

Who's Writing My Story?

By Edwin Faust

I am four years old. A witch is moving past me. Her long black dress makes a rustling sound. I can't see her face. Her head is covered with a black veil that billows as she moves. I can see her thick-heeled black shoes at eye level, for I am on the floor, hiding beneath a gray metal chair. My mother is tugging at my arm. "It's OK. It's only Sister Josepha." My mother pulls me up and guides me onto the chair. The witch has reached the stage and now I can see her face. She is sitting at a piano. She begins to play and some small voices sing brokenly, "On the goo-ood ship Lollipop ..." My sister is on stage with other girls. She is dancing. They all wear shiny black shoes with ribbons for ties instead of laces. They are rehearsing a school show. I am not afraid now. The witch is not a witch. Her face is smooth and pink and kind. She's smiling while she plays...

This is a memory. I just had it. But I am no longer four years old. I am 68. So, it is not happening now, yet I see it now, in my mind's eye. I don't know why these thoughts, these images, occurred just now. I didn't plan them. They happened. Perhaps, they were evoked by another thought. I can try to remember what thought occurred before the memory, and what thought occurred before that thought. I can keep going back in time, so it seems, but I can never discover the ultimate beginning of my thoughts, nor why they proceed as they do; nor can I know what will come next, a minute from now, an hour from now, tomorrow. I can watch. I can witness. I cannot control or predict. And this is the way my life unfolds, has always unfolded. It is the same with your life, with every life.

It is as though we are following a script we didn't write; as though we are a character in a play. We find out who we are only after we have said something or done something or felt something. Whatever understanding we have is retrospective, not foreknown. Sometimes, the script is dull; sometimes exciting; it is often confusing. Now and again, we try to take it in hand and write it ourselves, but we can't make things happen as we would like them to happen. Someone else is in charge and we have to follow the plot determined by this unknown author.

Who decided that I should have once been a four-year-old, crouching beneath a chair on an auditorium floor, hiding from a witch? Who determined that I should be sitting here now, remembering it and writing about it? Who's writing my story?

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We watch our life unfold, and we also try to influence it: sometimes we succeed; frequently we fail. In moments of failure, when our powerlessness is evident, we may wonder why things happen as they do and why we behave as we do. And we want to know what it all means, for life does not explain itself. We suspect there is something outside of events as they appear to us, a force or power that is executing a design we can't see for purposes we don't understand. Life seems to be a hopeless mystery, yet we cannot stop looking for a key to the mystery. Agnosticism is an effect of fatigue: it is for the old and the indolent. While we have life and energy, we question and search, for we have a deep certitude that there must be an answer

to any question we can ask. So, when I ask who's writing my story, I presume an answer exists, even if it eludes me now. If I keep asking, keep looking for an answer, I believe I will find it. I believe that I will, in time, know the author of myself.

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I just described a memory. Here's another:

I am 39 years old and staring at my newborn son through the glass of a hospital nursery. I've been awake all night. I look at the small face in the oval of the blue blanket and no words form in my mind. I don't know what to think. Later, at home, as I lie in bed, I see that face and begin to wonder whose it is. The memory of the face keeps recurring. It is the face of my son ... my son... What does that mean? How much of him is me? What about the rest? What accounts for him? I suddenly feel sorry for him. Love and pity. No one seems to deserve the harshness of life. Poor creatures. Poor me. What have I done to my son? Yet, I love him and I am happy he's alive. And the world now seems different from what it was. There is a new meaning below the surface of everything, a meaning my son brought into the world, an infinite tenderness.

Here's another memory:

I am 68 years old and walking along a concrete path bordered by palm trees. The grass is spiky, and small green and gray lizards dart across the path. I pass people now and then: dog-walkers and exercisers. They are old. Some have skin that is wrinkled like crepe paper, others have skin that is bloated like an overripe fruit about to burst. This is a gated community in the Sunshine State. It should be called the Sunset State, I think, for most people here are near the end of life's day. I am one of them. Everyone smiles and says hello and I smile and say hello in response. We are all rather cheerful as we "crawl toward death," as King Lear puts it. But here, some are jogging toward death. I wonder how I came to be here. When I return home, I sit in my little study and I become a four-year-old again, hiding from a witch.

