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Consideration of /'mem(ə)rē/: A Solo Performance Project

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CONSIDERATION OF /'mem(ə)rē/: A SOLO PERFORMANCE PROJECT

by

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DEDICATION

To my wonderful family for helping me on this journey. To the many friends who listened patiently while I worked out the nature of this piece and the faculty who helped me shape it. Finally to Alex Wade, for being the person I can always go to for support, tough love, and boundless encouragement. Thank you.

ABSTRACT

On February 18, 2018, I performed a solo show in conjunction with my MFA cohort. This solo show, titled /'mem(ə)rē/, was written and produced by myself and dealt with a woman's search through her memories to find something she's been missing. Over the course of this paper, I discuss the genesis of the central theme, the evolution of each frame, as well as the success and failures of the piece during performance. I conclude by determining whether or not a re-mounting of this work would be beneficial in the future and examining what I learned in the process of creating the piece.

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CONSIDERATION OF /'mem(ə)rē/: A SOLO PERFORMANCE PROJECT

Introduction

On February 18, 2018, eight Master's of Fine Arts actors performed 15-minute solo shows we had written and produced over the course of the fall semester. By combining my life experiences with the life of a fictional character, I created a solo show titled /'mem(ə)rē/ which dealt with a woman's investigation of key moments in her past through the papers she kept. As I re-examine how the idea began, my writing process, the framework of the piece, and the production of the show, I will determine what the next steps are for the project and how it impacts my trajectory as an artist.

How The Idea Began

It started one night when I was cleaning out. I'd finally gotten all of my stuff out of the storage unit in Texas where I'd kept it while I was away in California trying to figure out who I was after my divorce. While also training for a new career. While falling in love with someone new. I did a lot in the time my boxes and an old couch and my grandmother's bedroom furniture sat patiently waiting in the 5'x10' storage unit a mile from the townhome I'd shared with my former spouse. I'd gone to look at it a few times when I made the journey back to Dallas for holidays; I wanted to make sure it was all still there, untouched and unhurt. I didn't want it to feel neglected.

When I piled up the boxes and furniture that made it through the pre-move clean-out, my whole physical life fit in the back of my car and a U-haul trailer. My best friend and I drove it from Arlington, TX to Columbia, SC and moved it into the little house I was renting for my second year of grad school. I was so excited to have my life in one place. Every box was at once a surprise (packing up the townhome after my ex-husband moved out is and was a blur) and a comfort – my silverware and serving dishes, notes from my time with the American Conservatory Theatre, pictures from college, and everything I couldn't and didn't take to California all waiting for me to take them out of their newspaper wrapping and give them life again. I realized that I had changed a lot in the years since I'd stowed it all away; some things didn't fit me anymore. So the second clean-out began. And that's how I found the box.

I've always been a person who holds on to sentimental pieces of paper. It's a lesson I learned from my mom. When my siblings and I were little, we each had a large tupperware box that lived in our rooms called our "special" box. Whenever we would get birthday cards or win certificates or draw pictures, Mom would tell us we should keep it in our special box. So we accumulated paper trails of our childhood and then had to figure out what to do with them when Mom cleaned out our rooms when we graduated college. I still do it. I have lots of little boxes stashed in my closet and on shelves and in drawers with random collections of artifacts from my life. When I moved into the house in Rosewood at the beginning of my second year of my MFA, I decided that some of the boxes needed to go and the others needed to be condensed and organized. New, pretty boxes were purchased from Michael's and I began.

I was doing pretty well until I got to the Ben Box. I'd cleaned it off and restacked it when I'd visited the unit on holiday trips. I'd shuffled it around when I cleaned out the storage unit before moving. I just didn't ever look in it. Looking through it would be painful and I wanted to avoid that. But the night of the second clean-out, I decided to be brave and open the box. Here's some of what was inside: pictures of my ex-husband and me from high school, our wedding album, a metal Easter lily he'd made me, a CD of songs we liked, notes we'd written each other, and our marriage certificate. When I picked up the marriage certificate, I *felt* our marriage from beginning to end. I viscerally remembered the feeling of being married, being happy, feeling it fall apart, and end. The person I was then and the person I was now slammed into each other. All in the seconds it took to pick up the page and recognize what it was. I cried a long time. Then I started the process of letting go of some momentos of that part of my life.

