

Remembering matters. How we remember matters more.

It is our human nature to make stories of our memories. This is how we understand. This is how we find the meanings buried in our lives and in the lives of those we love. This is how we construct the myths that we need in order to make sense of it all.

Myths are not necessarily lies. In fact, in one sense, they are never lies. Myths extract the essential points of our stories; the facts and feelings that we string together like so many beads to create out of the past something that we can use. And in between those beads lie alternate stories, alternate understandings, the great gaps in our knowledge and memory, the vast truth of our limited understanding.

Out of our selective memories, we construct stories we can use. And the truth of these stories lies not in their factual accuracy. Their truth lies in the needs, the feelings and wishes that determine our choices of what to remember.

There's nothing wrong with that. That is part of our human nature, and it is inevitable that we will make such choices – that our memories will be partial.

Do we need to feel pride in our accomplishments or in our family name or in our nation? We select the shiny beads, the moments of triumph or altruism or courage, and wear them with pride.

Do we need to explain our failure to live up to the image of what we planned to become? We choose the broken and sharp-edged beads, the moments when we were betrayed, lied to, cheated on, deserted and disappointed by parents, lovers, leaders, and we wear these, too, cold, cracked and unlovely as they are.

Do we need to be comforted? We choose the memories that are soft and rich with love and we pull these close around us in times of grief or confusion or failure. Do we need to atone? We remember our own betrayals of trust, our own cruelties or bad judgment or selfishness or cowardice and we punish ourselves, wrapping ourselves in these harsh and painful memories.

And all of these memories are true, and all of us wear them, all of them.

But let us not forget about those spaces in between. It is in the spaces in between, the ordinary, small beads of lives lived everyday, lived and forgotten, that we find hope.

For these, too, are real. These are the forgotten moments when we performed our duties – not with flare or exceptional skill, but well enough. These are the moments of getting out of bed when we really didn't want to, of pouring the breakfast cereal, of returning the phone call, filling the car with gas we couldn't afford, reading the stories in the paper we'd rather not know about, smiling at a coworker when we just wanted to be

left alone. These are the moments of ordinary valor, of endurance and unexceptional kindnesses that keep us human. These are the unspectacular moments that we forget but that, remembered, give us hope for ourselves and for each other.

And it is in these spaces in between that we can listen to the stories that others tell, and consider – just consider – the possibility that their stories also are true. We can imagine that ours may not be the only choices that matter, not the only memories that count. We can wonder if perhaps we wear the memories of others without even knowing that we do. Brothers, sisters, parents and children – we all remember differently that 4<sup>th</sup> of July picnic when it stormed, or that birthday when unexpected guests showed up, or that last week of our brother's life. We remember differently what our mothers told us about sex or love, what our fathers told us about dying, or showed us about living. We can realize that these variations, these very memories, not just the events they recall, have power. That we have been carrying them with us – not just our own memories, but also the memories of others, in all their power to shape the present behavior of those around us, and hence, our own.

This is most apparent when we talk about our shared history, our national story, our memories, officially sanctioned or held subversively close in our hearts. Our memories of war, for example. When the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are long over, we will remember wildly different stories about how we got into them and what we did, and why. We see this in every war. And gradually, as the participants die away, a national consensus seems to form. “The Good War” or the “tragedy of Vietnam.” Slowly, we come to agree on the myth, the story we will tell about this particular series of decisions and events, and we forget about those spaces in between. Those spaces in which each person who was there and each person who was not there forms his or her own mythology about that war – chooses his or her own memories to string together to form a pattern, to make a story, to make some sense of history.

The national consensus will close up those essential spaces, those spaces of everyday lived experience, and we will remember only the grand or tragic moments. The national consensus will invalidate the unique memories, the unique sufferings of soldiers and civilians. Like the earthquake in China or the cyclone in Burma, the scale of the tragedies endured will allow us to forget that these wars had **individual** costs. Costs of life and limb and innocence. And when we forget this, we lose something of our common humanity.

We lose something that is at the heart of any hope for peace. For we will learn peace not from studying history textbooks or military science. We will learn peace from one thing only – from grief.

In memories of grief, personal and intimate grief, lies our hope. The grief of mothers, sisters and wives, fathers and children and brothers. The grief of strangers for one another. The stories we tell, and the stories we listen to – really listen to and hear, and adopt as part of our own stories – these stories full of grief, will call upon the better angels of our nature.

Abraham Lincoln, in his first inaugural address, said this:

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave around the world, to every heart and hearthstone, in every land, will yet swell the chorus that cries for peace, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

This is our hope and our prayer.