

The Perfect Memory of God

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What is done in the world is transformed into a reality in heaven, and the reality in heaven passes back into the world. By reason of this reciprocal relation, the love in the world passes into the love in heaven, and floods back again into the world.

—Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*

Ancient Witness: Hebrews 8:10b-12

One of the most profound passages in all of scriptures is in the gospel of Luke when Jesus is being crucified on the cross between two rebel bandits. One of the rebels kept saying to Jesus, “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other one told him to keep quiet. And then he simply said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

“Remember me.” We all want to be remembered. There is an instinctive urge to be remembered by others, to be remembered by God. There is a natural impulse to make an impression, to live on in the lives of others, to live on in the life of God.

Jesus’ response was: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Yes, I will remember you. I will take you with me.

Rabbi Harold Kushner recalls the brief passage in Genesis of the patriarch, Jacob, on his deathbed. And he’s looking back over his long and eventful life. And of all that had happened to him, the thing that he remembered was that his beloved wife, Rachel, died when they were young. Kushner imagines Jacob thinking to himself, “Every day since her death I have thought about her, and that act of remembering has kept her alive in my life.” Kushner writes,

Only human beings can do that. Only human beings can defeat death by summoning up the memory of someone they loved and lost, and feeling that person close to them as they do so...

*Memory can be painful, as everything that makes a human being more than an animal can be painful. Good memories deepen the poignancy of what we have lost. Bad memories keep the resentment alive when the occasion is long past. But memory is what ultimately gives us power over death, by keeping the person alive in our hearts. Memory is what gives us power over time, by keeping the past present so that it cannot fade and rob us of what we once held precious. (p. 163-4, *How Good Do We Have To Be?*)*

And so we use memory to keep others alive, and we carry them into the world as part of us. We can speak of God doing this, too. In a passage from Isaiah, the people of God are thinking that God has forgotten them. For them, a hopeless and despairing thought! “The Holy One has forsaken me, Our God has forgotten me.” The prophet responds: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?”

God is like a mother! God’s love is like a mother’s love. Like a nursing child, God holds us close, studies our face and takes us in. Isaiah continues: “Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.” We are etched, tattooed upon God, forever.

God’s motherly love is perfect. God’s memory is perfect. Yet, it is selective. God’s perfect memory is not like a DVD or a computer. Perfection does not mean objectivity. No, *God’s memory is perfectly selective*. It is colored by love and affection.

Leon Wieseltier, in an article on the holocaust, wrote:

*Remembering is the twin of forgetting. Memory is not retention, it is selection. (Memory is precisely what a computer does not have.) The memory of an event is an interpretation of an event. (“After Memory,” *The New Republic*, 5/3/1993)*

You know, as parents, as husbands or partners or wives, as children, as friends, we do a lot of good things, but we also make a lot of mistakes. Probably one of the most common mistakes is *remembering only the negative things*. It is by saying things like, “You did this...you always do that...I remember, you didn’t do this...you never do that...” And it is by this negative memory that we remind the other person or child how inadequate that other person is. And to live with people with this kind of memory can be very discouraging and disheartening.

Yet, some people remember quite differently. They seem to remember more the strengths, the good things about people or their children. It’s not as if faults and weaknesses are overlooked, but the focus is on reminding and remembering how good and important someone is. And this is redemptive! And by that I mean it brings out the best in people; it has an encouraging and heartening effect.

This, I submit, is the pattern of God’s memory. God dwells on and savors what is good and kind and beautiful, and in doing this, reinforces and calls forth more of the same. It is kind of like fanning the coals of a fire. God uses what is good to build upon. God lovingly tends to our best qualities, gently blowing across our embers, adding twigs and then bigger pieces of wood until there is a fully burning fire. Alive. Bright. Where there were sparks that only God could see, now there is a full-blown living fire.

There’s a story about many pupils who were studying meditation under the Zen master Sengai. One of them used to arise at night, climb over the temple wall, and sneak out to town on a pleasure jaunt.

Sengai, inspecting the dormitory quarters, found this pupil missing one night and also discovered the high stool he had used to scale the wall. So Sengai removed the stool and stood there in its place.

When the wanderer returned, not knowing that Sengai was the stool, he put his feet on the master's head and jumped down into the grounds. Discovering what he had done, he was aghast!

Sengai said, "It is very chilly in the early morning. Do be careful not to catch cold yourself."

The pupil never went out again.

This is kind of the embodiment of that gentle, redemptive memory that I'm talking about. Notice that the Zen master did not say, "You rotten pupil! You're always doing stuff like this..." No the Zen master's actions basically say, "I've noticed what you've done. Let's put it behind us."

It was Robert Browning who wrote, "Good to forgive; better to forget."

This leads me to notice that in God's perfect memory, there is a *divine forgetfulness*. Perfect memory is not photographic; it is not coldly objective. It is warmed by love.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds the readers of this aspect of God by quoting Jeremiah: "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and *I will remember their sins no more.*" It's as if God is saying, "I've noticed what you've done; let's put it behind us." And it is by remembering in this positive way—forgetting shortcomings and affirming when we are faithful—God calls forth the best within us and transforms us.

This is something that we all know inherently, this *transforming power of memory*. We all know how past events are colored and changed by perspective. Each of us can think of a moment with a new awareness and appreciation.

There were moments, late at night, holding my baby son or one of my baby daughters. Now, when it happened, I was tired, late night, and it was often experienced as a nuisance. But when I remember, I can see their faces, their precious core, and those moments have grown in value beyond measure! *Events are colored and changed when our perspective is widened.*

And God's perspective, God's wisdom, of course, is absolute; it is fully extended and out-stretched. And because of this, every moment we have is changed and fully redeemed in God's memory the way some things are partially redeemed in ours. God looks through the pain and the struggle, the boredom and the routine, the frustration and the pettiness, past the worst we have done—and God sees all the beauty and the goodness, all that is precious and cherished, all that is loving and caring. God looks past

all the dross and sees the gold. This is what God does with us, and what God wishes that we do with others.

I think that it is interesting that the word, “remember,” means that when we think of past events, we *re-member* them in our minds. We *re-constitute* the past within ourselves. We put it together and make it real again, and it lives on. Yet it is also have been transformed and changed.

When Jesus had his last meal with his followers, it is written that he said, “as often as you eat the bread and drink of the cup, *remember me.*” And so we do. And in the act of our remembering, we *re-constitute* Jesus, and he lives on among us.

God, too, does this, I think. God takes our souls, our minds, our thoughts, our actions, our events, our lives—and God *re-members* them. God puts them together again, *re-constructs* them. We can say that we are *re-constituted within God.*

If someone asks me what I think about an afterlife, this is as close as I can get—that we live on in the Divine memory. And what is remembered, what is saved, what is re-ordered is the good, the faithful, the kind, the positive and the beautiful. The sins and the negatives are forgotten. It is no longer just “me,” but it is the best “me” that will live on in God. It’s not so much that we live on as an individual consciousness, but that as individuals, we live on as part of the Divine Consciousness, it seems to me.

What is done in the world is perceived by God, taken in by God, becomes a part of God and is transformed into the Divine Reality—all that is good and loving and beautiful—is joined to the goodness and love and beauty of God. And then this Reality passes back into the world in the form of God’s spirit, presence and wisdom.

“Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” God remembers.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)