I don't remember when exactly, but I remember thinking back on that night a few days later and turning over the idea of writing my solo show about paper. About how our lives exist in the paper around us. It wasn't clear to me then how the show would take shape or what it was I really wanted to say, but holding my marriage certificate in my hand had opened up the idea for me and I was excited about it.

Discussion of Structure

The script is structured as eleven frames. The framework mimics how I perceive memory to work: it exists in flashes of color and sound, isn't necessarily linear, and is shaped by who we are in the current moment. This suggested a more cinematic approach to telling the story, using "Frames" in lieu of "Scenes" to mark on the page how the story

progressed forward. However, discovering this framework and how it communicated the theme of the play on a deeper level took some trial and error.

At the beginning of the writing process, I struggled with how to fuse together the seemingly disparate pieces of writing I had done around the idea of paper as a vehicle for memory. I wanted them to “make sense” in a linear way because that was the type of structure I was most familiar with as an actor. I attempted to restructure my smaller sections of writing into something resembling a more traditional script: the Woman didn’t change age or perspective, it all took place in a “realistic” setting, and it included dialogue between multiple characters. This structure felt constricting and didn’t serve the larger theme of the story. I thought about plays that dealt with memory, such as *The Glass Menagerie* and *M. Butterfly*. The way the narrator functioned in each of those plays got me thinking about how a character can move in and out of the action of the play while also thinking critically about her memories. Re-evaluating the role of the Woman in her own story led me to re-think the type of structure I could use to frame the story and themes.

In discovering the structure that would work best for my piece, I was inspired by the production of *Balance* I worked on my first year of graduate school. This show, written by Robyn Hunt and directed and produced by Steven Pearson, was my first experience performing a script that was not written linearly and used different genres and styles of writing to communicate the larger ideas of the play to the audience. It was a mosaic of movement, music, contemporary writing, and text from Anton Chekhov’s play *Three Sisters*. The play operated with the expectation that the audience is intelligent, both in the cerebral and emotional sense, and that because it is intelligent, it would be able to

follow the changes of time, space, and style, while also putting the pieces together in a way that spoke to each audience member uniquely. *Balance* had central story, but what each audience member experienced and took away from the performance was very personal. My solo show had pieces of writing that seemed unconnected, except that paper was link between them, but when I made a few changes to the perspective of some sections of writing and trusted that the audience would follow the Woman on her journey, I found a structure that lent itself beautifully to telling a story about memory. By considering my experience in *Balance* and choosing to allow the structure of that piece to inform the framework for my show, the structure of /'mem(ə)rē/ came into being.

Discussion of Frames

Building on my central idea and the discovery of the cinematic, collage-style framework, I started to put my pieces of text into their frames. However, because of the abstract nature of the piece, looking closely at each frame is beneficial for understanding how they work together and how effectively they worked in the overall story. The full, final draft of the script is available at the end for further clarity.

Frame 1:

While it's not stated or performed explicitly for the audience, this scene introduces the audience to the Woman's central conflict. She is struggling with who she is and where she's going, so she goes looking through her past to try to find what she's missing.

There are objects in the box that foreshadow the following action and also objects that do not. I felt like this was important to the character because there would be pieces of

paper that wouldn't trigger things sifted in with the pieces of paper that would lead her to where she needed to go. I, as the actor, wanted the opening moment to be as truthful as possible to the moment that started this idea, so I included a birthday card from my mom, movie ticket stubs, a matchbook from a bar where I spent time with my boyfriend when we first got to know each other, and more. The box needed to feel full for me as the actor, as well as the audience.

Frame 2:

Frame 2 is written in the script as "PROJECTION(?): Is it more difficult to read from a screen?". In the original conception of the piece, I thought that projections would be an interesting use of mixed media in the story. However as I moved closer and closer to the actual performance, I decided that the use of projections/digital media was counter to the narrative I had created about the immediacy and necessity of tangible paper. Choosing to not use projections also made things simpler in terms of creating a set and cues for the performance.

Something that helped me make the decision to cut the projections was the text of Frame 2. The text is an excerpt from "Screen vs. Paper: What is the Difference for Reading and Learning" by Caroline Myrberg and Ninna Wyberg. I chose to include an academic discussion of paper as the first spoken text of the piece because I enjoyed the contrast of the intellectual tone of the excerpt to the more sentimental beginning.

While the audience is seeing a memory of the Woman giving a lecture which includes a slide show presentation, there isn't a presentation projected onstage. Through the use of gesture and physical props, this Frame further establishes the convention of

memory. Physical touch creates a stronger memory than simply seeing something, so the objects in the memory that the Woman would have touched at the moment the memory was created – the podium, the slide show clicker – are present in the re-creation of the memory, while the presentation on the screen behind her is not.

