

The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



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Issues 5-6: *On Memory & Memorization*

When I was in ninth grade, I decided to memorize π —yes, the mathematical number significant for being symbolized as the ratio between the circumference and diameter of a circle, or sometimes called Archimedes’ Constant, and recognized by its Greek letter π . As a child, I was fascinated with the act of memorization, especially learning long, grown-up words, foreign words, music, and even numbers, like π , but this latter category was a little more complicated, because it was harder to commit into the folds of my brain using mnemonics. Admittedly, my determination

came from the fact that I couldn’t see well and didn’t know that I had to wear glasses, and as a result, I was on the precipice of passing/failing my algebra class. I felt that “memorization” of something wondrous and large like π might redeem my other shortcomings. I did finally get glasses, *and* algebra help, *and* passed that class. But before that, I went on determinedly, to memorize π to what I thought was a fairly noble feat: one thousand places. That would look something like this:

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510582097494
4592307816406286208998628034825342117067982148086513282306647
0938446095505822317253594081284811174502841027019385211055596
4462294895493038196442881097566593344612847564823378678316527
1201909145648566923460348610454326648213393607260249141273724
5870066063155881748815209209628292540917153643678925903600113
30530548820466521384146951941511609433057270365759195309218
6117381932611793105118548074462379962749567351885752724891227
9381830119491298336733624406566430860213949463952247371907021
7986094370277053921717629317675238467481846766940513200056812
7145263560827785771342757789609173637178721468440901224953430
1465495853710507922796892589235420199561121290219608640344181
5981362977477130996051870721134999999837297804995105973173281
6096318595024459455346908302642522308253344685035261931188171
0100031378387528865875332083814206171776691473035982534904287
5546873115956286388235378759375195778185778053217122680661300
19278766111959092164201989

I can no longer remember this. And don’t ask me to attempt again, as my brain is not as pliant as it

was thirty years ago. I have no idea how I managed to undertake such a mental task, but I did, and proceeded to “perform” the recitation before a handful of people, who checked my accuracy. I admit, a very nerdy thing to do—but I don’t regret it. And not long after, I remember reading an article in the New York Times, where there was an entire page dedicated to how a Princeton math professor and his wife would test each other’s memories by reciting π to the 1,000th place! I felt vindicated, but also, no longer unique in my pursuit! It’s funny, though, since the late 1980s till now, π has become a cultural icon of sorts. There are π day events (March, 14=3.14—and even in 2015 it was 3.1415, at 9:26AM it was 3.1415926, yes it gets that crazy!), and π day cakes and such have



Ludwig von Beethoven, 1820s Vienna Go To Guy

made the run of the Internet. But talking about π is only the start of this whole question of memory. I’d carried dozens of folded sheets of paper with poems by Romantic and early English and German poets in my pockets to consult and learn. I had been a fan of Goethe and loved learning his poetry on walks in the woods of upstate NY. It was the sound of them that was delightful. But I also noticed that when I was doing this, having memorized a poet’s lines alleviated any tension with the words themselves and allowed me to feel the performative space of memory. The same feeling reemerged when I memorized Schiller’s words in Beethoven’s 9th Symphony—the 4th movement of *Ode to Joy*:

Freude, schöner Götterfunken,
Tochter aus Elysium,
Wir betreten feuertrunken,
Himmliche, dein Heiligtum!

Say this by itself, and it may seem a bit like the slurping of frozen yogurt, but with Beethoven’s music, it is something altogether mellifluous and evoking “*humanhood*.” Whenever I’ve heard this in concert or on recordings since, I’ve sung it in my head or out loud, and the experience of possessing these words in my mind has completely transformed the act of listening and participating in the piece—even as an “aural bystander.” Why does this matter, then? What is the point of memorization and why should we care about it? *Should* we even care about it?

