

“CALLED TO REMEMBRANCE”
The Reverend William Warner-Prouty

At some point during the first week of school, when everybody is feeling the excitement of a new school. It's a time of year also mixed with the sad reluctance that is felt in letting go of a summer's unstructured time of vacationing. It's at this time that I share with my students these familiar lines from William Wordsworth's *Ode, Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*:

...Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind...

Sometimes I mention the fact that one of the first movies I remember sneaking off to see (my father disapproved) was *Splendor in the Grass*, a movie about a summer romance starring Warren Beatty (Shirley McLain's brother) and Natalie Wood. It wasn't until I was in college, taking an English literature course that I discovered the source of this movie's title, Wordsworth's poem. The verses also lead to a discussion about "grief," that sense of loss and sadness one feels when something or someone dear has passed on.

In Wordsworth's poem, what remains behind, of course, is our memory "of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower." I will also make the connection with the things we buy to remind us of places we've been, sights we've seen, what we call, "souvenirs." *Souvenir*, if my French is not mistaken, literally means, "to remember."

Though we must leave splendid moments behind and we grieve the loss of loved ones, the mystery is the strength we gather when we remember "what remains behind," the memories. There is a relationship, after all, between the idea of strength and "comfort," which literally means to give strength.

Memory, as I'm sure we are all aware, is a tricky thing. Memory can be selective; it can be repressed; it can be denied. What one person remembers is not necessarily what another person will remember. There is an amusing song about remembering in the Lerner & Lowe musical, *Gigi*. In the movie it was sung by Maurice Chevalier and Hermione Ginghold: "Ah, Yes, I Remember it Well." An older couple, Honore and Mamita, are recalling the early days of their romance. "We met at nine; We met at eight. I was on time; No, you were late....Ah yes, I remember it well. We dined with friends. We dined alone. A tenor sang...a baritone....Ah yes, I remember it well..." The way each one remembers makes one wonder if they are recalling the same events. Yet, it is in the process of remembering that they regain their closeness, however dissimilar the details of their recollections. Something happens when we remember together: shared memories comfort.

Personal memories can be difficult to sort out among friends and family. Historical memory becomes that much more complicated. I was reminded of this during our choir tour in August. The story we Center Church folk were focused on was Thomas Hooker's story: how he was born and raised in the farmlands of the English "Midlands;" how he was educated at the Dixie Grammar School, doing so well there that he ended up a "Dixie Scholar" at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Perhaps because of his own personal religious struggles in college, I learned that Thomas Hooker became a skilled counselor, what today we would call a "pastoral counselor." He was known for his ability to help sensitive souls, like Joanna Drake, reach some balanced sense of worthiness over-against the prevailing view of an overwhelmingly powerful God. The historical memory we were exploring was of a biographical nature, tracing Hooker's path that eventually brought him

to the point of escape in the face of probable imprisonment and possible death.

There is no doubt that Thomas Hooker is well regarded in Market Bosworth, Emmanuel College, and in the environs of Little Baddow. Striking blue historical Markers (pictured in Bill Gourlie's photographs in the display cases in the church foyer) are now in place on a number of buildings. Toward the end of our travels another memory began to emerge, though---the memory of those who did not, or could not, leave. The sermon we heard at Chelmsford Cathedral on Sunday morning was a gentle reminder that staying and working for reform from within the English government and church was no easy path, either. We New England Congregationalists are inclined to forget and seldom consider the fact that those who did come to these shores in the middle of the 17th century left in the midst of political strife that ended in civil war. Sitting there, looking and listening to Canon Walter King's sermon I began to think about the impact that "war without an enemy," the English Civil War, must have had upon the way that people of Chelmsford and Leicester, Hertford and Little Baddow view their past.

When my fellow Center Church travelers were packing up for their flight home, I made my way from Chelmsford to Harwich, across the North Sea, to the Netherlands to join Sue and spend a week visiting two dear Dutch-American friends. We stayed in a little town in Gelderland, not far from the Issel River and the city of Arnhem. It's an area made famous in recent memory by Richard Attenborough's 1977 movie, *A Bridge Too Far*. The movie was based on Cornelius Ryan's book about the Allies' failed "Operation Market Garden" attempt to cut to the industrial heartland of the German Reich through the "Over-Issel." I mention this, because I found that traveling through this area with our friends whose own childhood and youth were profoundly affected by the Second World

War, brought me closer to that War's memory than I usually experience. (And I think we Center Church travelers found this to be true in Essex as well.)

Before leaving for England, I had spent the last week of July in an exercise of earning summer travel (a form of Puritan self-justification) by cleaning and painting our living room/dining room area (much to Sue's dismay!). In the process of clearing out, I found a small book a friend had loaned me several years ago about an incident that happened toward the end of World War II in the Dutch city of Haarlem. The book, The Assault, by Harry Mulisch, tells this story (I'll read from the cover): "It is the winter of 1945, the last dark days of the war in occupied Holland. A Nazi collaborator, infamous for his cruelty, is assassinated as he rides home on his bicycle. The Germans retaliate by slaughtering an innocent family: only the youngest son, twelve-year-old Anton Steenwijk, survives." I decided to take the book along to read on the airplane, which I did.

Harry Mulisch, I found out, is a highly regarded writer in Holland, who explores the impact of remembering on human life. The book spans the course of 40 years as the survivor, Anton, gradually, reluctantly, accidentally, finds out, uncovers more and more of what actually happened on the night of the "Assault." When I mentioned the book to our Dutch friends, there was quick recognition of its importance to the way the War is remembered and discussed. When browsing a bookstore during my week's stay, I noticed a stack of recently re-printed small hard-bound copies of "The Assault" stacked on the counter near the cash register. Evidently, interest in the story has not been on the decrease.

Memory is a tricky thing. Sometimes we want to use it to regain some valued

moment from our past. Sometimes we want to lose it to be freed from some trauma we have experienced. Often memory helps us connect with our common past. Always our memory---what we remember personally and collectively---is partial, incomplete. “We see,” as Saint Paul wrote in I Corinthians, “as through a mirror dimly.” God knows, there is much of the past that we may yearn to forget, or seek to deny. Yet, strangely, paradoxically, it is often our willingness to face our past that frees us for renewed life in the future, “finding strength,”(and new direction) “in what remains behind.”

Of all the so-called “Resurrection Appearances” in the Gospels, I have always found Luke’s account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus to be the most convincing. I don’t know about you, but I find the idea of bodily resurrection hard to accept. Yet, I have always found the Emmaus Road encounter convincing. We moderns are a lot like the two travelers portrayed by Luke in his Gospel. Like those two, we journey, often away from Jerusalem. Like those two we sometimes open ourselves to the companionship of others who are on the same path. Like them, we walk and talk about the significance of events of the past. Like them we are often foolish and slow of heart. And like those two travelers on the Road to Emmaus, we listen to stories of courage and faith, remember, and (maybe even) sometimes our hearts burn within us.

It is significant that our Communion begins with the words, “we remember...” In remembering we seek not to turn our backs on the past, or deny its full reality. And it is essential that we remember together, not alone or in private. By opening ourselves to all that is past we are able to open ourselves to all that is possible. At this table spread before us, we are called to remembrance that our eyes might be open to a new realities made known to us in the every-day experience of breaking bread...together...in

remembrance of Jesus, when he was first at table with his disciples. Like them, let us now gather at the table, that we might know Him in the breaking of the bread....

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