

# Reconstruct Your Memories Carefully

Joseph Hopper studied the lives of 30 divorced couples including the time prior to their decision to divorce. He discovered that once one person made the decision to separate the memories of both changed. The one who made the final decision to separate remembered individual needs that were not met. Their partners emphasized commitment, and they remembered themselves as the responsible ones in the relationship. In short, the memories of both parties to the divorce became selective, and that which was remembered re-enforced the roles in which each person found themselves.

We tend to become the stories we tell ourselves. James Frey's powerful story, first told to Alcoholics Anonymous, was published as an autobiography called *Million Little Pieces*. An ex-girlfriend was surprised to read in the book that she had committed suicide. Frey later admitted that he started out writing a story he hoped would inspire others, but that he made up large parts of the story to make himself appear tougher than he was. He was attempting to become a different person by revising his story. He appears to have believed many of his revisions, those that were not proved false.

Elizabeth Loftus has shown how we can come to believe false memories of ourselves, even where the memories do not appear to benefit ourselves in some way. In one experiment, university students developed vivid memories of being lost in a shopping mall after she suggested this had occurred. She showed how a similar process to recover memories of sexual abuse could create false memories of events that did not happen.

There is no tape recorder in our heads that allows us to play back exactly what has happened and what was said. Instead we re-construct our memories from bits and pieces, feelings, the context around us, and, what I call "must-be-so" thinking. A political activist from northern Saskatchewan shows type of thinking when she declares that northern babies are deformed due to radiation caused by uranium mining. If we believe that radiation causes mutations, and if we believe that radiation levels in the north must be rising because of the mining, then babies are being deformed, despite the lack of actual evidence.

Our memories are imaginative interpretations, but when our interpretations stray too far from objective reality then the world does not appear to respond logically or predictably. We can protect ourselves from this result by realizing that our memories are inaccurate, and so we hold them as only being tentatively true – open to new evidence. We can gain some new evidence by talking to other people who have a somewhat different memory of what happened, in effect, negotiating with them a more accurate common memory. Psychologists commonly take notes, which no one else sees, to improve the accuracy of their memories of client sessions. You can do something similar by keeping journals and writing diaries. We can become like scientists and look for evidence to support or contradict a particular memory or position. We can avoid must-

be-so thinking by seeing ourselves as being above any belief system. We can learn to challenge our belief systems. Finally, we can avoid the pressure to present ourselves as different than we actually are by learning to accept ourselves as beautiful, before any revisions.