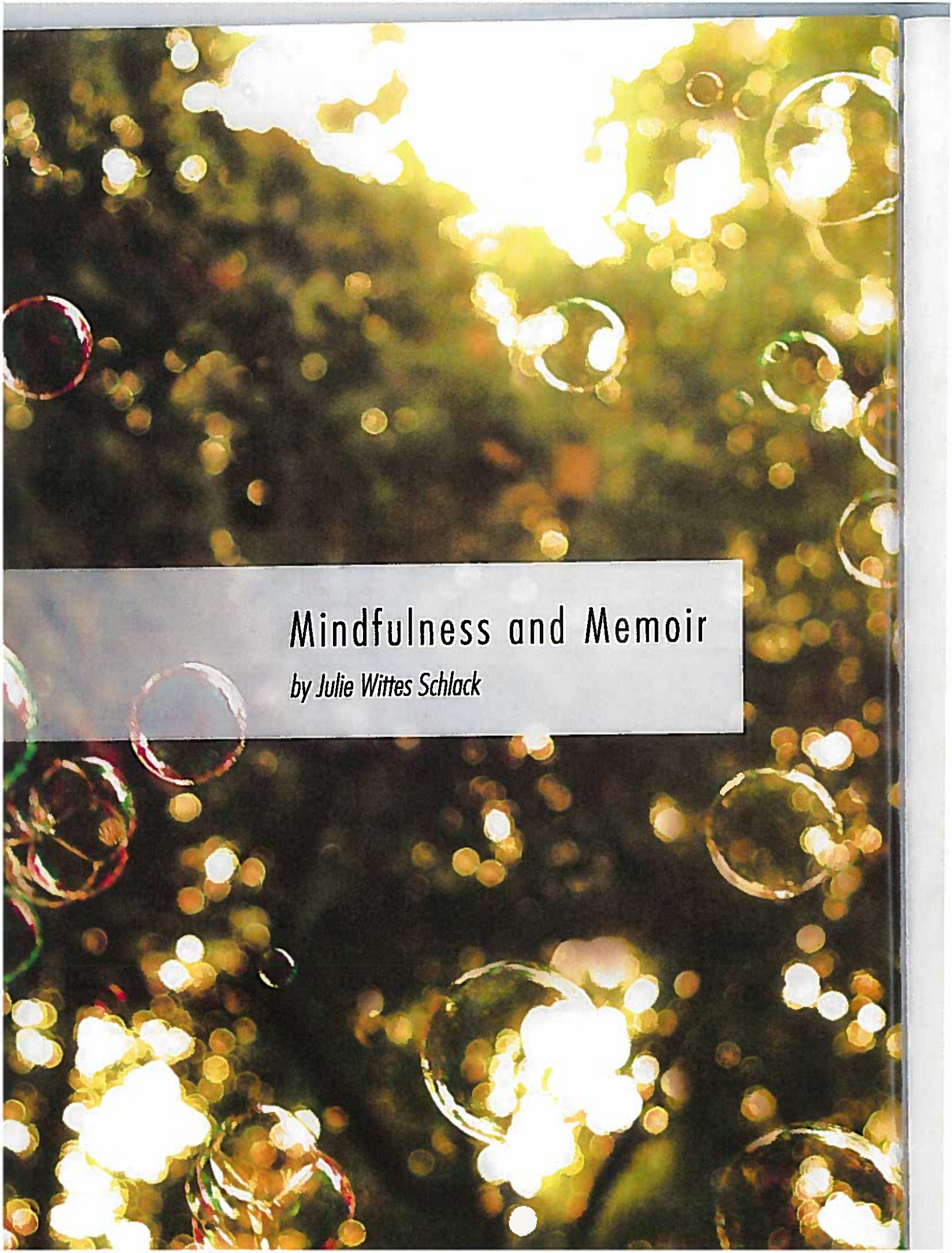

Mindfulness and Memoir

by Julie Wittes Schlack

—*Paul Broks*[1]

Our Capacity to See

"The extended self, which is what we think of as our self, is essentially a story," declares neuropsychologist Paul Broks.[2] "It's the story of what has happened to this body over time."