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I have long been wondering who I am, and my life is almost over. Do I have an answer? I was once four years old, and later, 39 years old, and now, 68 years old. Different things happened to me at different times. When I wonder who I am, I tend to look at these things that happened to me, as though they hold the answer to the question. But, how can they? They *happened* to me. They are not me. And now, all of these happenings are thoughts that rise from time to time, in no sensible order and for no apparent reason, and they tell me nothing. They may as well be hieroglyphics, images of an ancient script to which I hold no key. Yet, I keep looking for the Rosetta stone and I think, at times, I have found it.

I am not the things that happened to me. They are all past. I am present, always present. Even things that are happening to me now become the past immediately. And what is the past? We call it memory, a word for that which is no longer. Yet, every thought is a memory. Nothing is happening now, for as soon as it happens, as soon as we know it, it is past. The memory of my walk today and my memory of hiding beneath a chair when I was four years old are images of

events that no longer exist. I say that the memory of today's walk is closer in time to the present. But what is the present? There is no present. Only the past. Only what is known. Only memory, which has no existence and is but an image.

An image seen by whom? For everything that is seen requires a seer. I am the seer. All that I see is memory, is past. Was there a time when it was present, when it was *real*? It would seem not, for its only existence is in memory. It cannot be known outside of memory. It is forever the seen, not the seer; forever past. So, what am I seeing? A thought. That which is no longer. It is not that I see that which was but now is not; I am seeing what which never was anything other than a thought; that which only appeared as an image in the mind, then disappeared. All I know is thought, and thought has no abiding substance, no being of its own. It depends entirely on me, on my awareness. My awareness is what is always present; that which is seen is always past. Even when I think an experience is present, it has already become a memory simply by being known. I confuse the experience with my awareness and think it is present and real, even as it fades from view.

I have a friend who says that she is trying very hard to "be in the present." She has been taught that being in the Now is the key to happiness, and being in the past is the source of misery. Yet, this straining to be in the present seems only to compound one's misery, for thought, which is always past, then becomes something to be suppressed. But thought cannot be suppressed. And why try to banish a thought, which is already a fading image. Even the future is but an image, a thought sliding into the past. The present, the Holy Grail of Now, is also a thought; it is running away from us as we try to make it stay. We can chase the present but we will never catch it. We also tend to confuse the thought of the present with an object, that is, another thought. And then we try to make the two thoughts, which are separate, appear as one and simultaneous. But we can only have one thought at a time. And the present we are trying to seize and hold in place, and the object we are trying to situate in the present, keep dissolving. Trying to locate oneself in the Now is like trying to hold onto a soap bubble. When we try to touch it, to make it stay, it pops and is no more.

This continuous dissolution of thought cannot be stopped. Why?

Thought is what is known. All objects, whether we locate them in the world or in the mind, are thoughts. When a thought appears, there soon after appears the idea that I had the thought. So, thinker and thought, although separate notions, are given a false relation to one another. There is no thinker thinking a thought, for the thinker is itself a thought.

Descartes famously said, "I think, therefore, I am." He turned our attention from the nature of the object to that of the subject and forever changed Western philosophy, but he failed to realize that being is not known through thought. It is rather the other way around. And this being encompasses both thinker and thought and can therefore be neither.

I am not the "thinking thing" that Descartes identified as that which cannot be negated. I am that which knows the thinking thing. There is no "thinking thing" independent of the thought of a thinking thing, and that thought is known. So, it is the knower of thoughts that

cannot be negated. And it is in this knower of thoughts that thoughts arise, appear briefly, then dissolve. This is the irreducible truth Descartes sought. It is what Vedanta calls the Self, which is the unbroken, unmoving awareness to which thoughts appear and from which they are inseparable.

To say that we are the “thinking thing” is to confuse awareness with the world of thoughts: to make it into a kind of super-thought, the “I” thought, which we call the ego. But the “I” thought does not produce other thoughts: it does not think, but is itself a thought. The “I” thought has no substance. We might say it is the emptiest of all thoughts were that not to grant other thoughts a substance they do not possess.

