

Memoir and Memory, a Preface

It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.
—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

In 2002, I turned sixty, my daughter married, and I published a memoir titled *Crying at the Movies*. At the time, this seemed like a remarkable concurrence of events—a series of life changes that must be significantly related. But how?

I'm not obsessive about birthdays, but sixty seemed like a milestone, signaling the passage from middle age into what? Old age? Late middle age? As the demographics of aging shift, so do the categories and the lines of demarcation between them.

For my grandmother's generation, sixty was old. With the exception of my paternal grandmother, who lived to be nearly one hundred, all of my grandparents died before the age of seventy. In their sixties, they saw themselves as elderly, and they looked it—silver-haired, somewhat bent, slow-mov-

ing, arthritic. But the average life span in the United States has increased dramatically over the course of the twentieth century—from approximately forty-eight at the beginning to nearly seventy-five by its end. My own mother died at age eighty-two and would have lived even longer if she'd attended more carefully to her health in her middle years.

My father's tragic death at age forty-two was the subject of my memoir, *Crying at the Movies*, in which I explored how feelings of unresolved mourning invaded and disrupted my adult life. Yet, because my dad died so young, he offered me no model—either positive or negative—of aging. If anything, I found myself surprised at having so dramatically outlived him. At sixty, I felt more like his mother than his daughter. What could he have told me, had he lived, that I didn't already know?

All of this is to say that I was radically unprepared to think about aging, yet I was now entering the territory that I had once defined as old. I consoled myself with the thought that I was not in fact yet old, as my life could well extend into my nineties. Who knows, I might even make it to one hundred! I thought of my dad's mother, hoping I'd inherited her genes.

More importantly, I had not thought about the difference between being (or feeling) solidly middle-aged and something else. How was this time of my life different from what had gone before? No matter that everyone said I looked younger than my years. I didn't feel bad about how I looked—at least not yet—the real issue for me was that I didn't know how I felt within. This territory was uncharted. I was beginning a journey that was unlike any other—a journey that had only one destination, no matter how distant or deferred: death.

I'd already survived longer than most people would have at another time or in another (less privileged) part of the world. I'd had rheumatic fever as a child—three times with increasing severity, at a time when penicillin was just beginning to be prescribed for ordinary use—and had two different types of cancer in my adult life, fortunately both curable. Throughout

these various ordeals, I had good health care and excellent doctors, who, in effect, saved my life.

It wasn't as if I was unaware of mortality. Rather, I was just beginning to appreciate my extraordinary good luck in having come so far. But sheer relief was not enough. At sixty, I'd already lived more of my life than I had left to live, which meant that my life was as much grounded in memory as in present or future action. With each forward glance, I was also looking back. If anything, past and present now seemed commingled to the extent that I could no longer separate them. Experience in the moment embraced both in ways that also began to affect my anticipation of the future.

How to give words to such an elusive awareness? Especially now that memory itself is so much in doubt—less a certifiable entity than a mirage or fleeing shadow.

Cognitive neuroscience offers a guide through this phantom world. Personal memory, it tells us, is an absent presence—something that happens, brain-wise, in the moment, but refers to feelings or events that occurred in another time and place. The very process of remembering is fluid and volatile, dependent as it is on the activation of neural pathways in the brain, at the same time that it occurs in response to an absent experience or awareness.

Though it refers to something past, memory can only happen in the present. A neuro-chemical—yet also unreal—reality. You cannot take hold of memory. You can only comprehend it as paradox.

My daughter's wedding, in the early summer of 2002, foregrounded these issues. It was here that I began to think about my age, my past, and my experience in the present differently.

I had been used to thinking of the past as traumatic, something I'd labored to overcome or forget. *Crying at the Movies* explored this reaction and its painful consequences for much of my adult life. Not having mourned my father when he died, I found myself re-experiencing his loss in a variety of displaced ways in my middle years. Concluding *Great*

River Road felt like a relief, but I did not anticipate any radical change in myself or the way that I lived. It was enough, I thought, to have said what I needed to say.

Yet, the very act of having defined the parameters of my childhood loss subtly altered them. Suddenly, my past was accessible to me in a new way—no longer as something to avoid or suppress, but as a field of resonance.

At my daughter's wedding, I sensed this shift without having a language to describe it. Instead, what I felt was a kind of happiness I'd not experienced since I was a child. I was, for a brief though memorable period of time, euphoric. Yet, I was also immersed in, and suffused by, memory. My pleasure in the moment was underpinned and enriched by the density of my reminiscences. It was as if I lived simultaneously in the present and the past, neither vying with the other, but rather each contributing to something vibrantly new.

Although the euphoria faded, the feeling of inner change did not. Somehow, without conscious effort, my life had taken an unexpected turn. It was as if I'd been released from tragedy into a lighter, more comic mode—as in one of Shakespeare's late plays, where storm and shipwreck lead not to death and destruction but to reconciliation and transformation.

Lines from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* came to mind—where Ariel sings to comfort Ferdinand, who believes his father drowned.

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

When I first encountered this play, I took these lines personally. Drowning was *my* father's fate. Yet, I could not picture anything beautiful emerging from such a terrible story. Now I began to reconsider.

My father's body would never turn into anything other than what it was: his decomposing remains. But perhaps his lifeline, as represented in me, might have another trajectory? And what about memory, so seemingly fixed, yet also so flirty, so malleable?

At the root of the word memory—which gives rise to such words as commemorate, memorial, and memoir—lies the Latin *memor*, meaning to be mindful. Also the Old English *murnan*, meaning to remember sorrowfully, or to grieve. Mindfulness and mourning. Another conundrum.

To be mindful—that is to say fully present in the moment (to borrow the language of mindfulness meditation)—may also include remembering, which is to say being aware of what is not present, hence open to loss. Conversely, to remember is to re-member, to reconstruct or recreate, thus generating a new state of consciousness. Not only can you simultaneously inhabit the seemingly fixed past and the fluidly volatile present, but by that very act of mind you may alter both.

When I began writing *Great River Road*, I had something like a vision, not the transcendent kind where you are taken out of yourself and rapt into another world, but rather something like a shift of focus or attention—so mundane that it seemed at first more like an idea than a vision, yet so marvelous that it also felt like a revelation.

This vision had to do with memory and with a change in relation to my past that I began to experience as a result of writing *Crying at the Movies*. It came to me as a feeling of euphoria in the summer of 2002. It seems important to me now that this vision came to me in the form of happiness—as a feeling of supreme well-being coupled with a sense that my entire history was enfolded in the present moment. So powerful was this feeling that I even had a fleeting sense of destiny, as if all the scattered and seemingly unrelated parts of my life had conspired to lead me to this one encompassing awareness.