

“Husker Du?”

Channing Memorial Church

July 21, 2024

Worship Associate David Fu (he/him/his)

Husker Du?

When I turned 20, I discovered that I had the power to remember events from my life that had happened five, even ten years in the past: amazing. Since then, I’ve played a memory game on my birthday each year: I try to dredge up a memory from each multiple of 5 years past for as far back as I can. It has always been a pleasant, interesting, and rewarding diversion.

As I stand in the *pulpit* this morning, I’m going to examine several facets of the gem that is memory, and, as I often do, I will invoke God and refer to the teachings of Jesus in the process. And yet, I am not what most would consider a “traditional believer”. And here, at Channing Memorial Church, I am perfectly comfortable with this state of affairs, and, as you sit in the *pews*, I encourage you to listen with an open heart.

Memory can be a meandering kind of thing, and seeing as how I’m up here for the next twenty-some odd minutes, it would be civil of me to give you a road map.

First, I will talk about one of our underused superpowers: memorization. Next, there will be a good old-fashioned rant about the dangers of technology. This will be followed by some words on the importance of forgetting. And finally, Jesus will bat cleanup to tell us what we really need to remember.

Let us begin.

The power of memorization

Whenever I taught a course at my workplace, on the first day of class I would learn the names of the students. This would be anywhere from 15 to 50 people. I have a knack for quickly learning faces and names, and the students were always impressed.

Some years back, after witnessing my little party trick, one student recommended the book **Moonwalking with Einstein** by Josh Foer, a popular book about the history, art, science, and competitive sport of memorization. I read it, and it was fascinating.

Consider the beginning of the book of Matthew:

1: The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2: Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren;

3: And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram;

Come on! Everybody now! Join in if you know the words! [gesture]

4: And Aram begat Aminadab; and Aminadab begat Naasson; and Naasson begat Salmon;

It may seem a daunting task to memorize the 42 generations of the genealogy of Christ, but I'm sure it has been done. You probably have memorized similar things in your lifetime. Perhaps the capitals of the 50 states, or Marc Antony's speech from Julius Caesar ("Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears...").

In **Moonwalking with Einstein**, the author Josh Foer "embeds" himself in the world of competitive memorization, where people try to outdo one another in memorizing ordered decks of cards, lists of random numbers,

faces and names, freshly minted poetry, and other such contrivances. It is a weird world. What is the point of being able to memorize the order of a deck of cards?

For one thing, practitioners of the sport are convinced that it is good exercise for their brains, that it helps prevent or slow the effects of dementia. I would like to agree, but I think the science is still out on this.

Another thing is that it is a testament to our amazing powers. And it's not some kind of special talent or intelligence, so much as a matter of technique and practice. Competitive memorizers make no claims to genius. They use ancient methods, and they practice hard.

These days, especially in Western cultures, memorization tends to be viewed as mechanical and unimaginative: "Oh no, we don't memorize here, we **understand** things." And the memorization competitions in **Moonwalking with Einstein** tend to be viewed as a kind of freak show. But I believe that such views are "throwing the baby out with the bathwater". While it is absolutely true that memorization alone is *not* understanding, there can be no understanding without it. Indeed, in India, the tradition of learning is "first memorize, understanding will come later".

Because memorization allows us to "bootstrap" our knowledge. That is, by memorizing simple things, we can use them to reason about and understand more complicated things.

For instance, let's say that while you are awake you do something every 10 seconds. Approximately how many times would you do that thing in a year? [pause]. It is easy to answer this question if you have memorized that there are roughly 33 million seconds in a year, which means that there are roughly 3.3 million 10-second intervals. Assuming that you sleep about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the time, the answer is roughly 2.2 million times. Remember that figure.

To become literate in Chinese, one must memorize roughly 2000 characters. In the Muslim tradition the term "Hafiz", meaning "guardian", is

given to any person who has memorized the entire Quran, and millions of Muslims have earned this title. Amazing.

Back in the day, memorization was a crucial to preserving information and knowledge. Written records were rare, unwieldy, and expensive. But nowadays, the equivalents of these records are common, portable, and ludicrously cheap.

Consider the photograph.

Memory is not storage or recall

Early in the history of photography, having your photograph taken was a once, maybe twice in a lifetime event. Photos were treasured possessions. They were framed and passed down from generation to generation. This changed as technology marched forward.

