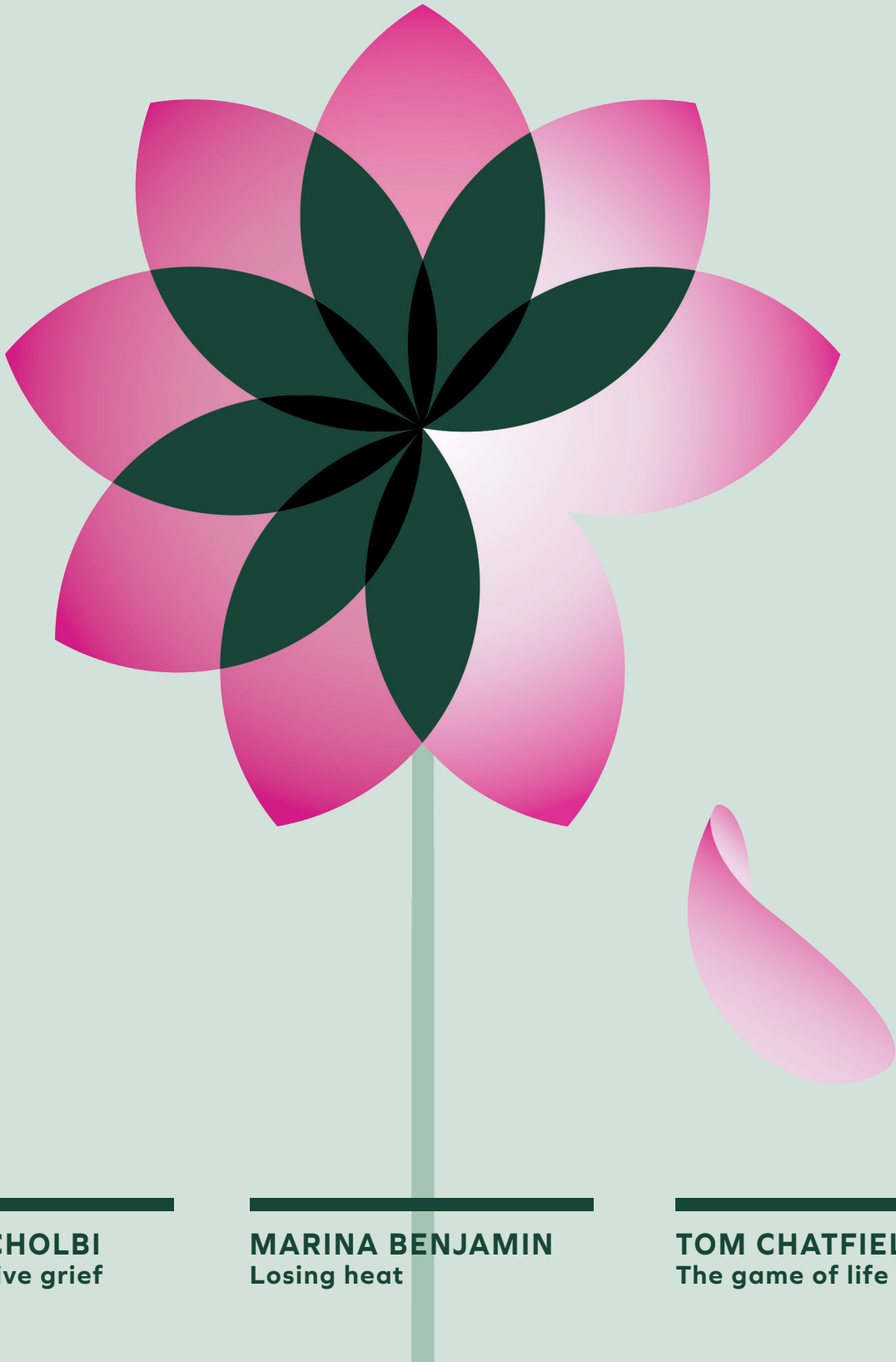


LOSING LIKE A STOIC

# NewPhilosopher



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**MICHAEL CHOLBI**  
Transformative grief

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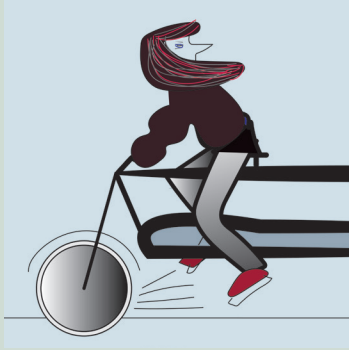
**MARINA BENJAMIN**  
Losing heat

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**TOM CHATFIELD**  
The game of life

