



Candy as Memory Catalyst

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Abstract

Jonah Lehrer's insights in his book *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, in particular his discovery of how lost worlds could be rediscovered through taste, inspired an experiment with groups of teachers in Lithuania who believed themselves to be participating in a writing workshop. The experiment tested whether a person can be induced to experience a flashbulb memory if the hippocampus is deliberately accessed via the sense of taste.

Six writing workshops in six distinct regions of Lithuania, held in February 2013, formed the basis of the experiment, along with a two-day writing seminar and workshop for a writers' group in Klaipėda made up of professionals, artists, and teachers who wrote for their own enjoyment. My goal was to prepare a writing exercise that would have the effect of inducing the writer to produce a powerfully charged emotional piece of writing in a comparatively short period of time -during a fifteen minute freewriting period. I set up a series of test conditions in which participants tasted certain local sweets that were popular in the Soviet era and are less popular now, and then wrote about their thoughts and feelings. The results were a series of homogenous pieces that were a detailed remembrance of life during the years of the Soviet occupation, and which are presented in this article.

Marcel Proust popped a madeleine into his mouth, and that random event triggered a flashbulb memory (psychologist David Pillemer's term) that led to volumes of novelistic writing on the mind, memory, a lost past, lost love, lost youth; writing we still read and reflect on a century later. Obsessed with every flutter of imagery and every thought inside his restless mind, in his 3,200-page, seven-part work, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, previously known as *Remembrance of Things Past*), Proust mines his psyche as a model for his study of the human condition, employing a device he called "involuntary memory" to conjure up Combray, the idyllic village where he passed his childhood, as one of the central themes of the novel.

This type of vivid description of place built from memory has been explored in the work of psychologist David B. Pillemer. Pillemer notes that in their "flashbulb memory" paper, Brown and Kulik (1977) hypothesized that "any event that is shocking and judged to be highly important or consequential will be recorded initially in sensory rather than narrative form."¹ Although flashbulb memories usually are defined as traumatic memories, such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy (people of Kennedy's day can all recall where they were and what they were doing at the time of the shooting), the routines of everyday life can also provide the intensity of a highly charged life event.

In his book *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, Jonah Lehrer examines the relationship between neuroscience and the senses as they are expressed in the arts. Drawing on numerous examples from the works of Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Igor Stravinsky, Paul Cezanne, Walt Whitman, George Eliot, Auguste Escoffier, and Marcel Proust, Lehrer argues that writers and artists and musicians who wholeheartedly gave themselves up to their creative process discovered information about how our brains function centuries before the work of neuroscientists caught up with them and confirmed their findings. Lehrer, through a careful analysis of the connection between neuroscience and Proust's novels, has concluded that Proust too made important neurological discoveries a century before the science to prove his discoveries caught up with him. In his chapter on Proust, "The Method of Memory," Lehrer makes the following observation based on the famous passage from the "Overture":

What did Proust learn from these prophetic crumbs of sugar, flour, and butter? He actually intuited a lot about the structure of our brain. In 1911, the year of the madeleine, physiologists had no idea how the senses connected inside the skull. One of Proust's deep insights was that our senses of smell and taste bear a unique burden of memory.²

Lehrer's insights on the connections between the findings of neuroscience and the working of Proust's mind, in particular his discovery of how lost worlds could be rediscovered through taste, inspired me to recreate the madeleine experience under a controlled setting with groups of Lithuanian language and literature teachers participating in writing workshops. At first, I did not reveal to them that they were the subjects of an experiment on how the sense of taste triggers the retrieval of buried long-term memories stored in the brain's hippocampus. I wanted to test a hypothesis: can a person be induced to experience flashbulb memory if the hippocampus is deliberately accessed via the sense of taste?

In the "Overture" to *Swann's Way*, Proust introduces his beliefs regarding how lost memories can be accessed through what he calls a "lost object," which he later clarifies as the lost taste of a childhood pastry, the madeleine, rediscovered while having tea at his mother's house. While setting the stage for the passage in which the madeleine transports him back to his childhood in Combray, Proust refers to a Celtic folk belief that "the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and so are effectively lost to us until the day (which may never come) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison."³ What Proust did not know was that the sense of taste and smell are linked to the hippocampus and that, once this area of the brain is activated, lost memories are retrieved from the depository of long-term memory. Not knowing this, Proust struggles with his revelation, following the twists and turns of his thoughts until finally a full-blown memory bursts forth in his consciousness, and he writes the famous madeleine scene.⁴ The passage is remarkable for its detailed description of the transformation that occurs inside the brain when lost or buried memories bloom back into life triggered by taste or smell. Many of us have had similar experiences, and so we intuitively recognize Proust's experience.

He writes:

Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Com-bray, save what was comprised in the theatre and drama of my going to bed there, had any existence for me, when one day in winter, as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines,' which look as though they had been molded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull 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. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place.⁵

Proust continues to describe a feeling of "all-powerful joy" that overcomes him and attempts to examine the source of the feeling. His insight is that "I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savors, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs."⁶

Proust delightfully describes his childhood in Combray in vivid detail, ending the passage with the observation: "...so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and all the water lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea."⁷ I emphasize "from my cup of tea" with italics to illustrate how Proust clearly attributes his sudden memory to his sense of taste.

Lehrer cites the work of Rachel Herz, a psychologist at Brown, who proved in her paper, "Testing the Proustian Hypothesis," that because the senses of smell and taste in humans are linked directly to the hippocampus, the center of the brain's long-term memory, accessing specific, vivid, long-term memories through taste can be a powerfully emotional experience for people. According to Herz, the senses of sight, touch, and hearing are first processed by the thalamus, which is the source of language and the gateway to consciousness. Therefore, humans do not typically have epiphanic experiences associated with the senses of sight, touch, or hearing.⁸ Lehrer observes that "Proust even goes so far as to blame his sense of sight for obscuring his childhood memories in the first place. 'Perhaps because I had so often seen such madeleines without tasting them,' Proust writes, 'their image had disassociated itself from those Combray days.' "⁹ We now know that Proust's intuition was correct.