The inspiration for this piece came from conversations and debates I’d had with colleagues about the role that memorization has played, currently plays, and may play in the future of theological education. I have an untested thesis that the introduction of certain kinds of technology in the 19th and 20th centuries provided a support to humans’ ability to remember things that afforded us less of a need to memorize. But there is also the question of how we are *motivated* or not to



J.C. Friedrich Schiller
(1759-1805)

remember, to memorize, and to retain things. The question of the “why” is still quite important. Many years after I had memorized Beethoven’s (Schiller’s words) *Ode to Joy*, I was at an event where I was asked to speak to a group of German professionals and toast a colleague on her 90th birthday—in it I wove from memory

German poetry and punctuated the event with a rendition of the *Ode to Joy*’s text that would have been lost if I had to pull out a smart phone and retrieve the words. The same is true of having memorized some Dante, for which at another gathering, I had to summon a few lines of *lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate...*! and to the great delight of our guests and patrons. Now some readers may say: “I will never be in those situations! Give me a break, Elia!” Perhaps, yes—well taken. But let me say that the utility of memory in certain circumstances can prove not just beneficial, but perhaps, who knows, even lifesaving. In recent

months I’ve been in situations, where seasoned ministers in their 80s and 90s have pulled out scripture from the deep wells of their memory and been able to possess the spiritual and physical spaces with poise and power, in ways I’ve rarely seen before. This is not to say that our techno-generational colleagues cannot do this—it’s simply that it is less common. When I worked at a well-known Lutheran seminary in Chicago some years ago, I was introduced to a practice of *biblical performance criticism*, a method of interpretation, which seeks to engage scholars and practitioners into a thought exercise that is also receptive, collaborative, and experiential. Practitioners memorize a lengthy Bible passage and perform it, as if it were part of a reenactment or theater or even a representation of an intimate affair. For some, this is a useless exercise, but for others it has profound implications and effects. When I’ve seen such performances, they have provided a distinctly different presentation of the biblical word and text, affording me and others to think about the Bible afresh, anew, and outright differently.

But this need not be an essay that convinces everyone—because it won’t. It may, at least, provide some ignition for conversation and debate. I recall a conversation I had over a margarita pizza and coke with the late Dr. James Cone, who regularly repeated the need for people to always read, study, learn, and memorize—“power is in learning, remembering” he said. It was important that people knew what they were talking about, and memory was part of facilitating us toward that point. Without memory, there is little advantage any of us might have.

In a recent piece on NPR, a commentator discussed how many old African-American churches in the south relied on memory to remember songs—hundreds of them. It goes back to the idea that memory is not something that is strictly forced or done without an accompanying tool—that of music. Music, in fact, facilitates how memory works, and for most it makes memorization easier. When my grandmother suffered from debilitating Alzheimer’s disease, she lost complete use of her

mind—except somehow, music and especially songs from her youth remained nearly fully intact, and at brief promptings, she could go into full song amazingly. Recent studies of musical memory have suggested that this kind of memory cannot be affected by degenerative brain diseases, because they are different areas of the brain.

Some people have said to me that they are not good at memorization, and in some ways, because of this, they see memorization as a waste of time; some have suggested its elitism, but I would imagine that learning through memorization would help to *break* some barriers. Yet, many of us who listen to songs, whether by Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Cardi B, Drake or Taylor Swift, among the most modern practitioners of the vocal crafts, easily recall and can recite the



Matteo Ricci and the Memory Palace

lines of these artists. There are, certainly, many types of memorization and practice. In the 16th and 17th century, there was the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, the famed sinologist, who sought the tools of imaginary memory palaces to remember Chinese language, literature, characters, and history. He would walk through imagined parlors of a mansion, each room associated with a character or idea. His method fundamentally changed the way that things could be remembered. The learning of language, too, is yet another form of memorization, which is absolutely required for having mastery and skill in that area. In ancient times, rabbis memorized Talmud and Gemara by sticking a pin through a book, memorizing the key words that the pin hit, and then learned the text around those pages. The famous book *The File on H*, by Ismail Kadare, is based on a story of ethnographers traveling around Albania in search of a long historical tradition of local mountain folk, who had memorized and routinely recited versions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* passed down since the time of Homer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer made his students learn full Psalms every month—sometimes, every week! This will not convince most people—as what was done in the past is not always a reason to do things now,

but he was imprisoned and managed to keep himself focused through meditating on a trove of memorized biblical verses. You never know where you'll end up without a book or technology! And so too, many famous thinkers and theologians memorized: Thomas Merton, Simone Weil, Audre Lorde, MLK, Jr. The list goes on.

