

My Forgettery

by Paul Graseck

Born and raised in Brooklyn, my parents loved New York, and they knew the city from the inside, frequently taking me on outings throughout its five boroughs. In the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan, we moved about the city underground, by subway.

Returning home from one excursion, the commuters on the stairs we climbed pushed passed us, seemingly unconcerned about me. On foot, New Yorkers move quickly from place to place; I felt small inside the horde of people on the move. Looking up at their feet racing ahead, I lost contact with my mother whose hand shortly before tightly gripped mine. Only four- or five-years-old, now suddenly alone and bewildered, I felt penned in, unsafe, nervous as I stumbled forward in the press of people. I panicked. Anxiety flooded my system. Lurching upward with the crowd, I felt a tug on the back of my shirt collar. I turned and saw Mom and Dad. Secure again, our threesome made its way to the top step where we stopped, and I cried.

Through the years, whenever I think of that period of separation—a brief flash in my life, undoubtedly no more than several seconds—I relive the experience in memory, adrenaline pours through me, my heart races, and my face broadcasts fear. I still recall with horror losing touch with Mom.

That scary stairwell moment evolved into a core memory, becoming a story I tell often in situations that provoke me to shake it loose from the filing system in my brain. It grew into a piece of my larger life story, the personal legends or lore that I use to help define myself. Perhaps more poignantly, in the class on Death and Dying that I taught for thirteen years, I used this story of separation from my mother as an example of what research psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton dubs a death image, an experience that evokes in children a primitive awareness of the meaning of death. Aware of the research on the fallibility of memory though, I began to wonder if I had the details of the legend that I created correct. How much of the original memory remained intact?

Studying eyewitness accounts, researcher Elizabeth Loftus conducted trailblazing experiments revealing the unreliability of eyewitness accounts. A recounted experience, she discovered, consists of “reconstructed memory.” The reconstruction sometimes omits facts, infuses new details, or exhibits an inaccurate record of a particular sequence of events. Errors in recall may occur because the brain’s system for storing a memory appears to divide the content of a memory into several parts, sending the components of a deconstructed memory to multiple sites to await the request for recollection, the retrieved memory, in effect, a re-created memory.

Retrieved memory typically includes content from the original experience, but sometimes we find incorporated into the re-created memory additional material previously consigned to storage but unrelated to the recollected event. The imprint of my fear of separation and subsequent panic remains intact, although I wonder, knowing what I do now about the unreliability of memory, if the recollected particulars of that event are accurate.

Add to reconstructed retrieved memories the process of shaping. We all shape memories. Developing an actual memory to share, we stamp onto it a story involving emotion, prejudice or judgment, and tone—the personal baggage the “rememberer” brings to a memory. In my case, was I panicked or only bewildered, becoming panicked only after reuniting with my parents who themselves may have been more panicked than I? Were the commuters truly rushing or is that just a prejudice inserted from my adult vantage point? Is the suspense of my story invented or simply a tone applied to the narrative as a means to creating a good story to share with listeners? Imponderables indeed! Nonetheless, such memories, now reconstructed and likely shaped, cease to exhibit factual accuracy. They devolve quickly into fiction. Perhaps, all history, personal or the academic variety, tampers with the truth, if truth means an exact rendering of the facts.

Teaching history in the 1980s, I sought to make this point to a group of high school students in my Ancient History class. The elaborate set-up I devised for the experiment, involved prearranging an ostensibly shocking event, one that would garner my students’ attention, an event they would *want* to recall. With the aid of the school’s principal, I

orchestrated a memorable classroom event. I started by providing each student with a blank piece of paper. I told them they were to use it to answer several quiz questions that I would provide momentarily. Just then, according to plan, the principal barged into my room wearing a wolfman mask, saying, “Mr. Graseck, I need to talk with you right now.”

My predetermined response, “What’s going on here?”

“I need to talk with you, Mr. Graseck. Stop what you’re doing and come into the hall.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m in the middle of class. Please leave! And what’s with that crazy mask?”

