MEMORY IS WILD

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MEMORY IS TO BE CELEBRATED. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays and the eucharist show us so. But memory is ambiguous, as can be seen in the different uses to which it has been put, nowhere more clearly than in El Salvador.

There a central memory nurtured by the wealthy is of the peasants' revolt in 1930, after which some 30,000 people, including many of the small Indian population, were massacred. Behind this revolt lay the expropriation of land in the nineteenth century, when peasants were driven off their land, and vagrancy laws were passed to force them to work on the large, newly privatized estates.

The memory of the peasants' revolt has persisted, and expresses itself in the fear of the peasants and a readiness to suppress brutally the first signs of dissent. Memory perpetuates the betrayal of trust which caused the original revolt and prevents any attempt to redress those original wrongs.

But in El Salvador, too, other memories have been precious and life-giving. On their anniversaries, for example, many communities commemorate within the eucharistic prayer the names of their martyrs who were murdered and tortured during the 1980s. To recall the martyrs around whom these communities are built is an act of fidelity. It encourages the survivors to live generously after their example.

Here remembering is a way of articulating the body of the community. At another level in the same nation it can be a way of dismembering the community by reasserting the injustice upon which it is built.

While the claim of memory is attractive within a society characterized by forgetfulness, these examples show that we need not only to remember but also to forget. In this article I would like to explore the nature of the claims which both remembering and forgetting make upon us. I shall conclude by reflecting on the discipline of remembering and of forgetting which we find within the eucharist.

To remember or to forget?

Attentiveness to memory is commended by critics of western societies. We commonly judge that our societies show a lack of due respect for memory, that they encourage forgetfulness of important events, and that they live unreflectively in the present.

This amnesia is seen to lead to a fragmented and shallow view of individual human lives. When we disregard memory we believe that what we have done in the past is simply irrelevant to our present identity. If someone were to suggest that we should take responsibility for what we did many years ago, we would be surprised, because we would believe that the person we were then is simply not identical with the person who exists today. Our past is a foreign country; exploring its topography does not help us to understand the current geography of our lives.

The same disregard for memory is seen to characterize national history. In Australia, whose modern history began with deeds of expropriation, many would argue that these old deeds should be forgotten, and should certainly not be taken into account in law or in national celebration. To such a mentality, the past is infinitely malleable because it is supremely unimportant. When courts decide cases in favour of disadvantaged groups – asylum-seekers, for example – a government will simply amend the legislation retrospectively to make it mean what it has now become more convenient for it to mean.

When memory is not respected, the result is commonly triviality and a preference for novelty over wisdom. Our elders, the traditional repositories of wisdom, receive no respect because their perspective is outmoded.

Christians who live in this sort of world will find it difficult to have a sense either of sin or of grace, for both concepts depend on the conviction that identity is built through a history of choice and action. If we are to experience grace – the unexpected change in a predictable and lamentable pattern – we need first to experience regret at finding our predicament intractable. Without the chains of memory, there can be no deliverance. We would be trapped in the perpetual supermarket smile, where every new day is by definition a good day, and no new day leaves us prepared for the beast that may shamble into it from the past.

Within this account of the human predicament, the recovery of memory is unambiguously good. To recover a measure of depth, continuity and responsibility in our culture, we must cultivate memory.

This, however, is not the only account of our situation. Others see forgetfulness, not as an infidelity, but as a necessary escape from a memory gone feral. In a simpler society people could easily cleanse themselves from the dust of their history. But not now: the most forgettable of incidents and boring of lives find their ways into books; the most passing personal details are stored on disks, are collated, and can be retrieved from information banks, so that our credit rating before God and humankind is irrevocably established. Human beings are no more than the sum of their past transactions.

This inalienable memory is a heavy burden to bear. Personal and communal amnesia are an appropriate response. Government departments erase compromising memos, and we seek ways to forget our own past. Memory is our enemy.

The case against memory is not built solely on the disastrous effects of new technology. Within families, the memory of even the most glorious of ancestors engaged in the most disinterested of public service can overwhelm the descendants. They drag out heavy lives weighed down and made ineffectual by the memory of the deeds to which they were expected to live up.

Where the memories that we nurture are of great wrongs and of terrible revenge, the effects are much more corrosive. Neither families embroiled in feuds nor societies recalling the wrongs inflicted upon them are the better or the happier for the length of their memories. Would the sum of human happiness or goodness be much diminished if the battles of the Boyne or of Kossovo and of all massacres done centuries ago were suddenly to be erased from the collective memory? Where memories are long and feed violence, even the altruism which is commemorated in stirring songs is seen to have been bought at too heavy a price.

