‘THE LARGE AND BOUNDLESS CHAMBER’
Long-Term Memory and the Future of Contemporary Preaching

Joseph M. Webb

> Great is this force of Memory, excessive great, O my God; a large and boundless chamber! Who ever sounded the depths thereof? A wonderful admiration surprises me, amazement seizes me upon this. And men go abroad to admire the heights of mountains, the mighty billows of the sea, the broad tides of rivers, the expanse of the ocean, and the circuits of the stars, and pass themselves by.
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> Augustine, Confessions

Over the past fifteen or so years I have spent a great deal of time studying the dynamics and importance of human memory as it figures in preaching. Most of the work has focused on the relationship between memory and the process of preaching without notes. In doing so, though, I have been acutely conscious of dealing with only one half of the process of human memory—that half we know as short-term memory. How, in other words, can a preacher easily, reliably, and quickly commit to memory a basic outline for the sermon’s presentation, and do so regularly on a weekly basis. This, we now know, is well within the reach of any preacher willing to embrace the basic disciplines of short-term memory.

For the past couple of years, then, I have turned attention to the other half of the memory equation, usually called “long-term memory.” Frankly, I had no idea when I started work on long-term memory that its role would be as important to the preaching task as it is. In a profound way, it is probably more important to what the preacher does, or might well do in the future, than short-term memory. In this brief paper, I want to lay some background about what researchers tell us about long-term memory—and then indicate what, for me, was the unexpected relevance of it to what preachers do in preparing and presenting sermons.

1.

Long-term memory involves the accumulated memories of our lives, not something that we set out to learn this week for an exam—or a sermon. When we talk about “remembering” this or that, or “do you remember?” we usually have long-term memory in mind. St. Augustine was right: our long-term memory is a “large and boundless chamber” the depths of which are difficult to fathom.[1]

The philosophers of long-term memory work on the really tough questions, often setting them up for empirical research. Their questions include things like: How do we know about such a thing as “pastness” at all? Or, where does an awareness of temporal sequence in our heads

[1] Numerous scholars of memory point out how far-reaching and unwieldy research in long-term memory is, which no doubt accounts for why this is still a largely unexplored discipline. See, for example, Elizabeth and Robert Bjork, eds., Memory (San Diego: Academic Press, 1996). They emphasize that one of the biggest puzzles of all is how we go about forgetting in long-term memory.

come from? Or, how do we distinguish "actual" past happenings from "imaginary" ones, "real events" in the past from "make believe" ones.[2] Researchers, on the other hand, tend to work on more practical matters. These involve such things as how and why we remember some things from our pasts and not others, and what happens when we try to call up long remembered or partially remembered things from our pasts.

As Augustine's extended paean to memory in his Confessions indicates, the Greeks not only appreciated memory's power and reach, but also valued it as an essential ingredient in their arts of rhetoric and oratory. Still, it was not until the latter decades of the nineteenth century, and largely with the rise of the psychological sciences, that the systematic study of human memory began. Among those interested in it, two made particularly important contributions. One was Herman Ebbinghaus, whose classic monograph titled, simply, Memory,[3] was published in 1885; the other was William James, whose monumental study, The Varieties of Religious Experience,[4] still almost submerges his highly influential studies of memory. Both Ebbinghaus and James were in a sense pre-scientific students of memory, though James is usually credited with some of the seminal distinctions still in use today—including the distinction between short- and long-term memory as two entirely different structures of memory; James is also credited with the designation of a separate category of memory for motor learning, or the behavioral "memories" that we know as "habits."

Despite such breakthroughs, it was not until the 1960s and early 70s that scientific work began in earnest, and in a variety of disciplines, on the nature of memory. One of the most important researchers of this era is a Canadian psychologist named Endel Tulving. Tulving began with James' category of long-term memory and devised another ground-breaking distinction, one that was picked up and echoed by other scholars using slightly different language. Tulving said there are two fundamental types of long-term memory, one he called, somewhat misleadingly, "semantic memory" and the other "episodic memory."[5] Another researcher, uncomfortable with Tulving's language, referred to the same things as "propositional memory" and "imagistic memory," though those categories are not much better than Tulving's.[6] Other terms are also sometimes used to talk about Tulving's distinction.

