

FORGETTING (ON PURPOSE)

We all forget to a certain extent as we age, making some jokes about the subject appropriate. Others experience memory loss that is debilitating, that takes away the power to recognize even dear family members. This kind is the result of disease and is not at all appropriate as a subject for humor. Forgetting on purpose is different from both of these. It is like God remembering our sins no more: it involves choice. It also involves putting God in charge of our past. To really explain what I mean, I need to introduce you to my Rear Guard.

Many years ago I first heard about the rear guard in a sermon preached by John Schroeder in Yorktown Heights, NY. The term is found in two verses in Isaiah: *"The Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard"* (52:12) and *"The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard"* (58:8). I remember that the sermon was preached on the last Sunday of December and had to do with letting God be in control of what was behind you. My mind was intrigued by the thought and soon took it over, adding new images, savoring the results of my meditation. And then one day I put my ideas into practice with exciting results!

It was 1977. Our oldest two sons, George and David, were away at college. MaryBeth was in high school and Marty and Paul in middle school. On this particular day I had to pick up Marty early to get her to an appointment. I parked in the visitor's lot which faced a pond on the joint high school/middle school property. Just then the high school dismissed and teenagers began walking around the pond within my range of vision. I began to get nostalgic, thinking: "My George and my David used to walk around that same pond and now they're gone!" My throat began to tighten and before long I would have been crying, EXCEPT ...

... I SUDDENLY REALIZED WHAT WAS HAPPENING! "Why, that's the PAST coming back to hurt me, to haunt me, to cause me pain," I thought. "The TRUTH is my sons are in college now and I must accept my new situation. This tight throat does not feel good to me; I don't want it!" And that's when I cried out, "LORD, BE MY REAR GUARD!" Instantly my throat went back to normal and the desire to cry went away. I still remembered that my boys were gone, but the memory no longer brought pain.

That was the day the rear guard of the Isaiah verses became MY Rear Guard. Many times since then I have called for help with the same results. The choice I had to make each time was to give up the sentimentality and the wishful thinking in which I was mired, and face reality instead. I like the truth so much better!

But people are different. A 92-year-old man asked me recently if I could remember how nice it was when my children were small and the family was all together. He indicated that he often indulged in such reveries. I told him I actually couldn't bring back the emotions of those wonderful family times. Why would I want to? I have practiced living in the present for so many years that it is normal for me to continue doing so now. That was the method I used for "letting" our children grow up. I figured if I enjoyed them at every stage of their lives I would have no reason later on to wish they were younger. It worked! My adult sons and daughters and I have such fine relationships that I have no need to remember them as children, much less to relive the emotions of those years.

"You must be frustrated, being so limited now by your disease," someone recently observed. I was puzzled. And then I knew. Of course I would be frustrated if I spent my time thinking of what used to be, but I don't do that. My life before PLS struck is part of my past and is under the control of my Rear Guard. In fact, living in an apartment in Drum Hill and using a power chair seem normal for me. Were things ever different? Of course they were, but I have chosen to forget and move on. Dwelling

on the past would keep me from enjoying the present. I wouldn't want to live with regrets. My aim is to:

LIVE IN THE PRESENT,
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE,
VISITING THE PAST WHEN NECESSARY OR USEFUL.

And when the past comes back to hurt me, I call on my Rear Guard! *"Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you will honor me" (Psalm 50:15)*. That invitation is not only for me, but also for you. What will you do with it?

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Holding on to memories from the past can keep us from enjoying and appreciating the present. Ingratitude is a result of comparing (unfavorably) the past with the present. A very vivid example of this is in the story of the Israelites traveling through the wilderness. Under the leadership of Moses, God had marvelously delivered them from brutal slavery in Egypt. All went well until they started remembering ...

– *"If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."* (Exodus 16:3)

– *"Give us water to drink. Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"* (Exodus 17:2,3)

– *"If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"* (Numbers 11:4,5)

– *"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"* (Numbers 21:5)

These are but four of the places where the Israelites complained on the trip through the desert. I find these passages hard to read. Notice that in their grumbling they lost sight of their goal (the Promised Land) and forgot their slavery in Egypt, but remembered the food and water there to the extent that they could not enjoy the present. God let Moses know that they were not really complaining against him, but against God. In the Numbers 21 story God sent poisonous snakes among the people to let them know how serious their grumbling was.

There is much complaining among the residents at Drum Hill Senior Living Community where my husband and I have lived for nearly ten months now. Much of it is about the food and sounds so familiar to me, so like the Israelites. Listen:

- I cooked for over 50 years and I know how things should be cooked. (Not like this!)
- I ate in the finest restaurants. This food is a disgrace! It's not what I was used to.
- The memory of how my mother/wife made this dish is so strong that I won't eat it here.
- I traveled all over the world and I know what good food is. (This food is lacking.)
- If they don't bring me water soon I'll die of thirst.

I think the memories of the past are hurting the residents who harbor them as well as affecting those who hear them day after day. No question about it: complaining is a contagious disease! My Biblical mentor, the apostle Paul, would not join in the criticism if he were here – and neither will I. Here is Paul's philosophy:

"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:11-13).

I think I know what Paul's secret of contentment was, at least in part: FORGETTING (ON PURPOSE). He as much as says so in Philippians 3:13,14: *"One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*

Paul certainly lived in the present looking to the future. I can't imagine what it would be like not to have a goal to look forward to, a future beyond this life. Thank God I have eternity ahead, a reason for living. When Paul talks of forgetting the past, he does not mean never revisiting the past for a purpose, because he did do that. But he saw the past through God, and he marveled at what he saw. I will develop this thought in the next section.

