

Lasting Imprints of One's Self: Assurance of Remembrance



Consider people who never accomplished anything extraordinary – nothing that would prompt observable longevity over the course of time. Imagine even implausible circumstances whereby a person was thrust into the world without any family, friends, or close associates. Still, there had to have been personal contacts of some sort. It is impossible to maintain an earthly presence unnoticed. So without realizing it, even if you think you have been relatively obscure, you could be lurking in the minds of many! You may have been tucked away in deep furrows of gray matter, but you're still there somewhere.

Just think of all the individuals you've perceived with at least one of your senses in some capacity at some time during your life.

Remember the woman who walked away from the restroom in that elegant restaurant, with a long string of toilet paper tenaciously adhering to her shoe and trailing behind her? Remember the reactions on Halloween when a couple wearing cumbersome costumes boldly boarded the crowded subway? The woman was

completely enveloped in purple balloons to depict a cluster of grapes, and the man was a bather crowned with a shower-capped noggin' above naked shoulders encircled by a hula hoop from which hung a shower curtain. Remember watching the principal's daughter angrily punch her seventh-grade best friend in the chin, unwittingly right in front of the priest? Or how about that time at your neighbor's party when a woman plopped her additional fifty pounds of pregnant weight onto their favorite antique chair... remember hearing guests' gasps as the wood cracked and split into pieces, causing her and her unborn child to catapult onto the hardwood floor?

Ah, yes, impressions are so easily created throughout life! Whether intentionally, accidentally, or incidentally, you have impacted many people in some way. There's a good chance that they still remember you for it. Because you have occupied the earth, bounteous memories are floating around in its atmosphere. So you will continue to live in the thoughts of many people, even after you are physically absent.

Picture yourself like a stone that has been tossed into a tranquil stream, creating a visual ripple effect. Although the stone sinks, the motion and appearance of the water is affected as a result of its immersion in it. Or think of the way a dead leaf detaches from a tree after completing its life cycle, yet falls into a brook's

coursing water and moves with the current, continuing to render splendor in the eyes of observers even though it is dead. You, likewise, have made your mark and because of that, life will go on with you still influencing it.

Though the fire will be out, embers will continue to glow. The warmth of your spirit will penetrate those whose lives you shared. Long after someone has died, people recognize that enduring energy. Behaviors among survivors often are governed, either consciously or unconsciously, by “the voice” of the decedent within one’s mind. Parents, for instance, inevitably blend into or stay attached to the consciences of offspring after they’re gone, continuing to guide, judge, and issue directives. After Lucille Ball’s mother died, the comedian and actress noted that she perpetually relied on her guidance from beyond the grave; when confronted by a problem, she would dream and her mother would give her the answer.

Indeed, you will be remembered. As noted by Robert Benchley, “Death ends a life, not a relationship.” Although the nature of your relationships with people will no longer be interactive, the relationships will endure. Musically speaking, your life symphony will close with a diminuendo rather than the complete cessation of a caesura. Though in a different form and by way of a changed medium, you will continue to be a companion, an advisor, and a source of support for those who have loved and appreciated you. Beyond such perceptions, mental associations may invoke a sense of one’s presence in a more ethereal way. Hearing a loved one’s favorite piece of music or observing his

well-worn chair may evoke images and fond recollections of that being who is no longer physically present. In the course of speaking, using words characteristically uttered by someone and recognizing that distinction can have the same effect. Our senses and thoughts enable us to maintain connections with those who were dear to us.

Anne feels that her father is near whenever she watches cardinals cavorting in her yard, as he had loved that type of bird. Since his death, they mean so much more to her. And every spring, amid the heralding of new life, a spread of his favorite flowers bursts forth in a stunning field of blue along the walkway leading to her house. These forget-me-nots, aptly named, ensure that Anne thinks of her dad as she approaches her front door.

Elizabeth, likewise, has a sense of her father's aura whenever a butterfly crosses her path. Butterflies had been featured at his memorial service as a symbol of many traits he espoused and as a reminder of the gardens he had tended. Years later, when this daughter was shopping for her dream house on a lake, she suddenly felt positive vibes as she walked onto a particular property. A butterfly flew across the deck, right in front of her. For her, that was a sign of her father's approval. That was the house she bought.

