

Living and Dying in the Realm of Forgetful People

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Are You Able to Remember?

God once asked a murderer about the location of his victim. The murderer evaded the question by posing another: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The almighty God of the book of Genesis, who sees all things, directs the universe, and knows when a sparrow dies, didn’t need Cain to tell him what happened to Abel; he already knew. His question appeared superfluous. In fact, if Genesis provided a snapshot of Abel’s whereabouts post-murder, it would definitely reveal something along the lines of the victim’s peace and joy in paradise. Whether from the Jewish, Muslim, or Christian outlook of justice and the afterlife, God assures the heavenly reward of a saintly person, so God above all others would have an idea where to find the obedient Abel.

Yet God asked Cain: “Where is Abel?”

What

My mother forgets her children sometimes.

“Mom, where’s Jake?” I could ask and substitute almost any of my siblings’ names and receive the same response: “Oh! What time is it? He’s at work. I forgot to pick him up!” The investment in a cell phone was one of Jacob’s wisest decisions.

“Can a woman forget her sucking child,” *yes, yes she can*, “that she may not have compassion on the son of her womb?” *I suppose she does have that, even when she forgets*. “Yea, they may forget,” *I see that. Feel that. Know that. I experience the condition of humanity called involuntary selective memory*.

“Yet I will not forget thee, O house of Israel” (1 Nephi 21:15).

To understand what it means to remember every moment of a human life from fetus to gray hairs and then again billions of times over is to understand the surface and rotation and chemistry of every star you see when you drive through the southern Utah desert in the dead of night, the sky studded with celestial bodies.



On late nights at the dance studio, after all of my classmates had wandered out with their parents and I was left staring at my reflection in the glass door, I brooded over my mother’s selective memory, wishing that somehow she could manage to make her desire to remember into an actuality. And the guilt that chiseled at my irritation was the guilt of a girl who failed to manage just the people in dance, school, and work. This girl had much less to love and remember than the woman who helped her neighbors, worked, and served while facilitating her own twelve children’s lives. But I would usually let the anger overwhelm any empathy as I was forced to weigh my options between asking to use the office phone and waiting for Mom to materialize.

In response to these memory lapses, Jacob became resourceful rather than resentful. He developed new tactics to grab my mother’s attention. On one of his last nights of work before departing on a two-year religious mission to Las Vegas, he taped a piece of paper to the back of the front door.

“Mom, don’t forget me, please!”

His signature was redundant because the all-caps and jutting lines informed us of the author. It was more for the rest of the world. My mother left it on the door the entire two years he was away, eager to share the inside joke with whoever asked about her son. She clung to the thought of him. I couldn’t be jealous, but

I wondered why his absence suddenly filled us with the responsibility to honor and remember him. When getting rides was a responsibility that allowed him to function and live, he slipped into the oblivion of the to-do lists. But his independence through the apparently complete severing of our existences brought an urgent obligation to pay homage to his memory.

He wasn't gone forever, though. Two years later, Jacob came home a whole lot tanner. He would choke up talking about his experience saving souls in Vegas for many months after his homecoming. We remembered how he was scrawnier and shorter when he boarded the plane as a nineteen-year-old with a bad temper. And he came home a twenty-one-year-old with a bad temper. He still had a passion for Bach and Rachmaninoff and a familiar knack for freezing around girls. He continued to bang out Chopin on the piano at midnight, and he still took time to pet the dogs.

He fell right into what our memories knew of him, our vague recollections of what these motions once meant to him. In our eagerness to pay homage to his memory, we forgot where he was now, unaware of what memories he now held sacred. More was different than the tan.

He had seen people and places we would never understand. He had walked down streets that were home for him and foreign to us. His soul was molded out of sight by factors he could not or would not describe. He now fought against our memory, inarticulate.

We sat in the car, the two of us, and I let him talk through the feelings of being a returned missionary. "It's hard to be who you are when you come home to people who expect you to be who you were." *I just wish you'd let me grow*, I heard in the silence that followed his attempt at making his agony clear.

