

**LIVING,  
THINKING,  
LOOKING**

**SIRI HUSTVEDT**

A PICADOR PAPERBACK ORIGINAL



ESSAYS

# LIVING, THINKING, LOOKING

ESSAYS

SIRI HUSTVEDT

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Also by Siri Hustvedt

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

AFTER REREADING THE ESSAYS COLLECTED in this book, I understood that although they take on a number of subjects, they are linked by an abiding curiosity about what it means to be human. How do we see, remember, feel, and interact with other people? What does it mean to sleep, to dream, and to speak? When we use the word *self*, what are we talking about? Every age has had its own platitudes, truisms, folk wisdom, and dogmas of varying kinds that purport to answer such questions. Ours is no different. In fact, we are drowning in answers. From simplistic self-help manuals on sale in every bookstore to the just-pull-yourself-together advice offered by talk-show therapists to the more sophisticated arguments made in evolutionary sociobiology, analytical and continental philosophy, psychiatry, and neuroscience, theories abound in our culture. It is important to remember that despite the plethora of solutions, *who we are and how we got that way* remain open queries, not only in the humanities but in the sciences as well.

Written over the course of six years, these essays reflect my desire to use insights from many disciplines for the simple reason that I have come to believe that no single theoretical model can contain the complexity of human reality. The reader will find references to philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, psychoanalysis, neurology, and literature. Some thinkers make repeated appearances: Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Buber, Sigmund Freud, William James, D. W. Winnicott, A. R. Luria, Mary Douglas, and Lev Vygotsky. The findings of neuroscience research run throughout the book, especially the work that has been done on perception, memory, emotion, and the relationship between self and other.

I am deeply committed to the use of ordinary language in my work. Esoteric jargons, however, do not come about because those in the know are snobs. Specialized languages make certain conversations possible because the speakers have refined their definitions and can then share and work with them. The problem is that the circle of speakers is closed unto itself, and the expertise of one field is not available to those in another, not to mention to laypersons who comprehend nothing. I believe that to some degree, at least, genuine talk among disciplines is possible and that distinct discourses can be unified through a lucid exposition of ideas. Nevertheless, it is fair to point out that these essays first appeared in a wide range of publications, from literary magazines such as *Granta*, *Conjunctions*, *Salmagundi*, and *The Yale Review*, to newspapers and magazines such as *The Guardian* of London, *The New York Times*, and the *Nouvel Observateur*, to more specialized journals including *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* and the peer-reviewed *Neuropsychoanalysis*. Some of the pieces therefore have extensive notes, while others have none. Some of the texts were

originally delivered as lectures. The Morandi essay was one in a series of talks at the Metropolitan Museum: Sunday Lectures at the Met. “Why Goya?” was delivered at the Prado. “Embodied Visions: What Does It Mean to Look at a Work of Art?” was given as the third annual Schelling Lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, and “Freud’s Playground” was written for the thirty-ninth annual Sigmund Freud Lecture, which I gave in Vienna in May of 2011. In some of these cases, I was able to assume certain kinds of knowledge among the members of my audience, while in others I was not. Nevertheless, every text in this collection is an essay—from the French *essayeur*, to try—and they are all written in the first person.

The personal essay began with Montaigne in the sixteenth century and continues to thrive today. Like the novel, its form is elastic and accommodating. It makes use of both stories and arguments. It can proceed with rigorous precision or meander into surprising terrain. Its shape is determined exclusively by the movements of the writer’s thoughts and, unlike papers published in science journals, or articles in academic journals or in newspapers, the first-person point of view is not banished but embraced. For me, this is more than a question of genre. My use of the first person represents a philosophical position, which maintains that the idea of third-person objectivity is, at best, a working fiction. Third-person, “objective” research and writing is the result of a collective consensus—an agreement about method, as well as shared underlying assumptions about how the world works, be it in neuroscience or journalism. No one can truly escape her or his subjectivity. There is always an *I* or a *we* hiding somewhere in a text, even when it does not appear as a pronoun.

