

Twelve Day Life

The Problem

When I was a child, one of the running narratives in our household had to do with my father's autobiographical articles for *Boston* magazine, later collected into the books *Moving-*, *Living-* and *Growing Upcountry*. My sister and I, who often featured in these articles, liked to take mock umbrage at their inaccuracies. Don would combine, redact, and sometimes invent events, all in pursuit of the better story. And after all, he was not purporting to write a veridical, journalistic account of our lives. Later on I would discover that many journalists are almost equally free with the facts, especially where young people are concerned. And as I've [written earlier](#), both Don's father Wayne and my maternal great-grandfather Julius Serra provided stellar examples of selective autobiography.

It is almost impossible not to. At Walden, where I teach, each of the students and staffers spends an afternoon telling their life story, once a year. I've also kept autobiographical blogs, such as [this one](#), and written many essays that are essentially autobiographical in nature. In all these instances, one is forced to make drastic editing decisions at the price of historical accuracy. After all, to compress my waking life into Walden's (very generous) two-hour time slot is a ratio of 100,000 to 1. Either something is going to get left out, or I am going to speak in terms so generic as to be useless. While we are thinking in terms of these ratios, it is worth noting that I've probably spent at least 400 hours of my life engaged in the act of conscious autobiography, either in prose or verbally. That is to say that that 0.2% of my waking life has been spent summarizing the other 99.8%. Is this a healthy ratio? I wonder what it would look like for Pepys or Nin, or even my father.

Julius chose to tell two versions of his life, one based on his career and the other based on his sexual adventures. These are both, in their way, popular structural choices. My grandfather Wayne focused primarily on his ancestry, childhood, and ascent to his career, which is another popular format. *Most* people, if asked to tell the story of their life off the cuff, on school, work, romance, and geographical moves at least to provide milestones, and frequently to provide most of the content. I do that too: I routinely leave out crowd-pleasing episodes of my life story in deference to a formulaic inclusion of every apartment I've ever lived in; every job I've ever held.

We can, however, imagine a myriad of other formats. For instance, I could create a fairly robust autobiography based entirely on the changing patterns of my dreams, or on my shifting intellectual interests, or what books I was reading. But I never tell my story that way, and nor does anyone else. Again, with the right sequence of editing decisions, I could tell my life story in terms of an action movie, or a romantic comedy, or a psychological thriller, or a road trip. But I don't do that. This is not to say I always tell my life story the same way: if I am in a bad mood, it is more tragic; if I am in a good mood, more dramatic, and so forth. But the general formula remains the same, leaves much omitted, and focuses on details that may not have much significance in terms of my life as a datum of social history.

And these same genre conventions are in place even if there is no audience, or rather no *external* audience. Quentin Crisp, a man of many adages, once said "it's no good running a pig farm badly for thirty years while saying, 'Really, I was meant to be a ballet dancer.'" Yet it is very easy to run a pig farm badly for thirty years while maintaining an autobiographical narrative that gives equal weight to one's six-month-long dance career right after college. It is easy to recall the vacations and elide the workdays, although they are a much larger part of one's life. There is a whole bestiary of mnemonic shortcuts that distance our memories from the reality of our lives. Bowles puts the matter with tragic precision:

We get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that's so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless.

What he suggests of the future is also true of the past. We are always using progressive constructions (!) to speak about events that happened once or twice and are, perhaps, unlikely to recur: *whenever I'm in Philadelphia I go the Melrose Diner*. But in fact I went there twice in the summer of 1994, and once three years later.... The struggle here is not just grammatical; it invokes a whole cloud of themes about mortality and possibility and memory.

The Plan

It is once again my turn to tell my life story at Walden, and I wanted to “fly by those nets” if I could. So I conceived of a different approach: I would choose 12 days from my life, completely at random, and then research them. By this random-sampling technique, I hoped to be able to rinse out some of the bias of my own memories.

