

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

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reMembering Our Future

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. – Deuteronomy 5:12-15

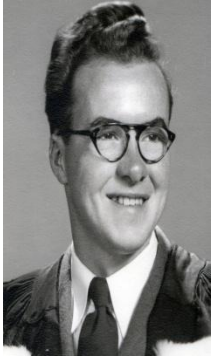
On this first Sunday in Sunnybrook, I thought sharing a bit of my personal history would be a good way to start, but in sharing my history the things I remember and the things I leave out, are not just incidental. Our memories are the pieces of our past, the parts or members of our past that are brought together, reMembered. What we remember, and the way we remember, are of vital importance because what we remember, and what we forget, shapes our future. This is the great truth that the Scripture reading this morning invites us to consider. The Sabbath commandment from Deuteronomy instructs the people to observe the Sabbath, because they were slaves in the land of Egypt, and were liberated. They are to live as a free people, but unless they remember carefully, if they take freedom for granted, they will often find themselves falling back into slavery. Sabbath is, in this tradition, both a gift of freedom and a means of preserving it, and remembering is the key to keeping that freedom.

I think that Remembrance Day has a similar meaning in our country. It is a day to remember that freedom is not to be taken for granted. There are many who have given their lives for freedom, and there are many more who bear the physical and emotional wounds of war. My grandfather, for example was injured at the battle of Passchendale in the First World War, and lived for the rest of his life with a fused elbow. That war was supposed to be the war to end all wars, but in the aftermath of that war, people on both sides did not remember in ways that made for peace. Instead of working on reconciliation and peace-building, many focused on retribution and animosity, which led more or less directly to Second World War.

One of the things I have admired about Sunnybrook over the years is that this congregation has remembered a part of our shared history that had been forgotten by most non-aboriginal people. In the Remembering the Children ceremonies and the leadership you have offered in the effort to establish Right Relations between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples, this congregation has helped us to shape a new and a healthier future.

So what are the things that I need to remember? The way I remember my own history, and the things I leave out are important, so I have to be careful to remember thoughtfully and carefully.

My parents have both died in the last few years, but I remember each of them with gratitude. My mother was a child of the manse but her father died suddenly when she was four and her mother died two years later. She was raised by two kindly maiden aunts who she remembers with great affection and gratitude, but those early traumas left a profound influence. Being an orphan made her deeply sensitive to those who were alone, and throughout her life she paid attention to those who were isolated. On graduating from high school, she went to nursing school, and found in that profession an outlet for her compassionate and nurturing personality.



Along the way she met a young graduate student who was studying biochemistry. They were very different personalities. My father was a very intelligent, but he lived in his head, and he valued rationality more highly than most other things. My mother was a good match for my father, but her intelligence was directed toward relationships. Their marriage was a marriage of head and heart. Shortly after their wedding, they began producing boys, of whom I am the second of four.

So as I think about the influences in my life, I think about the compassion and emotional intelligence I learned from my mother and the scientific, rational approach to life I learned from my father. Those influences live in my head relatively harmoniously. They are part of my history, and both have shaped me. There is a tension between them, but I appreciate them both and to be fulfilled, I need to give expression to each.



When I finished school, I planned to follow my father's career trajectory and become a scientist. So I enrolled in an honors biochemistry degree at the University of Alberta and did well enough that one of my father's colleagues offered me a summer job working in his lab.

One afternoon, while I was busy in the lab, I overheard a couple of graduate students having a conversation. One graduate student asked the other if he thought science would ever be able to answer the ultimate questions of life. The other student replied that of course it would. But they never discussed what the ultimate questions of life were, and that left me wondering whether the ultimate questions of life were factual questions that could be addressed by scientific means, or whether they were ethical and spiritual questions that required different approaches. That conversation, and the questions it provoked, ended up having a rather profound influence on my career trajectory.

