



# RESOURCES IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Dedicated to Research and Reflection in Formative Spirituality

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## MEMORY & MINDFULNESS

This issue of the Journal explores various facets of forgiveness and the dynamics of memory — remembering and forgetting — that come into play in establishing appropriate conditions for forgiveness and spiritual growth in our lives. In the last issue of this journal we reflected on the formative dynamics of forgiving and forgetting in human life. The words of St. Basil (c. 330 – 379) affirm the necessity of forgetting: “Not the power to remember, but the very opposite, the power to forget, is necessary to our human existence.” Not least among the important functions of forgetting is the “space” it creates to allow us to continue experiencing and to be present to life as it unfolds moment to moment. Remembering, also an important function, has the power to eclipse the present. The pull of the past can deter us from facing forward toward the unknown future.

In this issue we examine the activity of remembering as a potentially formative act. Memory doesn’t mean just one thing to any of us. It is a blessing in many ways, reminding us of what has been given to us during our journey of life. It is also at times a burden we carry — of past events that weigh us down, hold us back, and make us fearful of our possibilities for the future. The offerings in this issue suggest that the right kind of remembering enhances our power of appreciation, becoming as it were a disposition, a way of being in the world that re-members and enables us to draw what is necessary from the past to move forward in freedom, openness and integration. The American writer William Maxwell articulately observed that recollection could get out of hand:

I have liked remembering almost as much as I have liked living. But now it is difficult, I have to be careful. I can ruin a night’s sleep by suddenly, in the dark, thinking about some particular time in my life. Before I can stop myself, it is as if I had driven a mineshaft down through the layers and layers of the past and must explore, relive, remember, reconsider, until daylight delivers me.

Mindfulness would seem to be the corrective to “getting lost” in memory. We easily lose ourselves in thoughts, habitual behavior, and unproductive rumination. From the perspective of ongoing human and spiri-

tual formation, the concern is to foster modes of remembering that facilitate rather than hinder consonant growth and development of personality. In this issue we hope to show that mindfulness promotes formative remembrance and contributes to our understanding of memory as a vehicle for approaching the spirit, appropriating the pointers of our unique life direction, and sustaining awe in the midst of the vicissitudes of life.

As formative, memory is an ongoing source of human like formation meant to assist us in our efforts to live the good life. The William Stafford poem which follows testifies to the power of memory in helping us to live fully and thoughtfully in the present.

### For Givenness

With the world as it is  
And the heart in pieces  
The disjunction  
Between actor and acted upon  
Confounds responsibility  
The longed-for possibility

Of gathering the self  
and making ready  
To receive  
What is meant for giving  
And going beyond  
What can only be lived through

~ Romeo J. Bonsaint, SC

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## MEDITATION, MINDFULNESS, AND THE REFORMATION OF MEMORIES

~ John D. Hamilton, CFX, and Romeo J. Bonsaint, SC

In the previous issue of this journal we developed the theme of *Forgiving and Forgetting*. As we considered this theme it became increasingly apparent that forgiveness is not something we are able to *achieve* but, rather, that it is a gift we can only dispose ourselves to receive. To experience the possibility of forgiveness, our memory must expand and our consciousness be transformed. Memory can expand and change because its nature, according to Father Adrian van Kaam, is “formative,” rather than static. Memory is not a mental videotape of the past. Rather, our memories are organized and interpreted in light of our “present disposition formation.” We interpret not only the present moment but our whole life and its memories in light of our present dispositional life. Because memory is formative, it is capable of change, a change most often facilitated by an opening up to a wider and more complete vision of our life experience and world. A key to this increased opening of vision are the practices of meditation and mindfulness.

Van Kaam writes: “Because our memory is not a thing (it is ourselves as formatively remembering), we are not merely the passive object of our memories. We can become increasingly the subject of formative memory... formative remembrance can make us the subject instead of merely the object of our memories. “Van Kaam goes on to say: “Because of this memory, we can develop new integrative meanings for the whole of life that grant a currently significant configuration to both past and present formation events.” (*Human Formation*, p. 147) It is through this new “configuration” that we experience the possibility of compassion for what had before been apparently unforgivable. “My thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” through the prophet Isaiah. We never totally comprehend the *meaning* of the events of our lives – for their meaning is mysterious. To live in the developing understanding of our memories as formative is to come to realize more and more over the course of our lives that our present comprehension is always partial, that, in the words of St. Paul, “Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face.” (1 Cor 13:12) To deeply engage in our own formation is to realize that our conscious life is a continuing process of moving more and more into “unknowing”. Each hard won insight into our life experience at once expands our awareness of self and world, yet reveals itself as still partial and incomplete.

