On being stuck with our parents
Learning to die in Christ

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The title's suggestion that we are stuck with our parents may offend some readers. We do not like to think of ourselves as being stuck with each other. Why? Perhaps because our culture teaches us that the only things worth having are those we freely choose; we are taught to believe that our will and our freedom are basic to our being. But our parents and our children are precisely the people we do not first of all choose.

Stuckness is an apt label not only for our family ties; it also characterises much about our other relationships. We are stuck with our co-workers, our neighbours, our fellow citizens, the other inhabitants of the planet. We are also stuck with ourselves—our bodies, our minds, our aptitudes and deficiencies. We can alter our attributes in minor ways but not substantially. Above all, we are stuck with our finitude, our creatureliness.

For Christians, this is to state the obvious: we are created beings. We are beholden to another; we are stuck with God. Our free will is not basic to our being. If it were, we would will to live forever. What is basic is the givenness, the gift, of our existence. We did not give ourselves life, and even our parents did not will us into being. We were given life by God and are asked to receive it in praise.

Death is not the ultimate enemy; being forgotten is. Hence to help others die in Christ is to remember them as God remembers them and us. It is to remember together whose we are.

As Christians, we are called to imagine both life and death under God. Only then can we learn how to live our lives as given and taken by one who wills to save us. And as we look to Jesus Christ, we see a life that can be made visible in our own bodies (2 Cor. 4:10). As we listen to our messiah, we hear an invitation to become like him in his death (Phil. 3:10). To discover the meaning of these words is the challenge before us.

Memory, identity, and dying

> *Listen to me . . .*
> *[you] who have been borne by me from your birth,*
> *carried from the womb;*
> *even to your old age I am he,*
> *even when you turn grey I will carry you.*
> *I have made, and I will bear;*
> *I will carry and will save. (Isa. 46:3-4)*

My ninety-one-year-old mother-in-law is physically very much alive, but she has lost all her powers of memory. Her body, although frail, is still with us; for years her death has been gradually approaching. Reflecting on the slow process of her dying can teach us something about how to live with our own imperfect bodies. It can even teach us something about the Christian faith.

Mother was a saintly person, a conscientious Christian. She had an active prayer life, read the Bible faithfully, attended church with almost fanatic regularity, chided her children when they needed it, and rarely got angry. She was habitually hospitable, kind, gentle, loving, forgiving, gracious, and dignified. She had these characteristics, this character, because she knew whose she was. She lived under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

With the onset of her dementia her character began to change. When she was in the earliest stage of the disease, one day in the course of our Sunday dinner conversation she discovered (she had forgotten) that Father had stayed home from church. She exclaimed, "You were not in church this morning? I will never forgive you for that as long as I live!" We were shocked at her uncharacteristic words and tone. I said, "But Mom, you're a Christian, and Christians always forgive." "Oh yes," she said, "I forgot."

With the loss of her memory, Mother has lost her old identity. Does she have a new one? It is hard for us to know who she really is. Her identity confusion results in behaviour that makes no sense to us or to her. She lacks a stable frame of reference that could give consistent shape to her words and actions. Perhaps more accurately, her worlds keep shifting, without meaningful continuity. What remained longest in her memory were the poems and

songs she had learned by heart. During the five years she lived with Agnes and me, in the evenings we often sang and recited poetry. In our singing and reciting we still shared an intact world, for songs and poems are givens to be performed only one way.

Now Mother is not able to communicate at all—not to others and, one suspects, not even to herself. Until recently she was able to think. I doubt that she thinks in any meaningful way now. But she still has strong feelings and fears. With memory loss one doesn't immediately stop thinking and feeling; one just doesn't have a consistent place to think and feel from.

Memory names an important ability to make one's desires one's own. When one forgets who one is, strange things happen. Mother's children became her siblings, her husband became an uncle, her parents strangers. Once she went to our large dining room mirror and pled with the person she met there, "Please, please, take these pills and throw them away. These people are making me take them, and they are killing me. They want to poison me to get rid of me. Please take them and run!"

Why is it so hard to live with a mother whom we love, with whom we shared so many wonderful life experiences, and whom we all know to be behaving as she does because of a biological dysfunction that leaves her confused and disoriented? We see our granddaughter's confusion as normal when she cries because something has disoriented her. Like Mother, she lacks the capacity to place such events into proper context. Both are dependent upon others, yet these others often understand their roles quite differently.

