

Remember

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After twenty years of war and wandering, Homer's Odysseus does not return to his homeland amidst fanfare and celebration. He approaches tentatively. He cannot immediately recognize his own country; his trials have built up a wall of "instinctive falsehood" within him (90). Nor can his country, or even his wife, recognize him. He realizes that he still has many trials before him—perhaps more daunting than all that came before. Unsure of his place in the home he left two decades ago, he must find a way to reconcile the aged and long-suffering man he has become with the vigorous hero he once was—and the savior his family still expects.

Alone for twenty years, Penelope has all but given up hope of Odysseus's homecoming (*nostos*). The suitors and the deceptive gods have so hardened her that she cannot recognize him as her husband when he appears as a ragged beggar: "I am not struck by your appearance, for I very well remember what kind of man you were when you set sail from Ithaca" (155). She refuses to accept him as the man she has been missing until he can reveal to her an unmistakable sign (*sēma*): "if he really is Odysseus come back to his own home again, we shall get to understand one another better by and by, for there are signs with which we two are alone acquainted, and which are hidden from all others" (154). Odysseus then describes in great detail the bed he had fashioned out of the olive tree in the center of the room they once shared—a bed that "was wrought to be a great sign; a marvelous curiosity which [he] made with [his] very own hands" (159). Memory, so often elusive and hazy, provides the intimate sign by which they can discern one another as husband and wife after such a long period apart. Although time can change a man into a virtually unrecognizable person, *The Odyssey* suggests that some key exists, perhaps outside of Odysseus's control, that allows Penelope to unlock the connection between the stranger before her and the husband she said goodbye to twenty years ago.

Today, we have the ability to create extensive archives of our lives through pictures, audio, video, and other media. Yet without these devices, I

could still easily differentiate my loved ones from strangers, even after a long time. My grandfather passed away nine years ago; if prompted, I would find it difficult to recall his exact appearance or the sound of his voice. But our conversation would identify him to me almost immediately. We would talk about our Sunday morning walks, when we would pick the wild blackberries that grew near my house; how he used to swing me in his arms; how he nicknamed me *terremoto*—‘earthquake.’ These memories piece together the man that he was in a way that photographs cannot. They allow me to continue knowing him although my age has doubled since the last time I saw him. No matter how hazy these memories seem at times, they allow his identity to survive even though his life ended long ago.

Yet while we cherish our precious recollections of loved ones lost, we face the frightening realization that, in time, we might lose those memories as well. Bernard Cooper’s essay “Labyrinthine” traces how our memories progress from “bright particular[s]” to vague generalities as our minds wane (346). Using a maze metaphor, Cooper asserts that as we continue to chase our memories, our lives eventually spiral into confusion. But he allows us to maintain hope, showing us that pursuing these fading memories is crucial to our own self-discovery. Although it is in the nature of mazes to confuse travelers and delay them on their way to a destination, the fact remains that there *is* a destination: the inner-most chamber, the exit, the moment of clarity. Cooper muddles through his life’s maze with a destination always in mind, extracting the truth from uncertainty even though it “is never naked, but always wearing some disguise” (347). In the final sentences of the essay, Cooper addresses his dead parents: “I suppose it was inevitable that, gazing down at this piece of paper, I’d feel your weary expressions on my face” (347). A recollection of them lies at the center of his experience, but he can only reach it after many wrong turns. At the center of Odysseus’s labyrinth is the reclamation of his past self, despite the changes he has undergone and the extensive passage of time.

Memory also serves as a path to the self as it winds its way through Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The novel chronicles nine-year-old Oskar Schell’s struggle to remember and honor the father he lost in the terrorist attacks of September 11. Although his mother tells him to try to be happy and insists that his father would have wanted that, Oskar can only reply, “Dad would want me to remember him” (171). Just as Odysseus wishes to be remembered with honor by his homeland and with affection by Penelope, Oskar nurtures the same hopes for his father after his death. But at one point, when Oskar and his grandfather dig up his father’s

empty casket, Foer suggests—contrary, perhaps, to Odysseus’s experience—that objects are not sufficient in defining who a person was. “At first I suggested filling the coffin with things from Dad’s life, his red pens or his jeweler’s magnifying glass,” Oskar says. “But the more we discussed it, the less sense it made, because what good would that do, anyway?” (321). Instead, the pair decides to fill the casket with letters from the grandfather to his son—the history and memories with which a life should be filled but, in Oskar’s father’s case, were sometimes held back. What would a red pen, a maze, or a scar mean without the memories that they represent?

The divide between material objects and living, breathing memories widens tangibly throughout the day following the graveyard excavation. After filling his father’s casket with the letters, Oskar ventures into his friend Mr. Black’s apartment and begins to peruse the old man’s extensive index of all the significant people he has come across. Oskar spots a card labeled “Schell,” and for a happy moment believes he has finally secured a testament to his father’s renown—what Homer would call his *kleos*. He extracts the card and feels relieved: “I felt like everything I’d done had been worth it, because I’d made Dad into a Great Man who was biographically significant and would be remembered.” Upon closer examination, however, he realizes that the card actually bears his own name, along with a simple definition that conveys a thousand sentiments in one word: “Son” (286). The father lives on, but not in the “biographically significant” way Oskar expects. He lives on as the father implied by the word “Son.” He lives on, his identity preserved, in the memory of a relationship.

Odysseus could not rely on any amount of *kleos* or any number of scars to prove his true character to the woman who once knew him most intimately. The memories we possess and the memories of those we leave behind are the only medium that allows us to both know ourselves and to convey who we were after we are gone. Without these memories, is Odysseus the same person who left Ithaca twenty years before? A scar upon a limb is no more than a scar; a scar from a boar-hunt on Mount Parnassus is a scar upon the limb of Odysseus. A bed in a room is no more than a piece of furniture, but a bed made from a young olive tree by the skillful and dutiful hands of a husband for his wife is a bed made by Odysseus. Despite the passage of time and regardless of physical changes, Penelope can embrace Odysseus as her long-lost husband when and only when she sees within him the reflections of the memories he left etched in her mind so many years before. Although he has changed during his absence, some essential part of Odysseus’s character and identity endures precisely because she remembers who he once was, what he

once did. Rather than fame, honor, or trivial physical signs, memories serve as the vessels that carry the self onward through years, decades, even lifetimes.

Perhaps our memories not only contain imprints of our identities but also constitute identity itself. We tend to view identity as an intrinsic thing, belonging only to the individual, but we might better understand it as a collaborative endeavor. Identity does not solely take shape through our perceptions of ourselves; it is also pieced together by our experiences—that is to say, our memories and the memories of those who know us. It is a shared and continuous process, constantly altered, constantly formed. We cannot fully convey ourselves on paper, through objects, or in pictures; it is through our relationships and the memories we share with others that we give life and longevity to our selves. Even with Odysseus's certainty, he could never reconcile the aging man of Scroll 23 with the once vigorous hero of Scroll 1 without his family's recognition. Each memory holds a piece of him: he cannot become the master he once was without his dog Argos's dying recognition, the father he longs to be without Telemakhos's weeping embrace, or the husband he still is without Penelope's passionate kiss.

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