Nor is cultural memory unambiguously good. Tradition is seen as the sap which keeps alive the roots of culture. But where cultures become preoccupied with their memories, they begin to die. If memory has the last word, for example, will there ever be union between churches? Memory records divisions, their causes, and the words which enshrine them. Few divisions are healed by revisiting the past: they yield only to a common desire to make a new and fresh beginning. Similarly, if unfettered memory is in control, there can be no space for repentance of practices and decisions which, for example, have prevented women from taking 'their irreplaceable place in the church'.

On this reading, memory is often hostile to human flourishing, and, by and large, forgetfulness is a blessing. Memory is as attractive and as dangerous as a candle to moths. While we are inevitably drawn to remember, our safety demands that we are also able to keep at a safe distance from our memories, and so able to fly lightly on.

I have given two accounts of memory, one of which stresses its importance, the other its dangers. They should be seen as complementary rather than as rival accounts. Together they show that, while it is important to remember, it is also important to forget. But although important, these tasks are also notoriously difficult for reasons that will become clear when we reflect on the ways in which memories attach themselves to us.

Where memory lives

We often falsely believe that memory has its home in the mind. We tell ourselves that if we control our mind, we shall be in the position to tell our memory who is boss. The attempt fails because memory lives primarily in the body. The experience of grief makes this clear: when we grieve for others, we are restless, our joints ache, we need to move around, our memories drive and torment our bodies. We cannot tell our memory who is boss, because our memories are imprinted so deeply in the body. Similarly, where people have been abused as children or have long been forced into subservience, their bodies betray their memories. They instinctively turn their faces from blows, stand bowed, or try to remain unnoticed. Those who have survived long periods of active service in war, too, report how memories are imprinted in their bodies. They do not choose to remember, but find memories torn out of them unwillingly and helplessly. Their minds are alert spectators at the terrible play of memory in their bodies.

If memory is imprinted in our bodies, it also has its home in things and places. We instinctively avoid places which are associated with unpleasant memories: the towns or homes, for example, which we last visited with a recently lost friend. Such places revive our pain. Or we may visit regularly what have become the holy places of our lives. These are the places of significant experience and recognition, and to visit them is to foster the memories which attach to these places.

The powerful association between place and memory has long been recognized within religions and cultures. In most cultures shrines are placed on the hills overlooking the places where daily life is lived. When dictators, like Stalin or Kim Il Sung, come to power, they build statues of themselves which come to dominate the town squares. The place is then sacred to their memory and evokes its power. When tyrannies collapse, the statues are immediately and ceremoniously dismantled, so that the memory of the tyrant no longer remains in the land.

The relationship between place and memory can be seen vividly in the Holy Land. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem after the revolt, they razed to the ground both temple and city. When they allowed their military veterans to settle there many years later, they renamed the city and set above it a temple. Both the local inhabitants and visitors to this land were subsequently to remember Roman power, not Jewish history. Similarly, when Constantine came to favour Christianity, he built a splendid temple from the ruins of the old temple. Now visitors to Jerusalem were to think of the Christian God and of Constantine, his benefactor. And so in succeeding centuries the landscape was shaped

again to make people remember who was the God and who the people that owned this land.

The Holy Land is not simply land but landscape, in which diverse sets of memories are imprinted on the stones, the ruins, the fields and cities.

The association of memory with place is also enshrined in our moral discourse, which speaks of occasions of sin. For most occasions of sin are places – typically pubs or trysting places – which are so laden with memory that the associations of the place are at odds on to defeat the mind's good intentions.

Because memory is imprinted in the body and in places or things, its power to give definitive shape to life is intense when deep experience is associated with places or things. Ignatius' vigil in armour before the Black Virgin of Monserrat became an emblem of his change of life. In the novel *Docherty*, William McIlvanney explores the relationship between memory and things in a less heroic key. In one scene, Tam Docherty and his teenage son Conn, soon to join his father down the mines, have been talking inarticulately and at cross purposes about the value of education. The focus of their conversation is a book, one of Tam's prize possessions:

