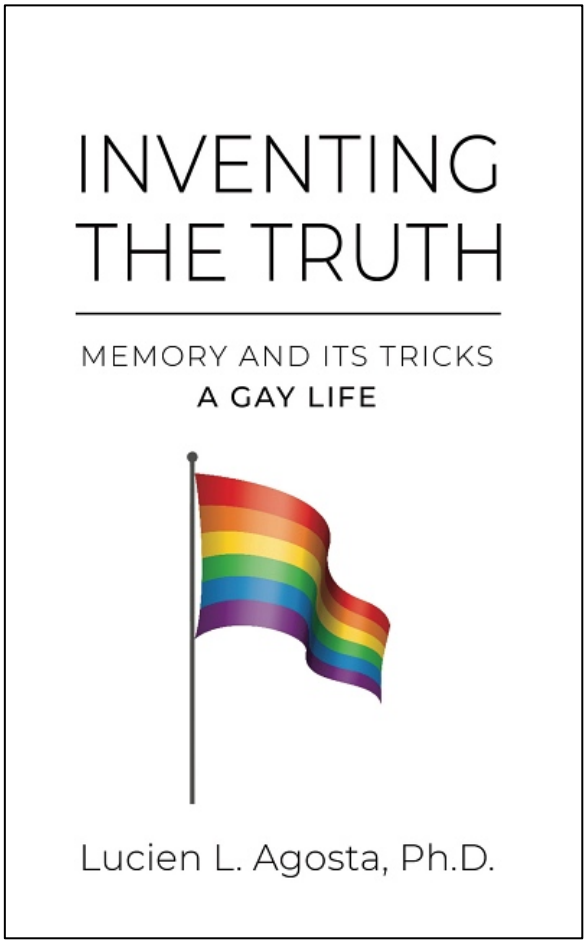

INVENTING THE TRUTH: MEMORY AND ITS TRICKS offers a collection of essays dealing with the author's life experiences as a gay man, including his complicated process of coming out and learning how to love and how to live happily and well.

INVENTING THE TRUTH:
Memory and Its Tricks - A Gay Life
By Lucien L. Agosta, Ph.D.

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INVENTING THE TRUTH

MEMORY AND ITS TRICKS
A GAY LIFE

Lucien L. Agosta, Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION

We can only understand life backwards, but we're forced to live it forwards.

--Kierkegaard

This is a book of memories. I cannot say that the memories summoned in this book are precise transcriptions of past events, a series of immersive re-experiences of bygone episodes in my gay life. Memory does not work like that. Memory is tricky. It wrests and twists, morphs and contorts one's past into shapes and designs bearing only a resemblance to the events memory tries to reconstitute from lost time. Memory reflects experiences of the past as if in a funhouse mirror, recollections recognizable as authentic though altered and transmuted. The "past," after all, is what we choose to remember, not what actually happened in any exact, immutable sense. A memory provides a strong gravitational core: Matter related, even matter extraneous to that memory can be drawn into its orbit, digested by it and germinated into extensions of it. But even such transmuted memories are true to the self they help to form.

For well over a century, neuroscientists have pursued memory's secrets, attempting to understand the complex workings of the extraordinary human capacity for remembering the past. They concur that memories are not preserved in a static state. Memories are never retrieved with perfect fidelity to the original events that prompt them. They do not emanate pellucid and unalloyed as diamonds dredged up from the coal-darkness of the mind's deep labyrinth. Memories are mutable and unstable. They are transformed each time they are summoned.

Retrieving a remembered event from its resonance in long-term memory initiates a system of reconsolidation, a process of aggregating to that memory present experience, linkages to similar memories, evolving attitudes toward and interpretations of what is remembered, maybe even details supplied by others who remember the event differently or more fully. This process of reconsolidation results in memory modification, a reshuffling of the narratives. We cannot retrieve a memory intact as from a storage cabinet. Our memories are not objective records of the past. We alter our memories each time we retrieve them. Thus, we do not remember an event; instead, we remember the last time we remembered an event. Memories are never infallible. There is an insufficiency in every effort at recollection.

Memory daubs like a Cubist: it slices events and reconfigures them, collages scenes from many odd angles all at once, shades in strange chromatics. It turns ventriloquist: it amplifies conversations and mouths novel dialogue, not bothering to disguise its moving lips. It snaps like a daft photographer, fiddling with exposures and overlaying images. It is an unreliable narrator.

