

# Mixing memory and desire: A family literacy event

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**For one family, a simple literacy event evolved into something more significant as they journeyed into a realm created by memory.**

**“When we open** our eyes each morning, it is upon a world we have spent a lifetime learning how to see. We are not given the world: We make our world through incessant experience, categorization, memory, reconnection” (Sacks, 1995). In the introduction to his book on “the nature of memory,” Hilts (1995) wrote, “memory, so familiar to us as a private act, becomes strange as a subject of inquiry” (p. 7). Familiar, yet strange, “memory not only recreates the past, but must be the source of the future as well...memory makes us fore and aft” (p. 15). Until a year ago, I would have nodded in superficial agreement with these claims without giving them too much thought. When I read them today it is with new eyes—a transformation in perspective brought about by a humble familial gesture that evolved into a powerful literacy event—one that caused me to reconsider my beliefs about memory and its role in shaping how each of us makes sense of our lives. As I reflect on what happened, it becomes apparent to me that the significance of this event extends beyond my family and myself. Although the immediate focus of this article is upon matters that are very personal in nature, my aim, ultimately, is to underscore the potential impact of new knowledge about how human memory

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## **Introduction: A life remembered**

Three years ago, my grandmother turned 90. To mark this occasion, I traveled with my wife and two children to the small town in New Hampshire where she lives in a facility designed to provide necessary care while allowing residents to maintain their own apartments. My parents drove down from their home in Maine to join us, and together we celebrated a milestone in our family history. More than anything else, however, the experience of watching our children play games and read books with their great-grandmother led my wife and I to the idea of making “GG’s” birthday celebration an annual event. Before embarking on what would be our third trip, an idea occurred to us that almost immediately began to expand into something more significant than any of us could have imagined at the outset.

Our idea began with a simple gesture. My daughters (ages 6 and 13 at the time) created a list of questions to ask GG about her life—a life that even she did not expect would span most of the 20th century (she was born in 1909). We sent her the questions in advance with the suggestion that, during our visit, we might use them as the basis for a videotaped interview. GG was enthusiastic about our proposal and, as we soon learned, had

made notes in advance to use during the interview. My parents once again joined us (GG is my dad's mom), and the anticipated event took place on May 31, 2002.

We decided to use audiotape as well as videotape so the interview would be easier to transcribe for purposes of reflection and sharing with other family members. In addition to inviting my parents to participate in the interview, this turned out to be the first of several decisions that expanded the scope and interest of the project. We opened the interview with questions about what it was like to attend a rural one-room schoolhouse in 1915, and GG proceeded to teach and delight us with stories from her childhood. After about 60 minutes, we were still going strong, but GG was tiring, so we decided to suspend the interview and continue it the next day. All in all, we recorded well over two hours of conversation. This prompted another decision, which was to take a tour by car of some of the places mentioned in the interview (GG has lived her entire life in western Massachusetts and New Hampshire in the United States). What began as an enjoyable way to pass the time had evolved into a truly memorable event.

What I experienced over those two days piqued my interest in learning more about memory and what researchers have discovered about how it works. Back home, while my adolescent daughter and I transcribed (and relived) the conversation, I did some further reading on the subject. In the next section, I summarize some of the rather startling revelations brought about by research on the human brain conducted over the past 20 years. Hilts (1995) is correct. When made the subject of inquiry, our memories do become strangely evocative in ways that are all too easily lost in the rush of daily living.

## Background: The ghostly work of memory

"Time," Hilts (1995) wrote, "is the human element, one not given to other animals in the same way,

and the one in which rationality and relationships are embedded. Thus memory may be the founding trait of humanness" (p. 143). Citing a claim that the present as a sustained act of perception endures for only 12–20 seconds (a claim that has since been confirmed by empirical research), Hilts drew the obvious yet startling conclusion that the sum of what we experience over time must consist of memory and reconstruction from it (p. 16). The title of his book, *Memory's Ghost*, alludes to the fact that memory—and thus identity—only exists as effects that remain after something directly present to the senses has passed away. Scientific research supports differing theories about the precise nature of these effects but there is general agreement that, as Loftus (1980) put it, "memory is central to being human" (p. 2). It now appears that our capacity to remember things and events situates us quite tenuously between past and present realities that are constantly, if often imperceptibly, changing. Insofar as identity is inseparable from memory, a human being is surely a work in progress.

