

## [Transcript] Conversations / Stories of starting over: Anne Howell

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Today I'm with Anne Howell.

In 1991, Anne woke up in a hospital,  
not knowing where she was, why she was there,  
or even what a hospital was.

What made things even weirder was that Anne believed herself to be  
a nine-year-old girl.

So the fact that she was inhabiting the body of an adult  
was incredibly disconcerting.

A woman eventually came to her and told her that she was her mother  
and she said that Anne's husband and baby would be arriving shortly.

But Anne had no memory of these people  
and no understanding of who she could trust.

Anne had a serious case of what's known as retrograde amnesia,  
which meant she not only had to rediscover who she was  
before she went into hospital, but also had her read and write again.

Anne's memoir is called *All That I Forgot*.

Hi, Anne.

Hi, Richard.

What do you remember of waking up from that coma in a hospital?

I remember quite a bit because I've thought of it a lot ever since.

It's a moment of waking that I run over in my mind over and over.

I remember waking up.

Firstly, my eyes wouldn't open,  
so I had to mount this enormous effort to make them go to part.

And when I finally did that and the lights settled,  
nothing made any sense to me.

All the objects just looked strange  
as if I'd never seen anything like them.

So it's a very sort of sci-fi.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

I thought somebody was playing tricks on me,  
and I was in extraordinary pain at the same time,  
which made it very hard to focus.

I just had no idea where I was or what had happened.

And every time I tried to get ahold of a thought  
to explain where I was, the thought would sort of run off from me.

Are you still in the kind of fugue state,  
like from a general anaesthetic or from the painkillers  
that made things weirder than they were?

I think I would have been on a fair amount of pethidine,  
and that produces sort of dreams and nightmares.

Because I had this pain... I'd had meningitis,  
which is, I believe, one of the most painful conditions you can have.

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I had lost my memory in relation to my autobiographical self,  
you know, all the things that had happened to me.  
I'd also lost knowledge of the world outside,  
knowledge of a lot of things.  
I could still move my eyes around,  
like I knew how to... I could make my body do things,  
but everything hurt so much I could barely move as well.  
You wrote that you weren't even entirely sure what a hospital was.  
Did you know what a window was, or a bed was,  
or a closet was, or anything like that?  
No, I didn't know anything at first.  
But things started coming back to me quite soon.  
So, concepts and names of things.  
The hospital, for a long time, I thought was a place of punishment.  
I thought I'd done something very bad.  
And because people were coming and doing tests on me  
and sticking needles into me,  
so I just tried to scrabble around and work out what was going on.  
I thought I was...  
Because I couldn't move and everyone else could move,  
the nurses and the doctors could move around,  
I started to think that the problem was that I couldn't remember,  
so I wanted to hide the fact to people around me  
that I couldn't remember because I wanted to get out.  
I wanted to be able to walk and get up and move around.  
Did you know your name was Anne?  
No, not until it was mentioned.  
I didn't...  
Sometimes things came back in my mind,  
but more often than not,  
I'd get triggered by somebody saying something to me.  
So, if I heard,  
hello, Anne, I'd think, Anne, Anne, Anne.  
Oh, oh, no, not a great name, but I guess that's mine.  
OK, oh, yeah, yeah, that seems right.  
So, I was very much reliant on the outside world  
to inform me and trigger me into remembering things.  
So, once the anesthetic wore off,  
who was Anne then, in your mind?  
Anne was someone who really wanted to be  
in her snug little home somewhere else  
and sort of had a vague recollection that she'd been somewhere else  
and it was not that scary previously in some sensible life  
that she couldn't quite access.

I just thought I was a girl.  
I thought I was a clever, smart girl  
who needed to impress her mummy,  
who wanted her mummy to take her home,  
but when I first saw my mother,  
she seemed extraordinarily old  
because she was a mother of a 30-year-old woman,  
not a nine-year-old woman.  
And so, I was just so shocked to see her  
and I thought she was playing tricks on me  
and then I thought she was someone else  
and then I thought she'd had some awful withering disease  
and become elderly overnight.  
It was all very peculiar.  
Were you feeling terror or were the painkillers  
sort of, you know, just taking the edge off that terror?  
I recall really big fear despite the pethidine  
because the pethidine had also...  
There was a stage of me waking  
where the pethidine had given me dreams  
to go along with the pain,  
so I was at one point being poked by little demons  
in bright red shiny coats and being barbecued  
and that made sense of the pain I could feel.  
I had a lot of head pain.  
And so, the pethidine was also addling my mind.  
It wasn't necessarily calming me.  
So, there was this mix between hallucinatory experience  
and waking experience,  
which at times felt quite hallucinatory as well.  
Given that you thought you were nine years old,  
was it weird to look at your hands and your body  
and seeing you feeling yourself  
inhabiting the body of a grown woman?  
Well, I didn't do that for a while.  
Everything hurt to move, so I didn't actually...  
It took me a while to look at my hands.  
It wasn't that instant looking.  
For ages, I just sat very passively.  
My head, I didn't realise, was hugely bandaged up,  
was very, very heavy, like a bowling ball was on top of it.  
So, I could barely move. I was scared to move.  
Everything just hurt so much to move.  
So, I was very still.

