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Crying: An Exploration

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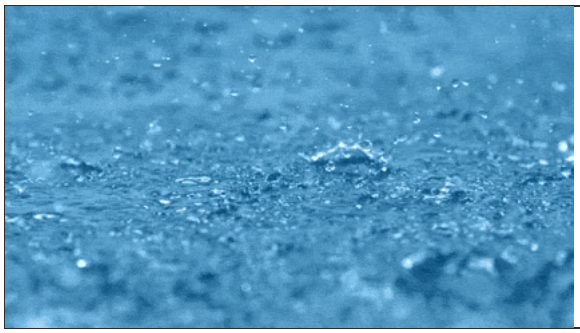
I. "Il pleure dans mon coeur"

"Il pleure dans mon coeur comme il pleut sur la ville." — Paul Verlaine

My mom recited this poem to me in the car on rainy days as we drove to or from school, and it comes to mind when I think of tears. The line means "it cries in my heart as it rains on the town" and plays on the way that 'it's raining' (*il pleut*) and 'he/it cries' (*il pleure*) sound almost alike in French. You wouldn't really say "it cries in my heart," but I translate it that way because in French, the raining and crying are analogous, sound-wise. But the analogy of raindrops to melancholy weather within also works in terms of meaning: rainy days do make us gloomy. It's crying in my heart. "Stormy weather (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIgVCU19pjg)."

Tears and raindrops: compare and contrast. Both are watery. Both fall. Both come and go. Both are associated with sadness (as this opening sequence (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JS4JMY0JWM&feature=youtu.be&t=43s) from one of my favorite movies, *Les Parapluies [umbrellas] de Cherbourg* (1964), makes so painfully clear). But we also need rain, and when the sun emerges, the outdoors feels miraculous and new. Is there an analogous silver lining to tears?

I think it's a coincidence that "it's raining" and "he or she cries" sound alike in French. There's no obvious etymological connection. *Pleuvoir* is derived from Latin *pluo, pluere*: to wash. Rain *showers*. *Pleurer*, to cry, is derived from the Latin *ploro, plorare*: to cry, cry out. Explore also comes from this root, as in "to search out." I imagine someone "calling out" a name, searching for someone. I am searching, too, searching for meaning in tears.



II. Embarrassing, inevitable, and ambiguous

Maybe you have a friend with eyes like a touchy sprinkler who cried during the algebra test every Friday of 8th grade, and during her first lesson with a new violin teacher; who cried when she lied and felt guilty, and when you backed out on plans, and when she felt excluded from the freshman-dorm birthday parties, and when she broke your new A string; who cried at the Japanese restaurant, when jets of flame whooshed up before her like a reverse waterfall, loud and sudden, and your marked distress and, yes, embarrassment at her response to the restaurant's supposed highlight just made it worse.

If yes, then you've known someone like me. I say that I have a low threshold for tears. Sometimes I cry because I am ashamed to be crying.

Tears are embarrassing and, for me, seemingly inevitable. I used to dread the first time a new friend or teacher saw me cry— *would they see a flaw in me?* — and I had to explain myself. It is possible, the first time, to act as if your tears are a surprise to yourself. "Honey, it's okay," people will say. "We all cry sometimes." But I know that I cry more than sometimes. Plus, once I've cried in front of someone, the dam has broken, and I can be almost sure that it will happen again, so instead of feigning surprise, I tell people: "It's not as bad as it looks. I'm not really that upset. I just cry easily."

As a kid, I used to say that I didn't know why I was crying. Maybe there were times when I really had no idea, but there were others when I just meant that I didn't feel as sad as my tears suggested. I didn't know *why* a given situation was making me cry, but I did know what the small upset was—the algebra test, the wrong note, the canceled plans, the words "I love you." Sometimes I didn't want to admit the pettiness of the apparent trigger.

On one hand, I feared that my tears lied by exaggerating the gravity of situations. But "I don't know why I'm crying" and "I just cry really easily" weren't quite true either.

