

Memory, Identity, and the Feminist Self

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San Francisco

March 2007

In 2001 the American Psychological Association *Monitor*, featured an article entitled “A new reason for keeping a diary.” The article discusses the results of several studies on the beneficial health effects of writing down our memories. These studies explored further “the well-established connection between writing and health” (Carpenter, 2001, p. 70). Apparently, “repeated writing about negative events decreases their emotional impact” (p.70). According to the Monitor article, the results of these studies demonstrate that “expressive writing—that is, writing that includes emotional descriptions of life events—helps people simplify and organize fragmented memories” (p.69). It squashes intrusive and avoidant thoughts about negative events as it may lead to improvements in working memory” (p.70). Improvements in working memory have been shown to have positive effects on health and academic performance. In fact, students who participated in this research increased their GPAs.

The beneficial health effects of writing and other forms of disclosure are a well-established fact (e.g., research by Jourard in the 1960s and more recently, Pennebaker, 1990; 1993; 1997). Sharing the intimate details of our lives has many functions: The act makes us feel connected to others, alleviates stress, and makes us healthier. Researchers have found that writing and self-disclosure, particularly about emotionally laden events and negative experiences, improves our sense of well-being, boosts the immune system, increases our T-cell growth and antibody response, lowers our heart rate, helps us lose weight, improves sleep, elevates our mood and can even reduce

physical pain, in addition to strengthening social relationships, which in turn has beneficial health effects. According to a number of studies reviewed by Norman Anderson, of the APA, in *Emotional Longevity*, his recent book on psychology and aging, writing also appears to prolong life, even when it is only writing for yourself (Anderson, 2003). It seems that writing creates changes in the way people interpret events and gives meaning to those events. When we reflect about causes and effects of life events, particularly when we do that in writing, our lives make more sense and become more manageable. The negative events become less intrusive, leaving us with more “memory space” and more energy to live our lives (Pennebaker, 1990; 1993; 1997).

Because a memory that is communicated in a story shows at least a minimum of coherence, writing down memories helps the individual construct a sense of the past, even if the story is told only to oneself in the writing of a journal. The narrative communication required in the writing or telling of memories becomes the form in which the individual constructs a sense of the past. Reflecting on our memories and writing about them increases critical insight and engagement. Telling our stories reinforces social bonding, learning, and memories themselves. According to psychologist James Pennebaker, this sharpening of communicative intent provides a mental frame of reference and a point of comparison for future decisions and actions, that serves to modulate emotional reactivity and, in turn, has positive effects on health.

In addition, stories are essential because they permit moments of reflection without which actions and judgment would not be possible. Personal stories and narratives have a transformative effect on psychological development. Recent research regarding the brain would suggest that narratives of self stem from impulses basic to

our being. We've learned that the mind is malleable, that the brain constantly rewires itself, creating connections among disparate facts and ultimately spinning explanations about the self in the world. In essence, in writing about experiences, the mind "is telling itself a story" (Carpenter, 2001? Anderson, 2003?) that serves to create our sense of self and identity.

Life stories, although deeply personal, also have important political and psychological purposes: They allow us to reinsert ourselves into the narrative that is history, to become a part of the public world by participating in the process of its making. As British Sociologist Ken Plummer tells us in his book *Telling Sexual Stories*, "Story telling flows in the stream of power[...] The power to tell a story, or indeed to no tell a story [...] is part of the political process" (p.26).

Although autobiographical memory is important for everyone, for immigrants or anyone who has lived in many places throughout their lives, memory provides the only sense of continuity. Places and people change, the only way of knowing who you are, that you are, is to remember. Memory is the only way to re-member all the scattered pieces of life. As Chilean author Isabel Allende puts it, "[t]hose of us who have moved on many times [...] lack roots and corroboration of who we are, we must put our trust in memory to give continuity to our lives" (2003, p. 79). When powerful dislocations occur in life, memory may be the only tool to recover a sense of self. Memory is the only witness to our lives.

