

## What to Remember, What to Forget

How many people here remember where you were on December 7, 1941? How many people here remember where they were on November 22, 1963? How many people here remember where they were on September 11, 2011? How many people here remember where they were on all three of those dates? Two? One? Amazingly, people born after September 11, 2001 are now fifteen years old. In High School. That's a lot of people who have grown up in the post 9/11 world, people who don't understand the difference between before 9/11 and after. It is becoming history.

Or is it? And what exactly does "becoming history" mean? Would it be more accurate to say that it is becoming "mythtery" And that's not mispronunciation. David Rieff, author of the book *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies* makes a clear distinction between the realm of history and historiography or the method and science of history and the world of myth.

Before we go on, I want to make a further clarification. Myth is not an untruth, a lie, a falsity, as in the common use of the phrase, "But that's just a myth" or as the word is used on the show, "Mythbusters". We have come to use the word myth in that way but a myth is also, and originally, a deeply felt and understood

part of a culture, the founding story, often, of a culture. It is the lens through which a culture sees and understands itself. We often use this word disparagingly, or patronizingly, as when we talk about ancient myths or the myths of other cultures and we contrast them with our own culture, which, we presume, and a presumption it is, has no myths but sees the world clearly and cleanly as it “really” is.

But we have our myths and, like other cultures, those myths are the way through which we interpret experience. And those myths are the way that we create other myths because myths constantly evolve to continue to breathe life into the culture. Myths are created because new events need to be understood but new myths are created from the yeast, the leaven, of our old myths. Myths are what make a culture coherent and living.

And so, the groundbreaking, game changing events of our lives, our Pearl Harbors, presidential assassinations, domestic attacks, are understood in terms of our myths and, at the same time, enter our folklore and become in their turn, our new myths, our way of understanding the world.

David Reiff makes the distinction between myth and history because the two have different functions and different ways of becoming. On the one hand, myths

arise because we feel we need them. They help us make sense of events and they help us orient ourselves without doing violence to our perception of ourselves. Myths endure because they are relevant to us. We no longer have myths about, let's say, the god of thunder and lightning, except, perhaps, in the movies. We have another way of understanding the weather. Myths are not created by scientists or social scientists, but they are, all too often, used and influenced by people with their own agenda, people who want us to see things in a certain way. And myths are much more resilient than facts because people need myths. Therefore, it is important to be aware of them. Now more than ever.

A recent article in *Nature* points to the way that social media, through sharing memories in groups, "blurr[ed] the line between individual and collective memories....The development of Internet-based misinformation, such as recently well-publicized fake news sites, has the potential to distort individual and collective memories in disturbing ways." Because, as the article goes on to say, our understanding of history is the basis for our decisions in the present and the future. We act on our myths.

History, or historiography, is a very different proposition. This is the realm of understanding life, a way that is often not the same as our myths. This way has

very little to do with our emotional needs. If myth is the property of the heart, to use an enduring myth about the human body, then historiography is the property of the head.

Historiography lives in the arid desert of facts and statistics, the land of documents and letters and census records and small town election results. It seldom has a grand narrative, though its findings can be, and often are, distorted or excerpted in the service of a grand narrative. Historiography resists a grand narrative. Instead, historians use tools and methods that attempt to create as true a picture of the past as is possible. Truth is complicated, nuanced, and often does not satisfy our desire to see ourselves in certain ways. It uses the methodology of social science, not the art of the storyteller. If it is really well done, it asks us to consider our present in light of the events that led us to this time, not as the rallying cry to battle but as considered honest self-examination. Looking honestly at our lives, our individual lives or our cultural lives, is tough, hard, painful work.

Let me say again that this does not mean that myths are not important or are not true. Myths are true in a different way but in an equally important way. We need to take into account both ways that we see our lives. We have been a

religion that has seen the search for the truth as a major part of our religious life. But we do need to understand how complicated that search for truth can be and how we are as vulnerable as anyone else to distortion and partiality.

