

**Remember Me**  
the Rev. Lisa Doege  
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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

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## **When We Dare Not Forget**

Memory is fickle.

I distinctly remember, from my Introduction to Judaism class at Hamline University, a lesson about a villain and an event in Jewish history that were so horrific Jews are commanded to remember to forget them. I distinctly remember the rabbi (Stacy Offner) who taught the class asking us why a people might be called to remember to forget something. I distinctly remember the discussion that unfolded—about how simply forgetting something, even something too horrible to bear remembering, simply forgetting something endangers us because it leaves us defenseless should that thing or something similar happen again. Remembering to forget is better. It offers some protection from the pain of the memory and some protection against history repeating itself—not a guarantee, but the possibility.

Remembering to forget. Oxymoronic. Counterintuitive. And it kinda makes sense to me. In fact, my recollection of that long ago discussion forms the basis of what I intended for this first section of this morning's sermon. But memory is fickle.

My research for this week revealed a more complicated history and a vast array of interpretations of the Torah portion that enjoins Jews “remember what Amalek did to you on your journey” and to “blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!” Old interpretations teaching that YHWH meant for the Israelites to wipe Amalek's bloodline from the face of the earth, exterminating his descendants as he slaughtered the stragglers of their people as they crossed the desert. More contemporary interpretations equating Hitler or Hamas or the former Soviet Union or even atheism with Amalek. Other contemporary interpretations challenge Jews to remember and to blot out the Amalek within themselves—the part of themselves that tends toward the destruction of stragglers, toward unkindness to the weak, to the other.

I hate it when research gets in the way with what I want to say! Amalek and the troublesome commandments regarding him are worthy of a sermon of their own—perhaps in next spring, the appropriate time on the Jewish liturgical calendar.

For today, even if my understanding grows out of a mis-remembered lesson from long ago, I believe there are many parts of human history that were so horrific that we might prefer to blot out all memory of them—if only it weren't for this: we believe, generally speaking, that if we forget the horrors we may allow them to happen again. The Holocaust, the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge, the Armenian genocide and countless others. The racist origins of the founding of the nation of Liberia. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, wide-spread, societally sanctioned lynching, human caused extinction of species, *separate but equal*. Closer to home for Unitarian Universalists, our celebrated Margaret Sanger's propagation of eugenics, our forbears' mixed record (at best) record on slavery and abolition. We believe that forgetting such things is dangerous. We believe this so much that the assertion of philosopher and poet George Santayana—*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*—is one of the most widely misquoted quotations on the internet.

The problem with this belief is, we keep doing it all over again, even when we do remember. We might not deliberately infect people with disease anymore and leave them untreated for science's sake, but we underfund research into diseases primarily prevalent in minority communities, and underrepresent minorities in drug trials. We allow and participate in war by proxy, contributing to famine. We turn away from evidence that mass incarceration is a new form of Jim Crow.

When we dare not forget, for the salvation of ourselves, our neighbors, the stranger among us, our world, when we dare not forget remembering is only the beginning. Remembering—as accurately and from as many perspectives as possible—must be followed with analysis and contemplation, listening and prayer, covenant making and mutual accountability. Lest we indeed be condemned for all eternity to repeat the worst impulses of our common humanity.

### **When We Cannot Forget**

Memory is fickle—except, it often seems, for the things we'd rather we *could* forget. Traumatic events, embarrassing mishaps, times we've not given our best effort or been shown in our best light. We might wish and even pray to forget. Forget that we were once so young and so foolish as to have been duped by that scam or the lover who loved only themselves. Forget the terror of the attack in the night. Forget the disbelief and fear and violation of the date that turned into a living nightmare. Forget a trusted family member or friend who never should have been trusted with the child we once were. Forget the panic of the moment the car spun out of control, the sounds of the impact. Forget the phone call that woke us in the night and ended life as we had known it.

But we don't forget. I can't give you the physiological explanation for why some memories last, and I don't know that there is any certain or safe method of erasing them. No *obliviate* spell out of the realm of Harry Potter. The unsafe methods—alcohol, sex, drugs, thrill seeking—are temporary at best and at worst add more memories to the collection we'd rather forget. There *are* ways skilled and compassionate mental health professionals can help us reduce the power these unwelcome memories hold over us; if such memories keep you from living fully the life you are called to live, please seek out one of these professionals.

From a theological perspective, when forgetting isn't an option, we can give our memories meaning. "If I remember the assault," we might say to ourselves, "then I know that I survived it." "If I have to remember my epic flop, my poorest decision, well, then, at least in doing so I can see what I've learned since then, notice the ways I've changed, matured, lighted up, settled down." "I thought my heart stopped beating that day, but here I am, marrying the second love of my life."