And I just had the feedback of people around me to sort of let me know who I was.

It was a very slow dawning that I was this thing called a patient in a hospital. It took quite some time to get there.

Were you weirded out about the fact that your feet were much further down the bed than they ought to have been if you were nine?

Well, then again, I suppose physically you were quite petite, aren't you? I don't suppose it would have been that odd then, in that sense, would it?

I am 5'1".

Yeah, I'm a pretty small person, so I have this...

I didn't think that much about the size.

There were just too many other things going on.

And, you know, I just responded to the world as a young person.

I didn't really think it through.

I couldn't think very clearly about anything.

It was very hard to hold a train of thought at all.

So, this woman who was your mum, but looking much older than she ought to look, what did she tell you once you sort of...

She came to you and you flirted in the consciousness.

What did she say to you?

A lot of what she said, I didn't understand.

People just talk so quickly.

And I was still coming to grips with words.

And people...

They might have theoretically known I had amnesia, but they didn't necessarily act accordingly.

So, people were themselves with me.

So, my mother just talked at a rapid pace and...

Skipping over all these concepts that you didn't know what they were?

I couldn't really, but I did a lot of nodding and smiling because I wanted to seem like I understood.

I wanted to be a good girl.

I wanted to please people.

It was a very strong drive in me to sort of be seen to be participating.

I knew I should be able to understand.

And slowly, things did come back.

And I slowly got better at understanding words and fast-talking.

It was all in there. It was just trapped, you know?

So, I had to sort of negotiate conversation, but she did indicate that this person was coming husband.

And I had a sense what a husband was.  
So, it was very random what I did understand and what I didn't.  
And I had a sense and that really was jarring  
because I thought, oh, goodness, that's a bit adult.  
I can't have one of those. How is that possible?  
You know, what's happened to me?  
Oh, I haven't grown up, have I?  
And that's when it really struck me when she said that.  
And a baby as well?  
She didn't actually mention that right at the start.  
That was something I would find out I had by looking at the baby.  
And that was the moment that I will never forget.  
Well, let's hope I will not forget it because I know my hat is off  
to people struggling with dementia, you know, but you can lose memories.  
But... See, I just thought, then, as you said that,  
that it's a line that most of us use really, really carelessly,  
but you're known to be more cautious than to say that.  
I think, too, as someone who's had almost, you know, very little memory.  
We're still humans. You're a very human person.  
You want to be treated as an equal with people,  
no matter what state your memory's in.  
Even though it feels like such a liability in a way  
to not be able to remember you can't function like everyone else,  
but it was quite hurtful when I couldn't...  
You know, when I felt so stupid and I felt so inadequate.  
So I feel for people that had trouble with their thinking.  
What happened when your baby arrived? What did you think?  
So my partner walked in and he was unusual and striking enough.  
A very unusual-looking man for me and, you know, quite dashing,  
I now realise, but at the time he just seemed a bit frightening  
and other and elegant and...  
And on his hip, he had this creature...  
..kind of a bit wiggly, plump, quite beautiful,  
but very strange to me.  
And I, for a minute, thought he'd brought his pet in.  
Oh, you didn't know what a baby was? I didn't know what a baby was.  
I did not know what a baby was, and I thought he'd brought his pet in,  
so I was really struggling to look at this little creature.  
And he sat quite far, he sat down near my feet.  
He was a bit frightened of me, I think, and he sat down near my feet  
and he bounced her on his knee and she bounced up and down, up and down.  
And she was very proud of herself and she was smiling at me  
and I thought, oh, my God, she's...  
Whatever this thing is, it's sort of like, it's a little human,

it's a little monkey.  
Whatever this thing is, I really love it, it's absolutely adorable.  
And somehow my mother, my mother was there at the time,  
she let it be known that this was my daughter  
and somehow she let me know that...  
..or I felt this responsibility, this big responsibility,  
this was mine, this creature was for me to look after.  
And I just was staggered.  
I thought, I wonder what I'd do with it.  
I wonder what looking after this creature will involve.  
Who else came to see you at this time?  
This beautiful friend of mine, Mahalia, came and our parents  
had been best friends, both our mothers had been best friends  
and our fathers had been colleagues and good friends.  
And I'd grown up with her as a child, she's half Indian.  
And she walked in the room and, again, I was...  
I literally said to her, you've grown up.  
Like, how is this possible?  
And she was great because we were childhood friends.  
She talked to me like we were kids.  
She could go, oh, Annie, yes I have, I have grown up  
and isn't it a bummer or whatever she said.  
And so I trusted her more than other people  
because, in a way, I let my guard down with her.  
So I could ask her questions.  
And she was the person that would tell me I was a journalist.  
So that childhood affection you'd had for her was there still?  
That was there and maybe some reservoir  
of adult affection as well.  
I think she and I have been so connected over the years.  
But I really didn't have any memory of my adult life at this point.  
So mostly it was relating to people from the past.  
And we'd been very close.  
She's like my sister.  
And she seemed to know how to deal with me  
and how to talk to me as well.  
I think it really...  
She's very empathetic and I think, in a way,  
she got how much I didn't know.  
Whereas other people, it suited them  
or they just couldn't see through my facade.  
And so she was able to sort of connect with me in a way  
that I didn't feel I had to play that game with her of,  
yeah, I know what's going on.

