

Setting the Table for Memory

David Carr¹
Arizona Convocation 2005
Phoenix, Arizona

March 6, 2005

Perhaps we think the past is fragile because so much of its documentation is crumbling and evanescent; but we should think of it at all times for what it can be: potent, dramatic, potentially eviscerating. Its strength lies not only in what we have lived, but more important, what we have lived through. The past carries the possibility of chaos, and it can remind us not simply of how we have lived, but of how we have lived through pain, obsession, error, and all the things contained in the word *loss*. Memory is often our agony. But with these portents memory also carries the possibilities of illumination and revelation, or gratitude and reconciliation, and these possibilities make memory worth our tears, and necessary to relive in ways we can learn from. As I think of this, however, I also think that even the greatest collection knows very little about the possible lives it invites each day, and how each one is unfinished and open, and always fragile in the light of the past.

Audience and memory, each is inexhaustible and infinite, and infinitely variable. It is possible to speak about the topics of memory again and again, each time differently informed, always observing something new, some new trace, some thread. Each observation not only suggests the infinity of remembering; it tells us that memory itself makes the audience infinite. It gives us each our infinitely connected tapestry, still being woven and rewoven every time we examine it. Audience and memory; audience is memory. One by one it is memory and the requisite performances of memory that enter the collection. An audience remembers nothing; one by one, it remembers everything. In the memory collection, the world of the user is perpetually in motion, turning and flowing, and perhaps given value by the exhilaration and intensity of the flow.

Memory is our self-encountered self. Memory is the narrative that hovers above us and shadows every new event. Memory is evidence we have not been given by another person, even our closest ones, or by our teachers. Memory happens to us, and becomes us. It is the evidence of living that no one else can describe exactly as we can. Memory is our self-experienced self. Memory is us, falling into ourselves, as into an abyss. Like

¹ School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, CB#3360, 100 Manning Hall, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3360. <carr@ils.unc.edu>

the voice of a poem, without which there is no poem, memory is identical to the rememberer.

The reflective user, when we think of that person as the author of memory, is never done, but brings a provisional text into our collection, and we help the user to revise it, sometimes undoing a carefully constructed anonymity. Perhaps you will agree: this is your work, revising life stories. If the cultural institution is to flourish, its first work is to participate in the evolving integrity of the rememberer, as we invite the rememberer to be present, here, today. "Today," Philo of Alexandria wrote around the turn of the Common Era, "Today means boundless and inexhaustible eternity. Periods of months and years and of time in general are ideas of men, who calculate by number; but the true name of eternity is Today."

Like all tentative learning, memory is a form of improvisation, a fabrication based on themes, like a musician's disconsolate phrase or bouncing ramble, unforeseen and unpredicted but never random or truly accidental. If we can use this word, memory is part of destiny. The musician finds what is immediate, inside, and so do we as we remember. The memory is predicated on some moment that precedes it, and, while it may be connected to a stimulus, it comes fumbling forward, retrieved and constructed at the moment it appears. In my experience, memory appears as a vestige of something carried and held close over time. But it emerges as a construction of the instant, still unfinished and fluid enough to seep away. These recognitions are exactly what our experiences and personalities have prepared us for, and yet we are so often surprised by their freshness and our own naïveté, that we cannot take them in as trustworthy evidences of our lives.

Like the musician, we do perform memory. In Tracy Kidder's book, *Home Town*, a man finds himself in a neglected Jewish cemetery and realizes that the names on the headstones have not been said aloud in generations. He says each name, placing a stone upon each marker. With memory it is the same: it is sometimes enough just to say the names, just to acknowledge the marker, and in all its smallness and enormity, the life it commemorates. Memory - remembering - among the artifacts of a lived life is a way to preserve the life, and so to save it against loss.

Speaking of loss, it is important for each of us to ask what happens to memory in a world where experience is surrogate, mediated, virtual, distributed in artless preconstructed forms, designed for us by strangers? How do we act, to create a place where users experience profound respect for their cognitive abilities, their deeply held evidences of lives lived? The place that remembers the rememberer invites its users to

participate directly in the construction and articulation of its leading ideas, asks them to express a part of themselves in contemplation of something they may never have seen before. The great power of the collection occurs when the human being uses it to encounter the surrounding unknown, and find a place for the human in it.