Apparently memory works like this: Neurons, fired by sensory experiences and our reactions to them, encode memories in the cortex and hippocampus, regions of the brain activated during the process of remembering. Each time a memory is subsequently summoned from the complex web of memories amassed in these regions, that particular memory is re-encoded by a similar, but never identical, set of neurons. This re-encoding impacts how a memory is called up in the future: Aspects of the remembered event may be strengthened, weakened, altered, even substituted depending on which neurons are roused during the process of remembering.

In short, memories cannot be returned to in stable form as one can repeatedly revisit sculptures, forever frozen in marble. Memories are surprisingly malleable. Plato recognized this when he theorized in his dialog *Theaetetus* that human souls cohere around what amounts to an internal ingot of wax, the gift of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory. Our thoughts, perceptions, and experiences notch themselves in this wax, but whatever is imprinted there is susceptible to reconfiguring, remolding, even to melting away. Imprinting on wax is obviously less durable than carving in wood or etching in stone.

Though not employing Plato's adroit metaphor for memory, modern neuroscientists similarly explain these memory permutations and insufficiencies. No one, they argue, is capable of perfectly encoding in memory all aspects and details of an event or experience. Memory is selective. The missing information causes gaps in memories, lacunae, some possibly significant, others minor. The brain, a fussbudget busybody always pressing for greater order, coherence, and pattern, pushes in to fill these gaps and defaults. The brain fabricates details that coerce memories to make sense.

Neuroscientists refer to this effect as "confabulation," the human brain's insistence on providing greater coherence and a consistent pattern to a memory sequence. Confabulation is not lying: it does not involve a conscious intention to deceive the self or others. It is an unconscious process employed by the fastidious brain that requires memories to be lucid and rational, narratives complete, reasoned, and intelligible. In confabulation, the brain connects the dots, colors in blank spaces, and spans the gaps in memory.

Confabulation tends to increase with age. Memories grow dimmer, increasingly accumulative, arrayed in

divergent interpretations, or tinted by evolving significances. I am keenly aware of this as I compose this book of remembrances in my 70s, as memory aids me in reading my life toward the end of it. In this book, I attempt to set down my memories before they evanesce in the solvent of Time. I recognize the vagaries and insufficiencies of memory, the inevitable effects of a brain busily confabulating. My memories recorded in these pages are thus necessarily both true and fictitious at the same time. Because absolute accuracy is alien to memory, the verifiable fictions that comprise this book are inventions of the truth, constructionist renditions of it. Both my confabulating brain and my conscious mind agree on their fabricated veracity. I can get no nearer to the truth of my experiences of the past than in these veracious contrivances.

I am not interested in facts as reflected in memory; I am interested in telling the truth. Granted, facts are important, particularly in the sciences, politics, and other areas of human endeavor where facts can be substantiated and result in serious consequences. But when laid out end to end in straight lines, the facts of one's personal life often lead nowhere. Personal significances float up from the facts that prompt them. One must always re-structure remembered events so as to locate the truth hidden within. Daily life is chaotic, far different from the orderly sequence one fabricates to understand it.

What is personally human can never be factual. As soon as the mind notices facts of a personal nature, these facts get screwed up. Motives and intentions and inferences warp facts. Events haze in interpretation, angle of vision, point of view, perspective, subjective filtering. They lie in a veiling mist of indeterminacy. What was said or done may not have been meant, may have been misconstrued. The witness who

saw a shove and the witness who saw a playful nudge both report the truth.

These pages offer a mix of imagination and memory and fiction and narrative sequencing and myth-making. I have changed almost all names. I have at times invented settings to locate what I suppose happened. I have worded conversations to dramatize what I think was intended. I have occasionally created characters who elicit actions and reactions and motives that reveal who I imagine I was at the time. These pages are readings of moments interpreted in a language unavailable to me while those moments were occurring. I am telling the truth in the best way I know how to invent it. I swear this account is utterly reliable, though I had to make parts of it up for accuracy.

Recording one's memories is a challenge for another reason: Memories never present themselves according to a schematic chart. They arrive as annunciations, suddenly opened windows, unexpected apertures, epiphanies, slippages in sequential present time. To record them in any way that makes sense, memories must be coerced into a chronology, made to align according to a narrative time frame. This imposition of order upon memories results in a further fictionalizing. In writing this book, I brought memory and narrative order together. They loathed each other. "Chaotic fuck-up!" chronology muttered under its breath. Memory was equally uncivil: it hissed and hurled images without words. It glowered, flashing hues and shifting outlines just to be ornery. The pen struggles to record and structure memories, so jumbled and prolific are they. In recording memory, the conscious mind wrestles with the illogic of its interior world.

