

Remembering the Forgetting

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In recent years, people have had discussions about remembering those who have gone before, or the “unsung heroes” in ministry or missions. In some contexts, I have even heard it mentioned that these are part of the “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1). While I certainly concur with this important perspective, over the last year I have become increasingly aware of another category of “those who have gone before” that has become more prominent in recent years. I am referring to ministers or missionaries who have gone through life fully following God—passionate for God, their family, the people God put in their path, and the lost of the world—but toward the end of their journey have suffered memory loss due to Alzheimer’s or some other form of dementia. Over the last several years, two very close co-laborers for Christ have moved into this category, and passed away this summer. Let me highlight them for a Moment.

The first person is Wayne Cagle, who served as a life-long missionary in Asia. For the first decade of his missionary career, he lived in Indonesia working with the church there and reaching out locally. Years later, he was still remembered for his work among (and heart for) the Indonesians. After this, Wayne served as the Area Director in the Assemblies of God World Missions (USA) for the South Pacific Island area. Annually, he traveled hundreds of thousands of miles

to meet with the missionaries for whom he was responsible, and to connect with Assemblies of God ministries and churches throughout the area. For the last stint of his missions’ career, he was the President of the Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, Baguio, Philippines (2004-2009). During this time, I worked directly with Wayne (although I knew him from before). I was the Dean of this seminary from 2006-2009 under Wayne’s leadership. He was truly a kind-hearted person with a passion for the people he worked with and those around him. A few years ago, he was diagnosed with Frontal Lobe Dementia and, over the last year, his memory deteriorated greatly. On July 19, 2016, he passed away in Springfield, Missouri.

The second person is Terrance R. Lewis, my father. He was an Assemblies of God (AG) minister for most of his adult life (resigning only when he felt his health would not allow him to preach any more). He had pastored in Maine, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Missouri, and Louisiana, and taught at Zion Bible Institute (Rhode Island, now Northpoint Bible College in Massachusetts), Central Bible College, Evangel College, and the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (all in Springfield, MO, now all consolidated under Evangel University), Southeastern Assemblies of God University (Lakeland, FL), and Valencia College (FL). He also worked as Church Growth consultant for

many churches in the U.S. (one year he traveled to 47 states in this capacity). He was a high energy, outgoing person, with a real passion for his students, congregants, and his Lord. Some years ago, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's, and later it was revised to Parkinson's with dementia. On August 5, 2016, after a great decline over the last couple years, he passed away.

These two men represent a growing segment of our world—a group of men and women who, while having served the Lord for much of their lives, go through a period of time toward the end of their lives when they have diminished mental capacities. Many times they are not only forgetting, they are forgotten, only to be remembered at their memorial services (sometimes with years intervening).

For those ministers who find themselves in this predicament, the weight of care usually falls to the spouse. I know that all of these caregivers struggle under an immense burden. They love their spouse, they remember the years of life and service together, and want to take care of them. Unfortunately, the emotional and physical toll is equally devastating on the care-taking spouse. I remember vividly this last spring when I have decided to fly down to Florida for the weekend, in order to persuade my mother to put Dad into an Assisted Living Facility (ALF), since his condition, from my perspective, required 24/7 attention. When I arrived in Florida, I found that my mother was actually in the hospital herself. She was down with some serious blood chemistry issues. We knew that she was under a lot of stress trying to take care of Dad—constantly monitoring him and accommodating to his desires. While he had not taught a class since 2008, he would often wake up in the middle of the night thinking that he had to get ready to teach a class, and would get my mother to drive him to the local place where

the classes had been held years ago. My purpose of trying to get Dad into an Assisted Living Facility shifted to a balancing act of determining who would stay at home with Dad and who would be at the hospital with Mom. God was gracious in that I was able to stay until Mom was released from the hospital and we, as a family, had set in motion the process of placing Dad in an ALF. I relate this story not due to any uniqueness, but because it is becoming more commonplace.

Currently, over 5 million Americans live with Alzheimer's, and one out of three seniors die with Alzheimer's or another form of dementia.¹ Around two-thirds of the caregivers are women. While many of these caregivers experience high stress, about 40 percent of them live with depression.² Over the last few years, I have wrestled with how to forge a path to honor my father and my friend, while realizing I am not clear on how to move forward. I found helpful insights on the "Building Faith" blog. It highlighted the need to remember six things that individuals with Alzheimer's/Dementia still have: value, a name they prefer, feelings, a spirit, a life story, and the present Moment.³ Those "present Moments" are meaningful to and for them, but to us as well. When dealing with a person who suffers dementia, one must remember all six of these components.

When in the process of working with those who are forgetting, there are several things to keep in mind. First, spend time, as available, both with the person suffering from dementia and the caregiver. The time I spent with my Dad over the last few years was important to him, but probably more for me. He loved his family and loved God, and while he was not fully there or always remembering, those times together are now precious to me. Although times of his forgetfulness or confusion were sad for us, being with Mom and being able to laugh at

the funny things encouraged our hearts, as we encouraged Mom as the caregiver. What I remember and cherish were Moments of lucidity, and being able to reminisce together about fun times in the past. As Dad was declining, we could no longer watch British mysteries with him since he could not follow the plot or story. Our television watching became completely focused on sports, which was not a problem for him. In that context, there were a number of times when Dad recalled going to Fenway Park when I was a boy, watching the Steelers vs. Raiders game live on television when Franco Harris caught the Immaculate Reception, or other sports events in the past. It was amazing when Moments of remembrance would come, but just as much, this did not happen. Thank God for those precious Moment, but when the confusion reigned, it created emotional pain for us all. Nevertheless, in those Moments of remembering and lucidity, we would talk about funny stories and events in our lives—many that my wife and daughters had not previously heard—these are precious times to them as well now.