You won't know it until you've done it, but memorization will transform you, and lead to mental, emotional, and spiritual experiences that you've never had before—and would not have had without memorization. This is sort of a “click bate” reason for promoting it. But I know this is true, because many have experienced this.

MY PRINCIPLES FOR MEMORIZATION

Memorization for memorization's sake should only be done for the self—if we are compelled to memorize, those reasons should be found on this list. We need to learn to want to memorize for ourselves, and not suffer the indignities of demonstrating the languorous enterprise of relying on the unknown.

1. Memorization is the foundation of self-reliance: as we memorize, we become clearer in our purpose;
2. Memorization is a tool for empowering people, including traditionally disenfranchised groups;
3. Memorization allows you to be more interpretive and bear facility without burdening you with reading your text;
4. Memorization allows you to internalize a text;
5. Memorization should take place through the written and spoken word and kinesthetic motion in a specific place — beyond Matteo Ricci's memory palace in the 16th century, it is well-documented that if you try to memorize something while moving physically, it will stick better;
6. Memorization should be seen as a friend not a foe;
7. Memorization will often lead you to be taken more seriously by other people;

8. Memorization demonstrates that you're willing to take the time, the energy, the fortitude, and the patience to do something and not take shortcuts, which may convey a value to others, peers, and potential employers; [SEE also #17]
9. Memorization lends itself to professionalization;
10. Memorization is biblically and more broadly *scripturally* rooted;
11. WWJD? Jesus did it. The Buddha did it. So did the rabbis, philosophers, writers, wine makers, Moses, Ruth, Elijah; mechanics and football players do it; basically everyone;
12. It helps strengthen your arguments, in part because you have information in your head already;
13. Memorization is the foundation of music and language; some would say society itself;
14. If other professionals and professions require it—like doctors and lawyers, why would we require less?
15. It may be our only companion in old age, sickness, loneliness, and solitude;
16. It cultivates leaders and leadership skills—which is what we are doing here, as a university;
17. It could get you a job. Having been on both sides of the interview table, when someone has studied and memorized something, it is more impressive. Most successful job applicants memorize a tremendous amount of material in preparation for interviews;
18. Institutions like museums, colleges, libraries, and religious organizations, especially churches, don't like their leaders to appear mentally slothful, even if you are a hard worker, mental laziness can come in the form of not memorizing certain things;
19. Memorization fosters responsibility;
20. Memorization is not a given—it is not easy for everyone; it is not to be taken lightly; it can be informative, entertaining, and who knows, it could even save your life;

The issue is not that people CAN'T memorize, or that they don't like to memorize, but that they *haven't yet learned the best way to memorize* and retain information. The famed conductor Benjamin Zander has a beautiful corollary with classical music. He posits that it's not that people don't actually dislike classical music, it's that they just simply *don't know how to listen* to classical music. They haven't been trained. In just under ten minutes, he proves that you can condition an entire room to listen to a haunting Chopin prelude through how we teach people to tap into the emotional core of that music and what it can mean to us individually. Similarly, memorization has its own place that can and will attach to our emotional cores—once we are able to accept that memory can provide us with aesthetically, emotionally, and spiritually exquisite places that have both tremendous meaning in our lives, and tremendous promise to transform our lives for the better. It is in this promise that the magic, beauty, and meaning of our spirits can and will come alive—not in the forcing and coercion of words without meaning. In song, in motion-movement-and kinesthetic joy, memory and memorization will be the prophets of our mind and caretakers of our soul to the end of our days.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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*NB: Jan-Feb are a double issue.