But who is the *I* on the page? Why use it? Some of the essays in this book are anecdotal, explicitly about my own experience; others make arguments I could easily elaborate without bringing myself into the text. I *want* to implicate myself. I do not want to hide behind the conventions of an academic paper, because recourse to my own subjective experience can and, I think, does illuminate the problems I hope to untangle. In an age of the confessional memoir, it is perhaps not surprising that there are those who expect a torrent of intimate material whenever they pick up a nonfiction book written in the first person. I’m afraid this is alien to my character. My essays are a form of mind travel, of walking toward answers with an acute awareness that I will never come to the end of the road. I use my own experiences the way I use the experiences of others—as insights to further an idea. In the following essays, I appear and disappear as a character. My presence and absence depends on the argument I am making.

There is nothing new about such an approach. We find out a great deal about Augustine in his *Confessions*, but what he tells us about the agonizing struggles he wages with himself is never gratuitous. It is illustrative of a profound philosophical investigation meant to bring the reader to his own spiritual awakening. A modern and far more circumspect example of the self as vehicle for ideas is found in Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*. By analyzing his own dreams, the neurologist reveals enough of himself to make his points stick, to sway his reader toward his new theory of sleep and dreams. Admittedly monumental, these two writers stand as exemplary nevertheless.

I received my Ph.D. in English literature at Columbia University in 1986, but I did not become a professor. I have been free to pursue my education as I have seen fit, and I feel blessed that I do not have to “keep up” in my field. Because my reading is self-directed, I have been able to spend countless hours studying neuroscience papers, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, the history of medicine, and philosophy, among other fields that interest me. I have attended many lectures and conferences and, in these last years, have also been giving lectures at conferences. There is no question that I am an outsider, an unaffiliated intellectual roamer who follows her nose and has found herself on unexpected ground, surveying landscapes I knew very little about before I arrived on site. These mental travels have been a joy for me, as have my encounters with the inhabitants of what were once foreign worlds, the scientists and doctors and thinkers of varying kinds I have met during my adventures.

The book is divided into three sections: “Living,” “Thinking,” “Looking.” As with most categories in this world, they are not absolute, but they aren’t arbitrary either. It would be difficult to do much thinking or looking if you weren’t living, for example. Still, I chose “Living” for the most personal essays, those that were, in one way or another, generated directly out of my life. The “Thinking” texts, on the other hand, were all driven by an intellectual puzzle. What is the difference between writing fiction and writing a memoir? What role does memory play in the imagination? Are they the same faculty or two different ones? How can we frame what happens between one person and another? Do two people create a third reality between them? The essays in the “Looking” section are all about art and artists. I have been writing about visual art for close to twenty years now. Over and over, I find myself lured in by some mysterious or disturbing work I can’t resist pondering for a while, and I am prompted to say something about it. Since my last book on painting, *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, was published in 2005, I have continued to try to write about artworks in a language that does not violate, reduce, or betray perceptual experience. This is not easy. An image is not a text. The difficulties inherent in the undertaking, however, have pushed me to examine further what it means to look at works of art and to develop an embodied, intersubjective approach to the question, one articulated most fully in the last essay in this collection.

Every book is *for* someone. The act of writing may be solitary, but it is always a reach toward another person—a single person—since every book is read alone. The writer does not know for whom she writes. The reader’s face is invisible, and yet, every sentence inscribed on a page represents a bid for contact and a hope for understanding. The essays in *Living, Thinking, Looking* were written in this spirit. They were written for you.

—S.H.

# LIVING

# VARIATIONS ON DESIRE

## A Mouse, a Dog, Buber, and Bovary

DESIRE APPEARS AS A FEELING, a flicker or a bomb in the body, but it's always a hunger for something, and it always propels us somewhere else, toward the thing that is missing. Even when this motion takes place on the inner terrain of fantasy, it has a quickening effect on the daydreamer. The object of desire—whether it's a good meal, a beautiful dress or car, another person, or something abstract, such as fame, learning, or happiness—exists outside of us and at a distance. Whatever it is, we don't have it now. Although they often overlap, desires and needs are semantically distinct. I need to eat, but I may not have much desire for what is placed in front of me. While a need is urgent for bodily comfort or even survival, a desire exists at another level of experience. It may be sensible or irrational, healthy or dangerous, fleeting or obsessive, weak or strong, but it isn't essential to life and limb. The difference between need and desire may be behind the fact that I've never heard anyone talk of a rat's "desire"—instincts, drives, behaviors, yes, but never desires. The word seems to imply an imaginative subject, someone who thinks and speaks. In *Webster's*, the second definition for the noun *desire* is: "an expressed wish, a request." One could argue about whether animals have "desires." They certainly have preferences. Dogs bark to signal they wish to go outside, ravenously consume one food but leave another untouched, and make it known that the vet's door is anathema. Monkeys express their wishes in forms sophisticated enough to rival those of their cousins, the *Homo sapiens*. Nevertheless, human desire is shaped and articulated in symbolic terms not available to animals.

