Research-in-action community

Yarn of remembering

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This essay is a first attempt to put into the public realm my explorations of the experience of remembering. Its focus is on what occurs “live”, in the moment of remembering, not on the memorialising of past events.

I ask the question, “What goes on in the experience of remembering?” and attempt to answer it, by considering some personal stories and reflecting on the insights they continue to offer me with each recollecting of the scene or moment.

A thread that weaves through the essay is the relationship between where we are now and where we have been. I suggest that the past continues to influence the present moment anew through each moment of remembering, and that this is a way of keeping ourselves connected to place, to others, and to ourselves.

I begin to articulate a distinction between individual memory, remembering together, and collective remembering, and I wonder about the role of forgetting.

Yarn of remembering

Over the past few years, various strands of my research have begun to weave together. Looking back, I see that I have been carrying particular questions with me as I have moved across fields of inquiry, shifting from ethnobotanical research in rural Africa to studying the Gaelic language in Scotland. I am now making a *portfolio*, a collection of my writings which explore how we experience the world through remembering. The question at the heart of my current work is:

What goes on in the experience of remembering?

I'd like to evoke in my reader a memory of something that *feels* like the thing I'm writing about – and then they're taken by it, taken into an experience of their own remembering. With that in mind, I'm making an invitation: to read slowly enough to notice the arising of memories as you go along.

My question has travelled with me from my early research work in a community in southwestern Zambia where I lived for many years. There, I was recording stories and traditional practices with the hope that, by describing *how* knowledge was acquired, stored, and shared, I might play some small part in preventing its loss, which was a deep concern within the community. I was also trying to reach an understanding of *what it would be like to know* the plants and their qualities, in particular those plants which have been interwoven into village life, down through the generations.

In trying out different approaches¹, I found that some of the more formal methods of gathering information – interviews, in particular – were counterproductive. From where I stood in my role of interviewer, I saw only a chasm, an unbridgeable gap between myself and *the other*. I could see no rope across the divide – barely a common language, no family bonds, and no shared memories to recollect together.

This experience shifted, however, when I abandoned my somewhat academic approach, shedding my self-appointed role of “recorder of knowledge”, and simply sat with people, chatting, cooking on the hearth, and sharing stories. I found it helpful to make the first move, offering a story from my own culture in the Scottish Highlands. From there, we would often sit together for hours, facing the light and warmth of the fire, darkness hugging our backs, the re-collecting of one memory sparking off the next.

It intrigued me that our disparate memories brought forth a mutual understanding. There was something in the process of *remembering together*² that reached across the chasm, bridging the gap. The focus of this first essay, however, is remembering *as it is happening in oneself*. As a starting point in my attempt to unravel this experience, I have included a vignette from my time in Zambia to illustrate how remembering a scene over the course of some years, and noticing what arises each time, brings new insights:

I am looking at Tall Clement sitting on a log too big for a fire, in the shade of a dark-leaved *Musikili* tree. His hands are moving over a long, succulent, pointed leaf of *Musokazebe*. The leaf is moving in Clement’s hands, its sharp tip grazing his leg. Suddenly, it lies still. A dull-bladed knife appears. The leaf and the knife move swiftly towards each other, and Clement’s hands are splattered with juice. Fine, white strings dangle and he tames them into a knot. Folding back a trouser leg, Clement drapes the plant bundle across his thigh. His hands part the strings into two lines which lie close together, almost parallel, and he runs his fingers down their length, smoothing and aligning. His palms, flat and facing down, roll firmly and swiftly across the lines, away from his belly towards his knee. As he lifts his hands, the strands spring together in entwinement, creating a fine rope. He does this over and over, until almost the full lengths of the fibres have woven together. His fingers tie fresh plant strings on to the loose ends and they extend the rope, leaf-length by leaf-length. Clement and *Musokazebe* and I share the shade of the *Musikili* and the movement of the late morning sun.

When I first wrote the story, a few years after leaving Zambia, I was most fascinated by the details of how Clement worked with the plant fibres, how he knew by feel which move to make at each moment, and how carefully he had prepared the turgid, spiky leaves beforehand. I took it³ to be an example of a traditional practice worth recording and sharing. In my *remembering* of the scene again - some time after writing the story - I saw something new, something I hadn't noticed before. It is *this* aspect of remembering which I am attempting to tease out from among the many strands: that something else may be revealed from remembering a scene anew.

