



REFRESHING

the story of your life

You are the editor of your life story. That means making choices at each moment about what to include and what to leave out

BY LEONARD CARR



YOUR EDITORIAL POWERS ALLOW YOU TO PLACE emphasis on some events and ignore others. As editor, you get to decide how you construe events, not only in terms of how you describe what took place, but also the meaning of those events. You may, for example, convince yourself that you know the true values, motives, and intentions of the people whose actions you are describing, and therefore feel justified in your judgments and conclusions. As an editor you may choose to become preoccupied with some memories and thoughts about people and events. You may choose to forget, neglect, or ignore facts or other evidence that contradicts what you choose to make your dominant story.

As events unfold you get to make ongoing decisions about which aspects, pictures, and words to give prominence, mull over and carefully file, and which to ignore. You can choose to dwell upon and consequently remember the one occasion someone wronged you, or the many in which they

showed kindness. You might choose to take the good in your life for granted and therefore not focus upon it, or to place it carefully in memory for future recollection.

There is an old joke about some elderly immigrants who are arguing over how a ritual was performed decades before in the old country. Exasperated, they decided to go to the oldest member of their group who was 97 and a resident in a retirement home. The old man replied that while he could not remember how the ritual was performed, he could well remember the contention and bickering. Retirement Homes are overlooked and much neglected repositories of warmth, wisdom, and insight as you see from the wisdom in this joke. One of the insights encrypted into it is that editorial choices are habitual and often shared in families, communities, and cultures. Some groups are optimistic and appreciative in their approach to life and others pessimistic, critical, and complaining. Some focus on

higher values and the bigger picture, like the old man in the joke, and others on petty contentious issues for the sake of maintaining a tradition of conflict.

Often people get stuck in negative thinking because they believe that being focused on what is missing or wrong with others and life in general will somehow enable them to have more control over their circumstances. It is as if good is something to be taken for granted as the accepted norm, while the bad is what stands out as something to be given attention and grappled with. You tend to believe that memories of bad will serve you in some way, as if they could help to make things better in the future. In fact, all they do is cause you to continuously contaminate the fresh present by re-evoking the stagnant past. Remembering disappointment, hurt, resentment, betrayal, and deprivation keeps your inner world bitter cold.

One of the biggest philosophical mistakes made in psychology is the notion



that behaviour is determined by past. Since you live forward not backwards, behaviour is in fact determined by the future created through the choices you make and the actions you take. You choose to remember things from the past only because those memories, you believe, will serve you in terms of accomplishing some future purpose. For example, you might decide that someone's bad treatment of you in the past relieves you of the responsibility to be kind to them in the future. Alternatively, you may tell yourself that past failures should be held in your memory to remind you to never again try to succeed, but rather to remain a self-pitying victim. It is crucial to understand this if you want to empower yourself to break free from destructive patterns of thought that get in your way of becoming the best version of yourself that you could be.

The first step to refreshing, renewing, and reinvigorating your life is to confront how the destructive memories not only do not serve or protect you, but actually cause you harm. Rather than making life better, they ensure that the future remains consistent with the past. Most people try to change their thinking by simply desisting from their destructive patterns. This is neither sustainable nor enough. Getting rid of old negativity only leaves a gap in the space where you previously harbored those destructive thoughts. Because nature does not like a vacuum, in the absence of better alternatives the old habits of thought just creep back.

To change your approach you need to take editorial control of your thoughts by deciding what story you would like to live in. Decide how your story should sound, what values it should embody, and how it should make you and others feel. As an editor you must actively and intentionally choose to populate your awareness with thoughts and feelings that make you feel

“EVERY MOMENT OF GOODNESS NEEDS TO BE FRAMED AND CAREFULLY PLACED IN MEMORY AS IF IT IS A PRECIOUS GIFT.”

about yourself and about life in general the way that you ideally prefer to feel. You can start by first recollecting from your past history and relationships all that was good and positive, no matter how thin the memories. Amplify and expand your appreciation of the good until good dominates your story of the past. Then make a conscious effort to focus upon, richly describe, and savour the good that happens in each moment of your daily life. Every moment of goodness needs to be framed and carefully placed in memory as if it is a precious gift. Then all that seems to go wrong is the part that you overlook and ignore. Place in your memory at every moment only what you will later wish to look back upon and enjoy.

I will illustrate this idea with a personal story. I was making daily visits to my grandmother who lived her last days in a retirement home. I was accompanied by my then seven year old son. Each time we met a gracious lady who used to sit on a bench in the garden. She would greet us in the same manner, introduce herself, and then proceed to tell us the same story about her life and background that she had told us on the previous visit only a few days earlier. After a few days, my son said to me, “Miss G is so lucky – she gets to make new friends every day.”

It became instantly clear to me from this profound observation that both remembering and forgetting can be either a blessing or a curse. It was clear from the start that all Miss G remembered, apart from the basic facts of her earlier history, was that the world is a good place, people are kind, and that you have to be kind to

them. I knew this because, besides the factual information, the attitude that she embodied through her way of being showed that this is how she had led her life.

The editorial choices, ways of being, and values that she had most consistently practiced had become ingrained habits and informed fundamental approaches to the world. With no short-term memory and therefore no other reference point other than her long term enduring beliefs about people and the world, kindness and trust remained her overriding approach.

You have the experience of complete forgetfulness every day. It occurs during sleep. You awaken each morning from this forgetfulness and have to reconstitute your life from memory. You have to recall and re-edit stories about who you like and who you don't, who has wronged you and who you respect and admire. Herein lies a great gift with unlimited possibilities for a life of happiness, well-being, and good will. Unlike Miss G, who happened to be fortunate enough to be left with good after almost all memory was lost, you can choose which memories to retain and which to let go of. In order to hold ill-will towards another, especially in the face of that person being nice, you have to dig deep into your memory bank and pull something from the past and bring it into the present in order to recreate the bad feelings.

Imagine if you could just forget the past, and respond to people and circumstances purely in the present, with no limiting beliefs from the past getting in the way of you being the most empowered and effective person you could be. Imagine if, in the freshness and unlimited potential of the present moment, you could believe that the future is yours to author according to your hopes, dreams, and ideals. Think of the world that you would prefer to live in if all your explicit memory got lost. Now think of what you would need to remember to forget in order to create that world. **■**

“SINCE YOU LIVE FORWARD NOT BACKWARDS, BEHAVIOUR IS IN FACT DETERMINED BY THE FUTURE CREATED THROUGH THE CHOICES YOU MAKE AND THE ACTIONS YOU TAKE.”