What is now known about the physiology of memory challenges at least two widely held beliefs about the brain's ability to record and remember past events. Following the influential work of Sigmund Freud, many people still conceive of memory as a discreet mental faculty capable of preserving a literal record of past experiences. Hilts (1995) pointed to much publicized but now discredited experiments performed in the 1960s that appeared to confirm this erroneous belief. Patients undergoing brain operations responded to targeted stimulation of the cerebral cortex by producing seemingly detailed accounts of past experiences. Subsequent research challenged the medical procedure as well as the factual content of the memories supposedly brought to light during these episodes. But the idea of memory as a recording device persists despite the preponderance of evidence indicating that Freud was wrong. Research conducted since the 1970s suggests that memory is not one faculty but many, and past experiences are not preserved in total but in bits and pieces that the brain uses to construct possible worlds (Johnson, 1991).

The link between memory and imagination first posited 2,000 years ago by Aristotle is now commonly accepted by those investigating how human beings construct memories (Johnson, 1991). While the precise nature of this link is a point of dispute among neurologists, psychologists, and philosophers whose inquiries focus on understanding the work of memory, researchers now reject the notion that memories are passive and more or less accurate recordings of past events. As Hilts (1995) put it,

It has become clear that the act of memory is an act of construction, not of recording. That is, we create experience and memory as we go, rather than being mere registers of the events around us. We reshape memory as we move through experience, and reshape experience with expectation brought up from memory. (p. 220)

Rather than the product of a single faculty or region of the brain, memories appear to be constructed through the coordination of “dozens, perhaps more than a hundred distinct or somewhat separable powers” (p. 188). Diffused throughout the human brain, these numerous capabilities function as “engines and stores of memory” (p. 188) that join together to produce experience.

Different theories exist to explain exactly how the human brain transforms sensations gathered through fleeting moments of present perception into complex concepts of mind, self, and world (Hilts, 1995; Johnson, 1991; Loftus, 1980). Nonetheless, even as questions remain about the precise physiology involved in the formation of memories, researchers appear to agree that the primary evolutionary purpose of memory is to make learning possible. What we find in even the simplest of organisms, namely the ability to modify behavior on the basis of “remembered” expectations, remains essentially true for humans, but with an important difference. It now appears that the vast and extraordinarily complicated components of a human brain and nervous system that contribute to the creation of memories

have as much or more to do with self-formation as they do with self-preservation.

Efforts to explain human memory in terms of a deterministic, bottom-up understanding of stimulus and response have failed. By the same token, top-down efforts to account for memory strictly in rational terms have also failed to the extent that these ignore basic brain chemistry. The biological roots of memory cannot be denied, but as Sacks (1995) pointed out, “the ultimate question in neuroscience” centers on understanding how “hundreds of tiny areas crucial for every aspect of perception and behavior” somehow “cooperate in the creation of a self” (p. xvii). Here at the very limits of scientific knowledge, a portrait of the brain is emerging in which the role of memory is central, and, as noted by Hilts (1995), “the central feature of memory is its malleability.” He goes on to say, “Memory is, at the end, a site of endless construction...in response to one’s current, and most urgent needs” (p. 224). Hilts’s review of current research on memory lends credence to Bruner’s (1990) contention that narrative plays a key role in self-formation via the construction of memories. According to Hilts, the most up-to-date scientific studies all suggest that “the central engines of our minds are bent always and forever on the job of making stories” (p. 224).

We are all, it seems, haunted by our past, by events that keep coming back in the form of memories that transform and are themselves transformed by the flow of lived experience. Like Hilts, Derrida (1994) associated memory with something spectral that hovers like a ghost between past and present, death and life. Memory brings back to life what was and is no more but not as mere repetition. Derrida’s view aligned profoundly with current scientific research when he posited that a memory is an act of translation—a reworking of the past in light of the present and vice versa, which he called “hauntology” (p. 10). What would be the object of this “hauntology,” Derrida asked, if not to move “beyond the opposition between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and

non-life” toward “thinking the possibility of the spectre, the spectre as possibility” (p. 12)? According to Derrida, the work of memory transgresses logical (and deterministic) boundaries, making it possible for people to learn how to think differently by learning how to listen to the stories they tell about themselves and their world.

