

# DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

A course written and given by  
Michael Whelan SM PhD with Marie Biddle RSJ MA MTh  
at Aquinas Academy

## **UNIT THREE** **SESSION ONE:** **The person as remembering**



AQUINAS ACADEMY  
*Freedom of the spirit in the Spirit*

Aquinas Academy, 141 Harrington St, Sydney NSW 2000

**T:** 02 9247 4651 **F:** 02 9252 2476

**E:** [secretary@aquinas-academy.com](mailto:secretary@aquinas-academy.com) **I:** [www.aquinas-academy.com](http://www.aquinas-academy.com)

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*The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us.*<sup>1</sup>



*We have many kinds of memory. One kind, for instance, is rote memory, which helps us to remember things, such as the multiplication tables we memorized in elementary school. Usually this kind of memory has neither a creative nor a striking influence on our personality formation as a whole. Hence we do not call it formative memory in a distinctively human sense. ... Formative memory implies that we are not apathetic in relation to our formation in the past. The dispositions we foster today may give a meaningful new configuration to memories of the past. They show up, as it were, in a new light. The configuration of our memories thus alters when our dispositional life changes, even if only slightly.*<sup>2</sup>



*I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.*<sup>3</sup>



*This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.*<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), 2:2. *Long Day's Journey into Night* is one of Eugene O'Neill's later plays. He wrote it for his wife on the occasion of their 12th wedding anniversary in 1940. O'Neill wanted to create a play that would lay forth his own family background in a forgiving way, which is why he strove not to bias the play against any one character. The play, however, has become a presentation of the problems of a family that cannot live in the present, because it is mired in the dark recesses of a bitter, troubled past. Because of its deeply personal nature, O'Neill requested that the play be published posthumously, which meant that the play was not revealed to the world until O'Neill's death in 1956. The drama occurs mostly in the living room of the Tyrone's home and mostly before or after a meal. The father, James, of Irish Catholic descent, has had a tough childhood, is successful and notoriously stingy. His wife Mary is addicted to morphine – it is she who makes the statement quoted above. Jamie is the elder of two sons, in his early 30's, has dropped out of school and is a spendthrift, dependent on the generosity of his parents. Edmund, the younger brother, is a sickly boy with tuberculosis. One of the central themes is the refusal to either face the present facts or remember the past honestly. Needless to say, it is a fraught household.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian van Kaam, *Formative Spirituality, Volume II: Human Formation*, Crossroad, 1985, 143-44.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 9:15.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 22:20.

## **THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

- \* Remembering is a certain configuration and appropriation of the past in the present.**
- \* Remembering is a critical part of the life formation process, for better or worse.**
- \* The past-as-past is unchangeable; the past-as-remembered is changeable.**
- \* In changing the way we remember the past, we change the way we live in the present – for better or worse.**



### **Remembering and forgetting in daily living**

The following brief news item, entitled “The day Patti forgot,” appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on May 20-21, 2006:

*On Wednesday the Australian Women’s Weekly hits the streets featuring a story about the day Bert Newton woke to discover Patti, his beloved wife of 32 years, didn’t have a clue who he was. ‘It was perhaps the most unnerving experience of my life,’ Bert tells the magazine. During the ‘amnesia attack,’ which happened in March, Patti stripped off her clothes in the driveway, thought it was 1950 and could not recognise Bert or any of the people she loves the most. ‘I had no idea what was happening. Had she had a stroke? Was it Alzheimer’s? It’s not too strong to say that we did think perhaps Patti may be lost to us forever,’ says Moonface. Patti, 61, is still recovering from the rare but debilitating brain disorder that caused her ordeal. She tells the Weekly: ‘It is like having to find yourself again.’ No one is sure what causes Transient Global Amnesia, but doctors say it can be brought on by violent trauma, stress or an intense migraine. ‘They even say it can be brought on by really amazing sex, but I can assure you that wasn’t me,’ quips Patti.<sup>5</sup>*

One of the possible reasons that a news item like that might send a shiver through us is that we know that loss of memory inevitably means, in some deep sense, a loss of self. Patti implies this when she remarks, ‘It is like having to find yourself again.’ Fortunately for her and those who love her, she was able to engage that process of rediscovery. Those who have lost the ability to remember, are like a space-walker whose life-line to the space craft has been severed.

There are, of course, more common and less serious forms of memory loss. We can, for example, easily imagine ourselves saying: “Why did I come out here

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<sup>5</sup> Page 22.

into the kitchen?” “What is her name again?” “I just had it here, in my hands, not five minutes ago, and I’ve put it down somewhere ... where did I put it!” “Where was this photograph taken of us?”<sup>6</sup> And so on.

Consider another instance of forgetting, from the other side as it were. How do you feel when those who ought to remember you forget you? For example, a number of people have worked very hard for the parish fête – especially you – and they are all thanked by name from the pulpit on Sunday – except you. Your spontaneous reaction, probably, would be to feel at least a little angry, hurt, resentful and so on. It is generally affirming to be remembered and distressing to be forgotten. It is almost as if the forgetting means we do not exist. Again, there is the link between identity and memory. When the significant other forgets it seems to undermine our sense of self. The forgetting in some strange sense seems to disqualify us. Like Patti in the above news report, we are cut adrift. Unlike Patti, though, we are fully aware of what is going on in the example given. And we feel more or less badly.