Van Kaam continues: “Memory that is formative in a distinctively human way is not just a duplicate of past formative events and their subsequent attached meanings and emotions. It is a reliving of these events in the context of a new formation field.” As our field of formation changes, so do our memories and our interpretations of them. “The consonant life-form integrates past formation events into itself by disclosing and releasing new meanings.”(ibid) This reformation and re-integration of memories by the disclosing and releasing of new meanings occurs as the transcendent-pneumatic dimension of memory (“the mind of Christ”) increasingly influences our consciousness. As transcendent-pneumatic memory comes more to the fore in us, we increasingly pass from the object to the subject of our memories. We come to recognize ever more our unique-communal life call through these memories. “In consonant life formation, higher-dimension memory prevails in formative influence over lower-dimension memories, yet it takes them fully into account.” (p. 151)

We see this expressed often in the calls of the spiritual tradition to grow into “the mind of Christ.” In the spiritual classic *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Jean Pierre de Caussade writes: “Thus, each instant of our lives, and each one of our actions, while increasing our debt toward God, form new bonds which make us yet more dependent on God’s divine goodness. At this thought, the spirit, heart, and soul with all its powers remain lost, swallowed up and annihilated in the profound depth of this sovereign dominion.” Our consciousness of reality and our presence to the world change in accord with the degree to which we become truly mindful of the Divine presence at the foundation of the world.

### Meditative Formative Remembrance

“Memory that is formative in a distinctively human way is not just a duplicate of past formative events and their subsequent attached meanings and emotions. It is a reliving of these events in the context of a new formation field.” One way that we change our field of formation is to practice or cultivate certain memories in order to strengthen or initiate certain dispositions. For example, if we want to cultivate stillness or recollection, we remember, we image, such memories and images from our lives. We also remember those persons we’ve known who embodied such dispositions; we “dwell” in words from the Sacred texts that speak to our hearts of these dispositions. “The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters;

he restoreth my soul." If we want to cultivate peace, we ponder the words of the prayer of St. Francis. "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love." As Jesus commands us, we make His words our home. We repeat the words over and over and attempt to practice them moment by moment until they become the place where we dwell. Thus, sacred words and the way of living they represent become more and more the structure of our formation fields. In God's time, these calls of the Divine Will become embodied as a powerful presence in our field of formation. And within this dwelling place of the Sacred Word that opens and illuminates our field of formation, the past and present events of our lives take on new meanings, informed by the realization that all is held in the compassionate love and mercy of God.

### **Memories of Form Traditions and Personal Encounter with the Mystery**

Meditative Formative Remembrance has the power to lead us to our own personal encounter with the Mystery. Van Kaam writes: "Our personal encounter with the mystery of formation happens in our life as we live compatibly in the present-day context. Yet it occurs through the medium of the memory of a form tradition. The personal encounter with the mystery creates its own transcendent and unique memories. In these memories the formation mystery remains present as one's personal epiphany. Here the mystery abides uniquely as a source of joy, peace and light to which one can return in faith, hope, and consonance. In its light, we remember the formative events of our life in a new way. We begin to see how the mystery of formation disclosed itself in them as a movement of personal care, how it addressed itself to us in them, drawing us into communication with its continuing presence." (p. 157) It is in meditation on the Sacred Words of the great spiritual traditions and by living in mindfulness, that is in full presence to the present moment that we become available for our "personal encounter with the mystery." It is this personal encounter that reveals to us the mystery at the core of our being as "a source of joy, peace and light" and as One who discloses itself to us in all the events of our lives "as a movement of personal care... drawing us into communication with its continuing presence."

### **Remembering in the Light of Mystery**

For the most part we tend to "forget" that life is personal encounter with the Mystery and that our personal experiences are ultimately "movements of personal care ... drawing us into communion with [God's]

continuing presence." This is why at the center of our teaching lies the call of Deuteronomy 6:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

In order to remember we must continually repeat the words that remind us of our Divine Source, and we must mindfully attend to what we are going through that we might abide ever more consistently in God's world and recognize our own moments of life as a small part of that world.