Similarly, the development of a feminist identity may also involve a dislocation of previous understandings of our lives and our worlds. Thus the memories of how that transition took place, of how that identity developed, constitute an essential grounding for

the self. It seems that we cannot underestimate the role of memories in the formation of self and identity, including a feminist identity, as well as the role of writing those memories in the preservation and integration of a sense of self. In other words, writing lets us observe the development of our own lives and of our identity as feminists.

The process of valuing our memories and telling them in writing provides tools to progressive, feminist clinicians, academics, students, interdisciplinary scholars and writers because it entails having the courage to challenge our old categories, and making space for contradictions and ambiguities while opening us up to our new creative possibilities. When women of different generations, ethnicities or sexual/affective orientations write and speak about their memories, we can examine the influences of age cohorts, historical generations, and cultural communities on feminist priorities. Writing memories evokes unexpected varieties and relationships among feminisms, expanding the definition of women's lives and identities.

However, as psychologists, we know that memory is precarious, fragile and changeable. Psychological and physiological studies demonstrate that memory is not always reliable, that autobiographical memory can be distorted, that memory is affected by many factors, including the languages in which memories are encoded and decoded. I know that my individual memory is, simultaneously, my own process, connected to the nerve cells in my brain, *and* the product of relationships and social contexts that have shaped it to determine what is important to remember. Memory is not just a residue or a fixed reproduction of events but also a dynamic, conflictual, and constructive process, deeply intertwined with values, communications, language and feelings, to name a few. Memory betrays, it mixes events; it leaves holes precisely about the moments you need to

remember most. Emotion both intensifies and obliterates the memory of events. What is remembered has a lot to do with what is culturally and theoretically acceptable at a given point in history.

But, as cognitive psychologist David Pillemer (2000) explains, “although examples of memory distortions exist [...] those memories that do persist into later life are likely to generally be truthful” (p.56). Memories of peripheral details tend to be more susceptible to distortion than the memory for central themes which tends to be very reliable. Pillemer tell us “that we can largely trust our vivid memories of emotional events (p.56) [because] emotional memories, although not infallible, are often broadly accurate” (p.55). [Even] “Memories of apparent trivial details can [also] fulfill important psychological functions” (p.62).

How can memory help to integrate all that we are into a fuller sense of our fragile selves...? Well, of course, through the memory work that constitutes the essence of the process of therapy. But also through the telling and re-telling of the memory to others and in our private and public writing. Because, despite all its limitations, all we really have is memory.

An important consideration in the deliberate transmission of any message is the decision about what language to use for the narration. And if the construction of memories is essential for the development of identity, linguistic decisions cannot be sidestepped. “You can never sidestep the question of identity when you learn to live in a new language” as Isabelle de Courtivron (2003, p. 4) says in the new collection of writings by bilingual authors she recently published. In her words, “where does the deepest material of the self, lodge itself if not in language? [...] the elusive search for

oneness, and the haunting quest for the self are perhaps foregrounded more acutely in texts by bilinguals because their authors face an ultimate disconnection. How much more difficult the fragmentation when you don't quite have "the words to say it"?" (p. 4). "Despite the fashionable postmodern emphasis on displacement and dislocation; [...de Courtivron asserts,] despite the intellectual persuasion that trying to find wholeness in our lives is a somewhat obsolete ideal, the anxiety about fragmentation and the search for existential coherence remain primordial human responses. The life-long struggle to reconcile the different pieces of the identity puzzle (or at least to acknowledge that they cannot be reconciled) continues to be a painful and constantly renegotiated process. All the more so when the fragmentation exists in that most intimate of sites –language" (p.2).

For some people, such as me, languages other than English may be the depositories of all those memories, at once trivial and significant, of songs, of poetry, of places, customs and daily events, shared through many years with others who have since disappeared from my life... or stayed behind in places where I am not. I experience a constant need to re-tell because those who are with me in this here and now don't know, don't understand, don't see... How could they? Their memory is of TV programs, sport events, and popular songs are not mine. That is why I always lose at "popular culture" and "sports" when I try to guess these categories while watching Jeopardy on TV during dinner.