## Spectral moments: A family literacy event

Aside from her longevity, there appears to be nothing particularly exceptional about my grandmother’s life. She continues to live humbly and quietly as she always has, caring about and being cared for by relatives and neighbors. Although she was known in her day to have been a master gardener; devoted homemaker; and skilled practitioner of various crafts including painting, sewing, and ceramics, it is gratitude more than pride that marks her recollection of these accomplishments. Nonetheless, as we soon discovered, a powerful will and sense of determination lie just beneath the surface of my grandmother’s self-effacing demeanor. As our interview progressed, we began to see evidence of what Hillman (1999) referred to as “the force of character” in my grandmother’s account of her life in response to our questions.

At one point midway through our first session, GG paused after recounting some of her earliest memories of growing up as one of seven children born of Polish immigrants who settled in western Massachusetts. When I broke the silence with an open-ended question about what she might want to add to the portrait that was emerging from our questions, she looked directly at us and said quietly, “trying to learn to take care of yourself.” On one level, she simply responded to our specific questions about her family, school, and what it was like to live on a farm. Looking back over the text of the interview and listening to the audiotape, however, I was fascinated by the complex tone of her responses, most of which were couched in the form of brief vignettes that accentuated the hardships she endured—the stark

contrast between then and now. She would say things like, “When I went to school we didn’t have heat like you people do.” But, at the same time, she clearly refused to position herself as a victim or, for that matter, position her grandchildren as unappreciative beneficiaries of modern technology. Instead, she used the memories available to her to represent herself as no more, but also no less, than a capable, self-reliant person who managed to do what needed to be done in any situation without fanfare or complaint.

As we listened to her stories, I got the feeling that our questions had opened up a space in which she was able to listen to herself performing what Hillman (1999) called “life review”—a process whereby one “attempts to turn events into experiences, to draw out their emotion and gather them into patterns of meaning” (p. 87). I’ll share my favorite examples of this process. The first is a story about how GG came to own her first washing machine in 1928 shortly after getting married and having her first child (my dad).

You had to wash all those diapers. You didn’t have [disposable diapers] like you do today. You had to take and wash all that. So I was washin’ those diapers one day, and my husband—[looking at my kids] that would be your great-grandfather—he says, “Let me help you.” So he started to wash those clothes. He was going back and forth and back and forth, and he says, “Boy. Enough of this! I am going to go up and buy a washing machine!” So that’s how I got a washing machine. He got a taste of how it was bad to do that washing.

Although my grandfather has been dead for many years and, as I recall, he and my grandma were not a particularly affectionate couple, I think this vignette says a lot about each of them and their relationship. Here GG characterizes her husband as a caring man who offered to help with a distasteful chore, while characterizing herself as a woman whose hard work is unexpectedly made visible and respectable.

A parallel vignette came up later in the interview when we asked GG about what it was like



to live through World War II. She recounted the experience of working the night shift with other women in a shop where airplane gyroscopes were being manufactured.

It was a wonderful paying job so what did we do, us girls, we worked like the dickens! We worked polishing those things taking burrs off and everything. And the next day when they inspected what we had done, oh my goodness! We spoiled the job for those poor men (who worked the day shift). I imagine they were expected to do what we done. The boss figured, "Well, if girls can do that much, why can't you men do that much?"

Here again, GG represents herself as a woman whose willingness to work hard without complaining is unexpectedly brought to light. Throughout the interview, GG linked our questions with her own usable past to construct an image of herself as a humble person who is yet worthy of respect.

Another aspect of GG's vignettes was the way she conjured voices from the past, sometimes making us feel as though there were five generations present in the room. Speaking with pride about her own father, a "railroad man," who became a "naturalized citizen" after learning to read and write in night school, GG recounted this memory of growing up:

I can remember my father always had a big garden and he grew vegetables for us. Every once in a while he'd say, "Now girls, today you go out and pick the potato bugs." We'd look at each other and say, "Oh no, not again!" When us girls would get so disgusted to go pick the garden with bugs, my father would say, "Oh, so you don't like to pick the bugs, but you want to eat the vegetables?" That's what we used to do.

