

Memory Serves
Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
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Opening Words (#435 – Kathleen McTigue)

We come together this morning to remind one another
To rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives,
To resist the headlong tumble into the next moment,
Until we claim for ourselves
Awareness and gratitude,
Taking the time to look into one another's faces
And see there communion: the reflection of our own eyes.

This house of laughter and silence, memory and hope
is hallowed by our presence together.

Welcome

Good morning! Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona.

We gather as a religious community to support one another in our individual, spiritual journeys.
We welcome diversity of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, abilities, and cultural and
religious backgrounds. We are glad you are here today.

We'd like to extend an especially warm welcome to all those who are visiting with us today. Our
membership representatives here today are Dave Weigel and Virginia Farrar. If you have
questions about our community, feel free to ask Dave or Virginia or me or any of a number of
smiling faces out there who, if they don't know the answer to your question, will steer you in our
direction.

Our greatest hope is that you feel at home in this community. We invite you to stay and have
coffee and refreshments with us after the service. We would like to get to know you and for you
to get to know us.

Please take a moment now to greet those seated around you.

Flowers:

Lighting the Chalice (#451, Leslie Pohl-Kosbau)

Flame of fire, spark of the universe that warmed our ancestral hearth—
agent of life and death,
symbol of truth and freedom.
We strive to understand ourselves and our earthly home.

Tending the Flame – Burt Jones

Hymn – *Now I Recall My Childhood* #191

Children's Time

Remembering

Joys and Concerns

As a church family, we seek always to provide encouragement and a loving and supportive environment in which we celebrate one another's joys and share one another's concerns. This particular time of sharing is a time to focus on what is going on in our personal lives.

As you share a joy or concern in your life, please state your name also.

(After sharing...)

Let's take a few moments of silence as we hold, together, those joys and concerns that were spoken and those that remain unspoken...

Offertory

Let there be an offering from our abundance
to sustain this gathering which is made holy by our deepest attention
and to strengthen the work that grows from our commitment to each other and to the world.

Readings (Maxine Krall)

"Vast...is the power of memory, more than vast in its depths...Even though this is a power of my

own mind, it is what I *am*, still I cannot take it all in...[People] go out to wonder at mountain heights, at immense sea surges, the sweep of wide rivers, the ocean's range, the stars' revolvings—and neglect the spectacle of themselves."

-- **St. Augustine** (354-430)

"It is all right to copy what you see, but it is much better to draw what you can no longer see except through your memory. This is a transformation in which imagination collaborates with memory. All you reproduce is what struck you. "

-- **Edgar Degas** (1834-1917)

"Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities have crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense."

-- **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803-1882)

Anthem – #179 *Words That We Hold Tight* – Joyful Noise Singers

It is early morning. We are in an airport. There aren't many people in this part of the airport this early in the day; just a young man and woman, late teens or early twenties, who are readying to work at the food vendors that are nearby. I can't help but eavesdrop on their conversation, (being a student of human nature and all...)

The young woman is obviously interested in the young man, flirting a bit, conjuring up a recollection of a time they had shared, laughing and interspersing her recollection with "Remember? Remember that? That was so funny!" The young man is either not interested in the least, or still waking up, or both, as the most that he can muster in response is a rather blank look and some unintelligible grunts. The young woman finally stomps away in exasperation, exclaiming over her shoulder, "If you don't remember, then just forget it!"

If you don't remember, then just forget it! Though I have forgotten so many other details about that day, such as where we had been and where we were going, I have remembered that phrase. On the one hand, it seems like such a straightforward and refreshingly simple command: if you don't remember, then just forget it. That seems supremely do-able, I thought. If you don't remember, then you already *have* forgotten it.

But on the other hand, it points out what a complex thing memory is, "more than vast in its depths," as St. Augustine says. Because the truth is, just because we can't remember something, it doesn't necessarily follow that we can forget it, right? Otherwise, why would there be all those things that we "try to remember." Names, places, circumstances, all right on the tip of my tongue like angels on the head of a pin. It's a wonder I can even talk with all that right there...All those

things that I can *almost* remember, and sometimes, miraculously, actually recall. But *trying to remember* means that I *remember* that I forgot something. Remembering *that* I forgot, I then try to remember *what* I forgot. So what that young woman suggested really is a choice: choosing to forget what you don't remember. I think Emerson would chime in with her command, and he may even go further in suggesting that we forget some of those things that we *do* remember to no good purpose, urging us to begin each new day with a high spirit that refuses to be weighted down with all the old nonsense of yesterday.

