

# *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories*

*How unforgettable moments  
help us understand the meaning  
of our lives*

*David B. Pillemer*



Momentous  
Events,  
*Vivid*  
Memories

David B. Pillemer

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## Chapter 1

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# Personal Event Memories

A HUMAN LIFE is composed of an unending stream of particular instances. As I write this sentence, my behavior and thoughts are influenced by attitudes and skills that grew out of an accumulation of countless past learning experiences, experiences that are for the most part no longer identifiable as individual lived episodes. But *right now*, the writing is taking place in a particular location (my office), at a particular time (2:30 in the afternoon), accompanied by a particular set of feelings, perceptions, and bodily sensations (blue sky and sun visible from my window, sore jaw from recent surgery). Will this singular moment, marking the beginning of writing the first chapter of a book, be preserved in memory, or will it suffer the fate of most experiences and drift from consciousness into oblivion? More generally, what determines whether a pinpointed life event will persist in memory, will remain accessible to conscious awareness, and will continue to influence the life course days, months, or years after its initial occurrence?

For truly momentous events, memory longevity is expected. A person is likely to remember, for example, an episode in which his or her life was in danger, even if the event occurred long ago. Howard Hoffman's oral history of his experiences as a soldier in World War II included a life-threatening encounter that happened 35 years earlier:

I was in a truck and I was sitting in the cab of the truck, and we were driving along a road, our whole convoy, when I looked straight in front of me, and I see a plane coming down to make a strafing run, and it's a German plane, and it's coming down very, very low, just exactly like what you always see in the movies. . . It made two runs, and between the first and the second run a lot of the guys ran into a house that was right by the side of the road. I was planning to run to the house, but for some reason I didn't, and the plane made a second run and this time I just maybe took one shot at it when it was pretty far in front of me and then I could see the bullets coming down. . . I saw a



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puff of smoke six inches from my foot. . . It made that run and then disappeared, and I went on into the house and the guys in there had been watching through the window, and they said, "Jesus Christ, I thought you were hit. I saw those shells coming down right next to you and I thought I saw one hit you." That's how close it was, but I hadn't been hit. (Hoffman and Hoffman, 1990, pp. 113–114)

When extraordinary danger or death strikes a loved one rather than oneself, memories can be similarly vivid and long-lasting. Henri Benchoan traveled to Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp, some 50 years after his mother was sent to her death there. He was 8 years old when he saw his mother for the last time: "We were at the police station all morning. There was lots of confusion. Suddenly my mother, sensing the danger, said to me, 'Take your brother and get out fast.' [From a nearby doorway, Henri and his brother watched his mother board a bus that took her to the train to Auschwitz.] She saw us and waved. I will never forget the look on her face" ("French Jews' Kin Retrace Rail Journey to Auschwitz," 1992, p. 12; no author).

Just as one would expect to be revisited by vivid mental images of a direct threat to one's own life or the life of a significant other, it is commonplace to remember the death of a beloved public figure. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 is the most celebrated example, but it is by no means unique. The renowned social reformer Jane Addams recounted how as a young child she heard the news of Lincoln's assassination:

Although I was but four and a half years old when Lincoln died, I distinctly remember the day when I found on our two white gate posts American flags companioned with black. I tumbled down on the harsh gravel walk in my eager rush into the house to inquire what they were "there for." To my amazement I found my father in tears, something that I had never seen before, having assumed, as all children do, that grown-up people never cried. The two flags, my father's tears and his impressive statement that the greatest man in the world had died, constituted my initiation, my baptism, as it were, into the thrilling and solemn interests of a world lying quite outside the two white gate posts. (Addams, 1992, pp. 507–508)

Not all vivid and persistent memories involve intense shock, danger, or death. Most graduates can recall specific influential episodes from their college years (Pillemer, Picariello, Law, and Reichman, 1996), most women can recall the details of their first menstrual period (Pillemer, Koff, Rhinehart, and Rierdan, 1987), and most married couples can recount the moment when they first met (Belove, 1980). At an interview



for a special tribute to Benny Goodman, Helen Ward, a vocalist with the famous swing band led by Goodman, reported a vivid memory of a marriage proposal she had received decades earlier:

