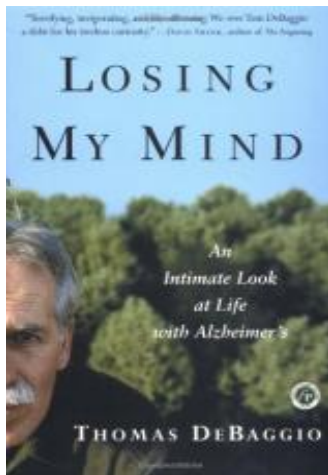


Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look at Life with Alzheimer's

by Thomas DeBaggio



About the Book

In *Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look at Life with Alzheimer's*, Thomas DeBaggio records in heartbreaking detail an experience that few have recounted and no one hopes to share: the onset of Alzheimer's disease. Diagnosed one beautiful spring day at the age of 57, longtime journalist DeBaggio initially viewed the condition as a death sentence, but also knew he had a story he ought to tell. While keeping up with his family-run herb and plant business, he began work on his new project immediately, writing in his journal to capture the personal angle and researching the latest scientific information on a still poorly understood disease. This book is the devastating result.

Discussion Guide

1. As he says in the Author's Note, DeBaggio weaves three distinct threads into this narrative. One records his memories from early childhood onward, another relates the present-day frustrations of the disease, and the last collects bits and pieces of the latest Alzheimer's research. Rather than treating these subjects in three separate sections, he alternates between them rapidly, creating a complex texture. What is the effect of this technique? Did you notice any interesting juxtapositions?
2. One of the most poignant aspects of the book is the use of short italicized quotations from DeBaggio's journal -- dispatches from his most personal thoughts. One reads simply, "This may be my last chance to dream." [p. 7] Why are these remarks so moving? Do they ever remind you of your own privately held feelings?
3. The author writes, "depressed patients often complain that they're unable to concentrate or remember things, while those with dementia are generally unaware of any mental problems." And yet, DeBaggio himself seems painfully aware of his own ever-increasing lapses, at least initially. Does this change over the course of the narrative? Do you think his

experience of the disease is uniquely self-conscious and insightful?

4. Sometimes DeBaggio quotes directly from his doctors' notes, which are often chillingly clinical. An early excerpt reads, "Mild dementia versus age-related memory loss plus anxiety. Suspect the former, rule out the latter. Rule out treatable cause." [p. 23] Do these quotations square with other medical experiences we all may have had?

5. "For me now, any question of identity becomes profound and difficult. Without memory you lose the idea of who you are." [p. 42] These two sentences succinctly capture what is so terrifying about Alzheimer's; if you could not remember your first kiss or your last address or your wife's name, would you still be you? Does DeBaggio's personality seem to change or even dissolve over the course of these 200 pages?

6. **Losing My Mind** has passages that are repeated at times, particularly in the second half. Do you think this is intentional? Note, for example, the repetition of the experience of lying in bed watching a light show of yellow images, or the memory of finishing reading **The Catcher in the Rye** and going out in search of "phonies." What is the effect of these echoes in the text?

7. Growing herbs and plants in his backyard, DeBaggio's life is bound with nature, and attentive to its dramas. Does an understanding of natural processes influence the author's writing style? Does it influence his experience of Alzheimer's?

8. DeBaggio cites a 1999 study estimating that "nearly half of all people age 85 and over have symptoms of AD" [p. 13], a truly shocking finding. Do you think this book will be valuable to the generation that is now growing into old age? Is it valuable to those who will never have Alzheimer's?

Author Bio

Thomas DeBaggio has worked as both a professional herb grower and a newspaper journalist. The author of **Growing Herbs from Seed, Cutting & Root, Basil: An Herb Lover's Guide** (with Susan Belsinger), and **The Big Book of Herbs** (with Arthur O. Tucker), he lives with his wife in Arlington, Virginia.

Critical Praise

"A brave, disturbing, immensely personal story...the insights are so pure, so startling, it's a remarkable offering."

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