But in league, narrative chronology and I were fierce opponents. Together we managed to straitjacket memory into its necessary constraints. Memory conceded at last, but

to the end it was a savage loser. The remembrances recorded in this book, then, offer narrative contrivances of my life's truths. I hope the book is readable and engaging. I would not want any reader to confront in these pages aboriginal memory scratching its nuts and snarling alone in a hoarder's house. I want to be kind to anyone who honors me by wandering into these pages and pauses to peruse them.

Granted, then: Memory is a shape-shifter, a fabulist rather than a historian, a storyteller instead of a tape recorder, a dauber and never a photographer—but memory is all any of us have to ground ourselves in our pasts. Memory, then, is my lifeline, securing me in the experiences that have formed me. As I have demonstrated, memory is a strange gift, unreliable, porous, susceptible to influence, revision, and interpretation, to being colored by shifting attitudes to what it summons. Nevertheless, in memory we locate ourselves. Our sense of integral personhood is established there and nowhere else. Memories exist to reinforce our life narratives, to provide us with a sense of identity and a place in the world's pattern.

Memory is also the abode of the beloved dead. Without our memories of them, the dead vanish. In not remembering the dead, we forsake them in their darkness. In these true fictions, I have attempted an animation of many of those whom I have loved and lost. I hope, to some degree, they live again in these pages. They were far too vital to fade into silence without leaving an echo.

The ancient Greeks revered Memory as personified in Mnemosyne, a Titan and mother of the nine Muses. The Greeks acknowledged Mnemosyne's continued power even after they had dethroned and dismissed her Titan siblings in favor of their newer gods. The Greeks praised their gods in a series of 87 Orphic Hymns, reserving the 77th one for Mnemosyne, whom they invoked in the following lines:

> ‘Tis thine to waken from lethargic rest
> All thoughts deposited within the breast;
> And naught neglecting, vigorous to excite
> The mental eye from dark oblivion’s night.
> Come, blessed power, thy mystic’s memory wake
> To holy rites, and Lethe’s fetters break.
> --translated by Thomas Taylor, 1792

The true inventions in this collection result from a summoning of my memories, rising like vapors from Mnemosyne’s breeze-stirred pool and here encoded before they condense and sink forever in Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, its banks blanched white with crusted salt.

Mnemosyne, 1881 (or Lamp of Memory; also called La Ricordanza) --Dante Gabriel Rossetti

A NOTE TO THE READER

This is my second published memoir (See *Losing Time: AIDS Lessons in Love and Loss*, 2019). We live in an age of self-disclosure: everything in everyone's life is now deemed worthy of documentation. Photographs of one's lunch, appetizing or not, regularly surface on Facebook; pictures of a daughter's third-grade finger-painted scrawls are posted on Instagram. Oprah Winfrey's program, which featured individual human dramas, was one of the most popular ever on television. "Reality TV" records the hyped-up interactions of "real housewives." Everyday people promote themselves as celebrities. Social media pervades our culture, for better or worse, introducing us to life narratives of sometimes noble, sympathetic human beings as well as to the malign stories spun out by lying self-promoters, wackos, narcissists, conspiracy theorists, and often witless purveyors of nefarious foreign propaganda.

In this atmosphere we are called to be perspicacious in our attention to the life stories everywhere thrust upon us. Nevertheless, this ubiquity of life narratives in our culture makes for a fascinating human terrain. It follows, then, that ours is a generation where memoir has begun to outpace fiction and other literary genres in demand and popularity. I hope readers of this memoir will find it engaging while it offers affirmation to its gay audience and an expansion of understanding and tolerance among any straight readers drawn to it. Those serve as the primary reasons for my having written it.

Born in 1948, I am now approaching my mid-70s. This gay memoir chronicles an extensive period of gay history, from almost universal homosexual condemnation before 1969's Stonewall Riots through the AIDS die-off (focused

on in my memoir, *Losing Time*) into the modified but shaky and precarious tolerance we gay people are currently experiencing in America. *Inventing the Truth* sets my personal experience within the historical context of my generation. I hope readers will find this memoir astute in its observations, adroit in its images and amassing of details, at times humorous in its depiction of gay life's incongruities, and well enough written to engage them throughout their perusal of it. Whether or not readers find in this memoir a satisfaction of all these descriptors, it remains nonetheless my story, told in the truest, most honest way I know how to invent it—and told without fear.

