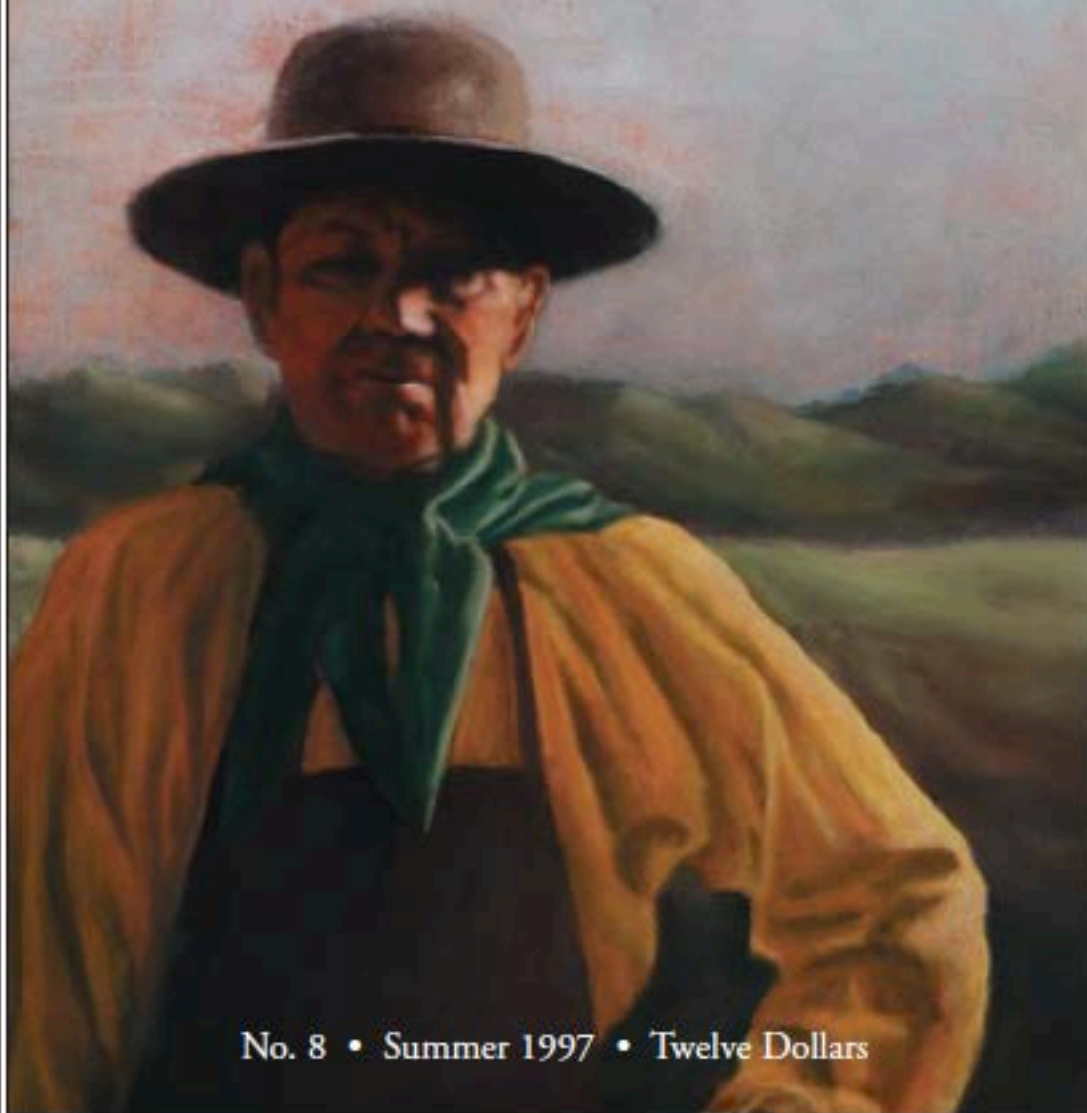


MARS HILL REVIEW



Essays • Studies • Reminders of God



No. 8 • Summer 1997 • Twelve Dollars

FORGETTING TO REMEMBER

How We Run from Our Stories

By Dan Allender and Don Hudson

Editor's note: In this two-part essay, authors Dan Allender and Don Hudson collaborate respectively on, first, a fiction narrative and, second, a nonfiction discourse on the uses and misuses of memory.

I.

The day trickled slowly through Aimee's hands. She looked out on the expanse of miles upon miles of South Texas scrub. The sun was setting and the orange swirls of luminescent clouds hung in the sky like victory laurels to help her celebrate another day of survival. Aimee was not amused at the thought, however—nor at this sign of an ordered world asserting its independence over her. She had no desire to celebrate her life. She did not want to survive; she did not want to make it through another day. She neither wanted to live nor to die.

She sat looking out at the deer that gathered below her at the feeder. Andreas, the ranch foreman, had salted the earth with desire, the sweet corn that suppressed the instinctual reticence of the deer to be drawn near man. They approached the feeder with slow, attentive steps. One three-year-old doe preceded the group of about twenty deer. She walked more quickly than the others, to have the first opportunity to graze on the corn. She was clearly bigger than most of the other does.

Aimee picked up her binoculars and focused on the confident doe. Her stride was dominant and fluid. She walked at least thirty feet in front of the herd. If a hunter were allowed to shoot near the big house where Aimee was staying, the doe would die. But in this protected setting, the animal was free to forage without bearing the consequence of a bullet fired from a high-powered, piercing assault rifle, which would have torn her breath and heart from her being. Aimee thought to herself, "I was once like her. Free and at the front of the pack. I guess I lost my fear."

Then she lowered the binoculars. She couldn't bear to follow the doe's grace, the polished strength that rippled through her flanks. Aimee shuddered with

AIMEE DID
NOT WANT TO
SURVIVE; SHE
NEITHER WANTED
TO LIVE NOR TO
DIE.

her next thought. She had never understood how a hunter could take the life of such a beautiful creature—yet, at this moment, she was simultaneously awed by the beauty and grace of the doe and repulsed by her courageous spirit.

Aimee had learned by this time in her life that confidence and success were merely setups for failure. Holding her head high and achieving were invitations for abuse from other people. “If that doe understood life, real life, she would not be so daring,” Aimee thought. “She would learn her lesson.”

It was time for dinner. For Aimee, this was the most painful and pointless time of the day. Time to replenish the nutrients necessary to survive another day—another painful day.

Aimee had been invited to the Quail Trail Ranch near Del Rio, Texas by her college friend, Allene. Allene had grown up in a hard-working oil family who, early on, had perceived that all nature is limited and fickle. They had diversified their family business in day-to-day real estate, such as strip malls and convenience stores—the kind of investment that depends on the drives of the middle class rather than on the polished arrogance of the well-to-do. So, when the intermittent economic busts came, they not only survived but advanced in wealth and power. Now the Quail Trail Ranch was run on the same common-stock, plain but gracious care that went into all the other family labor.

Allene was a Texan. Aimee was not, and their first meeting had been fraught with the typical tensions and misconceptions that most Texans and non-Texans (this being the most basic division of humankind) encounter when they are thrown into the same corral. Aimee had thought Allene was misogynistic, arrogant, and cow-brandingly brusque and brutal. Allene had met foreigners before, but she had never slept in the same room with one. She thought Aimee was sissified, fragile, dull, and naive. In their first meeting, they hated each other. Yet, like most friendships of depth, theirs began on this rocky ground of total difference rather than commonality. And so, that freshman year, Aimee and Allene were two more people washed again into the current of a larger story, one they never expected or would have dreamed of.