It was as if we were hearing his voice, a person none of us had ever met and about whom I knew almost nothing until that day. In a similar fashion, my grandfather came alive for my children through a story about his love for ice cream, and his mother, "Grandma Faust," who we learned helped the family survive the Great Depression,

seemed so much more real to us after we heard a story about Cracker Jack (a snack food).

Every time we went up to Grandma's house, them boys, the first thing, they went right into the pantry right in the corner, there was a big can there. There were the Cracker Jacks. And I can remember one time I went up there and, uh, Grandma wasn't home. Anyway, I went up there after that, and she says, "Why didn't you let those boys come in and get their Cracker Jacks?" She was so disgusted to think that I didn't let them boys get their Cracker Jacks!

This vignette prompted a lengthy digression on the subject of Cracker Jack. How strange and wonderful that such a simple thing could become a thread connecting five generations of a family. It was as if the past and present had become folded together for a time in which we all were able to see one another and ourselves in a different light.

As the interview progressed, it gradually dawned on us all that something important was happening, something we would remember for a long time. As Hilts (1995) explained, memory cuts both ways "making us fore and aft" (p. 15). Attending to the stories we tell about our past causes us to reconstruct that past, an endeavor that has the potential to open up new avenues to the future. Even as (with GG's help) we gathered memories from a distant and departed past, each of us became engaged in the process of building a new memory, one that would change us, perhaps in ways that have yet to be actualized in our lives. We—my wife and I, our children, my parents—found ourselves connecting with one another over our common fascination with GG's recollections. Her stories brought to life new possibilities for imagining our shared past. They also cradled new possibilities for our future as an extended family. Our lives might unfold differently as a result of what we were learning, not only about GG but also about one another through this event.

After hearing about some of GG's more recent memories (that included some funny stories about my dad) our follow-up interview session circled back to images from her childhood in

Conway, Massachusetts, and we ended with her recollections of Christmas circa 1920. I don't recall which one of us came up with the idea of taking a drive to visit some of the places mentioned in GG's stories, but, once made, the suggestion was greeted with enthusiasm all around. We piled into our rental car and set off with GG as our guide. We paused by the now abandoned one-room schoolhouse where GG attended classes as a little girl and discovered that it actually was a mile from the site of the farm where she used to live. The farm itself no longer exists except in memory, but we drove over a nearby bridge that is well over 100 years old and is the same one GG and her siblings used to play on and under so long ago. We stood on the spot where GG's dad would catch a train each day for work and where, once a month, her mom would step off a trolley with bags of groceries purchased in the town 10 miles away. Throughout this excursion, GG was alert and seemed almost magisterial as she used her cane to point out all the places that sparked memories of her youth and of people long since departed.

The energy in that car was extraordinary. GG was no longer merely responding to our questions but had begun to prompt herself as one memory flowed into another almost without pause. We drove by a house that was the first in the county to have a flush toilet and heard a funny story about how kids for miles around would dream up excuses to give it a try. As we drove along, the countryside around us came alive in little stories about ordinary, quirky, and hard-working people, most of them immigrants making a new and uncertain life for themselves in a strange land. Looking back I would say that GG was performing in a way that was certainly not customary for her and that what she was doing exemplifies what Hillman (1999) called "life review" as "a work of recovery not from the past but of the past, a work of research" (p. 85). My children were obviously fascinated, and I know I was. Even my parents evinced an unusual degree of engagement. All of us were learning and becoming connected with a past that was for the most part becoming palpable to us for the first

time in such a way that the present moment seemed weighty with possibility.

That car ride was a moment of great complexity in all our lives. We each in our own way became intensely aware of the passage of time and, thus, of our own mortality. (This observation applies, as we later learned, even for Taylor, my 6-year-old daughter, who asked many questions about aging and dying during the weeks following this event.) Among the various effects of this moment was the disruption of the logical boundaries separating past, present, and future. GG's stories created a web of connectedness, making visible the degree to which her own subjectivity is, in Bruner's (1990) words, "distributed" in the sense that "the self can be seen as a product of the situations in which it operates" (p. 109). Each of us riding with GG that day had a similar experience as our own subjectivities were folded together with her life history to constitute a kind of inheritance that with time may come to seem more significant than other more material forms of inheritance. Our gift of listening made possible her gift of a part of ourselves that did not exist until that day.