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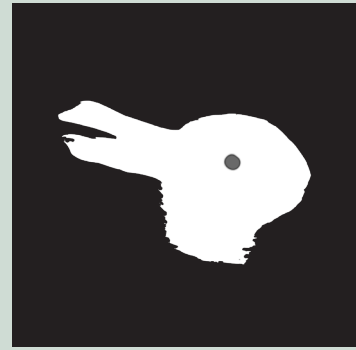
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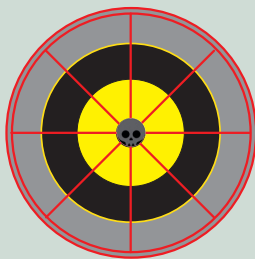
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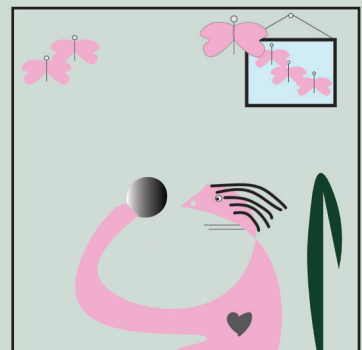
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 Patrick Stokes



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by Maggie Jackson

# Loss of certainty

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Why struggle to recall a fact or event when our devices easily offer terabytes of data? Neatly captured and then easily accessed: docile information is becoming the ideal. Yet crucial meaning making takes place not only when we encode memories but also in the process that scientists call retrieval – and, most intriguingly, in its failures. Recollection is no more a neat downloading than learning is rote replication. In remembering, the mind is haunting itself, reconstructing associations, replaying, and reconsolidating experience once again. And the more lost in the corridors of memory we allow ourselves to be, the more understanding we can reap.

In one series of experiments, scientists slyly set people up for failure by testing them on simple word pairs that we rarely associate with one another, such as whale and mammal. One group was first asked to wrack their brains for the other half of the pair before being given the answer, while another set of participants initially

saw the full pairing outright. Those who had tried, almost always in vain, to dredge up the associated word later proved to be up to 40 per cent more adept at recalling the pairs. In their futile searching, they did not find the exact answer but wound up exploring related branches – large, intelligent animals? – of their knowledge. They revitalised corners of their memory architecture, strengthening context, concepts, and new future pathways back to remembering.

Failures of memory often are not the cognitive defeats that we take them to be. Instead, they can be victories cut short or triumphs not yet ripe, memory scientists increasingly believe. Forgetting details of an event can pave the way for seeing the parallels to a different experience. An inaccurate remembrance that floats into awareness may in fact be a gleaning of gist. Scientists cannot yet fully decipher the intricacies of memory work. But its unfolding secrets underscore the importance of being

willing to let our minds saunter down ever-shifting and even futile paths to learning and insight.

Today, are we welcoming chances to reap the gifts of an uncharted mind? The very act of searching online brings to life neural networks related to locating information rather than those involved in probing our long-term memories, as chancy as that effort can be. The information is out there, we seem to assume, waiting to be neatly plucked from the digital sphere. But there may be steep costs to perpetually sidestepping the messy work of remembering. In the long run, “using the internet may disrupt the natural functioning of memory by interfering with mechanisms responsible for adaptive forms of forgetting, misremembering, and reconsolidation,” writes researcher Benjamin Storm.

If we redefine memory as something to be managed with a click, we may wind up narrowing our minds. By instead struggling to recollect, we

## Memory is not a quick, easy process of preserving and retrieving a frozen past but rather a part of us – linked, honed, evolving – whose acquaintance we must continually endeavour to renew.

can see knowledge as it truly is: a living thing. One midsummer morning, I found an unexpected guide to the fertile work of what scientists call memory's evolution.

Chris Gustin raises his hand to the wall of a massive pot, a year's work hanging in the balance. Standing in a dusty corner of his studio in an old Massachusetts barn, he and I are talking about how ideas develop when he falls silent, struck by a new thought on his work in progress. One of the foremost ceramicists of his day, Gustin spends his life pursuing the hidden promise of knowledge lost and found.

I first encountered Gustin at the opening for a gallery show of his latest

work, tall and stately vessels that are painstakingly built by hand. Glazed in shades of blue, brown, white, or green, they are the very archetype of a pot and radiate the quality of presence that potters call breath. That night and in subsequent conversations, he spoke of the copious time demanded by his art form and of the ultimate rewards that he has found in stepping back, in relinquishing control, and in forgetting. "It's the not-knowing that makes a work good," says Gustin, whose pieces are held in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and other major collections. "It's the not-knowing what the future entails . . . that can lead you to places you never thought you'd get to, you've never even imagined, in terms of your own understanding."

All ceramics is a waiting game. Once formed, a piece must be dried to "leather-hard" strength before it may be given a first bisque firing, then glazed, then a final firing in a kiln that may take a full week to cool. "The evolution of the clay . . . cannot be forced," writes legendary potter Daniel Rhodes.

This is particularly true in hand-building, where each addition of clay must dry before the work can hold the weight of the next. Throwing pots on a wheel is quick and direct, a product of channelled gravitational force. In contrast, constructing a pot by hand from coils of clay is an incremental process. A bit like nest building in the wild, handwork inspires pieces that have

"a sense of becoming rather than of finality" writes Rhodes.