Broks could also be defining autobiography. But memoir is something a little different. Its purpose is not to recount so much as it is to reflect. Great memoir depicts experiences and events, yes, but according to author and critic Sven Birkerts, in writing it, the author's purpose is, "... to discover the nonsequential connections that allow those experiences to make larger sense; they are about circumstance becoming meaningful when seen from a certain remove.[3]" And in writing memoir, the author is keenly aware of what Jon Kabat-Zinn describes as, "... seeing as a relationship, the relationship between our capacity to see and what is available to be seen.[4]"

As I have concurrently studied the practice and philosophy of Mindfulness Meditation and the discipline and great exemplars of memoir, I have been struck by the similarities in the two processes and in their inherent philosophical and psychological challenges.

In her landmark essay, "Memory and Imagination," Patricia Hampl describes the central challenge of the mind in relation to the self, addressing from a literary perspective what Jon Kabat-Zinn, Dan Siegel, Paul Broks, V.S. Ramachandran, and others explore in the realms of philosophy and neuroscience:

> ... each of us must possess a created version of the past. Created, that is, real in the sense of tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in place and in history. And the downside of any created thing as well: We must live with a version that attaches us to our limitations, to the inevitable subjectivity of our point of view.[5]

Though Hampl (and memoirists in general) address themselves to the past, the same challenge holds true in both experiencing and reflecting on what is occurring in the present. So it strikes me that experts from each of these disciplines are asking the same essential question: *How do we make sense of our own experience without becoming a prisoner of our own narrative, our own construction?*

I will not presume to offer a definitive answer, but I will explore the question itself in depth, from multiple perspectives, by focusing on four concepts from the realms of mindfulness and neuroscience that have direct application to memoir writing and reading:

what Jon Kabat-Zinn describes as, "[The] lack of boundary between knowing and the known, seeing without a seer;[6]"

- Our sense of self as something real but constructed, as continuous and self-contained but endlessly dynamic;
- Our sense of time passing, which accelerates and decelerates as a consequence of age, cognitive development, and our (in)ability to be present in the moment;
- Our need to create a coherent life narrative and the companion danger of investing in a story that obstructs our awareness of what is transpiring in the moment.

Memoirists also juxtapose the then and the now, the sensation and the understanding of it, simply by using a word or displaying an intellectual sophistication that was not available to the author then, but is so now.

Dual Awareness

"Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing," explains Patricia Hampl. "It can present its story *and* consider the meaning of the story.[7]" Consider this definition alongside Jon Kabat-Zinn's observation that, "We grow and change and learn and become aware through the direct apprehension of things through our five senses, coupled with our powers of mind, which Buddhists see as a sense in its own right."[8] Both are describing a duality—the act of sensing, and the act of observing oneself doing so and interpreting the experience.

In memoir, those two processes—sensing and reflection—are often separated in time, where the experience is remembered rather than felt in the moment. The author straightforwardly tells the reader what she recalls from the past and what she realizes now. The act of considering and interpreting the sensory experience is deferred and rational, as in this example from Joan Didion's essay, "On the Morning after the Sixties"[9]:

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> I was lying on a leather couch in a fraternity house (there had been a lunch for the alumni, my date had gone on to the game, I do not now recall why I had stayed behind), lying there alone reading a book by Lionel Trilling and listening to a middle-aged man pick out on a piano in need of tuning the melodic line to "Blue Room." ...That such an afternoon would now seem implausible in every detail—the idea of having had a "date" for a football lunch now seems to me so exotic as to be almost czarist—suggests the extent to which the narrative on which many of us grew up no longer applies.