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The imagery for seeing the past through God comes from an incident recorded in Exodus 13 and 14, at the beginning of the wilderness trip I have already mentioned. After suffering the death of the firstborn on Passover night, Pharaoh told the Israelites to get out of Egypt immediately. Since they were already packed for the trip, the Israelites hastened to comply. They did not go alone, by any means: *"By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people" (13:21,22).*

It didn't take long for Pharaoh and his officials to figure out that in letting the Israelites go, they were also losing their services as slaves. So an army was dispatched to bring them back. *"As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? ... It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!'"*

"Moses answered the people, 'Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.'

"Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long" (14:10-14; 19,20).

What a picture of the glory of the Lord being their Rear Guard! The pillar of cloud and fire must have been an awesome sight any day. For God to move his presence to the rear to give his people peace of mind and a good night's sleep in this incident was so tremendously kind and thoughtful that I am at a loss for words to describe it.

Imagine a few worried Israelites getting up in the night and looking back in the direction of the Egyptian army. All they would see was the glory of the Lord! If perchance vague figures were seen in

the distance, they would be seen through God. How that would affect them would depend on their relationship with God. Oh, to have faith like Moses (see Scripture above)!

Engrave this picture in your mind, as I have, so that the next time you are confronted with something from your past that wants to destroy you, you will see God right there, loving you, ready to fight for you. Our part is to stand still and let God do his work. But helping us forget is not the only work of our Rear Guard. Sometimes the Lord wants to give us a guided trip into the past for our sake and God's. We need not fear going, although it involves remembering ...

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Isaiah 43:18, 19: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland."

Isaiah 46:9, 10: "Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please."

Which is it? Are we to forget the past or remember it? Obviously, as with so many other things, there is a time to forget (on purpose) and a time to remember (on purpose).

Certain incidents are far too precious ever to forget, such as the time our spiritual eyes were opened and we knew we belonged to God's faith family. The apostle Paul never got over the way his life was changed when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He recounted the story numerous times, marveling at every telling, and letting the experience shape his character. I understand, for I have never forgotten the time God suddenly revolutionized my life on a baseball field in Annville, Pennsylvania, my home town. My whole being thrills every time I think of that heavenly encounter. In truth, I have lived my life ever since – more than fifty years now! – in gratitude for God's gift to me that day.

Many events, both large and small, are in my memory bank ready for use if I want to illustrate God's dealings with me, all for his glory. As a new bride living in Huntsville, Alabama, I remember going into a variety store hoping to find ceramic animals to put with my house plants, just as my Grandma Ziegler did. In particular, I really was looking for ceramic donkeys. There "happened to be" two little donkeys in the store, each in a different pose. I was thrilled and bought them both. They graced my house plants until we moved to Drum Hill. Now they sit on a shelf, reminding me of the way I experienced God's love that long ago day; how intimately I felt God knew me!

Then too, I am still amazed at how I came to be pastor of the Community Church of Yorktown Heights, New York, which led to my holding a two week gospel campaign in Cairo, Egypt! However, I do not dwell on even the good things of the past because I perceive that God is constantly doing new things in and through his people, including me. My life with God is still an adventure!

But what about painful experiences from the past? Again a new imagery is in order ...

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My body has many scars, each one involving a story. The scar that has been around the longest is on the left side of my face. I was about six years old when I fell down the last few steps of our staircase and hit my face on the corner of a chair positioned there. My doctor closed the wound with a stitch or two. Surely I would not have remembered that incident were it not for the scar. Unlike the one on my face, most of my scars are the result of surgery: they were inflicted on purpose. The intention was good and, for the most part, the aim was accomplished. But in spite of that, the wounds still hurt!

I have long compared emotional wounds with physical ones. Some emotional hurts are as minor as a scratch and leave no visible trace. Some are inflicted with good purpose (*Proverbs 27:6: Faithful are the wounds of a friend*); some are skillfully made by a professional, as when a counselor guides you in remembering a painful past; others leave gaping holes in the heart and mind that take various lengths of time to heal. If the healing is well done, you now have a valuable experience that you can use to help others, hence a cause for thanksgiving, not regret (in my opinion!).

I used to consider healed wounds as those that do not cause emotional pain when you recall them. Now I know they may hurt again (temporarily, at least) if conditions are right. Last year, after several surgeries, I had the services of the Visiting Nurse Association assigned to me, among them a Social Worker. As I talked about some incidents that I thought to be long healed, I began to cry. I wanted to know why and really appreciated her reply. She said I had changed – grown – since the last time I had discussed that part of my life, so now I was seeing things from a new perspective, one not possible before. I could understand that and eagerly went to work rethinking the sore spots of my life. New insights preceded my putting them away again in a place marked FORGOTTEN (ON PURPOSE).

I will let you develop further the comparison of physical wounds and emotional wounds, if you wish. (Why should I have all the fun?!)

“Your iniquities have separated you from your God” (Isaiah 59:2).

“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:4-6).

“If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared” (Psalm 130:3,4).

“[The Lord] does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:10-12).

Within these verses is the reason I can be at peace with my past. I admit to being a sinner and I know that if my Lord kept a record of sins, I would be eternally lost. But my Rear Guard was wounded for my iniquities; by his wounds I have been healed from my sin-sickness. I do not believe that Jesus died for my physical illnesses; they are minor compared to the sickness that once plagued my soul. I need not fear any future judgment; my God has forgotten (on purpose) my transgressions (east and west never meet!). I am secure in God’s incredible love. Why should I not be at peace?