

Wind on the Water

A Newsletter To Encourage
Unitarian Universalist
Theology and Spirituality

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Constructing Memories

Here is an experiment you can perform your self: remember yourself sitting down to watch TV (or sitting down to read). Do it now.

Did you see the room from your own viewpoint - out of your own eyes? Or did you see yourself from outside your body? Maybe from above, somewhere on the wall?

Most people will remember the scene from outside and above. They will see themselves in the situation.

Memory is not like replaying a video made through your eyes; it is a creation, a construction. It is manipulating a mental model.

Sometimes under cross examination, eye witnesses are caught testifying to details they could not have seen from their vantage point. They are not lying; they are accurately reporting their memories, but some of their memories are extrapolation.

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Chinese Mustard

It is easy to implant a false memory in someone; just have someone they trust mention to them an incident they supposedly were involved in. I did it once by accident.

"Like my first spoonful of Chinese mustard," I say to indicate that something surprised me. After using this in front of one of my friends several times, he said, "That was at Tai Sam's, wasn't it?" referring to a Chinese restaurant several of us frequented. Well no, it wasn't. I've never had a spoonful of Chinese mustard. It was just a saying, but I played along, made some encouraging sounds, and watched him develop the story over the years. Now he tells it this way:

"We were down at Tai Sam's and TC hadn't been to a Chinese restaurant before. When the egg rolls came, TC said, 'What's this stuff?'"

"We said, 'Mustard,' and TC said 'Good, I like mustard,' and ladled spoonfulls onto his egg roll.

"I said, 'TC, I don't think you' but four feet kicked me under the table so I shut up. I watched TC take a big bite and realized I was down range, so I tried to slide under the table before it exploded from

his mouth."

After he told this story for the dozenth time a year ago, I mentioned that it wasn't true. The look of bewilderment and betrayal on his face startled me. He didn't know it was made up. He remembered it just that way. Why was I saying this and making him look foolish?

You yourself can try implanting a memory in someone, if you're not concerned about the ethics. I don't

Faith Watching: Seeking Lost Memories

A technique has become popular for transforming lives by producing vivid albeit dubious memories.

Early in his career, Sigmund Freud experimented with hypnosis. He found an incredible, fantastic number of women remembered under hypnosis being raped during childhood by their fathers. After some years, he decided the number *was* incredible. He decided that most of the women were fantasizing, and that questioning under hypnosis

was not a reliable method for evoking accurate memories.

The method is still employed, owing its popularity, perhaps, to its



Seeking Lost Memories, continued

very inaccuracy. If you undergo this treatment, you too may be able to remember living previous lives. You may remember being abducted by aliens, participating in satanic rituals, or being sexually abused in childhood by family members -- experiences that so traumatized you that you totally repressed their memory. A self-proclaimed therapist will be glad to help with months or years of questioning and encouraging any trace of a memory that resembles the kind sought.

Is there reincarnation with memories intact? Our understanding is that memories are the result of changing connections among neurons in the brain. These connections are an acquired characteristic which can't even be passed on to offspring. Are we to believe that they are somehow passed on to unrelated people upon death after the connections have already ceased functioning?

Are people abducted by space aliens? It doesn't seem reasonable. It would take a huge investment in energy and time, especially time, for the aliens to get here. After that investment, can't the aliens think of anything better to do than skulk around at night nabbing people for experiments? And while they are skulking around at night trying not to be detected, why can't they remember to turn off the lights on their saucers? And then to release the experimental subjects who eventually remember the abduction and join organizations to investigate the aliens -- whatever can these aliens be thinking of?

What about memories of satanism -- murdering babies, eating flesh, performing disgusting rituals? Hundreds of thousands of (mostly) women were tortured and burned to death in Europe during the witch

hunts. There is now general agreement that witches were a fantasy of the church and society. Witch hunting has gotten such a bad name that it has to be called something else, so witches have been renamed Satanists. The accusations remain the same; the physical evidence that there are any such satanic cults remains sparse.

What about childhood sexual abuse so traumatic that it has been totally repressed? There is plenty of physical evidence that some children are abused. Where there is physical evidence, the children seem to remember the abuse as well. What is dubious is that memories of abuse are ever totally repressed only to be pulled out of surprised and unsuspecting adults years later by trauma therapists. The survivors of Nazi death camps, removed from their homes, separated from family members, starved, beaten, living in filth, forced to labor long hours, watching family and friends die, smelling the burning human flesh in the crematoria -- these people have certainly suffered a trauma, maybe even as severe as these supposed survivors of child abuse claim to have remembered. Why haven't the survivors of Nazi death camps forgotten?

Those of us who doubt the objectivity of memories evoked in this fashion face a moral dilemma. How are we to react when people testify to having recovered these memories? They are obviously troubled by the memories. It seems cruel to doubt them. Perhaps for reincarnation or UFO abduction it does not hurt much to play along. But what of accusations of satanism or child abuse? These charges bring disaster to other people's lives. It is well, therefore, to remember the witch hunts; there are greater cruel-

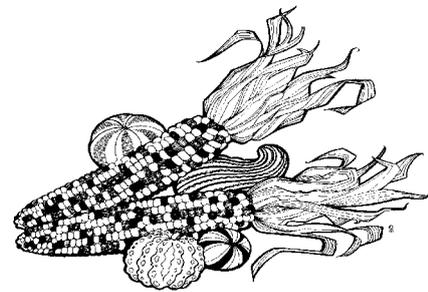
ties than doubting. Perhaps we should accept nothing but physical evidence. Nevertheless, how can we have the moral stamina to doubt a

Lost History

A friend visited Russia recently and reported that the first question people asked when they found out he was an American was "Were Americans really afraid of us?" Yes, we were, he told them.

The second question was "Have you studied Russian history?" Yes, he had. Then they would discuss Russian history with him for two, three, four hours.

It was maybe the sixth time this happened when the hairs stood up on his neck; he suddenly understood what it meant. They couldn't trust anything the communists had told them. They wanted to know their history, and they were learning it from him.



Meno

In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates leads a slave boy by a series of simple questions to discover the Pythagorean Theorem.

"You agree nobody taught him, but only asked him questions?" said Socrates. "He pulled the knowledge out of himself?"

Menon agreed.

"To pull knowledge out of yourself is to remember, isn't it?" asked Socrates, and Menon agreed again.