How do I explain to people, who matter deeply to me, but who have lived different lives, what the essence of mine is? How do I explain that, in many ways, I am not who I seem to be?

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For as long as I can remember, almost as soon as I learned to write, I have kept some form of diary/journal. Through the years, volumes have accumulated. Reading these studies about the value of writing memories has been a delightful discovery: Apparently, all that pile of what may have seemed more or less useless writing has played a role in helping me manage some of the chaotic events of my life and may even help to prolong it!!!

So, let me tell you a story that might illustrate the workings of writing and memory.

A few years ago I started doing research on female saints' lives, intending to write another academic book; this time about feminist and psychological perspectives on the lives of some of these women, who I consider to be "proto-feminists." But as the book evolved, it became progressively clear that I was writing about the effect on my life of reading these women's stories as a child and about the intricacies of my life that were more or less connected to this reading. Thus, the book I am now writing a memoir, rather than a book about saints that includes my memories.

The more I write in this vein, the more I confirm my belief that although expressive writing and disclosure of memories is important for everyone, for immigrants or anyone who has lived in many places throughout their lives, or has experienced some other profound identity transformation, memory is the only way to re-member all the scattered pieces of life. When powerful dislocations occur in life, memory may be the only tool to recover a sense of self and continuity. Places and people change, the only way of knowing who you are is to remember.

In my case, my individual memories and the collective interpretations of Cuban history have always intermingled in my life. But, while I was witnessing or living through momentous historical events, either I did not have the maturity to understand them or I was too absorbed with living to be able to assess their significance. But, with aging, has come a sense of the importance of some of the historical events I have witnessed and of how entangled they have been with the fabric of my life.

Thus it has been essential for me to examine the role that both historical and personal events have played in the formation of who I am; on the role of memory in preserving and integrating those events into my sense of self and personal identity. Writing about my childhood/early adulthood memories, has become my passion and occupies a lot of my time. Imagine how delighted I am to know that this is not only enjoyable, but also good for my health and it might even help me live longer!!!

Thus I want to share a brief abridged version of one of the pieces I have written. I would let you be the judge of its quality. And yes, I do hope that sharing this with you contributes to increase the meaning my life and to prolong it ☺!!!

Here it is:

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After several failed attempts during previous visits to Paris, on July 2006 I succeeded in visiting the Cemetery of Picpus. It was an important visit: After all, I am buried in the Cemetery of Picpus because Blanche de la Force is buried there. Or, to be exact, the sixteen Carmelite nuns from Compiègne, guillotined on July 17, 1794, in the nearby Place de la Nation, are buried there.

Blanche de la Force existed only in the imaginations of novelist Gertrude von Le Fort and of Georges Bernanos¹, who wrote the play *Dialogues des Carmélites* based on von Le Fort's story of the sixteen Carmelites guillotined during the French Revolution which included the imaginary character of Blanche.

For a few weeks in early 1961, I was Blanche de la Force in a college staging of Bernanos's play, and like her, was guillotined in front of an expectant, surprised, and moved audience.

Hence, the visit to Picpus Cemetery where in 1794 the imaginary Blanche de la Force and the real Carmelites were buried. My motivation always struck me as simple curiosity: having played one of the characters who met their fate in that place it seemed obvious why I was interested in seeing it. But on that Sunday afternoon, as I stared at the locked iron fence separating the ditches where their guillotined bodies were thrown from the rest of the Cemetery, something started happening.

That night I began to write about my visit, discovering in the next few days things about my connection with Blanche de la Force that had been buried in my unconscious for several decades. Odd as it might seem, I realized that the imaginary 18th century Blanche de la Force had been a compelling symbol of the powerful intersection between History with a big H and my personal history, between this personal history and the political history of my homeland.