Another avenue that works for many individuals with dementia is singing or telling stories from the persons' youth. I have witnessed instances where singing an old hymn or song will bring on a loud voice articulating the lyrics, or a biblical story would bring recognition and response when other things did not seem to break through. So finding occasions for singing or storytelling is important in dealing with those who are forgetting.

Third, people must take into consideration the toll caregivers and family/friends experience as they care for a loved one who needs full-time assistance. Truly, one cannot fully understand this without having experienced this situation, as caregivers undergo real stress with a pervasive impact.

In one sense, caregivers face multiple concerns: (1) caring for the person with dementia, (2) the caregiver's own fears, health issues, and stress, (3) financial issues, and (4) for some individuals, embarrassment arises when talking about the situation with colleagues or friends. Churches and church members who support, encourage, and pray for people experiencing this situation provide an inestimable ministry that often goes unnoticed.

Related to the toll, is the process of decline. I vividly remember talking to my Dad about his writings on church growth in the Assemblies of God, a topic he had studied for decades. On this particular occasion, he could not focus enough to organize his thoughts. The saddest part of this journey was the fact that at that time he was still cognizant enough to know that he was starting to forget and be confused. At times, a sadness would come upon him, and, based on his comments, we knew that he was thinking about his memory lapses and his move into forgetfulness and confusion. Yet, amazingly, he would always be concerned for his classes (although they were not going on), and would remember the names and details of students from the 1970s or 1980s.

Ultimately, this essay struggles to answer this question: "How do we honor those who, while in the state of "forgetting", yet have not moved onto their heavenly reward?" While no perfect answer exists, here are some things we endeavored to do (and learned through this experience). First, spend time with individuals who are "forgetting." I learned that my Dad felt it important for me to be there. It was equally important for us to be there for my Mom because she carried an immense emotional and physical load. Our presence gave her a respite, a distraction, and toward the end of Dad's decline, a time for higher level conversation and interaction. In retrospect, I

needed time to be with both Mom and Dad during that time, too.

Second, I would encourage people to continue to honor individuals—like my father and friends like Wayne—in the “forgetting” stage of life. In retrospect, I realize that I disagreed with some actions or opinions of my father, but now they are unimportant. My Dad and Wayne truly loved and served the Lord. They were passionate for the things of God and dedication their lives to serving their Savior and Redeemer—qualities which we should extoll. Immediate family members and the following generations of biological and spiritual descendants should not forget their exemplary lives and testimonies. Therefore, we choose to honor them, even in their time of forgetting.

Third, our experience taught us the critical importance of spending time with the caregiver. Spouses, children, and/or other individuals carry a heavy load as they care for family members with all forms of dementia. Giving time, conversational interaction, hugs, and time just to get away are huge gifts. In this regard, I cannot express my gratitude to my sister and my parent’s church, both of whom went well beyond the “normal” neighborliness to encourage my Mom during the ongoing issues related to my Dad’s condition. Due to my Dad’s Parkinson’s with dementia, he had not been able to attend church for a few years, and my Mom would attend as often as she could. Despite their lack of church attendance, the pastoral staff continued to pray, support, and encourage my family, especially in the passing of my Dad, which was meaningful beyond words. This ministry to the forgetting and their families is neither visible to the public nor exciting, but it is incredibly meaningful to the members (and possibly lapsed or non-members).

Fourth, society often attaches a slight stigma to this kind of condition. However, as I have talked with colleagues, friends, and fellow church members, I frequently heard them share their personal experiences of a parent, grandparent, sibling, spouse, or friend in a similar diminished capacity. Not only did it become a point of closer connection with some individuals, but my experience became a lens and venue by which to minister to other individuals in the beginning stages of this type of journey. Because I had gone through this experience, I could relate and reach out to people, both inside and outside the church, as they wrestled with similar difficulties.

As I write this, I still miss my Dad and Wayne (or, as my daughters used to call him, “Uncle Wayne”), but I know that both have lived a good life before God, and both are in a much better place now. So, while I feel a sense of grief, I also have a sense of peace that only God can give. In my Dad’s case, in one way, I said “Goodbye” six years ago. My wife reminded me of the incident. We had just returned from Asia for a short itineration and spent a week with my parents. At that time, Dad was in the early stages of his disease. As we drove away, I mentioned to my wife, “I cannot ask Dad for advice anymore.” At that point, my grieving started. So, although he recently passed away, this phase of his journey was longer. Nevertheless, I have the peace that he is not confused or forgetting anymore. He is with the Lord whom he loved.

While reflecting on the need to remember and honor individuals in our midst who are in the process of “forgetting,” the church must continue to support and encourage the caregivers. We must honor the memories of these individuals as part of the “great cloud of witnesses” who have gone before—even if they have not yet passed away. Their

models and testimonies are still, if not especially, needed for our world today.

¹ Alzheimer's Association, "2016 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures," accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.alz.org/facts/overview.asp>.

² Ibid.

³ Sharon Ely Pearson, Building Faith, "Ministry to those with Alzheimer's Disease," posted August. 16, 2011, accessed October 20, 2016, <http://www.buildfaith.org/ministry-to-those-with-alzheimers-disease/>.