On another matter: I received occasional blowback about the explicit descriptions of gay sexual encounters in my recent book *Losing Time* (2019). The criticism was leveled by some of my straight readers whom I know to be sophisticated and urbane, neither prudish nor easily shocked. The sexual accounts in that first memoir as well as in this one are, I contend, no more erotic or explicit than similar accounts found in many straight texts and films. I can only conclude that these readers found the frank sexuality in my first book difficult because it outlined certain homosexual practices they certainly must have been aware of but had perhaps not confronted so candidly before.

In *Losing Time* I had attempted to construct a dialectic between lust and love. Apparently I presented the matter without adequate cuing or appropriate reader preparation. I had originally preceded *Losing Time* with a note to the reader similar to this one, but I omitted it at the urging of a consensus of my gay readers for whom the note seemed more defensive than explanatory. In *Inventing the Truth*, I do not intend this note to be apologetic for the book's occasional descriptions of gay sex. But I also intend to address this matter without flinching. That said, I might

prepare a reader for the frank sexual discussions in Chapter 4: "Lust and Love." I would not want a reader skittish about gay sexual practices to wander away from the book's other chapters.

Throughout history, the straight world has molded gay discourse according to its strictures and has succeeded in forcing gay fluency into its own dialect, distorting our words and coercing our language and reining in our stories. In the face of this, gay men have had to prevaricate and edit and encode and drop hints and substitute pronouns and exercise restraint and sanction reticence and adopt duplicity. We have penned cautious and mendacious memoirs. We have projected inauthentic, self-edited, self-loathing personae. I can now write without needing the courage required of those before me who first worded gay silence. I cannot—I will not—ever speak in a borrowed voice again.

In *Inventing the Truth*, I do not suppress queer sexual languaging. In this chronicle, the fey heart words queer desire. I gift myself with the faggot-speak of a reclaimed tongue. Only 45 or so years ago, state sodomy laws in the U. S. criminalized gay sexual expression. Sexual acts acknowledged in these pages would be admissible as evidence against a gay man in a court penal trial or would have provided an excuse for confining him in a loony bin for his "psychosexual pathology." In a dozen or so countries in the world, such admissions would currently earn me the death penalty. Still. Being able here and now to write openly of gay sex—and of gay life in general—is celebratory and emancipating. This relatively recent freedom is ours for the first time in our long history. Even the Classical Greek pederasts and the uranians and inverts of early 20th-Century Paris and Berlin and New York had not this license for telling their sexual truths. I mean to take advantage of this liberating opportunity.

DRESS-UP DAYS

"You don't know me." I have just traipsed into Suzette's kitchen in one of my get-ups. I must be about five, maybe six years old. Suzette lives across the street and I like to play dress-up with her. I am wobbling along in my mother's cast-off high heels, an old graying black skirt cinched at my waist by large diaper pins with yellow plastic safety catches. I don't remember wearing a blouse, maybe just a t-shirt tarted up with tawdry necklaces and another diaper safety pin packed with religious medals. I have a champagne-colored window-sheer panel draped like a veil over my head and tossed de'gage' over one shoulder. I later got a long gypsy skirt with ribbons of shimmery rainbow colors all down it, after which I consigned the little black number to the bottom of my dress-up box. And I remember a fake leopard turban, too, though I don't remember ever wearing it. Suzette's father had asked who the new girl was when I had tottered into their kitchen. I knew enough not to reveal my identity to the questioner with the bright eye and the ironic smile.

I loved my get-ups and wore them often. Perhaps I am a master at repressing the unpleasant, but I remember only one time when I was taunted about my juvenile cross-dressing. What made this episode painful was that the jeering came from the girls I so loved to play with. There must have been four girls—Suzette, Nancy, Gloria, and my sister Mary—and then little ole anomalous me, all turned out in our finest. I think I was the smartest by far—the champagne sheer was magical. I felt like a fresh ingenue among time-worn matrons who took this dress-up business for granted.

