The Inescapable Digital Me

By Richard Cohen

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In the future no one will ever die. This is what a friend once told me. He said that as a person aged -- maybe when he got very old - - the contents of his brain would be downloaded onto a computer disk and his decrepit body would be discarded (or maybe recycled -- who knows?). Then everything on the disk, which is to say our mind, our brain, our personality with all its quirks and disorders, would be transferred to a new, synthetic body, which would -- if servicing was done on schedule -- last approximately forever. I am here to say part of this has already happened to me.

This startling revelation occurred to me the day Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein and Ben Bradlee confirmed that W. Mark Felt was -- as he insisted -- Deep Throat. I took this news with my customary aplomb because, among other things, I already thought I knew that Felt was Throat. What I did not know was what, if anything, I was going to write about it. A call from one of my alert editors solved my problem. It turned out that in 1980, I had written a column suggesting that Felt was Throat. Who knew?

I read that column with great interest. It had my name at the top, and a forensic columnologist would have noticed characteristic stylistic tics and a tiresome reference to self. But I read it as avidly as I hoped a stranger might -- as if for the first time. This is more or less getting to be a routine occurrence. I am forever coming across columns I've totally forgotten writing and I now, routinely, have to check to see if I have already staked out a position on some matter of importance -- and what, exactly, it may be. For this, there is The Post's own database, not to mention LexisNexis and Google and various competitors. These are where my life is catalogued. This is where I can retrieve my memory. I am digitized, therefore I am.

Obviously, this is a good thing. Less obviously, maybe, this is a bad thing. A man is entitled to his own view of himself. He is entitled to be who he says he is. He is the sum product of a gazillion memories, some of them shaved a bit, some of them totally renovated, some of them discarded and forgotten and replaced by dint of imagination and the urgent need to deny. Anyone who has led a full life needs denial. It is the Novocaine of life.
But now I am denied denial. I have been at this column business since 1976, writing most of the time three times a week, more recently just two. That comes to about 3,500 columns, my opinions on just about everything -- a huge memory dump straight from me to the printed page and thence, alas, to the dour computer that lacks remorse or romance and is nothing but rebuke: But you said in 1980. But you wrote in 1990. But . . . aw, shut up.

Vladimir Nabokov had to revise portions of "Speak, Memory," his autobiography, when his relatives got hold of it. He was wrong about this date and that person -- that sort of thing. In her new biography of Billie Holiday, Julia Blackburn writes that "Billie had always invented huge chapters of her life." And in a wonderful book about the origins of Holiday's signature song, "Strange Fruit," David Margolick wrote that Lady Day came to believe the song had been written for her. It had not. But she was telling a truth as she wanted it, maybe as she needed it. Frank Sinatra said that when he sang, he was always honest. The same with Holiday. The rest of the time was, well, different.

I yearn for the freedom to be what I want to be. I don't want to lie, but I want to be comforted by my own version of the truth. I want to own my life, all of it, and not have it banked at Google or some such thing. The trove of letters that some biographer is always discovering, the one that unmasks our hero and all his pretensions, has been moved from the musty attic to sleek cyberspace. I am imprisoned by the truth, a record of what I wrote and the public's silly insistence on consistency -- a life sentence without hope of parole. For me, the future is the present. It's not that I cannot die. It's rather that I cannot lie.

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