Like most college friendships, their close, daily camaraderie ended. At graduation they pursued different paths. Aimee had gone to graduate school to study English and literature. Allene had rejoined her family in business. Even though the two had not seen each other, they’d kept a conversation going over the decade and a half since graduation.

To Aimee’s surprise and wonder, she found her true love once she was in graduate school. She loved literature and, much more, she

loved to teach. Aimee continued her studies, receiving her Ph.D. in literature, and she took a professorship at a small but prestigious Christian university. Her first years in the classroom were thrilling. The university life, the eager students, the stimulating conversations with other faculty members—all of these Aimee loved during that first semester. She could not imagine being happier in any job on the earth.

Then reality set in. As with any endeavor in life, it didn't take long for Aimee's dream to come crashing down.

After three years, Aimee was up for tenure—the guarantee of a secured teaching position for the rest of her life. The decision process took two months of long, drawn-out meetings. In the end, the administration and faculty denied Aimee's tenure. Not surprisingly, when Aimee wasn't given tenure at the college—and therefore, in fact, was covertly being asked either to leave or to bear the humiliation of not being sufficiently respected to be honored with a professorship—she ended up spending a week with Allene on the family ranch.

Aimee was desperate. She had a month to decide before school ended whether to accept a contract that would leave her unprotected and disrespected in her department. She worked with four men. The department head was a pretentious man who covered both his bald spot and his threadbare career with the sweep of corrective combing. He had allowed his hair on one side of his head to grow well beyond Christian propriety and then swept it over his bald spot to hide his shame. He had done so in his career as well. He had garnered headship of the department by political maneuverings rather than academic competence.

Dr. Lory Adamson was a bright man, but for some reason he had taken a bully-vulture approach to academics. He scavenged the works of the younger faculty in his department and then worked them into his own thought. If any of the younger faculty protested, he pressured them into submission through the fear of losing the prize of all academic labor: tenure.

Most disappointing to Aimee, though, was that in the beginning Dr. Adamson had been a father figure, someone who championed her brightness and giftedness. Unlike her own father, Dr. Adamson had encouraged Aimee to move into areas of thinking that few Christians would even venture to entertain. He opened doors of speaking and writing for Aimee. Aimee thought she'd found the father she had lost. But as Aimee's thinking developed and her accolades increased, her favor with Dr. Adamson decreased. By her third year of teaching, Dr. Adamson had become her worst enemy. Here again was another of life's brutal betrayals.

IT WAS TIME FOR
DINNER. FOR
AIMEE, THIS WAS
THE MOST
PAINFUL AND
POINTLESS TIME
OF THE DAY.

AFTER THREE
YEARS, AIMEE WAS
UP FOR TENURE—
THE GUARANTEE
OF A SECURED
TEACHING
POSITION FOR
THE REST OF
HER LIFE.

Aimee and the other two younger associates were slowly taught the ropes of the academic Christian world. They had to be good thinkers; they had to know the secular realm of thought. But they could not be too friendly toward unbelieving scholarship, or they would provoke disdain or confusion from their students, who in turn would report to their parents the worst identification of all—the dreaded word *liberal*. To be called liberal, or *avant garde*, or a free thinker was the kiss of death in the Christian university.

Aimee had been asked to teach a course on feminist literary theory and another on semiotics. These areas of study were fraught with the possibility of confusion and complexity; they were fertile ground for Aimee to be labeled a poor teacher or, worse, a liberal. Aimee knew she was assigned courses the department considered important for students who would go on to graduate work, but too difficult for the average student. The risks were clear: Teach the course well, and disturb Christian students with complexity and a different way of thinking. Teach the course poorly, and possibly escape the criticism and scrutiny of those who guarded against the intrusion of liberal thought. Aimee was bright enough to know that these courses could make or break her career.

And she had been right. It all had transpired as she'd feared. She had been misunderstood by those not willing to be stretched by French literary criticism or the convoluted but brilliant thinking behind semiotics. As a result of these two courses, she was branded and then left unprotected to the carnivores of the academic world, the watchdogs of orthodoxy, who patrolled the fence of religious correctness. She was called a "liberal."

In truth, Aimee was not a liberal—far from it. She was a woman of gracious convictions, and she exercised a strong, rippling passion for truth. She simply wanted truth to be taken into account by those who often sauntered through life in the unthinking, unfeeling herd. She wanted truth to change the heart—to open up the passions of meaning that await all who are willing to be pierced by the ache of the heart and intrigued by the wonder of God's world. She was an artist and an open-minded thinker. Her academic motto was: "Truth has nothing to fear."

But she did not fit. Ironically, it was the story of her life that seemed to repeat itself with everyone with whom she came into contact. This was the major theme of her life: In the beginning of all her endeavors and relationships, she was bold, expectant, and confident—but in the end something always happened to strip her dreams away, reminding her she was a stranger living in a strange land.

Aimee had grown up in the suburbs of Columbus, Ohio. She was an all-American Buckeye, a midwestern, ordinary beauty whose eyes were kind and intense. She had been the girl voted Most

Likely Never to Fit to Accommodate the World. She had questioned everyone and everything. It was not essentially rebellion or doubt; it was a driving, almost inevitable curiosity that caused her to wonder why people speak as they do. To her, the world was always in speech. Loud and silent, brusque and covert, the world spoke. Yet, to Aimee's astonishment, no one seemed to hear. She alone heard trills and melodies in the silent knots of a tree. She saw the weight, darkness, and playful violence in Wagner's *Ring Trilogy*. She was alone—silent in a noisy world.

She was alone as an only child. Her mother was a workaday substitute teacher and her father a baker. Unlike her parents, Aimee was an intellectual—a reader, a thinker, a woman of lonely passion that had no audience or stage to play out its interior dialogue. And so she played with the people who introduced themselves to her through reading, and she took them into her heart as a hungry woman seizes scraps from a table. Yet the more she played with her new friends, the more she became odd and dangerous to her father.

He was an eminently practical man. He worked the hours of the dead and suffered others with the silence of the weary. His distracted, exhausted demeanor in the daylight always said to Aimee, "Don't talk. Don't upset, don't ask, don't want." He was not a cruel man, just empty and tired. And he desperately wanted his daughter to achieve the one status that would assure her a comfortable life: a degree in elementary education. He wanted his daughter never to suffer the endless nights of doughy slavery that drained both his blood and soul through the sweat induced by the hellish heat of the furnace—the omnipresent furnace that took all the labor of his hand and turned it into produce to be devoured.

He hated his work and he did not want his little girl to suffer the fate of the working class: endless, meaningless, poor-paying, soul-inhaling labor. He had impressed on her the value of education and the endless need for elementary school teachers. There would always be children and the inevitable need for good teachers.

She had been won to his commitment to education and teaching. But she could not be convinced to major in elementary ed. Instead, her heart burned with hope when she read fiction, essays, prose, poetry—anything to do with the rhythm of words. Her father was furious when she decided to go to graduate school, because it darkened his hope for her future. He knew of so many cabbies with doctorates in literature that he assumed at one point it was the reason most of them could barely speak English.

They had a fight the night she accepted the scholarship to the University of Chicago. He had warned her it was a desolate school in the worst squalor of the city. He screamed so loud about her throwing her future away, he popped a small vessel in his neck. It

SHE WAS A
WOMAN OF
GRACIOUS
CONVICTIONS,
AND SHE
EXERCISED A
STRONG,
RIPPLING
PASSION FOR
TRUTH.