We were sitting around a small chicken-wire cage in Suzette's side yard watching her black and white Muscovy duck with the red cancerous-looking wattles at the bridge of its black beak, the ugly grown-up version of the downy duckling, dyed pink, she had cuddled on receiving it the Easter before. I was poking a stick at the duck, trying to make it rise from its crouch and waddle over to the cement-lined puddle in the center of the cage. For some reason I wanted to see it in the mucky water. The duck was annoyed, dodging the stick and snapping at it with an outraged piping. When it refused to stand or move to the puddle, I began to jab it hard, and Suzette asked me to stop. When I continued, she started calling me a sissy and—where she got the word from I do not know—a "morphodike." This last word was news to me. The other girls immediately joined in: "Sissy! Sissy!" I remember being so outraged at this reminder of my slender attachment to their girl-community that I turned away from the duck, hoping the rejection would cease.

When it did not, I grew desperate. I tried to stand up—no easy matter in over-sized high heels that rocked and wobbled in the grass. At last I fumbled my skirt up and stepped out of the heels so I could rise. The name-calling was now a chant: "Sissy! Sissy!" I remember being furious, but even more hurt. I raised my skirt and bound it around my waist with one arm and with the other hand reached into the fly of my shorts and pulled out my penis. The chanting turned into shrieks and threats to tell. And then I started to whizz, flicking myself around and about to shower them. (I was too young then to understand the tyranny of phallic power I was exercising, but I clearly understood the problem-solvency of urine in this situation.) The resultant pandemonium startled the duck, which careened across its pen to the side farthest from us, adding its squawks to the girls' shrieks of terror and disgust. They all slid out of their

shoes and ran, skirts torrential. I picked up the stick, went to the other side of the pen, and gave that duck a vicious final jab under its wing. Then I did not know what to do, but I knew I was in for it.

That night, after supper, my eyes still bloodshot from crying during my whipping, I asked for the candy eye of a chocolate Easter rabbit my parents were dismembering for dessert. "An eye for the painter," my mother said sullenly, refusing to let go of the incident the day before when a neighbor lady phoned her to complain about my having daubed her clothesline pole with clots of bright blue paint I found in a small can in my father's garage. "No, an eye for the pissing demon of the duck pen," my father spat, his black Sicilian eyes ablaze.

I tried on a big, bright smile.

"Why is the simpleton grinning?" my father directed at my mother.

"Can't you see he's smiling to keep from crying?"

At that, I burst into tears and ran from the table. Later that evening, I emerged from my room to overhear snatches of conversation: "….the way he shrills and waves his hands about…." "He'll outgrow it." I crept back to my room, convulsed with shame.

My parents were clearly distressed about this dressing-up business and my early resistance to rigid gender conformity. It was one phase of my life they refused to document on camera, either still or moving. They also seemed averse to filming me playing with dolls, though the home movie camera caught me at it on several occasions. At the fourth birthday party for my younger sister, for example, she clapped her hands in anticipation as a large present was handed to her, but after she had unwrapped the present to reveal a dark-haired doll dressed up in pink gingham, the smile buckled into a deep frown abetted by a trembling

lower lip. Suddenly, I lunge across the picture frame to snatch that doll away from her, startling everyone. The film stops abruptly at that point.

On another occasion, the movie frame catches my sister Mary and me fighting in the background over one of her Barbies, but the camera snaps to a stop after a brief glimpse of this. I have the doll by the legs, an advantage that I'm sure allowed me to win it away from her unless a parent intervened. I played dolls for a long time in my childhood, and I played house too, decorating the chicken-wire pen of our own Easter ducks after I traded them in for a cocker spaniel puppy when my father had had enough of stepping in duck splatter every time he went into the backyard.

My parents finally came to the conclusion that I was bending boy-gender expectations too far out of whack by the time I reached first grade. I came home one day from school in early September to find my dress-up box missing from under my bed. "Who stole my clothes!" I wailed. My parents were talking together in the kitchen. They glanced at each other quickly when I entered.

"We gave them to Pearlene, Lucien." Pearlene was our praline-colored maid who arrived each morning at 8:00 from the bus stop at the end of the street. We had no idea where she lived, though we knew her mother lived with her and that her husband was at Angola State Prison serving a life sentence for having fatally knifed a man at a bar one night while drinking and throwing craps. Pearlene was confident he would be paroled in a couple of years. After all, as she explained it, he had only knifed another colored man, not a White man, and the judge would let him out early.

"Pearlene already <u>has</u> nice clothes!" I shouted. In fact, Pearlene had some very stylish dresses: though she changed into crisp blue button-down work dresses when she arrived, I remember her coming to work occasionally in bright

sundresses of a flowery print, tight in the bodice, flaring out full in the skirt below a thin belt. She wore these if she was going out after work and did not have time to go home to change. Hell, I wanted her clothes.