We can say therefore, that just as *our* remembering or forgetting affects our being in the world, so our *being remembered* or our *being forgotten* by others – especially significant others – affects our being in the world. It hardly needs to be added also, that our remembering or forgetting also affects *others’* being in the world.

Our connectedness – with ourselves, with others and with the assorted facts of daily existence – depends absolutely on remembering. If we do not remember, others must remember for us, and if others forget, we must remember for them. There is great potential for both formation and deformation in this fundamental fact of our lives together.

These common examples of remembering and forgetting suggest several interconnected significant issues:

- In the first place, remembering – and forgetting – is essentially a *social event*; remembering, like anything that is deeply human, ultimately points to our inherent relatedness – to be human is to be in relationship; put more simply, memory connects just as forgetting disconnects;<sup>7</sup>
- In the second place, remembering places us in a *context* – ie remembering helps us to be aware of the context in which we are situated at any given time, thus giving us our bearings and allowing us to feel as though we do belong in

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<sup>6</sup> Lesson: Always write names, dates and places on your photos because you will forget, sooner or later!

<sup>7</sup> Consider the common rituals we engage in, for example Anzac Day services, Australia Day celebrations, family gatherings, birthday parties, photo albums, and so on. They are all ways of remembering and thus connecting and maintaining and building connections and with those connections comes a sense of belonging. What might happen in a family or social group or nation that loses the ability or the will to remember in this way? Social groups that thrive pay a good deal of attention – implicitly and/or explicitly – to remembering.

some way; if we cannot make any connections through memory – if we cannot perceive any context – we must either create it afresh or endure more or less anxiety because we have lost our bearings, we do not know if and where we belong; a corollary of this is that familiarity tends to beget a sense of confidence and security, we take our bearings for granted and the issue of belonging is settled;<sup>8</sup>

- In the third place, memory is crucial to our *sense of identity*; if I cannot remember, I cannot know who I am; I recognize myself when I recognize a familiar other or a familiar landmark; to be me is to be with others, in a more or less familiar world, and if both those connections have gone from my consciousness, my sense of myself will be more or less shaken, perhaps destroyed;
- In the fourth place, memory is vital to *hope*; disconnected from the past we lose our way into the future; the forgetfulness of someone like Bert Newton's wife is one stark example, suggested by Bert's comment, 'we did think perhaps Patti may be lost to us forever;' on the other hand, the forgetfulness that comes through repression and denial over time, typically embodied in individuals and groups in such manifestations as prejudice, racism, sectarianism or simply a lack of awareness of what is actually going on, is mostly not so stark and may even go unnoticed, but nonetheless shapes our future and undermines genuine hope.<sup>9</sup>

What is your experience? Can you think of any other obvious implications of the human experience of remembering and forgetting? How does your remembering/forgetting affect your life and/or the lives of those you care about? How does the remembering/forgetting of those you care about affect you?

We could note, finally, that in a culture of information overload and frenetic activity and seemingly unending busyness, it is not surprising that we are sometimes forgetful. A certain amount of forgetfulness must surely fall within the range of normalcy. It may in fact be a safety valve. We can, in other words, distinguish

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<sup>8</sup> It seems reasonable to suggest that the function of remembering is a significant part of the common experience of culture shock, whether that be the shock of an entirely new culture as such or the shock of, say, moving to a new neighbourhood or marrying into a certain family. Adaptation includes developing a whole set of memories that help to shape our sense of ourselves in the world.

<sup>9</sup> Already implicit in this suggestion is a further suggestion as to the causes of forgetfulness. Organic deterioration of the brain is one of the more obvious causes; suppression and/or repression in the face of painful and traumatic experiences might be another cause. In the first instance there is almost certainly no moral responsibility, except perhaps in the case of the organic deterioration; in the second instance there may be some moral responsibility, at least in the unwillingness to work at self-awareness and face what must be faced. There is a tradition within Christianity that we might be morally responsible for some of our forgetfulness. This is a serious matter to which we must return. It is probably the primary reason for prophets in the community.

between remembering and forgetting that is of little or no real consequence, and remembering and forgetting that is the sign of something more significant. That said, it seems reasonable to reflect on our lives, our patterns of remembering and forgetting, and from time to time ask the fundamental question, “What’s happening?”

For example, a forgetfulness that is generated by excessive busy-ness, which busy-ness is in turn generated by escapism or failure to order one’s priorities well, cannot be accepted as healthy. And a remembering that is obsessive or merely self-centred, likewise cannot be accepted as healthy.

### **What is happening when the person is remembering?**

The first thing to note is that we are dealing with a mystery. When we begin to pay attention to the depths of human existence we are face to face with the inexhaustible intelligibility of life itself. We will never fully understand it. Each human being is a particular instance of the mystery of life and an expression of the Great Mystery. Facing such a subject, we ought to be more readily disposed to awe and reverence and humility than to the expectation of definitions and clear understandings. Every answer we produce will contain more questions. So we proceed with deep respect for this remarkable being – this *remembering* (and *forgetting*) being that each of us is.

In this remembering and forgetting being, the past, in some mysterious way, remains with us – it is present, as Eugene O’Neill’s distraught character reminds us, shaping us here and now. It does this with or without our permission or cooperation. This inevitable connection with the past will affect us for better or worse.

We are not merely hapless victims of the past either. We can, again in some mysterious way, re-configure that past which is present through remembering. In other words, we can remember well or badly.

