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Lost! The Social Psychology of Missing Possessions

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Sociology

by

Brandon Lee Berry

2012



## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Lost! The Social Psychology of Missing Possessions

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Jack Katz, Chair

For most, the loss of a material possession is an infrequent occurrence usually prevented through a variety of vaguely noticed practices and routines. For the sociologist, the occasion offers a natural experiment in how individuals deal with a sudden threat to the order, expectations, and material scaffolding sustaining their usual way of life. Drawing on 600 naturally-occurring cases of loss collected through observations around lost and found booths and counters, interviews with individuals recruited through lost and found websites, and guided journaling by college undergraduates about their everyday misplacements, this dissertation explores the social impact of a missing possession. Tracing losses from the moment of their discovery, I show how losing parties must carve out space from their ongoing biographies if a loss is to gain foothold as a social matter. In taking up the theme of ‘a loss’ as a matter to resolve, individuals will act to ensure that their immediate activities will go on as planned, that they will maintain untroubled

relations with others, or that they will feel “complete.” Yet a central paradox is that the object’s loss may disturb them even while they concede its dispensability. They find that what they have lost is not something with an undeniable sentimental meaning or something that allows for some practical ability, but rather something whose absence reveals a breakdown in the self’s absorption in the world. It is not that an object has been lost, but rather they have. Until they change their measures of safekeeping, get their memory checked by a doctor, get rid of extraneous possessions, etc. they cannot let go of the loss and assume that they are properly immersed in the world. It is the loss itself, not a particular object’s absence that unsettles. In other chapters, the dissertation explores losses as revelatory agents, providing the grounding on which individuals reflect on others, the place of the mishap, and the meaning of the object itself. As a lens pointed away from self, losses sometimes distil social relations down to basic concerns of trust and respect. Individuals know that what they might understand as a fluke or rare occurrence within their own biography could get misinterpreted by those not privy to a more longitudinal perspective on their life. They sense that their ‘rare occurrence’ may, for another, complete the gestalt of a “screw-up.” In orienting outward toward the world of adventitious finders, they conduct experiments on the sympathy of groups like “the French” and places like “Harvard Square,” hoping that unknown others who stumble upon the lost object adopt their meaning that it is a ‘loss’ rather than a ‘gain.’ They learn that to be understood as competent and trustworthy by others, they must demonstrate a facility for treating certain features of the inanimate world as part of their physical body. Each loss occasions an existential reflection on ease of movement through life, not as an abstract exercise removed from ongoing life, but within the dramas they currently find themselves. This is a study of how loss events and their objects are given meaning within the situations and biographies in which they unexpectedly occur.

The dissertation of Brandon Lee Berry is approved.

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2012

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3/11 "Subjective Experiences of Memory," Invited Lecture, Self and Society Course, Jack Katz, UCLA.

11/10 "How Objects Become 'Lost': A Naturalistic Social Psychology," Yale University Ethnography Conference, Invited by Elijah Anderson.

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## Introduction

When people cannot find a material possession, it may or may not be a cause for concern. If it is to stir them to any kind of action, they will see the absence as some kind of hindrance. They will act to ensure that their immediate activities will go on as planned, that they will maintain untroubled relations with others, or that they will feel “put together” or “complete.” They will discover that in order to sustain their usual way of living, or the activities and relations to which they have already committed, they need certain things around. They will discover how their personal identity and social obligations are supported by inanimate features of the material environment; they will experience the interrelation of self and thing.

Yet a central paradox is that the object’s loss may disturb them even while they concede its dispensability. They find that what they have lost is not something with rare provenance, an undeniable sentimental meaning, or something that allows for some practical ability, but rather something whose absence reveals a breakdown in the self’s absorption in the world. It is not that an object has been lost, but rather they have. Until they change their measures of safekeeping, get their memory checked by a doctor, get rid of extraneous possessions, etc. they cannot let go of the loss and assume that they are properly immersed in the world. It is the loss itself, not a particular object’s absence that unsettles.

The unexpected separation of self and thing in various social contexts and at various locations in a biography (such as a honeymoon, a first job, after living through hurricane Katrina, etc.) may stir them to articulate a personal mythology, or story of self, accounting for the loss’s occurrence in their life at this moment. Read like the psychologist’s ink-blot, individuals may find in the events of the loss versions of self caught up in great struggles, ill-conceived adventures, hopeless relationships, and at times, mundane setbacks that only raise an eyebrow.

They see the loss as a revelatory agent, revealing the logical manifestations of occasional bouts of carelessness, ongoing character flaws or psychic conflicts, or the workings of karmic law.

And then sometimes, they see it as a random event with no real bearing on their lives.

As a lens pointed away from self, losses sometimes distil social relations down to basic concerns of trust and respect. Individuals know that what they might understand as a fluke or rare occurrence within their own biography could get misinterpreted by those not privy to a more longitudinal perspective on their life. They sense that their 'rare occurrence' may, for another, complete the gestalt of a "screw-up." In orienting outward toward the world of adventitious finders, they conduct experiments on the sympathy of groups like "the French" and places like "Harvard Square," hoping that unknown others who stumble upon the lost object adopt their meaning that it is a 'loss' rather than a 'gain.' They learn that to be understood as competent and trustworthy by others, they must demonstrate a facility for treating certain features of the inanimate world as part of their physical body.

Throughout this study, the reader will learn of a basic tension underlying the relationship between people and their possessions. While they want the lifestyle afforded by certain material things, they do not always want to be burdened by the work or worry that possessing them entails. They want their ongoing concerns of spending time with friends and family, holding down a job, being a good parent, making ends meet, etc., to remain in the foreground and their concerns of object management to remain in the background. They want their things to afford a certain lifestyle, not to detract from it. It is with an object's loss that people, no matter their response, take a position on this matter when they choose to let it go or choose to try to preserve the relationship. Each loss occasions an existential reflection on ease of movement through life, not as an abstract exercise removed from ongoing life, but within the dramas they currently find

themselves. This is a study of how loss events and their objects are given meaning within the situations and biographies in which they unexpectedly occur.

Audiences in sociology may find familiarity with this study as an investigation of a natural breaching event, advancing themes explored by Alfred Schutz and Harold Garfinkel. From this vantage point, an unexpected disappearance of an object shakes people from a presumption in the everyday world's coherence and stability. Efforts to recover from the occurrence are efforts to re-enter this presumption and re-establish faith in their routines for maintaining the safekeeping of their possessions. Read this way, losing an object is a story about being drawn outside of 'normal life' with its usual dispositions and material affordances, and then trying to find a way to return. It is a story about losing faith in the unreflective regions of one's conduct to effectively carry out habitual acts and then trying to regain it.

It advances Schutz's (1964) work as a study of failure in the "recipe" of a routine matter. Usually in routine living, he showed, individuals take up the "natural attitude" in which they rely upon "cook-book knowledge," or "recipe knowledge" as Berger and Luckmann (1967) called it, to accomplish everyday tasks. In this mode of living, pragmatic-minded actors follow their own typified and practice-borne sense of the step-by-step directions for accomplishing practical tasks and generally presume that this know-how works in similar situations, that there is an obdurate quality to the world. This recipe knowledge, Schutz wrote, gives us all "we need to deal with the routine matters of daily life." In fact, "Most of our daily activities from rising to going to bed are of this kind. They are performed by following recipes reduced to automatic habits or unquestioned platitudes" (73-74). These recipes usually work, he noted, because individuals can take-for-granted that certain conditions will remain in place each time they take up the routine. Individuals engage in more active sense-making when recipes fail to produce the results that they

expect, such as when “strangers” enter unfamiliar communities and have to think through new customs and social practices (91-92).

Harold Garfinkel (1967) took up some of Schutz’s themes by showing what happens when recipes for conducting commonsense affairs, like playing a game, riding an elevator, etc., fail and disturbances arise. He found that when his students intentionally violated everyday recipes that everyone is expected to know, unwitting research subjects became bewildered and tried to make sense of the violation. They felt morally compelled to normalize the event, to find it somehow understandable or reasonable. Sometimes they reached ‘understanding’ by modifying their sense of the rules or what is ‘okay,’ and sometimes they reached it by condemning the ‘deviant’ other (Heritage 1984).

Since Schutz and Garfinkel developed this line of work, there has been a sustained scholarly interest in the steps people take to re-establish the seeming ‘normalcy’ of everyday life when disturbances arise. Notable among these studies is Doug Maynard’s (2003) work showing what the bearers of bad news do to keep individuals in a taken-for-granted sense of an understandable world, rather than a world of shock and disbelief. Jack Katz’s (1999) study shows the work automobile drivers do to overcome anger after getting cut-off and then returning to a taken-for-granted intertwining with their cars, what he demonstrates to be a necessary condition of competent driving. Pollner (1987) shows how traffic officers and drivers charged with a traffic violation maintain the taken-for-granted sense of a shared, intersubjective world in the face of contrasting portrayals of what occurred on the street.

In Maynard’s (2003; 1996) analysis of the telling of bad news, for instance, the teller does the brunt of the work of keeping the recipient of the news in a taken-for-granted state that the world is understandable in the face of news that could be baffling or shocking, or otherwise

hard to accept. The teller, he shows, works toward the recipient's realization and understanding through the technique of "forecasting." Telling the news in this manner ensures that the recipient will more easily understand it because it allows them to "estimate and predict what the news will be, such that when it actually arrives it does so in a prepared social-psychological environment" (2003: 35). In this way, Maynard shows that how a recipient of bad news makes sense of it is contingent on how the teller of the news decides to deliver it. The alternative, he shows, is that individuals enter into a state of disbelief or puzzlement. Maynard (1996: 110) concludes: "Thus, while I discuss forecasting as a deliverer's strategy for conveying bad news, it ultimately facilitates a recipient's realization by involving deliverer and recipient in a relational structure of anticipation." He shows how individuals sustain the presumption of an understandable interactional order and what happens when they cannot.

Katz (1999) reveals what it takes for drivers to return to a taken-for-granted intertwining with their automobiles, or a normal experience of driving, after getting "cut-off" by another driver. He shows that in normal competent driving, drivers must maintain an intertwining with their automobiles. The intertwining is a state of "metaphysical merger" with the car so that the driver dwells in it as if it were his or her own biological body. When another motorist cuts-off this driver, he or she experiences a cutting-off of the intertwining with the car and anger often arises as recognition of this disturbance. It is this anger that individuals seek to extinguish and sense as an obstacle standing in the way of their ability to re-establish the natural attitude of driving. In one path of return, drivers enact dramatic revenge scenarios in which they frame themselves as heroes acting to preserve a conception of the good.

In a similar vein of study, Melvin Pollner (1987) describes how people charged with a traffic violation and police officers maintain a taken-for-granted sense that they share a world in

common despite their sometimes profound disagreements over what happened on the street. Rather than perceiving a breach in their assumption of a shared reality, they transform the ontological challenge, the struggle over whose account is true, into a moral one. In a variety of ways, each levels a claim about why the other, due to some kind of defect in their powers of observation or honesty in reporting it, must be unable to tell the court what “really” happened. Pollner’s case study shows how individuals preserve an untroubled sense of intersubjectivity when flirting with its breach.

A study of object loss advances the general collection of work revealing how individuals sustain basic presumptions about the world in the face of challenges or re-establish them after they are shaken from their grasp. It shows how individuals get back to a place of adequacy in what they have materially available and a place of faith that their keeping abilities can sustain the kind of life they want to have. It shows how individuals get unexpectedly dislodged from an untroubled intertwining with their material possessions and then try to lose themselves in them once again.

### *A Study of Inexplicable Events*

For some, returning to the natural attitude after a loss is a matter of completing a reasonable story about what happened to something that has disappeared in a puzzling fashion; it is a matter of confirming what one suspects to be true: that material objects do not just disappear and reappear willy-nilly. A study of material loss contributes to a collection of works that address how people deal with the inexplicable in daily life. Many of these studies investigate how individuals make sense of puzzling events in their private lives, while others investigate sense-making as an organizational achievement or as an individual achievement within



occupational settings. None situate the challenge of sense-making as a Schutzian struggle to sustain the “natural attitude” in the face of potentially puzzling events.

The study of how individuals reach understanding in their private lives focuses on the sense-making practices individuals employ to overcome unexpected or puzzling occurrences when: severe mental distress unexpectedly arises (Cardano 2010), detectives are unable to solve a homicide case (Stretesky et al. 2010), symptoms of multiple sclerosis flare (Pakenham 2008), a pregnancy ends in miscarriage or stillbirth (van der Sijpt 2010), a spouse asks for a divorce (Vaughan 1984), or a death occurs unexpectedly in a family (Nadeau 1998).

In addition to studies of how individuals respond to puzzling events in their private lives, scholars have examined how individuals in organizations make sense of what is initially inexplicable. Generally established by Weick’s (1988) study of organizational sense-making in crisis situations, these scholars have examined how organizations make sense of disasters at NASA (Vaughan 2001), the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island (Perrow 1999 [1984]), the accidents of military operations (Hicks 1993), fatal accidents in the oil industry (Wright 1986), and general technological disasters (Baum et al. 1983).

Others have taken an occupational approach by examining how individuals handle the unexpected in workplace settings. These scholars have investigated how errors are managed on the job by construction workers (Reimer 1976), how psychiatrists make-sense of patient suicide (Light 1972), how new members of an organization make sense of their new environments (Louis 1980), and how workers make sense of incident reports in a high-hazard industry (Carroll 1995). The study of property loss advances this area of sociology by showing how individuals come to find a missing object a puzzling matter and then how they move on from it.

## *A Study of People and Things*

A study of mishaps in the keeping of objects is also revealing of people and their relationships with material possessions. Within this context of studies, an investigation of people trying to hold onto their possessions makes an important contribution. Despite advances in the sociology of material culture in recent decades, there has not yet been a single empirical work that takes as its subject matter the infrastructure of social practices that individuals draw upon in trying to keep their objects available, or the practices of object management. By omission, most studies of people and objects imply a kind of imminent ‘findability,’ or an invariably stable material world-at-hand. The absence of investigations into the social life of keeping objects is more glaring considering that all instrumental uses of materials depend on its practice in some way or another. If its location is unknown, it cannot afford certain ends. Keeping, in a sense, is the infrastructure of material culture.

This study tries to fill this gap by investigating how individuals deal with and make sense of breakdowns in safekeeping and the potentially permanent interruption in the powers that objects provide. The nature of the struggle depends, this study shows, on the precise way in which individuals invest themselves into their things. There are four distinct categories of findings specifying the interrelations of self and things to which this study contributes:

### *Identity Expression (1)*

The identity expression model demonstrates the ways people express who they are to others by controlling the movement or display of the material objects around them. As an early expression of the logic, Thorstein Veblen (1899) found that individuals gain and/or sustain social status through “conspicuous consumption,” or through displaying to others discretionary financial means by acquiring rare and luxurious goods. Demonstrated through an interactional

study, Erving Goffman (1959) found that people are deft practitioners who use the material things around themselves as “props” or “sign equipment” to manage particular impressions for others. By likening society to a stage where everyone is an actor managing his or her “performance” to convey a particular identity, objects are strategically employed by the actors to establish credibility and moral legitimacy for the act they are performing.

### *Identity Stabilization (2)*

The identity stabilization approach demonstrates the ways people use their possessions to stabilize a sense of self. For Hannah Arendt (1958), the power of one’s possessions lies in allowing one to “retrieve identity sameness” across time by relating oneself to the same physical thing over and over again.

The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that... men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table. In other words, against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world rather than the sublime indifference of an untouched nature... Without a world between men and nature, there is eternal movement, but no objectivity (137).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1982) echoes Arendt’s self-anchoring thesis. He notes that the power of possessions lie in their ability to ward off entropy because they objectify one’s past, present, future and social relationships; in this way, they stabilize one’s sense of self:

The objects we possess and consume are ... wanted because ... they tell us things about ourselves that we need to hear in order to keep ourselves from falling apart. This information includes the social recognition that follows upon the display of status symbols, but it includes the much more private feedback provided by special household

objects that objectify a person's past, present, and future, as well as his or her close relationships (5).

Following the lead of Arrendt and Csikzentmihalyi, it is in this light that Hocking (2000) writes that objects have a stabilizing power by reflecting back a particular self. He writes, "Just as real mirrors reflect our visible physical features, the objects we most closely associate with ourselves come to reflect our attitudes, values, personal qualities, relationships and achievements" (4).

### *Self Expansion (3)*

The self expansion model demonstrates the way individuals expand themselves into, or embody, their things so that it becomes a part of one's sense of self or identity. William James (1890: 293) describes this phenomenon in a discussion of what happens when one loses a possession.

Although it is true that a part of our depression at the loss of possessions is due to our feeling that we must now go without certain goods that we expected the possessions to bring in their train, yet in every case there remains, over and above this, a sense of the shrinkage of our personality, a partial conversion of ourselves to nothingness, which is a psychological phenomenon by itself.

Echoing James' things-as-self thesis, Anselm Strauss (1959) similarly suggests a kind of interrelation of self and possessions by discussing what happens when one loses something. That objects can come to symbolize who one is and yet, be so easily lost, creates a dangerous proposition from Strauss' perspective.

'To possess' connotes 'to have,' but the possession of objects means much more than merely having them around. Self-regard is linked with what is owned, with what is one's

own. A man's possessions are a fair index of what he is, providing the observers take the trouble to distinguish what a man owns by chance and of what he is really endeared. It is no accident that men mark their symbolic movements—into social classes, for instance—by discarding and by acquiring clothes, houses, furnishings, friends, even wives.

Common speech indeed recognizes that a man may be so heavily identified with some of his properties as to be possessed by them; that is, he is so greatly involved with them that he is no longer quite himself. All this is not mere word play, for when crucial possessions are lost—by theft, fire, bungling, betrayal, or whatever—then also a man for a time may lose his way. Having lost his property, he may give up, and change purposes and path. Likewise, when a person changes his course, the meanings of his previous possessions change. In some subtle sense he loses them, although legally he may still own them (38-39).

Georg Simmel, though not responding to the prospect of loss per se, makes a similar, though brief, observation about the extension of self into property: “material property is, so to speak, an extension of the ego, and any interference with our property is, for this reason, felt to be a violation of the person” (1950: 322).

In Erving Goffman's (1961) study of an asylum as a “total institution,” he makes a series of intriguing statements about the material basis of identity. He wrote, “The admission procedure can be characterized as a leaving off and a taking on, with the midpoint marked by physical nakedness. Leaving off of course entails a dispossession of property, important because persons invest self feelings in their possessions” (18). He went on, “The personal possessions of an individual are an important part of the materials out of which he builds a self, but as an inmate the ease with which he can be managed by staff is likely to increase with the degree to which he

is dispossessed” (78). Taking from individuals their personal possessions when they are institutionalized, Goffman contends, helps to weaken their attachment to an ‘outside’ identity and prepares them to more easily accept their new institutionalized identity.

The work of Russell Belk, a leader in the field of consumer research, offers insights into how people embody parts of the material world. In a review essay on “possessions and the extended self” for example, he cites research illustrating that when “a car is damaged, owners react as if their own bodies have been injured” and provides the following data to illustrate the point:

Someone had done to my car as rats... did when they raced through the warehouses by the thousands and tore open sacks of flour for the hell of it. I felt a similar rip at my heart. . . . I had allowed the car to become an extension of my own self. . . . so that an attack on it was an attack on myself (Bellow 1975 p. 36).

#### *Self/Object Fusion (4)*

The self/object fusion model argues that self and object undergoes a kind of metaphysical merger to form a new being as a mundane feature of everyday life. In an early statement on the fusion of self and possessions, Veblen (1898) drew on the case of early man: “Such meager belongings of the primitive savage as would under the nomenclature of a later day be classed as personal property are not thought of by him as his property at all; they pertain organically to his person.” He went on to describe this organic fusion of self and thing as “the quasi-person fringe.” He wrote, “Of the things comprised in his quasi-personal fringe all do not pertain to him with the same degree of intimacy or persistency; but those articles which are more remotely

or more doubtfully included under his individuality are not therefore conceived to be partly organic to him and partly his property simply.”

Michael Polanyi (1962) similarly describes the interpenetration of body and world through the example of the scientist’s use of instruments. He writes, “While we rely on a tool or a probe, they are not handled as external objects. We may test the tool for its effectiveness... but the tool can never lie in the field of these operations; they remain necessarily on our side of it, forming part of ourselves, the operating persons. We pour ourselves into them and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them” (59).

Extending these ideas into sociology, Jack Katz’s (1999) work shows how they help to uncover uncharted domains of identity transformation. A clear demonstration can be seen in his study of the emergence of anger while driving. Competent styles of driving, he shows, require a “metaphysical merger” in which the driver’s identity intimately combines with his or her automobile, forming what he calls an “automobilized person” or a “humanized car” (33). As the exact boundaries of their natural bodies fade from reflection while engaging pedals and wheel in the practical action of driving, they come to act toward their cars as though they are a part of their natural bodies.

The effects of incorporating parts of the world into one’s own sense of personal identity are most profoundly revealed through one’s concomitant style of perception. It is from this new sensibility that another driver’s action of moving in too close appears as a threat to self, as it “cuts off” one’s intertwining with the car, and in effect, his visceral experience of self. From an automobilized awareness, the consequences of not having one’s person-object identity properly acknowledged can be severe, sometimes acting as a contingency to the formation of anger. And passengers apparently do not undergo the same morally based intertwining with the car. For as

Katz reveals, “getting cut off” enrages, not the passenger, but the driver who experiences his or her identity as continuous with the car (41).

Taking a close up view of the phenomenon of people losing objects advances the investigation into the interrelations of people and things. As a naturally provocative occurrence, suddenly and unexpectedly separating from a material possession consistently forces individuals to make sense of what precisely has been lost; its sudden absence reveals, through glaring contrast, its presence in their life.

### *Chapter Plan*

This investigation offers a naturalistic social psychological approach to the study of what it means to lose a material possession. In seven substantive chapters, I detail the distinctive social life associated with “lost!” experiences. In chapter one, I show what it takes for a loss to become an ‘event’ or an ‘occurrence’ around which individuals organize their lives for a time and then move on. In chapter two, I explore the ways a loss will materialize in the losing party’s relationships with others by examining how they decide to tell, delay telling, or to not tell at all. In chapter three, I explain how people draw on losses to build a story of self, or a personal mythology, that tries to deny or undermine the notion that the loss occurred randomly. In chapter four, I show how investigations of physical cause (left behind, mislaid, dropped, etc.) guide individuals through mini-social psychological dramas in which they see self and other in recurring ways. In chapter five, I explore how ‘the loss’ as an organizing theme directs people to discover certain features of public places. In chapter six, I consider how a loss occasions people to reflect on the meanings of their lost object at recurring points in the social process of losing it. In chapter seven, I show how a loss lives on in the new or modified techniques of keeping that individuals institute after having lost something. In a closing methodological piece, I reflect on



the peculiar challenge of studying an occurrence in everyday life whose emergence, by definition, is unexpected.

### *Methodology*

This dissertation derives its findings from just over six hundred naturally-occurring cases of people losing material objects. The data come from five distinct collection strategies pursued in Los Angeles and several other cities from 2006 to 2009. First, I observed 44 naturally-occurring losses in public places, eavesdropping and sometimes speaking with folks at the booths, offices, and service counters that handle inquiries about lost and found objects at airports, malls, grocery stores, coffee shops, farmers markets, festivals, sporting events, museums, concerts, and similar venues.

The second strategy involved soliciting and receiving 397 first-person narratives of recent and vivid experiences of property loss from people who had posted a solicitation on an internet lost-and-found website such as craigslist.com and lostandfound.com.<sup>1</sup> About one out of four responded to my request for a step-by-step description of the event. These narratives averaged two and a half single-spaced pages in length, and about half of the informants responded to follow-up questions whereby I tried to clarify murky descriptions and patch incomplete narratives. In an effort to obtain the whole story, I requested updates from a third of all informants either three months, one year, or two years later.

I also completed 44 face-to-face interviews with people who had recently lost something. Participants were selected either through a snowball sampling procedure or a chance meeting. During these open-ended, semi-structured interviews, I asked my informants to describe the details of a recent experience in which they had lost an object from beginning to end. Typically, these interviews lasted ten to twenty minutes and were recorded as jottings in situ.

Fourth, I had 20 undergraduate students keep a journal of their everyday losses and related experiences over the course of a month. These “lost things journals” were an attempt to get at the personal experiences of loss that people would otherwise not reveal to others because the events were trivial, fleeting, or embarrassing. On average, each student reported about ten losses within the one-month period. From undergraduates at UCLA enrolled in two Self and Society courses, I solicited descriptions of recent loss experiences of their own or that they collected from friends and family members through interviews; these number 126.

In a final technique, I collected just over 30 cases by systematically searching hundreds of major newspapers from around the world over the last two decades using the search engine LexisNexis with search terms like ‘lost’ and ‘found;’ and with commonly misplaced objects like ‘ring,’ ‘wallet,’ and ‘keys.’ These journalistic accounts sometimes provided vivid descriptions of loss events and their impact on ongoing lives. Sometimes they made headlines because of the item’s local meaning, the story’s improbability, or the losing party’s celebrity.

#### *Analytic Technique*

I coded the data according to the techniques described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). I derived the study’s findings through a process akin to analytic induction. Through this process, I made repeated revisions to my statements of patterns until they robustly accounted for variations within the database (Ragin 1994; Katz 2001; Becker 1998).

#### *Sample*

I made an effort to recruit a diverse sample of respondents who have lost a diverse sample of possessions, allowing me to speak more confidently of the generic features of losing. Respondents range in age from five to eighty-one-years-old, with a median age of thirty. Their places of residence are geographically diverse, from international locations like London,

Brussels, and Toronto to cities across the US like Boston, New York City, and Los Angeles.

Their occupations run the gamut: they are construction workers, psychologists, auto-mechanics, professors, pharmacists, tattoo artists, writers, doctors, computer engineers, fast-food workers, college students, and the unemployed. They have lost, or nearly lost, the everyday (car keys, cameras, and purses), the rare (paintings, love letters, and wedding rings), the secretive (diaries, FBI laptops, and racy photos), and the odd (bovine carcass samples, didgeridoos, and LSD tabs).

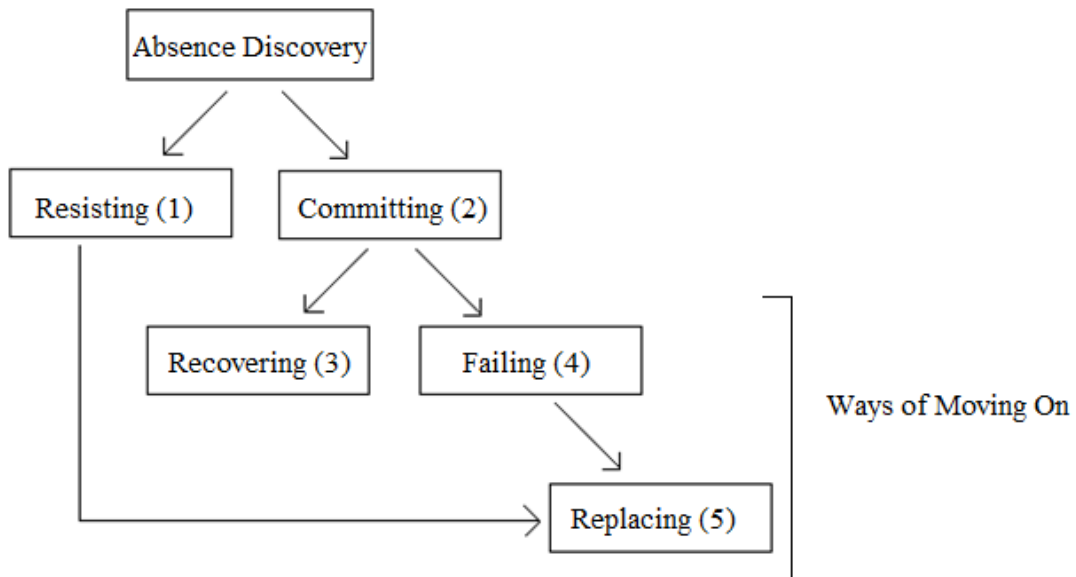
The ten most frequent items making up the sample are:

1. cell phones
2. cameras
3. keys
4. wallets/purses/driver's licenses/passports
5. rings
6. bracelets/anklets/necklaces
7. sunglasses/eyeglasses
8. bags/backpacks/briefcases/suitcases
9. coats/scarves/hats
10. laptops/electronic gadgets

It Begins and Ends with Shifts in Commitment - Chapter 1

To take up and then move on from a loss, individuals must first accept and then later reject ‘the loss’ as a theme animating their actions. For a loss to come to life, they must suspend their ongoing commitments, what they were already doing, and orient to the unexpected event. To move on from it, they must shift back again. These shifts are accompanied by reflective work: at each turn, in taking it up or letting it go, they must deal with who they appear to be to self and other through their decisions. To take up a loss and put aside other commitments too easily, they may appear self-absorbed; to let go of concern for a possession and rejoin a social gathering too early, they may appear overly-concerned with others and wasteful. This chapter shows how individuals resist making ‘the loss’ a theme in their life, how they commit to it, and then how they move on from it.

Figure 1. Ways of Committing and Moving On Diagram



*Absence Discovery*

In the beginning, if people sense that something may be lost, they will sustain that orientation by establishing through an initial exploratory search that in fact the object is missing. But sometimes the question of whether something is missing is not a simple matter. In order to discover a missing object, people sometimes must determine if the object was ever present in the first place.

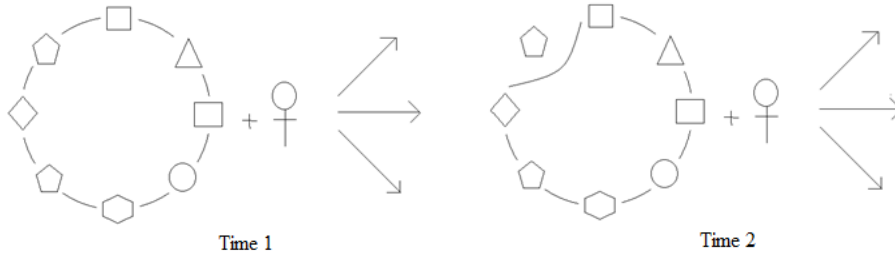
When Paul, a thirty-four-year-old walnut farmer living in Northern California, was leaving his house to return a doorknob to Home Depot, he realized he had made a mistake. He drove away with the doorknob sitting on his back bumper. As he drove away from his home along a windy road, he heard the sound of “metal crashing to the ground.” Immediately he realized what had happened. He pulled his truck over to the side of the road and got out to collect the pieces. He got all the pieces together and assembled the package in his truck. All the pieces were now in their designated places, except for the key; its space was empty. He quickly jumped out of his truck and scanned the road. He saw nothing. At this point he felt he had a “dilemma.” He was not sure if the set came with an empty key slot, whether it was still in the street somewhere, or if he had misplaced the key somewhere in his house over the past week when he first opened the package.

After deciding that an object is in fact missing, individuals’ subsequent actions hinge on a basic question: does the absence undermine my normal grounding in the material environment enough to react to it, or can I go on with life as usual? Put differently, does its absence pose a challenge to who I feel myself to be or what I am trying to practically accomplish now or sometime in the future? William James (1890) described the experience of losing an object as akin to a reduction of self. He wrote, “[P]art of our depression at the loss of possessions is due to



for self or for shaping their practical potential. In these cases, they may abort or indefinitely suspend their orientation to the thing as 'lost.'

Figure 4. Practical Potential Undiminished in Loss



If individuals orient to the missing object as a matter that they should immediately take up despite not feeling they have been diminished in some way by the object's absence, they will find another reason to act. They may seek to resolve its absence as an effort to display the proper sensibility to co-present others in dealing with such matters or as a non-reflective habit of reigning in errantly-placed things.

### *Resisting the Loss Orientation (1)*

Abandoning concern for the missing object before searching is the most direct way of moving on from an orientation to the absence. It affirms that one's current trajectory is greater than the value of potentially recovering the missing object. Individuals show allegiance to their ongoing path and resistance to the effort that searching entails in one of two ways: either by denying that the object is permanently lost and imagining that it will reappear on its own; or by immediately embracing the idea that the object has been lost irretrievably and no further concern with it will help bring it back.

The first route emerges when, realizing that a possession has unexpectedly disappeared, individuals avoid a sense of loss and the damning reflections of self it evokes by denying that

anything is threateningly absent. They believe, and at times hope, that the thing is probably around the house, the office, the car, or wherever, but at the moment is hidden from them for some reason. They might still want the item, and can imagine a time in the not-so-distant future when they will really need it, but they decide to allow the item to reveal itself naturally. They go on with life as usual, suppressing anxieties that might compel them to search for it immediately and betting that it will turn up in the course of their normal routine. They go on with a sense that the object is not at risk of becoming even more thoroughly concealed or, worse, permanently lost. Some force themselves to resist checking for it in fear that they are becoming neurotic, too anxious, too often looking to confirm that they have things that they never lost.

The absence does not point to a failing in the person because they feel that chaotic forces have descended upon them temporarily. They point to conditions that make it difficult to find something: the fact that their house is a bit messy or that they are engaged in a consuming project at work and cannot keep proper track of things. Maneesh, a thirty-year-old graduate student in economics living in San Diego, preserved a sense of self-efficacy in his management of objects. After briefly looking around for his misplaced laundry room key and feeling mildly frustrated, Maneesh decided, “No big deal, I’ll just wait until the key pops up on its own. The place is a mess; it’s around here somewhere.” He noted that he’d rather wear “slightly soiled clothes” than spend his time searching for a “needle in a haystack,” especially since he’s sure the key will show up eventually. By avoiding a search in this way, individuals maintain a self that is independent from the absent object. Putting off the search affirms the idea that who they really are is not affected by the object’s absence. Maneesh put off searching for the key for a week, effectively saying that not having the key and, by extension, being unable to wash his clothes did not unsettle him enough to require immediate action.



Another way to put off a search and to hold onto the sense that one's self has not been fundamentally affected is by understanding that internally derived chaotic forces, such as feeling tired or having consumed too much alcohol, are temporarily getting in the way. Katie, a twenty-one-year-old student in Boulder, decided not to look for her keys until the next morning since she has trouble finding things when she is "beyond buzzed," as she put it. That she cannot readily find something is not a sign of anything deficient about her abilities; rather, she had other things going on at the moment.

Resisting its framing as a loss derives from the individual's sense that the thing will reappear eventually, that in the normal course of life it will serendipitously reveal itself—a belief that suggests a kind of metaphysical connection between self and object that will make a difference once the chaotic forces pass. Individuals demonstrate this sensibility when they redirect their initial concern about an absence and settle on a strategy of serendipity. When Renee realized she had not seen her Kodak digital camera for a suspiciously long time after returning from a ski trip, she reasoned: "My ski jacket has an inner coat and outer shell, each with pockets. My ski pants also have pockets. Then there is the question of whether it was in the boot bag, my purse, my carry-on backpack, or a pocket in my suitcase. Then I wondered if it had fallen out of a bag and was in my brother's car or had slipped under the bed. With so many places where it could be stashed, I truly believed it would just show up without me having to look for it."

If and when the thing reemerges on its own, individuals get a double reward. The loss or gap is plugged and their hunch is confirmed. The latter can also convey a supportive emotional sense that the universe is conspiring in their favor. But when the absent object does not reappear

or is not forgotten, individuals reevaluate the object's absence and reconsider whether life without it is okay or they need to begin a recovery effort.

When seeing the absence as unthreatening does not appear compelling, individuals shift to the second method of moving on without searching: accepting a sense that the self is powerless to retrieve the object as a safeguard against a sense of self enmeshed in a struggle whose outcome is uncertain. Sensing one's impotence in the face of possibly surmountable obstacles feels humbling but also freeing compared to the imagined alternative of a self mired in a difficult recovery effort with no guaranteed exit strategy.

