

CASEY TYGRET

AS  
I  
RECALL

DISCOVERING *the*  
PLACE *of* MEMORIES *in*  
OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

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# 1

## HOW WE GOT HERE

*How we perceive the world and how we act in it are products of how and what we remember. We're all just a bundle of habits shaped by our memories.*

JOSHUA FOER

I woke up this morning and made my usual half-hearted slap at the table beside the bed. The slap, intended to shut off my alarm, happens every morning. Even though my unconscious aim should be far better than it is, I never seem to turn it off on the first attempt. Through many trials, I finally switched it off.

I slid sideways out of bed, my feet touched the floor, and I began the journey to find some clothes. At that point, I hadn't actively given thought to what I was doing. I don't have to think through how to stand up; I don't have to analyze the steps toward swinging my arm at the bedside table. These are embedded deep in what is called my nondeclarative memory, the memory we use for well-worn habits and rituals that require little to no conscious thought.<sup>1</sup> This memory seeps into my limbs, causing my body to operate more or less independently.

Now, trying to find my clothes is a different story. I'm reaching back to eight or nine hours ago when I took those clothes off and laid them, well, where did I lay them? Oh yes, on the chair. I knew that. There they are.

What emerges in this illustration is that there are several stories at work in my common movements. The story comes to mind, for instance, of why we bought the chair in the corner of our bedroom. Which of course is tied to the story of how we decided to buy the house with the bedroom that required the chair in the corner, a story that lives just around the corner from why we bought a house in the town we currently live in. From there, we see quite clearly the story of why we left the town we lived in before.

I also carry deeper whispers: experiences, events, happenings, messages repeated to me throughout childhood, the bigger designs and desires of my life, and the bigger dramas of my relationships and inner world. I carry memories of being loved or being ignored, being encouraged or discouraged.

They all come with me. They are my—*our*—companions, our friends.

This is the stuff of our every day. We all wake up in the morning, and we *walk*. We do things. We make things. We remember to pick up dry cleaning, remember the shortcut to work if traffic is bad, and remember our child's favorite color or sandwich or shirt. We slap the alarm and search for our pants in the dark. We have daily memories that shape everything that we do.

But why do we do *what* we do—in the way that we do it? Why don't we do otherwise?

## MEMORY-MADE PEOPLE

Pioneering neuroscientist Eric Kandel says,

Without the binding force of memory, experience would be splintered into as many fragments as there are moments

in life. Without the mental time travel provided by memory, we would have no awareness of our personal history, no way of remembering the joys that serve as the luminous milestones of our life. We are who we are because of what we learn and what we remember.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to our engagement with God and our formation around the life and teachings of Jesus, these memories come with us; they help make us, so to speak. We are at work in the renewal, care, and growth of our souls, and as Dallas Willard says, our soul is “that

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aspect of your whole being that correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, everything that is true of us has been etched into our souls from our memories of life with God, self, and others. We lose our selves when we lose our memories, and without our memories, growth and formation simply wander into oblivion.

In fact, every person alive today is living a certain way because of their memories and the stories that result. Throbbing beneath the surface of thoughts, words, attitudes, and perspectives are dramas built on ground that ran beneath their feet long ago.

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Of course, the “memory” that connects most deeply to our formation isn’t whether or not we can remember our online

passwords (it may be time to change all of my passwords to “Forgot My Password”) or our grocery list.

Instead, the kind of memory we’re talking about is the embedded recall of lived experiences, the experiences that make us who we are and give our spiritual lives the raw material for transformation through God’s Spirit. So, what do we do with that rough, unkneced clay?

It is here we find the gift of engaging our memories: *we engage our memories in tandem with God because they are the starting points for who we are now and who we have yet to become.* This is the most compelling call we have for a work that will, at times, feel beyond the scope of our abilities. However, we have no choice—whatever we do today or tomorrow will flow out of the memories that live deep within us.

Some of our memories are broken and misguided and need to be redeemed. Some of our memories are beautiful and can give us energy for present challenges. Some of our memories are signs of a person we used to be and can give us perspective and wisdom on where we are and where we are headed in our life with Jesus. And we are not alone:

For Esther, “such a time as this” required that she remember the times prior to the present moment.

For Moses, the phrase “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” required that he remember campfires and the stories he heard of an ancient promise now held in the present.

For us, we may hear Jesus say, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (Jn 8:36 NIV), and we are immediately taken back to memories of slavery and oppression so we might savor the honey-thick goodness of today’s redemption.

Without these memories, we cannot *become*. Without these memories, the narrative of our lives begins to disintegrate and lose its way.

### A NOTE ABOUT MEMORIES

Before we can go further, it is important to name a reality that many of us face when it comes to memories. Namely, the things we remember aren't always cute anecdotes or charming, CD-dispensing hospital employees.

