

## **The Story: Is It True? Does It Help?**

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I was invited to speak at this conference because of a book I had written on memory, and specifically on "autobiographical" memory. This is the memory in our heads, and maybe in our hearts as well, for the events of our lives. It's not, for example, the memory involved in studying for an exam, or memory for where I left my car keys, or memory for what I'm supposed to do tomorrow morning. It's memory for all that goes into an autobiography, into the story of a life.

The title of the book was *White Gloves* (Kotre, 1995), and it was translated into Portuguese and published in Brazil in 1997 (Kotre, 1997).

I became interested in autobiographical memory because I was doing what oral historians do: listening to stories and creating a written text out of what I had heard. But I wasn't an historian. I was a psychologist. I wasn't trying to understand some collective happening but rather the course of human life from beginning to end. At first I was focused on midlife and a quality the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson called "generativity" (Erikson, 1950), which is a concern for the effect one is having on future generations.

I ended up working in three media: print, audio, and video, each with its own limitations. And when all of it was over, I took a deep breath and began to wonder what I'd been doing all this time. What had I been hearing? Where were these stories, these memories coming from? Were they true? And what did the word *true* mean?

In this talk I'd like to do three things. First, I'd like to get autobiographical memory--what it is, how it works--into a nutshell. Then I'd like to ask: if this is the nature of autobiographical memory, how true are the stories we gather? Finally, I'd like to introduce the concept of "ancestral help."

## In a Nutshell

It's been interesting to see what's been made of the perspective I took in *White Gloves*. A Japanese translation was made of the book and given the title *Memory Cheats*. A German translation used the word *Strom* in its title. *Der Strom: The Stream of Memory*, or perhaps *The Current of Memory*, like the current in a river, or even an electric current. When you think of current, you also think of power. And so this title can also mean *The Power of Memory*.

So which is it? What's the story here? Is it that memory cheats? Or is it the power of memory?

*Does Memory Cheat?*

Let's start with cheating. Does memory cheat? If you're talking about accuracy in recall, yes, memory cheats. It gets things wrong. It's very easy to demonstrate that empirically. Not only does the research show that memories change over time, but that when they change, they don't tell you about it.

That last is a critical point. Some of you may recall the days of the typewriter. When you made a mistake, you swung the carriage to the side, erased the error (a few years later, you may have used a liquid white-out), and then typed over the erasure. A reader could see that a change had been made. Today, when you make a mistake on a word processor, you hit "delete" and then re-type. A reader *cannot tell* that a change has been made. Autobiographical memory is like the word processor. You think you're looking at an original record, but you are not.

"But," you say, "I can picture what happened as if it were yesterday!" It doesn't matter. Research shows clearly that the *vividness* of a memory is not a sign of its accuracy. Memories are vivid for other reasons. They may recall something unique, like a first-time experience, or something that in retrospect proves to be consequential. They may recall an emotional event or an event that connects us to history--a so-called "flashbulb" memory (Brown and Kulik, 1977). Or they may be symbols, as when a single conversation in memory sums up many actual conversations--what is known as a "repisode" (Neisser, 1981).

Nor is *certainty* a sign of accuracy. Our memories can make things up that never happened, even though we're one hundred percent sure that they did. In

the United States, this became clear in the 1990s, when an enormous controversy developed over the recovery of "repressed" memories. Some of them turned out to be unconscious fabrications, which led to the leveling years later of false accusations of abuse.

Our memories, of course, can also get things right. The point is, it's impossible to tell just by *looking* at a memory whether it's accurate or not.

A few years after *White Gloves*, a book came out in the United States called *The Seven Sins of Memory* (Schachter, 2001). The title was another way of saying that memory cheats. This approach makes you think, if only we could get memory to stop cheating, if only we could wash away its sins, then we'd really have something.

But consider the possibility that a "perfect" memory might not even work. What if you remembered every place you ever parked your car? Would you ever find it again? And consider the possibility that what autobiographical memory actually *does* is far more impressive than what it *doesn't do*: be perfect. This gets us into the *power* of memory.

