

They're only memories

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Opinion

To be alive is to have a past. Our only choice is whether we will repress or re-create the past. Childhood may be distant, but it is never quite lost; as full grown men and women we carry tiny laughing and whimpering children around inside us. We both repress the past and continue to fight its wars with new personnel or we invite it into awareness so that we may see how it has shaped the present.

--Sam Keen, *Your Mythic Journey*

This is my thirty-seventh year as a psychotherapist, and I have treated thousands of people, many of those in the stage of life I am now calling later maturity. One experience my clients all have in common is that they are feeling a great deal of emotional pain. I usually start by asking what brings them to my office and they begin to tell the story that is their life or some significant part of it. As they tell me of the recent events that have brought them to this particular present, I inquire about earlier experiences, and we go further back into their pasts. To fully understand the problems they face I must get an understanding of where they have been, their life experience, the traumas and triumphs that constitute their story.

What I most often find is that, though my clients may track the beginning of their problems to more recent challenges, the roots of their suffering are in events that happened many years before. More than that, they are suffering from the negative beliefs these events engendered, often without awareness of their cause. As we move into the second half of life, I think we are more determined than ever not to keep living exactly as we have lived, under the influence of the same fears and hindrances that have kept us from fulfillment in the past. It may be harder than ever to accept that, even 50, or 60, or 70 years into this life, we continue to repeat the past, or live out patterns of behavior established in our earlier years. Once we recognize it, we may face the sinking feeling that no matter what we do, we can never be free of the past's powerful grip.

Unless we've done a fair amount of introspection, either in therapy or on our own, we may not be consciously aware that the way we react to others now is the result of conditioning in childhood. Even when we understand this in a global sense, it's very hard to look at the ways our core beliefs about ourselves, the world, relationships, success and failure have also been conditioned in childhood. To fully recognize that you are reacting to your wife or husband with the beliefs and responses of an eight-year-old is difficult to accept. But that is often the case. Are we doomed or is Keen right that we still have the opportunity to "re-create the past" in the way we currently live our lives? When the past is repressed, it comes out in the present in the form of transference. This happens when we unconsciously see our parent's face, or the face of another significant adult, in the face of someone in the present, when we hear our parent's words rather than the words currently being spoken. And because our brains interpret the information our senses pick up, it is literally possible to re-live our past in the present, never knowing that we are completely out of sequence in terms of person, place or time. We see and hear with our senses but we interpret what we see and what we hear instantaneously

through the filters of our past. We are never completely free from transference, but we can become more aware of it. A friend of mine tells me that she sometimes says to her husband in the heat of an argument, "How old are you right now, because I feel about four years old." He'll respond, "Twelve, I guess I'm about twelve." Then they both laugh and are able to consider their current situation from a cleaner, more present day perspective.

David Richo writes in *When the Past is Present*, "Transference is an unconscious displacement of feelings, attitudes, expectations, perceptions, reactions, beliefs, and judgments that were appropriate to former figures in our lives, mostly parents, onto people in the present." So then, if transference is such a powerful force, why have I titled this chapter "They're Only Memories"? Because, it is important to recognize that the hurts and wounds of childhood, just like the hurts and wounds of former relationships, ultimately only exist in the form of memories, which we can acknowledge as belonging to the past. Only by consciously separating past from present can we free ourselves from ingrained and repetitive behaviors and reactions.

This kind of conscious change can be a daunting task. The problem is threefold. One, these bits of information lay in the subconscious, and out of our immediate awareness. In terms of neurological processing abilities, the subconscious mind is millions of times more powerful than the conscious mind. Cellular biologist Bruce Lipton, in *The Biology of Belief*, reports that the subconscious mind can process 20,000,000 environmental stimuli per second in contrast to the 40 environmental stimuli the conscious mind can process in the same second. Two, when activated by a perceived "threat," the subconscious mind reacts before we can think it through consciously. The brain's reaction to this threat, whether perceived or real, is to activate the stress response, or what we commonly call the flight-or-fight response. This automatic response can take the form of physical action or behavioral reactions, which have been conditioned in childhood.