Proust reasoned that the madeleine experience could be replicated. Theoretically, one could taste a sweet or a food from childhood or youth and then record one's involuntary memories and develop them for literary purposes, as Proust did. This Proustian thought led me to wonder: Could the madeleine moment of epiphany be consciously triggered if one were to serve a group of people a memory-evoking food or candy and then ask them to freely write whatever was on their minds? Possibly. Theoretically, yes. The science supports this supposition. However, our relationships and memory associations with certain foods are highly individualized; therefore, how could one recreate the experience in a classroom setting? What if one were to create the setting for the memory trigger with a homogeneous group of people who have lived through a unifying event and quite possibly had consumed a similar food because of cultural traditions, or limitations on the types of

foods available at a particular time? Certainly, in times of food rationing, certain foods, especially those that are hard to come by, take on particular meaning. To find the right group for my "madeleine experiment," I had to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

The opportunity to test my idea presented itself in February 2013, when I was invited to spend two weeks in Lithuania in my professional capacity as an educational researcher. The chance to teach writing workshops in Lithuania, a member of the European Union, but also a post-Soviet country, provided me with the opportunity to work with a homogeneous group that - because of the Soviet occupation that ended in 1991 - would have had more-or-less similar experiences growing up, working, and adapting to the shift from communism to capitalism. I would assign elementary and high school teachers of Lithuanian language and literature a writing exercise and then lead them in a writers' workshop.

In the space of two weeks, I led six writing workshops in six distinct regions of Lithuania: Klaipėda, a coastal city; Vilnius, the capital; Siesikai, a small isolated rural community; Domeikava, a suburb of Lithuania's second most populous city, Kaunas; and Onuškis, an isolated community surrounded by forests. In addition to the teacher-training workshops, I'd been asked to privately conduct a two-day writing seminar and workshop for a writers' group in Klaipėda made up of professionals, artists, and teachers who wrote habitually for their own enjoyment. I would conduct the exercises and workshops in Lithuanian, but translate the writing samples into English for the purpose of my research.

My goal was to prepare a writing exercise that would induce participants to produce a powerfully charged emotional piece of writing in a comparatively short period of time - during a fifteen minute free-writing period. In order to produce material strong enough to workshop in the condensed time allocated to us within the constraints of the seminar, I would need to create conditions that enabled a writer to access his or her unconscious mind during this short period of time and to write from that place of lost memory. I had to consider how I would facilitate getting writers to access their long-term memories to produce writing that at its core conveyed an emotional truth, was original, and met the aesthetic standards we expect when we engage in reading literature. I thought about how I could replicate the madeleine phenomenon to gain these results. At the same time, it was important that workshop participants not be aware that I was manipulating their long-term memories. Their memories and their subsequent writing had to be produced of their own free will for my experiment to be valid.

I set up a series of tests in which participants tasted certain candies, which had been the only sweets available during the Soviet era, and then wrote on their thoughts and feelings. I would not prompt the participants or lead them towards involuntary memory, but would keep my eyes and ears open for such memories when they occurred. I would also interview my participants on how they accessed their involuntary memories and how the experience of accessing those memories affected them.

In the writing process, the mind sheds seemingly extraneous detail in order to create a coherent theme. The editing and revising that take place later organize the involuntary memory born from free-writing experiences into a coherent message. Therefore, in my madeleine experiments, I resolved to pay close attention to how participants recorded raw memories as they played out, and how they shaped and edited those memories into a recognizable narrative or genre. Rational thinking is of little help to the writer in the composing phase. I have used drawing exercises, improvised dialogues, storytelling, and other creative methods to help writers access their unconscious. This time, I was eager to see how the sense of taste might trigger memory, unlock the unconscious, and inspire workshop participants' writing.

I took the unique history of the region into consideration. My workshop participants would have shared a homogenous life, as well as life-changing experiences. A little over twenty years ago, the Baltic States lived through massive cultural, sociological, economic, and political shifts. With the highly emotionally charged independence movement and the collapse of the Soviet Union, followed by two long decades of hard work rebuilding a democratic Western society, Lithuanians, like millions of others living in post-Soviet countries, experienced radical changes in a quarter of an average lifetime. In order to survive and adapt to the fast-paced changes that occurred on every level of society, a type of cultural amnesia was necessary. The memory of what it was like to live under a totalitarian regime had to be repressed in order for people to adapt to a new Westernized mode of living and working and thinking. For the generation that is now forty years old or older, there is a disconnect between the culture and society of their early formative and student years and the present. They may live in the same physical territory, even in the same house or apartment, but society had changed completely all around them. The points of social, cultural, and economic reference of their youth and childhood have radically shifted. Under the Soviet communist system citizens lived in similar compact apartments allocated by square meter according to family size and Party loyalties. Soviet citizens wore Soviet factory issue clothing and shoes, with the additional challenge of buying something Western and stylish, like blue jeans, on the black market or getting creative with sewing or knitting to design a more interesting outfit. Under the communist system, there was no unemployment, but no choice of employment either. The government assigned you a workplace and you had to comply. Under the communist system you made do with the resources allocated you, and you didn't complain (publicly at least). Money was hardly necessary, because most of one's needs - health care, education, transportation, and utilities - were covered by the government. With the exception of a handful of Party apparatchiks, who had a relatively more comfortable life than the masses, everyone lived a simple lifestyle that was more-or-less equal.