While Tulving's "semantic" and "imagistic" categories are the most important of recent research, they are not the only two categories of long-term memory to have appeared, however. One researcher talks about "procedural memory,"[7] or the ability to learn and then effortlessly remember "how to do things." It has also become commonplace to talk about what one researcher named "flashbulb memories;" this refers to those long-term memories that become tied in our minds to a particular time, place, and event, those memories, in other words, that have

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[2] There are a several insightful books from the past few decades that are rich in ideas and directions for thinking. Among the best in my judgment is Brian Smith, Memory (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966).

[3] Out of print for years, a new paperback edition was issued by Dover Press in 1987.

[4] James work on religious experience is widely available; his writings and studies of long-term memory are found scattered throughout his work on psychology.

[5] Tulving's work is also easy to find. Often he teams with a colleague or student for important work. Among his seminar works is Elements of Episodic Memory, published by Oxford University Press in paperback in 1985.

[6] See Smith for a discussion of alternative language.

[7] Thomas Butler, ed., Memory: History, Culture, and the Mind (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 42, 43.

a distinctive trauma, whether personal or collective, tied to them. Learning that President Kennedy was assassinated, or first hearing of 9/11, as well as being told as a child that one's parents were divorcing, are all examples of "flashbulb memories."[8]

Tulving's dual categories, however, are the most fruitful ones with which to begin a study of this material for our purposes in preaching, though acknowledging that the field is larger than appears here is appropriate.

2.

First, "semantic memory." The word "semantic" is not used here to refer to language or language usage, which is the misleading part. The term is used to indicate all of those materials—and they are strikingly vast, really—that each of us has "learned," school-like, over the years. We are taught almost from the beginning of life. From the moment that consciousness begins to form, we are learning—picking up things from others, absorbing, digesting, listening, testing, filing "information" away, out of school as well as in school.

In school, what we learned was more organized, disciplined. We studied subjects and blocks of material at every grade level. We took tests. We were pressed to relate facts, concepts and idea to each other; we discovered that what we learned as a body of material in one area became formative for what we would assemble in another area. We learned and, it turned out, we could file away in our heads and remember at least some things far beyond a test. We found ourselves very interested (for a variety of reasons) in some of those materials along the way, and we remembered them particularly well; even years later, they can still stand out in our memories when we dig again for them. Other things were more tangential to our interests, and drifted into the more obscure parts of our remembered pasts. We came to realize, though, that the better organized the materials were that were presented to us, the better we tended to remember them over time.[9]

By and large, this school-based "learned information" was not in any way first-hand to our experience, as important as it might have become to our lives. Moreover, much of the material we learned—as researchers are keen to point out—we learned without any reference to where we learned it. Most of this remembering—of history, math, science, music, etc.—was, and still is, learned and remembered abstractly. When we left school, the learning of "information" continued, though mostly on our own, or on our job. Even last week and the week before, in reading or doing research for a lesson or a sermon, we continue to generate and "learn" new information for ourselves. As in school days, some of it will stay with us into the future in some form in our long-term memory.

3.

[8] For an excellent discussion, see William F. Brewer's article, "What Is Recollective Memory?" in David C. Rubin, ed., Remembering Our Past (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[9] There are a number of excellent studies of these long-term learning/memory processes. For those interested, see Charles N. Cofer, ed., The Structure of Human Memory (San Francisco: W. H. Freedom & Co., 1976, and Gillian Cohen, Memory in the Real World (Hove/London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1989.

Tulving's other kind of long-term memory, the one he called "episodic," refers to those countless personally-experienced events of our lives—again from the very beginning of our growing up all the way through our maturational and aging process. We remember the past as we lived it and experienced it day upon day, week upon week. We do not remember everything—that we know for sure. But again researchers tell us that we would be amazed at how much of all of those past personal "events" find their way into our long-term memories.