I have a considerable amount of experience in researching essentially arbitrary moments in time, so methodologically I was prepared for this. On the later/recent end of the spectrum, I turned first of all to my email, and then to my own writing, then to blogs and image boards created by institutions I was involved with. I don't keep a journal, per se, but I do write and blog a great deal. Blog posts are inherently searchable by date, and my computer's OS allows me to search through my other writing by date, as well as photographs. The upshot is that I have about a decade of recorded thoughts and images that I can filter chronologically in a fairly precise way. I have also saved my calendars for some of the relevant years. These weren't that helpful, but they gave me a few things to follow up on. For instance, according to my calendar, I had had dinner with a friend on July 11th, 2006. Asking him what he was doing at that point in his life helped me reconstruct what we had likely discussed that evening, and even what we had done before dinner.

For the early years of my life (until about age 12), I benefitted from my mother's program of recording my sister's and my development on the pages of various calendars and planners. It was, by her own admission, a rather neurotic ritual, possibly begun in response to post-partum depression or some similar crisis. As the years ticked by, though, she hardly ever slacked off on this practice, though sometimes a one-sentence update might run across two or three days. Soon it becomes hard to disaggregate her parental anxieties from my own nascent eccentricities, and all of that is steeped in her own dry humor and third-person format:

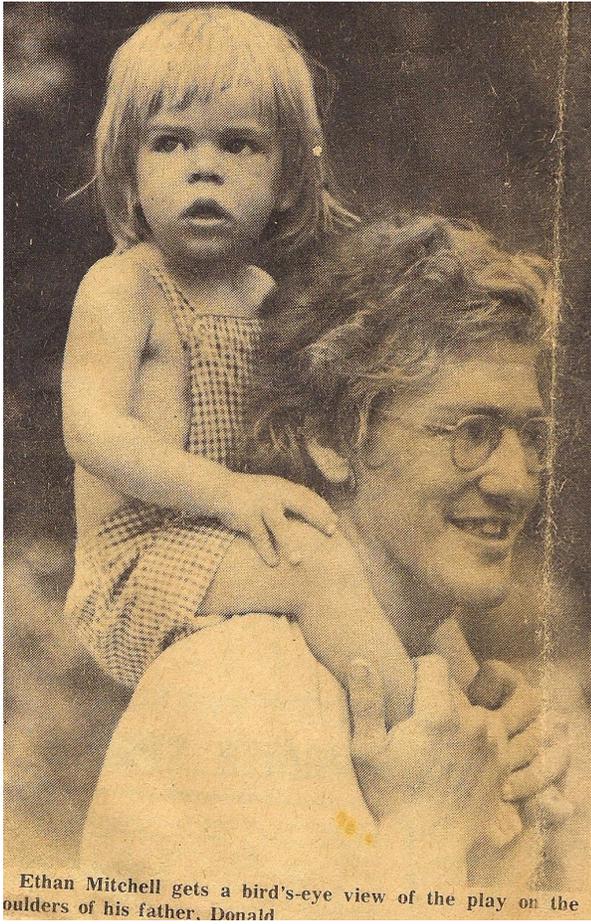
WORKED WITH DON ON MAKING THE MARIONETTES USED STICKS, SMALL HOOKS + STRING. CHERYL + ETHAN HAD A MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT THE HIDDEN DOCUMENTS + THE CLUES RELATED TO THEM. WE TALKED FOR A LONG TIME AND FINALLY AGREED THAT CHERYL WOULD STAY INTERESTED BUT WOULD NOT SEARCH FOR THEM. (May 31-June 2, 1983)

Then there is my grandmother's copious collection of photographs (even a tintype!) which go back six generations. Some of these, depending on the camera, are stamped with either the date of development (for analog film) or the date they were taken (for digital film). Others are dated by Lauraine on the back, though not always accurately. Recently she has lost her sense of chronology, and one picture taken in, I believe, 2007 is dated "About 2020". Even without dates, the pictures show a constant progression of houses, barns, vehicles, clothing styles, mustaches, houseguests, pets, all of which it is possible to sequence *a la* Thomsen's seriation. But they form an imperfect record, worse in some ways than my own memory. No one in my own family owned a camera, so the pictures are forever being taken by guests, or under special circumstances. They are posed arrangements of people at special events. And again, you never, or rarely ever, see the photographer. Thus, for instance, I infer that Julius Serra had a camera because I can't find any pictures of him—though Lauraine remembers her sister Lois as having the camera, so perhaps Julius was just camera-shy. It is difficult to parse backwards through these dynamics, precisely because photographs are *such* a compelling prod to one's memories, real or false.

