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Remembering The Rotating Elephant

By CNF

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By Kim O'Connell

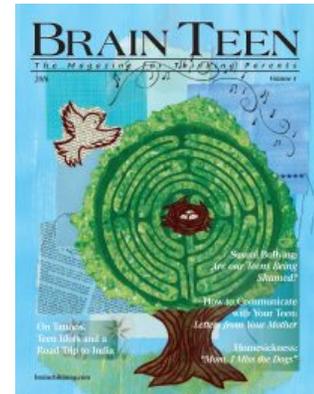
On a bright afternoon not too long ago, I took my kids to the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., a city that I've lived in or near my entire life. Although we've been there many times, the dinosaur bones and butterfly garden and mammal exhibits always draw us back. We especially enjoy seeing the giant African elephant that has been displayed in the museum's rotunda for decades. As we gazed up at its famous uplifted trunk, I told the kids, "When I was little, the elephant turned on a rotating platform."

They looked at me with raised eyebrows. "When did it stop spinning?" my son asked. Unsure of the answer, I went over to the information kiosk, staffed by a white-haired gentleman who looked seasoned enough to know.

"Excuse me," I said, "when did the elephant stop rotating?"

The man looked at me quizzically. "This elephant has never rotated."

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"No," I countered, "I distinctly remember it rotating when I was a child."

"Nope. Don't think so."

I was annoyed that a docent could be so ill-informed. You see, it's not just that I have a vague recollection that the elephant rotated; I have vivid, specific memories. All of them, I realize, involve my father. My parents split up when I was 7 years old, a moment that forever cleaved away the early part of my childhood. In the way of the newly divorced, my father compensated by frequently taking me to special places on his court-ordered every-other-weekends—the circus, the ballet, the zoo, and the natural history museum. With my small hand in his, I remember standing at the base of the Smithsonian elephant and watching it slowly move, almost imperceptibly, like the shadow of a sundial. I remember it facing a different direction every time I walked back into the rotunda. I remember the way the elephant seemed to spot me out of the corner of its eye as it came around again. There was no way I could be wrong.

When the kids and I got home from the museum, I crowdsourced a query on Facebook: Did anyone else remember the Smithsonian elephant rotating? The answers poured in: No spinning elephant. (However, some people remembered the creature as a woolly mammoth, so I'm not alone in my delusions.) Still unconvinced, I finally tweeted the question to the Smithsonian itself, which responded unequivocally: @kim_oconnell We've checked...and the elephant never rotated.

I was, frankly, crushed. I began to wonder whether all my other childhood memories were suspect, too. Had I really almost drowned in a motel pool in Beach Haven, New Jersey, until my father swam up and saved me? Did we really keep a box turtle in our kitchen for a week after my dad found it on a bike trail? Had my third grade teacher really taken me out for cherry ice cream after she testified in my parents' custody trial? Or was it all like the rotating elephant, a figment of my imagination?

I may never know the answer. Among other things, my father is now gone, so I can't ask him, and even if I could, chances are his memory would be just as faulty as mine. Scientists have studied the phenomenon of false memories for years, and the unreliability of memory has come up in countless cases involving eyewitness testimony. Apparently, our memories are malleable because our brains are taking in so much information all the time, and our thoughts about our memories, as well as our hopes and dreams and other input, inform what we are filing away for future retrieval. Psychologists have asserted that some false childhood memories can even be useful to us, if they help to construct a positive narrative of one's past.

This is how I've come to view the rotating elephant. Because my time with my father was so precious in those early days, my experiences with him were seared into my memory bank—or some version of them. Many times I have told the story about how a group of camera-toting tourists accosted my father and me outside the Kennedy Center in the 1970s, convinced that I was presidential daughter Amy Carter and my dad was a Secret Service agent. Did it really happen? Maybe. Or maybe just being there with my dad made me feel like we were something more special, together, than we ever were apart.

I hope that someday my kids will feel that way about me, even though our nuclear family—in contrast to the one I grew up in—is so stable, so easily taken for granted, that they aren't likely to consider our outings all that precious. Still, like my father did before me, I like to take my kids to places like the Natural History museum, where they are forming their own memories of the elephant, fixed as it is on the museum floor. Maybe they find enough magic in its broad shoulders, its wide ears, and its sad eyes. Yet I can't help but feel grateful to my younger self for conjuring up something even more enchanting—a gigantic elephant spinning, almost dancing, almost alive—to carry with me to adulthood, along with all the other real and manufactured memories that make up my life story. I'm not sure I'm ready to let it go, even now. And in my mind's eye, at least, I don't have to.

Kim O'Connell is a writer whose work has been published in The New York Times, The Washington Post, Ladies Home Journal, Babble, PsychologyToday.com, National Geographic News, and Little Patuxent Review, among others. In 2015, she was chosen to be the first-ever writer in residence at Shenandoah National Park. She lives in Arlington, Va., with her husband, son, and daughter.

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