

Memory as an Act of Creation

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We're in our second year of monthly worship themes here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley. We've considered peace, aging, ghosts, children of God, imagination, love, commitment, transformation, courage, joy, hospitality, connection and, this month, we've been wondering about memory.

In addition to providing an overarching theme for the month's services, these themes have been the basis for discussions at many of our monthly meetings as committees, Program Council, and the Church Board have set aside a portion of their meetings to engage in exploring these ideas. Not everyone has found these discussions to their liking, but, by and large, the program has been a success. Considering and sharing our thoughts and insights about deep philosophical and even religious topics have helped to make the time we spend together a richer and more fulfilling experience.

I must admit that I've found the experience of preparing the monthly discussion guides to be an adventure all its own. I always seem to learn something in coming up with a range of provocative quotes on the topic as well as questions for discussion. Sometimes the learning goes above and beyond and takes me in directions I never expected to go. This month's theme of memory did just that.

Some of the quotes were quite provocative. Salman Rushdie said, "Memory is a way of telling you what's important to you." Andrew Maurois said, "Memory is a great artist. For every man and for every woman it makes the recollection of his or her life a work of art and an unfaithful record."

And then there's Franklin P. Jones, who told us, "You never realize what a good memory you have until you try to forget something." This reminded me right away of the old country song that goes, "I forgot to remember to forget."

The past can persist in strange ways. It can haunt us with memories we'd like to forget, but our recollections aren't always entirely reliable. After a painful breakup

we might remember all the wonderful things we've lost, for example, and forget that things weren't all that pleasant all of the time. Sometimes we only remember the painful things as though the good ones had never happened at all.

Memory is the personal history we write one day at a time. And then there's also the more formal kind of memory that we call "history."

In 1960, Hans-Georg Gadamer published a book entitled *Truth and Method*, revolutionizing the study of history. Its 650 pages of highly technical and painstakingly thorough argument (and, yes, I did read it) helped to establish – beyond a doubt – that all human understanding is rooted in the culture of which it is a part. Every time and age has its own way of looking at and experiencing the world, its own version of reality that it often calls "the truth."

This work is deeply rooted in the German postmodernism movement, so much so that two widely used terms for the ways in which culture influences understanding come to us straight from the German: "zeitgeist," referring to the spirit of the times, which varies greatly from century to century, and can even change from year to year; and "weltanschauung," which is the fundamental cognitive orientation of an individual or society – a framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual, group or culture watches and interprets the world and its interactions with it.

Gadamer's thesis is that these frameworks for viewing the world can be so specific and also so radically different among various groups and historical epochs that it's impossible to claim with any certainty that we know how people from different historical periods understood their own experience. We may know a few things that occurred a hundred or a thousand or two thousand years ago but we have no access to knowing what it meant in the minds, emotions, and assumptions of those involved. Whenever we do so, whenever we write what we claim to be history, Gadamer maintains, we are performing a creative act, writing stories that pretend to understand the past but are essentially projections of our current weltanschauung upon people and events that may well be inconceivably different from us in the way they understood their world.

An anachronism might be very simple example of this. I remember what must have been the first one I observed. Back the 1960's there was a TV show called

“Daniel Boone.” It purported to tell stories about Boone’s adventures in 18th century America as he travelled with his faithful Indian companion, Mingo. I didn’t watch it much but saw part of one episode where there was an issue with the behavior of someone who lived some distance away. How will you tell them, Boone was asked. Stepping into the stirrup of his western saddle and mounting his horse, Boone replied, “I’ll deliver this message verbally.”

“I’ll deliver this message verbally?” I was incredulous. Nobody talked that way in pre-revolutionary America! But that is how we talked in the 1960’s – an example of assuming that those long dead had the same experience, values, and even habits of speech as our own.

It’s one thing to acknowledge and accept our limitations when it comes to history. Maybe we can’t get it right after all – we weren’t there. But looking further into memory revealed something rather more disturbing: we may not even be able to trust our own memories.

It turns out that eyewitness testimony, once thought to be the most reliable source of information, isn’t very accurate at all.

In a study by the Innocence Project, researchers have reported that nearly three-quarters of their 239 convictions overturned through DNA testing had been based on eyewitness testimony. A recent *Scientific American* article reported that “Jurors place a heavy weight on eyewitness testimony because of a popular misconception of how memory works. Many people believe that human memory works like a video recorder: the mind records events and then, on cue, plays back an exact replica of them. On the contrary, psychologists have found that memories are reconstructed rather than played back each time we recall them,” a process which has been described as being “more akin to putting puzzle pieces together than retrieving a video recording. Even questioning by a lawyer can alter the witness’s testimony because fragments of memory may unknowingly be combined with information provided by the questioner, leading to inaccurate recall.”

And there’s another factor that contributes to the unreliability of eyewitness testimony: mental constructs called “schemas.” Schemas are bits of worldview, story-like sets of narrative expectations that help us interpret and understand our

experience. According to the psychology educator, Kendra Cherry, “A schema is a cognitive framework or concept that helps organize and interpret information. Schemas can be useful because they allow us to take shortcuts in interpreting the vast amount of information that is available in our environment. However, these mental frameworks also cause us to exclude pertinent information to instead focus only on things that confirm our pre-existing beliefs and ideas. Schemas can contribute to stereotypes and make it difficult to retain new information that does not conform to our established ideas about the world.”

It turns out that we all have schemas that we use to interpret our experience. And we tend to remember things that fit our schemas and forget things that don't. For example, if we expect to be treated badly, we may have clear memories of all the times that has happened, but tend not to remember times when we were treated well.