When my sister Asti was three years old, her heart's desire, repeatedly expressed, was a Mickey Mouse telephone, a Christmas wish that sent my parents on a multi-city search for a toy that had sold out everywhere. As the holiday approached, the tension in the family grew. My sister Liv, then seven, and I, nine, had been brought into the emotional drama of the elusive toy and began to fear that the object our younger sister craved would not be found. As I remember it, my father tracked the thing down in the neighboring city of Fairbault, late in the afternoon that Christmas Eve, only hours before the presents were to be opened. I recall his triumphant arrival through the garage door, stamping snow from his boots, large garish box in hand—and our joy. My youngest sister, Ingrid, is missing from the memory, probably because she was too young to have participated in what had become a vicarious wish for the rest of us. Asti knows the story, because it took on mythical proportions in the family, and she remembers the telephone, which remained part of the toy collection for some time, but

the great unwrapping on the living room floor that I watched with breathless anticipation isn't part of her memory.

This little narrative of the Mickey Mouse telephone opens an avenue into the peculiarities of human desire. Surely the telephone's luminous and no doubt aggrandized image on the television screen whetted Asti's desire and triggered fantasies of possession. The Disney rodent himself must have played a role. She may have imagined having conversations with the real mouse. I don't know, but the object took on the shine of glamour, first for her, and then for the rest of us, because it wasn't gained easily. It had to be fought for, always an augmenting factor in desire. Think of the troubadours. Think of Gatsby. Think of literature's great, addled Knight Errant on Rocinante. A three-year-old's desire infected four other family members who loved her because her wish became ours through intense identification, not unlike the sports fan's hope that his team will win. Desire can be contagious. Indeed, the churning wheels of capitalism depend upon it.

Asti's "Mickey Mouse" desire presupposes an ability to hold an object in the mind and then imagine its acquisition at some other time, a trick the great Russian neurologist A. R. Luria (1902–1977) explicitly connected to language with its roaming *I* and the labile quality of linguistic tenses: was, is, will be. Narrative is a mental movement in time, and longing for an object very often takes on at least a crude narrative: P is lonely and longs for company. He dreams of meeting Q. He imagines that he is talking to Q in a bar, her head nestled on his shoulder. She smiles. He smiles. They stand up. He imagines her lying in his bed naked, and so on. I have always felt intuitively that conscious remembering and imagining are powerfully connected, that they are, in fact, so similar as to be at times difficult to disentangle from each other, and that they both are bound to places. It's important to anchor the people or objects you remember or imagine in a mental space—or they begin to float away, or worse, disappear. The idea that memory is rooted in location goes back to the Greeks and exerted a powerful influence on medieval thought. The scholastic philosopher Albertus Magnus wrote, "Place is something the soul itself makes for laying up images."<sup>1</sup>

Scientists have recently given new force to this ancient knowledge in a study of amnesia patients with bilateral hippocampal damage. The hippocampus, in connection with other medial temporal lobe areas of the brain, is known to be vital to the processing and storage of memory, but it also appears to be essential to *imagining*. When asked to visualize a specific scene, the brain-damaged patients found it difficult to provide a coherent spatial context for their fantasies. Their reports were far more fragmented than those of their healthy counterparts (or "controls," as scientists like to call them). This insight does not, of course, affect desire itself. People with hippocampal damage don't lack desire—but fully imagining what they long for is impaired. Other forms of amnesia, however, would make it impossible to keep the image of a Mickey Mouse telephone or the phantom Ms. Q in the mind for more than seconds. This form of desire lives only in the moment, outside narrative, an untraceable eruption of feeling that could be acted upon only if a desirable object popped up in the same instant and the amnesiac reached out and grabbed it.