### *The Power of Memory*

Let's take two middle-aged women and ask what their first memory of life is--the earliest thing they can remember. Both say it's being an infant in a baby carriage. One adds, "I'm bored and I'm restless and want to get out." The other comments, "I'm crying and crying and nobody's coming."

Whether those memories are accurate is anyone's guess. But we can still ask, what do those memories *mean*? And once you hear the whole life story, the meanings become very clear. A central theme in one life is being restless and curious and wanting to escape confinement. A central theme in the other is being alone and depressed and having no one there. You can guess which life goes with which first memory.

Think of what autobiographical memory did in each case. It surveyed an entire life; it identified a theme; it found a single incident to express that theme; and it placed that incident at the beginning of the story, where it would have the greatest impact. What more powerful image could you come up with than that of a baby crying in a carriage . . . and nobody's coming?

Memory may have "cheated" in these instances. Memory may have "sinned." Those memories may not be accurate. But they are very true--and expressed in a very powerful way.

*A Keeper of Archives, A Maker of Myth*

When I try to put autobiographical memory into a nutshell, I say things like: it's alive, it's brewing, it's not a machine, it's not a computer. Or: it's creating and re-creating, the way an artist would. Or: it's about the present more than it's about the past.

And it tries to do two things at once. Here's how I summed it up in *White Gloves* (Kotre, 1995, pp. 116-117):

The puzzling nature of autobiographical memory stems from two opposing elements in its character. On the one hand, it has the temperament of a librarian, a keeper of memory's most important archives. It can be fastidious in that role, guarding its original records and trying to keep them pristine. The keeper of archives represents the conscience of memory, doing what memory is supposed to do, and trying to do it perfectly. Memory is supposed to distinguish between what is true and what is false, between fact and fantasy. It is supposed to strive for accuracy and revise itself to conform to historical truth. Nor is this simply a matter of conscience. We humans have to stay in touch with the reality of the past in order to survive.

But memory's archivist by day has a secret passion by night: to fashion a story about itself, a story that some of us call the personal myth. A myth, in the sense that I use the term, is not a falsehood but a comprehensive view of reality, a different kind of reality than a librarian knows. A myth is a story that speaks to the heart as well as the mind, seeking to generate conviction about what it thinks is true. We think of myths 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.

That, in a nutshell, is autobiographical memory--both a keeper of archives and a maker of myth.

## Is the Story True?

If autobiographical memory has this dual nature, how are we to verify the stories we hear? The keeper of archives is interested in historical truth, and to satisfy this function we use personal documents, photographs, official records, letters, artifacts, and the like. But what about the mythmaker's truth, what might be called "narrative" truth? Here I'd like to offer some thoughts from a book of mine entitled *Outliving the Self* (Kotre, 1996).

In *Outliving the Self* I defined narrative truth as "coherence that takes on 'aesthetic finality' and fits the present character of the storyteller" (Kotre, 1996, p. 35; Spence, 1982). In this approach, when we return a completed story to its teller, we are like a therapist offering an interpretation to a client. In "testing" a story for narrative truth, we can ask three questions: (1) After reading the story, does the storyteller make allusions, direct or indirect, to being seen and understood? (2) Does the storyteller react in ways that are consistent with story motifs? (3) Does the story elicit fresh and deeper material?

### *Being Seen and Understood*

After reading her story one woman said she felt as if her "bare ass were hanging over a fence" for all to see. Another said, "It was like looking into a mirror." Both were amazed and stunned to see so much of themselves on paper, and both had a reaction shared by others: to *cover up* what was exposed. This feeling of exposure can be taken as a kind of verification. I responded to it in these two cases by going through the text and disguising identities--already fictitious--even further.

Being understood is more than being seen. It's a feeling that arises when a storyteller finds a pattern in her words, finds coherence in the written story. Reactions like "You pulled it all together" or "You really got the essence" show an appreciation of coherence. As the next examples show, a person need not *like* the story to feel that he or she has been seen inwardly. Being flattered is not the same as being understood.