Some of my twelve days were not very well covered by the resources I've mentioned above. Cheryl's documentation ended in 1988, and my digital records aren't much good before 2001 or so. For the interim, I have paper files that I could have delved into if I had had (much) more time: receipts, bills, tax records, bank statements, letters, notebooks. Instead, for the dates in this interval, I used a technique that is loosely borrowed from life-inventory interview methods. First of all, I looked at news stories, which were enough to place me in the right general region of my memories. These often generated a second round of questions. For instance, May 2nd, 2003 was in the middle of the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq. I had gone to a number of protests in that time frame, with friends. I talked to some of them; they remembered details that helped me remember details. Ted Conna, in particular, had a good deal of records for some of those dates.

This cascade process is not without its risks: it is quite possible to build a false memory out of such conversations, and the further one gets from exogenous sources, the more likely that is. But for the relatively modest purposes I had in mind, it was sufficient, and very, very interesting. In the end, I had only two dates where I really had to fish for details across many weeks.

The Results



Ethan Mitchell gets a bird's-eye view of the play on the shoulders of his father, Donald

Slightly before day 720. Staff photographer for Addison Independent.
←

This blog is not meant to be especially autobiographical, and I won't present the details of my twelve days here. I will, however, say that it was a very rewarding and eye-opening experience. It was not entirely uplifting, though. At some points it felt like the final scene of *Our Town: ogod, is this really how I've spent my life?* Because in many ways, the version of myself that is revealed by this random-sampling method is quite different from the version of myself that I would otherwise casually recall. Sometimes those differences are quite obvious, and others are more subtle and internal, but in every case I am inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to the twelve-day-version. By that I mean that the twelve-day-version of me is probably a more accurate reflection of *who I have been*, while my memories are probably a more accurate reflection of *who I want to be* and/or *who I don't want to be*.

Right around day 720. Note early use of pajama pants on the job. →

For instance, as a younger man I liked to think of myself as a “traveller”, and indeed I have been to 21 countries. Lately (by which I mean the last decade or so(!)) I've been quietly aware that I'm not *really* much of a traveller anymore. But still, it was a little shocking to me that all of my twelve days found me in the US...though in retrospect, the odds of this happening were about basically even (46%), and in fact on one of the twelve days I was probably recovering from jet lag after a trip to France. Again, Susannah's hospitalization and our subsequent isolation period in South Hadley loom incredibly large in my memory, but they don't show up in my twelve days...and indeed, there was an 83% chance that they would not show up, because they represent a fairly small portion of my life.