Memoirists also juxtapose the then and the now, the sensation and the understanding of it, simply by using a word or displaying an intellectual sophistication that was not available to the author then, but is so now. Look at this example from Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments*, as she tells us about the apartment in which she grew up:

> The clear air, the unshadowed light, the women calling to each other, the sounds of their voices mixed with the smell of clothes drying in the sun, all that texture and color swaying in open space. I leaned out the kitchen window with a sense of expectancy I can still taste in my mouth, and that taste is colored a tender and brilliant green.
>
> For me, the excitement in the apartment was located in the kitchen and the life outside its window. It was a true excitement: it grew out of contradiction.[10]

The use of the word "still" ("a sense of expectancy I can still taste in my mouth") is all that is needed to tell us that significant time has elapsed between the vivid sensory experience and the act of writing about it. Even more artful is the last sentence ("It was a true excitement: it grew out of contradiction."), where Gornick presents us with an unquestionably adult understanding of a childhood emotion.

The dual awareness to which Jon Kabat-Zinn refers is most thrillingly displayed when past and present, child and adult, experienced and understood are even more proximate, when they are simultaneous, as in this excerpt from *Fierce Attachments*:

> She holds tightly to my arm. She neither confirms nor denies my words, only looks directly into my face. "Remember," she says. "You are my daughter. Strong. You must be strong."
>
> "Oh Ma!" I cry, and my frightened greedy freedom-loving life wells up in me and spills down my soft-skinned face, the one she has given me.[11]

In this sequence of excerpts, we see the gap between observed and observer narrowing, and the prose becomes more powerful as a result. Even when describing the past, to achieve such detailed, vivid memories Gornick must essentially re-live that experience, which begs the question of whether imagination is, in essence, the ability to be present in a different time or place, to occupy the story one is constructing.

> ...while being perpetually in the now may benefit us as humans on a path to Nirvana, it eventually wearies us as readers. With only a continuous now, there is no narrative arc. And without the boundary of "self" creating a tension between an author's interior and exterior lives, there is little to engage us.

But Jon Kabat-Zinn challenges us to dissolve that barrier entirely:

> We never dream that there may be observation without an observer, that is, until we naturally, without any forcing, fall into observing, attending, apprehending, knowing. In other words, until we fall into awareness. When we do, even for the briefest of moments, there can be an experience of all separation between subject and object evaporating. There is knowing without a knower, seeing without a seer, thinking without a thinker, more like impersonal phenomena merely unfolding in awareness.[12]

What is so startling in Jon Kabat-Zinn's description is how closely it parallels Jill Bolte Taylor's account of what it was like to have suffered a massive stroke, one in which the functioning of her left cerebral hemisphere—site of one's ability to

·ocess language—was shut down, ıd her consciousness was informed ılely by her right hemisphere.

> I essentially became an infant in a woman's body... in that moment, my brain chatter—my left hemisphere brain chatter—went totally silent. Just like someone took a remote control and pushed the mute button. Total silence. And at first I was shocked to find myself inside of a silent mind. But then I was immediately captivated by the magnificence of the energy around me.... Because I could not identify the position of my body in space, I felt enormous and expansive, like a genie just liberated from her bottle. And my spirit soared free, like a great whale gliding through the sea of silent euphoria. Nirvana. I found Nirvana.[13]

What she is describing is a ·rmanent present, and one in which ıere are no boundaries. The sense of elf" as an object blurs into a broader field of energy and sensation.

But while being perpetually in the now may benefit us as humans on a path to Nirvana, it eventually wearies us as readers. With only a continuous now, there is no narrative arc. And without the boundary of "self" creating a tension between an author's interior and exterior lives, there is little to engage us.

