

*Wednesday October 17, 2012*

## **Retrieving long-vanished memories**

By Jim Taylor

The human mind is an amazing thing. I've read articles in popular scientific journals about how the mind works. Aside from learning the names of different parts of the brain – about as useful as studying ancient alchemy – I'm no wiser.

I know that memory is stored chemically, in the interactions between neurons. But how is it stored? How does a chemical reaction produce conscious thought? How can stored memories, which are, after all, simply observed data, somehow metamorphose into an entirely new thought?

Beats me.

But sometimes I can almost feel those neurons and synapses working inside my skull.

## **Nostalgia trip**

Joan and I took a trip down memory lane last month. We went back to Ainsworth Hot Springs, on the western shore of Kootenay Lake. For ten years, Joan's parents owned a motel there. We visited whenever we could, and got to know some local people.

But we haven't been back to Ainsworth in 20 years.

As we drove along the lake, we passed a small white house nestled against the shore.

"What was her name?" Joan asked, searching her memory.

A name popped into my mind. I have no idea where it came from. "Chris," I said.

A bit further down the road, Joan added, "Yes. Chris Lind. Her husband?"

I could sense millions of neurons flailing around for connections they hadn't made in decades. A couple of them touched.

"Charlie," I said.

It kept happening for three days. A word from our waitress, a view from the window, a roof among the trees... Suddenly, tiny billiard balls began ricocheting around inside my head. Some of them stuck together, and a memory came back. Of someone's name. Of something someone did. Or of what we ourselves had done, once upon a time.

## **The process of remembering**

The process gives "Random Access Memory" a whole new meaning.

My friend and mentor Eric McLuhan once defined memory as an act of creative imagination. Rather than exhuming whole memories, his aphorism suggests, we re-invent them.

Any courtroom cross-examination will reveal that we don't really remember much of what we call memory. We recall some basic facts. We embroider those recollections with details. Some details correspond with reality; others bear the sheen of fantasy.

Certainly, we revise and edit our memories. A longitudinal study of the same group of men, over a 40-year period, documented the ways they amended their memories to match their evolving perceptions of themselves. Some edited their stories to make themselves look better; others recast their narratives to put themselves less at fault.

It even happened in the Bible. If Mark's gospel derives mainly from Peter, as scholars claim, then Peter clearly remembered mostly what a klutz he had been. Paul, on the other hand, made sure we knew that he had been right, all along, even if he wasn't.

But you can't invent a name. It's either right or it's wrong. Where does it come from? Where does it go when it vanishes forever?

Which leads, of course, to the fear of all aging persons – if my memories fade away, do I fade with them?

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## YOUR TURN

There weren't as many letters about last week's column, so I can include a couple that simply patted me on the back.

Jim Henderschedt connected my comments to his art: "Love your article today. In a couple hours I will be off to painting class where I will attempt to convey the bigger picture in a small fragment of the whole. Many thanks to Newton, Capra, Julian and Blake.....and Taylor as well."

Wesley White posted a link to my column on his own lectionary blog, and added, "Thanks for your part in revealing a larger whole."

And Isabel Gibson mused, "Interesting, isn't it, how the ability to see the whole in the part seems to be linked to the ability to see the parts of the whole (as in your breakfast companions who couldn't see their lives as anything but continuous wholes). I often work with folks who can execute their business but can't explain it to anyone, because they can't break it down.

"My husband often (plaintively) asks me to take some landscape shots, so we can show people what 'these places looked like' -- I have stopped trying to persuade him that my wee close-ups DO show what the places look like...."

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

Okay, I'm going to try something different this time. The recommended psalm selection is Psalm 104:1-9, 24, and 35c. The NRSV calls it a psalm of praise to God the Creator and Provider. I tried seeing God through an unusual metaphor. See if you can figure it out.

1. You are weak, but you are strong.  
Not one thing in the universe can ignore you.
2. Your influence pervades everything.  
Your tendrils thread through empty space  
and churning galaxies alike.
3. You bend the web of all relationships,  
making bodies fall together.

4. Because of you, trees stand tall,  
tides surge, and mountains fall.  
5. You cause the earth to spin in its orbit;  
you guide it through the trackless void.  
6. Because of you, rivers rush down through their courses;  
7,8. Your power fuels the furnace of the sun,  
That warms the waters, that rise into the air,  
That fall on the mountains, and rush down again to the sea.  
9. Because of you, the seas stay in their beds;  
They do not rise up to drown our dwellings.

24. How infinitely intricate are your works.  
Did you know it would work this way?  
35c. We could not live without you.

Give up? I likened God to gravity – invisible but universal, touching all of us all the time even when we aren't aware of it. I think God might just act like gravity.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,  
[info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com) or 1-800-663-2775.

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#### YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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