If it is true that in a very real sense we are what we remember, then any attempt on my part to offer a final judgment on the family literacy event described in this article would be inappropriate. And if memory is a kind of inheritance we pass on to ourselves and others over time, then there is no telling how our lives may have been changed by the experience we shared on those two sunny days in May 2001. Nonetheless, I can point to several traces of that event that provide some indication of its lasting promise for our future as an extended family.

My mom and dad, both in their 70s, used the event as a springboard for connecting with their own "life review" process, and we have already talked about staging a follow-up event in which they would be the focus of an interview about their life and times. In conversations since the event in question, they both have spoken about the importance of identifying "peak experiences"—those defining moments in one's life that, according to

Hillman (1999), make visible the ever-evolving force of character in our lives. “Character consolidates by commemorating moments of value in oneself.... Old age gives time to commemorate our achievements, and also our inheritance” (p. 86). Hillman conceived of inheritance in psychological rather than material terms as a construct rather than a fixed reality. “When we are recollecting, we are always imagining” (p. 89). The work of memory provides an opportunity to shape our identity according to what we hope for ourselves, and the resulting configuration of memory and desire reveals the character each of us is in the process of becoming. The work of memory is ghostlike, providing images that return to help us discern not only what we are but what we might be.

Other evidence from our interview with GG arose when my 13-year-old daughter wrote an essay for school describing the event from her perspective. It turns out that she and her grandfather (my dad) both found themselves reflecting on the role of technology in their lives. GG had inspired them to ponder and weigh the positive and the negative effects of technology from their very different perspectives, one contemplating a life that will be lived almost entirely in the 21st century and the other looking back on the many changes wrought during the past 50 years or so. I’ve already alluded to my own newly discovered interest in the phenomenon of memory as well as my younger daughter’s questions about aging and dying, which prompted some fascinating and important bedtime conversations during the weeks following our trip to New Hampshire. I do not foresee an end to these emerging connections. Our interview project has energized me in ways I want to explore with the teachers and teacher candidates I encounter in my work.

## Implications for teaching and learning

Hilts’s (1995) reference to memory as ghostlike is clearly not meant to conjure frightening images of occult happenings any more than Derrida’s (1994)

use of the terms *spectre* and *spectral* is connected with a taste for horror. Both men are attempting to stretch language to make it accountable for experiences that elude more commonplace expressions. In this respect, their work aligns with Sumara’s (2000) provocative argument that it is time for “new commitments and practices” based on more complex notions of “mind, selfhood, intelligence, and practices of reading” (p. 267). Rejecting simplistic binary thinking rooted in commonplace Cartesian oppositions dividing, for example, mind and body, self and world, and present and past, he cites “complexity theory,” which “questions and offers an alternative to the notion that objects and events can best be understood by reducing them to fundamental components and/or laws” (p. 268). Sumara goes on to make a strong case for the idea that “knowledge is not hiding in the bushes waiting to be discovered. It is continually invented” (p. 269). Like GG’s life, and most lives for that matter, the interview project we conducted was not marked by anything of extraordinary significance except in the sense that life itself is an extraordinarily complex and inventive affair, especially when it comes to talking about memories.

The notion that memory can be an engaging topic for conversation and writing is not a new one for most teachers. In fact, ideas for bridging the gap between school and family literacy through projects similar to the one described in this article abound in the professional literature, but none that I know of connect this concept with recent research on memory in quite the same way. Once this connection is made, however, a number of other ideas worth investigating become possible. For example, as students begin to conceive of their own life history as a composition through memory that is subject to constant revision, it is possible to imagine a process approach to reading and writing that makes more sense to them. Activities that require students to pay attention to and craft their own memories can be directed toward helping them become more thoughtful readers and writers in other contexts. Another investigation could focus on the way listening to

the memories of others exposes absences and gaps in one's own memories. Through reconstructing her own memories, my grandmother prompted other family members to reconstruct aspects of their past, which is arguably an important form of critical thinking. My point here is that memory work can be more than a "hook" or "springboard" for teaching academic knowledge and skills. Memory work forges powerful links between literacy and self-formation that result in potentially transformative events.