We even remember much that we do not remember that we remember. We bring the past with us, in other words, in ways that are not always clear to us. For example, we may have learned patterns of behaviour in the family that we quite unwittingly perpetuate as adults. Although we speak of the *person* remembering, the very remembering seems to have something of a life of its own. The person as remembering is also the person as thinking ... willing ... anticipating ... imagining ... feeling ... all at different levels of consciousness.

We have already noted the impact on our lives when the remembering fails, more or less, in us and/or in those near us. What might the impact be when the remembering works well? Consider, for example, the photograph of a loved one, the gathering with old friends, the thoughts and images and feelings associated with a dear departed parent, the impact of a near death experience, the long term effects

of a dedicated and fine teacher, the thoughtfulness of a loving spouse, the telling of stories that are part of the history of a family or group to which you belong.<sup>10</sup>

When we are remembering in this way – that is, remembering well – we might say we are in fact allowing life into us. Life is much more healing than we might think. In particular, life is much more healing than any of the games and pretenses and evasions that deny the truth of our lives.

When we submit to the truth being revealed in and through life, we are opening to wider horizons. Our better possibilities are awakening and we are inclining towards goodness and truth and love. We are thus enabled to face the world with hope. We learn to know in our guts that the Great Mystery is benevolent and trustworthy, on our side. We experience ourselves as what we most deeply are – transcending beings.<sup>11</sup>

Even when we find ourselves remembering painful and perhaps tragic events, we may still experience this as opening us to the greater good, expanding our personal horizons, enabling us to be more merciful and compassionate. There is a remarkable paradox here: The person as remembering is thus, potentially, the person as emerging into a transformed and transforming future, coming to be what he or she is called to be, moving into the future in a particular kind of way. It is not difficult to see, then, that the life formation process is essentially dependent on our remembering well.

There is an obvious corollary to all this: The loving and perhaps professional compassion, care, support and wisdom of other human beings is invaluable in helping us to face what must be faced, to remember what must not – indeed cannot – be forgotten.

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<sup>10</sup> Storytelling is a particularly interesting instance of remembering. It can be most constructive. All stable societies have some mechanism for storytelling. It can also be destructive. The stories, for example, may be employed to maintain deceptions about the past or perpetuate negative stereotypes. Related to this is an apparently universal tendency to remember and share only “good” stories. Even the tragic moments and the hellish experiences (eg of soldiers) are often either elided or reconfigured to be ..... what? .... more bearable? One of the most helpful – and most difficult – things a therapist can do is to lead people to tell their stories as truthfully as they possibly can. To find the words to speak the unspeakable is often a question of remembering well. It seems to be a necessity for coping well with distressing experiences. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission seems to have been a particularly constructive way of remembering the dreadful injustices of the apartheid regimes. The work of restorative justice, pioneered in Australia by people like Terry O’Connell, similarly shows the effectiveness of remembering well. (See for example [www.realjustice.org](http://www.realjustice.org).)

<sup>11</sup> Anything that connects us more deeply with truth, beauty or goodness, in any form, will awaken us to our better possibilities and enhance our freedom to be what we most deeply are. Memory has a remarkable ability to open us to such things. Again, as with all life formation, this is not a matter of ego mastery but graced emergence, not control but facilitation, not domination but participation. We must be patient, respecting the pace at which our remembering, in conjunction with all our other faculties, is able to move.

## When remembering does and does not matter

A distinction immediately becomes evident when we reflect on our experiences of remembering:

- Remembering sometimes does and sometimes does not have a direct and significant impact on our life formation;
- When remembering does have a direct and significant impact on our life formation, it is not automatically formative – it may in fact be deformative.

In the first instance, some kinds of remembering actually have little or no direct impact on the life formation process as such. For example, I might remember the names of all the Roman Emperors or the winners of the Melbourne Cup or the cube root of twelve or how to fly an airplane or how to do a lens implant. While such remembering is often very useful and may provide me with income and may even invite admiration that gives me status in a certain group and might make me feel good and even contribute to my having a healthy sense of myself, it has little or nothing to do directly with my being a good or well formed human being.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, consider such remembering alongside the experiences of remembering, for example, the death of a loved one. Yes, I might remember the day and the details surrounding that death, but the remembering is much more than that. The remembering, as it were, is an affair of the heart. Through the remembering I remain deeply connected with that person who died. The connection through remembering is a significant part of who I am. Similarly, I may remember family holidays, being bullied at school, forgiveness when I felt unforgivable, a broken relationship, another's consistent and generous fidelity to me as a friend, sexual abuse as a child, an alcoholic parent, sporting and/or academic success at school, the sacrifices my parents made to give me a good start in life, and so on. In these instances, the remembering will typically have a more significant influence on my formation as a human being than remembering any amount of objective data or how to do this or that.

These latter life experiences – and they are myriad, ranging from those which make a strong impact to those that seem to go unnoticed – find access to the present moment of our lives through the power of memory. Remembering such experiences – consciously or unconsciously – has a direct impact on our lives. Whether the remembering is formative or deformative depends on our response.

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting how the game of “Trivial Pursuit” – and a number of imitations – has captured the modern imagination. We give great credence to people who can remember otherwise useless data. We can, after all, look it up very easily if we want to know that data. What is happening? Is this utterly innocent play with no deeper significance? Or is it pointing to something more significant about the modern person as remembering?