“The fundamental behaviors, beliefs and attitudes we observe in our parents,” writes Lipton, “become ‘hard-wired’ as synaptic pathways in our subconscious minds. Once programed into the subconscious mind, they control our biology for the rest of our lives. . . unless we can figure out a way to reprogram them.” He goes on to speak to the verbal abuses of parents and other authority figures in stating, “These verbal abuses become defined as ‘truths’ that unconsciously shape the behavior and potential of the child throughout life.”² Unfortunately then, the stress response can be turned on by anything that triggers a memory of an unhappy or traumatic past event, and the repetitive turning on and off of this response eventually leads to both physical and emotional problems and finally, even though they are seriously outdated and flawed, we hold onto these previously conditioned attitudes and beliefs because they *seem* to comprise our identity; we think that our *story* is who we really *are*.

The truth is that even when the negative and limiting beliefs about the world and other people, and the way we automatically react when “our buttons are pushed,” no longer serve us well, it can be more comfortable to hold onto a distorted belief than to experience the anxiety created by the possibility of change. Even if those distorted beliefs and behavior patterns have damaged our relationships, led to failure in the professional arena, and seem inextricably intertwined with our anxiety or depression, changing them can feel scarier than living with the familiar.

In spite of the inherent difficulties, I am issuing a challenge to all of us in this stage of life to activate the courage needed to face those left-over heartaches from the past, to create a method to work through the feelings and beliefs still attached to them, and to learn to let go of them so that we can get on with our lives. When this is done, it is possible to re-experience these memories as just that: only memories that need not have power over us anymore. We can learn to reflect upon our history as just events, events that no longer carry the hurt and anger they once did. Dr. Dan Siegel, Executive director of the Mindsight Institute, states, “When unresolved issues are writing our life story, we are not our own autobiographers; we are merely recorders of how the past continues, often without our awareness, to intrude upon our present experience and shape our future directions.”

To give you an idea of how the past can continue to intrude upon a person’s present experience, let me recount to you my own story. I was a ten-year-old boy, about to experience the major trauma of my childhood.

I grew up with an angry father, who might now be regarded as abusive. He used switches and his belt to keep me terrified of him and willing to do whatever he said. My mother, much younger than he, forged her own form of escape through prescription drugs which she surreptitiously parceled out from her own mother-in-law’s supply. My grandmother was registered as addicted to codeine for migraine headaches, and my mother regularly pilfered part of these drugs to cope with her own emotional pain. It was only much later I learned that when my sister and I were dropped off at the local five and dime it was to give my mother the time she needed to take part of the codeine, which came in small packets of powder, for herself. When the drugs weren’t enough, our mom attempted suicide by pulling an electric radio into her bath.

The details remain vivid. It was the summer of my tenth year. Things weren’t going well for my family, but that wasn’t unusual. We were struggling to survive financially. My dad, who worked as an airplane mechanic for Lockheed, had just recently found out that my mother had spent most of the money in the bank to pay for the

extra prescriptions now needed to make up for what she had taken. Violent arguments and incriminations followed his discovery, as well as a litter of torn check stubs that I can still see strewn across the floor. I didn’t exactly know what all of this meant, but I knew it was bad, and I was scared to death of what might come. Then, on a Friday afternoon, at about 4:30 or so, my mother went in to take a bath. This in itself was unusual for her because my father would return from work at about 5:00, and normally she would have been preparing dinner. That time of day was already electric with tension and laden with anxiety for me, because my dad’s arrival often meant sudden and unpredictable fury if I hadn’t done just what he had ordered before leaving that morning. But that day’s electricity was destined for a different purpose, for out of desperation, anger, and vindictiveness, my mother was preparing to pull our little Zenith table radio into the tub to electrocute herself. I guess she intended the message for my father as a way of punishing him, to make him blame himself and feel responsible for her death, but I got a host of mordant messages that day, that have haunted me ever since: messages about love and relationships, about money, and about my worthiness as a person. I could go on at length about the negative beliefs that were formed that day, but I’ve gotten ahead of myself.

An ominous sense of apprehension began to fill me as my dad came into the house and asked about my mother’s whereabouts. I don’t remember whether my sister or I told him, but I do remember him calling for her at the bathroom door. When she did not respond, fear gripped me. As fate would have it, the knob on the outside of that door, like many things in that awful house where I grew up, was broken. As he pounded and yelled, I ran from the house into the yard. In utter terror I waited, just as I was to wait many other times when life and death hung in the balance for my mother, trying not to think about what was happening behind that bathroom door. Whatever force pulled me back inside my house remains a mystery, but I knew I had to go back in.