While the state of forgetfulness is typical of our entire life, it particularly manifests in times of fear, stress, and anxiety. We look to the Psalms to teach us how to lay out our experiences and our memories before God that we might find their place in that Divine "continuing presence." In Psalm 118, 5 we hear a description of an experience we know well, of calling out to God in the midst of trouble: "I called to the Lord in my distress; the Lord answered me and set me free." In his new translation and commentary, Robert Alter translates



this verse: "From the straits I called to Yah. Yah answered me in a wide-open place." The place from which we call out, when we are in distress, is "from the straits" from a place of constriction and narrowness of heart. If we reflect on our state of mind when we are beset by distress, fear, and anxiety, we recognize that we are in "straits." It is a place where there is no breadth of vision, where we are unable to recognize anything but our own distress. And as psychotherapy has shown us, from these "straits" we are unable to see any choices or possibilities. All we are left with are the habitual reactions that have been formed in us over our lifetimes.

But as we see in the Psalm, while we are in "straits," Yah (the Lord) answers "in a wide-open place." The place where the Lord abides, however, is a place of possibility and hope. The truth is that things are not as they seem from our closed-in perspective. "The Lord is for me, I shall not fear," says the next verse, "what can humankind do to me?" This verse of the psalm describes a change in consciousness, a change in heart, from "the straits" to "a wide-open place." When we look for the Lord to free us and have mercy on us within the straits of our reactive and habitual consciousness, we are too "constrained" to recognize the love, mercy, and possibility of the Lord that resides "in a wide-open space." The love is there, but when we are constricted by our repetitive memories we can't recognize it. It is in "going out" from these "straits" that we can recognize, even within our distress, possibilities for love, care, and mercy that had been hidden from us.

*We thank you, our God, for your judgments which are sterner than the judgments of man. Help us to remember them when moral men speak well of us. We thank you for your mercy which is kinder than the goodness of men. Help us to discern this when we are overcome by the confusion of life, and despair about our own sin. Grant us, O Lord, always to worship you in all our doings in the greatness of your creativity and the wonder of your judgment and your mercy.*

(Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Wheat and the Tares*)

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## Reflective Sources

Paul Philibert, OP offers these insights on memory in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*:

Memory is the ability to recall images of events and to recognize them as having occurred in the past.... (It is) linked to the translation of physical objects into the state of mental images and ideas.

Psychoanalysis postulates that memory works according to the laws of association – that is, that memory is

improved by the formation of associations between memory traces. Research has shown that an emotional link is useful in enhancing recall and recollection: ...a strong emotional link can serve to reinforce the censoring power of reason when a client is searching for explanatory memories of a threatening kind within the context of therapy.

Through memory we can contextualize, compare, and evaluate, and thus have a basis for choosing.

Without memory, many of the functions of intellect and will would not be possible.

The retrieval of meaning is bound up with memory.

The wholesome estimation of oneself as a loved and treasured being will depend upon a healthy capacity to recollect and savor significant moments of self-affirmation. In both therapy and spiritual direction, a substantive dimension of adult growth entails appropriating a concrete account of one's life as a loved and productive human being. Sometimes persons whose lives are marked by threat, insecurity, hurt, or change need to be repeatedly reinserted back into a psychic context marked by both divine and human affirmation. The retrieval from memory of marker events that effect such a context can become an important step toward growth and decision. (pp. 651–653) But of course it must be received! In Kabir's prayer of forgiveness we take special note of "the child." The child is small, wayward, prone to error. Yet, it is all right. Why? Because the child is received. We are received. We must become – be like – the child who receives and is received.

In antiquity, St. Augustine dealt most extensively and inspiringly with the power of memory in human life. His journey of remembering led to a discovery of God in memory, otherwise spoken of as *Memoria Dei*, the memory of God. Kees Waaijman, in his masterwork *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, writes:

It is certain that from the moment Augustine learned to know him, God left his imprint on Augustine's memory. "And so, since the time I learned of you, you remain in my memory, and there I find you and delight in you." (896)

Augustine's reflections "upon the hidden recesses of my memory, the manifold vastnesses full of marvelous kinds of innumerable treasures" are recorded in Chapter 10 of his *Confessions*.