Which brings us to the second instance: Not all remembering is formative. In recent years, for example, we have become acutely aware of the centuries-old feuds, with their consequent hatreds and undying resentments, which plague the human race. In the Balkans, for example, people “remember” what happened in the fifteenth century and they are determined not to forget it and they are sometimes driven by this remembering to “settle old scores.” Similar “memories” haunt Ireland and the Middle East, various parts of the old Soviet Union, different segments of the population in Indonesia, tribal groups in Africa and the peoples of the Pacific.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, we might even ask whether as individuals and as a community in Australia, we are willing – able? – to remember our past in a way that is formative. We might note, for example, the inconsistency in those who embrace the Anzac tradition on the one hand and resist the public remembering of atrocities to the indigenous people of Australia as a “black armband view of history” on the other.<sup>14</sup>

### **The person as remembering – transcendent and functional possibilities**

We can think of remembering as:

- *an intra-formative power*
- *which enables us to participate in the formation mystery*
- *by appropriating the past.*

The person as remembering manifests the radical interdependence of the transcendent and functional possibilities of life formation:

- The person as remembering as *transcendent possibility* is a potential to appropriate what has been, in openness to and in the context of the Transcendent. My sense of being grounded in the Great Mystery relativises whatever comes into the present from the past – attractive or unattractive, violent or peaceful, pleasant or unpleasant, joyful or sad, tragic or triumphant. The person as remembering in this way is epitomized by a more or less gracious and free acknowledgement of all that has been, an affirmation of the past enabled by a conviction that it is all potentially transformable and transforming in the light of the Great Mystery. The transcendent possibility, in other words, allows us to situate and contextualize our remembering in a

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<sup>13</sup> The dispositions of Nelson Mandela stand out in stark – and welcome – contrast to the majority of those who find themselves struggling with dark memories.

<sup>14</sup> Most Australians were deeply grateful – and relieved – to Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, when he made a formal apology to the original peoples of Australia. This seems to have been a highly significant act of remembering for us as a nation. There is of course much remembering and consequent action to be done.

life-giving way. No past event is necessarily deformative. This is a vital part of formative remembering.<sup>15</sup>

- The person as remembering as *functional possibility* is a potential to appropriate various items of information in useful and practical ways. The person as remembering in this functional way, is thus grounded in the immediate and the concrete. The person as remembering in this way is epitomized by the ability to recall data as necessary, to repeat routine tasks, solve problems and to generally engage the world in efficient and practical ways. The functional possibility, in other words, allows us to situate ourselves in useful and competent ways in the world. We are more likely to notice the diminution of remembering as functional possibility than as transcendent possibility. The effects of the functional breakdown are immediate and concrete. The effects of the transcendent breakdown are much more subtle and may even go unnoticed.<sup>16</sup>

It is essential to see the transcendent and functional dimensions as necessarily interdependent. The transcendent is the ground out of which we live. The functional enables us to get on with the business and tasks of living in practical and realistic ways. The latter is the servant of the former and must always emerge within the context of the former.

### **Remembering and forgiving**

Perhaps all of us have experienced that inner struggle to come out from under the dominance of a dark remembering:

- “he put me down,”
- “she betrayed a confidence,”
- “they did not acknowledge me,”
- “I was overlooked,”
- “I was treated unfairly,”
- “I can never forgive him for what he did,” and so it goes.

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<sup>15</sup> You might find it useful to re-read Adrian van Kaam’s “Introspection and Transcendent Self-Presence” in *Reader, Volume One*, 18-28.

<sup>16</sup> The psychopathological effects of the loss of the transcendent possibility may, however, be quite stark. The question would then arise as to whether people were able to diagnose what was really happening. In other words, if a culture has lost its sure-footedness in regard to the transcendent dimension of the human reality, it may, quite simply be unable to recognize the reasons for the psychopathologies which are grounded in that very loss of sensitivity to the transcendent.

We can carry anger and resentment and hurt, like little bundles of unlived death, in and through our remembering.<sup>17</sup>

Given the deformative possibilities attached to forgetting,<sup>18</sup> we would be better advised not to focus our attention on forgetting but on *remembering differently and well*. There are much more life-giving possibilities in encouraging people to remember than to forget.<sup>19</sup> We are also much more likely to be able to do the former than the latter. *While the past-as-past is unchangeable, the past-as-remembered is changeable*. We remember in order to go on in freedom; formative remembering gives birth to a brighter future. We could say, in fact, that, just as deformative remembering can contribute to despair, formative remembering is one of the essential ingredients of hope.

Which brings us to the issue of *forgiveness*. Some practical principles might help:

1. We are normally better off facing our “demons” and working through them than trying to live around them or despite them. That is, it is generally better to take the initiative in remembering, putting the focus on dealing honestly and gently with what comes into our lives through that remembering.<sup>20</sup> That

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to trivialize the experience of those who have been deeply hurt in one way or another. However, it is possible that some people find in deformative remembering a perverse sense of security, a sort of twisted identity, which is perceived – probably unconsciously – to be more attractive than engaging the remembering formatively, facing what must be faced, and thus coming through into freedom and responsibility and accountability. Refer back to “Crises in Life Formation”, Unit Two, Session Two.

