

My mind and what she remembers

## **When I can't figure out what something means, I give the problem to my mind.**

by [Marilynne Robinson](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue



(Illustration by Tim Cook)

*During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, "How my mind has changed." This essay is the fifth in the new series.*

It feels to me as though my mind changes while my self remains the same—or is, at least, continuous with itself, as if it has not changed and will not. This seeming immutability makes the self stand apart from the mind, that assimilator of experience that builds the small model of reality mind and self inhabit, changing and being changed as it does so. Yet there are real limits to the degree to which the mind can be said to change through its encounter with experience. Notoriously, we

find ways to conform what we learn to our expectations and to exclude whatever tends to put them in doubt.

It gratifies me that an account of felt life sounds like a problem in theology—mind and self are of one substance, yet distinct. Being human, they are little known to each other, frequently at odds. It is impossible to say which one proceeds from the other or in what their unity and distinctiveness consist.

Augustine says, “Men go about admiring the high mountains and the mighty waves of the sea and the wide sweep of rivers and the sound of the ocean and the movement of the stars, but themselves they abandon.” This is quoted by the 14th-century Italian poet Petrarch, who is angry with himself “for continuing to admire the things of this world when I should have learned a long time ago from the pagan philosophers themselves that nothing is admirable but the soul beside whose greatness nothing can be as great.”

I could mention the soul as well, but that would be to add a vastly greater complexity. The self and the mind are certainly interesting enough, admirable enough, to sustain all the attention I can give them.

Skepticism has been a settled habit of mine since college, at least, and its rewards have been enormous. I have written about my rejection of the psychologies and anthropologies I was offered then, and I have said that it was Jonathan Edwards who gave me the means to think around them, to put aside the determinism they assumed. A tale of youthful awakening isn't supposed to go this way.

The thought offered to us as modern was also supposed to be liberating. In fact it was determinist without the mitigating association of anything like providence. It was a great relief to me to be rid of such notions and a welcome challenge to replace it all with my own thinking, assisted by classical theology and by my pantheon of 19th-century writers.

Important as it was to me, this escape from an intolerable worldview was impelled by my testing it against my own experience of human life and finding no likeness—by my finding it at odds with my self. This was not an instance of change but of homeostasis, the rejection of something inimical. This experience has recurred in milder forms throughout my life, and it has actually been among the great pleasures of my life to realize that almost anything offered as truth deserves another look. Looking deeper renews the world.

When I can't figure out what something means, I give the problem to my mind.

For instance, it occurred to me fairly recently that the English Renaissance and the English Reformation were simultaneous, many of the same figures prominent in both. It is not conventional to acknowledge this, but it is important for understanding the level of literacy in English in Shakespeare's audience—the Reformation was a great stimulus to literacy—and the seriousness and conceptual range he could rely on among them. The old conundrum of how these inexhaustibly brilliant plays could have pleased the groundlings is answered by the great interest in the sermons and political tracts circulating at the time in the streets and by the vigorous translation of learned and classical literature into English, most importantly the Bible.

That phrase, "it occurred to me," is interesting for purposes of this discussion. It describes the feeling that the mind has presented something to conscious awareness, putting together facts or impressions that have been known but not thought of as related. Things "happen" in the mind, events of consciousness that are not only unsought or unwilled but surprising. *Of course! Why didn't I think of that before?*

In these moments it feels as though the mind is autonomously active, making sense over time of whatever is provided to it—although not because the realization it yields has any immediate value beyond the pleasure of the surprise. It is like the recalling of a word, a name, or a telephone number that seems lost to memory until it emerges, sometimes long after there was any reason to try to remember it.

And so, for years now, when I can't figure out what something means or how it works, what metaphor I need or how to make a plot transition, I give the problem to my mind. I put it aside, as far as my consciousness of it is concerned, until the solution occurs to me, an experience as apparently passive as it sounds. Then, *Of course!* I have a solution much shapelier and more serviceable than I could have arrived at by either forcing a solution or evading the problem.

I have often felt that the best advice I could give a student would be to step away from the writer's block or whatever else is deviling her and let other resources come to bear. It will be your mind at work producing something distinctly your own, effort you will not be aware of but that will earn its reward. People prefer to grind.