SHE HAD BEEN
THE GIRL VOTED
MOST LIKELY
NEVER TO FIT TO
ACCOMMODATE
THE WORLD.

looked to her that he was going to have a stroke. When he threw the glass at her, it smashed her mother's favorite Will Moses print of the family picking its Christmas tree. That's when she knew her dream of hearing him say he was proud of her—thrilled that she was a reader, a thinker, a bright, gifted woman whom he loved—was as broken as the shards of glass that littered the floor. She could not bear looking at the shattered picture for another instant.

Another dream died that night. She had wanted much more than her father's encouragement; she had wanted her father to understand her—her mind, her confusion, her hopes for the future.

He never did. And from that moment onward, Aimee charted a course for her life that turned her back on practicality, caution, and the mundane, middle-class values her father breathed and had bled to achieve for his little girl. Aimee walked away from her family. She did not respect her mother or father. Their lives were a witness to what became of religious values that were in service to mere economic stability; she wanted much more for her life. She fled their values, but far more deeply, she fled their place in her life. She would never want nor ask her father to be a man whose lap could hold her as a little girl. She would never again let her heart suffer the hope of hearing his blessing.

Her Christian friends saw her as a committed, radical believer who was not comfortable with compromise or conciliation. She fought for her convictions and at times alienated others who did not share her passion for truth. In fact, she fought never to be drawn back into the orbit of memory that was disturbed like a meteor hitting a planet when her father shattered the picture and her future.

Aimee looked out over the darkening sunset and felt a tremor of history run through her back and arms. Her flesh broke into the goose bumps of memory. Her father had been dead for five years, and she had thought little of him or of her life back in Ohio. He had never blessed her prior to his death. She had made her way into the college setting and been honored with publishing a few noted articles in respected journals, but her father could never forgive her for not choosing a more simple and safe life. Strangely, though, rather than discouraging her, her father's renunciation had propelled her to be successful with a vengeance. She would deny her past by storming into the future of her career. She would use success to prove her father wrong, and in so doing forget him and his constricting, narrow-minded view of the world. She would pry the elusive success out of the hands of the stingy gods of the past.

She was seated before an expanse of horizon, filled with the subtle glory of scrub trees, and the sweet-salty brew of a margarita wafted across her senses. She was serene, at ease. But her body stiffened

when she remembered the stultifying heat of the bakery when she would walk in at two A.M. to help her father fulfill a special order. The sudden memory brought sweat to her brow, and her arms hardened in flight from that inferno of noise, heat, and repetitive, pointless movement.

She had hated to see her father smoking—a cigarette always dangling dangerously from his mouth over the mound of dough that soon could be anything from a doughnut to an ornamental French pastry. Now she turned away from the deer and the feeder and closed her eyes. But her father lingered before her closed sight, like a spot that wavers from side to side in our dark vision but will not disappear. She felt both revulsion and fear. He would not go away, and she could not summon other memories or friends to save her from the past. The memory of her father came upon her like a phantom and stole her away from her quiet despair with wanton, unpredictable violence.

Hours before she arrived, her friend Allene had driven her down Route 693, a dark highway between Bracketville and the ranch. Allene's mother had warned them before driving from San Antonio to the ranch that they should drive very slowly through that stretch of deer-infested highway. Allene had followed the advice and crept along at thirty-five miles per hour.

Two miles from the turnoff, Aimee said, "Looks like we're about to escape this trip through the heart of darkness." They laughed and agreed it was not a road they would like to be stopped on. Seconds later, a dull thud brought their car to a screeching stop. It happened so fast, it was as if it had not happened at all. But they had slid to a sideways stop, and they could see the young doe panting outside their window. Never before had Aimee heard a deer scream. It had wailed with a shrill that sounded like a desperately, perhaps mortally hurt child. It was an eerie, piercing scream that went on and on.

Allene did not travel with a gun on this trip. She knew it would have frightened Aimee to pack a .45, and so she could do nothing for the deer but to drive on. Hours later, as Aimee sat on the deck, she could feel the same sound birthing in her as she thought about her father and about the faculty meeting in which Dr. Adamson had postured and refused to defend her tenure evaluation before the faculty committee.

She had never associated her father with Dr. Adamson. Their differences were so severe that any attempt to find similarities seemed like a contrivance, a farce of thought that seemed more like a juvenile effort at playing psychologist. The physical differences were sizable, but the character differences were extreme. Dr. Adamson was effete and sophisticated, and her father was rough. But they

UNLIKE HER
PARENTS, AIMEE
WAS AN
INTELLECTUAL—A
READER, A
THINKER, A
WOMAN OF
LONELY PASSION
THAT HAD NO
AUDIENCE OR
STAGE TO PLAY
OUT ITS INTERIOR
DIALOGUE.

SHE AND HER
FATHER HAD A
FIGHT THE
NIGHT SHE
ACCEPTED THE
SCHOLARSHIP TO
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CHICAGO.

both had one striking similarity: the older men simply left her high and dry—used up and alone. She shuddered again when she thought about her history with men. “Same song, different verse” passed through her mind with hollow fear.

She could feel her eyes dull and black like the doe’s, lying in the blood that flowed from her twisted neck. She shook again: the shudder was an effort to shake away the thoughts of the dying doe, her father’s perspiration that dripped on the cutting table, and the false eyes of Adamson as he said he was sorry, there was nothing he could do. She interrogated herself with agonizing questions: “Why does my past keep returning to haunt me?” “Why can’t I forget my father and his silent rejection?” “Where do I go now that my future is over, now that my future will always be my past?”

She picked up the binoculars and quickly focused on the doe who was leading the herd. The whole herd had by now surrounded the feeder, and Andreas had made another drop of corn from his pick-up truck. She felt raw, sickening panic. She could not find her doe; she had merged with the herd and dissolved into the melting gray-brown backs of her species. Aimee heard the dull thud of something hitting against her soul; she shuddered, rose, and returned to join the family to eat.

II.

Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.

—Arnold Toynbee

Everyday we forget. We forget details, appointments, and keys, but all these pale in comparison to the amnesia of self in which we forget who we are. It is possible to appear to be responsible and happy, clear about who we are and what we are to do, when in fact we are living by convention and convenience. Many people live out roles and tasks that constitute a busy life but one bereft of much meaning and joy.

The woman, Aimee, was a typically busy thirty-one year old. She had achieved significant success in graduate school and had progressed to teach in a Christian college. She was happy. She had achieved a status far beyond what her father had envisioned when he wanted her to be an elementary school teacher. But she found herself in a setting that was potentially dangerous. She was asked to teach several courses in a disputed and difficult area that might provoke the confusion and disdain of some of her students, administration, and faculty.

It did. And she was not protected by her department head. In the aftermath of her crisis, she was floundering and called a good

friend for help. But as she sat in the privileged silence of a rustic and beautiful setting, she could find no solace. She was even more agitated than before she arrived. The respite brought her only a frightening stillness that served as a stage for memories near and far, which returned like haunting specters in the night.

The memories that returned might have helped her to face her current crisis. But, instead, the onslaught of memories about her father drove her to turn her eyes and shut her ears to what her inner voice of memory imaged and spoke of.

For many people, memory is not a safe place to journey, unless it is saccharinized through nostalgia. Many believers are told that to recall the past is only to set the stage for more doubt and heartache—and therefore it is not only better, but more biblical, to ignore the past and press onto the future. All in all, memory is a confusing and conflicted area for many Christians.