Was there another man who came to see you at this time?

Oh, absolutely.

So a man that I'd known for many years.

We went to the same high school and he'd been big in my life.

He'd been involved with a friend of mine  
and various other people, came to visit me  
and was quite brilliantly present.

He came right through my coma and he also was quite romantic.

Romantic?

Romantic.

And I mistook him because he came really regularly.

My actual partner wasn't coming as often to visit me  
and I mistook him initially for my partner.

I remembered him and I remembered some romance with him  
that I had, it would turn out that I had with him,  
but I was living in the past, you have to understand.

Anyway, he was quite, look,

it was such an overwhelming situation, I'd almost died.

In that coma, they really didn't think I was going to make it.

So people were really, people that loved me  
and were beginning my lives from whatever age  
were turning up all over the place and there was drama.

So you mentioned you had meningitis.

What had happened to you?

What had you gone into hospital for?

The duty that you later discovered  
and what had happened in the course of your care?

I had been having these migraines for some years  
and when I got pregnant, they just exacerbated.

I started just into it, something was quite wrong.

Doctors didn't think so.

I didn't go to a neurosurgeon or anything or a neurologist.

I just had various doctors,  
they just thought that headaches were pretty standard  
for pregnancy, but these were really serious.

They were really bad and I was getting sicker and sicker  
and about two days before my birth, I had a stroke.

And the way I knew was because my face fell,  
just half of my face fell.

I was quite panic, what's wrong with me?

And I ended up having to give birth before I could find out  
because really I was due and I was big.

I felt as big as I was tall.

So when you went in to give birth, had you told people

you'd had this thing?

No, I hadn't told anyone, so it went well.

Oh my God.

It was all a bit sort of, I should have, I guess,  
but anyway, I went and had a birth  
and I was really determined to have a natural birth.

I had a fantastic birth, apparently,  
but my head hurt as much as my contractions.

That's how bad those headaches were  
and apparently it was very dangerous.

Anyway, I had my child and my headaches were still really bad.

So I got a specialist and started having CT scans  
and they found that I had what's called an AVM,  
an arteriovenous malformation.

What is that?

Well, it's like an aneurysm.

It's in that family, but it's less known.

And it's a series of arteries in the brain  
or the outer brain, in my case.

It was on the left-hand side in the outer brain  
that it just malformed from birth.

So you had this condition from birth?

It was a birth defect.

And you'd been living with these headaches all your life  
and just all their migraines and mysterious?

No, the migraines started in my 20s.

So they just got really bad around my pregnancy.

I'd not been much of a migraine sufferer.

So that's why I thought something was wrong  
because I was not used to the headaches.

And so what kind of an operation was involved with that?

Well, I had two choices to not operate at all,  
and that would have given me about five years to live,  
the doctor's thought, or to have a 12-hour surgery,  
which is, at that time,  
that was about the longest surgery possible.

So I was sort of on that border of inoperable,  
but the surgery was going to be broken up into two parts.

Well, I had this little baby,  
and I really thought I'd better hang in there,  
and so I opted for the surgery.

I was very scared.

I'm not very brave.

So I breastfed her for about 11 months before that,



just to get her going.

It was very much imparted to me in a frank way that it was chancey and I might not make it.

You had her for 11 months, and then you went in for surgery.

And was the surgery straightforward?

You mentioned meningitis.

How did that come into your system after the operation?

After the first one.

Yeah, the first one was successful,

but then I got meningitis,

and that threw me into a delirium and then a coma.

And was it that that erased your memory?

Yes, yes.

There's a lot of very complex concepts to understand if you've had your memory wiped, too.

It must have been quite some time before

you were capable of understanding of what happened to you.

My doctor used to talk to me a lot about amnesia

and what was happening to me,

and it would go in one ear and out straight out the other.

I couldn't remember that I'd forgotten for a while,

so I couldn't come to grips with what I had.

I couldn't remember the name of my condition.

It did seem very complicated.

You said at the outset you weren't sure whether you were...

You thought you might be a prisoner in the hospital.

Did it take a while for you to realise you were there as a patient, someone being cared for,

as opposed to someone who was being tortured

with all these needles and pain and imbibilty?

I feel a bit embarrassed to say that

because I did have amazing nurses,

and the medical system were fantastic, you know.

I'm sure they were doing their everything back before you.

I had specialist nurses, but I did...

It's an understandable misapprehension, I think.

