

Disaster and Memory: How the Tragic Erasure of Mnemonic Devices Affects Personal Memory

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In this essay, the author explores the loss of ready access to memory through mnemonics in the aftermath of a fire which destroyed almost all of his possessions. He considers the ways in which physical objects serve as mnemonic devices that trigger memory, how we have trained ourselves to rely on them to index our memory, and how traumatic erasure of them irreversibly alters how we then access memory.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Memory, Mnemonics, Trauma

In 1993, Salman Rushdie, who was in hiding due to the numerous death threats against his life because of the publication of his book *The Satanic Verses*, made his first public appearance in front of over 100,000 people at a U2 concert at Wembley Stadium in London, England. I know because I was there. That same year, one of the last remaining statues of Russian communist political revolutionary Vladimir Lenin that was still standing in the city of Kiev, Ukraine was torn down. The statue was in a grand subway. I know because I took a picture of it shortly before it was removed from public view. In 1997, I saw the Rolling Stones in concert in Memphis, TN at the Pyramid. The Stones played five songs on a small stage in the middle of the audience. The third song was “Midnight Rambler.” At the end of that song, Keith Richards, who had finished a cigarette, meant to throw it somewhere on stage, but accidentally threw it into the audience. I know because I caught it. I dropped it because it was still lit. I picked it up. The cigarette still had the indentation in the butt from where he put it behind the A string in his guitar briefly.¹ Later, I had it framed with a picture of Keith from that show, his cigarette butt, and the ticket stub, all in a black frame with a red velvet background. From these three very unique events, I had the memory of being there to witness, but I also had my U2 Zooropa tour concert shirt, my photo album, and my framed Keith Richards’ cigarette. Any time I felt like reminiscing about these events or showing them off to friends, I would find the shirt, the picture, or the framed cigarette and the memories would come rushing back. At least I used to be able to do that.

As I write this, I am 41 years old. I have traveled all across the world, and have seen many unique and incredible things, such as those mentioned above. But in 2005, a fire took from me everything that I ever had. Every baby picture, every concert shirt, every souvenir from foreign lands, and a year and a half of dissertation research were all gone within about two hours time. The U-Haul that I was driving to move from State College, PA back to Memphis, TN caught fire about five miles outside of town. That’s right; I never made it more than five miles in that U-

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¹ Keith often plays electric guitar in a special tuning with the low E string absent.

Haul before the engine caught fire. I suspect there was no oil in the engine, but there was no way I could prove it.

As I was trying to drive over a mountain to get out of State College, PA, I pulled over at one of the two establishments on that road because I was unable to get the U-Haul truck over about 17 miles an hour. When I came to a stop, smoke started pouring from under the hood and fire began dripping from the engine onto the pavement. I ran in to the closest establishment and grabbed their fire extinguisher. I emptied it into the engine of the U-Haul, but it made no difference. Luckily, I was able to grab my backpack out of the cab, which had my wallet and a few other necessary items, such as the paperwork for the truck-turned-inferno that I had rented from U-Haul.

The next couple of hours are still a haze to me. I remember it raining at one point. I remember the fire department showing up to put out the fire that turned the U-Haul full of everything I owned into a burned out shell of molten metal and ashen debris. I remember a medic examining me briefly. Most of what I did during those two hours was just watch everything burn. That was about all I could do. After the fire was extinguished, the fire department transported it to a salvage lot for examination. While they were transporting it, the truck caught fire again due to the extra oxygen and wind from moving it. The truck had to be extinguished a second time before it made it to its destination. By the time I made it to the salvage yard where my twice-baked possessions had been taken, all I could do, with the help of some great friends, was sift through the ashes to search for anything I could identify and list, or for any scorched salvageables. There was nothing in my fire that survived unscathed.

My fire occurred in July 2005, and I have been dealing with it ever since. I needed almost an entire year to try to remember everything that I owned that I had lost so that I could provide a list to U-Haul's insurance company. The insurance company, owned by the same parent company that owns U-Haul, took almost two full years before I even saw a penny from them. Hardly a month goes by that I do not think of something that I lost in that fire that was not on my insurance list purely because I could not remember everything that I lost. I will never remember everything that I lost that day.

My fire changed everything for me. I even refer to it as MY fire, as if this trauma is a possession of mine that no one else can share or have. My fire changed the way I think, the way I act, the way I experience the world, and the way I understand everything. Rhetorical scholars like to examine and argue over how a text has the power to influence, and what mechanics were used to make such an attempt. My fire changed me irrevocably in ways that I would argue no single other text ever has or will.

