

Venus de Milo

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How does one ever know whether his memories are his or implanted by someone else?

Something had been gnawing at me for the last few years now. Something that I had taken for granted since I was a child, something I had believed to be true like the solidity of the ground I walked on.

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/drama/-venus-de-milo-.aspx>

“What can I do for you?”

“Well, Professor Palmer, I’ve been browsing the Internet and came across your work on false memories and external indicators differentiating false and true memories,” Axel answered the man sitting behind the oversized mahogany desk.

“That was based on research and clinical experience with childhood traumas such as those of rape or incest victims,” the professor explained.

Axel laughed, “That’s not my case, not that know of, at least that’s not why I came to you. Something’s been gnawing at me for the last few years now. Something that I took for granted since I was a child, something I believed to be true like the solidity of the ground I walk on.”

“Please go on,” the professor was skeptical but interested. The man sitting in the highback chair across from him seemed somewhat older than himself, physically fit, and not given to believing every passing nonsense.

“It’s something that is of consequence only to me but none-the-less has considerable impact on me,” Axel continued.

“What has been the impact on you?” the professor asked, looking for some classic symptom to latch onto.

“The impact on me has been to call into question all of my childhood memories related to my relationship with my birth mother,” Axel answered, taking the time to choose the precise words.

“Your birth mother?” the professor repeated, raising his eyebrow.

“Yes,” Axel explained. “that would deserve some elaboration. My father and mother divorced each other when I was seven years old. Dad remarried when I was nine. After some initial difficulties in accepting my new mother, I came to refer to her as “Mom” or “my mother”, and to the woman who gave birth to me as ‘my birth mother’ or ‘my biological mother’.”

“How did your birth mother feel about your referring to her as that?” the professor probed, thinking he might be getting closer to the core issue.

“Sorry,” Axel offered, “a little more elaboration is necessary. After my parents divorced, my birth mother also remarried. He was an army psychiatrist at the time, a nice enough man, although I didn’t have much to do with him. At first, they lived just across the court from us in the same apartment complex my father and I lived in. Then they moved down south, a good day’s drive from us. They came to visit me a couple times a year, sometimes staying at a motel in town, sometimes bringing me back to their home. He never stood between my birth mother and me. I remember him always in the background. Some years later he was transferred to the Philippines. Of course, my birth mother went with him. They were there three years. During that time they adopted a little girl. I remember getting a photograph of her in a letter. She must have been two years old or so. She was awfully cute. Three days before they were supposed to be rotated back to the States, my birth mother was doing some shopping in town when she was hit by a car and died. I was thirteen at the time. Her husband returned home with the infant and a coffin. She was buried in a cemetery in his home town. I never had any further contact with him.”

“That was quite a story,” the professor exhaled. “How did your birth mother’s death make you feel?”

“I was devastated,” Axel said, “but I got over it.”

“How did you get over it?” the professor asked.

“That’s the crux of the matter,” Axel also exhaled. “I never inquired into why my parents had divorced, at least not until a year or two before my father passed away. I have memories of my

mother taking a switch to me when I was two years old. I remember her walking out of our house with a suitcase, getting into a cab, and driving away. I remember her coming to visit me after she had remarried, my running to wrap my arms around her waist, and her arms hanging limply at her sides. Later, after I'd studied Art History at college, I started associating her with Venus de Milo, because she had no arms to wrap around me. I assumed she never really loved me. Maybe she loved me in the beginning, but sometime afterward stopped. I assumed that might have had something to do with my father divorcing her and getting custody of me. My father always loved me, as much as I loved him. Of that, there was never any doubt in my mind."

"So what caused you to call into question your childhood memories related to the relationship with your birth mother?" the professor probed further. It seemed obvious that this man was self-analytical to a fault. He might have made a decent psychologist, he thought, although the professor didn't have much faith in psychologists with their talking therapies.

"A couple years before my father passed away, I took him out for a drive," Axel answered. "We ended up driving past our old home, which Dad sold soon after the divorce. I was in my sixties at the time. Dad had recently turned eighty. I stopped the car in front of the house and asked Dad why he'd divorced my birth mother. He told me it was because she didn't love him anymore, at least not the way he expected to be loved. I asked him what he meant and he told me she had said she loved him like a brother. Was that the only reason? I asked. Well sure, he answered, I didn't want to be loved like a brother. I wanted to be loved like a lover, like a husband. I couldn't wrap my brain around that. I told him married love is multi-faceted. There are many aspects to love when you are attracted to a person but, at the same time, care for her deeply like a husband but also like a father or like a brother. The existence of one aspect doesn't preclude another aspect. Anyway, that's why I divorced her, Dad told me, turning red. That's the silliest reason for divorce I've ever heard, I said and we drove on."

"Why did that cause you to question your childhood memories?" the professor asked Axel.

