

The Duality of Memory

By Mary Meacham

The poet Mary Oliver writes of memory: “Some memories I would give anything to forget. Others I would not give up upon the point of death, they are the bright hawks of my life” (Oliver 44). Oliver captures here the duality of memory. We desperately hold onto positive recollections, believing they give our lives meaning, even as we look to forget the dark moments of trauma and pain. Memories are innately personal, yet shared experiences shape us equally. Just like individual memory, collective recollections of joy or triumph give our communal life meaning, while traumatic experiences demand that we choose between forgetting or commemorating. Memory both plagues and builds our communities: we mourn some memories of our past and honor the experiences that have brought us to the present. The title of our course, “Being Human, Encountering Others,” speaks to this dual nature of memory, as our ability to know ourselves and to know others is made possible by both the individual and the communal experience. Memory impacts every aspect of life: our sense of self, our knowledge of suffering (our own and the suffering of others), the search for meaning, and the formation of community. The study of memory has long fascinated psychologists, historians, doctors, and philosophers, all of whom work to uncover the meaning behind the act of

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remembering. In reflecting on what it means to be human, we cannot ignore the vital role that memory plays in shaping the self and defining humans' collective life.

Individual and social memory are the two basic subsets of the study of memory. Professor Benjamin Fishkin, Professor of English at Tuskegee University, and his coauthors explain that individual memory can be divided into three categories: the personal, the cognitive, and the habitual. Personal memory is defined as the narrative of internal life or our life histories, cognitive memory is the basic memory of knowledge and fact, and habitual memory is the memory of how to act, to read, walk, or breathe. Social memory, on the other hand, is the act of remembering – mediated through community, whether it be religious, familial, class, or any other form of kinship. “Group” is defined by Maurice Halbwachs, the French philosopher who coined the idea of collective memory, as “an abstract idea for characterizing persons with convergent interests, opinions, social representations, and remembrances” (Cordeiro 765). These two forms of memory are intimately connected. Social memory impacts the formation of the individual, while individual memory defines our understanding of the shared experiences of our community. Halbwachs says that “the ‘individual memory’ is shaped by the ‘collective memory,’ and the ‘collective memory’ is composed of ‘individual memory,’” (Cordeiro). Remembering is a constant cycle that shifts between individual and social memories, as humans cannot exist without the two coexisting, collaborating, and perhaps even competing within our minds.

The promise of individual memory lies in its ability to connect who we were with who we are becoming. The individual memory is a continuous cycle of remembering and re-remembering the self, marrying the past self with the

present. Before we become members of a community – of Halbwachs’ “group” – we are first solitary beings with the capacity to interpret our experience in singular ways. Individual memories are sources of comfort, beauty, the “bright hawks of my life” that Oliver exalts in her poems (Oliver 44). Psychologists argue that the memory of positive early experiences can promote future well-being and mental health (Ramirez). The brightest memories of my own childhood – lemonade stands on a summer day, pushing my sister on the swings, following my older brother around to just about anywhere – often resurface. They allow me to return to the simple, the bright, as life around me continues to become more intense. By keeping a connection to who I was in my most innocent state, I am reminded of the safe place to which my memory allows me to return as I encounter the storms of adulthood. Memories of failure, parental censure, and struggle also allow me to forge my own sense of perseverance, morality, and grit. Our pasts are the key to who we are, as each experience shifts our perspective and understanding of life. As Professor Nicola King of Edinburg University writes of individual memory in connection to narrative power writing, “‘Remembering the self’ is not a case of restoring an original identity, but a continuous process of ‘re-membling,’ of putting together moment by moment, of provisional and partial reconstruction” (King 175). Here, King suggests that memory is the very act of putting together physical ‘members’ – legs and arms, pieces of a body – in order to reconstruct the past and define who we are in the present. The construction of the self requires knowledge of the past, as we use our memories to create who we are becoming. The exploration of the self, or the ‘I,’ is a centuries-old discussion. John Locke wrote of the understanding of the self: “We must here take notice what the

word I is applied to" (qtd. in King 3). As Locke argues, the "I" of our childhood is not the same as the "I" of adulthood, for our memories have given new meaning and depth to our understanding of ourselves. Our happiest memories are guides to who we wish to be at our best. I want to keep the wonder I felt in childhood: I will continue to lead my sister, to follow my brother. Maybe I *will* stop at every lemonade stand I see on the side of the road. My memories remind me of who I was and teach me who I want to become.