This has become a popular sentiment. Let go of the past. Live in the present moment. But can we dispense with memories so easily? Is it true that they're just dead weight, stale recordings of the past that we are better off without? Or are memories possibly a key to understanding ourselves, as Degas suggested, in that they preserve what captures our attention? Or is it possible that memory is even more than just a key to understanding ourselves, but is, as St. Augustine suggested, *what we are*?

These are not idle questions. They strike at the heart of our capacity for joy in this present moment, and thus strike at the heart of our spiritual lives. And these questions are especially important for us, I believe, we UU's who claim no shared sacred text with which to guide ourselves once and for all; who allow for the shaping of diverse theologies through the crucibles of individual experience and sincerely focused reflection; who believe, like Emerson, that it is the book of life itself, our daily awareness of that life, that provides a unique and sacred text for each of us.

But if so, where do we store our growing awareness? How do we build on what we learn from experience? *Reflection* implies moments that are past, that are recalled so that we can calmly, intentionally see what they hold. The present moment flies by so fast that we cannot catch it sometimes, which is maybe why there is no word: *flecting*; only *reflecting*. We do not *member* (unless you're four or five years old, maybe... 'member, dad? 'member that? When you said I could go? 'member?)...But we do not *member*...only *remember*. How else can we stitch the pieces of our life together into one design? Where else can we hold onto the *results* of our free and responsible searches for truth and meaning if not in the sacred halls of Memory?

And I think Emerson understood this. When he advises us to forget, to let go, I think he is referring to those processes that masquerade as memory, or that hijack memory to do us harm.

One of the things that masquerades as memory is nostalgia. Beware of nostalgia. It has more to do with fantasy than memory. It is like a Utopian dream, the only difference being that it is set in the past. Novelist Milan Kundera writes in his book, *Ignorance*, "The stronger [nostalgia is], the emptier of recollections it becomes...[N]ostalgia does not heighten memory's activity, it does not awaken recollections; it suffices unto itself, unto its own feelings..." We can often romanticize

the past to an unrecognizable point... We see this nostalgia being used in politics today, first in fabricating a past for our country, then in calling us *back* to that past that never existed. Personally, it may stem from a desire to escape our present. The grass was always greener last year. Things were always simpler back then. None of this probably holds up to the scrutiny of actual *recollection*.

But if we are not captivated by the *simplicity* of the past, sometimes we are captured by its *difficulty*. Regret can grab hold of our minds, playing and replaying instances of misguided actions, roads not taken, thoughtless words... We go back, over and over, as if this time through we can change what we did, stop ourselves before we do that thing that we can't take back. "If only I had..." *Be done with it*, Emerson would say. The time I spend regretting is not only useless, but harmful. It renders me incapable of being fully present to this moment, because I've convinced myself that this moment can only be salvaged by changing the unchangeable past. Regrets will come, no doubt about that. We simply don't have to grab and hold on. We can see them; acknowledge them as they rise in our thoughts; and let go. Forgiving ourselves may be the best practice for forgiving others.

And forgiveness is not something that I speak of lightly. Some of you may hold memories of horrible things done to you, or painful memories of tragic events that seem senseless and cruel. Dropped like bombs in the midst of our lives, these memories claim us, too. We play and replay the events that seemed to shatter our lives. We walk again through the dark forest of our sadness and pain, looking this time to find the way out that leads to happiness, to freedom, to sunlight... but some events can so rock us that we feel dazed, disoriented, lost... We walk in circles, *remember* in circles, inevitably returning to what haunts us, what holds us.

It is easy to stand outside and say, "Come out. Let go of those memories. Let go of the past. Come join us here." Many of us know that it is not so easy to achieve that. Whether it is resentment or regret or anger or depression or fear or frustration that keeps us tied to these memories, it feels like it is not so much about "letting go" as "getting free." It is no wonder that so much of psychology has to do with precisely these issues, either moving deeper into memory to find the key to freedom, or directing one's attention elsewhere so that these painful bonds can be loosened. I don't pretend to have psychological expertise, and there are so many unique circumstances that call for individualized and professional care. But it may help us at this point, when it feels like memory lays traps to catch us in an unpleasant past, to try and understand what memory *is*.

