On Memory and Bravery: When You Can Be Screamed at and Honored on the Same Day

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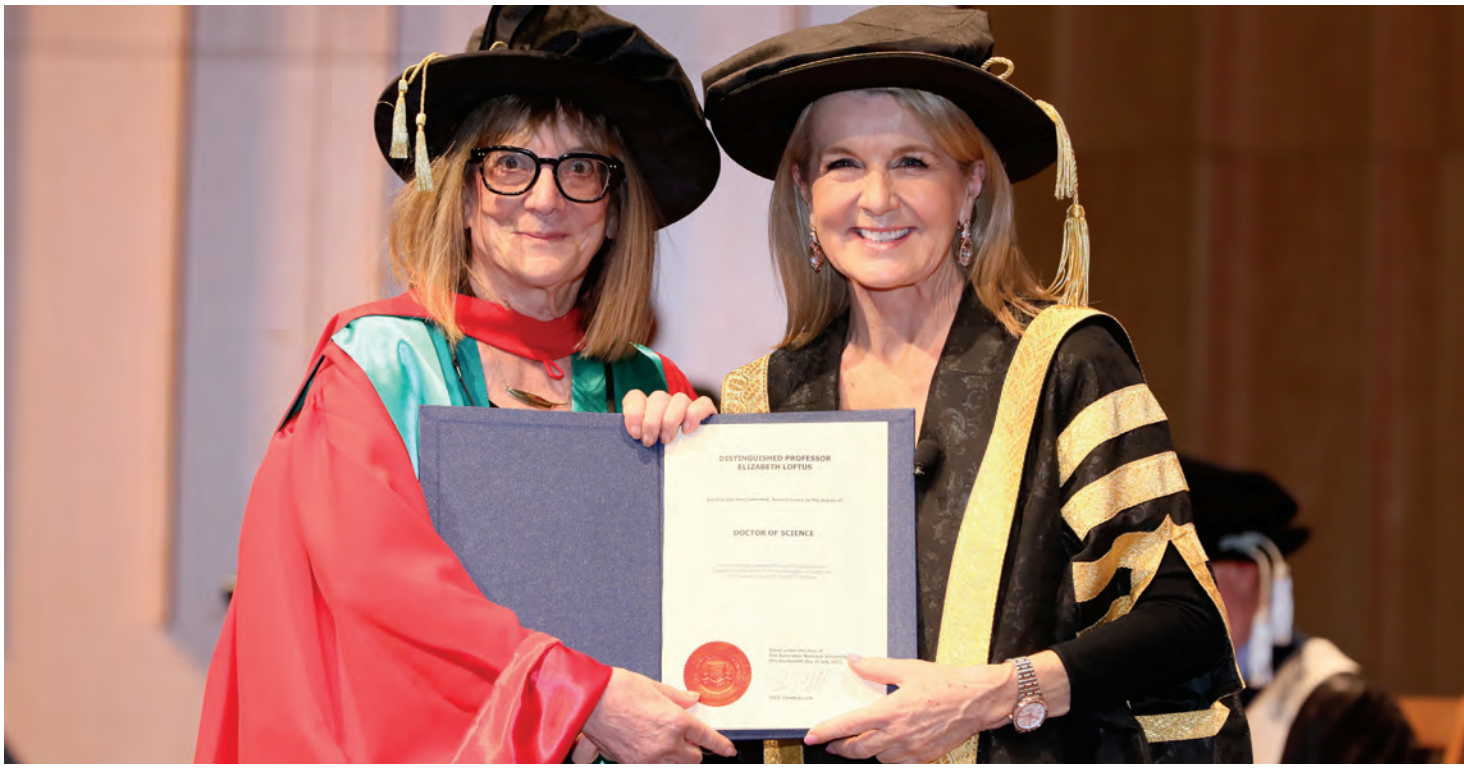
Editor's note: Psychologist and CSI Fellow Elizabeth Loftus is one of the world's leading experts on human memory. She has long been outspoken in her criticisms of the controversial claims about repressed memories and innovative in her research showing how false memories can easily be created. She is Distinguished Professor of Psychological Science, Criminology, and Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine. On July 14, 2022, she delivered the commencement address at Australian National University (ANU) and received an honorary doctorate "for exceptional contributions to psychological science, pioneering applications to the administration of justice, and her unwavering pursuit of scientific freedom." This is her talk.



