

In Praise of Forgetfulness

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This is dedicated to each person who has noticed a decline in their cognitive and executive function, is starting or has started to be concerned about it, but has not had a conversation with your family, friends, and loved ones about how you feel. I encourage you to talk about it and make a plan regarding your personal wishes, if or when the time comes that your clarity of thinking has diminished. There is no good time to do it, but the need for such conversation is more now than later. Most importantly, you do not need to face this journey alone.

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Disclaimer

The ramblings in this pamphlet are personal speculations and interpretations. They could be, and in many cases are, entirely mistaken and downright wrong. So you, dear reader, have to decide for yourself whether the ideas resonate with your own life experience, and what to do about it.

Even if it sounds like I am giving advice, or guidance, you and I both know it's bullshit; it is like me presenting an innovative dish I created in the kitchen from the leftovers in the fridge (some green stuff scraped off perhaps), and I'm saying "taste it!" "Just a little bit!" If you like, have some more, and even better, tell me how to improve it.

Me? I'm blundering through this entire thing, and your thoughts and opinions are every bit as valid and important as anything of mine. Our conversation is how we both begin to figure things out.

Ironically this is happening at the same time I'm feeling the beginnings of my own memory loss. This building is being built on a foundation of sand, and all I can hope for is that we can build it up a little before the entire thing crashes down with the incoming tide.

If you find yourself particularly sad

Please always know that help is available from professionals and many organizations, from your primary care physician, to your therapist, and sources among the following:

<https://www.mentalhealth.gov/get-help/immediate-help>

From that page:

Get Immediate Help

People often don't get the mental health services they need because they don't know where to start.

Talk to your primary care doctor or another health professional about mental health problems. Ask them to connect you with the right mental health services.

If you do not have a health professional who is able to assist you, use these resources to find help for yourself, your friends, your family, or your students.

Emergency Medical Services - 911

If the situation is potentially life-threatening, get immediate emergency assistance by calling 911, available 24 hours a day.

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline - 988

<https://988lifeline.org/> 988 is now active across the United States. This new, shorter phone number will make it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services. (Please note, the previous 1-800-273-TALK (8255) number will continue to function indefinitely.)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or Live Online Chat

If you or someone you know is suicidal or in emotional distress, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>. Trained crisis workers are available to talk 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Your confidential and toll-free call goes to the nearest crisis center in the Lifeline national network. These centers provide crisis counseling and mental health referrals.

SAMHSA Treatment Referral Helpline, 1-877-SAMHSA7 (1-877-726-4727)

Get general information on mental health and locate treatment services in your area. Speak to a live person, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. EST.

The Samaritans are another source for help in suicide prevention by phone call or text: <https://samaritanshope.org/>.

Memory and Forgetfulness

I wish to dispel some of the fear and loathing of the loss of memory as we get older.

Many years ago, I wrote an essay on this topic, but as perfectly appropriate, I have forgotten where I put it. This is my opportunity to approach this path which I've walked before, and will enjoy again.

My peers in age privately and publicly bemoan their loss of memory, the looming dark cloud of dementia that they have seen in their parents, projecting a frightening future for themselves. "I would not want to live like that" is a repeated phrase. I think that many probably fear the loss of memory more than cancer (for which there are many cures), or even death (for which there is at least the end of suffering). What life is it, if the "real me" has left the building, and the body that remains is a shell with little or none of the animating spirit that used to love and annoy so many?

Let's talk about it anyway, and you'll find that forgetting has its silver lining. Talking about it, and facing down your deepest fear, will shine some light into the dark corners.

Fearless vs. Brave

Be brave - being brave is not at all the same as being fearless: fearless is charging ahead pretty much regardless of the risk, while being brave is knowing the risk, being afraid, yet going forward to do it anyway. Yes, I am afraid of losing my memory because it

will limit what I can do. But I am also (mostly) at peace with that loss; when it's time to go, it's going of its own free will. I release it without a sense of loss.

The place you least want to look

There is a saying: "The thing you need most, can only be found in the place where you least want to look." Jordan Peterson attributes the quote to Karl Jung, but I could not confirm that Jung ever said such a thing.

The thing we need most is to reconcile and work out a deal with this fear of loss of memory. We don't want to look there because we are afraid of what it might show: will we be helpless without our executive function? Will we no longer recognize our loved ones? Will we lose the ability converse with another, while being clever and quick?

Look anyway. It will be better to see clearly than letting that fear lurk in the dark corner, never knowing how it will harm you.

Stay with me

Bear with some of the introductory ideas; I'll point out where forgetfulness is a many faceted blessing. If you forget my name, that's fine. I hope your cells remember that I love you.

Billy Collins

The poet laureate of the United States in 2001-2003 wrote a poem on this topic, titled "Forgetfulness" which you can read at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/37695/>

forgetfulness. It captures a nostalgia of the loss of memory, but does not address the fear that can come with that loss.

What is memory, anyway? Mistaken attribution

Just because you remember something, doesn't mean it is true. I've noticed that a friend of mine, Demetrius, sometimes talks about something I was supposed to have said. It's nice to give me credit, but it's something I would never say. So am I wrong to have forgotten what I told him, or is he wrong to attribute something to me that only he knows to be true? I'm almost sure he really believes these stories; does that make it better?