The subsequent scene in this foreordained scenario went something like this: Grabbing my shoulders the principal began to lead *me* to the door. He then reiterated, “Come into the hall with me *now*, Mr. Graseck. This is important.”

Feigning anger, I barked, “I’m sick and tired of your shenanigans. If you don’t get your hands off me, I’m going to send someone to the front office to get help. This is outrageous.”

Loudly, the principal then yelled, “Do you know who I am?”

I said, “I don’t care who you are. Get out of here now!”

The principal then tore off his mask, and I blurted, “Get out of my room,” forcibly pushing him out the door.

With the principal gone, I turned to the class and said, “This is the kind of thing that ends up in the courts. Using the piece of paper on which you were about to answer my quiz questions, I want you to record exactly what you saw. I will collect your eyewitness testimony when you are done.”

My students, now visibly perplexed, unhesitatingly accepted my instructions and began writing. After collecting their written accounts, sitting on the edge of my desk, I started reading them aloud. Wide variations in their accounts existed, especially in the sequence of events, their telling of who said what, and the vocabulary the principal and I used. No two recollections were alike. Some contained critical errors. I then explained that the class had witnessed a set-up, each step in the unfolding drama choreographed. “Having heard the eyewitness testimony,” I asked, “What lessons can we draw from this

experience?” Immediately, the utter unreliability of such accounts emerged as a key takeaway.

“Memory is fragile, unreliable, even memories of recent events,” I preached. Students shared examples of inaccurate recollections from occasions in their lives. I, too, related how once I stated passionately and with absolute confidence that I had put my book on a particular counter, even accusing my mother of having picked it up while straightening the kitchen, only to find the book on the bathroom sink, then recalling that I had indeed put it there. I also explained the research on eyewitness accounts that reveals the fallibility of memory.

At seventy-four, I maintain a healthy regard for the untrustworthiness of memory. Today, I will read a book, put it down, and upon returning to the book, having lost my place, reread a section that except for a phrase or two seems utterly new to me. But even as a much younger person, I experienced this phenomenon. And when I was in my thirties and forties, I recall telling friends on multiple occasions that for my entire life I have rushed into a room on a mission to accomplish something on my mind, only to arrive there having forgotten why I was there. I also shared with them reflectively, “When I am in my seventies or eighties, people observing this behavior will accuse me of showing signs of Alzheimer’s, even if that same behavior has defined me for decades.” True enough, but I suppose in my old age, I must leave space for second opinions.

Do fallible, reconstructions of memory blind us to behaviors we might otherwise disapprove in ourselves? Does the repeated sharing of emotion-packed stories to which we pay homage for shaping our adopted worldview blind us from expanding or adjusting that worldview? The centrality and power of a core memory transmuted into a locked up, hackneyed tale may imprison us as well as serve as a useful means to interpret our experience.

My father-in-law, upon straining without success to recollect a word or incident or when learning of his failure to fulfill an obligation to which he had agreed, would often smile, then say, “My *forgettery* is getting better and better.” Although understanding his meaning, I wondered if he invented the term or if “forgettery” made an appearance in

standard dictionaries. Merriam-Webster defines it thusly—a *faculty for forgetting: a poor memory*.

It is fashionable to say we should *live in the moment*. I can think of no other way to live, but those moments elicit memories—perfect, inaccurate, or irretrievable—and from time to time such moments involve circumstances that confirm, whether I like it or not, that my forgettery, too, is improving.



Paul Graseck taught high school for twenty-nine years, then served as an administrator for fifteen more, including curriculum director, principal, and superintendent. As a sideline, he portrays Gandhi and Socrates, drawing his audiences into interactive dialogues with these figures from the past. Paul also plays clarinet in a Providence-based, street band, The Extraordinary Rendition Band. Although retired, he now teaches reflective writing inside a state prison in Connecticut. He has published in *Kappan Magazine*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *History Matters*, *Quaker Life*, and elsewhere. Paul lives in Pomfret, Connecticut.