I think tears are interesting because they are an arguably involuntary yet also ambiguous form of communication. We cry from grief, joy, shock, embarrassment, jealousy, guilt, disappointment, and onions. As Thomas Dixon wrote in his essay, "The Waterworks," for *Aeon* (http://aeon.co/magazine/psychology/thomas-dixon-tears/), "A tear is a universal sign not in the sense that it has the same meaning in all times and all places. It is a universal sign because it can signify just about anything." Despite their ambiguity, tears are powerful signals. Whether or not you acknowledge another's tears, you can't ignore them.

I imagine that my tears signal that I am upset or worried or sad or in pain. I wonder how people interpret them and worry that they misinterpret. But more than that, I wonder what my tears mean to me, how I should read them. And why in the world does chopping an onion produce a similar signal to emotional distress or pain?

III. Why humans weep

To understand what tears mean, it might be useful to know what they are made of and what biological functions they serve. To investigate these questions, I turned to *Why Only Humans Weep* (http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780198570240.do) (Oxford University Press, 2013), a review of the scientific literature on emotional tears by psychologist and tear researcher Ad Vingerhoets of the Netherlands' Tilburg University.

There are three types of tears, distinguished by the circumstances that produce them and, one researcher has suggested, by their biochemical composition. The lacrimal glands, at the eyes' top outside corners, constantly produce what are called basal tears, which spread across our eyes like windshield-wiper fluid when we blink and then drain into mucous membranes of the nose and throat via channels at the eyes' inside corners. Basal tears moisten the eyes and also contain an antibacterial substance, lysozyme, that wards off infection. We don't notice these tears because they drain off. But when something like dust or onion fumes irritates the eye, the lacrimal glands produce more tears, so many that they flood the drainage routes and spill down the cheeks. These are called reflex tears or irritant-induced tears. A similar overflow occurs in response to strong emotions.

Another way of asking what function tears serve is to ask how they evolved. Humans are the only animals that shed emotional tears. Sure, other animals produce basal and reflex tears, but we are the only creatures that cry from feeling. Charles Darwin concluded that tears were useless, an exception to his idea that traits that weren't adaptive would disappear. Today nobody really *knows* if and how tears benefit humans, but there are many theories.

Crying aloud is the first thing a baby does upon entering the world. An infant's cries (along with laughter, perhaps) are his or her only way to communicate vocally until language develops. Evolutionary biologists suggest that the baby's cry is analogous to the separation calls of other animals, calls a young one makes specifically when the mother leaves that are designed to bring her—and her protection and, with mammals, her milk—back. Compared with newborns of other species, human infants are particularly vulnerable, so they especially need such an alarm. Infants' cries also stimulate the mother to produce milk—the so-called "milk-letdown reflex." So is that why we cry even as adults—because as babies, we wailed for our mothers?

It's certainly not the whole story. As we all know, crying has at least two aspects—tears and vocalizations (moaning, heavy breathing, wailing), and although these two facets of crying usually happen together, they actually emerge at different times during development and may serve different functions. Babies don't start producing emotional tears until they are a few weeks old, whereas they scream from the beginning. If the tears themselves are supposed to protect the vulnerable baby, say as part of the separation call, it would make sense for them to kick in right away. Tears themselves wouldn't work as a separation response, anyway, since the mother wouldn't be able to see them unless she were already nearby. Finally, if crying exists to make sure *babies* get necessary care, why do we cry as adults?

Vingerhoets has a good way of explaining the different functions of tears and vocal crying as children develop. Infants, who can't move around on their own, need to be able to scream for their parents so that the parents can physically go to them. But vocal crying also risks attracting predators. Once children learn to walk, they can run to their parents, rather than calling for them, a safer move. It's during this period—post-mobility, pre-independence—that tears might come in particularly handy, Vingerhoets told me. "As soon as you're motorically developed, then it makes more sense to replace that vocal crying by a visual signal, which has the major advantage that it does not alert possible predators and others and you can direct it, so to say, to the one that you approach." This theory could also explain why humans weep while other species, which have relatively shorter childhoods, do not, Vingerhoets said.

At first I was skeptical of tears as a visual cue; I didn't see tears—a watery substance running down the face—as a big deal. But research suggests that tears are a key part of the emotional expression of a crying person. In one experiment, researchers took photos of people crying and digitally removed the tears, then asked study participants to identify the emotions expressed in both sets of photos. While people could instantly tell that the crying subjects were sad, they identified the tearless faces as being in awe or confused.