The set became really important for me, not only as a physical place for the Woman to land with her memories, but also in what it communicated to the audience. I decided that everything onstage needed to reinforce the paper theme. What that translated to was that I decoupaged script pages, magazine pages, academic articles, etc. onto a podium, a table, and a chair. I'm happy to say they turned out beautifully. All of my props were made out of paper as well, with the exception of the coffee cup. The plan was that I would also decoupage it, but I ran out of time.

What is not spelled out for the audience is that the partial lecture they are hearing is part of the Woman's job as a university lecturer. She teaches in the education department and is curious about the efficacy of the current trend in using digital media as a teaching tool. Creating a specific backstory for the Woman was an important part of my process as the actor for the show. Backstory is part of my process whenever I begin working on a character, and I applied the same idea to the Woman, even though I was the author and felt I had a clear understanding of the character. I found, however, that there were things I didn't discover about her until I approached her as an actor. I didn't expect to have that experience in the solo show project.

This piece of text illuminates a possible reason for why the Woman connects memory to tangible paper, as well as asks the audience to question how they engage with

tangible paper vs. digital media. The audience doesn't hear the Woman's final thoughts on whether or not paper is more effective as a teaching tool, which was intentional and an invitation for them to engage their own opinions in what they were seeing and hearing.

Frame 3:

The moment between Frame 2 and Frame 3 was discovered late in the rehearsal process. I had connected all of the frames on paper, but needed to figure out how to convey the path memory takes in physical space. My solo show advisor, Prof. Robyn Hunt, worked with me on possible solutions, with the final product being the Woman breaking from the scene before, running in a sweeping curve around the podium, and landing in a new place to begin the first list of paper. The simplicity of the movement, as well as how it lent itself to the physicalization of the non-linear path between neurons, appealed to me and worked well within the world of the piece. It was also a clear contrast between the more direct way the Woman moved from the box of memories into Frame 2.

Frame 3 is titled "A Short List of Paper", which is ironic since it is the longest of the three list sections. The lists are an exploration of how the brain works. The Woman realizes at the end of Frame 2 that the information in the lecture isn't the memory or feeling she is looking for and her brain begins the process of re-organizing information in order to land on a new memory that might have what she needs. The list serves as the neural pathway between Frame 2 and Frame 4.

The structure of this list also serves to get the audience to think about the different types of things around them that are made of paper, but that don't have the word "paper" in the name, for example "world globes", "coffee filters", "lease agreements". The first

half of the list includes object names that are two words, then shifts to object names that are one word. The rhythmic build of this pulls the expectation of the audience into the next scene.

In the original script, I included stage directions for possible physical action during the recitation of the list. The idea of folding paper into an origami shape was interesting to me because it would have been an absurd tonal shift from Frame 2's more realistic physicality, and because I've learned in my graduate training that giving an actor a physical task to complete onstage helps the actor to relax and be present. I was concerned about my ability to remember the list of loosely connected objects and thought that a physical task such as folding origami or folding a piece of paper to be cut into a snowflake would allow me to relax and successfully deliver the list. However, upon exploration during rehearsals, I found that the physical task muddled the clarity of the list and didn't help communicate the idea of the pathway between thoughts. The frame became about the action and not the list. Instead, I discovered that traveling in a curved path, landing in a new position, and having a strong focal point outside of the audience while speaking was more clear.

Frame 4:

Frame 4 is titled "A Legal Pad". This was one of the last pieces I wrote for the show. I began by thinking about examples of meaningful paper from my own life. During our solo show writing and brainstorming class, I'd written a lovely piece about my father which began with a memory of him drawing a picture for me with a blue ball point pen on a torn envelope. My dad and I aren't close now, so the piece used memory to explore

how we remember people and whether or not we really know the people we love. I also thought about my mom's habit of writing huge lists on legal pads, specifically the shape of her handwriting on the yellow pages.

The text that is included in Frame 4 is a fictionalized moment in time in which the Woman remembers losing her father at 25. The writing is a cross between real memories of mine, such as my mother's handwriting and how she makes lists, and fictional re-imagining of my father. I wanted to sift through my feelings about my father leaving my family, but I was concerned about the entire show becoming too personal. Re-imagining his leaving into the father passing away in this frame was a safe way for me to examine my feelings about my parents, both positive and negative, through the character. It became a piece about trying to put into words the shock waves people make in your life, even after they're gone.