I remember my date taking me to the Brown Derby and we're sitting there talking and Benny [Goodman] leans over to Bill—that was my date's name—and says, "You know I'm going to marry that girl." And I'm sitting there like this. And my friend looks at me—What the heck's going on there? Bill took me home. Before I knew it, there's a ring at the doorbell. And it's Benny. And I let him in. And I'll never forget this. I'm, I'm sitting on the couch and Benny's standing in front of me and he's saying, "I want to marry you." And now no prelude, no inkling, no, out of left field, "Want to marry you." He convinced me to go East with him. (O. Jacoby, 1986)

Still other memories record personal milestones or turning points. A select few episodes come to be perceived as "originating events" (Pillemer et al., 1996) or "self-defining memories" (Singer and Salovey, 1993), moments that are believed to have profoundly influenced the life course. Photographer Margaret Bourke-White experienced such a moment in childhood:

Now and then Father put the drafting tools aside and took me with him on trips to factories where he was supervising the setting up of his presses. One day, in the plant in Dunellen, New Jersey. . .I saw a foundry for the first time. I remember climbing with him to a sooty balcony and looking down into the mysterious depths below. "Wait," Father said, and then in a rush the blackness was broken by a sudden magic of flowing metal and flying sparks. I can hardly describe my joy. To me at that age, a foundry represented the beginning and end of all beauty. Later when I became a photographer, with that instinctive desire that photographers have to show their world to others, this memory was so vivid and so alive that it shaped the whole course of my career. (Bourke-White, 1992, p. 425)

Although the topics represented in this sample of memories are diverse, the narratives share several basic characteristics: they each describe a circumscribed, one-moment-in-time event rather than an extended time period or series of repeated experiences; they focus on the rememberer's personal circumstances at the time of the event, including what was seen, heard, thought, and felt; they contain many specific details, such as direct quotations and descriptions of physical surroundings; and they have retained their vivid, life-like quality through the years. The term *personal event memory* captures these general characteristics, and it will be used in a somewhat informal sense until a more formal definition is offered in Chapter 2.



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All readers will be able to identify events from their own pasts that fit this characterization. Indeed, when in our everyday lives we say that we clearly “remember” a specific past event, we usually mean that we can produce a detailed narrative description of the episode as it was personally experienced. Considering the ubiquitous nature of this type of remembering, one might expect it to be a primary research topic for cognitive psychology in general and the study of memory in particular. This is not the case. Another shared characteristic of personal event memories is that they have until very recently been neglected by much of the scientific community. Before developing a case for increased scientific emphasis on memories of specific life events, this pervasive earlier neglect must be addressed.

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#### Neglect of Specific Life Episodes in Cognitive Psychology

Although studies of memory have long been a part of cognitive psychology, specific life episodes have rarely been the focus of these efforts. Rather, the primary goal was, and for the most part still is, to discover general rules about how people learn, solve problems, and form concepts. Cognitive psychologists can certainly point to hundreds of experimental studies of episodic memory, but the to-be-remembered “episodes” in these studies typically are words, numbers, or nonsense syllables presented to undergraduate students under controlled laboratory conditions. According to Endel Tulving (1983), perhaps the world’s leading authority on experimental studies of episodic memory, “Experiments done in the past *can* be interpreted as episodic- rather than semantic-memory experiments . . . but they were not designed as part of a grand plan to understand how people remember personal experiences” (p. 129). Tulving observed that “It looks almost as if there was something basically incompatible between human cognition as seen by contemporary cognitive psychology and the human experience that characterizes one of the most advanced forms of cognition, episodic memory” (p. 125).

Why have mainstream cognitive psychologists been content to study memory for stimuli presented experimentally, without broadening the scope of investigation to include personal event memories? Many cognitivists share the belief that psychological phenomena should be ex-



amined under controlled laboratory conditions; only then can underlying memory processes or mechanisms be isolated and described. “Everyday memory research . . . may alert psychologists to new phenomena, but progress in understanding them will depend on what experimental control is brought to bear, whether inside or outside the laboratory” (Roediger, 1991, p. 40).

The emphasis on experimental control is accompanied by an almost exclusive focus on memory accuracy as the outcome of interest. When the experimenter chooses the to-be-remembered materials and presents them to the “subject” in a laboratory setting, memory can be assessed “objectively” by comparing the stimulus input to the memory output. In contrast, personal life episodes are idiosyncratic, emotion-laden, and messy, occurring as they do within the ongoing flow of daily activities. They are uncomfortably similar to psychoanalytic case descriptions, a frequent object of disdain within scientific psychology. According to this view, personal memories are interesting as anecdotes and are a valuable component of autobiography, literature, and some forms of psychotherapy, but they lack the necessary qualities for truly scientific study.