I was also doubtful about the idea that people need tears to communicate, given that we have language. Yet I often cry about things I don't want to talk about—embarrassment, shame, frustration, uncertainty about how others feel toward me. Tears are a way of expressing negative feelings without articulating them.

Why not articulate such feelings? Perhaps to avoid provoking confrontation? Crying in the bathroom could be an alternative to making a public fuss about something that you aren't sure deserves it.

Perhaps tears could also soften a conflict when it happens. One idea about the function of tears, which Vingerhoets attributes to Israeli evolutionary biologist Oren Hasson (http://www.orenhasson.com/EN/), is that by rendering the crier vulnerable, they serve as a kind of white flag and reduce aggression in potential predators or foes. When I was a kid, I could not apologize for or confess anything to an adult without crying, and I wonder if the tears were part of an instinct to forestall negative reactions from the parent or teacher to whom I was admitting that I had touched the baby birds in the nest or had not brought my math homework. It's also hard for me to admit being upset with someone without crying; again, the kind of admission that could lead to conflict. I like to think of those tears as stemming from guilt or strong emotion, but maybe they are also manipulative.

Crying can be a social behavior, a way of communicating something—though exactly what varies widely. But people also cry alone, where this communicative function would be lost.

IV. Feel better now?

It's very appealing to think that tears in themselves are somehow useful to us. A pervasive belief about tears is that "a good cry" provides emotional relief. This could explain why we cry alone and help explain why we cry at all. I think that crying alone can serve the functions mentioned above—expressing unspeakable emotions and avoiding conflict. But does crying also just make people feel better?

The biochemist and neuroscientist William H. Frey II (http://www.neuroscience.umn.edu/prostu/facprof/frey.html), research director at the Alzheimer's Research Center at Regions Hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota, and one of the pioneers of crying research, started with the idea that people generally feel better after a good cry when he was designing his experiments to compare the biochemical composition of "onion tears" and tears of emotion, experiments he chronicled in his 1985 book, *Crying: The Mystery of Tears* (http://www.amazon.com/Crying-Mystery-William-H-Frey/dp/0866838295) (Winston Press). He conceived of the lacrimal glands as excretory organs ridding the body of waste. "I proposed that perhaps the reason people feel better after crying is that they may be removing in their tears chemicals that build up as a result of emotional stress," he wrote in 1985. "Therefore, emotional tearing may be similar to the other excretory processes, which remove waste products or toxic materials from the body."

Frey hypothesized that emotional tears would be biochemically distinct from tears induced by other stimuli, and he set out to test the idea by comparing the biochemical composition of emotional tears, induced by sad movies, and reflex or irritant-induced tears, stimulated by a strong whiff of onion fumes. When Frey compared the composition of emotional and onion tears, he found (http://www.nytimes.com/1982/08/31/science/biological-role-of-emotional-tears-emerges-through-recent-studies.html) that the emotional tears contained 24 percent more protein, on average, than onion tears collected from the same study subjects. (Vingerhoets says that he repeated Frey's biochemical experiments and did not detect any differences between the two tear types.)

In other experiments designed to probe the biochemical composition of tears in general, Frey also found that tears contained several substances of interest: the hormones prolactin, adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH), which the pituitary gland releases in response to stress, and the endogenous opioid leucine-enkephaline, which can act as a pain reliever. Tears also had levels of manganese four times higher than were found in blood.

These results, Frey said, supported the idea that crying makes people feel better because it helps the body remove substances accumulated by stress.

"Stress is a damaging thing, and if you evolve an ability that helps to reduce the adverse effects of stress, that could have survival value," Frey said in a phone interview.

"My theory was not that specifically one of these substances was going to be removed in tears," Frey continued. "My theory was that we feel better after crying because we remove in our tears chemicals that build up during stress, not just this particular one or that particular one." Frey's results did not yield a mechanism linking the crying out of particular substances to relief.

Beyond this biochemical uncertainty about how tears work, the idea that emotional tears provide relief to the crier is also a matter of some debate. Surveys have reported that people, overall, did tend to feel better after crying. However, in lab settings, people who cried during emotional movies did not feel better than those who stayed dry-eyed; in fact, the criers showed greater physiological distress.