I discovered all of this, or became aware of it, while I was writing my first novel, *Housekeeping*. I was living in France, there to teach at a university that had gone on

strike. I had a lot of time to myself, a spiral notebook, and the beginnings of a novel—fragments based on memories of Idaho, where I grew up. To avoid distraction, I closed the shutters, darkened the room, and worked by the light of a little bedside lamp. And there I was, trying to remember Idaho, where I had not lived for almost 20 years.

I was startled by the dreamlike particularity of my memories and at the same time by the rightness of them, as if they arose from a very lucid attention. People talk about precision of language, which is in fact wholly dependent on precision of perception and memory. Something must be held up to the mind's eye, to test the adequacy of words to description or evocation. What I learned was that the resources of the mind are vastly greater than I would have imagined. Put forth the question, ask after things only noticed by the autonomic workings of the senses, all those sounds and smells and plays of light, and there they are.

For me it was as if I were learning that I had lived much more richly in the world than I had realized, as if my mind and I had been sisters all along, she the poetic one, she the loyalist who kept faithfully things I thought I had surrendered to forgetfulness. This sister mind also remembers, in great detail, a whole suite of emotions—loneliness, shame, abandonment—that my self would rather not acknowledge as acquaintances. I would prefer to think of them as isolated and outlived, but she keeps them in her great stock of things to be known and can restore them to conscious memory on no greater prompt than an old song.

She is a great collector of cultural flotsam and is not above waking me up in the morning with a jingle for a forgotten consumer product. But she is also far more civilized than I am. I work diligently at knowing about something, seeming to myself to have retained precious little. But, however oblique and dilatory her intercessions, she will have the word, the line, the source I need. I owe a great deal to this (strictly speaking) nonentity, to whom it might never have occurred to me to find access.

This fable of mine, the self and her sister, is merely a shift to deal with a reality our culture gives us little help in describing or experiencing. There is nothing original in saying that the mind is intricate, mysterious, and very powerful. Those psychologies and anthropologies that it was so important to me to reject at least assume a hidden self of one kind or another: a blighted infant in Freud's case, a self-seeking and self-deceived hypocrite in present understanding. If their conceptualizations and mine agree at any point, it is in taking a human being by nature to be vastly more

complex than lived experience might let us know.

We are meant to have, and do have, a very different life from the one we usually experience.

But I and they differ absolutely in the character we attribute to the shadowy persons of this compound self. An important premise they share and I don't is the Darwinian assumption that self-preservation, the survival of the individual organism, is the determining motive to which all other aspects of life are finally subordinate. This reduces our motives to just one, implying that the glorious mechanisms of the nervous system, despite their millions of expressions in arts, philosophies, and sciences, exist to do what a virus does better, to survive and propagate. Whatever else might be true of a virus, its flourishing is proof that complexity is no benefit, relatively speaking, and that an absolute simplicity, so radical that it hardly rises to the definition of life form, excels us and in fact defeats us in this one great struggle to which our being, according to these theories, is wholly devoted.

Individual experience is a perfectly appropriate check on all theories of the self. What began as an essay about how I changed my mind seems to be at least as much about how my mind changed me. In either case, agency of some kind is attributed to both self and mind, together with a kind of collaboration that is not quite identity. Something called "I" can act on something called "mind," aligning it with attitudes or beliefs it did not previously share. This is experience encoded in language, representing an interval of time and in some sense a transaction.

By putting certain questions to my mind, I learned that my life—considered together with all my faculties, with everything that answers to my name—was large and rich, even opulent, in ways I had never imagined. This seems to me to have implications far beyond the nature and the capacities of memory. That ancient question arises: What is man? What is a human being?

Since antiquity, at least until thought became modern, this question was answered with reference to our distinctive behaviors, our attributes and abilities, perhaps our place in the cosmos. Surely this is a reasonable approach. It takes into account the complexity that so clearly is not very effective in assuring our survival (and is probably the single greatest threat to it) but tremendously enhances the interest and pleasure of life.

I am proposing an anthropology based on my own very inward experience. There are dreams and poems that envision a wanderer finding herself in a garden or a mansion, places whose existence was unimagined until they were happened upon, whose beauty was evidence of intention and care, possession and habitation, whose emptiness suggested hovering presence or imminent return.

Since my purpose in consulting my memory was to summon what I could of a distant landscape, the mountains of Idaho, and since I was writing in the voice of a young girl, the first things that came to mind (an interesting phrase) were dogs and water smells and wildflowers, notably a yellow lily we called lamb's tongue. Huckleberries and strawberries. Deer flies and dragonflies. A child's attention gathers what it will with no interest in what might be called the relative value of things. These odds and ends came back to me, including my old fascination with my grandfather's fishing creel. (Such a strange word.)

