

What is Memory?



REV. JANE DWINELL
UU Minister

I am terrible at remembering names.

I have tried all of the tricks to be able to do that, but nope, not for me. Thank goodness for name tags!

But I remember so many details about so many people, even if I have forgotten their names. I could list them all, but one stands out — the nurse's aide who held my hand in the emergency room after I was in a terrible car accident when I was 19.

Is it necessary for me to remember this? What if I forgot? Would it matter?

Thinking about memory suddenly became important when my husband, Sky, was diagnosed with dementia in 2016. I had known something wasn't quite right with him for a few years. He denied anything was wrong, but eventually agreed to be tested: probable early stage Alzheimer's. We were stunned.

As we processed this devastating news, Sky said he assumed he would eventually forget his family, but he was mostly afraid that he would forget his Self.

So we read books about memory. It turns out that there are several kinds of memory — ranging from memories of how to do things (ride a bike, tie our shoes) to memories of things that

happened to us (however incomplete those memories are) to memories of factual information (Where is the bathroom? What is the capitol of Mali?).

Then Sky wrote: As the attacks on our intellects and memory continue, we feared changing into people neither we nor our loved ones would value spending time with. What is left for us if the glue of memory no longer holds our selves together?

As time went on, Sky gradually lost the ability — the memory — of how to do many things. What clothes to wear. How to button buttons or zip zippers. How to read. How to get into bed. How to pull up the covers.

Did he still know his Self?

Sky spent his last year in a memory care facility. He walked the corridors, interacting with other residents and the staff, singing songs, making jokes. Sky was one of those people that had a song lyric for every occasion. Me? I can't remember song lyrics, never mind who starred in what movie.

When he was dying, he was still singing, and he seemed happy. He told me I was beautiful, and he told me the end was near.

He may not have remembered his Self, but I sure did. It was all there, in its blazing glory.

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in the hope
of becoming
a memory.”*

ANTONIO PORCHIA

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MEMORY

How do you honor memory in your life?

JOHN

CLF Member, incarcerated in TX

I feel like I am going to take this topic in a direction most are not expecting. The way I honor memory in my life is by trying to remember it. I know that may sound strange, but allow me to explain. Due to a past of very heavy drug use, I have done some pretty severe damage to my brain. My thoughts are slow, my ADHD is harder to keep in check (and yes, I actually have ADHD, unlike the massive numbers of people who have been falsely diagnosed). I will lose my train of thought, and if I don't have a good reminder it stays lost, no matter how much I rack my brain to retrieve it.

When I think of things I need to get done, I either have to do them right then and there, or I have to make a note of it, or it won't get done until something reminds me to do it. When I pick up a book I'm reading at the time, I have to skim the last page or two to remember what happened before I put it down. When I write a long letter, I periodically have to reread the letter to remember what I have already written (I've already done it once with this essay). I used to be quite skilled at mathematical calculations in my head, but that's impossible now, I have to do it on paper.



PHOTO BY PATRICK PERKINS ON UNSPLASH

I have been sober going on two years now, and unlike all the other times I quit using, I honestly have no desire to use anymore. Yes, on occasion I feel a slight urge, but it's so fleeting that I have already decided I don't want to before the thought is even finished. I know from experience that if I indulge in any kind of intoxicant, even slightly, it's a full on cannonball into the pool. I'm that kind of addict. I know this about myself. Ten years of experience taught me, so I stay away from everything.

Since I'm sober, the ongoing damaging of my brain has stopped. I was told by a highly intelligent friend of mine that my brain can slowly

heal the damage that I have done to it, and omega-3 fish oils will help. So I take two 1000mg gel tablets a day. He also told me that exercising my memory by memorizing things helps. I so memorize song lyrics. I'm also trying to teach myself to speak Russian and read and write Cyrillic. Tackling a new language at thirty with a brain that drugs have turned into oatmeal is difficult, but I persevere.