I want to be clear: I am not saying that any of these memory-making incidents—from foolish decisions to brutal attacks, from the deaths of loved ones to criminal acts, from life-altering physical illness to fortune-ruining financial scams—I'm not saying that any of these indelible memory-making incidents happens *in order* that we learn from it, that they happen *for* a reason, that they come into our lives because we *need* to be taught a lesson. I'm saying only that the events happen—sometimes through our own actions, sometimes not—and the memories become our lifelong companions. And those companions, if we're willing to engage with them, can become mile-markers along our life's journey. Showing where we've been, what we've survived, how we've become wiser or more careful, stronger or more compassionate.

When we cannot forget, when you cannot forget, may the meaning you make from your memories carry you into life more abundant, rich in joy, tempered with sorrow, awash in love and possibility.

### **When Memories Bless Us**

Memory is fickle. And for this, now, let us give thanks! For often our fickle memories bless us.

The unutterable joy, I'm told, of holding new life in our arms wipes away the memory of labor pain. One memory lasts; the other fades. And we are blessed.

The sound of a big band tune or a classic rock guitar riff or a lullaby wakens with us memory of courtship or college or infancy. Gone, for a moment, are the years in between, all that remains is the sensation of burgeoning love or self-discovery or complete security, blessing us with the suggestion that we are still that young lover, that student, that infant, and that love and discovery and security might still be ours for the having.

The photographs in the album or along the wall outside this room assure us that we are part of line of others with our same name or history or faith, loosening the hold of other memories, those of loneliness or being an outside in our own lives, blessing us instead with the memory of what it means to be part of something greater than ourselves.

The memory of an elder's voice drowns out memories of derision and taunting, blessing us with the conviction we need to raise our own voice against injustice. The memory of a stranger's kindness overrides other memories of fear and suspicion, blessing us with the impulse toward compassion for the strangers we encounter. The memory of dad's special soup, of mom's garden, of sibling's passion for puns, slide in and out of focus, alongside memories of arguments and disappointments and betrayals, blessing us with recollections of a fullness we might trust more than even the happiest of one-dimensional memories.

When we are blessed by memory, we give thanks. Thanks for this extraordinary power of living more than one moment at a time. Thanks, as we do at memorial services, that the power and the goodness of the lives of those we have known and loved, including our own, do not pass away with time or with the deaths of bodies. Thanks, that their, that our influence for good lingers on in the world through us, through those who love us, and in mysterious and hidden ways. Amen.

### **Dedication**

Memory is fickle. *I'll never forget you*, we tell summer camp friends or write in high school yearbook. *I'll never forget you*, we tell whisper in the ears of dying loved ones. But memory is fickle. We know it is. We know this when we forget an important phone number—well, I guess we don't have to worry about that anymore. These days we know memory is fickle when we can't remember a passcode or a PIN. When we can't remember the punchline to a joke. Or the lyrics to a favorite song. The name of a childhood classmate. Or, more worrisome, when we can't remember where we're heading when we find ourselves driving down the road, or forget a critical part of our job. We know memory is fickle. And we don't want to be forgotten, nor do we want to forget the ones we love. We want to keep our promises never to forget, so it is we put names on things—monuments, public buildings, rooms in building, gravestones. And smaller things, too, like sound systems and piano lights.

Lisa Cook loved her son and his family. She loved the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato. She loved Kristine Paulson. She love Nora Church. And she loved the larger Unitarian

Universalist faith which she served in many capacities. Upon her death she left Nora Church a generous financial gift, part of which we spent to purchase a new sound system. The sound system we dedicate today to Lisa's memory is a fitting legacy for the woman we knew and loved in return—ensuring that all who come to services here are able to hear and understand the proclamation and exploration and affirmation of the faith she loved. Blessed be her memory.

Lorraine Becken and Ardelle Becken were sisters-in-law, friends, and musicians. They were lots of other things, too. Mother, aunt, grandmother, great-grandmother, teacher, church women, one a political junky and the other a DFL mover and shaker. And did I mention musicians? We come back again and again to *musicians*. At their deaths the music they made, individually, with one another, with Doug, became memory echoing through this room and through our hearts. The piano light we dedicate today to Ardelle's and Lorraine's memories is a fitting legacy to the joy and inspiration of their music and of their very beings—bringing light to the those who still make music here. Blessed be their memories.

Lisa. Lorraine. Ardelle. We remember them. We keep them in our hearts awhile. With gratitude. And love. Amen.

[Recorded music during this service included *Remember Me*--the lullaby version--from the movie *Coco*, and *Keep Me in Your Heart* from Warren Zevon.]