But, to explain why, I need to tell you a bit more about Blanche's story. In Bernanos's play, Blanche de la Force, a young woman from the nobility, enters the Carmelite convent in Compiègne, near Paris, in the spring of 1789, to hide from her

¹ Francis Poulenc wrote the music for an opera of the same name, premiered at La Scala in 1957, using Bernanos's script as the libretto.

constant fear and anguish, which precede and are exacerbated by the rapidly approaching Revolution. The prioress who received her in the convent dies shortly after Blanche becomes a novice. The death of the old woman is preceded by a horrible agony, during which her terror surprises and offends the sensibility of other nuns. One of them ventures the opinion that the prioress seemed to have died someone else's death.

Outside the convent walls, the events of the Revolution continue at increasing speed. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette are decapitated, along with many members of the nobility. After several years of thousands of daily executions, the Revolution seems to have become nothing but a death machine, destroying the country itself. All religious communities are declared illegal organizations by the revolutionary government and disbanded; the Carmelites of Compiègne are ordered to leave their cloister. Before disbanding, they vow to offer their lives as a sacrificial prayer to end the reign of Terror. Blanche is embarrassed into making the same vow as her sisters although she feels her own terror mount. Taking advantage of the disbanding of the cloister, she runs back to Paris and hides in the basement of her family's abandoned old palace; she is willing to break her vow to avoid death. Soon, Blanche's worst fears materialize: the Carmelites are arrested in Compiègne, condemned to death, and taken to Paris for execution.

On the fateful day, July 17, 1794, as they descend from the cart that has brought them from prison and climb the steps of the scaffold, they sing religious hymns. In the play, as the guillotine falls, one by one, their voices stop abruptly and, suddenly, when there is only one voice left, another voice rises from the crowd assembled to watch the killing. Surprisingly, Blanche, who has come to witness the executions because she could not resist the desire to see her sisters one last time, ascends the steps voluntarily to meet

the death she has so feared until a few hours before. After a lifetime dominated by fright and anguish, Blanche finds the courage to die in the mysterious grace earned for her by her former prioress. Her miserable death had been exchanged for Blanche's.

Whatever we think about the value of offering one's life instead of doing everything possible to escape death, we are left with the feeling that these are heroic deaths. The Carmelites of Compiègne were beatified by Pope Pius X in 1906 in recognition of the willing sacrifice of their lives for the salvation of France.

In April 1961, the mixture of historical truth and fiction in Bernanos's play was particularly moving for our Havana audience, mostly in their early twenties. We too were in the first few years of a Revolution. We did not know where it could take us after the initial hopes created by Fidel Castro's takeover in January 1959. Yet, it was soon apparent that those who did not approve all government actions would be considered "enemies of the Revolution." Some of our friends, their parents, and others had been jailed for expressing misgivings. Bernanos's words gave flesh to our real feelings of doubt, fear, and confusion. But, above all, they assured us that courage and prayers would be rewarded because, in France, in that summer of 1794, shortly after the execution of the Carmelites of Compiègne, the Terror had ended.

Two centuries after the imaginary dialogues in the play, and two weeks after our staging it, we were confronted with what can happen to the enemies of a Revolution. The Bay of Pigs invasion took place on April 17th and our lives came to a halt.

At the beginning of May 1961, riding the wave of revolutionary fervor created by the failed invasion, the government nationalized all private schools and closed the University. We never finished the academic year. Our play was never staged again. Our

young director and his brother went into hiding. Others were jailed, while several of us were at home, waiting in fear for the dreaded knock on the door. Some of our friends and classmates were dead.

While I was living through these events, the French Revolution existed only as a distant historical event I had studied in school. A theater piece based on a distant past evoked but did not fully describe our lives. Today, I know that the historical realities that surrounded the execution of the Carmelites were as dramatic and confusing for their contemporaries as what I was experiencing in 1961.