In certain circumstances, I think that can be called "gaslighting" or making someone believe something that is not true through manipulation. If Demetrius tells enough people, it might become true for all of them. Even if that statement is not true for me.

Kinds of memory

In addition to what we think of conventionally as memory (recall of facts and information, or events), I suggest there are other ways our bodies remember and process our memories. Right brain memory can be hard to measure and quantify because that side of the brain doesn't use words or make lists. Finally, our cells remember what has happened, whether we have the words to tell or not.

Conventional memory

There is the conventional memory that we measure by our left brains: the one that makes lists, works out logical arguments, the

winner of the 1973 Wimbledon or second place at the 1999 World Cup. This side of memory remembers what you had for lunch last Tuesday. Cognitive function and executive capability are tested by such words as a recent President bragged about acing: “Person. Woman. Man Camera. TV.” What we know of science that can shoot a rocket into space and have it meet up with the moon of a distant planet years in the future, this is the left brain memory.

Right brain memory

Then there is the right brained memory: the thing that instantly recognizes a remembered face, improvises music that’s not written anywhere, and deeply understands kindness and mercy. None of these would be possible without a deep and lasting memory of its own kind. I met up with some high school classmates for the first time in 48 years, and some were instantly recognizable. It is important to note that this “kind” of memory is not measurable with conventional cognitive tests that use words.

Memory in the cells

Finally, I suggest there is an even more elemental memory that is embedded in our cells. It would not just be the cognitive right or the emotional left brain. In memory units of assisted living or nursing homes, you can see for yourself whether someone feels they are in a safe place where they are cared for – their cognitive memory has faded to a large extent, and their recognition of faces has weakened dramatically. But their cells know they are in a safe place. That is what they remember, and for this moment, it is enough. Infants in their cells know when they are loved and cared for, fed, safe, and warm. Babies recognize their parents and caregivers by face, touch, smell, and even the way they are cuddled. They don’t need words.

Babies who do not receive such love remember, in their cells, the loneliness and lack of unconditional love. I suspect that some people I know, from the beginning of their lives, have experienced varying degrees of absence and continue to feel alone, if not lonely because their cells and body remember it always.

Memory is Useful

This content is not available in the sample book. The book can be purchased on Leanpub at <http://leanpub.com/forgetfulness>.

Memory is how we know who we are

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Why It Is Important to Look

There is a self-help process by which individuals write about their traumas and things that bother them. By writing about those hurts, in a sense they exit the place where the sadness, or shame, or grudge has been held inside for a long time, and it ends up on the paper. Before it is written, the memory of that time someone made you cry, or embarrassed you in front of your friends, just sits in the dark corner and festers. In that process, writing out the event, and what you feel about it, takes the event out of your body, mind, and heart. So the story goes, you clean out the hurt and leave it behind.

Fear of loss of memory

Dementia from loss of memory capability ranks higher than fear of cancer or in some people, death. Today there is no cure for Alzheimer's Disease, and overall, modern society and its institutions don't know what to do with us. With no cure, and without sufficient support and resources to help the very large number of expected elders entering such situations, an increasing population are staring down this fear without the support they need.

Ignoring it does not help

I find in myself a remarkable ability to distract myself and not address those things that I know are important. If I were responsible for the care of anyone else, this avoidance is at such a level that

it would be considered reckless disregard for my safety and well being.

Deliberately ignoring a problem and turning away to do something else will not make the fear go away or resolve the trauma. It pushes the rotting support timber out of sight, when it needs to be repaired so the house doesn't fall.

Talk about it

You may encounter some resistance from family members, friends, and even loved ones: they may not want to talk about your memory loss any more than plans for your end of life care, or your funeral. So there is a bit of preparation you may have to do, to create the setting for your conversation.

It ranks right up there with the other important conversations, such as your own end of life care – it might well be many years in the future, but having your wishes known ahead of time reduces the amount of guessing your health care proxy and decider has to do, to make decisions that are aligned with your wishes. If you never tell anyone, how is anyone going to know?

Which brings up the other key point, which is, have you thought about those other decisions? Do you want to be kept alive (organs functioning) by machine action, even if your brain activity has been undetectable for weeks? It's possible to explore and think about these questions by checking out this website <https://theconversationproject.org/>. There is a work-book that helps you work out what is important to you as an individual.

There are many resources from how to start a conversation on many topics, including how to deal with all the aspects of

aging, not just memory loss.

** The idea is not to get depressed about how bad things are going to get, but to have an open and honest discussion with your future care team, whoever that will be.** If your imagination of how things will go is completely different from what your future care providers believe is realistic, there is time to be creative and plan out how to go forward. Waiting in silence with expectations that no one is expecting to deliver is not a good plan. Talk about it now before your argumentative faculties have deteriorated, right?

I Can Only Hope

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Notes to Self

Here is an open page for you to scribble down your reactions and if you wanted to tell me where and how I'm wrong.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.