Why this discrepancy? Vingerhoets suspects that the survey respondents may have remembered feeling better some time after crying or may have been influenced by the way they thought they were supposed to feel. Perhaps survey takers were comforted when they cried, and therefore felt better, which didn't happen in the lab. Another possibility, though, is that crying does provide relief, just not right away.

In recently published (http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11031-015-9507-9) experiments, Vingerhoets and colleagues monitored people's mood before and after sad movies, and consistent with earlier studies, they found that directly after the movie, those who cried felt worse, whereas the non-criers reported no change in mood. But they also measured mood 20 and 90 minutes after the movie, and they found that an hour-and-a-half later, the criers not only recovered but felt even better than they had before the movie. "It just may take some time to develop the positive effects," said Vingerhoets. Perhaps you need to hit an emotional low point, he continued, "but from that nadir on, you recover, and even more than recover."

In my experience, crying feels like relief in the moment because I can give in to the way I feel, rather than trying to fight it. However, I usually regret my tears later, when I think about the people who saw me cry and might write me off, when I consider those who were concerned about me, and when I'm feeling exhausted the morning after. Often, I realize that my tears have done more damage than whatever made me cry in the first place.

V. Crying wolf

According to Vingerhoets, it was Hasson who put forth the hypothesis of emotional tears as an "honest signal." Because tears attract attention and put the crier at risk, the thinking goes, people won't cry unless they are really in trouble. This idea could also help explain how tears evolved. It's useful to have a "help" signal that people trust and, therefore, will respond to.

I often think of the story of the boy who "cried wolf." The bored little shepherd shouted false alarms, then laughed at the people who ran to his aid. When the boy really did meet a wolf, his cries were ignored, and his sheep were eaten. Moral of the story: Only give emergency signals during emergencies; otherwise, the signals lose their trustworthiness and, therefore, their value. The same principle goes for crying; tears should be honest. The complication is that unlike "wolf!" tears can honestly mean lots of different things, not all of them worthy of alarm.

Sometimes I worry that by crying over little things, I am, in a sense, crying wolf. I fear I'm sending a signal that people will misinterpret, that I'm inadvertently lying. Because I have an obsession with honesty, this possibility bothers me a lot. But often I can't be sure if my tears lie because I don't even know what they mean, and you can't have a misinterpretation of a signal whose true meaning, in this case, its meaning for me, is unknown.

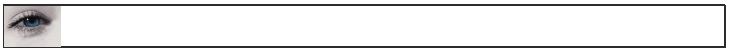
I think my concern with being honest goes back to a chronic medical problem that I have, in which a seemingly normal headache could also be a sign that something may be gravely wrong. The details of the condition are not important here, but briefly: I was born with hydrocephalus, or "water on the brain." Because my brain doesn't properly circulate the cerebrospinal fluid that normally flows throughout the central nervous system, I have a shunt that drains the fluid out of my brain and regulates the pressure inside my skull. If the shunt gets clogged, that pressure goes up, and until it gets unclogged, either by itself or through surgery, I may experience various unpleasant symptoms, the hallmark one being a headache.

When I have a small headache, I cry in part from pain but mostly out of worry—about what's going to happen, about whether or not I'll need surgery. I also worry about crying wolf. I would never fake a shunt failure. But sometimes I don't truly know whether the shunt has failed until after the surgery to fix it. Until then, the "little headache," like the tears that accompany it, is enigmatic. It could be an omen of shunt failure. Or it could be nothing.

As I sit here writing, I am skeptical of my own tears. I don't believe them. But when I'm crying, I often fall under the influence of the "honest signal." I think my body must be telling me something. When I cry in frustration with my life, it feels as if the tears are expressing some repressed essential wisdom.

And then a few days later, everything feels fine, though it hasn't changed. I again doubt the tearful revelations, which seem to be correlated less with "life events," as Facebook calls them, than with factors like my stage of the menstrual cycle, or whether I've had anything to drink.

Are tears honest or misleading? It's very hard to tell, especially when you don't know yourself what "the truth" is.