Descartes realized that the thinking thing, which we here call the “I” thought, was subject to doubt and delusion, but that it also held the concept of perfection. This concept of perfection he called God. And he reasoned that since nothing in nature is perfect, the concept of God was not due to perception but was innate, implanted in the human mind by God. But this is to separate the concept of perfection from that in which it appears: to attribute our concept of a being free of doubt and delusion to something external to us, which would make God an object, something separate from the thinking thing, to which it is known. God, then, becomes an object: a concept appearing in our mind, yet supposedly independent of all perception and from all thought derived from perception.

But no object is independent of perception or thought derived from perception. All objects, including the concept of God, are thoughts. And thoughts have no being outside of awareness. The sum of all conceivable perfection that we call God cannot exist outside of our awareness. These are thoughts. And no matter how base or how lofty, all thought is knowledge that dissolves into pure awareness. This is the true God of the thinking thing: pure awareness, me.

Thoughts have been likened to waves in the sea, but both wave and sea are water. Thoughts and the thinking thing are both awareness, which is me. There is no wave, no ocean, just me. All that appears to be other than me can only be me, for there is nothing other than the awareness in which all thoughts rise and subside.

This recognition may be overwhelming. We cannot comprehend it. Perhaps, this is what is meant in the prologue of St. John’s Gospel when we are told that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not comprehend it. In this understanding, it is the “I” thought - the thinking thing - that is the darkness, and the realization that we are limitless awareness – God - that is the light.

There is, however, another interpretation of this famous passage by Meister Eckhart, the greatest of the Christian mystics, which is unlike the conventional one and may be more insightful. He reverses the usual meaning of the images. He says the light is the life of creatures: of all that appears in time and can be grasped by the senses and the mind. Through this created light, images are imparted to the insubstantial memory. He maintains that the darkness is what is real, the uncreated self that does not comprehend memory, for there is nothing for it to

comprehend. The light – that which is time-born - shines in the darkness, which is the hidden godhead, where there is no distinction between Creator and creature, subject and object; but this created light has no substance of its own. It cannot be comprehended, for it has no meaning of its own. It disappears in the darkness, where subject and object have never been nor will ever be.

The Bhagavad Gita says much the same thing in an oft-quoted passage: that what is daylight for the ignorant is dark night to the wise, and what is daylight for the wise is dark night to the ignorant. When we look at death from the standpoint of our individuality, it seems as though it were nothingness, a void, for it will erase all the marks of our identity: the body, the senses, our habitual thoughts, our likes and dislikes. But if we look at death from the standpoint of awareness, nothing changes, for the marks of our identity that are to disappear never really existed. They were passing imagination: thoughts, some painful, some pleasant, but none of them real, none of them lasting.

When we look at life, at the memories that occur to us, we can find nothing that explains them. When we look for their causes, we can never get to the beginning of them. When we take them apart, there is nothing there. They slip through our fingers like sand or water.

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I said that there is no present, only the past. But if there is no present, neither can there be a past, for the past only exists in relation to the present. What is there? When I say I was once four years old and crouched beneath a chair, hiding from a witch, I mean that I am conscious of a four-year old body moved by certain thoughts: I see the body and I see the thoughts. The same is true of the 39-year-old body and its thoughts, and of the old man pondering life as he walks beneath the palm trees. I see these bodies, these thoughts, but I am not these bodies or these thoughts. I am the same in all these instances, which is why I say, "When I was four... When I was 39... When I was 68..." The real "I" is aware of all of these variations of body and mind, but it is none of these variations. Somehow, a confusion occurs and I attribute my constant self to the variations: I think I am the changing composition of matter called the body, or the roiling stream of images called the mind.

Now, when an image occurs, whatever stimulated the image is no longer present. If I see something, that seeing becomes an image in my mind and I give it a name. The seeing is over and done with. It has no part in the image and its name, which are now comprised in my knowledge. Knowledge is just an abstract name for my store of mental images, which really don't exist collectively but only individually, for I can only think of one thing at a time. So, knowledge is the mental presence of an image which no longer depends upon the senses. On what does it depend then? On the light of awareness. Can it be separated from this awareness? No, for it has its being in awareness. The image and awareness are just two names for a single reality. The past of objects is the present awareness.