After three years of biochemistry, I decided that I needed a break from school, and ended up volunteering for a development education organization called Canadian

Crossroads International. I spent three months teaching high school science in South America, in the small country of Guyana, and then travelled through Venezuela, Columbia, Equador and Peru for another three months. When I got back to Canada, I no longer wanted to be a scientist. The experience of living in a developing country had convinced me that questions of justice and ethics were at least as important as factual, scientific ones. I had realized that scientific knowledge is a form of power, but that science alone could not resolve the ethical and spiritual problems about how to use that power. I remained very interested in science, but I was becoming much more interested in the question of how to use the power of modern technology wisely.



I began to wonder if I really wanted to be a scientist after all, or whether I was being drawn down a different path. I thought questions of ethics and justice were fascinating, and started looking for a way to address them in a professional way. At the same time, I had found a mentor, the minister in my church in Edmonton, who brought together intelligence, warmth and wisdom in a quite compelling mix. Maybe the church could be a vehicle for that ambition? To make a long story short, I was offered a job in a small church in Pierceland, Saskatchewan. Unable to get a summer student from a theological college that summer, they were desperate enough to take me, and it proved a happy coincidence. I loved the process of preparing for worship, wrestling with Scripture, discovering that inspiration happens when you open yourself to it, and that ministry can provide that happy mixture of intellectual and personal challenges that my parents had equipped me for.

So I enrolled in theological school and started the process of discernment that led to my ordination. Along the way I met and married Therese Thompson, and we started our family. Sara was born just before I was ordained in 1986 and Sean came along nearly three years later. After four happy years in Bonnyville, I moved to Southminister-Steinhauer United Church in Edmonton. My long term goal, however, was not to be a minister in a congregation, but to teach in a university or a theological school. During my theological degree, I had fallen in love with the study of ethics. I loved how interdisciplinary it was. I loved the deep philosophical and theological questions it raised, but that it was also extremely practical. So after three years in Edmonton, I uprooted my small family and we moved to Durham, North Carolina to study in the graduate school of Duke University, where I started work on a Ph.D. in environmental ethics and theology.



At the beginning it seemed like my life-long dream was coming true, but it was not long before I realized that I hated graduate school. In part that was because I missed the compelling challenges to both my heart and my head that I experienced in pastoral ministry. Graduate school was unbalanced, with its focus on the intellectual in isolation from other parts of my personality. I missed preaching and leading worship

and supporting people at important points in their lives. I had forgotten to keep my head and my heart in balance.

It didn't help that I was sick. While I was there, a chronic pain in my guts was diagnosed as Crohn's Disease, and after a year and a half, I had had enough. I decided to give up on the doctoral program, settle for a master's degree, and find a church that would take me. So I ended up in Lacombe, and spent twenty-one happy years there.



On the way home from North Carolina, Therese and I paid a visit to Guatemala, which is the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere, after Haiti. We spent ten days among the indigenous Mayan people, who have a rich heritage but have also suffered centuries of brutal oppression. I fell in love with the people and landscape of that county. Before we left, one of the people we had met, said to me, "Please, don't forget us!"

It was a poignant reminder that many of the poorest people in Guatemala are used to being forgotten, both by the powerful in their own country and by the tourists who visit there. Their poverty and their oppression is rooted in others not remembering them, not remembering that they are children of God, not remembering that because our spiritual ancestors were slaves in Egypt, we have to cultivate a different set of memories. And so I have tried to remember the indigenous people of Guatemala. Slowly, I built a small group of people who call themselves the Friends of Guatemala in Lacombe, and they have partnered with a network of Mayan women to address food security and support economic and community development there. Right now, there is a group of people from Lacombe visiting our partners there.

Looking back, I wonder how my life might have turned out if things had turned out differently along the way. Would I still be in science if I had found a mentor in the biochemistry department who could excite both my head and my heart about science? If I had chosen a different graduate school, would I have been enthusiastic enough about my studies to overcome my health challenges? Sometimes I find myself mildly regretful that my early dreams didn't turn out the way I expected. But then I remind myself of all the many blessings that have come to me along the way: many friends, varied and fulfilling work, opportunities to learn and grow and experience life in enormous depth and richness.

When we look back, we take the pieces of our lives and we build a future on them. The things we remember and the things we forget can lead us into reMembering with gratitude and wisdom. Let us sing together, praying that as we remember, we might remember with wisdom.