



Soul Matters

Holding History



Materials for Individual Reflection

November 2021

Welcome to the Practice of Holding History

Let's start with the words of Parker Palmer,

"Jewish teaching includes frequent reminders of the importance of a broken-open heart, as in this Hasidic tale: A disciple asks the rebbe: "Why does Torah tell us to 'place these words upon your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?" The rebbe answers: "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in."

So, a closed heart. It's admittedly a strange place to begin a month of exploring Holding History. And yet, when we are honest, we know that defensiveness, protectiveness and closed doors rule our relationship with history more than we'd like.

For instance, very few of us have pasts without pain woven through. And it's just easier to shut out those traumatic times than confront them head on. We are all well taught in the game of sweeping old wounds under the rug.

And of course, there's the unprocessed horrors woven throughout our cultural history. They are the rule not the exception, but we work hard to close ourselves off from them with standard lines like, "At our best, this isn't who we are!" or "As Americans, we're better than this!" The truth is we've never consistently been "better than this." Amnesia rather than a courageous and honest reckoning describes the current character of America's heart.

All of which is to say that there is a deeper relationship between history and vulnerability than we often recognize. Without a heart willing to feel pain and endure grief, the fullness of our histories just can't enter in. Talking about past mistakes requires the ability to vulnerably say I'm sorry. An honest telling of racism requires the painful acceptance that some of us still benefit from the prejudices and oppression of our ancestors. Healing historical racism requires someone suffering the costs of reparations. And telling your full story requires navigating grief over choices you wish you would have made differently.

It certainly seems the rabbis were right. Like those holy words, history in its fullness just sits there until our hearts break open and allow it in.

So let's not just "remember" this month. Let's not just talk of telling truthful tales. Let's prepare to grieve, to confess, to feel, to forgive. The world needs broken-open hearts, not just good historians. That is, indeed, the only way the past gets in.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A

The Image of You

We all have it, that one memory from our younger years that brings us joy or grounds our sense of identity. It's one of the most precious pieces of personal history, so we hold on to it tightly.

Your task this month is not simply to remember it but find a picture of it. And bring it to your group.

The invitation is to spend some time exploring it in a deeper way than maybe you have before. So make time to ask yourself: Why have I held on to this memory for so long? Why has it been holding on to me? What is it trying to give me? Who helped me remember it? What piece of my current identity does it hold? What hunger does it represent? What wish is it wanting to rekindle?

Here's a bit of inspiration and encouragement as you make your way:

Remembering, by William Stafford

<https://wordsoftheyear.com/2018/07/02/remembering-by-william-stafford/>

Option B

Holding On to the History of Where You Are From

Remembering who we want to be is tied up with remembering where we've come from. Holding on to our roots keeps us rooted. It also keeps us connected to gratitude and humility. To remember where you've come from is to remember that you didn't create yourself or earn your successes all on your own. Remembering where you've come from is also a way to celebrate your uniqueness.

So this month, spend some time teasing out the unique roots that make you who you are...by writing a poem about where you've come from!

Don't worry; it's not as intimidating as it first may sound. Poet George Ella Lyon has already laid the ground for us with her poem, Where I'm from. Following her poem's structure, hundreds of writers have written their own. Here's Lyon's poem:

http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/professional_development/workshops/writing/george_ella_lyon.pdf

Read by author (poem begins at :54): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdnHI_yW1dQ

Here are examples of someone making it their own:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c02hS9vcsWM>
- [https://www.wsuu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/I_Am_From_Poem\(2\).pdf](https://www.wsuu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/I_Am_From_Poem(2).pdf) (scroll down)

And here's a template for you to use to make yours:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZFfjVGEN2PHHZIdBbw59NFeZ9bWqRo6QNZh_pHwrFvw/edit?usp=sharing

Option C

History That Takes Ahold of Us

Holding history can sound passive, as if we are holding it in place, protecting it from running away, making sure it stays alive in our memory. But we don't just keep memories alive, they keep us alive! They enliven us. They push and prod us to action. They don't just comfort us with warm thoughts of the past, they light a fire underneath us, calling us to make changes in the present.

That's what these two podcasts witness to. They tell two stories about holding history in a way that gets under our skin and forces us to alter our futures.

- Black Wall Street: <https://one.npr.org/?sharedMediaId=1002538572:1002597102>
- DIY Reparations: <https://one.npr.org/?sharedMediaId=993976420:994051982>

Your task this month is to listen to them and identify the single sentence or two from them that gets under your skin. In other words, find the sentences that speak to you personally and seem to ask something of you. Maybe they make you think differently, but hopefully they invite you to act differently.

Come to your group with your chosen sentence, and what push or prod it contains.

Option D

Cook & Share a Piece of Your History

History isn't just held in our minds and memory. As often, it's held in the food we eat, and the recipes passed down to us.