Elizabeth Loftus, left, receiving her honorary doctorate from the Hon. Julie Bishop, chancellor of Australian National University (ANU) in July. Bishop is ANU's first female chancellor.

As I prepared to travel to Australia for ANU's commencement, I and millions of other citizens in my country were glued to the Congressional hearings investigating the deadly attack on our Capitol on January 6, 2021—an armed and violent insurrection designed to overthrow the legitimate election that made Joe Biden president by seven million votes. One bit of standout testimony about the insurrection came from a young woman named Cassidy Hutchinson. She was in her mid-twenties, not much older than many of you, and a half century younger than me. She had been a White House aide and assistant to Donald Trump's chief of staff. She worked only a few feet from the Oval Office and clearly was in an insider position. There was nothing special about her; she was one of the legions of foot soldiers who work for any political party, the ones who show up every day to support their party and their president. But Hutchinson's testimony was particularly damaging to former President Donald Trump, as she calmly detailed the behavior of the chief of staff, her boss, and the many others who were aiding and abetting Trump

in his lies about a stolen election, his embrace of the armed rioters, his reluctance to call off the crowds, his temper tantrum when his own Secret Service whisked him away instead of letting him go to the Capitol. When she was asked how she felt about what she was observing firsthand, she said that as a staff member in the administration, she was "frustrated and disappointed." And then she added: "As an American, I was disgusted. It was unpatriotic. It was un-American. We were watching the Capitol building get defaced over a lie."

There she was, in the spotlight, with a choice she thought she would never have to make: support her bosses and party, be silent, obey orders—or tell the truth.

Many observers were dazzled by Hutchinson's calm testimony; one politician said she was "one of the most brave and honorable people I know." But almost at once, Republicans began accusing Hutchinson of betraying her party, lying, and making up stories. Indeed, at the hearings, one Republican after another told chilling stories of the abuse and threats they endured for testifying to the truth—threats on their lives and their children's, being called the vilest of names, being hounded on the internet and in person day and night.

Watching Cassidy Hutchinson's testimony made me want to talk to you about bravery. Some people seem brave by nature; they set out to change the world or pursue justice in the face of relentless opposition, or they run into burning buildings and freezing rivers to rescue a victim. But that's not the way bravery usually works. What happens for most people, at some unexpected time in their lives, is that they are tested. They face an issue, like whether or not to report wrongdoing that they observe at work, or they are called upon to testify, like Cassidy Hutchinson, and they have to decide: Am I going to tell the truth? Or am I going to play it safe, keep my head down, go along with the crowd? Hey, I have a family and job to protect, don't I? I want my friends to like me, right? No wonder bravery is difficult.

When I started out in my profession studying human memory, I never expected that I, or my work, would prove to be as explosively divisive as it has become—that, like Cassidy, I too would be screamed at for being shameful and dishonest *and* honored for being impressively courageous, sometimes on the same day. How should I think about these two diametrically opposite descriptions of me? And why did the study of memory prove to be so inflammatory?

You almost certainly have encountered memory disputes in your own life, as when you and your sibling disagree about some past event, or you and a friend argue about who started an argument. People don't *like* having their memories questioned—it can feel very unsettling. But I have been studying disputed memories for many years and learned that it's one thing when people disagree about a childhood memory but it's quite another when people witness crimes and accidents and other important events and disagree about what they saw. I wanted to understand this. What happens to their memories? How accurate are they? How permanent? Working with many research partners, I did hundreds of studies showing that you could easily change people's memories for significant events: You could make people believe that a thief had a red coat rather than a gray one, or that two cars smashed into each other rather than simply bumping each other's fenders. You could even make people believe they "remembered" entire experiences that they never had, such as being attacked by a vicious bully or even being abducted by aliens.