As bleak and repressive as this uniform life seems to us Westerners, when interviewing people who lived through this period of Soviet communism, I learned that there were certain aspects of Soviet life they found positive and missed, and

felt a strong nostalgia for. People revealed that they felt closer to their family and neighbors back then because everyone was "in the same boat," and they helped each other to get by. Because of the deficit economy, food and household goods were scarce and hard to come by. If someone heard some scarce food item was on sale at the local grocery store, they let others know so all could benefit. Therefore, small luxuries, such as a special candy, were cherished and appreciated. One person I spoke to told me that, as a child, he never tasted chewing gum, but he had a few American gum wrappers another child had given him he treasured. Another aspect of Soviet life was a type of group think or Soviet idealism. One was encouraged to live one's life dedicated to the good of the "collective" rather than the individual. This thinking helped people feel they were part of a larger community, working for a greater good.

After independence, the entire nation had to rebuild itself and create a new image in a relatively short period of time. The period of national rebirth was both a time of joy and a time of loss. It was a time of new challenges and, at the same time, nostalgia for a simpler past with simpler choices. Knowing in advance my writers' groups would be mostly women ages forty and up, I knew they would have lived through these massive cultural shifts. I just needed a catalyst to trigger memories of these times in a powerful way. I wanted to use a food that had been scarce during the Soviet era and was therefore special and possibly memory evoking.

The 2003 German tragicomic film *Goodbye Lenin*, directed by Wolfgang Becker, illustrates how confusing the radical change of a country's entire political, cultural, and social structure was for East Germans after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the film, a woman, Christiane, wakes up after an eight-month long coma after the fall of communism. Her family, worried that the shock of the sudden radical political changes would cause Christiane to have a second heart attack, makes a gallant effort to hide the truth from her. Although keeping her isolated and bedridden in the family apartment preserves her ignorance of the country's political situation, Christiane's son and primary caretaker, Alex, runs into a major snag when she requests a specific brand of East German pickles. These pickles, along with all the other commonly consumed East German brands, disappeared overnight along with the Wall when the East Berlin supermarkets were restructured as Western supermarkets, carrying only Western products. Alex faces the challenge of tracking down remnants of East German pickles to appease his mother. This theme repeatedly plays out throughout the film as he searches supermarket shelves for the "lost" pickles.

These supermarket scenes reminded me of my experiences in Lithuania in the early nineties, just after the fall of communism. The supermarkets began carrying exclusively Western products. Elderly people would approach me in the aisles and ask me to help them with their shopping because they could not locate any of the brands they were used to eating or read the foreign labels of the new brands. So, the pickle-hunt scenes in *Goodbye Lenin* resonate.

Rather than pickles, I decided to use candy as my memory catalyst. To find the appropriate edible memory trigger for my experiment, I thought back to a memory of my own from the years 1988-1989, when I studied at Vilnius University. It was only two years before the Soviet Union disbanded and Lithuania gained its independence. That winter, I became ill with double pneumonia and had to be hospitalized. My classmates in the Lithuanian literature department were very concerned that, as an American, I would have a hard time "surviving" a Soviet hospital. I am allergic to penicillin and no synthetic antibiotics were available in the Soviet Union at the time, making my recovery even more challenging. My friends brought food to comfort me during my six-week hospitalization. The cabinet beside my bed was crammed full of canning jars filled with pickles, pancakes, and applesauce, and slabs of bacon and rings of smoked sausage brought by friends whose parents lived on farms.

However, the one special treat I remember most from those long days in the hospital was Soviet-era candy. The memory is linked to an event that stands out in my mind. One evening a friend, a student named Vygantas, came to visit me. He had long blond hair tied back into a ponytail and was dressed in the hippie attire of young Lithuanian folk musicians at the time.

"I brought you something that's very hard to come by," Vygantas bragged, eyeing the cabinet crammed with sausage and canning jars, to let me know all those would pale in comparison to his offering.

I sat up in my hospital bed, curious to find out what this rare item would be.

He opened up his hand, and in his palm were two small chocolate candies wrapped in blue paper with a drawing of a polar bear strolling across a snow-covered plain

"These are called *Meška Šiaurėje* (Polar Bear in the North)," he said. "They are a deficit item, but I was lucky enough to get two. Enjoy. Just let them melt in your mouth and savor the taste."

I slowly and carefully unwrapped the candy and popped the dark chocolate into my mouth. The candy had that typical gritty, Soviet factory issue texture. There was a faint taste of peanut butter mixed with the chocolate. The candy was not especially tasty, not at all as tasty as a Snickers or a Mars Bar, but I appreciated the hours of waiting in a queue it took my friend to get them.

I will always remember that sense of awe my friend had expressed for the Polar Bear in the North candy. Months later, when I was released from the hospital, I searched for Polar Bear in the North in the groceries and could not find any. The candy had indeed been a special gift. Although it was not especially tasty to me, the gesture of a friend going to such great

trouble to bring me the candy stayed with me. The candy symbolized the kindness of taking the time to break away from a busy student schedule to visit me in the hospital and bring me candy along with the latest reports on the protests taking place on the streets of Vilnius. When selecting the memory-catalyst for my Proustian experiment, I knew candies that were once a rarity would be my writing workshop participants' madeleines.

Under communism, even candy production was controlled and limited to less than ten different types. Although these Soviet-era candies are still sold by most grocery stores, with the wide selection of foreign candies and new good-quality and gourmet Lithuanian candies available, the old Soviet-era deficit candies are not the first item on most people's grocery lists. It is the custom in Lithuania to bring candy or wine when visiting friends. Hardly anyone brought the old Soviet candies to gift their hosts anymore. Therefore, I reasoned, like Proust's madeleine, the taste of Soviet-era factory chocolates would have been long forgotten and hence could effectively rekindle memories under the right conditions.

