

“L’esprit de l’escalier” **(When Memory Rides an Escalator)**

*These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.*
(Psalm 42:4)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 22, 2017
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“*These Things I Remember*,” the psalmist says. What things do you remember? What places, what people, what events, what moments? Let’s the words of the psalmist in our own mouths this morning. *These Things I Remember . . .*

As an itinerant minister in the United Methodist Church and, before that as a student making my way through four universities, I’ve moved many times from places that became beloved – colleges, cities, congregations – these are the landscapes which have shaped me, and to which I remain attached by the threads of stories. People and places precious, because the stories are so often remembered and told.

We are bound, you and I, to one another by a web of stories. By keeping our stories fresh, flowing with each retelling, we regard the places sacred, alive in our imaginations. What is our living if not memories accumulating like the gradual accretions of a stalactite? Living in our hearts, these stories make up the landscape of our souls, a landscape on which we walk, even when our feet are still, mapping out a geography of the heart, charting seas and continents known only to us, and crowded with detail when we live attentively so that, like the psalmist we may say, *These Things I Remember*.

I’ve been thinking this week of Ann Arbor, Michigan, perhaps because it was the time of my youth, perhaps because I walked its landscape for the longest period of any one stay -- the entire decade of my 30 -- perhaps the most pivotal, formative time of my life. Ann Arbor was the place to which I ran to escape ministry. Yet, it was here, in Ann Arbor, that ministry found me.

These Things I Remember. A chilling winter air still sweeps across my face as I remember walking across the Diag, immersed in academe. Paddleboats on the little Huron River still splash in my mind, recalling Saturday trips to the park and the laughter our girls, then in elementary school. The ornate elegance of the study chambers of the Rackham Building still quiets my mind, remembering the countless hours laboring over Hebrew and cuneiform, ancient Semitic literature, in this very place where Jonas Salk 30 years earlier announced a vaccine for polio and changed the world. Rackham was a place where we all thought we could change the world.

These Things I Remember. The meandering layout of married student housing emerges pumpkin orange in my memory as I recall how Sherry and I guided the girls through the creatively

decorated townhouses at Halloween. The crack of the bat at Tiger Stadium yet sounds in my ears as I remember Larry Herndon's solo shot over the center field wall on that bright and loud October Sunday 30 years ago, in 1987, having splurged at the beginning of the season to buy box seat tickets for the final game of the season and little knowing then that Sparky Anderson's Tigers would need that last game to clinch the pennant, beating Toronto 1 – 0. And the screams of Roller Coaster Heaven on our Cedar Point getaways to Sandusky, Ohio are with me still. Yes, *These Things I Remember*.

What are the things you remember? Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the most highly regarded preachers of our day, shares her rules for telling personal stories in preaching. “*Only say ‘I’ when you are reasonably sure those listening can say ‘Me, too.’*” I share these personal memories then, in order, not to tell you about myself but to remind you about yourself. As a new pastor I want you to know me, yes, but I'm having fun getting to know you – hearing your stories little by little – in Care Zone gatherings, in homes, on the golf course, in the office. I'm finding that a congregation like Christ of the Hills, living in the Village, offers a rich variance of experience, lacking the sort of geographical homogeneity most congregations have in their DNA. Your DNA, as a church, is blessed with a wide variance of markers. So I love hearing your stories, your memories as you remember and tell them.

Today let's consider what it means to *Remember*, how *Remembering* plays a vital role in your faith journey – just as it did for the psalmist. Remembering and telling the story, as the psalmist's words make clear, is a joyful part of our faith journey. We gather around our central sacrament with the words of Jesus, “*This do in remembrance of me.*” The sacrament tells a story, since our faith is based in historical events. Our creed is no mere philosophy of spirituality, nor a golden rule model of decency and kindness, but anchored in history, God entering human history in a manger, the Word become flesh to be a participant in our story. So we have sung this morning *Tell Me the Stories of Jesus* and will yet sing, *I Love to Tell the Story*, each hymn declaring that ours is a faith anchored in history, in remembered events.

