

Daily Lenten Devotional
Sunday, March 16, 2025
Written by Rev. Fred Garry

oblivion (ə'blɪviən)

ad L. *oblivion-em* forgetfulness

- 1.a. The state or fact of forgetting or having forgotten; forgetfulness.
- 2.a. The state or condition of being forgotten.
 - b. A thing forgotten.

The common phrase spoken when memorials are constructed and dedicated is that we "shall never forget." With this statue, this plaque, this piece of art or architecture we will be ever reminded. Emblazoned on many of the mementos for 9-11 is the imperative, "Never Forget." I believe the impulse and intent of such declarations is noble. We should always bring to mind, be mindful of, those who sacrificed for us, those who suffered in a cause that brought us freedom from suffering. And more to the point there is a debt owed in memory. We have an obligation to remember.

Yet there is an aspect of memorials and grief work where not always remembering is key. When we lose someone we love and begin the year to eighteen months of healthy grief, this time of mourning, is often marked by the way our attention shifts from being consumed with the weight of loss, the persistent memory, to the time where we begin to live beyond grief. Where grief might be described as seeing the world through the frame of loss, grief work is where the world around the frame comes back into focus.

Often such a return to the world is lengthened with tragedy. There are other aspects of loss that can deepen the experience of grief such as survivor's guilt, a feeling of culpability, or factors that are not explained all leaving the grieving unable to accept loss. Be it healthy or tragic, the passage through loss ultimately seeks the same moment. We don't forget the ones we lost, but we also do not always remember. This is how we treat the living. We don't forget the people we love, but they are not always in our consciousness.

Before I began the research on monuments, memorials, and museums, I thought the word "oblivious" meant *out of touch* or *clueless* or simply *unaware*. When I came to see the notion of oblivion as a state of being forgotten, it changed how I looked at memorials in particular and especially the call to "never forget." What is more, there is ever in the background of any memorial or monument the need to both remember and to forget, to render somethings silent as we chose somethings to be spoken. In the making of a marker to remember we are also assigning parts of a time or a tragedy or an event to the realm of *oblivion*.

"There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument." Robert Musil

After a funeral, after the hymns and the eulogies, after the prayers and meditations, there is the brief moment of committal at the graveside. Here we say things like "from dust you came and to dust you return" or "as we commended the soul unto God we commit the body to the earth." In each of these moments and phrases there is a covering, a placing out of sight. Although it would be crass to speak of oblivion at the grave, this is the first step of invisibility. Even though a marker will be placed naming this ground as where we buried a loved one, we begin the path to oblivion by covering the casket or urn. In the instances where I have committed someone's ashes into water, this invisibility is almost instantaneous. It is as if they disappear.

The grave marker, the monument, the tombstone serve the dual purpose of memorializing, the names are cut in stone, etched in brass so to be remembered, but their bodies and remains are buried, covered, put out of sight, they become invisible. To be so "engraved" is the most common memorial. Although not common until the French Revolution, the individual grave with the maker naming the deceased is the expected path in death. Before the French Revolution, graves were common and burial notices were in books not in granite.

Although it may seem counter intuitive, part of every memorial is how far and what way people are ready to remember and what they are not ready to call to mind. This was very true of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. Constructed less than a decade after the fall of Saigon, those who spearheaded the "wall" were very careful not include the word "war" or to suggest this was a monument to the Vietnam War. It was too soon perhaps to speak as if the "conflict" could be defined.

In the same way, after the Civil War any attempt to refer to slavery and emancipation was suppressed in monuments and memorials. It was a fight for the union. The end of slavery, the horror of millions enslaved to fuel the cotton economy where both the Northern states and Southern states were complicit, any attempt to memorialize this was deemed unspeakable. The closest the nation came was the pitiable statue of Lincoln as the emancipator in Washington D.C.

It is a fair critique to suggest the silence regarding slavery was a convenient omission that allowed Jim Crow to re-enslave. No one who reads Douglas' Blackmon's painful, Pulitzer Prize winning work *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, no one can read this book without feeling the violence of not remembering, of burying the truth of "reconstruction." At the same time, it is also clear how much people needed to forget. The hundreds of thousands dead, even greater number of wounded, the widows, the orphans. It was as if one horror was enough. More than that was too much.

How we memorialize, be it in the simple grave marker or the colossus statue, how we remember is both visible and invisible, something brought to mind and something left silent. Why we do this, why we pay what we pay, offer what is given and what is withheld requires

skill. One skill I find of great importance is our ability to forget. Oblivion sounds unloving and unkind, but there is much more of life we do not remember than we conjure.



Saint-Gaudens "Adams Memorial"