I did. I thought I was being punished for some bad deeds,

and I thought that it was a prison,

and I thought I was being punished

because I didn't have comprehension, I didn't have logic,

I didn't have a backstory.

We love narrative,

and I didn't have my own narrative to say how I'd landed there.

So, to me, pain was punishment,

and these people were inflicting things on me.  
You had a sense of sin as well. That's terrible.  
I know. Oh, God.  
I didn't even... I wasn't even... I've been a bad girl.  
I wasn't even brought up religious,  
so I don't even know where it came from.  
Yeah, both my parents were secular people,  
and I was not to go to Sunday school  
because it was all propaganda.  
They believed in science,  
so I didn't have sin in my childhood,  
except that it's in the broader culture.  
Yeah, well, you don't need to go to church  
to get a sense of sin, do you? That's the thing.  
So, how did you then decide  
you were going to get out of there, that hospital?  
How did you then find your way out?  
Because I'm sure they were reluctant to release you  
until you could operate competently in the world.  
How did you persuade them you could get out?  
Well, it wasn't like that at all.  
At that time, as I recall it,  
I was in a neurology ward.  
You only stay there when you really need to.  
It's very urgent for very urgent surgery,  
and they decided that I was to be tested.  
I mean, there were various tests going on all the time,  
but there was one particular test for going home that I recall,  
and I was taken in a wheelchair from the ward  
across the road to a rehab centre  
where I was to bake Anzac biscuits.  
That was your rehab test?  
I suppose that's not a bad one in some ways,  
but what problems did you encounter making Anzac biscuits?  
Well, the thing was I couldn't read,  
and they didn't seem to have that in their notes  
because they expected me to read a recipe.  
So, the first problem was that I had to admit  
to this woman that I couldn't read,  
and I hated admitting that,  
but I already knew I couldn't read,  
so she handed me this recipe and said,  
you know, we're about to make these wonderful, wonderful biscuits,  
and I said, oh, look, I can't read this.

And what did the words look like on the page to you?  
Like hieroglyphics or something?  
Words look like little, yeah, little hieroglyphics.  
That's a good word for them.  
They just look puzzling, and when I'd stare hard,  
sometimes they'd wobble a little and shake,  
you know, if I stared really hard,  
so it was best not to focus on them for too long.  
They sort of hurt my eyes and my head to look at.  
But you passed the test, nonetheless.  
You baked the Anzac biscuits.  
She read it out to me.  
She said, oh, OK, all right, we'll just...  
Well, like, it's a doing test.  
It's a doing test, not a comprehension test, so...  
Well, I suppose it does make sense in some ways.  
It sounds kind of ridiculous,  
but I suppose you have to think sequentially,  
and you have to show some kind of motor skills  
and an idea of time and all those sorts of things,  
so maybe it's not such a bad test at all.  
And not burning the house down.  
Ah, not burning the house down, too, of course.  
So, at some point, you were brought to your home  
with the man you were told was your husband  
and your baby, then, you were brought home.  
Do you think you were ready to operate in the world?  
I didn't really know what was going on on many levels.  
I couldn't read, I couldn't write.  
I didn't know my own history.  
I hadn't been out in the broader world.  
Even sitting in a car on the way home was terrifying  
because speed was frightening.  
It was like the modern world.  
But I didn't really have much choice,  
and I really loved the idea, naively, probably,  
of spending time with my baby.  
I was really looking forward to it,  
kind of thinking that it would all magically turn out  
to be wonderful and that I'd know what to do,  
but I might have been a bit immature and thought,  
oh, goodie, I'll play with a little...  
My dolly of a baby.  
I don't know what my thinking was,

but I do know that I really...  
I was very adrift, untethered,  
and a bit lost in my own life.  
It sounds like you had to, like,  
walk on eggshells through the world.  
I was playing pantomime in a way.  
I was winging it,  
so I would learn off other people what to do  
and what things were,  
and you could sort of study other people  
and go, okay.  
And then, because, of course, I had retrograde amnesia,  
some people have something called anterograde amnesia,  
where they really forget who they are every 10 minutes.  
Their memory goes back to the centre of the now.  
That would be awful.  
Mine, I was repairing, so I was getting...  
I had my childhood, so I knew how to eat with a knife and fork,  
because I could do that as a child.  
I had my childhood self intact,  
and bits of the adult were coming in.  
It sounds like that TV series that was on years ago  
called Thank God You're Here.  
I don't know if you ever saw that,  
where they'd get some kind of famous person  
and they'd get them ready,  
just by saying, are you ready to go?  
And they'd drop them into a scene,  
which was...  
It could be like, suddenly, you realise  
you're the president of Zambia or something like that,  
and as soon as you walk in, they go, oh, thank God you're here.  
You know, we've got all this thing going on,  
and you had to fake your way through it.  
You have to pretend to be the person  
that people expect you to be.  
Yeah. I think, for me, I felt that the people around me  
I did feel heavy expectations.  
I don't think they're aware of it.  
I think everybody was trying really hard  
and quite freaked out.  
My mother, in particular, was really, really stressed  
by my condition.  
She had thought I was going to die.

