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What's Your Story?

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Since I retired, I've found myself reminiscing more. When I worked full time, the demands of job and home sponged up virtually all my attention, but now my thoughts venture beyond the bounds of the daily. One of the places my mind often goes is to the past. My grandparents and parents appear on my mental slate regularly, as do friends not seen for decades. Old photographs help make these memories more real. Faded pictures of me—a child in a swimsuit, a teenager behind the wheel, a 40-something eating birthday cake—speak of who I was, where I was headed, and what once seemed important.

Life Review as a Vantage Point

Researchers tell us that, aside from the very young, everyone thinks about the past. During the last third of life, such memories are likely to take the form of a “life review.” Psychologist Robert Butler suggested that people within sight of death get a much better sense than before of the entire course of their lives. It is as if we climb a hill from which we can see, more clearly than we did before, a panorama of our days on earth. This surveillance from an advantaged viewing post results in more integrated sense of our life.

We reminisce to gain a sense of perspective. When Moses gave his farewell address to the Israelites before they entered the

promised land, he began by reviewing all that had happened since they left Mount Sinai (Deut. 1:6-4:40). This overview of 40 years could be abridged into one crucial truth: “You were shown these things so that

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you might know that the Lord is God; besides him there is no other” (Deut. 4:35). Keep thinking about these events, Moses urged. “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out” (Deut. 5:15). Climb regularly to the overlook, survey God's deeds, and reflect on them.

The Unfinished Business of Memory

Our thinking about the past not only provides perspective but also influences what we do in the present. Sometimes we're reminded of things we've left unfinished. Perhaps friends or family we need to bless (or from whom we need blessing).

Apologies we intended to make, or forgiveness we intended to offer. There may be a spiritual legacy—an offering of wisdom in the form of stories or life lessons—that we wish to pass on to someone.

options for how to now think about mistreatment once inflicted on him by a Yugoslavian army captain: “I can view myself primarily as a person who was terrorized by powerful people against whom I was helpless and whose intentions I could not discern. Or I can see myself primarily as a person who, after some suffering, has been delivered by God and given a new life. . . .” The latter interpretation, which emphasizes his new identity in Christ, is most healing. Volf also suggests a new understanding of the perpetrator. Keep in mind, he says, that Christ’s atoning sacrifice is sufficient for anything that has been done against us, should the wrongdoer be willing to accept forgiveness for his or her deeds. Volf concludes, “I will remember every wrongdoing in the light of that hopeful horizon of future reconciliation with the wrongdoer.”

What I Did, What Was Done in Me

We remember in order to gain perspective and to guide what we do in the present. Another reason for a life review is evaluation. In looking back, we are likely to take stock of the kind of life we’ve lived and the sort of person we’ve become. If this assessment is favorable, we’re likely to feel self-worth. A negative evaluation of our life, on the other hand, produces futility and despair.

Such, at least, is what psychological theorists maintain. A Christian’s self-evaluation might be tempered by other considerations. None of us has done all we could to further the cause of Christ, yet our shortcomings don’t result in despair because every shortcoming has been redeemed by Christ’s sacrifice. Besides, what really matters is not what I’ve done but what Christ has done in me. God “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Eph. 3:20), and that dwarfs my accomplishments.

If what matters is what God has done, not what I’ve managed on my own, my life review takes on a different character. It’s less about how I’ve lived and more about the life of Christ in me. I no longer tell a story of such small scale that I look big, but embed my story in God’s great story of reconciliation. I’m less concerned with validating my own self-worth than with recalling the deeds of the One who alone is worthy.

That’s the story I want to tell, anyway. Often, I focus more on what I’ve accomplished than on what I’ve witnessed of God’s accomplishments. I would like to be more like Paul, who, when he looked back near the end of his life, focused not on his achievements but on his shortcomings. “I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man,” he notes (1 Tim. 1:13). In spite of this, he goes on to say, “I was shown mercy.” This mercy was part of God’s larger purpose, “so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1 Tim. 1:16). The phrase “I was shown mercy” can more literally be translated “I was mercied.” I like that. I too have been mercied, often when mercy was least expected. The vantage point afforded by advancing age is best used not to review my successes but to look back on the copious mercies I’ve received.

Memory and the Whole People of God

It is not just our own lives that we remember. In her book *The Spiritual Practice of Remembering*, historian Margaret Bendroth encourages Christian communities to keep alive the memories of our ancestors in the faith. Noting that historical societies erect markers to commemorate memorable events, she envisions church buildings filled with do-it-yourself historical markers—of a donor’s generosity, of a life-changing sermon, of baptisms, of funerals, of members who regularly occupied this or that pew.

Our memories, after all, are not islands apart; each is connected to the whole. With age, we see a bit more of that whole than we did when we were younger. We remember what we were told by members of the family of God who no longer walk the

earth; we remember the evidence of God's grace manifest in their lives. We tell their stories, and ours, so that the people of God might recall how richly the followers of Christ throughout the ages have been "mercied." Let's speak again and again of

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