

“Messy, Muddled, Marvelous Memory”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

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Reading Nostalgia on the 5:42, Elizabeth Tarbox

Sermon

Recently, my son who has been very interested lately in hearing again and again the story of his birth. Each time I try to remember how I told it the time before which I'm usually not able to do. In this act of remembering, I realize that we are really creating a memory together.

Perhaps at this point at four years old, his birth isn't something that he can remember on his own, but it's a memory that his father and I can share and help form each time the story is told with all of the different details that are added or repeated each time. It's amazing which details he can remember I've left out in the second or third telling of the story and that he knows that his father's version and my version are slightly different. Jared's always includes him having to leave a pan full of eggs and home fries on the stove to rush to the hospital. Mine always includes the word "yanked" as our son was born by c-section and so the most accurate way to describe it is that "the doctor yanked you out." Both versions include us crying and Jared seeing him first and whispering, "He's beautiful."

Memories connect us to each of our individual's pasts and also to one another.

This is true of those memories that we hold dear, that bring a smile to our face, that are pleasant. Those memories that are also painful, those difficult memories.

Memory links us with the past, with who we are. Memories give shape to our identity.

As Elizabeth Tarbox says in her meditation on riding her train in England, returning to that place that she lived long ago brought back memories that reminded her of who she was at that time, the things that mattered to her during those five years, the life that she was trying to create.

Tarbox notices how the flash of time it takes to pass through the station doesn't give justice to the significance of her memories of living there. In just a few seconds, she can look back at her old self and hold who she was with great tenderness and fondness. Memory is part of the ever unfolding journey of becoming linking us to who we were along the way so that we can make sense of who we are now.

Memories can be very dear to us like a treasure - gifts of stories from the past.

Memory, though, is complicated. It doesn't just live in tact in one place in our brain where we can go and retrieve it. Memories are recorded and sorted and constantly shuffling around in our brains.

The Disney movie, *Inside Out*, depicts this process in the life of the fictional character, 11 year-old Riley Andersen. Inside the headquarters of Riley's mind, the emotions of Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust stand at the control board. They watch at the end of each day as Riley closes her eyes and all of the day's memories - represented as colored orbs - get sorted, most of them being sent off to the long-term memory storage shelves. Five core memories are set apart and are linked to important islands that represent core aspects of Riley's personality - Goofball Island, Hockey Island, Friendship Island, and Family Island. Joy is the leader of Riley's emotional team and tries to ensure that all of the memories Riley collects are happy ones.

The creators of the film did a fair amount of research in creating it and though it is not all scientifically precise it does provide a pretty good view of the complex and miraculous way our brains work and the interplay of memory, personality, and emotion in making us who we are.

As the film depicts, we come to depend on our memory to make sense of who we are now.

We might take for grant just how much we rely upon our memories in shaping our identity. Those things we can remember about our own past as well as our very capacity to remember become essential parts of who we are.

This is most poignantly felt when any of us might start to lose our memories, whether that's due to a natural aging process or more painful diseases like Alzheimer's. A loss of memory can be extremely painful and can make someone feel like they're losing a grasp on who they are and their basic functioning and capacities as human beings. I know that some of you have witnessed this painful process of memory loss with loved ones or are even beginning to experience it yourself.

Any kind of loss is painful and the loss of memory which can feel so central to who we are is especially so.

Memory loss can be one of the most poignant reminders of our mortality. Yet, in the face of this kind of loss, we can continue to look for what remains even as memory becomes more muddled and begins to slip through our hands.

The capacity to remember and to recollect and to communicate and verbalize those memories is just one part of who we are. Often the reason memories are so meaningful to us is not because of the details we can recall - the exact outfit you were wearing the first time your partner said "I love you" or the exact color the paint on the wall of that doctor's visit when you got the dreaded diagnosis. Those details aren't what make the memories so meaningful, but the feelings underneath those memories that the experience themselves bring up.

The feelings are ones that linger even after the memory might have faded.

Researchers have discovered that this is true. That long after our ability to recall some event has faded or gone away, the emotion that is behind that event stays with us. A scientific study published in 2010 by researchers from the University of Iowa "provides direct evidence that a feeling of emotion can endure beyond the conscious recollection for the events that initially triggered the emotion."¹

For some of the people who work with and treat those with Alzheimer's or other illnesses that causes memory loss, this has helped shape their approach. With the understanding that there is a lot of the human experience that still remains even after the ability to recall certain details of information from one's mind or one's past diminishes, caregivers can focus in on being with people in a way that honors their humanity and the emotional life that is still very active underneath it all.