For the sake of nostalgia, I went to one of the last remaining Soviet-style groceries in Vilnius - the kind where you point at the shelf and indicate what you want and a glaring, square-shouldered, hold-over Soviet-era matron in a white lab coat and white cap takes it down for you and rings it up at the counter. This grocery still carries bins of my deficit-era candies and sells them by the kilo. I selected several brands: Polar Bear in the North (Meška šiaurėje); Little Cows (Karvutės); Pineapple (Ana-nasiniai) and Milk of the Birds (Paukščių pienas). I also bought some "zephyrs," tangy marshmallow candies in the shape of half shells. I added tangerines to my list as well. Tangerines, mandarins and oranges were practically nonexistent in Soviet grocery stores. People considered themselves lucky to taste an orange once in a lifetime under the Soviets.

I structured my workshops as follows: I would talk about writing exercises as a catalyst for generating writing and then talk about "freewriting" in particular. Freewriting is an exercise in which one writes continuously for a fixed amount of time - usually in five, ten, or fifteen minute intervals - without pausing, on a theme assigned by the instructor or any theme that comes into the student's head. The idea is to mine the unconscious in order to allow ideas to flow. In a second draft, those ideas are shaped into a narrative. Before the freewriting session began, I would pass around my plate of candies, zephyrs, and tangerines, and encourage participants to taste a treat before they began writing. I would casually say to them: "If you don't have any ideas to write about, just describe the taste of the treat you've selected."

I watched as people made their selections. Many paused to consider before choosing a treat. One woman blurted out, "Can't I just have one of each." "Sorry," I said, "just one." Once everyone had eaten their treat, I'd tell them that I would time them for a fifteen-minute freewrite. I reminded them not to worry about grammar, style, or punctuation. I told them it would be their choice whether or not they shared what they had written with the group. Following the freewriting, there would be an opportunity to share work, share ideas, discuss. Then, time permitting, participants would take what they had written and shape it into more formalized writing.

I was not prepared for the emotional responses I received. I had expected that fewer than half of the participants would have a flashbulb memory experience. But in the six workshops in which I conducted this experiment, 99 percent of the participants had powerful flashbulb memories and were eager to share them. The one or two people in each group - and each group was made up of between ten and thirty participants - who did not have a flashbulb memory and in fact could not and did not connect with the stories of those who did, were younger women in their twenties. These women expressed a sense of bafflement, frustration, and exclusion when workshop participants aged forty and up eagerly exchanged memories of Soviet-era scenes from their family or work or student lives evoked by tasting the candy. The younger women talked about how they grew up with more candy than they could ever eat or want and what was the big deal? The older participants were uncomfortable with these comments and insisted that the younger generation could not comprehend what their lives had been like under the Soviet system, living in a deficit economy.

When working with a group of thirty professionals who came to my writing workshop as part of a series of writer-led workshops they attended at the Ieva Simonaitytė Library in Klaipėda, several members cried when reading their candy-related memory pieces to the group. Others comforted them and expressed their solidarity on how difficult it was to find themselves back "physically" in a place in their past they had left behind and outgrown. This emotion prompted one woman to shout at me, somewhat aggressively, though at the same time with a touch of irony: "What did you put in that candy!" When I explained that I was attempting to recreate Proust's madeleine experience, some participants were delighted, while others expressed they felt they were manipulated to feel vulnerable.

People whose memories from decades past are triggered by taste describe the experience not as the type of memory one works to dredge up from the unconscious mind, but as a sensation that does not resemble memory as we traditionally understand it. The experience is emotionally overwhelming, in that one finds oneself physically, psychologically, emotionally returned to the place and the time where the memory took place, with all details played back to them in vivid and accurate color. A recurring theme expressed in all six workshops was that the flashbulb memory was not experienced as one normally experiences memory, but that the participant was overwhelmed by a sudden, detailed image from their past that preoccupied them and rendered them unable to think or write about anything else.

In Vilnius, I conducted the candy experiment with a group of thirty educators who taught in an inner city school in the roughest neighborhood. Their job was challenging, but they were well prepared for those challenges. I would have liked to have heard everyone's piece, but there simply was not enough time. During our lunch break, after the writing activity was

over, a woman in her mid-sixties approached me and invited me to sit at her table. She was eager to tell me what she had been too shy to express in front of the larger group:

"My mother is ninety now, and I often go to my village to take care of her," she said.

I always think of her as a frail and old woman. I haven't thought of her as anything but old and frail for many years now. But the strangest thing happened to me today in class. When I bit into the Pineapple candy, I suddenly saw my mother standing in front of me as a young woman. I saw her youthful face and her long blond hair plaited into thick braids. It was not at all like when I try to remember her the way she was when she was young. She was simply there, in front of me, in physical form. It was difficult for me to recover from seeing her standing there in the classroom as a young woman because it came as such a shock. When I was a little girl, my mother worked in the grocery shop in our village. She was in charge of handling large buckets of Pineapple candies when they were available for sale. Those days she would stand beside the candies all day long, weighing them and selling them to long queues of people. I would go to visit her while she was at work. Occasionally, I'd sneak a few candies.

A recurring theme in these candy-writing exercises was an association between the candy and a person who was important to the writer: a mother, a close friend or family member, or someone who had shown special kindness. A teacher in her late fifties from the rural town of Siesikai shared the following piece:

I chose a Pineapple candy and bit into it. For some reason, the moment I tasted the pineapple flavor I remembered my friend, Vanda, whom I haven't thought about in years. When we were girls, Vanda had a connection with people who worked in the candy factory in Kaunas. She would bring me two or three kilos of Pineapple candy whenever she could. We would climb up into a tree with our books and read and eat the tangy pineapple-flavored chocolate candy. My friend Vanda had such a good heart. She was generous with her candy. We grew up. We both went off to study; we married; we began working; we raised our families; and we grew apart. I hadn't talked to Vanda in years, but when my son needed to pass his twelfth grade exams, Vanda came back into my life and offered to tutor him and help him prepare for the exams. She did, and he passed. He could not have done it without her. Vanda has been very sick for the last few years and is not working anymore. I ought to go see her. She has such a good heart. How could I have forgotten her?