We need to ask how Aimee's academic demise came about. Was she a mere victim of a political power play in the department? A sacrificial scapegoat who was ostracized for exposing the lethargy and pedantry of some of the faculty? Or is it conceivable that in addition to the other possibilities, she had repeated a pattern in her life related to older men, authority figures who set her up to trust them and then failed to come through for her?

The answer requires more data than we have offered here. But the domain we need to explore in order to answer this question is the past: the recent past regarding the political situation at her school; and the more distant past regarding her relationship with her father, mother, and other authority surrogates. To understand any behavior or group of behaviors (a pattern), we need to see it in its larger context. And the past provides us the frame of reference for looking more richly and deeply at our inner life.

In this essay, we wish to consider the nature of forgetfulness and memory in order to provide a context for understanding who we are, so that we may reclaim the treasures of memory for our life's journey.

We will consider the nature of forgetfulness and memory in light of these questions: 1. What is memory? 2. Why is memory so important? 3. Why do we forget to remember? 4. How do we escape remembering the past? and 5. What is the cost of forgetting?

What Is Memory?

For some, memory is a warm glow of nostalgia that soothes the heart. For others, it is a dark, cold room full of plaintive horror—a space never to be entered. On one level, memory is a mystery—a

AIMEE LOOKED
OUT OVER THE
DARKENING
SUNSET AND FELT
A TREMOR OF
HISTORY RUN
THROUGH HER
BACK AND ARMS.

TWO MILES FROM
THE TURNOFF,
AIMEE SAID,
“LOOKS LIKE
WE’RE ABOUT TO
ESCAPE THIS TRIP
THROUGH THE
HEART OF
DARKNESS.”

complex process involving morphological changes in neuronal structure, biochemical changes, and other physiological processes. This biological aspect of the brain has too often been ignored as either irrelevant or in opposition to Christian reflection. Yet, in fact, it is a lens of reality that we ignore to our detriment. Recent neurobiological research compels us to reconsider how we view memory.

For centuries the mind in general and memory in particular have been conceptualized according to evolving metaphors. Steven Rose points out that through the last several centuries, scientists have compared the mind to the advanced technology of their particular age.¹ In Descartes’s day, the mind was viewed in light of hydraulics and clocks. In the early twentieth century, the mind was compared to a telephone exchange system. More recently the dominant metaphor has been a computer: the brain is the hardware and life experience the software.

If this metaphor is accurate, then memory may be thought of as the storehouse of the past. A data bit, like an event, can be retrieved if we know the right folder or name under which it is stored. Data is recorded—that is, perceived and subsequently organized into some category—and then stored under that structure and retrieved for use when needed.

This computer metaphor fits easily with our view of the mind as a videotape or a series of photo albums. We know that a picture of our high school sweetheart is stored in some file in our memory and we “re-call” it to mind. Or, we may see her picture and forget her name, but we can “re-collect” the context—other friends’ names, our last date—and in the midst of this network of information we may suddenly recall her name.

This view of memory holds that the past is stored intact in accurate and neutral form, and is likely to be found in one or several places in the brain. Such a view is derived from a Cartesian perspective, which uses inert, inanimate mechanisms as paradigms for assessing living organisms. The result is an analysis that does not take into account the radical disposition of the mind. Indeed, neuroscience demands a radical shift in our understanding of the brain/mind dynamic as it influences memory.

Current Understanding of the Process of Memory

Memory is a dynamic and selective process and not merely a matter of storing and retrieving neutral data.

In the early years of brain research, it was presumed that the brain recorded data the way a photograph does. What was stored was an imprint of what was perceived; therefore, what was retrieved was an

1. Steven Rose, *The Making of Memory* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

accurate representation of what had occurred. Yet the truth is that bias not only influences how we perceive something, but it even influences how we retrieve it.

Storage is not neutral, because we store information on the basis of meaning. Studies have been conducted comparing a person's ability to memorize randomly presented words with words that are allowed to be recalled in an order or structure. Obviously, our recall is more effective when there is order. But when incoming data is given personal meaning and provokes emotion, then the material is recalled even more effectively.²

Retrieval is also "meaning" driven. The day after the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded, Ulric Neisser, a memory researcher, told his students to write down where they were and what they were doing when they first heard of the tragedy. Three years later, Neisser asked the students to answer the same question. One third of the students gave answers that were so far off from their original account as to be utterly unrelated to the facts they had recorded within twenty-four hours of the explosion. When shown their original accounts, many refused to believe their current memory was inaccurate.³

Memory is not a record; it is rather a reconstruction of what occurred—and is influenced by selective attention, bias, guesswork, and imagination. Thus memory is not so much like a photograph as it is like an impressionistic painting. For example, Van Gogh's trees may blaze up into the sky like an inferno, but they are unmistakably trees. And in the vast majority of our memories, they are indeed trees—but they are embroiled with the themes and passions of our present as much as they are a replica of something from our past. It is a construction shaped as much or more by our present subjective demands than merely by what occurred.

Magdala Arnold, a pioneer in memory research, writes:

Memory is not an isolated process. It depends on perception, is influenced by emotion and imagination and embedded in the whole sequence from perception to action. Without memory, there can be no perception as we experience it, no learning, no motivated action. . . .⁴

In short, memory is selective, meaning-driven, and subjective. The importance of Arnold's findings is that memory is no longer presumed to be separate from imagination. My past is "story," in fact, to some degree unknown and hidden. It is no better known in fact, than the keys used to unlock it—"keys" being the categories we use to bring order and meaning to the countless, apparently random events of our past.

SHE
INTERROGATED
HERSELF WITH
AGONIZING
QUESTIONS: "WHY
DOES MY PAST
KEEP RETURNING
TO HAUNT ME?"

2. E.B. Bolles, *Remembering and Forgetting* (New York: Walker and Company, 1988), 66-72.
3. See "A Case of M i s p l a c e d Nostalgia," by Ulric Neisser, in *American Psychologist* (January 1991); and "Phantom Flashbulbs: False Recollections of Hearing the News About Challenger," by Ulric Neisser and N. Harsch in E. Winograd and U. Neisser (eds.), *Affect and Accuracy in Recall: Studies of "Flashbulb" Memories* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).
4. Magdala Arnold, *Memory and the Brain* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984), vii.

FOR MANY
PEOPLE, MEMORY
IS NOT A SAFE
PLACE TO
JOURNEY,
UNLESS IT IS
SACCHARINIZED
THROUGH
NOSTALGIA.

I cannot recall what I ate for dinner last night, but I do remember the shimmer of the sun on the brown, shoulder-length hair of the girl who stood in front of me at recess in fourth grade. I cannot recall much about my doctoral graduation ceremony, but I can tell you what I had for dinner the night of the ninth-grade football honors banquet. Why? I don't know. Or do I? I suspect there are many factors embedded in what I recall that provide hints as to how I see, shape, and move into my future.

Why Is Memory So Important?

Memory is a seldom-entered gallery of selectively chosen paintings that provides structure, meaning, and energy to live in the present and to create the future. It is inconceivable to imagine what life would be like without memory.

In the fascinating work, *The Man Who Thought His Wife Was a Hat*, Fuchs describes the horror of a man who suffered a brain injury and as a result could not remember any conversation he had even a moment before. He had no past, therefore he could make no plans for the future or use any data of the past for guiding decisions in the present. He lived imprisoned in the present. As a result, he could read the same page in a book for hours, forgetting by the end of the page not only what he read but that he had read the page at all. It is a life of meaningless, thoughtless repetition with no progress into the future, with no value gained from the past.