Why does the disorientation of elderly people with dementia bother us while that of a baby does not? I suspect it has something to do with the relationship between dependency and future. The future of a child is wide open, while the future of an elderly mother is death. Both dependencies beg for a coherent imagination in which actions and thoughts have places that are shared by a community of friends.

Whose speech? Which metaphor?

> *Precious in the sight of the* LORD
> *is the death of his faithful ones. (Ps. 116:15)*

The story of Mother's dementia is not pretty, but I truly believe that she can still teach us much about the love of God, perhaps only in spite of herself, but that is not so different from how the love of God gets expressed through the rest of us. Her story can help us see the place of Christian memory in our living and dying in Christ. While memory is central to our understanding of human existence, you and I are not simply what we as individuals remember. We are also remembered by others.

Mother's memory and her identity are no longer principally in her own hands—not that they ever were lodged only there—but in the hands of those who control the discourse about her. Because Mother no longer knows herself, we must now be her memory. We have the power to shape her identity because we provide the speech and the metaphors. But which speech and which metaphors will do?

Michael Ignatieff[1] and David Keck[2] have written moving accounts of their mothers' struggles with Alzheimer's disease. The two accounts differ markedly because the imaginations in which these men hold their dying mothers differ; their speech and metaphors are different. They literally remember their mothers differently.

Alzheimer's may help us become aware that faithfulness in exile is after all possible. It may help us see that our salvation lies not in our control over life but in our life in Christ when we have realised that we are not in control.

Ignatieff struggles to understand the disease itself. He writes, "Diseases whose cures have been found become mere diseases; those we do not yet understand become metaphorical carriers of everything we fear and loathe."[3] He cites Susan Sontag's proposal that cancer should be regarded "as if it were just a disease, a very serious one, but just a disease. Not a curse, not a punishment, not an embarrassment. Without 'meaning.' And not necessarily a death sentence."[4]

Ignatieff labels this a "non-metaphorical" understanding of disease. To live an illness as Sontag proposes is to live it on the basis of a radical individualism, which, Ignatieff asserts, one can do only if one has an irrational trust in a medical profession that tacitly promises to win the biological wars using sophisticated scientific counterattacks. "Only medicine approaches disease nonmetaphorically." He wants to go further: "What is needed is a

shared stoicism, in which patient and doctor reach an understanding of what medicine can and cannot do."[5] In other words, Ignatieff argues that submitting to our biological destiny is not something we have a choice about. All we can do is struggle to accept what we have received. And here the task is to struggle well. We are not in control of everything, but we are in control of some things. The challenge is to accept what we cannot change and to change what we can.

Yet this difficulty remains: in the struggle of life, everyone loses. A people who from childhood have been fed the myth of self-mastery find that loss hard to accept. Death is frightening and painful because it is defeat.

While David Keck is troubled no less than Ignatieff by Alzheimer's degenerative effects, he calls it "the theological disease." Why? Because it forces us to re-examine our notions of Christian faith—faith reduced to self-fulfilment, personal experience, or social justice, for example. How can the church offer salvation to one who can no longer pray or sing or read the Bible or attend church or accept communion? What is salvation for a helpless victim succumbing to the ravages of a disease that robs one of mobility, memory, thought, and even identity? These questions are related to the question of how the church can offer salvation to a violent and unjust world when our non-violent efforts fail to make it better. In other words, how can we come to an understanding of the Christian life that is not grounded in what we can do but in how our efforts fit into the fabric of what God is doing?

Alzheimer's may help us become more intimately aware that faithfulness in exile, in a place of homelessness, strangeness, speechlessness, is after all possible. It may help us see that our salvation lies not in our control over life but in our life in Christ when we have realised that we are not in control. The story of salvation is not principally about Jesus Christ equipping his followers with new insights or tools or strategies or power to fix things. Rather salvation lies in the drama of God's grace and mercy into which we are invited as participants.

Keck suggests that (like an Alzheimer's patient) contemporary theology displays a kind of forgetfulness: it forgets that Christian faith has at its centre the symbol of suffering—Christ's suffering.

The church is often tempted to separate salvation from suffering, to see salvation as synonymous with overcoming suffering, with liberation. Memory loss teaches us otherwise! "When one beholds an Alzheimer's patient as she loses control of her body, one may see more clearly the obvious fact that when you are nailed to the cross, you can no longer control your body's motions."[6] Our ability to imagine salvation for such a person requires understanding that our well-being rests in the hands of another who can change what we cannot.

