

The Rolling Pin

Susan Pollak

If I close my eyes, I can almost go back to my grandmother's kitchen. The fragrance of pot roast permeates the air, redolent with caramelized onions, potatoes and carrots. I can see the golden lemon sponge cake, made with nearly a dozen eggs, just emerging from its worn silver bundt pan. And I can smell the cups of steaming black tea with sugar. This was grandma Tilly's healing elixir that could soothe any pain, still the rivers of my childhood tears and my adolescent rage.

A shaft of sun on the kitchen table illuminates the sugar bowl and the flowered, blue plastic tablecloth. The light reminds me of the serenity of Vermeer's interiors and of his women, completely absorbed in their domestic tasks. I see my grandmother in her apron, her hair the purest, softest white. She is legally blind, but is holding her beloved rolling pin. Even though she can only see shadows, she is still cooking for us, baking the most delicious sweets.

To think about my grandmother, with her rolling pin and her fragrant kitchen, is to meditate on loss. She was the stable anchor in my life, mediating between an absent, depressed father and an irrational, erratic mother. Thankfully, she lived behind us so I could escape to her kitchen when I needed solace. I remember the sheer joy of climbing over the stone wall that separated our houses and bounding into her kitchen, feeling both free and deeply connected.

I was nine months pregnant with my first child when she died. Even though she was seriously ill, she was holding on, waiting for the birth of her first grandchild. We were hoping, praying, that she would be able to cradle the child in her arms. Every day felt like a race between birth and death. Tilly, a union organizer with a will of steel, seemed in control of her death.

The baby was breech, and my doctor informed me that unless it turned I would need a Caesarian section. Days before the baby's due date, my grandmother died. I spent the night weeping, mourning her loss and the fact that my children would never know her warmth and her kindness. During that night of grief, the baby turned, its head pointing down, ready to be born.

My grandmother has been dead for nearly 15 years, but when I make cookie dough with my children I use her wooden rolling pin with its chipped red handles. I exert gentle pressure, and roll the dough back and forth. I add flour, and flip it over to the other side. This tactile ritual takes me back to the warmth of her kitchen, the aromas of her cooking and the comfort of her presence. As I bake, I often tell my children stories about Grandma Tilly. The loss is still present, but now bittersweet. I miss the comfort of her world yet I am deeply grateful that she was such a presence in my life.

As I use her rolling pin and feel its texture and weight against my floured hands, I think of the hundreds of pies and cookies it helped create. As I reflect on the power and meaning that I have invested in this object, I realize that it transports me to the lost person. It is my link to the comfort and security of childhood, to my grandmother's nurturance. It anchors me in the past, to my ancestors and my roots, yet continues to create memories for the future. This object, for me, becomes timeless—it partakes in the past, present and future. It is an object to share with my family, as well as an object that creates.

Marcel Proust gives us deeper insight into the nature of the evocative object. In *Remembrance of Things Past* he describes a moment of epiphany evoked by a madeleine, a small, scalloped cake... “dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake... a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses.”¹

This humble cake set into motion Proust's masterpiece on memory and loss. His poetic understanding of the power of the senses to evoke a state of consciousness is unmatched. “But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting,

hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest, and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.”²

Evocative objects can hold the “vast structure of recollection.” This is more than poetic construction – objects can have a profoundly healing function. The British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott developed the idea of the “transitional object.” We think of the child’s teddy bear or the “blankie” as a link to the love and comfort of the mother, but Winnicott also located the capacity for tenderness and caring in this object. What is less known, but germane for the purpose of this essay, is that it is also the basis of symbolism and creativity. “In this way I feel that transitional phenomena do not pass, at least not in health. They may become a lost art, but this is part of an illness in the patient, a depression, and something equivalent to the reaction to deprivation in infancy...”³ The object can hold an unexplored world, containing within it memory, emotion and untapped creativity.

As a psychologist, I inhabit multiple worlds. Through transference and countertransference, I have a special relationship to the stories, dreams and objects of others. Working with my patients, I become both translator and participant/observer of their inner landscape. When a case deeply engages me, the objects and stories of others assume weight in my world, inhabiting my thoughts and imagination.