I conclude from this that in the capacious mind there is no hierarchy. If any experience is privileged, it is the kind that carries the suggestion of private, unarticulated meaning—that certain slant of light, the red wheelbarrow. Classic American poetry has always celebrated the democracy of unfiltered, unconstructed perception.

I take all of this as evidence that we are meant to have, and do have, a very different life from the one we ordinarily experience. No awakening (as that word is ordinarily understood) is necessary to know this, no movement to a higher plane, only an awareness of what might be called a companion self, alert and memorious in a degree we would never expect.

She effectively demonstrates the value of our life by preserving a true sense of what we saw when we were children only capable of wonder and metaphysics. Much more than that, she saves up for us and sometimes restores to us a great many things we learn and wish we could remember. Most remarkably, perhaps, she retains as if before her eyes pauses, glances, and silences that we did not quite notice, and she does this without accommodating them to our indifference or our misreading, even when regret is entailed.

I long ago abandoned any thought of keeping notes or journals. I have found that memory will yield more precise and sensuous detail than the most diligent observation. The difference between what I note down and what I retrieve from

memory is so stark it is as if they were the work of different hands. Synthesis and invention, so far as I experience them, come to me, occur to me, strike me, as gifts of this larger mind.

There must be theological consequences to this reconception of what a life is. Not only does my hypothesis offer an account of what this amazing complexity supports, it also proposes that the gift of life is lavish far beyond our usual understanding of it.

The fact that special circumstances enabled the realization that I have described here may have been the consequence of my own culture and education, which privilege the seemingly straightforward, seemingly rational thinking that is the preferred dialect of the world we moderns live in. This is the dialect of the reductionist anthropologies and psychologies I rejected when I first deployed my skepticism. That they have been superseded, shelved, and forgotten, one after another, seems to reflect a tacit acknowledgment among specialists in the field that in fact they had little value.

Say I was offered a false language of rationality, and through it, in its terms, a false model of consciousness, one which had profound implications for the nature and meaning of human life both as a global phenomenon and as an individual experience. Whatever the particular fable, they all had in common a radical narrowing of traditional notions of what we are.

Human life has long fallen on a range from hard to terrible. We manage to delight in it anyway.

Reduction of the nature of humankind to a few unadmirable instincts makes it morally easier to exploit and deprive them. Why this project has taken hold in our great humanist institutions is a question that probably has no sensible answer, which is far from saying that its influence there has been without consequence. The idea that the shadow self is by its nature incestuous or reptilian, or, worse, a money-grubber of some kind, always out for itself—these things discourage inwardness. Once granted, they preclude the enjoyment of the self, that most wondrous creation.

I learned from querying memory that perception itself is beautiful and that its most casual notice can make anything proof of the fact—the tiny flowering of a weed, the bright clarity of a puddle. If the First Commandment tells us to love God with all our minds, it seems that a presumptive respect for our minds is called for. If we are to celebrate creation, surely we should enjoy every means we are given to experience

it, which certainly includes the unaccountable processes of memory and reflection.

Contemporary culture teaches us to search our past in order to identify trauma and to measure its importance by its felt impact. But this project too is reductionist because it occurs in a context that does not acknowledge the whole of consciousness. Historically, human life has fallen along a range from difficult to terrible, and humankind has managed to delight in itself through it all. I suspect we are not bringing our full resources to bear in the matter of enjoying life deeply in all the ways we are given, that is, in the fact and by the means of our strange brilliance, individual and collective.

In this time of trouble, we are reminded by the loss of them how many ordinary things—church and school and public transportation—are threatened or threatening. Despair is never mitigating. Gloom is little better. A great demand on our resourcefulness and our humanity is being made. It is very well worth rising to and certain to be important historically, to our credit or our shame. So we might as well not hobble ourselves with a diminished sense of what we are and what is at stake.

For the purposes of this essay I have written as if the self we foreground and the self that is occluded were distinct from each other, and as if a change of mind of the sort I describe from my own experience were necessary to access a fuller consciousness. In fact I assume that the varieties of consciousness interact with one another more or less continuously. I believe also that it is among our strange privileges as human beings to have an important ability to decide what in our minds we choose to attend to—and therefore what our lives will be.

© *Marilynne Robinson*