I remember my brother and I being taken on a trip from Illinois to Washington DC by our parents. While I don't remember what year it was or how old I was—I could find out, I think, though that would depend on the memory of my brother or our mother, though they may not remember when either. I remember the long driving, and talk of "the boring Pennsylvania Turnpike," but I don't remember the make or model of the car we were in. I didn't know about "motels" then, but I remember that we stayed in what our dad called "rooming houses," regular houses, really, with flashing signs out front. I remember hunting for them, often long after dark, and I remember an awkwardness about having to sleep on the floor in the same room with mom and dad on the bed. Now, in retrospect, I wonder if my brother remembers all that the same way I do; it is not at all likely that he does. I vaguely remember the enormous city, too, though not specifically. What I really do remember is being terrified at the top of the Empire State Building. I remember learning for the first time that I was deathly afraid of heights, petrified of looking down. I don't remember very much else about the city, and I have no memory of what we did while we were there, besides go to the top of that building. I remember distinctly, though, that the building swayed, really swayed, while we were at the top of it, and I was quire beside myself with fear.

What does a memory, or set of memories, like that tell us about the nature of long-term memory, as researchers analyze it? Let me summarize a lot of material with a couple of important, and rather striking findings.

The first thing we know from researchers is that these "episodic" or "imagistic" memories are not just things or events filed away in the mind or brain someplace, things that can be brought out at will. To bring memories of the past into being, we have to "construct" them. As in my memory of that trip to New York City as a child, I remember it in bits and pieces, not as an uninterrupted, overall event. Some things, usually traumatic things, stand out, but the "rest of the story" I have to fill in. As James L. McGaugh put it in a recent book:

> Remembering events, whether ordinary or significant, is not simply a matter of locating the otherwise perfectly preserved memory stories at some place(s) in the brain and retrieving it intact . . . The terms 'remembering,' 'recollecting,' and 'recalling' quite literally reflect what we much do when we experience or discuss a particular memory. We must 're-member,' 're-collect,' and 're-construct' as we 're-call'; and, because of the massive interconnectedness of the records of our personal experiences and general knowledge, it is often, if not usually, quite difficult to retain and remember experiences with great accuracy.[10]

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[10] James L. Mc Graugh, Memory and Emotion: The Making of Lasting Memories (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 116.

He adds that we do remember some parts of events and even a few distinct details, particularly details that affect us deeply, but that when we recall those "events" we are forced to draw on the general knowledge we have picked up about similar events as well. And, in our remembering, what we re-call and what we fill in "are not always (if ever) clearly distinguished."[11] David Myers puts it concisely and strikingly: Long-term memories "are not copies of experiences that remain on deposit in a memory bank. Rather like scientists reconstructing dinosaurs from bone fragments we construct memories as we withdraw them from storage."[12] Or, in Thomas Butler's formulation, the memory system abstracts out one or two features of a long-term memory and files it away "in such a way that under the proper emotional conditions, its acts synecdochically, restoring the whole," whether fully accurate or not.

Second, no matter how "invented" or "constructed" out long-term memories might be, researchers point out that they invariably seem correct—no, downright truthful—to us. Even the parts that we candidly sense that we are "filling in" seem very real to us. We intuitively believe that what we remember is "what happened." As David Rubin puts it, "we do believe that our own autobiographical memories are true even in cases when we know from independent evidence that they are not."[13] While that statement may be a bit exaggerated, anyone who has ever spun a story of "back when I was young" for one's friends knows the disarming validity of what Rubin says. We remember the "core" of something, something that, in truth, happened; but when we want to tell it to somebody else, with the core in tact, we construct the details whether we actually member them or not.