When

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, August 2014: I am on a paved walkway. It has recently faded gray; its surface, updated a few years back, is just now allowing purple clover flowers and floppy-headed cat-tails to climb through cracks for a peek at the sun. And it's only a peek. The sidewalk leads up an incline overshadowed by oak

trees. Oak giants, the weary survivors of mortars. One can hardly see the scarring from cannons belonging to soldiers who fired bits of shrapnel through the space of this park. The park is now so lethargic I wonder how the violence of those years could not fire through time and stare me more boldly in the face. I nod at a passing visitor who leads his boys up the hill as they shriek, “Bang!” while pointing their newly-purchased toy pistols with one hand and keeping their Confederate caps on their heads with the other.

People come by the busloads: to take pictures from this overlook, to climb on the exterior of the model log cabin, to ogle reenactors sporting long-sleeved, wool getups in 100-degree weather. What do they see? Why are they here? I want to hate them for their casualness, but instead I let my dad shuffle from angle to angle, torso tilted back, smartphone at his nose, taking candid shots of me at this or that monument. The fields below the hill—solemn, sacred grounds—look less affected by the Civil War than the ground around the path—ground battered by the onslaught of tourists. On either side of the walkway is compacted brown earth dotted with yellow grass. Little unplanned paths break off from the concrete and wind like tributaries through towering undergrowth. They lead to the discovery of some-society-or-other’s memorial: another something or someone somebody somewhere is supposed to remember. But off in the distance, the real memorial looks like any ordinary meadow. I wonder at nature’s ability to adapt and live on. I remain stuck, straining to grasp and value lost lives that would have been gone by now anyway, war or no war. I strain if only because no one else seems to care. Not even the earth seems to care.

Across the sloping fields the cross-work fences sag with rot. I stroll along the hilltop, thinking about figures that long ago stirred the weeds with last breaths: the whimpering men unable to lift and save themselves, the women hurrying through the fields to find the mostly living, the dogs, like lost children, meandering among the bodies, pausing at the carcasses of the horses whose wide eyes were frozen in frenzied confusion. These are the images I try to create to make me feel something. Anything. Please make me different than these tourists.

The expanse of open land sparkles with wild flowers that laugh at my recreation of the past. White, bespeckled butterflies drift over the milkweed, mirrors of the ghosts who drift over this unmarked graveyard in the night. In daylight, the world keeps spinning. A tractor breaks up a fallow field, disturbing the earth that once yielded a deathly harvest. The plowman, the tourists, me—we court the belief that if the bushes resurface and the wood ferns return, the wounds are all healed.

Why

I've wondered if God was really asking Cain, "Do you love Abel?" The question may seem just as ridiculous as asking where Abel was. After all, Cain had just killed the man. But love and hate are twins, connected by their births, equally rooted in their origin of passion and human need. Apathy is their enemy, a loss of feeling, a disconnection from what it means to be alive. And I look at Cain and his smart-mouthed response during his brief interview with his maker and wonder at what point he crossed the line from hate to not caring at all.



How much of me wants to forget? There are people and places I want to erase from my history, forget how they have hurt me, or I them. And yet they stay. I see their faces on the backs of my eyelids at night, feel their presence in the emptiness of the pillow beside me.

Guilt keeps them here.

And yet, there are others, when life takes me far, far away, or death takes them farther, as much remorse as I attempt to conjure in order to hold to the ghosts of the gone, they move on without me. Or maybe I just leave them behind because my heart is tired of carrying them.

As Cain was condemned to roam the earth a cursed man, did his mind delete his memory as a means of self-preservation? It's possible that remembering not only his crime but those whom

he had offended would have caused an irreparable, emotional short-circuit. Maybe he could not care without breaking. Maybe it would have been important for him to break.

How

“What means the most to me is when people remember them,” Erin said to me. “Because I miss them every day.”

The curtains shifted as if with the swell of my guilt rather than a summer gust. Erin was lounging on the couch, smiling with her mouth only. Her two boys alternated between jumping on her limp body and loudly reproducing animal noises while running through the house. Charles was five or so; Elliot was barely trotting and gurgling half-coherent words. There should have been four children pretending to be lions as they harassed their mother.

Lilly was a few years younger than Charles and she lived about a month. James was only seven months younger than Lilly. He was born prematurely and died almost immediately after birth. I didn't meet either of them. Elliot came many years later.