People discover the impotent self as an attractive identity project through cost-benefit analysis, either reflectively or through a gut feeling. They weigh the value of the object against the imagined effort that searching for it requires. Sometimes this calculation depends on their schedule, whether they have time to suspend belief in its unrecoverability and check things out. For instance, when Pedro, a twenty-four-year-old living in Boston and working for an educational nonprofit, was out running, he noticed his watch was missing and momentarily ran in place as he considered its value and the cost of a recovery effort. In the end, he chose to search for it. "I check my watch . . . to see how I'm doing . . . and it's not there. Fuck! I think back . . . that must have been the sound I heard. Shit, now I'm going to be late for my date, I've got to run all the way back to where it fell . . . and it's a nice watch, sitting right there on the sidewalk. I'd be lucky if it was still there. After moping for about ten seconds, I turn around and run back."

Through other calculations, the loss emerges as such an unwanted burden that people immediately try to forget about it, angling their whole disposition against making any effort to recover it. When Hassan, a twenty-five-year-old Brooklyn filmmaker, discovered that his half-rimmed glasses were missing, he was straining to find his iPod, cell phone, and cigarettes—what

he calls his “various metro-centricities”—in the diminished light of a setting sun. When he realized that his glasses were missing, he instantly deduced what likely happened to them. “I had a lot of walking ahead of me, as I was walking from Chelsea to Union Square. I was feeling particularly good, as I had just dropped off a movie I’d been working on to be sent to Sundance. I stopped at a crosswalk and took off my blazer and slung it over my canvas shoulder bag. The top end of the jacket was hanging upside-down, behind me, over the bag. It was in the following ten minutes of walking that I must have lost my glasses.” Though Hassan knew he could return to that location, he was not motivated to do so. “I had some time to kill. But I took it more as a sign that perhaps it was never meant to be. I could just picture myself, my head down as I walked, retracing my steps, scanning the ground through crowds of rush-hour on-foot commuters, bumping into grumpy, self-righteous suits. And then either A) not finding them, or, even worse, B) finding them broken. No thanks. So I went to Union Square and ate some Thai.” For Hassan, resigning himself to a life without his glasses felt easy. He noted that, having found them just recently after they had been missing for four years, the loss seemed less a chance occurrence and more the fate of those particular glasses. From his point of view, he’s simply not meant to have them.

While some draw upon their troubled history with their lost objects, others sense a host of circumstances pacifying their motivation to search. When Amy, a twenty-five-year-old teacher living in Boston, realized she had dropped her keys, “it was later in the evening and I had no energy to make the twenty minute and two big hills bike trip back in the dark to search out the keys along my route. I actually had duplicates of my important keys, which made things easier. This was probably the reason I didn’t ever go back to search the route for my keys. I figured if

they were there, I probably wouldn't see them, being under a car along the road or they were already crushed by city traffic.”

In deciding not to try to recover a mislaid object, some people are convinced that any effort to retrieve it would be futile, pacified not by the insignificance of the item but rather by the opposite. Nick, a twenty–six–year–old business consultant living in San Francisco, dropped his wallet during the “annual Bay to Breakers event, at which thousands of people run or walk a designated route in San Francisco from one body of water to another. I recognized that any one of thousands of people could have found my wallet, so it didn't seem useful to do a physical search of the park route.” By casting the lost object as unrecoverable, individuals continue on their path.

Some delay their own progress of determining if the missing object is actually ‘lost’ because they rather not deal with the implications. Robert is a thirty-four-year-old network engineer living in San Francisco who lost his wedding ring. “Oddly, I found myself consciously avoiding searching certain things or areas, in the fear that I would not find it there,” he recalled. “If I didn't look, it might still be there, like Schrodinger's cat. For example, I still haven't done a really thorough cleaning and search of the kitchen and office floors, and it took me all weekend to get around to searching the kitchen recycling and the office trash can.”

Individuals who move on after losing an object without searching may either evade a sense of a threatening absence by seeing the missing possession as likely to return on its own or embrace a sense of their own inability to recover it. But if they are unable to sidestep a commitment to the loss, individuals will invest in a search effort.

*Committing: Subordinating a Biography (2)*

If the person does not drop the orientation to a lost item by suspending or aborting their initial concern, he or she continues it by giving themselves over to a search project. They take up a search effort by allowing themselves to be taken by some kind of motivating force. They must want to recover the object or deduce an explanation of its absence for some reason. They may need it to carry on with their plans, to overcome a feeling of carelessness, to project an image of someone who responds appropriately to lost objects, or to calm themselves when it appears that something of value is missing. In some cases, it is a matter of resolving the burden of not knowing and overcoming a puzzling inexplicability that provides sufficient motivation.

When Les, a thirty-year-old graduate student living in Los Angeles, lost a hard copy of a term paper in his apartment before he was able to turn it in, he took solace in knowing that he could simply print out another copy. But once he had turned in the second copy to his professor a few hours later, the loss began to irk him. When he got home he decided he would “just check a few places” before calling the “unnecessary search” to an end. A few places lead to a few more and before he knew it, he had spent the last full hour searching. Or consider Elena who is a thirty-two-year-old art director living in San Francisco who lost her two-week old prescription eyeglasses. “What kills me most is I can’t stand not knowing what happened,” she explained. Because the hardest thing for me isn't even parting with the possession, it's that lack of knowing where it went... I would rather know the truth than get back whatever it was I lost.”

In subordinating their ongoing biography to their concern for the whereabouts of the object, individuals shift to a decentered basis for organizing their behavior, taking a view of the world from the perspective of the lost object. They shift from examining their biography now (e.g. what problems the absence causes for them and whether they can carve out a space for a search effort) to examining the separation of their biography from the trajectory of the object.

They consider where 'it' is, what 'it' is doing, or where 'it' has been going, since it separated from them. They shift to seeing the world from the perspective of the object and suspend their orientation to their own biographies, or what they are otherwise doing, to pursue this inquiry. The first step of committing to a loss as a matter to resolve is this decentering, this shift from self to trying to see the world from the perspective of the lost 'it.'

When people commit to a recovery effort they must sometimes still fight the attraction of their ongoing biography and the immediate activities in which they find themselves. Some know that they can only commit for some limited amount of time before their ongoing lives will creep back in and demand primary attention. With a scheduled flight quickly approaching, for instance, they cannot take the time to look any longer for their car keys. In order to make the flight, they must call a cab and suspend the recovery process. Carving out more space from their ongoing activities is not always possible or does not seem smart. They know that whether they have lost something or not, sometimes they have to carry on with a pre-established plan. They cannot always 'afford' to decenter themselves now and worry about where something is.

Conversely, others may find the pull of the loss difficult to resist as they uncover natural reminders of the missing object(s) in the course of carrying out their normal lives. Edith is a twenty-year-old art history student at the University of Toronto who lost her "hobo" wallet. "For the past couple of day I have been unexpectedly reminded of things that were inside and relive the experience again," she recalled. "When I remember something important that has been lost, I immediately begin to panic and start retracing my actions..."

For some, to keep a loss going means they must overcome a sense of ignorance in how to treat such matters. Consider Edith's case again. "I called my mother because she had just gotten her wallet stolen on a trip a few months before," she recalled. "I cancelled my credit cards after

consulting with her. I called my boyfriend and the friend I had been for coffee with to ask her experience and because I was uncertain about what the protocol was in this situation.”

#### A. Finding an Explanation: Identifying a Pre-Phase

In the immediate moments of discovering that something is missing, individuals may discern what had happened to it in a flash. In these cases, the explanation forms as an embodied certainty of what has happened and less as a deliberately reasoned conclusion. Individuals commonly portray themselves as suddenly regaining their awareness, again having their “wits about them.” A recovery effort, if it seems sensible to conduct, occurs as a natural reflex or an automatic urge to recover the left-behind object, but usually not as a test of what they already presume to be true. Sara is a twenty-one-year-old journalism student living in Chicago who suddenly realized exactly what happened to her beloved mittens moments after noticing they were missing.

I wanted to get to the terminal as fast as I possibly could; I still had to check my bags, get my boarding pass, and get through security. It takes about 10 to 15 minutes to get from the trains to the check-in desk. I was probably about halfway there when I remembered to check my pockets for the mittens. They weren't there. That moment I realized where I'd left them, my throat clenched up. They were still on the train. These were the same mittens I promised myself I would never lose, the same mittens I'd keep until they fell apart.

If individuals are not immediately struck by a sense of what happened to the object after discovering its absence as was Sara, they may begin a self-conscious effort to construct candidate explanations of its disappearance. They typically initiate this phase with a basic query:

“Where do I remember having it last?” By orienting toward this question, they begin trying to identify a pre-phase when the item was still with them. They go back to a time of non-variance, before its absence, to isolate when their paths separated. It may not be obvious what this pre-phase was, but there is often a flurry of work in identifying it.

When Sue, a landscape architect in her fifties from Atlanta, could not find her iPod while preparing to board a flight with her husband, she immediately tried to establish a starting parameter on when it became absent. “I looked around and sensing something not there all of a sudden, said, ‘Where’s my iPod?’ she recalled. “My husband, not sensing any kind of fear, said ‘Didn’t you pack it?’ I said, ‘No, I purposely kept it out to have during the flight,’ and I then began backing up to the moment when I knew I had it last.”

Some will realize that they cannot recall the last time they had it. Jackie is a 38-year-old realtor living in Massachusetts who lost her bracelet. “I tried to backtrack my walk to no avail,” she recalled. “I now realize that I did not remember the last time that I physically looked at it, so I am not sure where I lost it.” Audrey, a thirty-seven-year-old pharmacist living in Wisconsin, found a gaping hole in her memory instead of the place she last had it. “As we hurried our way back to the check-in counter, I begged my memory to serve me,” she recalled. “My husband was visibly upset. I was trying desperately to remember if I had had it when we left the check-in counter. I was pretty sure that I had not set it down there. I tried to remember setting the camera bag on the table in the food court, but I couldn't envision that either.”

Individuals employ a variety of measures for discerning a pre-phase to the moment of separation, including: (i) associative and indirect recall, (ii) looking for signs of access, and (iii) identifying traces. These are social-like encounters with the past in which they try to locate a



pre-phase version of self, or a version of self who appeared to have some kind of defect or limitation in awareness of the immediate environment.

(i) Associative and Indirect Recall

Individuals may settle on the point of last known possession by recalling a particularly memorable moment associated with the object in the past. Robert, the thirty-four-year-old network engineer living in San Francisco introduced earlier, used the memory of his wife's "chiding" to reassure himself that his wedding ring was somewhere in his house, though he could not exactly pinpoint where. "Wednesday night I had left my ring on the bathroom counter and [my wife] had chided me for it, so I know I had it Wednesday night and assuming I didn't remove it in my sleep Thursday morning before showering. Ergo, it's somewhere in the house. But where?"

Individuals may also indirectly discern when they last had the object by recalling when they first remember not having it. Nikhil, an unemployed twenty-four-year-old and recent transplant to San Francisco from New Jersey, lost his two notebooks; he recalled that he did not have them when shifting between two locations: "My first fear was that I'd left them on the bus. I tossed that idea as I remember holding my guitar in my right hand and the phone in my left when I boarded the bus, so I must have lost them earlier." His point of last known possession must have been before the bus ride, he ascertained.

(ii) Signs of Access or Use

Individuals may establish when they last had the object by recalling the various kinds of access, especially to certain locations, that the object granted them at a particular moment in the past. When Sasha, a twenty-five-year-old living in San Diego, began looking for her lost driver's license, she was able to infer that she had it at a particular point in the recent past: "I

met some friends at a bar on the beach but didn't drink cause we were leaving soon and I had to drive but I had to show the door guy my license so I knew I had it there." Like Sasha, Bill, a fifty-year-old civil engineer living outside of Seattle, knew that he could not have gotten home without the keys to his electric bicycle: "I rode my bike to work on Friday.... and then home. Have to have my keys to unlock my bike, so I know they left the office with me."

Jules, a woman in her late forties living in Brooklyn, established a point of last known possession for her lost cell phone by remembering a call she had made with it before it went missing. "Basically I was driving around on April 16th doing some shopping," she recalled. "The last place I had my cell phone was at a Clinton Hill restaurant in Brooklyn. I know I had it with me there because I went there to order take out and used the phone to call home to find out what my partner wanted."

For Gillian, a resident of Denver, tracking down where she last used her camera's downloading dock was a matter of checking the date inscribed on the downloaded images saved on her computers at work and home. She recalled what happened: "Maybe I can tell when I last downloaded images on my home computer, vs. when I last downloaded at the office... It looks like home wins. I last downloaded here late on the 22nd of June. Was I still carrying the cradle in my purse after that? Shouldn't it, logically, be in the house? Perhaps, I don't know, near the computer? Where the hell is it!? My knickers are in a serious twist."

### (iii) Unintended Traces

Individuals may detect unintended traces of the lost object as it was passively picked up in photographs and video recordings on cell phones and cameras to establish when they last had it. For instance, with a firm sense that she had been wearing a necklace on the night it became lost, Lam, a thirty-year-old graduate student living in Los Angeles, tried to narrow the time

frame in which it could have fallen by examining her neckline in the fifty-odd photos she took that night. Similarly, Matthew, a twenty-three-year-old computer support technician living in the Bay area, tried to reconstruct his relationship with his keys by looking at a video recording meant to capture the night's festivities: "We even analyzed the video tape from the camera that somehow made it to the kitchen where we were drinking the night before to see if I had a bulge in my pockets the shape of my keys."

When Eleanor, the personal chef living in Massachusetts, lost two rings, her husband helped her narrow down the timeframe of the loss by examining a photo he took of her during that period. She reported, "My husband is taking full credit for my having found them; he is a photographer, and by looking at pictures of me, and picking my brain, he had helped me to narrow down when they were lost to probably having to do with making meatballs for my son's school a month ago."

#### B. Finalizing an Explanation: Uncovering a Separation Point

If they succeed in establishing a point of last known possession, individuals may then try to locate treacherous conditions occurring in their biographies after that point that may have led to the object going astray. They may try to recall potential dislodge points or places where their path was particularly difficult during its suspected period of loss. Through this technique they try to locate in the past a self who would be vulnerable to bumps in the road while being careless or distracted enough not to immediately notice the object's absence.

They supplement this technique with vital background knowledge about how particular objects can conceivably get lost based on their own idiosyncratic way of living with them. For instance, if they usually wear the object (jewelry, a watch) on their person, they know it could

have fallen from them without their knowing. If they alternately handle it and put it into a pocket (cell phone, wallet, keys), they know they could have dropped it, left it behind, or stored it and forgotten about it. If they might set it aside for safekeeping (photos, clothing, a CD), they know they could have forgotten where they put it or that others could have moved it without their knowing.

When Beth, a thirty-year-old resident of Vancouver working in customer service, retrieved her last known memory of having the camera, it directed her to a moment when she could have dropped it without knowing. She reported, “I thought I’d put it in the basket under our stroller. If that were true, the only thing I could think of is that it might have fallen out when we folded our stroller to put it in the trunk of the car. We pulled out of our parking spot going forward so we wouldn’t have seen it on the ground if we had dropped it.” She surmised that keeping it in the basket under the stroller set up the possibility that it fell out when they packed the stroller into the car.

If some identify these potential dislodge points in their mind’s eye, others will reenact candidate points of escape to ascertain their likelihood. Pat, a forty-eight-year-old graphic artist living in Berkeley, wanted confirmation that her ring could have fallen at a gas station and she would not have seen it when getting back into her car, so she turned to recreating the suspected conditions of its loss. She reported, “A couple of days ago, I went back to the gas station, put a single key on my lap, got out of the car abruptly, and saw the key bound under the car. It made me realize that I would not have seen the ring outside my car door when I got back into the car and may have even run over it when I left the gas station.”

If individuals cannot construct a candidate explanation using these techniques, they may sense the futility of any further effort. The moment may remain shrouded in mystery until it

fades from memory. But it is rare that individuals do not develop some kind of basic explanation of what happened. When they are able to construct a candidate explanation, they may settle on it as the actual explanation for the object's absence through one of two paths. They may test the explanation through a recovery effort, a kind of folk validity test, or come to see the explanation as convincing enough on the merit of its logic and not worth testing.

Often people start testing hypotheses even without settling on the 'pre' phase, or without being confident about the moment of separation. They take up a search based on what is practical to do. They may test hypothesis B, even though it is second in the order of likelihood based on their current knowledge, because they have the practical resources for testing B. They search the place they are in currently while holding onto the notion that it is probably in another location that they cannot easily check at the moment. In this way, they shape their search behavior in an interaction between the beliefs they have about where the separation may have occurred and what is practically available to search.

For instance, when Robert, a twenty-seven-year-old web developer, could not find his notebook, he was not "too worried," and assumed he left it at his martial arts studio the day before. But because it was Sunday, he knew he would have to wait until the next day to inquire about it or recover it. In the meantime, he made do with what he had and tested a secondary hypothesis to be sure. He explained, "Just to be sure it wasn't around, I checked all through my car and its trunk and then checked around the house, under clothes and stuff. Wasn't there. I had class again on Tuesday night, so I just waited till then. I was worried about it, but kept putting it out of my mind whenever it came up."

*Recovering the Lost Object (3)*

There is no guarantee that finding the lost object will bring immediate closure and allow them to move on from the loss as a theme animating their lives. Individuals must transcend the experience of loss in order for the object's recovery to move them on. They must believe that the thing that has returned is essentially the same thing that disappeared, despite recovering it from what they perceive to be polluted hands or in a different working order. They must believe that the loss was somewhat of a fluke and they are not at an ongoing risk of losing the object again because of its extreme delicacy. They cannot remain baffled by the mysterious route through which it ended up in a particular location or passed through someone else's hands. They must also overcome any sense of embarrassment about not recovering it sooner, or overlooking what in hindsight appear as tell-tale signs of its now obvious hiding place.

Individuals reach a firm resolution through recovery when the object is recovered from a location that suggests it was reasonably mislaid and reasonably not looked for there, even when the initial vanishing was baffling. When JJ, a personal chef in her forties living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, lost two rings, the mysterious circumstances overwhelmed her. "I was absolutely confident that I had put them where I always do. Not having done that has shaken me horribly. I feel completely distracted and crazy. I wander from room to room in our tiny apartment, looking over and over again in places I have looked so many times before." When she happened upon the rings by chance some days later, the recovery provided the clues she needed to defuse her anxiety. Like the abrupt resolution to an ancient Greek tragedy, the thing plays the part of *deus ex machina*, resolving the otherwise inexplicable problem with its sudden reemergence. She reported:

I have a few aprons, which live on a hook in the kitchen. I checked the pockets over and over in my search to find my rings, but yesterday when I was straightening up a cupboard

I found one that had been misplaced with my dish towels, which I use all the time. In grabbing at them, usually in a hurry to get at something hot, or to wipe my hands and keep cooking, this wandering apron had been pushed to the very back of the bunch. When I found it yesterday I hung it back on its hook. Later when I was making dinner I grabbed for an apron and it was at the top of the pile. While I was doing all of my evening tasks I heard something in the pocket. I reached in, thinking “maybe . . . ?” but sure I was going to pull out two dimes, or buttons, or anything but my rings, as I had so many times before. And then there they were, in my hand, and I had to look at them for a good fifteen seconds to be sure.

In other cases, rather than defusing inexplicable details of its vanishing, the successful recovery unearths them, transforming the loss of the object into a loss of reasonable expectations. When Crystal, a mother in her early forties living in Washington, D.C., lost her wallet, for several days she scoured all the places she thought it could be, but when “six little skateboard dudes” showed up at her house with the soggy wallet she was baffled. The missing details gnawed at her as she tried to fashion a reasonable explanation.

I asked the boys where they found my wallet and they said “near the sewer across the street.” Apparently one of the boys lodged his skateboard in the sewer and while getting it out he noticed my wallet lying in a puddle of water. Right across the street from my house? How did it get there? I told them where I had thought I lost it, which was several miles away, and they couldn’t believe where they found it either. The location where it was found raised more questions than answers. Had I lost it in the driveway? If so, how did it get across the street and down a ways? I recalled the recent forecast, thinking, it hadn’t rained recently. I thought maybe the person who found it came by my house but

saw me at home and didn't want to get in trouble for taking the \$100 so they threw it across the street, thinking that would be good enough for me to find it. . . . I still want to know the full story of where my wallet had been. As if it had been on an adventure without me and I was entitled to know every detail. The wallet had a life of its own.

These puzzling recoveries compel individuals to hunt down explanations that abide by the laws of physics that do not allow things to disappear and reappear willy-nilly.

If it is not mysterious forces and their baffling reflections of self that recoveries alternately pacify and excite, recoveries regularly evoke reflections of self as careless or otherwise incompetent that must be dealt with in moving on. When individuals recover a lost possession from a place they have already looked or know they should have looked, resolution comes by dealing with these apparent shortcomings in their investigative measures. When Nicki, a twenty-four-year-old social worker living in Toronto, lost her wallet somewhere in the city, she searched exhaustively but failed to recover it. In a last-ditch effort, she called the local transportation authority's lost and found office, which informed her that it had been turned in several days earlier. "It is difficult to describe the mix of emotions I felt then, but it was a mix of relief, joy, and embarrassment that I hadn't just called that number in the first place."

If they are to move on after a recovery, they must resist or overcome seeing themselves as stupid or otherwise incompetent, sometimes in the face of others' pronouncements. Ana, an undergraduate at UCLA explained what happened when she was unable to find her social security card after searching through many drawers of paperwork. "When my brother arrived for dinner that night we told him the reason behind the mess," she recalled. "He looked at me and asked if I was, 'stupid or something?'" He then proceeded towards our fifty-five gallon fish tank. Our fish tank is mounted on a wooden shelf type thing that has different compartments for the



food and cleaning supply for the fish and water. He opened the right hand door and took out a box. At that moment it all came back to me.”

A successful recovery also fails to grant an immediate sense of resolution when individuals perceive themselves as having cried wolf. When individuals get others involved in recovering a lost object and then they themselves find it somewhere obvious, resolution comes by dealing with how they suspect others will see them in light of the recovery. After Randi, a twenty-five-year-old living in San Diego, lost her driver’s license—or “drinking permit,” as she calls it—and ransacked her whole house, she came up empty-handed and decided to make the dreaded trip to the DMV for a replacement. After expressing her irritation with the ordeal to her housemates and asking them to check a few places for her, she stumbled onto the card in what seemed an obvious location. “There it was, sitting right underneath [my] jeans. I was happy and irritated. I was going to the DMV and everyone knew it. I was half tempted to tell them I went anyway. But that seemed like too much effort and I just explained that I’m mildly retarded and it was exactly where I had thought it had been.”

While individuals are cooling out unsavory reflections of self as they search for an object, they must also resist other lines of closure. Finding closure through recovery means doing whatever it takes to maintain the belief that success is possible and repressing the impulse to give up. In some cases that means resisting getting a replacement because that seems like an admission of defeat. When Nicholas, a twenty-four-year-old writer and musician living in San Francisco, lost his spiral notebook full of creative ideas for stories and songs, he reports, “I did no writing for the entire week. I had nothing to write in. I couldn’t find the strength to buy a new notebook because that would mean admitting the old ones were truly lost. If I started a new one now, I’d have to commit to it, and I wasn’t ready for that because I hadn’t finished the old ones.

So I tried to busy myself with other work and pretend it didn't matter, but the loss was slowly sinking in. I refused to believe yet that they were gone for good."

A successful recovery of the serendipitous sort may fail to bring individuals to closure, not because of its unsettling revelations, but because they have already found some kind of peace with the object's absence. For instance, after Emmanuel, a twenty-seven-year-old web developer living in Denver, lost a journal, he slowly made peace with its absence and then, several years later, happened upon it in his martial arts studio. "It was a very nice thing to find my [journal] finally, but I had spent the last couple of years starting a new one and trying to redo all of the writing I had lost, that it didn't make such an impact to find it again. It was fun to flip through and review my old writing, but that was about it." He expressed surprise and happiness about its return, but conceded that he was not freed from any unresolved feelings.

When individuals move toward closure after recovering a lost object, they work to control the forces that threaten to keep them in a state of loss. But when recovery does not seem immediately forthcoming, individuals may find a kind of closure through failure. As with successful recoveries, individuals must overcome a set of recurring challenges to self in order for failure to take them back "home."

#### *Failing to Recover It (4)*

People recurrently move toward closure without having found a lost object by developing a sense that they have put in a "good effort," that they have done what any reasonable person could do in such a situation and do not have to bear the burden of a guilty conscience. As the unsuccessful search can theoretically go on as long as someone lives, at some point the strategy to find the thing turns into a strategy for getting over the effort to find the thing. As all search

projects start a narrative thread that implies an ending, individuals sense that doing something to try to find the thing prepares them to give up trying to find it.

Through such resolution-producing, yet failed recovery work, individuals discover a reflection of themselves as careful and thorough, as people who, though they occasionally lose something, are still deserving of nice things. When Michael, a thirty-one-year-old Broadway actor living in New York City, lost his engagement ring after he “carelessly” placed it in a shoe before taking the field at a softball game, he felt “very guilty” for losing such a “treasured item.” After thoroughly, but unsuccessfully, searching the dugout and field with a metal detector purchased from Radio Shack the next day, he felt a sense of resolution, but his fiancé, Eva, did not. “Eventually we decided to quit [looking], convinced that we’d done everything we could. If there was a ring there still we would have found it. I felt a sense of closure after the extensive search, but Eva began to get upset. She’d really thought that we’d find it with the metal detector and was now mad at me for being careless with the ring. There were definitely better places to store it than a shoe, and it probably would have been just fine on my finger anyway.”

Though the “good effort” path to resolution is not something individuals regularly cite as a strategy guiding their treatment of a loss, in some search situations people know full well that it will let them sleep at night. Anna, a twenty-eight-year-old graduate student at Emory University, reported, “I figured if the hat was gone, I could deal with it if I knew that we checked every possible place I had been that night.”

The sense of having put in a “good effort” also emerges when a search effort must end prematurely because of what individuals sense to be legitimate obstacles. For instance, when individuals imagine that the lost object could be almost anywhere and any effort appears futile, they may cite needle-in-a-haystack circumstances as an insurmountable obstacle that effectively

excuses them from further effort. Vicky, a twenty–seven–year–old manager at a company in New York City, conveys this sentiment after coming to multiple dead ends in her search for her bracelet.

Clearly the bracelet is so gone. Maybe it fell off in the first restaurant or the second, maybe it got swept up unnoticed or maybe a waiter found it, maybe it tumbled off while I was walking and some passerby caught the light gleaming off the gold and picked it up in a most lucky turn of events for him, maybe it fell off into the subway tracks. . . . The possibilities are endless, far too endless, and after a week of contemplating every conceivable way I could have lost it, as though I could at least reconstruct the exact moment of loss, I am done.

While some, like Vicky, find closure through what they perceive to be insurmountable practical obstacles to a search, others end unsuccessful searches and relinquish the possibility of recovery in order to leave an unsettling image of self behind. While looking around the dance floor of a crowded nightclub, Andrea, a twenty–one–year–old art student in New York City, worried about what others thought of her as she and several others try to track down her errant cell phone.

[My friend] had gone the extra mile: she'd recruited the help of the bouncer. They were busy bobbing between the crowd, peeking around the high-heels and trainers with his trusty mini-torch. That made me incredibly embarrassed. . . . Losing my cell phone was one thing, but looking like "that girl" is another. You know that girl. You don't want to be that girl. That drunken, idiot who loses her cell phone in a bar. . . . But I didn't say anything besides "thank you very much anyway" when they returned empty-handed.

Andrea's embarrassment pushed her toward closure by forbidding her from further searching for her cell phone.

While catching a reflection of themselves as "uncool" prompts some to abandon their search, others end their effort by catching an unsettling reflection of themselves when they meet people with relative expertise in lost property. A few days after Lizzie, a forty-one-year-old journalist living in Santa Barbara, lost her gold ring "somewhere around town," she tried the local pawn shop, "but those guys seemed amused that I'd think I could find my ring there. One said if my ring was stolen, it was in Mexico getting new documents and that the gold had probably been reduced down by now. I felt a little naïve in front of those guys at the thought that I could just walk in there and find it."

Beyond the social pressures to give up, search efforts also come to an excusable end when people run into access issues deriving from the seemingly circuitous lost and found procedures of a place of business or public institution. Rather than feeling guilt for stopping a search prematurely, losing parties feel frustrated by a sense of impotence in the face of greater powers. For instance, when Javier, a student at the New School, believed he had left his violin on a commuter train, he encountered difficulty with the MTA's lost and found office. "I call MTA to see what their policies are about lost and found items. After trying the number many times over . . . I manage to get hold of someone only to discover that you must wait seven to ten business days before you should call them. They do not get daily updates. As absurd as this seems I could do nothing short of traveling from station to station along the route asking everyone in the ticket booths if something had been returned."

While Javier moved toward closure after hitting a seemingly insuperable bureaucratic obstacle, others bring their recovery efforts to an excusable, though begrudging end when they

uncover signs that the item was stolen and is virtually irretrievable. Faced with this conviction, individuals may give up. Pat, a forty-eight-year-old freelance graphic artist living in Berkeley, reconstructed how she had lost a piece of jewelry: “After I dropped off my daughter I stopped at a gas station . . . and got out of the car forgetting the ring on its chain was on my lap. That is how it happened. The ring simply fell off my lap when I got out of the car. I am pretty sure I will never see that ring again. I noticed at that time that on the ground at the gas station was a little tiny ziplock bag used for the distribution of methamphetamine or crack cocaine. I just know that some junkie took my ring.” Convinced that any recovery attempt was hopeless, Pat treated the object as stolen.

In addition to ending a search because of a sense of impotence and to avoid disconcerting reflections of self, individuals stop searching because they do not want the loss to burden those around them. When Mike, a thirty-three-year-old pastor at Valley Christian Fellowship in Northern California, lost the receipt to his church’s projector, he enlisted his staff to help locate it so they could take a tax write-off. “They were all completely invested for an hour. And I could’ve looked for another hour or two easily but I quit because I didn’t want the staff bothered by it anymore. If I was looking, I know they would have demanded to help. But . . . I didn’t want to burden them with it.”

#### A. Reaching an Explanation when Recovery Efforts Fail

Individuals may sense a turning point in their efforts to explain what happened to an object when they discover that an explanation has failed to lead them to the object. In discovering the apparent failure of an explanation, they may discount it as misguided and begin building a new explanation. Or they may build onto it to account for the actions of opportunistic

or even benevolent others who they suspect may have moved the object from where it had fallen or was erroneously left; they frame the object as a moving target. In this way, they preserve the validity of the work they did to identify a plausible explanation by not accepting a failed test as proof that it is wrong. When Edgar, a twenty-one-year-old college student living in Minnesota, discovered that his jacket was missing, he was able to fashion an explanation for its absence that he found compelling. When the explanation failed to guide him to the jacket, he reported feeling surprised and upset:

I went out to check my truck to see if my jacket was there, but I knew that it wasn't because I could now remember clearly that I had left it sitting on my seat at the theater. I called the theater, fully expecting my jacket to be there, but I was most mistaken. The manager I got on the phone at 10 am said there weren't any jackets that had been found that night, nor in the last few nights, and said the night crew hadn't said anything to him about finding it. I thanked him and hung up, but was very upset.

Because he was certain he had left it in the theater, the manager's words fell flat. He must see for himself.

So I decided that even though I would be late for an engagement I had at 10:30 that I would drive to the theater and see if they would let me try and find the jacket in my seat myself. I did just that, and I was let in by the same man I spoke on the phone with, and after checking my theater and the seat I was in my jacket was nowhere to be found. My conclusion is that someone on the night crew has a nice new jacket, or another patron of the movie.

The failed recovery test did not dissuade Edgar from his initial explanatory hunch. Instead he preserved the candidate explanation by modifying it with an addendum.

Individuals may then test their newly crafted addenda. Though the modified explanation may also fail to recover the object, it may succeed in that it does not uncover disconfirming evidence of the updated explanation. Without disconfirming evidence, individuals may treat the newly modified explanation as tenable through logic and a sense of probability. When Alejandro, a thirty-nine-year-old construction contractor living in San Francisco, discovered his wallet is missing with \$400 of cash inside, he had a hunch that he left it at a burrito stand where he had just picked up his lunch. Unable to find it there, he and the manager tacked on an addendum to the explanation that they found compelling.

Raimundo, who is the manager of the place, warmed up to me and remembered that a familiar panhandler woman had walked up to the counter a few minutes after I left asking for water and in retrospect realized that this was kind of odd because he's seen her around often but she had never approached them for anything before. At this point I had given up on the money but figured I could get my wallet back so I asked Raimundo if he would recognize her. He said "yes" and agreed to jump into my van to help me track her down. We went east at first with no luck and then he suggested going towards 16<sup>th</sup> street where all the crack and smack dealers hang. After maybe 20 minutes of policing the Mission we gave up. She was in some ugly place scoring some ugly stuff with loads of cash.

That was my image of her but I also had a mixed feeling of revenge and regret. Through my utter carelessness I had probably facilitated a chance for her to OD this weekend.

Though he was unable to find the homeless woman who could have his wallet, Alejandro did not find disconfirming evidence of the explanation that he and Raimundo crafted. From his perspective, their inability to find her lent credibility to the explanation. Any addicts who have come into a lot of money, he pointed out, would be hidden away somewhere buying or



consuming the drug to which they are addicted. In sum, individuals can confirm that their candidate explanations are accurate or plausible through failed recovery efforts.

When individuals reach a sense of closure through a failed search effort, they often see the lost object as having purely sentimental value, something that cannot be replaced. But when individuals reach a sense of failure without a sense of resolution, they often try to get on with life by replacing it.

### *Replacing It (5)*

Replacing a lost item is no guarantee that individuals will overcome the burdens of having lost it. If they turn to a replacement too early, individuals feel wasteful, as if they are just throwing one thing away and picking up another. If they replace something with what turns out to be an inadequate substitute, the loss continues to bother them. By trying to replace something that has irreplaceable value, individuals sense the ineffectiveness of their efforts.

When Rob, an American software engineer on a business trip in London, lost the wedding ring he had worn for twenty years, he put in an exhaustive search before deciding to replace it with an exact replica made by a jeweler in London. But the replacement never quite felt right and he continued to make phone inquiries to lost and found offices around London. He noted, "I wear that one now, but it is not the same. I still make efforts, no matter how futile, to find it." Jackie, a realtor in Cambridge, Massachusetts, replaced her nearly thirty-year-old charm bracelet hoping that it would assuage her feelings of loss. But after duplicating some of the original charms, she begrudgingly conceded that the "meaning is not there." For some, the shortcomings of the replacement will spur another round of searching.

While some discover that their lost objects have irreplaceable value by actually replacing them and then feeling the inadequacies of the substitutes, others sense right away that the lost object cannot be satisfactorily replaced. When Laura, an adjunct professor of graphic design at a southern university, lost a memory chip from her camera filled with hundreds of “artsy” photos documenting her and her son’s trip through Germany and France, she scoffed at someone’s suggestion that she could replace them. “Someone said I could just collect some pictures off the internet or gather some pictures of those who accompanied me on the trip. But, bottom line: they are someone else’s memories. Not mine.”

Those who replace lost objects may find that does little to resolve a sentimental loss or to repair negative images of self derived from losing something, especially when their competency is already suspect. When JP, a twenty-eight-year-old aspiring comedian living in Boston, lost his cell phone, he had difficulty finding the humor in the situation. Having recently told his disapproving family that he was going to pursue a career in comedy, he felt that telling them he had lost his only means of communication seemed like “evidence that I was not in fact a creative person trying to pursue a dream, but an immature fuck-up with delusions of grandeur who couldn’t keep things in his pocket.” Several days after the loss, JP checked a few more places and began considering a replacement. What he found most disturbing was the damage to his sense of credibility. “It seems really strange to me, because at the same time I recognize how inconsequential [the loss] is. I can buy a new phone, probably a nicer one, and try to keep in mind that one piece of plastic and circuits is easily replaced by another. But there’s a nagging feeling that by losing the phone, the status symbol, the life line, that I’ve somehow taken a step backwards from being a responsible adult.”

Chloe, a former corporate analyst in Manhattan, also knows that a replacement will not repair the damage caused by a loss that signals incompetence. She had just moved to Maui to “take a break from my high-pressure work history” when she lost her new employers’ keys. She had presented herself to them as a highly skilled organizer who had “a reputation for knowing where things are, why they are there, and where they will go next . . . and for being supremely qualified not only to keep track of things, but to determine if they are really needed to begin with.” When she had to contact her employers while they were away and enlist their help in finding spare keys or replacing them, she felt humiliated about messing up the very task that she claimed was her strong suit. Soon Chloe deduced why the mishap had occurred and concluded that the problem could be resolved only by quitting her job.