I mention three events that have, in many people's living memory, affected us in how we view our national identity, an identity that Benedict Anderson, as quoted by David Reiff, calls an "imagined community". The imagined community is created by agreed upon historical remembrance that he says "allow[s] ourselves to be swept away by a strong emotion dressed up in the motley of historical fact". And those dressed up facts are the interpretation that we put on events. To add to the difficulty, it turns out that, as neurologists and psychologists tell us, memory is not a video, the same every time we play it. We notice things and events, we remember things and events, not as they were but as we reconstruct them. And our reconstructions are determined by our myths, which determine what we see and how we see things. No one lives in a vacuum and none of us were born yesterday. We all have developed myths about ourselves and the world around us. Facts, as it turns out, are as slippery as myths since we interpret events through myths about ourselves, whether it's personal myths, family myths, or national myths. We see some events and we don't see others, based on how we see the world. We interpret what we see, not as a robot might,

but as people do, with our pasts and our prejudices and our ingrained sense of the way the world works. And so the search for truth with a capital T is not as straightforward as we would like to think.

Because of this, a question such as “where were you on 9/11, or Pearl Harbor Day or the day Kennedy was shot” is not as clearcut as it might seem to be. Perhaps it should be “who were you on these dates” and “who are you now, after these events.” What was your view of the world and how has it changed? How did your view of the world let you see the events unfolding before you? How did the pundits, the politicians, and the media work to change your world view? How do different people benefit from shaping the way we saw these events? How does your world view let you see what is happening now?

I’m not here to change your world view. If I could, I’d be really in demand by both political parties and by the advertising industry. What I’m here to do is to just to say that all of what we think we know is up for examination and that, at its heart and its head, I think we belong to a denomination that is unique in that it has room for that sort of examination. And respect for everyone’s view of how the world works.

But, given the tricks that our minds play, David Rieff's thesis is even more startling. He advocates something that seems to run counter to every effort of our modern lives. While we are told of the necessity of memory, the necessity to "never forget", whether it's the Holocaust, the Middle Passage, Pearl Harbor or 9/11, Rieff's theory is that forgetting is more important than remembering. He says: "It is that far too often collective historical memory as understood and deployed by communities, peoples and nations...has led to war rather than peace, to rancor and resentment rather than reconciliation, and to the determination to exact revenge rather than commit to the hard work of forgiveness." And, he says further of this "one proof of this can be found in the fact that in the minds of their perpetrators, virtually every great crime of the twentieth century has been committed in an atmosphere of fear and with the justification of self-defense...that is to say, of 'us or them.'"

He cites numerous examples, but perhaps the one most important to the time in which we find ourselves is the example of the myth of the South. Very soon after the Civil War the rehabilitation of the Southern way of life became part of our national agenda. From Cecil B. DeMill's movie "The Birth of a Nation", the movie that both justified and led to the rise of the KKK, to one of the most beloved movies of all times, "Gone With the Wind", the myth of the romance of

the Southern way of life was cemented in people's minds. The romance of the Southern way of life involved convenient blurring of the suffering of many in order to sustain the myth of white privilege and entitlement, privilege and entitlement that was really only available to a tiny portion of the population. This was a myth that was sustained by many who never benefitted and indeed, in the case of poor white farmers, those who collaborated in their own oppression. Only recently, since the Civil Rights era, has that myth been systematically challenged by historiography with its discovery and interpretation of slave ship manifests, plantation records and the biographies of slaves.

And yet, this careful historiography is drowned in the myth of the heroic South, a myth that is finding an eager audience, an audience ripe for the manipulation of those who profit from stoking the fires of resentment and depravation. Facts don't stand a lot of chance against myth.

What sort of myths are being formed now? If myth will always dictate a political agenda, what myth can arise that will lead us out of our national division into some kind of progress toward a nation that is able to provide for all its citizens, not only materially, but also in terms of their mental well-being, individual wholeness that is achieved honestly, not at the expense of another group.

Perhaps it is good to look at the aims of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa. However well that worked, the word Truth comes before the word Reconciliation. Bitter, hard truth, the truth of history, comes before the lovely, lilted word, reconciliation. This implies a balance, a balance that may be beyond humans to completely accomplish, but an aim at some balance nonetheless. The balance between the need to have a complex and accurate picture of the wrongs done by apartheid is the precursor to the act of reconciliation. Reconciliation is the word used, not forgiveness. Reconciliation a pragmatic word, a desire to create a working community based on the need to continue to live together despite memory, not because of it. It implies the need for something which transcends memory while not distorting the events of the past. And somewhere in this there is probably the realization that some forgetting must occur if people are to go on creating a new community. Some forgetting must be allowed to happen, some letting go may be required, even at the expense of a certain kind of justice. Can that happen? Is it possible to forgo the desire for retribution, retribution that would seem to be justified? And can that forgetting occur without distortion, with a full understanding of the price that is paid in forgetting, with a full understanding of the honor that should be given to those who chose to forget in the name of community and a sane future.

