

Today is Valentine's Day. My mind turns easily to a conversation I had while standing in the aisle of a church on the east side of Cleveland. This friendly woman chatting with me was probably in her mid-50's and had a charming mop of blonde curls. I was 26 with a not-so-charming amount of student loan debt. She had turned the conversation to her daughter, though I can't recall precisely how. Then, she said to me two important words. It was only the second time in my life I had heard them. One right after the other—and full of meaning. When I heard them, my mind instantly, and without a flinch, turned back 14 years earlier to when I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade at Center Street Elementary. There, in that school building and in that grade, was last time I had heard those same two words, one right after the other. Hearing them again caused that first time I had heard them to come back to me in a shot. This woman had given me her daughter's first and last name, and I instantly recognized it. 14 years later—and never having once met or spoken to her daughter—I knew the name enough to remember that a friend of mine had said that name to me 14 years earlier. He said that name just one time as he told me about a girl on his bus. Using his bus route, I told that nice woman right there in that aisle that I actually *knew* her daughter's name and I identified, within about 10 houses, the closest major landmark to their house. I nearly shocked her blonde curls straight. The name she gave me in that aisle was the name of the woman who, three years later, I would marry in that same church. I would see her come down that same aisle to meet me at the altar. I think of it now and it's as if Cupid himself, cherubic and grinning with the secret knowledge of his purpose, had fired that name through the corridor of years knowing that I was at the end of his arrow's flight.

I am sure you have heard it cheaply stated that love and chocolate produce the same chemicals in the brain—that, from a brain chemistry point of view, there is very little distinction between their intra-cranial lives. It doesn't feel true though, does it? If you have known love, you have surely known it more completely than you have known any really good chocolate you've ever had. And when my amazing wife gives me really good chocolate today—because she knows its power over me—these chemicals will stir in me again. Now, what if I told you that there was a chance that the story I shared above stirred up the same chemical in your brain? What if I told you that stories are like love and chocolate?

Part of the power of chocolate lies in its ability to produce dopamine and oxytocin.<sup>1</sup> Dopamine might not need as much introduction as oxytocin, so let me informally introduce oxytocin to you here. Oxytocin is quite the Valentine's Day hormone. It is released in us when we are hugged, kissed, or have sexual contact.<sup>2</sup> Associated with other kinds of human bonding, it is also released during childbirth and breastfeeding.<sup>3</sup> This chemical river cuts a deep and

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hess, *Do You Love Chocolate? Blame Your Oxytocin Receptors*, INVERSE (Apr. 23, 2017, 2:14 PM), <https://www.inverse.com/article/30664-genes-diet-chocolate-oxytocin>

<sup>2</sup> Phoebe Weston, *Why chocolates are the perfect gift for your partner: The sweet treats stimulate the same hormone as sex*, DAILY MAIL (Apr. 9, 2018, 7:13 AM), <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-5593981/Chocolate-really-DOES-melt-heart-loved-ones-say-researchers.html>

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Watson, *Oxytocin: The love hormone*, HARVARD HEALTH PUBLISHING: HARVARD HEALTH BLOG (Jul. 20, 2021), <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/oxytocin-the-love-hormone>

important channel, indeed, as rising and falling oxytocin levels have actually been correlated to rising and falling levels of empathy.<sup>4</sup>

An oxytocin researcher by the name of Jeffery Zacks has tried to find ways to stimulate the production of oxytocin. Here, we arrive at the crux of this month's blog piece, packaged into this quote from Zacks: "Of all the stimuli we've developed that release oxytocin, [consuming stories] was the best."<sup>5</sup> The more emotionally charged the story, the higher the release of oxytocin.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, a group of researchers tested the power of storytelling with hospitalized children.<sup>7</sup> They found that after just 30 minutes of having stories read to them, the children showed a marked increase in salivary oxytocin levels, showed lower levels of cortisol—a stress hormone, reported feeling less pain, and made more positive word associations with words like "doctor," "nurse," and "hospital."<sup>8</sup> Now if that doesn't melt an icy lawyer's heart on Valentine's Day, I don't know what will. As I frequently say in this space, the trial applications of storytelling and oxytocin don't need to be explored at length in this short blog. It will suffice to ponder for a moment just how much we would like our jurors to feel bonded to our clients and to feel the empathy we hope will result when they hear our emotionally charged tale of injustice. Consider this the chemical rationale for working on the craft of our courtroom storytelling.

Ask my wife how we met and she will never include in that narrative the story of how I remembered her name 14 years after hearing it for the first and only time. It's not that she sees no mystery in it. It's simply that this part of our story is more mine than hers. Today, we and our loved ones will write another line, separately and together, in the story of our shared lives. Love moves the pen. Love bends the story arcs of our lives together as easily as a tailor bends a thread to her will. I love this trial advocacy community that so many of you have helped forge over the years. And, yes, perhaps I feel a little sappy about our trial advocacy community on a day like today...but you would understand how I feel if you knew how much chocolate I've already consumed.

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<sup>4</sup> Jessica Marshall, *Gripping yarns*, 209 NEW SCIENTIST, no. 2799, Feb. 12, 2011 at 45, 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 46-47.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 46.

<sup>7</sup> See Guilherme Brockington, et al., *Storytelling increases oxytocin and positive emotions and decreases cortisol and pain in hospitalized children*, 118 PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, no. 22, May 24, 2021 at 1-7.

<sup>8</sup> See *Id.*, generally.