At the Klaipėda writers' workshop, a woman described her memory associated with Little Cows. As a teenager, she had a friend who worked in a candy factory. That friend would sometimes come to her house, bringing a bag filled with Little Cows. The two teenage girls would sit with her mother on the couch and stuff themselves with the candy while watching movies on television. She was very close to her mother, and the Little Cows reminded her of her mother, who had died a few years later when she was barely out of her teenage years. Now, she works as a teacher in a high school. On Fridays, after work, she goes to the grocery store and buys a bag of Little Cows, takes them home and sits on the couch alone, watching a movie, stuffing herself because the candy brings her mother back to her.

The woman seated beside her fought back tears while reading her piece. The Little Cows also reminded her of her mother, who was dying in the hospital, and with whom she'd had a difficult and painful relationship. The next day, when we worked with shaping the raw material we'd mined from the candies into more focused narratives, this woman chose to write a letter to her mother, in which she recalled her painful memories and which she ended with two simple sentences: "Mother, I love you. I forgive you." In her initial freewrite her emotions towards her mother were wild, uncontrolled, riddled with guilt. Why? Because the Little Cows reminded her of home. It was the candy her mother ate at home, a treat. During our initial discussion of her freewrite, this woman made the association that "Although we always had food and even candy at home, we had very little love." Other writers in the group felt the opposite - there was a lot of love, but candy was a rare and sought-after treat, so the opposite was true. After much discussion and reflection, this woman was able to write the following epistle to her mother:

Letter to Mama

Mama, I want to talk with you about that thing that we never spoke of our entire lives, not even one word, not when it happened, and never afterwards... Not you, not me. No one.

Maybe there is no need? Maybe?

We lived on the land. In Lieporai. Not far from the Latvian border. We didn't have much. We had too much. We had enough. We had clothing. And food. And candy. We even had chocolate-covered Zephyrs that your brother, Uncle Joseph, would bring over from Jūrmala. But I do not know if we had enough love. As far back as I remember, I was searching for love. I feel as though I have spent my entire life searching for love, and it always seems that there was never enough. Never enough.

Why? What made it that way? How did it happen?

A few incidents have seared their way into my soul.

The first is the theft in the collective farm offices. The offices we (you, me and my older sisters) cleaned in the evenings. That time you blamed me. You said that I stole the calculator.

I was so ashamed. Insanely ashamed. Only, I don't know if I was ashamed of myself or of you. Me, a teenager, I was called into the principal's office. I was called in to confess to a theft I did not commit. Did I tell the truth? Did I dare tell them that you were the actual thief?

Can you imagine: I don't remember. I have blocked out the details. I have erased them. Only one truth remained - you had betrayed me. You betrayed my love for you. I wanted to kill myself. I wanted to stab myself. I remember that I even wrote out my will...

The other incident occurred when I was a student. I was in my first year, and it was the beginning of summer. I had an appendicitis operation in Klaipėda. We were separated by 200 kilometers. I did not want to worry you, Mama. I didn't even tell you. Or perhaps, in those days, it wasn't so easy to contact you? Or maybe we didn't share a bond anymore? When I returned to our farm for the summer solstice, I knew only one thing, that I would not be able to do physical work. Nobody was home. The neighbor hurried over to tell me that I had to haul the hay out of the barn and set up the haystacks immediately, so that the hay would dry by evening - he was going to cart it away for us. That is how I ended up working out in the fields. Maybe I wanted to do something heroic? It wasn't easy, but I stacked all the hay and dried it. Then, it so happened, that you came home and angrily told me to drag that hay right back into the barn because for some reason (and I don't remember why) we could not cart it away that evening.

Gritting my teeth (and my soul) I was determined to get the job done, although it was already growing dark and seemed impossible. I don't know how, but my sister Lolita (my guardian angel) came to my rescue. The two of us worked hard until we dragged all the hay back into the barn. Until it was pitch black night. Until we had not an ounce of strength left to blame anyone, to feel sorry, or to love.

I miss you, Mama. I love you anyway. I have written about my two (and your two) life events. How many years have gone by before I was strong enough today to write to you about all this? How many years have had to go by for me to be able (here and now) to say the words: "I forgive you, Mama."

Your little one

The powerful feelings that come through in this simple letter - the lack of love, the search for love, finding love - emotions that this woman had held at bay for several decades, all came spilling forth the moment she bit into the candy that reminded her of the hurt of those long-buried feelings she could no longer hide from her mother. With encouragement from the group, on the second day of the workshop she was able to shape the raw emotion of her freewrite into this letter and finally find peace for the injustices that had happened decades ago, back in the days of the Soviet Union, when life in the collective farm communities consisted of hard work and a good dash of bitterness in order to survive. After reading her letter to her mother, this woman cried, and we all cried along with her. She said that she felt as though a heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders the moment she had been able to finally forgive her mother. All that wrapped up in a single square of candy!

Like the woman who had a painful relationship with her mother, several participants associated a specific taste with traumatic life events. Here is an example from the Klaipėda writers' group:

I chose the tangerine, but in my heart I wished it to be an orange. I carry an orange inside of me all the time. Now, you can buy them anywhere at any time, but when I was growing up, they were something rare and to be treasured, a treat you might or might not receive for Christmas. I grew up without a father. I grew up alone with my grandparents in a small wooden house on the edge of the forest. My childhood was lonely. I never knew my father. I saw him only once in my life. It was dark, around Christmastime. I was sitting by the stove when this man came into the house and my grandmother told me it was my father. He handed me an orange - an incredible treat back then. I'd never seen or tasted an orange. It was a tremendous gift. He told me that he always loved me, that he thought of me every day. Then he turned and walked back out into the snowstorm. He died two weeks later. I know now that he was not a good man. He committed crimes. But he did love me. When I taste an orange, I remember his love. I carry that orange around with me in my soul wherever I go. Whenever I go to the supermarket now, I visit with the oranges, and I remember my father.