All of our experiences are images of what has occurred a minute ago or a lifetime ago. They are all nothing but awareness, from which they cannot be separated. What we take to be

our personality is but a collection of memories, of images in awareness. Individuality is an optical illusion: it is looking at thoughts as though they were separable from awareness, as though they were a series of divisible memories. That awareness is not divisible is proved by the very experience of memory itself: that I can recall my self at the age of four and at the age of 68 shows that I have never changed, never aged. The continuity that consists of my "I" is not the body or the mind but the awareness that always and everywhere encompasses them, penetrates them, is them. I am four and 68 and all ages in between and all the experiences that take so many different shapes yet all dissolve into knowledge, into the one awareness in which they have their being.

But even to say that they dissolve implies that these conditions of mind and body were at some point real in themselves. All experience is only me, always me and nothing but me – awareness. Perception passes into knowledge, which is awareness, me. Now, the previous sentence suggests that a temporal process is involved in which, by stages, knowledge is formed from perception and then presents itself to awareness. And the word memory signifies a power that stands apart from thoughts, recording them, dismissing them, then summoning them to reappear. This is how we usually understand the world of experience, when we take our self to be the "I" thought. But awareness is not divisible into perception and knowledge and memory. These are but words.

A word refers to one thing only, when a word is used correctly. This means that every word stands for an individual object or action: words then divide the world into seemingly self-existent and separate beings. Words impute independent existence and consciousness to thoughts. They present a picture of the world that does not correspond to reality, which is indivisible awareness.

To speak or write is to invest thought with a seeming substance, a permanence, for words try to fix in place that which is ever moving and never fixed, never solid, never real. It presents the transient object as though it were the eternal subject. It turns me into my thoughts. This is how so-called memory works: an image appears in thought, and I think the image is me, which it is, but not as it appears.

The image then changes, and I seem to change with it. But I never change. That is the meaning of "I": that which never changes. So what accounts for the seeming change? If I say ignorance, that is right. But ignorance is a negation: it is the absence of knowledge. And the knowledge that is absent when seeming change occurs is the knowledge that change never occurs; that the "I" accounts for everything, for there is nothing else.

But there seems to be something else, and this something else is what I call my story: the things that apparently happen, the experiences that shape this intimate knowledge of what I call my personality. That this personality is not real, in the sense that it is no more than fleeting thoughts in the mirror of awareness, does not mean that this personality is not experienced. I was never a four-year-old boy who saw a witch, yet I can recall the experience of a four-year-old boy who saw a witch. And this experience, along with countless others, makes up that strange creature of shifting shapes and thoughts to which I give my name.

But in giving this shape-shifting a name, I endow it with a stability it never possesses. The name remains the same but that to which it refers has no constancy. My individuality, which is so precious to me, has no enduring substance. But the awareness in which the name recurs, in which the idea of individuality appears, is constant. I confuse that constancy with the name that signifies the phantoms of thought: images that rise like smoke and twist and curl into shape after shape until they dissipate and become nothing, or rather, resolve into the awareness from which they arose and were never separated. To know that our individuality is a passing thought is both liberating and frightening.

It is liberating in that it frees us from the burden of becoming. The personality, synonymous with individuality, is a never-ending self-improvement project. We think we are the effect of what we do, and so we keep doing things to make ourselves better, happier, more fulfilled, more empowered, etc. We become a never-finished sculpture to which we are forever adding or taking away some bit of clay. We stand back and look at our personality, as we conceive it, and critique its form, deciding what has to be done to make it more pleasing. And there are numberless teachers and counselors, self-help authors and gurus, quite willing to lend us their expertise in our quest to fashion a more alluring shape of me.

But we often tire of this quest; its relentless demands exhaust us. Now and then, we give up on it and slump into a dull complacency: "I am what I am. I can't change." But we find it impossible to rest in this complacency, for personality is not natural to us. It is only the conditioning to which we have become accustomed and with which we identify. Our desire to be free of it reasserts itself eventually, but instead of casting it off, we resume our restless search for the brighter, shinier version of me.