In remembering *again*, I discovered a sense of belonging to that place. I see this in the way I described my participation in the scene (which I wrote some years after the event, and some years previous to writing *this* essay): at the beginning, I was an observer, an on-looker, but by the end, I was embedded. I wrote of how we were sharing the shade and had sat together long enough to notice that the sun had moved across the sky. I had become woven into the rope.

To extend this a little further, here is an example of remembering from where I live now, on the Isle of Skye:

I watch a bird as still as a statue on the seashore. As I walk along the path nearby, it stays motionless until I reach a point too close, when it rises slowly with a few wing-beats and lands, standing. The questions come: am I annoying it, disturbing its fishing? Have I as much right to be here? Yes, maybe, to both. The heron looks at me, and I look at the heron, and I know that I am being seen and considered. The heron is considering things as a heron being and I am considering things as a human being.

In that quiet, still moment came the feeling of being *re-membered*⁴, becoming woven in, again. But why is *this* memory coming back? Why is heron still standing on the shore and why am I still walking by, and hesitating, again? It may be that this encounter with a creature, as fully present in its own kind of knowing as I was in mine, has much more to tell me - more of which will be revealed through a future remembering.

Some songs may evoke a memory of connection with a particular place or time. I was discussing this with Christine Primrose, a renowned traditional Gaelic singer. Christine said of the phenomenon,

It's eternal, it's never-ending, because each time you listen to the song being sung, you experience it in a new way. The song evokes a different experience of the same memory. It is renewed again and again. It is in the experience of remembering that we know something, we become aware of something we've known for ever.

I take her words to refer to *collective memory*: to a story so powerful - a story that has been re-told across so many generations - that it has become woven into the fabric of the society. An evocation of that cultural story may stir us as vividly as a personal memory.

Particular songs and stories seem to have this collective creative power, a quality which affects the listener so profoundly that they feel touched by the elemental, by something that deeply connects. There is a Scots word - *conyach* - for singing or speaking with this quality. *Conyach* has been translated as, "to speak from your soul, becoming a vehicle for the voice of your ancestors"⁵. I wonder, then, how might one distinguish between that inner voice from collective memory and one's personal recollecting?

Reflecting now on how my inquiry has taken me on several interweaving paths, I would like to bring this piece to a close by touching on particular insights which I've had along the way.

Firstly, remembering has become a tangible presence in my day-to-day life, not only when I am on my own and can pay close attention to memories as they arrive, but also when reflecting quietly in the midst of other people's conversations. This asks of me, "How do I know when I'm remembering?"

Moving into the social realm, "remembering together" brings one's personal memories into a shared space. The back and forth of story-telling, of taking one's turn to speak and then to listen, begins to weave a bridge across social and cultural divides. Through this act of "going back" in memory, both the past and the present are reconfigured.

My closing - and most stirring - thought, is that *forgetting* is as significant as remembering. We tend to praise the ability to remember and castigate ourselves when we forget; and much distress is caused by the loss of self which is associated with forgetfulness. Yet, somehow the two belong together: just as we craft objects by shaping our materials around empty space, we may mould our identity around the forgotten happenings of our lives.

This is where I would like to move with my next piece of writing, carrying across the question, “Do our forgotten memories create the shape of our lives?”

Footnotes

1. *Approaches*: I have come to this research along various paths, some conventionally ethnobotanical which I learned from field manuals, others of my own creation - more a way of life than a methodical sequence of steps. [↵](#)
2. *Remembering together* is the expression I use for when a person is recalling events or stories in the presence of others. It’s a distinct happening in which a particular atmosphere is created among the rememberers. Individual persons may each recall their own story or version of a scene, but something *in addition* is created, some social quality. [↵](#)
3. *I took it*: these words reveal what I was doing at that time – I was taking things, seeing what I could find and could go away with, carrying information and anecdotes back home in order to build up a career as an ethnobotanist. This would be my evidence that I had been *in the field* and had come back to the academy with findings, with treasure. Something more profound had called me to the work in the first place, but this collecting of things was how I began my research in Zambia. [↵](#)
4. “*Re-membered*” (*with a hyphen*): one can become a member, can be part of, in a new way/old way. [↵](#)
5. Davie Donaldson, a Nawken who campaigns for social justice for the Gypsy/Traveller community in Scotland. See Donaldson, D. (2021). “Conyach Advocacy and Engagement”. Available at <https://conyach.scot/> (accessed 9 April 2021). [↵](#)