

Memories--- UUFVB Covenant Groups--- September 2018

Chalice Lighting

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings,
but connected, in mystery and miracle,
to the universe, to this community, and to each other.

Check-in: How is your spirit right now?

Centering: Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let this moment of silence ease your soul.

Opening Reading

Memory is imperfect. This is because we often do not see things accurately in the first place. But even if we take in a reasonably accurate picture of some experience, it does not necessarily stay perfectly intact in memory. Another force is at work: The memory traces can actually undergo distortion. With the passage of time, with the introduction of special kinds of interfering facts, the memory traces seem sometimes to change or become transformed. These distortions can cause us to have memories of things that never happened. Even in the most intelligent among us is memory thus malleable.

(Elizabeth Loftus, Memory: Surprising New Insights Into How We Remember and Why We Forget)

Topic Exploration: Fact or Fiction

Memory is our ability to encode, store, retain and subsequently recall information and past experiences in the human brain. It is the ability to call to mind previously-learned facts, experiences, impressions, skills and habits. However, the memories about our lives are not only storehouses for facts, but also a creative blend of fact and fiction that helps us tell meaningful stories about our lives, set goals and envision the future in a realistic way. It is commonly believed that storing a memory is like making a video, but long-term memories are never literal replays. They're mental constructions of facts, inferences, and imagined details that people patch together after the fact. Sometimes, for instance, people infer details they didn't notice or can't recall; in other cases, people compress long events into brief incidents or mistake events they imagined for real memories.

People sometimes unconsciously fictionalize memories that threaten their beliefs about themselves or that, unfiltered, would cause them great pain. Inconvenient or embarrassing details may be omitted when recalling past experiences in order to create more coherent or hopeful stories, says Dan McAdams, a psychology professor and researcher at Northwestern University. People may also exaggerate the darkness of past experiences so their 'escape' from those circumstances becomes even more impressive. Further, our memories are affected by the level of stress being felt at the time. It is no surprise that the unreliability of courtroom eyewitness testimony has been noted in numerous studies.

Questions / Sharing

1. Are you aware that you've changed certain recollections about your life over time, and if so, in what way?
2. Do you and your siblings have different memories of shared experiences, and if that's the case, why do you think that is?
3. Are you more likely to remember happy or sad experiences, and do you think you tend to expand or suppress memories of either kind?

4. Give examples of how you can remember certain types of information better than others—for example, faces rather than names; written words as opposed to spoken; a book rather than a movie.

Topic Exploration: Building our Memory Bank

The ability of humans to call on past memories in order to plan future courses of action is a hugely advantageous attribute in our survival and development as a species. In fact, the capacities that cause us to rewrite or make up memories also can be useful, enabling us to imagine the future and make creative associations among unrelated facts. Thus, both real and embellished memories contribute to making decisions, interacting with others, and solving problems.

If we recognize the inherent faultiness of our memories, we are more likely to find ways to accurately recapture information that is important to us (ideas in a lecture, advice from an investment counselor, directions for reaching a destination, facts on which to base a course of action.) Some ways to improve the accuracy of our memories:

- Keep a written record of data and experiences; make an entry on a computer or other device.
- Cluster, or categorize complex data into groups or topics.
- Make up a story or a rhyme (30 days hath September).
- Hone your ability to observe and focus during new learning or new experiences.
- Discuss the information with someone else.

5. What strategies for remembering have you found useful?

6. Are you concerned about the accuracy of past memories? To increase relevance for your grandchildren and beyond, do you believe you should reexamine and record your life story memories?

Closing Reading

The memories of all we have loved stay and come back to us in the evening of our life. They are not dead but asleep, and it is well to gather a treasure of them.” (*Vincent van Gogh, The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*)

Check-out and Reflection on Today’s Session: How were your needs for connection and spiritual growth met by this session? Do you feel your voice was heard?

Extinguish the Chalice

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
these we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Housekeeping