As an accomplished pianist, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice summoned her mother's spirit through musical ties that had connected the mother and daughter.

Upon returning home following funeral proceedings for her, she went straight to the piano to play hymns that had been her mom's favorites.

Within a compilation of articles about death in the book, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Tom Krause, a teacher and coach, reflected upon sentiments toward his father in response to his sudden death. Still feeling the pangs of grief, he was awakened to a sense of consolation one day while supervising a first-grade class recess on the playground. When a boy grabbed his hand and held it by the last two fingers, just the way his dad had held his hand when he was that age, instantly he felt his father's presence and was infused with a renewed outlook. He realized that in spite of his absence, his dad had left him not only the gifts of his smile and his compassion, but also his touch.

Having received a handmade wristband from a fan after his mother died, Scott Hamilton, the Olympic skater, wore it for many years. It served as a good luck charm that caused him to think of his beloved parent. Before going onto the ice for any competition, he rubbed it, mentally signaling for her "to watch" while providing him with the reassurance that she was with him in spirit. This simple cloth bracelet represented an ongoing kinship with someone he had loved dearly and appreciated enduringly. It alluded to her presence in his mind. She had sacrificed much and had been an avid supporter of his skating career, so this was a gesture that allowed him to "stay in touch" with her while driving his motivation to succeed.

All of these, then, are figurative representations that keep someone's spirit alive. They invigorate the lives of the living. After your death, your life companions will summon their own mental associations independently, based upon their experiences with you. Let's assume you'll be represented by blossoms rather than by weeds in their garden of memories! Just like lovely flowers, though individuals fade away according to a matter of course, they leave readily retrievable mental images.

Belleruth Naparstek, a psychotherapist and guided imagery innovator, speaks to the significance of mental representations following the death of a loved one. "By internalizing these steadfast images of loving comfort, we establish the primacy of imagery as our automatic, built-in, self-soothing tool." She continues, "By experiencing the presence of the lost loved one inside of us, and sensing the way they are carried within our hearts, keeping us company, continuing to advise, inspire, and find unique value in us, we manage. We still 'have' them. We see their faces, hear their words, smile at their foibles, hold conversations with them, laugh with them, scold them, and embrace them still. In an absolute and immutable way, they still exist. Eventually, the comfort of the image takes over for the flesh-and-blood reality. We slowly trade anguish for sweet sorrow, draw nourishment from the inner companion, and transcend the loss, thanks to the gentle resourcefulness of the imaginal realm." Furthermore, "Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in

his spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance.”

The scientist, Douglas Hofstadter, suggested that a decedent’s soul, a detailed, elaborate pattern, can be embedded in another person’s consciousness. When a human being dies, the original is no longer around, but there are other less detailed versions of it in people’s brains. For those whose relationship with the individual was intimately entwined, it may entail a process whereby the essence of that person is imported into one’s own brain.

So the prospect of being gone doesn’t need to imply absolute finality. Instead, like barren branches of a wintered tree that will sprout new leaves, it can suggest the impending arrival of a new season that will bear the re-birthed freshness of changed perceptions.

Chances are, after your death the lives of individuals close to you will be infused all the more with ideals and tendencies embodied by your life. As if ignited by a spark from your glowing embers, they will grow to appreciate how special you were. Most likely, they’ll even recognize what a force you continue to be in their own lives. They will still care about you. They will still love you. There will be no end to the echo of your being. You will not be silenced.

In her book, *Long Quiet Highway*, Natalie Goldberg eloquently summarized this assuaging reality: “Whether we know it or not, we transmit the presence of everyone we have ever known, as though by being in each other’s presence we exchange our cells, pass on some of our life force, and then we go on carrying that other person in our body, not unlike springtime when certain plants in fields we walk through attach their seeds in the form of small burrs to our socks, our pants, our caps, as if to say, ‘Go on, take us with you, carry us to root in another place.’ This is how we survive long after we are dead. This is why it is important who we become, because we pass it on.”



Excerpt from the pre-planning book,
*Pondering Leaves: Composing and Conveying
Your Life Story's Epilogue*
(no longer available)

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