Our Sense of Self

Paul Broks writes that:

> The illusion is irresistible. Behind every face there is a self. We see the signal of consciousness in a gleaming eye and imagine some ethereal space beneath the vault of the skull, lit by shifting patterns of feeling and thought, charged with intention. An *essence*. But what do we find in that space behind the face, when we look?
>
> The brute fact is there is nothing but material substance: flesh and blood and bone and brain. I know, I've seen. You look down into an open head, watching the brain pulsate, watching the surgeon tug and probe, and you understand with absolute conviction that there is nothing more to it. There's no one there. It's a kind of liberation.[14]

I use the term "self" as though it is something as concrete, tangible, and commonly understood as "rock" or "slipper." But Jon Kabat-Zinn argues that: "There is no permanent, isolated, self-existing self... Both the sense of personhood and our personality are in a profound way impersonal, although clearly unique and relatively real... We need to question whether the sense of self is fundamentally real or just a construct of the mind.[15]"

On this point, many memoirists (and novelists) would likely agree: the "self" *is* a construct of the mind. But here is where some

principles of "good" mindfulness vs. good memoir diverge, because that "sense" is as essential to vivid and compelling story-telling as the other five perceptually based senses. Neurologist V.S. Ramachandran says that the sense of self rests on seven pillars,[16] and good memoir does too.

> **1. Unity:** Despite the diverse and continuous onslaught of sensation that you experience from one moment to the next, "you feel like one person. Moreover, all of your various (and sometimes contradictory) goals, memories, emotions, actions, beliefs, and present awareness seem to cohere to form a single individual."

Memoir is made of goals, memories, emotions, actions, and beliefs; they are the bricks that the writer carefully selects and aligns. He then applies his present awareness to building an inviting and durable structure from these raw materials.

> **2. Continuity:** Despite the distinct events punctuating your life, you feel a continuous identity through time, and can easily navigate from early childhood memories to projections of your own future.

If "unity" comprises the bricks from which memoir is assembled, "continuity," or what Sven Birkerts describes as "the need to plait together past and present," is the mortar. "I now, I then" is the very essence of continuity and of memoir, as Birkerts illustrates with this excerpt from Virginia Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past"[17]:

> 2nd May... I write the date, because I think I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present—at least enough of the present to serve as platform to stand upon. It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast. And further, this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year's time."

...the fluid and fairly constant shuttling between past, present, and imagined (or implied) future, is what transforms chronicle into memoir.

If Woolf explains the technique, memoirist Abigail Thomas executes it stunningly in this excerpt from the chapter titled "What Stays the Same," in *A Three Dog Life*:

> This is the one thing that stays the same: my husband got hurt. Everything else changes. A grandson needs me and then he doesn't. My children are close then one drifts away. I smoke and don't smoke; I knit ponchos, then hats, shawls, hats again, stop knitting, start up again. The clock ticks, the seasons shift, the night sky rearranges itself, but my husband remains constant, his injuries are permanent. He grounds me. Rich is where I shine. I can count on myself with him.[18]

> **3. Embodiment:** This pillar refers to feeling anchored and at home in your body in the most literal way—"you know that your hand belongs to you and that the waiter's hand doesn't."

Not only does physical sensation play a prominent role in memoir, but authors often describe the sensation of feeling at home in their bodies with language like "coming into my own," and usually only arrive there after painful adolescent years of frequent betrayal by their constantly changing and unpredictable physiques. Robust embodiment—not just knowing the distinction between one's own hand and someone else's, but feeling in control of one's body—seems to be a prerequisite to the more developed and metaphysical sense of self.

> **4. Privacy:** "Your qualia and mental life are your own, unobservable by others." You can empathize with others but not really experience what they experience.

Recent research into the action of mirror neurons suggests that this construct may require some tweaking, that humans may minutely ape the facial expressions of others in order to evoke what they are likely feeling. By copying another person's physical response to a stimulus (whether internal or external), it appears that we do a pretty good job of recognizing what caused that response. In short, mimicry is the first step to building empathy.

But empathy does not preclude privacy. Even when we understand and feel the feelings of others, we are also observing ourselves do so, judging the validity of those feelings, anticipating their social desirability, and engaging in all sorts of internal chatter that is not shared.

For example, observe how Anne Lamott writes about the true, shameful feeling of jealousy when a fellow writer meets with great commercial success, especially if that person is a friend.