Let me tell you, I felt bitch-slapped by the great goddess Karma. I don’t know what offended her more, my arrogance about how far beneath me this job is, or my lack of concern about honesty in the reporting of my work hours. But either way, I was severely reprimanded. Therefore, this story has not one but two morals, and both are horribly clichéd. Any job worth doing is worth doing well, and honesty is the best policy. Did I take these morals to heart? Well, in a manner of speaking. As far as the honesty goes, I shorted my hours for the second week to make up for what I had overcharged the first week. With regard to the “any job” moral, I decided that this was not a job worth doing, and gave my notice well in advance of my actual date of resignation, so as not to leave them in the lurch. And immediately felt better about the entire situation.

Under circumstances like those JP and Chloe encountered, replacing the lost object cannot repair the damage caused by the loss.

For others, replacement soothes a glaring absence or restores a taken-for-granted and comforting intertwining of self with thing. When Gina, an executive of a Fortune 500 company living in New York City, lost her ankle bracelet while “drinking and gallivanting across the city,” feeling its absence stirred her from sleep and irked her for the next five days. “It was strange getting dressed . . . putting on my shoes especially, without the anklet there. . . . I hardly ever really noticed it, but suddenly my ankle felt very naked without it. Its absence was so obvious. At the jewelry store where my parents bought the original gift I bought a replacement . . . five days after it disappeared, which at least got rid of that naked ankle feeling and gave me something to fidget with in all the odd ways I had never consciously realized.”

Replacing a lost object works only when the replacement does not act as a reminder of the loss. Ryan, a twenty-one-year-old college student living in Minnesota, lost his much-loved jacket. “Two days later, after giving up hope of finding the jacket, I ordered the exact same one-hundred and fifty dollar jacket from Cabela’s, even though it was going to be a stress on my finances, because I knew that I enjoyed that jacket so much that if I were to get another of less quality and value I would always think of the one that I lost and how much better it was.” Individuals may move toward closure if the replacement puts the lost item in a less attractive light, however. When Marcy, a fifty-one-year-old pediatrician living in New York City, begrudgingly began the process of replacing her lost camera, she found its loss much easier to accept, “I learned that it was an old model and was shown the new lighter, higher pixel replacement. Funny that the camera I had loved which took amazing pictures in sunlight now seemed a bit obsolete!”

Others know that the replacement will not efface the lesson about self that the loss engenders. For Jae-Eun, a surfer in Los Angeles, immediately replacing his prized Takayama-

designed surfboard does not feel right, though he knows it is permanently gone. “At this point, I’ve pretty much given up hope on finding it. I’m just surfing on the old funny bubble nosed board. It’s not as nice, but I don’t deserve to get a new board yet. Then I’d just be a spoiled child.”

### *Conclusion*

Despite the idiosyncrasy of individual responses to losing personal belongings, people always begin and then move on from them by addressing recurring kinds of concerns. In deciding whether to commit to the loss, individuals consider what its absence means for their ongoing lives. They consider whether the object’s loss impairs their ability to engage in the activity to which they already find themselves committed. They weigh whether the practical and emotional disturbances caused by the object’s absence are greater than the disturbance caused by supplanting their current activity with an effort to search for it, find a replacement, cancel credit cards, etc. Through a flurry of considerations, they make a decision to either abort, suspend, or commit to their initial orientation to the item as missing. In committing they take up a search for it, throwing themselves more radically into the concern for the object.

Sometimes moving on entails pacifying unsettling feelings or sidestepping them altogether. If and when these feelings develop, they do so by portraying the self in a deficient light, leaving individuals to revive a sense of an adequate self. But what it takes to get them back to a more settled place is often not entirely known by individuals at the outset. Every loss presents itself as a kind of riddle through which losing parties come to see, through subsequent steps and even stumblings, a route for getting back to life as usual.

When first realizing a loss, individuals feel or logically deduce whether they must embark on a recovery effort or can calmly put their concerns aside and back away. When they choose to invest effort in searching, they may learn that a successful find is not enough to enable them to move on. The reemergence of the thing must be pacifying, not a damning commentary on self. Yet counterintuitively, failure to recover the object may provide an escape from the burdens of loss, provided that individuals feel they have made a genuine effort. When all else fails, replacement solves the practical deficits created by the object's sudden absence, but leaves one in the lurch when its powers derive from its provenance.

Each way of moving on constitutes a different way of imagining the relationship of self and thing. Moving on without the thing, whether by sidestepping a sense of loss entirely or through a failed search, becomes an effort to disassociate self from thing and re-imagine an adequate life despite its absence. Moving on with the successfully recovered thing becomes an effort to ignore or disarm the continued existence of troubling forces that could cause the loss once again. Moving on with a replacement becomes an effort to lose oneself once again in the thing while pacifying a sense that the connection is artificial. To move on from a breach in one's taken-for-granted grounding in the material environment is to play with a notion of where the self ends and the world begins.

## On Telling and Not Telling Others – Chapter 2

“The funny thing is that even those friends or people who cared in the beginning have to go on with their own lives, and it is foolish to expect they will continue to worry about your worries. So much for friendship, I guess. You really are alone in so many ways in this world...”

-Annie, 19, Student, Vancouver, BC, Cell Phone

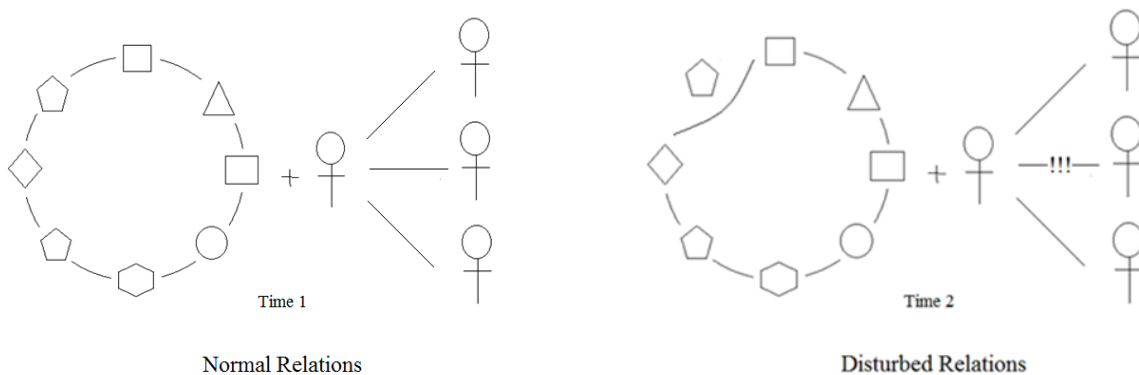
Losing an object may or may not become something more than a solitary event. When people engage in searching behavior in front of onlookers, they may passively convey the matter to those who can infer its behavioral signs without saying a word. But when a loss's tell-tale signs of sleuthing occur where others cannot see, they may only learn of the matter when the losing party decides to tell. As a straight-forward pro-social drama, they tell others when they want to 'make conversation' about an unusual experience, to share what is bothering them, to report the loss of something of shared value, or to recruit practical support and advise volunteers. When losing parties sense that the details of the loss may place them in a discredited light from the vantage point of certain others, they sustain their orientation to the loss through evasive acts. They may minimize contact or avoid transparency with these individuals in order to hide the discrediting details of the loss, fearing that it will live on as a point of contention between them. They decide that they would rather the loss manifest as interpersonal distance rather than as the distrust or contempt that another may secretly or overtly harbor against them once they have learned of its discrediting details.

While hiding certain details of the loss from some, they may reveal it to others who can provide instrumental or emotional support but are unlikely to read the loss in a discrediting way. Or if they are to read the loss in this way, losing parties surmise that the reading will not pose too great a threat to their other relationships or statuses. They may reveal the loss to strangers, for

instance, or those who are not in a position to affect their reputation at work, in a family, or in an intimate relationship. For many, involving others is a matter of deciding who will lend them the most help and threaten their ongoing relationships the least.

In both hiding a loss from some and sharing it with others, individuals commonly treat some miskeepings as more damaging to the impressions they are trying to convey than others. They fear that a loss makes them look like they are not who they say they are. They have made the claim that they are not someone who loses things or not things of that sort; or if they do lose things occasionally, they do not usually lose them under these circumstances. They try to manage the news of the occurrence to avoid appearing as a member of a stigmatized class of keepers of things: or, as otherwise inept, careless, unappreciative, disorganized, cognitively impaired, or insane. Those who have lost something want it to appear like a normal, everyday oversight, or otherwise not their fault. In this chapter, I describe how and why individuals who have suffered a mishap in the safekeeping of an object tell others, delay telling them, and choose not to tell them at all.

Figure 5. Normal and Disturbed Relations



This chapter deals with a general human concern: how much do we share with others about our everyday mishaps? There is a balance to which many show sensitivity in handling the



concern of loss: they want to share enough to feel close or honest with others, but they do not want to share if it threatens to keep the hardship going too long or in ways that belie its personal significance. In deciding with whom to share news of a mishap and how, individuals display keen concern with losing control of its meaning.

### *Managing Discrediting Information*

There are two traditions of work that are directly relevant to how people involve others in their potentially discrediting occurrences. One examines how individuals handle everyday interactional blunders that may have errantly led to the creation of incompatible portrayals of self in a particular social occasion. Erving Goffman's (1959: 14, 208-212) work on faux pas, gaffes, and boners famously teases out the interactional maneuvers by which individuals unintentionally create competing versions of an ongoing performance and then work to minimize the social fallout that may emerge from it. His work focuses on the situational management of discrediting events with co-present others and not necessarily on how they manage the news of the event beyond the situation in which it occurred.

Scholars investigating stigma have looked more closely at the work of managing potentially discrediting information as a longitudinal concern, or beyond the immediate situation in which it has occurred. Yet in contrast to 'dumb mistakes,' these scholars look at what are generally considered to be more permanent threats of discrediting in the form of identity attributes, such as physical handicap, or features of biography, such as a felony arrest. Goffman's (1963) work on stigma laid much of the foundation in this area. These scholars have examined how gay people strategically reveal their sexual preferences (Kanuha 1999), how biracial people pass within racially homogenous groups (Khanna and Johnson 2010; Brown 1991; Unterhalter 1975; Conyers and Kennedy 1963), how people pass within an ethnic group

with which they do not privately identify (Stein 2009; Tai 1996), how convicted criminals manage the telling of their criminal histories, the factors shaping disclosure of victim status after violence or sexual abuse (Fraga et al. 2012; Schaeffer et al. 2011), how students hide a learning disability in school (Rueda and Mehan 1986), how people who are HIV positive manage that information (Holt et al. 2011), and how women manage the news of their infertility among family and friends (Steuber et al. 2011).

In this chapter, I combine these two literatures by dovetailing the care that stigma scholars show in the management of personal information with how individuals manage less permanent, more episodic, bouts of discrediting occurrences.

#### *Lost and Found Signs and Electronic Posts: Putting Yourself Out There*

As a passive expression of telling behavior, individuals make a loss known to others by posting lost and found notices in public places or on internet lost and found sites. For many, the lost and found notice, especially the electronic version, feels like a shot in the dark, a last and likely hopeless resort. Rob, a twenty-seven-year-old web developer living in Denver, noted: “As a last resort, I posted a ‘lost and found’ notice on the internet. My daily news-bites on my cellphone had come up with a headline ‘People Finding Lost Things Online’ and, taking that as a sign, I wrote up a note. Still no luck.” Or consider Tom who posted on Craigslist after his son lost a baseball tossed to him from the field by a member of the Boston Red Sox staff after a game: “Later that night I posted a notice about the lost ball on Craigslist.com. I really didn’t expect anyone to contact me, but I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

Sometimes these signs and postings are “long shots” and “last resorts” because they do not expect that the finder will see it; in other cases, the effort feels particularly hopeless because

they do not expect a stranger will act sympathetically toward someone they do not know, especially with objects of obvious value. They feel that getting someone to return something out of sheer generosity is an uphill battle. But some sense the power of the written sign or post itself to transform a fence-sitter and feel that if they make a good case, they can win the finder's sympathies. Julie, a twenty-six-year-old lingerie designer living in Manhattan, felt she needed to give her lost pin a good, though fabricated, origin myth. "Since you may publish this I will tell you that I lied about the pin being my grandma's," she explained. "I just wrote that to throw in a punch, hoping that if someone found it, they would feel bad and return it. It has not yet turned up... and if someone did pick it up, maybe they don't read the New York City Craigslist lost and found."

For some, the internet offers anonymity when posting a sign on a street seems "silly" for particular kinds of objects. While some losing parties know the unique biographical meaning of the lost possession and why it warrants being treated akin to a lost pet, they cannot expect that others will. Cami is a resident of Cleveland who lost her black scarf. "The next day I still scanned around when I walked up the hill," she recalled. "I thought to myself that I should post a sign but well, I'll be honest...I felt a little silly putting a picture of my scarf up on a "Reward if Found" sign. Craigslist is a little more anonymous..."

The hesitance that some have to share an account of their mishap on a sign or posting is not completely unfounded, some experience various forms of mockery and ridicule. Carter is a thirty-six-year-old small business owner living in Pasadena who lost a remote-controlled jet aircraft. "I placed an ad on Craigslist in the hopes that someone might find the jet and return it," he explained. "I felt extreme anger as people responded to my ad by sending an email back

saying, ‘Hahaha, LOL’ or another that said, ‘you owe me a window because of this junk that crashed through my living room.’”

Others feel harassed by being made targets of what appear to be con-jobs. Jae-Eun is a surfer who left his surfboard behind at his parking spot after surfing in Santa Monica. He posted a flyer around the area and on an internet site. “A few days after I lost my surfboard, someone left a message on my cell phone that he had found it,” he recalled. “He was a mover, and someone had approached him and offered to sell him my surfboard. The exchange was made, but now that he knows it was stolen, he wanted to return the board back to its rightful owner. But as I was talking to him, I kept thinking, wow he sounds like a New York mobster. He continued to tell me that he could not meet in person to return my board, because he was a mover and thus was in Illinois (even though I only lost it 2 days ago). The mover offered to ship it to me, and could I send him a check for the shipping costs? Hundred dollars of course. I said no, I wouldn't just mail him money, and he said he would call me back but never did.”

Others, in receiving harassing phone messages about a loss, try to take punitive measures. Ethan is an opera singer in his forties living in New York City who lost an “expensive” Montblanc pen. He recounted what happened: “The night I... taped a hundred signs to lampposts, mailboxes, and phone booths in the 5 block radius, I got a call and what sounded to me like a teenage voice said ‘I have your pen.’ I was so relieved and happy for a second. I asked, ‘Did you see the signs or Craigslist?’ He replied, ‘If you want to see your pen again, you'll give me 200 dollars.’ I thought either this is a prank or someone's actually holding my pen for ransom. I said something like, ‘Okay you must be fucking kidding me’ and then he laughed and hung up. I was enraged. I wanted to trace the call and kill the prankster, but it was listed as ‘private number’ [with] no caller ID possible. I called the cops (‘911 where's your emergency,’

‘well, it's not exactly an emergency...’ etc.) and they told me only if I came into the precinct could they possibly trace the call. ... Objectively, it was a pretty funny call, unless the little bastard actually has my pen.”

For some, the attempt to get others to act sympathetically on their behalf is a struggle in meaning. They try to get unknown others to adopt the notion that the object’s absence is a ‘loss,’ not something for another’s amusement, or ‘gain.’ What they find is that while they themselves can sustain the theme of the ‘loss,’ others do not have to and some are unwilling to try. The sharing of a loss through written public declaration to anonymous others brings to light a kind of hermeneutic struggle between self and other to define what an object’s disappearance really means.

### *Learning of a Loss with Others*

In telling another face-to-face about a loss, individuals may be more surgical than signs and posts allow in their choice of who to tell. To strategically package a loss for another, they might imagine the point of view of the person to whom the news can be told or otherwise revealed, see the loss from this imagined frame of reference, and manage the release of the information accordingly to exert some control over how they think they will be seen. But when they uncover a loss in co-presence with another, they must manage it as a kind of mutual discovery.

In the social organization of the mutual discovery, the individual who has lost the object may first communicate the loss to another through their surprise or alarm at the disappearance, as often displayed by a vocal exclamation or facial expression connoting surprise or shock. For Colin, a resident of San Francisco in his forties, the realization that his daughter has lost the

recently purchased Native American ring that he and his wife had given to her as a gift the day before occurred in plain sight just as she was discovering it herself.

We pulled into our parking place and saw her and her best friend walking quickly up the street. When she saw me, she ran up to give me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek, and when she pulled back looked down at her hand in disbelief and horror. Her ring was not on her thumb. She frantically looked on the ground, checked her jacket, looked at me pleadingly saying, no, no, I can't believe it. I can't believe it. Her friend had already started down the sidewalk to look for it. In a matter of seconds she said that she had it on just minutes ago, but she had taken her coat with tight webbed cuffs off and... It was not in her purse, it was not in her pocket, it was not in her jacket.

Discoveries of loss by one person while in co-presence with another become a mutual concern only by overcoming ordinary obstacles to intersubjectivity. As communicative utterances, shrieks, screams, and other excited expressions sometimes fail to precisely convey the reason for excitement, leaving co-present others at an initial loss for what is happening. A mutual orientation to the loss occurs through subsequent articulation. John and Natalie, a newly married couple in their 40s and 50s from Boston, were on their honeymoon in Hawai'i. John initially mistook her yell of fear as one of excitement. "I heard her yell, and swam in as fast as I could, thinking she had seen some cool fish or something," John recalled. "She was facing me and looking down as I approached, and told me the ring had slipped off her finger. I immediately could see she was not kidding, and dived down where she was standing a number of times, thinking and hoping I could make a quick grab."

While some mutual discoveries occur through an initial alarm phase—as a shriek overheard by another or a look of surprise and a display of angst-ridden searching—others begin

as mundane talk about where something has been left. In these cases, the shared use of an object naturally develops into a shared accounting of its management, or in this case, mismanagement. When Megan, a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate living in Boston, could not find her digital camera the morning after a night out, she shared the matter as a casual concern with her sister before she understood it as an actual mishap. They learned that it was missing together.

On the Tuesday of my actual birthday we went out again and took about 50-100 more pictures and video. That night on my way home in a Boston cab, I'm not sure which one it was, I got out at my apartment and went inside. The next day I woke up and asked my sister where my camera was and she told me it was in my jacket, which it was not. The both of us then searched my entire apartment top to bottom, going through everything. It was nowhere to be found so my sister started calling all of the cab companies, Boston Police Hackney Carriage Unit, and cabs lost and found department leaving messages for everyone.

### *Telling as a Conversation Piece*

When individuals discover that something is missing, they may decide they will share news of the event with someone who was not present. They readily share news of a loss to another without great machination when they deem the loss to be of little consequence to their own life or the life of the other. These are not losses of deeply profound objects or losses that are deeply revealing of who one is; they treat these tellings as conversation pieces. When Rihanna, a thirty-five-year-old web editor living in Seattle, came home from work, her husband immediately announced having lost their ten-month old's "plastic bathtub squirty" in the shape of a potato: "Chris 'fessed up as soon as I came in the door: 'It's really sad; we lost little potato today!'" They conceded that their baby might not even notice.

In these cases, telling another about a missing object may serve as no larger purpose than water cooler banter, or grist for the conversational mill, and sometimes with unexpected results. When Arun discovered that the single pearl had popped out of his pendant that hung from his necklace, he assumed it to be a lost cause. “It was tiny and I just decided to let it go,” he recalled. “I didn’t really think much about it after noticing it. It wasn’t very expensive or anything... worth about 50 rupees [or, one dollar US] when I bought it in India. I ended up telling [my roommate] about it just to make conversation.” Soon his roommate was unfolding a piece of tissue from the bathroom wastebasket. There among the hair and lint collected from the shower drain was the single pearl that he had lost.

While not all conversation pieces lead to a successful recovery of the missing object by the recipient of the telling, some may arouse other pro-recovery forces. When Shawn, an American ex-pat living in Brussels, Belgium, told his girlfriend about the loss of his keys, he did it with an air of defeat. But she did not accept the resignation. He explained: “I went home and told my girlfriend that my keys were gone and that I’d never find them again. ‘Impossible she said. ‘They must be here somewhere.’ So, with that I started moving furniture hoping I’d find keys under a chair, behind a cabinet, etc. I moved everything around. Finally I moved the trash bin. The garbage. Was it possible that I accidentally tossed my keys in the trash? I wondered.”

Yet if a loss is too mundane, insignificant, or otherwise meaningless, it may not even meet the minimal threshold of becoming a conversational matter. When Amy, a teacher in her mid-thirties living in New England, dropped a bobby pin in her bathroom while getting ready for work, she immediately knelt down and scanned the floor. Not seeing it anywhere, she stood back up, grabbed another one, and never made mention of it to anyone.



### *Reasons for Being Upfront*

People commonly tell others about their losses as something more than merely conversational. Telling others may serve an important function from the teller's vantage point: as an act of transparency it may sustain intimacy in a relationship or it may limit the potential shock or surprise that some may feel when they notice the absence. Robert is a thirty-four-year-old network engineer living in San Francisco who lost his wedding ring over Thanksgiving. He told people about the loss because he wanted to give an accurate account of his holiday, but also because he anticipated their noticing its absence on his finger. He recounted: "I feel obligated to tell people about its loss, both because I want to explain its absence in case they notice it, and also because people keep asking me, 'How was your Thanksgiving?'"

Individuals may treat the act of telling as the fulfillment of an informal contract in which some individuals, such as spouses or therapists and clients, share the matters currently occupying their minds. But in achieving transparency, they may have to suffer through dread leading up to the telling because of their fear of appearing 'stupid.' Minos, working in TV production in downtown Manhattan, explained: "During the cab ride, besides trying to re-create the series of events that had occurred, I felt an overwhelming sense of stupidity... And I began to dread having to share the story over the phone with my Argentinian therapist..."

They may feel hesitant in being upfront about a loss to other family members, when the loss might indicate that they have violated their own domestic rules of staying neat and organized. When Barbara, a forty-two-year-old stay-at-home mom living in Denver, lost her red leather wallet, she felt like a hypocrite as she was often urging her family to be more organized. She reported, "I was really embarrassed to tell my husband because I'm frequently chastising him and his children for not being more organized."

Commonly, individuals feel the pressure to be transparent about their mishap out of an obligation to report a threat to something of shared value. After Miguel, a real estate agent in his forties living in Toronto, drove away from the college graduation of a good friend, he was alarmed to discover that he probably left the digital camera that he and his wife share on the roof of his car before leaving. The telling became particularly poignant because, like Barbara, he worried about telling his family after providing very adamant guidelines on how to treat the camera when using it. He explained: “I drove my wife and my two 20-year-old-plus children crazy with my ad-nauseam rant of, 'make sure that strap is on your wrist whenever you use the camera and if one of your friends is taking the picture, place the strap around their wrist so they don't drop it.’” In sheepishly reporting the news to his wife, he was struck by her unanticipated response.

Now to tell my wife, you'd think I just cheated on her the way I started, but I was really surprised she just laughed at me and said, “Great, I have been dying to buy a new camera for our holiday, and now I can. But you don't get to take care of it, Mr. put-the-strap-on, you have to take it off the car roof before you can do that, and really, that was pretty stupid.” My daughter needless to say had a field day with me, (boy, am I glad I didn't get angry with her [when she recently dropped it]), talk about dropping the camera, I rather have dropped it than have lost it. [She said:] “Way to go Dad!” And then she rubbed the salt into the wound, “What about Trevor's pictures?” A blank face I had. “Nice dada nice.”

### *Telling as Help-Seeking*

People commonly reveal their mishaps to others in order to gain their practical help in its recovery. In some cases, they tell at the potential cost of appearing incompetent or needy. Some

anticipate the threat posed by help-seeking and only tell with unease. They treat these tellings as sacrificial acts; they must lose some status, esteem, or credibility if they are to receive some help resolving the matter. When Christopher, a twenty-eight-year-old software designer living in New York City, lost his slacks on the way to the tailors, he felt embarrassed about asking for his boss's help after only recently starting the job. "I had to call my boss, who was still in the office, and ask if he saw my stupid pants sitting anywhere, which was just embarrassing..." he recalled. "I felt horrible about it, sick to my stomach, and everyone being so nice and sympathetic about it kind of made me feel even worse, because then I had to be the guy who said everything would be fine and I was sure they'd turn up somewhere."

But having a personal relationship with those who they share the news with is not a precondition of feeling threatened by the telling; even telling strangers may feel sacrificial, especially in settings thought to be intolerant of hurried presentations of self. When Andrea, a twenty-one year old student at The School of Visual Arts in New York City, lost her cell phone at a nightclub, she felt like "that drunken idiot whose loses her cell phone in a bar" when her friend enlisted the help of the bouncer. When Vicky, a forty-four-year-old art director and graphic designer living in Portland, Oregon, lost a department store bag of already purchased clothing while still shopping, she had to explain to the sales clerks what happened in order to get their help; her self-revealing explanations embarrassed her: "How stupid could I be?" she asked herself. For Lisa, the thirty-seven-year-old undergraduate introduced earlier, having to identify herself over the phone as someone who has lost something made her feel like an "ass." She wanted to tell them, "You don't understand, I'm not someone who loses things! I never lose things! I'm careful! I'm not like those other people who do this all the time!"

Yet not all telling for the purpose of enlisting help strikes one as a sacrificial act. Some disclose news immediately at the scene of the disappearance to strangers because they know that recovering the item takes precedence over any pride they might lose. When Beatriz, thirty-five-year-old veterinary assistant living in Rosemead, California, lost a piece of jewelry, she enlisted the help of folks standing nearby.

We walked around a bit more and stood in line at the port-a-potties and I felt for my necklace and panicked when I realized it wasn't around my neck. I ran to the intersection where we were dancing, thinking it must have snapped off when I was pogoing. I looked around on the floor for a bit and asked a security guard standing nearby if he had found a necklace. Some people asked if they could help and I was really surprised because I didn't expect anyone to notice in a huge crowd. Then I started to cry. I knew it was gone. I felt like an idiot for my mom to even give me the necklace. I searched the ground for a bit longer and then gave up.

For some, seeking help from one particular person, such as a spouse, to reign in mislaid things is a frequent occurrence. In some instances, in asking for help, they must bear the ridicule of repeatedly violating the help-giver's advice for avoiding the problem; some may consider the ridicule a fair price for the help.

A man and woman in their 70s are leaving a Starbucks in a small Northern California town. The man uses a cane, slowly hobbling toward the door. His wife is a few steps behind after throwing away their trash. When they get to the door and are just about to exit, the man turns to his wife and the following exchange takes place:

Man: Edith, I left my glasses at our table. Would you mind grabbing them?

Woman: How many times have I told you to put your glasses on when you get up?

M: I know, I know. I forgot.

W: Okay, I'll get them.

M: Thanks, and can you grab my wallet and keys while you're at it?

### *When They Delay Telling*

Individuals manufacture temporary rifts in or otherwise suspend their social relationships to protect themselves from revealing information that could discredit them while still looking for the object or while still considering how to explain it to others. Some anticipate that if they were to share co-presence with a particular person, the news of the mishap could unintentionally leak out in an unflattering way or their intimate proximity could otherwise obligate them to share it.

Individuals delay telling another about a loss because they need to gather their bearings, calm down, regain confidence, imagine how others may react, or simply stall while trying to find it. In many of these cases, the individual who delays telling another anticipates an imminently meaningful symbolism based on the meaning of the object in the relationship, especially as it relates to the object's provenance (as a gift, etc.).

To delay telling another about the mishap, individuals must first identify someone to whom they are hesitant to tell. For some, it is the fear of telling someone for whom the loss would be directly damaging that spurs the hesitancy. As soon as Megan, a twenty-five year-old human resources manager living in Philadelphia, realized that a part of her Halloween costume may be lost, she knew who it would be difficult to tell.

We were minutes from the door of the party, and a really strong gust forced its way past us, the hat went with it! I saw it for a minute and then in the blink of an eye it was gone. I searched under every car, I peered down every alley, I asked crazy drunk kids on their way to another kegger. I looked and looked and looked, and nothing. It was simply gone. All I could think about was how I looked like I was wearing my grandmothers' curtains; without the hat the whole costume suddenly looked stupid. And then it hit me

that the costume shop was probably going to have my head. As I said, the costume had never been rented before. If I had lost a tassel it wouldn't have been a big deal, but I

### LOST THE HAT!

For Megan, the loss's immediate impact on rendering her costume unintelligible to other partygoers is overshadowed by her realization of who she would have to tell about the matter.

People who have lost something will sometimes put off telling another in order to reflect on the likely effect that such an act would have, especially when they sense that it could cast them in unflattering light and fatally injure the relationship. A man using the moniker, "Forgetful in Chicago," delayed telling his girlfriend about losing the engagement ring he had planned to give her. His request for advice from the popular advice columnist, Dear Abby, showed his concern with managing the telling of the news.

Dear Abby: I admit it: I am scatterbrained. I'm forgetful when it comes to events and information that affect me personally, although I have the odd ability to remember facts and trivia. It is a source of frustration and amusement to others that I can remember details about the Battle of Actium but can also lose my car for several days because I forgot where I had it parked.

Now things have gone from comical to critical. I had been planning to propose to my girlfriend of three years, and I have lost the engagement ring. I bought the stone some months ago. It's a rare green sapphire that she helped select. I had it set without her knowledge a few weeks later. When the ring was completed, I hid it in a small space behind a drawer in my desk.

This month I planned to pop the question. But today, when I looked behind the drawer, the ring was gone. The worst part is I don't know if I moved it myself. Did I hide it somewhere else because I was afraid she might discover it? Or did I take it out to look at it and forgot where I set it down?

My forgetfulness has caused friction between us before. I want to propose, but I don't want our engagement to be forever associated with another irresponsible mistake on my part. What should I do?<sup>2</sup>

“Forgetful in Chicago” treats the matter of telling his girlfriend about the loss as a dilemma that a stranger can sensibly comprehend and help him resolve. For that reason, a delay seems a worthwhile response to the matter.

Some put off telling others about a loss when the timing does not seem to be right, when the news would further exacerbate a tough situation. Some use this time to try to recover the object to avoid having to further burden an already burdened other. When Nikki, a thirty-two-year-old teacher living in southern New Hampshire, lost her engagement ring and wedding band, she and her husband were at a hospital seeking treatment for their son, Aaron. Hoping to remedy the matter without strife, Nikki avoided telling her husband when she first noticed the loss and then set off on a clandestine recovery mission. “Not wanting to upset my husband, who was already very stressed just having to take Aaron to Mass General Hospital I told them I was going to find a bathroom and retraced my steps, all the way down to the lobby,” she recalled. ... “I found nothing. Later that night I finally confessed to my husband that I had lost the ring. He knew I was upset but wasn't sure why as we had had a positive report from the doctors. He was of course furious and then sad. We cried together in between tearing apart the car, the house and a small mountain of dirty diapers.”

While a delay may allow individuals to strategically reveal the mishap when the time is right, some use delays to try to resolve the mishap so that they do not have to tell at all. JP, a twenty-eight-year-old comedian living in Boston, lost his phone and then delayed telling his family about it for several days while trying to recover it. “And what I was really concerned about was telling my family,” he explained. ... “It was new, it was relatively valuable, and only an idiot would lose track of it. Being an idiot is only fun if you don’t realize it. Realizing it was no fun at all. After five days I gave up. I sent an email to my family saying that I had lost my phone, so it would be difficult to get in touch with me until I either purchased a new one or had my old phone reactivated.”

Though not deeply moved by the loss herself, Lynn, a thirty-seven-year-old homemaker from Marin County, delayed telling her husband about losing her “very expensive” Lumix digital camera at a water park for a week even though she seemed to agree with the criticism she was avoiding. During the week she tried to recover it, but finally gave up. “I did not tell my husband for a week. I am not that concerned about material things so I didn’t really get upset. I was concerned about what [he] would say because he says I try to do too many things at once. He is right. I prayed to St. Anthony who is the patron saint of lost items.”

Some first try to resolve a loss on their own and then only tell another reluctantly when he or she can offer help to resolve the issue. Not telling only becomes a delayed telling when it becomes clear that the recipient of the news may offer help in a recovery effort. Jean, a sixty-two-year-old retired marketing executive living on the Maine coast, only told her husband of her loss when it became a clear asset in the recovery effort.

My dress was a delicate fabric; no lapels; nothing thick enough to hide a safety pin. So I’d spent the entire drive into Boston touching [the brooch] every so often to make sure it



was still there. Before the waiter had a chance to hand us the menus, I realized it was gone. I couldn't bring myself to tell my husband just then, so I excused myself to the ladies room and went to the cloak room to check if it was caught on my overcoat. Then I made a desperate plea to the maître d' to find the valet and send him to wherever our car was parked. While I went outside and combed the sidewalk, curb, gutter... the valet guys searched our car. No sign of it. I remember standing at the curb looking out at traffic, imagining that brooch being tossed and flattened by the constant stream of cars spraying up dirty slush from the melting snow. Returning to our table, I had to fess up and ask my husband to make another sketch of the brooch so we could leave it with the manager to show his staff and hope that somehow, someone would find it and turn it in.

Not being immediately forthcoming about a loss that affects another could itself undermine intimacy and trust in a relationship. From the point of view of the individual who only learned of the matter after a delay, leaving another in the dark for a time may appear dishonest, cowardly, or as hindering a timely recovery effort. Jenny, a woman in her thirties living in Toronto, does not appreciate that her eleven-year-old niece delayed telling her what happened.

[I]t was on Easter Sunday [and] I was at work when my niece borrowed my iPod to hang out with her friends at a Tim Horton's inside the Toronto Western Hospital. She told me she left the [iPod] unsupervised and hurried to her friend's house and may have forgotten about it. My niece was too scared to tell me that she lost my iPod when she came home. She had to write it all in a letter for me. When I asked her where my iPod was on Monday morning she told me to check under her pillow... instead of finding the iPod I found the letter. Well, I was really upset at her, mostly because she didn't have the

courage to tell me herself but through a letter. I was at work all day thinking about how I should deal with her. And then I realized that she is only an 11-year-old and she herself would never have wanted that to happen. She and her friends did try to look for it. I made her realize that she is much too young to be carrying expensive purses and electronics until she works and earns enough to afford them.

While the niece fails to give full life to the loss soon enough by including her aunt in the news of the discovery, as a disciplinary measure the aunt ensures that it will live on in the eleven-year-old's life through restrictions on her future borrowing of "expensive" things.

Individuals also delay their telling of a loss, not because they feel especially concerned about losing credibility in a relationship, but because they do not want that story to overshadow other news. Jackie, a thirty-seven-year-old pharmacist living in Wisconsin, and her family have just returned from Lima, Peru where she believed she lost a digital camera and a portion of their vacation photos.

Usually, this is a story I would've told in boring detail to my sisters, my parents, my good friends. Normally, I would tell a story like this as soon as we got home and I talked to these people. This was different, though. For some reason, I didn't share it with very many people initially. I remember a part of me wanting to tell people, but choosing not to. When I talked about our trip, I wanted to focus on the many great things we had experienced. I think we had been back for over a week or more when I finally started telling people. By that time, I had accepted that I wouldn't get it back. I was still bummed about it, but I knew that it was SO SMALL in the grand scheme of things. I guess I told about it in a matter of fact way, explaining the whole food court scene and how I thought the camera had been stolen.

She chooses to suspend the life of the loss when she initially returns from the trip so that it does not become the master narrative in the eyes of others.

*The Uses of Silence, Omission, and Duplicity*

Individuals attempt to lessen the potential discrediting they may suffer or the upset they may cause others by changing key details about the object's disappearance when they tell others. Following Goffman (1971), when individuals attempt to control how others read a potentially discrediting occurrence, they are engaging in work intended to change "the meaning that otherwise might be given to an act." Individuals may try to convey that "the act never occurred," "that the wrong person has been accused," or "that the act itself was different from what it appeared to be." Individuals who have suffered a potentially discrediting loss may engage in similar accounting techniques through the telling of half-truths, or otherwise omitting revealing details.