We have the museum, the archive, the library, the collection, all for one thing, to move ourselves forward toward evidence and interpretation, toward crafting our next knowledge. "The true name of eternity is Today." Let that thought inform us, briefly. Memory is the opposite of information; it cannot be given to or organized for another human being without destroying its essential nature as our own thing.

Memory seems to me to be a form of play around the evidence at hand – play, where the recombination of perspectives and experiences is possible. *I can recognize this in myself, we might say, but I must play with it if I am to understand its meaning to me today.*

In the collection for memory we require a situation where the fabric of play is woven, by stories and instances, around the evidence at hand. One rule is to work toward coherence among voices and objects by looking and talking. Another rule is to pay attention to the life of the user, because it is in the human lifecourse where the deepest evidence lies embedded, and where only gentle attention allows it to unfold. In such collections we need to create situations for the grounding of continuous, reflective play. Play is the imaginative hand that unfolds us in the world.

My father, Clifford Wildon Carr, was born in 1896, at the end of the second Grover Cleveland administration, and my mother, Marie Schaible Carr, was born in 1909, when William Howard Taft was in his first year of office. In youth, Marie and Cliff must have been surrounded by Civil War veterans, just as I, born eight days before Franklin Delano Roosevelt's death in 1945, was surrounded by returning GIs, most of whom said very little about what they had witnessed in Europe and the Pacific, just as my father had said little about his war, the War to End All Wars. I did not go to my own war, but kept it here at home.

My mother talked about her growing up all the time, from the perspective of an awed, childlike observer of progress; it all happened so rapidly for her, I think she never could sort out what she had witnessed, and what part she played in the drama. Consequently, her childhood was forever unfinished. (Her role was that of a first-

generation American, the good elder daughter who stayed devoted to her German Mama and her German Papa, who were too busy running a tavern and a restaurant, and favoring their sons, to be particularly devoted to her. But she was their most faithful curator in a way, keeping alive stories in which my grandmother was always the heroine. They involved a locked and flooding steerage ship cabin on the voyage over, a stable fire where she sought to save the horses, and a suicide by hanging. Each story, as my mother told and retold it, held a moral lesson about her origins and daughterhood.)

My parents, and perhaps some of yours, lived among adults firmly embedded in the nineteenth century, configured by a world without widespread electricity, automobiles, highways, radios, airplanes – all just waiting around the century’s corner. (My father’s English father was born around 1860, about halfway through the reign of Queen Victoria, and likely had parents born under George III. The three of us, my grandfather born in 1860, my father born in 1896, and I born in 1945, cover a span equal to four or five more normally procreative generations.)

I like to think about what my parents must have seen, what their families were like, what my grandparents must have known, how they lived every day, what they hoped for, how they voted, where they found happiness, all of the invisible traces of time on them. But, as we know, even among our most intimate companions, we cannot grasp the traces in memory of another person’s experiences.

No, I think, our lives are not long enough, and will never be long enough, to fully grasp the experience of memory, or to fulfill the concept of memory. It is like neither blood nor bone, yet memory forms us and flows through us just as bone and blood do. Memory, we might say, is what we momentarily restore to the present in our own voices, in the presence of some evidence that suddenly compels us to speak – compelled, as though we were in therapy or on the witness stand – and if we don’t speak it, as truly as we can, we cannot move forward, toward integrity in our lives. We say, “I remember ...” but then the story we tell ourselves is a version of our experience, more like fiction than truth.

What does memory mean in our cultural institutions? What does experience mean in a history museum, if the practice of history fails to touch the privacy of memory? What do our inquiries in cultural institutions mean if they do not evoke and challenge and confirm or disconfirm our intuition? What does it mean in an art museum, if we think our task there is to replace what we feel with what we are told to feel, or with dim details we never needed to know? What could a more human touch mean in the library, helping us to feel strongly grounded in our own lives, and our possible lives, as adults? What might the value of memory in our museums, our libraries, our archives become, because we learn to think constructively about it and design a practice that thrives on connection and narrative? What does it mean if the experiences of our cultural institutions lead to nothing recovered, nothing expressed, nothing spoken?

