

GHOSTS OF MEMORY: INTEGRATING OUR LOSS THROUGH REMEMBERING

By: Dave Roberts



I recently read a book called: *Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road*, by Neil Peart. Peart is the lyricist and world renowned drummer for the Canadian rock band, Rush. His daughter Selena, age 19, died on August 10, 1997, as a result of a car accident and his common-law wife, Jackie died on June 20, 1998, of cancer. Peart became a bereaved parent and a young widower in the space of ten months.

One year after the death of his daughter, he embarked on a 55,000-mile, fourteen-month journey on his motorcycle across Canada, the United States and Mexico. He rode “to try to figure out what kind of person I was going to be, and what kind of world I was going to live in.” (Peart, 2002. Pg 10). The book describes his travels, grief experiences and the intense emotional pain associated with constantly reliving his losses.

Peart’s personal tragedies resulted in a four-year hiatus from Rush. When he returned, he wrote the lyrics to an album called “*Vapor Trails*.” In his book, he described *Vapor Trails* as “an off-handed reference” to the ghosts of memory.

Following the completion of his book, I began to give some thought to the specific ghosts of memory that we experience and the roles that they play in our grief journeys as bereaved parents. This is what I came up with:

1) Memories of a life that no longer apply: Before Jeannine was diagnosed with cancer, I was preparing to graduate from SUNY Albany with a masters in social work, do private practice part-time and go on with my life as I knew it. After she died, memories associated with school and dreams of my past life were foreign to me and contributed to the disorientation and alienation that I experienced early in my grief. These types of memories challenged me to redefine my assumptions about life and my worldview.

2) Memories of our loved ones that are unique to us: A friend of mine who is also a bereaved parent recently recalled that she cried because she didn't remember an aspect of her son's death the way that her husband remembered it. She came to the conclusion that it is more important to remember the essence of our children, and that our memories are a product of our own creations.

3) Memories of the promise of a future: When my youngest son graduated from high school in 2006 (three years after Jeannine died), the school band played "I Hope You Dance," by Lee Ann Womack. This song was played as a tribute to Jeannine's life at her funeral mass. In the midst of my sadness, I saw a brief vision of Jeannine as a child, smiling and dancing under a blue sky. I interpreted this memory to mean that Jeannine was ok, and that I was going to be ok in the aftermath of the worst loss of my life.

I believe that we can use memories of our past, present and future to learn to adjust to life without the physical presence of our children and to find meaning and hope in our forever changed worlds.