But once the threat of me dying was gone,  
everybody was side with relief and went back a bit to normal.  
I stayed home and looked after this baby.  
I was offered by this partner of mine, a nurse.  
And that would have been probably quite helpful,  
but I associated nurses with the hospital,  
and I just didn't want anything to remind me of the hospital,  
so there's no way I was going to have a nurse in my house.  
It just seemed absurd to me.  
I probably could have done with some help, and he did offer.  
But I was, no, no, I can do this on my own.  
I'm bringing up my own baby.  
This is Conversations with Richard Feidler.  
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So, Anne, what were you told about your life  
before the operation?  
I was told that I was going to die.  
I was told that I was going to die.  
Before the operation.  
I wasn't told as much as you'd think.  
So, I was living with the father of my daughter,  
who didn't really talk much about the past with me,  
and didn't talk personally,  
so he talked a lot about his business and work,  
and a few things about our friends and just daily life.  
My mother wasn't as forthcoming as you'd think either.  
Well, it took me a long time to realise,  
but she was great on telling me what lovely times  
we'd had at Balmoral Beach when I was a child,  
or what a good ballerina I was,  
or what a great news journalist I was.  
So, I'd been a journalist.  
And my friend Mahalia had told me that in the hospital,  
and when she told me, I thought, oh, my God, how?  
How could I possibly be a journalist?  
This is unbelievable.  
I'm this quiet person, I'm this quiet girl.  
When you'd once been Lois Lane,  
bollies coming out into the world,  
taking names, reporting on things  
that people didn't want other people to find out about.  
Wow. I had a sense of...  
I suppose I think yarn event was big in those days on TV,

and I had a sense of who she was by then from TV, so...  
What were the details your mother admitted, though?  
She admitted to the things that she loved about me the most.  
So, she liked that I'd been in news,  
she liked that I'd been a ballerina,  
she liked that I'd been a good clever girl.  
So, there's lots about me being a clever girl at school,  
and there was whole reams of my life that got left out  
of the narrative because they were unpleasant.  
So, I'd gone off the rails,  
and I'd had a very difficult relationship with my mother,  
and, of course, that was just not discussed.  
I don't think she meant to do that.  
I think that she just wanted to see me in the way that she did,  
and... Didn't want to distress you?  
She didn't want to distress me,  
and she really didn't want to distress herself  
thinking of the bad sides, the bad things.  
And I would find that some people around me,  
I think, had the idea that there's...  
And that there was no point telling me of things  
that it would be better for me to remember them myself,  
spontaneously, ideas about recovery  
and what was good for me and what was bad for me.  
But also, I did a lot of pretending.  
I did a lot of not asking,  
and I was quite passive about it,  
but I would rush around on my own, you know, investigating things.  
Was this a part of the process of you faking it  
till you could make it,  
trying to pretend you knew what was going on  
when you were really quite unsure?  
I think so, and since then,  
I've met a woman called Sue Meck, who's also written a memoir,  
and she did a similar thing,  
and I don't know if it's not part of the Amnesia process  
because I think that it makes you aware  
how conformist we all are  
and how you want to perform and achieve.  
You don't want to be this person that doesn't know your own life.  
It seemed quite...  
I felt quite guilty and pathetic that I...  
You know, what sort of a mother forgets her daughter?  
What sort of a woman forgets her own history?

It seems like a failure.  
You said when you were in hospital,  
trying to figure out who on earth you were  
and who these people were,  
and your mum came in and she was 20 years older  
than she ought to have been to your mind.  
She said, oh, your husband will be arriving shortly.  
And sure enough, he arrived,  
the man who was the father of your daughter arrived.  
But was he your husband?  
No, he wasn't my husband,  
but my mother...  
My mother thought of him as my husband  
because my mother believed so much in marriages,  
and when I was young,  
she married several times,  
and when I was young, I said,  
I'm not marrying you, you've married enough for both of us.  
And this distressed her.  
Oh, dear.  
She married and divorced my father twice,  
so it was very...  
To me, animal...  
I was a child of the 70s,  
and we all thought marriage was going to go away.  
We were all going to burn our bras,  
and marriage wasn't going to be important.  
It hasn't kind of gone that way.  
So there were a lot of things going on,  
but he was my partner  
and she would make it clear  
that she just thought of him as my husband.  
So she wasn't meaning to  
tell me false things.  
She just used the language  
from her own world,  
and that did happen with various people.  
You realise that we've all got different views of one another,  
and their perception of me  
would colour what they'd tell me.  
You know, if you're relying on other people  
to tell you who you are,  
you will get their version of you.  
You said this other man would be coming to visit you,