Like Ignatieff, Keck believes that we are not in charge, but Keck refuses to submit stoically to the inevitable, to surrender to biological determinism. The fact that we are not in charge doesn't mean that no one is. The story of the suffering Christ does not serve to reinforce the irony that even our Saviour lost the battle with death. Rather this story tells us that despite our experiences of suffering, death, and loss of control, God is in charge. The Bible's exile-exodus and cross-resurrection stories are not about hopeless resignation to the madness of a broken world. They are stories of hope in the saving acts of God who as creator recreates. In the face of human powerlessness, Christian hope trusts the God of resurrection who is actively restoring what is broken. The metaphor that stands as an alternative to biological destiny is that of the transforming power of God. Our speech about death's coming must therefore focus on God and on how God remembers.

Remembering as God remembers

> *Can a woman forget her nursing child,*
> *or show no compassion for the child of her womb?*
> *Even these may forget,*
> *yet I will not forget you.*
> *See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.*
> *(Isa. 49:14-16)*

Some will say that Mother is remembered best, that we remember her "true self," when we remember her as she was before the disease took hold. Although continuity with the past is important to our understanding of identity, to remember Mother as she was carries no distinct Christian meaning. Moreover, it seems alto-

gether arbitrary that we should be able to choose the time-frame by which we define our lives.

In biblical and theological terms, we all—the living, the dying, the dead—are best remembered as God remembers us. For to die in Christ is to die being remembered by God. The repentant thief on the cross knew this when he cried out, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). It is not important to die remembering. Most of us do not die that way. But to die being remembered by others makes dying bearable, and to die being remembered by God is what saves us from the sting of death.

To ask how God remembers requires a theological account of memory. M. Therese Lysaught, who is indebted to Keck's work, reminds us that a theological account of memory must begin with the simple affirmation that God remembers! Humans forget, but God remembers.

What does it mean to say that God remembers? Lysaught writes, "To be remembered by God is to be held in existence, to live. To be forgotten, on the other hand, means death."[7] To be remembered by God is to have one's deepest fears allayed, to have what threatens us with non-existence taken away.

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Lysaught and Keck both point out that while we may come to know who God is through God remembering us, in the biblical account God's acts of remembering do not have the primary function of disclosing God's identity. Rather, God's acts of remembering issue from God's loving-kindness and mercy. That is, how God remembers flows from God's character. Hence such acts are tied intimately to God's relationship with the other: fidelity rather than identity is the issue.

God's remembering is not principally mental recall. When God remembers, God acts in character: God redeems, creates, forgives, judges. And when God sets people free, as in the case of the exodus, God expects Israel to respond with similar redemptive activity—remembering the poor, the widows, the strangers in the land. God's remembering is an invitation that seeks a response.

While God faithfully remembers us, history is marked with human forgetfulness of both God and neighbour. Yet despite human forgetting, God's remembering knows no end. As Lysaught puts it, "God remembers us to the point of assuming human flesh and living among us, suffering our forgetfulness in his very body, and in rising, forgiving—or remembering our sins no more. Through God's act of remembering in Jesus we are given life anew; our enslavement to the tyranny of existential forgottenness—death—is vanquished. Our task is then very simple: 'Do this in remembrance of me.'"[8]

When we live in remembrance of Jesus Christ, that is, live as his disciples, we open ourselves to the transforming power of God, and we become able to mediate God's remembering to others.

If we are called to remember as God remembers, we will need to reorient our own understanding of the relationship between remembering and identity.[9] When we live in remembrance of Jesus Christ, that is, live as his disciples, we open ourselves to the transforming power of God, and we become able to mediate God's remembering to others. In this way we participate in God's healing ministry, living in relation to others out of our God-given identity. When we remember as God remembers, we become the kind of people who are empowered to help others die in Christ, placing them in God's memory where death loses its power.

Lysaught points out that this learning occurs in the body of Christian friends, the church, in the interplay of remembering both the living and the dead. "We learn how to remember the living . . . where we learn to remember the dead—through that remarkable Christian practice of remembering, the practice of funerals."[10]

To remember as God remembers is to live with the dying as we live with the living, that is, to hold before each other the reminder of who we are in Christ. We are loved, we are accepted, we are gifted with grace, we are being healed, we are not forgotten. And in our sometimes exilic existence God is still present with us and is redeeming us, no matter what befalls us. The concerns of the dying matter, yet only living friends can attend to them, because the dying eventually become powerless. Death is not the ultimate enemy; being forgotten is. Hence to help others

die in Christ is to remember them as God remembers them and us. It is to remember together whose we are.

