

Of Divine Origin Remembering Where We're From and Why We're Here

by
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The 2000 Christopher Nolan film, *Memento*, involves the story of a brain-damaged man whose injury leaves him incapable of making new memories. Each day he leaves himself clues to remind him that he's trying to solve the crime that caused his unusual condition. The genius of the film is that it begins at the end of the story and works its way backward, toward its beginning. It's a fascinating movie to watch for both these reasons; the main character suffers from amnesia, and it's by returning to the origin of events that the mystery is eventually solved. Yet I wonder if this unusual plot for a film might be more true to life than most films in which a resolute protagonist progresses toward a definite conclusion. What if each of us, like this character, has forgotten who we really are, where we're from, why we're here, and what it is we're supposed to do? And what if returning to our source is the only way to answer such questions?

This idea is not as uncommon as films like *Memento* are, at least not in the realm of religion and philosophy. There's an old Jewish tradition, for instance, that the philtrum, that indentation between our nose and lips, is placed there just before we are born by an angel who presses his finger against our lips and whispers, "shush," reminding us not to tell the secret of our true origins. The Huichol Indians of northern Mexico have a similar myth suggesting we are all gods before we're born, but once we pass through the tunnel into this world, we forget who we are and where we're from. Like the man in *Memento*, however, the Huichol story also suggests there are clues all around us to remind us of our divine origins. It's also the concept of *reincarnation* found in most Eastern religions. Even Christianity, the dominant religion in our culture, tells us we must be born again, that is, we must return, not to the womb, but to the mother, to our beginnings.

Many philosophers have also promoted the idea of "eternal return," that the Universe itself keeps recurring over and over. It was one of Friedrich Nietzsche's most important concepts, but one he held with trepidation—a secret, not given to infants at birth, but by demons in our nightmares. "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more," he lamented, "and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"¹ In his work, *Will to Power*, Nietzsche said, "Duration 'in vain' without end or aim is the most paralyzing idea..."² Thus, Nietzsche's idea of *eternal return*, or "eternal recurrence," as it is sometimes called, is negative, like the Buddhist idea of *samsara*, suggesting each of us is caught in an

unending cycle of birth, life, and death, and through this reincarnation we are repeating the same mistakes over and over again, completely unaware, with, perhaps, the exception of an occasional *déjà vu*, that tells us we have already been here before.

It reminds me of an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, called “Cause and Effect,” that begins with the entire ship blowing up. In the very next scene, however, the crew is alive again, reliving the same events right up to the point the ship blows up again. This cycle keeps repeating itself throughout the episode, but each time it does some of the crew begin to realize that they’re stuck in a pattern and, like the man in *Memento*, they begin leaving themselves little reminders so that eventually they can figure out what’s happening and escape the time loop they’re stuck in. It may sound like science fiction, but physicists as renowned as Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking have suggested time is not linear, but cyclic in nature, making it possible, should we ever discover the right technology, to travel back and forth in time. As J. Richard Gott has explained in his book, *Time Travel in Einstein’s Universe*, “All you have to do is get in a spaceship, go to a star a bit less than 500 light-years away, and return, traveling both ways at 99.995 percent of the speed of light. When you come back, Earth will be 1,000 years older, but you will be only 10 years older.”³

Of course we don’t have time machines, at least not yet, and, so far, even though the notions of *rebirth* and *eternal return* present themselves universally among humans, we have no solid proof that each of us has any more than the one life we are given, or that there might be more to us than we’re capable of remembering, something divine and eternal. Even so, we cannot doubt that, at least within the span of our individual lives and memories, that these principles are true, that we often repeat our same patterns again and again. Many of us go to the same jobs at the same time each day, take our breaks at the same time, have lunch at one of the same places we like to eat, leave work at the usual time, drive home the same route, then begin our nightly routines before going to sleep so we can get up and repeat the same kind of day all over again. We often even engage in the same conversations with the same people each day.

We also know that our physical bodies are but constantly repeating patterns that, at the molecular level, are always moving in and out of existence, awash with new parts, yet, somehow, manage to repeat themselves, giving our physicality the illusion of permanence. Deepak Chopra says, “Every second of our existence, we are creating a new body.”⁴ This is so, as physicist Frank Tipler explains, because, “At the subnuclear level, the quarks and gluons which make up the neutrons and protons of the atoms in our bodies are being annihilated and recreated on a timescale of less than 10^{-23} seconds; thus we are actually being annihilated and replicated—resurrected— 10^{23} times a second in the normal course of our lives.”⁵ As Biologist Rupert Sheldrake succinctly puts it, “Things are the way they are because they were the way they were.”⁶

Perhaps these scientific discoveries about the underlying nature of reality, along with our common myths and philosophies are among the clues we leave for ourselves to remind us there's something more going on than meets the eye. Assuming this is so, are we then to look at such a possibility negatively, like Nietzsche and *samsara*, as if we are caught in a trap we cannot escape from, like ghosts unaware that we're really dead, doomed to repeat ourselves endlessly? Or should we entertain the possibility, like *Memento*, that the mystery might be solved, like the Huichol Indians and *Star Trek*, that there are clues all around us, telling us to return to our origins, not so we can merely repeat our lives, our patterns, our habits over and over, but so we might remember that we are more than our mere lives and patterns, that there is something divine about us? Master Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, said, "You are here for no other purpose than to realize your inner divinity and manifest your innate enlightenment."