> They sat hopelessly together in the darkening room, their shapes unfinished sculptures in the firelight, affirming the worth of each other and injuring each other in the affirmation. Conn turned the book over in his hand. He had always loved the feel of it, bound in soft leather and on the front two circles, one within the other, embossed in gold, like a medallion, inside of which was the figure of a lady in a wide, sweeping dress. But at the moment he resented it. Running his fingers over the braille of that design, it was as if the gesture taught him he was blind, as if the book could only be a tactile object for him, and he and his father were locked out from the rest of it, rejected by the complex patterns of words which it contained. The sensation which his fingers casually imparted to him now was never entirely to leave him, like a burn that mutes all subsequent touches to a partial memory of itself, one of those perceptions that remain precisely because their truths outreach our rational comprehensions, have no need of it, though our comprehension will repeatedly come back to illumine them, intensifying the mystery.
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> So, in later years, holding again this book, Conn as a man was to understand this evening better, and so many others like it. (*Docherty*, pp 164–5)

In remembering this incident Conn recalls his crucial relationship with his father and also his decision to leave school, which has shaped his

life. This central memory is associated with a book, and significantly more with its shape and texture than with its context. For it becomes central within Conn's memory because he has fingered it. The memories imprinted in the book are also imprinted upon Conn's fingers. Thus, Conn's memories are based on an apparent paradox: the written word reminds him of his father, but does so precisely in its inarticulacy. But this is only an apparent paradox, because through the printed words which do not speak to him, Conn is confronted with the mystery of memory. Memory is a mystery beyond articulacy precisely because it lodges in the body.

I have dwelt on the relationship between memory and the body because it suggests that memories are much more deeply rooted than we often believe. The relationship suggests also that forgetting is a complex process. Memories which are imprinted on the body are not lost by simple inattention. They must be drawn from the body and from places and things with which they are associated. For that reason we find the advice trite when people urge us to forget any serious and painful experience. While we would certainly benefit by forgetting, our problem is that we cannot tell our mind to forget.

Forgetting must touch also the body and the places on which memory is imprinted. This requires good ritual of a seriousness that is suggested in popular images of exorcism. Stories and films assure us that where demons are imprinted in the body, they must be drawn out from the body ceremoniously by anointings, crossings, prayers and much agonizing. Although reflecting bad theology and dubious pastoral practice, such images do suggest the seriousness and the difficulty of the struggle to forget.

Funerals, properly celebrated, certainly embody good rituals of forgetting. The realism of the prayers, the sound of clay on the coffin, the leisurely progress from church door to the grave and back to the house, and the marking of the grave with stone, all recognize the power of the body as the locus of memory, and consecrate a place to the memory of the person dead and not alive. Old memories are drawn out and the appropriate new memories implanted.

In public affairs, too, effective rituals of forgetting need to be ceremonious. At the end of the war in El Salvador there was public debate about the proper attitude to be taken to the atrocities of the war. Those prosecuting the war wished simply to forget the past and make a new beginning. Their opponents argued that the past needed to be uncovered, remembered and publicly repented of. The path of forgetting had to be ceremonious and punctilious. This latter attitude was the

more realistic: after tyranny and brutality, statues of tyrants need to be pulled down; desecrated churches must be purified; services must be held to commemorate the dead and to free the living from the burden of revenge.

The relationship between memory and the body indicates that proper processes of forgetting are deep and slow. The major defect of western society is not that it wishes to forget, but that it tries to forget on the cheap. It assumes that remembering and forgetting are simply mental activities, and ignores the stubborn imprinting of memory in the body. Hence, it despises and allows to decay the rituals which can draw out the power of memory from the body. But when memories are ignored, they do not go away: they breed private and public neuroses.

Eucharist and memory

Within the Christian life the eucharist provides a discipline and a style both of remembering and of forgetting. The ritual which we enter can imperceptibly shape our daily lives and suggest what and how we are to remember and to forget.

In the first place, the eucharist brings the body into play. That is clear in the theology of the eucharist. We believe that it is the body of Christ which we share in the eucharist. We recall in particular the point at which the bodiliness of Jesus Christ was displayed most palpably and distressingly by being handed over to the butchers.

The ritual and context of the eucharist also emphasizes its bodiliness. We bring real bread and wine to the eucharist, and celebrate the sacrament by eating and drinking. Although the reality of eating and drinking has been attenuated, so that it may seem to require almost as great a leap of faith to believe that what we eat is bread as to believe that it is the body of Christ, the ritual remains stubbornly bodily.

The context of the celebration of the eucharist also emphasizes the bodily. It is a regular celebration in which we learn to use our bodies in predictable ways: preparing to go to church, standing, sitting, kneeling, walking to communion and returning, chatting outside the church, and finally returning home. We express fidelity through our bodies, whether our minds are on the job or not. While we are always exhorted to have our minds aligned to what our bodies are doing, nevertheless the bodily presence within ritual has its own effects. When people discover the meaning and heart of what they have been doing for many years, their fidelity to ritual has played an important part in their discovery.

