

**PROUST/REGAINING TIME**  
**LENTEN DEVOTIONAL**  
**April 3, 2025**



All streams run to the sea,  
but the sea is not full;  
to the place where the streams flow,  
there they continue to flow.  
—Ecclesiastes 1.7

There is a risk in our consideration of debt. When we say we owe honor, or we are indebted to the memory of someone, or what we convey in the common confession, "I owe you an apology", when we consider such claims there is a risk we will transform memory into a commodity, memory will become something not only be monetized in terms of value, but also memory becomes something exchanged as a good or product.

We walk a similar path when we speak of time as a possession. "This is my time!" "Don't waste my time." We see this in sporting events where time is "put back on the clock." In legislative hearings members of congress may say, "I yield my time." When we speak of time this way it is as if we own it, possess it as we would a car or a book. Yet, when we consider time this way there is a confusion between our perception of time and how we account for time.

You can see, or better yet feel, the difference when we say things like, "it was only five minutes, but it felt like an eternity." Or the opposite, "time flew by so quickly, an hour felt like a few moments." In a different way, there are certain times in our life of greater and lesser value. If we speak of having the "time of our life" there is a greater value inferred than the claim of "wasting time".

In the need to honor, to express gratitude, or to offer penance, there is a greater and lesser value. As we considered with the eulogy, the value of the funeral is often found in the measure of authenticity. Was the presence of the deceased felt and heard in the memories and tributes, in the prayers and pronouncements? The conjured presence of the dead changes the value of the experience. People will speak of "being moved" or that words were "very fitting." Yet, the one comment I find the most satisfying is this: "that was beautiful." Somehow in the midst of sadness, grief, loss, heartbreak, even tragedy, people have described what they heard and saw in a funeral as beautiful.

Before we consider how Marcel Proust illumines this valuing of time and memory, just one more word about debt. From time to time I will hear people say, "I will ever be in this person's debt" or they will say, "I could never repay you" or most intriguing, "I can't apologize enough." In these claims the economy of memory, the price of both deeds and misdeeds is valued as beyond measure. What I find intriguing here is how sincere are the claims. Although there are times when people exaggerate the value of what is owed, there is, perhaps even then, an element of endlessness. What is more, quite often I find the person who is "owed" has no interest, no sense, usually no recollection of what they did or didn't do, offered or withheld. The one we most want to thank usually has no idea they did something valuable. In the same way, often with claims of penance, the need to apologize, to amend, to reconcile, often this need is only felt by one person. So often when a person is devastated by an error and they confess such an error, the supposedly injured party will say, "I didn't even notice that. Don't worry. There is no need of an apology."

How we value time and how we conjure memory is the structure of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. These two are like the structure or foundation of all that he offered. Into this structure, though, is a constant exploration of desire. Who desires whom; how one is desired; what you desire; what it means to be desirable. So often Proust would expound on a gathering at a home where there was conversation and food and intrigue. Yet, after a few hundred pages you might wonder what really happened. Was that really a long description of a dinner where the narrator felt uneasy? If you are looking for action, or events of great magnitude like tragedy or violence, Proust can be incredibly disappointing. Yet, what he captures is how we are satisfied with life or dissatisfied. More to the point, Proust illumines how our satisfaction is elusive. We are like the ocean ever being offered more by the streams, but yet, never being full.

As Swann, Charlus, Albertine, and the narrator move through desire, the persistent theme is disappointment. It is like the old adage, the hunt is more thrilling than the kill. And if that were Proust's message, he could have been done with it in an essay and not filled thousands of pages with sentences containing hundreds of words. What made the exploration of value was not the idea that the pursuit of desire is often greater than the satisfaction, what made his narration of great value was its poetic possibility. Each novel had the opportunity for beauty and in this beauty light can be gained and with the light our memory, and possibly our desire, can be seen and heard. There could be, as it were, a regained value of time, the worth, the substance of memory as time regained. The narrator's persistent desires and pursuits are not mine. I am

not a debutante in late 19th century Paris who felt the earth shook with World War I. I will most likely never summer in Normandy. Yet, in his memories mine were conjured as well.

When we build a monument to honor a great life, to remember a deed of power or bravery or sacrifice, we are satisfying a debt. We owe thanks and praise. But what is greater is that we can create a poetic offering where light is cast on our own life, on our memories. Even in the neglected and unadorned statue of Daniel Webster there is the possibility of light, there can be an illumination of memory surpassing his life and reaching ours. The light might be great or it might be fading, the offering may be of great value or it may be a poor tribute. In the degrees of light is a possibility of satisfaction, fullness. The satisfaction is not determined or owned, but it can be exchanged as a gift, an offering.