

## *Sins of Memory*

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ [www.buf.org](http://www.buf.org)  
Rev. Paul Beckel  
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Memory's a freakish bank where embarrassing treasures still draw interest. —Marge Piercy

Memory is a complicated thing, a relative to truth but not its twin. —Barbara Kingsolver

I can never remember things I didn't understand in the first place. —Amy Tan

They ask me to remember but they want me to remember their memories  
and I keep on remembering mine. —Lucille Clifton

**CHALICE LIGHTING**      We lit the chalice today in loving memory of E.K. Butler

**GATHERING SONG**      *Morning has Broken* #38

**CHILDREN'S FOCUS**      *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge*, by Mem Fox

Summary: A little boy brings his curiosity to the residents of the nursing home next door and—by looking with her through some evocative everyday objects—helps one to find her memories.

**RESPONSIVE READING**    “Those who Live Again”      #719

**SILENCE (3:00)**

**REFLECTIONS, PART 1**

I had a birthday this month. I can't remember which one. I do remember that I had my favorite cake—thank you Jane—a chocolate Bundt cake with cream cheese filling. But that's easy to remember, because I have that every year...wait, let me count...yes, 52 times.

It's funny what we remember. Not always ha-ha funny. Often just weird. I remember reading Ann Landers when I was little. I remember one of her columns in which she responded to someone who had written complaining about going to church and hearing sermon after sermon, year after year, not a single one of which he could remember. Ann's response was to suggest that over all of these years he had also eaten countless meals, none of which he probably remembered either, but no doubt these meals had nourished him in substantial ways. Now it's pretty self-serving for me to mention that one, but really, I remember it, from childhood. While I've probably forgotten even the topics of 9 out of the last 10 sermons I've preached.

That's the standard pattern of human memory—it's typical of a healthy human brain—to forget the bulk of what we experience after a short delay...and then, gradually, to lose the rest. It's the same for

significant and insignificant events. And it happens to all of us, regardless of our age. We're built that way; it's not necessarily a sign of mental decay. Memories are transient.

And since transience—or learning to appreciate transience—is one of our most essential religious challenges, maybe there's something to be learned from the transience of memory.

So even though I titled this sermon “Sins of Memory” [a phrase that I borrowed from Daniel Shachter's book, *The Seven Sins of Memory*] my purpose today is not just to bemoan memory's limits. Our memories are really remarkable products of natural selection—very effectively adapted to human conditions as they were about 15,000 years ago.

And even if our mental software hasn't been upgraded for a while, it's still pretty remarkable how much, and how often, we remember. Yes, you probably notice when you forget your keys and your wallet and your glasses. And we certainly notice when partners, children or co-workers forget. But still, is transient memory a sin? Or is it our salvation? At any given moment we hold in our attention, and short—term memory, the circumstances in which we find ourselves. And then, the next moment, we let that particular awareness go...so we can attend to our new circumstances. I find, for example, that I will forget a phone number by the time I'm done dialing—which is much better than remembering the phone number, and forgetting who I'm calling (although that has happened too).

For storage in long—term memory we tend to combine what we've experienced into generalizations. The downside of this is that we tend to lose details; the upside is that those details might have just gotten in the way. We're often better off consolidating multiple experiences into the memory of a few patterns and principles that can be readily available rather than having countless specific memories to sort through, which is one description of the difficulties of autism.

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Similar to transience is absent—mindedness. Which is when you kind of remember something...you know it's in there somewhere, but it just doesn't come out when you need it. For example, I often put my lunch in the microwave, turn it on for a couple of minutes, walk away, and then remember it a couple of hours later. How many of you have put a cup of coffee on top of your car while you unlock the door, then drive off with the coffee still on the roof? Don't sweat it. I once saw someone turn a corner in front of me... and a plate of spaghetti came flying off the roof of her car!

Absent mindedness of course can also be serious, even dangerous, when we lose track of important meetings, or forget to take our medicine.

But absent—mindedness cannot be cured by telling ourselves (or others): “don't forget...don't forget...don't forget.” It can be helpful, however, to connect a meaningful cue to a time signal. For example, when the teakettle whistles we don't say, “Gee, I wonder what that is supposed to remind me to do.” It generally helps for reminders to contain some specific context rather than tying a string around your finger. I find that even writing notes to myself doesn't work if I leave out the verbs...or if I write down a phone number assuming that tomorrow I'll remember *whose* phone number it is.

