Saving Memory in the Decline of Life

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

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DEDICATION

To my wife of fifty years who has supported my return to school in my seventh decade.
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It is difficult to remember and identify everyone in the George Mason community who gave aid and insight and I apologize in advance if I have forgotten someone due to age-inflected memory.

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ABSTRACT

SAVING MEMORY IN THE DECLINE OF LIFE

Raphael Warshaw, Master of Fine Arts

George Mason University, 2015

Thesis Director: Professor Peggy Feerick

“When one reaches the decline of life it is imperative to try and gather together as many as possible of the sensations which have passed through our particular organism.” Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

Much has been written about memory, its formation, persistence, malleability and loss. Although the chemical and physiologic mechanisms are largely beyond the scope of this manuscript (and to some extent, science itself), we know that they form, grow, decline and ultimately disappear. Our hopes and fears, all we know, are controlled by what we remember; what we learn is based on what we know.

My mother and mother-in-law shared a hospital room when my sister and wife were born two days apart; As a result, my wife and I have been aware of each other ever since. We have to a considerable extent lived the same life in close proximity and yet we remember
many things differently and often different things. Our memories seem best aligned
about food and place.

If Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa is right that “it is imperative to try and gather
together as many as possible of the sensations which have passed through our particular
organism” there must be a repository in which to do so. For me place is the template that
organizes this repository and photographs are the external physical representations of the
memories it contains, old, new and yet to come.
INTRODUCTION

I was born on October 2, 1942. I know this in part because of repetition, the need to provide it for all manner of reasons. Should I forget, it is recorded on my Birth Certificate, Driver’s License and Passport and encoded in my Social Security Number. A simple mathematical process reveals my age. The license contains my height, weight and eye color self-reported but approximately true as well as a photograph, all records of a point in time and valid only for that moment.

There is still more information in the public record; schools I attended, how I was graded, who I married and when. My military discharge papers reveal the length of my service, rank achieved, occupation codes, disability rating and condition of discharge. The recorded condition of that discharge, “Honorable,” says little but implies a great deal. County Clerks maintain detailed property records of the places I have lived; Social Security records reveal where I have worked and what I was paid; my medical records describe my injuries and illnesses and how they were treated. My Curriculum Vitae contains titles and dates along with a list of the scholarly publications in which I participated. A summary of my data can be obtained from the Internet in minutes for a small fee. This data forms a map and a framework. It is at best a series of signposts, pointers to place and to memory. None of it tells who I was, who I am or will be.
MEMORY AND THE SOUL AS ITS REPOSITORY

If memory is worth saving it would be useful to know what it is, where it resides and how best to access it. As a child, I was taught that the soul is the repository of memory but I have never seen a soul. Do we have souls? A majority, sixty-four percent of Americans, believe in an immortal soul which survives after death.² On the other hand, modern science regards both the soul and memory as constructs of the physical brain. I have never encountered a disembodied soul and can find no credible evidence for the existence of one. While “out-of-body” experiences have been cited as evidence for an extra-corporeal soul³, closer examination is likely to reveal fraud, deception or fuzzy thinking. Attempts to document the paranormal phenomena cited as evidence of a mind separate from the body invariably come up empty. For the purpose of this discussion I will assume that an invisible, immaterial, immortal soul that survives death does not exist and that memory is, in fact, a construct of the physical brain. I take this position based on my reading of the evidence that, collectively, indicates that it is more likely than not to be the case. If the scientific consensus shifts in the future, I will not hesitate to change my mind.
WHAT IS MEMORY?

The dictionary defines memory as “the power or process of remembering what has been learned and retained, especially through associative mechanisms.”

Chris Westbury and Daniel C. Dennett attempt to find common ground in the definition of memory and belief in ways that permit a dialog between the scientific and philosophical disciplines. Westbury and Dennett represent philosophy and attack the issue accordingly. They begin with a quotation from Thomas Reid, an 18th century philosopher and founder of the “Common Sense” school, on beliefs which he defined as those tenets that we cannot help but believe, given that we are constructed the way we are constructed: “The analogy between memory as a repository and between remembering and retaining, is obvious and is to be found in all languages, it being natural to express the operations of the mind by images taken from things material. But in philosophy, we ought to draw aside the veil of imagery and to view them naked.”