But desire can be aimless, too. It happens to me from time to time that I wonder what it is I am wanting. A vague desire makes itself felt before I can name the object—a restlessness in my body, possibly hunger, possibly the faintest stirring of erotic appetite, possibly a need to write again or read again or read something else, but there it is—a push in me toward a satisfaction I can't identify. What is that? Jaak Panksepp, a neuroscientist, writes in his book, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions*, about what he calls “the SEEKING system.” Other scientists have given drabber names to the same circuit: “behavioral activation system” or “behavioral facilitation system.” Panksepp writes:

Although the details of human hopes are surely beyond the imagination of other creatures, the evidence now clearly indicates that certain intrinsic aspirations of all mammalian minds, those of mice as well as men, are driven by the same ancient neurochemistries. These chemistries lead our companion creatures to set out energetically to investigate and explore their worlds, to seek available resources and make sense of the contingencies in their environments. These same systems give us the impulse to become actively engaged with the world and to extract meaning from our various circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

Curiosity, that need to go out into the world, appears to be hardwired in all mammals. As Panksepp articulates it: it's “a goad without a goal.”<sup>3</sup> The “extraction of meaning” from those investigations, however, requires higher cortical areas of the brain unique to human beings. My dear departed dog Jack, when unleashed in the Minnesota countryside, would move eagerly from stump to thistle to cow pie, nostrils quivering, inhaling each natural marvel, and then, once he had mastered the lay of the land, he would burst into a run and race back and forth across the territory like a demented conquering hero. Through his superlative nose, he remembered and recognized the place, but I don't think that when he was back home in Brooklyn he carried about with him a mental image of the wide flat land where he could romp freely or that he actively longed to return to it. Nor do I think he lay on his bed and imagined an ideal playground of myriad odors. And yet, he missed his human beings when we were gone. He grieved, in fact. Attachment and separation anxiety are primitive evolutionary mechanisms shared by all mammals. Once, when my sister Ingrid cared for Jack in our absence, she was sitting in a room of the house and, feeling a chill, went to the closet and put on a sweater of mine. When she returned, the poor dog was seized with a fit of joy, jumping up on her, turning circles in the air, and licking whatever part of her he could reach. Jack's nose was spot-on; what he lacked was a human sense of time and context, which might have prevented him from believing in my sudden materialization out of nowhere.

There is a beautiful passage in Martin Buber's book *Between Man and Man*, in which he describes stroking a beloved horse on his grandparents' estate when he was eleven years old. He tells of the immense pleasure it gave him, his tactile experience of the animal's vitality beneath its skin, and his happiness when the horse greeted him

by lifting its head.

But once—I do not know what came over the child, at any rate it was childlike enough—it struck me about the stroking, what fun it gave me, and suddenly I became conscious of my hand. The game went on as before, but something had changed, it was no longer the same thing. And the next day, after giving him a rich feed, when I stroked my friend’s head he did not raise his head. A few years later, when I thought back to the incident, I no longer supposed that the animal had noticed my defection. But at the time I considered myself judged.<sup>4</sup>

Buber’s story is meant to illustrate the withdrawal from a life of dialogue with the Other into a life of monologue or “reflexion.” For Buber, this self-reflective or mirroring quality disrupts true knowledge of the Other because he then exists as “only part of myself.” It’s notable that Buber shifts to the third person in the early part of the passage and then resumes in the first, because his experience is of a sudden, intrusive self-consciousness that alters the character of his desire. He has become another to himself, a third person he sees in his mind’s eye petting the horse and enjoying it, rather than an active “I” with a “you.” This self-theater of the third person is, I think, uniquely human and is forever invading our desires and fantasies. Celebrity culture demonstrates the extreme possibilities of this position because it runs on the idea of a person seen from the outside as spectacle, and the possibility that lesser mortals, with some luck, can rise to the ranks of the continually photographed and filmed. With the Internet and sites like Facebook, the intense longing to live life in the third person seems to have found its perfect realization. But all of us, whether we are Internet voyeurs of our own dramas or not, are infected by Buber’s “reflexion,” his description of narcissism, in which the self is trapped in an airless hall of mirrors.