> You are going to feel awful beyond words ... It can wreak just the

tiniest bit of havoc with your self-esteem to find that you are hoping for small bad things to happen to this friend—for, say, her head to blow up. Or for him to wake up one morning with a pain in his prostate, because I don't care how rich and successful someone is, if you wake up having to call your doctor and ask for a finger massage, it's going to be a long day. You get all caught up in such fantasies because you feel, once again, like the kid outside the candy-store window, and you believe that this friend, this friend whom you now hate, has all the candy. You believe that success is bringing this friend inordinate joy and serenity and security and that her days are easier.[19]

ıs socially undesirable as it is, lousy is a creaky, echoing haunted ıse that is actually built on a ndation of empathy with someone e's happiness. And that is precisely y we tend to keep it locked away as much as possible, visible only to our own, scolding selves.

> **5. Social embedding:** "... almost all our emotions make sense only in relation to other people ... the self needs to feel part of a social environment that it can interact with and understand on its own terms."

In essence, Ramachandran is saying that the sense of self depends on its own juxtaposition with a broad "other" to exist. The central thread of most memoir—particularly the coming of age story—is precisely that quest to move from "me vs. the world" to "my place in the world." In memoirs such as Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club*, or Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*, the world that these authors interact with and try to understand largely comprises their immediate family. In the work of essayists like Joan Didion, the challenge the author works through on the page is to understand her own experience within the context of societal events and upheavals, as in this excerpt from *The White Album*:

> Driving a Budget Rent-A-Car between Sacramento and San Francisco one rainy morning in November of 1968 I kept the radio on very loud... in an effort to erase six words from my mind, six words which had no significance for me but which seemed that year to signal the onset of anxiety or fright. The words, a line from Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," were these: *Petals on a wet black bough*. The radio played "Wichita Lineman" and "I Heard It through the Grapevine." *Petals on a wet black bough*. Somewhere between the Yolo Causeway and Vallejo it occurred to me that during the course of any given week I met too many people who spoke favorably about bombing power stations. Somewhere between the Yolo Causeway and Vallejo it also

occurred to me that the fright on this particular morning was going to present itself as an inability to drive this Budget Rent-A-Car across the Carquinas Bridge. *The Wichita Lineman was still on the job.* I closed my eyes and drove across the Carquinas Bridge, because I had appointments, because I was working, because I had promised to watch the revolution being made at San Francisco State College and because there was no place in Vallejo to turn in a Budget Rent-A-Car and because nothing on my mind was in the script as I remembered it.

Without that tension between internal and external reality, the memoirist would have little to say.

> **6. Free will:** You can envisage different courses of action and have the sense of making deliberate choices.

What line of poetry is probably most remembered by anyone attending an American high school from 1960 to the present? It has to be Robert Frost's "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Though the belief in free will and self-determination has taken on religious overtones in American culture, becoming something of a self-serving myth, it is nonetheless true that the ability to envisage different choices and outcomes, and then to choose the more desirable path and act on it, is a defining feature of the human brain. It is also a defining theme of memoir. From choosing who to play with or who to marry, which secrets to reveal and which to harbor, when to leave home and when to return to it, the heart of much memoir is in chronicling the choices one has and has not made, and in reflecting on their consequences.

> **7. Self-awareness:** "A self that is not aware of itself is an oxymoron... your self-awareness might partly depend on your brain using mirror neurons recursively, allowing you to see yourself from another person's (allocentric) viewpoint. Hence the use of terms like 'self-conscious' (embarrassed), when what you really mean is being conscious of someone else being conscious of you."

Self-awareness is, indeed, intrinsic to the sense of self and to memoir. But what is perhaps more germane to their parallels is what Ramachandran says about the *evolution* of introspective consciousness, in essence, the evolution of self-awareness, which happened somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000 years ago.