Interview projects like the one I describe in this article call for an integrated approach to the language arts (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), one that provides a meaningful context for students to practice important skills. Beyond this, however, lies the potential to make a lasting difference in students' lives. One of my motives for describing this particular project in detail has been to make it accessible for teachers who may wish to try something similar with their students. I would also encourage teachers to experiment with other ways of realizing the creative potential heralded by the work of memory. In fact, the idea to have my children interview their great-grandmother stemmed from other related projects I have used in my own classroom practice over the years.

A reviewer of this article mentioned The Pennsylvania Oral History Project, "a highly successful project that bridges the generational gaps within local communities." This project sponsors activities that are currently available on diskettes distributed free of charge by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and are soon to be available electronically on the Web. About this exciting initiative, I would say what I have been saying lately about my own classroom practice, namely that it all takes on new meaning in light of the recent discoveries I have described regarding the nature of human memory.

One of the limitations of the literacy event in this article is its focus on one person. The multiple perspectives engendered by the interview with GG for the most part remain implicit. Thus, I conclude by mentioning four alternative assign-

ments, each of which emphasizes multiple perspectives while connecting memory work with purposeful learning that bridges family and school contexts.

### ***Individual history: Multiple perspectives***

For this assignment students interview one another about past experiences that have made a difference in their lives (e.g., defining moments in relationships with friends and family members, outstanding accomplishments, moments of excitement or danger). Just as I did with my children, it is always a good idea to have students develop a list of interview questions in advance. Tape recording the interviews is also a good idea, though in most cases it should not be necessary for students to get involved in transcribing the tapes. These interviews could be developed in a number of directions, focusing for example on why certain memories keep coming back. Students gain firsthand knowledge of how different people make sense of past experiences that are otherwise quite similar. In addition, one student's reaction to another's account of past events has the potential to open up an alternative take on that individual's sense of his or her own past. Through sharing memories, students learn how one's personal past can become more complex in the process of representing it for others.

### ***Family history: Multiple perspectives***

For this assignment, students interview family members together or separately to gather their impressions of a past event such as moving to a new neighborhood or taking a trip together. In addition to whatever insights students gain about how people in general perceive shared experiences differently, this assignment has the potential to alter the conversational space existing between family members. Of course, teachers need to respect the fact that some (and perhaps many) of their students experience less-than-ideal relationships with their parents and siblings. A



brief conference or a written prospectus turned in beforehand could help students avoid potentially divisive topics and identify those promising at least the potential for a productive interview.

### ***National or world history: Multiple perspectives***

For this assignment students interview older relatives (or other members of their community) about their memories of historical events. Although the interview with my grandmother focused mostly on her personal memories, her story about working in a factory during World War II provided my daughters with a glimpse of what it was like for women during that crucial time in U.S. history. Had my girls been a little older, that would have been a very interesting topic to pursue with them. Years ago, I had a student from Japan in one of my classes who, as a result of this activity, became interested in the contrasting perceptions of the bombing of Hiroshima that appear in U.S. and Japanese textbooks. His project became a catalyst for other students who had never thought to question what they were being taught in history classes.

### ***Literary reading: Multiple perspectives***

For this assignment, which I call a “two-level response,” students select a book they have read (or was read to them) at least one year earlier, describe what they remember about it, and then reread the book comparing their present and past experiences. Most find this a truly eye-opening experience because they have not learned to appreciate the fact that the same book might mean very different things to them at different points in

their lives. In a similar vein, I have found it a useful exercise to have students interview one another about what they remember most about a shared text. This leads to important conversations about how people can have very different experiences with the same book.

These and similar activities help students begin to understand that memory is generative and not merely reflective of the past and that, as such, it is profoundly connected with their own task of self-formation. The personal narrative is a staple in U.S. classrooms, but this assignment becomes so much more engaging and significant when connected with an understanding that “life review is nothing other than rewriting—or writing for the first time—the story of your life, or writing your life into stories” (Hillman, 1999, p. 91). What greater inheritance can we offer our children than to help them sustain, through their own work of memory, the force of character building begun in generations past and carried on in our own lives as parents and teachers?

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