Another reason personal memories have been given short shrift is the higher priority psychologists place on acquiring general knowledge than on remembering and learning from particular episodes. The dominance of the general over the specific led Jacoby, Marriott, and Collins to name the last 20 years the “abstractionist period” in the history of psychology (1990, p. 111). Once one adopts the commonsense view that “many of the important things in human experience are ongoing situations rather than single events” (Neisser, 1985, p. 274), or that “knowledge of the world, by and large, is more useful to people than are personal memories” (Tulving, 1983, p. 52), then the most important subject of scientific inquiry is how the ongoing flow of particulars that confront consciousness becomes transformed into useful abstractions: “even undergraduates understand that the truly interesting question is how we ever come to represent abstractions from the particular world in which we live—to develop categories and impressions of *types* of people, *types* of situations, and so on” (Srull and Wyer, 1990, p. 166).

The emphasis on learning that is general rather than situation-specific is reflected by the research focus in cognitive psychology on abstract knowledge structures, including schemas and scripts (Abelson, 1981). Much of the time our behaviors are indeed guided by generalized, over-



learned expectations or scripts for how to act in particular settings, such as restaurants or classrooms, not by memories of specific past experiences in those settings. One would expect the human memory system to reflect this priority of the general: “the basic episodic memory system is part of a general mammalian learning-memory adaptive function for guiding present action and predicting future outcomes. The most useful memory for this function is generic memory for routines that fit recurrent situations, that is, a general event schema (or script) memory system” (Nelson, 1993, p. 11).

Information-processing approaches to understanding the mind, with their reliance on the computer analogy, have given top priority to explaining the acquisition of abstract knowledge structures. Because memory in computers is limited, it is necessary to economize on storage rather than keep detailed records of specific instances (Smith, 1990). From this perspective, the theoretical and programming challenge is to explain how particular episodes can be transformed into generally applicable abstract knowledge structures, such as prototypes, concepts, and schemas. Because the information-processing approach coincides with our intuitions about how an efficient memory storage system should work, the priority of the abstract has gone unchallenged. “If we see a hundred dogs and each has four legs it just seems like common sense to ‘store that information only once’. . . To change our thinking and consider memory storage as virtually unlimited is not easy” (Smith, 1990, p. 25).

The dominance of the general over the specific is not limited to academic theory-building. The acquisition of abstract, general-purpose knowledge structures is a primary research topic within applied psychology. Although most readers will be able to identify particular educational experiences that influenced their lives—words of support from a valued teacher, a harsh reprimand, an inspirational lecture or assignment, or an unusually successful or disastrous performance on an exam or paper—educational researchers have paid scant attention to such “educational episodes,” specific moments of learning or insight that occur in educational contexts (Pillemer et al., 1996). Research preferences in education reflect instead the high value placed on the acquisition of general knowledge: “Children and people of all ages go to school in order to learn skills and knowledges that they need for life. They do not go to school in order to acquire a storehouse of temporally dated personal memories” (Tulving, 1983, p. 51).



A final underlying reason why the idea that specific episodes can profoundly influence the life course has captured only a modest amount of scientific interest and attention is that this idea runs counter to the prevailing (and reassuring) view that life is thematic, continuous, and predictable. For the most part, the core of personality and progression of the life course are believed to be consistent over time, resilient to abrupt changes and unforeseen events. Yet this book contains abundant and multifarious examples of singular events that are represented in memory as profoundly life-affecting and even life-altering. If one scathing comment from a professor can appear to prompt a change in a student's choice of a major, if one colossal mis-step on the baseball field can send the life of a professional athlete into a downward spiral, or if one forceful social rejection in childhood can linger in memory and cast a negative tint over subsequent interpersonal interactions, then life plans are alarmingly vulnerable to unexpected and disquieting interruption and people may inadvertently affect others' lives in negative ways. The potential power of the specific may be an unpalatable idea to many, but it is an idea that is nevertheless worthy of serious scholarly attention and scientific investigation.