I'm doing my best to honor my memory. I really hope that I can bounce back from my poor decisions. But if I can't I accept the consequences of my bad choices, I really have no choice, right? ■

April 2022

ROBERT

CLF Member, incarcerated in MA

Memory can be a fickle thing, especially with me. "You have autism, so you must have a photographic memory!" Well, a) it's technically called idyllic memory, and b) I don't have it either way. My memory just functions differently than the norm; some things are just easier for me to recall, and others less so.

Pretty much anything that involves static events and not people, I can recall, even if I can't recall them that quickly. When people become involved, even in those life-changing, life-affirming events, I struggle to remember. I may know that something happened, the "wide-strokes" if you will, but the nitty-gritty details can escape me.

But not always. Not in the sense that when I was younger I could and that as I got older the ability lessened, but that there was a time for me when I could recall all memories with the same level of clarity.

The time is simple to define: it was when I was able to be with, be near, my one and only, my Forever & Always. When in her presence, I could bring to mind all those things that mattered so much. When I first met her and when our daughter was born, everything, good and bad, felt as if it just happened. (Though mind you, the bad wasn't really that bad, for it was always a learning experience, and something greater always came out of it.)

Then with the separation, brought about from me being charged and incarcerated, things started to slip. Now it's a struggle to hold onto any little detail, every smile, every hiccup, fading away to nothing.

What hurts even more is that I know that there's a hole there, a missing spot within my memory, like an empty folder in a filing cabinet. Something important was there, I just don't know what it was.

Nowadays, people bemoan social media and living your life online, taking needless pictures, posting irrelevant information that only matters to them. But that's the thing: all of that matters to them. It's a digital record, a "backup" of your memories, that allows one to easily go back and relive those memories. I find the expression of the self and the sharing of it to be a wonderful thing. Through that, one can live true to themselves, and remember all they were, are, and can be. ■