The woman who wrote the above paragraph, and who was painfully shy, expressed to me that she had been shocked by the bare honesty of her long-suppressed memory when it burst forth in her freewrite.

Another strong theme that emerged in the freewrites was that of then versus now. The following excerpt is a good example of this dichotomy:

Ah well, it is my childhood flavor that is in my mouth. When my sister and I were little, even these Pineapple candies were a scarcity. We only tasted candy on holidays. But now. What's there to say? Every day we are tempted by flashy, tasty candies. We are surrounded by all sorts of tasty treats - you just need to have enough money and you

can buy whatever you like. Maybe that is why children today don't appreciate holidays the way we did when we were children. It's always like this. When you have too much of something, you don't appreciate it; it doesn't make you happy; and you don't think about what it means to you or to someone else. Even something like a comfortable apartment or a car has become bland and ordinary. You couldn't even imagine your life anymore without these basic comforts. Oh, but my parents, my grandparents, their lives were completely different. When I hear their stories. In our times. Then even I become nostalgic and begin to mourn what they felt for each other, how dear they were to each other.

I was surprised that some participants, writing spontaneously and in a fixed amount of time, wrote essays that were of a sociological nature. The following piece was written without revision by a teacher at the school in Domeikava, a suburb of Kaunas:

The Polar Bear in the North candy in my mouth smells like nuts, tastes like chocolate, and has a crunchy texture when you bite into it. The candy reminds me of the Soviet era. This type of candy was the tastiest of them all. Often they were hard to find. I lived with my family - my mother and two sisters - in a small wooden house in a small town. I tasted this candy only a few times in my life back then. The wrapper was different back then, too. The wrapper was blue and paper, not cellophane like this one. The picture was much simpler - just a polar bear set against a blue background. Recently one of my students, a heavy-set girl in my ninth grade class, told me that Polar Bear in the North is her favorite candy and she can polish off a kilo or two in one sitting. Just before Christmas, she brought in a bag of these candies and walked around the classroom, parceling out two apiece to each student. Of course, we all ate the candy. Meanwhile, she told us about how her family was traveling to Tunisia for the Christmas holidays and about how it would be their third trip to Tunisia. There were young people in that class who had never even traveled beyond the city limits of Kaunas! And here they were now, subjected to this self-confident rich girl's narration about her travels. I also began to dream about going somewhere warm for winter vacation. I felt like that polar bear in the north. Outside the classroom window it was cold and dark. Oh well, I thought, the winter vacation will pass quickly, just like this candy quickly melting in my mouth. This candy, which, for some reason, no longer tasted good.

After the teacher read this freewrite, the other teachers launched into an animated discussion of the social inequalities they've all had to endure since independence. They pointed out a link between the material poverty of the writer's childhood during the Soviet era and the continuing poverty of some children in her class; only the poor students' poverty was more painful now because they were subjected to wealthier children flaunting their privileges. Back in the days of the Soviet Union, the teachers explained, we were all in it together. I found it interesting that, by the time she reached the end of her meditation on the candy and on social inequalities, the taste of the candy in her mouth literally changed and no longer tasted good. The nature of this teacher's memories and present association with the memory changed her perception of the candy in her mouth.

What makes Proust a genius is that he did not simply stop and indulge himself in the unexpected childhood memories that the cookie brought to mind, but according to Lehrer "... once Proust began to remember his past, he lost all interest in the taste of the madeleine. Instead, he became obsessed with how he *felt* about the cookie, with what the cookie meant to him. What else would these crumbs teach him about his past? What other memories could emerge from these magic mouth-fuls of flour and butter?"¹⁰

In the two-day workshop I taught in the port city of Klaipėda, most of the participants, who were either working writers or working seriously on developing the craft of writing, took the extra time to shape the raw memories the candy had elicited and develop them into art. The images in the poem below - women waiting on a queue for candy, pregnancy, birds, silence - seem disjointed, linked loosely by the poet's subconscious. What is interesting about Proust's memories evoked by the madeleine is that they lead to other memories that seem random and disjointed, but in Proust's inner logic, they are somehow connected:

In this Proustian vision, the cookie is worthy of philosophy because, in the mind, everything is connected. As a result, a madeleine can easily become a revelation. And while some of Proust's ensuing mental associations are logical (for example, the taste of the madeleine and the memory of Combray), others feel oddly random.¹¹

We see this same random work of the unconscious in this poem, written by the Klaipėda poet Sondra Simane. Sondra bit into the Milk of the Birds candy and remembered standing on food lines back in the days of the Soviet deficit economy. But, rather than remain firmly rooted in that particular concrete memory, the poet allows herself to free associate, linking together seemingly random images and emotions, arriving at her own fears of giving birth, which she must soon live through. Similarly, Lehrer observes:

Why does the cookie also bring to mind "the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping it in little pieces of paper"? And why does a starchy napkin remind him of the Atlantic Ocean, which "swells in blue and blossomy undulations"? An honest chronicler of his own brain, Proust embraced such strange associations precisely because he couldn't explain them. He understood that idiosyncrasy was the essence of personality. Only by meticulously retracing the loom of our neural connections - however nonsensical

these connections may be - can we understand ourselves, *for we are our loom*. Proust gleaned all of this wisdom from an afternoon tea.¹²

Sondra allows herself to free associate her random memories as they come to her, circling back always to the central memory evoked by the taste of the candy.