Some will not take overt actions to hide a loss, but they will also not go out of their way to draw it to someone's attention. They allow the matter to remain untold in the presence of someone who they suspect would want to know. Jennifer, a thirty-year-old executive assistant in global banking living in Connecticut, illustrated: "I called the lost & found division of the police station... Now I wait. ... [and] I try to figure how long my mother will take to notice that the bracelet I haven't taken off since the day she gave it to me is suddenly absent. [I] can't even wear dad's anymore. It just makes the other wrist look so empty."

Some start with the intention to tell another about the loss but ultimately make the choice not to when they cannot find the 'right' moment to share the news. Jason is an undergraduate at UCLA who has lost an iPod purchased for him by his father. "The worst part about losing my iPod was trying to figure out a way to tell my dad that I lost it," he recalled. "He spent so much

money on it and I was irresponsible. I did not know what to do. I had an entire day to think of an excuse to tell him. When I got home that night after my basketball game, I ate and just went into my room. I eventually just decided not to tell him and hopefully he wouldn't notice that I lost it.”

Others tell but only partially. Some will lie about their handling of the now-lost object when it may appear that they had been careless with something valuable. When Angela, a college student living in Denver, lost her wallet somewhere on campus, she goes out of her way to tell others that she was planning to deposit the large bill and spend the gift certificate it contained that day, framing herself as especially unlucky and giving the loss more irony.

When I think about it, I noticed myself lying to people when I told them about the \$100. I told them I was planning on depositing it later that day. In reality, I knew I should have deposited the money, but was probably not going to make an effort to do so until four days from then, if that. I thought about how much easier this would be if I didn't have that \$100 in my wallet. I figured I would have gotten my wallet back if there was no money in it. I even told people that I was planning to spend the gift certificate that day. I thought about it, but I doubt I would have made it to the mall that day.

Some admit to others that they can no longer use the object, but manufacture less discrediting or upsetting stories about what that means precisely and how it came to be that way. Supporting Marcel Mauss' central thesis in *The Gift*, individuals commonly treat gifts as inalienable from their givers; they know that treating a gift poorly could signify that they had treated the giver of the gift poorly as well. Phong, a nine-teen-year-old student, provided illustration after having lost a pair of designer sunglasses that were gifted to him by a friend.

“The thing I was most worried about though was that I would upset the person who gave them to me because I had lost them and as such had been careless with their gift,” he recalled. “In fact I wound up telling them a lie that they had broken and when they had come apart one of the lenses had shattered so I couldn't wear them anymore. I have since then replaced them with a cheap pair from a discount store.” Phong replaced his negligence in the loss of the glasses with a story of a defective product and shifted any threat of carelessness in the relationship to his friend who had potentially purchased a ‘cheap’ or defective gift.

In other cases, individuals portray themselves as a victim of theft to minimize the spoiling of an identity as careful and professional in occupational settings. Jessica, a thirty-two-year-old fourth grade teacher living in Connecticut, lost her students’ report cards before she was able to hand them back. That these report cards were not electronically saved and had accumulated parent signatures from earlier quarters compounded the significance of their loss.

I felt so embarrassed and unprofessional. I really pride myself on being well organized and that just flew in the face of the reputation I had been working to build all year. I dreaded telling my principal, figuring out how I was going to replicate them, dealing with the parents, etc. I started to recreate the report cards, but I knew the parent's signatures from the previous terms wouldn't be on them, and while I wasn't trying to be sneaky, it felt dishonest. Finally I decided I would just have to tell the principal and see what she said. I worked up my courage, waited for her, and then told her that my bag was stolen on the train (which as far as I knew could be true) and that my report cards were in the bag. She was really sympathetic and nice about it. She said that it seemed like I had "stewed in it long enough" and we started making a plan for how to recover. She said that I should enclose a letter about it with the report card and "since the parents like you,"

they would be forgiving. I felt relieved, but still upset about the potential problems and my reputation.

She strategically managed the telling of her mishap to the principal to minimize her role in the loss of the report cards and to propose an alternative, less discrediting, reading of theft.

Some will keep others from uncovering the loss by lying when they seem to catch on. Unlike the cases of Phong and Jessica, these are instances of ‘on the fly’ duplicity rather than a pre-packaged strategy. Andrea, the twenty-one-year-old student at the School of Visual Arts in New York City introduced earlier, was on her way home to Connecticut for Mother’s Day when she decided to call home to report the train she will be arriving on. She explained, “I call up and say when I’ll be there and ask my pops if he’ll pick me up from the station. Check. Done. Then he asks what phone I’m calling from. Crap. He noticed the line quality wasn’t as good. I lie and tell him that I left my phone charging at my apartment, so I had to use my friend’s... My parents pay for my service and don’t exactly appreciate that I’m so careless. . . . [My dad] is always telling me that I have to be more responsible.”

People avoid mentioning it to those who they believe will unfairly judge them. When Jessica, a twenty-four-year-old waitress living in Utah, lost her high school class ring, she avoided telling certain others even while still actively searching: “I avoided telling some of my former classmates because I would be looked on as careless for losing something of such sentimental value.” Similarly, when Irene, a twenty-nine-year-old architect, lost her “very expensive” watch while skiing at Lake Tahoe’s Heavenly Resort, she did not tell anyone. She reported: “I hid the loss of it to everyone. I didn’t want anybody to know... I feel shame for being so careless. This was a very expensive watch [at] about \$3000. [But] not only that, my father gave it to me for my college graduation ceremony, so it meant a lot.”

As a common tactic in hiding a loss, some will obtain a duplicate and attempt to pass that off as the original. When Alenna, a twenty-seven-year-old seminar coordinator living in Leander, Texas, lost a camcorder given to her by her boss as a Christmas present, she was adamant that she will never tell him. But because she thought it was in good taste to describe her appreciation of the camera, she planned to take the deceit up a notch by buying an identical one, honestly enjoying it, and then telling her boss about her experiences with the replacement.

The camcorder was actually a Christmas gift from my boss. I work in a very small office, so my boss can afford to get me nice presents... I was completely shocked when he got me the camcorder last Christmas, and [my husband] and I were both really excited about it. I see my boss every day at work, but I will definitely not ever tell him that it was lost. I probably won't ever be around him when using the camcorder, and even if I was, the differences between the old one and the new one are so small that I think they would have to be compared side-by-side to figure out what the differences are. I haven't mentioned anything about the camcorder [to him] since it was lost and we got a new one, but we haven't done a lot of taping this past month either. We have a few vacations planned over the next couple months and I will probably tell my boss if we use it then... not to be deceitful, but to show him that I really do appreciate that he got us that camcorder last year, since I know we weren't planning on buying one anytime too soon. I honestly don't see why I would ever have to tell him that the one he bought us was lost though. It's water under the bridge now.

Some will not tell others because of what they see as the sensitive condition of the potential recipient. When Larry, a resident of Queens, lost the pinky ring given to him by his father, he decided not to share the mishap with him. “[My dad] is 81-years-old and was told in

September of his lung cancer,” he recalled. “It was September 16th to be exact, one of the worst days of my life. Shortly after finding out about his condition, he gave me a few pieces of jewelry, one being the pinky ring that I loved. It really reflected my dad’s class and manhood. I could never bring myself to tell him [about its loss]. That would kill him faster than the cancer.”

Others manage the telling of a loss to account for an object’s absence, but keep any information of its indeterminate location hidden when the news may disturb the sensitive person. Meredith, a forty-year-old human resources consultant, is the mother of a two year-old named Timmy. Together they managed to lose his beloved stuffed animal named Chickie.

We went on to the restaurant and I called my daughter to ask her to look up the zoo's lost and found number. The man who answered physically went to the monkey house to look for Chickie while I waited on hold. Nope. Several times before we arrived back at the kids' apartment, I started to cry. Timmy never did ask for Chickie while we were out. Thank goodness. [He] asked for Chickie that evening, about a half hour after we returned from the restaurant and I told him Chickie was at the zoo. He said, "But I want her. I will go get her." I told him we couldn't and distracted him several times throughout the evening and at bedtime. But, Timmy went to sleep without any trauma - I was much more traumatized that he was, but of course I kept it hidden. I really thought the zoo guy would call that day or the next and I'd be able to tell Timmy Chickie was on his way home. We got home and Timmy still asked for Chickie, but he seemed to accept that Chickie was at the zoo (even though he still said he wanted her and would go find her, etc., he didn't cry or seem too upset).

For Meredith, the loss becomes a charade of distraction and obfuscation designed to keep the missing stuffed animal’s absence a matter of logistics (“Chickie is at the zoo”) rather than one of



indeterminacy. The effort is to keep the loss from coming to life for her son even while the matter threatens to overwhelm her because it is all too real.

### *Telling's Negative Effects*

This chapter has reported the various forms of telling and the reasons for being other than straightforward about a loss. When people reveal a loss to others, they may learn that responses are often more nuanced than a simple discrediting. In intentionally making a loss known to others, losing parties may get charged with acting histrionic. Jessica, a resident of New York City, explained: “As an indirect result from this one of my closest friends ended up telling me that I acted like everything was a catastrophe and that I wanted pity. This, in fact, is not true... I just wanted my belongings. My sentimental personal belongings.”

Individuals sometimes regret revealing the loss to others when doing so elicits an excessive level of sympathetic treatment. Virginia, a resident of Vancouver, British Columbia, lost her camera containing photos of her visit to Europe while visiting family in Berlin.

We got home that night and were supposed to go for dinner with friends. I was so upset, that I locked myself for a good 45 minutes in the bathroom to cry. Again, nothing I am proud of, it's silly, it is “just a camera” after all, and I am supposed to have all the precious memories and images in my head anyway and it could be so much worse, at least we are all healthy and together, and yadda, yadda, yadda. The more people were trying to comfort me and were telling me to “let it go,” the angrier I got.

When Cozy, a thirty-nine-year-old personal chef and mother of two living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, lost her ring, she could not help but sense stern criticism from her husband despite his words to the contrary after telling him about the matter. She reported, “My husband, who gave me the wedding band, which was his grandmother's, when we got engaged told me he

wasn't angry, and that these things happen, but I don't believe him. He thinks I'm flaky and forgetful and can't understand why I don't remember exactly where I put the rings.”

The fear that they may become known as someone who has a problem with holding onto their things if they tell others, or the wrong others, is a well-founded threat for some. Rachael, a twenty-three-year-old graduate student living in Berkeley, recounted a memory from childhood. She explained, “As a child I was very forgetful... In my middle school years, I was known to the janitor as ‘the girl who always loses her coat.’ I remember several incidences of my mom and I returning back to school after getting off the bus to pick it up if it had been found, though of course when I left it in other places, I wasn't always so lucky in retrieving it.”

Some losing parties show concern with how their public displays of emotional turmoil about a loss will be read by unknown others. When Lisa, a thirty-seven-year-old undergraduate studying linguistics and German at Portland State University left her laptop behind in some unknown location, her boyfriend, Andrew, became sensitive to what others may make of her emotional reaction to the loss. She explained, “I sat down on the floor outside the bathroom, leaning against the wall, sulking. I didn't have to tell Andrew that it wasn't there. I wanted to throw something. Punch something. I banged the back of my head into the wall pretty hard. I wasn't aware of other people being around, but I guess they were.”

On their way home, Andrew expressed to Lisa his concern that others may have seen her emotional reaction. They recounted their exchange:

Andrew: ...[Y]ou DID pitch a nice embarrassing public hissy fit!

Lisa: Meh, there was no one who actually knows me.

A: Well, sniffy fit.

L: If they knew what I had done, they'd be understanding.

A: Everyone was looking at me as if I'd just dumped you or something. "What a bastard!" they said with their eyes. It was a bit discomfiting.

L: Sorry.

A: Meh.

L: I couldn't not be upset. That's impossible.

A: I know... I just don't like to be uncomfortable, even though I couldn't give two shits and wipe what students think of me.

L: They were probably thinking, "What's that nice boy doing with that crabby old bitch?"

A: Probably. Hee.

Andrew expresses concern that others may have misunderstood his role in Lisa's emotional outburst at the realization that the recovery effort had failed.

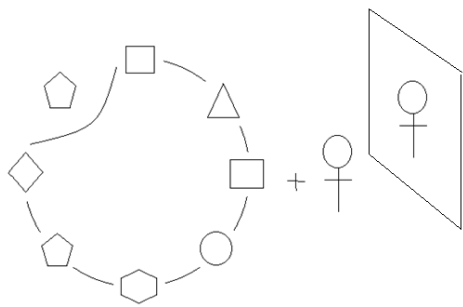
### Conclusion

Individuals may manage the news of a loss in several commonly occurring ways. Each form of management requires that they develop and sustain unique social relations with the individual whose reception of the news they wish to manage. In many ways, they manage the potentially discrediting information in ways that subordinate the ongoing relationship to these concerns. They manage the relationship so as to avoid being portrayed as someone with an enduring incompetence or otherwise someone who is careless. When individuals present the mishap to others, they often frame it as a fluke, a temporary spell of incompetence, or an everyday mistake that anyone might make. As a story about what it means to lose a material possession, the chapter shows the various ways a loss lives on in the relations individuals keep with others.

Beyond loss, it sheds light on a more generic social concern experienced by those who have committed a dumb mistake, failed at a pursuit, made an embarrassing gaffe, or have otherwise done something that could discredit their social standing in the eyes of others. Because this class of personal mishaps often does not occur for all known associates of the potentially-discredited to witness, they may try to manage its release in ways that preserve their pre-mishap relations, or at the very least control how these relations might change.

People sustain loss as a theme organizing their behavior by shifting reflections back on to their own biography, sometimes while still engaged in a flurry of practical action to recover the object, sometimes when they have aborted such effort. In reflecting on a loss's significance to the self, losing parties may learn that they had been stupid, careless, dumb, or neglectful in the moment of the loss. Or they may be drawn to deeper, more situationally-transcendent insights into self that the loss seems to unearth, de-emphasizing the foreground dynamics by which it went missing. As private barometers, individuals may see their losses as indicating how their lives are going more generally. As harbingers of the future, they may see them as ominous signs of what is to come. But not all losses offer readings of lives going awry, some dispense powerful counsel before any difficulties greater than an object's disappearance take place.

Figure 6. Seeing Self through Loss



Seeing Self through Loss

### *Momentary Defects*

Freud once famously described the subconscious motives behind seemingly unintentional misplacements. In the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, he argued that those who leave things behind in his office, like gloves and scarves, are expressing an unconscious motivation to return. Yet many resist reading their losses for a deeper significance to the self. Jeanie, a sixty-two-

year-old retired marketing executive living on the Maine coast, asserted: “I can comfortably dismiss the Freudian theory of having mislaid my wedding brooch on account of hidden but powerful motives. Sometimes, dear Sigmund, a cigar is just a cigar.” These are losses that only indicate something about the person within the situation, that day, or on that outing, they are not a deeper statement about who they are.

For some, the loss is a logical result of having been somehow off that day. When Jae-Eun, a surfer living in Los Angeles, discovered that he left his surfboard behind before loading it onto his car, he chalked it up as a bout of carelessness. He explained, “Then one evening I took it to Bay Street in Santa Monica, and after surfing, I was changing by the parking meters. I was very absentminded that night, as I sometimes am, and forgot my board and drove off without it! I guess I wasn't thinking or something...”

Others understand a loss as the logical result of breaking from their routines. Deidre, a forty-three-year-old systems analyst living in Boston, concluded that her absorption in a game on her Blackberry threw off the normal way she handles her train pass. “I was out of my routine when getting off the train, I think I was playing a game on my blackberry and sort of held onto the pass in my lap,” she explained. “Normally as soon as the conductor walks by, I stick the pass in the outside pocket of my biker bag. Clearly I did not follow the routine and lost the pass.”

Some treat the occurrence as a fluke through displays of incredulity that they could have committed such a thoughtless act. Lisa is a thirty-seven-year-old senior undergraduate studying linguistics and German at Portland State University. When it appeared that she had left a laptop behind somewhere, she was in disbelief that she could commit such a ‘careless act’ and took time to re-assert a more familiar version of herself: “I couldn't believe that I would just walk off

without the computer! What a stupid thing to do! I'm an extremely careful person. I just don't do things like that.”

But if some admit to a momentary carelessness that caused the loss, others deflect any sort of responsibility, even after admitting that they dropped the object to begin with. Rather than focus on the mishandling that caused the initial separation, Amy focused on the role that an imagined finder played in the loss of her purse, noting, “I always say that stealing must be a popular trend in Philly right now. One could say that I was just acting irresponsible and careless, but I haven't been the only victim. Some of my friends also have experienced this nasty habit that people continue to uphold.”

### *Generalizing from Moment to Character*

In realizing that something has been lost, individuals may discover a more damning commentary of self that extends beyond their inability to keep an object in safekeeping at a particular moment. In these instances, individuals generalize from the situation to their character more broadly. They may find that their mishandling is an indication of a chronic defect that plagues them or an indication that they are not adequately prepared for the endeavors they are undertaking in life. When Christopher, a twenty-eight-year-old software designer living in New York City, lost the slacks to his new suit while taking them to the cleaners by foot, it seemed more significant than “just losing a pair of pants.”

I bought the suit two weeks ago—a charcoal two-button Italian suit with pale blue pinstripes and a crimson silk lining... I'd decided that because of my work, and because I just graduated from college this month, it was high time that I owned an actual suit that I'd had tailored to fit me. You know, an actual grown-up kind of thing. So losing half of

the suit, silly as it sounds, feels like a lot more than just losing a pair of pants. There's this whole symbolic aspect to it that really makes me feel even worse about it than I think I should. My friend who recommended the tailor (and who had gone with me to pick out the suit) showed up and asked how it felt to drop off my very first grown-up suit, and I had to tell him about it too.

From Christopher's point of view, purchasing a tailored suit felt like a rite of passage into adulthood. Losing part of the suit felt like a challenge to his readiness.

For some, it may be difficult to resist seeing what might otherwise appear as a bout of youthful indiscretion as actually a symptom of a deeper problem. When Rebecca, a twenty-two-year-old living in Toronto, lost her black United Colors of Benetton blazer at the Mod Club while out drinking with friends, she took it as a sign of a more dangerous problem with binge drinking. She explained, "It had put a major moral dilemma on me, getting so drunk that you lose your brand new expensive blazer. Jeez. So I have contemplated giving up drinking."

It may be easy for people to reason that a single loss is only a fluke, not something to read into too deeply. But in light of a second loss, individuals may find it hard to resist seeing themselves as having a more general problem. When Marty, a man in his early forties living in San Diego, lost the family's camera on vacation in Tijuana, he read it in light of having lost another camera on a previous vacation. He explained, "Incidentally, we lost a camera in a black case a couple of years ago in Hawaii, leaving it on the floor of the rental car, which we turned in hurriedly at night. It took me a year to completely get over feeling bad and stupid for that blunder, and it was on our minds that losing a vacation camera a second time really made us feel foolish."

A second loss appears particularly challenging when the lessons of the first seemed to have been blatantly ignored. When George discovered that his passport was missing, he was hurrying to leave a friend's house to catch a flight from Seattle back to his home city of Chicago. He explained, "That time, it was certainly an act of stupidity... and in this case, I was certain I MUST be an idiot because I didn't learn the first time to always keep the damn thing in a safe place. So, I swore some more... at myself... and turned the couch cushions over again."

Some losses may transport individuals back in time to a similar loss they suffered as a child and generate a sense that what is otherwise an episodic problem has actually been life-long. Olivia, a fifty-three-year-old actress and theater director living in New York City, recalled, "I was sweating profusely, and remembering the time when I was ten and left my purse on the London tube, realizing it just as the doors shut behind me, and feeling like the whole forty years between then and now I had done nothing but lose things and look for them."

Caroline echoed Olivia's sentiment in reading her loss as a damning reminder of the immaturity that has plagued her life. After losing an L.L. Bean bag containing many items including her wallet and press pass, she reported, "'I'm 44 years old and I'm still as irresponsible as I was as a teenager' is the mantra I keep repeating to myself. I'll say it all night and into tomorrow morning, when I wake up with that same nagging feeling that I'm a huge screw-up."

For others, a loss does not signal a lack of maturity, but perhaps that they have surpassed maturity and could now be entering into a state of decline. When Betty, an eighty-one-year-old living in San Diego, left her purse behind at a bus stop and remembered just in time to watch it as the bus drove away, it brought to mind questions about the viability of her mental faculties. As her daughter explained, "My mother is in very good health but is becoming somewhat forgetful so it was upsetting to her."



But if an occasional loss will signal a defect of character or memory problem that individuals find worrying, others will concede that there is a deeper problem but work to mitigate the upheavals it may cause, expressing a 'just roll with it' mentality. Elena, a thirty-two-year-old art director living in San Francisco, understood a loss to be part of a growing problem, but tried to make peace with it rather than allow it to worry her.

I found them a month later. They had never left my house in fact. I had them in a black case, in the top drawer of a little dresser I have that keeps random things in it. I was very happy to find them, however I did feel a little bit idiotic about it since I had gone through the pain of losing it and looking for it, and that it's become very typical of me to misplace things. I've come to accept it though for the most part, that I lose things, or misplace them rather.

For these individuals, losing things is further evidence of an underlying problem on which they have already worked to make peace. These occasional glitches of self are a part of who they already know themselves to be and do little more than raise an eyebrow. Even when Cami, a resident of Cleveland, lost a beloved scarf that "started growing a personality" over the years that she owned it, it failed to pose a great threat to the person she already knew she was. She had learned to expect as much and admitted that losses had become only minor setbacks. "Well, I have to admit I lose a lot of things," she explained. "Annually I'll lose my wallet, my cell phone, clothes, shoes, socks, earrings, everything. I'm actually pretty well known for my ability to lose something. I've lost my wallet and cell phone so much that at this point, I am usually 'okay' with it. I mean, it's not easy to lose all that... but overall I know I'll get back into the swing of things and that life isn't over."

But if some losses reveal the losing party's 'true' character, some losses will illustrate differences in character between people. Jennifer is a twenty-eight-year-old aircraft maintenance engineer for Air Canada living in British Columbia. She was snowshoeing when she lost her camera. "At the time I was fighting a bout of depression and the camera was the last thing that I wanted to deal with," she recalled. "It actually was really difficult for me. It was like the last straw sort of thing, I just couldn't handle it. [My boyfriend and I] actually ended up having a fight over this. Such a trivial thing, the loss of one of my possessions, but it really illustrated some differences in personalities between us. Anyway, he did the initial searching for me and insisted on discussing it every time I said I didn't want to talk about it. Finally I managed to convince him that I couldn't handle dealing with it on top of everything else I was dealing with at the time."

#### *Revealing Hidden Desires or Inner Conflict*

Beyond character and personality traits, individuals commonly find that losses reveal unexpressed motives and concealed turmoil. Sigmund Freud (1901) turned this kind of reading into the basis for psychological insight. He wrote, "If one looks over the cases of mislaying it will be difficult to assume that mislaying is anything other than the result of an unconscious intention" (34). For some, there is a vague sense of deeper significance behind the loss of the object, but grasping its precise meaning appears elusive. Matthew, a twenty-three-year-old technology support staff member living in Concord, California, struggled to find the deeper meaning behind the loss of his keys and pocketknife.

It plagued my mind for the entire day. My frustration grew, which was followed by anger and rage. The thought of my keys missing drove me a little closer to madness. It's not the fact that I lost keys. Everything on the keychain itself is replaceable, but for some

reason it's more than just keys, it's symbolic. Symbolic of what? I haven't quite put my finger on it, but it has affected me in some way, a sort of setback.

Some will sense that their chronic carelessness, of which the loss is an indication, is symbolic of a deeper problem. The desire to unravel its meaning will drive some to share the matter with others. Upon sharing the matter with his therapist, Minos, working in TV production in Manhattan, began to consider how the loss of his laptop could indicate something deeper about his psyche.

During the cab ride, besides trying to re-create the series of events that had occurred, I felt an overwhelming sense of stupidity. How could I be so stupid and careless? Why am I so stupid and careless? And I thought about analysis and how Freud talked about losing things and what that represents. And I began to dread having to share the story over the phone with my Argentinian therapist and breaking the news to the guy who I work with who had given me the laptop; it is a laptop that I use for work. The next morning, I explained the whole situation to my Argentinian therapist. I won't go into details, but she told me what I was expecting to hear. Losing something is a way of hurting yourself, a way of losing yourself; it is your subconscious at work...

Others suspect a deeper meaning to their losses when considering the symbolism of the object in their lives. For Pat, a forty-eight-year-old illustrator living in Berkeley, her ring is an empty promise that has too often belied its symbolic meaning of trust and fidelity. She found that its loss could have been an expression of her latent desires to dispense with empty promises. She reported, "That I unconsciously threw the ring away has run through my mind over and over again. I do not want another ring, as my love has promised. I do not want 'things' to be so important. [T]hat ring does not replace loyalty, honesty or integrity... I want to be treated with

respect and with honesty and integrity. The loss of the ring is very significant on many levels. All of them personal, all of them representative of how damaged I am.”

But for others, subconsciously willing the loss of an object is less about the object’s symbolic meaning, as it is for Pat, and more about their own attempts to wake themselves from personal illusions. Kitty, working for a media group in Manhattan, lost her gold Tiffany’s bracelet that her parents gave her for her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday “in the dirty streets” of Lower Manhattan. Looking at the loss as an indication of inner turmoil is a lesson from her childhood.

In the household that I was raised in, there were no accidents. When reporting a stubbed toe or lost item to my father, the response was always the same: I had been too caught up in my thoughts, or too wound up with unexpressed feelings or emotions. The accident served as a reminder of this. I was always quick to defend the Random Accident as having (humorously) "nothing to do with me". I hated the idea that I was getting ahead of myself or that I was too much in my head and ungrounded in my body, and that I ultimately played a part in what had happened. Losing my bracelet last weekend in a rainstorm in the hectic and construction heavy intersection of Broadway and Rector was no accident. I now see that it was the only way I could subconsciously will my inner turmoil to be sorted out. I had to physically manifest some buried feelings with a truly horrible event that would get my attention sharply back onto the essential questions I so often ignore: Who am I? Am I being honest with myself? Am I being true in my word and action?

While some find a loss a tempting window into one’s own inner turmoil, others find that it provides an intriguing—and at times troubling—insight into the secret or hidden motives of others. Elle, a twenty-nine-year-old doctoral candidate living in British Columbia, was returning

home from Atlanta with her husband when a loss occurred. After checking out of their hotel room and making it to the airport “just in time” for the flight back, Elle’s husband coolly informed her that his wedding ring was missing. Immediately irritated by his blasé attitude about what was for her a deeply important object, a whirlwind of insecurities began to mount for Elle. That he managed to pack nearly everything that “wasn’t bolted down” struck her as a particularly telling condemnation of their relationship. She recalled “read[ing] the loss of the ring as a symptom of my husband’s overall detachment from me and from our marriage.” From Elle’s perspective, it was not simply a ring that was lost; but rather, it was her husband’s commitment to the relationship that showed up missing.

Some losses force a reflection on whether they are denying who they really are. Ethan, an opera singer in his early forties living in New York City, explained how the loss of his “fancy” Montblanc pen elicited thoughts about his direction in life.

More complex series of thoughts arose around the pen because I bought it with money I’d made singing and I’ve had an ambivalent stance towards the singing career the entire ten years I’ve done it, and even in the past three or four years when I’ve made a decent living from it. It feels like a bad fit, like it’s too precious, the wrong genre for me. Too antique. Too old world. I acted in theater, did stand up for a while, and acted in a soap a few times, and I feel more like a comedian or actor, more like a Bic pen, than I do like an opera singer, which feels like the fancy engraved pen of a performance genre. I don’t feel like an opera singer, and I sort of felt like a poser whipping out the Montblanc to sign things.

Others may find that an otherwise minor loss of an object reminds them of a more troubling time from the past. Rather than act as a revelatory agent, clarifying what is happening

in their lives, as it did for Elle, these readings are associative: one loss draws up, or symbolizes, a more unsettling time. When Chuck, a fifty-four-year-old working in air cargo handling in Albuquerque, lost his family's camera, it rattled him more than usual according to his wife. She explained, "I think he felt more upset than usual because we had just been through Katrina and even though we lost no worldly goods, he lost his job and we relocated and are just now settling in. Katrina left us all, the whole family, feeling more vulnerable and exposed, if that makes sense. And yes, prone to misplacing stuff and forgetting stuff. And then little things can be more unsettling than usual." From his wife's perspective, the family's experience with hurricane Katrina left everyone, and especially her husband, feeling more vulnerable.

#### *A Sign of Life's Downward Turn*

Individuals commonly find that their losses reveal insights about their lives beyond their character or hidden desires. In these cases, a loss is an ominous sign of a downturn in one's life, or a foreshadowing of what is to come if efforts to thwart it are not undertaken. In the former case, the loss is read as a revealing clue from which individuals can finally grasp the emergent pattern in which they currently find themselves living.

When a loss indicates a looming threat, the item and the context in which it is lost may seem to provide an obvious interpretive framing. For some, it is hard to resist a damning reading of an object's loss when the object has been explicitly imbued with the meaning of renewal. For Lisa and her husband, losing a wedding ring on the honeymoon after their renewed vows appeared as an unnerving sign of the lingering marital discord that they hoped to leave behind.

The ring was a symbol of how we were going to have a new marriage that was even better than the old one. It would be more valuable to us and it would be everything it should have been from the start. We wouldn't take it for granted and we'd guard it with

all we had in us. Our new marriage vows would be kept "till death do us part" this time. It was ironic how the ring was taken from us at just this moment. Was there a deeper meaning in this event? Was it just another lost possession or a warning from above? I wish I knew. Maybe if our ring was brought back to us by some miracle it would mean that our marriage won't be swept away when we let our guards down and that ups and downs are just a part of life, that it doesn't ruin our relationship. That God has our backs. All I know is that we long for that ring to be back so I can put it on his finger once again and for always.

For others, losses may signal a coming trend, but one that they are only able to detect in hindsight. Tara, a thirty-three-year-old British photographer living in London, explained how the loss of her London Tube pass came to be seen as a harbinger of things to come. That it contained a photograph of herself that she found particularly flattering, reminding her of a much younger self and a time much removed, was symbolism not lost on her. She explained, "Unbeknown to me it would mark the beginning of a huge cycle of loss on a much larger scale. In August I split up with my long-term boyfriend, my Grandfather died in that September and then my Dad died in December of the same year. Last year two family friends died and then an elderly neighbour who I had photographed and become friends with died this November. On reflection the loss of the oyster card and the picture of me at that time seems quite symbolic as my world was about to change immeasurably."

But not all losses indicate coming trends. When a loss appears as part of a larger set of negative circumstances plaguing them, individuals sometimes feel that the loss provides evidence that they are already amidst a larger spell of hardship. When Amanda, a thirty-four-

year-old marketing representative for a large pet food manufacturer living in Vancouver, lost her gold link bracelet she could not help but feel that the whole world was picking on her.

The next morning, I retraced my steps but the bracelet was nowhere to be seen. I must admit, I was feeling kind of down about the whole thing. The bracelet was given to me by a friend, and had been brought back from Italy. It was kind of like a kick in the ass from the universe. Have I mentioned that my watch battery died the same morning? And then, despite the fact that I am disabled and use a cane, I had to argue with someone for a seat on the bus? All in all, I had a fairly stressful day. It's hard not to feel like the whole world is picking on you sometimes.

When things begin to improve after a period of hardship, individuals may treat a newly occurring loss as indication that the hardship is not in fact over. For some, these losses occur at sensitive moments in a recovery process and are difficult to ignore as signs that life is essentially tragic. Robyn, a twenty-five-year-old waitress and struggling artist living in Toronto, explained:

I left original artwork , stuff I was actually going to sell that day, stuff that I was happy with, art that was a step for me in recovering from my year-long creative block and then this happened and I thought it would only keep me from making more. I thought everything ends in tragedy. I felt silly for thinking like this but you have to understand that I don't feel like a waitress... I feel like an artist. I feel like that is my life. A part of me died with [the painting's loss] even though I keep telling myself it's just a material thing I can make more.

But not all losses offer serious challenges to a recovery process, some are merely acknowledged as bumps in the road. When Matthew, a twenty-three-year-old computer technical support staff member introduced earlier, lost several keys and a pocketknife, he felt like



it may undermine the upward swing in his life. “Losing my keys really took the wind out of my sails,” he recalled. “Things in my life started to turn up after a slight slump. I started to put in more work hours, my social life was getting better after falling out with a few close friends, I took on more responsibility financially and in the work place. Then I lost my car keys, my two house keys, the office key and my pocket knife, which had sentimental value.”

For others, a loss is less indicative of a change in life’s direction and more indicative of a temporary spell of bad luck. When Melissa, a resident of Washington DC, lost her fleece she could not help but see it in combination with other troubles she had recently. She explained, “In the few days after I lost the fleece a couple of other minor but bad things happened. I choked kind of badly over lunch and a friend accidentally elbowed me in the face. I definitely said to myself that I was having ‘bad luck’ which I never say to myself and did wonder if I had done something wrong and was having ‘bad karma.’” Like Melissa, Nick, a twenty-six-year-old strategy consultant living in San Francisco, felt that he had entered a spell of bad luck after he lost his wallet. He reported, “After the loss, I felt a little star-crossed, as I’d been in a minor car accident on Friday of the same weekend, but eventually I just decided to laugh about it and fix what I could.”

#### *Offers Wise Counsel or Corrective Action*

While some losses indicate what is going wrong in one’s life, others provide ways out of the troubles they are mired in. Individuals may read losses as ameliorative forces in their lives, responding to a particular event in which they displayed questionable ethics or responding to a more longstanding malaise. After losing her gold bracelet, Amanda, the thirty-four-year-old from Vancouver introduced earlier, conceded that the occurrence may actually hold valuable

advice. She noted, “[M]aybe I needed to be reminded not to take things for granted or to not value material things so much.”

Others look to losses as ‘signs’ of how they should be living. When Martina, a twenty-three-year-old recent college graduate living in the Bay Area, determined that her problems with bulimia had caused her to lose a dearly loved ring given to her by her grandma, she took it as a “sign” that the eating disorder had become too serious. “We were cutting it close [to the flight’s departure time], we heard the boarding announcement and we were just getting the food,” she recalled. “We ate it very fast and none of what happened next would have happened if I had not done what I had done next. I have been battling with an eating disorder for the past five years. I insisted that I run to the bathroom very fast before boarding the plane. [My friend] was rushing me and asked me to be fast. I took the ring off in the restroom, put it in my pocket and was finally punished for being bulimic. She was yelling to hurry; they were making the final boarding call. I washed my hands and ran as fast as I could to the plane. As we were waiting to take off I remembered that I had not put my ring back on... And that brings me to today. After that happened I took it as a sign that I need to stop with the bulimia. That was my sign...”

Examined in hindsight, some may express disappointment in themselves for missing the obvious advice the loss was offering after problems that it would have resolved begin to arise. Kendal, a twenty-six-year-old living in San Francisco, reported, “Angry with myself because I had received a preemptive warning from the pin a week prior while meeting a prospective new roommate in a possible new living situation, the pin had fallen off. Clearly, a sign that the living situation was not going to work.”

For some, the loss itself is a toll they must pay for living beyond their ethical means. The loss acts as a karmic correction to a dishonest act of which the object is symbolically related.

Eileen, a forty-six-year-old lawyer living in Brooklyn, explained what happened while she and her family were on vacation in Paris.

I was eager to please my son on the one hand, but determined not to pay the entrance fee just to see [Napoleon's] tomb. I decided to casually show the passes and see if anyone would notice that they had expired the day before. I felt there was nothing wrong with this because we had bought the passes very late on the 15th and only visited one attraction that day. I rationalized that the 15th didn't really count, and this was the second full day of the passes. This was only "fair." No one noticed that the passes had expired. ... Part of the reason I was so upset [about the loss] was because I felt pretty smug about getting into the museum. I knew it probably wasn't my most noble hour, but I really wanted us to [see] the tomb. When I lost the guidebook I felt as if I was being punished for having committed a sin. Karma, if you will.

Eileen conceded that losing her city compass, her guidebook, felt like it came about as a result of losing her moral compass.

Others are prompted by sympathetic onlookers to consider the loss through an interpretive frame of deep insight. When David, a resident of Seattle, lost the keys to his home and car, his wife's advice to examine the loss for its guidance resonated with him deeply. He took up his wife's suggestion with thoughtful sincerity.

