



‘A Primer for Forgetting’ Review: The Past Need Not Be Prologue
Human beings—and human societies—cannot change or grow without learning to let go.

By Christian Wiman
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A Primer for Forgetting by Lewis Hyde *Farrar, Straus & Giroux*, 372 pages, \$28

Lewis Hyde’s new book is so counterintuitive, so bracingly clear and fresh, that reading it is like leaping into a cold lake on a hot hike. It shocks the mind. It flushes all kinds of monotony and mental fatigue right out of your system. I have filled a notebook with things from this book I am determined to remember, which is quite a paradox, given that it’s a book about forgetting.

Mr. Hyde’s thesis is that forgetting is as important to one’s vitality and sanity as memory, though the definitiveness of that formulation belies the book’s entire aim and being. Composed of anecdotes, quotations and thoughts that the author has been compiling for years, “A Primer for Forgetting” is quite different from Mr. Hyde’s earlier books, the most famous of which is “The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World” (1983). “A Primer for Forgetting” constantly weaves and unweaves its own realizations. It is less argument than art.

“In forgetting lies the liquefaction of time,” Mr. Hyde writes. Bad remembering causes time to clot. Bad remembering can be an error of content (we remember the wrong things) or an error of action (we remember for wrong reasons). Time is, or ought to be, fluid, and to be fluent within time, we must let a lot of life drop away. Thus, as he puts it, “every act of memory is also an act of forgetting.”

There are two ways of thinking about this. Some experiences need to be remembered so they can be forgotten. The book is filled with examples, but one will suffice. Sohaila Abdulali is a rape victim who has dedicated herself to counseling other women. After repeatedly telling her own story to others, she one day finds that it has lost its terrible effect on her. The whole trauma has

become, in fact, “*boring*.” “Forgetting appears when the story has been so fully told as to wear itself out,” Mr. Hyde concludes.

To forget, in this instance, is to confront, not to evade. Forgetting need not imply total loss. To consign something to oblivion is not to be oblivious about it. As the author points out, the very word “consign” suggests a conscious act. Ms. Abdulali surely remembers the details of her experience. What she has forgotten, to her great relief and profit, is its malign charge.

On the other hand, some experiences need to be forgotten so that they can be remembered. All of the great moments of recovery in Proust are involuntary. These crucial moments are redemptive only because they have been cleansed, so to speak, by oblivion—cleansed of bad remembering, it should be said, and not of difficulty, complexity or sorrow. Some of Mr. Hyde’s own personal recoveries in this book are radiantly painful, such as the memory of a holiday party in which his mother, suffering from dementia, does not remember his name.

One of the author’s recurrent concerns is whether the process that explains an individual’s experience “scales.” That is, might the same dynamic between memory and forgetting that exists in an individual consciousness apply to entire societies as well? Yes and no, Mr. Hyde concludes. He has high regard for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that followed the end of apartheid in South Africa, which made possible an amnesty that was a kind of collective forgetting. This process “worked” (he is careful to point out its shortcomings) because it involved some shared understanding of what had happened, public confessions and some sense of justice. He quotes Ernest Renan, who says that a country’s essence is “that all its individuals have many things in common, and also that everyone has forgotten many things.” For a country to thrive, Mr. Hyde writes, for a people to “live steeped in history but not in the past,” there must be some agreement on what has been forgotten.

Mr. Hyde is less sanguine about the United States (“The United States of Amnesia,” as Gore Vidal termed us) and writes extensively about the Sand Creek Massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho natives in 1864, as well as violence from the Civil Rights era. Both are examples of bad forgetting. The history is either disputed or ignored, the acts of repentance either entirely private or disingenuous, and justice forever delayed. But “violence denied and repressed doesn’t disappear,” Mr. Hyde says, “it repeats.” Trauma, badly forgotten, bleeds into lives that had nothing to do with it. He draws a line between the graves of murdered minorities in this country and America’s militarism abroad.

Religion, very broadly defined, is a recurrent concern of this book. At one point Mr. Hyde quotes E.M. Forster: “To forget its Creator is one of the functions of a Creation.” Forster is speaking of literature but obviously has a higher and more heretical aim—heretical, that is, if you think that piety and memory are coextensive.

If you belong to any religion with a written scripture, you do think this, at least to some extent. But if time is a river, scripture is a rock. (Sometimes literally: Moses didn’t come down from the mountain with an Etch A Sketch.) You see the problem. The People of the Book become the people of the past.

Which, I think, is exactly what Mr. Hyde would say often happens. Whatever one thinks of the various religious frictions around the world, that they are so constant and volatile suggests a certain congealing of our collective spiritual life.

How to remedy this? Mr. Hyde is too much of a Buddhist (I'm guessing at this) and too much of an artist (but not this) to offer an answer. Yet provocations abound in "A Primer for Forgetting," and two passages particularly struck me in this regard.

In the first one, the author discusses the origin myth of an oral culture in northern Ghana. Anthropologists have learned that the myth has altered over the years as circumstances have changed, and altered in ways that are saner and more sustaining than if it were merely the result of one generation imposing interpretive power on the past. "We may think of myth as representing things from the primeval past," Mr. Hyde writes, "but a case like this shows that it is sometimes better to say that myth offers a map of present conditions, giving them authority by framing them as primeval."

Reading this, I wondered if there might be some way of "oralizing" a written scripture, of liquefying a language that has grown hard and brittle. Then I remembered the great Australian poet Les Murray, who died earlier this year:

God is the poetry caught in any religion,
caught, not imprisoned. Caught as in a mirror
that he attracted, being in the world as poetry
is in the poem, a law against its closure.

Remembering the poetry of scripture, then, and thereby forgetting some of the interpretations that have distorted, violated and closed its nature, might be a step toward recovering some of its original power.

The second provocative passage in Mr. Hyde's book focuses on Augustine, who in his "Confessions" becomes obsessed with the nature of time and his own existence within it. Feeling himself scattered through past and future, with every "now" becoming a "then" the minute his attention touches it, yet all the while intuiting an existence that transcends time altogether, Augustine comes close to despair. Then he reads (very poetically) a passage from scripture that leads him to a realization that a life in God entails " 'forgetting the past' and moving not toward those future things which are transitory but to 'the things which are before' me." Mr. Hyde sees this as a "double forgetting" that "promises to open the door to eternity."

If much of "A Primer for Forgetting" can be read as a struggle to name ways in which forgetting is a form of faith, here Mr. Hyde reverses the terms: Faith is a form of forgetting. In Augustine's formulation, a faithful person doesn't merely forget the past, that collection of dead nows. One forgets the future. That is, to have faith is to live toward—and, very occasionally, in—a future devoid of any of the attributes of time. Forever and eternity are not synonyms, but they're also not quite antonyms: One needs a "now" in order to be released from it. As the Roman philosopher Boethius (quoted by Mr. Hyde) once wrote: "The now that passes creates time; / The now that remains creates eternity."

And that, finally, is Mr. Hyde's real subject: the now that remains. Early in this wondrous book he quotes a letter from the poet Elizabeth Bishop, who is writing partly in praise of the attentive oblivion necessary for any great creative accomplishment (she is reading Charles Darwin) and partly in praise of the Oblivion that the right attention enables: "What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration." That would be an apt description of this entire book. I can't tell you how many times I put it down to stare out the window. I can think of no higher praise.

—*Mr. Wiman's most recent book is "He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art."*