VI. Breaking down the breakdown

"It cries without reason in my disheartened heart." – from "Il Pleure Dans Mon Coeur"

Verlaine may have shared my frustration at not knowing what tears mean. His poem, which I quoted at the beginning of this piece, ends this way:

> It's the worst pain,
>
> To not know why,
>
> Without love and without hate,
>
> My heart has so much pain.

So often, my tears are without reason. I wonder how often tears, in general, actually signal distress. According to Vingerhoets, if you ask which situations most often elicit tears, the answer will be deaths, break-ups, job loss—events that would sadden just about anyone. But monumental losses like these are infrequent for most people. If, on the other hand, you ask people to describe the last time that they cried, they mention more mundane and varied triggers. The idea of adult tears as alarm signal is an oversimplification. Vingerhoets thinks of crying, whether or not it happens, and how you feel about it if it does as being affected by: a. the situation b. your attitude toward the situation c. your threshold for crying d. how well you control your tears e. whether people comfort you/whether you end up feeling embarrassed. Of all these factors, the situation at hand is only one. Let's meander through the others.

Attitude

As you might expect, how you view a situation determines how you react to it. For example, neuroticism, or the tendency to view situations negatively, is associated with more tears.

Threshold

Many factors influence the crying threshold: how bad things have to get or how dire the situation must seem before a person cries. Women tend to cry more easily than men. Sleep loss and alcohol lower the threshold. Mood medication, in particular selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, like Lexapro, can raise it.

Restraint

But when you're at your threshold and you do feel like crying, can you hold it back? Some people can, but according to Vingerhoets, they don't do it the way I had imagined. I had the idea that people who could control their tears had the ability to confront stressful situations—"I have a headache; I'm worried about money; are you mad at me?"—and still not cry. But Vingerhoets says that people tend to forestall tears by using cognitive "tricks," mainly distraction. Perhaps something closer to reality is that people avoid tears by avoiding their worries, at least in public.

I have never been able to hold back tears. Though a low dose of Lexapro makes me less crying-prone, once I feel like crying, I'm going to cry. One day, climbing a mountain with a close friend, I fell and scraped my knee. I cried, though physically I was fine. I remember being startled. Also, this friend had been telling me how she used to run up and down the mountain for exercise; maybe I was embarrassed at my lack of athleticism. Anyway, the friend was annoyed. "You can choose not to cry," I remember her saying. "It's like at school, when someone whispers something funny but you don't laugh if the teacher is talking and you would get in trouble. You can choose not to laugh." I don't know if I could have chosen not to cry. In the moment, I got mad and cried more. Yet behind the spurting tears, the idea that I might be *choosing* something harmful—to me, to others—made me feel guilty, and still does.

Reactions

Conventional wisdom says that if people comfort you when you cry, you'll feel better, and I think that's somewhat true. That doesn't mean, however, that comforting stanches tears; when people comfort me, I tend to cry more, maybe because I feel as if I have their permission.

Medical issues

You might think that people with depression cry more than others, or that people who cry a lot might be depressed. The results on that question are unclear, according to Vingerhoets. Some people who are depressed cry a lot; others report having lost the ability to cry. And when people with depression do cry, the tears less often provide relief. Crying symptoms have not consistently been used to diagnose mood disorders, Vingerhoets wrote; they certainly do not make or break a diagnosis.

There are people with neurological conditions—amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, multiple sclerosis, brain tumors, having had a stroke—with which "pathological crying" has been associated. Vingerhoets criticizes the term given how little we know about "normal" crying; he prefers to call it "excessive crying." Some people with "excessive crying" truly do cry without knowing why and are unable to control their tears. Asked whether they also feel especially sad, they say that yes, they are sad—because of their crying. Take this interview, excerpted by Vingerhoets, with a patient who had a stroke and afterward began to cry much more than usual (conducted as part of a study (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02732173.1998.9982191) on "crying management" in stroke survivors):

> Patient: I hate it that I cry too much. I hate it.
>
> Interviewer: Did you use not to cry?
>
> Patient: Very little. Oh I thought I was pretty even temp- even tempered and a fairly happy person. So this bothers me.
>
> Interviewer: So you don't think you're as happy person now as you were before?
>
> Patient: Not when I cry too easily. That upsets me. I would like not to do that.