Book III of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* by St. John of the Cross contains the saint's insights on the process of the union of the memory with God. "Everything that has passed through the soul," the saint asserts, "leaves a track ("trace") behind in memory." This is true not only for material (sensate) forms but also for whatever spiritual images or communications a person has experienced. The saint insists however that "God cannot be grasped in any single form or perceptible communi-

cation, nor in any image of the memory: God has no form or image comprehensible to the memory. Therefore the memory is without form, figure, or fantasy when united to God.” The mystical path the saint lays out for us involves the “unforming” of memory – *if it is to be united with God*:

The annihilation of the memory in regard to all forms is an absolute requirement for union with God: the memory must empty and divest itself of all communications and forms.... Union with God cannot be wrought without complete separation of the memory from all forms that are not God. (See especially chapters 2, 7, 8, 12 and 14 of *The Ascent III*)

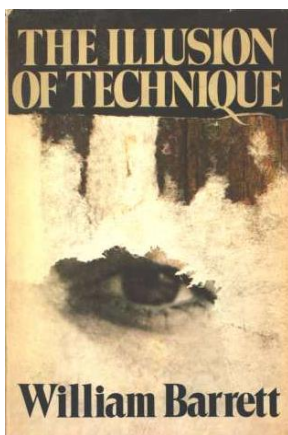
The saint is aware that initially this emptying will evoke fear and disorientation. Gradually, however, as God becomes the “form” of the memory, the person will achieve a sense of security. This is attested to in Book III, 52, of *The Living Flame of Love*: “Neither should there be any fear because the memory is void of forms and figures. Since god is formless and figureless, the memory walks safely when empty of form and figure, and it draws closer to God.”

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## BOOKS ON MEMORY & MINDFULNESS

In *The Illusion of Technique* (Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1979), the philosopher William Barrett writes:

Each day when I enter my garret of a study I make the sign of the cross over myself as I pass the threshold. Do not ask me what it means. It is a gesture they taught me as a child, I had forgotten it, but it comes back to me now. It helps to keep me from thinking. In silence, performing it, I am not trapped in words and their cunning. Perhaps some other gesture might do, but it would come to the same thing. It would be the same gesture for me. I have become part of an invisible church of one. I am ready to accept whatever rituals or charms that can now sustain and quicken me within this mystery that is given me to live.

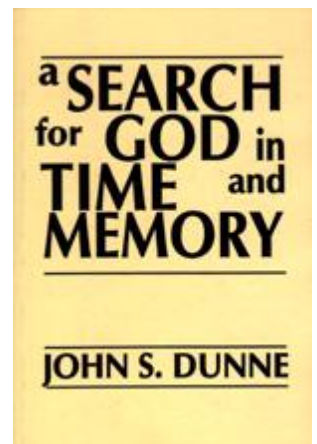


To philosophize requires of us a capacity for thinking, and for not thinking. It requires a capacity to interpret, to create a narrative of meaning based on experience, and a capacity to transcend such meaning-making, a potential for presence to the mystery of being without narrative and interpretation. It is the stories that our memories create that help to create our

subjectivity, and it is our potential as spirit to transcend those stories and enter into a spacious silence that affords us access to a Mystery beyond our subjectivity

In Volume Two (*Human Formation*) of his *Formative Spirituality* series, Father Adrian van Kaam treats at length of “formative memory,” one of the “incarnational sources” of formation. He points out that memory seen as formative is not a static reality but rather that “memories change dynamically under the impact of the changing direction of our life and its dispositions.... The dispositions we foster today may give a meaningful new configuration to memories of the past.” (p. 144) Thus, we can see that the dispositions of heart and sense of life direction that we foster today actually affects the configuration we give to our past memories. We also begin to appreciate the call of the great spiritual traditions to living mindfully, to awakening to a consciousness that is living in the present moment. So, as he enters his garret of a study, William Barrett engages in a ritual that helps him to enter a space where the life and inspirations of the present are not impeded by the compulsive repetition of the limited meanings of the past. To enter a space where the “changing direction of life” can be heard and responded to, a direction that is capable of offering new and expanded meanings to the memories of the past.

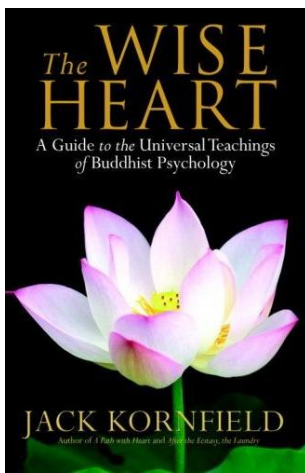
The works of John S. Dunne, Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, are considerations of a movement by which we pass over from our unique subjective experience and awareness to the larger world of others and the Other, and then back again to our own experience, now with a transformed perspective. In *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (Notre Dame Press, 1969), Dunne addresses particularly the process of discovering the deeper meaning of our individual life story through passing over into humankind’s story and ultimately into the understanding of one’s life as life in God. For Dunne, this process of an ever deepening quality of remembering is earliest and perhaps best exemplified in *The Confessions of St. Augustine*.