Eilėje prie Paukščių pieno

*Paukščių pieno, sako aukšta moteris brunetei,
Ir juda link manęs.
Dar keturios ir aš.
Kartoju: paukščių pieno ir imu aprupėjusią plytelę.
Putojantis baltas šerbetas, -
Rembranto potėpis Saskijos šlauny,
Juodi saldūs trupiniai
Saskijos plaukuose.
Suleidžiu dantis ir laukiu.
Laukiuosi,
Primenu sau taip tyliai, Kad
girdėti tik laivų stiebai,
Svyrantys nuo sienų,
Ir afrikietiškos kaukės,
Miegančios gilyn į trečiąją akį...*

*O paukščiai išskleidžia saldžius sparnus
Ir spiria į paširdžius.
Laukite, sakau moterims,
Eilėje prie paukščių pieno,
Laukite net tuomet, kai
Paukščiai tyli,
Snapais į karstą
Kaldami.*

Standing in line to buy Milk of the Birds candies

Milk of the Birds, the tall woman says to the brunette
And moves closer to me.
There are four ahead of me.
I repeat: Milk of the Birds and reach for a crumbling square.
White milky sherbert –
Rembrandt's brush stroke, Saskia's thigh.
Sweet black crumbs
In Saskia's hair.
I sink my teeth into the candy, and I wait.
You are pregnant,
I remind myself so quietly
That all I hear are boat masts,
Tumbling down from the walls,
And the African masks,
Sleeping deep in the third eye.

And the birds spread their sweet wings
And kick me just beneath my heart.
Wait, I say to the women,
In the queue for Milk of the Birds,
Wait even then, when
Quietly the birds
Peck with their beaks
Into my coffin.

Please note that in Lithuanian the verb *laukti* can mean both to wait or await and to be pregnant, as in the English euphemism: "She's expecting." When questioned by the group about the last three lines of her poem, Sondra, who is forty-five and pregnant with her sixth child, explained that, when giving birth, the risk of death is always present.

The idea that people have more material wealth and access to goods now than they ever did, but that they are un-happier for it, came up in all the workshops. Participants had emotionally overwhelming experiences of nostalgia for simpler times, when there was less choice, less opportunity, less material wealth, but a good deal more warmth between people. These emotions are present in this spontaneous freewrite by a library worker from Klaipėda. The following unedited free-writing sample expresses these warm comradely feelings and the sense of despair over having lost them:

The taste of Milk of the Birds candy reminds me of the Soviet era and my job in the Botanical Institute Library. We library workers offered everyone who came in a piece of candy. "Where did you get it?" people would ask. A Jewish man had opened up his own candy shop inside the institute. The administration rented him a laboratory space. Those were the days of the first cooperative shops. They made all sorts of candy in the lab - yellow candy with red inside - unheard of candy in terms of taste and appearance. They made Milk of the Birds. You could buy the candy cheaply if you bought it by the kilo and without a box, and if you didn't mind if the candy was a little lopsided. He sold it all for kopeks. It didn't matter, the taste wasn't any worse for his cheap prices. Antanina took our orders for measured kilograms of candy: "Get some for me - I don't care if they're lopsided." It's funny and sad and sweet all at the same time. Now I'm preparing for a trip abroad, and I am going out of my mind trying to come up with ideas as to what to bring with me as a gift. Twenty years have gone by, and now we have everything. I walk inside any common grocery store now and I am overwhelmed with a feeling of hopelessness. When there is so much of everything, I want nothing. I feel sick to my stomach from that feeling of not wanting anything. After all, everywhere everyone has too much of everything. Who needs the knickknacks I will bring them? They won't have anywhere to put them. I long for the days when every one of us was overjoyed when someone offered us a candy, and you knew that the candy was offered from the heart. It was so easy to surprise people and make them happy. It was easier to feel happy. It is a strange feeling, this having too much of everything. It brings all these psychological problems along with it.

Something must be left from those days? Only what? It was so pleasant then to enjoy tasting a candy that was offered to you; to savor the candy's taste, to feel how, with the movement of your hand reaching out for that candy,

your thoughts would begin to flow of their own accord.

As expressed in this piece, simple pleasures, such as offering someone, or being offered, a piece of candy, were appreciated.

When teaching in remote Siesikai and remembering *Goodbye Lenin*, I decided to add pickles into the food-memory mix. Here is an example of a freewrite in which a woman associates pickles with her childhood and finds a link between the past and the present:

Unexpectedly, I bit into a pickle and, without even realizing it, I returned to my childhood. I remembered summer vacations at Grandmother's house. I see in front of me the huge barrel of pickles down in the root cellar. There is a large wooden cover on top, held in place with a stone. I see myself as a little girl, picking cherries, blackberries, running towards Grandmother, who is working in the garden. Those were good times. Even now, I like to can pickles. I cook and boil all sorts of combinations of vegetables and pickles. I feel happy when spring comes and the earth is warm. I drop those little cucumber seeds into the earth, and then I wait for the yellow blossoms and then, later in the summer, the green cucumbers. Then the hunt for recipes begins, the conversations with neighbors over canning and spices, the exchange of expertise. I am so happy when my pickles turn out good and when I offer them to friends and family and neighbors to enjoy they all smile and tell me how good they taste. Then, I grow tired of new recipes and my mind bends back to Grandmother's pickle barrel.

In Vilnius, there were teachers in my workshop who had flashbulb memories of working in the local candy factory as teenagers. In the Soviet era, high school and college students had to volunteer a certain amount of time working for the State. These women had unique memories associated with the candies:

This candy tastes good. However, I like candy in general, but I like good quality candy, like Rafaela from Italy. I like marmalade candy, but I don't eat it that often. The smell of chocolate always brings back certain associations and memories.

I remember when I was (no, I don't remember what class I was in then) we had to fulfill our work quota at the Pergalė chocolate factory. I can't remember the exact name they called the chocolate factory back then.

