

Shacil B.

Newark, New Jersey

Recall

Hardboard panels, Acrylic paint, Oil Pastels, Wood Glue

My family is pretty superstitious. No shoes on the bed, or purses on the floor because of bad luck. Calls in the middle of the day from my grandma who says to watch out, because she had a dream that something bad was going to happen. Or even the endless ghost stories from my mother and my aunts who all back her up. I've always been taught that there is greater meaning in what you see, do and remember. So with this in mind, I wanted to learn more about the things my parents remember in hopes that it would get me a better look into their lives. When making writing ideas for my project, nostalgia was one of the first things I put down. That feeling of longing when you get hit with a particular smell, or when the sun hits you in just the right spot, bringing you back to a memory. It's these memories, the ones that make you hum in thought, that I wanted to explore further. In my exploration of thought, I learned about not just my family's oldest memories but also my own.

Memories



Shacil B.

The Oxbow School

OS48

Writer's Note: *I wanted to get to know a little more about my parents. What better way to do that than to ask them to go back in time and relive the past?*

Part 1: The Transcriptions

It's the morning of the Prom. I'm sitting down as my mom helps to paint my toes for the day. I decided it was the perfect time to ask her something for my final project at Oxbow.

Shacil: Ok earliest memory story.

Mom: Ok my earliest memory, I had to have been maybe around umm three or four. Actually, I was four now that I do the calculations. It was my godmother's wedding and she was married on my birthday, umm she had to decide between her day and her niece's day, and she decided to get married on my birthday, June 26th. And I was dressed up in this really pretty white dress that kind of looked like hers. And I remember seeing her go down the aisle, all I can remember, th-th-th-the biggest part of the memory, the most vivid part of the memory, is me running through the church pews in this white dress. And I remember just looking at the dress flow as I was running through the pews. That's my earliest memory.

Shacil: Mmmh ok, sounds cool. Any other things about this wedding that you remember

Mom: No I just remember her dress had a really long train and veil and umm, that's it. I don't even remember seeing my parents. I don't remember my parents being there or anything, I just remember watching her go down the aisle and I remember running through the pews.

The first part was done, now all I had to do was ask my Dad the same thing. Two days later, while he and my mom get ready to go out to a party, I ask the same question.

Dad: My first memory?

Shacil: Yes.

Mom: I knew mine right away.

Dad: I'm trying to think of what I got. Let me think about that for a second. Hmm. Let me say this, the memory that I think I had the longest... is my grandmother smacking my hand.

My Mom, Dad, and I giggled.

Shacil: What did you do?

Dad: Umm, we used to have a glass table in the living room by Nana and I, and I think I must have like, thrown something, and it dropped on it, and my grandmother, she smacked my hand, May May. So that's the earliest thing I can remember.

Shacil: Did she smack your hand with anything? Like with something?

Dad: Nah she just like smacked my hand with her hand.

Shacil: What did you drop on the table?

Dad: I don't remember what it was. It might have been umm, it might have been... I don't even know what it was, to be honest with you. But I was playing with something in there and it hit the glass table.

Shacil: Was it hard?

Dad: Yeah, it was something hard that hit the glass table and she smacked my hand.

Shacil: How old do you think you were?

Dad: I don't know. Maybe three.

Shacil: Is that the earliest thing you can think of? For right now.

Dad: That's the earliest thing I can think of at all.

All three of us chuckled.

Part 2: What Does The Science Say

I have always had a fascination with time. How sometimes it feels slow, or fast. Or how a moment that, at the time felt slow and long, is now a memory that only lasts a few seconds. These thoughts on time have also led me to other interests, specifically memory. When making my mind map, one of the first things I put down was nostalgia. That feeling of longing when you get hit with a certain smell, or when the sun hits you in just the right spot, bringing you back to a memory. It's these memories, the ones that make you hum in thought, that I wanted to explore further. In my exploration of thought, I explored not just my family's oldest memories but also my own.

For me, it's quite blurry. I remember it like this: I was sitting on a couch in a room, probably a living room, with very little furniture, almost like we had just moved in. I knew I wasn't somewhere in America. I looked outside the window and I remember seeing mountains, tall ones. And in this memory, I remember imagining a person walking along the mountain path with maybe a cow, or something of that sort. The funny part was that when I asked my mom to verify whether I had made that all up or not, she knew exactly what I was talking about. She said that it was our house in St. Vincent, which sounded about right based on the pictures I had seen of it. However, there were some key differences between my memory and hers. For one, the house wasn't bare at all, in fact, it was full of furniture according to her. Then, when it came to the mountains, it didn't sound like it matched what I remembered. She describes some mountains, but with lots of fields and farms, which is not something I visualized at all. And yet even with these major differences, we are remembering the same things.

It's interesting how your brain works. It's one of the most powerful things in the world and yet there is so much that it can't do, especially when it comes to memory. For example, most people's memories start at around three or four years old. Memories before then are usually lost

due to a phenomenon called childhood amnesia. It's the reason you don't remember anything from when you were an infant. Another example is how your memories might not be memories at all. I know that sounds ridiculous: how can you have a made-up memory? But it's true. In fact, 40 percent of people have fabricated their first memories¹. And even if your memory isn't fully made up, it could also be changed so much to the point that it's not at all similar to the original event.