"A monkey, a dolphin, or a dog probably enjoys some rudimentary form of visual imagery, but only humans can create symbolic visual tokens and juggle them around in the mind's eye to try out novel juxtapositions. An ape can probably conjure up a mental picture of a banana or the alpha male of his troop, but only a human can mentally juggle visual symbols to create novel combinations, such as babies sprouting wings (angels) or beings that are half-horse, half-human (centaurs)."[20]

This ability to create "tokens"—representations of entities and ideas—and to manipulate them, apply them, juxtapose them, and create outlandish scenarios with them—this capacity lies at the heart of what we call imagination and draws its fuel from both hemispheres of the brain.

...empathy does not preclude privacy. Even when we understand and feel the feelings of others, we are also observing ourselves do so, judging the validity of those feelings, anticipating their social desirability...

Our Sense of Time Passing

In *Coming to Our Senses*, Jon Kabat-Zinn explores the "sense" of time passing. He alludes to Ray Kurzweil's theory that "our internal, subjective sense of time passing is calibrated by the interval between what we feel or sense as 'milestone' or noteworthy events, along with 'the degree of chaos' in the system," and goes on to note that:

> Babies and young children have lots of milestone events happening in those formative years and the frequency of such events decreases over time, even as the level of chaos in the system (say, for example, unpredictable life events) increases. The interval between milestone events is short and thus the felt experience of childhood is one of timelessness, or of time passing very slowly. We are hardly aware of it, we are so much in the present moment. As we get older, the spaced intervals (time) between noteworthy developmental milestones seems to stretch out more and more... Subjectively, it feels like time is speeding up as we age because our reference frame is growing longer.[21]

Anyone over the age of forty probably recognizes this

phenomenon of time seeming to accelerate, and of feeling that our lives have comprised two distinct phases: *childhood*—long, languorous, and rich with sensation and detail; and *everything that's happened since*, an exhausting blur of teachers, bosses, bills, cars, boxes packed and unpacked, debts acquired, some of them paid—all punctuated by a few key events like weddings, births, and funerals.

But the fluid and fairly constant shuttling between past, present, and imagined (or implied) future, is what transforms chronicle into memoir. Knowledge of the past and projections about the future, lend essential richness to the literary (and, I would argue, lived) experience, as described by Virginia Woolf in *A Sketch of the Past:*

> I was thinking about Stella as we crossed the Channel a month ago. I have not given her a thought since. The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but it is then that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else, when the film on the camera reaches only the eye.[22]

Slowing down the felt sense of time passing, living most fully in a present that is "backed by the past," seeing "through the surface to the depths" —these are the most challenging tasks for the writer, and it is here that mindfulness practice perhaps has the most to offer. "The other way to slow down the felt sense of time passing is to make more of your ordinary moments notable and noteworthy by taking note of them," Jon Kabat-Zinn writes. "The tiniest moments can become veritable milestones. ... Since there are an astronomically large number of moments in the rest of your life, no matter how old you are, the more you are here for them, the more vivid life becomes."[23] Taking note of ordinary moments—a skill so essential to memoir—is a discipline that mindfulness meditation reinforces kinetically through the practice of attending to one's breath when meditating.

But note that Kabat-Zinn does not say that life becomes "happier" or "more serene" as a consequence of meditating. Indeed, "vivid" is precisely the right word for what both meditators and writers aspire to. In great memoir, past and present collide and converge, enabling moments to be more deeply felt and specifically rendered, as in this poignant excerpt from *A Three Dog Life*, Abigail Thomas's memoir about her husband's severe brain injury:

> Rich is lodged in a single moment and it never tips into the next. Last week I lay on his bed in the nursing home and watched him. I was out of his field of vision

> and I think he forgot I was there. He stood still, then he picked up a newspaper from a neat pile of newspapers, held it a moment, and carefully put it back. His arms dropped to his sides. He looked as if he was waiting for the next thing but there is no next thing.
>
> I got stuck with the past and future. That's my half of this bad hand. I know what happened and I never get used to it. Just when I think I've metabolized everything I am drawn up short. "Rich lost part of his vision" is what I say, but recently Sally told the nurse, "He is blind in his right eye," and I was catapulted out of the safety of the past tense into the now.

