A SAGA ACROSS GENERATIONS
A Personal Narrative

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Towards the end of the 19th century, my families, living unknown to each other in India, each crushed by a hopeless poverty, accepted an offer from the British colonial authorities of a five-year contract to go to a country they had never heard of, thousands of miles of ocean away, to work the land. At the expiry of the contract, they would receive either some money and passage back to India or a piece of land in the new country. My great-grandparents chose the land. Over the years, over the generations, they would seize this unexpected opportunity offered them in this small Caribbean island called Trinidad. They would labour in the rice paddies and the sugar plantations, eventually sending their children for a year or two of education — enough to learn how to read and write and count — at the schools set up by Canadian protestant missionaries. Some would adopt the religion of the missionaries, although many more would retain their traditional Hindu beliefs. All would learn the language of the missionaries and the colonial authorities, new tools to help them move ahead, explore new possibilities. And so, one of my grandfathers would leave the fields and go into business, first as a clerk for someone else, then with his own store. My other grandfather would develop a thirst for learning and reading and writing, and through intelligence and effort turn himself into a working journalist and short-story writer. Their successes would lead their children into the professions and the liberal arts: towards medicine and the law, teaching and writing. Among these children would be sociologists and university professors, high school teachers, lawyers, doctors — and a Nobel Prize winner in literature.

In two generations, then, from a crushing poverty to worldly success on a scale my great-grandparents could hardly have dreamed of.

Since then, that movement of migration has continued, so that many members of my families, having travelled extensively, now live in various parts of Canada, the United States, and Great Britain.

Much has been lost along the way, of course. By my generation, the languages of India have disappeared, the religions of India have become for the most part ritual bereft of philosophy, the Indian foods of the Caribbean are not the Indian foods of the subcontinent. If my parents' generation still viewed India as the mother country, if its young men still set off in ritualistic
fashion for Benares in search of education, India today is for me just another
country, as interesting as China or Japan or Nigeria but with no greater
claim to my intellectual or emotional loyalties.

Much more, however, has been gained as well. The families have been
transformed thanks to those courageous or desperate enough to sign those
contracts — and to those who saw and seized the opportunities for a new
life, those two grandfathers who decided to strike out on their own and beat
the odds.

There you have, briefly, the family memory, the family mythology. I
offer my daughter who, at 13, is the embodiment of her parents, her Que­
becoise mother who has given her her language and her culture, her father
of East Indian descent born in the Caribbean but who, after 30 years in
Canada, considers himself a Canadian and who has also given her his
language and his culture. This is the most precious gift I can offer my daughter:
this gift of memory that helps her to see the two streams of history that
came together to create her, to help her place herself not only in narrow
family terms but also in the larger scheme of world history. It has helped
make her a very secure, very confident child unafraid of the world, eager to
engage with it on her own terms.

Memory is one of those faculties that make us human. As human
beings, we evolve. We acquire experience, we learn things about the world
and about ourselves. We cannot unlearn what we have learned. And all that
knowledge — the distillation of experience and thought — is stored in what
we call memory, an incandescent faculty which we can either betray through
distortion, disuse or misuse or which we can use to ensure that the past —
examined with honesty, recounted with frankness - helps to construct a
clarity path towards tomorrow.

This is no easy task — and it is one which goes beyond the purview of
the professional historian. We so easily filter our memories, give them pleasing
shapes — or we do the opposite and turn them into cornerstones of horror
and victimhood. I think of the man whom I met just after my arrival
in Toronto in 1973. After twenty-five successful years in Canada, he had
decided to quit his job, sell his car and his house and return to Trinidad
with his young family to, as he put it, “help his people”. I had just come
from Trinidad, and when he spoke to me of the place he was returning to
I failed to recognize in his words the place I had just left. He was describing
to me the place he had known as a very young man, a place that had changed
immeasurably since — and not for the better, I thought it a foolish enterprise.
He was returning to a fantasy spun from memory and he would not be
deterred. I was not surprised to learn that six months later he had returned
to Toronto disheartened. The past is a foreign country, and should be
approached as such. I think too of the portrait of pre-Columbian North
America that is often peddled as a way of underlining the venality and
brutality of Europeans. It is a portrait of Eden, every native a peace-loving
environmentalist who would never think of encroaching on another's terri­tory. While north, central, and south American natives do have shattering
grievances, while they are peoples to whom grievous wrongs have been done
and to whom much is owed, their case is not helped by fantasies of superi­
ority. The pre-Columbian Americas too knew love and kindness, wars and
slavery, robbery and rape. To claim otherwise is to deny these peoples their
essential human complexity. It is to turn them into cliché and stereotype,
to make them into simply useful arms for modern-day battles. It is to betray
those peoples, it is to betray memory.

