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## *“Remembering Thankfully”*

*Deuteronomy 16:1-15*

**George C. Anderson**

“Oh, the good ole days!” It is amazing how memories can be edited to come to that conclusion when the good old days meant slavery. I am not speaking of the Antebellum South but rather how newly emancipated Hebrews reminisced about the good old days in Egypt. Having just been emancipated from slavery, freedom in the wilderness looked bleak with the hardships it entailed. You’d think that long hours of enforced labor, made worse by cruel headmasters who did things like denying them straw to make the task of making bricks easier, would be enough to ban any nostalgia. But all they could remember was having assured food and shelter. “Why did you bring us out here?” they complained to Moses. “Did you bring us out here to die? At least as slaves we were provided shelter and food.”

Fear, like resentment and hate, is a strong editor of memories. When something like fear edits the past so that authority is given only to the good and not the bad, it is dehumanizing. Let’s call it the “self-deflating editing of memories.”

This kind of self-deflating memory happens all the time. You’ve heard it, maybe you’ve done it, this damning of the way things are and demand of the way things should be by praising the past. It’s a power thing, this constant negotiation between past, present, and future.

It takes a generation to get there, but there comes a day when fear no longer dictates how the Hebrews remember. Our passage describes that day. When you hear the passage imagine being in the setting as it is presented by Deuteronomy. See Moses giving instructions and look beyond him to see the River Jordan.



You are stronger now, having been toughened by the hardships of the wilderness. As a people, you have a strong sense of yourself—you are a strong, independent and resourceful people of God who are grateful for your freedom.

Moses sees your strength and is now not worried about your having a “self-deflating” sense of self. Now he worries you will have a “self-inflating” sense of self. He is not worried so much about Egyptians, Philistines, or other tribal treats, but what corruption can come of strength and prosperity, evils like arrogance, greed, and abuse of others. And so, before you cross the Jordan into the land that would become you home, Moses tells you how now to remember. Listen to his instructions because we might pick up a thing or two.

“When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess and you possess it and settle in it, <sup>2</sup> you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. <sup>3</sup> You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, ‘Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.’ <sup>4</sup> When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, <sup>5</sup> you shall make this response before the LORD your God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. <sup>6</sup> When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup> we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup> The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup> and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup> So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.’ You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. <sup>11</sup> Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

<sup>12</sup> “When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns, <sup>13</sup> then you shall say before the LORD your God, ‘I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of your commandments: <sup>14</sup> I have not eaten of it while in mourning; I have not removed any of it while I was unclean; and I have not offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the LORD my God, doing just as you commanded me. <sup>15</sup> Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey.’

We must be mindful as to what memories we give authority because it can make a huge difference in how we live today and who we might become in the future.



Take Anya Yurchyshyn. Anya remembered a childhood where her parents were unhappy with each other and unhappy with her. She remembers

- her father as being cold, mean and often away from home before he died in a car accident when she was sixteen years old,
- and remembers her mother as being distant and aloof before she drank herself to death when Anya was 33.

When her mother died, she was relieved because she thought she could then leave the past behind and move on.

Today, Anya remembers differently, because after her parents died, she learned much more about their past that didn't fit what she thought she knew.

First, she discovered passionate love letters between the father she had remembered as cold and the mother she had remembered as aloof.

Second, she traveled to the Ukrainian town where her father grew up and to which he often returned, which is why he so often was not home. She found that the people of the town considered him to be a hero. His parents' town had struggled during its years beyond the Iron Curtain, and he took every opportunity he could to return to help in its rebuilding, giving not only money but also his labor.

She understood that her mother didn't hate her father, but resented him for being gone so much, and then resenting God- or Life- or Fate- or whoever or whatever it was that took him away from her leaving her to raise her daughter alone. Anya learned that the best way to move on was to not to forget her past but *remember it differently*. The past did not become for her all rosy, but it became a past she could embrace and carry with her. She is glad now to claim her parents as her own.

You can read Anya's story in her book, *My Dead Parents*.

Again, it makes a great difference how you remember. Your future can depend on it.

Moses could not let resentment and ingratitude of recently emancipated slaves continue. He had to show them tough love to make them do what they did not want to do and that is move on.