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### The Specific Episode in Memory Research

The scientific status of personal event memories has risen in recent years as a result of new theoretical and empirical advances in several research domains: memory in natural contexts, narrative studies, and experimental psychology.

#### Memory in Natural Contexts

Two publication events were central to the growth of interest in personal memory among cognitive psychologists: Roger Brown and James Kulik's famous paper on "flashbulb memories," published in 1977, and Ulric Neisser's influential edited volume, *Memory Observed*, published in 1982. Brown and Kulik's paper was unique in several respects. They analyzed memories of a number of different shocking and consequential public events, such as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Brown and Kulik were centrally interested in people's memories of their own personal circumstances when they "heard the news,"



rather than memory for factual, verifiable public information about the newsworthy events. The researchers obtained memories and quantitative ratings of reactions to the remembered events from 80 adults. Almost all of the respondents remembered how they learned that Kennedy had been assassinated, and the vivid details that characterized the memory narratives suggested the photographic “flashbulb” metaphor. Even though it was not possible to assess memory accuracy, Brown and Kulik accepted the respondents’ recollections as data worthy of study in their own right. The relatively large sample size enabled Brown and Kulik to go beyond anecdotal reporting and to conduct statistical tests of several hypotheses; for example, events that respondents rated as more consequential (such as the Kennedy assassination) were remembered in greater detail than events they rated as less consequential (such as the 1975 assassination attempt on President Gerald Ford).

Because Brown and Kulik’s paper was published in the respected journal *Cognition*, it received attention from cognitive psychologists even though it broke sharply with the usual emphasis on laboratory control and assessment of memory accuracy. Moreover, flashbulb memories were so easily recognized, so universally experienced, that they were difficult to dismiss out of hand. Virtually every American who was at least of school age in 1963 had his or her *own* flashbulb memory of the Kennedy assassination. Famous and ordinary people alike were dramatically affected by the news, and their memories persisted for years with little loss of clarity. Opera singer Robert Merrill, for example, remembered being in a restaurant. “The waiter said, ‘Sir, I must tell you that your President Kennedy has been killed.’ I choked. His shaking hand dropped the chocolate on Marion’s white dress” (Peyer and Seely, 1993). Marylyn Moore, homeless when the following memory was elicited 30 years after the assassination, was a Boston homemaker in 1963:

I was at a drugstore in the South End getting an ice cream when the radio announced that Kennedy was shot. Right away I started praying and ran home to the Lennox Street projects where I lived. I started crying and everyone came into the halls crying. I went downtown to Filene’s Basement [discount retail store] afterwards to do some shopping, and everyone’s eyes were puffy. It was like going to a wake. I was pulling on a piece of clothing that another woman was holding onto. We both looked at each other and started crying. She was white. We had heard that Kennedy had died, and we started holding hands. (Tlumacki, 1993)



Surely there must be a scientific explanation for this ubiquitous phenomenon, and examining personal memories of contemporary public tragedies was an obvious research strategy to follow.

Brown and Kulik's paper was followed closely by Neisser's provocative *Memory Observed* (1982). Neisser presented examples of research conducted outside the laboratory and case studies of interesting memory phenomena. His criticism of traditional laboratory-based memory research included this highly publicized charge: "If X is an interesting or socially significant aspect of memory, then psychologists have hardly ever studied X" (p. 4). Neisser's stature made the claim difficult to dismiss out of hand. It was not leveled by a representative of "soft" psychology, but by a leader in the field of cognition: in 1967 Neisser had written an extremely influential book, *Cognitive Psychology*, which helped to establish the field as it currently exists. Cognitive psychologists who had closeted their interest in memories of personal life episodes or had struggled to translate their unconventional ideas into acceptable research designs welcomed Neisser's bravado and his manifesto was readily adopted. Researchers who continued to believe in the inherent superiority of traditional laboratory approaches did not remain silent for long; the counterattack in Banaji and Crowder's 1989 paper, "The Bankruptcy of Everyday Memory," had an edge as sharp as Neisser's contentious statements.