On one level, memory - researched (i.e. the fruit of many memories)
and written down as History - is subject to ideological manipulation. Napo­
one once suggested that history is a fable agreed upon and it was this sense
of collective memory that allowed Joseph Stalin, a lifelong student of history,
to decide that history was not what the archives said but what the party
decreed. The fable could be faked to suit the ideological ends. And so in
Stalin's Soviet Union even photographs could be altered, people such as
Trotsky, having fallen into disfavour, being literally erased from the record.
Stalin once declared: "Sometimes one must correct history." Correcting
history means tampering with memory. It was to defend memory, to return
to it its fullness free of ideological cant, that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote
The Gulag Archipelago- the fruit of a one-man truth commission, if you will.

Let me bring it closer to home. Take the great novelist Mordecai
Richler, for instance, a man of superb intellect and irrepressible passion
whose literary achievements were, for a long time, obscured by his 1992
essay Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!, a polemic against Quebecois nationalism.
The fatal flaw in this essay is Richler's childhood memories of antisemitism
in Montreal in the thirties. Those memories were so searing they turned
him into their victim by blinding him to the astonishing changes that the
decades had brought to the Quebec nationalist movement — a movement
that slowly sloughed off its narrow racial and religious nature, that rejected
its initial ethnic underpinnings, and opened itself quite successfully to a
larger, more inclusive constituency. Today, there is no contradiction in being
both a Quebec nationalist and a federalist but Mordecai Richler, scarred
forever by memory, could not see that.

This is a mindset shared by some of Mr Richler's opponents on the
other side of Quebec's linguistic divide. When, for instance, I sometimes
bring up former premier Jacques Parizeau's infamous declaration the night
of the last referendum blaming the loss on money and the ethnic vote, I am
I think on the other hand of my late friend Ken Adachi. Ken was for many years the Toronto Star’s book critic, one of the brightest lights in a generation of bright lights. As his name suggests, Ken was of Japanese descent. As a child, he, along with his family, was interned during World War II by the Canadian government. That experience marked him for life. One of his passions was the demand for an apology from the government of Canada for what it had done to so many of its citizens and compensation for those who had lost their belongings and their livelihood. Memory was important to Ken and, to ensure that the experience of Canadians of Japanese descent would not be forgotten, he wrote a seminal book on the topic, *The Enemy That Never Was*. Yet although this was one of the animating passions of his life, it did not control him. One had the sense that his sense of outrage was sharpened by the fact that these things had been done to Canadian citizens by the Canadian government in the name of other Canadians. It was not an ethnic sense of outrage. It was as a Canadian that the memory of genocide in Rwanda have on our actions in the Sudan? We’ve seen it all before and, institutionally, we remain paralysed. A link can be made, I think, between memory, ideology, and reality. The present US administration does with reality what some do with the past — distort it beyond all recognition and despite the evidence, or lack of it, before the eyes of the world. Bush and Cheney take recent history, fresh memory, and wrap it so tightly in neo-conservative ideology that it can no longer breathe. They make clear the dangers inherent in manipulating the past (What did he have? What did he hide? What did he do?) and so misrepresenting the present and imperilling the future. The continuing betrayal of knowledge and experience — of memory, no matter how recent — is mind-boggling. The polite word is misrepresentation and, on another level, it is hardly different from that man I met thirty-one years ago when I arrived in Toronto — except that in his case only his family paid a price.