"A few years later," Axel said slowly, "a woman came across my name on one of the social networks I belong to, quite by chance, she explained in a private message. She identified herself as the Philippine infant my mother and her husband had adopted. She confirmed the details I remembered about my mother's second husband and the events surrounding her death. She said she had been rummaging around the attic of her adopted father's house soon after he'd passed away. She had stumbled on a shoebox full of returned unopened letters addressed to me. She apologized for opening one of the letters but, after I told her it was ok with me, she read me the letter. The letter told me how much my mother had loved me and how much she missed me. The woman, my half-sister I guess, told me her father had talked about the divorce. He told her that my father had tricked or forced her to accept the conditions of the divorce. That was difficult for me to swallow since Dad had

always been a gentle fair man, except when his back was against the wall; however, I could believe my grandfather was capable of being forceful to get his way. Dad had dropped out of college to elope with my mother, who came from a simple background, not that I cared an iota about that. My half-sister asked me what I wanted her to do with the box of letters. I told her I'd love for her to send them to me. She said she would. That's the last I ever heard from her. I looked for her on the social network and sent her a followup message, but she never responded to me. It might be because of my political views, I don't know."

"So how do you think I could help you?" the professor asked.

Axel looked into Professor Palmer's eyes and said, "After hearing Dad's explanation about why he had divorced my Mom and then receiving those messages from my half-sister, I don't know what to believe about my childhood up to the age of seven. Did my birth mother love me or did she not love me? How can I know what happened to me? How can I interpret what happened? How can I assimilate what happened? Were my memories my memories or were they implanted? If they were implanted, then when and by whom? The ground on which I walked as a child has disappeared from under my feet."

After a moment the professor asked Axel, "What is it that you think I can do for you?"

"Obviously you are a psychiatrist, so you probably don't put much stock in talk therapy," Axel replied. "So I was thinking that, if you had experience with and access to a transcranial stimulator, say, a transcranial magnetic stimulator or a transcranial direct current stimulator, you might be able to do an fMRI of my head while showing me a picture of my mother and mapping the cells or regions that lit up. Then you could stimulate just those areas while I reported which memories popped up."

"A nice idea," the professor said, "but the TMS and the TDCS coils are only positioned for regions of the brain dealing with depression and other moods. Besides, what you're asking for is a function not approved for those devices by the FDA. What you are requesting would require deep brain stimulation; which would require open brain surgery while you are conscious. Are you sure you'd want to do that?"

Axel thought about the professor's words a long time before answering, "If it turned out that my memories were true and my mother didn't love me, I could deal with that. If it turned out that my memories were false, that they were implanted, I could deal with that too. What I couldn't deal with is thinking my mother didn't love me when she did. It's like a major chunk of my memory is missing, like I have amnesia, not being able to trust any of my childhood memories. So, yes, I'd be willing to undergo open brain surgery for the chance of getting back my childhood memories before I die."

The professor tried to talk Axel out of what he considered to be a rather frivolous discretionary but dangerous medical procedure. “We wouldn’t be able to differentiate between a true memory and a false memory; neither could we be able to tell apart a self-acquired memory from an implanted memory.”

Axel told the professor, “I’d be satisfied if you found a memory in which her arms are wrapped around me.”

The professor told Axel to go home and think it over, talk to his wife and children about it, and then give him a call if that’s what he’s decided. In any case, an elective surgery such as this would take up to a year to schedule, what with all the real life-and-death cases requiring surgery.

Axel thanked Professor Palmer for his time and patience, and promised to call him one way or the other.

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The surgery was scheduled for 2:00 New Years morning. He reported to the hospital reception desk the day before the surgery, accompanied by his wife and children. He was assigned a private room and told to don the hospital pajamas. The nurses stuck him and probed him. He was taken to get an EEG, EKG, X-Ray, MRI, and fMRI.

“Do you still want to go through with this?” the professor asked Axel.

“Yep,” Axel answered.

“Can’t you talk any sense into him,” the professor asked Axel’s wife, glancing also at Axel’s sons.

“No,” Axel’s wife answered, her energy depleted. “Just make sure you bring him back to us, alive and functioning.”

“You know open brain surgery is never a slam dunk and Axel signed a waiver form protecting the hospital and us from any liability if the procedure has complications,” the professor said

“Yes, I know,” she responded. “He explained you wouldn’t perform the surgery if he didn’t sign the waiver. We wouldn’t sue you or the hospital if he were to wake up a vegetable, or didn’t wake up at all.”

Axel’s sons gathered closer around their mother, putting their hands on her shoulder.

A male nurse shaved Axel's head. His wife gasped. Then she stood up and bent over him, kissing him on the cheek. "I love you," she said. "See you on the other side."

"Good luck, Dad," the sons said and, one after the other, kissed their father.

The male nurse wheeled Axel out of the room and down the hall to the elevators.

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The timeline bifurcated again, as it does every moment; after all, we live in a quantum multiverse.

In one universe Axel's surgery was a success in every way. The professor had stimulated a memory cell in Axel's brain that triggered a memory of when his mother had hugged him warmly.

In another universe, Axel's surgery was a success but all the memories were of a mean cold-hearted mother who had no arms for hugging Axel.

In yet another universe Axel's surgery was not quite successful. The young doctor assisting the professor had been handed an unsterilized scalpel. There was an infection and the inflammation spread through Axel's brain. He went into a coma and, three days later, died; however, the professor had managed to trigger a memory of Axel's mother hugging him. Then he lost consciousness.