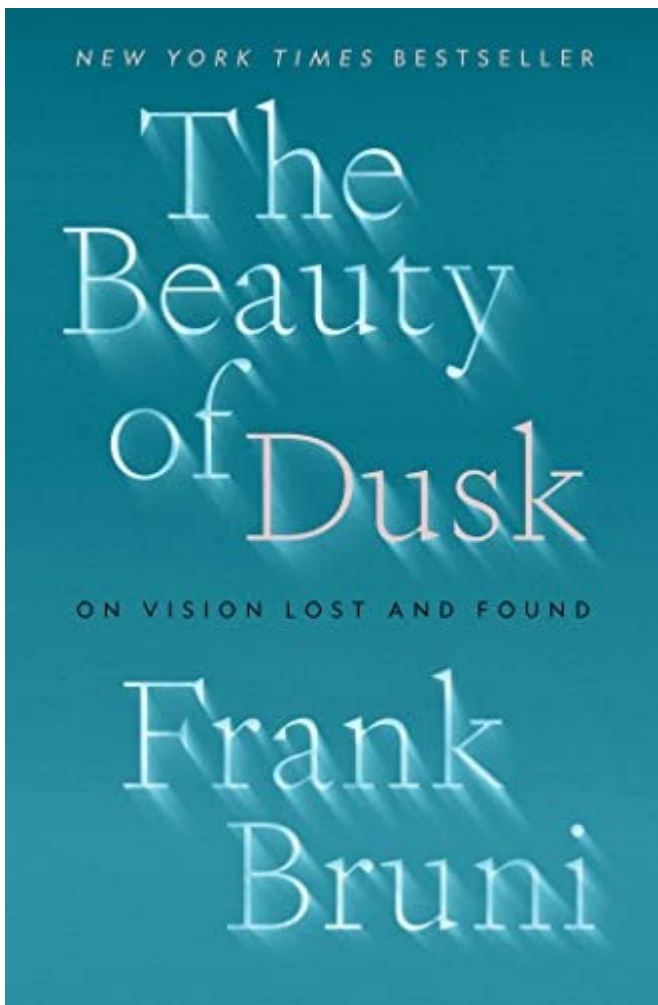


How do we cope with intractable loss?

When Frank Bruni suffered permanent vision damage, he embarked on a philosophical quest.

by [LaVonne Neff](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue

In Review



The Beauty of Dusk

On Vision Lost and Found

By Frank Bruni
Simon & Schuster

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Novels, it is said, can help their readers develop empathy. *The Beauty of Dusk*, which begins with the moment Frank Bruni's life was irreversibly transformed, ranks with the best empathy-building novels. It is not, however, fiction. Although billed as a memoir, it transcends that category. Important sections read like newspaper feature stories—not surprising from an author who has been a *New York Times* restaurant critic, Rome bureau chief, White House correspondent, and op-ed contributor. Other parts tread the line between philosophy and self-help. Seen as a whole, Bruni's exploration of pain and loss could be called wisdom literature.

Bruni's loss struck with no warning. When he went to bed one Friday night in 2017, he felt fine. When he woke up the next morning, his left eye was out of focus, as if smeared with grease. He figured his vision would clear up once he was fully awake, but it didn't. In fact, it got worse as the day went on. Before long the central vision in that eye was nearly gone.

Bruni needed sharp eyesight. His career involved close observation, careful reading, and long hours of screen time, while his favorite leisure pursuits included watching movies and exploring unfamiliar places. By Sunday afternoon, he was worried enough to text his ophthalmologist's personal cell phone.

Four days and two specialists later, Bruni had a diagnosis: non-arteritic anterior ischemic optic neuropathy, or NAION. In lay terms, a stroke had damaged his optic nerve. His left eye, the neuro-ophthalmologist told him, would never improve, and there was a 40 percent chance his right eye would suddenly lose vision as well. At age 52, Bruni faced the prospect of waking up some morning legally blind.

He panicked, of course. He immediately enrolled in a clinical test requiring a series of shots in his eyeball. He began taking aspirin with several glasses of water at bedtime in hopes of preventing another stroke. He spent hours reading up on the optic nerve. And he worked harder than ever—interviewing celebrities, writing articles, giving speeches—partly from a sense of duty and partly to persuade himself that everything could continue as it had always been.

A few months after the initial shock, Bruni wrote a long column in the *Times* about his changed reality. The response to this article added to his awakening empathy

with other people experiencing permanent loss: a middle-aged friend with worsening Parkinson's disease, a career diplomat who went blind in his 30s, a comedian with severe depression. People living with constant pain or unremitting grief or the depletions of old age. His own father, now diminished by Alzheimer's disease.

Bruni was discovering that “*everyone* is vulnerable to intense pain and that almost everyone has worked or is working through some version of it.” He was also learning that he could create a satisfying life with just one good eye—or even with no good eyes—but that it might be radically different from life before the stroke.

If experience and observation can generate empathy, reflection can lead to wisdom. Realizing that the damage to his optic nerve was permanent, Bruni embarked on a philosophical quest. “To what extent do I reject [the diagnosis], grasping for fixes and insisting on daily routines, weekly schedules and monthly goals as rigorous as they were before?” he asked himself. “To what extent do I accept it, recognizing that there comes a time, definitely as we grow older, when we can't do what we once did and must say goodbye to certain aspirations and feats?” How do we react to intractable loss? Do we defy it? Resign ourselves to it? Or are there other possibilities?

Bruni's mother, who died of cancer at age 61, attacked setbacks with relentless cheerfulness. If her children fell into dark moods, she would belt out a stanza of the 1944 hit “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive.” “She had a weakness for life instructions that could be delivered epigrammatically,” he writes. Bruni found her optimism irritating, but he may resemble her more than he realizes. While he avoids bursting into song, some of his anecdotal superheroes may inspire fatigue rather than emulation.

His mother would no doubt have expressed her son's newfound wisdom epigrammatically: Pay attention. Keep moving. Be grateful. Carpe diem. Create memories. Be sensitive to others. Focus on what you have, not on what you've lost. But Bruni's style is not his mother's. *The Beauty of Dusk* is not a self-help book; its author is a journalist with the soul of a poet. His writing, always clear, soars as he describes not only the inevitability of loss but also its “consolations, including all that remains.”

You might read the book for advice or encouragement or to increase your empathy with people who struggle, or you might pick it up because you're already a Bruni fan and you know it will be good. Whatever your reason, don't even think of skipping

chapter 9, Bruni's exuberant paean to his number one consolation, his beloved Australian shepherd mix. Regan offered him love and, even more important, the opportunity to be loving and generous in return. Her antics pushed aside his daily frustrations and fears for the future. Watching her fly over fences as she cavorted in Central Park, he would enjoy moments of complete happiness. "Dogs have a talent for joy that most people, including me, don't," he writes. "Without therapy or thought, Regan reveled in being alive. That helped me do the same."