[My wife] said that maybe losing the keys could symbolize that there are other "keys" in my life that I have lost... or am losing and to think about that before I fall asleep. It reminded me of continuing my education at the University of Washington, how hard it was for me to get admitted into the school of business, could it possibly be a "key" to the future? Work was getting busier and they noticed my performance was lacking. They

said I needed to choose work or school. I told them I would continue working, so I missed the last two quarters of school. I had some dreams about getting a college degree, not for money but for confidence and a sense of accomplishment. Did I lose this key too? My marriage has not been great as far as having a sex life goes. It seems after 25 years of marriage it is just too much work to make love anymore. Too many things need to be "just right" and they never seem to be anymore. The doctor said my testosterone levels are low and he gave me medication for it. Could a sexual relationship be a key that is missing in my life... when did I lose it and can it be found again?

### *The Deflation of Significance*

For some, a sense that the loss revealed something meaningful becomes dwarfed by subsequent events. At first blush, some losses will strike individuals with a poignant symbolism. But with subsequent events occurring in their lives, they will realize the relative insignificance of the insight that they gained from the mishap. When Elle, the doctoral candidate living in British Columbia introduced earlier, learned that her husband had lost his wedding ring, it revealed his inadequate commitment to her. Shortly thereafter the matter diminished in light of subsequent events in her life.

At any rate, the ring issue remained interesting for only another ninety minutes after we arrived home. Fifteen minutes later I was to learn by email that my provincial scholarship would not be renewed (which would in turn set off a whole number of other problems too numerous, complicated, and irrelevant to get into here), and another hour after that I would discover that my aunt had lost her battle with cancer while I was away. The day got progressively harder, and as it did, the problem with the wedding band

seemed to shrink away. Now, strangely, I find myself writing about this absurd incident, which at the time felt like the end of the world, and it's a veritable relief from all else that's happened. That's probably why I'm writing this, to get back to a place where a lost ring was the worst of my troubles. "My preciousssss!" Yes, those were the days.

Some may reason through the meaning of the object in their lives and realize that they had unnecessarily inflated it. When Vanna lost her Canon 450 Powershot digital camera in Florence, Italy, she was initially very upset. But soon she began to examine her reaction. "As I pondered my pain and the circumstances, I realized that I had placed an almost visceral transference of power into the digital snapshots of the vacation!" she recalled. "I replayed the pictures as highlights, as though they were the vacation, when there were many more frames of experience in between and beyond those few I captured digitally. I began mitigating the loss, and was interested in realizing my illusion—that I had lost the vacation, the memory by losing the pictures."

In other cases, individuals deflate the significance of a loss, not by meeting new circumstances as in Elle's case, or reasoning through the artificial inflation of the object's meaning like Vanna, but by sudden realization. Jackie is a thirty-seven-year-old pharmacist living in Wisconsin. After an emotionally difficult loss of a digital camera somewhere in Lima, Peru just before boarding a plane to return home with her family, the loss suddenly became a minor issue. "As I was absorbed in my thoughts, I looked over at my children sleeping and had a true light-bulb moment," she recalled. "It just suddenly entered my mind that I was one of the luckiest people. My husband, children, and I were returning home from a fabulous adventure. We were all intact, safe and healthy. We had many wonderful memories to keep with us forever. WHY, I wondered, was I sniveling over AN OBJECT that could be replaced?"

### *Resisting a Reading*

Despite their potential to contain great symbolism, individuals commonly resist reading their losses for even minor insights. When the object holds no significant value to them or when it is quickly recovered after only a temporary and otherwise uneventful loss, they may gloss over the occurrence as a non-event. When Amy, a college professor in her mid-thirties living in New England, dropped a bobby pin in her bathroom while getting ready for work, she immediately knelt down and scanned the floor. Not seeing it anywhere, she stood back up, grabbed another one, and never made mention of it to anyone. Similarly, Arnold, an automotive technician from Northern California, was initially miffed that he could not find his sunglasses for his drive to the airport on a “very sunny day,” but knew he could find others scattered around his home and truck once he returned from his trip. “It was no big deal,” he recalled.

Others, while experiencing moments of great frustration sometimes notice that a spouse or another family member is not moved by the loss of a shared item. These unmoved individuals may initially frame the loss as a non-event, but may finally concede that they cannot resist the aggrieved frame succumbed to by others. Eileen, the forty-six-year-old lawyer living in Brooklyn introduced earlier, reported: “My husband thought it was no big deal to lose the book, but he got swept up in my agitation.”

### Conclusion

When an object unintentionally goes missing, individuals commonly find that the event offers revealing insights into their lives. Upon considering the recalled dynamics that led to the loss, individuals read it much like the psychologist’s ink blot test; within it they find a story of

self. As a simple narrative, this is a tale about situationally-specific carelessness, idiocy, and at times, neglect. But individuals may also see something of greater concern to them and find a more complicated narrative. They may see the loss as the logical outcome of a situationally-transcendent defect in their character, hidden desires or underlying turmoil, or as a forerunner of a larger downturn in their lives of which the loss is part. As a silver lining, individuals may also see that the loss has offered wise counsel about a heretofore neglected problem that had been plaguing them.

Why would losses of everyday objects consistently point to deeper insights into self beyond a temporary bout of absentmindedness? Do losses reliably point individuals to hidden forces working in their lives because of the mysterious details of many of their occurrences? By their nature, losses of everyday objects are events that individuals do not directly witness happening and sometimes something for which they never find satisfying explanation. If it appears that it has vanished into thin air in truly puzzling fashion, perhaps individuals find themselves more amenable to the idea that hidden, and sometimes greater, forces are at work. For some, the hidden forces responsible for the loss are the non-mysterious, and sometimes disappointing, manifestations of personality or character. For some, the forces reflect a vaguely recognized impact of hidden desires. For still others, the forces responsible are the invisible powers regulating right and wrong in the universe.

## Discerning Immediate Cause – Chapter 4

When individuals subordinate their ongoing biographies to the concern of the object's recovery, they begin to organize their efforts around a presumed way that it went missing. They begin investigating or assuming different physical causes. They commonly work from four possibilities, each placing the self in a unique relation to the object and others: they may find that they have (1) miscollected, (2) mislaid, (3) mis-secured, or (4) mishandled it. Having miscollected it, they find that they have failed to gather up something that they sat aside while temporarily immobile. Having mislaid it, they understand that they put it in a place that they cannot currently recollect. If it were mis-secured, they understand that it had fallen from them without their knowing due to a malfunction in the object's strap, clasp, hook, etc. or their failure to secure it appropriately. If it were mishandled, they likely watched as they fumbled it out of their own grasp and into a hard to reach space. In organizing their behavior around each of these paths, they discover features of self and the challenge they face to resolve the matter from different vantage points.

The process of orienting to the object's path of escape commonly has a protean narrative quality. People may change their hunches easily and repeatedly as evidence or likelihood of some paths decrease and others increase. They may treat the object as having escaped safekeeping in a particular way because: it is their best guess after considering alternatives; it is what they can practically check right now; it is what happened to them in the past, etc. When evidence is slim and not knowing feels emotionally unsettling or looked down upon by co-present others, they may quickly commit to a path as a defensive measure to quiet the critics or assuage the judgmental internal monologue.

*Miscollected*



Sometimes individuals discover that an object is missing when they suddenly realize that they failed to gather up what had been temporarily set aside. Commonly, the absence comes to light with a sudden sense of feeling incomplete, too light, or less encumbered than they should be. If the signal is not physical, they may sense that there is a dangling opening to a narrative act that they did not properly close. Sometimes leaving the location in which it was temporarily set aside spurs the recognition that something has been “left behind,” as people tend to perform togetherness checks at these transitional stages.

So-Young, a thirty-six-year-old chemist in San Francisco, reported noticing her jacket was left behind on her seat at a restaurant when she went outside and felt “too cold.” Entering into the brightness of a sunny day, individuals see that what is missing is a kind of partial blindness, what their sunglasses provide. Sara, a forty-three year old schoolteacher in Ann Arbor, realized she has left her beloved and “well-aged” Rayban sunglasses behind at a grocery store checkstand when she simply crossed from the shady to the sunny side of the parking lot and notices “the glare.” One’s baseline sense of ‘feeling normal’ becomes the feeling one has when he or she has certain possessions; when something is gone, a familiarity of self is gone, signaling the loss.

Others are struck by a feeling of being too light or unencumbered. Joseph, an eighteen-year-old tourist from Manila, realized that he left his camera behind at an attraction at Disneyland when he felt “considerably lighter.” “I realized that I was missing my Canon Powershot S80, which I had received as a birthday present only a week before, around 10 minutes after we had left Innoventions [an exhibit at Disneyland],” he recalled. “I was waiting outside the bathroom for my mom and siblings when I realised that my pockets were

considerably lighter than they should be... I felt around and my heart stopped... my camera was nowhere to be found.”

Through the act of realizing the object was left behind, individuals invoke contrasting versions of self. They sense that a blindness that plagued them in the past contrasts poignantly with a newly re-awakened sense of object management awareness. They demonstrate their expanded awareness in recalling a memory of the object sitting somewhere that went unchecked before leaving the place. If the memory of the object sitting at one’s feet is not forthcoming, they may generate a sense of their expanded awareness through an immediate logical deduction. ‘It is not here now and the last place I saw it was there. So it must be there,’ they reason. They sense that they can know now, as someone removed from the scene, what they failed to know then as a member of the scene.

Individuals experience themselves going from a state of dumbness to an expanded sense of object management awareness in a flash because the realization of absence and then the memory of where it was mistakenly left tend to occur as couplets. When Eileen, a forty-six-year-old attorney living in Brooklyn, realized she had left her Paris guidebook behind in a cafeteria, she and her family were observing Napoleon’s tomb in a nearby museum. “As we walked in, we came face to face with Napoleon's opulent tomb, in all its glory,” she recalled. “Aside from being awestruck, I felt a sense of personal satisfaction... It was at that moment that I noticed our Paris guidebook was missing. I had lost our Paris guidebook. I immediately realized that I must have left it at the cafeteria in the main museum area where we had earlier stopped for a snack. I had set the book down on the chair next to me and put my jacket over it. I took my jacket but did not check the seat.” In the moment of the discovery, she realized that she

had committed a dumb act and implicitly regained a sense of acumen for dealing with her possessions.

Some may wish that they can stage an intervention on behalf of their less-aware self. Having realized that he had left his camera behind at the last attraction, Joseph, the visitor to Disneyland introduced earlier, wished he could go into the past and stop himself before walking away from his camera. He reported, “I wished over and over that I could turn back time and just stop myself from leaving it... Just that one little moment ruined my visit to what was supposed to be the ‘Happiest Place on Earth!’”

After the realization of the mistake, individuals commonly conduct a cost-benefit analysis of an immediate return to the location. When they deem the item valuable enough to return and possibly supplant or delay an alternative line of conduct, they dash back. When these dash backs are directed toward places of business, they must humble themselves, or otherwise decenter themselves from their conception of the universe and allow for competing interests. Though Ryan is certain that he left his jacket behind at the theater that he visited earlier in the evening, he must thwart his quick return and subordinate his ‘troubling’ matter to non-troubled others, or the theater and its hours of operation. He noted, “I could now remember clearly that I had left it sitting on my seat at the theatre. I was disappointed and frustrated to say the least, and very seriously considered driving to the theatre right then [at] 2:15 am, to see if there was any way I could get in, but I realized this was a bit extreme.”

They rush back while assessing the likely sympathy levels of members of the scene. In rushing back to recover something left behind, losing parties recurrently gauge their deservingness of support from anonymous and known others at the scene. They imagine the wait staff and the clientele, if it was a restaurant for example, and either hope for benevolent treatment

or assess the likely honesty-level of the people on the scene. They show sensitivity to how they might have been perceived by others at the left behind location when they were there earlier and often ask themselves some version of, ‘did I seem impolite? Is there any reason why they would not hold my personal belonging for me?’

On his way back to a restaurant in Berkeley to recover his PDA, Raymond remembered thinking, “I knew I should have tipped that waitress better... I hope she doesn’t throw away my PDA out of spite.” When Alex, a UCLA professor, noticed his wallet was missing, he found some reprieve when considering the owners of the shop he may have left it at. “This morning I could not find my wallet...” he recalled. “In that minute, I flashed on multiple stories about what might have happened, including: the last time I used it, yesterday, was at a grocery store in Koreatown, and they are nice, honest people ... they would surely have held it for me.” Conversely, when Samantha left her laptop inside its case on a bus in Jerusalem, her retrieval effort is charged with a sense that she will not be given special sympathy. “It was a prime target for exploding,” she reported thinking at the time, describing her sense of what happened to baggage left in places where objects left behind were sometimes seen as bombs by the authorities.

For some like Alejandro, a thirty-nine-year-old living in San Francisco, getting help from others after leaving something behind was less about his presentation of self and deservingness of sympathy and more about the pragmatics of the built environment and getting ‘lucky.’

[I] pulled out and made it to the store a few minutes later... go for the wallet and zap ...mind starts racing and I start swearing that I am the biggest idiot this very minute on the whole of this planet as I burn some rubber pulling out of the store's parking lot to drive back to the restaurant...while thinking that I might have gotten lucky and the

Mexicans at the place had grabbed it. When I finally get there after maybe 10 to 15 minutes in all, I lunge into the window and asked them in my native Spanish if they had found it to which they answered with a perplexed expression of absolute ignorance of what I was talking about...

He soon learned that they would not have been able to see his wallet from their angle within the burrito stand.

If the item is not there when they return, they often, because they still have a vivid image of it being left behind, transform the loss into a theft and the loss orientation effectively comes to an end. When Teri, a resident of Los Angeles in her mid-twenties, got into a barroom brawl, she soon learned that her purse was one of its victims.

Billy thought it would be a good idea to hide my purse since I got wrapped up in fighting too. When he left he forgot to bring the purse and I forgot it as well. It dawned on me as soon as we got to the car. I freaked out literally. I never had lost anything as valuable and as important in my life. Of course everything was a little escalated because of the alcohol, but needless to say I went crazy and tried to get back to where it was "hidden." I did go back again to find it had been stolen.

### *Public Transportation: A Common Sub-Type*

When leaving something behind on public transportation, the realization that something is missing often comes in the first few moments after exiting and performing a togetherness check, or a series of pats and glances on or around one's person to determine if everything is accounted for. It unfolds differently than other miscollections because the left behind location quickly becomes a moving target.

Individuals commonly see themselves as having few options except working bureaucratic channels by telephone, often a traveling companion's cell phone if theirs was left behind. Having left something behind in a cab, they commonly place their hopes on some anonymous central taxi office, or as in the case of New York City, the TLC (Taxi and Limousine Commission). Met with questions about identifying the cab and the driver by the operator, many fail to show that they know anything more than the driver's gender and approximate ethnic background. They often express suspicion of the official's bureaucratic calm and recalcitrance as they are usually told to call back in a few days and rarely given overt expressions of sympathy. Their own emotionality often contrasts sharply with the sober and efficient demeanor of the operator.

Having traveled by taxi across New York City, Yo-yo Ma left his 18th century cello (valued at over a million dollars US) in the trunk and only realized it as the taxi drove away. Having held onto the receipt by chance, he is able to report the cab number to the TLC and within two hours inspectors for the taxi commission brought it back to him with police escort. At a news briefing at the Peninsula Hotel shortly later, he said what people who have miscollected something commonly say, "I made a stupid mistake and I just left without it."

### *Mislaid*

Individuals may begin treating an object as having been mislaid when they presume its routine placement but find that presumption is wrong. They may determine, or otherwise presume, that they placed it in a wrong or unusual location absentmindedly or that they placed it in a special location that they now cannot recall. They may have placed the object in a special place because they had just come into possession of it for the first time or because they must

temporarily move it in order to keep it hidden from others. They may begin treating it as mislaid when they have exhausted their sense of places to search and cannot easily think of new ones. Even with a strong hunch that it was specially placed for a later time, they may come to treat it as mislaid because they determine that the special place is so unintuitive that its placement was actually ill-conceived.

Along either path of the object becoming ‘mislaid,’ individuals may initially frame their inability to identify its exact location as benign. As Laura, an adjunct professor of graphic design at the University of Alabama, noted, “Immediately I thought ‘I’ve put it in a safe place.’ A terrible habit of mine where in a matter of time the object always manages to show up.” Jimmy, a thirty-year-old surfboard designer from Honolulu, echoed her sentiment, “I generally don’t lose shit. I sometimes will put it in a safe place and then not immediately remember where I put it, but it’s not really lost, I always find it.” They are able to sustain an orientation to the object as benignly misplaced, allowing themselves to come across it without declaring it lost.

To sustain an orientation to the object as only benignly mislaid, individuals may cycle through a sequence of compelling alternative explanations of why it should likely be in the ‘next place.’ When Matthew, the nineteen-year-old living in Salt Lake City introduced in a previous chapter, could not initially find his sunglasses, he put off understanding them as lost with each failed attempt by moving through a string of compelling alternatives. He explained:

As for what I went through when I lost them, I basically looked around everywhere, and spent nearly a week looking and digging around in everything. My car, my parent’s car, my friend’s car, my work, all my classrooms, my house, my friend’s house, and everywhere I went. Basically I thought I lost my mind because I swore that it would be in one of those locations. I just assumed they were someplace I didn’t check. It took me

about a week to check all of the places that they could have been, so my initial worry wasn't that bad. I just figured they would turn up at the next place. However I ran out of 'next places' and that was when I assumed them to be gone.

When Randi, a twenty-five-year-old woman living in San Diego, could not find her debit card and driver's license, she strung together a sequence of compelling locations to check before she declared them lost.

I dismissed the two as being left in the jeans, on the night stand, or even the floor. Never thought I lost them. When I got home I looked in the pocket of the jeans but they weren't there. I got some food, watched some TV and later called the boyfriend to see what he was up to. I also casually mentioned that I thought my debit card and ID were at his house. He told me that he hadn't seen them. I thought that he must not have looked and they had probably fallen under the bed. When I later got to his house I looked, he was right. No cards. I must not have looked hard enough at my house. They probably fell out when I took my jeans off. I looked around a bit more thoroughly but again assumed that I just misplaced them. That was Thursday night. Friday day I was complaining to a co-worker that I was going to be unable to go anywhere because I had no ID and I couldn't even get money because the card I lost was my debit. She asked if I had cancelled the card. When I told her "no" she lectured me on how irresponsible I was, stating that I might now have a zero balance. But I was convinced that there was no way that I had lost them. They must be around somewhere.

Individuals resist the notion that the object was mislaid by imagining a past self's competency and a current incompetency, or inability to channel their past logic. They sense that



a version of self carefully placed the absent object in a special place at some point in the past and is now unable to remember where that special place is. When JJ, a thirty-nine-year-old private chef living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, could not locate her wedding ring and another pearl ring, she had to let go of a queasy notion that she had placed the rings safely somewhere before coming to treat them as lost. Her two-year-old daughter's sober analysis spurred the transition.

Two weeks ago, when I realized that my wedding band, and the single pearl ring I wear with it, were not where I thought they were, it didn't occur to me that I wouldn't find them. I began to look for them in the places I put them when I take them off to cook or clean. They weren't by the sink or on the shelf in the bathroom. So I took the bed apart, thinking maybe I'd taken them off in the night and they might have fallen through the frame. Not there either. Still, I was sure I'd come across them eventually, and I started searching pockets, bags, coats, my kid's toy baskets, under the stove, behind the sink... I asked my two-year-old where they were and she said they are on the counter in the kitchen. I said they weren't and she said, "Oh, then they are lost." I hadn't yet admitted to myself they might be lost.

In the search for something mislaid, individuals may work from a recollection of having chosen a temporary location for quickly 'stashing' an object when holding onto it became an unexpected burden. When Harry, a thirty-three-year-old first year law student, living in Philadelphia, could not find his iPod, he recalled having had a careful approach to its placement at the time. "My girlfriend got out of bed when I got home, beat me to the bathroom and interrupted my routine," he explained. "I was clinging to the hope that because my routine was interrupted, I may have put the iPod in a 'safe place.' I held onto that hope for the next week or

so. I searched drawers I may have tucked it into, jacket pockets, etc. I checked wash baskets, trashcans, the fridge, under the dog bed, where the cat keeps his stuff, behind the couch...”

They may come to see the object as mislaid when they begin losing faith in their queasy hunch of benign placement. Through the ongoing struggle to remember where it had been placed, they may begin to question a past self’s object management aptitude. They may realize that its chosen placement was not in fact memorable or intuitive enough. They may realize they were in no condition to place it in a location that they could discern later. When LaShonda, a manicurist living near San Francisco, could not find her ring, she thought she remembered putting it in one of its usual homes. But when it was not in either of them, she began to suspect misplacing it somewhere when she got “pretty buzzed.” She began looking in places where an inebriated person would put things.

Friday night I was so upset I made myself a piña colada and sat down to play a game of scrabble at the computer just to relax a bit and get my mind off the car [trouble]. I rarely drink so it made me pretty buzzed. I thought maybe that was why I didn't have a clear memory of taking off my wedding ring. So I stopped looking in places I would normally keep it and began looking where a drunk person would put it. I looked around my son’s diaper changing table. I looked on the floor...

When Amita, a thirty-four-year-old physician living in Manhattan, could not find her wallet, she assumed it was around her apartment somewhere. After she checked sensible places, she unearthed a past self’s ineptitude and transitioned from a theory of mislaying it to a theory of miscollecting it.

By now my pace was frantic. I was under the bed, between the mattress, in the pillowcases and shaking out my covers. I was behind the toilet, the hamper, in the

shower. For a moment I entertained checking the cat's litter. So I had learned to NEVER put anything in those cute pockets. Which meant I had been holding my wallet. In my lap. "Oh, you idiot." Like every New Yorker, I had experienced the classic bad cab move. Important shit in lap. Pay driver. Get up. Get out. Important shit in cab. But I was not yet convinced. I mean, I could not have been so stupid, right? No, of course not. I am a New Yorker. I am a physician. For god's sake, I was hardly drinking. I wasn't even HIGH for god's sake. There was no way.

In losing something by mislaying it, individuals start by presuming the past competency of a currently incompetent self and then flip the dynamic in order to see the possession as lost. In coming to believe that they failed to place it in a location that they can now uncover, they highlight a past self's miscalculation of a future self's acumen.

#### *Seasonal Usage: A Recurrent Sub-Type*

In coming to treat an object as mislaid, individuals may allow for some 'looking around' because the object has drifted from one closet to another or from one dresser to another between seasonal uses. They allow that they might not remember exactly where it was put, though they commonly begin with a conception of a reasonable self who had competently placed it. This orientation sustains the task of 'looking around' as a pre-loss recovery technique below a level of concern or worry that it will not be found. Carly, a sixty-year-old middle-school teacher, finally gave up a two week occasional 'looking around' for her "pumpkin sweater" and accepted that the sweater was lost when she realized she was still looking for it three days past Halloween.

#### *Mis-secured*

Individuals may also come to treat an object as missing when they ascertain that something secured to their person had unknowingly fallen from them. In transforming the ‘absent’ object into a ‘missing’ object, they may first need to rule out counter-hypotheses that they removed the item from their person or never had it to begin with. They may first determine if they put it somewhere “absentmindedly,” “without thinking,” or while “on auto-pilot” before they decide that it had errantly fallen from them. Steph, a forty-three-year-old student living in Bethesda, ruled out this counter-hypothesis after noticing that the gold watch that she had owned for sixteen years was missing from her wrist. She noted, “While on the bus, I patted down my clothes to make sure it wasn't caught on the insides and make sure that I hadn't absentmindedly put it in one of my pockets.”

To see the missing object as having been lost due to its mis-securing, they may need to rule out alternative pathways to its loss, such as it having been left behind. Some will examine their routine behaviors with an object to assess the likelihood of having dropped it. Marina reported, “I never take my ring off during the day so the chances are that it had slipped off.”

Others rule out this path of separation, that it had fallen from them, by latching onto compelling alternative explanations. Michael is a resident of San Francisco who lost a watch passed down to him by his grandfather, the former Yankees shortstop and then coach, Frank Crosetti.

I spoke with a friend and he suggested that the clasp could have come undone and it may have fallen off my wrist as I walked home the night of my date. I argued that I would have felt it come off, but he told me that it happened to him once and it could have happened to me. I refused to believe that it fell off. My mind went back to the night of

the loud banging noises and I started to believe that perhaps the robber or robbers came back the following day, or perhaps the day before and entered my apartment.

Once individuals determine its likelihood of having fallen, they may begin searching for a narratively-situated self's blind spots. They search for where in the narrative they may have been 'in a hurry,' 'out to lunch,' somehow 'distracted' and would not have noticed something falling from them. They try to track down treacherous features of the built environment that conspired to stealthily pull a rug of material stability out from underneath them. They review their day or some segment of it with an eye to how their corporeal grammar may have been perturbed in a way that something would fall because of it. They are struck with a kind of paradox in these searches, that they can be perturbed enough that something was dislodged from them, yet maintain an obliviousness at the same time. Christopher reported how this paradoxical work took shape, "The whole time, I kept replaying the day over in my head, wondering where they might have fallen, where I might have stumbled and knocked them loose."

When Nick, a twenty-six-year-old strategy consultant living in San Francisco, lost his wallet at the annual Bay to Breakers running event, he instantly zeroed in on a risky moment.

I was walking and had brought along a coat in anticipation of rain, but the weather was much better than I expected it to be and I ended up leaving my coat draped over my arm, with the wallet in its pocket. I could have lost the wallet anywhere, but I suspect it may have fallen when I handed my jacket to a friend to swim in one of the lakes in Golden Gate Park with a woman I'd just met.

In considering the explanation that the object was dropped, they may cite a recollection from the moment of the object's proposed escape that they failed to properly understand when it

occurred. When Susan, a forty-year-old math professor living in Connecticut, noticed her watch was not on her wrist, she suddenly recalled the unexplained sound she heard earlier that day.

On Friday March 31, my two oldest children were going to a birthday party at the Ultimate Sports Complex. I walked in with them, carrying the gifts. As I walked through the entrance, I reached out to hold the door for a friend who was walking out. I heard what sounded like metal hit metal. I glanced around, but didn't see anything. As we were getting ready to leave after eating, I glanced at my wrist to check the time, and noticed that my watch was missing. I immediately thought of the sound I heard.

When Brian, a twenty-four-year-old working for an educational non-profit living in Boston, went to check his watch, he drew a similar conclusion. He suddenly knew how to make sense of a sound he heard but could not explain earlier.

I've got 45 minutes before I'm supposed to meet up with this girl, so I decide to bang out a quick 3-4 miles. I'm running hard, timing the run, and at about the 2 mile mark I'm just under 14 minutes: 13:20, according to the chrono function of my sparkling metal watch. Shortly thereafter, I hear over the music in my headphones a crashing sound, as if something has broken on the sidewalk or I've stepped on something. Glancing back as I run, I check my iPod: intact. No sunglasses. Everything's good, no worries, nothing of mine. I run on. I check my watch about a mile later to see how I'm doing... and it's not there. Fuck! I think back... that must have been the sound I heard.

If they cannot ascertain the drop point, individuals may retrace their steps. Andrea, a twenty-three-year-old living in New York City, takes this recovery approach after suspecting that her cell phone had fallen out of her purse in a 'risky' location. She reports, "Immediately, I went

into retrace-my-stupid-goddamn-drunken-steps mode, and girl number two joined me on the hunt.”

In recovery mode, mis-secured losses tend to present a ‘needle in a haystack’ feel. Because a dropped object can land in locations that are difficult to see, they uniquely require a relatively invasive search of the social scenes one has visited. Invasive searches may seem to, from the vantage point of the losing party, disrupt the business at hand and amount to a public declaration of a self’s problem. In a conference of perceived intellectual heft, one might sense the damning commentary on their intellect as they scour the ground around the feet of their colleagues. At a scene of perceived ‘cool,’ they sense the challenge to their status as a legitimate member when a recovery effort may present them as ‘rattled.’ Andrea, a twenty-one year old art student in New York City, senses a kind of tarnishing of self as she tries to track down her errant cell phone at a nightclub.

[My friend] had gone the extra mile: she'd recruited the help of the bouncer. They were busy bobbing between the crowd, peeking around the high-heels and trainers with his trusty mini-torch. That made me incredibly embarrassed... Losing my cell phone was one thing, but looking like “that girl” is another. You know that girl. You don't want to be that girl. That drunken, idiot who loses her cell phone in a bar... Cringe. But I didn't say anything besides “thank you very much anyway” when they returned empty-handed.

Some suspect that others will not be able to accurately make sense of what they are doing while searching for something that was dropped. They show some concern with looking odd, or even mentally ill. Sue, a fifty-two year old court reporter living in Philly, reports, “I am sure people must have thought I had lost my mind, staring at the street and sidewalk for so long. Then again, it is NY.”

### *Mishandled*

A mishandled object escapes from safekeeping when individuals errantly drop, fumble, or otherwise lose the handle on something that moves into a location that is not immediately accessible to its owner. It is lost, not because its location is unknown, but because its owner cannot restore normal physical access to it. These are cases in which a front door key falls between the planks of a wooden porch as its owner clumsily tries to lock the door in the dark; or, when fidgeting with a bracelet, the owner watches it fall into a hard to reach space. One way or another a personal belonging moves outside of direct physical control through some kind of errant move by the individual. With this path of separation, the challenge does not lie so much in figuring out what happened to the object, but rather in figuring out how one can recover it or make do without it. The experience of loss is one in which the losing party feels teased by something whose location is approximately known, but just out of reach.

Individuals experience mishandled items as ‘lost’ in the sense that they cannot practically retrieve the item without undergoing some kind of self-enhancement with a tool (often a long stick) or establishing strategic relations with resourceful others. The thing is lost to a current situationally-limited self that lacks the immediate equipment or help to recover the object and restore usual relations with it. In contrast to ‘miscollected’ objects, the ‘mishandled’ object appears to leave its owner, rather than the owner leaving the object. When Mariana, an unemployed forty-three-year-old living in Minnesota, accidentally dropped her digital camera and hundreds of “irreplaceable” photos over a cliff, she immediately felt an ill-preparedness for restoring her usual relations with it.



We were on top of Palisade Head on the shores of Lake Superior. It's a 200-foot cliff... My Olympus digital camera, a \$400 purchase at the time, was in the pocket of my hoodie. I didn't use the case because it was awkward and cumbersome. So I sat there several minutes, alone, watching the waves, measuring the distance to the bottom in my head. When my wandering friends finally returned, I stood up and quickly spun around to face them and at that moment, my camera flew from my pocket and went sailing out over the edge. I followed its flight to the bottom where it landed on a boulder the size of a VW Beetle. I stared at it for an extended minute, weighing the loss in my mind, and in my heart... I couldn't get down there, but a friend was a climber and thought he could do it... Too bad his wife was against the idea... I'd have to figure out a way down there myself or just hire an experienced climber.

In conceding that she will have to make a series of practical arrangements, either alone or with others, to recover the object, the mishap accentuates a situationally-inadequate self.

If the object is one of significant meaning or value, the shock of separation itself may render some emotionally incapable of a recovery effort in the immediate moment of the separation. When Meredith was mindlessly tugging on her wedding ring while cooling off and stretching out on a track after a run, she suddenly pulled too hard and watched as the ring rolled under an irrigation grate next to the track where it came to a visible rest a few inches down.

My first reaction? Did I calmly start to formulate a plan to retrieve the ring? Did I ponder in a Zen-like way that the ring was only a piece of jewelry and losing it doesn't mean anything other than that I lost a piece of metal? Nope. I, in all my 34-year-old maturity, burst into tears like a toddler. I stood there crying, waiting for my husband to

come help me rescue it. He did, by the way, with a very MacGyver-esque move that actually involved chewing gum and a straw. Not kidding.

When the discovery of its path of escape transitions into an effort to secure assistance for its recovery from others, individuals may consider how a request for help may tarnish an ongoing portrayal of self. When Rocio, a twenty-nine-year-old marriage and family therapist living in Berkeley, dropped her apartment key between two planks in her wooden porch, she asked herself if the disturbance in her day from attempting to recover an apartment key by herself, a seemingly challenging matter, seemed preferred over the tarnish of her reputation as a responsible tenant who wouldn't disturb landlords for another key so late at night. "It just seemed like it was so close that I shouldn't need help," she recalled thinking.

Others see themselves as potential bothers to those who could supply the assistance they need when they have asked for help too frequently. When Arturo, a forty-year-old teacher living in Portland, flew his son's kite into a neighbor's backyard tree, he could not bring himself to knock on their door without hesitation. "I just borrowed their air pump for [my son's] bike tires and my wife got Rick [the neighbor next door] to help her get in through a window after she locked herself out," he recalled. "Now I'm knocking on the door asking if I can try to climb their tree and get my kite. I just feel like that jerk neighbor who can't figure things out on his own... I hate looking like that guy."

Errant separations of this sort sometimes cast the quest to recover the object in a flirtatious light. What was previously inanimate seems to become animate by dropping, floating, or flying away from its owner. One version of the drama comes to life when individuals see, or at least approximate, where the object has ended up but cannot quite grasp it physically. Dan expressed this sentiment after he flew his ten-year-old son's remote control airplane into a tall

tree in a nearby school's playground: "It was frustrating because it was in plain sight, but I just couldn't get it. It almost felt like it was taunting me."

A second version of the drama takes the form of a chase. When John and Natalie, a newly married couple in their forties from Boston, were on their honeymoon in Hawaii, Natalie's engagement ring, a one-hundred-year-old antique, slipped off and spurred a frantic chase.

I heard her yell and swam in as fast as I could, thinking she had seen some cool fish or something. She was facing me and looking down as I approached, and told me the ring had slipped off her finger. I immediately could see she was not kidding, and dived down where she was standing a number of times, thinking and hoping I could make a quick grab. After doing that about ten times with no success, while my wife was roiling too, we quickly tried to ascertain exactly what happened. Not knowing the ways that small objects react in roiling waves, I figured the best bet was to scour the area in more shallow water, where I thought the ring would wash up. My wife joined me as we went up and down the beach, looking everywhere we could. I again was hopeful for a quick find. We later learned from an expert that the ring almost assuredly was immediately buried where it landed, and quickly shifted downward at that spot.

For some, the object's escape seems facilitated by powers greater than themselves, rather than simple carelessness. Kevin, a thirty-six-year-old small business owner living in Pasadena, could only watch as his remote-controlled jet was swept away by a gust of wind.

I maintained full throttle as I tried to keep the jet in range and close by but the wind was far too strong. It began to lose ground and was being carried away very quickly. This particular jet did not have an elevator control so I could not make the jet dive. It was at the mercy of the wind. Even when I cut the throttle, the jet kept going higher and higher

and further and further away. It was now behind trees and I scrambled (scrambled is a good word here) to maintain visual contact. It was no use, I had lost visual contact and no matter where I ran, I could not see the jet. I had managed to control it for all of 10 seconds.

Both versions of the flirtation casts an image of self as having limited situational powers, limited abilities to re-establish possession and to project a future self with the object. Individuals sense that if they could only undergo practical augmentation—a ladder in Dan’s case, or snorkeling gear in John and Natalie’s case—they could overcome the separation and transcend the situational obstacles keeping them from their objects.

When things get away from individuals in plain sight through ‘mishandling,’ they consider their situational powers to recover it and evaluate their worthiness of help from others who can help retrieve it.

### *Conclusion*

Whether individuals take up particular paths of escape as an explanation depends on their level of commitment to an ongoing biography and their sense of how pursuing it would re-organize their immediate lives. People commit to a path of escape by carving out a space for it and the new commitments it implies from their ongoing biographies. Once they commit to a particular path, they see themselves in varying lights. If they find that the loss is a result of ‘miscollecting’ it, they must construct an incompetent past self who has newly re-gained awareness. In losing something by mislaying it, individuals start by presuming the past competency of a currently incompetent self and then flip the dynamic in order to see the possession as lost. When things get away from individuals in plain sight through ‘mishandling,’

they consider their situational powers to recover it and evaluate their worthiness of help from others who can help retrieve it. When they discover that they have 'mis-secured' it, they search the past for a momentarily blinded self who would have missed its escape.

