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## Memory, Nonfiction, and “The Handicap Bug”

Young people who serve missions for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are assigned companions to live and work with 24/7. In March of 2009, exactly three years ago, my companion was one Elder Coffman. Coffman and I told each other many a story from our previous lives, stories about friends from home, about girls, about family members. Most importantly, I told Coffman about Brandy Mace.

Brandy was a year younger than I and attended the same high school. Just a few weeks before my graduation, Brandy and I, along with many other students, were lucky enough to attend a national Business Professionals of America conference in New York City for 12 days for nearly free. I told Coffman that when we were in New York, Brandy and I became rather close, holding hands as we walked through the city and spending every moment with each other. I told him that one night she came to the room where I was staying and was very forward with me physically, that I had to spurn her advances by pretending to be asleep, and that she ended up spending the night on the floor on my hotel room. I was like Joseph, as in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, rejecting Potiphar’s wife. And, I must confess, the story ended up being rather compelling and very erotic.

But there’s a problem here: I lied to Coffman. Part of the New York story was true; I did indeed bond with Brandy and she did spend the night on my hotel room floor once. But I greatly embellished how forward she was with me. In the version I told

Coffman involved back massages and other scandalous activities. But that never happened. As more and more time separates me from that New York trip I have a harder time remembering exactly what *did* happen in New York. My memory is now spoiled with the Coffman version of the story and I can no longer distinguish what really happened and what I said happened. My memory and my fabricated story are becoming one and the same. This proves to me how shoddy our memory can be, how quickly it can be tainted by our own re-discovery or interpretation.

Memory plays a key role in creative nonfiction. Most creative nonfiction essays are incredible personal for the authors, meaning that they stem from his or her own experiences and thoughts. But how trust-worthy is memory? When do recreated memories become fiction? In Matt Babcock's essay "The Handicap Bug" he recounts his experiences as a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader in Jerome, Idaho, when a scabies outbreak seemed to dominate all thought at his school. He was convinced that these parasites were going to be the death of him. Young 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Matt also believed that scabies were responsible for two handicapped boys' conditions in his class, especially a young boy named Mike who was severely handicapped. Mike required metal crutches to get around the school and wasn't capable of advanced reasoning like the other 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. Babcock eventually uses scabies as a metaphor for the human condition, for the side of us that does terrible things. The bug not only caused Mike's handicap (at least, according to Babcock's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade understanding) but we all have a bug that leaves us handicapped, incapable of being and doing what we deeply want.

He relates an experience when his teacher, Mrs. Turnipseed, lost her temper with Mike. She gave him the Pig Award, a special recognition for messy students, and said he

had to keep the award until his desk was cleaned. Mike never did clean his desk and one day, in frustration, Mrs. Turnipseed rushed to Mike's desk, lifted it off the floor, and dumped the contents all over Mike, a crippled handicapped boy. This event seemed to have scarred Babcock, and understandably so; a grade school teacher is often seen as a hero, a moral exemplar. Babcock says that even his 3<sup>rd</sup> grade mind knew that this was wrong. But he didn't see Mrs. Turnipseed as an evil, terrible person. He instead claims that this event was his first postmodern experience, a moment of paradox, an introduction to the stubborn infection too microscopic to see that ran under so many people's skin and that would one day run under his.

But my question is this: How much of Babcock's memory of this event is accurate? Did it happen exactly how he describes it in his essay? I recall my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Mrs. Gardner, losing her temper with a young boy and hitting him over the head twice with a hardbound book. Many of us probably have similar memories. But think about it: as youngsters these events were likely extremely shocking and traumatic. Isn't it possible that our childish minds saw these things as more serious or more intense than they actually were? When we look back at adults, do we match the same level of intensity that our elementary minds experienced? Isn't this inaccurate, dishonest?

Creative nonfiction gets away with a great deal of "gap-filling." How could an author remember every word spoken verbatim from a childhood event? The answer is that he can't, most likely, but the story must be told nonetheless. Perhaps it's more important that the *feel* of the story is nonfiction, as Tim O'Brien said about his Vietnam stories: "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth." O'Brien doesn't pretend to retell factually accurate

stories from the war but instead wants us to understand what the war meant for him and so many others. The moment an author uses a story as a metaphor or analogy he is instantly leaving the realm of factuality. In reality, the event an author describes had no intrinsic truth about the human condition. Mrs. Turnipseed simply lifted a desk and dumped its contents. That's all that happened. But Babcock interpreted it as troublesome, as meaningful. As soon as he does this, he leaves the realm of history and enters creativity.

Babcock doesn't seem too concerned with whether Mrs. Turnipseed actually did what he remembered or not. He uses the story, I would assume as clearly and honestly as he remembers it, to ask the reader this one question: "Are we who we are thanks to or in spite of the disability? Is it the disease that invigorates our steps? Health that cripples us?" Like O'Brien, what's important to him is the feeling and thematic question.