So this month reconnect with your history through the food you love and the food that loves you, by:

- Dig out an old family recipe and have your family cook it with you. As you do, share the stories connected with it.
- (In a covid safe way) Invite over a small circle of friends and have each of them bring a dish from a family recipe or their particular culture. During dinner take turns sharing your stories connected to the dish everyone brought.
- Talk to a parent, uncle or grandparent and ask them about family recipes or cultural foods they loved. Then connect with them by making the recipe they give you or creating a dish from your cultural heritage.

And maybe most important of all: whichever option you choose, consider making it again the day of your group and sharing it with your Soul Matters friends.

Option E

Which Quote is Yours?

In the Companion Pieces section below, there are many quotes about the practice of holding history. Engaging these quotes and finding *the one* that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself.

So, as your spiritual exercise for this month, reflect on those quotes until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of holding history.

After you've found it, consider writing it out on a small piece of paper and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Artists among you may want to embellish it with art or create a collage. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? And what is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge?

Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

1. Do you believe that history is "[written by the victors](#)"? How have you experienced the "losers" version of history winning out? Or altering your own calling in the world?
2. When you tell the history of the pandemic ten years from now, what story do you think you will begin with?
3. What memory has been with you the longest? What does it want from you so badly that it has held on to you for so long?
4. What memory will die with you if you don't pass it on? Is this the month you finally make a concrete plan to make sure it lives on the memory of another?
5. What memory holds your truest self? What memories help you hold on to yourself?
6. What if the question isn't, "Did it really happen that way?" But instead, "Why do you want to remember that it happened that way?"
7. Have you figured out the story you want to be remembered by?
8. Does fall come with its own set of memories? Do you remember differently this time of year?
9. What has life taught you about memory and pain?
10. Is it time to question the ancestors' wisdom?
11. Is it time to tell the ancestors' secrets?
12. Have you forgiven yourself for that mistake-filled chapter in your own history?
13. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining the spiritual practice of Holding History.

Wisdom from Word Roots & Definitions

The Ancient Greek roots of the word history carry the meanings of "inquiry", "knowledge from inquiry", or "to judge." In all European languages, "history" is still used to mean both "what happened" and "the study of what happened." In modern German and French, the same word is used to mean both "history" and "story." ([source](#))

So the roots contain a calling not simply to recount what has happened but to study and "judge" it, to tease out its significance and challenge for us today. History's close connection to storytelling is also a caution that there is no "history" that doesn't involve someone's imposed "story."

It's also helpful to think about the definition and roots of the word "remember," which some dictionaries define as "To do something that one has undertaken to do or that is necessary or advisable." There is a powerful connotation here of responsibility to complete a task one has pledged themselves to or a task that has been given one to complete.

Wise Words

History is written by the victors.

[Author unknown](#)

History is written by everyone. The more accurate quote would be, "History is temporarily twisted by people who're going to profit from it in the short term."

[Subham Jain](#)

Amnesia gets in the way of atonement in America. But amnesia is actually too benign a word because it sounds as though people just forgot about the horrors of slavery, forgot about people who were forced to work in the fields literally until their death, forgot that between 50,000 and 85,000 Africans died during their forced migration to this country in the way one forgets where they placed their car keys or their passport.

We've been through more than a willful forgetting; we've had instead an assiduous effort to rewrite history. We've built monuments to traitors and raised large sums of money to place the names of generals who fought against their own country all over highways and civic buildings. We've allowed turncoats to become heroes.... On a personal level, this false narrative about America is another act of cruelty, even a kind of larceny.

[Michele L. Norris](#)

There is a lie some Americans tell themselves when America is on its worst behavior: "This isn't America!" or "This isn't who we are!" or "We're better than this!"

[Sam Sanders](#)

One thing I've learned is that at the core of white privilege is the entitlement to amnesia and ignorance. To forget that America was founded on stolen land, stolen labor, and genocide, and that we live in a society structured by this history, is to embrace an identity rooted in a false innocence and a flight from truth and healing. This is the rot at the root of the nation.

[Jabari S. Jones](#)

The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in an illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.

Walter Brueggemann

In times like these, I look to the past. I come from people not meant to survive, and here is our bloodline, stronger than ever.

Brittany Packnett

To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves.

Alice Walker

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes—our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking around.

G. K. Chesterton

We are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them.

Joan Didion

Is memory produced by us, or is it us? Our identity is very likely whatever our memory decides to retain. But let's not presume that memory is a storage room. It's not a tool for being able to think, it's thinking, before thinking... It's impossible to separate it from what it remembers... Memory is intelligent. It's a knowledge seated neither in the senses, nor in the spirit, but in collective memory. It is communal, though deeply personal. Involved with the self, though autonomous. At war with death.

[Etel Adnan](#)

Memory invites us to maintain our grip on the past, but it also calls us to pay attention to who we are in the present. Memory's question is not just "Do you remember?" but "How do you want to be remembered?"