In my own lifetime, it used to be that we would take photographs on special occasions: weddings, funerals, babies, birthdays, graduations, vacations. We accumulated hundreds of photos: some went into albums, most went into boxes.

With the advent of digital photography and storage, we still take photos on special occasions, but we also take them on ordinary occasions. Heck, we even take them on non-occasions [pretend to take a selfie]. We have a computer at home with thousands of photos on it that we rarely, if ever, look at.

But what if you had a photo for every 10 seconds of your waking life? How many photos would that be in a year? [pause for answer]. [nod] About 2.2 million. Why would *anyone* want to do that?

One chapter of **Moonwalking with Einstein** is devoted to an interview with Gordon Bell, co-author of the book **Total Recall**. I quote from its

introduction, which starts out with the following proclamations in large friendly block letters:

THE TOTAL RECALL REVOLUTION IS INEVITABLE.
IT WILL CHANGE WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN.
IT HAS ALREADY BEGUN.

The introduction continues, quote:

“What if you could remember everything? Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmell draw on their experience from their MyLifeBits project at Microsoft Research to explain the benefits to come from an earth-shaking and inevitable increase in electronic memories. In 1998 they began using Bell, a luminary in the computer world, as a test case, attempting to digitally record as much of his life as possible. Photos, letters, and memorabilia were scanned. Everything he did on his computer was captured. He wore an automatic camera, an arm-strap that logged his bio-metrics, and began recording telephone calls. This experiment, and the system they created to support it, put them at the center of a movement studying the creation and enjoyment of e-memories.

Since then the three streams of technology feeding the Total Recall revolution – digital recording, digital storage, and digital search, have become gushing torrents. We are capturing so much of our lives now, be it on the date-and-location-stamped photos we take with our smartphones or the continuous records we have of our emails, instant messages, and tweets– not to mention the GPS tracking of our movements many cars and smartphones do automatically. We are storing what we capture either out there in the “cloud” of services such as Facebook or on our very own increasingly massive and cheap hard drives. But the critical technology, and perhaps the least understood, is our magical new ability to find the information we want in the mountain of data that is our past. And not just Google it, but data mine it so that, say, we can chart how much exercise we have been doing in the last four weeks in comparison with what we did four years ago. In health, education, work life, and our personal lives, the Total

Recall revolution is going to change everything. As Bell and Gemmell show, it has already begun.”

I’m going to skip about 500 words now and share one more sentence before sharing my reaction with you:

“Total Recall is a technological revolution that will accomplish nothing less than a transformation in the way humans think about the meaning of their lives.”

Please excuse me while I puke.

Revolting. Horrifying. Yuck.

To be fair, perhaps I should actually read the rest of **Total Recall** before passing total judgment on it. Perhaps, in my lifetime, life recording equipment will be viewed as nothing more than a kind of eyeglasses for one’s memory. Perhaps.

Whenever I have such a strong reaction to something, I’ve found that it is a valuable spiritual practice to stop and ask myself “What is it about this thing that I fear?”

Part of my fear is that I know that losing my mind as I age, via dementia, is a real prospect, and the excerpt from the book reminds me of this prospect.

Part of my fear is that while I feel that my life is more than the sum of my “digital data streams”, the future painted by **Total Recall** seems to say otherwise.

Part of my fear is that recording one’s life this way seems to be a substitute for real living, a substitute for real **awareness**. And unaware people are dangerous to themselves and others.

But, if I’m being honest, none of these things are what **really** scares me.

If you happened to be with our church for some time, you may have already heard the story of my sister and the napkin drawer, first told in November of 2013. What you may not have heard is what happened after I shared it with the congregation.

I was particularly proud of this little remembrance story, and so I emailed it, along with photos of three illustrative figures that I had drawn, to my father, mother, sister, and brother.

Not one of them remembered the incident. Nor did anyone remember the “napkin-fetcher protocol”.

My mother did remember the table. “Don’t we still have that table in the kitchen?” she asked me. And when I gave this sermon and retold this story in 2015, my mother happened to be visiting and in attendance, and she interrupted to tell me that the table had ****two**** drawers. And she was right.

My little sister, Melissa, **did** confess to having an irrational fear of putting her hand into drawers when she was growing up.