In Havana in 1961, there were no guillotines. But the cries of “*Paredón!, Paredón!*” –referring to the thick wall in front of which executions by firearms had been taking place since 1959– could be heard in the streets, encouraging and celebrating the death sentences and executions of those considered enemies of the Revolution. The equivalent of the “*Ca ira! ça ira!*” that had been heard in Paris two centuries earlier.

As I wrote in Paris in 2006, I remembered that, ironically, at the time when the events of 1961 were unfolding, I was emerging from a serious emotional crisis that had paralyzed me in the course of the previous eighteen months. Daily panic attacks had prevented me from getting involved in any of the activities that had cost many of my peers so much. Like Blanche de la Force, I was temporarily saved by the pain and humiliation of my debilitating and constant fear. I was completely incapable of doing anything. I knew I had no available strength to contend with the sweeping transformations our daily lives were undergoing. And because I did not feel heroic at all, escape was the only avenue left. Paradoxically, while others were devastated because of

the increasing overpowering force of the Revolution, I was beginning to feel free from my own demons after long and painful months. Like Blanche at the moment of her execution, overcoming fear just when everyone else I knew was immersed in it, was an unexpected grace. Almost as a miracle, at this moment of danger, I managed to set myself free from panic attacks to help others, plan, and act in the last few months I lived in Cuba.

Those of us who left Cuba after the events of 1961 and our production of *Dialogues des Carmélites* were scattered in all directions and lost contact with one another. When Blanche de la Force, crossed that stage at the university theater to be guillotined, I had no inkling that in barely three months I would leave Cuba for good.

Writing about the feelings and memories triggered by my visit to the cemetery of Picpus, my role as Blanche de la Force and the memory of my panic attacks started coming together. For the first time, after several decades, I realized that my fear and anxiety were not different from Blanche's. I guess I had been Blanche in more than one way. Perhaps that is why I was chosen for this role: because my fragility at that moment in my life was so evident that I could become Blanche just by going into my personal experience. The role was me and I could become the role without much effort.

Astonished by the revelation that writing had made me aware of, I spent the following days in Paris getting in touch again with the pain of my losses, the fears—both real and intrapsychic—of my last few months in Cuba, and the mysterious ways in which memory, writing, and life intersect and recreate experiences.

Writing about these events I have realized that in playing Blanche at that particular moment in my life, I reproduced an intertwining of personal story and

historical events. No wonder I have had a very personal attachment to *Dialogues des Carmélites* and Blanche de la Force has stayed with me over the years. I was alive, and on many stages of the world, so was this woman who never existed.

I find it astonishing that it was not until writing about my visit to the Cemetery of Picpus in 2006 that I became conscious that in playing Blanche de la Force in 1961, I was enacting multilayered lifelike truths. For the first time in decades, I realized that this had not been just a stage role for me, that my fears and Blanche's had played against the backdrop of Revolutions which perpetually altered our lives. I could identify so closely with Blanche in the playing of this role because even though the Cuban Revolution did not extinguish my life, it forever changed its course.

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I hope the story I have just presented conveys a sense of what I believe is the significance of writing for self-discovery and a sense of identity and continuity. As Anna Quindlen (2007) said in her recent piece in Newsweek, entitled *Write for your life*—“writing can make pain tolerable, confusion clearer and the self stronger” (p.74). “...Communications give shape to life by describing it for others; they help us make sense of ourselves.” And, as Quindlen says, that “is not just for writers. That is for people.”

I also hope to have convinced you that writing memories and telling your stories is one of the most appealing and effective ways of composing a life and understanding its meaning. As Spanish poet Antonio Machado put it seven decades ago,

*Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar;
al andar se hace camino y, al volver la vista atrás,*

se ve la senda que nunca se ha de volver a pisar...

(Walker —or pilgrim or traveler—there is no road.

You build the road as you walk.

And when you turn to look back,

you see the road you had built,

the path you will never walk on again...).”

It is only memory, despite all its limitations, that makes the road clear.

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