, again and again. How to lose things, so that we can gain something different. Maybe something better. Maybe we come here to embrace the necessity of loss—the way there will always be beautiful stuff out there to fill the gaps left behind by grief.



Quincy is two now, and sometimes—after he has brushed his teeth and put on his pajamas—we climb together into the "big bed," all three of us, to snuggle and to talk. Quincy leans his head against Daniel's, and asks a question:

"Daddy, you will tell me 'bout jellyfish?"

Daniel tells him everything he knows about jellyfish: they are sea creatures, they are translucent, their tentacles will sting you if you touch them, they are beautiful and strange. And when he has finished, Quincy scoots closer to me and repeats everything he can remember, his breath hot on my cheek:

"You know a jellyfish, mom? It is a creature. It lives in water, like sea turtles! It is bee-yooooo-double! But you no can touch it. It is ouch!"



As he talks, I feel Daniel's hand on my leg—a little squeeze. I can feel how happy he is. I'm happy, too. I press my nose against Quincy's blonde hair and inhale, knowing he will not be young forever. That someday he will be too old for this kind of cuddling—he will leave home, and live his own life, and maybe even have his own children, and I will grieve the passing of another season.

---

This personal essay by Shamae Budd received second place in the 2022 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest, sponsored by BYU Studies.