Arkansas

In 2014, I moved to Conway, Arkansas for a new teaching job at the University of Central Arkansas. As I began unpacking in my new home, I found some Russian nesting dolls that I had bought in Kiev back in 1993 that had barely survived the fire. The outer doll was charred a bit, but the smaller ones inside were only slightly affected by the heat of the fire. The dolls were of Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Brezhnev, Stalin, and Lenin. I bought the dolls in Kiev because they included all of the U.S.S.R. leaders before the Berlin Wall fell and the former Soviet Union broke up. I was in Kiev right after the Wall fell, and I knew these nesting dolls were a document of a moment in history. Looking at those dolls, I was reminded of a bottle of vodka that was presented to

me in Kiev by some children at an elementary school I visited. I remember what the bottle looked like, and I remember when I opened it to share with some friends back in Memphis.

I hadn't thought of that bottle of vodka in a long time, probably ten years at least. I haven't seen that bottle since 2005 when I was packing up my apartment before the move. The bottle itself was not really worth anything, but the more I thought about it, I realized that I had not listed that bottle on the insurance forms. I know that in the months following my fire, I thought about my trip to Kiev and the souvenirs and pictures that I brought back. I don't know why I did not think about that bottle. Maybe it was because I had too much on my mind to remember every possible thing that I owned. Maybe I didn't think about it because it wasn't worth anything monetarily. Maybe I didn't think about it because there was no possible way that bottle could ever be replaced.

So How Does Memory Work?

The fire not only erased my possessions, but also created a problem for me as I started to write this autoethnography. I know how memory works and how we find and use mnemonic devices. I took a class on public memory at Penn State, and part of my research for the paper I wrote for that class concerned how individual memory works. The theories are in my head, but I do not remember who wrote them or where I found them. All of my class notes, books on memory with my comments written in the margins, and the many articles I photocopied for future use were all in the fire. I know the information, but I now have to figure out HOW I know the information so I can find the articles and cite them. I have found this exercise to be much like searching for a children's picture book based only on the memory of one illustration that was somewhere in the book. Most of my attempts to find those articles resulted in how to use mnemonics as learning tools and how individuals who have had a traumatic experience remember the traumatic event, rather than trying to remember what had happened leading up to the event. There has been some discussion concerning the lack of research about an individual's memory of what happened prior to a traumatic event, but most exploration focuses on how those memories factor into a person's level of posttraumatic stress or depression, rather than focusing on mnemonic devices.²

So how does personal memory and the use of mnemonic devices work? Pierre Nora argues that "memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects."³ When people experience something that they intentionally want to remember, be it a vacation, birthday, graduation, and so on, as we⁴ are experiencing the event, we find something physical that we can keep that is significantly tied to the event that can trigger memories of the event in the future. MacKay et al. discuss how the emotions present during an experience that results in the possession of a mnemonic device can make the individual see both the experience and the mnemonic device as

² For a recent summary of this work in the field of psychology, see Richard A. Bryant, Kylie Sutherland, and Rachel M. Guthrie, "Impaired Specific Autobiographical Memory as a Risk Factor for Posttraumatic Stress After Trauma," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 116, no. 4 (2007): 837-838; Miyuki Ono, Grant J. Devilly, and David H. K. Shum, "A Meta-Analytic Review of Overgeneral Memory: The Role of Trauma History, Mood, and the Presence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*. Published electronically May 2015, DOI: 10.1037/tra0000027.

³ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux De Mémoire*," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 9.

⁴ I am using "we" here to include myself with others who have gone through a similar experience.

one, due to the same emotion/s tied to both.⁵ We take pictures, buy souvenirs, or find something unique to tie to that moment in time. Ohl and Potter discuss photographs as a form of evidence of what “actually” happened in the past⁶, but I would broaden their claim to include all that we use as mnemonic devices. I admit that a beer bottle collected from a fun weekend trip might not be as useful in a court of law as a picture of a moment from that weekend, but then again, we don’t collect mnemonic devices for others, only for ourselves. We collect them as evidence of our experiences, but also to act as touchstones for our memories. The actual items can vary greatly depending on what happened, where we were, who we were with, and why we were there. But the items must be significant, even if the item appears to be mundane. For example, if we went to New Orleans, we would not buy a regular shot glass to take home with us. We would buy one that says “New Orleans,” or “Bourbon Street” on it so the item, the mnemonic device, has a strong enough significance to it to spark memories that we have let slip from our conscious mind.

