

After Words: a Personal Epilogue (with poetry)

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We used to think that babies and young children were irrational, egocentric, and amoral. Their thinking and experience were concrete, immediate, and limited. In fact, psychologists and neuroscientists have discovered that babies not only learn more, but imagine more, care more, and experience more than we would ever have thought possible. In some ways, young children are actually smarter, more imaginative, more caring, and even more conscious than adults are.

—Alison Gopnik (2009, p. 5)

In this section, which is a separate matter from the rest of the book, I relate some of my own childhood experiences—including some from my earliest days—to the theories of development discussed in the text. As with other certain other chapters, this one may be omitted, depending on the instructor’s discretion in planning the course syllable. What I am attempting here is to personalize the context by showing from a first person’s perspective how these theories can be viewed.

Memories from early childhood especially can be problematic. As the “new thought” psychologists studying perception in the earlier part of 20th century concluded, we see the world not as it is, but as we are. And memory is known to be a reconstructive process since even before the time of Charles Bartlett’s *Remembering* (1932). Here’s Kuhlman (1906, pp. 342-343): “...the total process of recall is not recall at all, and can never be described even half correctly by calling it reproduction. It is, rather a construction, not a reconstruction, a construction of a certain result that is accepted in place of the original, and far from a reconstruction of a past memory” (cited in Summers & Fleming, 1971). This theme has continued to be reinforced by psychologists

through the years. Elizabeth Loftus (e.g., 1997) has shown experimentally how unreliable our memories are, and how easy it is to alter them. I need not review further studies here except to offer these up as a something to keep in mind when reading the subsequent text. So here goes.

Earliest Dream (Age Two?)

When I was perhaps two going on three, I can still recall some of the events in my early life related to toilet training: the sudden urgency of the need to urinate or defecate, and the grabbing of the nearest family adult member to help; to lead me to the bathroom, and so forth. I would be literally dancing.

I was fascinated by the processes of elimination, as are all children of this age. Where do those poops go when you flush the toilet? My little friend Tony had a way with toilet paper rolls, he would slap at them and watch as the roll unfolded. Kippy would use a kind of karate chop as his way of tearing the paper from the roll. Needless to say, both of these methods could be messy, but that's what this age was all about, wasn't it? We used to do finger painting using some colored oils that we smeared upon a sheet of paper (or some such substance) to make interesting patterns. At a slightly earlier age we may have used feces as our chosen medium for "finger painting." If these anecdotes make you feel uneasy, perhaps you are not ready to have children (wink).

My dream was this: I felt myself being flushed down a toilet, experiencing a sudden rush through the pipes in a gigantic whoosh. It was truly a "wet" dream. It ended abruptly, yet it was not an unpleasant dream

In thinking back on this dream I had to wonder, could this sensation be based on a physical memory fragment of being ejected from my mother's birth canal on the way to being born?

Developmentalists tell us that children haven't much if any memories concerning their earliest years. However, the science fiction writer Ray Bradbury (1996) claims he not only recalls his birth, but also his undergoing circumcision. I am open to this possibility, after all, why not? It is not for me to say, and this

dream may have been merely an unconscious fantasy based on my observations of toilet engineering and nothing more.

A (Freudian?) Dream at Age Five

At this time of life we were living in New Jersey. In my dream, night was falling, and I was seeking shelter in our back yard. Ah, the cellar door could be my escape route. These were slanted double-doors that led to the family's basement.

But I was thwarted at the door where I was greeted by a giant, fearsome wolf's head which took up the entire doorway that blocked me from entering.

In the basement there would be a coal bin and a furnace for heating the house. I knew that our Doberman Blackie was in the furnace room and that he would protect me if only I could reach him, or vice versa. But he was tethered by a leash to a pillar.

In my imagination dogs were the good guys; the heroes who would protect us. Wolves, foxes, and panthers were evil and dangerous. Blackie in the safety of the cellar would protect me if he could.