Most people do not suffer such a traumatic injury, but by choice (or unconscious reflex that involves some prior decision) we lose our memory of the past; and therefore we lose a sense of our soul's movement from the past to the future. Once we lose memory, we lose hope not only for what is now, but for what we desire to desire in the future. Put another way, once we lose (or radically diminish) the ability to remember, we lose (or radically impede) the ability to imagine. And if memory is imagination regarding themes of the past, then creativity is imagination that uses the past to create the future.

Memory may provoke the pain of trauma or the bittersweet recollection of happiness that has passed and cannot be recaptured; nevertheless, it is the foundation of our identity, the future of our dreams, and the texture of our souls. Without memory, we are not only lost in the present, but we are lost from ourselves.

Why Do We Forget to Remember?

Ordinary Forgetfulness

“Forget me not” is the plaintive cry of many a lover. To be forgotten is to have our name erased—our existence not only called

into question but possibly brought to nothing. Yet, the ability to forget is as important as our ability to remember. If we were compelled to remember every detail, number, facial expression, word, or meaning of our every interaction, we would soon run out of mental capacity. Far worse, we would overdose on the glut of reality that we would continually be forced to ingest.

The novelist Jorge Luis Borges paints the horror of a life that cannot forget. He writes of a character named Funes:

We in a glance perceive three wine glasses on the table; Funes saw all the shoots, clusters and grapes on the vine. He remembered the shapes of clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once, and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho . . . These recollections were not simple; each visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, etc. He could reconstruct all his dreams, all his fancies. Two or three times he had constructed an entire day. He told me: "I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world. . . . my memory, sir, is like a garbage disposal" . . .⁵

It should come as no surprise to us that Funes dies young.

What ought to trouble us is not that we forget. This ability is actually necessary for our survival. We will call it "ordinary forgetfulness." This involves forgetting the name of our third-grade teacher or the phone number of several residences ago. Ordinary forgetfulness may trouble us when we lose our keys, but it is mostly a skill that allows us to recall and use the most necessary data while discarding or perhaps so deeply storing the unnecessary that access to it is nearly impossible.

Personal Forgetfulness

There are two other kinds of forgetfulness that are complicated and intertwined: "personal forgetfulness" and "existential forgetfulness." Personal forgetfulness involves the loss of either the direct memory in part or whole, and/or the meaning of an event. I have asked certain counseling clients if they recalled significant trauma—such as severe injuries, disease, or abuse that was confirmed to me by other family members—and was told that the "event" did not occur. One researcher interviewed 114 women who were evaluated in a hospital for sexual abuse or assault. Each of the women was confirmed to have been abused on the basis of sufficient physical data. When asked about the event several decades later, twenty-four percent denied the event ever occurred.

THE PAST
PROVIDES US THE
FRAME OF
REFERENCE FOR
LOOKING MORE
RICHLY AND
DEEPLY AT OUR
INNER LIFE.

5. Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes the Memorious," *Fictions* (Calder, 1965).

FOR SOME,
MEMORY IS A
DARK, COLD
ROOM FULL
OF PLAINTIVE
HORROR—A
SPACE NEVER TO
BE ENTERED.

Personal forgetfulness, on the other hand, may acknowledge some of the contours of a past event, but may distort significant details while also disavowing the event's power to have an effect on the heart. For example, I was told by a client that her father was an alcoholic but not a mean or violent man, even though he once got mad and disciplined her so severely that her mother had to call the police.

When we explored the event, she could only recall her head bleeding and going to the hospital. Over several weeks, more elements of the memory returned that indicated she was thrown against a door so violently the door was smashed. The memory once recalled was then dismissed as an aberrant and uneventful occurrence since she did not suffer any broken bones or permanent injury. She eventually dismissed the horror of this event by explaining away her father's rage due to her tendency to talk too much.

Personal forgetfulness pulls the blinds over our eyes in order to both fragment the memory and disavow it of any real meaning in our lives. As Aimee sat looking out at the expanse of horizon on the ranch, she was actually looking at the "stage" of memory. The actors began to walk onstage: her father, Adamson, her department head, the dull sound of the deer hitting the door. All these apparently disparate scenes began to play out their presence as she thought about the terrible bind she was in.

The memory of her father's rage and his bursting a blood vessel, the insincere eyes of Adamson, and the death struggle of the deer were too much for her to look at, let alone to ask why all three appeared together. And so she shuddered and felt too much pain and fear to pursue the unknown and mysterious connections that resided in her memory, and she fled. Whether this is called a selective memory, a distorting, denying flight from reality, or "personal forgetfulness," it is intimately tied to the third form of memory loss: existential forgetfulness.

Existential Forgetfulness

What ought to haunt us is the question: When we forget or distort some portion of our past, or disconnect from what was felt, who are we really forgetting? Who or what are we really fleeing from? The answer most often given is pain. The assumption is that memories which provoke pain at best make us feel uncomfortable and at worst devour us; therefore, we escape to a more positive or safe domain. This is accurate, but it does not capture the more essential reason we flee from memory.

It is not impersonal pain from which we flee. It is the God who could have changed our story that we wish to escape. It is unexplained suffering that most often incites us to ask difficult, largely

unanswerable questions about God—questions such as: Where was he? Why did he let this happen? Why did he save/bless her and not me? Is he good? Is he strong? If he is both, then why did/does he allow things like this to occur? It seems easier to numb ourselves to the past and forget the event, ourselves, and the God who surrounds all reality.

The Old Testament places the idea of “forgetfulness” and “remembering” at the core of our relationship with God. Read the words of Moses:

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. (Deuteronomy 4:9)

. . . then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Deuteronomy 8:14)

What are we to make of Moses’ words here?

“To forget” in these passages does not indicate ordinary forgetfulness, in which matters are wisely deleted from memory. Rather, it involves the forgetting of the stories from their own past, as well as the more distant past related to God’s manner of dealing with his people. In other words, it is both a historically and theologically oriented “selective memory.”

Moses suggests that pride is the key to comprehending why we forget the One who is unforgettable (Deuteronomy 8:14). Is the matter as simple as this one word? It is both simple and wildly complex. Pride is a word that implies we wish to see ourselves as self-sufficient, needing no one and nothing outside of ourselves for our existence. We forget God because to remember him is to be stripped of our presumption of independence, control, and self-centeredness.

The apostle Paul assumed it was pride that made humankind blind and numb to the truth. He viewed this form of forgetfulness in terms of “suppressing truth in unrighteousness.” He wrote:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. . . . For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1:18–19, 21)

MEMORY IS A
DYNAMIC AND
SELECTIVE
PROCESS AND
NOT MERELY A
MATTER OF
STORING AND
RETRIEVING
NEUTRAL DATA.

MEMORY IS NOT A
RECORD; IT IS
RATHER A
RECONSTRUCTION
OF WHAT
OCCURRED—AND
IS INFLUENCED
BY SELECTIVE
ATTENTION, BIAS,
GUESSWORK, AND
IMAGINATION.

Truth is self-evident until we blind ourselves to the reality of God's authority and goodness. When we turn from truth we always escape what we essentially know, but we will not embrace because it would strip us of our independence and self-reliance. Further, Paul says, we turn from all truth, including truth about our past, because it would compel us to glorify him and be grateful to him. Paul presumes that all truth, including the truth about our past, if properly understood would lead us to a sense of awe and thankfulness.

