

# *Denis Dutton: Memory a sucker for fabrication*

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Denis Dutton

COMMENT

Our will to protect the welfare and fate of our children is deep and fierce. It brings out the caring best in people - a sense of sacrifice, an intense desire to offer them a better life.

But this same primal impulse can also bring out the worst in us - hysterical panics about the latest threat to our children. At the low end, such perceived threats might include fast-food obesity or violent video games. At the high end, we worry our children will fall victim to drug pushers or child molesters.

These are authentic worries because incest and sexual abuse are as real as drugs. But given the complexities of the human mind and the mechanics of memory, sex- abuse anxieties have also resulted in witch-hunts and horrific miscarriages of justice.

Memory is a tetchy subject. Even people who would not claim to have a good memory are quite confident of what they do remember. For the past 30 years, however, psychologists have shown what an imperfect instrument memory is.

In particular, work by researchers such as Victoria University psychologist Maryanne Garry has demonstrated how easy it is in a therapeutic setting to implant false ideas into a person's mind - which are then fervently taken to be accurate recollections.

A simple line of questioning can establish in visual memory that a blue sports car was white or that a bald man had hair on his head. Whole episodes that never happened, such as getting lost in a shopping mall, can be manufactured from ideas implanted in a young person's mind.

Early childhood is a particularly treacherous area for memory. Many of us "remember" childhood events not from direct experience but from stories told to us later, including anecdotes that might have been about a friend or sibling. The child's request, "Mummy, tell me about the time I spilled the

paints", might create images permanently embedded in the mind as early memories of spilling the paints, when, in fact, they are later, story-induced imaginings.

This tendency for us so confidently to believe in memory (a process we see in others but have trouble recognising in ourselves) produced episodes of unspeakable ugliness in the sex-abuse panics and memory wars of the 1980s and 90s.

In a typical scenario a young woman went to a therapist for depression or anorexia. The therapist had adopted the ideology that many common psychological malaises were caused by repressed memories of sexual abuse.

(The very idea goes counter to what is known about memory of trauma: people who have experienced real trauma have trouble forgetting, not remembering it.)

Using a process of suggestion and leading questions, the patient was convinced that her real problem was a terrible childhood event, usually incest or rape by a friend or neighbour.

This fabricated memory, often developed in the most lurid detail, then became the single explanation of all the patient's present failures and problems.

Recovered memory therapy, as it was known, destroyed families and lives in the English-speaking world (the fad, oddly, never caught on in continental Europe, Latin America or the rest of the world). The victim-survivor, backed by a support group of fellow victims, would confront her stunned parents, demand they be jailed or sue them. Grandmothers were cut off from grandchildren and families blown to pieces.

I saw cases of this here in New Zealand. In one instance a woman in her 30s with a history of borderline psychosis had, with the help of a therapist, at last recovered memories of the "real cause" of her problem - her parents. A quiet, pleasant North Island couple, they had supposedly forced their daughter to be gang-raped in front of them when she was a child.

On the therapist's advice, the daughter cut them off and denied contact with the grandchildren, leaving them bewildered and utterly heartbroken.

Which brings us to a twist in the Peter Ellis case, a stunning interview carried by Radio New Zealand. Nathan, as he was named, is a 22-year-old Christchurch resident who had been at the Civic Creche for a short time in 1985. He, too, now claims that Peter Ellis had abused him.

It wasn't until he was 16 that he told his parents about this, although you'd think his mother, who was also interviewed, would have realised it, since she now claims that as a small child he ran from the room when Peter Ellis' face appeared on television.

And how does Nathan know he was abused? At "about 14" he noticed that he would "freak out" if a girl kissed him, and that he couldn't handle and was "uncomfortable" in sports changing rooms. Socialising with girls "scared the heck out of me" to the point where "I knew there was something wrong".

He also apparently knew more about sex than a normal 14-year-old should have known. The explanation in his mind is that he remembers lurid details of things that happened to him in the few weeks that he was at the Civic Creche in 1985. He also now understands why he has nightmares and wakes up in the night to vomit.

There is a problem, however. According to Gaye Davidson, the supervisor of the creche at that time, Ellis made his first appearance at the creche in August 1986, assigned to it on a community service scheme. (Davidson rejects the idea that Ellis ever hung around the creche in the previous year.)

Given the intense publicity swirling about the Peter Ellis case in the 1990s, it is no surprise whatsoever that a troubled young man should come forward with such fantastic allegations. Nor is it surprising that the police have refused to pursue the case on his behalf.

What is astonishing is that Radio New Zealand would give him 40 minutes to share with the nation the genesis of his problems - those dreadful experiences at age 4 at a creche that did not then have Ellis on its staff.

There is no doubting Nathan's sincerity, however turbid or confused his memories might be. But how curious that he was allowed to go on National Radio to express his sense of injury and hatred of Ellis, virtually without serious challenge. The memory wars are not over yet.

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