Yes, our patterns, our habits, often cause us to forget the larger picture, that we are here to do good, to take pleasure in life, to create beauty, to make justice, and to give love. We find all of these truths present in our origins. We come from pleasure, beauty, harmony, and love. Each of us is conceived in a creative explosion of passion and pleasure, just like the Universe itself. Our conception is but a microversion of the Big Bang, the Great Unfolding that is, at least, the current incarnation of the Cosmos. We also know that life is a rare, if not impossible, gift that it has taken 13.7 billion years of stars collapsing and exploding, breathing in and out, to make happen. The green forests, the snow capped mountains, the blue oceans, the golden sunsets, and all the beauty therein originates and exists only within a harmonious, just, and balanced relationship to all that is and ever was. There is nothing that exists now that didn't also exist, in some form, 13.7 billions year ago within our universe when it was no bigger than an apple. That's where we come from and that's what we're supposed to be about—passion, love, creativity, beauty, and harmony. What would the world be like if, as a species, we would all come to remember this rich cosmic heritage by returning to our origins?

But why, then, did the angel press his finger against our lips? Why must we forget our divine origins, our place among the stars? Is this some joke played upon us by Nietzsche's demon—a cruel joke that has left so many of us feeling empty and insignificant, and justified the exploitation that is now destroying nature's beauty and the miracle of life, and has left many of us loveless and greedy in a world full of injustice? Why can't we remember?

Those of us who have reached midlife know the difficulties of forgetting, brought about by aging brains with a limited supply of cells. We forget things that once came so readily, things we're supposed to know, the name of an acquaintance we haven't seen for a while, a phone number we've repeated a thousand times, a meeting we didn't write down. It's as if, at times, we're losing our minds. Yet, perhaps there is good reason for this. Perhaps it is important for us to forget such trivial things in order to truly remember what's important.

In his book, *The Force of Character and the Lasting Life*, psychologist James Hillman points out that, “For every decade after age fifty, the brain loses 2 percent of its weight... The motor area of the frontal cortex loses between 20 and 50 percent of its neurons; the visual area in the back loses about 50 percent, the physical part on the sides also loses about 50 percent.”⁷ It is frightening to think about this, that our brains get smaller as we age, that we, literally, lose our minds. But the areas affected by this reduction in size mainly involve our short-term memory, leaving our long-term memories intact. As Hillman goes on to explain, “The higher intellectual areas of the cerebral cortex have a significantly lower degree of cell disappearance... It may even be that the few neurons increase their activity... Recent research suggests that certain cortical neurons seem actually to become more abundant after maturity... the filamentous branchings (dendrites) of many neurons continue to grow in healthy old people...”⁸

Could it be, then, that forgetting is a natural part of human experience, that we have evolved to lose our short-term memories in order to focus on the long-term, on what’s eternal? Perhaps, at a certain age, nature expects we don’t need our short-term memories anymore, that we ought to have been around long enough by now to have developed a certain wisdom about the important things in life. “It may be annoying to you and infuriating to others,” writes Hillman, “that you let the kettle boil away, mislay your keys, forget your great-nephew’s name, but is character built of kettles and keys and the names of little boys?”⁹ Forgetting what happened today, just a few moments ago, may be important for those who are so inexperienced that they must still figure out what life is about, but the longer we’re around, the more room we need in our shrinking heads to dwell upon our life’s experience, about its meaning, about who we really are and what we’re about when we finally learn to forget our routines. As Hillman puts it, “The inability to recall this morning’s conversation, let alone last week’s visitors, keeps the shelves open for assembling the records so long stored.”¹⁰

And so the philtrum above our lips, the forgetting about today, is a divine necessity in answering those perennial questions about the purpose and meaning of our lives. It is necessary to forget what we know in order to become wise. The *Tao te Ching* says, “Failure is an opportunity,”¹¹ and reminds us that, “Seeing into darkness is clarity. Knowing how to yield is strength. Use your own light and return to the source of light. This is called practicing eternity.”¹² Life gets busy, so busy, that we often lose sight of the big picture, of eternity, of our true purpose and meaning. So, perhaps, as Jesus said, we must lose our lives to save them. Perhaps we need to forget about ordinary things to reawaken to those extraordinary events that brought us into being to begin with. In retrospect, aren’t those really the things that life is all about? Aren’t those the things we ought to reflect upon? That womb of passion, creativity, harmony, justice and love that gave us birth to begin with? Isn’t that a place we ought to return? The place we ought to begin?

¹ *The Gay Science*, p. 341.

- 2 *Will to Power*, p. 55.
- 3 Gott, J. Richard, *Time Travel in Einstein's Universe*, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, NY, 2001, p. 33
- 4 Chopra, Deepak, *Journey into Healing*, Harmony Books, New York, NY, 1994, p. 59
- 5 Tipler, Frank J., *The Physics of Immortality*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1994, p. 236
- 6 Sheldrake, Rupert, *The Presence of the Past*, Park Street Press, Rochester, Vermont, 1988, 1995, p.xvii.
- 7 Hillman, James, *The Force of Character*, Random House, New York, NY, 1999, p. 84.
- 8 Ibid. p. 84f.
- 9 Ibid. p. 85.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 #79

- 12 #52