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REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

In new year, let us cherish memories

Preserve your memories; They're all that's left you." Simon and Garfunkel sang these words on their 1968 album, "Bookends." They made many hearts feel what it is like to be two old friends sitting on a park bench recalling confidences and intimacies and experiences that had given their lives meaning.

Simon and Garfunkel get across forcefully a serious truth. Memories are wind-blown autumn leaves, just as Homer, in a vivid metaphor, sang that human lives are.

We say that the end of the year and the beginning of a new one is a time for looking back. But the phrase "looking back" flattens the emotions that are attached to our memories. We feel those emotions if we sit quietly and let our whole body and soul become involved in the process of remembering.

American culture emphasizes "being happy." It promotes simple how-to ways to acquire happiness. We have invented and use countless distractions to take us away from our feelings of sadness. We can even foolishly think that such feelings are bad and be ashamed of having them.

We can then forget that sorrow is an essential part of remembering. Even the warmest memories of our best experiences are ghosts of things gone and never coming back. These ghosts live on, fortunately, in our minds and souls. We can care for them and let them help us.

This is nothing new to us in the 21st century. The Indo-European root of the word "memory" gives us also in English the word "mourn." In ancient Greek and old Armenian, the same root yielded words relating to things that are baneful and melancholy and make us anxious. A second root associated with memory produces in Greek and Latin words that lie behind our words "mental," "mention" and "mnemonic." The basic sense of the root was to think deeply and strongly, to have thoughts that were felt passionately and ardently, even to be in a furious rage — another English derivative is "maniac." There is then, as far back as language will take us, no separating what we call memories from strong emotions.

I have memories of 2010 that I never want to forget.

One is of a service I attended at First United Methodist Church in Genoa City, a small rural working-class community in southeast Wisconsin, on Nov. 21 — Christ the King Sunday. The sermon was delivered by the Rev. Lucinda Alwa, who has long been a dear friend of mine. The chapel was filled with older people, who greeted the stranger among them in a heartfelt way. One parishioner had been to Mesquite once for a rodeo. We talked about her trip.

There were two pre-teen boys whom Alwa called up and greeted ahead of the service. She asked them what they thought about Christ as king and then used their embarrassed responses in her beautiful sermon, which wove together ideas distilled from her training as a doctorate and professor of classics, an ordained minister and a practitioner of Zen Buddhism. I remember her gentle, intelligent voice and the comfort her words brought to people who openly expressed their worries about jobs, failing health, family members and friends in the military, couples going through divorce, a young man out on parole, another overcoming drug addiction, children in need of foster care and food on their tables, and the state of our country.

I went to this service after visiting in Madison, Wis., with my doctoral mentor. He is 92 and affected by Alzheimer's. Seeing a brilliant scholar now without the mind that brought him worldwide recognition was poignant, but not sad or painful. He could not say that Tom Palaima was with him, but he knew me and was glad I was there. And seeing his daughter's tender love for him, the courtesies extended by the two old gentleman who shared his lunch table, and his joy in hearing the music he always loved and the ice cream he equally enjoyed makes me glad I have a memory and am wise enough now to nurture it.

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