Westbury and Dennett quote Jacques Monod’s statement that “ever since its birth in the Ionian islands almost 3,000 years ago, western philosophy has been divided between two seemingly opposed attitudes. According to one of them the true and ultimate reality of the universe can reside only in perfectly immutable forms unvarying by
essence. According to the others, the only real truth resides in flux and evolution.” Monod divides the two camps into “Neats” and Scruffies.” Westbury and Dennett come down on the side of the Scruffies concluding that “memory as a storage of representations of the environment to be used on different occasions in recall does not exist as a neurophysiological function.” What we call recollection can never be more than the most plausible story we come up with or, perhaps only a story that is plausible enough within the constraints imposed by biology and history.”

For Westbury and Dennett what is meant by an organism having a belief is that its behavior can be reliably predicted by ascribing that belief to it. They call this “taking the intentional stance” and discourage the notion of a context-independent definition of belief.

They conclude that “The complex network of implicit and explicit knowledge that underlies the categories of both belief and memory rest on the ability of that network to both define and recognize its own coherence” and “a set of diverse and complex mechanisms that are all attempting to achieve a single common end – to keep the useful facts of history from going immediately inert.” What they do not provide is a functional definition or a locus.
THE MECHANISM OF MEMORY

In recent years, progress has been made in working out the neural basis of memory formation. The actual synaptic changes, both chemical and electrophysiological, have been extensively studied, either in vitro (Lynch, 1989; Stanton and Sejnoski, 1989) or in vivo (Alkon, et al., 1993). Until recently, how human memory is formed, organized and retrieved, how concepts such as time and space are recorded and in what structures has been a mystery. Physicians using Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scans had been able to locate sites of neural activity and, by relating them initially to crude stimuli such as flashes or pin-pricks and sound, linked them to ever more precise areas.

Over time, experimentation has led to a theory of memory that identifies at least some of the sites associated with different forms of memory; emotional memories, fear, love are stored in a region called the amygdala, conscious visual memories in the hippocampus; procedural memories are distributed throughout the brain. A memory has no single locus, instead it is made up of a web of chemical and electrophysical pathways which connect over wide areas. Immediate memories are fragile; the pathways take time to form and consolidate, eventually becoming long-term memories. This has been the paradigm for almost 100 years.
Beginning in 1974, Elizabeth Loftus published a series of articles\textsuperscript{13,14,15} suggesting that memory was more work-in-progress than recording. She was able to implant false memories of supposedly long past events in her research subjects by supplying plausible information and third person confirmation of details. Besides destroying the notion of recovery of repressed memory, this suggests that our memories may not even be our own.

In 2003, Karim Nader established that the very act of remembering rendered a memory susceptible to change\textsuperscript{16,17}. He postulated that each remembering altered the memory in at least a small way. There is a photographic analog to this process; the Joint Photographic Experts’ Group (JPEG) standard for compression for storage and transmission alters an image with each resaving due to the reapplication of a compression algorithm\textsuperscript{16}. Professor of Radiology and Psychology Jeffrey Sacks suggests that our minds are “well equipped to remember things that we see or hear — but not to remember the source of those memories”\textsuperscript{18}.
AGING AND MEMORY

While there are easily accessed external markers of aging and decline of the body (mirrors, comparison with family photos, etc.), those affecting the brain are hidden and must be inferred by the product of what they control. The reactions of others provide additional evidence. Reduced mobility, changes in visual perception and reduced plasticity in one’s world view are all consequences of this decline; some of the effects can be overcome by prostheses as varied as eye-glasses, calculators, canes, walkers and wheel chairs. Others, plasticity in particular, respond less well to mechanical or chemical intervention. Many outcomes of the aging process damage the ability to understand and respond, suggesting the need for advance planning and outside help.