Buber’s condemnation of the monologue position is profound, and yet self-consciousness itself is born in “mirroring” and the acquisition of symbols through which we are able to represent ourselves as an “I,” a “he,” or a “she.” It is this distance from the self that makes narrative movement and autobiographical memory possible. Without it, we couldn’t tell ourselves the story of ourselves. Living solely in reflection, however, creates a terrible machinery of insatiable desire, the endless pursuit of the thing that will fill the emptiness and feed a starved self-image. Emma Bovary dreams of Paris: “She knew all the latest fashions, where to find the best tailors, the days for going to the Bois or the Opera. She studied descriptions of furniture in Eugene Sue, and sought in Balzac and George Sand a vicarious gratification of her own desires.”<sup>5</sup>

It is no secret that, once gained, the objects of desire often lose their sweetness. The real Paris cannot live up to the dream city. The high-heeled pumps displayed in a shop window that glow with the promise of beauty, urbanity, and wealth are just shoes once they find their way into the closet. After a big wedding, which in all its pomp and circumstance announces marriage as a state of ultimate arrival, there is life with a real human being, who is inevitably myopic, weak, and idiosyncratic. The revolutionary eats and sleeps the revolution, the grand cleansing moment when a new order will

triumph, and then, once it has happened, he finds himself wandering among corpses and ruins. Only human beings destroy themselves by ideas. Emma Bovary comes to despair: “And once again the deep hopelessness of her plight came back to her. Her lungs heaved as though they would burst. Then in a transport of heroism which made her almost gay, she ran down the hill and across the cow-plank, hurried along the path, up the lane, through the market-place and arrived in front of the chemist’s shop.”<sup>6</sup> It is the phrase “a transport of heroism” that is most poignant to me, the absurd but all too human desire to inflate the story of oneself, to see it reflected back as heroic, beautiful, or martyred.

Desire is the engine of life, the yearning that goads us forward with stops along the way, but it has no destination, no final stop, except death. The wondrous fullness after a meal or sex or a great book or conversation is inevitably short-lived. By nature, we want and we wish, and we assign content to that emptiness as we narrate our inner lives. For better and for worse, we bring meaning to it, one inevitably shaped by the language and culture in which we live. Meaning itself may be the ultimate human seduction. Dogs don’t need it, but for us to go on, it is essential, and this is true despite the fact that most of what happens to us is beneath our awareness. The signifying, speech-making, willful, consciously perceiving circuits of our brains are minute compared to the vast unconscious processes that lie beneath.

Almost twenty years ago, I gave birth to my daughter. Actually, “I” did nothing. My water broke. Labor happened. After thirteen hours of it, I pushed. I liked this time of pushing. It was active, not passive, and I finally expelled from between my legs a bloody, wet, awe-inspiring stranger. My husband held her, and I must have, too, but I don’t remember her in my arms until later. What I do recall is that as soon as I knew the baby was healthy, I lapsed into a state of unprecedented satisfaction. A paradisaical torpor seemed to flood my body, and I went limp and still. I was wheeled away to a dim room, and after some minutes, my obstetrician appeared, looked down at me, and said, “I’m just checking on you. How are you?” It was an effort to speak, not because I had any pain or even a feeling of exhaustion, but because speech seemed unnecessary. I did manage to breathe out the words that described my condition: “I’m fine, fine. I’ve never felt like this. I have no desire, no desire of any kind.” I remember that she grinned and patted my arm, but after she left, I lay there for some time, luxuriating in the sated quiet of my body, accompanied only by the awed repetition of the same words: I have no desire, none, no desire of any kind. I am sure that I was under the sway of the hormone oxytocin, released in quantities I had never experienced before, and which had turned me into a happy lump of flesh. Birth was a wholly animal experience; its brutal corporeal paroxysms left reflection behind. The executive, thinking, narrative “I” lost itself entirely in the ultimate creative act: one body being born of another. After the birth, it returned as a stunned commentator, similar to a voice-over in a movie that noted the novelty of my situation to an audience of one: me. Of course, the stupefaction didn’t last. It couldn’t last. I had to take care of my child, had to hold her, feed her, look at her, want her with my whole being. There is nothing more ordinary than this desire, and yet to be gripped by it feels miraculous.

Martin Buber doesn’t treat mothers and infants in his I/Thou dialectic, but the ideal

dialogue he describes of openness to the other, of communication that is not dependent on speech, but which can happen in silence “sacramentally,” is perhaps most perfectly realized in the mother/child couple. Especially in the first year, a mother opens herself up to her baby. As D. W. Winnicott writes in *The Family and Individual Development*, she is able to “drain interest from her self onto the baby.” A mother, he adds, in his characteristically lucid way, has “a special ability to do the right thing. She knows what the baby could be feeling like. No one else knows. Doctors and nurses know a lot about psychology, and of course they know a lot about body health and disease. But they do not know what a baby feels like from minute to minute because they are outside this area of experience.”<sup>7</sup> Imagining what your baby feels like by reading her carefully and responding to her is a mother’s work; it is a first/second-person business, and it brings with it ongoing gratification for both sides of the dyad. It is also, as Allan Schore makes clear in his book *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self*, essential to the neurobiological development of the infant.

