

“The Way We Were” December 9, 2007

(Rev. Martha Hodges)

This is the season of memory. As the days grow shorter and colder, we huddle closer to our virtual hearths, light our candles and Christmas trees and recall or try to re-create remembered holidays of our childhood. Or, if we were less lucky in our choice of family, to create a holiday that we never had but long for, even as adults. That perfect White Christmas of peace and goodwill, gingerbread and candy canes, sleigh bells and mistletoe... Wait a minute. Sleigh bells? In Sacramento? I doubt too many of us have gone dashing through the snow in a one-horse open sleigh

But such is the nature of nostalgia. Memory... Neuroscience tells us that memories are stored patterns of connections between neurons that make synaptic connections with other neurons. About 500 to 100 trillion synapses in the average adult brain. That's a lot of storage space. No wonder we fill it up with memories of events that never occurred and feelings that we only long for.

Every sensation we remember, every thought, every dream while we're asleep, strengthens or weakens these synapses, or forms new ones. In other words, our brains – our physical substance – changes when we think, feel, imagine, dream ... remember. In this sense, we *are* our memories.

This has been on my mind – so to speak – a lot, lately.

I recently read an article in the *New Yorker Magazine** about a man named Clive Wearing. Maybe you saw it, too. Clive was – or is – that is the question -- a musician and musicologist whose hippocampus and medial temporal lobes – the parts of the brain that encode experience and transfer it into memory – were destroyed by encephalitis. He has the most extreme case of amnesia ever recorded. Clive is unable to retain a memory for more than a few seconds. Every moment of his life, he starts anew, from scratch, with no frame of reference, no sense of continuity whatsoever, constantly surrounded by strangers in a strange place, with no knowledge of where he is or what has happened to him. So... is Clive still Clive?

His wife, Deborah, thinks so. She still loves him, is still married to him after decades of living with this affliction. Because this is the intriguing part. Clive may not remember her name or be able to describe her. He has no idea when he last saw her, whether it was a week ago or a moment ago. But he adores her – still. There are many kinds of memory, the author of this article, Dr. Oliver Sacks, tells us. And emotional memory is one of the deepest and least understood. Clive's love for his wife, Sacks writes, is so deeply engraved in the remaining areas of his brain that her appearance, her voice, her scent, the way they behave with each other, and the intensity of their emotions and interactions confirm to him her identity, and, therefore, his own.

Another part of Clive's identity that survives his illness is his musicality. Asked if he can play the piano, Clive wouldn't be able to tell you, and yet, when given a piece of music, he plays with enormous skill and sensitivity, even if the piece is new to him in

reality as well as in his mind. Like his relationship with Deborah, his musical talent and training exist in a part of the brain unaffected by his illness. Although he doesn't "remember" a piece of music in the sense that we might, although he couldn't tell you its name to save his life, he is able to play it, with style, intelligence and feeling, because he can still access procedural or unconscious memory. To quote Dr. Sacks, "Clive's performance self seems, to those who know him, just as vivid and complete as it was before his illness. This mode of being, this self, is seemingly untouched by his amnesia, even though his autobiographical self, the self that depends on explicit, episodic memory is, is virtually lost."

A friend of mine was married to someone with advanced senile dementia. Like Clive, Ralph retained an impressive vocabulary, could sing old songs and had an engaging, if superficial, personality. In fact, in his illness, he was a much nicer man than he had been when he was well. He could not remember my friend's name; he wasn't sure what their relationship was, but he knew that there was one. He knew that she was someone to him, and he to her. He was glad to see her when she came to visit him.

But his continued existence was a torment to my friend. She frequently wondered aloud if, without memory, we are really human. Having cared for a mother with dementia, I found this question very distressing. And I've thought about it a lot over the years. Human... yes, certainly. But does the person without memory have a real personality? A self? A soul?

These three questions are not simply different ways of asking the same thing. Personality is defined as "the totality of a person's qualities and traits, character and behavior, that are peculiar to an individual." A person's personality changes, evolves. It is one way of being who we are. Parts of my mother's personality remained, if not exactly intact, then at least present in recognizable flashes. In fact, some aspects of her personality seemed to disappear, while others became exaggerated. In some ways, it seemed to me, she was never more herself. In other ways, completely not herself.

And what about the "self?" The self is "the total, essential or particular essence of a person," as perceived and understood by that person. It is "the individual's consciousness of his own being or identity." The key word here is "consciousness." In order to have a self, we must be self-aware. An animal has a self, then. My cat, for example, certainly understands that she is she – not I, not a bird or a dog, not some other cat. In this sense, my mother, my friend's husband, or Clive Wearing all have a self. But in humans, we expect to find a different order of consciousness, or self-consciousness. We expect to find not just an awareness of oneself as a being separate from the rest of reality, but a sense of identity. A sense of what, *beyond* the boundaries of our body, distinguishes us from the rest of the world.

Does someone without memory have a self? I think yes, although her sense of self is clearly not our sense of her self. It's a self that is minimal, confused, blurry. But a self can feel emotion. Clive, Ralph, my mother, clearly felt things, often quite intensely.

Could they understand those emotions? Examine them, think about them? No. Their self existed, though it was an impaired self, diminished.

And what about a soul? If we understand the soul as that animating force or principle that distinguishes the quick from the dead, then, of course. As long as we have breath or brain waves, we have a soul, and quite possibly, after that as well. But what if, by soul, we mean “a person’s emotional or moral nature.” The part of us that is capable of transcendent experience, of relationship, of creative impulse, play, devotion, the part that appreciates beauty, that has a sense of the sacred? Is this part of us dependent on memory? The soul is nourished by memory. And memory is nourished by the soul. But are they necessary to each other?

It’s no coincidence that these holidays, these holy days, are made of memory and soul. Not personality. Not self, although heaven knows that these are thrown into sharp relief at these times of family gatherings, with their inherent stress and complex connections, loves and disappointments. But the soul -- our love for what we hold to be of ultimate value -- the soul beckons us, invites us in during this season, if we pay attention. And memories, real or imagined, literal or heavily edited by need and emotion – memory is one key that unlocks the door to the soul. And soul – that longing for the ineffable, that yearning for meaning – soul opens wide to memory.

Personality changes, depending on circumstances, surroundings, relationships, experience. Self alters with age and infirmity, tragedy and triumph. The soul... the soul is the constant, the through-line. It is the soul in Clive that loves his wife. Soul is what Clive expresses when he plays the piano. Our brains change by the second, the millisecond, as thoughts and sensory impressions speed through our synapses.

Yet something remains. Something that is deeper than patterns of behavior or character traits. Something that gives us life, that persists until the end and perhaps beyond. We access it through music, through emotion, through other people, through our deepest longings and through memory. It is there, waiting to be recognized and welcomed. It is the holy that dwells within us.

To Clive, to all of you, I wish a soulful Hanukkah, a soulful Solstice, a soulful Christmas.

* “The Abyss” by Oliver Sacks, The New Yorker, Sept 24, 2007, pp 100-111