These things I remember. It need not, I think, be perfect remembrance. An ancient allegory asks us to imagine a map of the world that grows in detail so precisely until every point in reality has its exact counterpoint in the map. The twist is that such a map, ideally accurate for precision, is also entirely useless, since it has become the same size as what it intends to represent. It is, then, not a map but an alternate reality, losing its function as the guide it was intended to be.

Perfect replication may seem at first glance to be the ultimate map, but actually contradicts what a map is intended to be. The same may be said of our mental maps. Perfect memory, exact recall of our accumulated experiences is harmful, stifling the imagination and hindering us from developing stories. Of our yesterdays, one need be willing to forget detail in order to remember essence. Forgetting is essential to the kind of remembering which shapes a story.

Like the allegory of the map, if the experiences of our living get recorded in real time it hardly counts as a record at all. Life and experience are too wonderful for the map to be the territory. Forgetting detail allows our minds to focus on the truly extraordinary, de-cluttering in order to salvage the essence of the moment, so that mind and soul can go to work remembering and shaping what matters into a story not guided by DVD exactness, but with participation of heart and soul. Both *Remembering and Forgetting*, then, in proper balance, are gifts.

So let's ask this morning, what is the role this gift of *Forgetting* in the forging of our Stories? We owe much, more than you might imagine, to the gray waves of oblivion, for through *Forgetting* comes much beauty. I began by describing a bit of Ann Arbor for you, the way I *Remember* it. Several years ago our daughter Ashley traveled back to the Ann Arbor of her childhood to be Maid of Honor at her friend, Laura's, wedding. Before she left Arkansas she described, close to our house on Manchester, along the path of her daily walk with Laura between home and Tappan Junior High, a phantom Howard Johnson's Motel. Phantom, I say, because her memory was defective. The Howard Johnson's, which our family knew well because we would often eat Saturday breakfast there at Silverman's Restaurant, was several miles in the other direction, in Ypsilanti. "No," Ashley insisted, having none of it. "*These Things I Remember! THIS thing I remember! The Howard Johnson's is there.*"

It wasn't. So when she called home after arriving and engaging in a futile search, Sherry and I thoroughly enjoyed her *Mea Culpa* moment. Was she wrong? Well, yes and no. Digitally, yes, she was wrong. Still, what emerged from her memory is precious, preserving a reverence for her holy places, not based on digital fact, but in the reshuffling of memory, the work of imagination creating a landscape for her soul to walk upon. It was a Howard Johnson's *half-remembered, half-imagined*. I much prefer such half-ness to perfect memory. You see, in digital memory the past is always here, never half, always whole, nothing lost to time. Yet, like a map as big as the world itself, such memory may be useless precisely because it's too good.

We owe much to *Remembering*, for without it we lose meaning, but we also owe much to *Forgetting*, for without it we would collapse under the weight of memories in the same way a hard drive is limited in the space it has to store data. *Forgetting* is essential to our sanity (and to our Story-telling), life an antiphonal movement between *Remembering* and *Forgetting*.

When we forget past reality gains a smooth surface upon which memory might overlay a soft patina, what the French call, *l'esprit de l'escalier*, or, "*the Wit of the Staircase.*" You can easily make out our English, "*the Spirit of the Escalator.*" Have you ever been in a conversation and, only after leaving, it occurs to you what you should have said had your wit been sharp? *L'esprit de l'escalier* refers to the words you think to say only as you're on the staircase, leaving.

We've all been there. I live it every Sunday, by the way. *L'esprit de la voiture*, "*the Wit of the Car.*" It will happen today, as it always does, that on the way home I think of what I might have said to make my point clearer.