## Seeing Public Places through It – Chapter 5

“I always used to pass by the corner of 42nd and Lexington with a frozen stare, trying not to look down (or breathe in the homeless smell), at the vendors selling their ‘merchandise’ they found on the subway, in the trash, on the street. Now, I find myself looking down, on the cluttered mess of mismatched shoes, out-of-print editions of crunchy books, playboy magazines from the early 80's, in search for my pearl ring.”

-Jennie, 25, Finance, New York City, Pearl Ring

When individuals try to resolve a loss that may have occurred in a public place, they come to interact with and reflect on places in loss-specific ways. As an imaginative feat or a return visit, a loss may direct them to investigate its physical landscape and its likeliness to conceal objects of certain shapes, sizes, and colors; it may direct them to consider its reputation for sympathetic treatment of its visitors; they may learn of its internal staff hierarchy and its bureaucratic inner-workings; they may learn of a place’s techniques for handling lost property or other matters ancillary to its official business; they may discover the moral make-up of the people who work there, frequent it, or pass by it. This chapter demonstrates how individuals sustain a commitment to a loss in their interactions with and reflections on public places.

In showing the public place manifestations of loss, this chapter demonstrates a more generic point: people apprehend place and the world more generally from a commitment to some pre-established line of conduct, such as an effort to recover a lost object. Individuals are always self-reflectively caught up in some doing and narratively contained by a sense of where they are in that effort, whether at the beginning, middle, or end. They never discover or reflect on the meaning of a place in a vacuum, or apart from what they are doing; fashioning a sense of a place’s character is always a practical step in accomplishing some action. In deciding where to hold a meeting with a potential business client, for instance, individuals may imagine the

aesthetics of a particular restaurant and consider what image that place would give off to the prospective client. In listing a residential address or the section of town from which one comes on an employment application, individuals may consider the identity that location is likely to convey to the potential employer. Individuals generate and reflect on the meanings of place in taking practical steps toward some end.

### *The Meaning of Place*

In furthering the story of loss, this chapter contributes to the tradition of work showing how places convey identities and meanings through everyday experience. There are two broad schools to the experiential study of place: the everyday life and competing claims approaches. The everyday life approach prioritizes the way ordinary people live in a place and develop a sense of that place through their everyday routines. The competing claims approach focuses on the tussle over identity claims made by institutional actors like developers, municipal leaders, and community groups.

The competing claims approach is the conflict model of urban identity; it implies that there is something important about what institutional actors make of place identity, that how groups see and portray place matters, especially groups with contested points of view. Many of these tussles emerge out of what Jack Katz (2009) refers to as “sanctification,” or the process by which local groups claim a special ethnic or otherwise historically-based recognition for the geographic space that they inhabit.

In this tradition, Gans (1962), in a study of a West End Italian-American working class neighborhood in 1950s Boston, showed how the natural development of a place’s character gets trampled on by government reformers unfamiliar with the local culture of its “urban villagers.”

Logan and Molotch's (1987) model points out the process by which property developers and local politicians using a pro-growth agenda iron-on identities designed to increase their own "urban fortunes." Brown-Sarcino's (2009) ethnography of four towns describes the efforts of social preservationists, a form of gentrifier, to preserve the identity of place and the role of the old-timers in the name of authenticity. Deener's (2009) work on the historically black section of Venice, California, known as Oakwood, shows the concerns of the dwindling black residents to try and hold onto a location's identity as an African-American community despite the substantially larger and still-growing Latino community. Sheth's (2009) work shows how the concerns over the identity of a place can play out over efforts to erect a mostly thematic freeway sign designating a commercial strip in Artesia, California as "Little India."

While the competing claims approach hones in on the institutional conflicts and controversies surrounding place identity, another approach investigates how places form enduring meanings and identities through the everyday routines of its residents. The accumulated experience approach suggests that the identity of place congeals in the mind of its residents through routine experience and as such, tries to excavate that experience-based image. Lynch (1960) argues that the perception of cities occurs by way of a regular series of environmental features that structure perception of place over time such as paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. Paths, for example, are "the channels along which the observer customarily... moves" and tend to be the most predominant elements structuring an observer's image of a city (1996: 99). Hunter (1974: 69), in a reprising of Burgess' (1925) Chicago study, examines the subjective identity of place by simply asking its residents, "What is the name of this part of Chicago and what are the boundaries of this area?" Whyte (1980), by examining use patterns with video recordings, reveals the subjective sense of particular features of the plazas of



New York City. Anderson's (2004) work on "cosmopolitan canopies" shows how visitors to particular "neutral social settings" see those areas without the normal racial tensions that characterize their home neighborhoods. Kusenbach's (2008) study of neighborhoods in Hollywood, California reveals the nested sense of community that residents develop of their living environments over time independent of situational fluctuations. Though making advances in the study of place identity, the experiential approach has largely neglected the narrative structure of everyday social process and the influence it exerts on the perception of place. This chapter shows how people see place when having committed to recovering a missing object in a public location.

#### *Reflecting on the Moral Constitution of Place*

After realizing they have lost something somewhere in public, individuals commonly return to the suspected location physically or in thought, and consider the role its passersby or patrons may play in the matter. They consider their chances of recovery based on who its likely visitors were and how such visitors would treat the kind of person indicated by the lost object. Some of these imaginings are merely speculative, using quick impressions of the scene to determine who its regular inhabitants are and if any of them would pose a risk of theft or a risk of neglect to return the found item. Some of these wonderings are based on face-to-face interactions with members of the scene either in the past or in the current moment of the recovery effort.

Individuals turn to morally evaluating the people frequenting a site as a practical step in a recovery effort. They may forgo immediate recovery efforts, or at least conduct them in a less angst-ridden way at locations populated by people they imagine would be sympathetic to their

problem. They sometimes treat places of like-identified people, or people who otherwise share their sensibilities, as public safe zones for object management mishaps, presuming that members of a scene will likely act sympathetically toward them. For instance, when Crystal, a mother living in DC, lost her wallet, she ruled out the park as a possible location to search because the finder would be someone like her, “some other unorganized mother;” or in other words, someone who would try to return it.

I remember going down the slide with my daughter and just before I pushed off down the slide I got a phone call. I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and took the call. I later thought maybe my wallet fell out when I did this... While at the park it warmed up quite a bit and I tied my jacket around my waist, yet another possibility of how the wallet was lost. At one point, I took off my jacket altogether and threw it over a friend’s stroller, yet another possibility. While these technically were all possibilities, I thought it unlikely given the neighborhood we live in and the all mothers traffic that I would drop a wallet and someone not notice and return it. I had faith that if the wallet were lost at the park, it would be returned promptly by some other unorganized mother.

In considering a recovery effort at the park, Crystal saw the location in terms of who she imagined its visitors are, using such information to rule it out as a place needing to be returned to and physically searched.

For some, a place made up of mostly known others attending an event could mean that a search could still be worthwhile there. Friends, they reason, are more likely to leave it alone, especially when an event to which they are all oriented has not yet completed. When Wang, a recent Taiwanese immigrant now living in Los Angeles, lost his cell phone at a softball tournament put on by a Taiwanese Student Association at a local university, he decided to search

the park, as it is mostly made up of “friendly faces.” He reported, “I thought I could recover it as I tried to search for it around the field because I think the whole park is packed mostly with friendly faces. If any of the Taiwanese players find it, they’ll probably return it to the tournament staff.” For Wang, evaluating the park along a friend/foe dichotomy served as a practical step in his decision to continue looking for his cell phone there.

Some moral evaluations of place and their visitors may calm anxieties because through them they discover that the proposed place of loss is made up of morally decent people, making the return of their item imminent. Junior, a twenty-eight-year-old academic librarian in New York City, lost his digital camera in a hardcore music club and is buoyed when reflecting on its likely fate: “I began to think that I lost my camera and knowing that the hardcore scene in general is very progressive, that someone would turn it in.”

If finding like-identified people in a candidate loss location justifies a search effort as it did for Wang or generates a sense of a safety net as it did for Junior and Crystal, in other instances, examining the moral make up of the patrons leads one to end a recovery effort out of a loss of hope. When Lorraine, a twenty-seven-year-old clerk at a law firm in San Francisco, could not find her purse after she suspected having left it on a city bus, she decided to quit the hunt based on who she thought regularly frequented that specific bus line. She reported, “I called both Richmond’s and Oakland’s lost and found. No sign of it... I gather that it’s stolen. I knew it would be because I live in a high crime area. The seventy-two line carries people who are criminal, crackhead, ghetto, low-lives.” She found that the bus line was made up of morally deficient individuals who would not be averse to stealing an errantly laid purse.

A loss forces some to calculate their chances of recovery based on implicit measures of likely opportunistic theft in certain public areas. When Pedro, a twenty-four-year-old living in

Boston and working for an educational non-profit, noticed his watch was missing while on a jog, he momentarily ran in place as he considered how his watch would look on the ground in that location.

I check my watch about a mile later to see how I'm doing... and it's not there. Fuck! I think back... that must have been the sound I heard. Shit, now I'm going to be late for my date, I've got to run all the way back to where it fell... and it's a nice watch, sitting right there on the sidewalk. I'd be lucky if it was still there. After moping for about 10 seconds, I turn around and run back.

When there are two candidate loss locations to consider, individuals may engage in a comparative moral analysis of place. They may try to determine which set of people would pose a greater threat to their recovery success if it were left in that location so they know which one to return to first, or so they know which one to hope for. When Angela, a resident of Denver, lost her wallet containing quite a bit of cash, she could not help but hope that it was lost at her university rather than the community college housed on the same campus. "My campus has three different types of schools on it," she recalled. "The classroom I was in housed the—I hate to say it—'inferior' community college, and yes, I know how bad that sounds. I started imagining the type of person who found my wallet, and how they spent it. If I lost it at this building, I was certain I would never get my wallet back."

Some notice that their hope for re-uniting with the lost object rises and declines when they consider the prospect of having lost it in different locations. Hannah is a twenty-eight-year-old public health graduate student living in Atlanta. "My hope was waning when I thought I lost it at the airport," she recalled. "My hope was renewed when I thought of the chance that I could have lost it at the restaurant."

Others look back at place like archeologists after having lost something and seize upon material features of the scene, such as particular kinds of litter, to infer who its visitors are and their likelihood of feeling sympathy for the losing party if they were to find the lost possession. When Pat, a forty-eight-year-old freelance graphic artist living in Berkeley, lost a necklace, she saw the tossed aside drug paraphernalia littering the ground of the gas station as a sign of the morally dubious people who pass by it. She explained,

After I dropped off my daughter [at school] I stopped at a gas station at 8:00 a.m. and got out of the car forgetting the ring on its chain were on my lap. That is how it happened. The ring simply fell off my lap when I got out of the car. ... I am pretty sure I will never see that ring again. On the ground at the gas station was a little tiny ziplock bag used for the distribution of methamphetamine or crack cocaine. I just know that some junkie took my ring.

Pat's experience shows how individuals see certain place-based indicators, such as discarded drug paraphernalia, as working against their retrieval chances. In varying ways, losing parties see places through a morally charged dichotomy of friend or foe when searching for their lost property.

### *Ungoverned Spaces*

When their own efforts to track down the object have failed, individuals investigate the presumed scene(s) of the mishap in an attempt to determine who has authority over matters of lost property at the location. They see the place through the concern of authority; they see it as a governed space. If the losing party can ascertain the setting's system of authority or access its representatives—its clerks, agents, sale associates, hosts, managers, etc.—he or she may feel

heightened contentment in their own recovery effort, that they did what they could. While some places like airports and subway stations usually have dedicated offices and formal rules about how to deal with objects left behind, dropped, or turned in by others, other locations like streets, parking lots, and parks tend to have more nebulous procedures from the perspective of those seeking to find an errant possession.

When the place of loss is presumed to be a street or sidewalk, people regularly call on nearby shops to help them locate what they have lost. In this way, they see the street with an adjacent authority, not an immediate onsite governing body, but rather an authority in the more indirect Jane Jacobs style of ‘eyes on the street.’ When Rob, a twenty-seven year-old web developer living in Denver, suspected having lost his notebook full of his “most creative ideas” on a sidewalk lined with businesses, he looked to the nearby storefronts for help. “I called some of the storefronts that were on the street, asking the workers and owners if they’d seen a notebook the week before,” he recalled. “Nobody had.”

Others like JP, a stand-up comedian in Boston, are keenly aware of the improvisational nature of good Samaritans when attempting to deal sensibly with property dropped in anonymous spaces. He reported, “I still haven’t given up completely. There are still a few bars that I have to check. Maybe someone walking by found my phone on the ground, picked it up, and dropped it off at one. Maybe it’s at the neighboring shop.”

When Mary, a special education teacher in her forties living in Washington DC, lost a wallet containing her driver’s license, ATM card, and a small amount of money, she and her husband turned to the restaurants and cinema near the intersection where she suspected having dropped it. “We retraced our steps back to the intersection where he had let me out,” she recalled. “There was nothing. The intersection has three good-sized restaurants on the corners,

and we went into each one to see if perhaps someone had found it in the street and turned it in to one of them. No luck. We returned to the box office and no one had turned it in there either.” In making contact with local businesses after suspecting having lost something on a nearby street or sidewalk, individuals treat them as ethically-sound liaisons between finders and losers.

In some instances, people find that certain spaces lack an adjacent governing body and their best chance at recovery is to assemble their own ad hoc system. They place signs on the street publicizing a loss and provide a way for the finder to contact them. Unsure of how to notify others around the area in which she was parked, Debbie, a fifty-year-old secretary in a dental office living in Savannah, Georgia, placed signs on her car and hoped that anyone with information about the phone would notify her. She recalled, “I put signs on my car... I was parked on the corner of intersecting streets hoping that someone saw something, I also announced a reward for the return of the phone at that time. For three days I put signs on that car...” She treated the street as lacking an immediate governing body that she could turn to for dealing with her loss and launched a grassroots recovery effort.

When losing parties suspect an unattended parking lot to be the location of the loss, the question may arise: who manages this space? When Crystal, a mother living in DC, lost her wallet complete with her driver’s license and credit cards, she suspected it had fallen out of her lap in the parking lot at the strip mall she visited earlier. But because there was no parking lot attendant, she relied on the associated authority of the three restaurants nearby and hoped that a good Samaritan did as well or will soon. As she noted, “I went back to the strip mall where the bagel place was and went to each store asking if a wallet had been turned in. I left my name and phone number with them in case something showed up at their store... after all, if it were lost in

the parking lot it wouldn't be obvious which shop I had been to." She conceived of the parking lot as unaccountable space without immediate support for benevolent acts by anonymous others.

In some cases, people learn that the care of lost objects has not become an officially regulated matter in some places. They learn of the informal practices that have been put into place to deal with the issue in an ad hoc way. Robert is a twenty-seven-year-old, website developer living in Denver who has lost a notebook of important writing. "I looked all around the [martial arts studio], along the walls, in the bathroom, and it wasn't there," he recalled. "I asked some other students, and the teacher, and they told me about the various 'lost and found' spots where people typically leave stuff they find; it wasn't in any of those spots either. I did find some interesting books and things that I would have never known were there, though."

### *Getting the Run-Around*

When the losing party suspects having left a possession behind at a place of business, he or she returns to the place—in person, by telephone, or by email—with a new way of seeing it. The returning patron notices how the staff treats a past patron whose concerns are ancillary to the establishment's official business. In some instances when losing parties return to or call a suspected place of loss, a straightforward and immediate answer to the question of whether one's item is there is hard to come by. Places have multiple staff who are not always scheduled to be there and not always able to handle the question with what the losing party sees as bureaucratic efficiency. As a result, losing parties may experience what they describe as "getting the run around."

Some forms of disconnect between patron and employee are not necessarily the fault of the place of business. When Eileen, a forty-six-year-old Brooklyn lawyer, left her Paris



guidebook behind at a cafeteria before leaving to visit Napoleon's tomb, communicating to the staff with her "beginner's French" proved less than straightforward.

I raced back to the cafeteria leaving my husband and son at the tomb. Having very little command of the French language, I tried to ask the cashier whether anyone had turned in a lost book. Up to that point, I had found all Parisians warm and friendly. This one woman, however, brushed me off. She was clearly annoyed that I was asking her something about a "libro." I had no idea that the French word for book is "livre," so I was improvising. I also pantomimed opening a book and turning its pages. I probably looked quite agitated and like the typical "ugly American." In retrospect I guess I understand her reaction to me. Defeated, I left the cafeteria.

For some, the realization of the loss itself seems to transform staff people from accessible to inaccessible and a place from sympathetic to unsympathetic. Jackie, a thirty-seven-year-old pharmacist living in Wisconsin, ran into challenges when trying to get help from the staff at an airport in Lima, Peru.

By the time we got back to the check-in counter, things seemed very chaotic. And it suddenly seemed as if NOBODY could speak any English! Once again, I stood aside with tears in my eyes while my husband attempted to explain our situation to a very busy and distracted airport employee. My husband was then taken back to the security office to speak to the security officer. They did not have our camera and hadn't seen it. They took our flight information and said they would get the camera to us if they found it.

But if language serves as an effective barrier for an efficient exchange about the object in some cases, a restaurant's staff scheduling does the trick in others. When Rachael, a twenty-three-year-old graduate student at UC Berkeley, lost her checkbook-size Guess wallet, she must

work around a shift-change at a small Japanese restaurant in order to track it down. She reported, “I called around noon, as they are only open for lunch and dinner, and the nice man on the phone said nothing was found but he would call me back on my cell phone when the evening shift arrived at the restaurant at 4:30, as they had been working the previous night.”

If it is not a shift-change serving as obstacle, losing parties must yield to the business’ hours of operation. Ryan, a twenty-one year old college junior, remembered leaving his jacket in his seat at a movie theater, but could not immediately retrieve it as the theater had long closed. “I could now remember clearly that I had left it sitting on my seat at the theatre,” he recalled. “I was disappointed and frustrated to say the least, and very seriously considered driving to the theatre right then [at] 2:15 am, to see if there was anyway I could get in....”

Even with places that have formal procedures in place for handling lost property, the authority structure and associated retrieval procedures can seem quite circuitous and sometimes frustrating. When Javier, a student at The New School University, believed he had left his violin on a commuter train, he sensed the absurdity of the formal recovery rules of the MTA.

I call MTA to see what their policies are about lost and found items. After trying the number many times over... the line is constantly busy. I manage to get hold of someone only to discover that you must wait seven to ten business days before you should call them. They do not get daily updates. As absurd as this seems I could do nothing short of traveling from station to station along the route asking everyone in the ticket booths if something had been returned.

People commonly express distrust in an anonymous lost and found worker’s efforts to effectively search for their lost property in a suspected place of loss when contacting them by phone. Julie, a New Yorker in her forties, would not take “no” for an answer from the staff at

the restaurant at which she suspected having left her cell phone. She reported, “I immediately called the restaurant who said it wasn’t there. I went back to the restaurant that evening to double check with the barman. But nada.”

When Johanna, a resident of Toronto, made a visit to a restaurant after having already asked about her missing laptop by phone, she was met with a chilly reception: “I decided to personally visit the restaurant to have a look for myself. The manager was somewhat irritated that I came by even though she had already told me there was nothing there.”

Some develop familiarity with the lost and found officials at certain locations by calling frequently. In certain cases, they sense that their eagerness for recovery has been tagged as an annoyance. When Robyn, a twenty-five-year-old artist living in Toronto, lost her original artwork that she was preparing to sell, workers at the municipal lost and found seemed more of hindrance than a help.

I’ve been calling every day for the past week and a half. They know me there by my voice. I wonder if they are lying to me. I wonder if they have those jobs specifically to steal from innocent, idiotic people. I ask them to check their databank under words like "art, Fedex, brown bag, brown envelope, artwork, prints, original art." They seem to not understand. I seem to sound crazy... I think maybe there’s this room where all lost things go and everything is piled high in the room. I feel slightly nauseated.

Others find the people managing matters of lost and found to be more of a frustration than a real obstacle to their recovery efforts. Edith is a twenty-year-old art history student at the University of Toronto who lost her “hobo” wallet.

I then assumed that it would be at the Starbucks that I had been to roughly half an hour before. At this point I was extremely nervous and visibly upset. I looked around my

table at Starbucks and asked the employees whether it had been returned. They hadn't seen it and they asked if I wanted to leave a phone number and I did. They were flippant and unsympathetic about the situation, which only further frustrated me.

In more extreme reactions, losing parties vow revenge on those who they believe shirk their official duties to help and treat them unsympathetically. Joe, a twenty-three year old New York City policeman felt especially peeved by this kind of response. "At first I went to the movie Box office," he recalled. "The supervisor told me she does not have it and to call back tomorrow. I felt she did not even look hard enough I vowed revenge on her if I ever saw her on the street again."

### *Reputations of Place*

Some individuals draw on the reputation of a place or its people in considering their chances of sympathetic treatment and deciding how much effort they should invest in a recovery. When Laura, an adjunct professor of graphic design at a large university in the south, lost a memory card from her camera in Paris, she began to wonder about the likelihood that a Parisian will find sympathy for an American. "Next, having remembered the name of the last cafe we visited, I e-mailed the owner and am still awaiting a response," she recalled. "It's said that the French don't like the Americans, but I'm holding out hope that it simply fell out of the wallet as I made payment at any number of the spots I shopped in Paris and the cashier set it aside for me." Others, like Rhys, a writer from New York City, was upset that he lost his journal in France while traveling across Europe rather than a country that he thought would less likely mistreat it. "I regretted not losing it in... Switzerland where life is so structured that everything lost there must find its original owner," he recalled.

Some strategically draw on the notion of a place's reputation in the loss announcement they post on internet lost and found websites. They may offer a timely reminder to the residents of the suspected place of loss of their reputation for doing good deeds and being friendly. One woman posted this note to the citizens of a Canadian city, "Lost my wallet in North Vancouver... Somewhere between Waves Coffee Shop on Mountain Highway and Lynn Canyon Suspension Bridge. I'm visiting from England; I've heard of the friendliness of Canadians... you return wallets don't you?"

In the moments following a loss, individuals may determine that a place is prone to opportunistic theft and discount their chances of recovering the missing object. When Noura, a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts, Boston was helping a friend move into a Harvard Square apartment, she realized her bracelet, gifted to her by a family friend living out of the country, had fallen from her wrist. Upon realizing that it was gone, she conceded that finding it again was hopeless. "I'm almost sure I won't find the bracelet because Harvard Square is like a black hole, whatever is gone there is never found again," she recalled. She conceded that investing in a search effort in this location would be pointless.

Some undergo an immediate transformation in their conceptions of a public place as they realize that something was likely stolen and not lost. Jeff, a professor in his mid-sixties, reported his experience after noticing his camera was missing. "I was in Barcelona and realized my camera was gone," he recalled. "I'd been sitting on a bench near the port. I then realized some professional thief had conned me, with an ally distracting me with a dumb question while he must have stolen the camera, which was on the ground behind or beside me. I came to see this tranquil, pretty place as menacing."

In some instances, a failure to recover a missing object in a certain location only confirms how individuals already feel about a place. After Vince dropped his wallet somewhere in Boulder and failed to get it back after a few days, it reminded him of why he already disliked the city. "... [I]f you lose something important in a college town, you will probably never get it returned," he recalled. "I never really liked the city of Boulder, but I had a sliver of hope inside of me that people in this town still had some integrity. Now I have become even more jaded, and I dislike Boulder even more."

Individuals may re-imagine a place after recovering an object from somewhere they thought of as callous and unsympathetic. Olivia is a fifty-three-year-old actress and theater director living in Manhattan. She was surprised and very grateful after cinema staff returned her lost wallet. She reported, "I put \$20 in Gideon's card and \$40 in Jeff's (he had after all rooted around in garbage for me), and words to the effect that their kindness and integrity should be repaid a million times, and that I would never forget that I got my wallet back in New York City with everything intact."

### *Place Associations with Loss*

After a loss, individuals may come to associate a particular location with that occurrence after they return to their normal lives. Susan is a forty-year-old mathematics professor at a college in New England. "Just recently I drove past the restaurant where we ate that night," she explained, "and one of my children said, 'Hey Mom, remember that night when you lost your watch?' I think about it when I drive past the place where the birthday party was held..." Two years after the loss of his journal, Rhys, the writer from New York City introduced earlier, noted, "I only think about it superficially when I do remember it. If someone tells me they're going to

Paris, for instance, I'll think, 'oh, I wonder how my notebook is doing,' and then not think about it anymore.”

For Sara, a twenty-one-year-old journalism student living in Chicago who lost her beloved mittens on a train in Chicago, it is the signs and sounds of the train that spurred reminders of her loss. “When I flew back into Midway, I saw the signs pointing the way to the Orange Line and painfully remembered what I had lost,” she recalled. “My office is right next to the same stretch of L tracks that took me to Midway, and when I hear the train rattle by, I sometimes feel a small pang of resentment toward the CTA. And this time it's for something other than the poor service that currently plagues commuters.”

### *Conclusion*

Unable to find a personal belonging after having been away from home, individuals examine—in person or in their mind's eye—the places to which they have recently been. If they can reasonably place the object in a particular location, they will consider the threat posed by the imagined visitors to that place or the activities they presume are going on there. They consider the visitors for their moral leanings and likelihood of opportunistic theft. If the threat seems severe they may rush to the object's rescue; if it does not seem severe and the object is not particularly missed, they may work a return into their schedules when it seems convenient later in the day or week. Underlying this concern of risk is an existential orientation: who are they and who will they think I am based on the object that they may find?

Examining how individuals try to recover from mishaps in public places is a strategic approach to the question of how people construct the character of place through their experiences. Following Schutz, typically individuals are unreflectively following recipes that get

them through their routine affairs. A place's character tends to become a habitual awareness over time, known only tacitly and not necessarily reflectively available in lived-experience. But new circumstances brought about by a breakdown in routines force individuals to reflectively consider how to re-enter the natural attitude. In the case of individuals trying to resolve commonplace losses of everyday objects in public places, re-entering the natural attitude and returning to life-as-usual requires that individuals discover and reflect on places in various ways.

Following Erving Goffman (2008 [1967]: 3) who highlighted the importance of situations in the formation of selves, or "moments and their men," this work offers its geographic corollary, a study of 'moments and their places.' It shows how people see places through the 'moment' or situation of having lost.



## Finding Meaning in the Object – Chapter 6

“See, I helped clean an old couple's apartment after they had moved to a nursing home. It was a very meaningful experience that made me realize material items mean nothing. We come into and leave this world, after all, quite naked, I thought. Well, life has just given me a sweet reminder that the [stuff] is worth the drag.”

-Liza, Spanish Teacher, Harlem, Red Suitcase

Individuals sustain their orientation to the ‘loss’ as an animating force in their lives by reflecting on the meaning of the object at recurring points in the loss narrative. Early on, sometimes providing the first signal that something is missing, the object’s absence may elicit the sensual experiences of feeling naked or incomplete; through it, they discover inanimate features of their physical self. In a subsequent step, when deciding how much to subordinate their ongoing lives to the object’s recovery or replacement, they consider the object’s role as supportive scaffolding for some line of conduct or way of living, or they may consider how much its absence will unsettle them emotionally because it symbolizes a sacred time or someone who is no longer present. Yet if recognition of meaning sometimes drives a hunt, it may also put an end to it. Individuals will sometimes reel from initially overwrought reactions and show concern that they are imbuing too much meaning or feeling into inanimate things, or otherwise being too “materialistic.” Either way, through the discovery of a loss, individuals consider the role an object has in sustaining their ongoing lives.

This chapter contributes to the study of objects by showing how an object’s meaning becomes a reflective concern in recurring situational contexts after losing it. It begins from the notion that people always make sense of the world, and the objects around them, from some line of activity to which they possess different levels of commitment. Studies investigating the

meanings of material objects tend to overlook how particular lines of conduct frame what people make of material things. To understand the dynamic fluctuation of an object's meaning to its caretaker, the researcher must ground the investigation in the actor's process of doing some kind of action. The situational meaning of a car key, for instance, shifts depending on whether someone needs to drive somewhere or if they have already returned from the trip.

Studying the losing of objects, a moment that is commonly a natural break in routine, is a strategic approach to the study of how objects become topics for reflection. In routine living, individuals tend to live with the "attitude of daily life"; they are not always reflectively considering the world around themselves. Within this routine disposition, objects safely embedded in routines tend to fade from conscious reflection. They hold places in recipes, as Schutz (1964) noted, but are not always the target of ongoing, reflectively-aware meaning-making. The study of objects that are missing, nearly missing, or just returning, offers a way around this obstacle because the material relations usually occurring tacitly or in the background of conscious experience are now occurring reflectively. Losses shake individuals from the natural attitude and people reflect on what an object means to their ongoing lives.

### *Finding Features of Self in Objects*

The unexpected absence of an object commonly evokes a feeling of being naked, incomplete, or somehow exposed, often signaling the first indication to individuals that something is wrong. For some, it is this strange feeling that motivates an effort to recover or replace the missing item, or otherwise take the loss up as a theme to orient to. When Gina, an executive of a Fortune 500 company living in New York City, lost her anklet, a feeling of

nakedness aroused her from her sleep and provided the first indication that it might be missing. The feeling persisted, motivating her to find something to take the anklet's place.

It was strange getting dressed, putting on my shoes, especially, without the anklet there. As I said, I hardly ever really noticed it, but suddenly my ankle felt very naked without it. Its absence was so obvious. How could I not have noticed the instant it suddenly wasn't there? At the jewelry store where my parents bought the original gift, I bought replacement this past weekend, five days after it disappeared, which at least got rid of that "naked ankle" feeling and gave me something to fidget with in all the odd ways I had never consciously realized.

Like Gina, Joanna, a thirty-year-old software developer from Atlanta, first realized that something is missing when she detected a feeling of nakedness. "I arrived in the bar and headed straight for the stairwell to lead me to the bar basement," she explained. "Half way down the stairwell I felt the nakedness on my finger. I stopped and dropped down to search my purse. I was panic stricken. My mind raced, why is my ring not on my finger? I ran down the stairs to find my friends."

Some are so unsettled by the strange feeling of absence that they will move to quickly put something else in its place. If they then take up the loss as a matter to resolve, it is no longer the feeling that motivates them. Laurie, a forty-year-old preschool teacher living in San Francisco, explained: "Since the loss, I've had to put something on my finger. It felt extremely naked. I found my high school graduation ring and gave it a home. I like the graduation ring, but still miss the beauty of the turquoise ring." A replacement assuaged the naked feeling, but her desire to recover the lost ring's beauty sustained her motivation to continue the hunt.

Some make quick efforts to replace the missing item and find some reprieve in knowing that a replacement is coming. Teirra, a twenty-two-year-old mother of an infant and receptionist at a gym in Syracuse, was on vacation with her mom and dad in Hawaii when she lost a pearl ring: “My finger feels naked even now but I know that my ring is now in the process of being remade, made to my size with my pearl and will arrive in the mail in a few weeks.”

In addition to feelings of being exposed, the loss of an object may evoke the feeling of having lost a part of one’s self. Susan experienced an object as an inanimate feature of self when she had to give up the hunt for her lost salsa dance shoe in Argentina when her vacation was coming to an end: “I was sad for my lost shoe and knew I would not find it. As I was leaving Argentina, I felt a part of me was staying behind.” Robyn, a twenty-five-year-old waitress and struggling artist living in Toronto, noted that, “A part of me died with [the painting’s loss] even though I keep telling myself it’s just a material thing I can make more.”

Rhys, a writer living in New York City, described the loss of his black Moleskine notebook containing some of his best ideas as causing him to feel “incomplete.” When Noura, a twenty-one-year-old student at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, lost a bracelet gifted to her by a family friend she rarely sees, she “felt a huge hole in [her] stomach...” Ethan, an opera singer in his early forties living in New York City, described a recovery of a beloved red t-shirt that said ‘drink coca cola’ in Hebrew as having “been made whole again.”

Others seek to recover something that is lost in order to undermine a threat to their identity, or sense of who they are. When individuals lose official forms of identity, like IDs, passports, or birth certificates, they may feel a tangible threat to their sense of identity. Barbara is a forty-two-year-old stay-at-home-mom from Denver who lost her wallet containing IDs and credit cards. “I felt a little like my identity had been erased,” she recalled. “I had a spare debit

card that I kept in my yoga bag, so that saved me from being completely powerless. A clerk asked me for my ID to go along with it, so I told her the story.”

When these individuals finally recover the identity supporting object, they sometimes report the sensation of putting themselves back together. Sarah is a twenty-four-year-old costume designer living in San Francisco who lost her purse containing her ID, bank card, and cell phone. “Without ID, I did not have any access to funds in the meantime and was quite broke,” she recalled. “Then my ID came, I got my new bank card, and got a new phone. I had the sensation of slowly putting myself back together as I reconstructed my basic my belongings.” Tyler experienced a feeling of becoming a person once again when replacing the contents of his wallet: “I returned home and assured everyone that I once again existed as a person. Joking aside, I really did feel validated somehow, as if being reunited with those pieces of paper and plastic made me someone with a unique identity once again, instead of Random Person #576890754.”

Some acknowledge the absurdity of treating a plastic card that was designed to confirm their identity for bureaucratic matters as necessary to sustain the real thing. After losing her wallet and racking her brain for two weeks about where it could be, Crystal, a forty-year-old therapist living in D.C., found a sudden break in the case. She explained: “[The finder] was holding it by one end with it flapping open revealing my driver’s license. My eyes immediately filled with tears and a sudden rush of emotion came over me, as if to say, “You aren’t a lost soul after all! You don’t have to move to Canada and change your name!” Seriously, for a brief moment it was almost as wonderful as the day I gave birth to my daughter! I know that sounds absurd, but it is so true. I was so happy to have my identity back.”

Individuals routinely describe what was lost as their “whole life” especially in referring to contents of purses, wallets, backpacks, briefcases, blackberry mobile phones or iPhones. Robert, a resident of Brooklyn, described what he lost: “[A] whole bunch of IDs, ATM cards, Credit Cards, my whole life, my wife's whole life that I stupidly left behind.” Katie, an unemployed twenty-one-year-old living in Denver, echoed his sentiment: “I didn't care about the money, the gift card, or the gym card, or anything else, only the birth certificate and the ID. My whole life was pretty much in that wallet.” Danielle from New York City noted, “There were about 40 bucks in it, but don't care about the dough (even though I am broke), my whole life was in there.”

When people understand that something is unrecoverable, they sometimes mourn the loss of biographical experiences, or stories of self. Liza, a Chilean high school Spanish teacher in Harlem, left her red suitcase behind in the trunk of a taxi in New York City. When she determined that a recovery was unlikely, she was struck by the depth of feeling she had for the lost objects it contained and the stories they told.

Up to a few days ago, I truly felt that material things were... a drag. See, I helped clean an old couple's apartment after they had moved to a nursing home. It was a very meaningful experience that made me realize material items mean nothing. We come into and leave this world, after all, quite naked, I thought. Well, life has just given me a sweet reminder that the [stuff] is worth the drag. As I see now, these are symbolic tokens that represent our experience on Earth... Some motherfucking bitch may be walking around wearing my shirt, my high heel stilettos, my stretch jeans, the most comfortable ones. The bitch who will wear my pants obviously ignores the story behind those pants, the bastards won't recognize the persons behind those digital pictures, the stinking little whore ignores

what secrets lie behind my favorite burgundy shirt, the energy placed behind a simple ceramics necklace. As I see it now, we drag stuff for a reason and it is well worth it.

Others lament the loss of an object now for the hindrance that they anticipate it will cause them in the future when they want to remember past events in their lives. Joe is a general manager of car lot in Phoenix who has lost a camera and the photos it contained of a special trip. “[M]y wife was looking, just yesterday, for the 500 plus pictures we took on that trip to New York,” he recalled. “I had to remind her that the camera never made it home. The camera was never recovered and since this was the only trip I had taken to my wife's hometown in the 18 years that we have been a married couple with the fact that it was her dad's sixtieth birthday we definitely feel like something very special has been lost.”

