

Looking ahead

Life isn't meant to be lived in the rearview mirror.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [June 29, 2022](#) issue



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The windshield on my car is five feet by three feet in dimension. I know this because I just measured it. The rearview mirror inside is 9 inches by 2 inches. There's a reason the windshield is about 100 times larger than the mirror: cars are designed to be driven forward. Drivers benefit from having an optimal view of where they're headed.

It strikes me that a lot of people spend their days trying to steer their way through life by fixating on the rearview mirror. What's behind them in their own life's experience guides their navigational instincts. Instead of believing that God or anybody else might be beckoning them toward a new future, they're more focused on recovering the past. The orientation map they rely on keeps directing them backward rather than forward, which turns out to be a pretty difficult way to drive.

Rick and Meredith have grown apart in their marriage ever since their 26-year-old daughter died from complications of sepsis six years ago. I touch base with them about once a year, only to discover that nothing has changed about their situation. Meredith is pleasant, happy, and fulfilled. Years ago, a grief therapist helped her realize that, though she thinks of Katie on a daily basis, there's no better way to honor her daughter than to steer life purposely toward the newness in front of her.

Rick, on the other hand, refuses to seek any help for getting beyond his sorrow. He clings so desperately to the past that it all but paralyzes his present. He sits at home in a depressed state, slowly worsening in health. Nobody has yet been able to redirect his sight from the rearview mirror where he's determined to secure the memories of what was. A crash in this marriage seems imminent.

Plenty of other life circumstances have people fixating on their rearview mirror. For some, it may be their past health that now frustratingly eludes them. For others, it's that inability to let go of any possession with even the slightest memory attached.

One need not be amnesiac about the past. We live pretend lives if we don't let history and experience inform us. To paraphrase Søren Kierkegaard, life can only be understood backward, but it has to be lived forward. But how to treasure or accept our past without getting stuck in it—that seems to be the trick. Teaching ourselves to cull wisdom from what's behind us without allowing that past to dictate our future is our regular assignment. Anything less may well result in a crash.

I remember reading a number of years ago about a successful program in which seasoned farmers helped Iraq War veterans cope with their post-traumatic stress disorder. They did so by creating opportunities for hundreds of vets to live and work on farms in different locales. While PTSD used to have them falling asleep to the terror of past trauma, the demands of planting and harvesting vegetables now had them waking up to a future in front of them. Farming, which is all about the future, completely redirected the focus of their vision and the hope of their lives.

The longer we live, the more memories we see in our rearview mirror. But that doesn't change the size of the mirror. We still need a big windshield in front of us to see what's ahead, which is where we'll spend the rest of our lives.