Let's take a moment to reflect on the dream symbolism, as I tried doing years late in my adulthood. The warm cellar? A return to the safety of the womb. The wolf guarding the entrance? Perhaps representing the pubic hair surrounding the "vagina" of the folding cellar doors? The dog tethered to the pillar? A fetus attached by the umbilical cord. The theme? Freud's admonition that we can never return to the comfort of the womb.

All of this could make sense except for the fact that at age five I had no clue of the "facts of life," as adults used to call them. I knew nothing of the birthing process, never mind how children were created. My mother just got my little brother from the hospital, and that was that.

Like a lot of kids in that post-Victorian age, I would be getting my sex education from other kids in the neighborhood. At age 10 a friend told me that as he understood things, the man and the woman went to the doctor's, who placed them behind a screen, and he peed on her. Well...

So I still don't know quite what to make of this dream. If sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, then maybe sometimes a dream is just a dream. Alternatively, I suppose a Jungian might argue that these symbols were already deeply embedded in the collective unconscious. The moral here is don't be too inclined to accept the certainty of your views—including the idea that there must be a single meaningful, and absolutely correct interpretation of one's dreams.

A Discovery at Age Seven

As my seventh birthday approached I was quarantined to my home as I was recovering from a severe case of chicken pox. I had already missed several weeks of school, and now I couldn't have my friends over for a party. My father decided to do something special for me, so he rented a home projector and some films to show me as my mother baked my cake.

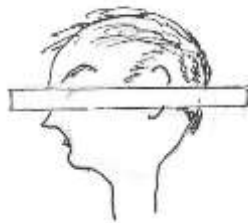
One of these was a live action film showing bruins frolicking in a meadow. Another was a cartoon featuring "Kiko the Kangaroo." (Aside: I had at this age a fascination with kangaroos that was probably inspired by Winnie the Pooh stories. I had been jealous of my friend Kippy, who had a stuffed 'roo that I envied, so on the preceding Christmas my mother made me a beautiful kangaroo and two baby 'roos fashioned from old blankets. I still have that toy (see below), and one of the babies, shown in the mother's pouch, the other having been lost or destroyed during the ensuing years.)



My father explained to me that the young bears were “real” but the cartoon was not—it was just a series of drawings photographed and projected in rapid sequence to give the illusion of motion, like the little page flip books we children used to have which gave the same effect.

But then he explained to me that the frolicking bear cubs were also just a series of photos shown in rapid succession. In other words, movies, too, were in a sense, merely apparent motion as opposed to continuous movement.

Soon after this showing I found myself sitting in a bright sunroom, on a kind of a sofa bed, where I began thinking deeply about the things my father said to me regarding the films we watched together. Words like “continuous” and “discrete” were not a part of my vocabulary, yet I seemed to have those concepts in mind as I thought about life, thought, and perception. My thinking process went something like this: is living and perceiving continuous, or do we experience discrete chunks of life, and if so, what came between these chunks of experience? Or on the other hand, is life continuous but our perceptions of it discrete, and again, if so, what filled that gap between each bit of mental activity? And how long is a moment (of actual time, or of experiential time)? I thought and thought about this, and developed a kind of non-verbal symbol of my own in my head for the situations I was considering, which consisted of the silhouette of a man’s head, side view, with a ruler superimposed over it (see crude drawing, below). I thought so hard I thought my head would split.



Then in a flash something miraculous happened. Suddenly my thoughts ceased altogether and I found myself in a new situation in which I was just “there,” alive to the present. I have no words to describe quite what this experience was like, but if I had to put it into words, it might be “Oh! I see!” I was simply “being” in the present moment, a place I had never been before, nor have I often been since that time. And it was as though time itself had stopped for a few brief moments.

Later, thinking back on this experience, I decided that there must be two sorts of mental activities, one sort of which one might call “analytic thought” (although that word was not in my vocabulary either), and the other this state of simply being.