It means that we make nothing happen, because what we want to make happen is exactly that: recovery, expression and language. We want people to remember and speak. For this to happen, we have to work to create situations of trust and circumstances where memory can be spoken, and where articulated memory can make a difference to experience.

I always ask it: *What does it mean, to be the rememberer?* In the most important sense, it is to be the artist and the conjurer. It is to play with evidence, and tell its story, engaged as we should be in our craft, the play of memory and possibility. If memory is to help us learn and change, it should explain the choices made before we were born, the situations of life we entered, the structures of family and community, the passions of history and politics, the economics, the duties of a nation at war and at uneasy peace.

Our parents grew up in contexts, lived with and were formed by their own parents, endured their own wars and lived up to their own responsibilities. They transferred to us – as had been transferred to them – patterns of thought and personality that play out every day in us. We take on life using the terms and perspectives given to us long before we could ever have understood the implications of the gift. When I pause a devastating moment in a museum, or explore the unexpected possibilities of connection and understanding in libraries, I am working like a poet with the open text of my experience as it has been given to me, and as I have created it, hoping to find myself.

The play of memory in its most important sense implies something that must be vivid to us: motion and structure, improvisation amid the rules, the invention of contexts and narratives. Play is a game-like drama, performed without the arch or curtain. It is the fabrication of our own heroism, and the rescue of ourselves from the past that is unknown to us. We gather data and we play with it. This, I think, is what we engage in when we remember: we try to find a pattern in it, we seek and even improvise to fill the vacancies, and when we remember, we speak in stories. We create a structure, a timeline, a sequence, a passage, a line.

Or we spin a fine strand. We make something connect to something else. We could begin with the idea that we are always weaving and connecting everything. As we stand before the childhood doll or the battered teacup, we may recall our feelings – the weather, the light -- at a specific moment in our experiences. And then we will tell the story we remember, and what we remember is all a form of play, a kind of improvised performance, not just a game but a drama as well. And then another person tells a parallel story, or we find a photograph of that teacup in a hand, or another doll we had forgotten, and the drama adds a dimension, perhaps another act. Every life contains a constant performance of memory – and it is always an improvised performance, summoned to the table with the arrival of some foul or fair breeze through an open window. Something happens, and we remember another thing, and we perform this memory unexpectedly, almost uncontrollably. That too is the play of memory, when the

past we thought we had lost or left behind, enters the room and sits in the next chair, making us silent.

Memory arrives every day. Memory drinks milk at the kitchen table. Memory goes into our old bedrooms and pokes in the closet. Memory sees our toys and books. Memory has a doll. Memory shows us our first bike, our first pet, our grandparents' deaths. Memory goes to camp. Memory goes to our school, takes the bus, sits in our classes, takes gym. Memory falls down. Memory eats our lunch. Memory shoots baskets in the driveway. Memory fails with girls, gets into trouble, feels lonely. Memory plays in the band. Memory goes to the dance, but does not dance.

And when we remember it, we cannot help but attend the dance, one more time, standing against the wall with memory, among the traces of experience.

What are these traces? I think of them as the infinite and invisible pieces we keep to ourselves because we cannot possibly communicate them. When I was about two or three, I smelled the mixed fragrance in my German grandfather's shed, of his empty wine barrels, and the damp dirt floor, and the honeysuckle on the doorframe. That is a blended trace - none of them is pure and isolated -- I can never communicate, really, to anyone.

Traces are contexts full of things living and dead; evocative, powerful, sensory artifacts; resonant sensory experiences; the lost patterns and sensations of the everyday, rhythms and patterns of everyday time; the watershed moments, events or decisions of long ago, after which all things changed; flashbacks; family memories of nothing we have ever directly experienced, but have heard about so often the experience seems to be our own. Memories are often shaped and given to us whole. Traces are shared memories, as between siblings; transmitted memories, things told directly to you alone, for safekeeping; unspoken memories; unspeakable memories; recurrent themes in relationships and families, that last like grudges and legacies. We are always open to these traces, as long as we can remember; and so our stories are perpetually unfinished, just as my parents' story is unfinished as long as I am alive, and your parents' story is living still in you.