Former New Brunswick premier Frank McKenna once said, “History teaches us that men behave wisely once they have exhausted all the alternatives.” But what, one wonders, does the memory retain? Memories of rightness wronged by power, military action, money or the ethnic vote? Wisdom undone by the venality of others? But what of our own wrongdoing, our own venality? To insist that there was none is to say that we are not human, to suggest that we are superior — itself a tumble into venality.

Colonialism is the convenient whipping boy for many of the world’s ills. Damn those British, damn those French. Yes, colonialism created many horrors, claimed many victims — but it was hardly the first or the last ideology to do so. There were many before and there have been many since. Blanket condemnation is simply not good enough. The world is not so simple. It was colonialism that afforded my great-grandparents, and millions of others, the opportunity to undertake the monumental task of changing the destiny of their families. It was a system of education bequeathed by the British colonial administration and the Canadian missionaries that allowed my grandparents — these two individuals — to effect revolution within their families. Colonialism was what it was, in all its complexity. There is much to condemn, much to learn, but forgiveness is pointless.

It is part of the reason that I refuse to be seen as “racialized.” To accept the label is to accept the stamp of others. I do not see myself as a “person of colour” — look around, who is not a person of colour? — just as my grandparents saw themselves simply as individuals using their drive and their intelligence to make opportunities where there were few. I grew up in a community that saw itself as superior to the surrounding peoples. We were Hindus and so superior to the Moslems. We were well off and so superior to the poor. We were members of the British Empire and so superior to the nearby Latin Americans. We were English-speakers and so superior to our Spanish and French-speaking neighbours. This was a community full of a sense of racial superiority. Children of mixed race (particularly black/Indian, less so Indian/white) were viewed with a mixture of contempt and pity. It was a community that knew racial pride. To be “racialized” also implies pride in one’s race. But my race, my colour, are simply parts of me, like the shape of my ears or the tilt of my nose. They are simply there. Besides, I feel no urge to share in what was a central precept of nazi and apartheid ideology. It was
within the bosom of my community and my families, then, that I learned about racial pride, racism, and hypocrisy. And these too, along with the successes of which I spoke earlier, are part of my memory, part of my family mythology.

Against this background, the concept of “racialized” becomes nonsense. It is in part for this reason that when I write, when I speak, I do so in my name only and never on behalf of any community.

I assume my identity, then, in all of its fullness — an identity of which the colour of my skin is but one element and far from the most important. I engage with the world not as a brown-skinned man of East Indian heritage born in the Caribbean but as a man who has been shaped by the myriad forces which shape all of us. Just as a novelist I am less interested in Humanity than in the individual human being, so as a person I view myself — and I insist that I be viewed — as an individual human being with my strengths and my weaknesses, my desires and my passions, with all the sunshine and storm clouds that make me the person that I am. All labels, then, are necessarily reductive and a bane on our essential individuality.

As a novelist, I have a habit of seeing both that sunshine and those storm clouds. I refuse to turn away from the thunder and the lightning and the crashing rain, just as I refuse to turn away from the rainbow that will follow and the need to clean up the debris, repair the damage and move on. I can spend the rest of my life raging against the sky. I can spend the rest of my life cursing fate and mourning all that has been lost. Yes, I do rage and mourn and demand justice but I also move on, rebuild — because, otherwise, all the victims of the past will be betrayed, all the effort for nothing. Success really is the best revenge and success begins with every individual turning the broken trees into firewood and planting new ones, never forgetting what has happened but not letting that memory shackle me either.

The choice of what to do with memory, I therefore suggest, is up to each and every one of us, not as members of a group or a collective (which tend to exercise a manipulative pressure and impose a kind of group-think, party discipline if you will) but as individuals made so by the essential autonomy that is our birthright. To never forget: it is one of our great responsibilities as human beings. We can become either a prisoner of memory, chained by a sense of victimhood and entitlement, or we can decide in the private recesses of our souls that our recollection of the past will make us free. Pardon begins with us.