In light of the current culture of remembrance of all sorts of injuries done by all sorts of people, perhaps we have overlooked the virtue of forgetting. Though we often quote Santayana, “those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it” perhaps we are not examining the difference between historiography and myth. Historiography demands as rigorous an approach to reality as it is humanly possible to get, including the necessity to constantly revise its findings. That is why history is constantly updated. We should not confuse what we need to learn from history with what we need to learn from myth.

Myths are necessary because they are part of how we function as human beings. Myths are necessary because they provide us with values and with the courage to act on those values. Myths are necessary because they provide us with a much needed sense of identity and community. Myths are necessary because they inspire. And, since we are myth making animals, they are inevitable, Myths are powerful and unexamined myths are dangerous.

Forgetting is what we do all the time. We no longer rally to the call of “Remember the Maine”. We forget and we remember guided by the power of myth and what our community, whatever that community is, sees as those things which are important to remember and what things are important to forget. Reiff

asks, provocatively, whether “when collective memory condemns communities to feel the pain of their historical wounds and the bitterness of their historical grievances—and all communities have such wounds, whether at a given point in history they are oppressors or the oppressed—it is not the duty to remember but a duty to forget that should be honored.”

So far I have talked only about collective memory, the memory of a nation, a people, a culture, but the questions about remembering and forgetting are equally true for our own personal lives. Does the interplay of memory and forgetting have the same effect in our personal lives as it does in our communal lives? We all know people, perhaps we are the people, who live on the injustices of the past, the wrongs done to them within their families. Equally, we all know people who seem to have amnesia about the wrongs they have done others. Are both cases equally problematic? Is there a way to come to terms with memory, with injustice without allowing it to destroy our present? In which case is memory more to be honored. In which case is forgetting more to be honored? What is the difference between productive remembering and destructive remembering in our lives? What about the injunction to “forgive and forget”? If we had the magic button that we could push to erase memory, would we, should we push that button?

In this time, we honor memory much more than forgetting. Remembering, calling up the truth of the past, personal or communal, is regarded as the first step in healing. This is an article of faith which almost everyone acknowledges. Perhaps, like most articles of faith, we should take another look at it.

Technology has made it possible to freeze the past as never before. Everywhere people are taking pictures, making videos, each event of our lives, collective and personal, is documented and recorded. And yet the act of interpretation, of myth making, goes on. For each item of evidence, there are many contrary explanations. And those explanations distort that evidence to see what people want to see, to keep those distortions constantly in our minds. As Nietzsche said, "there are no facts, only interpretations". And so the question of how to find reconciliation, of how to find harmony, of how to find peace, remains an open question. And it calls up many questions.

Is forgiveness possible without forgetting? Or does the ability to remember lie, like a poisoned seed, in the mind, ready to blossom into an evil flower when things go badly in the present? Is forgetting injustice another injustice? When is memory itself a healing power? When is it only scratching at an open wound? Can we go forward unless, in remembering, we resolve the wounds of trauma,

open, acknowledged and remembered? Can we go forward with the burden of the past on our shoulders? These are only some of the questions that we might ask about the assertion that forgetting is to be honored, perhaps more than remembering. We have our own moments in history that we say must never be forgotten. And yet these collective memories do not always help us to see clearly what is happening in front of us. Worse yet, they are often used in ways we find anathema. The remembrance of the Holocaust has served as the moral basis for the oppression of the Palestinians as much as it has been a cry to resist genocide. When is forgetting a betrayal and when is it a sign of health, an acknowledgement that new relationships are both possible and necessary, despite the wounds of history? How do we arrive at a new day, a day of mercy and forgiveness in which the wounds of the past do not call for more wounds in the present? How do we create the beloved community?

I would like to close with a poem by a Polish poet, Wislawa Szymborska:

Those who knew  
What was going on here  
Must make way  
For those who know little.  
And less than little.

And finally as little as nothing.  
In the grass that has overgrown  
Causes and effects,  
Someone must be stretched out  
Blades of grass in his mouth/  
Gazing at the clouds.