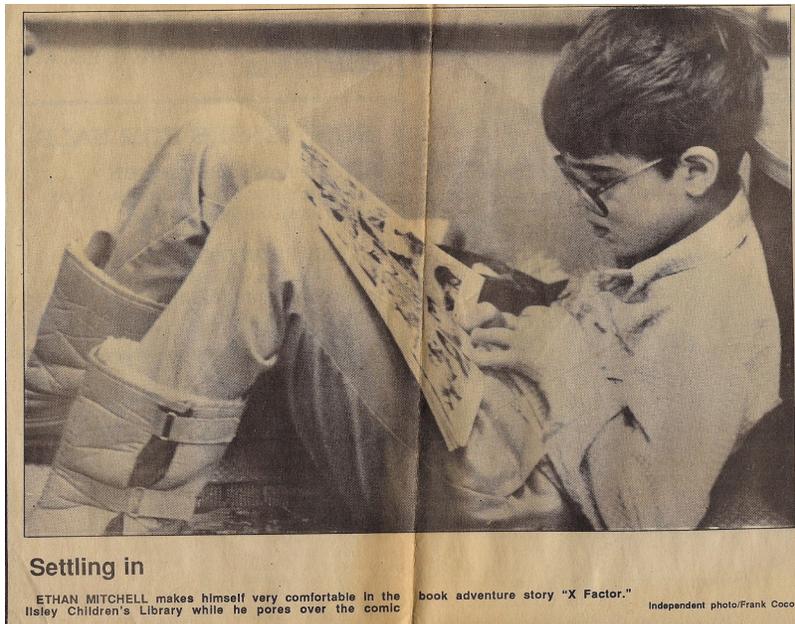
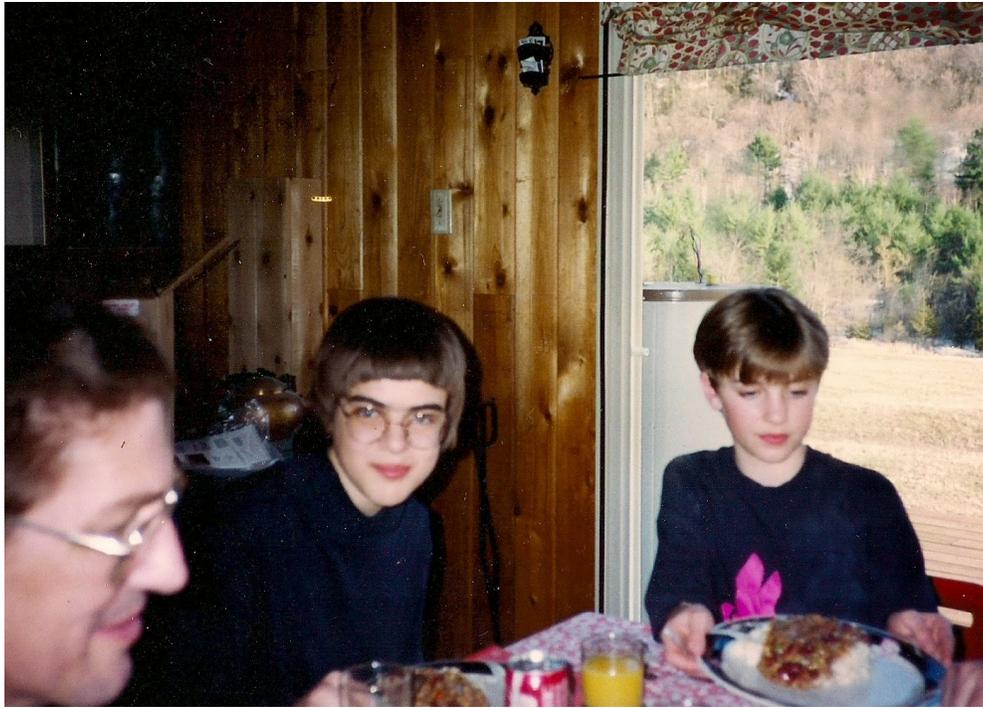


Photo by Frank Coco, one week after after day 4042.

