

# The Coffee Cup Metaphor

*By Tom Doona*

As infants, we as humans believe that the world ends at the edges of our sight. Our peripheral vision is the limbo between existing, and ceasing to exist. If something is out of sight, it is out of mind. And if something is out of mind, it is out of the world entirely. For infantile egocentrism is innate. Through the first chapter of our lives the whole world is ours. But as we age, and our eyes are opened more and more to the grandeur of the world, the idea of it all being ours grows increasingly unfathomable. Until eventually we become thankful that we do not control this whole lot – for that would be way too much for our tiny hands to handle. And through this we develop a mechanism called object permanence: an understanding that objects, things, beings, continue to exist even when they are no longer visible to our senses. We accept that things continue to exist beyond our vision, that they exist in this world as concretely and as singularly as we do ourselves. Once we develop this object permanence, it never goes away. We can no longer evade the fact that nothing ever disappears. It becomes a piece of our nature, a cog in the engine inside our heads that allows us to process the world subjectively without losing sight of the objectivity of it all. The world doesn't end with our vision. In fact, it barely even starts there.

But at some point in our lives, inevitably yet unpredictably, object permanence becomes an adversary. The mechanism that helped us understand the world becomes a thing that hurts us. It gives us hope when all hope does is damage. It gives us a tool to fight an unwinnable fight. It makes us believe that something we can no longer see is still there. Still somewhere in the world. Still on a course of existence that one day may again cross paths with our own. But a cold, hard truth of understanding the world is that sometimes that is not the case. Sometimes things do just disappear.

When we can see a coffee cup, we know it exists. When we can no longer see it, we know it still exists. It is simply out of our sight. This process becomes instinctive at a very early age. We recognise it before it even needs to become an active thought. It happens despite us. But it is not until that coffee cup becomes something bigger that it begins to happen to spite us. Growing up is driven by an acceptance of the inevitable. Inevitable changes that we can do nothing about. Changes which are usually manageable with a little bit of trying. Physical changes. Situational changes. Emotional changes. They are not always easy, but they are part

and parcel of life, so we accept them. Though there is one inevitability, one change, that lingers long before it even comes into play. Its shadow precedes it by years because we always know it is coming. We just don't know when. That change is death.

Your own death is the easiest one you'll ever have to handle. Because you won't have to at all. Sure, you may need to handle the shreds that said death turns the last chapter of your life into – but death itself; that's not your worry. You'll never be burdened by that. Only by the thought of it. And at that point you will probably be too busy living to really let it impact you. Although the death of those around you, that is the change that really rocks the boat. Loss is a seismic tremor, and even if you stay standing, it sends shockwaves through your whole body. Which is why it is instinctual that we will fight it. Deny it, deep down. We fight the grief. We tell ourselves that the coffee cup never ceases to exist. We just can't see it anymore.

But grief is chronic. It is not something any of us ever get through. It is something we get to. At whatever point that may be. We arrive at grief, or maybe grief arrives at us. And it stays. No matter how we fight it. The fight is never won: not by us, nor by the grief itself. The fight is never won because it is a fight that never ends. And it is in the bloodied labour of that fight that we feel the real pain of grief. A pain that strengthens the more we try to weaken it. A pain that blossoms most painfully in a bed of uncertainty. It thrives in the "maybe"s, the "soon"s, the "we'll meet again"s. Grief hurts the most when it charges at us hand in hand with denial. But that denial is inevitable. Maybe it can be fended off on the surface (the first stage of grief...), but denial burrows deep down, it nests itself in the crevice of our brain, latching on to a love that we can never let go of. Love for someone who is gone; love that is the most immortal thing anyone ever leaves behind. Grief overrides that love – and it becomes a linear, parasitic relationship. Where that love once held all the feelings that make love so special, grief now twists it into pain. The love becomes what was, and what will never be again. We can be headstrong. We can look in the mirror, deep into our own eyes, and try to convince ourselves: 'They are gone. And they will never be back. And although that hurts, it will hurt more if you hold hope against it. You will never see them again. Never laugh with them. Never share ideas. Never argue. Never have hopes and dreams. Never turn those into plans. And yes that hurts. More than anything else. But it is the truth. And it will hurt much less if you accept it'.

And maybe that will work. You will move on with your life. Never forgetting them, never letting their influence or importance dimmer, but also never forgetting that you are the one still living, and that it is your duty to live.

But maybe it won't. Because the mind doesn't function on "maybe"s. It ticks like clockwork. Its mechanisms and processes never fail – well, they do, but at that point it's fair to say you would know about it. The mind never clocks out. Nor do the things that tick within it. Like object permanence.

We would never relegate the thought of a loved one to the thought of a coffee cup. Metaphors do not stretch that far. But the mind still gives us hope. It still tells us: the coffee cup isn't gone, you just can't see it. And despite ourselves, somewhere deep down we believe it, and that belief comes to the surface in fleeting moments, harnessing our attention for a moment until common sense kicks in. One day you might turn a busy street corner and see the coffee cup flicker by in the bustle of the crowds. You might hear a laugh in the cinema and turn around expecting to see the coffee cup sitting behind you. You might hear an idea and think "that was the coffee cups' idea, and it's made its way to me like in a game of Chinese whispers". You might glance in the mirror and see the coffee cup in the curve of your chin. You might hear a song on the radio and swear you hear the coffee cup's voice buried beneath the music, singing the lyrics idiosyncratically. Or you might sit, staring at the ceiling, convincing yourself that the coffee cup is gone. Fighting the object permanence. Fighting the function of your mind that taught you so much about the world all those years ago. Telling yourself that the coffee cup is not just out of sight. It is out of time.

Or, you might sit with a pen and a pad of paper, writing a metaphor that doesn't really make much sense. But at the same time couldn't be any clearer to you.

Grief never wins, because it doesn't want to. It just wants to fight. It wants to wear you down. Steal your strength. So let it think it is winning. Take it to your corner. Look it in the eyes. See the reflection of your smile in the black of its pupils. Tell it to keep trying. And then do your own thing. Live despite the fight. Live to spite the fight. Miss the people you miss. Feel the feelings you feel. You won't beat grief. But it won't beat you either.

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Sometimes a coffee cup shatters into a thousand tiny pieces, and then it is gone. But that doesn't mean it never held the coffee you drank in the morning. To wake you up. To give you warmth that cuts through the bitter dawn air.