"Well, Pearlene is poor," my mother said. "We thought you should share with her." Actually, these people had just donated my dress-up box to the Purple Heart! Pearlene was in on the ruse because the next day she thanked me for the beautiful skirts which she was going to wear to church every Sunday.

"They're my clothes," I protested. "You give them right on back!" My mother reprimanded me for being ugly, and Pearlene cooed, "Oooh, now don't go be that mean way, sugar."

I could not stay mad at Pearlene for long. She brought me home the only comic book I ever owned, one she found on the bus one morning. My mother never bought comic books for us. She took us to the library every week or two instead. Pearlene's gift was a "Dr. Dread" comic book, depicting on its glossy cover a demented horror in a white lab coat midway down a stairway littered with skeletons and facing a rush of buff shirtless men, the man closest to the demonic doctor already skeletonizing at the point of injection with a huge hypodermic needle. This cover gave me screaming nightmares for a week at least, but I would not tell my parents where the terrors were coming from for fear they would confiscate this wondrous comic, the cover images of which were to provide me with some of my first masturbatory fantasies in the future, a fact best for me not to examine too closely.

Eventually I relented about my dress-up box, but I remember asking Pearlene's mother how Pearlene looked on Sunday mornings in the skirts I used to have. That was the

only time I ever saw Pearlene's mother startle out of her stern mask to register anything even hinting at surprise.

I was fascinated by Pearlene's mother, who, we were told, was "from the Islands," wherever that was. She was short, not very old, her eyes and mouth three straight lines across an expressionless mask of a face. I was convinced that she, like the Sisters at school, had no hair: she wore a swath of brilliant fabric tied around her head, not like the bandanna of Aunt Jemima, but a headpiece of pure elegance. I never understood a lilting dialect word this woman ever uttered.

She was what my father called a "Hoodoo." The first thing she would do before entering our house was drop a small divot of blue powder on each of our steps and blow it away, her lips moving soundlessly. She would then proceed to the back steps and repeat the process. She preferred to sit in a metal lawn chair in a shady corner of the yard under a blooming white oleander if it was warm outside and stir the air with a heart-shaped palmetto fan. Pearlene would bring her things to drink, over which she waved her hands cautiously.

When she left with Pearlene around 3:00 PM, we raced to check the corners of each room where she would occasionally leave small coins scattered or coke-bottle caps filled with rum. We never saw her do this, though she must have had to go into the house to use the bathroom. When it was cold or rainy, she sat in the kitchen listening to the radio dramas always on while Pearlene and my mother worked about the house. Pearlene explained that these coins and liquor-filled bottle caps were offerings to the "loas" and to various spirits of the house, to appease them, to divert any mischief they might be conjuring up.

One day, Pearlene's mother presented my father with two small cans of paint, one a brilliant blue, the other ruby

red, and instructed him to paint the window frames and door jambs with these powerful colors to ward off evil powers, spiteful loas, and wandering malign spirits. When my father declined, she advised him, second best, to spot a drop—a mere undetectable drop—of each color on the corners of the window sills to fend off the greatest malice, especially in a house so vulnerable to it, filled with five healthy, crowing babies and a pretty wife, enough to inspire envy in the groaning vacuity of the spirit world. My parents never followed this advice, a negligence I thought reckless.

Given my penchant for dressing-up, I had little regular interest in making-up, though I watched my mother when she sat on a cushioned low bench before the mirror of her vanity bureau and applied what she called her "allurements." I would stand right up next to her, the length of my body touching her arm.

"Wouldn't you rather go play?" my mother would ask.

"Git!" my father would say if he were in the room. I had designs on him too. I wanted to see him take off his pajamas and get dressed. I could not believe how big his penis looked when I was five years old.

If she were alone, my mother would sometimes guide me around to the left of her and sit me beside her at the bureau. "Now talk to me," she would say, "but don't fidget." I would chatter away, admiring my mother's dexterous moves among her puffs and potions. First she would rub some cream all over her face, then rub it all off again. Then came beige powder from a compact, patted on with a small frayed pad. Next came torture from a silver contraption with scissor finger-holes and rubber-lined jaws clamped onto her eyelids to curl the lashes. My mother's face would squinch up when this instrument was applied. "Don't move," she would breathe. Then came the drawing on of her lipstick, which my mother was never without and which she

refreshed often, unscrolling the pointed stick from its jet case. She wore only one color all her life, Revlon Super-Lustrous "Cherries in the Snow," a deep, muted red lightened with silver undertones. Usually she blotted it, leaving red kisses on a white tissue. Some days she would smudge a tiny bit of this lipstick on a fingertip and rub it into her cheeks a long time. "Good as a rest cure," she would say. This whole operation took maybe ten minutes, and when it was concluded, she looked the same to me, only better.