I know a similar circular feeling: "I'm crying because I'm embarrassed that I'm crying."

Vingerhoets points out that patients with other, not specifically neurological health problems, such as cancer and heart conditions, also experience increased teariness and suggests that the tears may be more of an emotional response to having a medical problem than a symptom of the condition itself. He writes "... increased crying in patients with neurological disorders may thus not necessarily result from the brain pathology, but rather be related to the dramatic changes in that person's life perspective."

I think my crying threshold is low. I think I often appraise situations negatively and prepare for the worst. I find it difficult to control my tears, and that embarrasses me. So I cry easily, and I usually feel badly about it. Plus, I have neurological issues, though none specifically related to crying. I suspect the stress of having a chronic medical condition is probably a larger factor in my tears than the neurological situation itself, but who knows?

VII. The other people in the room

Rarely have I played the part of comforter, or witness to tears, and so I don't really know what that's like. My instinctive perspective on my tears re: other people is selfish— *I'm the one crying; it doesn't hurt you*—and defiant—*I'll cry if I want to*. At some point, my mom explained to me that tears do hurt other people, in a way. When I'm with a friend in public and I start to cry, it looks as if she made me cry, though that's usually not the case. That's unfair, and

embarrassing for the other person. And though I'd like to think that I cry in an emotional vacuum, it hurts empathetic people to see another unhappy.

I think I really only came to understand this idea thanks to a good friend from college who told me outright that it bothered her when I cried. We had made tentative plans to meet up on a Sunday night. She was working toward a Ph.D.; I was working at a grocery store and searching for a meaningful, tenable way to live. I had been watching a rented movie from the library in my apartment that day, feeling lonely, and had been counting on this social event to redeem the weekend. She was tired from working. She saw people all the time, at school, and she had a boyfriend. When she called to cancel, I think I said "okay, that's fine." But after I hung up, I cried. I then called her back, in tears, to tell her how upset I was. I thought I was doing the right thing by being honest. She told me, I think, that it shouldn't have been such a big deal.

A few days later, she wrote me a considered email saying that it upset her when I burst into tears, that it made her uncomfortable and not want to be with me right then. As seems obvious to me now, it wasn't lack of sympathy that made her want to pull away: "I love you very much, Ashley," she wrote. "That's WHY I felt terrible and get upset when you cry, because it makes me feel terrible. If I didn't care about you, I would be laughing or something stupid. But that isn't the case at all." I was glad to know how she felt. This was a friend I didn't want to lose. If my stand of "honesty"—atop the many other times I'd cried to her—bothered her that much, maybe it hadn't been the right thing to do after all.

I put scare quotes around the word honesty because my view of honesty has changed since that day in 2009. The way I saw it, honesty meant saying what you thought even if it might make you cry. To hold back for fear of crying was a weakness. The problem with that view, I think, is that it makes tears out to be a small side effect of or impediment to communication when in fact, they're saying something on their own. Tears convey messages that are so weighty, ambiguous, and volatile that their social cost likely exceeds the value of whatever you're saying in words.

Now I have a much milder view of what it means to be honest and I'd advise my former self differently. We can't communicate all our thoughts. An honest person can, and must, choose to say some things and withhold others. Of all the things to say to a dear friend, why choose such a blend of triviality and emotional weight? And if what you really have to say, what your tears may have meant, is something more like, "I feel lonely and insecure about our friendship," then articulate that in a conversation, at the right time. Even writing with years of hindsight, articulating feelings is not easy, but it's better than crying.

In theory, I prefer words to tears because words are clearer. What I'm less sold on, though, is the practice of explaining away tears with words. At one point, I dealt with crying outbursts by writing letters to the people who had seen me cry that explained the tears and apologized for whatever discomfort I had caused the addressees. That worked fine, but I started to fear that I would get into the habit of apologizing instead of doing the right thing in the first place. I hated the distance between my actions and my words, between what I did and what I thought I should do. Perhaps I encouraged myself to try to talk, even tearily, in the moment as a reaction against the impulse to run away and write a little story.