Yet, how could this be true about events of past sexual abuse, or about memories of a death of a parent, the loss of a job, or the breakup of a marriage? The full answer is not yet forthcoming, but the core first step to awe and gratitude, if we are to take a biblical view of memory, resides in facing the issue of pride. Forgetting God, then, is a raw, pernicious, and intentional flight from what is true. It is a suppressing of memory in order to avoid God's call to keep him central in our daily operations and life's passions. And somehow it is walking into the depths of our most difficult memories that involves the deepest form of trusting God.

But sadly, we often deceive ourselves about facing our past. How do we flee memory and thus flee God? A greater idea of how we escape will open the door to greater clarity about what it means to trust him in facing our past.

How Do We Escape Remembering the Past?

Fight and Flight: The Ways We Forget

For the moment, let us return to the story we began with. Aimee was a bright, confident woman who had the moxie to take on those who would disagree with her. Even though she loved and honored her father, she would not submit to his small vision for her. He wanted her to choose a path that would guarantee a consistent, constant income that would provide for her the rest of her life. Though Aimee knew that a portion of her father's vision manifested his care for her, she also knew that the path of elementary education, for her, would be a path that would bring her to only one guarantee: sacrificing her creativity for the refuge of a certain future.

We all have scenes in our lives that become defining moments for the rest of our lives. Recall one of the defining moments in Aimee's life: it was the time her father smashed the glass against the wall. What was her commitment? What was the decision that would become a theme in her life, that would be a way of becoming the woman she really wanted to be and knew she had to be? So much of our lives are defined and driven by just a few scenes and by mere seconds of our past. In response to her father's soul-deadening rebuff, Aimee would throw herself into academic work and by so doing prove her father wrong, to prove finally that his dream was an illusion after all.

To do this, though, she would “forget” her father. She refused to live as her father had chosen to live, by living in a small world with small dreams. She would be everything her father was not and reject everything her father was. Aimee made an entrenched commitment to live in such a way that she could shield herself from her well-meaning but mistaken father. And she would accomplish this by leaving home and making a new life and creating a new person. Aimee decided to fight the story she inherited from her father by fleeing the moments in her past that troubled her the most. She would deny the past by focusing on the future.

As we have seen previously in this chapter, forgetting is not merely a passive slip of the mind or a hapless, careless way of living. Forgetting, as we are defining it, is not something that mysteriously happens to us or something that can be controlled by working on memory technique or tying a string to a finger. It is more than losing a wallet or forgetting an anniversary. Forgetting to remember is an act of thinking or an act of the will which makes a commitment that certain moments from our past do not matter or do not exist.

Most of us live out a determined forgetfulness of fight and flight. We flee from memory in fear of what the past may tell us, and then in fury fight to recreate an unencumbered present that cuts the cords to the past. This foundationless reconstruction is doomed to fail, however, because it makes us the creator of our story rather than allowing the true creator of the universe to shape our story. It is fearful flight and furious fight against our memories that constitutes our true rebellion from God. How do we do so?

The Fight and Flight from Memory

What do we do with our memories? If we are honest, we must admit that many events in our lives make no sense. There are disturbing moments in our past when we have been harmed by others or we have harmed others. We live our lives endeavoring to banish those memories because they are a constant reminder of injustice, danger, and unexplained suffering. That is why we urgently strive to escape our past. Events intrude into the present and cause us to question our faith in a good, righteous God.

The memories do more than unsettle us, though—they leave us hanging in midthought with no closure. Part of our misconception about the past is presuming the past is over, closed, and settled. But this assumption could not be farther from the truth. The power of memory is formidable, and it easily matches our power to forget. We walk unsuspectingly through the journey of life when one day a lover’s advances brings us face-to-face with sexual abuse many years previous; or we see a parent harshly reprimanding a child and all the years of verbal abuse come rushing back; or we fail in business, and a grandfather’s deadening words of prophecy come back

I CANNOT RECALL
WHAT I ATE FOR
DINNER LAST
NIGHT, BUT I DO
REMEMBER THE
SHIMMER OF
THE SUN ON
THE BROWN,
SHOULDER-LENGTH
HAIR OF THE GIRL
WHO STOOD IN
FRONT OF ME AT
RECESS IN FOURTH
GRADE.

MEMORY MAY
PROVOKE PAIN, OF
TRAUMA OR THE
BITTERSWEET
RECOLLECTION.
NEVERTHELESS,
IT IS THE
FOUNDATION OF
OUR IDENTITY,
THE FUTURE OF
OUR DREAMS,
AND THE
TEXTURE OF
OUR SOULS.

in full force. We see a certain film and feel immeasurably guilty over how we have parented our own children. We can count on the fact that memories will return, often at difficult and unsuspecting moments.

Every story begins in innocence. Soon, though, conflict and tragedy—things we never expected in an innocent world—intrude into the world's story, and we are dumbfounded. When the first tragedy enters our “perfect” world and replaces a sense of security with fear and anxiety, we turn to a self-sufficient way of living that enables us to cope with our ruined Eden. We choose ways of coping that become patterns or themes in our lives. Then when new tragedy enters our world, we rely on whatever originally worked to dull the pain.

One of those ways of living is to flee whatever we fear. Fleeing our memories is in essence living in a fantasy world by putting our head in the sand. If we choose to flee our memories, then we choose to reject our memories and their claim on us. Fleeing the past is a desperate attempt to remove the past by pretending that it does not exist or that it does not matter. We often flee memories through nostalgia.

The Flight from Memory: Nostalgia

The word “nostalgia” comes from two Greek words that mean to “return home.” Remembering the past invites a person to return home, but to do so with honesty and clarity. Nostalgia acknowledges the past, but it refuses to see the past for what it is. Living in nostalgia takes disturbing events from the past and places them in a new light—a warm, fuzzy, sentimental glow. It looks at the past with the proverbial rose-colored glasses.

This is why some people live so easily in the past, or talk about “the good old days.” A cursory reading of history teaches us that there never were any “good old days.” Remembering through nostalgia is very simply reshaping memory by selecting only good memories or putting bad memories in a good light.

We forget the numerous violent Christmases by remembering the one good Christmas. We forget our father's drinking problem by remembering the few times he was sober. We remember our mother's “overprotectiveness” as special care when, in reality, she intruded into our world to find life through us. We remember the good Christian father who was a strict disciplinarian when in reality he was brutally violent with his punishment.

Tragically, much Christian thinking asks people to view the past through nostalgic eyes. The scriptures and the gospel become a way of whitewashing the past rather than facing the awful truth of the

past. For example, when my father died and I faced even more clearly some of the areas of his failure and betrayal, I had several well-meaning acquaintances attempt to offer comfort by reminding me of all the good days I had with him prior to his death. There were many glorious days to recall, but there were some dark realities that set my heart reeling. Nostalgia focuses on what brings immediate but shallow hope and pleasure.

Nostalgia recalls the good, but flees the tragic, sad, or ambivalent past. Therefore, it is a fearful flight that fights to dissolve that which would disturb. It is an effort to live by deception. When we deceive ourselves, we ultimately end up deceiving everyone with whom we are in relationship. This is a great mystery in life: we cannot lie to ourselves without eventually lying to others. Or, to put it another way, how can we expect to be honest with others when we attempt to make life work by lying to ourselves?

The Fight to Erase Memory: Oblivion

If nostalgia reshapes the past, then oblivion is a violent eviction of the past. Oblivion involves an active turning away from the past. The difficulty is that the past can not be escaped, nor ignored. Therefore, oblivion requires the service of other means to help destroy the past. One of the most violent means to obliterate the past is addiction.