Some things, changes in color vision, close examination of the part of the world within reach and levels of acceptance may be worth embracing. Claude Monet’s eyesight was compromised due to cataracts in his later years. In 1923 he underwent surgery on his right eye and began to wear glasses that improved his vision for a short time\(^9\). Lisel Mueller, a German born American poet, sums up nicely in “Monet Refuses the Operation”\(^{20}\):
“Doctor, you say there are no halos around the streetlights in Paris and what I see is an aberration caused by old age, an affliction. I tell you it has taken me all my life to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels…”

Petrarch refused to put a number to old age: “When you feel you are old, then and no sooner will you declare your old age.” Personal experience, however, suggests that age declares itself.
WHAT MUST WE SAVE AND WHY?

If what we collect as memory is incomplete, changeable, replaceable, forgettable, its mechanism subject to decay, what is it that we must save and why must we save it?

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s exhortation to gather “the sensations which have passed through our particular organism” may best be understood as a call to autobiography. Autobiographers find it convenient to work from the position that ‘memory’ is “a storehouse in which the past is preserved intact conveniently awaiting autobiographical recall in any present.”

Paul John Eakin, Emeritus Professor of English at Indiana University, has written extensively on the process by which we create identity by narrative. He presents the idea of memory and, by extension, autobiography as fiction that he describes as “that which is formed, shaped, molded, fashioned, invented”. He intends this as description, not pejorative. Eakin quotes Israel Rosenfeld’s idea that “recollection is a kind of perception… and every context will alter the nature of what is recalled”. This fits with the idea that memory is altered by context and the timeline is altered by whether the perception of an event is positive or negative (negative events are viewed as older than positive ones). Interestingly, the degree of negativity we assign to unhappy memories
increases with temporal distance from them, perhaps in the service of our perception of improvement.

Eakin presents the idea that “memory does not preserve the past; instead it interferes with its recovery. Because the body changes and consciousness alters, the recovery of the past – autobiography’s project – is, in a deep psychological and neurological sense, impossible.” According to Oliver Sacks: “It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a “narrative” of us, our identities.” As an artist, I try to construct visual stories, based on what I believe to be true. This truth is as likely to be based on societal code or belief as verifiable fact. If my memories and, by extension, the stories themselves are false what I am left with is the act of construction and must learn to make the best of it.

In her novel “Patterns of Childhood” Christa Wolf debunks the notion of memory unchanged by the time of its remembering and the changing needs of the one who remembers. Her protagonist, Nelly, speaks of her time as a member of the Hitler Youth in the third person “because it is unbearable to think the tiny word ‘I’ in connection with the word ‘Auschwitz’. ‘I’ in the past conditional: I would have, I might have. I could have. Done it. Obeyed orders.” My immigrant parents never spoke about the Holocaust in front of us although many of their relatives and friends had narrowly escaped it. What their memories of it were, how they were formed initially, how they changed and the effect on their lives and mine are rendered mute by that silence.
While attempting to flee occupied France, Walter Benjamin’s way was temporarily blocked by the authorities and he killed himself to avoid falling into the hands of the Nazis. It was, on its face, a rational decision. The next day, the refugee party he was travelling with was permitted to cross the Spanish frontier to Portugal and safety.\textsuperscript{28} In committing suicide, his final act, he negates himself in anticipation of memory.

