

Prologue

I am a Bangladeshi born of a Muslim family. My ancestors were Hindus and, somehow, I have inherited their philosophical instincts. Although professionally I am an engineer with advanced degrees from the USA, and remain a practicing Muslim, at some point in my life I was drawn to the Indian philosophy and devoted myself to studying Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, seeking to understand the fabric of life.

It is through years of introspection that I have come to realise that the key to life is memory, and there would be no existence without it. Like a thread in a fabric, memory is one continuous chain from the beginning of life to the present and extends into the future. It is like a river that originates from the mountain, meanders through the plains and eventually merges into an ocean. If a water molecule had memory, it could remember its entire journey—from the mountain top to the ocean. So, the question then arises: Is a living species able to recall its past legacy?

The answer lay in Richard Dawkins' books—*The Selfish Gene* and *The Ancestor's Tale*, in particular. It was a burst of blinding light that made me realise that a living body is fundamentally built on two things: the coded instructions on the primordial seed, and memory that not only retains the instructions but also passes it to descendants such that every life carries its past legacy through genetic inheritance.

The Corridor through Time is the tale of a journey that explores life's distant past—not by scientific investigation, but by innate remembrance.

Genetic Inheritance

After a long journey to a remote island, Professor Jonathan Price, an eminent evolutionary biologist, returns home with a few fossilised relics. One of them is an uncommon egg-shaped seed.

He buries himself in his laboratory to assess the mysterious item. After months of painstaking examinations, he finally gains sufficient insight not only into the origin and nature of the seed, but also into the fully-grown plant the seed embodies.

In his scientific report, Professor Price details the plant's conceptual height and breadth; the shape, colour and fragrance of its branches, leaves and flowers; the size of the protective spikes; and even the colour, smell and taste of its ripened fruits.

Based on the concept that any seed is linked to life's first creation by an unbroken chain of inheritance, he explains how this unusual plant with an unusual seed may have evolved over time.

THE CORRIDOR THROUGH TIME

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ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

MUSINGS

It is fascinating to consider that the seed account applies to all species, including humans. I am now 65, but truly I am much older than that—as old as the first appearance or creation of life. A seed is the beginning of a plant's life, but the seed itself is linked to life's first creation by an unbroken chain of inheritance. Likewise, an embryo in its mother's womb is not the beginning of a new life—it is the new beginning of an ancient life.

Therefore, the question arises: Like a seed, does a man (and, for that matter, all living species) carry past information? Evolutionary biology suggests that all lives store a vast amount of information assembled over time. It is just that one may not be aware of it, let alone have any clue as to how to unlock it. But, interestingly enough, the memory unlocks itself during life's birth and growth. The only thing is that we humans, mistakenly, refer to it as enquiry, learning, knowledge and creativity. In the Socratic view, it is nothing but recollection.

As narrated in Plato's *Meno*, Socrates believes that "all knowledge that has ever been known and will ever be known is already pre-existent in human memory." In that sense

there is no such thing as human creativity or originality. How valid is it for a mango tree to claim that the king of all fruits that it bears is its own creation? Therefore, I cannot claim originality of my writing. It comes down from the primordial seed. I, too, am a plant; only of a different kind.

Biologically, Richard Dawkins notes in *The Ancestor's Tale*, "Humans as a species, as well as humans as individuals, are temporary vessels containing a mix of genes from different sources. Individuals are temporary meeting points on the crisscrossing routes that genes take through history." Therefore, like nourishing seeds into sprouts, buds into blossoms and ripening flowers into fruitfulness, intrinsically, a man's actions and reactions, plans and aspirations, thoughts and perceptions, and knowledge and wisdom must originate from a primordial life and are carried through generations by genetic inheritance. Every life is an embodiment of its past legacies influenced by the environment and circumstances that surround it.

One may disagree with this inference, just as people often disagree with each other on many other matters—religious beliefs, in particular. Fundamentally, diverse and even conflicting perceptions are the norm of life because the genetically stored information varies from life to life, species to species, and man to man as memories get mixed up, buried, eroded or even lie in a dormant state. And, then, the process of recollection is complex,

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and its outcome is not necessarily unique. Above all, like rivers, even though all lives descend from a common origin, they end up taking diverse paths, following a different journey, and landing worlds apart. Therefore, there is nothing wrong in one person being a believer where another is an atheist; or, there is nothing wrong believing in "creation" as opposed to "evolution." Imagine, if water molecules had memory and could speak like men, how diverse and conflicting the stories would be from each water molecule belonging to glaciers and fountains, torrents and lakes, rivers and oceans, clouds and raindrops. Each tale would be true in itself, but the sum total of all tales might lead one closer to the whole truth. Each tale would be more like an infinitesimally small fragment of a hugely complex jigsaw puzzle.

Remembrance

However, the real challenge, like that of our fictional Professor Price, is that if a man could crack the coded instructions imprinted on life's fundamental building blocks, he would gain insight not only into the diversity among species but also into their intricate forms and features, attributes and skills, characters and behaviour; above all, he would know the deeply coded knowledge that only surfaces with the passage of time. Or, if a man could unlock his own memory and delve deep down into the distant, foregone past and ultimately to life's foundation, he could trace his lineage back to the origin.

Remembering the past may be difficult, but not entirely impossible. There are simple means to get around solving such a complex problem. One of the ways to unlock one's own memory may work like this: When one sees something old—say, one's childhood photo in the family album—or hears something long forgotten—say, an old song on Grandpa's record player—does it not evoke deep emotion? Does it not bring a flash flood of buried, childhood memories of joy or even of sorrow? In a similar manner, if a man could recollect his own life events as far back as his memory goes and go through all his instincts and impulses, reactions and deeds, passions and fears, loves and hates, and track the moments that evoke profound sentiments and emotions, would it not reconnect him to his long-forgotten past? Would it not trigger innate recognition and remembrance of the events on the "crisscrossing routes that genes take through history"?

The Corridor

Like the sonic signals that geoscientists record to discover deeply buried, past geologic events, in my recollection I have been able to detect the subtlest tremors in the innermost recesses of my mind. It is more like how certain notes in raag Jaunpuri strike my heart's deepest chords and make me cry. The wonderful thing is that the process led me to trace back some of my deeply buried past.

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I remember that I lived as a mother; a cleaner; a poor, starving man; a sufi, saint, or Yudhisthir; a thief; and as a violent man. I even remember my days in solitary confinement. Paradoxically, on one hand, I appreciate the freedom I enjoy in this life and, on the other, my past remembrance pulls me back to my 'cherished abode'.

My remembrance also takes me to the days when I lived as a cold-blooded reptile; a plant—maybe a banyan tree, a dandelion or a desert-dwelling cactus;

and, more importantly, as a tree-dweller. My days of piggyback rides, climbing trees and swinging through the branches continue to thrill me even after all this time.

I also treasure my days in the shallow, cool waters of an inundated grassland. The soft breeze creating endless ripples on the vast expanse of water brought me boundless joy that, even today, resonates in the depths of my heart. But the episode that made the deepest

impression on me is the time I dwelt in the remote, arid, rocky mountains. Even after all this time, the mesmerising beauty of the dry, rugged, desolate landscape continues to possess me, holding me in a hypnotic spell and, like a lonesome mother, calls me back home.

As I continue to trek the corridor through time, I begin to realise that it is nothing but the journey of a homecoming.

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