Had I given myself a kind of Zen koan by attempting to understand time and experience, and did I awaken to some sort of “enlightenment”? Again, this was a very long time ago and although memories fade, I thought at the time that this seminal experience (which I was able to repeat for a short time afterward) was important enough to try to hold onto this memory; and so I have for all of the ensuing years.

But something else was going on at this time too. I began to realize that in some sense I was a “self” who saw the world in a whole new way. I cannot truly explain what this meant, except to say that I knew I had forever changed the way I experienced myself in this world. Piaget, no doubt, would call this a cognitive restructuring; a movement from one stage to another.

But even today I find it very difficult to put these experiences into words. They defy simple categorization. To understand me, you would have had to be there, in my head with me.

However, I do know that other children can also experience something similar. I know this, for instance, from reading Bradbury’s (1957) “Dandelion Wine,” in which he describes a marvelous scene that takes place between two boys. The scene I have in mind involves the brothers Douglas and Tom, who go berry picking with their father. In this passage Tom, in a moment of horseplay, leaps upon his brother:

They fell, thrashed, and rolled.

No! Douglas squeezed his mind shut. No! But suddenly...Yes, it's all right! Yes! The tangle, the contact of bodies, the falling tumble had not scared off the tidal sea that crashed now, flooding and washing them along the shore of grass deep enough through the forest. Knuckles struck his mouth. He tasted rusty warm blood, grabbed Tom hard, held him tight, and so in silence they lay, hearts churning, nostrils hissing. And at last, slowly, afraid he would find nothing, Douglas opened one eye.

And everything, absolutely everything, was there.

The world, like a great iris of an even more gigantic eye, which has also just opened and stretched out to encompass everything, stared back at him.

And he knew what it was that had leaped upon him to stay and would not run away now.

I'm alive, he thought. [p. 9; ellipses and italics in original.]

Then a bit later in the text Douglas says "'Tom!' Then quieter: 'Tom...does everyone in the world...know he's alive?'" (p. 10; ellipses in original). This, and the line "And everything, absolutely everything, was there" are the two phrases that resonate most strongly; those that capture the essence of the delight in my own fresh experience of being. And like the fictional boy Douglas, I also in my childhood marveled at having discovered the reality of myself and my realized being-in-the-world. (I use the latter term, or sometimes just "being," in the sense of Heidegger's (1927/2019) Dasein. Maslow's (1968), sense of wonder, ecstasy, awe, or peak experience applies here as well.)

My own experience was cognitive in contrast to Bradbury's character, whose experience was very physical. But I was then and always have been a very inward and introverted person. I suspect that similar experiences are typical of other children, though in many or most cases they have been forgotten.

What about twins, especially identical twins? How do they form their separate identities? My wife and I have no children or

our own but I have identical autistic twins for grand-nephews through my first marriage (my first wife died in 1996). One day one of them came to her mother and said, as if in great discovery, “There are two!” She was astounded and nearly cried. What to make of such a thing? Unfortunately, developmentalists cannot “get inside” young children’s minds, and that is too bad, because at young ages they are not able to explain to us what kind of experiences they are having in a way that we can understand.

Is language necessary for forming complex thoughts, or does language development precede understanding of cognitive concepts? In my case I could not have formed the thoughts I did without having learned some vocabulary, but at the same time, through the use of mental symbols, I was able to formulate some of my thoughts without a more extensive vocabulary, through the use of mental imagery.

Education (K through PhD)

I hated school from the moment I entered kindergarten. At first I would vomit daily. The school nurse told my parents I *must* have a substantial breakfast in order to remain attentive during class. The day they stopped forcing breakfast on me was the day I stopped vomiting. (Another “conventionally correct” assumption proven wrong.)