With the significance of any mnemonic device, most of what makes the item significant is the emotional connection to the device. The stronger the emotions we experience during an event, the stronger the emotional attachment will be to these items. The idea of trauma and emotion is hardly a new idea, and all that is included in the creation and preserving of personal memory is still being explored. However, Honeycutt et al. discuss the value of an individual’s processing of strong emotions after a traumatic event. They pick apart specific emotions and the availability to use or not to use social media as a way participants processed emotions after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as an essential step to progress toward catharsis.⁷ When being forced to remember events without the help of any mnemonic devices, those events that were tied to the strongest emotions would be the easiest to recall. Because a traumatic erasure of mnemonic devices forces an individual to try to remember events with strong emotions, the individual becomes encumbered with both the raw emotions from the traumatic event, and the emotions of the events prior to the trauma that they are trying to remember. Individuals who experience this type of trauma have additional emotional hurdles they must overcome if catharsis is to be found. Walker, Skowronski, and Thompson discuss voluntary memory and state that memory for negative events tends to be poorer than memory for positive events.⁸ Most of the events for which we would keep mnemonic devices are those connected to more positive emotions. The combination of negative emotions tied to the trauma and positive emotions tied to the attempt to remember mnemonic devices can both conflict the individual, and also, possibly, keep the individual from focusing purely on the negative emotions of the trauma and loss by redirecting their focus.

Once we have our mnemonic device/s that we gathered during our experience, we let the memory of the event itself slip from our conscious mind so that we can keep our focus in the present, not the past. We do not have to try hard to relive the experience in our heads over and

⁵ D. G. MacKay, M. Shafto, J. K. Taylor, D. E. Marian, L. Abrams, and J. E. Dyer, “Relations Between Emotion, Memory, and Attention: Evidence from Taboo Stroop, Lexical Decision, and Immediate Memory Tasks,” *Memory and Cognition* 32 (2004): 474-488.

⁶ Jessy J. Ohl and Jennifer E. Potter, “United We Lynch: Post-Racism and the (Re)Membering of Racial Violence in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*,” *Southern States Communication Journal* 78, no. 3 (2013): 187.

⁷ James M. Honeycutt, Khaled A. Nasser, Joyceia M. Banner, Christopher M. Mapp, and Betty DuPont, “Individual Differences in Catharsis, Emotional Valence, Trauma Anxiety, and Social Networks Among Hurricane Katrina and Rita Victims,” *Southern Communication Journal* 73, no. 3 (2008): 229-242.

⁸ W. R. Walker, J. J. Skowronski, and C. P. Thompson, “Life is Pleasant - And Memory Helps to Keep it that Way!” *Review of General Psychology* 7 (2003): 203-210.

over again because we do not need the memory readily available in our conscious mind. That is what we have the mnemonic device for: to bring specific memories that we have forgotten back into the conscious mind. As Stephen Browne put it, “every act of remembering is also an act of forgetting.”⁹

So memory is created a certain way, but then creates a new path for retrieval. To create memory, we go through an experience and find a significant mnemonic device while in the experience that can be that future trigger. Our experience in that specific time and place is what gives the mnemonic device its significance. So if the individual is A, the experience is B, and the mnemonic device is C, then we experience events in the order A-B-C. Once we have the mnemonic device, we allow ourselves to forget the experience. We have new experiences to focus on. But when we chose to relive those experiences, we have to go to the trigger first to then jog the memory. Essentially the act of remembering through a mnemonic device would go A-C-B. We use the device to trigger the memories of the event. B is always the specific moment in time that is either experienced, or is remembered. But after the event or experience has concluded, we let go of the direct line between A and B. The line fades to nothing as we can no longer have that identical experience again.

But what happens when a person loses all of their mnemonic devices? Sadly, this happens every day. A home, or moving truck, is consumed by fire. A home is flooded and all possessions are waterlogged beyond repair. Maybe an earthquake forces a structure to collapse upon itself crushing all of the items within. Sometimes everything is stolen away. There are numerous ways to lose everything. But what does that do to memory? We went through all of these experiences and had decades worth of souvenirs, photos, and all sorts of significant mnemonic devices. Now they are all gone. What happens then?

