
Mind, Memory and the Five-Year-Old

GARY F. DORR

I was moved to memory by the glass. The fragile glass was now the concrete upon which I began to build a reason for why I liked sitting there in that restaurant with my mother. I could just as easily have been staring out the windows of the old Datsun station wagon my parents drove when I was only four years old, smelling the sudden burst of coffee as my father opened the steel thermos my mother had filled only minutes earlier. The odors of blood, hides and entrails were also deposited into the bank of my memory. I remembered hanging over the back of the seat, straining to be close to my father. I could very easily have been delivering lunch to my father at his meatpacking plant. Only, something wasn't right. I wiped the dust off of my memory's photograph.

Now, I see that I was only straining to get close to my father because I had been placed into the rear storage compartment of the car. If I had been able to keep from wetting my pants, I would have been allowed to sit on the seat. I competed for what little time my father had, and, when I realized I wouldn't gain his sole attention, I began to stress out; both ends of me grew wet. I agonized over which was worse. I questioned whether the stupid, uncontrollable tears were more humiliating than the wetted pants. Now I remember that staring through the glass, away from my family's glaring faces, was about all I had left to do.

My memory has been serving me well since the day I was adopted. I remember being three years old and listening to my caseworker, Mrs. Arnold. I was riding "shotgun" in her green car and standing up on the same cloth-covered seat as she was sitting on.

"Do you know where we're going today Gary?" she asked with a great big loving smile. I wanted to hear her tell me again, so I shook my whole body from left to right to indicate a solid no. "I'm taking you to see your new mommy and daddy today," she said through a smiling, confident face. I grinned and tilted my head back to let some of the excitement out before I burst. I just grinned, swayed, jumped, and shook different body parts to release the excitement as it built up. Oh, but she knew what she was doing all too well! She presented the script, a well-worn script, but with each new actor, I am sure she still achieved standing ovations from a heavenly audience. She began, "When we get to your new house I want you to give your new mommy a big hug; can you do that?" I asked why I should hug her and she answered, "Because

she is your new mommy and she’s going to love you.”

“Will I have a bed to sleep on?” I inquired, missing the totality of the moment as only a child can.

“Gary, your new mommy and daddy told me they have a bed just for you—now what do you think of that?” she asked, finishing with a rounded, exclamatory mouth and raised eyebrows, meant to excite me more. I was jumping and waving my arms and grinning. I was grinning for sure.

We arrived at the house soon after. I wore my giant green shorts and a horizontally striped shirt that almost every three-year-old is familiar with. To top it all off, literally, I had my big, black, cowboy hat. I remember the hug and saying, “Mommy Mommy,” but what may have been the most vivid moment probably came at my first dinner, when my identity, as I knew it, was carelessly taken away. Mom took the hat away from my bushy little head to maintain proper dining etiquette, and “Asshole!” rang from some region of the table, very near to where I was sitting. I said it casually, but with enough force to convey my point: do not take the hat. The lively linguistic abilities, for which I will always be famous to my mother, came from my earlier life with alcoholic and abusive parents. Despite the gravity of it all, I can’t remember anything before the moments I rode with Mrs. Arnold down Wiley City Road, over the creek and up the drive to my new house.

Being new to a family was tough enough, but, in addition, they were white. It never bothered me at the start. I knew Mom and Dad to be just that. My sisters seemed to get along with me ok. I remember once, after a frustrating toilet-training session, my older sisters sought to rescue me from the terror of being flushed down the very same toilet by the frustrated father of a difficult four-year old. Yes, that was a sure sign that I was going to be a part of this family forever. I possess a truly unique answer to the question, “What are sisters for?” We moved from that house where Dad’s toilet training academy failed to achieve any success. We made it a whole 50 yards north to what we would call our “White House.”

It was in an alfalfa field next to that house where I made my first promise to myself. In the moments just before making that promise, I was with my father. Something on the TV made mention of the year 2000. I looked at my dad and asked him when that year would get here. He tried to explain it to me by helping me add twenty-eight years to my age then. Together, we talked about how much I would change. I thought it was an important moment. I walked to my

office, which the farmer next door called his alfalfa field. I had gotten spanked for going to the office without supervision before, but it didn't seem to matter to me that day. I picked a spot, and I got down to business; I started to remember.