Oblivion may use a chemical substance, or dependence upon alcohol, or an obsession with pornography to erase the past. In every type of addictive behavior, there is at least one common point: removing the memory of the past from the present. When the past becomes unbearable, innumerable distractions exist to “forget” the past. But the few addictive behaviors we have just listed are quite obvious.

There are other forms of oblivion that remove the past. We can turn to work and keep ourselves so busy that we never take the time to slow down and think about our lives. Many Americans are increasingly living in this type of oblivion. We are living in an age that is literally “out of time.” There never seems to be enough time in the day; but running nonstop in the present can also be a fierce but “productive” running from the past. Many people are afraid to slow down and live differently, because they fear the thoughts that would intrude like demonic presences.

A number of Christians use Bible studies, Bible-verse memory, or church activities to dull the pain of the past. If they can use their Christianity to banish the thoughts of the past, then they are living “godly” lives. This manner of “religious” oblivion is an insidious form of forgetting—and one of the hardest to break, because these Christian behaviors are often affirmed by others and appear to be

THERE ARE TWO
OTHER KINDS OF
FORGETFULNESS
THAT ARE
COMPLICATED AND
INTERTWINED:
“PERSONAL
FORGETFULNESS”
AND “EXISTENTIAL
FORGETFULNESS.”

PERSONAL
FORGETFULNESS
PULLS THE BLINDS
OVER OUR EYES IN
ORDER TO BOTH
FRAGMENT THE
MEMORY AND
DISAVOW IT OF
ANY REAL
MEANING IN
OUR LIVES.

blessed by God. However, this is where all believers must check their motivations for living. The truth of God's word—the reality of the gospel—never denies the truth of our lives.

Sadly, this was not the case for one newlywed couple. Mick was twenty-eight year old, a successful real estate attorney who had been married for six months to Elaine. Like many couples, Mick and Elaine came for counseling as a last-ditch effort. Even though they had been married a very short time, their marriage was in serious trouble, and they believed their marriage was through. Incidents and events had happened in their first six months together that convinced them they had made a serious mistake.

Elaine was from a violent home and had been demeaned and humiliated by her father while growing up and throughout most of her life. In marked contrast, Mick was from a good Christian home. In our first session together, I asked Mick what he meant by a "good" home. My suspicions were confirmed when he acknowledged that his mother had done everything for him. Mick now was faced with a wife who would fly into fits of rage and would stay so angry she refused to help around the house. When Mick compared his wife to his mother, Elaine came up woefully short.

At the end of the session, Mick looked at me and with all sincerity told me that his life was fine until he met this "madwoman." It was obvious to him by now that he had married the wrong woman, and unless she changed he was out of the marriage. I asked him what he needed to change, and his answer was telling: "I don't need to change anything." He was a Christian man, from a good home—yet he was self-righteous and blaming. In short, this man was terrifyingly oblivious.

Mick could never get beyond the fact that Elaine was not "submissive." She may well have failed to be submissive, but Mark used her failure and his view of the Bible's teaching on submission as a wall that kept him from looking at his own failure. The word "submission" not only served to block his view of his current failure, but he also used it to block his vision of the past. His mother was good because she was submissive. Elaine was bad because she was not. There was no apparent way to get beyond his "addictive" use of the word, to open his eyes to the past failure of his mother or the present failure of his wife. The Bible can be used as a barrier to the truth and is as addictively powerful as any drug.

Unfortunately, Mick and Elaine separated and then divorced a few months later. After a few counseling sessions together, Mick was horrified that I would not agree with him that all of these problems resided squarely on his wife's shoulders. There was no getting through to Mick because he felt justified in his beliefs and actions.

Oblivion is a very active and violent form of forgetting the past. We can live in such a way that we are not aware of our own sin and how we treat people. We can easily ignore what motivates us or lose sight of the consequences of our behaviors. To live in oblivion is to refuse to take the time to think through the past with other people in our communities. Had Mick reflected on his own past, he would have realized that his mother's actions were not always good and "Christian." Had Mick not been oblivious to his past story, his marriage would have had a chance.

What Is the Cost of Forgetting?

The "Circle of Life"

Fortunately, for every human being, inevitably the past returns to haunt us through a spouse, a friend, a department head, a child, or even a stranger on the street. We do well to heed one of the pronouncements of one of our modern-day prophets: "He who forgets is destined to remember." One of the hopeful realities of life is that we repeat the past until we face it. Aimee thought she could escape her father, when in fact her father—her past—was facing her again in the person of Dr. Adamson.

To forget the past is to live as a pagan lives. Obviously, as moderns we live our lives very differently from our ancient ancestors, such as the Egyptians, the Babylonians, or the Greeks. However, they were as human as we are and we as they. They struggled with the same questions and yearnings that we struggle with today. For millennia, humanity has attempted to answer the problems of guilt and suffering: "What do I do with the reality that I am an offender (that there is guilt in my life), and that I have been offended (that there is suffering in my world)?" If you want to understand how a society or a people answer the problems of guilt and suffering, then study their religion, their gods, their faith.

Consider a recent example of paganism that occurred within the movie, *The Lion King*. If you have seen *The Lion King*, most likely you recall the power and beauty of this "children's" film.

In the story, Mufasa is the great lion king who rules over the pride lands with justice and mercy. His son, Simba, is the young prince who would rule over the pridelands by succeeding his father, the king.

Mufasa is a tender father who instructs his son in the ways of the elders, the ancestors who have gone before them. In one of the first scenes of the film, Simba, acting as a typical adolescent, wanders off onto forbidden property and is nearly devoured by the hyenas, the immortal enemies of the lions. Mufasa saves his son from danger, and then "punishes" him in a strange way. The king tells his

WHEN WE
FORGET OR
DISTORT SOME
PORTION OF
OUR PAST, OR
DISCONNECT
FROM WHAT WAS
FELT, WHO ARE
WE REALLY
FORGETTING?

THE OLD
TESTAMENT
PLACES THE
IDEA OF
“FORGETFULNESS”
AND
“REMEMBERING”
AT THE CORE
OF OUR
RELATIONSHIP
WITH GOD.

son the story of his ancestors and explains to him that one day in the future, he would rule these lands. Mufasa also tells his son that he would not always be there to help him and guide him, but that if he would remember his fathers, then he too would be a good king and he would rule well.

As with any good story, there is the antihero, the villain who strives to destroy what is good and taint what is beautiful. Scar is Simba's wicked uncle, who wants to take the throne from Mufasa. Thus Scar concocts a devious and brilliant coup that would rid the land of Mufasa and place the throne in his own hands. His plan is brilliant, because it performs two functions in one stroke of violence: Mufasa is trampled to death by the wildebeests, and Scar has staged this to make Simba think that his father's death was his fault.

The scene displays what we have been speaking about concerning the problem of remembering. Simba's self-imposed guilt and the loss of his father send him into flight, and he remains in exile in a land far away.

As Simba grows into adulthood, he is mentored by two characters in the film, Timon and Pumba, who pass on a view of life that most of us covertly and some overtly follow to a T: *hakuna matata*, or, “It doesn't matter.” In short: Forget the past. Be happy in the moment. Deal with the tragedies of the past by living in a constant state of happiness in the present. Tragically, there are many mentors today who offer the same attractive but soul-destroying wisdom.

Simba decides to live by this mantra and in so doing forgets his past, his father, his land, and his high calling of kingship. Then the story of the film takes a radical turn. Nala, the young lioness who was Simba's friend, happens upon Simba in the jungle. At first they are thrilled to see one another. Then Nala tells Simba that he must return home because the wicked king, Scar, has turned the pride-lands into a wasteland.