What this amounts to is that we seem to know from an early age that it is the details which we invariably supply to our core memories that turn them into exciting, meaningful, tellable stories. When we share our memories, we share them as stories—it appears that we have no choice but to do that. As humans, we are, by nature, storytellers. In remembering events we construct stories. The stories we tell, moreover, are true to us, very true to us. They really happened, for us, as we remember them. Granted, we would never insist that every detail in our remembered story is true. But the story we tell us true—we would insist on that. We are not "making things up." We are telling "what happened," as we re-call it. If pressed we could admit that we don't actually remember all of the details of our memory; still we would insist on the "truth" of what we are telling. We would stand by our memory, our story.[14]

Third, most of our long-term memories, however far back they go, have both a private and a public side. I remember, let us say, that I was a high-school newspaper photographer with a big graphlex camera positioned in the end zone during the state final football game the night old Lincoln High, my school, won the state championship. I remember the score. I remember shooting a masterpiece picture from that end zone as Bob Goebel came dashing across the goal line with the winning touchdown. My memories of that event may spin on as I tell a wonderful story. But—I would need to be careful about the story I remember, there we other people there, and there are newspaper records of the details of that night. My story could easily become

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[11] McGraugh, 116.

[12] David G. Myers, Intuition: Its Powers and Perils (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 69.

[13] Rubin, 4.

[14] This point was originally made in some detail by Frederic Bartlett's classic book, Remembering, first published in 1932, reissued by The University Press in 1964.

fanciful. A lot of other people were there that night. Others were actually around me, if I was standing in the end zone shooting pictures with that big graphflex. If I did what I say I remember doing, then there should be a picture of mine in the newspaper someplace that someone could actually look up. One of the dangers of sharing our long-term memories with others, of telling wonderful stories of things we "remember" doing, lies in making sure that our exciting story, our memory, can be "verified" by a public verification of what we tell. That is, one might say I remember graduating from such and such a place at a particular time and I can tell you a story about it—but does the public record verify or disprove the "truth" of my memory?[15]

Finally, it is well known that our minds work not with what is really around us in the present, but by our perceptions of the situations, circumstances, and people that make up our lives.[16] What long-term memory researchers are now telling is that our memories of our pasts function in the very same way. That is, that our long-term memories are not about "what happened in our pasts," but about our perceptions of what happened in our pasts. We could even say, at the risk of getting tangled up, that our memories are really our perceptions of our past perceptions. It would be useful to find time to untangle that. For now, though, let's describe our past memories as our perceptions of what happened. This is why my brother John and I can remember being part of the very same events in our childhood, but remember them in entirely different ways. It is the nature of long-term memory.

4.

I need to stop in order to do two things. First, I want to indicate the direction in which, for me at least, this discussion of long-term memory, in both of Tulving's forms, actually points. Second, I want to connect, however briefly, each of these kinds of long-term memory to that direction or envisioned goal; in doing that, I want to try to make long-term memory as relevant as I can to the future of Christian preaching.

A growing understanding of human long-term memory leads the study of homiletics in a provocative and unexpected direction—one that, in my judgment, is actually most welcome given the nature of today's contemporary worship environments. It is necessary to say, though, that it is into an area that has literally been anathema to homileticians and teachers of preaching for years. It points to the possibility of, and the need for, learning (and teaching) how to preach in an impromptu manner.

Most know what speaking impromptu means. It is not the same, in fact, as extemporaneous speaking or preaching. Extemporaneous preaching or speaking refers to speaking without notes, or with minimal notes; i.e., speaking without manuscript. Impromptu speaking, on the other hand, means to speak, literally, without advance preparation as well as without notes. Ironically, that well-known public speaking organization to which I once belonged, Toastmasters International, believes enough in the importance of learning to speak impromptu that it holds a practice session on impromptu public speaking at every meeting. A

[15] For an excellent discussion of both the meaning and implications of this public and private side of long-term memories, see Smith.

[16] I have explored this sociological understanding of communication thoroughly in my book, Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998).

large bowl is (or at least was) filled with slips of paper carrying speaking topics and each member would draw a topic from the bowl and then, after a few minutes of reflection, speak impromptu for five minutes or so on that topic.

5.

We in the Academy now are part of a generation of preachers and homileticians for whom the idea of impromptu preaching induces shivers and cold sweats. That should come as something of a surprise, however, when one adds up the number of times during the typical church week that a preacher is called on to speak, sometimes quite substantively, in an impromptu manner. While no homiletician that I know—including myself—would advocate that sermons should regularly be delivered without adequate, even thorough, preparation, there are times when speaking impromptu as part of a sermon, or as a substitute for a prepared sermon, is not only justified but downright necessary. Hence, it is not an inappropriate topic to raise among teachers of preachers.