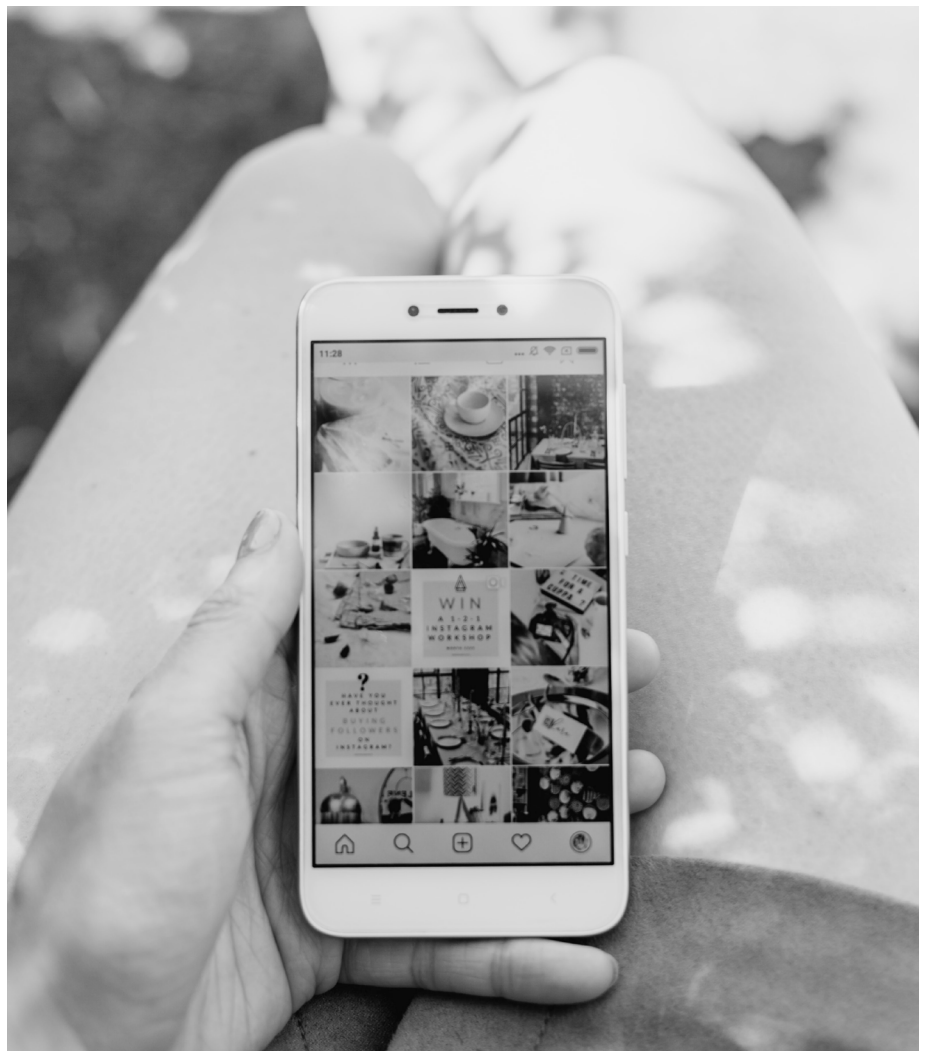


PHOTO BY GEORGIA DE LOTZ ON UNSPLASH

MEMORY

DONALD

CLF Member, incarcerated in CO

When I reflected on this question I realized I don't really honor the memories in my life. What I do is long for them, grieve for them, reminisce, and become nostalgic. Memories come all

the time, triggered by sights, smells, sounds, and stimuli that I can't always put my finger on.

When these memories arise now and flood me with emotion, I will pause and rest in whatever it is I am feel-

ing. I give that memory the proper place it deserves, and give myself the extension of that time and place. This will give that memory the honor and respect it deserves — good or bad, there is always a knowledge and understanding to be grasped. ■

Memory, continued from page 1

Is it only memory that is the glue that holds our selves together?

I think there is a fourth kind of memory — emotional memory. We all have negative emotional memories, but we all have positive emotional memories as well.

I was so, so grateful for the nurse's aide who soothed me, scared and in pain, as I waited in a cold, stark ER. I can still feel her love and care fifty years later.

And when I remember Sky these days, a year after his death, of course I remember all the things we did together. But mostly I remember the love we shared.

And what could be more important?

What about you? What memories are important for you to remember? Are they factual? Emotional? How would it feel to not remember? ■



PHOTO BY KELLY SIKKEMA ON UNSPLASH

Notice of the CLF Annual Meeting

To all members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Unitarian Universalist:

Per Article VII, Sections 1 and 2, of the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) Bylaws, the 49th Annual Meeting will be held via video/telephone conference call and screen sharing on **Sunday, June 5, 2021 at 7:00PM EDT**. To join the meeting, go to www.clfuu.org/joinannualmeeting.

We will be distributing materials electronically to all CLF members for whom we have a current email address, and posting the documents to our website (www.clfuu.org/annualmeeting). All incarcerated members will automatically receive paper copies of the materials along with postage-paid ballots to return. Others may request hard copies mailed to you by sending back the form on the final page of this issue of Quest, or calling the CLF office at 617-948-6150.

All those who have access to the Internet or phone are encouraged to join our meeting via Zoom and participate in the discussion. Meeting materials will include absentee ballots for those unable to attend in person.

The purpose of the meeting is to:

- Report on highlights of CLF activities and finances
- Vote for the following leadership positions (see nominations from Nominating Committee in the packet):
 - Elect three members to 3-year terms on the board of directors,
 - Elect one members to 1-year term on the board of directors to fill a term vacated before the term was finished,
 - Elect one member to a 3-year term on the nominating committee,
 - Elect a clerk and treasurer for one year

We will elect a moderator from among members present to preside at the meeting.