Dunne points out that it is through “the bringing of time to mind” that Augustine begins to recognize that the events of one’s life “are a revelation of God’s will or purpose in one’s regard.” It is through the events of our lives that God responds to our questions about our

lives. Dunne writes: “Thus the [one] who is recollected, who has [one’s] life before him [her], or has the time of [one’s] life in mind, is in a position to discern a response to [one’s] prayer.” (p. 48) To see the moments and experiences of our lives in time is to begin to see God’s response to our prayer. Or, as van Kaam says, “memories change dynamically under the impact of the changing direction of our life and its dispositions.” (Dunne revisits some of the major themes of his teaching and writing career in his recently-published *Deep Rhythms and the Riddle of Eternal Life*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.)

But how do we become “recollected”; how do we live with our lives “before us”? In his newly published book *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*, Buddhist practitioner, meditation teacher and clinical psychotherapist Jack Kornfield brings together his experiences of a lifetime of practice and teaching in a very practical discussion of the core of Buddhist practice and psychology. He builds each of his chapters around a core principle of Buddhist psychology. The principle discussed in Chapter Three reads: “When we shift attention from experience to the spacious consciousness that knows, wisdom arises.” This is what happens to Augustine. When he turns his attention from the physical events of his life to the “time” in which those events unfold, he sees those

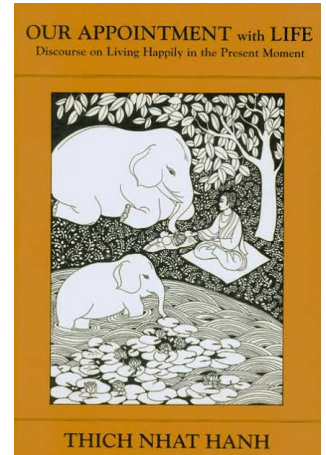


events from a totally different perspective, the perspective of Divine call and direction. Thus, Augustine experiences that the God whom he has experienced as silent and distant is actually present and responding to his prayer through the unfolding of the time of his life. Kornfield describes this, from the Buddhist perspective, as attention to our own consciousness or mindfulness.

If you relax and allow [the] experience of unfixed knowing, you will discover what Buddhist writers call the clear open sky of awareness. It is empty like space, but unlike space it is sentient; it knows experience. In its true state, consciousness is simply this knowing – clear, open, awake without color or form, containing all things, yet not limited by them. This open quality of consciousness is described as unconditioned. As with the sky, all kinds of clouds and weather conditions can appear in it, but they have no effect on the sky itself. Storms may appear or disappear, but the sky remains open, limitless, unaffected by all that arises. Consciousness is unaffected by experience, just like the sky. (pp. 38-39)

In the practice of mindfulness, in attention to consciousness (or time for Augustine), we manage to forget the repetitious stories attached to our memories, that we might, as Kornfield says, know experience beyond the limitations of those stories. It is this knowing in silence that Barrett recognizes as the prerequisite for presence to the mystery that reveals itself through the experiences of life, but beyond the interpretations and limitations our memories impose.

*Our Appointment with Life: The Buddha’s Teaching on Living in the Present* by Thich Nhat Hanh is a small book that focuses on meditative practices meant to help us to overcome obsessive concern with the past or future. The idea here is that spiritual practice effects a gradual transformation of our attention. Over time – and through regular practice – we learn to live more attentively in the present and more selectively in regard to past issues and future anxieties. The book offers a few versions of a meditation prescribed for this purpose. The following is one example



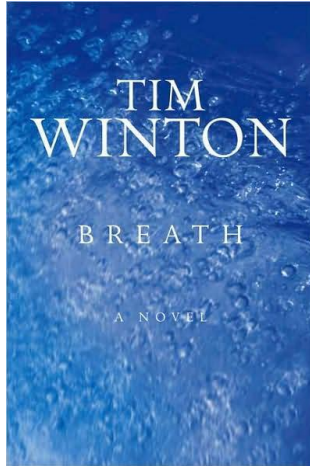
Do not think about the past.  
Do not worry about the future.  
Things of the past have died.  
The future has not arrived.  
What is happening in the present  
should be observed deeply.  
The wise ones live according to this  
and dwell in stability and freedom.  
If one practices the teachings  
of the wise ones  
why should one be afraid of death?  
If we do not understand this,  
There is no way to avoid  
the great pain of the final danger.