As the actor, I had a difficult time with this frame in rehearsal. There needed to be a clear character change from Frame 2, where the Woman was her current age, but I didn't want to be heavy handed in playing her "younger". This frame also needed a strong sense of the other person, the Woman's mother, without having her appear onstage. The coffee cup became an effective vehicle for leading the audience to believe the mother was in the scene, but I struggled with maintaining a consistent "other" to ask questions and off of which to bounce ideas. Fortunately, I had an excellent solo show advisor who worked this piece with me and we worked together to create a clear story for this frame.

Frame 5:

Frame 5 is another list of paper, titled “A Shorter List of Paper”. It is, in fact, shorter than the first list and changes the structure of the list by naming objects made of paper that include the word “paper” as the second word in the name, such as “wrapping paper”, “toilet paper”, and “construction paper”. This frame continued to play with the idea of physicalizing neural pathways in that instead of repeating the path from before, the Woman steps up on top of the table to recite the list then jumps down behind the table after the list is complete, leading the audience directly into the next frame.

Frame 6:

Frame 6 was one of the first pieces I wrote for the show. It is titled: “The Similarities and Differences Between a Marriage Certificate and a Divorce Decree”. This piece is the only one in the play that is completely non-fiction and from my own life. In other pieces, I’d blended my memories and experiences with fiction to create memories for the Woman that were hers. However, the description of the marriage certificate and divorce decree were so strongly tied to the reality of my own life that I didn’t want to pollute the memory by adding fiction. As a writer and actor, I wanted to challenge myself to be personally vulnerable with the audience in a way that I hadn’t done before, by sharing truthful experience with them directly and without the filter of fiction.

While it was my favorite frame in the piece, it wasn’t originally written for */’mem(ə)rē/*. In its first incarnation, I wrote the description of the marriage certificate as an exercise in class. I only wrote the first paragraph to share with my cohort, but as I discovered more and more layers in the idea of paper and its significance, I decided to

expand the marriage certificate to include the actual ceremony and the “statistics” of the day. The slow reveal of what type of paper I was describing was exciting for me, and it kept the text from veering into the sentimental by making it about the ceremony and how I felt about it. That model also served the second section of the text: the divorce decree. By setting them against each other, I hoped the audience would absorb the similarities of the pieces of paper while understanding the emotional and experiential differences.

In rehearsal of this piece, we explored many different ways to stage this frame. The original stage directions at the top of the frame said: “*Lights shift, clinical white, fluorescent. WOMAN in a green dress holding large brown bag with papers in it. She presents paper out of the bag to the audience as if submitting evidence*”. I wanted to replicate the feel of a county court room as much as possible in the beginning, but eventually decided that approaching the text with that setting in mind showed my hand too early: it made the piece about my feelings about what happened. I didn’t want to take that stance. The piece was really about opening my experience to the audience with as much simplicity and grace as possible. The next idea was setting it in an art gallery and the Woman was curating the pieces and trying to decide which one to keep. This was an appealing idea because it gave me as the actor something more tangible to try to get from the audience in the direct address. However, this idea was also cut because I felt that it over-complicated the message again. What I realized, and how we staged it eventually, was that simplicity was the best vehicle for the text in this piece. I wanted to simply talk to the audience and not layer any additional meaning onto the words. That way they could listen and respond to what authentically resonated with them instead of waiting for me to show them what type of response I wanted from them.

Frame 7:

Frame 7, “Fortune Cookies”, was a departure from the rest of the structure of the play in that it is not scripted at all. In composing the piece, I knew I needed something after Frame 6 to serve as a palate cleanser for the audience, a breath of humor after the most serious section of the play. I borrowed the idea of a truly unscripted moment from Dada-ism and it became one of my favorite parts of the piece. I as the actor needed Frame 7 to laugh with the audience after feeling as vulnerable and exposed as I had to be during Frame 6, and I think the feeling was mutual.

What was particularly enjoyable about this frame was that no one knew what each fortune cookie would say until it was opened and the Woman read it aloud. Sometimes the fortune would be tonally in line with the frame before and the Woman could share the echo of what they had all just learned about her. Sometimes the fortune would be completely ridiculous and we would all laugh together. This frame worked beautifully with the frame before it because it deepened the intimacy that had been built through vulnerable direct address by encouraging the audience to engage in a moment of spontaneity and laughter.

