The Power to Forget

James Downey - Columbia, Missouri

I believe in the power to forget.

On December 12, 1969, my world changed forever. My father was murdered. I was eleven years old.

In the middle of the night I woke to flashing lights from a police car. A knock at the door, and I heard my mom answer it. Then I heard a man say: “Marlene, Wil’s been shot.”

See, my dad was a cop. And as happens all too often, he was killed during a routine procedure, in this case a burglary investigation. They caught the man who killed my father that same night. He was tried and convicted, sentenced to die. That sentence was commuted in 1973 by the Supreme Court, and to this day he is in prison.

I think he is, anyway. I don’t know for sure, because I have tried my very best to forget him. It was that, or succumb to the hatred that threatened to define my life.

For a while I tried forgiveness, since that is supposed to be liberating. When I say “for a while,” I mean for years. But I failed. There are some things that cannot be forgiven, at least for me.

Instead, I have slowly, and carefully, excised his name from my memory. Now and then something will happen; I’ll come across a story in the paper about him being up for parole, or a family friend will ask “whatever happened to so-and-so,” and I’ll have to start again to forget.

It’s not easy. Much of our culture, much of our popular literature, is based around the theme of a son avenging the death of his father. The whole “find the bastard who shot my pa” thing. You may not notice it, but I do. And every time I hear about another officer down, every time Father’s Day rolls around on the calendar, I think about my dad. And I think about his death. And I deny the existence of the man who killed him.

Even now, as I write this, his name tries to emerge, tries to struggle free from where I have buried it. But it means that I don’t have to live with a constant, aching anger. It means that I don’t have to be trapped in that moment of history. It means that I can continue with my life, never forgetting the love I have for my father, or what it meant for him to die, but not being possessed by a need for vengeance.

I believe in the power to forget. How many old grudges still fuel the fires of revenge in this world? How often have more people had to die because of a fixation on a memory? How much better would things be if we could just clean the slate, forget the offenses we’ve suffered and the ones we’ve inflicted, and move on?

*James Downey is a book and document conservator in private practice in Columbia, Missouri. He is also a writer, with hundreds of freelance articles, a care-giving memoir (Her Final Year), and a novel (Communion of Dreams) published. He is currently working on his second novel.*

As heard on *the This I Believe podcast*, March 23, 2015  
Recorded by Jeff D. Corrigan from The State Historical Society of Missouri

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/1856/>