We are also frightened of losing our accustomed identity. It seems to provide us with an anchor that secures our position in the turbulence of life. It is true that my thoughts have no constancy and that to which I assign my name is a roiling stream of impressions, yet, certain thoughts recur with a frequency that allows me to say, "This is what I think. This is who I am." What are these recurring thoughts?

They are not really ours. They are our legacy, bequeathed to us by our parents and teachers and society in general, or by previous lives, if you like. If we were raised Catholic, we will have Catholic thoughts; if we were raised Jewish, we will have Jewish thoughts, etc. The same is true of our politics: if our parents were conservative, we will likely be so; if they were socialists, we will probably be socialists, too. We may also react negatively to our environment and adopt a set of thoughts opposite to those imbued in us in childhood, but this is mere reaction, not freedom, and we are still conditioned by our early circumstances. We may realize this and want to discover who we are beneath the conditioning. Such a desire may lead us to one of the many schools of psychotherapy that promise to get to the bottom of things. We may then discover, after many years and considerable expense, that there is no bottom. The search for causes is endless and, when it comes to motives for action, uncertain.

If we read the thoughts of the wise, in philosophy or literature, we will tend to appropriate the thoughts of the wise, which are not our thoughts. We can then add these

thoughts to those which recur through our conditioning. We can develop what is called a cultured mind: that is, a greater storehouse of thoughts. We can add a bit of clay here, take away a bit of clay there, and sculpt our personality into what we deem a more attractive form. And it may seem that we are, indeed, the sculptor. But the very notion of what is attractive to us is not freely chosen. It, too, is conditioned. If this were not the case, what people take to be true and beautiful would not vary as it does.

There is a theory of human personality that maintains we come into the world "*tabula rosa*" – as a blank slate - and that life, in the form of our parents, siblings, education and experiences, etch upon that slate what we come to identify as our individuality. If this were true, it would mean, in effect, that we are the products of an inexplicable fate: a passive reflector of our environment who seems to act autonomously but is, in reality, an automaton. We can see the truth of this idea, but we can also see its untruth.

We are greatly determined by the circumstances into which we are born, but not entirely determined. We have an ineradicable sense of freedom. We are influenced by environment, but not enslaved by it. We can, it seems, act responsibly, but only to the extent that we become aware of the ways in which we act irresponsibly, as automatons.

Some therapies and self-help books talk about how we can become "more conscious." And the phrase "consciousness-expanding" has been applied to experiences obtained through drugs, sex, mysticism and other avenues. But being conscious means being aware of our thoughts. We can have more thoughts or fewer thoughts; our thoughts can vary in intensity; they can be ordinary or strange; pleasurable or painful. The thoughts change, but our awareness does not. Becoming "more conscious" really means understanding that what we call our self is usually our conditioning and is not in any real sense individual or personal. Our consciousness cannot expand, but our understanding can recognize that we are not the personality we took ourselves to be and, in that sense, we can get beyond our personality; we can expand beyond the contractions of thought that have become habitual and with which we identify.

It is unfortunate that many of us who come to see that what we had assumed to be our personality is merely the result of conditioning, then go on to construct a new personality: one that is purchased from the modern marketplace of identities from which we select according to our likes and dislikes. The irony is that our likes and dislikes, the motives for forming a new personality, are determined by the old personality. From where else could they arise? I may cast off the dogmatism of my Catholic upbringing only to adopt the dogmatism of another creed, all the while believing I have freed myself from the shackles of my conditioning. Even Vedanta can be distorted into a creed, a set of principles to be memorized and accepted on faith. Often, what we take to be a new beginning is merely the adoption of a new terminology. The tendencies of mind remain unaltered, but we give our habitual thoughts new clothes to wear and think we have changed.

If we are trying to discover who is writing our story, that means that we still accept the story as real. We see ourselves primarily as an actor and define ourselves by our actions. We

then want to know who made us the actor. We are searching for what has been called the First Cause: that intelligence or force that set the world, and us, in motion. Aristotle and the scholastics called this First Cause the Unmoved Mover. But how can that which does not move cause anything else to move? A cause cannot give what it doesn't have. There can never be an Unmoved Mover, which is a meaningless abstraction, a kind of rabbit pulled out of the metaphysical hat. But so long as we think we are primarily an actor, we will look for the author of the play and make ourselves susceptible to such verbal tricks.