Or, if we have a schema that tells us that African-Americans are more likely to be perpetrators of crime, we often tend to remember a person who committed a crime as African-American, even if the person we saw was as white as a Norwegian.

Another flaw in the video recorder model of memory is that memories are more like stories we tell ourselves rather than video recordings. And it's been found that the more frequently we go over a memory in our minds, the more often we tell ourselves the story of that memory, the more we tend to edit it to fit our schemas, our preconceptions. And, since these memories often stand out as our most vivid recollections, it's more than ironic that these are the very ones that are least likely to be accurate!

People don't usually think that they have frames or schemas that distort their understanding of the world; only other people have them. The gulf between the progressive left and the conservative right in our culture is a good example of this. Each side is absolutely sure that they are right and that the other is engaging in a dangerous misunderstanding of the facts. But what the study of schemas shows us is that there really aren't that many facts in this public discourse, but interpretations and judgments based on our unacknowledged biases.

Of course, biases are a little like prejudices. Mine are good; yours are bad.

George Lakoff has described two examples of this polarization. One is the strict parent model, popular mostly with the conservative right. It sees the world as a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good.

Lakoff sees the progressive left, on the other hand, with a schema that's more like a compassionate nurturing parent model. It assumes that children are born good and can be made better. The parent's job is to nurture their children and raise them to be nurturers of others.

These assumptions go on to generate radically different views about culture and society and government on both sides. With root assumptions as different as this, it's no wonder that the left and the right don't get along – we disagree about the very nature of the existence of which we're a part!

In an article in *Pacific Standard* magazine, David Dunning describes an anthropological theory of cultural worldviews that posits a couple of basic schemas. He says that people “are either individualist (favoring autonomy, freedom, and self-reliance) or communitarian (giving more weight to benefits and costs borne by the entire community); and they are either hierarchist (favoring the distribution of social duties and resources along a fixed ranking of status) or egalitarian (dismissing the very idea of ranking people according to status). . . These ideological anchor points can have a profound and wide-ranging impact on what people believe, and even on what they ‘know’ to be true.”

We often assume that information and education would counteract this, but we'd be wrong there, too. A recent study at Yale Law School revealed that when people who knew almost nothing about a subject – and who knew they knew almost nothing about the subject – read just two paragraphs of accurate, balanced information, they tended to form strong opinions and to disagree – not on the basis of the identical information they'd read, but on the basis of their schemas.

This situation is reflected in a wonderful quote from Bill Watterson's comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes, where he says, "These are interesting times. We don't trust the government, we don't trust the legal system, we don't trust the media, and we don't trust each other! We've undermined all authority, and with it, the basis for replacing it! It's like a six-year-old's dream come true!"

And finally, when we realize that everything we know – all of our knowledge – is stored in our memory and so is subject to distortion by our schemas, prejudices and expectations, we are led to a somewhat unsettling conclusion: we've gone through the looking glass into a world where nothing is what it seems, or at least what we think it is. Watterson only got it part right – we can't even trust ourselves!

So what's left? Where do we go from here? Deconstructing reality like this may sound rather depressing, and there's been a lot of pushback against this post-modern understanding that all our knowledge is subjective, but that could be because it defies the logic of our own personal schemas. I take a different view about this, though: this is good news.

When we're freed from the belief that the contents of our mind accurately reflect reality, we can finally understand the advice from the bumper sticker that says, "Don't believe everything you think."

We can be freed from the burden of being right, from the compulsion to try to change each other's minds about things by logic, argument, or persuasion. We now know why that never works. People's schemas determine what they think far, far more than any facts or information they may have.

This understanding might lead us to understand why religions are rarely concerned with being factually accurate. They're not designed for that. Religions are designed to influence or create the schemas by which we process our life experience. From this perspective, it's a little odd that so many of us have adopted schemas that place a great deal of emphasis on factual accuracy as the basis for our beliefs when facts have never been the issue at all!

All this is not to say that we shouldn't address the issues that concern us: justice, equality, peace, and the environment need our sincere efforts more than ever. But once we accept that fact-based arguments aren't what turn the tide of belief and

opinion, we might be able to find more effective pathways to advocacy – through engaging these root schemas, our own included.

Once we begin to see and appreciate the power schemas have over memory and knowledge, we can begin to study, understand, and even modify our own distortions, giving us more control over how we see the world.

There's another benefit to all this. Once we understand that memory is more a creative act than a video replay, we can intentionally engage and participate in that creation. We can edit the records of our experience, not through mindless distortion – as usual – but by choosing which memories we want to emphasize and which to minimize. We can be happier by choosing to dwell on happier memories.

There's one saying that always bothered me. It goes, "It's never too late to have a happy childhood." Give me a break! It took most of my life to discover just how unhappy my childhood was. I now know the facts about what happened and how I felt. So it seemed like having had a happy childhood would be a delusional fantasy.

But now I get it. There are always happy memories to find, even among the ruins. The sunrise, the sunset, the feel of warm water or clean sheets. The sound of music or the way fresh air lifts the spirits. And if there's any difficulty finding them, you can even find happy memories in some of the dark places, too. How about appreciating the joy of no toothache?

So it is possible to have a happy childhood. It's just not easy. We can take creative responsibility for our memories, edit the past (without forgetting the lessons we've learned, of course) and enjoy a happy childhood, a happy adulthood, a happy life.

How wonderful it would be to lay down that heavy burden of believing that our memories are absolutely true! If we can just lay down that burden, free ourselves from this one compelling delusion, we would be able to be free, to find joy, and to create a community and a world that is joyous and free, as well.

May it be so.