Perhaps a better question is not what must we remember but what must we construct. The written external record of our lives is a lattice, at once supporting and constraining our autobiographical creation; we bend it in support of our self-image but stop short of its breaking point. An entry from my résumé, “Knitting Mechanic,” is unambiguous but largely incapable of creating much emotion in a reader whereas for one of my generation ‘1-A’ written on a Draft Card provokes a cascade (figure 1). The combination of the text and the context are powerful.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Draft_Card.png}
\caption{Draft Card}
\end{figure}
If we must preserve our impressions, for whom must we preserve them? I think and write using analogy but I find that my references are out of date; my classmates and the younger of my professors return blank stares when I mention Rudy Vallée. Many of my references are not only archaic but worse, obscure. For me, the imperative is to make images. The viewers I construct them for are free to develop their own stories about them.
LATE STYLE

My artistic career is divided into early and late, there is no middle. My early scientific career suggests that I was able to function in my field at a high level but I no longer have that capability. Nicholas Delbanco in the introduction to his book ‘Lastingness’ states that he has limited his focus to artists who had early success, lived to at least seventy, remained productive forces in their “sunset” years and were now dead. As an artist starting out at seventy-three, this is somewhat disconcerting. I would argue that “late style” in relation to artistic production is simply what the artist is doing at the moment.

As an apprentice in a knitting factory I was able to match yarn colors with precision. As a photographer for artists, the prints and transparencies I produced for reproduction of their work were tack-sharp and as faithful to the original colors as a chemical-based process permitted. Well into my forties, I could read a typewritten page across a large room. Those capabilities, while preserved to a degree by prostheses and mental tricks are greatly diminished. Returning as a student to photography at this late stage, these deficits must, inadvertently or by choice, affect my production. Best to embrace them.

A lifetime of study and experience has made me both more critical about and less certain of the value of what I produce. Age affects where I can go, and colors what I see and
hear. This mediation of my senses must surely influence my work but I have been unable to craft a unifying description or theory of this “late style.”

In “On Politics”[^30], a two-volume history of political thought and thinkers from the early Greeks (Thucydides and Plato) to 20th century writers (Dewey, Marx), Alan Ryan places his subjects in the time and place in which they live(d). He believes that their work can only be understood in historical context. Assuming that their works and writings are incomprehensible without reference to their views of man, nature and God, as well as the historical events of their lifetimes, he concentrates on that aspect.

I have come to believe that, to a considerable extent, the time when and place in which the artist arrives at old age is what illuminates so-called late style. In order to avoid having to think or write about the period to which my style belongs, I have placed myself, in the time of my dotage, among far younger colleagues; it is for others to determine the success or failure of this strategy.
EXTERNAL MEMORY

(The public record)

A good biographer or autobiographer relies on the public record in order to create the framework of a subject’s life. Important dates, parentage to the extent it can be determined, school records, employment records, positions held, arrest records and, if the subject is/was important enough, to attract such attention news coverage, all shape the skeleton around which the life can be reconstructed. If the subject has written letters, articles or kept a diary, these can be compared to public information and may give insight into what he/she was thinking at a particular time. While not “hard” information, they may serve as flesh for the factual skeleton.

Most of the biographical and autobiographical writings available to me appear to have been created in this way. They were based on sources external to the subject and accessible to anyone within reach of a college or large municipal library. Because so much of this history was archived and fixed in ways beyond the ability of the biographical subject to change, there was at least certainty that, accurate or not, the information hadn’t changed from its original form. It could be destroyed by earthquake, fire or theft but not easily altered.
Starting in the late nineteen-sixties, I gained access to a public mainframe computer with a massive digital archive in which my research data could be stored. The data was encoded on nine-track tape reels in duplicate for backup. Because the tape substrate became stiff and brittle over time and the magnetic information weakened as well, the data was frequently copied from older to new or reconditioned ones. Because the data was digital, each point being either a one or a zero (a switch in other words) and each digital word was checked for parity, the data didn’t change with each rewriting.

This archive was like the libraries I was used to with one important difference; it could be accessed in its entirety from a single terminal next to my desk. Not just my own data, but, with proper credentials, that of everyone else’s in the City University of New York system and, when it was linked with those of other institutions and agencies, their data as well. Not long after, the system acquired the technology to save images, albeit in painfully low resolution. While my purpose is not to tell the story of computers and the Internet, this having been done authoritatively by others, several aspects are relevant:

1. Massive quantities of undifferentiated data are stored digitally and accessible either by public search or illicit techniques.