The praxis recommended in this particular exercise is indicative of the goals of all mindfulness practices. Han F. de Wit offers an enlightening explanation of the purposes of mindfulness techniques in his 1999 book *The Spiritual Path* (Duquesne University Press), p. 128:

(Mindfulness) confers a certain *stability* and *precision* to our way of experiencing: mindfulness counteracts the tendency to jump from one thing to another. It creates space for us to recognize the details of our actual situation. Thus, many of the spiritual traditions also size that the cultivation of mindfulness is at the same time the development of a certain mental calm. We are not talking here of a spasmodic, forced form ofness but of mindfulness that finds its natural resting

place in itself. Stability, precision and rest are all indications of this first aspect of consciousness.

Memory plays a key role in several recent novels of critical acclaim. Philippe Grimbert's original French novels, *Un Secret* and *Memory* have been translated into English, and in the case of the former made into a film ("A Secret"). Siri Hustvedt's *The Sorrows of an American* is a searing account of a brother's and a sister's attempts following the death of their father to piece together family wounds from the past and their own lingering senses of fragmented identity. *Breath* (FSG, 2008) by the Australian novelist Tim Winton is an unforgettable evocation of lost youth and the innocence that went with it as two young boys discover more about risks and the art of maintaining balance in life than they expected when their apprenticeship in the joys and dangers of surfing commences.



Adam Phillips's *Equals* (Basic Books, 2002, 146-147) contains the following observation:

Trauma is when the past is too present; when, unbeknownst to oneself the past obliterates the present. It is the traumatized person - all of us, to some extent - who says that there is nothing new under the sun; that nothing ever changes. It is the art of art to make the past bearably present so that we can see the future through it. The problem, in other words, is not in making the past present, but in making the past into history.

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## ALL SOUL'S DAY

~Fr. Jim Savage

There is an African proverb which reads: No one is truly dead until they are forgotten. This African proverb is a good summary of why we gather for today's commemoration of all the Faithful Departed better known as All Soul's Day. We who gather here today are those who have not forgotten. Instead, we gather as those who remember. Specifically we gather to remember three things:

- 1) to remember the dead,
- 2) to remember our own death,
- 3) to remember God's word concerning death.

## To Remember the Dead

For most of us here today the dead whom we remember are not some nameless faceless individuals whom we simply label as the Holy Souls. For most of us our memories are far more specific and personal.

Grandfather or Grandmother,  
a deceased child, spouse or other family member,  
a lover, a friend, a confidant or a business associate  
We are here to remember someone who shaped  
and formed us,  
who helped us to be the person we are today,  
who nurtured within us the seeds of faith.  
We are here to remember someone who hugged us  
when we were sad,  
prodded us when we were discouraged,  
loved us when others wanted to blame us,  
challenged us to the next horizon,  
and who prized us, and we prized them.  
Maybe we are here to remember someone who was  
our own flesh and blood,  
whom we fed, clothed and watched grow up.  
Maybe we are here to remember someone with  
whom we shared our deepest secrets  
and our boundless hopes;  
or someone who was our crutch in life or our fishing  
companion,  
or our lunch mate or our drinking buddy.

In other words, our memories today are very specific

The memory of these individuals arouses in us an array of feelings. For some the memories produce overwhelming feelings of sorrow and loss,  
for others warm feelings of nostalgia,  
for others feelings of an emptiness that will never be filled,  
for others angry feelings because they sense their dead have abandoned them  
and left them to cope in this world alone.

And just as the memory of the dead produce within us different feelings, so likewise there are different ways in which we choose to honor our dead today.

It might be a visit to their grave in the cemetery,

going home and dusting off their picture and hugging it,

paging through an old scrap book,  
musing with another about the dead,

lighting a candle for them here in church.