Even if we come to believe in an oxymoronic First Cause, in a Providential God, where does that leave us? We are then thrust into existence from non-existence by a Creator whose purposes we cannot know, unless we are willing to accept the word of those who claim a special knowledge not available to us. In this way, religion is born. We remain actors dependent upon an author, but the meaning of the script is explained by other actors who assert an acquaintance with the author and his purposes, which assertion we cannot verify. But so deep is the metaphysical hunger in the human heart that masses of men accept as answers to the riddle of life claims that are unsupported by either experience or reason. The appeal of such acceptance rests largely on the desire to put an end to the arduous business of thinking, but doubt will remain. Doubt is often externalized, assigned to others who then must be converted or vilified. That in which we sought peace then becomes the generator of strife.

Religion is a fact of life for most of us, usually dinned into us at so early an age that it seems as though it were innate. And the most absurd notions then appear as not only possible, but as natural and certain. Even if we come to reject the faith into which we were born, it is difficult to shed the habits of mind that came with it. The true believer will always have a predisposition to believe, to trust that another knows what he does not.

If we escape religious conditioning and still wonder who's writing our story, we may resort to the dogmas of materialism. We may be told, or merely absorb through cultural osmosis, the widely held assumption that we are the body; that matter is the ultimate and only real thing; that any question we ask can be answered by referring it to the appropriate science. Our story becomes the body's story. Consciousness is then taken to be what is called an "epiphenomenon" – an incidental effect – of brain matter and nerves. The idea that thought rests in something immaterial is seen as atavistic, an illusion that clings to us like a cobweb from an old house we have left and to which we will never return. We must brush it off and resign ourselves to the fact that we are merely stuff. Our story, then, is our emergence from the illusion that we have any being other than the temporary and precarious composition of elements we call the body. But even a modest bit of reflection reveals the problems materialism faces and cannot resolve. The main problem is that matter does not explain itself; it does not explain anything.

Science can describe the relations of objects as apparent cause to effect. But this is mere description, not explanation. It can talk about gravity and electro-magnetism as laws of nature, but science does not tell us what either of these forces are in themselves, only how they manifest in objects. To say that I just walked across the room due to the muscular power of my

legs says nothing about why I walked across the room nor how my legs came to have muscles, nor why muscles should be required for locomotion, nor why locomotion occurs in some bodies but not others, nor what locomotion is in itself. What is presented as scientific explanation is often no more than tautology.

Most sciences develop specialized vocabularies which are systems of classification. Botany classifies plants; geology classifies rocks; physics classifies motion; zoology classifies animals; physiology classifies bodily processes; psychology classifies thought processes, and so on. In the end, science, despite its beneficial uses, remains on the other side of what is called metaphysics. It can only make lists of things that are observable. It is a lexicon, not an understanding.

The more we press scientific explanations, the more apparent becomes the fact that we are dealing with names: the table in front of me is made of wood; the wood is made of cellulose; cellulose is made of molecules; molecules are made of cells; cells are made of atoms; atoms are made of particles; particles are made of energy; energy is what? We run out of names eventually, and the riddle of life remains unresolved.

Our story, then, is made up of experiences; experiences are made up of thoughts; thoughts are made up of sense impressions; sense impressions are made up of what? The seen depends upon the seeing. And the seen only becomes known, and named, when it becomes thought. And thought is only known in awareness. And awareness is known – by what? Here, the trail of names ends. Even awareness is but a name for that which cannot be named, for it cannot be objectified. When we say “awareness,” we tend to project a concept into the world of experience, of objects, as though awareness were another thing to be perceived. But it is that in which perception takes place. Our story is the story of awareness, which is not a personality, not an individual, not an experience.

Every story has a beginning, a middle and an end. But awareness never began: it was never born, for it is existence itself and could never not exist. It has no middle, for it does not grow and develop. It has no end, for it is not a composite that will decompose. So, if we are awareness, which has no story, neither do we have a story. What we take to be our story arises from the thought that we are the body and that what happens to the body happens to us. But even the thought that we are the body rests in awareness, into which it dissolves whenever it is not present to the mind, as in deep sleep.