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These studies showed us that the past is not indelibly etched in stone—or wired once and for all somewhere in a corner of the brain—but a living, breathing reality that takes shape as we revisit our own stories. Our memories are not literal truths but, at least in part, creative manipulations of fact. Layered on each remembered event of our lives is the icing of dream, myth, and wishful thinking. To make it all more complicated, every time we tell a memory, we are rehearsing it, modifying it, adding details … until, over time, it may have changed a great deal from the original version.

These research findings were crucial for helping us understand how witnesses to crimes can develop mistaken memories—and how, tragically, their mistaken memories can and have led to the conviction of innocent people. Our experiments helped us see how highly suggestive interviewing practices or even suggestive psychotherapy can lead people to develop bizarre false memories that can destroy their own lives and those of their loved ones.

And then, thirty years ago, as I was getting deep into research on the distortions of memory, the Recovered Memory Movement first erupted. I never imagined that recovered memory hysteria would envelop the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, and other parts of the world—thousands of people going into therapy and coming out believing bizarre memories of abuse and torture, uncorroborated and in many cases flatly contradicted by evidence. Alleged memories that divided and destroyed countless families. Allegations against parents and daycare teachers that were hysterical and preposterous but put hundreds upon hundreds of people in prison or otherwise destroyed their lives. When I started to speak out about these injustices, and offer the evidence from psychological science, I was unprepared for the hostility that came my way—from psychotherapists who were promoting the unsubstantiated notion of repressed memories of trauma and from their patients who were victims of their treatments. I received barrages of threatening letters. A woman on a

plane, recognizing me, swatted me with her magazine. Coordinated efforts tried to get me fired from my job. Threats of violence were aimed at organizations that had invited me to speak. Amongst the worst was having to defend a lawsuit brought by a daughter who had accused her mother of sexual abuse based on memories that were, in my view, highly suspicious. I never imagined that mistaken views about memory could ruin so many lives. I found myself drawn into the position of defending the science—and defending people falsely or mistakenly accused—and for my efforts, big trouble came my way.

I'm not Don Quixote, that great character in the seventeenth-century Spanish novel who soaked himself in romances and dreams of adventure and then set out to be a chivalrous knight, rescuing damsels in distress and protecting the innocent. I didn't set out to be brave, to fight the forces of pseudoscience and dogma with the sword of science. And yet I had to keep speaking up.

Coming back to you, ANU graduates. In the safety and specialness of this day, you might not be thinking about bravery or courage, but for many of you there will come a day when you will be faced with a choice you will have to make: integrity vs. convenience, doing the right thing or justifying the wrong thing. Will you take the brave path and step up, or will you play it safe? Will you blow the whistle on some unethical practice in your company, risking your job, or will you remain silent? Some choices must be made instantly, and sometimes you'll have a bit longer to think about what you want to do. What choice will you make?

I do know that once faced with the choice between yielding to the wave of hostility and criticism that my research provoked or standing as strong as I could for science and justice, the answer was a no-brainer for me. As I look back, I feel pride about the work that I've done as a psychological scientist. I'm proud of the fact that I was able to help so many people along the way, particularly when my work has helped prevent innocent people from being found guilty in a court of law. It's pretty powerful when you know that you have helped to save even one life.

My point is this: It has not been easy to pay the price for doing work that threatens some people's cherished beliefs, questions their certainty about their memories and experiences, or throws doubt on the story they have created to explain their life. But there are rewards aplenty—not only the immense emotional satisfaction you feel when you've saved a life, but also the immense intellectual satisfaction you feel when you've contributed to our understanding of a phenomenon as central to human life as memory—work that has helped countless couples and families realize that their different memories are perfectly normal and there's no need to go to war over them.

Most of all, there is a deep gratification in knowing that my profession and the academic enterprise that I love and work for appreciates my labors. Which is why, at this moment, this honorary doctorate from ANU means so very much to me. Thank you. ■

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Carol Tavris, a brave skeptic herself, for many discussions of bravery and her myriad contributions to my thoughts on the topic.