IX. Tears of joy

On top of all of these possible negative meanings of tears, there are the well-known tears of joy that situations "bring to people's eyes." In his essay for *Aeon*, Dixon brought up an idea, posited by psychoanalyst Sandor Feldman, that tears of joy are not what they seem:

> Underlying moments of pride or joy, Feldman claimed, was an awareness of the transitory nature of life and happiness. Seeing small children might make us cry tenderly, but it is because we know that they, like us, will lose their innocence, and that the infant idyll will pass, to be replaced by the ugly adult world. "Small children" themselves, Feldman observed, "do not cry at the happy ending: they smile because they do not yet accept the fact of death. Crying at the happy ending probably starts when death is accepted as an inevitable fact." We cry, Feldman concluded, at the sad end that is sure to come: "There are no tears of joy, only tears of sadness."

"Do you miss me already?" my mom asked me, when she was visiting me in New York and I was in vague tears the night before she was to leave. I did, and in a big way. That was a period when I had trouble thinking about love for parents without crying. They would say "I love you" on Skype, and I would cry. I think it was part fear of losing them, eventually, part shame/fear of not deserving their love, though I know in my mind that unconditional, parental love is outside the bounds of merit. These "tears of love" are similar to what Feldman was speaking of, I think. Love made me sad because it reminded me of all I stood to lose. To avoid those thoughts, I would have had to avoid love, which I certainly did not want to do. Then that phase passed.

X. Blue skies

I just walked out into the blue-skied evening to get a beer at the corner store. It felt as if the clouds were brushing against me as I walked. My street is quiet, so I could mostly look up as I walked to stare at the blue sky and the wispy clouds. I felt happy thanks to the weather. And then I had an idea, which made me even happier.

Perhaps, as Verlaine implied, tears are like raindrops in that emotions are like weather. There's no rhyme or reason to the weather. The weather on a given day doesn't tell you how the world is doing any more than your mood tells you how your life is going. In SAT-speak, weather is to feelings as climate is to how your life is going.

Somehow everyone knows not to take the weather too seriously. You dress for the weather, or you bring an umbrella, but you don't, say, decide you need to change your life because it's raining. That's not to say, of course, that weather doesn't influence mood.

It's just that mood feels so personal. I often feel terribly responsible for my feelings, and my inability to hold them in adds to my guilt. It's important to see the glass as half full, or as even a quarter full, and if I don't see it that way, I feel guilty for bringing sadness upon myself. But with weather, you can't change it, and calling the day partly cloudy, as opposed to somewhat sunny, seems not pessimistic but rational.

Maybe it could be useful, or at least comforting, to think of mood as being more like the weather, as something that you shouldn't feel responsible for or guilty about or even give a whole lot of thought to.

When it cries in your heart, grab an umbrella.

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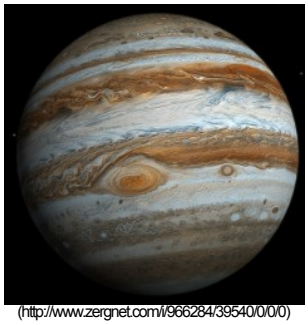

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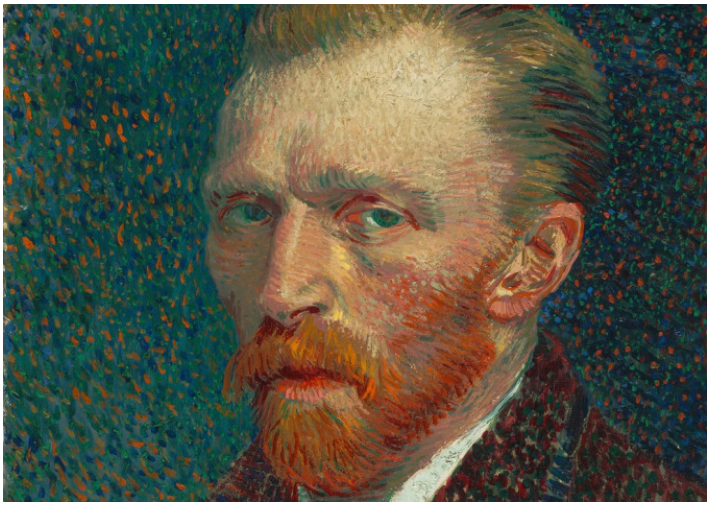

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