I won't lie, after hearing all of that I began to question my own sanity a bit. I kept wondering, *How much of what I remember happened? How much of what I know is real?* My spiral stopped pretty quickly though after the good news, which is that even though there can be a lot of inconsistencies, your memory is very accurate most of the time. Even though your memory is pretty, it might still change for a couple of reasons. One may be that your feelings for an event or moment have changed and therefore the way you remember it changes. For example, you go to a party, and it's super fun, and for the next few days, you can only say good things about what you remember of the party. However, if you later hear that the host was really rude and that they said or did something mean behind your back, you might now begin to remember this party in a different light. In fact, according to an article from Northwestern, your memory is "like a telephone game" where each time you recall it, it changes. Even the passing of time can change the way you remember something.

Part 3: Putting It All Together

¹ Griffiths, Sarah. "Can You Trust Your Earliest Childhood Memories?" *BBC Future*, BBC, 24 Feb. 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190516-why-you-cannot-trust-your-earliest-childhood-memories>.

I have always been an over-analyzer. When I say that, I don't mean it in the way that you analyze texts for a larger meaning, although I do love that too. I mean it more in an observational kind of way. I love to observe people's different features, from the way someone's eyes are tilted downward, to the way one tooth pokes out a bit farther than the other. I love to watch people's mannerisms: from the way they move their hands when telling a joke, to the cadence of their voice. I love to analyze, experience, and consume the world around me. So, it is only natural for me to want to further understand my parents' transcriptions.

One of the first things I noticed, after doing all my research and rereading the transcription, was how much they knew, but didn't actually remember. My mom knew she was at the wedding with her parents, but she could never actually remember them there. My dad knew he must have thrown something hard on the table, but he had no idea what it was. And I knew I wasn't in America, however, I couldn't actually remember where I was. It's so interesting how fickle your memories are, and what types of memories actually stick to people. You would think that it would be the most important life-changing, or strongly emotional memory that would last, but in each of our cases, it was a memory that wasn't that impactful or crucial. Not only was the memory not life-changing, but the details that we ended up actually remembering were sometimes the smallest things. My mom, she could very clearly remember the way her dress flowed. My dad remembered the glass table very vividly, and for me, I recalled the inaccurate setup of the room. To me, these inconsistencies in details and visuals were the perfect example of memories that not only change but may also be unreliable.

Another thing I noticed about the transcriptions was how much personality you could get from just a short conversation. It was quite funny to know that even if I had to assign these transcriptions to each of my parents without knowing these stories beforehand, I could probably

do it. My Mom was very thorough. I didn't have to ask many questions because she would explain as much as she could in one go. It also didn't take her much time to pinpoint her earliest memory. Just from the transcription, I feel as though you can tell she is a very detailed and chatty person. My Dad on the other hand wasn't quite like that. It took him a bit of thinking before he could pinpoint one moment. In his explanations, there weren't a lot of details and he kept his descriptions short and concise. I feel as though with his transcription, you can probably tell he is a man of few words who likes to take his time. It's amazing how much information you can get from just a couple hundred words. And even beyond what was said, I feel as though I understand more about my parents in an unspoken sort of way. I think that what's so beautiful about this question is that there is so much unsaid information you can get about someone just by asking them something as simple as "What's your first memory?" Everything from the memory itself, to the details in it, to even just the way someone describes it gives you a window into the person you're talking to.

Works Cited

Alberini, Cristina M, and Alessio Travaglia. "Infantile Amnesia: A Critical Period of Learning to Learn and Remember." *The Journal of Neuroscience : the Official Journal of the Society for Neuroscience*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 14 June 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5473198/> .

This study is about childhood amnesia and what it is. Childhood amnesia is why most people cannot remember memories from when they were an infant. Many people's first memories start at around 3 years old. This relates to my project exploring earliest memories and what that says about someone.

Griffiths, Sarah. "Can You Trust Your Earliest Childhood Memories?" *Www.bbc.com*, 20 May 2019

This article explores just how reliable memory is, especially childhood memories. The article talks about how many of our first memories might be completely fabricated. This is related because I am exploring earlier childhood memories, and this related to many aspects of the stories that I've collected. My family's first memories are often blurry and incomplete, which both relate back to and call into question the reliability of memories.

"What Makes a Memory Stick." *Columbia University Irving Medical Center*, 24 Feb. 2023, www.cuimc.columbia.edu/news/what-makes-memory-stick . Accessed 24 Apr. 2023.

This Article is about what allows for a memory to be stored long term. It goes into the specific reasons and explanation for why a memory “sticks” with someone.

Understanding what allows memories to stick might help me understand why these first memories are the ones that my parents seem to remember.

Paul, Marla. “Your Memory Is like the Telephone Game.” *Northwestern.edu*, 2012, news.northwestern.edu/stories/2012/09/your-memory-is-like-the-telephone-game.

This article is about how People’s memories change each time they recall them. It discusses the reason they change and how it might affect the memory itself. I think this is relevant because it once again calls into question the amount of accuracy in your first memory. It helps me understand why our memories might not be consistent.

Olagunju, Abdulrahman. “Cells Deep in Your Brain Place Time Stamps on Memories.” *Scientific American*, www.scientificamerican.com/article/cells-deep-in-your-brain-place-time-stamps-on-memories/.

This article goes into the science of how your brain is able to keep track of your memories in chronological order. Since my paper deals with time and memory and themes, I felt that it would be interesting to understand how they are related. Reading this allowed me to have a new perspective on how complex and amazing your brain is.