Maternal desire is a subject fraught with ideology. From the screaming advocates of “family values” to those whose agenda makes it necessary to replace the word “mother” with “caregiver” at every opportunity, popular culture trumpets its competing narratives. In a country where human relationships are seen as entities to be “worked on,” as if they were thousand-piece puzzles that only take time to complete, the pleasure to be found in one’s children, the desire we have for them falls outside the discussion. It is not my intention to be a Romantic. Parenthood can be grueling, boring, and painful, but most people want their children and love them. As parents, they are, as Winnicott said about mothers: “good enough.” This “good enough” is not perfection but a form of dialogue, a receptiveness that doesn’t impose on the child the monologic desires of the parents, but recognizes his autonomy, his real separateness.

Every week, I teach a writing class to inpatients at the Payne Whitney psychiatric clinic. My students are all people who find themselves in the hospital because life outside it had become unbearable, either to themselves or to other people. It is there that I’ve witnessed what it looks like to have no desire or very little desire for anything. Psychotic patients can be electrifying and filled with manic, creative energy, but severely depressed patients are strangely immobile. The people who come to my class have already put one foot in front of the other and found their way into a chair, which is far more than some of the others can do—the ones who remain in their rooms, inert on their beds like the living dead. Some people come to class but do not speak. Some come but do not write. They look at the paper and pencil and are able to say they cannot do it, but will stay and listen. One woman who sat rigidly in her chair, hardly moving except for the hand that composed her piece, wrote of a morgue where the bodies were laid out on slabs, their mouths opened to reveal black, cankerous tongues. “That’s why we’re here,” she said after she had finished reading it aloud, “because we’re dead. We’re all dead.” As I listened to her words, I felt cut and hurt. This was more than sadness, more than grief. Grief, after all, is desire for the dead or for what’s been lost and can never come again. Grief is longing. This was stasis without fulfillment. This was the world stopped, meaning extinguished. And yet, she had written it, had bothered to record this bleak image, which I told her frightened me.

I said I had pictured it in my mind the way I might remember some awful image in a movie, and I tried to hold her with my eyes, keep her looking at me, which I did for several seconds. When I think of it now, bringing up film might have been defensive on my part, a way of keeping some distance between me and that morgue (where I'll end up sooner or later). Nevertheless, I've come to understand that what I say is often less important to the students than my embodied attention, my rapt interest in what is happening among us, that they know I am listening, concentrated, and open. I have to imagine what it feels like to be in such a state without coming unglued myself.

I don't know what that woman's particular story was or why she landed in the hospital. Some people come wearing the bandages of their suicide attempts, but she didn't. Everybody has a story, and each one is unique, and yet now that I've been going to the hospital for a year, I've seen many variations of a single narrative. One man encompassed it beautifully in a short poem. I can't remember his exact wording but have retained the images it brought to mind. He is a child again, wandering alone in an apartment, longing for "someone" to be there. He finds a door. It swings open, and the room is empty. I can't think of a better metaphor for unrequited longing than that vacant room. My student understood the essence of what he was missing: the responsive presence of another, and he knew that this absence had both formed and damaged him.

I seem to have come far from the Mickey Mouse telephone, but like so many objects of desire, the telephone was more than a telephone, and the story of searching for it and finding it at last to fulfill a child's wish is a small parable of genuine dialogue: I have heard you and I'm coming with my answer.

2007

# MY MOTHER, PHINEAS, MORALITY, AND FEELING

“DON’T DO ANYTHING YOU DON’T really want to do,” my mother said as she drove me home from some class, meeting, or friend’s house I have long forgotten. I don’t remember anything else my mother said during our conversation, and I can’t say why she offered me this piece of advice just then. I do remember the stretch of Highway 19 just outside my hometown, Northfield, Minnesota, that is now forever associated with those words. It must have been summer, because the grass was green and the trees were in full leaf. I also distinctly recall that as soon as she had spoken, I felt guilty. Was I doing things I didn’t really *want* to do? I was fifteen years old, in the middle of my adolescence, a young person filled with private longings, confusions, and torments. My mother’s words gave me pause, and I have never stopped thinking about them.