Rev. Scott Tayler

Remembering (On the freedom of childhood)

William Stafford

Full poem found at

<https://wordsfortheyear.com/2018/07/02/remembering-by-william-stafford/>

"...I carry those days in a tiny box

wherever I go, I open the lid...

There is a sigh like my breath when I do this.

Some days I do this again and again."

I do not know if the seasons remember their history or... if the oak tree remembers its planting. I do not know if the squirrel remembers last fall's gathering or... if the night remembers the moon... Perhaps that is the reason for *our* births -- to be the memory for creation. Perhaps salvation is something very different than anyone ever expected. Perhaps this will be the only question we will have to answer: "What can you tell me about September?"

[Burton D Carley](#)

It's not forgetting that heals. It's remembering.

Amy Greene

You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. And you come through. It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly – that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp.

Anne Lamott

I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me to see the beauty in the world through my own eyes.

Since you've gone and left me, there's been so little beauty,

but I know I saw it clearly through your eyes...

[Ysaye M. Barnwell](#)

Don't cling to a mistake just because you spent a lot of time making it.

Aubrey De Graf

Someone once told me the definition of hell; on your last day on earth, the person you could have become will meet the person you became.

Anonymous

Remember the Sky

Joy Harjo

Full poem found at

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/remember-0>

Remember your birth, how your mother struggled to give you form and breath. You are evidence of her life, and her mother's, and hers...

Remember the earth whose skin you are...

Remember you are all people and all people are you..."

Music

Two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. They are organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlists as musical meditations.

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Holding History](#).

Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [Holding History](#).

Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

Videos & Podcasts

What is Generational Trauma?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqFyXFjQcHw>

The Spaces that Hold Our Nation's History of Racism

<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-55897250>

The Doctrine of Discovery: Why the Europeans considered the "New World" given by God to them

<https://vimeo.com/71915411>

How to Narrate Your Life Story

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Brpk26Oq4aE&vI=en>

Free Brian Williams - Revisionist History

Malcolm Gladwell

<http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/24-free-brian-williams>

"NBC news anchor Brian Williams told a war story on national television. It wasn't true. But does that make him a liar? Part two of Revisionist History's memory series asks why we insist that lapses of memory must also be lapses of character."

Therapy Session - Spoken word poetry on memory and race

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKLCwSDEix0>

"If you could talk to your ancestors, what would you ask them?"

Forgetfulness, Billy Collins

<https://www.britannica.com/video/164445/Billy-Collins-American-work-documentary-Poet-Laureate>

Articles

21 Lessons From America's Worst Moments

<https://time.com/5858169/americas-worst-moments/>

On holding on to the lessons of bad history...

Many Black World War II Veterans Were Denied Their GI Bill Benefits

https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/many-black-world-war-ii-veterans-were-denied-their-gi-bill-benefits-time-to-fix-that/?utm_source=pocket_mylist

Why Confederate Lies Live On

https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/06/confederate-lost-cause-myth/618711/?utm_source=pocket_mylist

We're Gonna Carry That Weight a Long Time

https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/were-gonna-carry-that-weight-a-long-time/?utm_source=pocket_mylist

"A team of scientists, writing in Nature, estimated that 2020 was the year the mass of human-made materials exceeded that of all living things on the planet: the combined mass of our concrete, asphalt, aggregate, metal, glass, and plastic superseded the one Teratonne (one trillion metric tons) of plants, mammals, fish, bacteria, fungi, archaea, protists, and viruses. By mass, there are now more buildings and infrastructure (1,100 Gt) than there are trees and shrubs (900 Gt); more plastic (8 Gt) than land and marine animals (4 Gt)..."

The Right to be Forgotten

Talha Jalal

<https://onbeing.org/blog/talha-jalal-the-right-to-be-forgotten/>

A deeply contemporary reflection on "the right to be forgotten" and the desire for our current, real-life selves to represent us rather than the selves housed on the internet from long ago.

Books

Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America

Ibram X. Kendi

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

Isabel Wilkerson

[Review of the book](#)

The Forgetting Machine: Memory, Perception, and the Jennifer Aniston Neuron

Rodrigo Quian Quiroga

[Review of the book](#)

Still Alice

Lisa Genova

[Review of the book](#)

Movies

[The Report](#)

[The Sense of an Ending](#)

[13TH](#)

[The Father](#)

[Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind](#)

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as "soul_matters_circle"

Music Playlists:

Click [here](#) for links to the [Spotify playlists](#) for each month.

Click [here](#) to check out the [YouTube playlists](#).

Find support for bringing the
monthly themes home and into your family life with

Soulful Home: A Guide for Families:

<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/soulful-home.html>



© 2021-22 Soul Matters ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Packets are for use only by member congregations of the Soul Matters Sharing Circle.

Learn how to join at

<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com>