For the sticklers, creative nonfiction can present quite an epistemological problem. How accurate is our memory? How accurate is our knowledge? Is it fact that John Lennon was born on 9 October 1940 at Liverpool Maternity Hospital to Julia and Alfred Lennon? This kind of data may seem entirely concrete. But how do we know these things? Well, we could check the birth certificates of England. We could find hospital records or journal accounts. But in the end, don't we still trust some outside source that *could* be wrong? I wasn't there when Lennon was born. I didn't see it. I *was* present, however, the day my niece was born. I marked it on my calendar. 22 November 2009. I trust this more than I trust John Lennon's birth facts because I remember waiting in the hospital for hours just to get a glimpse at her. I remember holding her for the first time, thinking about her tiny forearms one day being as long as mine. I remember looking at

her shut eyes and wondered what they would one day see. Perhaps our own experiences are the most accurate. Our flawed memories might be the best we can do.

Babcock's essay was likely for him a re-discovery of these childhood events. He must have visited his elementary school to jog his memory of many conversations and happenings. He even ties in the idea of weak memory with his scabies analogy: "The problem with discovery is that there is no such thing. Re-discovery is our only option. Cycles of memory and awareness that find us shifting in our chairs and reaching to scratch new rashes that have been around for centuries." Re-discovery of feeling, then, is what creative nonfiction is all about. An author re-discovers what he or she *felt* at a particular time, not what he or she *did* or *saw* or *said* or *heard*.

Consider the following passage from Babcock about an encounter with Mrs. Turnipseed many years after the incident with Mike's desk and the Pig award. Babcock returned home to Jerome as an adult and ran into his old teacher and her husband:

"She inquired about the usual things: work, family, children. I asked about her son, who had been a friend of mine. As we chatted, I was unable to account for a triphammer of anxiety cocked in my chest, a swelling question mark crested with a froth of nostalgia. Outwardly, I flashed a palette of casual smiles. Inside, a squadron of tiny bugs paratrooped through my veins, racing down my tendons on razor ice-skates, jamming pitchforks in the breaker box of my cerebral cortex. Before I could decode my feelings, the small talk abated, and we parted.

"Nice to see you," I said, fumbling for something grander.

I thought: Do you remember Mike Farnsworth? His desk, the pig award?

"I need to meet that great family of yours," she said, sweeping hair from her forehead.

“I’ll be in touch,” I said.

I thought: Why did we . . . ?

“Goody, take care!” she called waving, speeding past the Lighthouse Assembly’s weathered fence.

I wagged a wave over my shoulder and started back. Halfway down the Bird Farm Road, the truth of my feelings emerged, raw but cleaned, like an animal skeleton in the sun.

Without knowing it—in a way I still don’t understand—I had waited almost thirty years, foolishly, for my third-grade teacher to explain the complexities of life, to unroll and explicate the grand blueprint that maps the architecture of all human failing. In one chance meeting, I had expected Mrs. Turnipseed to give me the answers to the lifetime of stored confusion I had carried like an infection, for her to teach me the truths about people I should have already taught myself.

Here’s what I want to remember: I am jogging down a country road to the house in which I was raised. I am balancing two images of Mrs. Turnipseed in my mind, one with a clown’s wig of dense black hair as fantastic as a storm cloud, the other wearing a conservative cropped mop sugared with age. Sprinkler rigs on monstrous tires shower the alfalfa, which is green and plush and grooved in the wind. I am racing the experience of learning, running down the faulty road of memory and adulthood into the classroom of final answers.”

Perhaps Babcock hesitated to bring up Mike to Turnipseed because he didn’t trust his memory. What an accusation to make! Maybe he’d remembered it wrong. No doubt her version of the story would differ greatly from his. But Babcock instead uses the problem of memory to strengthen the problem he sees, the problem of the handicap bug.

He describes an elk that has been stricken with scabies and asks, “Has the disease forced the elk to grow stronger? Or was it simply virile enough to withstand nature’s routine prescription of weakness?”

The weakness of memory doesn’t worsen the genre of creative nonfiction. Yes, it’s true that the moment a writer offers deeper meaning to an event she is leaving the realm of accuracy. But authors needn’t be enslaved to facts and occurrences. A writer sees an event as more than a conversation or an action but instead as a metaphor for human experience and existence. The handicap of recollection and reflection makes creative nonfiction possible.

Babcock ends his essay with the following:

“No journal contains what I never told Mrs. Turnipseed. After she dumped out Mike Farnsworth’s desk, I saw him walk. I was in the boys’ restroom, alone, standing at a urinal when I heard him and turned.

Without a word, he peeked around the corner, flung his crutches aside, and with his arms extended like a withered tightrope artist, walked—unsteadily, yes; on the floppy sides of his scruffy feet, yes; on legs as warped as pipe cleaners, yes—but walked from one side of the room to the other like a man raised from the bed of sickness that had claimed him for thirty years.”

Babcock believes the handicap bug makes us who we are. He believes our weakness defines and enables us, like Mrs. Turnipseed’s weakness enabled Mike to walk without crutches. Likewise, faulty memory enables creative nonfiction, makes it possible.