The month after Lilly's birth was filled with late-night phone calls from Mom and even later-night calls up to God. I was at school on the other side of the country. I only heard what was happening; I never experienced taking a shift with the baby at the hospital, never volunteered to watch Charles so Erin could stare at the chest that fluttered with the forced rise and fall of the machine dubbed the “iron heart,” never listened to my brother strum Bach's “Sheep May Safely Graze” late at night for his baby girl teetering between life and death for forty days and forty nights. All accounts were secondhand. The emotional distance made the pain as far away as the land spreading between us. 2,000 miles away. I wept if only because I wanted to hurt more and couldn't.

My inconsistent suffering created an inconsistent memory. Lilly's reality was drowned in finals, a promotion at work, another date, my roommates' dirty dishes. Then a phone call from home, a passing comment about families, an old friend's question about Micah and Erin: I would inevitably experience a spike of obligation to pay homage to pain I did not know how to feel. It led me

to draw out the names James and Lilly when convenient. *Sunday School and inspirational stories about healing from loss and leaning on the strength of God. University classrooms and real-life application for the analysis of Anne Bradstreet's poems about her dead grandchildren. Livingrooms and late-night talks about the meaning of life and suffering.* Yet my mouth formed a story about the shapes pain would have taken if I had a memory of touching Lilly's hot, fleshy palm. It's a useful learning experience for the detached aunt. And yet the youngest aunt, my little sister, emailed me during this time and said, "By the way, do not think that I'm not sad about Lilly's death just because I don't mention it. I just don't like to talk about it." And then all of my talking suddenly felt cheap. Was it? I don't know. And I don't know if I lack an answer because I'm too afraid to face my selective memory or if there is something in the human relationship with recollection that is more complicated than I understand.

I don't remember Lilly's or James's birthdays until it's too late to send Erin a commemorative card. The Lord gives life and he takes it away. But who takes away the memories?



My sister Mimi took me to Lilly's grave over Christmas break. The memorial garden was as mysterious as my understanding of this child: chilled winter mist over green fields surrounded by naked trees. Lilly rested in "The Angel Garden" surrounded by the plaques of other infants.

We stood for a while. Mimi suggested singing a song. "Be Still My Soul," I affirmed. Halfway through the first verse we realized we didn't know the words. We giggled before morphing our smiles into solemn hums to finish off the song. I touched my hand to my lips, kissed it, and placed it on the grave.

"Goodbye," I said. *I never met you*, I thought.



I was home for Easter. It seemed an appropriate time to take Lilly daisies from our front yard. I wished I could afford lilies. The

memorial garden looked much the same as it did during my first visit. The hanging moisture obscured the scene and flattened the grass. Many graves bore the tokens of loved ones. Neon Easter egg baskets contrasted with the wet granite headstones. Many more graves remained naked, unornamented by even a flower. *Who mourns for those people? Suffers those losses forever? Why do I feel so keenly obligated to their memory?* I stood overwhelmed by a consciousness that I could not even hold my own niece in the same sort of sacred remembrance everyone else seemed to be able to.

It appeared I was not the first of Lilly's visitors that season. A bright white blossom of an undefined species glowed against the dewy grass in a vase above her grave. I stared at it for a while before adding my daisies, pressing my lips through my hand to the baby's plaque before standing and rescanning the space.

How could I have missed it? A fresh, bright gravestone lay beside Lilly's. In memory of a baby boy born a few weeks ago, the brass lettering told me he died the day of his birth. What was the journey like that had brought the parents to this garden? They had been here recently. They had placed an enormous bouquet of those unidentified white blossoms beside their son's memorial. I looked from flower to flower, plaque to plaque, grasping for the emotion that had inspired the parents' movement of a solitary flower to the grave of another lost child, a child they had no memory of anticipating, a child whose name they would only remember when they visited the grave of their son. I took a daisy from Lilly's bunch and added it to the bursting bouquet on the boy's grave.

I recognized in that moment that I wanted to hold this gesture as long as my mind would let me, yet having experienced it is far more precious than its memory. But still. I can't help but treasure the frame paused in time: adjacent graves, splotchy with drying rain, bordered by growing grass, and crowned with the life of white petals.