

Palisades Presbyterian Church
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With Built-in Forgetters
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Built-in forgetters. You know we all have them. They are those things that allow to, well, forget. It is a psychological process referred to as “retention loss,” a spontaneous or gradual process in which old memories are unable to be recalled from memory storage. Within that process there is a carefully balanced optimization that also ensures that relevant memories are recalled. Tilt the balance, for whatever reason, and the system doesn’t function quite the way we would like.

In 2004, John T. Wixel published an article in the Annual Review of Psychology called “The Psychology and Neuroscience of Forgetting. Dr. Wixel is a member of the Department of Psychology at the University of California, in San Diego. In it he states that one of the theories that has to do with “forgetting” includes the supposition that “...forgetting probably also involves [a] retrieval failure due to changed or inadequate cues.”¹

Well, we know what that is! We all have the experience of cues that trigger memories. One that happens to me each early summer is a very sweet smell that comes from the small white flowers of a green hedge. It immediately reminds me of the first summer I used to walk down Richardson Avenue in the Bronx to P.S. 16 for summer camp at the schoolyard grounds. With the scent comes a flow of feelings, other memories, and, in some ways, even a sweeter time.

The cue was powerful. And there are others just as powerful and not always as sweet to remember. The acrid smell that permeated lower Manhattan for months following 9/11; the empty space where the towers stood; the walk through the old neighborhood; the smell of incense; home-cooking; or the trigger of a long-forgotten photograph. Just a few of those “cues.” I’ll bet you are thinking of one now!

It’s simple. We forget. And, based on the prophet Jeremiah, it seems that God has gotten a bit frustrated with this aspect of God’s design in humanity:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says our God, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water. Jeremiah 2: 12-13

¹ <http://psy.ucsd.edu/~jwixted/Reprints/AnnualReview.pdf>

It was the prophet's job – in many cases, to remind the people of what they had forgotten; warning them that unless they remembered and took action (read: repent) that tragedy would soon follow, usually identified with some aspect of the wrath of God. And he was not alone: Whether one of the twelve minor prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi or the Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel – this was always the way with some variations.

All of them, in one way or another, called for a return, a remembering, of who God was, what we had been called to do, what we had forgotten to do or done wrong, and how we needed to follow God's commands NOW to be saved BEFORE God's wrath became even more apparent. In some cases, the forgetting had gone on too long, and according to the prophet – all hope had been lost.

The major prophets (not the most important but the one's with the longest books) had these major themes, for example:²

Isaiah

Isaiah's message is that salvation is bestowed only by grace, by the power of God, the Redeemer, rather than by the strength of people or the good works of the flesh. The holy God will not permit unholiness in the covenant people, and will therefore deal with them in such a way as to chasten and purge them and make them fit to participate in God's program of redemption. [In other words: make them remember what they need to do!]

Jeremiah

He lashed out against the sins of his countrymen, scoring them severely for their idolatry, which sometimes even involved sacrificing their children to foreign gods. But Jeremiah loved the people of Judah in spite of their sins, and he prayed for them even when the Lord told him not to. [You have to love Jeremiah, sort of the tough love type, again reminding them of how they had gone wrong – but he himself never forgetting the compassion he had for the Jews, a compassion he must have believed God would prefer, even if delivered, by some measure, through his disobedience.]

Lamentations

These are laments or mournings over the woes that had fallen on sinful Judah and the pitiable destruction of the holy city and the temple. God's promised judgment for Judah's sin has come. A second theme flows out of this of judgment for sin. The prophet (believed to be Jeremiah) appeals to the chastened nation that they recognize God was just and righteous in God's dealings with them, and that they cast themselves upon God's mercy in a spirit of repentance. [Remember and repent!]

² http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=3579

Ezekiel

Ezekiel's prophecy is that the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity are necessary measures for the God of grace to employ if God is to correct God's disobedient [forgetful] people and draw them back from complete and permanent apostasy.

Daniel

This is about God's sovereign power as the one true God, who judges and destroys the rebellious world powers and will faithfully deliver God's covenant people according to their steadfast faith in God. [Remember me: I will remember you!]