We live in the fear that our story will end; that our individual self will be extinguished forever when the body dies. And this is true: our individual self will be extinguished forever when the body dies. So what? That individual self was never more than the sum of all the conditioning the body and mind underwent in the course of its temporary manifestation. It is thought, which is consciousness. Consciousness, which is our real self, never dies. Even thoughts, which seem to change, are consciousness appearing as particular shapes, like water appearing as particular waves in the sea. The waves have no being of their own: they rise and fall; they seem to exist briefly, then disappear. But the waves were always water, and their appearance was only appearance, not real in itself. There was never a wave, which is merely a

name for water. Before the wave appears, while the wave appears and after the wave subsides, the water, its real and only being, is present and unchanging.

We recoil at the thought of death because our nature is life, and our life is not in time. Our personality, that procession of changing thoughts, is in time. So, our personality will die, because it never really lived. It was a conditioning we wore for a time, like a set of hand-me-down clothes. We can cast off those hand-me-downs even now. We don't have to wait for the death of the body. This personality, which we cling to as to life itself, is not who we are. It cannot even be defined, except through the names we give to recurring thoughts.

And when we consider it closely, is not personality the source of our misery? It is the assertion of our individual identity that separates us from others and forces us into competition with them. As an individual ego, a separate self, we engage in the war of all against all. But we become battle-weary. We then want to lay down our arms and cast off our loneliness. We long to be rid of our separate self. We want love.

When we love and feel loved in return, our individuality falls away. Two become one: "They shall be one flesh," the Bible says of husband and wife. It is this oneness that we all long for in our relationships. It can only be had by giving up that which separates us from others.

The reason most relationships fail is because our individuality, which had briefly bowed its head to love, reasserts itself. We then want another to love that very thing we were trying to escape. "Love me!" we demand of our partner, but there is nothing there to love, only a ceaseless parade of fears and desires rooted in the idea that we are the body. We want another to love what we can't love, what no one can love, for it has no abiding substance. It is as though we want to be embraced when there is simply nothing there to embrace: only vaporous images: fog in the night that we imagine to be real.

If we are to live in love, we have to put aside our story. We may regard it as we would an interesting anecdote, but we must stop mistaking it for who we are. This rag-bag of memories, of things that happened to our body, of things we saw or heard with our senses, of facts and fairy tales that were impressed on our tender young mind, cannot be who we are. They are what we have known. But we are the knower, not the known. And all that is known has no being and will soon be no more, for it never really was. When the body dies and, with it, the memory of its passage through the world, we lose nothing. But we need not wait until the death of the body to shed the weight of memory.

If we realize that every thought arises in awareness, appears momentarily, then subsides in awareness, we will be able to discriminate that which is real from that which only seems to be real. We will stop trying to hold onto thoughts as though they were our lifeline, the substance of our being. And all the marks of identity we cling to are nothing but thoughts.

Our story is a tale of what has happened, of thoughts we have had. We always tell it in the past tense, for the events recounted no longer exist and are mere images we have captured in words which we then try to communicate to another. Why do we tell our story? Because we want to be loved. Every time we corner another poor soul and tell him about something that

has happened to us, we are really saying, "Please, love me." We believe that if we can make another person realize what we have experienced, they will have compassion for us and accept us. So, most of our stories are tales of woe, complaints of not being properly understood and treated justly. But the person to whom we are telling our tale has his own story, his own plaintive litany he is anxious to recite. It is as though we are all looking past one another, at a mirror over the other's shoulder in which we see our own reflection which we are impatient to describe. We all compete to tell our story, to get a hearing to redress our grievances, and so the world resounds with lamentation. It is a chorus of the loveless wailing for love and being answered by its own echo.

But our story is a fiction. Our character is cobbled together from thoughts that recur, some with more frequency than others. How can anyone be expected to love our memories? And if they appear to do so, they will expect us to love their memories. But, memories are passing images. They have no substance.

Our story as a personality seeking love is really the story that writers of soap operas are fond of spinning out: that of a character stricken with amnesia. There is something terrible yet appealing about having the marks of our identity erased: on the one hand, it frees us from the problems that made our life a misery; on the other hand, it robs us of the comfort of knowing who we are in relation to the world.

