

CREEPING REGRET

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After September 11, 2001, U.S. intelligence operatives realized that they knew a lot before the attacks: Osama Bin Laden had spoken of sending students to American aviation schools; then, two suspected Al Qaeda operatives had entered the United States and attended flight universities; then, phone traffic spiked between the suspected Al Qaeda members in the summer of 2001. Finally, a message was even intercepted that spoke of a “Hiroshima type event” involving airplanes. As alarming as this information may seem now, before 9/11 it was deemed too vague to be actionable, in part because of the fact that all of the available intelligence on these matters was divided between the FBI and CIA, which did not coordinate their terrorist investigations. Of course, after catastrophes like 9/11, many tend to look back and think, “we should have ‘connected the dots’”; “we should have realized something was coming.” Such hindsight thinking, according to Malcolm Gladwell, is a case of Creeping Determinism.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is relatively easy to make connections. But before an event, it feels impossible to perceive these same connections, or even to understand what may be most relevant. In his essay, “Connecting the Dots,” Gladwell writes that it is “Fischhoff [who] calls this phenomenon ‘creeping determinism’—the sense that grows on us, in retrospect, that what has happened was actually inevitable.” The “chief effect of creeping determinism,” writes Gladwell paraphrasing Fischhoff, “is that it turns unexpected events into expected events” (85). Subsequently, the hindsight bias caused by Fischhoff’s ‘creeping determinism’ leads people to overestimate the chance that they could have predicted an event. Looking back with this bias can be harmful for two reasons: first, we falsely believe that outcomes and events are more in our control than they actually are; and second, those who fail to foresee the outcomes of events are rashly blamed for their supposed failure.

In his essay, “Coming Home Again,” Chang-rae Lee demonstrates the effects Creeping Determinism can have on a person’s life by looking back in

retrospect on the times he spent at home before his mother died of cancer, as well as his high school years, which he spent away at a boarding school, only coming home in the summer and on holidays. In Lee's essay, we read how towards the end of his mother's life, Lee started to realize the effect that his absence had on her. At one point his mother says to him, in broken English, "I should never let you go there [to Exeter]" (168). Reflecting upon his mother's expression of regret, Lee writes, "[s]ometimes I still think about what she said, about having made a mistake . . . but those years I was away at boarding school grew more precious to her as her illness progressed" (168). Her words haunt him, continuously reminding Lee of his mother's perceived mistake: letting him going away for school. Lee never seemed to realize how much his mother missed him while he was away at Exeter. After she finally tells him, Lee punishes himself for not picking up on it earlier. Lee's relationship with his mother, as he depicts it in his essay, reminds readers of how sometimes we fail to realize the effect that our absence can have on someone who is important to us. It is not that we do not care enough, but rather that we underestimate the value of our own presence in another person's life.

After his mother dies, Lee's father tells him that they both cried after dropping Lee off for his freshman year at boarding school. At this point, the impact that Lee's absence had on his mother fully hits him. The story his father tells him never really leaves Lee, and it creeps out from the back of his mind whenever he is particularly lonely, reminding him of all the uncertain regret he felt about being away for so much time. Regret never truly leaves. We can force it to the back of our minds and find a million temporary distractions, but at the end of the day nothing can fill the void created by regret. When we have nothing but ourselves, as Lee does when he is alone, our deepest thoughts emerge, forcing us to confront emotions that we would rather forget. We try to escape regret, but it always catches us when we are alone, encompassing our thoughts, sometimes completely. Every time Lee is driving alone on the highway, for instance, he sees his parents pulled over in the darkness, and he wonders, "Are they all right?" (168). Looking back, he feels as though he never should have gone away to boarding school. But there was no way for him to know that his mother would die so relatively early. He may also never know if going away was worth it in the end. That is the problem with regret; most of our decisions in life are irreversible. There is no going

back and seeing what else could have happened. There is no real way to predict the future, so all we have to rely on are our basic instincts and thoughts in the moment.

