

Why Remembering God's Work in Your Past Can Keep You From Losing Your Way

Remembering is a crucial activity for all of us. We will not know who we are without remembering.

The Hebrews in the Old Testament were called again and again to remember. In the book of Deuteronomy, they're about to enter the land God has promised them—a new life and land where milk and honey flowed from every ravine! So much anticipation—but even after wandering and longing and salivating for their new home for 40 years, they aren't yet ready to cross the threshold. They can't cross over without these words:

“However, be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you don't forget the things which you have seen with your own eyes. Don't let them fade from your memory as long as you live. Teach them to your children and grandchildren” (Deut. 4:9, GW).

What are they remembering? “But you shall *remember* that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there” (Deut. 24:18, ESV, emphasis added). And in many places, God tells them specifically what they're to remember about their story: “Tell in the hearing of your son and your son's son the mighty things I have done in Egypt ... that you may know that I am the Lord” (Ex. 10:2, NKJV).

They're to remember who they are and where they've come from and how they've gotten there. And this story is completely wrapped around God's story: who He is and all He's done with them, for them. Without this remembrance, they are lost.

And so they were. They did forget who God is, the miraculous

ways He freed them to make them His people, His daughters and sons: “And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies on every side” (Judg. 8:34, RSV). In fact, the whole history of God’s people in the Old Testament is the story of the rise and fall of kings who do evil because they forget God. Then occasionally a righteous man emerges who “remembered” God.

Listen. I know I’m going all preachy here, but this is monumental for all of us, no matter what we believe about the Bible: The past is not done. It lives on in us, no matter how cleverly we disguise ourselves, no matter how fast we try to run from it. When we don’t turn and look behind, we lose our way. Even our very selves. Dan Allender writes:

Rather than living a life of freedom and creativity that finds meaning even in the meaningless places in our past, we purpose to forget. ... Forgetting is a wager we all make on a daily basis, and it exacts a terrible price. The price of forgetting is a life of repetition, an insincere way of relating, a loss of self” (Dan Allender and Don Hudson, “Forgetting to Remember: How We Run From Our Stories,” Mars Hill Review 8, 65).

Which stories should we remember and pursue? Only you can answer that.

The first summer I began work on the memoir, I scratched out a timeline in pencil on yellow legal pads. Into that single horizontal line, I staked a peg and labeled it with an approximate date. I remembered my first visit to Alaska and to this island off Kodiak Island. How at 19 it was my first time in a plane, how I landed in a tiny village in a floatplane and was met on the beach by the family I’d soon belong to. I remember the sweater I was wearing: bright yellow, red and green, flashy and optimistic. I remember the first time in a

skiff the next day. Then the first time fishing in the skiff. The first time seeing the island I thought I would live on for every summer the rest of my life. I remembered building the house that winter, that whole year just the two of us on an island with no contact with the outside world.

I marked another stake years later, unexpectedly moving to another island. The birth of our daughter. The Exxon oil spill. Cleaning the beaches with shovels and rake.

One memory triggered another. The timeline marched across pages, and I laid them out on the table, one after another. Railroad tracks, horizontal and vertical marks across the expanse of my days. I took my time. I didn't rush.

And already it began, a sense of relief. My childhood and even my early years in fishing were all cast in a cloak of secrets. As I marked down my memories and turning points, some fleeting and fragmentary, others vivid and overwhelming, I felt lighter. It was freeing to bring words and language to some of those memories. And I hadn't even begun to write yet.

I didn't yet know the science of "remembering." Scholars and social scientists have studied the cost of keeping secrets. Protecting secrets saps our strength, erodes our health. When we suppress and hide events in our lives, we have no means of integrating them into our experience. We think keeping secrets is good, that it keeps us from obsessing or being stuck on whatever that hard truth or event is. But of course, the opposite happens. What we try to hide will show up everywhere (James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smuth, *Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain*, 10, 11).

When we intentionally map out the pieces of our lives, the strangest and yet most ordinary thing happens. We are mapping *chronos* time, the Greek word for time that measures the earth's journey around the sun, the steady ticktock calendar

of our days and years—and then some pencil marks will drop us through the floor into *kairos* time. Kairos is the other word Greeks use for time, and it is time beyond measuring, beyond quantifying. This is the now from another now, and there we are, my newborn daughter and I both lying on the sawdusty, plywood floor of the new house, gazing at each other. She is fussing and squirming, just 4 weeks old and frustrated she cannot go where she wants, and I am exhausted from her colic, no longer seeing out through the windows of our half-built house the whales that spout outside in the bay. I lie beside her in a red corduroy shirt, seeing only her wide brown eyes, her appetite for always more. And I don't know if I'm going to survive this love, these nights and days on this wilderness island that blur into the unending fatigue of the sleepless now, a love that surely will kill me—yet I am dying happy every day because I gladly give my body to this being who is teaching me how death and love are so much the same. This is just a moment, just three minutes. Does this belong on my timeline? I mark it.

And the piercing of that tent peg moves to another, earlier moment, and I go again, falling or rising into one of the scariest moments of my life. It is blowing 40 miles per hour, the sea a whirlwind of white. I have been given the job of running the skiff, alone a mile down the channel, into the breaking waves to catch the net in the water and somehow to hold on, to hold on against the wind and sea and to tie on and wait, and I am pregnant and don't know to say no to this impossible task. I mark it on the railroad tracks even though I am afraid to think about it or write about it. But I can worry later, whether to write about it or not. For now, I stake it down because it happened. And that's enough for now.

As you enter the fullness of your own story, begin with the big events marked on your *chronos* timeline. Within those, you'll find *kairos* events that beckon you deeper. Right now, there is no hierarchy of importance. Mark whatever comes.

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