The promise of presence

> *Even though I walk through the darkest valley,*
> *I fear no evil;*
> *for you are with me. (Ps. 23:4)*

God promises to be with us always, even "through the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4 KJV). Remembering as God remembers means being present, participating in the other's joys and open to the other's needs. Helping others die in Christ is not merely, or even primarily, a family matter. We only learn to befriend those with whom we are stuck by learning from the Christian community what it means to give our lives for another. It is the church—the body of Christ—that teaches the model of divine friendship by forming a people capable of incarnating love in a hostile world. Families cannot be Christian unless they learn from the Christian family, the church, how to live in remembrance of Christ. Helping people die in Christ is therefore not the task of the biological family alone but particularly of the family called church, the family that trains its members in what it means to be Christian friends.

The most basic promise we can make to one another is the promise of presence. In the consoling presence of another our fears of abandonment, alienation, and death are lessened. And what do we fear more than abandonment?

If we want to befriend others as God befriends, the most basic of all promises we can make to one another is the promise of presence, of fidelity. In this promise lies our hope, for in the consoling presence of another our fears of abandonment, alienation, and death are lessened. And what do the elderly, the dying, fear more than abandonment? For that matter, what do friends fear more?

Christian friendship expresses openness to the other and to God. We do not have all the answers, for God alone is wise. We certainly do not have all the powers, for God alone resurrects. However, Christian friendship promises presence, a promise that

commits us to sharing each other's fears and joys. We promise a presence that teaches mutual practice of Christian virtues, that seeks to build up the Christian community and fosters friendship with God.[11] Christian friendship begins and ends with the faith that we are God's.

Insofar as friendship is the promise of presence, it takes time. But those who are not elderly tend to see time in terms of getting things done, and see non-productive pursuits as a waste of time. As Richard (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) says in the movie *The Beach*, "In the endless pursuit of pleasure there is no time for death." Our culture teaches us to see time as a commodity that may be exchanged for other goods—it has cash value—rather than as a gift, an opportunity to be present to another in Christ.

Presence often produces nothing we can measure. Instead it flows out of an identity given to us in Christ, and we remain present because we are driven by passion, the passion God expresses in the incarnation. We are present and give care to the elderly because we want to—we are driven to! Without time to be present, there is no possibility of friendship, and without the possibility of friendship, dying is tragic.

In ancient times a good death was one where the gift of time provided opportunity to make things right with friends and to say good-bye to loved ones. These preparations were seen as essential to a good death. Today we fear time spent in dying—in part because we do not wish to be a burden, in part because we fear suffering. But perhaps our biggest fear is of being forsaken (even Jesus expressed this fear), and we cannot imagine our friends wanting to be present if our death comes slowly. In other words, what we fear most is loss of friendship. We find it hard to imagine that to be stuck with anyone can be a good thing. The only good end we can imagine is a quick one.

How utterly sad and impoverished such an imagination is! To remember as God remembers, to be present as God is present, is precisely to promise that we will not forsake our friends even when they become burdens to us. Stuckness, it turns out, has other names, *Christian* names: promise and commitment. We can offer each other no greater promise than to remain present to one another, redemptively reflecting the face of God's healing love! To help another die—or live—in Christ is to help that person remain

who she is in Christ, in spite of her loss of mobility, thinking capacity, and even identity, for in Christ our identity can only be found, not lost.

Notes

[1] Michael Ignatieff, *Scar Tissue* (Toronto: Viking Press, 1993).
[2] David Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).
[3] Ignatieff, *Scar Tissue*, 67.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, 17.
[7] M. Therese Lysaught, "Memory, Funerals, and the Communion of Saints: Growing Old and Practices of Remembering," in *Growing Old in Christ*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas, Carole Bailey Stoneking, Keith G. Meador, and David Cloutier (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 279.
[8] Ibid., 281.
[9] See ibid., 280.
[10] Ibid., 282.
[11] See Stanley Hauerwas and Laura Yordy, "Captured in Time: Friendship and Aging," in *Growing Old in Christ*, 177.

About the author

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