Aisha Ansano, *Board Chair*

If you are a free world member of the CLF and you would like to receive Annual Meeting materials by mail, please use the tear-off form on the final page of this issue to submit your request.

All incarcerated members will automatically receive these materials by mail.

The Shape of Memory



ROSE GALLOGLY
CLF Publications
Coordinator

A phrase landed in me during the week that my mother was dying, as I grasped at any words I could find to make sense of the enormous shift in front of me.

The shape of every memory is changing.

I was seeing with painful clarity what anyone who has experienced big loss knows: I would now have two lives. The first life was the previous 26 years in which I was lucky enough to have my beloved mother with me in life, and the second, however much time I have in front of me, in which I would have to hold her close as a beloved ancestor. And every memory from that first life was now changing, shaped by the reality of this sudden ending.

My mother was a constant in all of the life I'd already known. Her steady presence, her love and care, was a backdrop to all things — a backdrop so fundamental to my experience of life that it was hard to see it clearly at times. Her love had always been at the center of my life, but I wouldn't have named it as such until I realized I would have to live without her living presence reinforcing it. Perhaps that's just the way of everything that is fundamental. We assume there will always be air to breathe, until there



PHOTO BY SARANDY WESTFALL ON UNSPLASH

isn't; we assume the sun will rise every day, until it doesn't.

Now, the backdrop of my every memory was suddenly shifting into focus. Now, in the constant foreground: the gift of having had my mother for any time at all, my gratitude for any moment we spent together in life. The shape of every memory had changed.

So many other things have come into clearer focus along with that shift. There is painful truth to the cliché that major loss makes you realize what's most important. I've moved through the past year with much more clarity about how I want to use my time and energy, letting go of past insecurities and narratives that no longer serve me. With my mother's love at the center, I understand the sacredness of my life more fully. The shape of my every memory has changed, and with it, the shape and direction of my life.

Memory is not static, an unchanging account of events and relationships and facts. It is the source of our meaning-making, a collection of threads from which we weave the narrative that holds our life. The shape and texture of our memories change along with us, as we need them to, to make sense of the ever-changing reality we are faced with.

Letting the shape of my memories change to foreground my mother's love is one of the things that has saved me, that has made surviving this first year without her possible. *How* we remember matters — and the shape of our memories can shape our lives as we move through them.

May you each find a shape to your memories that allow you to move through loss and change with more ease. May you know, always, that you are loved, and let that holding shape all of your life to come. ■



UUA GENERAL ASSEMBLY MULTIPLATFORM / PORTLAND • 2022

Would you like to represent the Church of the Larger Fellowship at General Assembly (GA) this summer? The CLF is entitled to 22 delegates at the UUA's General Assembly, which will be held both online and in-person in Portland, OR from June 22-26, 2022.

You will be able to attend online or in-person workshops, programs, and worship services. Proof of vaccination for COVID-19 is required to attend in person.

As a delegate you will be able to vote during General Sessions. General Sessions will be held from 9:30-12:30pm PT on 6/23-6/25 and 12:30-2:30pm PT on 6/26. Delegates should be able to be online or in person to attend the majority of these General Sessions. CLF delegates vote their conscience on matters related to the denomination of Unitarian Universalism, and are responsible for their own expenses.

If you'd like to participate in GA 2022 in this role, please fill out the online application at clfu.org/delegate-application. Visit the UUA's General Assembly website at www.uua.org/ga for details.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

In this section, we offer questions for reflection based on ideas explored in this issue. You may wish to explore it individually or as part of a group discussion. To submit your reflection for possible inclusion in a future issue of Quest, tear off your answer and mail it back to us using the envelope included in the middle of this issue, or mail a longer reflection separately.

From Rev. Jane Dwinell: What memories are important for you to remember? Are they factual? Emotional? How would it feel to not remember?

If you would like us to be able to publish or share your writing in the future, remember to include "You have permission to edit and publish my words" somewhere on your submission.



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