When I got into the house again, I saw my mother stretched out in the living room and my father desperately trying to revive her. My father looked up at me with that same fire I had seen so many times in his eyes, and spat out, “Where the hell have you been?” My mind raced, my heart thundered. I had no answer. I snapped out of it instantly as my dad yelled at me to go to the neighbors’ house and phone for an ambulance, something I had never done before. In fact, I’d only used a phone on one other occasion. Remember, those were not the days when most ten-year-olds carried their own cell phones. Those were the days when having a phone in your house was a luxury, not the necessity it is today, and we were too poor to have one. Now I had to run down the street to make that horrible call. And run I did, frantically, the half block to the only friendly neighbors we had, where I asked politely to use their phone and attempted to get somebody to send an ambulance to our house. Because my voice was obviously that of a young boy, the operator refused to believe me and asked for an adult. I put the phone down wondering if my mother would die because of my delay. Knowing that I had failed, I had to run back and face my father for a second time.

I ran back to the same terrifying scene of my father attempting CPR and my sister kneeling silently alongside, and tried to explain what had happened. “You get back there,” my dad screamed, “and get that ambulance here.” I flew back to the neighbor’s house, my heart pounding in my ears. I didn’t know if I was more afraid of my mother dying on the living room floor or my father waiting to kill me if I failed again. When I arrived, breathless and dripping sweat, my neighbors caught me in flight, telling me that they had vouched for me

with the operator and an ambulance was on its way. I still remember my sweet neighbor, in her southern drawl saying, "If that boy says it happened, then it happened!"

After a flurry of questions about what had actually happened, how it happened, and whether she was alive or not, none of which I could answer, I again turned and ran home. My mind raced with these new questions, giving shape to vague impressions I already had, and my ears rang with the whine of sirens as an ambulance mercifully pulled in front of the chain link fence that separated our house from the rest of the neighborhood, and in fact, the rest of the world.

Where were our Dobermans and why weren't they barking? The dogs that made our yard feel so dangerous to the rest of the neighborhood had been put in the garage, I guess by my sister. I waited at the gate while the paramedics went in, followed them and hovered over and around my mother while they tended to her, asking my father questions, the answers to which I don't remember hearing. I was either too stunned to hear his answers or have blocked those memories out. Finally, I saw them wrap her in a blanket, strap her to a stretcher, and put her into the ambulance. Not one tear had come from my eyes. I didn't really know what had happened or what would happen, but I knew my mother was miraculously alive. I couldn't speak. I was afraid to look at anybody, lest they see my weakness, my fear, and the emerging feelings that if my mother could abandon me in this way, did she really love me after all? Once in the back yard again, my sister covered her face and cried out, "she tried to kill herself," and the answers to all my questions crystallized around that shocking declaration. I stood alone in the shadows of the house and felt an intense pain that I could not fully understand.

My mother lived that day, but this event changed the lives of a then ten-year-old boy and his thirteen-year-old sister in ways that are still being made evident as they live on into their seventies. Through the rest of my childhood and adolescence, I lived in constant fear that my mother would try it again. That night, when my father and sister and I went to see her in the hospital, my mother called me to her bedside and whispered in my ear, "What floor are we on?" I thought that she was going to reassure me that things were ok and that she would not try to kill herself again. Instead she said something which only intensified the fears that had been building for many years. The message I got was, "I'm not sorry and I'm not sure I won't try it again." Luckily, the tiny hospital in Northridge had only one floor, but I knew what she meant. I never told my sister or my father of my mother's request that evening, but it is another trauma that scarred me deeply. When she came home I would check the number of razor blades in the drawer after every time she used the bathroom. As I grew older and would go out at night, I always came home early so that I could be there if there was another suicide attempt. Though the failure of this first attempt seemed to take all the steam out of her desperation, at least for a while, it in no way reduced the anxiety that I had experienced through most of my childhood and adolescence, and experience at lesser levels to this day. Long before this trauma, I was frightened by the constant arguments between my mother and father, the violent fist fights my father had with his brother, Ralph, and the rage that filled my father's eyes when he was angry with me or when he would whip me. I grew up in a home addicted to violence and I was always afraid that someone, maybe even I, would be killed. My fears--and consequent feelings of responsibility for my mother--lasted until the day, when out of a different kind of desperation, that of pain and illness, she successfully completed that which she had begun nineteen years earlier.

