

## Pleasure and Pain Were My Earliest Memories

*By Irv Sternberg*

For many years I thought my earliest memory was about getting my hand caught in an automobile door when I was a very young child. But then I began to doubt that was actually my first memory. I decided it was something my mother told me when I was older rather than something I actually recalled. So what *was* my first memory?

Actually, there are two. First, I clearly remember lying on a couch in our home when my mother handed me a slice of orange and showed me how to pull back the peel so I could suck the juice out of the pulp before eating it. It became a lifetime habit. My second earliest memory was painful. I recall sitting on my tricycle, pedaling furiously, losing control and slamming into the side of our building. I slid forward on the tricycle into the bar between my thighs. The pain in my groin was something I had not experienced before. Maybe that's why I remember it so clearly.

I think both episodes occurred when I was about three years old. That's consistent with psychological studies that indicate few adults can remember anything that happened to them before that age. A study in 2014, for example, demonstrates that it's about the age of 7 when our earliest memories begin to fade, a phenomenon known as "childhood amnesia." The phrase was coined by Sigmund Freud who theorized that people repressed their earliest memories due to their inappropriate sexual nature. Of course, Freud said everything could be explained in terms of sex.

Recent research, however, shows that infants simply do not have the sophisticated neural architecture needed to form and hold onto more complex forms of memory. Infants keep their memories in a sort of colander with large holes through which their memories fall. Older children create a fine net in the colander and are able to retain more memories.

As we age we are less concerned with our earliest memories than we are with more recent ones. Where did we leave our keys, our glasses, our car? Wasn't there a birthday or anniversary or some other important date we should remember? Many of us depend on our memories to comfort and entertain us. We take delight in recalling our school days, our family dinners and trips to relatives' homes, holidays, finding love, raising our children, our work lives, etc.

We are less likely to enjoy memories that make us sad or unhappy. Maybe, if Dr. Freud were alive today, he'd come up with another theory about senior amnesia. And he'd probably blame it on lousy sex.