To take a line from Mary Oliver once again, memory is not always bright: "Memory, a golden bowl or a basement without light" (Oliver 44). It is clear that literature, poetry, and art all gather inspiration from the dual nature of memory, as artists of all mediums study the breadth of emotions they raise. Our identities are shaped and shifted by memories of trauma, the "dark basements" we wish we could forget. But the darkness of the past lodges within us next to the brightness. Personal trauma changes the trajectory of our lives in countless forms, some more damaging than others. As Locke's "I" shifts from innocent to mature, from unknowing to knowing, from naive to experienced, memories of trauma may play new roles. Trauma directly affects human memory, often resulting in the repression of the memories that negatively affect our psyches. Sigmund Freud famously studied the impact of trauma on our memories. Through his study of repression Freud discovered that "In response to conflict or trauma we have split certain memories away from consciousness, thereby giving them the power to make us ill" (Hodgkin 103). As Freud posits, we often block traumatic memories, and negative memories in general, from our minds as a way to protect ourselves from the pain the memories cause. However, such memories cannot be overlooked for long without severe damage to human mental

health. In a study of Holocaust victims, Claudia Welz, a professor of ethics and philosophy at the University of Aarhus, discusses the gravity of confronting memories of trauma. She writes, “The testimonial process in the presence of a listener who accompanies the survivors on their journey into the past not only takes them back to the pain, horror, and sadness that is associated with that past; rather, it also engages them ‘in claiming a story of their own which holds together the fragments of their memory’” (Welz 116). Reclaiming and discussing memories of trauma is the path to peace of mind, for recognizing traumatic memories allows for victims to piece together their pain. While forgetting and repressing memories of trauma is the brain’s protective natural response, the only way to heal from the pain of the past is to directly confront the horrors one has faced. The practice of therapy is an attempt to bring the individual memories of trauma to the surface, offering them to someone else in an attempt to find a community in suffering.

Shared individual narratives are critical to the formation of a community. A community is strengthened by shared memories, traditions, and practices. It finds unification through communal memories, no matter how heterogeneous the members. Archivist Terry Cook describes group memory, writing, “As influences of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation make their varying impacts felt, related groups in society shape their identities anew, seeking in the memory of past triumphs or abuses, traumas or achievements, very powerful ammunition to justify and strengthen their identity formulation, and re-formulation, to serve the needs of the present” (Cook 96). Just as individual memory is vital to the unification of past and present selves, social memory is integral to the understanding of community. Shared histories bring

groups together, creating the common ground necessary to forge powerful bonds. It is through memory that tradition is born, and traditions form the bedrock of a strong community. Jan Assmann quotes Aleida Assmann, his spouse and expert in cultural memory, in his renowned study of cultural memory saying, “Tradition can be understood as a special case of communication in which information is not exchanged reciprocally and horizontally, but is transmitted vertically through the generations” (qtd. in Assmann 8). The sharing of memories, traditions, and beliefs helps to form a social understanding and collective identity. The practices and products of a culture are concrete examples of memories being passed among people and generations. Stories passed on to posterity create a link between those in the past and those in the present – the very goal of sharing memories. Shifting individual memory into social memory allows for memorials and remembrance, helping individuals to live on in others’ minds. Poet Antonio Porchia writes in his collection *Voices*, “One lives in the hope of becoming a memory” (Porchia 6). The existence of memory means individuals can never be fully forgotten, just re-remembered and their survival prolonged through stories and histories. Memory grants us the ability to live on in others’ thoughts and remembrances.

However, in our world, not only the positive memories can live on. In the case of social memory, the failures of societies and groups plagues communities. The actions of societies against other humans – war, genocide, and terrorism – have harmed the collective memory of full communities. Across the world, the Holocaust is remembered and memorialized in order to show respect for and collectively mourn the six million Jews exterminated by Hitler. This collective act of memory is perhaps most powerful in Germany,

where politicians, writers, and activists believe the commemoration of the suffering of the Holocaust is a means of preventing it from happening again. As George Santayana, the 20th century philosopher said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” The study of history itself is an attempt to harness collective memory, to both learn from and repent for the mistakes of the past. Social memory results in a cultural responsibility to honor those traumatized. Jan Assman writes of the Holocaust, saying, “It is incumbent on us, therefore, to incorporate the suffering we have caused into the collective political bonding memory of Germany, and that can only be done in the form of public pronouncements and recognition” (Assmann 22). The responsibility to honor and continually mourn those lost in the Holocaust remains prevalent in all aspects of German society. The majority of modern civic sites are “memorials” to people and events that deserve recognition in our collective memory. While we will never be fully free from pain, we can memorialize the trauma in order to be aware of and guard against it. The remembrance of trauma and cultural failures is vital in the process of remembering. Without memory and respect for the terrors of our past, we cannot learn and move into a future of lesser evil.

Memory shapes who we are, what we know, and what we believe. It is the fascination of both doctors and poets, psychologists and artists. Memory is what makes us human and shapes how we encounter others, and the synthesis of individual and collective memories allows for humans to find their personal identities and their place in communities. As we continually reconstruct ourselves, memory is the key to connecting the past and the present. Memory exists in duality. Some memories are so dark that our minds work to repress and cover them up, despite acceptance of the dark being the path to

light. Other memories exist in a palace in our minds, and we return to them throughout life as a source of comfort and solace. Our personal memories shape who we are, creating internal narratives that are constantly writing the history of our lives. As our individual memories shape our collective identities, we strengthen our communities through social memory. Members of a community must wrestle with their shared memories, looking to heal from and memorialize the bad and to celebrate and recognize the good. Memory is not simply a record of the human experience—it is the human experience.



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