The fact is that it is not a new idea by any means. In his old but still splendid book on preaching, John Broadus reminded us that Augustine "was occasionally directed" on the day he was to preach "to the choice of a subject by the passage which the 'praelector' had selected for reading;" moreover, Broadus said that Augustine "was sometimes urged by some impression of the moment, to give his sermon a different turn from what he had originally proposed." Even the great Chrysostom reported, Broadus added, "that his subject was frequently suggested to him by something he met with on his way to church, or which suddenly occurred during divine service."[17]

I have no idea, either, how many homileticians will be surprised to learn how heartily another great preacher of the not-too-distant past advocated the art of impromptu preaching. In his book called, simply, Letters to My Students, Charles H. Spurgeon includes a chapter titled "The Faculty of Impromptu Speech." In it Spurgeon wrote that "this power is extremely useful, and in most cases is, with a little diligence, to be acquired." He defined it as we have here—as speaking without immediate advance preparation, distinguished from "extemporaneous" preaching, or the advance preparation of ideas but not words. Spurgeon added:

> The power of impromptu speech is invaluable, because it enables a man [or woman] on the spur of the moment, in an emergency, to deliver himself [herself] with propriety. These emergencies will arise. Accidents will occur in the best regulated assemblies. Singular events may turn the premeditated current of your thoughts quite aside. You will see clearly that the subject selected would be inopportune, and you will . . . drift into something else without demur.[18]

I have called attention in other places to Drew Hanson's book on Martin Luther King's famous 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. The book is a study of the speech, and points out that even though King prepared and read from the podium that day a manuscript that he had

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[17] John A. Broadus, A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1898), 434.

[18] C. H. Spurgeon, Lectures to My Students (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1954), 144.

prepared, he did not read it all. In fact, two paragraphs from the end of it, King was unhappy with the reaction of the massive crowd. He stopped reading, and for the next fifteen minutes, all the way to the end of his words, King spoke completely impromptu; he spoke words that he had not in any way prepared or planned to say that day. He knew when and how to speak impromptu when he needed to—and the rest, as far as that speech is concerned, is history.[19]

Last year, James Forbes preached a sermon—without notes—in the opening session of this Academy of Homiletics. It was the brilliant sermon we would expect from him; but then he did something unexpected. He took a break from his sermon, telling his audience that he wanted to talk about his experiences with Katrina and New Orleans. I may be wrong, though I have not been able to confirm whether I am or not; but my sense, then and now, was that Dr. Forbes preached the last fifteen minutes of his sermon impromptu—speaking of things he had not directly prepared, but that were weighing heavily upon him.

Those are not uncommon experiences for any preacher. One is well-prepared, but something happens, and the preacher feels a need to take the sermon in a different, unplanned, direction. To do that, however, requires the impromptu. At the last minute, an invited guest speaker does not show up for a special occasion. What should the preacher do? Call it off, or just cross out any sermon at all? Get a sermon out of a nearby book or file that may have nothing to do with the occasion at hand? Or undertake to speak himself or herself—impromptu?

That last idea is invariably the best one. It is a normal Sunday morning, and as the service time nears word comes that two of the congregation's most faithful members have been killed en route to the service in an automobile accident. What to do again? Proceed as though nothing has happened when it comes to the sermon? Or respond in a way that is appropriate to a tragic even that affects everyone? The best thing of all would be to set aside the prepared sermon and speak impromptu in a way that addresses the day's grief. These are only a few of the possible situations that call for skill in impromptu preaching—and the number of impromptu needs becomes even greater when one adds in all of the possible scenarios that arise from the spontaneous character of today's contemporary worship formats.

6.