When an individual has a tragic erasure of mnemonic devices, the loss changes how that person accesses all of the memories up to that point forever. The individual cannot use the normal process to go A-C-B to access memories anymore because all of the items that were in the “C” group are now gone. The memories are not gone, but the triggers to each of those memories are gone. Decades worth of memories are still there, but no longer have a mnemonic index.

Filling Out Paperwork

The day after the fire, I was still in shock. Honestly, I was still in some level of shock for a few weeks. I had to try to process everything that had just happened, everything that needed to happen, and then deal with finding a way back to Memphis to start teaching again, all in a very short period of time. My friends and family tried to help me the best they could, but I didn’t know anyone who had gone through anything like this that really understood what I was experiencing.

In the weeks following the fire, I struggled to process everything. I had plenty of people around me ready to help however they could, but it was really only my stuff that was in the fire. I was the one who watched my stuff, my baby pictures, my photo albums, my clothes, my furniture, my dissertation research, my Zooropa t-shirt, my picture of the Lenin statue, and my framed Keith Richards’ cigarette burn in front of me. And I was the one who had to fill out the paperwork.

I had a lot to do to file a claim with U-Haul’s insurance for everything I lost in that fire. I tried to find a lawyer to help me, but none would take my case because they said I could not

⁹ Stephen Howard Browne, “On the Borders of Memory,” in *Public Memory, Race, and Ethnicity*, ed. G. Mitchell Reyes (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 19.

prove what started the fire. So I was alone with these forms. They asked me to provide a detailed list of everything that I lost in the fire, how old it was, and estimated value. The value part was tricky because they wanted current worth, not what each item was worth when I obtained it. Most everything I had bought was now considered used, and, therefore, had gone down in value, although I had a few autographed kids' books that had risen in value.

I sat in front of my new computer that I had to buy since my old one was now a molten paperweight, and I tried to create a list of everything I owned that was lost in the fire. Shit. I owned a LOT of stuff that I now no longer have. I had a few pictures that I had sent my parents of my apartment with everything intact. The pictures didn't show everything, but would at least trigger a few memories. I also had some pictures I had taken at the salvage yard of items that were beyond salvaging, but were at least partially recognizable enough for me to write it down. Beyond the pictures, I had thousands of items that I still had to try to remember without any form of a prompt so that I could write them all down.

I spent most of the first year post-fire trying to compile my list of what I had lost. I now refer to my life in those terms: pre-fire and post-fire. I have to. My memories from before the fire are now accessed very differently than my memories of events since the fire. But back to the list, I tried categorizing lists by rooms, or by specific types of items just to try to help me remember. For example, I had my bedroom listed to include the furniture and other items I kept in there. But I had a separate list for my DVDs and Laserdiscs because I had so many of them. Yes, I had Laserdiscs and they were awesome, until DVDs really started coming out. I had to try to remember everything that I had collected during my 32 years of living. The list took so long to create partially because life demanded that I continue to live it, and partially because I had to try to remember everywhere I had ever been, everyone I had ever known, and everything I had ever obtained.

Memory in Reverse

So we experience events with A-B-C, and we trigger those memories and remember by going A-C-B. So what happens when C is erased, but you need a list of everything that was in C? Everyone who has had a tragic erasure of mnemonic devices has been presented with this question. Whether it is an insurance company asking for a list, or just for the sake of personally knowing what is gone and what remains, there needs to be an answer. When a tragic erasure of mnemonic devices occurs, memory must work in reverse. We can no longer go to our mnemonic devices to trigger memories, so memory can no longer go A-C-B for any memory for which the trigger is lost. We create our lists first by trying to remember everything we have ever done. Trying to remember everywhere we went, when we were there, who we were with, and why we were there. Second, we have to try to remember everything that we obtained during those experiences to trigger the memory of it. Creating the list forces memory to work A-B-C. We experience through A-B-C, and we remember through A-C-B. But now that we have lost all mnemonic devices, we must struggle through A-B-C purely from memory. Our mnemonic devices are now ghosts, much like the events that their purpose was to preserve.

Here is where the uniqueness of mnemonic devices comes into play. When we collect mnemonic devices, we tend to choose significant items, items that have some identification with the event. The significance of the item is important when trying to remember lost mnemonic devices. The more unique the item, the easier it will be to remember. The more mundane the item, the harder it is to remember. Therefore, when trying to create a list of the lost items, most of the

items that will be remembered will be significantly tied to the events. Items that are mundane may or may not be remembered.

