My memory is not what it used to be. That isn’t to say it is better or worse, just that it has changed.

I was never particularly good with names or faces and, while I expect I could get better at both (there are learnable techniques), I have to admit I’ve remained a distinct underachiever in that regard.

Now, however, I forget an occasional fact or a word that is at the tip of my cerebrum but somehow never quite makes its way out. No, I don’t have incipient Alzheimer’s (which, thankfully, doesn’t run in my family along with everything else!). In fact, scientists are now suggesting that the opposite is the case: I have so many intact memories, that it becomes more difficult to access just the right one at the proper time.

I used to express this in technological metaphors. Back 30 years ago, I would regularly describe my mother’s similar memory idiosyncrasy as being based in her “thought-o-rama,” a type of multi-level Kodak Carousel projector. As anyone old enough to have wrestled with this contraption will fully understand, sometimes it was difficult to get the right slide to pop up into view. A later metaphor was that the hard drive is full and, that for any new memory to enter, it has to overwrite an older one, and chances are that data bits will occasionally be corrupted. Now, it would be something with BlackBerries and MP3s, although I’d be the first to admit that, technologically speaking, I’m falling a bit behind.

But what the brain scientists are telling us is a bit different. Every time we take in a new piece of information – new data – the connections between it and all the data sloshing around our brains have to be reconfigured. Any particular fact is physically as well as psychologically (they being the same thing) embedded in all the other facts and beliefs we hold at the same time. From one point of view, this would mean that it is more difficult to learn something new simply by virtue of the energy required to reorganize all the neural associations. However, from another perspective, it is the richness of these mental and emotional relationships that we carry around in our cranium (or, as we like to say metaphorically, in our bones) that constitutes the wisdom which comes with age.

In short, memory is our ability to bring forward some elements of our experience into the present. How and what it brings forward – how it “composes” the past – is much of what determines our future.

When we are younger, then, it is easier to learn something new, once the neural net has gotten into the swing of things. What this also means, however, is that the experience of our youth is a matter of setting down templates, which are the major highways of thinking, feeling, acting and learning. In other words, we are creating the wellsprings of memories (as well as some of the most long-lasting memories themselves).

I was always considered a very good student in school. I didn’t rock the boat and was good at the game, for which I was rewarded. But, try as I might, I have very little memory of having liked it and always had the nagging feeling that there were so many other things I could be learning, I could be doing, with the available time. It was only a feeling, of course, and what I actually learned in school was to keep such feelings below the level of active consciousness, if not to distrust them. Not any more.

What I do remember, and viscerally, were the daily, ongoing insults endured by those around me. No one escaped unscathed. For me, it was little more than little humiliations and petty acts of disrespect, like having unauthorized books confiscated. They were the ones I would read under my desk when I was bored.
(and with all my “work” – although it shouldn’t be graced with such an appellation – completed). Or the sarcastic comments about my attempts at art, or the teacher, having found something about which he could cut me down to size, ridiculing my admittedly (though, it seemed to me, involuntarily) abominable handwriting for months on end. For others, the humiliations were not so small and, being a constant stream, engraved templates deep, making them all the more difficult from which to recover in later life. Many never did, or do.

So when you have one of those 2 A.M. moments, worried that you haven’t provided the best possible education for your children, I urge you to turn your minds away from curricula matters (if you have any), and instead consciously consider what wellsprings of memory you hope to have your children carry with them into adulthood. Keep a pencil and paper on the nightstand and write them down. And when you’re done, hang ’em on the refrigerator and be prepared to add to them.

Here’s five of mine for my kids:

• That with the advantages of our birth and upbringing comes a responsibility to others who lacked similar advantages;
• That we can tackle any task placed before us without fear of failure and that, more often than not, time, energy and effort can get us where we want to go;
• That we can learn from the example and experience of others and rejoice in the experience of others unlike ourselves;
• That we can experience joy in activities and pursuits at which we are not particularly “gifted” or which are not likely to be highly valued by many others;
• That love and learning go hand-in-hand.

I’m sure yours may be different. Send them to me, and maybe we’ll convince Wendy to put them on the Natural Life Magazine and Life Learning websites.

And when will you know whether the wellsprings are there to be tapped? That’s an easy one. If you’ve done the job right, you are going to really love your grandchildren! I can hardly wait!
Joyce:

David, this may be your most satisfying article yet, especially to an incipient 70-year-old grandmother who thought such memory slips would never happen to her. Hmmm. Of course, I love the idea that I have so much/too much experience and memories, and that the ‘file cabinet’ has become so crammed and messy that it can be harder to retrieve some of the materials. But it is all too true that painful incidents from childhood and teen years can seem acid-etched on our consciousness and consciousness can be very hard to re-program.

Thus, I relished all five of the “wellsprings of memories” that you hope for your kids. And I’d add a couple more for mine:

• That our primary option for choice in our lives lies not within our circumstances or experiences, but with our response-ability – our ability to respond to what is given or opened for us. In other words, when life provides a knock on our door, will we get dragged kicking and screaming through the incident/path that opens? Or get up, brush our bottoms off and dance off down the path? We always have that choice, no matter how hard the circumstances may seem;
• That it pays to be honest with ourselves.

David Albert is a homeschooling father, writer and speaker. He is the author of a number of books, including And the Skylark Sings with Me, Homeschooling and the Voyage of Self-Discovery and Have Fun. Learn Stuff. Grow. Homeschooling and the Curriculum of Love. He lives, works and writes in Olympia, Washington. Visit David’s website and purchase his books at www.skylarksings.com.

Joyce Reed is the parent of five successful home educated college grads. She served for 14 years as Associate Dean of The College at Brown University where she reached out to homeschooled teens. After retiring, she began consulting with primarily international and homeschooling families seeking to attend college. Visit Joyce’s website at www.CollegeGoals.com.

Later this year, Natural Life’s publishing company Life Media will be publishing a new book based on this series of What Really Matters columns by David and Joyce. Check out the website www.LifeLearningMagazine.com to read more of their conversations. -NL-