Frame 8:

Frame 8, “The Importance of a Hand Written Thank You Note – From the Emily Post Institute”, was another frame in which I originally had included a projection with the full title of the frame. I thought that a projection would make it more clear for the audience that we had shifted away from a more personal memory into another more intellectual thought the Woman had about paper. However, in working this frame during

rehearsal and deciding to cut the earlier projection, I changed the context of this frame to be another personal memory so the projection was no longer necessary.

This frame is the only frame in the piece that I felt, in hindsight, didn't work in performance. It's the only frame in which the Woman fully changes into someone else – her grandmother reading the Emily Post book to her as a child – and that character shift got lost. The problem wasn't apparent to the audience, who in reviews of the performance made connections between this frame and the others, but as the actor, it felt like a departure from the relationship that was being built between the Woman and the audience. Another issue with this frame was the focus: whether it was direct address or to a fictional character wasn't clear and it put the audience in an awkward position of not knowing if it was supposed to be the recipients of this information.

Frame 9:

Frame 9 is the final list frame, titled “An Even Shorter List of Paper”. It is, indeed, the shortest list and changes the format of the lists again. Each paper object has a two-word name, similar to the list in Frame 5, but it begins with “paper” instead of ending with it. For example, “paper towels”, “paper napkins”, and “paper dolls”. Also the physical life of this frame is the simplest, with just a few steps from the end of Frame 8 to the beginning of the list in Frame 9.

Frame 10:

While the idea of paper was the start of this specific piece, this frame had been in my head since the summer before we began writing potential solo show threads. I had no idea how it would be used, or if it could be used after I'd written a few smaller pieces, but

the image of a girl reading a love letter and a shower of stars raining down on her was stuck in my head. Once I realized that I wanted to create a piece about memory and searching for something that had been lost, this image was one of the first I wrote down for this show.

In this frame, the audience gets to remember with the Woman how it felt to be in love for the first time and to have that love returned. And through the entire journey her mind has taken, the audience gets to realize with her that this is what she has been searching for: love without fear of it ending. Love that is simple and straightforward and reciprocated. While it may not be attainable for her after everything she's been through, the Woman needed to remember what it felt like so that she could find the courage to try to love again.

Something I am particularly proud of is the stars dropping. I had no idea how to make that happen in the Center for Performance Experiment, but with help from Steve Pearson, I was able to build and hang a box in one of the overhead trusses. The box tipped over and dropped stars when someone pulled a string from the tech booth. It took a lot of trial and error, and a lot of cleaning up glitter and the 1000 stars I'd cut out and painted, but the final effect was really beautiful. It gave me a lot of confidence in my ability to create my own technical effects, which is really helpful as an artist in the first years of my career. I have faith in myself as someone who can create their own work, as an actor and producer/director.

Frame 11:

This frame wasn't written into the original script, but in later drafts, I felt that there needed to be a clearer ending. I wanted to make sure the audience put all of the pieces together. It was also important to me that the audience got to experience the full journey the Woman went through in the moment it took to pull the note from the box.

Discussion of Performances

The performances of my solo show went very well overall. Of all of my performances at USC, performing my solo show created the most nerves I have felt pre-show. My show was last the first night, because of the star drop and subsequent clean-up, and this position in the line-up contributed to my nervousness. I enjoyed watching half of the MFA performances, then went backstage to wait through three more performances before it was my time.

In hindsight, what made it feel the most nerve-racking was the nature of the piece. I'd created a piece that was incredibly vulnerable, personal, and challenging in terms of the overarching narrative. I wanted the audience to go with the Woman on her journey and connect the dots between her memories. This put a lot of pressure on me as the actor because I was aware of the stakes that the writer had created in a way that I hadn't felt in other scripts. Playing women in other shows allowed me to keep a piece of myself away from the gaze of the audience – I could give over to what the character wanted and not have to think as myself. However, in /'mem(ə)rē/, so much of it was personal and true to my life that I wasn't able to fully step out of myself and become the character; she was me in many ways. My nervousness didn't keep me from being able to

complete the show. Once I got through the first list section, I felt more in control of the performance. By the time I got to Frame 6, I felt very relaxed and was able to engage with the audience in an authentic way.

While many of the components of the performance went very well, I struggled with each of the list sections in every performance. Fortunately, I was able to recover each time and keep going, but I wasn't successful in saying the full lists. In contrast, the star box worked every time and I was very grateful for the technical crew who made sure that the music started and the stars dropped on time every performance. The amount of stars that dropped was inconsistent, but at least half dropped each time, which was fine with me. Overall, I was very happy with how the performances went and felt very proud of the piece I'd created.