Our memories can be dark specters, unkind and unyielding. They can be monsters of the grandest design.

Many of us have experienced physical or emotional abuse, failure of jobs or relationships, and failures of nerve throughout our histories. Revisiting those memories sounds like self-inflicted torture, and that reality requires respect and tenderness.

Allowing the Spirit of Jesus to redeem and renew past pain for the sake of our formation is not perfect or painless in and of itself. Any process of change requires a form of dying, of letting go of structures and conceptions that hold us in the place of suffering or stagnancy.

As Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24).

Even allowing God's gentle and tender presence to move through us as we draw our memories close feels like embracing a flame, and we can't ignore the possibilities of further wounds.

Yet we may also see a redeemed, uncontainable harvest from digging deep and bringing out those seeds planted within us. Such is the good and terrifying mystery of formation.

In the pain of our memories, it is important to call to mind the image of Jesus from Matthew: “He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick” (Mt 12:20).

His presence is sweet, strong, and easy—tending to us like a delicate plant swayed by winds no firmer than a child’s breath. We need that presence in us as we journey with our memories; they can be places where the darkest corners are darker still, places where we are already wounded and another blow could be fatal. Though it is not always the memory that wounds.

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The reality may also be that the memories are the beauty and the *present* is actually painful. Perhaps we have photographs hanging on the wall of a time we loved, and we are reticent to replace them with more recent photos because things are not as we believe they should be. Instead of avoiding and fearing our *memories*, we cling to them because our present darkness is too great.

In a strange twist, we cling to memories of the past because the present is too brutal and the future too uncertain. Yet our movement toward our memories in partnership with God renews the present because we are offered the wise and imaginative view of our Creator. We need the savory scent of why that past was beautiful to remind us of what is present in front of us here and now.

It is helpful to move through these memories and the reflections that will come with a spiritual director or counselor. Choosing someone who is compassionate, who knows our story and is willing to sit with us in the midst of what we’re reading and processing is helpful. My recommendation is that



if this book becomes too difficult, please move from reading to conversation with someone who can walk with you through the difficulties.

### WE REMEMBER WITH

I have memories of events that I was not even alive to experience. Somewhere in my mom's house is a book of photos, born of Polaroids and Kodak film painstakingly developed to find both the smiles of children and finger-blurred shots that could be *anything*. I have memories of looking at pictures while my parents or grandparents explain what's happening, why those clothes were actually in style, and why certain people look irritated in every single shot.

These are not my memories, at least not initially. Once explained, however, I realize my place in the narrative—where my picture fits—and they become sacred texts of my family and world.

Every sacred text, even the Bible, has a memory of sorts; it has a history, a “that which came before.” The Bible itself is so full of memories that the most dangerous way to read it is to pretend that each verse dropped out of the sky completely devoid of history.

It would be like looking at my childhood photographs and pretending they had taken place only the day before. Each woven phase of the Bible comes from stories passed around campfires, family tables, and gathered communities. It is a book of memories.

Every word of Paul or Moses or John (pick your favorite) rises from their own living memoir, just as ours do. They speak out of the memory-laden context of life with God in their own place,

time, and situation. They are not our memories from experience, but we integrate them into our stories just the same.

More than that, every illustration and teaching that we hear in our churches and fellowships is full of memories—stories heard, classes taken, experiences endured. Think about the first time we heard the name *God*. Who was it that taught us? Where were we when we heard that teaching? How has that teaching impacted our life up to this point? How has it formed us? Without engaging who we have been taught *God is*, we will remain in the dark about our present challenges and future implications.

We have been given a lens for seeing God, and that lens will form the way we see the world. The least we can do is learn the particulars of how that lens affects us. This is the critical value of our memories in our formation.

As Joyce Rupp notes, “Our understanding and our experience of God shapes our image of God and our spirituality.”<sup>4</sup>

And we never remember alone. We are always sharing memories and the lessons therein with a bigger group: a family, a church, or a Christian tradition that spans millennia.

All of these things make it impossible to assume that somehow today is immune to the past and the future is exempt from today. All memories matter, and our present-day journey with Jesus is reflective of everything that has gone before.

Any transformation that happens in us through the beautiful Spirit of Jesus leaps from the shoulders of those who have helped fill our memories with the stories of ourselves and our God.

For you, is there a memory that has risen to the surface as you read? Something that causes you to shiver because you’re unsure of the vulnerability it creates?

Is there a moment in your past—dark and dangerous or fluorescent and hopeful—that shapes and frames you today?

Where did it begin? Who gave it to you? Where does Jesus' call to transformation lead you from here? Keep these questions in mind as they may be helpful for a practice at the end of the chapter.

