



The Moral Power of Memories

Clay Nelson © 6th October 2019

I'm not sure why but I'm finding that with age I am spending more time in my long-term memory vault. The trade-off is I can't remember why I went to the kitchen or where I left my keys. I think this is due in part because the memory vault is full to bursting and almost anything my five senses encounter brings back a host of memories. For instance, I find colour to be a highly effective trigger for memories.

Institutional light green is one that brings back less than positive memories. It was the colour of choice in schools and hospitals, at least in America. Because we moved a lot when I was a kid, I associate it with the first day of attending a new school, which I always found intimidating.

Other colours evoke more positive memories. Ruby red and bright yellow remind me of one my earliest movie experiences. I was five when my parents took me to see the *Wizard of Oz*. I found the black and white beginning with a nasty woman who took Toto away on her bicycle and the coming of a tornado a little frightening, but then the movie went from black and white to dazzling colour. I suspect my eyes got big as saucers. I still remember being mesmerised by the yellow brick road and the sparkle of those ruby red slippers.

I wouldn't have another such reaction until I saw my first colour TV programme at my aunt's house. She could afford to give her family the very expensive set as a Christmas present. I was eleven and the show was *Bonanza*. It evokes other memories. I can remember everyone who was there to see this technological wonder, even where they were sitting in the room. The only negative memory is my aunt serving us a special dessert called a snowball, ice cream laced through with coconut. As a child I detested coconut and I'm still not fond of it, but I was brought up to be polite so I choked down most of it until my mother rescued me with some excuse, sparing me from having to finish it.

Take a moment and try to remember when you first noticed and were moved in some way by a colour or colours.

One colourful childhood thing for us who grew up in America that hasn't changed is the big 64-piece box of Crayola crayons. I loved the tiered box with row after endless row of colourful choices my grandfather would send me every birthday. It was an adventure to turn each crayon sideways and read the name of some of the more exotic colours....puce, cinnamon, aqua, vermillion! Rachel tells me that Kiwi kids were deprived of such colourful richness. It's a shame you can't pick up a box this afternoon and see what memories might be released.

Memories are important pieces of the puzzle of figuring out who we are ...

and how we are to live. Memories can remind us of what we love (like crayons or clouds). And, as we remember, we create and re-create ourselves anew. Even our vision of the future is anchored in the stories and images and, perhaps, colours that we remember.

Marcel Proust wrote that memory comes as a rope let down from heaven to draw one out of the abyss of non-being.

The problem is that rope can be frayed. When gathered with family it is not uncommon to reminisce. It can be disconcerting to discover our memory of shared events differs from those of our siblings, children or parents. I have had the experience of having no memory at all of events they remember even though they assure me I was there. Try as I might I have not been able to dredge them up. Then there are memories that turn out to be false. Then the question becomes, whose memory has rewritten history? It turns out that memories can be suppressed by shame, embarrassment and pain. If memories don't validate who we would like to think we are today they become inconvenient. Best to leave them in a dusty back corner of our memory vault.

The problem is they are still a part of us. Suppressing or denying or cleaning them up to be suitable for company only deprives us of becoming all we are capable of being.

The rope drawing us up out of nonbeing can be strengthened only by honouring all of our memories. Robert Frost once wrote a poem about the sale of his farm after his wife had died. He apparently wasn't pleased with it as he did not include it in his collected works. It wasn't published until after his death. It tells of returning to the farm years later to honour his wife's wishes that her ashes be scattered by a creek that ran through it. When he went back to the farm it had become a neglected, dilapidated eyesore and the owners told him he was trespassing. It is the last lines of the poem I find poignant:

*It shall be no trespassing
If I come again some spring*

*In the grey disguise of years,
Seeking ache of memory here.*

Having lived all over the US I have lived in many homes from trailers to married student housing to apartments to houses. On journeys of self-discovery I have sought the ache of memory by visiting some of those that hold strong memories for me. Some are gone all together. Some have not aged well. Some like my grandparent's home in San Francisco are repositories of who I was from six weeks to when my grandmother died when I was in my early forties. When I visit San Francisco, I go park across the street from the house and let the tears flow. I have never sought to trespass by asking the family that lives there if I can come in. I want to remember it the way it was.

Why seek out this "ache of memory"? I suppose to check to see how my interior memory matches present reality. I suppose to recollect myself, to learn again, and for the first time, who I am. TS Eliot's familiar words from "Little Gidding" capture what I mean:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

And it's always the first time ... because each time when we circle around and return, it's a different place. We are different; our experience is different.

Or, again, perhaps we seek out "ache of memory" because memory is crucial to our humanity.

For most species, memory is ground in to the very cells of their bodies, into their DNA ... and so, too, for us. But for us humans, there is a greater flexibility with regard to memory, so that, as with so many aspects of our species, memory is something we must *cultivate* — it's not just given, but it's something we give ourselves to.

And so it is that we take notes, take pictures, write journals, put up plaques and monuments, create cemeteries. Archeologists, for example, are able to identify our species — *homo sapiens sapiens* — by the fact that we are the species who create burial sites; we are those creatures who mark a place by which to remember those whom we have loved and lost.

Part of the ache of memory is the ache of being cut off from something that was once precious to us. The poet Robinson Jeffers,

for example, imagines himself — or his ghost — returning to the house that he built.

Robinson Jeffers had built a house, adjoining buildings, and a tower out of sea-rock that he had pulled up from the coast in Carmel, California. In a poem titled “Ghost,” found in his effects after his death, he had written:

*There is a juggle of masonry here, on a small hill
Above the gray-mouthed Pacific, cottages and a thick-walled tower,
all made of rough sea-rock
And Portland cement.
I imagine, fifty years from now,
A mist-gray figure moping about this place in mad moon-light,
examining the mortar-joints, pawing the
Parasite ivy: “Does the place stand? How did it take that last
earthquake?”
Then someone comes
From the house-door, taking a poodle for his bedtime walk.
The dog snarls and retreats; the man
Stands rigid, saying “Who are you? What are you doing here?”
“Nothing to hurt you,” it [the ghost] answers, “I am just looking
At the walls that I built. I see that you have played hell
With the trees I planted.” “There has to be room for people,” he
answers. “My God,” he says, “That still!”*

There’s an ache associated with returning to the places with which we are connected, and there’s an ache and a sorrow in contemplating the fact that we can never return.

With regard to that sorrow, I respectfully submit that we must allow ourselves to enter it ... to give ourselves to the “ache of memory.” I submit that to avoid the “ache of memory” is not healthy — that you will lose track of parts of yourself.

And, with regard to loved ones who have passed, if you attempt to avoid the “ache of memory” with regard to them, you will lose parts of them as well ... for after a loved one dies, you cannot remember that loved one without also remembering that that loved one is no longer physically with you. So, now, each time, at least in some degree, you have to go through the “gate of death” to meet your departed loved one on the other side.

So, there’s some advice here, namely, not to try to avoid the “ache of memory” or the “sorrow of the world.” Allow yourself to enter the “sorrow of the world” and to experience the “ache of memory.”

Seek out, as Robert Frost suggests, those places that may hold “ache of memory” for you ... for, indeed, our memories are held in

things and places ... encoded in our brains, yes ... but for the mind to retrieve those memories, it often requires a physical prod or a physical contact or if that is not possible, contemplating the colour, smell, taste, sound or feeling associated with it... so that going to the place opens and unlocks the vault of memory.