Yet if regret too often takes over and clouds our retrospection, looking back can also teach us some important lessons. If we can use our current knowledge to better interpret past events, sometimes we can expand our understanding of our lives in the present. But sometimes we are also better off not fully understanding. Knowing too much can leave us feeling as if there is nothing to wonder about, a realization that Bernard Cooper, in his essay, "Labyrinthine," has as he looks back on his childhood and begins to identify with his parents' feelings of banality. With age comes experience and understanding, and Cooper uses his gained experience to reconsider his memories in his essay. When he was younger, Cooper lacked his parents' experience and had trouble understanding their motivations. As a child, he explains, he loved mazes, solving the ones in his coloring books as well as creating his own. The construction of his mazes always began in the center, he says, getting more elaborate with every outward layer. Cooper found "embracing safety" in mazes as if he was "zipped up in a sleeping bag" (95). With painstaking effort and patience, young Cooper expanded his mazes, each one larger and composed of more intricacies than the last. Looking for someone to wander through the mazes he had drawn, he would always ask his parents to try them. He remembers his mother refusing by saying, "I'm lost enough as it is" (96). He also recalls his father regularly promising to try them later. At the time, Cooper was bewildered by their lack of enthusiasm. But the text fast-forwards to Cooper's adulthood, where retrospectively he writes, "Thirty years later, I understand my parent's refusal. Why would anyone choose to get mired in a maze when the days encase us, loopy and confusing?" (96).

As he grew up, Cooper's understanding of the world also grew, and he could newly relate to the way he remembers his parents feeling. He realizes something that no one ever wants to believe: that life does not eventually get better for everyone. People have tendencies to romanticize the future, but realizing that things are not going to get better removes the comfort people find in the hypothetical future. What Cooper learns, and what his essay suggests, is that a lack of wonder about the future can be as detrimental as won-

dering about what could have been in the past. Occasionally regret oddly creeps out into the future, and we let it take over, there, too, often completely. When this complicated feeling occurs, we convince ourselves that the future will be exactly like the past, and we lose all hope.

Cooper's parents felt that they understood in the past what Cooper feels he understands now: life is comparable to an interminable maze because of the "endless succession of burdens and concerns" (97). His parents refused to enter his mazes because they thought life was too much of a maze already; they had lost hope. As people get older, life becomes less and less new to them until, sometimes, almost nothing seems new. All that they can perceive is a monotonous stretch ahead of them of growing older, of feeling more lost. It is like believing that a maze will end and everything will make sense, but then seeing that it never does and never will. This perception gives older people, or people who lose hope, a sense of estrangement from everything—past, present, and future. People often spend their entire lives trying to believe that things will eventually be so much better, because having nothing to look forward to is isolating. Most of us do not find comfort in feeling like we are lost in a maze in the way Cooper did as a child. But we also tend not to feel as if we want to connect the dots. We like to find meaning in everything we do, because it validates our worth; so, when we start to feel like everything we have done is not leading us to someplace better or something greater, it is easy for us to lose our sense of self. And when we feel that detached from ourselves, it is almost impossible to feel connected to anything, or anyone.

Perhaps, then, uncertainty is not such a bad thing, because without it, people seem to lose hope. Paradoxically, people in general often seem to feel happier when they know less and can hope to learn more than when they feel as if they know everything and have nothing to learn. Lacks and absences in knowledge can be freeing as they allow people to wonder. However, while regret, weariness, and knowledge have their negative aspects, we cannot simply act as if disappointing or catastrophic things never happen. We cannot just ignore 9/11 and move on. People in our government have to address their mistakes, and many people have to regret the people they lost and knew.

We should not simply allow a sense of Creeping Determinism to cause us to blame the government for the losses that cannot be brought back. We should instead aspire to connect the dots in ways that allow us to recognize

our past failures while also making new dots to connect in the future. We benefit from accepting the reality that even as we gain knowledge, there is so much we still do not know. We have to go on wondering, and we should strive to balance our desires for knowledge with our acceptance of uncertainty. Finding out things or wishing we had known them sooner does not give us an excuse to dwell in regret or to blame others. There is always more to find out, too, so no one should settle permanently into weariness or complacency. We have to gather our knowledge, feel our regret, and cherish our uncertainty, transforming each into new wonder about the future.

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