The eucharist is also associated with particular places. The importance of these associations can easily be forgotten, because we regularly

play them down: the church, we say rightly, is not primarily a place but is a people gathered together. But the quality of the place where we habitually celebrate the eucharist remains important for us. It is marked with memory: with plates which commemorate donors and the dead, with banners which the school children have made for the season, and with windows commemorating people and events. It is the place where parents have been married, grandparents buried, where children have been baptized and made their first communion. For those who grew up there it provides their first and often strongest memory of church.

When the eucharist is celebrated, these memories of families are joined to the memory of Jesus Christ in the Church. The stitching together of memories is intangible, but it earths the memories which comprise the gospel. The power of this association of memories should lead us to ask what will be the effect of priestless parishes and of less frequent celebration of the eucharist in the local church. It may turn out to have been more significant than allowed by anyone who believes that memory resides in the mind rather than in the body and in place.

The eucharist also commends a style of remembering and forgetting. It is relatively lean in what it remembers. The narrative at the heart of the eucharist is indeed sparse and is restricted to issues of great significance: the story of Jesus' last supper, of his going to his death and of what that death signified. It commemorates the large issues of life and death, of hope in the face of loss, of injustice, sin and forgiveness. The smaller details of Jesus' life and death are omitted.

In focusing on memories which are so central to the story of Jesus Christ and to the stories of ordinary human lives, the eucharist provides an implicit standard by which we can measure our own memories. We can set them against the story of Jesus Christ and can discern which memories we should treasure and which memories we should let go of, either because they contradict the narrative at the heart of the eucharist or because they are trivial.

If the eucharist measures our personal memories, it also provides a standard against which we can set our culture. It enables us to assess our current political concerns, slogans and traditions. The core of church tradition is enshrined in the eucharist, and traditions need to be set against the large and central memory of the eucharist. Against this standard, what once seemed central may well appear trivial.

Finally, the eucharist provides us with a discipline of forgetting. Forgetting is here called forgiving. The central memory of the eucharist lays hold of unmerited and violent suffering, the kind of memory which is most deeply engraved in the body and is most intractable. But in the

celebration of the eucharist, that story is remembered as a story of forgiveness. The body of Jesus Christ is marked with forgiveness; we who share the broken bread are those responsible for its breaking. Ultimately, we remember a forgetting and are drawn into it.

This description of the eucharist may seem to be little more than theological rhetoric. But is is embodied also in the way in which we celebrate the eucharist. In most churches, the congregations which gather together to celebrate comprise people of different areas of life and endowments. Here, they are not differentiated by wealth or by virtue. Hierarchies and injuries can be forgotten.

Parts of the ritual, too, evoke forgiveness. The recent history of the greeting of peace is instructive. Following the Second Vatican Council, it was added to the eucharist, apparently without much reflection. Yet it was quickly given a central place in the celebration of the eucharist, precisely because it was a ritual of forgetting. Indeed, some rural congregations were reluctant to accept it at first, because the sign was so strong. In their communities a handshake popularly meant that all debts had been remitted: people were correspondingly reluctant to put at risk their livelihood by too enthusiastic or too undiscriminating an exchange of peace.

The fact that the eucharist celebrates forgiveness will always mean that gestures of exclusion based on past history will be seen as problematic. Currently, the exclusion of non-Catholics from the eucharist and the denial of communion to the divorced and remarried have been particularly controversial. So in many parishes, the eucharistic discipline is tacitly being modified.

Both this unease at patterns of exclusion and the expedients adopted to deal with it underline the need to forget. The eucharistic discipline itself, however, also states unequivocally that significant memory is written in the body, and must be drawn from it with corresponding seriousnesss. The breakdown of marriages and the separation of churches are written in great pain, not blame, and they cannot simply be forgotten at will. The Orthodox service for blessing a second marriage is appropriately a penitential ceremony, which enables the bodily depth of memories to be given full weight. The eucharistic discipline urges the case that grace is costly, precisely because it involves forgetfulness, and therefore must be expressed with due seriousness.

The eucharist, then, is about remembering and forgetting. It shares this with the Church. Both are the body of Christ, and in both memories are deeply imprinted. For that reason both focus deep tensions, and from both we may hope to learn how memories may appropriately be healed.