

WHEN I BECOME A PHOTOGRAPH

As grief evolves, so does memory

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MAKING SPACE FOR EMOTIONS

For the last six years, I have had the privilege of facilitating numerous bereavement support groups for families who have experienced the death of a child. On several occasions, group members have brought in photographs of their children, which represented special memories of their time together. Typically, the children in those photos come alive because of the stories that are shared. In the process, some beautiful and often serendipitous moments of nostalgia occur.

Though there are many tears shed during our photo share, there are also many moments of joy and laughter. Making a space for divergent emotions is necessary. Without alchemy, there can be no metamorphosis of grief.

MY EXPERIENCE WITH NOSTALGIA

Nostalgia is defined as “a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition.”

During the early grief following the death of my 18-year-old daughter Jeannine in 2003, nostalgia manifested itself primarily as a desire to return to



the way things were before her death, and to perhaps magically reverse the outcome of her illness. Any nostalgia that I experienced about Jeannine was characterized by extreme emotional pain and longing.

My desire to want things to be as they were before Jeannine’s illness was, in retrospect, a necessary and at times, an unwelcome part of experiencing the pain of her physical absence and eventually accepting the finality of her physical death.

As the years passed and as I began to gradually accept that my daughter’s physical absence would be a permanent part of my existence, nostalgia had a different meaning for me.

Nostalgia about my earthly relationship with Jeannine no longer involved painful emotions or yearnings because of her physical absence. Also, nostalgia was no longer tinged with regret and longing for a life that I could no longer have.

Nostalgia now meant looking at the past that I shared with my daughter and what our ongoing relationship taught me about the life path that I was now destined to walk.

I no longer dreaded revisiting Jeannine's death because of the emotional pain that it caused. I also learned that all of my past experiences both good and bad have become seamlessly intertwined with my present.

AS GRIEF EVOLVES, SO DOES MEMORY

I firmly believe that my shift in perception about Jeannine's death altered the type of nostalgic episodes that I experienced. An example that I frequently use in support group settings, relates to the last moments of her life. At 12:30 am on the morning of March 1, 2003, I was the person who last held her hand and witnessed her last breaths. In early grief, I always verbalized that I was the last person to see her alive. Today, I view myself as the person that Jeannine chose to escort her into the next phase of her existence, her new life. Perhaps it was part of a sacred contract that we entered into before we were born or perhaps just part of the grand design.

Whatever the circumstance, this shift in perception permanently modified my recall of the last moments of her life. Instead of the sorrow that I experienced during my early grief, I now viewed Jeannine's end-of-life journey and moment of death as part of our overall human spiritual experience.

In the process, I was able to embrace a peaceful perspective about Jeannine's death and the path that I was destined to follow in the aftermath.

Nostalgia about life with Jeannine now had many positive associations as well.

Perhaps modified perceptions about life events alter the course of nostalgia related to those events. I know that it did for me, and continues to do so today.

I received a sacred gift when given the opportunity to say goodbye to Jeannine.

I am saddened that parents, whose children died suddenly, were not afforded that opportunity. It is my hope that the parents and family members left behind realize that it is not the circumstances of death that matter, it is how their children are remembered and honored. It is how we say hello and not goodbye that helps us to find our peace.

MY WISH FOR THOSE I LEAVE BEHIND

After I die, a photograph of me could serve as a conduit of nostalgia for family, friends, former students, colleagues and others with whom I have crossed paths during my lifetime. Perhaps in the beginning their sentimentality for the past may be reflected in their desire for a return to the way things were when I was alive. I do hope that those left behind would realize after a period of time, that we couldn't wish for something that is no longer within our grasp.

I would also hope that those who were a part of my life would experience nostalgia in a similar way that I experienced it with Jeannine, during the later phase of my grief. More specifically, I would hope that nostalgia about our time together would among other things:

- Evoke memories of what we learned from each other
- Reveal how we were mutually transformed.

As a result, we learn that though our time on earth is finite, the teachings discovered through interpersonal relationships are eternal.