Simba refuses to go, even though he is the rightful king and could bring justice and mercy back to the land. To cut off the discussion with Nala, Simba proclaims to her *hakuna matata*—“It doesn't matter.” Simba's new, pagan philosophy is a refusal to remember, a selfish commitment to forsake love for others, and the loss of any hope for change in the future. His forgetting of the past is a commitment to himself—yet, ironically, it is an imprisonment of his soul in a day-to-day drudgery that will never impact others.

The film takes yet another turn, however, in the character of Rafiki, a trickster and wise orangutan who knew the good king Mufasa. Rafiki, which means “friend” in Swahili, intrigues and invites Simba to throw off the pagan, selfish way of living of *hakuna matata*. Like any good friend, he calls Simba back to the past so he can move on from living a deadening, repetitious life.

In a very moving scene, Rafiki brings Simba back to his father. Simba sees a vision of Mufasa in the stars, and Mufasa speaks to his son. Though this is strange scene to some, it is a vision of what it means for Simba to remember his father. Mufasa calls his son by name, saying, "Simba, you have forgotten me." "No, father, I have not forgotten you," replies Simba. Mufasa answers, "Simba, you have forgotten me because you have forgotten who you are. You are my son. Remember who you are. Remember. Remember. . . ." With those words, the vision of Mufasa recedes from sight and vanishes into the stars.

Simba had lost more than his way. He had lost his identity. By attempting to live solely in the present—to live in an innocence of nostalgia and oblivion—Simba had lost his father; and in losing his father, he lost himself. He had lost his father once, and now his oblivion was causing him to lose his father again and again. Indeed, as anyone makes a commitment to forget the past, he also forgets the present and the future. Simba's "memory" challenged him to change his way of living and return to bring the pridelands out of chaos and destruction.

As Rafiki wisely says, "You cannot change the past, but you can learn from it." We would add that you cannot learn from the past if you banish it from your thinking. Forgetting the past is always a guarantee that we will repeat the past every day and in every relationship. Tragically, all the ways of forgetting are an attempt to change the past rather than learn from the past. Simba used *haku-na matata* to live in innocence, but a problem was clear: as long as he forgot, he was in league with the wicked king Scar and opposed to the father he loved dearly.

Almost every pagan religion is a return to innocence. Pagan religions attempt to return to the garden of Eden by "forgetting" personal guilt and human suffering. Whether through animal or human sacrifice, or the acting out of great and majestic tragedies, or the obliteration of human passions to the point of nirvana, or rituals celebrated in orgiastic frenzies, a pagan theology endeavors to go back to a time when life was perfect. To return to such a time, though, demands the removal of guilt and suffering.

One way that pagan religions of the past removed guilt and suffering was the celebration of New Year's Eve. Each new year was the passing of the old year and the birth of a brand new year. We observe this today in our own culture by the picturing of the old year as an old man and the new year as a newborn infant. In simple terms, the passing of the year is removing the year as if it did not even exist; what is important is the new year, the present. The old year, like the old man, is to die, be buried, and be forgotten.

At the crossroads of faith lies the interplay of both tragedy and redemption. Much of modern-day Christianity wants us to believe

MOSES SUGGESTS
THAT PRIDE IS
THE KEY TO
COMPREHENDING
WHY WE FORGET
THE ONE WHO IS
UNFORGETTABLE.

TRUTH IS
SELF-EVIDENT
UNTIL WE BLIND
OURSELVES TO
THE REALITY
OF GOD'S
AUTHORITY AND
GOODNESS.

that faith comforts and consoles us while canceling out doubt, heartache, and struggle. In fact, our faith does comfort as it propels us to face the most difficult questions of life. Ours is no easy faith, nor is it a cowardly faith. God does not forget the past—he redeems it. He does not remove the past, but instead calls it forth. God does not deny the past, but makes sense out of it.

The Rut of Repetition

Here is the irony of forgetting: To forget the past is to “forget” the present and to lose the future. We want to think we can easily move on from the events of long ago, those painful scenes from the past.

A few years ago I spoke with a young man who had attended a seminar in which I had spoken about the importance of a man remembering his past—both the blessings and the curses, the good times and the bad times. This particular man had grown up in an atrocious, violent home. The day he graduated from high school, he left home and never turned back. College for him was a wondrous escape and, like Aimee, he found significant life in his studies and later in his vocation as a C.P.A.

He possessed everything he wanted and had, in just a few short years, reached a number of his dreams that he had dreamt as a boy. “But,” he said, “I am exhausted and I feel emptier than at any time in my life, even more than when I was lonely and scared as a child.” He told me that every day felt like an impossible endeavor, and each new day seemed to get just a little worse.

I asked him why he felt so exhausted. He looked intently in my eyes and told me he was determined to live his life by forgetting his past. He said that every morning was painstaking, because he awoke and asked the question, “Who am I today?” He wanted to look into his wife’s eyes, but each time he believed himself to be a man who had no idea who he was. He wanted to be involved with his children, but he knew he was running from a past that he could not slow down long enough to let catch up with him. He said—and I quote him verbatim—“I am tired of life because I am tired of inventing myself every day of my life.”

This man reflects what happens to us when we forget. Rather than admitting the past, we play mind games with it. Instead of embracing the past, we run from it. Rather than redeeming the past, we renounce it. But there is a great cost to forgetting. Every forgetting of the past is another opportunity for the past to sneak back into our lives and drive us to relive the past. Gertrude Mueller Nelson warns on this score: “Know your story or your story will live you.” When we forget, our story lives us. We become the fathers we vowed we would never be. We become the mothers we

are attempting to escape. We live terrified of our past and so we flee. We are furious at our past and so we fight.

Why do we find ourselves living again and again in the rut of repetition? The answer in part is we are inveterate meaning-seekers. When there are huge gaps in a story, we naturally begin to build our own bridges from one side of the chasm to the other. We fill in the gaps. We do it with TV sitcoms, novels, even the stories told to us by friends. Why would we think we wouldn't do so with our own stories?

But when we flee and fight the past, we do not fill in gaps, but we actually relive the gaps. We unconsciously return to the disturbing, undigested, meaningless past through re-creating scenarios in the present, and then attempt to fix the past by their re-presentation in the now. We work toward resolution, yet one built on a deceptive foundation. Therefore, we are doomed to repeat the past without ever really achieving resolution.

Rather than living a life of freedom and creativity that finds meaning even in the meaningless places in our past, we purpose to forget. And so we keep returning to the past, striving to resolve the same old issues and ghosts. Life becomes an exhausting incarnation of the myth of Sisyphus. As soon as we roll the stone to the top of the hill, we inexplicably let go. We rush back down to begin anew the arduous task of the rolling the stone of forgetfulness to the top of the hill. And then again, we let go of the stone only to chase it down the hill.

Forgetting is a wager we all make on a daily basis, and it exacts a terrible price. The price of forgetting is a life of repetition, an insincere way of relating, a loss of self.

But there is an even greater cost. Every tragedy in the past is an opportunity for redemption. And each time we forget, we lose another moment to experience God's mysterious redemption in our lives. Every time we deliberately forget, consciously or unconsciously, we live by fate rather than by faith.

FORGETTING
GOD, THEN,
IS A RAW,
PERNICIOUS, AND
INTENTIONAL
FLIGHT FROM
WHAT IS TRUE.

