

Lovely Memories and Painful Recollections Make us Who we are.

By Philip Henderson, March 2025

I am a human being. My humanity is created by my relationships with other people. My membership in a society defines the roles that I play daily. In my society I relate to family, friends, and strangers. Each person plays many roles within society. You could be a sibling, a parent, a cousin, or some other relative to me. You could be a friend, a coworker, or a stranger. Nonetheless, you will form a relationship with me should we meet. That relationship determines how we behave toward one another.

The words “being human” is a vastly different concept than the words “human being” represents. When I express “human being” it is clear that I am speaking about an animal of the species *homo sapiens sapiens*. When I reverse these two words to the term “being human” I have created what it means to be relationship with each person in society. Being human is complex. My relationships with a sibling is different than with a parent. My relationship with a friend of fifty years is different from the relationship with someone I met yesterday because we simultaneously reached for the same book on the shelf of a bookstore and realized that this coincidence has deep connections. Who else would have searched for the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* written by Alex Haley (author of *Roots*) except for a kindred spirit.

When we are “being human,” we immediately understand who has the upper hand, or whether the hands are about even. We may defer to the other fellow as a righteous behavior for example if the other person is our elder, our teacher, our medical doctor, or a higher up at our place of work who we are meeting for the first time. In every case we kind of know what to do that would be appropriate behavior.

The rules of a society determine expected behavior of each of us in every situation. We learn these rules through a subtle dance of trial and error. We make

adjustments as we experience positive or negative reactions to our behavior. The rules are firmly imbedded in our way of being. As we mature our behavior seamlessly adjusts to subtle changes in status. What happens when an individual no longer has the ability to recognize interpersonal relationships? We have lost our sense of self due to an injury or illness. This in turn causes us to be unable to mentally appreciate the identity of another person. Without a clear sense of self we cannot relate to another person whether that person is a stranger or a close relative such as a spouse or child.

It is our nature being human to live as social creatures. We rely on people we know and trust. We rely on people we will never meet to obtain water, food, clothing, transportation, housing, medical care, and education. Even learning how to eat, walk, read and write requires cooperation from others. If we were gods or superheroes our super power would be our emotional brain. Our emotional brain inspires us to take action and to live as social human beings.

One special gift we possess is that we are able to recall the experiences of our life. Our recollections give us an awareness of who we are at each moment. Imagine what life would be like if you could not recall what happened ten minutes ago, ten hours ago, ten days ago, ten months ago, or ten years ago. You would have no personal history of happy or unpleasant experiences. How would you know what might happen if you take one path or another? Our recollections of past experiences amounts to learning the consequences of specific behavior.

We are unable to recall a perfect record about our past. Our memory is not like a CD of a movie where the same actors speak the same lines no matter how often you view the movie. Instead our recollection is a current version or interpretation of those occurrences. Superseding events will 'color' our memory recall. Some of the events we do not remember at all. While other events feel as though they are burned into our memory seemingly indelibly. For example, we are unlikely to recall what we had for lunch on a specific day ten months ago. However, if we were dismissed from our employment unfairly on that day we are likely to recall details of that day and we might

even recall what we consumed for lunch on that day. The dismissal serves as a marker that collects an array of random events that are concurrent with the dismissal. Memory is fickle that way.

Being human is about experiencing events and remembering a personal history. Being human requires awareness of our species history. We know “who we are” as distinct from others. That is our personal history. In order for that history to have proper context we must know who we are historically in the 40,000 years that modern human beings have lived. We understand that our life is limited in the number of moments we can experience life. *Human being* is a thing, *being human* is a process.

Being human makes each moment precious. One moment something wonderful occurs that we savor for a lifetime. At another moment something dreadful happens that produces emotional pain and unrelenting sadness. We feel profound love and affection for family and friends. Our love creates a conundrum. It is inevitable that one day those loving relationships will become the cause of soul crushing sadness perhaps a numbing sense of despair. That is the nature of *being human*; we remember these signature emotion packed moments. In particular we understand who our parents are and who our siblings and children are in an emotionally saturated relationship. When something untoward occurs in the lives of our children, parents, or siblings those events create a lasting mark. These events can redefine who we are. When a parent dies our relationship with the remaining parent is modified. These life changing events transform our love to its highest level. Loving someone who has died is the ultimate relationship. The important gifts we receive from such loved ones are our memories of their lives with us. These painful experiences allows us a glimpse of how our tiny existence fits as part of the entirety of human existence; present, past, and future. Time is our friend and our leveler.



When, due to injury or illness, we become unable to appreciate who we are in our species and especially fail to understand what our personal history is, our *being human* has changed forever. When a friend or a loved one has experienced dementia in one of its many forms, then you understand how helpless they are to experience being themselves.

With dementia we have a body but the person has changed, at least the individual's sense of themselves is no longer present, so we have a body but a hugely diminished person residing inside. Those among us with debilitating dementia don't know who the person in the mirror is, or what she is about to do next.

There is no redemption for a person who has diminished ability to recall their personal history. These illnesses are progressively debilitating. We have no treatment that will stop the progression. Our loved one is becoming anonymous to himself. Such a person cannot experience the present in a uniquely human manner. They are alive but their humanity has diminished in ways that challenge **agency**¹. Such a person cannot plan. The future is a stranger to them. They do not look forward to any event or action in the future. They have only the present and that quickly evaporates. Their life continues due to the grace and goodness of others who perform the agency required for them to survive. It is the love, kindness, understanding, and protective behavior of others that keeps them alive.

¹ Sense of agency refers to the feeling of control over actions and their consequences.