2. Digital images can be manipulated by accident or by design.

3. Unsaved data can be erased or lost.

4. Saved data can be deleted or lost.

5. Connections between storage sites are not linear and can be lost.
6. Data associations are fuzzy.

How very like the human brain. Still, the computer stores everything in easily preserved ones and zeros; the brain does not. On entering the digital system, certain aspects of the data become fixed, a long-term memory if you will, that remains as long as the electricity stays on and/or the storage media are intact.

Because this digital record, every ill-advised post, inappropriate picture and black mark at school or at work is, in terms of its means of storage, unchangeable, considerable effort and ingenuity are being expended in attempts to change, destroy, or if the first two are impossible, hide it in plain sight. Hillary Clinton’s conducting of official business using a private email account and server while Secretary of State (NY Times, March 4, 2015) can be viewed as a form of digital forgetting, an interruption of the connections that form the public memory. As the size and reach of the public memory-store increases, it may need, in order to function, the ability to forget.

A Google search of my name returns fifteen pages of links; searching for “Warshaw R” or “Warshaw RH”, the way in which authors are identified in medical publications, yields still more. Adding categories such as “Warshaw and sailplane” returns an additional handful. Now even “Warshaw and Photography” gets a few hits. This constitutes a large portion of my external memory or at least points to other repositories. While following
these links serves to recall memories, real or imagined, they also serve as constraints, boundaries beyond which my memory/stories stray at their (and my) peril.
MY LIFE IN PICTURES

“So, take and use Thy work: Amend what flaws may lurk, What strain o’ the stuff, what warpings past the aim!” Robert Browning

I remember receiving my first camera, a Kodak Brownie Hawkeye at age six. I have constructed the memory of it by searching the Internet for images of cameras from that era that looked right and choosing this one. Even if someone were now to present incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, my first camera is enshrined as a Kodak Brownie Hawkeye. The first picture I took with it was from the back seat of my parents’ car as we crossed the border near Niagara Falls from the US to the Canadian side (figure 2).
Figure 2: Canadian Customs, Niagra Falls, Ontario (1948)

Comparing it to another that I took twenty-odd years later (figure 3) is instructive.
The next image on that first roll is of the Falls from the window of our hotel. The third is taken from the approach to a cable car that crossed over a whirlpool in the Niagara River (figure 4) but the memory it provokes is of running into a man waiting to board it causing his glasses to fall and break.
My remembrance of the event and the embarrassment and fear of punishment to come was immediate and palpable when the print fell from a box 67 years later. The composition of these images is eerily similar to that of my work in later periods. Might the structure of the images I make be a roadmap, a pointer to the memories I seek to
maintain? Might this arrangement actually be a representation of the mechanism by which I remember? Is memory in fact composition? It is impossible, at least with current knowledge, to tell. I took fewer pictures thereafter, at least that I can find; one of my father (figure 5),

![Figure 5: My Father at home, Kingston, NY 1948](image)

another of my dog (figure 6).
What few I have of my life after that time were taken by others. Without complex visual reminders, my memories of that period are best recalled by reference to place. My memories seem to be organized in this way – even now I rarely recognize people without reference to the place where I first encountered them. Long periods in my life are inaccessible to me because I have no record of the places in which they occurred. What I do remember is sorely lacking in detail.
When, as a soldier, I left for Southeast Asia, my cousin gave me a Minox camera small enough to wear on my dog tag chain. I have several hundred tiny negatives taken with it but, except for when I picked them up from the pharmacy, I have not looked at them and have no immediate plans to do so. I do have a few photos taken in rear areas (figure 7) with a camera purchased at the PX, which I have printed; they are sufficient to invoke the memory of that place absent its associated baggage.

