

JOTTINGS

Memories and remembrances

When he was a youngster, my nephew kept a pet ribbon snake for several months. The snake, whose name was Sidney and who was a variety of garter snake, lived in a tightly-screened cage which contained everything a little ribbon snake's heart could desire. Sidney became so well-adjusted to sharing his environment with people that, when his name was called, he responded by uncoiling from beneath sheltering leaves, or the small cairn of stones where he hid most of the time, and came gliding out to see if there might be a meal waiting for him.

Because it takes a snake a long time to digest its food, Sidney was fed only once a week; nevertheless, he learned to associate people with mealtimes, and remembered that one often led to the other. Like other creatures, Sidney had a capacity for remembering.

What became of Sidney is a mystery. One morning he did not appear when he was called. Investigation revealed he was no longer caged. An attic to cellar search was launched, but no trace of him was ever found. But this isn't a story about a snake, anyhow; it's about remembering.

Is it true, do you suppose, that an elephant never forgets? And if an elephant possesses a prodigious memory, do you suppose a whale does, as well? Both mammals have enormous heads and large brains; if an elephant has a good memory, chances are, whales do, too.

Small birds, on the other hand, song birds, have extremely short memories, but even such a bird-brained bit of fluff and feathers as a chickadee remembers from winter day to winter day that sunflower seeds appear upon people's outstretched palms at the sound of a particular whistle. They come fluttering at the first "Tweet!" Don't skip many days once you train your chickadees, however, or you must start the training process anew. They forget quickly.

Human memory is complicated; since we all have our own memories, we all understand, in a general way, how those of other people operate. And for most of us, that general acceptance is adequate. There will always be, of course, people who are initially curious about a characteristic like memory, who will spend years thinking about it in their spare time and studying the process, and who eventually will come up with complex theories of how and why our memories function. Then they spend the rest of their lives fired by an enthusiastic drive to explain their theories to whomever will listen. And that's fine. Their activity keeps that kind of person occupied harmlessly.

That's not my idea of how to find pleasure in memories. I like, instead, to dive deep into my own remembrances, dig around for "buried treasures" . . . things I though I'd forgotten . . . and surface with recollections that have particular value to me because they taught special lessons.

When I was quite a small child I discovered (to my intense consternation) that no matter how many hours I devoted to certain creative enterprises, forces of nature were bound to destroy my efforts. Nothing I could do would protect my snowman from melting in the sun's warm rays, and nothing I

could do would save my sand castle from the rising tide. Neither tears nor prayers were effective. Nor could my parents, who seemed to me all-powerful, turn off the heat or stay the tide. They just laughed and shook their heads. Like others who came before me, I learned to accept the transitory quality of even the most perfect of sand castles and snowmen.

Once when I could have been no more than a toddler, I became temporarily lost. Getting lost involved my impulsive dash into a sun-dappled woodland glade, perhaps in hot pursuit of a butterfly, perhaps simply to see where the path led; I don't know. I can still recall the feeling of panic that engulfed me, however, when I stopped and looked around only to find nothing familiar in sight. From where I stood, house, home, familiar street, people, all had disappeared. I was utterly alone. My shrieks soon brought my brother's smiling face into view, instantly dissolving my terrors. Would that all life's woes were so easily conquered!

The first day I attended school, I was so excited, so thrilled to have achieved the glorified status of first-grader, I lost my breakfast, had to change my clothes, and could not wear the new dress purchased for the occasion. Once re-outfitted (and considerably subdued) I was packed off to my first school day in a small disgrace. How that unfortunate introduction to the world of learning might have been avoided I'm still not sure, but the lesson remains one I must re-learn repeatedly. Again and again, I must remind myself, don't expect so much. Prepare yourself for possible disappointment. But an eternal optimist finds it hard to remember to look for negatives as well as positives.

There are other firsts, other kinds of firsts: the first year we went to the mountains to see the fall foliage, for instance, is unforgettable because the colors were breathtaking. More than that, though, the sheer mass of mountains rearing bulkily against the sky bespoke an awesome power that made me feel insignificant. Ponderous and brooding, mountains possess a presence of pressure that is tangible to a person looking for the first time at a mountain. Enormities of oceans' reach, of deserts' stretch, the one a seething, heaving surge . . . the other an inexorable and desiccated lifeless plain . . . affect some people much as mountains do me. The lesson, of course: humility.

For inculcating responsibility, there are memories of permissions granted at appropriate stages of growth; when you could swim, you were allowed to borrow a skiff from the float at Crosby's boatyard. No matter that, at first, my little arms proved to weak to manage heavy oars, that the tide carried my craft up alongshore, and that someone must come to my rescue and tow me back to the float. That's all right, I was reassured; happens to lots of people. Try again another day.

The year I turned ten, Grampa bought me for Christmas my first very own bicycle. You've heard of people talking to their horses? Well, I chattered a constant stream at my bike. It was friend, pet, and pride as well as transportation. First freedom

was what it truly represented, of course; and, at 16, I moved from bicycle seat to the driver's seat of an automobile.

Memories and remembrances . . . people, places, things. Sights and sounds and smells . . . and lessons learned. Patience. Courage. Realistic expectations. A sense of proportion. Responsibility. Interdependence as well as independence. And perhaps, for me, the most important of these is patience. Have I learned it yet? Almost . . . almost.

—Andrea Leonard