Hers is a curious sentence when you look at it closely, with its two *don*’ts framing the highly positive phrase “anything you really want to do.” I knew my mother wasn’t offering me a prescription for hedonism or selfishness, and I received this bit of wisdom as a moral imperative about desire. The *don*’ts in the sentence were a warning against coercion, probably sexual. Notably, my mother did not say, “Don’t have sex, take drugs, or go wild.” She cautioned me to listen to my moral feelings—but what exactly are they? Feeling, empathy in particular, inevitably plays a crucial role in our moral behavior.

That day she spoke to me as if I were an adult, a person beyond looking to her parents for direction. This both flattered and scared me a little. Hiding behind the sentence was the clear implication that she would *not tell me what to do* anymore. Because my own daughter is now twenty, I understand my mother’s position more vividly. As a toddler, Sophie wanted to stick her fingers into outlets, grab toys from other children, and take off her clothes at every opportunity. When her father and I interfered with these desires, she howled, but our six-year-old girl was another person altogether. Even a mild reprimand from either her father or me would make her eyes well up with tears. Guilt, an essential social emotion, had emerged in her and become part of a codified moral world of rights and wrongs, dos and don’ts.

The journey from naked savage to modest, empathetic little person to independent adult is also a story of brain development. From birth to around the age of six, a child’s prefrontal cortex develops enormously, and how it develops depends on her environment—which includes everything from poisons in the atmosphere to how her parents care for her. It is now clear from research that an adolescent’s brain also

undergoes crucial changes and that emotional trauma and deprivation, especially when repeated, can leave lasting, detrimental imprints on the developing brain. The prefrontal cortex is far more developed in human beings than in other animals and is often referred to as the “executive” area of the brain, a region involved in evaluating and controlling our feelings and behavior.

Twenty years ago, I stumbled across the story of Phineas Gage in a neurology textbook. In 1849, the railroad foreman suffered a bizarre accident. A four-foot iron rod rammed into his left cheek, blasted through his brain, and flew out through the top of his head. Miraculously, Gage recovered. He could walk, talk, and think, but along with a few cubic centimeters of the ventromedial region of his frontal lobe, he lost his old self. The once considerate, highly competent foreman became impulsive, aggressive, and callous with other people. He made plans, but could never carry them out. Fired from one job after another, his life deteriorated, and he wandered aimlessly until he died in San Francisco in 1861. This story haunted me because it suggested an awful thing: moral life could be reduced to a chunk of brain meat.

I remember asking a psychoanalyst about this story not long after I had read it. She shook her head: It wasn’t possible. From her point of view, the psyche had nothing to do with the brain—ethics simply don’t vanish with gray matter. But I now think of the Phineas story differently. Gage lost what he had gained earlier in his life—the capacity to feel the higher emotions of empathy and guilt, both of which inhibit our actions in the world. After his injury he turned into a kind of moral infant. He could no longer imagine how his actions would affect others or himself, no longer feel compassion, and without this feeling, he was fundamentally handicapped, even though his cognitive capacities remained untouched. He behaved like the classic psychopath who acts on impulse and feels no remorse.

In *Descartes’ Error*, the neurologist Antonio Damasio retells the story of Phineas Gage and compares his case to that of one of his patients, Elliot, who, after surgery for a malignant brain tumor, suffered damage to his frontal lobes. Like Gage before him, Elliot could no longer plan ahead and his life fell apart. He also became strangely cold. Although his intellectual faculties appeared to work well, he lacked feeling, both for himself and for others. Damasio writes: “I found myself suffering more when listening to Elliot’s stories than Elliot himself seemed to be suffering.”<sup>1</sup> After doing a series of experiments on his patient, Damasio theorizes about what my mother took for granted: emotion not only enhances decision-making in life, it is essential to it.