The Case of Mr. B.

Mr. B., a fifty-year-old married man, entered treatment (his third) to work on an abusive and traumatic relationship with his parents. He was a novelist, but had been unable to write for a number of years. During the course of treatment, his father died after a long illness. The father, a distant, tyrannical alcoholic, never let his son know that he loved him. Although Mr. B. had written a number of books, his father had never made an effort to read them.

A number of months after his father’s death, Mr. B. was visiting his mother. During the visit, they returned to the town where Mr. B. had grown up. Out of nostalgia, he looked for the bakery that made his favorite treat, a thin cake covered with chocolate and vanilla frosting and called a “half-moon.” One of his fondest childhood memories

was of his father surprising the family with a box of these cookies. Remarkably, the bakery was still in business, and Mr. B. bought a box of half-moons for himself and his children. Because he had grown up in difficult times and money was tight, his father routinely bought day-old cookies, which were often broken and stale. Mr. B had never tasted the cookies either fresh or whole.

To his taste buds, there was something wrong about the moist, intact cakes. He saved them, waiting for them to become stale. After a few days, the texture was “right”—the frosting hard, the cake dry – and he could savor and re-create the lost tastes of his childhood.

Never underestimate the power of an evocative object. The incident with the cookie—the finding of a lost object and sharing it with his children, gave him access into the “vast structure of recollection.” Entering this forgotten world of smell and taste allowed him access to new memories. Some symbolic essence of childhood had been recovered. As Mr. B. grieved, he was able to recover positive feelings about the father that had eluded him for the two years of our treatment. For months after the death he had experienced a profound, deep terror. He had recurrent nightmares where he would look for his father in vain, searching in attics and basements, only to find the house in ruins, the ground littered with shards of glass and shattered bricks.

The re-finding of the cookie corresponded to a turning point in Mr. B’s grief. This sweet was a concrete and positive link to his past, an evocative object that was both sustaining and stabilizing. Mr. B. was able to recall acts of generosity and to develop a deeper understanding of his father’s need to live in a drunken haze. He was able to tell his children stories about their grandfather. The cookie had become a gateway, connecting him to “enduring and faithful” memories. It became a way to integrate what was positive and “sweet” about the father. Slowly, with hesitation, Mr. B. began to write again, beginning a novel about childhood.

Toward the end of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust makes a connection that Winnicott would wholeheartedly endorse. “Ideas come to us as the successors to griefs, and

griefs, at the moment when they change into ideas, lose some part of their power to injure our heart.”⁴ Proust’s stymied protagonist is able to give up his fruitless search for his lost mother, which frees him to act. As his pain is transformed into ideas and images, he begins to write.

My patient experienced a parallel process. When he had mourned, remembered, and worked through all that he had not received from his father, his rage and paralysis subsided and he was able to write again. Winnicott would agree that a return to health is also a return to creativity. The evocative object holds more than memory, it holds healing potential as well. We create our objects and are inspired by them. As I found with my rolling pin, and my patient with his cookie, the evocative object is transitional in the fullest sense of the word—it can bring together generations, anchor memory and feeling, and evoke attachments which have long been forgotten.

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Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past: Swann's Way*, C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, trans., New York: Vintage Books, 1981, vol 1, pp. 48-51.

I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory - this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it *was* me...

And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it; perhaps because I had so often seen such things in the meantime, without tasting them, on the trays in pastry-cooks' windows, that their image had dissociated itself from those Combray days to take its place among others more recent; perhaps because of those memories, so long abandoned and put out of mind, nothing now survived, everything was scattered; the shapes of things, including that of the little scallop-shell of pastry, so richly sensual under its severe, religious folds, were either obliterated or had been so long dormant as to have lost the power of expansion which would have allowed them to resume their place in my consciousness. But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

¹ M. Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), vol 1, p. 48.

² Proust, *Ibid.*, p. 51

³ D.W. Winnicott, "The Fate of the Transitional Object," in *Psychoanalytic Explorations*, ed by Claire Winnicott, Ray Sherpherd, Madeleine Davis, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) p. 58.

⁴ Proust, *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 944.