Still, making an effort to remember does make a difference. But there are productive and unproductive efforts. When we're in a conversation and we don't want to forget what we have to say, if we repeat it

over and over in our mind to help us remember, we're obviously not going to take in anything or learn anything from the world and the people around us.

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Our memories also fail us by blocking names. I'm going to get to some of the ways that memory relates to matters of theology and social ethics in a few minutes, but these practical matters are also very important in the church setting where we are trying to build community...but we may be so embarrassed that we don't remember someone's name that we allow that to get in the way.

So it's important to know that everyone blocks names. It's not a sign of pathology. And there are some simple things we can do for one another to ease the discomfort and to further the community building.

For example sometimes, as I say hello, I might find that I know that you helped to trim the bushes last week, I know you're a vegetarian, an agnostic, an undecided voter, and that your kid's favorite cartoon character is Spiderman, but still I stutter trying to initiate conversation because I cannot remember your name. There ought to be a simple, silent, and shame-free hand signal for this because it's a universal experience, and there is just no need for this to interfere as it does. Maybe we could just tap our heads to say—without saying—“Help!”

Actually pointing to the tip of your tongue would be the more universally significant expression, but that's probably not going to catch on. Still, having something on the tip of our tongue is so universally human that one study found 45 languages that use a similar metaphor for that experience: from Korean (“sparkling at the end of my tongue”) to Cheyenne (“I have lost it on my tongue”).

Someday our phones will probably whisper to us as we're walking around coffee hour (“approaching Maria...Lester is on your right”). But in the meantime, I thank you for wearing a name tag. And I thank you for introducing people to each other, frequently. And when you're in a little cluster of people and you can tell that someone has forgotten a name, thank you for subtly dropping each other's names into the

conversation. It's a real way to acknowledge one another's inherent worth and dignity to help each other with names.

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Now we're going to get into something a little darker, and that is *misattribution*: remembering things that did not actually happen.

Unfortunately, misattribution can have devastating consequences when an eyewitness to a crime, with sincerity and honest intention, misidentifies a suspect. Many of the convictions that have been overturned after years of wrongful incarceration involve in-accurate *eyewitness* testimony.

It's very easy to remember words or faces or events but to remember in-correctly the context in which we first saw them.

This may seem a rather trite example of such a serious matter, but would you take a moment to read the words at the bottom of your order of service? [Thread, pin, eye, sewing, sharp, point, prick, thimble, haystack, thorn, hurt, injection, syringe, cloth, knitting...]

Now if you'd just close your eyes and let's take half a minute to breathe together, calmly, in silence...

Now please don't look. I have just one question about that list of words. Was the word "needle" the first, or the last word on that list?

My point is not to embarrass you, of course, but just to help us understand how easily we can make such an error. There is a common scam, for example, used against the elderly, in which someone calls and says, "Thanks Mr. Washington for sending us the payment for \$500. I'm happy to tell you that you've overpaid, so if you'll just send us a check for \$400, we'll tear this one up; let me take you step by step through where you can send the new check."

And sadly, it is not unusual to have some parts of our memory working well while other parts are more vulnerable, so we or those who are looking out for us might not notice or make the needed adjustments.

It's not that we should constantly second-guess ourselves, and each other. But we should be aware of how we can harm ourselves and others if we rely on the certainty we feel ahead of evidence or independent confirmation.

Which brings me to perhaps the most significant religious aspect of this sermon. That is: we need one another. We need one another not just for care and mutual support. We need one another—even in our fiercely independent society—we often need one another just to know what's what.

## **MUSICAL MEDITATION**

### **REFLECTIONS PART 2**

It's one of the key teachings of Buddhism—that what we know that we know...is often an illusion. Psychology also has some words for this: *confabulation*, which is when we confuse our imagination or a dream with memory...and *cryptomnesia*, which is when we have a great idea that is not our own idea.

Another weird memory of mine from about 30 years ago: You may have noticed that I like wordplay and little twists on conventional phrases. Well, I was riding along listening to the car radio when a neat phrase occurred to me. "Total eclipse...of the heart." What a poetic metaphor, I thought. I ought to write something with that. And then somehow I became aware, even as I was thinking, that in the background

Bonnie Tyler was singing these very words on the radio, in this new pop song that I'd probably heard, unconsciously, 5 times already that day.