Back to the List

I did eventually finish my list. Well, I should not say I finished my list because I will continue to remember items I lost that were not on that list for years to come. I finalized my list under the belief that I had successfully remembered most of what I lost in the fire, at least the big things that really meant the most to me, were the most expensive, or were physically and obviously noticeable. Looking over my few dozen pages of spreadsheets containing my itemized loss, most entries became new triggers for me. I scanned page after page and remembered exactly where I was and what I was doing when I obtained most of the items listed there. Everything was a little more abstracted for me, similar to looking at a picture of a picture of that statue of Lenin. The focus wasn't quite as clear, but at least I now had a list as a mnemonic placeholder. Had I listed the Russian bottle of vodka, I would have thought back to the specific classroom with Russian fairy tale characters painted on the walls and the children dressed up in traditional Ukrainian clothes so they could put on a play for me and my companions. I remember the two little girls who came up to me and in broken English presented me with that bottle.

Truth be told, I probably had a few vodka bottles of different brands that were also in the fire. I bought them at a liquor store in State College, PA. There was nothing significant about them, other than they were top shelf brands. Those other bottles would never have made it on the list because they weren't significant; they weren't important.

The Day the Fog Began to Lift

U-Haul's insurance took almost two full years to the day after my accident to give me a little over half of what I estimated everything I lost in the fire to be worth. With that money, I bought some new things, and I replaced many things. Some things, like my DVD collection, would be easy to replace. A lot of things, like my U2 shirt, my bottle of Russian vodka, my photo albums, and my framed Keith Richards' cigarette, will never be replaced because they were so unique to the experience, so unique to that one moment in time, that there is no replacement for them. I still have the list that I submitted. I haven't actually looked at it in years. And from time to time I still remember things I had that were not on the list. That fire changed everything. I think I even lost part of myself in that fire. I know that since the fire, I have never been the same person I was before it. I don't think anyone who experiences a traumatic event can ever be the same.

But, I remember the day that I started to move forward from the fire. I started to let go of the confusion, the anger, and all of the other emotions that clouded me for so long. I started looking up the day I realized that I was starting to understand how my fire had affected my use of memory. I had an idea for a paper that would help me understand how memory works after such a trauma. I was finally able to see something positive coming out of my fire. I catharted. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Then I started thinking that this phenomenon of memory reversal was not unique to me. Anyone who had gone through a tragic erasure of mnemonic devices would most likely have had a similar experience. Ironically, my fire happened less than a month before Hurricane Katrina hit, when thousands of people would go through something similar to what I was going through. Honestly, I didn't really notice the hurricane because I was still in a fog from my own tragedy. But as my mind cleared and I started to hear stories

about those in New Orleans who had lost everything they owned, I understood what they were going through, at least to some extent. I knew that feeling of loss, and the feeling of trying to deal with everything to move forward. I didn't feel quite so alone anymore.

Conclusion

I know that no other person can ever walk in the exact same path that I have traveled any more than I can rewind time and re-live a new experience. I also know that I am not the only one who has experienced such a specific trauma. Karen Lollar wrote a similar autoethnography where she recounted her story about her house catching fire and how she came to cope with the loss of her possessions. She positioned her home and its possessions as extensions of her concept of self, and used the process of autoethnography as a means to process and understand how to cope.¹⁰ The loss of all mnemonic devices due to a traumatic event occurs more often than most probably know, but I would wager that if you asked any executive from any insurance company, they would confirm the commonality. Nothing can ever bring back what I lost, and I know I will never again be the person I was before the fire. However, coming to an understanding of how my fire affected me and my memory has helped me move forward from my fire. Knowing all of this when the U-Haul was on fire would not have saved me any time and would not have gotten me off the emotional roller-coaster I was on for years as a result of the fire, but it has helped me be able to let go of some of those negative emotions that ate at me for so long.

For those of you who are wondering, I started the research for my dissertation all over again about a year after my fire. I finished my dissertation and received my Ph.D. in 2008, about two years behind schedule. But I have seen the Rolling Stones twice since 2005, and Keith Richards has yet to throw another cigarette butt at me.

¹⁰ Karen Lollar, "The Liminal Experience: Loss of Extended Self After the Fire," *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (2010): 262-270.