What, then, is the connection between long-term memory and impromptu speaking or preaching? Probably the most important one is that the presence and cultivation of our long-term memory means that impromptu preaching, despite its definition, is <u>never done without preparation</u>. It is, though, that the preparation for such speaking or preaching is done in a way that we have seldom, as serious homileticians, even considered, let alone taken seriously. To explain, it is necessary to return to the two major kinds of long-term memory. First, Tulving's "semantic memory," or the kind represented by materials that we learn and hold onto over time, school-type materials. From this vantage point, for one to learn and be ready to preach impromptu at any time would mean becoming an ongoing student of theological and theologically-related materials, biblical materials and so on—materials of our profession that we collect, learn, and that our minds retain over time.

[19] Drew Hanson, <u>The Dream: Martin Luther King and the Speech That Inspired a Nation</u> (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

I have compared this process to two things. First, it is like preparing to write those old doctoral exams we all took. One must master some domain of knowledge; and anything in that domain, in a sense, is fair game. So how does one study? Months before the exams must be written, one finds a way to divide up the area of specialization into an extensive number of topics; materials are collected under those topics and one by one are mastered. Since we do not know what the questions themselves will be, we learn as best we can comprehensively, so that no matter what the question is, the materials that we have learned can be molded to meet any question that comes. On a less rigorous, but no less disciplined fashion, we remain, long after seminary, that same kind of student of theology, Bible, history and culture. We read. We organize. We remember a lot.

The second thing I compare this to is a presidential press conference, the kind we have all seen on television. Let's say that the preacher will meet the congregation from time to time not to preach but to carry on a "press conference" with the members. Congregation members come armed with questions about anything they have a real concern about—about theology, about church life and polity, about what is going on in the world that they should be up on, about why there are so many different church bodies—on an on, serious questions. The preacher is expected, as the president is when quizzed by reporters, to listen, and give informed, spontaneous answers to everything he (she?) is asked—in fact, let's say the preacher's job depends on how well this all is done. The demand here is for a high level of impromptu public speaking—preaching, let us say, if in a remarkably different form.

How is the preacher to prepare for such an occasion or series of occasions? What we know is how the President, whoever it is, has prepared for years for press conferences. He keeps up to date with a series of looseleaf binders full of materials—"answers," really, to every conceivable question that might arise. Before every press conference, he studies those binders of material. He learns how he will tend to answer a question on a given topic, however someone might phrase the question. In doing so, he gets himself ready for an hour of impromptu public speaking.[20]

7.

Finally, a few words about the other of Tulving's long-term memory, the "episodic" kind, the kind that is personal to every one of us—the kind, moreover, that invariably comes out as a story when we "re-call" something from our past. What this boils down to is facing squarely the fact that every single one of us, every preacher, has a thousand stories from growing up, stories that arise from his or her long-term memory. The trick is learning how to cultivate them, how to make records of them in spiral bound notebooks, and how to review them periodically so that they could be available to us whenever we might need something in an impromptu speaking or preaching situation.

[20] Spurgeon writes, "If a man would speak without present study, he must usually study much.," and, "Store your minds very richly, and then, like merchants with crowded warehouses, you will have goods ready for your customers, and having arranged your good things upon the shelved of your mind, you will be able to hand them down at any time without the laborious process of going to market, shorting, folding, and preparing." 145.

Granted, there is no space here to talk about the actual use of our personal stories, since they do require special understanding and care when we use them as part of our preaching. My brother and I have recently completed a book on the nature of personal stories for preaching which looks in great detail at both the problems and the opportunities for mining and use one's own stories, drawn from long-term memory, in developing good sermons, even impromptu ones. Our own stories easily become new parables for conveying biblical truth—parables modeled after biblical ones. Such stories can also be used as guides and motivations for how to live, or told as a basis for building or strengthening community within a church fellowship. We describe at least ten excellent uses for personal stories—all the while explaining how the preacher can remove the egotism from these kinds of materials in the sermon.

For some, what I discuss here is out of the homiletical boundaries—advocating impromptu preaching in given circumstances. And yet the whole topic of long-term memory points exactly in this direction. The pulpit of the future, as can already be seen, must find ways of being more open, more fluid, more spontaneous, and more genuinely authentic, arising more than ever not just from tradition and Scripture—but from the life of the preacher. The revolution in worship, and in preaching, well under way already, is a still a long way from being concluded.