<sup>18</sup> And we might wonder whether it is *possible* to forget significant human experiences and their impact and consequences. We may not remember in a focally conscious way, but we may remember in an infra-focally conscious way. This can be particularly destructive. In this context we should note the so-called “recovered memory syndrome”. According to this theory, it is argued that traumatized people can carry destructive memories of experiences of hurt without actually being aware of that memory and, in the course of therapy, they may “remember” the details. This theory has come in for much criticism – rightly so it seems to me – because it has been used to “substantiate” incorrect allegations against people. Perhaps the most notable instance was that of the allegations of sexual abuse brought against the late Cardinal Bernadin. The young man bringing the allegation on the basis of “recovered memory” later withdrew those allegations.

<sup>19</sup> There are, of course, matters of sensitivity and timing and respect that need to be factored in here. Remembering well includes love and care and compassion and sensitivity to the ability of the person at any given time to deal with the issues. We would also do well to remember our own ability to be motivated by some deformative forces, like the wish to get even or score a petty victory or hurt another who has hurt us or simply work out our own unacknowledged agendas. We are walking in complex and difficult terrain here!

<sup>20</sup> If the things being remembered are particularly painful, professional and long term therapy might be called for. Otherwise conversations with friends who are able to resist the temptation to rescue can be sufficient help. The use of Eugene Gendlin’s focusing technique can be invaluable. “Digging” in the past is generally *not* to be encouraged.

is, use the power of memory as a gift rather than a burden, a source of hope rather than despair, a way to freedom rather than a way to bondage.

2. We should always engage in this kind of remembering about hurtful things *explicitly in the context of the Transcendent*.<sup>21</sup> This will give us a broad horizon against which everything is relativised and nothing can assume an overwhelming or absolute gravity.
3. Distinguish between what is *moral* and what is *psychological*. For example, it is a normal and healthy reaction to feel anger and resentment towards another who has hurt us. This is a *psychological* reality. If we then – more or less freely – choose to strike back at that other in some destructive way, that is a *moral* issue. Morality only becomes part of the equation to the extent that freedom is operative. It may be, that despite our best efforts to the contrary, we carry strong negative feelings against others to the grave with us, yet rightly claim that our chosen disposition is one of forgiveness. It is, in fact the mark of a mature and well-integrated person that he or she is able to make choices on the basis of transcendent aspirations, values and reason rather than be driven simply by emotion.<sup>22</sup> This is the difference between a *response* – a free and therefore moral stance – and a *reaction* – an unfree matter of psychological fact. The attitude we choose is the key. We ought never forget that life is not so much made up of what happens to us, but how we respond to what happens to us.
4. The gouging of our inner beings that is the consequence of life's hurts, is also potentially the making of a bigness of mind and spirit that nothing else can engender. Show me someone who is deeply merciful and compassionate and forgiving and I will show you someone who has traversed this desert of memory with courage and generosity. Paradoxically, it is often in our limits that we discover our best possibilities. Happy are those who discover and face what life is really like and remain hopeful and joyful.
5. In the fifth instance, it is possible to deliberately reconfigure the remembering. We may, for example, imaginatively recall the scene, but this time introduce someone of strength and goodwill who will act on our behalf. Or, more subtly, a re-configuration can happen over time if we write about past events in our journal. A technique which some people find useful is that of the dialogue – imagine yourself at the time of the hurt and let a written dialogue emerge between you now, as an adult, and you then, as a child (for instance). Speaking about the memories – directly with the person concerned or with someone else whom you respect and trust – can also help us to re-configure the remembering.



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<sup>21</sup> Again, you might find it useful to re-read Adrian van Kaam's "Introspection and Transcendent Self-Presence" in *Reader, Volume One*, 18-28.

<sup>22</sup> See the discussion of the metaphor of "structural self" in this course, Unit 2, Session 2.

## CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

*\* By remembering, the Christian is able to live into the great saving acts of God in history and through those acts enter Time beyond time in communion with all peoples.*

*\* Remembering in this way facilitates our transformation in Christ individually and communally.*



### The Jewish Scriptures

We could think of both the writing and reading of the Bible as an act of remembering. The Bible records the remembering that lies at the heart of the relationship between God and the chosen people. The Bible is as much about Yahweh's faithfulness as it is about the people's struggle to be faithful. In other words, the Bible records the fact that through the Covenant Yahweh has undertaken to remember the people and the people have undertaken to remember Yahweh, and the remembering allows the intimacy to grow.<sup>23</sup>

Forgetting Yahweh – ie forgetting the Covenant – is the root of all their sins.<sup>24</sup> One of the central role's of the prophets is to call the people back from their forgetfulness, to help them remember once again who they are.<sup>25</sup> The prophet is a

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<sup>23</sup> When Yahweh appears, for example, in the burning bush (cf Exodus 3:1-15), Moses is asked to remember what Yahweh remembers – the Covenant of old.

<sup>24</sup> For example, see Judges 8:34: "The Israelites no longer remembered Yahweh their God, who had rescued them from all the enemies around them." Jeremiah 2:11-13: "Does a nation change its gods? - and these are not gods at all! Yet my People have exchanged their Glory for the Useless One! You heavens stand aghast at this, horrified, utterly appalled, Yahweh declares. For my people have committed two crimes: they have abandoned me, the fountain of living water, and dug water tanks for themselves, cracked water tanks that hold no water." Hosea 2:15: "I mean to make her pay for the feast-days on which she burnt incense to the Baals, when she decked herself out in her earrings and necklaces to chase after her lovers, and forget me!"

