

It Has All Hit Home: Reflections on Memory and Fact in the Age of COVID

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Global Research, June 20, 2023

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

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"I went to a flower shop to purchase a bouquet – during the time of mandates and masks – and because I was unmasked I was asked to step outside"

To a psychoanalyst memories are a stock in trade, common coin, the currency of every session, and we tend to regard every reported memory never as actual indubitable truth, but as an amalgam of wish, fantasy, fact and emotion, an amalgam that drew across the lifespan to result in the 'remembered' event, a phenomenon that could conceal other memories and also lead to new insights. In short, memories are the stuff of a kind of dream.

It is doubtful – though, perhaps, given the mind and brain's complexities, possible – that we have stored every perception of our earthly experience, somehow, somewhere. But no matter how many times I drive along a certain highway I could never, if pressed, reproduce with complete accuracy a comprehensive picture of what I perceive. Instead I will remember road signs, junctions, turning points, just as, when reviewing my life I remember certain nodal events. In fact I am often surprised when in company a person may remind me of something I did or said years ago about which I have no memory – because it held no importance to me, because it was too threatening, or because nothing really registered? I don't know.

What I do think I know is that memories require some sort of nourishment over the years, a calling up, a reinvestment and a reliving, in the quietness of thought, to stay alive, and memories may even grow as newer experiences resonate with the old. It's as if they require care and watering like a plant, and with enough memories tended we may find ourselves within a pastoral glade that demarcates our life lived.

This past week I learned, quite by chance, of the death of a friend, a friend with whom I had lost contact for many years but who had probably been the most influential person of my young manhood.

You see, in these covidian times, whose long shadow stretches into our futures, I wanted to see how he was faring, I wanted to see if perhaps I might visit him when or if I returned to the States. The friendship we shared for a very bright and very intense year abroad as students at a foreign university had a kind of force that never – for me, at least – dissipated, regardless whether we spoke or met during the afteryears, which was hardly at all.

But I remembered him well, I remembered our times together, our competitions, our sports and our work in theatre, our studying, our jokes, I remembered a trip we took to Belfast during the troubles to find the divisive graffiti and barricades and armed British soldiers in that forbidding city, and a visit to a pub where but for the grace of our naivete we escaped without harm. I am, in fact, surprised by the plethora of very specific memories I harbor, which signifies to me the importance of our relationship and its enduring effect upon my life, because this friend was a paragon of very hard work and idealism.

If someone, years from now, asks me about these past three Covidian years, one particular memory comes to mind. I went to a flower shop to purchase a bouquet – during the time of mandates and masks – and because I was unmasked I was asked to step outside. I asked the proprietress why, given that I had an official, if absurd, ‘mask exemption’, and she told me that she needed to protect her daughter, at home, who suffered from an immune problem. When I tried to tell her that the masks did nothing to protect her, or me, or anybody else, she turned, flustered, away, and retreated back into the bowels of her store. I left.

Sure, there are other memories I can conjure during the vax apartheid here in Wellington – some joyful, too, about the new friends I made and the gatherings we had – but for some reason this one serves as the exemplar.

And as for my friend, I learned that he died suddenly near the end of 2021. This is fact, not memory. I cannot and will not ask the question of the loved ones he left behind, I don’t want to know.

It has all hit home.

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