Where do I want to go next with this project?

While I am delighted with the reception my solo show received and with my ability to write and perform a piece that was challenging in terms of composition and vulnerability, there are some aspects of it that I would change in future productions. First, The lists proved to be very difficult to manage in performance due to my nerves. Frame 3 in particular suffered in performance because I hadn't settled in to the performance yet and was very aware of the eyes of the audience on me. While rehearsing these lists in the future, I would like to re-introduce the idea of having a physical task for the actor. The action of the physical task would help ground the actor and enable them to feel free of the pressure of the audience. Second, in future iterations of this piece, I would re-work Frame 8. The perspective of the text needs more thought and clarification if it were to be

included in another draft of the script. Possible solutions for this could be the use of a voice-over recording of the text while the Woman writes a thank you note, more specific use of costume to suggest that the Woman has shifted perspective to another person, or a projection of the text written by hand on a screen behind the Woman as she talks about what she learned from her grandmother. This was one of the weakest sections of the piece, so it would need considerable re-working to feel like it really belonged in the Woman's overall journey. Another possible solution for Frame 8 would be to only use the first paragraph of the text, which focuses on why handwriting is meaningful, and read paragraphs from other manners gurus about their takes on handwritten notes. This might lead more cohesively into Frame 10's focus on the love letter. Finally, Frame 4 would benefit from further exploration in rehearsal in order to clarify who the Woman is talking to, communicate the overall setting of that frame, and feel more relaxed and authentic for the audience. The theatrical conventions in this frame, using the prop to suggest interaction with another person and speaking a monologue to a character who is not actually present, are devices that could work more effectively if I'd spent more time exploring in rehearsal. I think I got focused on the end product too soon with this frame and didn't spend enough time feeling out all of the options that were available to me in telling this part of the story.

While I'm not sure that remounting /'mem(ə)rē/ is something that I want to pursue, ripples from my solo show have already appeared in other work I've done since last February. The exploration of the physical life of thoughts and abstract use of the body made its way into my performance of Stephano in *The Tempest* with the Warehouse Theatre, as well as in exercises I've taught to students as a teaching artist last fall and this

spring. The lessons I learned about creative self-production and minimal set design served me very well in the production of *Eleemosynary* I directed in November. With no budget, I was able to use books and a single platform to convey multiple locations in three women's memories. I also used the movement work I'd discovered to map out how their memories overlapped each other in an abstract way.

Conclusion

The solo show project was an incredible opportunity to dive into a creative genre that I hadn't experienced before. Over the course of a semester and the summer preceding it, I was able to uncover my unique perspective as a writer, develop my ability to rehearse and perform a challenging piece of theatre, and learn new skills in set construction, creative problem solving, and stage craft. /'mem(ə)rē/ is a piece that will stay with me for the rest of my career as an artist and will continue to inform the way I see possible projects. It also left me feeling encouraged about my ability to create my own work in a way that is authentic to my experience and passion.

/ˈmem(ə)rē/ FULL SCRIPT

Frame #1

(Lights up on WOMAN sorting through a box of papers and momentos, organizing into piles to keep or throw away)

Frame #2: Is It More Difficult to Read From a Screen?

(Lights shift to WOMAN at podium, with projection clicker)

Excerpt from “Screen vs. Paper: What is the Difference for Reading and Learning?” by Caroline Myrberg and Ninna Wyberg

Kretzschmar et. Al did a study in 2013 that compared reading effort on three different media: a paper page, an e-reader, and a tablet computer. They studied eye movement, brain activity and reading speed. The participants also answered a few questions to determine reading comprehension. The interesting thing was that all participants said that they preferred reading on paper, even though the study found no support for it being more effortful to read on digital media. On the contrary, the older participants read both faster and with less effort on the tablet computer, due to the back lighting giving a better contrast, and because of this being better for older eyes.

But why did all the participants still prefer to read on paper? The authors suggest that it is more about people’s attitude towards the digital media than the actual reading experience: ‘The present findings thereby suggest that the skepticism towards digital reading media...may reflect a general cultural attitude towards reading in this manner rather than a measureable cognitive effort during reading’.