<sup>25</sup> For example, see Micah 6:3ff: "Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. <sup>2</sup>Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. <sup>3</sup>'O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! <sup>4</sup>For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. <sup>5</sup>O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.'" Micah then goes on to remind the people (6:8): "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Jeremiah 13:24-25: "I will scatter you like chaff driven by the wind from the desert. This is your lot, the portion I have measured out to you, says the LORD, because you have forgotten me and trusted in lies."

living memory. In their forgetfulness, the people lose their identity. In a profound sense, they lose their very existence in their forgetfulness.<sup>26</sup> In these times, the presence of living memories in their midst is salvific.

Why do the people celebrate the Passover? Why keep the Sabbath? So that they will always remember, and in the remembering they will grow in the relationship. The celebration of ritual and feast is an act of remembering in itself. That act facilitates a life of remembrance – living in remembrance.

Even more than that, remembering is a particularly Godly act – it is one of the promises of Yahweh central to the Covenant and is implied in the *emet* (*faithfulness*) of Yahweh.<sup>27</sup> Remembering is a Covenantal act – an act of love in which the People are continually being drawn into loving intimacy with God.<sup>28</sup>

Two texts from the Book of Deuteronomy epitomize this central role of remembering:

*Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children - how on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children so.' For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not fail you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers which he swore to them.*<sup>29</sup>

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and 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. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the*

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Chapters 13 and 14 of the Prophet Hosea.

<sup>27</sup> “Can a woman forget her baby at the breast, feel no pity for the child she has borne?” (Isaiah 49:15).

<sup>28</sup> One author writes: “The Bible speaks of the memory of God for man and of the memory of man for God. Every reciprocal recalling implies past *events* where one had been in *relation* with another, and a result of the recalling these events is a renewal of the relation. ... Memory in the Bible refers to encounters taking place in the past and when the covenant was established. It brings to life the “today” with the intensity of presence which flows from the covenant. The recollection is here all the more in place since it is a matter of privileged happenings which decided the future and which contained it in advance. Only the faithful memory of the past can insure a good orientation for the future.” (Xavier Léon-Dufour, “Memory” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1969, 307.)

<sup>29</sup> Deuteronomy 4:9-10.

*doorposts of your house and on your gates. And when the Lord your God brings you into the land which he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you, with great and goodly cities, which you did not build, and houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, and vineyards and olive trees, which you did not plant, and when you eat and are full, then take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.*<sup>30</sup>

A contemporary Rabbi says:

*“How did Jews survive all these centuries of persecution ... knowing all the pain and persecution, why didn’t they just give up? The answer, it seems to me, lies in Passover itself ... We never forgot the story; we taught it to our children; ... ”*<sup>31</sup>

## **The Christian Scriptures**

The essential place and intent of remembering is maintained in the Christian Scriptures. However, here it takes on a very specific definition in the life of the community. The Covenantal act of remembering within the community of the baptized now focuses on Jesus who is the Christ, and the great action of God in and through His life, death and resurrection. Each time the community gathers and breaks the bread and shares the cup they give thanks in remembrance of Him.<sup>32</sup> More than that, the act of remembering in the Eucharist is also a “proclamation” of His saving death and resurrection.<sup>33</sup>

Liturgical worship is always an act of remembering within the community. In and through liturgy we break through the constraints of time – past is present and the future is fully contained in both. Liturgy is an act of remembering and in that remembering we enter Time beyond all time. The worshipping community, for example, when it says at the proclamation of the Gospel, “Glory to you Lord!” and “Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ!”, it is speaking directly to the risen Lord present in the assembly now. And when the community of the baptized assemble for the

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<sup>30</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This text forms part of the *Shema* – the prayer said by the faithful Orthodox Jew to this day, morning, noon and night. When Jesus is asked “Which is the greatest commandment of the Law?” he repeats part of the *Shema* – you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul”. From his earliest years Jesus probably would have recited the *Shema* at least daily. The *Shema* is an act of remembering, an act to ensure that one lives in remembrance rather than forgetfulness.

<sup>31</sup> In an interview, reported in *The Tablet*, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks, asked this question of himself. Catherine Pepinster, “Sacks’ Plaintive Melody,” in *The Tablet*, 21 May 2005, 14.

<sup>32</sup> See Luke 22:19; Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24.

<sup>33</sup> 1Corinthians 11:23-27.

breaking of the bread and the words are spoken, “This is my body!”, that community “proclaims the death of the Lord Jesus until He comes”.<sup>34</sup>

The coming together to remember in and through liturgical worship is an aid to communion. The liturgy gives us one of the primary ways we become Christian. We say that the Eucharist is “the source and summit” of the Christian community’s life.<sup>35</sup> We are perhaps more readily able to accept the Eucharist as the “summit” of the Christian community’s life than we are able to accept Eucharist as the “source” of the Christian community’s life. Yet, it ought to be the case that, as we gather to remember God’s action in the world through Jesus Christ, we are not only drawn more intimately into communion with Him but also into deeper communion with each other.<sup>36</sup> The liturgy – particularly the Eucharist – transforms us into Christ’s Body.

Nor should we miss the significance of commencing the Eucharistic celebration with the penitential rite. We remember, individually and communally, the absolute need we have of God’s mercy and our absolute confidence in that mercy. We are therefore not afraid to remember even the dark past. We stand and face the raw truth of our lives, as best we can, and the overwhelming truth of God’s unconditional love. In the sacrament of reconciliation this action is brought more fully into focus.