My sister met me at the door of our old home and told me that our mother, now 52 years old, had indeed, committed suicide. This time she had made sure she wouldn't fail; she had used a razor blade, taken pills and turned on the gas. As she was still living with my father, she scribbled a final note for him: "Can you ever forgive me?" was all it said. She left no note for my sister and me. My mother's suicide, like most suicides, lays waste to the family left behind.

Despite my mother's first suicide attempt, my father's rage and violence, and other associated traumas that came later in our childhoods, my sister and I, bearing the wounds of our dysfunctional family, grew into adulthood. I married at 23--far too young for me--hoping to escape some of the demons of anxiety and depression that followed me. My mistrust of women, my fear that any woman I loved would, in some way, leave me, and my belief that I really didn't deserve love played havoc with our relationship, all contributing to the dissolution of our marriage after 15 tumultuous years. However, two very important and life-altering events happened: the birth of my son and many years of serious therapy.

Being in weekly individual and group therapy with an excellent therapist helped me to confront my fears, learn how to manage my depression, and start to understand myself for the first time. I began to integrate all the painful experiences of my childhood, learned to take responsibility for the problems that were mine, and let go of those that belonged to someone else. I never dreamed that a decade later, I would become a therapist myself.

My son's arrival opened a place in my heart that had long been closed, a place of love and vulnerability that is impossible to describe. When my son Wesley came gently into my life, it was never to be the same. Just to hold him in my arms was the best thing that had ever happened to me and I was determined not to be the same kind of father that I had experienced growing up.

When the loving family I thought I had finally created ended in a bitter divorce after fifteen years, I carried on as a single parent, managing the pressure of a professional practice. When Wesley left home for college, I lost my sense of purpose; I felt overwhelmed by what's commonly referred to as the *empty nest syndrome*, a condition which usually describes the reaction of mothers. At the same time, my professional life was in disarray, as the changes in reimbursement policies for mental health care had led to a devastating loss of income and, with it, a drop in self-esteem. Despite all my years of therapy, all the years of feeling that I had overcome or at least understood the impact of my childhood, I fell into a deep depression. A year after I'd recovered and returned to work, I was diagnosed with cancer. These are the kinds of events that hit us all as we age; few of us are immune to loss and change. Through all of these life events I was aware of the presence of the negative beliefs and self-limiting patterns that had begun in my childhood. I saw clearly the belief that I really didn't deserve good things and would avoid or just give up in the face of a strong challenge. I was aware of a deep fear that something would happen to my son or that I would lose him in some awful way. I carried with me many other painful memories, as well as fears about the future, but I was also aware of how I could use various therapeutic techniques to continue the process of letting go, and create new patterns and beliefs to bring back the joy and fulfillment that I was missing.

For many of us, later maturity can provide the opportunity to become our own autobiographers, to write our life stories in the way we want them to be, not merely allowing them to be written by the conditioning of the past. The writing can be in the form of a life

review, personal memoir, or commitment to the desires of our heart for the remaining time we have left on this earth. This is a time for writing and reflection, for “letting go of things” and painful memories that keep us trapped by the energy we give them, and to open up to the myriad possibilities of our present.

Years ago I watched a rescue of two girls from the high tops of trees that were being engulfed by flood waters. The trees' uppermost branches were only about five feet above the water. Men piloting outboard motor boats tried to position themselves to be able to catch the girls if they jumped, but this required that they let go. They were terribly frightened, and all the rescuers' encouragement could not get them to release the branches to which they clung. Eventually, the children's bus driver, who had been trapped in the trees as well, was able to get to the girls and pry their fingers free. Each one in turn was swept into the waiting arms of the men in the boats. Finally, the bus driver was also rescued in this same way, so that all three were saved in what could have been a terrible tragedy.

Sometimes finding our true selves requires facing our worst fears and letting go of what we think of as security. Sometimes enjoying our lives requires asking for and accepting rescue from the things that hold us back. Remember: *they're only memories*; they can't hurt you anymore unless you allow them the power to do so.

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