This litter on my mother's bureau looked benign, a little like my older brother's chemistry set. One Saturday morning, I sat at her bureau alone, commanding the array of bottles, potions, notions, and tubes. The blinds in my parents' bedroom had not yet been drawn; the beds were unmade. The smell of bacon and coffee and the canned laughter of a radio comedy came from the kitchen. I rubbed on the cream and rubbed it off, flicking the tissues stuck to my fingers until they let loose and floated to the floor. Then I applied the powder. Immediately I looked different, older somehow: my face was all one color and texture. The jagged pink scar on my forehead where I got stitches when I fell on the concrete steps was obliterated. Gone too was the white pucker scar above my upper lip, set there when the lid of the back hatch on the drugstore delivery motorcycle fell on me as I rummaged through the bin. The tight red stitches scar at the bridge of my nose had also disappeared, the one I got from following Pearlene too closely as she was swinging a bucket she had just emptied of its dirty mop water. My face now looked like a grown-up face—even, hard, settled—and it frightened me.

I uncapped the "Cherries in the Snow" and applied it to my lips, then immediately decided I had not colored within the lines. Red leaked below my lips; the sharp corners of my mouth were gone. My face had changed once again, this

time alarmingly: I looked all mouth, a great ragged wound. I scraped my upper teeth over my lower lip, backing them with a waxy sludge. I looked as if I had been gnawing raw liver. In a panic, I reached for gobs of tissue and started rubbing. The smear spread. It got up under my eyes. I sat still for a moment to do a little damage assessment. My image in the mirror swam in tears, but I fought them back, afraid to do any more rubbing.

And then I decided. I picked up the compact and powdered my face again. The red diminished in the dim light. With the lipstick, I painted semicircles under my eyes and two short diagonal stripes on each cheek. Then I ran a vertical line down my chin.

I went into breakfast. I thought if anyone noticed anything, I would say I was playing Indian, even though I had on my favorite cowboy shirt with the fake mother-of-pearl snap buttons and covered wagons rumbling all over it, raising little tan puffs of dust. My older brother Andy saw me first. He stared at me solemnly, then looked up at my father to learn how he should react.

"What the….!" whispered my father.

"Are you bleeding?" gasped my mother. She leapt up from the table, dropping the spoon she was zooming as an airplane to dump a cargo of Gerber plum-pap into the drooly mouth of my baby brother.

"Take them off! Take them off!" I bawled, shocked at the vehemence of their reaction to me.

"Them?"

"Cherries in the Snow."

"For goodness sake, Lucien. What possesses you?"

"A fiend," my father laughed, "like I've been telling you."

My mother ignored this and took me by the hand. My father sighed, folded the paper, and got up from the table:

"Here, let me take him." He march-stepped me into the bathroom, a firm hand on my shoulder. "Close your eyes and I'll make the cherries go away," he said. "But from now on, light on the lipstick, ok, cowboy?" He slathered camphortingly Noxema on my face to dissolve the "allurements" and my tears and any further desire to daub myself with make-up ever again.

Looking back at my early interest in dressing-up and at the loss I felt in being forced to donate my clothes to Pearlene, I am surprised that I never attempted to reassemble my dress-up box. Apparently this youthful foray into female drag was enough to satisfy me for the remainder of my days. Never again did dressing-up like a girl hold me in its swishy spell. When I look now at Helen Bedd, a 6'3" drag queen, her feet tortured into size 15 stiletto heels like one of Cinderella's stepsisters, her hair a vertiginous tease, her voice a disconcertingly deep baritone, her shaved cheeks shadowed blue-black beneath the pancake, I consider myself fortunate that I was a shimmering diva early on, that I knew the thrill and the despair of gender-fuck before descending into the everyday sunlight of the ordinary male with a penchant for khakis and button-down Oxford-cloth shirts for teaching—my "schoolmarm drag," as I called it. For parties and such, though, I do gay-up my wardrobe with flocked paisley shirts and designer jeans or leather trousers to remind me of the dress-up glory days I am relieved to have left buried deep in my past.

