

# Even the Gods Are Sometimes Forgetful

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**For those of advanced age, we are told, the great enemy is** worrisome, embarrassing and corrosive forgetfulness: great hiatuses that yawn in our reserves of remembrance, great lapses that arise in our capacity to retain new happenings or recall precious events of the past. At a slightly younger age, one might easily remember the name of one's second grade teacher; now, sadly, one has difficulty remembering even the name of the school.

If remembrances are the currency, the components of our personality, then clearly the act of forgetting represents the adversary, the unforgiving force that deprives us of our identity, our role in society and effectively separates us from daily reality. If we forget a part of our personal history, it is a sadness; if others forget it, we become both lessened and saddened; but if the world forgets our history, it then becomes an insoluble calamity. Our identity remains intact to the extent to which we are remembered by others and by ourselves.

Sometimes, however, remembering becomes an issue of pride; and at 3 AM many an elderly person will patter down to the book shelves to recall the misplaced name of this nation's fifth President or the name of the capitol of Nebraska. But more often it is a loss of those cherished intimacies of childhood that cannot be retrieved from a textbook: the name of the little girl living down the street, the title of your first Technicolor movie, the name of the aunt who combed your hair on Sundays, or the first poem that you had memorized in the third grade. We acknowledge, sometimes wistfully, sometimes gracefully, those inevitable milestones of aging such as graying of one's hair or the depletion in one's memory archives.

Many elderly recognize that their missing memories are not lost but rather misplaced, misfiled perhaps in some inadequately used cerebral enclave or gone astray amidst accumulated cobwebs. To remember the name of that quaint hotel where you and your spouse enjoyed a honeymoon, for example, may require hours of deliberate cognitive review, going through the alphabet or perhaps trying to picture the hotel's marquis; but sooner or later the tattered name emerges from some Stygian gloom and a small victory over senility is proclaimed. What we had disparagingly called senescent forgetfulness may merely be a misplacement of a recollection, a filing under the wrong rubric.

On the other hand, how much of sadly irretrievable information is truly needed? In the interests of naked survivorship, do we really need to know the NY Yankee baseball lineup for 1938? Or the seven wonders of the world [or was it eight?] Will the world cease to function if we can't remember Fred Astaire's dancing partners other than Ginger? And is it therefore possible that the basis for our dismay is injured self-esteem rather than, or in addition to, deficient memory?

Are there items which, by their nature, we tend not to forget? Is there an insulated corner of our cerebrum where we selectively store, for all eternity, our bitter defeats, our unresolved antagonisms, the insults we weathered in childhood ["Hey, fatty!"], thus keeping them unnecessarily protected from amnesic erosion? And do we ever forget where we have buried the hatchet?

Alternatively, are there items of memory that can never be retrieved, that are truly lost forever? And even when the answer is finally supplied by a smug, younger family member, we can offer no sign or hint of recognition except a resigned, "Maybe." Only then can we assume that the lost memory, like a mindless, homeless barnacle, must now dwell in some uncertain location without a zip code, perhaps a fishing village in Patagonia with neither libraries, archives or telephones, a hamlet called oblivion.

Has any social scientist, or geriatrician, ever recorded the characteristics of the things selectively forgotten by the elderly? Are happy memories more vulnerable to loss than unhappy ones? Do our emotional traumas linger longer than our remembrances of pleasant, post-adolescent interludes from the past? Are the doleful memories selectively covered with some kind of Velcro so that they cling resolutely to the top shelves of our memory and cannot therefore be displaced, suborned or made to perish? The loss of a child, for example, a happening decades ago, remains as though carved from the densest granite, never to be obscured or hidden from consciousness. Resurrecting those bitter remembrances becomes a curse; and forgetting them, alternatively, becomes a blessing, one of the few benedictions bestowed upon the elderly.

Forgetting is therefore not always a misfortune, just as perfect recollection is not consistently a blessing. And remembrance, also, can either be a dismal wasteland or a wondrous rapture. Maybe, just maybe, forgetting is nature's way of making room for newly experienced adventures to be recalled around some recently lighted campfire.

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## Disclosure of Financial Interests

Stanley M. Aronson, MD, has no financial interests to disclose.

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