

Memory and Personhood

Martin B. Copenhaver

Wellesley Congregational Church (UCC), Wellesley, Massachusetts

I remember the first time that my grandmother was not able to recognize me, the first time that it was clear that she did not remember who I was. I was in high school. The look on her face revealed that she had no idea who had just walked into her room. “It’s me, Grandmother. It’s Martin.” The expression on her face—if one could call it that—did not change. She was the only grandparent I ever knew; because my father was an only child, she had only three grandchildren—not many to keep track of, but there is no memory, however precious, that is immune to the ravages of severe dementia.

My grandmother and I were not particularly close. To be frank, even when she was well, my siblings and I always experienced her as a rather formal and distant woman. Her dementia only added to that sense of distance, because there is nothing quite so distancing as a loss of memory. As her memory receded, the focus of her world narrowed, until she was only able to recognize my father, her only child, the one upon whom, at other stages of her life, the sun rose and the sun set. And then, her memory reached the vanishing point when she could no longer remember even my father.

When my father died quite suddenly, we went to tell my grandmother the news, news that she was not able to comprehend. But we thought we should say something. Her only child.... Yet, in another way, we were grateful that she could not take in this news, because it would have been overwhelming. In a sense, dementia saved her from grief, so there was some comfort in that. Still, her only child had died, and it seemed unspeakably sad that she could not remember him or recognize his name or mark the loss. The prophet Isaiah asked, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?” In the case of my grandmother, the answer would have to be, “Yes.” But then, Isaiah follows those words with these words of God’s own assurance, “Even these will forget, yet I will not forget you.”

When my grandmother died a number of years later, we said things like, “She was not herself for many years. This was not Grandmother. She left us a long time ago.” I have since heard similar thoughts expressed many times, when someone dies after a long illness and particularly after a long and losing struggle with dementia. “She left us a long time ago.” So I want to consider with you some of the ways in which statements like that are true and ways in which they may not be entirely true. That is, I want to think with you biblically, spiritually, about the relationship between memory and personhood.

One could make the case that, to a significant degree, we are what we remember. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in an essay entitled, simply, “Memory,” writes:

[Memory] is the thread on which the beads of man are strung, making the personal identity which is necessary for moral action. Without it, all life and thought were an unrelated succession. As gravity holds matter from flying off into space, so memory gives stability to knowledge; it is the cohesion which keeps things from falling into a lump, or flowing in waves.

Later in that essay, he writes of memory as the personification of a divine presence:

Memory performs the impossible for man by the strength of his divine arms; holds together past and present, beholding both, existing in both, abides in the flowing, and gives continuity and dignity to human life. It holds us to our family, to our friends.

Our memories are so much a part of who we are that it can be hard to imagine who we would be without them. What if I no longer remembered what it was like to grow up in my family? What if I could no longer remember my parents and what it was like to feel so completely loved by them, which I have always thought of as the origin and source of my sense of self-esteem? Or, what if I no longer remembered falling in love with my wife? Or, the times of bonding with friends? Or, what it was like to feel the stir of a call to ministry? Or, if I forgot about the birth of our children? Or, that I even have children? Or, what prayer is? Or, which baseball team I root for? Or, what if I could no longer remember what baseball is? Or, the voice of Ella Fitzgerald? Or, the face of my wife? If I could no longer remember what it is to be Martin Copenhaver, would I still be Martin Copenhaver? In what sense would I be a different person—or a person at all—if I no longer remembered? If I lost much or all of my memory, might someone say, understandably, “He left us a long time ago?” So, yes, one could make the case that, to a significant degree, we are what we remember.

But, just as surely, we are more than our memories. We do not say of an infant, living in those early months before memory, “Well, she’s not yet arrived. She’s not yet a person.” When we baptize an infant we do not say, “It’s too bad that he is not yet a person, someone who can remember events like this.” No, we affirm that an infant is a person, even without memory—a full and growing person, not yet all that she is to be and yet, from the beginning, a full person. The truth is, we are always changing, always gaining and relinquishing, grabbing hold and letting go—of relationships, of abilities, of memories, at every stage of our lives.

A loss of memory does not make us any less a person. In fact, I have learned that equation of personhood and rationality is a peculiarly western notion. I gather that, for instance, the Eastern Orthodox tradition lays less emphasis on rationality as the criterion for human status, and more on the person in relationship. According to that tradition, we are who we are not so much because of what we remember, but rather, we are who we are through how we are remembered by others in community.

What if we acted out the understanding that those who no longer can remember the prayers of the church, or the Bible stories, or the hymns, have a special place in the church because it is a community that remembers the prayers and stories for you and sings the hymns on your behalf when you no longer can? What if we are more than what we remember? What if we are who remembers us? And what would it require to be that kind of community?

In the end, what is most important, what ensures our personhood, is that we are remembered by God. It is true that throughout scripture we are reminded to remember, told to remember, commanded to remember, that, in some sense, remembering is an act of faith: “Forget not all God’s benefits.” In the end, however, here as elsewhere, what matters ultimately is not our actions, but God’s actions. If we do not remember God or God’s benefits, God still remembers us.

Isaiah asks, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?” And the answer is, “Yes. Tragically. Sometimes, yes.” But Isaiah quickly adds these words, which he takes to be God’s very assurance, “Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.” It is as if God says, “You are not something I merely hold in my hands because something that is held can be dropped. You are not something that is merely written on my hands, because what is merely written can be washed off or worn away. No, you are *inscribed* on the palm of my hands. You are marked on the palms of my hands in a way that cannot disappear or even fade. I will not forget you. Even if you forget me, I will not forget you. I hold you dear and always will.”

Psalms 139 reminds us that God will not let us go or let us go alone. God accompanies us, through triumph and trial, through the heights and the depths.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol—in the shadowy pit—you are there.

We might add:

If I ascend to the heights of rationality, you are there;
If my memory leaves me altogether, you are there.

It is true that throughout scripture we are reminded to remember, told to remember, commanded to remember. But, thank God, scripture always points beyond our actions to God’s actions. And God will always remember us.

The psalmist goes on:

You knit me together in my mother’s womb...
My frame was not hidden from you,
When I was being made in secret,
Intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

We might add:

And even now, at the other end of my life,
In a different kind of darkness than the darkness of my mother’s womb,
The darkness of forgetfulness,
Even there I am not hidden from you,
Once again, as always, you see me, and know me.

You see, we are so much more than what we remember. We are what God remembers.