who'd been a former lover,  
and you'd had quite powerful feelings for him.  
When he came to visit you with that,  
you really being certain of what your background with him was.  
What about your husband?  
When you were told was your husband.  
What were your feelings towards him?  
I didn't remember him at all.  
It was shocking to me,  
and I felt terrible  
because I didn't understand  
why I couldn't remember him.  
And he seemed  
extremely  
vacant from my mind.  
It was just a source of great pain for me.  
And it would take many, many, many years  
to properly remember meeting him  
and the whole thing.  
And partly, that was to do with the nature  
of the way my amnesia functioned.  
But I thought it was personal.  
I thought I'd blotted him out.  
You said you'd been a journalist,  
and of course, obviously, reading and writing  
was a big part of your life  
before the amnesia,  
which wiped out your ability to read and write.  
I just wondered what it was like for you  
to come home and see like a  
bookcase full of books that you'd once owned  
and read and loved.  
It was extraordinarily sad  
that the only time I was aware  
that I cried  
was standing in front of my bookcase.  
So I hadn't...  
I hadn't confronted  
the fact  
that I couldn't read fully until I saw it.  
And it stood  
in front of me.  
I hadn't even known what a bookcase was  
until I looked at it. Then I went,



and all these books there,  
and I realised  
walking up to it that  
I couldn't even read the names on the spines  
and that they had  
must have held some huge meaning for me  
because at the side of my face  
there were tears.  
And I hadn't cried  
through all those things happening.  
I hadn't recalled that I've cried.  
So the books to me, having lost that,  
I just felt so  
separated from who I'd been.  
I thought, these are important to me.  
I used to read. I was a reader.  
How did you then go about  
learning how to read and write again?  
At first...  
At first I tried with my child's books,  
and that didn't seem  
to help at all.  
There was this  
extraordinary pain  
in my eyes  
and my head that I get when I concentrate  
on things  
closely.  
So  
it would hurt.  
It would physically hurt to look at these words.  
And then sometimes  
confabulation would kick in  
and that's where your mind plays tricks  
in the first stages of amnesia.  
And so my little letters  
could turn into ants  
and walk off the page.  
And I knew that wasn't valid.  
I knew this isn't what letters do.  
That's not very helpful, though, is it?  
No, my mind is playing tricks on me.  
So I actually ended up  
learning to read off an adult

book.  
And for some reason,  
I got out an adult book  
and  
just stayed with it, stayed with it,  
stayed with it, and I had breakthroughs  
and was able to do it.  
Do you think you were learning how to read and write  
or just remembering how to read and write?  
I'd imagine remembering because  
I had all the alphabet and everything.  
I didn't have any of that.  
I think it was a remembered thing.  
Everything  
with amnesia was in there.  
I just didn't have access to it.  
And how satisfying was that  
to be able to read and write again?  
It was amazing.  
It was absolutely amazing.  
It really changed everything.  
But then I got really  
strangely ambitious  
because I was surrounded by people  
who were really  
talking about the latest ideas  
all the time. There's a lot of artists and writers in my life  
and people studying this and that  
and I'd realised by then  
that I'd been quite, you know,  
I'd studied myself and  
I got it into my head that I would  
no, actually, actually it was  
my friendly  
artist who  
suggested to me,  
why don't you go and study again?  
Because I was so conscious  
that I had no knowledge.  
So no, not much history?  
Would have been good to study history.  
Yeah.  
Yeah, that was all gone.  
What did you study then?

I ended up studying philosophy.  
See, I'm not surprised.  
I'm absolutely not surprised. Well, I mean,  
you've got to go back to basics then, don't you?  
You have to sort of go to first principles.  
And philosophy gives you maybe  
some sort of base to understand the world  
with.  
It's all about thinking.  
I've had trouble with my thinking.  
I've studied philosophy before  
and I thought this  
will be like a workout.  
You know, this will make this  
brain  
snap into action.  
And did it? It did.  
It really did. It did.  
I'm still surprised to this day  
how effective it was.  
How did you pursue philosophy?  
Did you go to uni or why?  
Well, I went to Sydney Uni  
where I'd studied before  
and I had this idea  
that I'd just sit in on classes,  
but it was suggested that I enrol  
because you couldn't get the books  
if you didn't enrol. So I hadn't thought through  
that that would mean I'd have to actually write essays.  
So when it came to the essay point,  
I remember going to my lecturer  
and he sort of, I said,  
look, I don't think I can spell.  
I don't think my grammar's going to be so great.  
I told him what had happened to me  
and he said, well, don't worry about that.  
And he said, I won't mark you down for that.  
I would  
imagine to any philosophy academic  
you'd be a super interesting human being, wouldn't you?  
I mean, without any preconceived ideas  
about much at all at this point,  
someone who's had their whole consciousness