When the community is faithful to the remembering, a tradition develops. The tradition both emerges from the act of remembering and in turn facilitates the remembering. Part of this dynamism is the development of objective structures – rituals, symbols, customs, lifestyles, roles, processes and so on – which protect the community from the subjective – often egotistical – intrusions of individuals that would otherwise undermine or deform the remembering. Thus it is not only appropriate but necessary for the community of the baptized to decide what is and what is not a suitable structure and manner for remembering the saving death and resurrection of Jesus.

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<sup>34</sup> It is crucial that we learn to recover the power of liturgy as an efficacious act of remembering. The changes to the ways we celebrate liturgy introduced by the Second Vatican Council were much overdue. However, we have now entered a transition phase in which we are struggling to find forms of worship that allow us to experience the drama that we are in fact celebrating. For example, the changes have, in fact, meant that much now depends on the personality and inclinations of the celebrant. Prior to the Council this mattered little because it was “the Mass”. (NB This *not* a plea or an argument for a return to “the good old days” which were not as “good” as some would have us think.) We are in danger of losing touch with the *substance* of the liturgy.

<sup>35</sup> Cf For example *Lumen Gentium*, (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”), 11.

<sup>36</sup> For a series of historical reasons, coming into the middle of last century, we tended to place a heavy emphasis on being forgiven all our sins *before* we approached communion. We forgot the traditional teaching that the celebration of Eucharist and reception of communion are in themselves effective rituals of forgiveness for those who are open to receive. Perhaps we should be telling people: “Only stay away if you are sinless; come and celebrate and receive communion *precisely because you are a sinner*”.



Finally, the authentic tradition has always encouraged ongoing commitment to a moral life, to personal prayer and various daily customs and rituals that assist the individual to live in remembrance. The life lived in remembrance will be one that is alert, aware, paying attention to every person, event or thing in the conviction that each is a sacrament of God's love, each an epiphany.



## Snippets for meditation

(1) *“This only is denied to God: the power to undo the past.”*<sup>37</sup>



(2) *“To the faithful Jew no act has deeper religious significance than the remembrance of the origins. The memory of history is a religious duty, and one which extends not only to those times when Israel felt close to God, such as the Exodus event and the Sinai revelation, but also to those which seemed far away, such as the golden calf episode and, later, the holocaust. Yet more than being a sacred obligation, the remembrance of Israel's past provides the Jew with a pattern for understanding and accepting the present. Identifying with the types of the past, he finds meaning in the vicissitudes of his own existence.”*<sup>38</sup>



(3) *“(The essence of Jewish religious thinking) does not lie in entertaining a concept of God but in the ability to articulate a memory of moments of illumination by His presence. Israel is not a people of definers but a people of witnesses: 'Ye are my witnesses' (Isaiah 43:10). Reminders of what has been disclosed to us are hanging over our souls like stars, remote and of mind-surpassing grandeur. They shine through dark and dangerous ages, and their reflection can be seen in the lives of those who guard the path of conscience and memory in the wilderness of careless living.”*<sup>39</sup>



(4) *“Memory maintains the traditions of the people of God. Observance of the sabbath represents Israel's continuing relationship with Yahweh. By remembering in the liturgical worship of the sabbath and festival days, Israel gives evidence that she continues to participate in the liberating event of the historical exodus, and she makes her faithful response to the demands of the covenant.”*<sup>40</sup>



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<sup>37</sup> Agathon quoted in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, 6:2.

<sup>38</sup> Louis Dupre, *Transcendent Selfhood: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Inner Life*, Seabury Press, 1976, 74.

<sup>39</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy on Judaism*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980, 140-141.

<sup>40</sup> John Navone, *A Theology of Failure*, Paulist Press, 1974, 87.

(5) *“Great is the power of memory, exceeding great is it, O God, an inner chamber, vast and unbounded! Who has penetrated to its very bottom? Yet it is a power of my mind and it belongs to my very nature, and thus I do not comprehend all that I am. ... Great wonder arises within me at this. Amazement seizes me. Men go forth to marvel at the mountain heights, at huge waves in the sea, at the broad expanse of flowing rivers, at the wide reaches of the ocean, and at the circuits of the stars, but themselves they pass by. They do not marvel at the fact that while I was speaking of all these things, I did not look upon them with my own eyes. Yet I would never have spoken of them, unless within me, in my memory, in such vast spaces as though I were looking at them outside, I could gaze upon mountains, waves, rivers, and stars, which I have seen, and that ocean, which I believe to be.”*<sup>41</sup>



(6) *“O Lord, remember not only the men of goodwill, but also the men of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we have gathered thanks to this suffering - our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of this - and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness.”*<sup>42</sup>



(7) *“If you do not know where you come from you will always be a child.”*<sup>43</sup>



(8) *“You will have to live with these memories and make them into something new. Only by acceptance of the past will you alter its meaning.”*<sup>44</sup>



(9) *‘I think continually of those  
who were truly great’*

*“I think continually of those who were truly great.  
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history*

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<sup>41</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions*, trans J K Ryan, Image Books, 1960, Book X, Chapter 8, 238.

<sup>42</sup> Prayer found in a concentration camp after the War.

