

INTRODUCTION

One need not be a chamber to be haunted;

One need not be a house;

The brain has corridors surpassing

Material place. ~Emily Dickinson, "Time and Eternity"

Memory is one of those glorious conundrums about being human. It gives us context and facilitates our lives by automatically accessing how-to information for the most basic functions we execute over and over again. Early in life we develop a storehouse of things we should react to and be afraid of, then as we learn and grow our brains integrate the physical and emotional events of our lives into memory for future reference. Our brains are constantly comparing old and new memories to help keep us safe in many different situations. Our memory has helped us survive and evolve as a species.

But memory and the way we handle it can also make us sick and unable to function. It can wash in on us when we least expect it or elude us when we most desperately need it. It can be ushered in on a smell or a sound or a flash of light. It can be blocked by fear, anxiety, stress or aging. It can mix with dreams and fantasy, skewing or even completely obliterating reality. Our memory can paralyze us or send us on a wild goose chase. At times, the way our brains store the experiences of our lives is a painful mystery of distortion, omission and illusion, especially our fear memories. If we let it, memory (or lack thereof) can turn our lives upside down.

My story starts upside down.

I began to question memory and brain function in my mid-twenties. My promising life was suddenly in shambles for no apparent reason. I had a deeply troubled marriage, a failing career, and recurring depressive episodes that had me waking up each day wanting to die. When multiple rounds of medication and therapy didn't stop repeated relapse, I went looking for explanations for my mental condition. I was unwilling to accept that I might be one of the intractable cases that couldn't be helped or that I might just have a "defective" brain that the prevailing scientific wisdom maintained was hardwired and fixed once we reached adulthood. I didn't know it at the time, but I didn't really believe I was doomed to a lifetime of simply coping with despair. I felt as if it was a puzzle to be solved, and if the doctors couldn't do it, I would.

My inability to reach equilibrium in adulthood made me start to wonder if something in my past was slowly poisoning me. I didn't have a lot of specific memories from childhood. Why

not? Had I been abused? Traumatized? Inherited some defective “madness” gene from an unstable relative? Was I repressing some horrible past? I speculated that finding and confronting where things went wrong might help me get well. So I went back to the beginning. I searched my first memories and combed through the events and emotions of my childhood looking for clues. I asked questions.

What I found explained a lot. There had been subtle hints I had missed all along. Family secrets. Infidelity. Sexual abuse. Denial. Neglect. Bitterness. Religious fanaticism. Shame heaped on shame. After a few years of emotional excavation, I thought I had the reasons for my painful existence and that in finally knowing the truth I would be able to overcome my difficulties. On the surface, I should have been ok. I did all the right things. I worked with the emotions that arose and tried to get perspective on what I had discovered. I confronted the people I needed to confront and began the process of grieving and forgiving. I tried to get on with my life. But knowing what fueled my depressive thoughts did nothing to stop them. In fact, they got worse. I began to believe my brain HAD been irreparably damaged during key periods of childhood development and that the doctors were right. I would just have to learn to live with despair. I slipped closer and closer to wanting to die.

But something began to change in my early forties. I had nearly abandoned myself to living a life without joy when I read that meditation was proving effective for the treatment of some mental disorders. The scientific study of its benefits was in full swing. Researchers believed meditation and something called mindfulness training might help with chronic, unresponsive depression. I didn't have anything to lose. So I gave it a try. I read a few books and started to practice. When sitting meditation proved too excruciatingly difficult, I tried meditative walks in nature and gardening, and discovered both soothed me long enough to be aware of something outside my own pain. And once I stepped outside the pain, I knew I wasn't trapped there. I knew I could teach myself to do it again and again. I began to understand that my thoughts were not me.

In hindsight, I realize I was initiating a paradigm shift. The minute I learned to step back and observe what was really going on inside my head, I began to understand that my brain often doesn't see things as they truly are. It is fixated on making sure that the ME it perceives as its reason for being survives. And somehow it came to believe that in order to do that job well it must demand resolution when there is conflict, jump to conclusions when there is confusion and

make decisions when there is uncertainty – with or without all the facts. It grabs onto one detail, connects it with something stored away in the recesses of memory and reacts as if all situations that LOOK the same ARE the same. Unobserved, my brain runs my life without my conscious participation. And while the marvels of my brain’s capabilities to help me survive and navigate the world are truly awe-inspiring, my brain is not me. I am that observer calmly standing outside the gyrations of a brain that is frantically trying to control a completely uncontrollable situation—life. And as I trained myself to view the world through the lens of that observer-self and live from the expansive space where my true self resides rather than define my existence by the thoughts of a troubled brain, my life began to change. The despair began to lift. I began to heal.

I originally began this memoir with the intention of helping myself and others by recounting how I discovered and coped with repressed memories of childhood abuse. I had read other memoirs on the same topic. Many were sensational and bitter. Others expressed hope for healing in ways that had failed me. And none addressed the excruciating shame of knowing but NOT remembering. They did not describe the price of spending a lifetime carrying around an unrelenting madness without identifiable roots.