Yes, but now, here's what I find interesting. As we retell the story over and over, gradually the thing we wish we had said has a way of entering the Story, so that the Story now climbs the escalator instead of descending, riding an escalator to a new reality. Over time, instead of remembering the event, we begin to remember our subsequent telling of the event, which is the reason that for a great moment in sports – Don Larson's perfect game in the 1956 World Series or the Great Shootout between Arkansas and Texas in 1969 -- over the years twice as many people may claim to have been present at the event than the stadium actually held. That's the work of *l'esprit de l'escalier*. "*I wish had been there,*" becomes, over time, "*You know, I think I was there.*" Then, with the passing of more time and the telling of more stories, "*I KNOW I was there. I remember, because we stayed at the Howard Johnson's!*"

“Memory,” wrote Plotinus, “is for those who have forgotten.” Indeed, for one can’t Remember, until one has *Forgotten*. Remembering implies a previous *Forgotten-ness*, details degraded so that Story might emerge. Think of *Forgetting and Remembering* as a staircase. This spiral staircase is the Bramante staircase in the Vatican Museum, the 1932 recreation of Bramante’s original from 1505, constructed herringbone fashion so that the pope could ascend in his carriage, not having to walk with heavy vestments. This is said to be the most photographed staircase in the world – a double helix (can you see the two entrances at the bottom, an entrance and exit, more precisely?). Let’s think of *Forgetting* as a descending, a going out, and Remembering as an ascent, a going up into Story.



Utopia is a word coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516, the title of his book about an ideal society. Derived from Greek, it consists of two components, “U” and “topia.” *Topia* is obvious, from the Greek *topos* (“place”), as in *topography*. The other component is more vague. The “U” of *Utopia* is derived either from *eu* (“good”), as in *eulogy*, or *ou* (“not”).

I think Sir Thomas might have intended the contradiction, playing with this double helix of meaning. Choose up or down. Does *Utopia* mean “Good place,” or “No place?” Take your pick. I think, both. Ashley’s Howard Johnson’s was a “Good place” in her mind and memory, though when it comes down to details, it was “No place.”

For the same reason, it’s okay for us fondly to talk about the “Good Old Days” knowing that, were the chance offered, we would not want to go back. The “Good Place” of those “Good Old Days” is often, “No Place.” In the actual living of it, it wasn’t quite so good. It was life, with all its mix of joy and struggles, happiness and suffering. Treasuring the past comes as precise memory degrades, allowing the soul to shape our stories.

John ends his telling of the stories of Jesus wondering how Jesus’ life story might have been told with full and perfect use of the best technology of his day. “There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” No, I suppose not. A world full of books on Jesus’ life, no matter how accurately transcribed, is not what is needed. I’m glad we don’t have a super-computer full of digital memories of Jesus’ life, or a library on the scale of a modern presidential library, every word recorded, millions of notes and e-mails, a public life lived on camera.

We have, in God's providence, just what we need, meaning we don't have Christ's life lived in digital precision. Thank God that when Jesus was born, there was no such thing! The lack of such technology allowed stories to develop that are precious and enduring, essential to our faith.

Consider the sacrament of Holy Communion. Can you imagine churches showing a video presentation prior to each celebration of Holy Communion, projecting onto a screen a re-living of the actual event from 2,000 years ago? Advantages? I suppose. It would, after all, solve the debates existing between denominations. It would fill in the gaps of the gospel tellings of the event, overlaying two dimensional text with tone and inflection so that we receive it in a wonderfully 3D context.

Yet, would there not also be profound disadvantages? Such perfect memory, you see, would rob us of the mystery, making unnecessary the images and symbols which have shaped our faith, which have powerfully conveyed the Story from generation to generation. Holy Communion would have become a spectator event, rather than an invitation to enter into the Story which Jesus, by becoming flesh, entered for us. I'll take "*half-remembered, half-imagined*" any day over verifiable video certainty.

Had such preservation technology been available when Jesus lived, I think, we would suffer immensely. No longer would we gather at the table "*In Remembrance of Him,*" for our memories would have been made unnecessary by technology. Why remember that which technology has remembered for us? We would be robbed of the story that has made Christian worship vital and alive for two millennia.

So, dear, Plotinus, you are right, remembering truly is for those who have forgotten.

Lord, in our Remembering, but also in our Forgetting, we give you praise!

Sources and notes:

"*Telling Truths,*" an essay by Barbara Brown Taylor in The Christian Century, July 25, 2006.

"*Memory Overload,*" an article by Jim Lewis in WIRED, February 2003.

"*Focus,*" the editorial introduction to PARABOLA's issue on *Memory and Forgetting* (Winter1986).