But they did move on. Now, a strong people with the dream of being a settled nation, they have reason to brag, and perhaps even the temptation to bully. It is important that they do not do the opposite of what they did a generation ago. If they become a people where resources flow among them as smooth as milk and as sweet as honey, he doesn't want their story to become one of those "[We did it on our own stories](#)." You know, the "[I am my own hero](#)" story, or the "[I pulled myself up by my own bootstraps](#)" story.

There is no self-awareness in the business of self-inflating. Moses did not want them to become so self-unaware that they would tell their story as a version of the quote that went viral years ago by a famous actor who, for a regrettable moment, thought he could act the part of political pundit. I won't say the actor's name because what he said was so embarrassingly lacking in self-awareness. What he said was this, "[I've been on welfare and food stamps. Did anyone help me out? No!](#)"



Moses did not want the Hebrews to say: “We survived the wilderness. Did anyone help us out? No!” He wanted them to remember that they were delivered by a mighty hand, that without God’s help and each other’s help, they would not have made it a week in the wilderness.

So, he told them *how to remember*. When they come to that day when they are settled into the land and have comfortable homes and flowing resources within defended borders, they are on designated days to go before the priest and declare their memories.

You heard the instructions. When you have harvested, and you see that you have more than enough to feed your family and more, take some of the first fruits and give them away. Make an offering of thanks. Explain your thanks by offering the memories of your people:

- how your ancestors were nomads, beginning with Abraham,
- how one of your ancestors, Joseph, ended up in Egypt, and came to a position of authority where he could offer guidance during a famine,
- how Joseph’s family joined him in Egypt because of that same famine, and how they prospered there growing great in number and resources,
- how a Pharaoh came to power who edited his people’s memories choosing to cast the Hebrews as a problem rather than a resource (sound familiar<sup>1</sup>), and had the Hebrews enslaved—and enslavement that lasted generations,
- how their enslaved ancestors cried out, and God heard their cry,
- delivered them into the wilderness,
- made them strong until they became a mighty nation with resources like milk and honey flowing among them.

And then, we get to the most important part of this ritual of remembering. In celebrating the kindness God showed, they are to be kind to those who today are like they were then. Out of your bounty, share with those aliens around you. Share with those most vulnerable in that patriarchal world, widows and orphans.

Why? The reason is simple. It is because they are to remember that they once were aliens who did not have the protection of Egyptians. They once were like widows who had been robbed of their means of providing for themselves when they were made slaves. They once were orphaned until God claimed them as his children.

The goodness we have to offer comes of the good we choose to remember. Fear, resentment, hatred provide great cause to cling to what we have. Remembering thankfully gives clear cause to do for others the kindnesses done for you.

I do love reminiscing. I love being with close family and friends after long separations and taking time to “catch up.” For many of us, that kind of reminiscing will happen this week. Some of us will travel to be with loved ones or welcome loved ones who travel to be with us. We will

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<sup>1</sup> Recent news has included hate crimes against Jews, and antisemitic sounding statements from Ye (Kanye West) and Kyrie Erving.



share not only a Thanksgiving meal but also funny, sad, and important memories. Remembering has a special timeless power. Past, present and future define each other. We edit who we were, who we are, and what we are becoming in the way we tell our stories.

I love reminiscing because I know my life is blessed, and so, for me, my good memories have more authority than bad ones. I hope I am not pollyannish. I hope I am realistic. I hope it is because I reminisce with grace.

I encourage you to do the same—to *reminisce with a purpose*. With humility, empathy, grace, compassion, and humor, consider the blessings of your life and from where they came. I know most of us can find reasons for resentment complaint and things to resent, and even some of the hard memories can add color even to what becomes a story of appreciation. But let grace lift the good. What are the blessings you've received and who was responsible for your receiving them? As you reminisce about your blessings, what does it say about who you are right now, and who you will be moving forward?

Reminisce about your faith. How did you come to sense God, to trust God's love, to believe that God has a place for you not only in God's heart but also in God's world and in God's work? In thinking about your faith, a simple question: Does your reminiscing about faith stop with your blessings, or does it involve how you can be a blessing moving forward?

Whether it is family, friends, country, the world, or church, I encourage you this Thanksgiving to remember in a way that lifts blessings that are not only to be claimed today but also shared in moving on.