Awakening to the moment, what Jon Kabat-Zinn describes as "falling into awareness," is not always pleasant. But it is essential to what Buddhist writer and teacher Natalie Goldberg advises memoir writers to do: "Build a tolerance for what you cannot bear. This is good practice. It makes your capacity larger. You grow and are willing to embrace more. Your memoir becomes richer."[24]

The "Coherent Life Narrative" as a Double-Edged Sword

In *Mindsight*, Daniel Siegel defines a life narrative "the way we put our story into words to convey it to another person," and explains how mental health professionals elicit such narratives from their clients. "By simply asking certain kinds of autobiographical questions, we can discover how people have made sense of their past—how their minds have shaped their memories of the past to explain who they are in the present."[25] Although explaining a diagnostic tool called the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), he could just as easily be defining memoir, which Sven Birkerts describes this way: "Apart from whatever painful or disturbing events they recount, [memoirs'] deeper ulterior purpose is to discover the nonsequential connections that allow those experiences to make larger sense; they are about circumstance becoming meaningful when seen from a certain remove. They all, to greater or lesser degree, use the vantage point of the present to gain access to what might be called the hidden narrative of the past. Each is in its own way an account of detection, a realized effort to assemble the puzzle of what happened in the light of subsequent realization."[26]

"Detection" strikes me as a very deliberate choice of word. Beyond simple "discovery," detection implies that meaning-making is an imaginative, deductive act, built from clues more than from direct inquisition or evidence. Interestingly, though, psychiatrists like Siegel seem more accepting of the primacy of emotional truth over documentable fact than are memoir writers and critics.

> The AAI evaluation accepts that memory is fallible... Even at our most honest moments we say things we think others expect to hear, and we say them in ways that make us appear as we want to appear. For these reasons the analysis does not presume the accuracy of the facts as stated. Instead it focuses on the coherence of the story.[27]

This tension between "the accuracy of the facts" and "the coherence of the story" generates myriad challenges for the memoirists, who by virtue of choosing nonfiction—a genre defined by what it is *not*—hold themselves to a standard that may at times be unrealistically rigorous. Certainly there are cases of fiction masquerading as memoir for purely commercial reasons—James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* comes to mind as an especially obvious and egregious example. But most memoirists would agree with Sven Birkerts that, "... memoir, unlike reportage, serves the spirit of the past, not the letter... The writer must represent as faithfully as possible what memory has shaped inside—memory and feeling. This, needless to say, may prove to be different in some respects from what may have been captured by an unseen crew of recording technicians. Distortion is inevitable, permissible, so long as it is in the service of the truth that overrides the literal sequence of events."[28]

...is the quest to make meaning from memory and immediate experience an inherently dangerous pursuit? Or even an inherently worthy one?

Regardless of the ethics of labeling something "memoir" vs. "fiction," Siegel believes that having a coherent life narrative—making sense of what has happened to you and of how you have come to be who you are—is a necessity for and marker of emotional and mental health, arguing that, "Making sense is a source of strength and resilience. In my twenty-five years as a therapist, I've also come to believe that making sense is essential to our well-being and happiness."

But Jon Kabat-Zinn would maintain that this kind of narrative is a double-edged sword. At best, it is an illusion.