I do not know for certain what caused this early gender-nonconformity as manifested in my juvenile habit of cross-dressing and playing with dolls, though I suspect I engaged in these girlish pursuits because I did not want to play rough, competitive boy games and sports, preferring tamer, more creative play. I was never dissatisfied with or wanted other than the boy body I was born with, and I was exceedingly

happy later on to possess a brisk post-pubescent penis. I never rebelled against the binary rules which assigned me to one definitive gender. I would have bristled had anyone dared use other than male pronouns in referring to me, nor did I ever desire to be considered anything other than a boy. It was just that women's clothes were more colorful and creative, more flowing and dramatic than the bland khaki shorts and t-shirt drab business I was given to run around in.

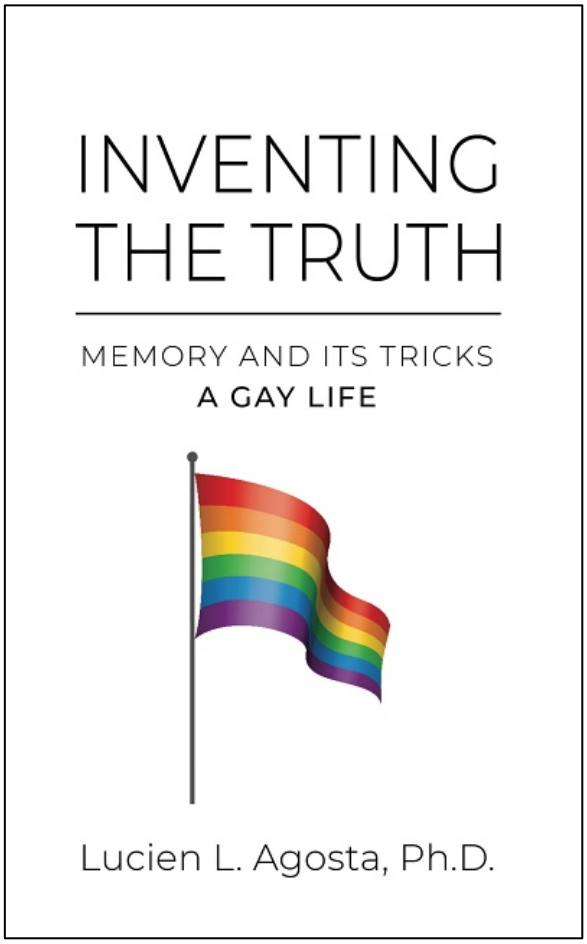
Would I have fared better in a family more accommodating to my early cross-dressing and interest in dolls? I doubt it. My family was tolerant of my temporary alternate gender expressions. Their concerns were voiced when they thought I would not hear them. They never ridiculed or belittled me over the issue.

From my perspective now, I am relieved that my parents were of a generation which had never heard of withholding a definite gender identity from a child until that child was old enough to choose one. It never dawned on my parents to create an atmosphere where I could free myself from "the restrictive prison of binary gender." I did not have "gender-creative" parents, and I am happy that they never questioned my cis-male identity, no matter to what degree I challenged it at times.

If I had manifested gender-dysphoria, been desperately unhappy, especially at puberty, with the male body and the gender identity assigned me at first glance in the delivery room, this would have been a different story. And I have never had any interest in experimenting with being "gender fluid." It just feels right to me to identify according to a fixed male gender—simpler somehow, though I am far from judging anyone whose gender identity is more complex or fluid than mine, no matter how I started out in life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucien L. Agosta (left in photo), Emeritus Professor of English Literature at California State University, Sacramento, earned his Ph.D. at the University of Texas, Austin, in 1977. In addition to publishing numerous articles in his field, he is the author of three books: HOWARD PYLE (G. K. Hall, 1987); E. B. WHITE: THE CHILDREN'S BOOKS (Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1995); and LOSING TIME: AIDS LESSONS IN LOVE AND LOSS (BookLocker Press, 2019). He appears on the DVD for the 2006 film version of CHARLOTTE'S WEB under the segment "What Makes a Classic." He received the outstanding teaching award at California State University, Sacramento, for the 1999-2000 academic year. He is married to Bud Sydenstricker (right in photo) and now resides in Palm Springs, CA.



INVENTING THE TRUTH: MEMORY AND ITS TRICKS offers a collection of essays dealing with the author's life experiences as a gay man, including his complicated process of coming out and learning how to love and how to live happily and well.

INVENTING THE TRUTH:
Memory and Its Tricks - A Gay Life
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