What are we to make of that part of history that remains unfinished, but resonant with traces, in us? For me, as I think and read, there are many unfinished parts of history. Surely our participation in American democracy is unfinished; so are what remains of slavery and the national war so centrally influenced by that vile practice. Similarly unfinished, for me, among other things are Wounded Knee, European Immigration, Jim Crow, The War to End All Wars, The Great Depression, F.D.R., organized labor, Manzanar, Auschwitz and Belsen and Dachau, The Enola Gay, Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, Vietnam, Oklahoma City, human rights, 22 November 1963, April 1968 and June 1968, 11 September 2001. These are unfinished

not only in my life today, but also in the lives you live and the lives you serve. These parts of experience, and others that differ for every one of us, will never be finished in this life, but remain as loose ends in the fabric that clothes American people.

What are we to make of these loose entangling ends, both the human intimacies and the human hammering blows, of history? The myths and the lies. Accidents, disasters and errors. Coincidences, synchronicities. Character flaws. Contradictions, mysteries, debates. Personalities, geniuses, eccentrics. Undercurrents, movements, radicalism, protests, assassinations. Racism, bigotry, genocide. Alternative readings of documents, alternate memories of conversations. Anti-intellectualism. And of course fear, the intimacy and hammer common to us all?

They are the great concepts of history, because they remind us of its complexities and its effects, and its ambiguities as well as its secrets. These are the things that rise in memory, the traces of having lived and deeply felt our lives. We are drawn to the complex because we cannot live a human life that matters while living on the surface of things. Every unaddressed ambiguity has a price. I now think that this is a primary purpose of museums and libraries: to remind us of complexity, that no answer is whole, that there is no end to the conditional understandings we need to bring to the past, including our own pasts. Speaking for myself, every day I think about the interactions and combinations of the past, the irreversibility of acts and events, the steadfast laws and phenomena of both the physical world and the mind; I think of the complexities of contexts and the countless chambers of the heart.

Thinking of that complexity, it seems to me, will make it easier to think about the future. And, as we know, all museums are about the complexity of the future. That, in some way, is what we might believe ourselves to be challenged by: how to articulate the unfinished issues embedded in the present, and how to recognize in them the unfinished issues of the past. There is a challenge for us to recognize how difficult we all find it to live with any outcome whose goodness is relative, ambiguous, or complex.

We need to make clear that the world is not finished yet, and neither are we. We will always have something more to become, and our institutions must be part of that. The world is still happening to us right now. I see cultural institutions as metaphors, obviously, for human memory and for the process of keeping and restoring and mining the evidences of our lives. But I would change that word as well, from “memory” to “experience.” Our institutions are metaphors for our experiences, for all of American experiences, community experiences, family experiences, individual experiences, lived experiences known only to us until we communicate them to others. Everyone has hidden a story. Where are its traces?

It is important work is to tell the story of this experienced life. I think that among the primary themes of our lives still to be articulated in cultural institutions this is most

important: the interdependencies of human beings in communities, places where kindness and generosity are practiced, and where we are able to become engaged by the possible stories, the untold stories, in our unfinished world. In the practice of this recovery of stories, our institutions will define themselves as what public memory causes them to become. I would have our institutions be those places where we tell these stories to each other as ways to know that we are human beings, and that we carry our lives as artists do, indelibly expressing our experiences in our work. It is important work to set the table for memory.

I may be talking simply about our role in civic life and civic responsibilities, how we foster discussions and expressions of value, and the ways we have of enacting our human feelings and fulfilling our promises, how we address our differences with respect and integrity, in the way we come into the presence of each other, to understand the energy of each other. That place, civil society, is where we leave our most important traces, simply by being part of it.

Every museum or library we have is a metaphor for the unfinished world surrounding us, and all the untold ways of telling its crafted truths; it is always about the future, and it is always about what we most remember about what it was we once wanted to become, but have not yet found ourselves to be. Our experience is what we carry with us every day as a series of narratives that may, one day, make perfectly coherent sense, but on another day may present for our inspiration and awe the great chaotic complexity of human contradictions and accidents, human heartlessness and human compassion, human losses and gains, human constancy and change. Our history is a series of written and unwritten narratives, a record of memory, and all of them are in play every day, as we imagine the presence of lost lives and as we live their traces in the paths that we imagine and believe to be our own.