In short, the prophets – major and minor were trying to get us to remember where we came from, who we were, and what we were called to do. Each had their style and personality, but the message was the same: remember – repent – be saved.

A Comparison of the Four Major Prophets³

	Isaiah	Jeremiah	Ezekiel	Daniel
Propheesied To:	Jews in Judea	Jews in Judea and captivity	Jews captive in Babylon	Jews captive in Babylon and Gentile kings
Concerning:	Judah and Jerusalem (Isa. 1:1; 2:1)	Judah and Nations (Jer. 1:5, 9-10; 2:1-2)	The whole house of Israel (Ezek. 2:3-6; 3:4-10, 17)	Israel and Gentile Nations (Dan. 2:36ff; 9)
During the reigns of:	Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah (kings of Judah)	Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah (kings of Judah)	Zedekiah (king of Judah); Nebuchadnezzar (king of Babylon)	Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah (kings of Judah). Nebuchadnezzar (king of Babylon)
Dates:	740-680 B.C.	627-585 B.C.	592-570 B.C.	605-536 B.C.
Historical Setting:	2 Kings 15-21; 2 Chronicles 26-30	2 Kings 22-25	Daniel 1-6	Daniel 1-6

³ Ibid.

And the cause of the forgetting was that things, it seemed, had gotten either too good or too bad. The people either forgot because the cues of the birthing pains of the covenant had long passed, passed with less first-hand experience from generation to generation – or that the demands of the present had caused them to lose hope in the slow-acting God and so they moved on to others. In a way, the people sometimes thought that God had “forgotten” them!

At any rate, I think it is a fair question to ask of ourselves today: Where do we find ourselves in this continuum of forgetting and remembering?

Luke helps us out a bit here. The reading is about pride and humility, not to be confused with self-confidence and low self-esteem. It seems through Luke that Jesus tells us to avoid puffing ourselves up or be prepared for some serious deflation.

A paraphrase of a simple and often repeated message. Remember: you can not force your way into the kingdom of God. Your pride and your ego will not get you in, rather your humility and service to others, just as Jesus did will be the constructs that make the difference. He might have said, “Hey, remember, it’s not about you!” Instead, we’ll go to Psalm 46:10 for a more traditional translation: “Be Still and know I am God.” Psalm 46:10

All of this is heavy. I was reminded of that recently, just how “grave” all this can become.

There are cycles, though. As I prepare to get ready for school in the next couple of days, I am again aware of the importance of play in remembering who we are and in learning to work together. It may be that the reason we forget as much as we do is because we get a bit too serious; a bit too intense and we just don’t play enough.

We sometimes see being Christian or following a faith tradition or belief system as work, work, work. Intense, directed, focused, sacrificial, a narrowly defined path that with one slip we are lost forever. I do not know about you, but I was never created to live like that or even to evolve into that.

In [Play, Character, and Spirit](#) a recent podcast on www.speakingoffaith.org, Stuart Brown, a physician and director of the National Institute for Play was interviewed. In a wonderful session, which I encourage you to listen to, he states that “[play] pleasurable, purposeless activity prevents violence and promotes trust, empathy, and adaptability to life’s complications.”⁴

⁴ <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/play/index.shtml>

As I played, lying on the early beach, eyes closed, listening to the podcast – I thought what the prophets accused the people of forgetting with their built-in forgetters. I thought about how we forget what we often choose not to remember, because it is either too painful or calls us for doing something we don't want to do.

I listened and I tried to connect to link and integrate the calls for repentance and the promotion for more play, and I found some common ground. Maybe if we did play more together more, especially when the heart aches -- maybe we would remember better what a gift we are to one another.

Maybe if we played more together we would fight less, care for others better, find abundant gratitude in life for many more things than we ever expected, discover it unnecessary to draw so many boundaries between us out of fear of the other. Maybe in play we would increasingly find the cues for joy and the reminders that the presence of God abounds in each of us and in all things.

That would be as sweet as any flowering hedge I could possible remember. And, I think, even Jeremiah might agree!