But no matter how you chose to remember your dead, hopefully on this day all will say a prayer for the dead, requesting from God for their sake – eternal rest, everlasting peace, perpetual light, and resurrection life

## **Remember our Death**

To think about our own death is a difficult piece of reality with which to come to grips. This is true no matter what age you are. When you are in your twenties you say, “Why bother thinking about death. It’s a long way off, and there’s a lot of living left to do.” And when you’re in your eighties or older, you might sound like my Aunt who used to say, “I know I’m getting close to death, do you have to keep reminding me?”

And yet, the spiritual masters of every age remind us that those who live purposefully and meaningfully in this life are those who live with an eye to death. Living daily with an eye to death might sound a bit morbid and literally a dreadful way to live. But quite the contrary. Failure to do so, according to Jesus, is foolish: “You fool, this very night your life will be asked of you. To whom will all your piled up wealth go?” (Lk. 12:20) Living daily with an eye to our own death is intended to give us a proper perspective about life.

Speak to someone who has had a close brush with death or with someone who has been in contact with an individual who one minute is an example of perfect health and who the next moment drops dead, and they will tell you how differently they view life after such an experience. For example, last week a third year student at Harvard College (21 years old) suddenly collapsed while participating in intramural sports and died of cardiac arrest. It was a shocking event. A fellow student wrote about her reaction to the event. She wrote:

When I learned that Peter Cai, a student I had never met, had passed away, it sent me reeling. I felt a reflexive clench in my chest, and I suddenly wanted to hold everyone around me. How do you put into words the fact that you’re sorry for all the times you were petty, every time you were sullen, and every minute that passed you by as you poured over some text you can’t remember now? How do you tell someone that you are so happy that they are alive? . . . There are not always words for these matters of life and death. All the clichés and all the

trite slogans about enjoying life never seem true until the moments when we are confronted with life’s end.

There is a text from the Byzantine Liturgy that is a very sobering reminder of why we should live daily with a view to death. It goes like this:

Come, Brothers and Sisters, let us consider the dust and ashes of which we were formed. What is the reality of our present life, and what shall we become tomorrow? In death where is the poor and where is the rich? Where is the slave and where is the master? They are all ashes. The beauty of countenance has withered, and the strength of youth has been cut down by death. All has withered as the grass of the field and has vanished.

A sobering text indeed! But a text that nonetheless keeps us anchored in the Real

## **Remember God’s Word in Regards to Death**

To live each day with an eye to death is not in and of itself a helpful thing. In fact, it can be a very harmful thing and a depressing exercise. A daily look at death is only helpful when death is looked at from the perspective of faith. And that’s what today’s three scripture readings offer us (1) a glimpse of, (2) a promise about, and (3) an assurance concerning life after death from the perspective of faith.

In the first reading, we are given a glimpse of how some Jews about one hundred years before Jesus had come to view life after death. With conviction, the Author of the Book of Wisdom states that immortality is what awaits those who live justly here on earth. Their souls, the Author states, will in the future rest in the hands of God, and God’s care is with them.

In the second reading, we are given a promise about life after death. Paul writes that in baptism we have already passed from death to life. Because in baptism we passed from the death of sin and into the life of Christ. This baptismal passage was no mere metaphor. It is not just a matter of pretty words. In baptism, the old self, which was enslaved to Original Sin in the case of infants and actual sins in the case of adults, actually died so that the new self could be reborn in the Risen Christ. As Paul writes, this is to be seen as a foretaste and a promise. The foretaste and promise is this: If we live daily in God’s presence now, if we die daily to what is not of God, then at the moment of our earthly leaving, we will again pass over with Christ from an earthly, bodily death into the perpetual presence of God.

And finally, in the Gospel reading, we are given an assurance. The assurance is this: That it is the will of God (and I emphasize that), It is the will of God, that all

who believe in Christ and live their life in Christ will have eternal life.

My friends, there are few passages in the Gospel where the will of God is so explicitly stated and spelled out. But clearly, in this passage God's will is announced: That no one should perish or be lost whom He has created, but rather that all who look upon and believe in Christ shall have eternal life.

The words of scripture do not explain life after death. They do not explain how, when, or where it will happen, or what it really looks like. But what scripture does do is to give us a glimpse of, a promise about, and an assurance concerning life after death. As a result, we can look at death honestly and with the conviction that "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling on death by death, and upon those in the grave lavishing life."

We are very grateful to Father Jim Savage for sharing his homiletic reflections for the Feast of All Souls, celebrated this year on Sunday, November 2. Father Savage is Parochial Vicar of St. Paul Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



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