Alan Dienstag is a psychologist who has counseled people with Alzheimer's and their caregivers. He shares this story of working with a woman whose husband was living with Alzheimer's Disease and was in a nursing home. He was at a stage when he was beginning to not be able to recognize his loved ones, including his wife. The first time she went to visit him and he didn't recognize her, she was just distraught. She shared

¹ Justin Feinstein et al., "Sustained Experience of Emotion after Loss of Memory in Patients with Amnesia," PNAS/Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United State of America, April 27, 2010, <http://www.pnas.org/content/107/17/7674>.

that she would go see him and the first thing she would ask him was, “Do you remember who I am?” Dr. Dienstag tried to convince her that she should try another approach and that there were other ways that her husband could show that he recognized her - from the look on his face or his body language. There are other ways for him to express his recognition of her besides answering the question, “Do you remember who I am?” with a clear answer. He reached a point where he just couldn’t answer that question. And one day, she went to his room and she asked him, “Do you remember who I am?” and he looked at her and said, “I don’t know who you are, but I love you.”² This man whose memory was quickly fading still understood exactly what she needed to hear. And he still understood the deep feeling of loving that was shared between them and the deep feeling of love that he felt inside himself. And he could give word and expression to that feeling.

Memory holds the emotional power to keep us connected.

Memory can hold the emotional power of love so strongly. And even when the details of those past events and those details even of who we are have faded, that feeling of love can be passed on.

The memories that we have can be given away so that we don’t lose them.

Alan Dienstag’s grandmother shared with him a bit of wisdom towards the end of her life. When we give something away, we don’t lose it.

Memories that are given away are not lost.

They may eventually be beyond our retrieval but if they are given away - passed on - they have not been lost.

Even when we are gone, memories of love and care, connection and humor, can and do live on because the love, care, connection and humor at their heart endure. These lives memories have an immortality of their own. We feel this poignantly when someone we love dies.

This story illustrates this in a moving way. I have shared it with you before so it might sound familiar.

It was 1965. Carole met Rick in the back row of band. She played the drums, and he played the tuba. Carole was the new girl at their high school. Their love developed as it often does at this tender age. Shyly and sweetly. Carole would pick flowers for Rick on her way to school. They passed notes to each other when they met in the hallways. Rick always began his notes to her with, “Hi Lover,” but not for the reason one might

² <https://onbeing.org/programs/alan-dienstag-alzheimers-and-the-spiritual-terrain-of-memory/>

suspect. He said that she was a person who had a lot of love for everyone and everything. Carole says, "It was a view of myself that I hadn't had before; that I was a person who gave love to other people and was there for them."

Rick went off to college in the fall and by October, Carole's feelings had changed and she decided to break off their relationship. He accepted her decision with grace and they remained friends, writing regularly and seeing each other now and then. After about a year of school, Rick went home to Minneapolis to work before being drafted in the Army to serve in Vietnam. Rick made Carole promise to write to him and she agreed. But over the next nine months she didn't hear from him.

She was studying when her mother handed her the newspaper. Pictured were the faces of soldiers who had been killed. And that's how she found out Rick had died. For more than a decade, Carole didn't talk to anyone about Rick. She once visited his grave in the military cemetery in Minneapolis bringing him daisies and sitting for several hours.

When she heard about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, she sensed she finally might be able to say good-bye. Carole visited the memorial in 1985 with her husband and children. And after walking the length of it, she found his name on Panel 40 West and left this letter:

"Hi lover!

Seventeen years...you're still twenty-one—forever young, but gone. Murdered. And nothing will make your loss to us less of a tragedy... [*reading not included due to copyright restrictions*] ...

I'll always bring you flowers. You gave me love. Good-bye. Hello.

Carole Ann"³

May we know our memories, however messy and muddled, to be part and parcel of who we are.

May we know that they are given life in us and in those who come after us by the love the endures and remains immortal.

So may it be.

³ Shrapnel in the Heart: Letters and Remembrances from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by Laura Palmer (First Vintage Books, 1988)