### *Reactions Consistent With Story Motifs*

An overriding emotion in one story I recorded was a feeling of personal failure despite extraordinary public accomplishment. When the story was

published as a full-length biography (Kotre, 1978), the subject reacted in print (Greeley, 1979):

Am I the man portrayed in the book? Probably, and I wish I weren't. . . .

The book terrified me because I did not find the life described therein attractive, which I suppose means that I don't find the leading character all that attractive. I found myself saying, "What a wasted life, what a tragic misuse of time and energy and ability." . . . I've worked very hard over the last quarter-century, frequently to the point of exhaustion, in the production of an inordinate amount of printed pages. I see it all neatly arranged in the Kotre monograph and realize how much the effort was a waste, how worthless the product. Better never to have started.

The sense of waste was central to the story and central to the teller's reaction to the story. I took that as a verification of character, of narrative truth.

In a book called *Simple Gifts* (Kotre, 1979) I wrote about a couple who were generative in Erik Erikson's sense. They had four children, adopted a fifth, took numerous foster children and foreign students into their home, and began an international family movement--activity that on occasion forced their own children into the shadows. In the book I devoted an entire chapter to a foster child and gave far less space to the couple's own children. Seeing the manuscript, the mother objected: the picture activated a motif that had caused regret in the past. The foster child, however, was overjoyed: the manuscript gave him a place in the family for which he had always longed. The reactions of the readers, both negative and positive, were consistent with what appeared in their stories--a confirmation of narrative truth.

### *Fresh and Deeper Material*

If, after reading his or her story, a teller suddenly remembers more, or has a new insight, or feels the pressure of "all the things I didn't say," I become more confident of the basic truth of the story.

The same mother who objected to the neglect of her children in the *Simple Gifts* manuscript later produced two documents that no one outside her immediate family had ever seen. One was a meditative note her husband had scrawled on a yellow pad the evening before a surgery for cancer. The other was a letter written to her by a psychiatrist friend after her husband died. These two

privileged documents revealed the substance of her husband as no others had done. Even though the mother objected to a portion of the manuscript, the emergence of fresh material showed that she felt understood at a deeper level and that the portrait of her family was essentially true.

These three criteria for narrative truth may operate differently in the world of oral history than they do in the world of life history. But in both worlds there is always that "moment of truth" when the storyteller reacts to what you have written. If the teller makes allusions to being seen, if he acts in ways that fit patterns in the story, if he brings forth fresh material, we can be confident that the story possesses a good degree of narrative truth.

### **Ancestral Help**

Let me turn now to the question: does the story help? The subtitle of *White Gloves* was *How We Create Our Selves Through Memory*. Recently I've been thinking about how we create not just selves through memory, but ancestors, ancestors who help. Here are some examples.

#### *The Woman Warrior*

A few years ago I had the opportunity to reread a book written by a young American, Maxine Hong Kingston. It was entitled *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (Kingston, 1977). The ghosts in the subtitle were the stories Maxine's Chinese mother told her, the stories Maxine grew up on--the stories, she says, that her mother stuffed in her head like underwear in a suitcase (Kingston, 1977, p. 102).

A sentence in the book jumped out at me. Speaking of an aunt who committed suicide back in a Chinese village, Kingston wrote, "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no *ancestral help*" (Kingston, 1977, p. 10). That was the germ of the idea.

Maxine was going to tell secrets in her book--secrets on her mother, secrets on her family, secrets on her culture. So she began with the story of an aunt who got pregnant as a young teen and was relentlessly shamed by the people of her village back in China. She ended up committing suicide by drowning herself in the village well.

Maxine must have been twelve or thirteen when her mother told her this story. It was a warning. Don't *you* get pregnant! Don't *you* humiliate the family! Look what happened to your aunt!

When she began her memoir Maxine was in her late twenties, and it was then that she saw something else in the story of her aunt. She saw her aunt taking vengeance on the village by poisoning the well with her dead body. In her memoir, Maxine was going to do the same thing. Even if she ended up in the bottom of a well, she was going to tell the stories her mother told her not to tell.