<sup>43</sup> Cicero, cited by Brendan Walsh in a review of Simon Goldhill, *Love, Sex, Tragedy: How The Ancient World Shapes Our Lives*, John Murray, 2004, published in *The Tablet*, 19 June 2004, 21..

<sup>44</sup> T S Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, Act III, Faber and Faber, 1950, 177.

*Through corridors of light where the hours are suns,  
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition  
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,  
Should tell of the Spirit, clothed from head to foot in song.  
And who hoarded from the Spring branches  
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.*

*What is precious is never to forget  
The essential delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs  
Breaking through rocks in worlds ,before our earth.  
Never to deny its pleasure in the morning simple light  
Nor its grave evening demand for love.  
Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother  
With noise and fog, the flowering of the Spirit.*

*Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields,  
See how these names are feted by the waving grass  
And by the streamers of white cloud  
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.  
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,  
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.  
Born of the sun, they traveled a short while toward the sun  
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.”<sup>45</sup>*



(10) “... *the past is in us, and not behind us. Things are never over.*”<sup>46</sup>



(11) “... *memories are like corks left out of bottles. They swell. They no longer fit.*”<sup>47</sup>



(12) “*Those who cannot remember the past are destined to repeat it.*”<sup>48</sup>



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<sup>45</sup> Poem by Stephen Spender.

<sup>46</sup> Tim Winton, *The Turning*, Picador, 2004, 53.

<sup>47</sup> Harriet Doer, *Stones for Ibarra*, Penguin, 1978/1984, 3.

<sup>48</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (1905-1906).

(13) *“The past is never dead, it’s not even past.”*<sup>49</sup>



(14) *“When he has seen the truth about himself, or better when he has seen himself in truth, such a man has come to a deep heart.”*<sup>50</sup>



(15) *“We all have distinctive ways of appropriating our own histories into our current sense of ourselves. Just how an individual lives his past is a powerful part of how he lives his present and future. Perhaps the greatest fallacy of contemporary Western thought upon which our psychology has been built has been to suppose that the past is the past, present only in terms of ‘effects’ produced by prior ‘causes.’ When one thinks of an individual’s sense of himself one is immediately struck by a different kind of relevance of the past. The past is not simply present in terms of its later effects of prior causes, it is to appropriate a self to take up a history as one’s own and to build a present and future upon it. To remember, in other words, is intentional; it is to piece together a thousand fragments into a coherent whole that lays groundwork for contemporary meaning and experience.”*<sup>51</sup>



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<sup>49</sup> William Faulkner, from his 1950 play, “Requiem for a Nun.”

<sup>50</sup> St Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux: Treatise II*, Cistercian Publications, 1974, 43.

<sup>51</sup> Ernest Keen, “Regret, Recall and Reminiscence: Experiences of the Past,” unpublished lecture notes, Duquesne University, 1971. Cited by Beverley Stott RSM in her Masters Thesis, *Spiritual Appropriation of the Past: From Resentment to Gratitude*, Duquesne University (1979), 183.

## Suggestions for further study

- Cinema *The Assault* (1986) – Dir: Fons Rademakers with Derek de Lint and Marc van Uchelen; a Dutch film with sub-titles.  
*Autumn Sonata* (1978) – Dir: Ingmar Bergman with Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann; sub-titles
- Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book X.  
Foley, Patrick, “Remembering, Imagining and Anticipating in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition”, *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, VI, 1 (Feb 1985), 39-51.
- Léon-Dufour, Xavier, “Memory” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1969, 307-308.
- Navone, John, “Love: Remembering to Share our Story of God”, *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, VI, 1 (Feb 1985), 73-86.
- Stanley, David, “‘Do This in Memory of Me’ (1Cor 11:24, 25)”, *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, VI, 1 (Feb 1985), 103-116.
- Van Kaam, Adrian, *Formative Spirituality, Volume II: Human Formation*, Crossroad, 1985, Books, Chap 8.
- , “Glossary” in *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, II, 1 (1981), 117-119.



## Suggested exercises

1. Find a photograph of yourself as a much younger person. Look at it. Listen. What does it tell you? Allow it to awaken memories that you have forgotten. Avoid passing judgement, listen rather to that inclination and the feelings that might be driving it.
2. Next time you are celebrating Eucharist, be aware of the fact that you are a member of a remembering community. A crucial responsibility for both you and the community is to remember well. In particular, listen carefully for that ritual prayer surrounding the proclamation of the Gospel: The proclaimer says, “The Lord be with you” and the assembly responds to the proclaimer, “And also with you”; the proclaimer then turns to the Book of the Gospels, makes the sign of the cross on the Book and says, “A reading from the holy Gospel according to .....”, and the assembly then responds to the Risen Lord in their midst, “Glory to you Lord!”; after the proclamation of the Gospel, the proclaimer then says, “The Gospel of the Lord!” and the assembly responds, again to the Risen Lord, “Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ!”. Be attentive and mindful of what is implied in this ancient ritual. And be attentive to the proclamation of faith: “Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!”
3. Make a point of calling to mind the presence of God several times each day this week. Live in remembrance of who you are and who God is for you and the world. Maybe you could use the Jesus Prayer or a familiar text from the Bible or simply have a conversation with God about what is happening in and around you. Enter the present moment, in other words, as a place of memory, an experience in which you dispose yourself to remember who you are and what is happening and how God seeks to be born of you.