As we progress through this life, we acquire memories that we fashion into a self-portrait. We then point to it and say, "This is who I am." But we don't entirely believe it. We know that we are something more or other than this recollection of events, which is why we are always looking for a new experience, a definitive experience. And, urged on by the soap opera writers, we think that this ultimate experience will manifest as love.

The soap-opera character stricken with amnesia faces a dilemma. Freed from his former identity, he has a romantic encounter. Life is wonderful with his new love. Then, he meets the one he loved in his former life. The plot thickens and, through some manner – a knock on the head, etc. – his memory returns. He then must choose between his new love and his former love. There is something that resonates in this melodrama, because it tells the story of our life, of every life, which is a search for a love that will free us from our usual marks of identity, from our story.

Vedanta offers us a new life, a new love, so to speak. All analogies are imperfect: they serve only to help us understand that which language is inadequate to express. But we can liken Vedanta to amnesia in that it frees us from all the woes that come from thinking we are the body and our habitual thoughts. It frees us from bondage to our personality, to which we cling as to life itself, but which we know will be erased by death.

The flaw in this analogy is that Vedanta is not primarily the loss of our old identity but the recognition of our true one, which was always with us. The old self is not so much forgotten as it is disowned. We see that we are not the body, with its pains and mortality, nor the mind,

with its nagging fears and desires. We stop identifying with all of this, which constitutes what we call our personality. We then step out of the personality into freedom, which is our nature.

Now, when we see the soap opera character facing his dilemma, we are torn. We think, "Should he choose his new life and new love, or resume his former identity?" We put ourselves in his place and wonder, "What would I do?" On the one hand, freedom has great appeal: it accords with our true nature and we long for it. On the other hand, we have grown accustomed to our usual identities and fear that we will be lost without them.

The soap opera character usually chooses to return to his old life, for the writers of serial drama need continuity in their story line. We need it, too. Habit is security, or so it seems, and we find it hard to cast off our old identities, which we think define us. But so long as we cling to the habitual identification with the body and mind, we will be unhappy, always dreaming of freedom, of a new life and a new love. And this deep desire to be other than who we usually are is the recognition that, in fact, we are other than who we usually are, other than our personality.

The new love the amnesiac finds is his true self, shorn of the old attachments. It is only made possible by his forgetting his habitual self. Freedom from memory makes love possible. And we search for this love because we are love. This sounds contradictory: if we are love, why do we search for it? Because our story has gotten in the way and obscured our line of vision. We cannot see our true face because we are looking at the shifting images that memory presents.

Whenever we think we have "fallen in love," we experience a brief escape from memory, from personality. This is why we feel that love gives us a new life. We then want to do away with all that separates us from our love. We embrace the one we love, for we want to do away with bodily separation. We are pleased with how much our lover's thoughts align with ours: we say, "We are so much alike. We are of one mind." And we revel in feeling the same way our lover feels. Relationships are always an attempt to erase our individuality; to become one with another.

But relationships break down because two personalities can never become one. When the honeymoon ends, individuality returns. I then begin to notice that my lover is not as accommodating as she should be. She has ideas and feelings that differ from my own and with which I am not entirely in sympathy. If she loved me, she would think and feel as I do. Confrontations arise. I demand that she conform her thoughts and feelings to mine. She makes her counterdemand that I conform my thoughts and feelings to hers. But my personality, along with hers, are simply sets of dueling memories. And, as in all duels, wounding and death result. I then say, "She never loved me." She says, "He never loved me." And both statements are true. We never loved each other as personalities. We only experienced, for a fleeting time, the love that is our nature. But we located our love in the other person. It was a mistake, which reality corrected. But if we don't understand our mistake, we will likely make it again and again.

When we give up on our story, that is, when we see it for the poorly made patchwork of memories that it is, we can fold it up and place it in the cedar chest with other relics of time. We

can then realize who we are and have always been. Love then will not be something we have to find by discovering someone who will cherish that odd collection of thoughts we call our personality: it will be our abiding experience. Love becomes our personality, so to speak: not something we give or get, but who we are.

And we will then live happily ever after. So ends our story.