On the very first day I arrived at the chocolate factory, I was delighted by the wonderful scent of chocolate. We kids had to pack the New Year's Eve boxes. In the corner there were sacks of nuts. We were allowed to eat our fill. The only rule was that we couldn't leave the factory with any candy or nuts. We could only eat it while we were there. And eat we did. We crammed our faces full. They took us on a tour of the factory and showed us how candy was made. We saw how they made the Milk of the Birds and other candies. After we worked there a few days, none of us could stand the sight of candy any longer. I would throw up as soon as I approached the vicinity of the candy factory. All of us were saying to each other: I've eaten enough candy for a lifetime. When I went home after work, I happily ate cabbage soup or pickles. These days, whenever I drive past the chocolate factory, the smell makes me sick.

Lithuania is a small northern country, a member of NATO and the European Union. Lithuania's neighbor, Russia, is often politically at odds with the Baltic States. A little more than twenty years ago, Lithuania and Russia were the same country - two Soviet states within the Soviet Union. Soviet chocolates were uniform from the Urals to the Baltic. Therefore, I found it interesting to find a reference to the Polar Bear in the North chocolates in a personal essay in The New Yorker blog by formerly Russian, now Canadian, writer Mikhail Iossel. This particular candy serves as the catalyst to reunite two old high school friends in a chance meeting at Strand Books in New York City:

Someone I hadn't seen in forty years recognized me the other afternoon at the Strand Book Store. In middle and high school back in Leningrad, he had been one of my closest friends. He was buying a coffee-table album of New York pictures (something along the lines of "To See New York and Die," for his mother-in-law, he told me, winking), and I'd stopped by on my way to a friend's house in the neighborhood.

A burly, broad-shouldered, handsome man of vaguely Levantine aspect - a cross, of sorts, between Hitchcock and ... oh well, those crosses and parallels tend to make nothing more vivid; a cross between Alfred Hitchcock and Angelina Jolie: how's that? - he hailed me good-naturedly, in Russian, as I was passing by the cash register: "M! M! Is that you? . Is Mishka already up north?"

That was an old running high-school joke between us. "Mishka up north" had been one of the most popular brands of chocolate bar in the Soviet Union. Its wrapper pictured a dignified-looking polar bear strolling along a massive floe of Arctic ice. Mishka is the common loving diminutive for any kind of bear, in Russian - be it black or polar. Mishka, of course, is also the diminutive, highly irreverent, and child-like form of Misha, which itself is the diminutive of Mikhail, which is my name. For someone to be "up north," in the general Soviet parlance, meant his having been arrested and sent off to one of the gulag destinations for his political activities - or, more likely and pertinently, the looseness of his lips, the pointless frivolity of his speeches.

The Polar Bear in the North candy takes on a different meaning in the banter between two old friends, a meaning that has a distinctly shaded Russian nuance, which is different from the mostly sentimental associations the candy held for the Lithuanian schoolteachers and fledgling writers who participated in my candy experiments. Two distinct worlds, united under one political system, associated the same candy with a different kind of memory.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz in his TED talk "The Paradox of Choice" discusses how increasingly more and more choices make us more and more miserable. Under the Soviet system, one had little to no choice. Now, as members of the European Union and a greater Europe, Lithuanians are overwhelmed by choices and opportunities. These newfound opportunities create stress for people. In the six locations where I conducted my candy experiments, I listened as person after person spoke and wrote with great nostalgia about the good-old Soviet days. Although one's first thought might be that these people are politically naive and pine for a Big Brother figure, a Stalin or a Brezhnev, this is not the case. Contemporary post-Soviet people would never seriously condone returning to life as it was under the Soviets. They are appreciative of the privileges of democracy, independence, and capitalism. What they do long for with great nostalgia are simpler days. They mourn the loss of the psychological simplicity of living a life in which they are absolved of the complications of having to choose, even if it is the matter of a choice between two good options. The following essay by a young Lithuanian woman who now works as an English teacher after having lived in England for five years is a good example:

The basket filled with treats is coming closer to me. From afar I see the yellow wrapper of the Pineapple candy. At least once in my life I know quite firmly what I will choose. But then again, when I see the selection from up close, I waver. Maybe I should take Milk of the Birds? It looks so tantalizing with its wrapper removed, ah, chocolate. I freeze. Perhaps I can have them both? Time slows down. The others are growing impatient with me. I can't believe I'm tormented by having to make a choice - over candy?! It's always like this with me! All these choices are killing me! Why can I never have both at the same time? Why can't I walk two roads at once? Why can't I live in Vilnius and in Klaipėda? Vilnius is the capital, but the sea is here. My mother is there, but my friends are here. Should I emigrate abroad or live in my own country? Should I worry about money or my health? Should I dedicate myself to raising happy children or having a career? Should I live in an apartment in the center or in a house in the suburbs? Should I have a third baby or take some time for myself? Should I have tea or coffee? With sugar or without? Should I have a Pineapple candy or Milk of the Birds? It is always eating away at me, would the other path have been better? How will I ever know? Can I live here and there? Can I make my decision after I've tried both? Then I start blaming the Soviets. I blame the Soviet daycare, where I was forced to be just like everyone else and to fear authority and listen to directions. I have grown children already, and I still want someone to lead me by the hand. So, which candy shall it be?

Notes:

- 1 Cited in Pillemer, *Momentous Events*, 27
- 2 Lehrer, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, 80.
- 3 Proust, *Swann's Way*, 54.
- 4 Ibid., 57-58.
- 5 Ibid., 54-55.
- 6 Ibid., 55.
- 7 Ibid., 58.
- 8 Cited in Lehrer, 80.
- 9 Lehrer, 80-81.
- 10 Lehrer, 81.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.

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