In that moment, I promised to remember as much as I could. I would be grateful, as a grown man, for the wisdom gained from that promise. I smelled the alfalfa, heavy with spring rainwater. I tried to remember the shape of the clouds as I tilted my head back. When I leaned back, my head touched the red fur on the collar of my little red-and-blue jacket. I remembered Mom telling me to put my jacket on if I was going outside. I looked down and saw that I had my all-time-favorite tiny blue boat shoes and plaid pants to remember. I took note of the sounds from red-winged blackbirds playing in their jungle next to the creek and a pair of meadowlarks sitting on the fencepost right next to my dad's red truck. I looked at the house, just a couple of butt-swats away, and I committed everything inside it to memory.

How could I know that as New Year's Eve, 1999 approached, the same small child in my mind would still be walking in that field, anxiously waiting for any spare moments I had to share with him. I would never have guessed that my inner child would serve memory so well. For though the saying goes, "if memory serves me correctly," rather, it is we who are slaves to memory. The memory exists to bind us to lessons taught one day, but sometimes learned years later. That brave little guy in my memory deserves a medal for remembering so much more than just that day.

I remember the pain of being pushed into a family, without choice, where we did not swear. I remember the feelings of frustration, generated both by my rebellion and my family's reaction to it. I remember the feelings of inadequacy from not learning to use a toilet until well after the age of five. I shock even myself with the harsh memory of just "being Indian." I was in Kindergarten when boys teased me for trying to become white. I was ashamed, but I didn't know of which side to be ashamed. Was I ashamed that I was Indian or that my parents were white? This feeling was never more evident than when we went to parades or rodeos in Toppenish. I looked at the other Indian kids, and I tried to keep my distance from my parents. I couldn't bear the weight of the argument that standing next to them would present. It didn't help any when I got in trouble; my mother would grab me and make sure I got an earful. I looked around fearfully, searching for any Indians who might run to my rescue, never dreaming she was my mom. This feeling of shame can never be explained to my family with any success. I guess

you just had to be in my black patent-leather parade shoes to understand.

Years later, an Army friend, Captain Bhatt, asked me, “When did you first know you were a part of your adoptive family?”

“The Puyallup Fair!” I fairly shouted in the voice of that little boy, Gary. My family had parked in the back of a huge grass parking lot. I was about eight-years old, daydreaming the feel of my stomach in my throat and the sky beneath me as I looked at a huge roller coaster. Fortunately, my dad was watching the cow-pie in front of me at that moment. He grabbed my hand with his huge rugged fingers and spoke firmly but not harshly.

“Watch out son!” he spoke into the recorder, deceptively stored between my ears.

Those words were instantly seared into the chest of my soul; never before that moment and never again has my father referred to me as “son.” I knew then and there that I was part of this family. No wet pants or skin color could ever be a barrier after that. A passing girl spoke to her own family in those same moments. “Oh, did you hear that, he called that little boy his son, how sweet,” she said to the people on her left and right. A white guy calling a little Indian boy “son” was what she thought was so cute; the importance of the moment nullified whatever would have normally made me cringe in embarrassment. Many times I have found my peace from remembering those magic words. I discovered many inadequacies as I aged. Remembering I had a father who called me his son was all I needed to find my balance again.

I knew I had to tell somebody about this insightful lesson that I had kept hidden for so long. I headed for the mall where Mom is the marketing director, and I shared the memory of the cow-pie incident with her after lunch. As I finished, we each dabbed a tear from the corners of our eyes. I knew then that I would never have to look away in shame again; nevertheless, as I left the hour-long lunch with my mom, I found myself looking up at people walking by that glass wall again. I turned toward my mother. Earnestly, I wished that the sweet little five-year-old with the tiny blue boat shoes and the big wet spot on his plaid pants could have been on the other side of the glass to see that I was no longer looking away in shame. Then, those shameful tears on his face would have disappeared, replaced by his huge grin. That very instant, I began to grin; I was grinning for sure.