and life rebooted.  
I was of interest to my tutor,  
but I kept to myself.  
I mean, I felt very different  
and I really kept to myself.  
I didn't feel like an average student.  
I was older as well.  
And you didn't probably feel like being prodded  
and poked, I suppose.  
But still, wow.  
I have serious scars on my head  
and I just still at that point didn't have much hair  
and I'd wear a little bowl hat  
and go in and just write down.  
And I was very serious. I took it really,  
and I didn't have, I had a baby.  
I had just set amount of time.  
You mentioned you have big scars on your head.  
Was it strange to feel them?  
Oh yeah, it still is.  
I think a dent back there.  
The scars are really confronting.  
I have trouble looking  
at pictures of them,  
but anyway, they're out there in the world.  
They're not visible now, but you know they're there.  
They would be if I didn't grow my hair.  
Were snatches of your old life  
coming back to you? Definitely.  
And in what form?  
I mean, in stupid movies,  
like, you know, they go,  
you know, there's suddenly this flash of memory  
and it's sort of like a super eight film  
and then you go, oh my God.  
Of course, memory doesn't work that way.  
Are you able to describe how memories come back to you?  
Do they seep back in? How do they come back?  
I think they do come back  
sometimes through triggers,  
through smells and sound and sight,  
or merging like a little film clip.  
I think that does happen sometimes.  
Smells really powerful, isn't it, to the memory?

Smell is really powerful.  
And I think that they've, studies have found  
that those bits of the brain do light up  
when you remember, but my experience was  
that not all the important memories came back,  
like it could be quite random  
and little bits would come, but suddenly  
there would be that  
whole memory that's so amazing  
when you lost them to have  
like a little window into a past  
bit of your life take hold.  
It's fantastic to have just triggered  
through somebody saying a word or a sound  
or even a place.  
So do they sort of slot back in or something?  
And how does it feel when they do come back to you?  
Is it disturbing or is it really nice?  
Well, you don't have a sense of slot  
because then I would have had a sense of a whole narrative.  
I mean, I was missing a narrative at that time.  
They would come like little gems.  
They would come like little flashes of reality.  
Now, by this stage, by the stage  
I'm getting a proper real, proper memory like that.  
I'm not anymore having the confabulation.  
So I know that they're trustworthy,  
but I still would go back  
and make sure with people, you know, come on.  
I've got a memory of, you know,  
my teen years where they like this  
or I've got a memory of being a journalist.  
Was it like that?  
So I would still go back and test that out.  
Even for those of us who haven't had  
your Amnesiac episode, memory is unreliable.  
It's funny, isn't it?  
And you have to wonder after a while,  
how much of it is imagination?  
Did that really happen to me?  
Did I imagine it?  
Absolutely.  
Look, you couldn't be more correct.  
I have a memory that I suspect

is just a reconstruction of being  
three years old on my mother's lap  
and Kennedy was shot on a new,  
but, you know, wonky colour television.  
Colour was sort of greenish bit off.

That's my memory.

I bet you that was my parents telling me that happened.

You know, so I do know exactly what you mean  
and I do think our memories are reconstructions.

So, but I spend a lot of time  
actively reconstructing my memories.

Several times I've had this experience  
where someone, a good friend,  
someone I know very well,  
has sat there and told an anecdote  
about something that's happened to them  
that's kind of dramatic and interesting.

But no, it never happened to them.

It happened to me and I told them about it  
and they've sort of adopted it  
and sort of glommed onto their minds  
as something that happened to them  
and it's a really amazing and enormously funny thing to say.

Well, let them finish

and you go, that never happened to you  
because that happened to me.

And you just sort of point out the facts  
and you couldn't have been there at the time  
and I was there at the time.

And the profound shock it has on that person  
after they've very confidently told this amusing anecdote  
and realised that not a bit of it was real to them  
is amazing to watch.

And are they performing?

Yes, they are.

And they've nicked off with your memory?

Yes, they've nicked off.

They've stolen my memory.

They don't believe that they've had your experience.

Well, eventually there's a shock when they realise  
that it's actually true.

Then they remember me telling them the story.

But they've presented it very confidently  
and it's not a lie.

They've not been lying in their mind.  
I was at home and Simpson says,  
if you believe it's true, it's not a lie.  
But they've told that story  
and I know it's not happened to them.  
It's really interesting.  
Well, so far my book's been out since November  
and the people who have been represented in the book  
so far have not argued with me about any of it.  
So I'm hoping that I haven't nicked off  
with somebody's memory.  
You had been a journalist.  
How thoroughly did you investigate your,  
as a journalist, your ex-life as a journalist?  
Because this is 91 and there's not the internet then, is there?  
No, there's not the internet.  
So what do you do?  
Go through like archives or something?  
Do you have your previous articles to read them?  
My mother did have scrapbooks and I had collected,  
I had cut out most of my articles  
and put them into folders and had them lying around.  
But at first it's also like I was that journalist beforehand  
but I must say having lost my memory  
could make me quite passive.  
I didn't want to know everything all at once.  
I couldn't digest all those articles.  
I was still, and I didn't want to go back to some of it.  
So it was bit by bit.  
So there was one hunger to want to know  
but there were times when it was just too much.  
So I wouldn't say that I've ever really fully set out  
to investigate myself.  
I don't think my journalistic career was as interesting  
as it could have been.  
It was pretty just a lot of boring bits.  
So had I maybe been a bit more staggeringly brilliant  
it would have been more fascinating.  
Meanwhile, how was your relationship with your partner,  
the father of your daughter fairing?  
Oh, that didn't go very well.  
He became very distant,  
very focused on his work  
and quite unreliable in terms of when he would come home.