I hated school because it took me from my own private world and my playmates into an alien world I could not understand. In reflecting upon my education, I believe it was not until I was in graduate school at Berkeley that my instructors were curious about what I actually thought, as opposed to the kind of facts they were attempting to cram into me. And I loved graduate school! But how could any adult have known what a rich inner life I’d had as a child; and how could I even begin to tell them if I’d been asked?

The worst of it came in the first grade when we were taught simple arithmetic. Each child had to stand in front of the class as the teacher held up index cards with numbers on it, such as “ $8 + 5 =$ ”, and you were supposed to respond with the answer. If you didn’t have it memorized then you were penalized by having to

stay after school until you got it. This is how I came to hate math. It now seems so odd, that I would end up not only becoming a statistics teacher in colleges but have also published papers steeped in math. But having such an experience forced upon me was like having breakfast stuffed into me, so of course, I rebelled, in my own quiet way. This was a kind of Lockian (Chapter 3) model of education, except somebody forgot that Locke said that education should not be punitive.

But I don't mean to say that it was all bad. I had great teachers, for instance, in the third and fifth grades.

More about Shadow Work (Secondary School Years)

In the chapter on Jung I included a fearsome sketch of my “shadow self” that I titled “Seeing Red.” Growing up I always felt inferior about being short (today I am 5-foot-6), and a fear that I could not compete with bigger boys at athletics. And moreover, I could not deal with schoolyard bullies. Following Shakespeare's John Falstaff, I concluded that discretion was the better part of valor, and so was always able to avoid physical confrontations—except for one time in my life when I was in Tech School for the Air National Guard. I don't know how it happened but I attacked a bully and, to the delight of my comrades, I whipped him. But it didn't feel like “me” who did the beating, it was as if some alien creature had taken over my body. Something inside me just snapped.

I've always hated bullies and so I would wish I'd had the kind of physique I'd need to put them in their place.

But what if nature had blessed me with the physique of an Adonis? Would I really use it for the betterment of the world, by putting down these bullies?

Well, maybe not—what's to say having all of that power might have made me into a bully too? Would the transformation of a 140 lb. weakling boy into a muscle-bound matinee idol have made me a better person, a kind of super hero? The possibility that, but for my size, I could have become an actual tyrant myself occurred to me, and I found myself lacking for a good answer. Yes, all of us

are capable of entering the “dark side of the force,” even me. And such considerations are what “shadow work” is all about. Beware the monster within! And parents, you have a role in shaping your child’s sense of right and wrong.

Children can be Cruel

Don't be Cruel--song by Elvis Presley

*You have to be carefully taught to hate, you have to be very carefully taught.
—from Rogers and Hammerstein, South Pacific*

Very young children are empathetic; even altruistic. They get upset when they see someone in pain. They are helpful: “If they see an experimenter straining for a pen that is out of reach, for example, they will obligingly help him to get it. In fact they’ll toddle all the way across the room and clamber over a couple of cushions to get there to help. They will not only get upset when someone is in pain, they will also try to help, petting and kissing to try to make it better” (Gopnik, 2009, p. 211).

But as they grow a little older, “life happens,” and they don’t always behave like little darlings in social situations with other children.

Yes, children can be cruel too. I wrote the ensuing poem based on my own memories of childhood in the school yard. This poem is offensive; it employs racial and ethnic slurs, for instance. So why did I compose it? Because it is a truth that we might wish were not so, yet I believe it is important not to ignore truth.

I don’t believe in “politically correct” trigger warnings, but I did think a heads up here is in order, so please read on.

playground poetry
(as overheard, countless years ago)

I. Ordinary insults, aggression, and coprolalia

Kindergarten babies,
born in the gravy!
Nyah, nyah, nyah, NYAH, nyaa, nyaa...

Hold your tongue and say:
“My father works in a ship yard.”

Inka-bink a bottle of ink, the cork fell off and YOU STINK!

Look up...look down...look all around. Look at my thumb...gee,
you're dumb!

Susan and Raymond, sittin' in a tree
K-I-S-S-I-N-G
(NOWEDIDENT!)