But that’s all.

My family doesn’t remember “the incident” like I did. Maybe it didn’t happen the way I think it did. We ate **thousands** of meals at that table as I grew up. And I’m remembering **one** incident, along with maybe a **handful** of times that the “napkin-fetcher protocol” was enforced. Yet somehow that one incident and its aftermath was formative **for me**.

What if I had been outfitted for “total recall” and the incident at the kitchen table had been recorded? I could flaunt it in the face of my family. I could relive the moment, my little sister, Melissa, shrieking and crying, my parents yelling. I could post the video on the internets for all to see. Would this help me make sense of it? Would this help me make a story of it? Would this help me enrich my life?

I don't think so.

The section of the book **Anam Cara** from which today's first reading came is titled "Memory: Where Our Vanished Days Secretly Gather". I find that title somehow magical and potent. [repeat it]. To me, it suggests that as we live, we are all the while accumulating a treasure trove of memory and meaning, and it is up to us to discover it.

And I think O'Donohue hits the nail on the head. There is a difference between memory and storage, between recall and remembrance, and as a society, we have conflated these things. It takes **work**, the work of the soul, and **time**, the time of living, to make a treasured memory out of the raw material of recall. And the rewards are great.

And so what I really fear about **Total Recall** is that we would deny ourselves these rewards. Because staring at a screen and doing an instantaneous search on a hard drive full of data is not the same thing as living your life and looking back in your mind's eye.

Total Recall was published in 2009, and while a lot has changed in the world of technology since then, I'm not really seeing the "Total Recall revolution" that the authors' so boldly proclaim. I don't see people wired up to record their every waking moment. And I'm glad for it – though I remain wary.

Anam Cara is a Celtic phrase that roughly translates as "soul friend". Nice. And where did I learn of the book **Anam Cara** by John O'Donohue? (Apologies for misspelling the name in the printed program). From my little sister, Melissa.

Forgetting is important, too

The introduction to **Total Recall** ends with a compelling question from Bill Gates:

What would happen if we could instantly access all the information we were exposed to throughout our lives?

I think I'd shoot myself.

I don't **want** to be able to access all that information. Most of it is eminently forgettable. Life is not about remembering everything. Moreover, there will be errors in the process. I'm going to forget some things that I want to remember, and, I'm going to remember some things that I'll want to forget. After all, to quote Sir Michael Phillip Jagger, "You can't always get what you want."

And there can be joy in forgetting and then re-experiencing. Rereading a book, or getting reacquainted with an old friend.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot remember,

The wisdom to understand the things I can,

And the courage to face the difference.

In **Moonwalking with Einstein**, I read a case-study of a man who has an absolutely phenomenal, arguably computer-like memory. But he cannot function in society, because he cannot **filter**. He does not forget, and so he does not know what is important.

There **are** good reasons to fear our forgetfulness. There are issues of personal safety, "yes, child, this flame is hot, too". There are issues of injustice. So often we keep walking down that street and falling down that hole, because we do not remember the right things.

But I take comfort in the idea that it is **God's** job to remember everything, and that it is **our** job to use our God-given powers to remember what is most important.

So what is most important, and who can tell it to us?

[pause]

Ironically, when I was first working on this sermon, I had trouble remembering the name of the student who recommended **Moonwalking with Einstein** to me. I did eventually remember it, though. His name: [Spanish pronunciation] Jesus. Jesus Rodriguez. [pause]. God is laughing at me. Again.

So, what does Jesus have to say?

Help me, Jesus

35: Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying,

36: Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

37: Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

38: This is the first and great commandment.

39: And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

40: On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

For whatever reason, I've never had trouble remembering the gist of this passage. And in contrast, I've never really learned the Ten Commandments. Indeed, this week, I quizzed myself on them. After floundering around for a bit, I managed to remember... **six** of them:

D-.

But I contend that these two commandments, originally from Deuteronomy and then brought forth by Jesus in today's reading: Love God and Observe the Golden Rule, will never steer you wrong. And look at the connecting bit in verse 39!

39: And the second is like unto it

That is, the Golden Rule is "like unto", i.e., **the same thing as** loving God with all your heart and soul and mind. So really, that's only **one** thing to remember.

"The rest", as Rabbi Hillel so eloquently put it, "is commentary".

Amen.