Autobiographical Memory and Vocations of Learning

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Abstract: This paper addresses these questions: *What can be derived from current theories of autobiographical memory for understanding how individuals understand and represent their aspirations, activities, and achievements in adult learning? And, How does recent autobiography represent the role of memory in learning across the life cycle?* The opening section introduces current ideas about memory, in particular how we recall the personal past. The second part of the paper explores three "vocations" in learning that depend on autobiographical memory. By vocation I mean more than simply a form of work or profession, but a conviction of fitness or suitability for a particular career, and what it requires of learning in adulthood.

Memory: Archive and Myth

Recent and authoritative studies in adult developmental and cognitive psychology concur regarding the decline in influence of the mental model of information processing. Leading theorists now believe in the "constructive" dimension of memory and they favor the significance of human agency, will, and narrative in shaping recall of the past (Engel, 1999; Kotre, 1996; Schacter, 1996). Thus, accounts of individual lives have new roles in the study of the meanings of experience. "Psychologists have come to recognize that the complex mixtures of personal knowledge that we retain about the past are woven together to form life stories and personal myths. These are the biographies of the self that provide narrative continuity between past and present--a set of memories that form the core of personal identity" (Schacter, 1996, p. 93).

Even so, there are important theoretical differences with regard to the relations between neurobiological or cognitive accounts of memory, focusing on how the mind works, and those that look to culture and language as primary resources. Proponents of the latter believe in the need for attention to the settings for memory over the life cycle---or, as Susan Engel (1999) says, "context is everything."

All theories of memory take learning in adulthood as a primary theme, though vocabularies can vary with regard to relations between experience and knowledge, and thus the nature of change in behavior or perspective (a commonly used definition, of course, of adult learning). For example, John Kotre proposes that memory is shaped by opposing elements. It acts like an "archivist" in preserving records that are as accurate as possible. "The keeper of archives represents the conscience of memory, doing what memory is supposed to do, and trying to do it perfectly." Set against this function of memory is the instinct to make from memory a story of a

certain kind, or a comprehensive "personal myth." It speaks to the heart as the "archive" appeals to and represents the mind. "We think of myths as belonging to a culture, to a group of people. But there are also personal myths. When a myth is personal, it seeks to know the truth and generate conviction about the self, about who I am" (Kotre, 1995, pp. 116-117). The myth supplies desires and aspirations, including those focused on what must be learned to deepen and sustain the self as it acts in familiar and in new domains.

Remembering to Learn

Autobiographical memory expressed in personal myth supplies an essential element to a vocation of learning, a self-made narrative structure with which to reflect on its origins, meanings and consequences. In the "cases" summarized below, there are important differences in key matters of context: geographical and religious backgrounds, subjects of learning, age and gender. But all subjects remember (in order) to learn.

Second Drafts

Poet and essayist Patricia Hampl grew up in a Catholic home in the Upper Midwest. In a widely admired memoir of her formative years and early adulthood she explores how in her mid 30s she moved beyond her formal education to educate herself in her Czech past, in particular the role of history in the lives of individuals (Hampl, 1982). A second book based on autobiographical memory shows how the dynamics of adulthood prompt experiments in learning, in her case one that teaches about a unique form of mature experience and offers resources for personal change (Hampl, 1992). The goal is to discover the potential for learning in solitude.

Hampl has recently made a contribution to the theory of autobiographical memory, focusing on the interactions of recall and reflection. Making a new metaphor of the writer's habits of revision, she identifies a core activity of learning in adulthood. "If we learn not only to tell our stories but to listen to what our stories tell us--to write the first draft and then return for the second draft--we are doing the work of memory" (Hampl, 1999, p. 33). It is a commonplace in the teaching of composition that we learn how to write by revising. What do we learn in memory's revisions? In effect, Hampl redefines memory as a source and product of writing. We learn how to remember by giving the personal past form in a memoir.

Autobiography is a unique form of learning, of representing change and interpreting experience. "Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing. It can present its story and consider the meaning of the story" (p. 33). For Hampl, autobiographical memory and what is learned from experience constitute an obligation to secure continuity, and to give integrity to the self. "If we refuse to do the work of creating this personal vision of the past, someone else will do it for us" (p. 32). And as a reader of St. Augustine, the West's first autobiographer, she identifies how memory actually directs action through learning. "[He] makes the central, paradoxical discovery of autobiography: Memory is not in the service of the past: it is the future which commands its presence" (Hampl, 1999, p. 180).

Seeing Things "As We Are"

Edward Wilson grew up in a Baptist community in the deep South. He has made a vocation of entomology and advancing the role of the biological sciences in understanding the whole of the

natural world, including the varieties of human behavior and culture (Wilson, 1998). It is the desire for synthesis (or integration) that has guided Wilson's mature learning, as well as his memory and the intellectual continuity it provides. As he says in his autobiography: "Although the tributary sources extend far back in memory, they still grip my imagination. . . . I am reluctant to throw away these precious images of my childhood and young manhood. I guard them carefully as the wellsprings of my creative life, refining and overlaying their productions constantly " (Wilson, 1994, p. 19).