This is the lifework that Gustin has chosen. As a young potter, he turned out platters and urns that at first he could not even give away. It was only when his pace of production slowed that his reputation began to soar. Bulbous, twisting teapots that one critic called "impertinent" gave way to the curvaceous pots, some as high as several feet tall, that I am watching take shape in his studio. At most, he can finish twelve such pots a year.

His art is an unending cycle of leave-takings and returns. And this summer, the interims between progressing on any one piece were further lengthened after he broke his hip in a fall while putting up an exhibition. Since May, he had only once touched the pot before him, part of an attempt to create a wholly new cantilevered form.

As I watch, Gustin places a short rope of damp clay along the pot's raw upper edge. A barrel-chested man with unruly red-gold hair and ice-blue eyes, he has the look of a surfer and the haunted intensity of an artist. Kneading and tamping the fresh piece into the vessel wall, he works to meld something new from thousands of muddy bits. Periodically, he takes up a small flat metal tool called a rib and scrapes down the pot's body as if brushing a horse's flank. His rhythmic motions belie a lifetime of learning. Yet within, he is struggling to work

his way back into understanding the pot he had put aside months ago. He is reconciling himself with the metamorphosis of what he knows.

“You may have one sense of reality when you are working on a piece, and you move [away] and it gets lost in memory,” Gustin once told me. “And by the time you get back, . . . it’s like you are seeing it for the first time. It’s like ‘I know you – but I don’t know you.’” I ask him about this transition again, and he looks up. “You were intimately engaged and then you leave, so you have to find your way back in. . . . It’s about where I am now, not where I was three months ago.”

Take heed of a changing world. Look and look again: the pot has dried and changed, the storm has shifted direction, the virus mutates. But what is evolving as much or more as the evidence around us is the knowledge that we hold within. This is the promise and the challenge of the double-edged work that Gustin both endures and rever-

ently seeks: letting our minds digest experience, then struggling and often stumbling to catch up with our shifted knowledge.

“It’s hard to stand back, hard to let things progress and let things happen, let the natural consequences take hold,” he says at one of our talks at his studio and at his nearby home a few miles from the sea. But the cycles of quiet, anticipation, and then reconciliation make the work come alive for him. “When you keep approaching it from a place of newness and possibility, that’s a place of un-knowing. . . . In that is the risk. That’s the edge.”

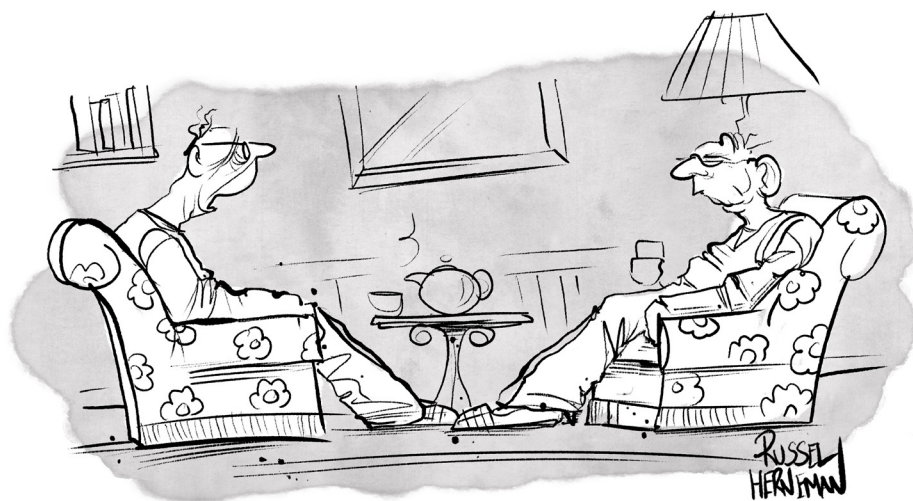
Memory is not a quick, easy process of preserving and retrieving a frozen past but rather a part of us – linked, honed, evolving – whose acquaintance we must continually endeavour to renew. By shelving and reclaiming knowledge, we affirm that we are willing to be changed by life and to adapt to memory’s evolution. Falling silent once more, Gustin seizes a scalpel-like knife and holds

it to the neck of the pot. An hour after pausing and seeing the work anew, he slices away weeks of effort, casually tossing the spent earth aside.

“Okay, that makes more sense,” he says, softly slapping the pot, then to me, “However I may see the piece early on, I am not locked into it.” Across the morning, he destroys as much as he builds. The work “evolves only because you evolve.”

Do we dare to explore the back roads of memory, seeking truth in knowledge yet seeing stumbles in remembering as sometime victories in disguise? Are we willing at times to let a bit of the past go to gain a new point of view? Failures, wrote Rhodes, are merely “searches in the byways.” Gustin’s reconciliations with the work that he has set aside should remind us of what we miss when we short-change the messy work of memory evolution. What do we expect of the past? ▣

Adapted from *Uncertain: The Wisdom and Wonder of Being Unsure*



*“I’ve forgotten how much I’ve forgotten.”*

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