### MOVING TOWARD OUR MEMORIES

To put it in terms of a definition, spiritual formation is learning to live like Jesus within the skin we're in. We are compelled then to come to terms with what that skin looks like, which means we have to reengage the experiences and memories that have tinted and weathered the skin we're in.

Our engagement with our own memories also trains us for peaceful, civil interactions with others. When we see people acting in ways we consider outrageous or irrational, we might do well to remember that everyone we encounter is the way they are because of their memories. Of course, understanding this does not inspire us to enable but instead to empathize.

We are all containers of shells, some rough and broken and some colorful and fully formed. To count these shells is to know who we are, and to know who we are is to experience the wildness of redemption, mystery, and conviction that come through being "searched" and "known" (Ps 139) by a careful and loving God.

How do we go about engaging with our memories in an honest and transformational way?

Throughout the conversation, we must continue to come back to our key memories. We do this in order for the Spirit of God to help us make sense of and even redeem some of the shells we have collected over the years. The four movements that follow

give us footing for engaging with the shells that may rise to the surface. Feel free to come back to these movements as you enter into the broader discussion about memories.

*First, we bring the shell.* This may be a difficult movement as our memories contain painful thoughts and harmful narratives that many of us have worked hard to release and redeem. You can practice “bringing your shells” in personal practice as you read or as you are accompanied by a therapist, counselor, or spiritual director you trust.

*Second, we honestly engage with the implications.* As someone who has spent the last twenty years teaching in public settings, I have had my share of follow-up correspondence regarding messages and teachings I’ve given. I have in my personal files some encouraging notes—people finding hope, challenge, encouragement, or enlightenment—and I turn to those when days become difficult.

However, I have one memory—a shell—that comes up as soon as I think about feedback. After one particular message regarding the intersection of science and the Bible, I heard (secondhand by the way, thus increasing the bitterness) that one of our staff received an email saying, “The Bible needs a better interpreter than Casey.”

I have carried that memory forward since 2011.

It has *formed* me.

So what are the implications of this memory for my formation in Christ? What does this nugget have to do with the way I see my calling, vocation, identity—even my self-confidence in presenting what I’ve been asked to present?

We bring the memories, stories, and scripts to the front, and

we engage with the question, What did that moment, that experience, that emotion mean then?

*Third, we begin to look at what those implications have created.*

The experiences and memories we've gathered have created some sort of story. Stories about God, ourselves, and others are woven out of what we have experienced. The implications of my credibility and fitness to teach being questioned shapes my pride, the depth of my preparation, and cultivates in me the ability to realize not everyone is my biggest fan.

As we look at the implications of our memories of failure and success, frustration and fruitfulness, mystery and misunderstanding, we begin to see that these memories have shaped us immensely. We have something within us that directly ties to these memories and stories. That "something" is raw material for the journey of formation through redemption that causes the Spirit of God to salivate.

*Finally, we explore how the Spirit of God is wooing and moving us through these particular memories and stories.* Drawing on the experiences we've identified and the memories and stories they have written, we have an opportunity to revisit the daily scripts through which we've been living up to this point. We come to a sense of *why*—even if it is only a flicker—we are who we are, and we begin to ask questions about where God may be leading us as a result.

Are there conversations we need to have in order to re-engage long-accepted narratives that came as a result of our memories of a mom, dad, brother, sister or significant other? Are there practices such as prayer, fasting, and sabbath that we need to engage in so that we can begin to redeem narratives of foolishness, compulsion, and slavery? Is God moving in us so that

we may have space to consider our past as *relevant* to our present and therefore understand the intense need for healing that has always been within us?

As we go, we bring these four movements into our observation and dialogue with the stories of Scripture. In them we find that the complicated litany of our memories is both messy and miraculous. In so seeing, we can take a deep breath in our own formation and release the pressures of perfection. Instead, we lean into the grace of the good journey.

# PRACTICE

## NARRATING A MEMORY

We opened the discussion of how important our memories are for creating the selves we bring into the journey of transformation with Jesus. During the reading, it is likely that a memory came to the surface for you. It may have been a painful memory or simply a regret you had put well behind you.

You may have had several memories come to the surface, but at this point it is important to identify one that you'd like to work with.

In this practice, the point is to establish a "text" for that memory that you can return to throughout the rest of the book. Find a journal and use the following writing prompt to sketch out one particularly important memory that has come to the surface during your reading. A writing prompt is simply a question or phrase to get things started, and in this case it gives you a place to begin your memory sketch.

Make sure to provide as much detail as possible: from smells, sights, sounds of the memory in question to the backstory or context of the event. Write from your perspective, even though your perspective is limited, but leave room to bring in details from the perspective of others involved in the situation. Try to explore as many different angles on the memory as possible so you have a large and clear picture to work with. Keep this memory "text" with you as you read the rest of the book.

*Prompt:* I remember the moment when . . .

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