Wilson ponders the basic structure of knowledge in an effort to identify the highest of educational motives. In an image reminiscent of his decades of field work in remote places, he says: "To the extent that the gaps between the great branches of learning can be narrowed, diversity and depth of knowledge will increase. . . . The enterprise is important for yet another reason: It gives ultimate purpose to intellect. It promises that order, not chaos, lies beyond the horizon. I think it inevitable that we will accept the adventure, go there, and find out" (Wilson, 1998, p. 4). Learning in science is perhaps an unexpected domain for the uses of autobiographical memory but Wilson insists on making his past part of his empirical and theoretical inquiries.

"Come back with me now to October 1935. . . ." is the way a crucial chapter in Wilson's autobiography opens. Further along Wilson meditates on memory as a biologist and autobiographer.

> The human mind moving in a sea of detail is compelled like a questing animal to orient by a relatively few decisive configurations. There are an optimum number of such signals. Too few, and the person becomes compulsive-obsessive; too many, and he turns schizophrenic. Configurations with the greatest emotional impact are stored first and persist longer. Those that give the greatest pleasure are sought on later occasions. The process is strongest in children, and to some extent it programs the trajectory of their lives. Eventually they will weave the decisive images into a narrative by which they explain to themselves and others the meaning of what has happened to them. As the Talmud says, we see things not as they are, but as we are. (Wilson, 1994, p. 51)

Wilson's insistence on the priority of the observer's perspective is surprising coming from a scientist. But it is a sign of how memory of the making of his vocation in childhood fortifies his belief in its durability.

"Permeated with Divinity"

David Weiss Halivni was born into an orthodox Jewish family in Eastern Europe. As a teenager, he was the only one in his family to survive the Holocaust, and inevitably he struggles throughout his life with its memory. Even in the concentration camps he struggled to maintain the spirit if not the actual activity of deep Jewish learning. Thus, when he observes a German guard eating a sandwich wrapped in a page (or "bletl" in Hebrew) torn from a volume of the *Jewish Code of Law*, and miraculously convinces the man to give the bit of sacred text to him to study, he identifies the episode as a sign of his vocation. After emigration to New York and many years as a professor of classical Jewish civilization, he turned to the meanings of his own

career in *The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning in the Shadow of Destruction* (1996). "My spiritual self," he says there, "is learning, learning Torah, the Bible, and the Talmud, as a highly stimulating pursuit permeated with divinity" (p. 166).

Halivni is distinctive among scholars for his determination to always stay within the boundaries of the ancient text itself, declining to explore or explain it with reference to "external" factors. Memory of his youth supplies one key to his adult temperament as a learner, and the limits he accepted to make it durable: "Study became a crutch that help me bear those adversities and, if not overcome them, at least live with them. That identity, that affinity between security and learning Talmud . . . may partially explain why I . . .remained within Jewish learning, venturing only very rarely into the non-Jewish intellectual sphere" (p. 27).

But if Halivni is conservative in this way as a scholar and learner he also relies on novelty and change. He tells this story of responding to an unsettling encounter with young students: "I did what I always do when I feel upset. I went . . . home [and] took out a Talmud, and learned. . . . To this day, when I feel downcast for no discernable reason, I will take out a Talmud and study. After I score a chiddush, an innovation, after I have discovered some new twist, I will again regain my composure" (p. 127).

Halivni leaves gaps in his autobiography because there are features of his life that are not integral to the "spiritual odyssey" deriving from his learning. "They did not contribute to my survival and were not instrumental in defining my spiritual self as did, and does, learning. It was learning that made my life as a child bearable, insulated me from what was happening in the ghetto, and reached symbolic heights with the *bletl*, the page of holy text in which the German guard wrapped his snack; and it was learning that allowed me to resume my life after the Holocaust" (p. 167). For Halivni, as is the case for most Holocaust survivors, memory is both painful and necessary. Thus, his vocation takes from his suffering the lesson of how the spirituality he pursued in learning came to provide a structure for the future even as it gave bearable meanings to the past.

Conclusion: "Second Living"

What motivates an autobiographer, and in particular one inclined to present herself or himself as certain kind of adult learner? According to Hampl, "To write one's life is to live it twice, and the second living is both spiritual and historical, for a memoir reaches deep within the personality as it seeks its narrative form and . . .. grasps the life-of-the-times as no political analysis can" (Hampl., 1999, p. 37). Autobiographical memory is for adults an indispensable resource for learning, and for reflecting on it. For scientists, scholars, and poets it is the foundation for recognition and representation of how they realized their vocations.

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