#### *Finding Other and/or Relationship with Other in Objects*

In losing a keepsake given or passed on by another, individuals sometimes feel a double sense of loss. They lose the object and they ‘lose’ the object’s former owner or a connectedness to them. They may feel as though they have failed to properly honor or care for someone, living or deceased, for whom they care deeply; they may feel that they have lost someone “all over again.” In these instances, they are treating the object as if it contains the mana, spirit, or essence of another. Joan is a forty-five-year-old consultant in the banking industry living in Huntington Beach who lost a necklace. “The necklace was given to me by mother approximately 10 years ago,” she explained. “The diamond belonged to my father, who passed away in 1978. I rarely took the necklace off. I liked the feeling that I had when wearing it. It may sound corny, but I felt comforted in a way - like my dad was watching over me. I am hopeful that it will still show

up somewhere that I overlooked. It haunts me. In some way I feel like I lost a part of my dad all over again.”

In losing the necklace worn by her grandmother and passed onto her after her death, Lia, a thirty-five-year-old veterinary assistant living in Rosemead, California, “...felt like I lost my Granny all over again and my heart feels broken. I shouldn't have worn the necklace that day. I shouldn't have changed the thick, braided chain for the slimmer, shorter chain. I shouldn't have gone to the festival. Granny gave me a pair of her diamond studs that were on her ears constantly. They were on mine since her funeral but now they are in a drawer, hiding. If I ever lost those I don't know what I would do.”

For some, the object conveys a sense of an ongoing relationship with a loved one after he or she has died. When the deceased has gone “too soon” or was otherwise “taken” by a murder or an unrelenting illness, individuals may understand the subsequent loss of an object that symbolizes the deceased as a continued onslaught against them. Marisa is a twenty-nine-year-old land use consultant living in Santa Monica who left her purse behind on a table at the Third Street Promenade. Though she conceded leaving it behind, she understood the lost object as having been “taken” from her much like her mother’s life at the hands of the murderer.

It wasn't the purse I cared about or even the wallet, cell phone or brand new camera, but one keychain that meant the world to me. My mother was murdered on October 15, 2005. Once the police released the house where my mom was murdered to us, I went into my room and found this keychain hanging on my light switch. It was an image of an Angel hugging a small girl and the name Pamela was written on it. My mom's name was Pamela and this keychain represented everything to me, she was my angel that would protect me during what I didn't know then would be the most heart-wrenching year of my



life. Through the murder trial, the sentencing, the one year anniversary, I held this keychain close to me. In fact, the moment the verdict was read the keychain was locked between my brother and my hands as we squeezed our hands together tightly waiting to hear the outcome of the verdict of guilty on all counts for the kid who killed my mom. I kissed it at her grave on the one year anniversary, the day we finally laid the headstone. And this day, the day this keychain was taken from me was exactly one week after the one year anniversary of my mom's death. I had already been stripped of everything I thought I had, but the one thing that continued to keep me connected to my mom was taken too. It was the final blow, I thought I had been through everything, hurt enough, but I was wrong.

Others discover that the object's loss undermines their sense of connectedness to their family. Kitty, who works for a media group in Manhattan, lost a gold Tiffany's bracelet. Given to her as a gift by her parents many years before, the bracelet had come to signify her roots and the family in which she grew up. "Without my bracelet on my wrist, I feel off kilter," she reported. "Something crafted from the earth and heavy with love is no longer dangling in the light to remind me of my family, to ground me to my roots. I see now that on my wrist a gentle phantom rests, reminding me that the compass I truly seek is always right beneath the surface." She found that the un-tanned shape of the missing bracelet on her wrist reminded her that she did not actually need it to feel the peace of mind and connectedness to which she attributed it.

Individuals commonly portray losses as creating circumstances by which they can appreciate the object's real value. When Kendal, a twenty-six-year-old living in San Francisco, cannot find a pin given to her by her mother and once worn by her grandmother, only then does she sense its significance to her as a proud marker of her family's matrilineal lineage.

No one would characterize me as a sentimental or nostalgic person. Whether this is a result of upbringing or the pragmatism that results from moving often, I am quick to shed material items, unafraid to toss what most would deem sentimental - in a constant battle to keep my life streamlined and minimalistic. While carrying three bags of groceries, feet screaming in high-heels, retracing my steps while on the phone with my boyfriend, finally, I decided to give up. I told him what had happened and he said, "Oh, does the pin have 3 daisies? Yeah, I found it in my room." Clearly, he did not realize the importance I attached to the pin and frankly, neither did I, not until it was gone anyway.

Some realize through the loss that their relationship with another transcends the presence of the object, that they do not need the object to sustain relations with the person the object signifies. Camille, a resident of Los Angeles, lost a brooch she gifted to her now-deceased mother. She recalled that when her mother died, "all things mom somehow became precious." But the loss of the brooch forced her to reconsider where precisely the preciousness lies. She noted, "I realize that the brooch is gone, my mom is gone but the memory of having bought it for my mom about 6 years ago will never die." Similarly, when Roni, a resident of San Francisco, lost a necklace once worn by her mother, she felt the loss of her mother's presence in her life when she finally gave up searching. She reported: "[The loss] makes me very sad. My mom lives very far away from me and she is one of my best friends. When I wore the necklace, it was like I had a piece of her with me all the time. She still lives inside my heart though..."

### *Object as Scaffolding for Activity or Way of Being*

In normal possession, people presume safekeeping and draw on objects as natural extensions of themselves. In Michael Polanyi's (1966) terms, they "dwell in" their possessions

and see the world from their potential with them. But when the object is not there to support a pre-established line of conduct, they perceive the object's unique powers for sustaining and completing the narrative to which they have committed themselves. In the realization that a narrative-sustaining object is missing, the projected beginning (if they have not yet started it) or end of the activity (if they have already started it) comes under threat. In these moments, individuals uniquely apprehend the instrumental role the object was already playing or was projected to play.

Many losses that cause some sort of path strain involve what we might call access-granting objects. These are items that individuals, for one reason or another, need in order to engage in some sort of planned action. Often these items grant access to society's institutions and services, such as keys, wallets, purses, passports, money, etc. But we may also characterize things that function symbolically as keys or identification cards in particular contexts or within certain lines of conduct as access-granting. Though most have a working sense of what possessions are important to them, some do not realize the full extent before losing them. When Minh, a twenty-three-year-old hotel concierge, lost her wallet, she recalled, "I didn't realize how much I needed my wallet until I no longer had it."

When plans hinge on having a particular object in possession, individuals may feel its disappearance keenly as a wrench in that plan. They shift to a focus on the object in order to preserve the trajectory they set out to complete. When Sheena, a fifty-two-year-old nurse living in Manhattan, could not find her passport at home before leaving to catch a flight to Scotland for dental surgery, she gained a poignant sense of the passport's value to her life. "I realize now just HOW much I depend on that photo ID and never again will I just throw my passport in my bag,"

she recalled feeling. “So much expense, so much inconvenience and it could have been avoided if I had paid more attention and been less careless.”

A missing object may muddle the ease at which one can otherwise move through routine procedures. The object emerges as a facilitator of, but not required by, their planned activity. When George was detained at the security checkpoint of the Seattle International Airport, all of a sudden not having his passport seemed especially significant.

They detained me for 20 minutes for a luggage check. I had forgotten to seal my liquids. And I had a penknife in my pocket, which had slipped my mind. And, for some unknown reason, one of my bags tested positive for a substance I had never heard of. So, here I was with a weird ID from Pennsylvania that looks like a forgery... maybe even worse than a forgery... a concealed weapon, and some kind of homeland-security-flagged chemical, with nothing to defend myself with except a sob story about how I accidentally misplaced my passport.

For others, it is the worry about the loss itself that undermines their plans. Having just learned that something is missing, the losing party experiences the loss as pulling their attention away from their ongoing activities. It is not the object itself that is sustaining their ongoing life, but rather a sense that they are properly composed, or put together. Liz was a sales clerk at an upscale furniture store living in New York City when she realized that her \$2000, 18k gold, Chanel ring was missing. “I noticed the ring was gone while I was dealing with customers at my home furnishings store,” she noted. “The sale was important to me. I didn't want to draw attention to my personal problem: my lost ring. But I did anyway. At some point I interrupted my conversation with the clients and said, ‘Could you excuse me? I lost my ring and need to

look for it.’ And I pretty much ‘snuck in’ looking for it throughout the afternoon. I was embarrassed more at having such a preposterous ring than I was at losing it.”

When the realization of a loss occurs immediately before a moment of necessary calm, it may distract individuals from a planned style of self presentation. In these moments, individuals experience the safekeeping of their normal collection of possessions as important for maintaining their usual presentation of self. When Tina, an unemployed resident of San Francisco in her twenties, realized that her Razor cell phone was missing, it undermined her usual demeanor.

[I] did a quick rifle through and horror of horrors, my cellular was gone. I flipped out inside, as I generally don’t lose very many things, or rather, things that come with a 300 dollar price tag. Totally rotten! I tried to buck up and revert to charming my interviewer, but instead ended up dazed during the tour. I kept tugging at my hair every now and then, and proclaimed that “well, obviously, office work has never been my ambition.”

The job’s for a Google lackey, essentially. Horrible!

Others discover that the object provided support for a certain style of living. They learn of the lost object’s role in facilitating, or sustaining the charm of their everyday lives. Heather, a thirty-year-old sales representative living in Los Angeles, described life without having her complete selection of song choices at her fingertips after losing a case full of CDs: “I would say that life sucks regarding [the loss]. I’ll think of a song and I can’t hear it. My boyfriend will ask to listen to something, and more often than not, that disc is gone.”

Some individuals describe how the absence of the object throws off their general rhythm, causing them to feel ‘lost’ while carrying out normal routines. They treat the object as anchoring their place in the world; without it, they are disoriented, in chaos. Ali, a woman in her early-thirties living in Orange County, described the effects of losing her cell phone, especially while

commuting. “I felt lost without my blackberry, even though it wasn't even two full days,” she recalled. “It's a very weird feeling not being that connected to my email and phone calls. I wondered how I managed before cell phones and blackberry's... The drive felt very weird without talking on the phone or looking at my emails at red lights.” Others reflect on the loss of ease to move through their normal routines. Sara explained: “By [losing] them, I was not able to maneuver about in my daily life as easily as I am used to.”

Others feel ‘lost’ as a result of losing an object. Eileen, the Brooklyn lawyer introduced earlier, lost a guidebook in Paris while on vacation. She noted that “[She and her family] had been enjoying the book a great deal because it put what we were observing into historical context. ... [L]ater that day we went to the Bastille but we really knew very little about it.”

Some learn that the object allowed them to sustain a preferred separation from the outside world, without it, they are more vulnerable to the whims of life and destabilizing forces may enter. Jason is a resident of New York City who lost his Zen Micro MP3 player. “Listening to music in commute is essential to keep my peace of mind on the subway,” he noted. “I’ve had to adjust to get by. For instance, two Caribbean women argued for a solid 20 minutes about whose bag was shoving into whose back.”

Some speak of an object’s role in sustaining an abstract sense of rhythm and good fortune. Sue, a fifty-two-year -old freelance court reporter living outside Philadelphia, described what the loss of her wedding ring meant to her: “I felt that I needed my ring on my finger for everything in my family to be okay. I loved the ring, not as a beautiful piece of jewelry, but I guess it just felt special to me, it was my family as a symbol that I could see whenever I looked down at my hand. If I ever took it off, it went right back on. All would be well for my children with that band on my finger.”

Some sense that a loss has undermined their rhythm by disturbing their usual connectedness to others. When Annie, a nineteen-year-old student living in Vancouver, British Columbia, lost her cell phone, she felt “how hard life can be without it.” “My contact with people has definitely taken a nose dive,” she noted. “I relied on it to keep me in touch with everyone, and never even bothered to memorise numbers. I feel out of sync with the world in general and my social bubble in particular.”

### *The Subjectivity of Objects*

Individuals find that their objects contain energies, motivations, and dispositions after discovering that they are lost, coming to life in three recurrent ways: individuals find in them motivations to escape, they find in them the feeling of loneliness or fear, and after having disappeared, they orient toward the object’s ongoing life apart from them. Some imagine their cherished belongings with their own motivations, with their own plans of action to leave them. Like Mary Shelley’s, Dr. Frankenstein, bestowing life to inanimate matter, Eduardo, a thirty-two-year-old computer technician living in the Bronx, raised his new engagement ring from the dead of inanimacy even as the act struck him as absurd. “It was strange since just a couple weeks before I lost it, I had an accident where that same ring actually dug into my finger and cut me pretty bad,” he recalled. “It’s almost as if it wanted to come off.”

Some express concern that the object is suffering from human-like emotions such as loneliness or fear during its time away from home. After losing her wallet, Jaime recalled, “My anxiety got worse... I thought about my wallet, out there, alone in the world.” Robert is a twenty-seven-year-old web developer living in Denver who has lost the notebook in which he writes his creative ideas. “I really wanted to drive down on that Sunday, and look through the

windows, though, just to know it was safe,” he recalled. “But, I didn't.” Jennie, a twenty-five-year-old working in finance in Manhattan, wants the finder of her ring to treat it right, “I just hope whoever has it takes the ring off when they put on hand cream. It's bad for the pearl.”

Others want to know of the life their objects lead while they are away. Crystal felt a strong urge to know about the life her wallet had lived for the last two weeks. “I still wanted to know the full story of where my wallet had been,” she recalled. “It was like it had been on an adventure without me and I was entitled to know every detail. The wallet had a life of its own.” Elle, a twenty-nine-year-old doctoral student introduced earlier, began to imagine what new life her husband's wedding ring would lead after feeling that it had most likely been found and the finder was not going to return it: “I started to wonder what would happen to the ring, now that someone had chosen to take it. Would they take care of it? Would they appreciate it?” Elle and Crystal keep their losses going through the concern they have about the life the missing object is leading without them.

### *Loss Forces Consideration of Object's Comparative Value and Value to Others*

In previous sections, I showed how losses force a recognition of the missing object's value in the life of the losing party. In this section, I show how they reflect on the value of an object in two other ways: its value relative to other objects they own, and the value opportunistic others may find in it.

Some reflect on how prospective finders would likely see the meaning of the object. Some know that the object's lack of obvious sentimental significance or personal markings could be a hindrance to their recovery effort. Liz, the New Yorker working as a sales clerk at a furniture store, introduced earlier, lost her Chanel ring. While searching for it, she recalled



asking herself, “What were the chances someone would find and return my ring? It was not a wedding band, had no inscriptions and no visible signs of ‘sentimental value.’ To the contrary, this is the ring you'd want to find in a safe you'd just cracked open: nothing but pure gold and plenty of it. The only writing: the tell-tale words ‘Chanel 18k.’ Ka-ching.”

When individuals lose multiple things at once, they may consider their relative value when deciding which to replace first, or in considering which loss makes them most upset. Chris noted, “I didn’t care so much about the skates, but losing the helmet is what really upset me. Danielle, a New Yorker, explained, “The thing I am most upset about is the purse. I really liked it. It was only big enough for a few cards and some cash, more of a pouch really. My aunt made it in the 70’s, she used to do a lot of embroidery.” Andrew, living in Queens, noted, “I lost a lot, and the most important thing being that bag. I loved that bag. I found it in a cemetery of St. Benedict of Nursia in Subiaco, Italy. It was old and sturdy, military green and military style. Probably a good 40 years old.” After having lost his “man purse,” Jason, a New Yorker, noted, “There were a few things of value in it; a psychology textbook (I reordered), my class journal for psychology (this I’ll have to recreate or just start from now as the class is over), and my mp3 player. The player was the biggest loss.”

In accounting for what has been lost after the initial discovery, some naturally toggle back-and-forth between the object’s value to themselves and to opportunistic others. Caroline, a producer for a major television network living in New York City, described her process of reflecting on what contents had been lost in a bag. With each item that she identified as lost, she considered its unique value in her life and what value others would find in it.

Walking home, I start doing a mental inventory of what I’ve lost. ... I lost two pairs of prescription glasses, one of them sunglasses that I really liked a lot, though my favorite

pair is on my head at the moment, so at least I have that. There's a Dora the Explorer coloring book that I bought earlier that day for my son's upcoming 3rd birthday. Sad but I'll survive. ... I've also lost some paperwork from my son's school, with the names and addresses of all his classmates. Can that be dangerous? Is this thief also a robber or murderer? God, I hope not. Ugh...and my Palm Pilot. There's 500 bucks down the drain. Hey, wait a minute, can that be dangerous? I start thinking to myself. Can they start calling all my contacts and hassle them or try and sell them life insurance? And oh my God, did I have social security numbers on there? As they say here in the Big Apple: "Oy vey." When I get to work I inform our Operations person that I need a new office key. ... Talking to her, I remember that I've got a pack of business cards in the bag, as well as my NYPD Working Press card. What if someone tries to get into a Mayoral press conference – as me – and shoots the Mayor? Sorry for these graphic words, but now I'm truly fucked.

For others, loss forces a recognition of how well one knows the object that was lost, revealing either a looseness or precision with its exact value. Some reflect on how little they can actually recall about the lost object. Josh is an eighteen-year-old working at a Wendy's fast food restaurant in Michigan. "I go downstairs and ask my mom if she had seen it," he recalled. "Of course she hasn't. Now I realize my wallet is lost. I go crazy, thinking I had my social security card in it. ... Then a few days later my mom comes to tell me she had my SSC in her wallet. We both thought it was in mine, but I guess she needed it for something and took it out of my wallet." Similarly, when Edith, a twenty-year-old art history student at the University of Toronto, was trying to gauge the level of threat that the loss posed, she experiences difficulty in determining what actually was lost. She explained, "Other than fundamental things like

identification and credit cards, I had a great deal of trouble recalling what else was in the wallet, although it was full.”

### *Threats of Materialism*

Individuals are commonly self-conscious about caring about a lost object too much. They are sensitive to appearing materialistic or otherwise overly concerned about one single thing. In the process of searching for a missing object, they commonly reflect on their level of investment in recovering it, sometimes as strategically invoked justifications to sustain their effort. Eva, a twenty-two-year-old nanny living in New York City, was well aware of the apparent absurdity of investing too much time thinking about her lost belt. In the midst of her hunt, she paused to ask herself what she was doing. What she found only energized her hunt: “I thought maybe it may seem stupid to be so hung up on a belt, but it was once my mother’s, and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to find another like it.”

But others are not energized by reflecting on the effort they are investing in a recovery; they begin deeply moved by a loss and then undergo a transformation. When John, a resident of Washington DC, lost his new cell phone in the Adam’s Morgan neighborhood while out late drinking in a bar, panicking seemed initially justified. He explained: “Then I asked Emily, my girlfriend, to call it. We couldn’t hear anything. I went downstairs to our living room and she called again, still nothing. This is when I began to panic. Normally I try not to be too connected to material things, but this cell phone was less than a month old. I haven’t even received the rebate yet.” Only later does John’s justification for getting caught up in the loss fall flat even to himself. He explained, “I look at this incident as a lesson about being so obsessive about something as trivial as a cell phone. I do my best to take care of the things that I have but I will

not become distracted from things that are truly important. I maintain perspective by thinking of family and friends.”

Others understand at the outset of a loss discovery that deeply attaching to material things is a misguided philosophy, explaining their orientation as the product of lessons learned. In accepting its permanent loss, Liz, a sales clerk living in New York City, resisted seeing a symbolic meaning in her ring and found comfort in its pure market value. She explained: “No ring, that's certain. But still, I'm okay. I've lost a lot of jewelry and I've never shed a tear. Some has had sentimental value, even this ring was a gift from my husband for some birthday or other. But I remembered my mother telling me about the difference between things that could be replaced by money and things that couldn't. And over the years I've learned this lesson well. I've lost best friends and boyfriends, parents and pregnancies, things that were completely and utterly irreplaceable. And for \$2,000 I could walk into Chanel and walk out with the same thing I'd lost – that was quite a deal.”

Some catch a glimpse of themselves as deeply concerned about the lost object while doing whatever they can to recover it and find such concern for the object puzzling. They ask themselves, ‘if I am not a materialistic person, why should the loss so move me?’ Kaytie is a twenty-nine-year-old writer living in San Diego who lost her wedding ring from a failed marriage. Her concern to recover it initially puzzled her.

I wanted my own diamond back. It killed me to think someone was out there hocking it, wearing it, selling it, melting down the gold. And I had to ask myself, because I swear I'm not usually this materialistic, why it bothered me so much. I didn't stop crying about the loss until I called my ex-husband and told him what had happened. He was very sympathetic. Even now it brings tears to my eyes. Turned out when I was honest with

myself I realized I was upset because I had come to view my old wedding set as representative of all that had been good in my previous marriage. We hadn't been right for each other, but there had been a few good things. I had offered to return the rings when we decided to part but he wanted me to keep them.

Kaytie's concern that the loss was bothering her beyond what it should compelled her to find the lost object's true meaning to her. Once she realized that the ring had symbolized something good from her failed marriage, she conceded that the bother it had caused her made sense; she was not simply "materialistic."

### *Conclusion*

This chapter demonstrates the ways that people discover and/or reflect on the meanings of their objects while in various stages of losing them. In the initial realization that it might be missing, they experience a piece of self, a skin or a protective covering is missing. In forcing an end to their involvement in certain activities or a style of living, they discover the object's role in sustaining their usual routines. When the loss feels like a loss of a loved one or their relationship with them, they discover the object's role in sustaining their social relations. For others, the loss forces a recognition of how the missing object compares to other possessions they have and what value opportunistic thieves may find in it. In an effort to avoid a sense that they are acting materialistically when responding to the loss in various ways, it forces individuals to reconsider the meaning that the object has for them. This chapter offers a counter to social scientific work that tends to study objects abstractly, or outside the context of individuals' normal day-to-day lives. It shows how objects pick up rich meanings, many not focused on as they are used, but

discovered in the wake of certain occurrences, like a loss. It shows how people discover the social life compacted in an object.

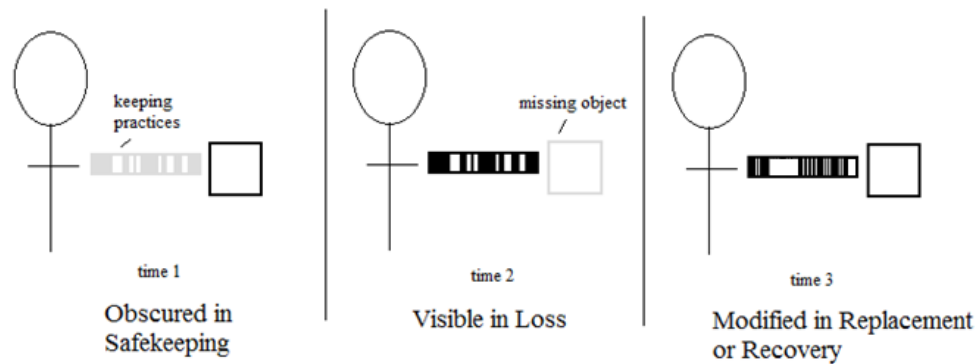
## Orienting to It as a Future Possibility – Chapter 7

Individuals sustain an orientation to loss even when something is not actively lost by anticipating its potential to occur at some point unknown in the future. The concern for future losses comes to life in three ways: (1) after a loss or near loss, individuals may institute a new way of keeping the possession or its replacement in order to extinguish a similar threat in the future; (2) as singularly occurring stop-gap measures, individuals may act on an as-needed basis to prevent a loss when it seems imminent and for various reasons, resist changing the faltering method or instituting a new one; (3) as a diffuse anxiety about having things together or not forgetting something important, people may perform routine checking acts without a reflective sense of reacting to a particular loss that already happened in the past or will happen in the future. By orienting to the possibility of a loss occurring in the future, individuals try to remove the power that the object has to subordinate their lives to it. The idea is that by making small sacrifices of their ongoing lives in the form of small preventative acts, they try to lessen its ability to demand a larger sacrifice of their lives some time later.

### Instituting New Routines after Loss

When they change their routines due to a loss, that loss experience remains with them, sometimes only in the background, every time they enact that routine or gather an object from its new home. The modification process is a drama in three acts. (See the diagram below.) In safekeeping, the techniques individuals use to manage an object may fade from conscious reflection. In loss, people may actively reflect on these techniques, determining if they need modifying. If modification is in order, that loss event leaves its mark on their newly modified keeping practices.

Figure 7. Post-loss Modification of Keeping Practices



Commonly, individuals transform their keeping techniques after losing something. Rhys, a writer from New York City, noted how he has changed the way he keeps his notebooks after losing a very important one in Paris. “The loss certainly changed my behavior,” he explained. “Afterward, I was hesitant to use notebooks at all, and would tend to write my ideas on individual scraps of paper, so that if I lost one, it would be a minor loss, especially if I’m going on a trip. I would never bring a notebook full of untranscribed ideas on a vacation with me. But as far as I can remember, I haven’t lost any of these loose leaf idea papers.”

Many describe the outcome of a loss as a didactic tale in which they learn how best to care for some particular object through a failed effort. Shawn is a nine-year-old living in Denver who lost two hobby-sized rockets. “We looked for it, walking all around the fields and open space in the area,” he recalled. “I thought I saw it, but it was just a rock. We gave up. The rest of the day was kind of sad... I learned an important lesson that day. Use recommended engines. And the higher they go, the easier it is to lose them.” The past loss lives on to the degree that Shawn orients to this ‘insight’ in the keeping of his rockets in the future.

After a streak of losing things frequently, individuals may change their technique so that they are more frequently relying on the help of others. Prior losses live on in the ways others



assemble around and maintain awareness of possessions on behalf of 'loss-prone' people. From her own point of view, Vanessa, a resident of Austin, fit the criteria for an object management deviant. She explained, "My friends are all very aware of my inevitability to lose things constantly, carelessly, and ridiculously so much, that they hold tickets for me until we reach the point where they are to be required, this includes from the movie box to two feet away at the usher inside a theatre."

Some individuals suffer through a loss of a possession caused by another before realizing that they must keep valuable items from them more generally. The loss lives on through their attempts to keep valuable things away from them and may color their sense of the person's character more generally. Through the event, they may come to think of the person as "immature" or "careless," vowing to not loan something of value to them again. Jenny, a woman in her thirties living in Toronto, learned that her niece was not yet mature enough to care for valuable possessions. She explained: "... [M]y niece borrowed my iPod to hang out with her friends at a Tim Horton's inside the Toronto western hospital. She told me she left the [iPod] unsupervised and hurried to her friend's house and may have forgotten about it. ... I made her realize that she is much too young to be carrying expensive purses and electronics until she works and earns enough to afford them."

Through a loss, individuals may vow to remove the extraneous possessions that are normally not needed as they go through their daily routines. The loss lives on as a pared down style of moving through life. Jannel, an employee of a small town newspaper living in Massachusetts, realized that taking a "full wallet" to a beer festival was a bad idea before ever leaving home.

[F]our friends and I went to a beer summit in the Castle at Park Plaza in Boston. It's funny because before we even left I looked in my wallet and was going to take everything out that I didn't need, but I forgot, so I had everything in it: 3 credit cards, 2 store cards, my 3 health cards, license and I even had gift cards that I received at x-mas and hadn't used yet. I had receipts and all sorts of things in there. But ... I forgot to take everything out and off I went to the beer Summit. So lesson learned: I will never take anything with me that I do not need. Even though, now that I think of it, my wallet is in my pocketbook right now with all my stuff in it. When I go to lunch I will sort through my things.

### *Object Marking*

Through losing something, individuals may decide to modify the possession or its replacement in order to increase the ease at which they can recover it in the future. The loss event lives on as visible markings, a kind of scar of the past, rather than as new procedures for keeping it. Commonly, the loss spurs them to label their possessions with return information when they sense the possibility of misplacing them again after having just misplaced them. After Debbie, a forty-nine-year-old former special education teacher living in Mountain View, recovered her father-in-law's keys after dropping them on a walk in an unexpected downpour, she immediately labeled them with his phone number. She noted, "As soon as I arrived home, doubly drenched now, I took a permanent ink marker and wrote my father-in-law's telephone number on the attached key chain. May I never lose them again!"

The practice includes the effort to label the belongings of another deemed to be an object management deviant. A mother has labeled her son's jacket with their last name in case he accidentally leaves it behind at school, as he is known to do on occasion. She told a woman who

works at the school on yard-duty, “I wrote our last name on the label because he has a tendency to drop it in the middle of the playground and never think about it again. He did it once before.”

For some, indicating ownership is meant to prevent others from mistaking it for their own when it is among many that look similar. At a park in a west Los Angeles neighborhood, several pickup basketball players begin playfully chastising another player for the number of markings on his basketball. “Let’s see. You got your name, your phone number, some drawings, and your email! Are you a little worried about losing it?” The owner of the basketball quickly offers up an explanation. “Hey, someone walked off with the last ball I had. If that ever happens again, I want to make sure it wasn’t a mistake.”

#### *Modifying the Object*

A loss or a close call may continue to live on as a physical modification of the recovered object or its replacement, rather than as only a marking. For those who have undergone weight loss, a loss of one item, like a piece of jewelry or clothing, will spur them to re-size similar items that have not yet been lost. Jessica, a twenty-four-year-old waitress living in Utah, modified her existing jewelry after her beloved high school class ring slipped off her finger because it was too big. After the loss she noted, “I have worried about some of my other jewelry and have had most of it re-sized.”

For others, modifying an object may mean building onto its replacement with ‘safety’ features. After losing a necklace given to her by her mom somewhere in Reno, Nancy, a forty-five-year-old high school teacher from Ontario, added a safety chain to it. She noted, “Mum, of course, had another one struck off for me for my next birthday and I had it fitted with a safety chain which often isn't as pretty, but, you know, once burned...”

When individuals lose items that must stay in one location or on their person, they may modify their possessions through a technique of anchoring, or tying them down to their bodies or stable features of the environment. Due to a bothersome frequency of loss, a Zen practitioner named Shunryu Suzuki, one of the first to bring the practice of Zen Buddhism to the West in the 1960s, was known to keep his spectacles tied to his robe to reduce the possibility of their loss (Chadwick 1999: 238). When things leave their homes too often, people tie them down to a particular location using the anchoring technique. At a coffee shop on the UCLA campus, for example, workers kept a stapler that was attached with Velcro to the counter. A worker there explained how this technique came about, “The thing ends up over there (pointing to a back counter) or in this drawer. The Velcro was an idea from the old manager. Now it sticks around... literally.”

#### *Acquisition Practices*

Individuals may sustain their orientation to a past loss and the future potential for another in what and how they buy new possessions. Some try to resist a deep attachment to items and remind themselves that their relationship is only temporary upon acquiring something for the first time. Rachael is a senior at UC Berkeley who has learned to make peace with the loss of a new possession in the moment of its acquisition. She explained, “I am the sort of person who loses material things quite often. As such, I try not to become too attached to any of my possessions, and have a way of assuming their loss upon acquisition.”

When individuals replace objects that were lost, they may feel the need to undergo preparatory work, or make vows to themselves, that they will be more careful with the replacement. They vow to more carefully anticipate the behaviors that may threaten its loss as a

way of transitioning from the prior loss and beginning with a clean slate. Sara, a twenty-one-year-old journalism student living in Chicago, provided illustration:

My adorable one-of-a-kind giraffe mittens, in fact, were bought to replace a pair of gloves I had just lost. I thought about the possibility of losing them when I was making the purchase. I decided right there at the register that I was going to take more care of these mittens than I did with any other pair, so I wouldn't have to worry. I put it out of my mind.

Parents sometimes choose not to buy particular items for their children and cite their past losses of the item as justification. For the parent, the past loss lives on as a reasonable justification for not buying another when the child solicits a new purchase. A child of about five-years-old walks up to a row of gumball machines positioned adjacent to the front doors at a Mexican restaurant in Portland, Oregon.

“Mom, can I have a quarter.” The child points to the row of machines. His mom, a Latina in her mid to late-twenties, turns from the cash register where she is paying for their meal. “I’m not giving you a quarter for another rubber ball. I guarantee you’ll lose it in five minutes.” The boy looks deflated. His mom finishes paying and promptly walks past the machines without a glance. The boy holds a steady and saddened gaze on the machines as he walks out.

When people lose something that is relatively expensive, they may decide that a cheaper version is less of a risk. Matthew, a nineteen-year-old from Salt Lake City, changed his sunglass preference after losing an Armani pair worth \$150. “As for more serious results of the loss, I’ve changed my opinion about sunglasses, because I used to only buy designer glasses that were

\$150-plus,” he recalled. “However now I know that my \$14 pair is just as good, and if I lose them or whatever, I don't care. So I guess there are good things about this.”

While some avoid buying themselves expensive items after losing something monetarily valuable, others make spouses and family members promise to follow their new practice of austerity as a way to cope with their own carelessness. Paula, a thirty-four-year-old stay-at-home mom living in Michigan described what happened: “I just cannot get over this. I keep dreaming about it. After talking to a friend of ours who is a psychologist, we realize that it is me feeling that I am worthless because I let this happen. One thing I do know now, that I have suspected for some time, is that I have serious attention issues. I am constantly losing things. I made my husband promise that he won't buy me anything that valuable again. That's the only thing that made me feel remotely better.”

If it is not with an eye to loss that individuals discern *what* they buy, it is with an eye to loss that they discern *how* they buy. When Chandler, a thirty-year-old medical school intern in the Midwest, lost a wallet full of cash, he vowed to rely more on his debit card as a preventative measure in the future. He described his new strategy: “After the loss, I will not carry huge sums of money with me if I'm traveling. I'll rely exclusively on my debit card and maybe a few singles for the subway or bus. If the wallet gets lost, there's no paper trail back to the cash, debit cards can be tracked down and most importantly, I can be reimbursed by a bank.”

### *Placing Practices*

Individuals assign items homebases after having trouble finding them because they anticipate the possibility of more difficulties if they do not. Esther, a sixty-year-old retiree living in Sacramento, designated one location for store receipts during a remodel project after having lost some of them.

She decided to buy a simple plastic organizer to hold receipts after deciding that she had lost enough of them. She tells me that she'll keep it on the fridge using a magnet so her husband will remember to use it too.

After having lost her family's Paris guidebook while in Paris, Eileen learned to be vigilant about immediately placing it in its home on later vacations. She reported, "The profound sense of loss has passed. I have... learned that when I am on a vacation and I am using any kind of guide, I immediately toss it into my knapsack so as not to lose it."

After Laura lost her memory chips to her digital camera while also in Paris, she created special homes for them when on a later trip to Italy and Germany. "But this recent trip reminded me that I needed to be extra careful this time," she explained. "I did not visit Paris again. This time, my husband and I toured Italy and Southern Germany. I was better prepared for storing the memory chips from my camera. I brought along twice as many as last trip including zip lock bags AND a special carrying case specifically for the chips. I was determined not to lose another chance to remember a special place through MY eyes."

For some, a loss will spur them to draw up plans for a change in their keeping practices, such as keeping a spare copy, but never leave the drafting table. Craig, a thirty-nine-year-old owner of a body piercing shop living in Vancouver, British Columbia, had thought about buying a spare car key for a number of years. He reflected on his failure to act after its recent loss.

The planned "other spare set" which I meant to keep in a coffee can buried somewhere in the building's flowerbeds had never gotten past the planning stage in ten years. Entry fobs are \$100. I just never have had and "extra" \$100 to lay out for buried keys. I still haven't made the coffee can set although I lose my keys (usually found) at least once a

year. I'm still too broke and I only think of it for a short period after losing them; never when I have both keys and "extra money."

After a loss, individuals sometimes realize they failed to carry out the proper keeping technique for that item, vowing to keep it correctly next time. Lauren is a forty-one-year-old software consultant living in Seattle who lost her heart rate monitor while walking to a chiropractor appointment.

About half way over [to the appointment] I pulled the chest strap and the iPod out to change a setting on the iPod. I was concerned I would lose the [heart rate] monitor, so I hooked it with the elastic part of the chest strap and returned it to my pocket. I kept the iPod out. After the appointment I went downstairs, went outside to put everything on for the run. I put my hand into my pocket and only came out with the strap part, not the monitor. I looked around the area and saw nothing. My first reaction was that I was REALLY annoyed at myself, knowing that even though I had taken SOME precaution to make sure this didn't happen, it happened. I kicked myself for not just putting the thing on for the walk.

### *Reducing Possessions*

People may give objects away because they are too difficult to keep from getting misplaced or they are complicating their ability to easily find other possessions. Shantel, a twenty-eight-year-old teacher's aide living in Los Angeles, gave some of her young son's toys away when she realized that the sheer number was complicating her ability to keep them from getting lost. She stated, "We gave probably half of Jarrod's toys to a shelter... He had so many that it was getting hard just keeping them all together."



