
HOW MEMORIES PROMOTE TRANSFORMATION AFTER LOSS

Deciding on the world you're going to live in

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Neil Peart retires

In 2018, Neil Peart, the brilliant drummer for Rush, announced his retirement after 40+ years with the band, due to health issues. Peart died on January 7, 2020, after a 3 ½-year battle with cancer.

From my perspective, he was the best, most creative drummer of my generation — a true master of his craft. Peart has inspired me not only through his music and lyrics but through his literary contributions as well. His book, *Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road*, was one of the keys to my transformation of grief due to the death of my 18-year-old daughter Jeannine in 2003. In *Ghost Rider*, Peart chronicles his 55,000 mile, 14-month journey on his motorcycle across Canada, U.S. and Mexico, and how it helped him work through his grief following the deaths of his daughter and common-law wife in 1997 and 1998, respectively.

His reason for taking this trip resonated with me: "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."

When Peart returned to Rush, he wrote the lyrics to an album called Vapor Trails.



In *Ghost Rider*, Peart describes the term vapor trails as an off-handed reference to the ghosts of memory.

GHOSTS OF MEMORY: THEN AND NOW

After reading Peart's book in 2009, I was inspired to write a piece for Open to Hope Foundation on my perceptions of specific ghosts of memory that we experience following the deaths of our children, and how we can integrate those memories into our grief journeys.

Peart's announced retirement compelled me to once again revisit this article and my own observations about types of memories experienced after loss, both then and now .

MEMORIES OF A LIFE THAT NO LONGER APPLY

Before Jeannine was diagnosed with cancer, I completed requirements for a masters in social work. My postgraduate goals involved private practice and occasional college teaching while continuing to work fulltime as an addiction professional. I did begin to teach at the college level, prior to her death.

My other dreams regarding private practice and for life in general became a distant memory to me. However, the challenges presented by this particular type of memory nudged me to rethink my assumptions about life and my worldview. That has allowed me to rebuild my world in the aftermath of catastrophic loss.

Today I surrender to the reality that my world is permanently changed, and that “living differently” is my new norm. Surrender has also taught me that grief is a microcosm of life; even during the best of times we are not immune to experiencing sadness. My pre-Jeannine goal of private practice work has begun to manifest during the past year of my life. Just as grief is circular, so is life in general.

MEMORIES OF THE PROMISE OF A FUTURE

In 2006, when my youngest son graduated from high school 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 okay, and that I was going to be okay in the aftermath of the worst loss of my life.

Today I continue to receive signs of Jeannine’s continued presence. Her signs not only continue to reinforce for me that she is okay, but that she continues to evolve in her new existence.

As she evolves in her new existence, I continue to evolve in my present existence. I now see the promise of a fulfilling future based on memories that have been created because of our continued bond after her death.



CLOSING OBSERVATIONS

In early grief, memories can be burdensome because of their emphatic and painful reminders of whom we’ve lost. However, as we work through grief, our memories can have different meanings, allowing us to embrace a peaceful perspective which promotes self-awareness and clarity.

As I grow older, memories of my past flood my senses, creating a richer definition of my present. Those memories also involve family and friends whom have predeceased me, yet whom I know live on in my heart, mind and soul. The sad moments and periods of longing for their physical presence are still there, but I quickly realize that I can’t long for what I can’t have. In those moments I remember that there are no boundaries as to how we define relationships.

The rules we apply in this instance are our own, crafted from the challenges presented by life-altering events. As long as the rules that we now live by help us to grow in the wake of trauma and transition, the content matters none. When we believe and internalize this truth, the lens through which we see our reality becomes our own. Through this lens we see and stand in our truth, with conviction and passion.

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