

We Remember More than We Know

by Rod Jellema

The easy way through what we hate to remember about ourselves is to shrug and say, “Well, just *forget it.*” For individuals that often works. But I’m thinking here about social ethics—the mental health of the whole society’s imagination, of the collective psyche, or even of the guiding vision of a national conscience. How and how much should we allow these to forget? Do we assume that those who suffer our actions will, like the Judeo-Christian God, “remember them no more” and thus leave us alone? For example, can American civilization forget that it exterminated entire nations of people native to American lands, and still humiliates their survivors? Can a nation’s conscience say *let’s just forget it* about the consequences of importing, enslaving, and dehumanizing a foreign people? If so, at what price to its collective psyche? Can a cultural community teach itself to ignore centuries of injustice imposed upon women, racial minorities, and other religions? Will history erase the yellowing photos of slave ships or Buchenwald, the recent photos of Abu Ghraib, or today’s photos of diseased and starving children in Burundi?

We can get relief from these annoying stings of group conscience by quoting the great Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska: *hope is the gift of forgetting.* But that won’t work. She said it in the voice of the *zeitgeist*, not in her own voice. Szymborska is in fact distinctly a poet who makes us remember, as literature generally does, that “Traces of blood are forever.”

Well, take it anyway. That sentence: *hope is the gift of forgetting.* It says so well what consoled millions want to believe. And I want to object. Strenuously. Instead I want to say this: The good that a culture remembers inspires and sustains it; the bad it remembers but wants to forget makes it human, critically so. The hope of any civilization lies in the tension, in the sustained dialogue between its unforgettable bad and its good.

Memories good and bad float back up to us in our thinking and wondering, in dream or nightmare, in the arts as we create them, and in the memories of the human race forever etched in our symbols and mythology. Homer and Shakespeare know us. They can remind us, through centuries but also next week Tuesday, hauntingly and beautifully, of what we cling to and of what we try to forget but shouldn’t.

This whole matter of remembering and forgetting is beautifully complex. “It is not yet enough to have memories,” Rilke tells us;

You must be able to forget them when they are many, and you must have the immense patience to wait until they return. For the memories themselves are not important. [They matter] only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless. . . .

Which is to say, our memories are most significant when they become us, beyond our consciously remembering them.

I’m saying that simple forgetting does not give our culture its hope. It distracts us with shopping malls, electronic chatter, amplified music that kills conversation, contrived entertainment, and celebrity worship. Our abiding humanness, rich with choices we are free to make, is the gift not of forgetting but of remembering. Remembering holds us to think and to wonder. When our culture wonders it imagines—through it we imagine terror and beauty, and create transcendent objects and moments, and even parallel worlds, in music, in shapes and colors, in images made of words. We remember, beyond our understanding, beyond even our natural memory, what it is to be human.

Part of what human culture remembers is the fundamental mythology of its start in Eden. Right after dark water and the warm womb, there’s that garden, more real than anything merely archeological, historical, or actual. Forget fossils and pot shards—is Eden in fact alive as memory? It seems to be more than just a perfected martini. We sense Eden sometimes in little flashes and splinters of recognition of an ur-memory, an “almost-memory”—almost knowing who and why we are, a perfect life, what God is, everything for split seconds at a time perfectly clear.

But there is also the much popularized Eden we are conditioned to believe we long for—the yawning, effortless, cloudless cultivation of perfect pomegranates while we pet the family tiger, play harps, and rest in knowing that nothing needs completion and everything is known. That’s the “better place” than where we are? Think about it. All this really spells out is absolute

boredom, especially to the huge majority of us who want something fulfilling to do and are not into agriculture.

This kind of Eden is not memory; this is the indulgence of escapist sentimental rumination. I'm told it is comforting. I do not find it so. It forces us to believe that history has no meaning; that whatever Creator there might be would have no interest in the eons of struggle and folly and celebration, the betrayals and joy and grief that his creatures created, long out of Eden, with a small flicker of Eden in mind, in that realm of ours called history.

Human life need not be the frustrating ambivalence of trying to remember while wanting to forget. It's the exciting tension, the imagination's dialogue between these two, that keeps us human. The human mind—something much bigger than intellect—develops into the achievement of critical evaluation.

That sentimental eternity—pop entertainment about an intolerably non-human life—is worth forgetting. If you want a partial sense of the timeless “Eden Regained” that the scriptures call Heaven, remember poet Denise Levertov's observation: Heaven's matter is not comfort, its matter is Awe.

That's deep in our mythic unconscious. Literature and the arts are here to remind us.