Individuals may also reduce their stock of possessions when the number makes it hard to find the objects they want. When Annette realized that she was not able to easily find the clothes she wanted to wear in her undersized closet, she knew it was time to give some things away. She explained, “I’ll be giving some clothes away to the Goodwill because I’m having such a hard time finding things in my tiny closet.” Jane, a columnist for the New York Times, announced her intention to undergo a radical overhaul of her home in order “to rid [it] of a half-century of accumulated ‘stuff’” after she “wasted an hour a few weeks ago looking for a report that was hiding in a pile of documents waiting to be filed.”<sup>3</sup>

### Stop-Gap Measures

Individuals may show orientation to the potential for a future loss by employing the irregular use of stop-gap measures to support their normal routines of keeping. In some cases, they employ these stop-gap measures when they notice that their usual routine breaks down in certain circumstances like playing with kids, or when equipment is failing (a broken clasp, a hole in a pocket, etc.). When the keeping technique shows signs of having a permanent susceptibility to the threat of loss, they may resist a permanent defusing of it and prefer stop-gap measures until they have the time, energy, or necessary equipment (a strap, a bag, etc.) to establish a new keeping practice. Stop-gap measures are a way of orienting to the future potential of loss without making the concern a permanent part of their behavior by modifying their normal routines.

For some, employing a stop-gap measure is a temporary solution when they cannot carry out their normal keeping routine. Ethan, an opera singer in his early forties living in New York City, anticipated the loss of his designer Mont Blanc pen when he tried keeping it in a particular way.

This time I had it engraved with ESH my initials, and I'd been using it a lot recently signing a lot of papers for a new business venture. A week or two before losing it after that shoot, the pen fell out of my pants pocket at my girlfriend's house and I heard it hit the floor, so I had an awareness that it was lose-able, and that maybe I wasn't being careful enough with it. The key was to always return it to the pen slot in the shoulder bag, but I didn't always have the bag with me now, so the pen ended up in my pocket frequently.

Some will realize that the object itself is changing through normal wear and tear and that successful safekeeping requires new preventative measures. They engage in stop-gap preventative work until they have time to make changes to the object. Noura caught her bracelet from falling after noticing it was getting loose. She contextualizes the foreshadowing of the loss with a description of the circumstances in which she received it as a gift from a family friend she had not seen in a number of years. "I was extremely happy since ten or eleven years [had] passed without knowing anything about her," she recalled. "When I was leaving she gave me this beautiful silver bracelet with a circle on top of the bracelet that looked like a coin and had the *fleur de lis* emblem engraved in it. I never took it off, I slept with it, took showers, worked, went to school, etc. However, I noticed that it was getting loose and I caught it a few times before it fell off my wrist."

In some instances, individuals notice that the threat of loss is growing, not because the object is changing, but rather they are changing. When Liz, a sales clerk at a furniture store living in New York City, finally lost her ring, she regretted not taking more proactive measures with its safekeeping after noticing the growing threat.

I knew the ring could be easily lost because in the past few months it had slipped off my finger quite a few times, once ending up in a recycling bag. I had lost about 40 pounds over the past year and a lot of things were slipping off. The recycling bag incident should have been a warning, but it wasn't. All I knew was that this was one slippery sucker that could be anywhere. I'd have to be resourceful.

For some, the reliance on stop-gap measures is a normal routine that will accompany the use of some objects when they are in need of maintenance. Jean is a sixty-two-year-old retired marketing executive living in Maine. When she noticed the threat of loss posed by her brooch, she kept it under active surveillance on a night out.

Once seated inside, my hand went up to touch the brooch... something I'd been doing all evening, because once again, the pin on its back was weakening. Every few years the latch needed replacing and sometimes I would run a large safety pin through the back of my lapel and around a more solid piece of the brooch. That night I didn't. My dress was a delicate fabric; no lapels; nothing thick enough to hide a safety pin. So I'd spent the entire drive into Boston touching it every so often to make sure it was still there. Before the waiter had a chance to hand us the menus, I realized it was gone.

Rather than maintain constant vigilance over an object's safekeeping as did Jean, some will modify their method of keeping an object to mitigate the threat of loss after detecting that one method is faulty.

A man in his fifties exiting a Starbucks notices his wallet has fallen out of his back pocket on the sidewalk right outside the door. He picks it up and stuffs it into the same pocket. It is clear now that this pocket is only half sewn on. He continues to walk while

the wallet inches closer and closer to falling again. When it finally falls again after walking twenty yards, he promptly picks it up and places it in the other back pocket.

Individuals commonly express regret for not taking a near loss as a cue to defuse the threat more permanently, instead relying on a temporary measure of loss prevention. Kendal is a twenty-six-year-old living in San Francisco. “[I am] angry with myself because I had received a preemptive warning from the pin a week prior while meeting a prospective new roommate in a possible new living situation: the pin had fallen off,” she recalled. ... “I did not take precautions. I did not affix it to my coat in a more fortified manner. I simply re-pinned it, then went about my business.”

In addition to the regret individuals have about not properly reacting to a detected threat of loss, they also regret not being properly attuned to the possibility of an object’s loss. Sue, a fifty-two-year-old, freelance court reporter living outside Philadelphia, missed signs that her ring had fallen off.

[M]y husband and I got a call from a friend that he had extra tickets for a Phillies game, so off we went. It was a bit chilly that evening, so I took my coat and gloves. After the game we walked back to our car, and I didn't want to wear my coat and gloves in the car so I took them off before getting in. I remember hearing a soft tinkle sort of sound on the ground, and I remember thinking that I wasn't even going to bother looking down because it was probably just a dime or something and it was dark and chilly and all. It's that last thought that gives me an ache in the pit of my stomach because I'm sure when I pulled off my gloves my ring came off and tinkled to the ground.

In some cases, individuals sense that the environment they are entering into or the activity they will take up will pose a threat to the objects they have in possession. Sometimes

they act accordingly and secure these items; in other cases, they have the thought but do not act. When Griselda, a resident of Los Angeles, was visiting a theme park in southern California, she boarded a ride with her family. Before long, she can tell that the ride is going to get rough and may cause one of her earrings to fall off. Though she has the thought, she let it go out of what she described as “stubbornness.” She explained, “When we got on the ride, the little jeep started running until all of a sudden it got very rough and I had a feeling I may lose my earrings and thought to myself that I should have put it in one of my jean pockets. But no, being very stubborn, I let it go just like that. When the ride was over, I touched both of my ears and found that one of my earrings was missing.”

### *Considering What to Bring*

Sometimes people decide what to bring on an outing or a trip with a sensitivity to the possibility of losing something. After Rhys, a writer living in New York City, lost his black Moleskine notebook while in Paris, he recalled his initial hesitation in bringing it on the trip because of his fear of losing it.

As I was leaving, I hesitated before I decided to bring my notebook with me. I was always more afraid to take my notebook out into the world if I was being relatively adventurous. I took it to work with me every day without questioning it, but to another continent seemed riskier. However, I knew that if I didn't take my notebook, I'd probably end up jotting any ideas I had while on the trip on napkins and random scrap pieces of paper that would be a huge hassle to organize later. I also knew that my notebook was going to be in my pocket the whole time anyway, so what was the difference if I was in Switzerland or Brooklyn? My pocket's my pocket. And what if my apartment burned down while I was gone?

Individuals may anticipate the risk of bringing certain items with them to events that could create obstacles to the safekeeping of personal belongings. Jannel, an employee of a small town newspaper living in Massachusetts, realized that she did not need to take every item in her wallet to a beer festival. But before she left, she failed to act on her concern and remove the extraneous items.

[F]our friends and I went to a beer summit in the Castle at Park Plaza in Boston. It's funny because before we even left I looked in my wallet and was going to take everything out that I didn't need, but I forgot, so I had everything in it: 3 credit cards, 2 store cards, my 3 health cards, license and I even had gift cards that I received at x-mas and hadn't used yet. I had receipts and all sorts of things in there. But needless to say, I forgot to take everything out and off I went to the beer Summit. ...So lesson learned. I will never take anything with me that I do not need... even though now that I think of it, my wallet is in my pocketbook right now with all my stuff in it. When I go to lunch I will sort through my things.

Individuals also return objects to their homes on behalf of others in anticipation that not doing so will cause these others distress in the future. For these individuals, seeing the other's possessions in unusual locations spurs a reflection on their routines and their usual ways of occupying a space. The challenge is moving the possessions from the presumed darkness of the other's awareness to a place of visibility. After he began to notice that his wife easily loses things "all the time" and the stress these losses generate for her, Steve, a professor at UC Riverside in his early forties, began a preventative measure to help her. When he noticed that her keys or cell phone, or any number of other things, were in potentially difficult places to find, he moves them to where they usually go, or puts them more in plain sight. He reported, "She is

constantly losing things. I just know that she won't find some of the stuff I come across... So I move things around without her knowing." It is Steve's behind-the-scenes work that keeps these potential misplacements from living on as modifications in his wife's keeping techniques. In this sense, he ensures that her potential misplacements will live on for him, but denies her the exposure to it.

#### *When Not in Use*

Individuals keep their things with an eye to loss also when they are not in immediate use. In some cases, the objects that individuals take out in public with them become hindrances and they wish to temporarily relieve themselves of them. But how does one put something aside in such a way that it does not look abandoned or lost and thereby increase its chances of getting taken, thrown away, or otherwise mistreated? One could, if loss is not an issue, set it aside without much thought. But when the prospect of loss is a concern, one may set belongings aside in public with a strategy. When David, a twenty-six-year-old PhD candidate in physics, needed to set his coat aside before a run, he intentionally placed it in such a way that it would be obvious to passersby that it is not abandoned.

I had been training to run my first half-marathon, so I was planning to run eight miles that afternoon. It was perhaps 40F outside, so I wore my coat on the 1/4-mile walk over to Forest Park, the large city park where I am accustomed to running. I had previously dropped my long-sleeved shirt a couple times in the park, and it had always been undisturbed when I finished my run. I suppose that gave me a false sense of security. So, I took off my coat and tossed it at the foot of a tree where it would be obvious to passersby it was not abandoned.

If in some cases individuals place their possession to make them seem like they are not abandoned when in public, in other situations they place them so they can simply keep an eye on them. When Melody, a nineteen-year-old undergraduate student at McGill University in Montreal, and her friends go out clubbing they put their things aside in a way they think will reduce the possibility of loss.

[M]y friends and I went out to a club in downtown Montreal. To prevent losing anything at such busy places, I only bring the essentials: some change, my ID, and my house keys. I kept everything in the pocket of my coat. We decided to place all our belongings on a chair where we could keep an eye on them.

### Routine Concern

Individuals also maintain a more diffuse sense of loss anticipation that does not necessarily derive from one loss occurrence, but rather from the general sense that they, like others, are prone to lose things from time to time. When they lose something, they sometimes reflect on their routine's failure to work effectively or their own failure to pull it off correctly.



For others, 'loss' as a theme materializes as a matter of recurrently confirming they still have an item (their keys, wallet, phone, etc.).

### *Exit Rituals*

Practices of looking, checking, patting, etc. are of a particular class of habitual techniques in which the concern for losing is built into the care of an object and does not become a separate, special, or occasional technique. The technique is a part of them; life is not suspended through it. Individuals sometimes reflect on these habitual techniques through their investigations of a loss's cause.

When people visit a public place where they have made themselves at home for a time, they may engage in a common behavior upon their preparation for exit. When someone leaves a table or couch where they have been sitting for any period of time, they will commonly get to a point before they have exited where they feel compelled to *look back* at the place they were sitting. In the following case, a man in his mid-sixties sat unaccompanied at a table in a Jewish Deli called Frommins in Santa Monica.

He has just finished eating a corned beef sandwich and fries. He wipes his mouth and then takes a sip of water. He picks up his reading glasses from the table, folds them, and places them in his front pocket. His car keys are next. He stands, picks up the bill, and begins making his way toward the cashier. Halfway between the cashier and his table he stops, turns, pats his front pocket, and looks back at his table. He seems to have found what he was looking for and continues on to the cashier to pay his bill.

Two college-aged Latinas were studying at a Starbucks in the Brentwood neighborhood of Los Angeles when they engaged in the practice.

They finish studying and begin packing up their books, binders, and laptops. Carefully winding up their laptop power cords, they then place all of their items in large black backpacks. “I hope he waits for us,” I hear one say to the other. They dart off toward the exit doors. One pulls the door open for the other, but before she steps through the door, she stops in her tracks, turns around halfway and holds a three second gaze on the table where they were seated. Her friend, still holding the door, also looks back as if taking the cue from her friend. A moment later they are through the door waiting for the light to change at the crosswalk.

Some individuals institute the technique in particular locations because they suspect having lost something by leaving it behind there in the past. Rob, a twenty-seven-year-old web developer living in Denver, described a similar technique he employs before he gets into his car and drives away. He reported, “Losing my notebook did have lasting impact though, since I was a lot more careful with my future ones. I had thought that I lost the old one by leaving it on top of my car and driving away, so I have a habit installed of looking on top of my car one last time before climbing in.”

Those who are accustomed to keeping a wallet, a set of keys, or a cell phone, in their pants or shirt pockets sometimes engage in a peculiar dance just before leaving their homes or places of work. Listening for the jingle of keys, feeling for the outline of a cell phone, or the bulk of a wallet, individuals pat and grasp, jiggle and shake, and then they are off. In the following example, a forty-something male employee at a Bank of America branch in Sacramento performed the dance before leaving for the day.

A man gets up from his cubicle chair behind a bank counter at a Bank of America, pats his behind and jingles his front pocket before declaring, “Okay, I’m outta here. See you guys on Wednesday.”

### *Routine Karmic Maintenance*

Charmaine, an undergraduate at UCLA, noted her routine effort to treat the lost objects of others with respect because it could karmically affect how others treat something she may lose in the future. She became aware of her routine when noticing that another has seemingly failed to return the favor. “I was upset because when I see someone lose something I always turn it in or try to find the person in an honest way. I would not want anyone to keep my stuff so I try to keep my karma positive by doing the right thing and then someone does that same thing to me anyway.” Her worry about losing something manifests itself in the way she deals with the lost objects of others.

### *Routine Keeping Practices*

When Sarah, a twenty-four-year-old costume designer living in San Francisco, began to sober up from an LSD trip, she tried to pick up the pieces of what seemed like a chaotic night. When she noticed that her purse was missing, she immediately sensed how the LSD trip took her away from how she normally keeps it when she goes out dancing. She recalled the technique upon realizing that it had broken down due to her drug taking.

As I trickled back into my senses, my first thought was to look around me for my purse. Gone. Whenever I go out partying I'm careful to have a purse that can be strapped to me to make dancing easier and lower my chances of losing it. It's an ingrained habit of mine to continually check for it and to make sure it is closed. When I don't feel it immediately, I'll often have a little pang of panic until I locate it.

### *Using Fakes or Less Valuable Duplicates*

To avoid the problem of needing to store an object when away from home, individuals may avoid bringing it in the first place. When Mercedes, a forty-two year old real estate agent living in Houston, lost a necklace while salsa dancing, she quickly sensed the silver lining. Though she certainly wants the necklace back, she described her preventative technique that lessened the sting of its loss.

I have two diamond necklaces. One fake one and one real... I take the fake one out when I go salsa dancing and I take the real one out when I'm doing something tame. So because I was dancing I only lost the fake one. But I still want it back; it performed a useful function.

A New York Times article reported on this practice among New York City police officers. Though it is technically illegal, some estimate that thousands of New York City officers carry fake badges because of the fear of losing the real one. Besides losing ten days pay for the loss, the loss could reveal unflattering information about the officer, especially if the badge is left behind at a location that could tarnish their reputation. The article reported:

Even at least one police commissioner has carried a dupe [a fake duplicate]. William Bratton, who served as commissioner from 1994 to 1996, said he had the original gold and platinum Tiffany badge, first issued in 1901, encased in a shadow box in the commissioner's office, where it sits today.

“The police commissioner's badge is a historical museum piece,” Mr. Bratton said. “It's worth a small fortune. It's not practical to carry it around.”

...

“I remember asking in Miami, ‘What happens if you lose a shield?’ ” said John F. Timoney, the departing chief of police there, who was a first deputy commissioner in New York. “They said, ‘You get another one.’ It’s no big deal.”

Mr. Timoney said that he never had a dupe, but that plenty of friends did. “They were so paranoid, they would get a dupe, then they would hide the original in a safe until they retired,” he said.

Mr. Anemone [a former chief of department who retired in 1999] said one reason officers got dupes was their fear of losing their real badge at a bar.

“You’re going to go get boxed on a Friday or Saturday night,” he said. “You don’t want to say you lost your shield when you were out drinking, so you carry a dupe.”<sup>4</sup>

In these ways, individuals discover their own routine techniques for evading losses when they lose something and reflect on the failure of the routine or their failure to enact it.

### Conclusion

This chapter details the techniques that individuals call upon to minimize the occurrence of material loss in their lives. They typically engage in anticipatory work under three circumstances: they embed their concerns of a past loss in a new technique to prevent it from happening again, they irregularly employ stop-gap measures when they sense that a loss is imminent, or they act toward their objects with routine keeping procedures. With each approach, individuals resist or embrace a past loss’s ability to embed itself in their ongoing life. With each

approach, they believe they can secure the order of their future world through their behavior in the current moment.

## Conclusion

Since ancient times, every major religious tradition has attributed great insight to those who regard material possessions with detachment. For those who have recently discovered that something is missing, the ancient wisdom may either resonate or fall on deaf ears. Throughout this study, we have learned of a central tension underlying the relations between people and their things. People want the benefits of things, the lives they afford, but they do not want to invest too much of themselves in taking care of them. They want to remain the masters, and their things, the servants. They want to resist a flipping of the power dynamic.

When people notice that something is absent, they will take a position on this central tension no matter their response. With each case of loss, they make a decision about whether the object's keeping, with its peculiar pattern of elusiveness and the problems it causes, is worth the cost by acting or not acting to resolve the matter. With each case of loss, they decide if its current indeterminate fate and the work they think it will take to resolve it, together with the likelihood of future object management difficulties, is a fair price for the object's graces in their life. They consider this tension, not as some abstract exercise set apart from ongoing life, but within the dramas they currently find themselves.

Sometimes one's investment in ongoing life and its delicate balance of schedules and deadlines can undermine an immediate investment in a recovery effort and provide the 'sensible' reason for leaving a possession, and its keeping troubles, behind. Others take up a case of loss with a working sense of how much time and effort they can spend on it before re-establishing normal routines becomes more valuable than the object's return. They may find that their commitments to ongoing life creep back in and will not play second fiddle to concerns ancillary to raising a family, completing projects at work, spending time with friends, etc. It is in these

cases, that they finally judge the replacement that initially seemed too expensive and too meaningless as a reasonable expense and an adequate substitute. They discover that sustaining the narrative of ‘the loss’ is more costly and burdensome than letting it go.

People learn that the central tension of having and not being had, or of possessing and not being possessed, is always worked out in relation to others around them. In some situations, they give up earlier than they would otherwise on a hunt because revealing the loss or a lengthy search to others becomes an argument against their own credibility as a sensible, careful, or otherwise decent person. Alternatively, they may maintain their fidelity to some items because giving up on them and their search efforts makes a presentation of self that is incompatible with the presentation that they have already made. Leaving it behind may be personally easy based on the object alone, but doing so may mean things to others that are hard to bear.

It is this central tension that individuals must address in trying to return to ‘normal life,’ or what Schutz called the “natural attitude.” In trying to move on and leave the concerns of the loss behind (whether it was recovered or not), individuals must decide if they can once again forget about their keeping practices and presume that it will work itself out. They must decide if they can calm their increased vigilance and assume that their habitual know-how, or tacit knowledge, of managing objects will be effective on its own. Losses in this sense are crises in faith and overcoming them are attempts to restore this faith.

Though this study has primarily investigated the social life around something’s unexpected loss, it also suggests what life is like when things are ‘here.’ It suggests what it is that people are trying to recreate or preserve; it suggests what life is like when a loss is not the primary theme organizing one’s conduct and shaping one’s concerns. Drawing on Michael Polanyi’s (1966) notion of “dwelling in” physical tools in order to competently use them, I



suggest that we can use the concept to effectively describe the relationship between people and their possessions when they are understood to be ‘in possession.’

Like Polanyi’s scientist who must “dwell in” his probe, or overlook the connection between self and thing, in order to effectively use it toward some practical end, individuals dwell in their collection of possessions, or overlook their separateness from them, when projecting their own potential in the world. It is from this metaphysical being of self-and-collection that individuals sense they can do certain things, enact particular kinds of selves, navigate certain kinds of social situations, etc. They may feel, for instance, a kind of potentiality of movement or geographic freedom through a working presumption that their car keys are in safekeeping. They may feel a kind of potentiality of easy passage through a presumption that they have their ID in a wallet or purse as they approach a TSA agent at an airport. They are projecting their potential in the world from a presumption of connectedness. It is this sense of potential that they are forced to reconsider when the thing they thought was here turns out to be missing. Losses, in this sense, are revelations of who individuals are apart from their possessions.

## Appendix: Methodological Reflections

Early on I faced the challenge of finding individuals who were currently experiencing or had recently experienced a loss that they would be willing to talk about. In the beginning, I went where losing is publicly visible: I hung around lost and found counters and booths in different kinds of public places (airports, museums, festivals, sporting events, etc.) and was occasionally privy to vivid scenes of loss playing out directly in front of me. Making small talk with lost and found staff or sitting strategically close to the action, I watched as individuals approached the lost and found desk hopeful that someone had turned in whatever they had lost. Most found out that their possession had not been turned in, quickly decided that they had other places still to check, and then rushed off. Generally it was clear that these folks were not interested in answering questions that would not help them find the item and were not interested in allowing a stranger to tag along on their hunt to document their behavior. Yet a small number discovered that their lost possession had been turned in and generally welcomed an interviewer's questions. These were insightful encounters, though hard to come by.

I began experimenting with other ways to get at the immediacy of the loss experience at a moment when people would be willing to tell me about their experiences. One of these ways entailed using the internet. I found that people who were posting their losses on internet lost and found websites were generally willing to describe their experiences if they could do it on their own timeline and with some anonymity. I found that as a collection technique for capturing instances of events that are hard to stumble onto in everyday life, it had its advantages, but also some disadvantages. As this is not a conventional approach in ethnographic studies, I take time here to describe my experiences with this technique.

### *The Social Process of Using Internet Lost and Found Sites*

My interaction with would-be respondents began when I read their electronic post declaring a loss on one of various lost and found websites like craigslist.com and lostandfound.com. These public declarations typically described the missing item, the likely location in which it was lost, and then a way to get in touch with the losing party. Here is a typical post:

I dropped my small coin purse/wallet containing my driver's license, school ID, VIC card, RX card, ATM card, and a small amount of money. If you have found it, please contact me via email, and describe. Thanks!

More elaborate advertisements offered rewards, blessings, pronouncements of karmic ablution, or an explanation of the object's unique meaning or value to the losing party.

A small black notebook that contained half a year's worth of ideas for scripts and stories. I left it in the back seat of a taxi last week. It's hard cover, with a thin black strap on the outside. My name and address are in the front of the book. I'm offering a reward for its recovery. \*This is in or around St. Germain Boulevard.

Or consider this advertisement that is unique in its offering of a causal explanation that blames others for the mishap.

My complacent friends have lost my backpack... at June 25th's Pride Day! I left it with them while I checked out the other stages in the area and they TOTALLY forgot that I left it in their care (so much for counting on your friends I suppose). I'm asking anyone if they saw the bag to please let me know how I can get a hold of it and its contents.

### *Making Contact*

I responded to loss notices with a personal email letter introducing myself, offering my condolences, and showing my interest in a detailed description of their experience using the following format:

Hi [name, if given].

My name is Brandon Berry and I'm a doctoral candidate in the Sociology Department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I must say upfront that I'm very sorry to hear about your lost [object]. It may seem sort of strange but I'm conducting a dissertation study on the experience of losing things and I was hoping that you could provide me with an \*unpolished\* description detailing your experience. Your case actually seems quite perfect for the study. (And who knows, your story's publication in a later article or book could help you locate your missing item one day.)

I'm especially interested in a description of how you think it was lost (if you're unsure that's okay) and how you tried to find it. What did you do at each step of the way? What kinds of thoughts/feelings did you have during the search and what was/is life like without it? If you don't remember all the details, that's okay. I'm looking for the ordinary experiences, not embellishments. Some participants have written as little as half a page and others have written five pages. It's up to you, but the more detail, the better.

If you would like to participate, please send me your story, age, city location, and job type (or student status). I will not use your name or any other identifying information, unless you prefer I do.

I'd really appreciate your help on this. And I truly hope the [object] turns up.

Warmest Regards,  
Brandon

### *Responses*

My letter elicited many kinds of responses. Some responses reported the difficulty of engaging the matter and “reliving” its frustrating or saddening details. For this reason the technique sometimes excluded those for whom the loss was exceptionally difficult. One respondent named Judy wrote, “I am sorry, but I cannot participate in your survey. I have no desire to relive that painful moment. My heart hurts so much, I can't do it all over again. I wish you well with your project.”

Some agreed to participate but reported the emotional challenge it would create in going through the details of the events surrounding the loss. Sergio from Portland noted, “First you should know that even writing to you about my camera is bringing back ugly feelings that I am working hard to let go of.” After losing her deceased grandmother’s pendant, Lia, a thirty-five-year-old veterinary assistant living in Rosemead, California, explained the challenge of participating: “My story is hard to tell because I'd rather not think of the loss, but it is on my mind nearly every moment. I wake up in the middle of the night and remember it is lost and then worry again.” Melissa, a twenty-four-year-old registered nurse living in San Francisco, reported her initial hesitance to participate, “I was tempted not to reply at all since it felt as though you were adding insult to injury and encouraging me to wallow in my misery. However, I figure as it's not your fault the phone is M.I.A. you needn't suffer for it.” Yet a few others, though it was not my intention, reported a positive experience with participating. Mathew, a naval officer on a submarine, who left a camera in a bathroom stall at the Louvre in Paris, explained: “I will be perfectly honest that this email has been a sort of venting and I feel a little bit better now.” Another wrote, “It's been very therapeutic trying to recreate an unbiased story. If you have any questions, please let me know.”

There were minor difficulties with potential respondents misunderstanding my intentions. Using the subject line, “Lost [object] Story,” I intentionally described what I wanted rather than what I had. I wanted to personalize the subject line with their lost item while being careful that I did not lead them to think I had found it; my technique was clearly not foolproof. Alicia noted that she thought *I* had a story of what happened to her lost ring. “I got my hopes up when I saw your subject line that you had not only found my ring, but that there was a good story behind it... like, it was cooked into a taco you had in Griffith park or something. Oh well.” Another noted,

“Imagine my excitement when I saw your email header, and only the slight bit of disappointment that it wasn't that someone actually found my didgeridoo. Not to worry though as I dig the idea of what you're doing and will be glad to relate the story to you.”

Many respondents responded quickly with a rich narrative demonstrating a keen eye for the sequential details of their experience. But for some, responding was clearly an afterthought. Robert noted, “I'm sorry it has taken so long to get back to you, but I forgot about your e-mail until I was cleaning out some crap and came across it.”

Commonly, their responses revealed how using an internet lost and found service fit into their larger response to the loss. They posted their lost and found advertisements at several points in the experience of losing and from a variety of different dispositions. For some, posting a notice about their loss was a last-ditch effort after they had exhausted all others.

When I left my building, I asked my doorman if anyone had found a gold anklet, and no one had. When I got to the office, it wasn't there. I tried calling the two places I had been the previous evening, but no one had found it. I even emailed the gentleman who organized the work reception, and he was of no help. I stayed late at work to ask the cleaning lady, with whom I am on friendly terms, but she hadn't seen it. I'm not sure at what point I posted the message on Craigslist, but it was a dumb, last-ditch effort at a miracle.

Some responses I received revealed the losing party's pessimism for being treated sympathetically by others through the internet. In some cases, these folks manufactured sentimental meanings for their lost possessions. Julie, a twenty-six-year-old lingerie designer

living in Manhattan, decided to lie about her lost item's meaning in her life to appeal to the sentiments of the imagined finder. Her post advertising the loss read as follows:

I work in the 34th St/Madison Ave area and live in the 60's east side area. Somewhere in ones of these areas or in between on the 6 train, I lost my vintage Beau sterling kitty pin! It's about 2" round circle in sterling with 4 funny cat heads. It was my grandma's. Please email me if you found this. I am sad.

Thanks!

Julie

Her response to my letter revealed her strategic deceit.

Since you may publish this I will tell you that I lied about the pin being my grandma's. I just wrote that to throw in a punch, hoping that if someone found it, they would feel bad and return it. It has not yet turned up... and if someone did pick it up, maybe they don't read the New York City Craigslist 'lost and found'! Anyway, it was a pin a bought at a vintage shop a few years ago and I did really like it... I've seen a lot of the Beau vintage sterling cat jewelry before but never this particular piece.

In some cases, it seems that the anonymity of the internet method allowed me to get descriptions of events that I would not have received in face-to-face interviews. Some anonymous respondents described very revealing (and possibly incriminating) details of their lives. Consider this anonymous participant's response.

I had been in a porn shop on 8th Ave in NYC and was playing with this cute boy I had met before. He wanted to play with his friend Robert who was there as well. We all went in to a booth together and Robert started to freak me out. Suddenly he seemed to

me to be very high on something and I realized that he may have been selling drugs as well. So I fled...

But even anonymous respondents sometimes reported that feelings of “humiliation” affected what they shared for the study. A twenty-nine-year-old writer living in San Diego, wrote, “A tertiary effect of writing these memories and feelings down is embarrassment that I lost the items in the first place. There's a humiliation factor here, and that's why I gave you the story about the jewelry rather than the keys. Even though the value was much greater, the circumstances were less humiliating for me.”

Many responses were revealing of the social context in which losing parties received my letter. Several received my letter within the context of having been heckled and ridiculed over the posting of their story. Dale described an angering experience: “I placed an ad on Craig's List in the hopes that someone might find the jet and return it. Again I felt extreme anger as people responded to my ad by sending an email back saying, “Hahaha, LOL” or another that said “you owe me a window because of this junk that crashed through my living room.”

Some responses showed that, through my letter, I had entered into potentially delicate negotiations. Consider this response to my letter soliciting my help in dealing with a potential con-job.

Hey Brandon, I would be happy to share my story with you. I will send you an update as soon as I can. The story does not have an ending yet, so I will write when it does.

Someone that either stole my gear or is involved with this person has contacted me. They claim to have taken the gear in exchange for a loan of \$150. The last time I spoke to this person he claimed that he would check and see if he could have it sent COD, after I refused to wire him the shipping money plus the \$150 he supposedly lost.



If you have any insight into how I might handle this situation, I would greatly appreciate it. I am probably just going to claim it on my insurance and get on with my life, but I would really like to get that stuff back. I just found out that my wife is pregnant, so I won't be able to replace that stuff for a long time.

Thanks, Jason T.

### *Reactivity Issues with Internet-derived Narratives*

A story recounting a loss is not the same thing as observing a loss experience firsthand. There are several ways that stories of a loss experience may threaten to distort the lived-reality of the loss. When ethnographers rely on written first-person narratives to understand something that has happened in the past, special care must be taken so as not to capture a post-hoc rendering of the event under question. That is to say, we want a description of an experience as it was lived, not as it was re-imagined from someplace removed. In this vein, the ethnographer must take special precautions against a storyteller's inclination to impose a plot, a dramatic arc, or a didactic lesson on the episode if the experience was not lived that way.

There are several strategies for limiting the degree to which stories of loss are an artifact of the data collection process itself. First, I collected a majority of the loss stories within one week of the loss experience. If the memory of the episode is still fresh in the losing party's mind, there is less reason to believe that he or she will unintentionally distort its details. Second, I urged my informants to write of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that he or she remembered having during the loss episode, not the thoughts that occurred while thinking back to the experience. Third, I compared these internet-derived autobiographical narratives with my

face-to-face interviews and observations as a check against the distorting effects of written narrative on the respondent's retelling of events.

There are at least three practical benefits of an internet collection strategy over the traditional face-to-face interview for studying loss. First, there is greater anonymity, as the respondent decides how much to learn about their personal identities. Because losses can be a particularly discrediting, anonymity could be valuable, allowing the respondent to convey details that they would otherwise suppress out of embarrassment or shame. Second, in retrieving the details of past experiences, I suspect it is helpful to be in the comfort of one's own space. The conditions of sitting quietly at a computer may lend themselves to that imaginative feat more easily than sitting in front of a stranger-researcher waiting for 'answers.' Lastly, the ease of writing someone back, when the respondent so desires, could increase the pool of participants who would otherwise be too busy to meet somewhere for some specified amount of time.

### *Generalizability*

To what degree of generalizability can we extend the patterns reported by this study? A review of respondent occupations suggests that this is predominantly a story of middle-class values and experiences. If so, such a sampling might tilt the findings toward a greater obliviousness to the loss of monetarily valuable possessions. We might find a greater reporting of certain practices like the keeping of duplicates as a loss prevention strategy when it requires discretionary spending, or see a greater frequency of cases in which individuals readily abort the loss orientation and replace the missing object by purchasing another the first chance they get. We may find a greater frequency of losses as 'rare' occurrences in this sample as the middle-class likely enjoy a greater domestic stability than the impoverished, or are less likely to be forced out of their homes on a moment's notice. In general, we may find in this study a greater

reporting of an ease with or acceptance of loss that only financial means allows than we would otherwise find in the general population.

But the argument that class has a significant bearing on loss experience has some limitations. First, the nature of contemporary manufacturing and marketing ensures that there are often like-items offered at multiple levels of pricing. If people with less financial means spend an equivalent proportion of their incomes as wealthier people who purchase a similar product, they may experience the financial threat of that loss identically. Those with greater financial means do not necessarily enjoy greater insulation against financial loss. Second, the meaning of an object's loss may be unrelated to its market value. We have learned that the primary value motivating recovery efforts in many cases was not financial, but rather biographical or sentimental. Unless there is reason to believe that individuals at certain class positions are more or less likely to invest their possessions with sentimental value, then the loss of the object as a loss of this kind of value should be similarly experienced across the classes. Thus, in some ways this is a story of a certain class of people, but it is also a story of an existential concern that resists simple class distinctions.

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<sup>1</sup> Solicitation letter:

Hi [name, if known].

My name is Brandon Berry and I'm a doctoral candidate in the Sociology Department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I must say upfront that I'm very sorry to hear about your lost [object]. It may seem sort of strange but I'm writing a dissertation study on the experience of losing things and I was hoping that you could provide me with an \*unpolished\* story detailing your experience. Your case actually seems quite perfect for the study. (And who knows, your story's publication in a later article or book could help you locate your missing item one day.)

I'm especially interested in a description of how you think it was lost (if you're unsure that's okay) and how you tried to find it. What did you do at each step of the way? What kinds of thoughts/feelings did you have during the search and what was/is life like without it? If you don't remember all the details, that's okay. I'm looking for the ordinary experiences, not embellishments. Some participants have written as little as half a page and others have written five pages. It's up to you, but the more detail, the better.

If you would like to participate, please send me your story, age, city location, and job type (or student status). I will not use your name or any other identifying information, unless you prefer I do.

I'd really appreciate your help on this. And I truly hope the [object] turns up.

Warmest Regards,  
Brandon

<sup>2</sup> Dear Abby's Response: DEAR FORGETFUL: You have several options. The first is to fess up and tell your girlfriend what happened. If she's going to accept you for better or for worse, she deserves to know what she's getting into. If she loves you, she'll forgive you. The second is to go through your office with a fine-tooth comb and get it organized. This will increase your odds of finding the ring. The third is to start looking for another rare green sapphire. Last, but not least, schedule an appointment for a complete physical and neurological checkup on the chance

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there is a medical reason for your forgetfulness. (Source:

[http://www.uexpress.com/dearabby/?uc\\_full\\_date=20071213#ContinueFeature](http://www.uexpress.com/dearabby/?uc_full_date=20071213#ContinueFeature))

<sup>3</sup> <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/30/making-progress-against-clutter/>

<sup>4</sup> From The New York Times newspaper from December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009.