

A Different Kind of Time

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Sermon of March 9, 2014

Forgetfulness by Billy Collins

The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,
never even heard of, as if, one by one,
the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,
something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

Sermon

When my 92 year old father asks me where the car is I tell him his neighbor Tom is taking care of it for him. Who's Tom? he says. Tom, I say, the neighbor across the street. For a moment he seems to remember Tom. He relaxes. When he asks if everything at the house is alright, I tell him yes. He asks me if I have been there. I tell him I have and everything is alright.

I'm taking care of it. He calms down. My Dad still recognizes me and remembers who I am, though when I last called or visited or when I will come do so again are unknown to him.

My Dad has dementia. He does not know what day it is, what time it is, where he is or why. He experiences sundowners – as the sun sets he can become more disoriented than usual, more argumentative, more anxious, and more determined that it is time for him to leave.

Even in his most delirious moments there can be connections to his real past – he wants to call his bowling buddies and tell them he won't make it tonight, he says it is time to get ready to go to work at the golf course. Some of the ramblings contain "truth" if, IF, you know my Dad. If you don't then they are just nonsense like the peanuts in the bed or the money on the ceiling. While there are moments that have the feel of a "normal" conversation, I would be foolish to think that he will remember anything of what was said.

For me – whose life is organized around a daily schedule and appointments; whose ministry depends on my ability to draw on past experience, learn from the here and now and be as fully present as possible, and plan for the future . . . for me life lived only in the present moment, a present that comes and goes without recall, is impossible to imagine.

Neuroscientists are still trying to figure out how we humans perceive time and use it to make sense of our world. They know that every second we're conscious, a circuit involving three regions of the brain checks and cross checks incoming information and builds a logical sequence of events. Our brains create our sense of time out of these multiple memories. Our brains create our internal clock.

While there is still a lot to learn in this "science of time", it appears our grasp of long time spans helps us apportion our energies – as one scientist put it this seems to be "evolution's way of ensuring we mete out attention and energy efficiently, rather than expending too much too soon and falling short at the end." At the other end of the time spectrum is that "tiny stretch of time we call 'now. The most important and fragile part of our internal clocks", now is roughly 2 ½ seconds, the span of our unconscious attention. All of us live in, move and react in this tiny increment of time. (Science of Time, Los Angeles Times, Melissa Healy March 9, 2009)

When Dementia, Alzheimer's, other brain disorders or injuries, disrupt the brain's circuitry, the world becomes illogical. A chaotic jumble. When we cannot remember what happened in the past, we lose our sense of time. When we cannot remember yesterday or last night or five minutes ago, we don't know what day it is or what will happen a few moments from now. Short term memories must be ordered and stored by the brain if we are to have a sense of what will happen next. Otherwise all we have is this present, fleeting moment. (Memory Loss Stops Internal Clock for Alzheimer's and Dementia Sufferers, 11/3/10, free-alzheimers-support.com)

As more is learned about Dementia – it is increasingly being understood as brain failure, akin to heart failure. The brain loses the capacity to do what is necessary to sustain life.

When I visit with my Dad he usually has appointments – the doctor, physical therapy, a bath. He doesn't remember any of them no matter that there is a calendar where appointments are recorded and days marked off, and a clock that shows time, day and date. When we are together I manage his schedule and my own for things like grocery shopping,

banking, laundry by slowing down, slowing way down. Moving calmly, slowly. Speaking calmly, slowly. Repeating what is happening. As I help him get ready, or as I start to prepare to leave for some errand I hear myself saying over and over “you’re doing just fine; we’ve got . . . plenty of time” in hope of reassuring him all is well.

When I am in my Dad’s world where there is only the long ago past and no future, where now is seconds; when I am in that world I get caught up in the unpredictability of it and in the relentlessly-never-ending-need-to-do-one-more-thing –on-the-list. And I get crazed. And my Dad? When now is fast moving, when memory can give no meaning to or purpose for activity, when things become confusing and frustrating, my Dad just stops. He stops and looks at me and says, “There is too much going. There is **too much** going on.” He moves more slowly, asks more questions about what we are doing and why, about what I am doing and why. I learn again that, try as I might, slowing down is not my best thing. . . .

Though the current moment is the time my Dad lives in every once in a while, unpredictably, something sticks. Like this. The folks who lived across the street from my parents (for 30 years or so) are neighbors we have counted on for so much -from grocery shopping to sitting with my Dad in the emergency room. Not too long ago our neighbors had a death in the family. After being told that “Tom’s brother died” my Dad said little. Several times over the following days, he mentioned this – Tom’s brother died. He wanted to go over and see Tom. He said he was sorry he could not go to the funeral. The news of this death had a place to go and be remembered. It tapped into well-worn memories from the past about what one does at a time like that.

Dementia has a cruelty to it. Poet Holly Hughes described her mother’s decline as a “slow process of subtraction, as we lost her one brain cell, one synapse at a time.” As the editor of *Beyond Forgetting: Poetry and Prose about Alzheimer’s Disease*, she posted an on line invitation for contributions. From nearly 500 responses, she selected poems by social workers, nurses, physicians, teachers, even one insurance adjuster. Losing Solomon, a poem about his grandfather by a creative writing teacher at Arizona State, begins

*Things seem to take on a sudden shimmer before vanishing:
the polished black loafers he wore yesterday,
the reason for climbing the stairs,
even the names of his own children are swallowed
like spent stars against the dark vault of memory.
Today the toaster gives up its silver purpose in his hands,
becomes a radio, an old Philco blaring a ball game from the ‘40s
with Jackie Robinson squaring up to the plate.*

Dementia has cruelty . . . it steals precious and irreplaceable things. And there is also humor, often of a poignant sort, as I find in these lines from “Forgetfulness”, the Billy Collins poem I read earlier:

*Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag*

*Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.*

When humor breaks in it is such a relief. My Dad loves to joke – always has. His failing brain has not yet robbed him of the ability to offer up a funny and timely one liner. I love those moments – and my Dad’s smile. They give us the simple pleasure of laughing together.

But I do not laugh **at** my Dad. My Dad still gets the morning newspaper. He looks at the front page. He reads a section or two several times. Each time he reads it, it is new news. New news. If I am quick enough we can sometimes have a brief conversation about **what** he’s reading. When there is mention of a golf tournament – the name of a golfer may jog some memory about their swing or putting ability. It’s a short conversation . . . but one from memory. And no laughing matter.

Beyond the science of time and memory -- there is another kind of time. The Greek word for it is “kairos” - the right or opportune moment. Dementia does not make it easy to find such moments. AND I cannot help but to look for kairos moments with my Dad. – the time to tell him something that I must out of respect and love even though he will not remember, the time to suggest we start getting ready for an appointment, the time to have that short conversation about golf. My father needs to experience events as being **right** at a given time. Events need to be opportune and meaningful whenever possible. Kairos is a time he can still live in. No clock or calendar required.

I know . . . it’s entirely possible this effort is a form of denial for me. Maybe I am the one who needs kairos. Too often the alternative feels like lying . . . which it sometimes is. His car is not being looked after by Tom the neighbor. I sold it back in September. And the house was fine the last time I was there. I sold it last month. But it is a lie only to me. Without memory there is no truth to differ from or contradict. There will come a time when this time, too, will disappear, when there will be no right, no opportune. For now . . . for now I remain watchful for these moments. And about the car and the house – I did find the right and opportune time. He doesn’t remember. I do.

For everything there is a season.