

Remembering

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [January 5, 2000](#) issue

I remember myself as an insomniac nine-year-old, lying sleepless in bed after my parents had turned out the lights. In those self-centered, introspective days of childhood, I hardly believed in the reality of the present. How could anything really happen? I wondered. Reality didn't seem real until it was past, when I could turn it over in my memory and find the meaning of it. A trip to the circus, being punished by my father, the appearance of light on water—nothing became fully real for me until I could remember it and think about it.

So if I couldn't remember it, how was it possible that my parents could actually have been married and had a life together two whole years before I even came into existence? For that matter, how was it possible that my mother could remember my own past when I couldn't?

Like most children, I was convinced that reality existed only insofar as I could remember, assimilate and think about it. Children can't help being narcissists, and they are always trying to make sense out of and control an adult reality far more complex than they can imagine. What is shocking to discover, however, is how much truth there is in the childhood understanding of the self as constituted by memory, and how destructive it can be to forget the implications of this.

A case in point: With the support of my mother and my aunts, I spent nine years weaving together into one story key family events of the past 120 years. My mother, aunts and surviving uncle supplied me with details I hadn't known, as well as new stories. The hard part was sifting and sorting the jumble of plots, metaphors, images, phrases, aphorisms, jokes, recipes, smells and sights to forge a single story. And it was impossible to write about any of it without living through it again, mind and body, in vivid, excruciating detail.

I was pleased with the results. Whatever the flaws in the project, I was sure I had transmitted faithfully and lovingly, and to the best of my ability, the collective family memory of joys, grief, successes and heartaches. I expected everyone to be pleased. Instead, family members were shocked and horrified. "How can you have

said those things about your grandmother?” says one. “There is no reason to put that disgusting detail in this story,” says another. “Nothing was the way you describe it,” says a third. I’ve been shaken to the core by this reaction. Their attack on my memories feels like a denial of my very being.

What went wrong? First of all, I forgot the obvious. Though my memories do constitute my bones and flesh, other memories constitute the bodies and souls of other family members. I should have been prepared for this.

As a historian, I knew that every family member experiences the same event differently. Birth order, disposition, previous experiences, age, gender and the larger family dynamic all shape the lens through which each one sees the world. What I did not realize was how little we human beings really believe this when it comes close to home. I worked from the unconscious assumption that the family would share not only my memories but my interpretation of them.

I realize now that because I am a human in a fallen world, my being and my memory are flawed. Though reality is infinitely complex, each of us wants to believe that our memory alone defines reality. Thus we feud in our families, anathematize fellow Christians and demonize the stranger. No wonder Athanasius and his fourth-century friends insisted that for this lack of vision we need not just forgiveness, but the possibility that God will radically re-create our very being, including our self-centered vision.

In the incarnation, God offers this new creation. I cling to this promise as I pray for my family and for all of us who are flawed and yet desire God.