Maxine identified with that aunt. She began to see the aunt's life flowing into her own. Her memory--the mythmaker in her memory--created an ancestor to help her do what she was now going to do: write this book.

### *The White Gloves*

I realized then that I had done the same thing in *White Gloves*. The opening story was different; its meanings were different; but the function was the same.

The story involved someone I had never known, not an aunt this time but a grandfather. It was buried in hours of tape recordings that I had made of my father's life. I didn't "hear" the story when I was making the recordings--it didn't register--but years later, when I returned to the tapes during a turning point in my life, there it was--a scrap of a story, just a minute or two long.

My grandfather's life had begun in Hungary, where he had played the clarinet in what was probably a military band. "I think his whole soul was music," said my father. Before he was twenty, my grandfather was playing, writing arrangements, and touring Europe. He came to the United States in 1912, sent for his family, and tried to make a living doing what he loved.

But he couldn't, so after a year he got a job in a brickyard. The music was put away and with it a pair of white gloves that were part of his uniform. "The fingers were long and slender," said my father. "After he worked in the brickyard doing manual labor, he couldn't fit into them any more. And he was a very proud man." My grandfather went from making bricks to shoveling coal, where he must have breathed in clouds of black dust. He died from that and a traffic accident before the age of fifty.



When I finally "heard" this story, I had the clear sense that the gloves that no longer fit my grandfather's hands were now meant for me, and that only my hands could fit into those long, slender fingers. The gloves didn't exist anymore, but still, at that moment, I put them on. And they helped. They pointed to my true temperament, which was that of an artist, not a psychologist. At a turning point in my life, in matters of both love and work, the gloves said: start fresh, stick to the soul, get going.

Historically, I know very little about my grandfather. The last person who could add to the picture has died. So my memory of the gloves is almost entirely a product of the mythmaker. Because of it, I began to see an ancestor's life flowing into mine. I began to tell myself: that ancestor died shoveling black coal so that I could wear his white gloves.

Did memory cheat? Well, it fabricated. Was it powerful? Absolutely. Was it true? That memory is one of the truest I have. For years I have gone back to it as a reminder: start fresh, stick to the soul, get going. I've gotten ancestral help.

#### *A Family Remembers*

A final example of creating ancestors is one that is best listened to. If you get the chance, go to [www.johnkotre.com](http://www.johnkotre.com), scroll down to "Ancestral Help," and click on "A Family Remembers." You'll hear a seven-minute audio clip of four generations in a family reminiscing about their recently deceased great-grandfather. The seven minutes were distilled from several hours in a recording studio.

The great-grandfather's name was Sarkis Hashoian. As a boy he had escaped the Armenian genocide of 1915 and found his way to the United States. Eventually he married, started a cleaning store, and spent the rest of his life running it. Before he died, I recorded and wrote up the story of his life. Afterwards, his family gathered in that recording studio to share memories.

Sarkis's two children were now in their fifties. As kids they had heard bits and pieces of their father's escape story, but those bits and pieces were used as object lessons. If they weren't eating their dinner, if they weren't doing well in school, he'd tell them to shape up. "You wouldn't have made it. You don't know what it's like to eat grass. How'd you like to eat grass?" It became a joke to the children: "Oh God, here we go again, another story."

But later on in life, the children put the bits and pieces of the story together. They began to realize what their father had done. Now the man who was once a foreigner to their ears, who once acted "old country," who once was nothing more than "a wild man at the back of the cleaning store sweating and freaking out" . . . now that man became an epic figure.

Toward the end of our recording session, his daughter's thoughts turned to her children. "I want them to know where they come from," she said. "I think my dad was a great man." And the son who fought the stories as he was growing up said, "I felt there was an anchor. I felt he was going to be there forever. And even though I never went to him for wisdom, I could just look at him and say that was enough. This guy survived that great attack from the outside world. I'm going to survive."

"Great man." "Great attack." "Anchor." "Be there forever." In his death the great-grandfather of the Hashoian family has become a heroic figure who tells his descendants that they can get through anything, that they will survive. His story has become a source of ancestral help--another example of the power of autobiographical memory.

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