### Narrative Studies

The sudden rise in research on memory in natural contexts, including remembered personal life episodes, has not occurred in a vacuum. The study of narrative has experienced a similarly dramatic increase. The virtues of examining life narratives or stories have been extolled in recent books (Britton and Pellegrini, 1990; Bruner, 1986, 1990; Josselson and Lieblich, 1993; McAdams, 1993; Schank, 1990; Singer and Salovey, 1993) and academic journals (Bruner, 1987; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Howard, 1991; Vitz, 1990). Human experience is conceived as a process of constructing and reconstructing a life narrative: "'Life' in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as a 'narrative' is" (Bruner, 1987, p. 13). If one accepts the premise that "a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (Bruner, 1987, p. 31), then the ground rules for scholarly



analysis are shifted. According to Singer and Salovey (1993), "What is most intriguing to us about the self is that identity may be as determined by events we believe happened to us as ones that did" (p. 157). The concern with the *accuracy* of memories, so prevalent in experimental cognitive psychology, gives way to an emphasis on the person's *beliefs* about what happened: psychic reality is as important as historical truth.

The narrative movement also has strong adherents within the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic communities (see White and Epston, 1990). Donald Spence's influential book, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth* (1982), identified two views of memory as it is expressed in therapy. The first view assumes that objective truth is discoverable in the patient's life story, and that a goal of the therapy is to get closer and closer to this historical truth. The second view assumes that the patient's story is a construction in which the teller *creates* a coherent and convincing personal history. Spence argued that the patient's created narrative account is "truthful," but that its truth value does not lie in its historical accuracy. "There seems no doubt that a well-constructed story possesses a kind of narrative truth that is real and immediate and carries an important significance for the process of therapeutic change. Although Freud would later argue that every effective interpretation must also contain a piece of historical truth, it is by no means certain whether this is always the case; narrative truth by itself seems to have a significant impact on the clinical process" (pp. 21–22). Narrative truth is defined as "the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction; it depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality" (p. 31). When we arrive at the historical truth, our description of a prior event is based on the "facts"; when we arrive at the narrative truth, our explanation carries "conviction."

In the psychotherapeutic milieu, creating narrative truth may be more important than establishing historical truth: "narrative truth has a special significance in its own right . . . making contact with the actual past may be of far less significance than creating a coherent and consistent account of a particular set of events" (Spence, 1982, p. 28). In a similar vein, Howard (1991) characterized psychotherapy as "exercises in story repair" (p. 194). If a life story can be truthful even if it does not conform perfectly to the historical past, then personal memories composing a life history are psychologically valid objects of analysis in their



own right. "Once a given construction has acquired narrative truth, it becomes just as real as any other kind of truth" (Spence, 1982, p. 31).

From an applied standpoint, narratives describing personal experiences can offer valuable truths or lessons for practitioners (Pillemer et al., 1996). Sarason (1993) argued that descriptions of personal experience could enrich analyses of educational policy: "In fact, in the entire literature, reference to personal experience is very rare. I'm quite aware of the arguments against using personal experience to prove anything or as a basis for a policy recommendation. But what if there are certain types of personal experiences that are so general, so illuminating, so important that they should not be dismissed on grounds of subjectivity?" (p. 10). Similarly, Carter (1993) extolled the educational value of personal narratives, their lack of quantitative rigor notwithstanding: "these stories capture, more than scores or mathematical formulae ever can, the richness and indeterminacy of our experiences as teachers and the complexity of our understandings of what teaching is and how others can be prepared to engage in this profession" (p. 5).

The force of the narrative movement has been strengthened greatly by the stature of its outspoken proponent, Jerome Bruner, within the field of scientific psychology. Narrative analysis itself is not new; Labov, for example, had conducted detailed analyses of memories of specific life episodes decades earlier (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). But Bruner, like Neisser, was not an outsider; he was a prominent player in the cognitive revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Bruner had a track record of anticipating major shifts in interest and practice within psychology. He and the prominent experimental psychologist George Miller had co-founded the influential Harvard Center for Cognitive Studies in 1960. In recent publications Bruner strongly endorsed the study of lives through autobiography—"an account of what one thinks one did in what settings in what ways for what felt reasons"—in which belief rather than accuracy is the primary consideration. "It does not matter whether the account conforms to what others might say who were witnesses, nor are we in pursuit of such ontologically obscure issues as whether the account is 'self-deceptive' or 'true.' Our interest, rather, is only in what the person thought he did, what he thought he was doing it for, what kinds of plights he thought he was in, and so on" (1990, pp. 119–120). Within this conceptualization, memories of specific life episodes are psychologically real entities that are worthy of study independently of their objective truth value.