So I'm not going to feel stupid for having that experience since it's got its own name: cryptomnesia. Psychologist B.F. Skinner noted how one of the most disheartening experiences of old age is when you make a point—so insightful, so beautifully expressed—only to be told that you've said that a hundred times before.

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Another troubling failure of memory is suggestibility. People have been shown to remember things very readily as if they were first—hand experiences, when in fact these memories were planted by others. The most horrific examples, perhaps, are false memories of sexual abuse, which in all probability were unintentionally planted by counselors or criminal prosecutors. There was a great wave of this in the 1990s, from which a lot has been learned about how not to ask leading questions.

In addition to the extraordinary challenges this situation poses for the justice system, let me suggest two points of *religious* significance for mis-attribution. First: our memories embellish things. So when we hear a story, a bible story for example, we cannot help but add costumes and settings and extended dialogue to make that story come to life. Obviously, over time, that can make stories, even our most precious stories, inconsistent with their original versions.

Which leads to the more significant religious point: that of trust, and the fact that reliable good-hearted people can be both certain, and wrong. And the universe itself can often seem to deceive us.

What we do with that, I suppose, is another sermon. But I don't think it's necessarily cause for despair. Look, I acknowledge that I am probably creating false memories for my kids by periodically re-reading with them our little notebook in which we recorded some cute anecdotes from when they were little. But I also have no doubt that it's a good thing to do. If you've done something like this while looking through a photo album with someone you love, it's a great way to rekindle a sense of connection. That is, even if your memories are somewhat different, you can share together a sense that this was a moment worth remembering.

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The final wickedness of memory I'll mention is the opposite of transience, the opposite of forgetting—and yet equally painful—that is: being unable to forget. Intrusive memories, that won't stop replaying on a loop in our heads. "If only I had taken my money out of the stock market before it crashed. I should have known. Damn it, I did know, but I didn't act. Oh if only...."

Persistence of memory can be extremely painful. Perhaps the most poignant persistent memories are those of the death of a loved one. Especially if we somehow imagine that we could have done something to prevent it. Or that we should have done something, said something, to have made the situation different.

Even when it is objectively obvious that we could not have done anything then. And of course we can't, now.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is, of course, an example of persistent memory. On this Memorial Day let us not forget the extraordinary number of veterans who suffer from PTSD.

I don't think there is a consistent solution to persistent memories, whether they are trivial, like a song playing through your head, or memories of traumatic violence. In some cases it might be better or necessary to interfere with the memories, chemically or with distraction. In some cases it might be better

to draw memories out, retell them and retell them and retell them... *if* we have a safe and receptive environment in which to do this.

And yet there may be an evolutionary benefit to persistent memory—at least to some degree. Like pain, or worry, persistent memory can call us to pay attention to something important, something that we need to attend to, something that holds a lesson for us. But then, of course, pain, worry, or persistent memory can also just shut us down.

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In closing I'd like to make three quick comments on religious aspects of memory.

First, misattribution has a lesson for us. Misattribution, please remember, is knowing something, but not knowing how we know it, or where it comes from. But it often doesn't matter where our knowledge comes from; at least this is true regarding our knowledge of virtue. Humans might argue for another several centuries about whether kindness and honesty and gratitude are gifts to us from Allah, or from nature, or from a flying spaghetti monster. Forget it. I don't think it matters if we remember where or how we've learned to love.

Second, if you can't remember anything I've said today, you can find copies of most sermons at [buf.org](http://buf.org)

And finally, despite the fallibilities of human memory, despite our natural limits, we *have* found ways to harness the lessons of the past, we have found ways *to record and to reflect* upon our experiences. And this gives us power to refrain from making the same tragic errors again and again.

Through our evolving cultures—made up of our collective cultivated memories—through art and literature, storytelling, ritual, and the study of ethics, we have found powerful if imperfect means to make some of the good things last...so as to improve ourselves, and improve our futures.

Through the natural sciences and technology, we have discovered powerful means not only to destroy but to create and to heal.

And through history and the social sciences, we have found powerful tools to help us pierce our self—delusions... ways to understand how human societies have acted in the past. So we may learn, if nothing else, some things not to do...laws that have not served justice... collective gluttonous desires that may be destroying our living planet. If we wish to live long together... If we wish to live long together, then this much, let us not forget.

## **SHARING OUR GIFTS**

### **SENDING SONG**

*Thanks be for These* #322

### **BENEDICTION**

Thanks be for memories and forgetting; thanks be for trial and error; thanks be for confidence and doubt; thanks be for yesterday and today.