Now hold your tongue and say:
“I have a big red apple.”

Nyah, nyah, nyah, NYAH, nyaa, nyaa...

I see London, I see France
I see Sharon's underpants!
(Yeah, that's so funny I forgot to laugh!)

There's a place on Mars
Where the women smoke cigars
And the men are small
They are five feet tall

Made ya look, made ya look

Made ya buy a penny book

I can make you talk like an Indian.
(How?...oh, you.)

Nyah, nyah, nyah, NYAH, nyaa...

II. Genuine cruelty

Fatty, fatty
Two by four
Can't get through
The kitchen door.

Say black eyes backwards.
Eyes black?
Yo' sho' is, honey

Wop, wop,
goes the top
of the Italian
helicopt

Dandy Randy
what a pansy!

Cholos
will sucker punch you
down below.

Blue, blue, you're a Jew

Nyah, nyah, nyah, NYAH, nyaa nyaa...

III. The takeaway

Whose children's voices were those,
Entombed in a time-vault from yesterday;

And what (can you even guess)
Are your children saying today?

Religion at Age Eight and Beyond

There were two important male models for me as I was growing up, both were old men with white beards who seemed to know whether you'd been bad or good. I'm speaking of God and Santa Claus, of course. One lived somewhere in the sky and the other at the North Pole; one fat and jolly, the other dour and judgmental.

Being a good little empiricist, and an amateur detective at that (I had read all of Sherlock Holmes) I knew that Santa was real because of clear evidence. Who else would consume the hot chocolate and cookies we set out for him on Christmas Eve? Who else would pack the living room with toys and presents before departing up the chimney?

But God was another matter. I never saw him, nor any trace of him, nor did anyone I knew. So I was fast becoming a little atheist. God, if you're there, show yourself!

The problem I encountered was this: Everyone else in the world believed in God (or so I thought), so I must be mistaken, and so ended my heretical ways.

My mother was a religious, church going Christian—though not of the fundamentalistic sort. But I learned from my father when I was about fourteen that he was an atheist! What confusion that caused! But I finished my stint with organized religion at around age 20. The minister at the church we attended turned out to be, in my mind, a bigoted hypocrite, and the Bible stories seemed far-fetched, so I'd had it.

Today I say (as seems to be the popular thing to say) that I'm "spiritual but not religious." But things are not all that simple. Who

I am now, and what I believe, is no one else's business. But here's
a poem that bears upon my present mind set:

mysterium

some say we are here to learn
but do we?
and if so, what are we to discover?

nothing that can be written down
or memorized
or bumperstickerized

so, what then?
can there be any way to state
that which is ineffable?

only allow love to manifest
and let go the rest

One More Time for the Self in Psychology

As readers may have noted, I've always been interested in the psychology of the self. I pooh-pooh those reductionists who want to claim that there is no self or consciousness (the "nothing-butters"). As a final word I offer this poem on the topic:

where is me?

lodged deep within this cranium
is there a "me" to be found?
no aver the scholars
of neuro-psychology
there we find only
myriad electro-chemical processes

vying for dominance
no one of which, alone (alas),
is capable of driving the bus

i suppose i could despair
if there were an “i” behind these eyes
yet some brain process herein
whispers softly:
“relax and continue to observe
the ongoing drama”
as science struggles ceaselessly
to grasp the essence of
mind and self

My non-reductionist intellectual heroes who are still active today include such geniuses as Antonio Damasio, Siri Hustvedt, Stephen Pinker, E. O. Willson, and Michael Gazzaniga, to name just a few. In the history of the field of psychology I consider William James (though not a developmentalist) to be the greatest of them all, with Piaget a close second, followed by Freud, Erikson, and Jung. Certainly, as they say, your own mileage may vary! So as this course is ending with this chapter, perhaps you could share with the class, which of these theorists have touched you the most—or the least.

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