A study was undertaken in 2013 with tenth-graders in Norway, where the students were divided into two groups. One group read two texts (1,400 – 2,000 words) in print and the other group read the same texts as a PDF on a computer screen. In the reading comprehension test that was administered, the students who read on paper scored significantly better than those who read the texts digitally. It was easier for those who read on paper to remember what they had read. Mangen et al. says that this is because

papers gives spatio-temporal markers while you read. Touching paper and turning pages aids the memory, making it easier to remember where you read something. Having to scroll on the computer screen makes remembering more difficult.

Frame #3: A Short List of Paper

(WOMAN runs in a circle around the podium, landing behind the table and chairs before beginning the list)

World globes

Coffee filters

Lease agreements

College diplomas

Lamp shades

Death certificates

Birth certificates

Grocery bags

Lunch bags

Tea bags

User manuals

Speeding tickets

Medical charts

Bandages

Calendars

Cardboard

Stamps

Envelopes

Coupons

Checks

Bills

Posters

Books

Frame #4: A Legal Pad

(Lights shift, blues and pale yellows, suggesting that time of night when night is on the edge of being day. WOMAN sits in chair and retrieves legal pad and coffee cup from one of the boxes downstage of the chair. She begins to silently read through the notes on the pad.)

Oh, god... Yeah, I'm OK. I couldn't sleep. I just couldn't get comfortable and my brain wouldn't stop. No, the bed is fine. I just... Yeah, that would be great. Thanks. *(moves cup across table)*

I don't know... around 12 I guess. What time is it?... Shit. Shit. Do you think I should call in? They understand, right?

Thanks. *(moves coffee cup back to her side of the table)* What are you doing up?... No, I'm OK. Really. I just... um...

It's a legal pad. I couldn't sleep and I wanted to do something, you know, to... I don't know... feel productive. So I came down here to, fuck, honestly I don't know what I was going to do, probably clean something, and I found this. There's his handwriting all over it and I... I've just been sitting here holding it. For hours, apparently.

It's a list. Pages and pages of lists. Lists that God Himself couldn't complete. *(flips through pages carefully)* And budgets. I don't know why he made so many budgets. He wrote budgets years into the future! We never stuck to them! I can just see him sitting here, scribbling list after list of what needs to get accomplished over the weekend or a holiday or any time he had off. Maybe he was trying to take control of something or... but... I do it too. Make lists and budgets and use legal pads. I like white better, I never really liked how blue pen looked on yellow paper, but I do like legal pads. I am my father's daughter.

I can't put it down. I've tried, it'll still be there in the morning, but I'm afraid it'll disappear... He's disappearing. Every time I come back here, there's less of him. It's not wrong, I get it. We have to move on, but... I'm mad. That feels ridiculous to say out loud, but I am. I'm mad at him. He's supposed to be here. He's supposed to be here to tell me

what to do and how to do it and fuss about making sure my tires are aired up and do I have groceries and am I safe and he's not. He's not here anymore. And I'm mad...

Actually that is comforting. It's better than being sad all the time, right? At least when I'm angry, I feel like I'm not wallowing...

But then I feel like it's not fair. He didn't die on purpose. It's not like he wanted to. So it feels stupid and mean to be mad at him. Then I'm mad at me. So it's just this damn cycle that keeps me up all night.

Can I keep this? I've got other stuff to remember him, I've got pictures and his sweatshirt and I love them, but seeing his handwriting...

I'm going to call work. I love you, Mom.

Frame #5: A Shorter List of Paper

(WOMAN climbs up and stands on the table, then says the list)

Wrapping paper

Toilet paper

Construction paper

Tracing paper

Tissue paper

Newspaper

Butcher paper

Parchment paper

Copy paper

Wax paper

Notebook paper

Graph paper

Wallpaper

Frame #6: The Similarities and Differences Between a Marriage Certificate and a Divorce Decree

(WOMAN jumps down behind the table and pulls the first piece of plain white paper from secret pocket 1 on the table. The following frame is delivered direct address.)

Heavy ivory paper. Lightly textured. Green and gold fillagree scrollwork around the edges and sweeping through the spaces between the decree and the signature lines, instructions for who should sign where neatly printed in plain black letters. The title and the county were also in black, but it was in Olde English – I thought it was kind of tacky after the fact. But I guess there's a level of ceremony and grandeur that's expected in its case. A proud proclamation.