More subtly...I have a mental narrative of being happy as a child, excruciatingly miserable as a teenager, and then quite happy again during my adulthood. This is calculated to imply that I was internally balanced, but I was kicked to the curb by schooling, and then reaped a just emotional reward for escaping it. I maintain this slightly politicized plotline even though I know that hedonics generally doesn't work that way, and even in times (like this winter) when I am feeling pretty low despite being 37 and not in school. In looking over the twelve days, though, I notice several hedonic patterns that belie all this. First of all (and quite in keeping with the literature) this sample suggests that I have generally spent my time near the middle of my own happiness curve, rather than on any major excursions from it. I was certainly depressed on day 6320 (Jan 24, 1994), but I was also experiencing a lot of frustration and anxiety on day 13673 (Mar 13, 2014). And wonderful things were going on on both those days, which don't feature as clearly in my memory. By contrast, I was almost certainly happy on days 8885, 9705, 11702, and 12954. What is fascinating (and again is quite in keeping with the literature) is that I can remember exactly what was upsetting me on 6320, so viscerally that I can almost feel it, and I made enough of a fuss about it that my mother recorded it in her ledgers. But happiness is harder to recapture, and often leaves less of an imprint. It is not quite fair to say *happy people don't leave a paper trail*, because on the basis of family photography and Christmas letters, everyone is ecstatic all the time. But certainly happiness is not a prolific author...it gets out a few haikus while melancholy is publishing the ninth volume of its collected works. In particular, on days 8885 and 9705 I am fairly certain I was very happy, but I have no direct record of what I was doing. Probably working, reading, and sitting around with friends, talking politics.

There are three days (720, 3282 and 6000) for which I have fairly little direct information about my mood. Based on my internal narrative, I would have guessed that I was happy on 720 and 3282, but depressed on 6000, because I was respectively ~2, 8 and 16 on those days. But on the basis of this exercise, I'm not sure my guess is worth much.



Anais and I a little before day 6320. Who needs gender or lipstick?

What else? My association with NBTSC appears twice, with Walden and Pacem and the ACLU once each, despite relatively small amounts of clock time those have taken up. Most of the people I consider good friends appear once or twice, at least in the background. A pretty decent playlist appears (I've queued it up on [my Tumblr](#)). Certain obsessions and habits of mind that I would not have thought to list as major elements of my personality show up on *several* of the twelve days, so they are probably quite important to my psyche, whether I recognize them or not.



*Day 13161, at camp.
Photo by Gayatri.*

Twelve is clearly an arbitrary number, but the order of magnitude isn't. If the number were much smaller, I wouldn't have felt like I was getting a representative sample: or, more to the point, I would have found it easier to dismiss the gloomier aspects own study as non-representative. If it were a much *larger* figure, it would have diluted my ability to do solid research on the days in question. When I began to analyze my twelve dates, I felt an enormous, venal urge to expand to fifteen or twenty. Not for any methodological reason, mind you, but because the twelve dates in question had failed to land in certain moments of my life that I like to talk about. Where was Baltimore? Where was Chiapas? Where were [various people that I adore but hardly ever see]? This very reaction suggests to me that twelve is a good figure: it provides a certain degree of discipline.

Finally, due to a rounding error (corrected below) and dumb luck, the twelfth day that I picked landed on March 13, 2014...which at that time was two weeks in the future. I decided this was serendipitous, and scheduled my life story at Walden so it would fall on that day, bringing it all home (and incidentally saving me some research). This also raised the bad-scientific-method but good-existential-exercise point that I would be *living* day 13673 with the knowledge that it was a representative day of my life. What would I do differently? What would I do the same way?

As it turned out—and there is probably some cold-water insight to be had here—I didn't have much choice in the matter. We were hit by a massive blizzard, school was cancelled, and we had to spend much of the day digging out. The evening was taken up by a bunch of pre-scheduled family festivities, and a bit of attendant family drama. I did make a point of spending several hours on my most cherished project of late, a computer program called Sphinx. But still, I have ears to hear: you cannot simply declare one day out of days to be “special” and expect reality to keep its distance.



Day 13673, photo by Dane Haskell.

ETA: Dane actually captured two other family members and one other generation here. The painting in the upper left is Norine, Lauraine's mother, who was apparently sort of an informal sex-ed teacher for the local girls. And Cheryl is wearing a Child Ballads promo T-shirt with a picture of, more or less, Anaïs.

Doing it Yourself

All in all, this was a fascinating introspective exercise, and it occurs to me that some of my readers might want to duplicate it. Since it is somewhat tedious to do calendar calculations, [I've provided a calculator over here](#) for anyone who wants to do this themselves.