So we were sort of moving off in other directions.  
I was really trying to reconstruct my life,  
very focused on my studies.  
He didn't really understand why I would be studying philosophy.  
He was something like, where is the product?  
Where is the product of philosophy?  
Well, you get philosophical books  
but he wanted an object.  
So profoundly different people.  
What about your daughter?  
How are you getting on with your baby daughter?  
She was most excellent.  
Jessica was a great baby for me.  
She was very smiley.  
We'd sometimes call her the Buddha baby  
because she would just beam  
and she had a good sense of humour.  
She had a son, strange and a baby  
but she'd look up at her...  
Once she was talking, look up at her moth  
and say, cuddle.  
You know, she was just cute and fun.  
It was gruelling work  
because, of course, motherhood is  
and I was out on my own with it a bit.  
But because she was so delightful,  
I was very lucky to have her  
because it gave me joy  
and I didn't have much joy.  
So you break apart from her dad.  
He came to see you while you were in hospital  
that gave you nice feelings.  
He did walk right back into my life  
and I spent some time with him  
and I'm really grateful for what he did do.  
At the time that I needed somebody to be there for me,  
he changed an appeal to...  
He turned up, he fronted up.  
And look, I was about six stone.  
I didn't know always what was going on  
and I was a bit of a jittery little thing  
so he didn't seem to flinch  
and turned up was quite good to me.  
Well, it's been more than 30 years



since you woke up not knowing who you were.  
Do people say you're different now?  
Do you think you're different?  
Do you think, given that you've had this big reboot  
of your identity and your memory,  
do people say things like,  
oh, you're not as stressed out about things  
as you once were,  
or you're more stressed out about things?  
Do you think there's been changes to your character  
or are you pretty much the same person?  
The people who would know many of them aren't with us anymore.  
So one of my friends sometimes says,  
oh, that's Annie,  
that's the sort of thing Annie would say.  
And do you like to hear that?  
I do, I do.  
My sense of humour is pretty similar.  
But there was a profound change in who I am  
because everything came easy to me before  
and I've had to struggle.  
So I suppose, you know,  
when I hit 30 was my first big struggle  
and I had to struggle to do basic things like read and write  
and to fit into a culture  
that everybody else can do those things.  
Well, I used to be one of those clever kids  
who could just do what they wanted to do  
and I was sporty and I was clever and I was popular.  
But I've always had a timid side  
and even as a journalist I had the two sides.  
So I think it helped my compassion to...  
I think I was more ambitious  
and probably competitive before than I am today.  
When you have kids,  
one of the things you notice when they're small,  
and I find that's this,  
particularly with my daughter when she was little,  
still to some degree now,  
you suddenly realise kids are super observant.  
They see all sorts of things as they walk down the street  
that you'd miss because as adults  
we learn how to think in shorthand  
so we can arrive at the point of what we need to do.

We become more pragmatic.  
We don't see things that are apparently irrelevant  
but, you know,  
your little daughter will see a specific kind of bird up there  
that you won't see as an adult.  
Is that you?  
Were you like that for a long while?  
Were you seeing all sorts of things  
given that you couldn't take anything for granted?  
Much the same way a small child can't take anything for granted.  
It is unable to think in that kind of cognitive shorthand.  
I certainly spent a bit of time absorbing the world  
and having that sense of wonder  
because when I was in the hospital,  
I couldn't remember what it was like outside the walls of the hospital.  
And of course, once my senses returned to normal  
because I had the sense shut down for some time  
and then when it came back,  
I could feel the wind and see that, you know,  
it was beautiful.  
I mean, I love nature.  
Yeah, what was a warm sunny day like?  
Yeah, so everything was more,  
it was heightened and beautiful and swimming.  
I've reacquainted myself with swimming  
which was just incredibly pleasurable to do.  
And so, yeah, I think it was having that sense of wonder again  
that we can lose so easily if you get too busy as an adult.  
And I also think I could look on at some adults in the early, early days  
and think, that's a bit silly.  
Look how they all, you know, go on about having some ritual tea  
and they're not getting to the point.  
Why aren't they talking about this?  
Why aren't they, you know, that childish thing  
of criticising the adults?  
Right, right.  
They're elaborate curtesies and all that.  
Yeah.  
That just looks kind of...  
So the grown-ups look lame to you, even though you were one?  
Adults do look very strange.  
When I first saw kissing on the television,  
it looked like I thought, what are these people doing?  
They're sucking each other's faces.

**[Transcript] Conversations / Stories of starting over: Anne Howell**

It looks quite aggressive.

Aggressive, right.

Is kissing nice now?

Yes, kissing is excellent now.

And it's been amazing speaking with you.

What an extraordinary story. Thank you so much.

Thank you so much, Richard.

You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations  
with Richard Fidler.

For more Conversations interviews,

please go to the website,

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