Our names scribbled in blue pen? Or maybe it was black? No it was blue. That's how you have to sign legal documents, in blue pen, so that there's a clear distinction between the original and the copy. It was smaller than I expected – somewhere between 5x7 and 8x10. You would have to have a custom frame made for it if you wanted to hang it on the wall. You couldn't go to Michael's and grab a brown wooden frame and throw it on you wall between work and dinner. You'd have to go in and talk to the person in the frame department and choose a custom frame. Not that I did that. I didn't want to hang it on the wall, it was bad luck or something. I don't know why.

It takes two people to get a marriage certificate. At least it did when we went. We insisted on going together. Two people to get the one page to be signed after we'd stood in front of our family and friends and ceremonially married each other. After the guests moved on to the cocktail party, we stayed behind with our wedding parties and families and signed the certificate. A marriage is not legal until you sign the certificate and have a state-recognized third party also sign it.

One Page

Three Signatures

Two Parties Present

One Justice of the Peace

250 Witnesses

(WOMAN sets down the first paper and retrieves the second plain white page from secret pocket 2 of the table.)

Plain white paper. 8.5x11 inches. Plain black ink. No interesting type face, just cleanly organized legalese. The parties names in all caps each time it's mentioned. You have to be very careful to make sure everything is spelled correctly, names, dates, addresses, etc. because if it's not spelled correctly, the court won't accept it and all of the lonely hours entering information into a free state-run online legal document creator will have been for nothing and you'll have wished you'd spent the money on an attorney.

Small spaces at the bottom of each page for each party to initial their understanding of whatever was written on the previous page before moving on to the next set of questions and guidelines for dissolving a marriage. Our initials and names carefully signed in blue ink on three copies: one for him, one for me, and one for the court.

Because we had no joint property of any worth, we elected not to involve legal counsel. I elected not to involve legal counsel – he elected not to be involved in the process of ending our marriage beyond signing the necessary documents. So when I went to the court house to file the five page document and then stand in front of a stranger and ask him to end my marriage, I was alone. I was too ashamed to ask anyone to come with me. The judge was a very nice man who asked me if I was sure this is what we wanted. As I was the only one there, I had to answer for both of us and say yes, we were sure. He signed all three copies in blue pen, stamped the date on each, and handed two of them back to me for our records. A divorce is not legal until a state-recognized third party says it is.

Five Pages

Three Signatures

One Party Present

One Judge

No Witnesses

Frame #7: Fortune Cookies

(WOMAN dives under table and re-emerges with a box in hand. She sits on top of the table, opens the box to reveal it is full of fortune cookies. She opens 5 of them, reading each of fortune to the audience.)

Frame #8: The Importance of a Hand Written Thank You Note – From The Emily Post Institute

(WOMAN leaves the box on the table, walks over to the podium, and picks up a small book. She reads the following text in the voice of her grandmother.)

The Importance of a Hand Written Thank You Note

Written by Dan Post Senning

A Personal and Thoughtful Gesture

When I get a handwritten letter, I'm excited to open it. The art of the postage stamp, the feel of the paper, the graphic quirk of a friend's handwriting: There is simply nothing as personal as a handwritten note. In a stack of bills and flyers, it's a treasure in a sealed packet, full of promise and potential. It is a visceral reminder of someone far away.

Good manners are about more than fulfilling bare-minimum social obligations. They are an opportunity for us to connect to the people in our lives in a meaningful way. In an increasingly digital world, continuing to pull of pen and paper is a way to distinguish yourself. The handwritten thank you note speaks volumes simply as a medium and sends the message that you care enough to invest yourself personally in acknowledging another.

Would I ever send a digital thank you for a gift I was given? No. It just isn't enough – not personal enough, not weighty enough. You can't hold digital thanks in your hands the way you can hold a note. When was the last time you printed out an e-card? Right. Email is read and deleted. A mailed note is seen again and again on a desk or counter. Would you rather your thanks be remembered or deleted?

Frame 9: An Even Shorter List of Paper

WOMAN leaves the book behind and steps to the side of the podium before saying the list

Paper towels

Paper napkins

Paper planes

Paper plates

Paper money

Paper dolls

Paper maps

Frame #10: Love Letter

WOMAN walks up center. Sounds of middle school hallway. WOMAN shifts to GIRL, looking for someone. Waiting for someone.

Note appears, drifting down from the ceiling into GIRL's hands. She opens it, reads it. Sharp intake of breath. Music swells and the ceiling erupts with paper stars. GIRL finishes reading note.

Frame #11: Full Circle

GIRL becomes WOMAN. She brings the note back down stage to the box from the top of the show and finds what she was looking for.

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