Figure 7: Fishermen, Nha Trang, Vietnam 1965

By the time I returned from Vietnam, having contracted a respiratory disease first diagnosed as Tuberculosis, I had decided, for reasons I no longer recall, to become a photographer. As a patient on active military duty, I was able to take for free as many
college courses as I could handle; Philadelphia College of Art was nearby and I began to photograph in earnest. As a result, my memory of people, and places from that time is, whether or not accurate, at least rich in detail.

Figure 8: Memorial Day, Kingston, NY 1969
In 1971, having learned cutting edge techniques of respiratory physiologic measurement while a patient and faced with the need to provide for a family, I went to work in a medical school laboratory. When I became its technical director and joined the faculty shortly after taking the images in figures 9 and 10, photography was, with the exception of snapshots and visual note-taking, over. My external memory of that time consists of published papers with graphs as the visual element.
Figure 10: Ruth, Mt. Sinai, NY 1972

Figure 11: Ming, Mt. Sinai, NY 1972

Figure 12: Snapshot taken by one of my technicians, Mt. Sinai 1972
When I returned to photography ten years into the beginning of the twenty-first century, my subject was landscape; it was not a conscious choice but there are practical reasons for it; the landscape doesn’t rush about and, as a result, can be studied at leisure. My experience in Occupational Medical research leads me to examine small sections of the world for discrepancies in what passes for scenic beauty. I look at and think about the places I photograph for clues about what has happened there, how they have been changed and what is left. It may well be that what I experienced in the thirty-eight years I did not photograph was necessary as preparation for what I capture now. I am interested in the process of change and have gravitated toward construction sites and quarries as places that change quickly enough to fit within both my attention and life-span.

Figure 13: New Monument Construction, Fairfax, VA 2013
In a survey of landscape photography\textsuperscript{31} Karen Hellman and Brett Abbott provide eight pages of description in which ‘memory’ is never mentioned. By contrast, Lucy Lippard writes that photographs are “inherently about memory” and that if “space defines landscape…space combined with memory defines place.”\textsuperscript{32} A peculiarity of my wiring makes me unable to recognize people with whom I should be familiar if they are disconnected from the place(s) where I normally interact with them. My classmates become strangers when I encounter them away from school. For me, place is the
container of memory and composition is the process by which that memory is formed. As I become more forgetful, composition becomes the memory.

When I was younger, I could find my way back to any of the places I had been. Now many of them are lost to me. A leaky boat seems a useful metaphor for memory – when new the leaks are small and learning is effortless. With aging the balance changes – some information goes in but far more is lost – eventually, even if life continues, the boat sinks. The onset of old age has come as a surprise. My contemporaries say the same. They reach immobility and incontinence living in houses with long stairways and a single bathroom on the top floor. Some portion of what has happened to them was foreseeable and could have been planned for; some arrived from left field. This cannot be what I am meant to save.

When my parents went to work, they would say that they were going to “The Place,” not the office, the factory, the store, the studio but “The Place.” My aunts and uncles, their friends and acquaintances in the German, Polish and Russian Diaspora communities all said the same. For me this was natural so, when asked in a kindergarten show-and-tell what my parents did for a living I answered that they worked in the place. My classmates called me stupid and never let me forget, but its truth is palpable. The Place was the receptacle of their lives, the hopes, dreams and, for better or worse, realities. It was the lens through which they viewed the world and themselves. I have inherited this view that
place is my life, its receptacle if you will; it evokes all memories and, when these memories are strong, sensations; this is what I attempt to gather.
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BIOGRAPHY

Raphael Warshaw was born in Kingston, New York in 1942. He attended Kingston High School until age 16 after which he moved to Couvet, CH as an apprentice in a factory that produced knitting machinery. He became interested in photographing in 1965 while in military service. Prior to being discharged from the army, he studied photography at Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts). After discharge, he attended Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles before moving to New York where he graduated from the State University of New York College at New Paltz with a degree in Art History. In the mid 1970’s after working as an editorial, architectural and annual reports photographer, he changed course in favor of a career in medical research. He has recently returned to photography as a Master of Fine Arts candidate at George Mason University and will graduate in 2015.