> [Both modern biology... and Buddhism would say that]... you will not find a permanent, independent, enduring self,

whether you look for it in 'your' body... in 'your' emotions, 'your' beliefs, 'your' thoughts, 'your' relationships, or anyplace else. And the reason you will not be able to locate anywhere a permanent, isolated, self-existing self that is 'you' is that it is a mirage, a holographic emergence, a phantom, a product of the habit-bound, emotionally turbulent, thinking mind. It is being constructed and deconstructed continually, moment by moment. It is continually subject to change, and therefore not permanent or enduring or real...[29]

nd at worst, he argues, having a erent and *repeated* life narrative imprison us, making us hapless ims of mental and emotional its. "Without awareness of the er or of the self-absorption, or ıui, or any other mind state that take us over when it arises," he tes, "we reinforce those synaptic works within the nervous system t underlie our conditional aviors."[30]

ı some respects, Patricia Hampl ees with Kabat-Zinn but questions ether we have any other choice.

... each of us must possess a created version of the past. Created, that is, real in the sense of tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in place and in history. And the downside of any created thing as well: We must live with a version that attaches us to our limitations, to the inevitable subjectivity of our point of view.[31]

leredith Maran's memoir, *My Lie: rue Story of False Memory*, starkly strates how this quest to make se of our feelings can lock us into arrative that reinforces painful ings, justifies dysfunctional ones, l has destructive consequences. describes how she came to member" having been molested ıer father, only to realize eight rs after severing her own and her ldren's contact with him, that this was a false memory. Years later, she talks with her brother about her false (but, at the time, sincere) allegations.

"The human species has a hard time achieving balance," he said. "It's hard to achieve balance when you're unhappy. You were unhappy. You were looking for balance. You thought you'd find it by putting the pieces into place, by remembering that you'd been abused. I can't blame you for looking for happiness."

So is the quest to make meaning from memory and immediate experience an inherently dangerous pursuit? Or even an inherently worthy one? Without addressing that question, Patricia Hampl simply notes that it's a process that has consequences on a social as well as personal level. She quotes Milan Kundera, who writes, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting," then reinforces his point, flatly asserting that, "What is remembered is what becomes reality." She is talking about the tendency of those in power to create their own version of the past, one that suits their current ideology,

objectives, and actions. And she is reminding us that, "The function of memory, while experienced as intensely personal, is surprisingly political."[32]

Living with Paradox

If you were simply flipping through this paper, depending on which page you landed on, you might variously conclude that the "self" is an illusion or that the "sense of self" is what makes us human; that without the language center in the left brain we would have no such sense, or that self-awareness depends on the symbolic and pattern recognition capabilities of the right brain; that one's past feels fixed and ancient, or that memories inform and enhance our present awareness.

Writers in the realms of mindfulness, neuroscience, and memoir make all of these assertions, and all of them truthfully, if not comfortably, co-exist. They converge in the recognition of a paradox beautifully articulated at the start of Paul Broks's *Into the Silent Land*:

> Reality is under constant review... We still live by intuitions and illusions, especially when our thoughts turn inwards. The bright, intangible qualities of subjective experience have yet to be reconciled with the dark substance of the brain, but that space behind the face is still lit by the mind's eye. Irresistibly, we still see the vision of minds in the light of other people's eyes. Cosmologies come and go, but if this illusion begins to fade then so does the observer.[33]

Science, spirituality, and literature—we need all three to get through the day, the life, the universe. AWP

Julie Wittes Schlack *writes book reviews for the* Boston Globe. *She won a Hopwood Award for Fiction. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous publications, including* Shenandoah, *the* Literary Review, Ellipsis, *the* Louisville Review, *the* Dos Passos Review, Eleven Eleven, Ninth Letter, *and* Tampa Review. *Julie received her MFA from Lesley University's low-residency program.*

Memoir is made of goals, memories, emotions, actions, and beliefs; they are the bricks that the writer carefully selects and aligns. He then applies his present awareness to building an inviting and durable structure...

Notes

1. Paul Broks, *Into the Silent Land: Travels in Neuropsychology* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), p. 126.

2. Interview on RadioLab with Paul Broks.

3. Sven Birkerts, *Then, Again: The Art of Time in Memoir* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2008), p. 8.

4. Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to our Senses* (New York: Hyperion Press, 2005), p. 43.

5. Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), p. 32.

6. Kabat-Zinn, p. 168.

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