Memories do not lie in our past. Memory is a creative process of the present moment. Though it is tempting to think of memory as a recording of past events which we carry in our minds, (once-recorded, always the same), it is much too vast, complex, and intricate for that simple description. Though we often hear of a "storehouse of memories," many scientists suggest that

memories are not *stored* at all, but rather are created anew each time we remember something. Memories *change* as we change. They grow with our understanding. They expand with our perspective. Ask most parents out there if their memories of childhood didn't take on whole new shadings after *they* became parents. Possibly you don't remember your fights with your parents with quite the same self-righteousness that you once held. You are seeing the same circumstances that you always remembered, but the story takes on whole new dimensions. In just such a way, as we meet new people, experience new places and points of view, learn new things about ourselves, our memories expand to include all of that. Memories, ideally, do not drag us into the past. Rather, they strengthen us at this moment as we seek to *interpret* what we have experienced in the light of our present understanding. We cannot change the past, but this moment is full of possibility.

Memory, seen in this way, has a natural corollary in my own understanding of Unitarian Universalist theology. I believe that we discover new truths throughout our lives. I believe that we find meaning in our experience and reflection on that experience, and that we test that meaning we discover as individuals by being in community, sharing our own journeys and listening to others. Memory plays a huge role in all of this. It is the process we call upon to hold our experience so that we may recall it and reflect upon it...and yet I don't wish to deify memory, either. I know that, though I may feel like I have the definitive version of my memories right now, they are open to expansion, new perspectives, greater understanding than I can muster at this moment. Just as Truth is never final, the process of remembering our lives is never complete. And just as we know that Truth is not buried somewhere in the dusty recesses of the past, we know that Memory, at its finest, is not concerned with relics but with realization; it calls us not backward but moves us forward with the insight we have gathered along the way, what we have learned, those lives we have touched, the awesome power of the love offered to us by others, what we have become and are still becoming...

And memory also, and I believe that this is a holy thing, reminds us to stay humble...to keep a sense of humor about ourselves, and even about the search for Truth. Because Memory delights in confounding us, doesn't it? Me, at least. When I read Degas' quotation about Memory retaining that which strikes us, I thought, "Why is it, then, that I can remember the melody and lyrics to the Pepsodent toothpaste commercial from 40 years ago, but can't commit a word of Shakespeare to memory? (Maybe Steve and Billie can help me with this...but you get my point.) Why do I remember the titles of a whole series of pulp science fiction novels from the fifties, but can't remember the name of the visitor to our congregation to whom I have just been introduced? (That won't happen today...I swear. It's a very rare occurrence.)

It's tempting to think that Memory is only concerned with the most wondrous of things, the most profound, the most important...It's tempting to think that Memory lies within our control, responsive to all our best intentions...tempting, but we all know better, don't we? Wondrous as

Memory is, it is raggedy, full of holes, embarrassing us with its perceived imperfections, surprising us with its whims. St. Augustine may have been right...it *is* what I am. And that includes the sacred...and the profane. The sublime...and the silly. The *extremely* silly. The trivial. The ludicrous. The things that make you say, "Why on earth would I remember that?"

And finally, after all, not even Memory, as awesome as it is, as vast as it seems in its capabilities, as close as it seems to defining our very identities, even memory may not quite encompass our humanity. I have stood with a woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease in the hallway of a nursing home, speaking as if it was the first time I had met her though I had been there most every day for weeks. I introduced myself, with the understanding that I would do so again tomorrow; sought to quell her fears at encountering this stranger who had startled her with his unexpected presence, and listened as best I could to what she would tell me from her eternal present.

I know that many of you have experienced this with people close to you, and your examples of compassion and caring are deeply inspiring. I mentioned to the kids that memory is like glue, and it's easy to feel with these folks that they have been set adrift, no longer attached to a community by this strong adhesive, so hard to relate to by those of us who are still connected that way. But the other component of that adhesive that holds us together is love. Love and memory. Do this in remembrance of me. When another's memory fails, we can hold those memories for both; and if my memory fails, stand beside me and remember... Hold my hand. Keep me connected. What is it that makes us who we are?

Though it is what I am, still I cannot take it all in. I'm not sure that I know what *it* is yet, this *it* that I *am*. I believe that we are a mystery, finally, even to ourselves. This is a piece of the mystery that we celebrate here each week. And we return each week to this house of laughter and silence, memory and hope, confident in the understanding that, though we may be mysteries to ourselves, we are also, undoubtedly, blessings to each other.

Hymn – *When Shall We Learn*

#334

Announcements

It is important that we share information about those activities, events and concerns that speak to the life of this community.

We ask that you please read the program announcements about our church and upcoming events

and also to keep your newsletters handy throughout the month. Also, if you choose to use the Internet, check the web site for updated events and announcements.

I invite those who have **brief** verbal announcements to come forward now and please give us your name.

Closing Words (#701 – Sara Moores Campbell)

We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight. Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are and, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown.

Extinguishing the Chalice