Sometimes, however, I don’t know what I really want. I have to search myself, and that search involves both a visceral sense of what I feel and a projection of myself into the future. Will I regret having accepted that invitation? Am I succumbing to pressure from another person that will fill me with resentment later? I feel furious after reading this e-mail now, but haven’t I learned that waiting a couple of days before I respond is far wiser than sending off a splenetic answer right now? The future is, of course, imaginary—an unreal place that I create from my expectations, which are made from my remembered experiences, especially repeated experiences. Patients with prefrontal lesions exhibit the same curious deficits. They can pass all kinds of mental cognition tests, but something crucial is still missing. As A. R. Luria notes in *Higher Cortical*

*Functions in Man* (1962), "... clinicians have invariably observed that, although the 'formal intellect' is intact, these patients show marked changes in behavior."<sup>2</sup> They lose the critical faculty to judge their own behaviors, and lapse into a bizarre indifference about themselves and others. I would argue that something has gone awry with their emotional imaginations.

A couple of years after that conversation with my mother in the car, I was skiing with my cousin at a resort in Aspen, Colorado. Early one evening, I found myself alone at the top of a steep slope made more frightening by the mini-mountains on its surface known as moguls. I wasn't a good enough skier to take that hill, but I had boarded the wrong chairlift. There was only one way out for me and that was down. As I stood there at the summit looking longingly at the ski chalet far below, I had a revelation: I understood then and there that I didn't *like* skiing. It was too fast, too cold. It scared me. It had always scared me. One may wonder how it is possible for a young woman of seventeen not to have understood this simple fact about her existence until faced with a crisis. I come from a Norwegian family. My mother was born and raised in that northern country and my father's grandparents emigrated from Norway. In Norway, people say that children ski before they walk, an overstatement that nevertheless brings the point home. The idea that skiing might *not* be fun, might *not* be for everyone, had never occurred to me. Where I come from, the sport signified pleasure, nature, family happiness. As these thoughts passed through my mind, I noticed that the chairlifts were closing and the sky was darkening. I took a breath, gave myself a push with my poles, and went over the edge. About half an hour later, a patrol on a snowmobile discovered me lying in a heap under a mogul, minus a ski, but otherwise intact.

Ridiculous as the story is, its implications are far reaching. We sometimes imagine we want what we don't really want. A way of thinking about something can become so ingrained, we fail to question it, and that failure may involve more than a tumble on a ski slope. The friend who returns repeatedly to a man who mistreats her is in the grip of a familiar, self-defeating desire in which the imagined future has been forgotten. When I was an impoverished graduate student, I would sometimes spend twenty or thirty dollars on a T-shirt or accessory I didn't need or even particularly want. What I craved was the purchase, not the thing itself. Of course, a sense of not being deprived may fill an emotional void without ruinous consequences. On the other hand, if you can't pay your electric bill, you're stuck. I found myself in a bad spot on the ski slope because I was doing something I didn't really want to do. My poor judgment was the result of both an alienation from my feelings and a lack of sympathy for myself. The latter observation is vital. Because, like all human beings, I can objectify myself—see myself as one person among others in the social world—I am able not only to plan ahead by imagining how what I do now will affect what happens to me later, I gain the distance needed to recognize myself as a being who deserves compassion.

During the first year of my marriage, I was nervous. I worried in an abstract way about losing my freedom, about domestic life in general, about how to be "a wife." When I confronted my new husband with these worries, he looked at me and said, "Why, Siri, do whatever you want to do." I hadn't told my husband what my mother

said to me on Highway 19 twelve years earlier, but his words created an undeniable echo. I understood that he wasn't giving me license to hurl myself into the arms of another man. He released me to my desires because, like my mother, he trusted my moral feeling. The effect was one of immediate liberation. A burden fell off my shoulders, and I went about doing what I wanted to do, which included being married to the particular man I loved.

My marriage thinking wasn't all that different from my skiing thinking. I adopted an externalized, rigid, heartless view of both: skiing is supposed to be fun and marriage is an institution of constriction. I didn't ask myself what I *really* wanted, because I was in the grip of a received idea, one I had to interrogate and feel for myself before I could discard or embrace it. Unlike Phineas and Elliot, my frontal lobes are intact. I know, however, that the mysteries of my personal neurology are, like everybody else's, a synthetic combination of my innate genetic temperament and my life experience over time, a thought that takes me back to my mother, a person central to that story. When I told her that I was writing about the advice she gave me years ago, she said, "Well, you know, I couldn't have said that to just anyone." Unlike some hackneyed phrase lifted from the pages of a parenting guide, my mother's sentence was addressed directly to me, and it was given with knowledge, empathy, and love. No doubt, that's why her words have stayed with me. I felt them.

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