The writing coincided with a significant series of personal life events and the discovery of new scientific research explaining why sexual abuse so severely impacts its victims. The effects are not just psychological. Sexual abuse changes the victims’ brains. The damage distorts and fragments memories and causes ongoing problems with learning and remembering new information. Internalizing responsibility for the physical symptoms can lead to more mental manifestations such as depression and anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

And there is tremendous hope mixed in with the new research. New studies show that the parts of the brain that are affected by trauma such as sexual abuse have the capacity to regenerate nerve cells if subsequent stress is minimized and certain therapies and mental training occur. The millions of victims dealing with the fallout of trauma are no longer faced with just “coping.” Finally my experience is corroborated by scientific data. The damaged brain can heal.

I finished the first full draft and several rewrites of this book in October 2009. It sat for nearly a year, waiting. I wasn’t sure for what. The few people I asked to read it had mixed reactions. One reader told me he thought the events I describe weren’t particularly dramatic or traumatic. There are more horrific stories to be told, he said, what makes yours worth reading? I

stuck on fear. It is an example of how understanding the strengths and weaknesses of our brains, accepting the fallibility of our memories and learning to live from our hearts can balance all the madness this earthly existence can conjure up. When the heart is allowed to lead, anything that happens can be made whole.

I stoically held onto the panic as I walked her through the pre-op procedures. The adrenaline overload finally drove me to tears as I pushed through the glass doors and out to my car. I wailed like a cornered animal on the drive to work then tried to compose myself before I climbed the steps to my office.

It was going to be a long day.

I sat quietly breathing while I booted up my computer. My heart was still racing and I could feel a slight quiver in my throat and weakness in my arms and legs. The adrenaline. Weariness made itself known with each breath. It continued to tingle in my legs and then twine around my chest like a choking vine. The vice-like vine, the difficulty in filling my lungs with air was familiar and always seemed to arrive after the adrenaline. I pulled my cell phone from my bag and placed it within reach, expecting not only a call from the animal hospital, but hoping to hear back from a friend I had called that morning for moral support.

A year prior I had become acquainted with a man who also lived in this mental place of disproportionate stress reactions. And on this particular morning, he would be the only person in my life who would really understand my distress. Of all the wonderful friends who have loved and cared for me and tried to help me through these kinds of moments, he was the only one who had been there himself. He was the only one that knew the screaming going on in my brain during these episodes and how it washed out into my body.

Up to the point of meeting him, I had made a lot of progress in isolating and transforming the symptoms of this perceived madness to a saner way of living. I had begun to understand what had damaged my brain and why I had been caught in a vicious cycle of thoughts. I had found practices and therapies to shift the reactions. The healing had been slow but encouraging. Yet even today I still sensed some belief or memory floating beneath my consciousness that continued to impact my life. No matter what therapy, what spiritual practice, what holistic approach, I could not get over what felt like the last barrier to a healthier life. And while I had begun to talk openly about my struggles several years before, had completed a first draft of a book about them and knew I was clearer than I had ever been, I still had not allowed anyone to see the depths of my brokenness. Despite all my hard work and progress, the shame remained.

The connection with this individual was immediate and intuitive like two people who had been through a life or death experience together. Like war buddies. And while we are both veterans, he a Vietnam-era warrior who saw combat that earned him a Bronze Star and a lifelong

memory of parents who had not provided reliable care. When faced with losing what my brain had tagged as emotional security (little dog), I was reminded of the deep vulnerability, anxiety and avoidance that had been with me my entire life. Yet today I had navigated a traumatic stress episode more efficiently than ever before. I had managed to consciously step outside the reaction and “prime” my brain with memories of emotional security. How and why? Even though the legacy of my childhood remains, I am aware that I have developed a new capacity. But I still cannot name it.

Then a few days later I had a remarkable conversation with my brother-in-arms. I was feeling hurt that he had not called during my “ordeal.” I was obsessing again that I wasn’t ok. I was worried that even in the connection we had made, he was rejecting me. I slipped back into a hopeless place and whined and lamented my inability to make this stop. His response profoundly changed everything-- not because I hadn’t heard it before or didn’t know the intellectual truth of it. It changed everything because I finally felt the truth of it. “Lady, I don’t know what really happened to you in your life to cause this or why. But I do know from what you’ve described to me over the last year, you’ve got the ‘dis-ease.’ It’s not going to just go away. It’s part of you. But you can train yourself to see it happening before the story carries you away. And each time the reaction will be a little shorter. You don’t have to change anything you just have to see things a new way. You can be exactly who you are and you will be ok.” The words swooshed through me in a cleansing flood, the shame of a lifetime of madness washed away in an instant. Combined with everything else I had researched and uncovered in the first draft of my book, what I had experienced in my own life, and what I was seeing happen in his, I knew in my bones he was right. The old wiring would always be there, but I had a choice about what circuits I traveled. The new capacity I had developed was seeing I had a choice.

My response to a sick dog classically illustrates just a few of the symptoms of PTSD. Seeing the pattern so clearly reflected in that situation and then in the conversation with my new friend, the last piece of life-long puzzle-solving finally snapped into place. There was another life beyond the stories I had been telling myself, and I was slowly learning to live it.

The details of discovering and subsequently transforming an unrelenting personal madness to a healthier way of being began to unfold during a visit with my family in 2007.