



ART OF LIVING

A PRIMER FOR FORGETTING

A CONVERSATION WITH LEWIS HYDE

Photo R. Whittaker

*"TO STUDY THE SELF IS TO FORGET THE SELF,
AND TO FORGET THE SELF IS TO BECOME ONE
WITH THE WORLD AS IT IS."*—DOGEN ZENJI

“If you want to have fresh perceptions and things that emerge you hadn’t ever thought of, you need to be aware of your habits of mind and have some method of suspending them, at least for brief periods, to see what’s going on.”

Every Saturday, Awakin.org hosts a conversation with an individual whose inner journey is inspiring and whose work is transforming our world in small and large ways. Awakin Calls are an all-volunteer-run offering of ServiceSpace, a global platform founded on the simple principle that by changing ourselves we change the world to create a more compassionate and service-oriented society.

Pavi Mehta: Thank you for joining us. Today our guest is the influential writer, Lewis Hyde. Our moderator is Richard Whittaker, the founding editor of *works & conversations*. Richard’s body of work is an unhurried labor of love that returns readers to that place of mystery and intelligence that lies at the heart of all true craft. He’s also the West Coast editor of *Parabola* magazine and dear friend. Over to you now, Richard.

works: Thank you, Pavi, and thank you, Lewis, for being here. I’m guessing all of you listening have read the introductory notes about Lewis on the website. Most of us know of him thanks to his really remarkable book, *The Gift*. Today, we’ll be talking about his most recent book and maybe we’ll have time to get into some other areas. Here are a couple of notes of early

praise. Poet Jane Hirshfield writes, “Lewis Hyde stands among the pinnacle writers—Jane Jacobs, Ivan Illich, Rachel Carson—who make visible foundational truths. This seemingly modest, entirely irresistible volume offers nothing less than a roadmap to sanity.” And author Justin Knapp writes, “*A Primer for Forgetting* is a lightning bolt of a book, a luminous meditation on the uses and disadvantages of memory. Hyde has distilled a lifetime of learning across disciplines into a vital and vivifying collection of parables, anecdotes, and gnomic insights that ramify the mind, that urge us to ask better questions of ourselves, to honor the responsibilities that we have to one another, and to wrestle with the debt we owe history.” Lawrence Weschler calls Hyde one of the country’s greatest public thinkers.

Now I remember that Weschler wrote a book about artist Robert Irwin called *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*. And I thought this title was a nice lead in for our conversation today, Lewis. Let me start by asking what drew you into the subject of memory and forgetting?

Lewis Hyde: It’s a bit of a mystery. You know, finally, I think memory is the faculty of mind by which we know that we are creatures who live in time, and time itself is one of the great mysteries. I mean, it’s as mysterious as gravity. My habit as a writer has been to find topics that are fascinating enough to keep me interested for the many years that I write about them.

I used to teach a seminar on cultural memory, and I remember once reading one of the books about orality. So, in memory studies, people are always interested in the moment when oral cultures, which had no writing, turned into print cultures. One of these books about oral cultures mentions that the liveliness of an oral culture is partly due to the fact that it can simply forget things that no longer fit the present need, which is not true in a written culture. In a written culture, it’s harder to forget because things get written down. I thought that was an interesting notion, that forgetfulness would be useful if you want to be lively, and it appealed to the contrary side of my own sensibility.

So, I began to collect anecdotes and examples of places where forgetfulness was more useful than remembering. In a way, the book is a contrarian experiment. It takes the thing we normally praise and value—remembering—and comes at it from the other side to say, “What happens if we praise and value forgetfulness instead?”

works: This reminds me that you were a reader of St. Augustine, who was quite taken with the question of time, as you write. Would you like to say anything about about St. Augustine and time?

Lewis: You've picked one of the more difficult pieces in my book, but yes, I'll try to say something. So, two things. In the *Confessions*, St. Augustine has a chapter on memory and eternity. He's trying to understand what time is and finds it very confusing, particularly because it doesn't seem to exist. If you think about the past, it's something that's already gone away. If you think about the future, it's something that doesn't exist because it hasn't happened yet, and if you try to think about the present, it's so fleeting, you can't even touch it. So, he ends up thinking, well maybe these don't exist outside of the human mind. The past is the thing we call memory in the mind, but it's a mental state; the past is the mind thinking about things that have happened. And the future is a mental state, it's the mind thinking in anticipation. The present is the mind paying attention in the present moment. Then he says maybe time is the experience of having two of these, or two or three of these mental states simultaneously in your head. So you're both in the present moment and you're thinking about what happened in the past. He calls this "distention." He says when we think about time, or when we're experiencing time in the mind, the mind is in two places at once.

Then he finds he doesn't like the experience of being distended mentally. So, his intuition is that there's some kind of salvation available if you could give up this distention. So for Augustine, salvation requires forgetting the past and the future, that is, stopping the mind's habit of musing on the past and anticipating the future.

works: Fascinating. You can interpret that to mean Augustine valued staying present.

Lewis: Yes. It's an almost Buddhist point, that attending to the present moment is the key. There's a Dharma teacher in Cambridge, Larry Rosenberg, and he makes a useful distinction about time. There's one kind of time in which you remember you have a dental appointment tomorrow or that you went to the library yesterday. Then there another kind of time he calls psychological time. It's when you begin to live in the past or the future in your own head. You remember

"[In] Old German, the prefix 'for' means neglecting or abstaining from something, and the Germanic 'getan' means to hold onto something or to grasp it. So, to forget is to stop grasping, and then 'to remember' is 'to hold on.' You could say to forget something is to open the hand of thought, to stop grasping."

some insult that happened in the fourth grade and you're still upset about it; you're living in the past. Or you daydream about how someday you'll win the lottery and be rich; now you're living in the future. The simple Buddhist instruction is to notice the degree to which psychological time takes you out of the present moment. And the present moment is the cutting edge of dharma. It's where you can actually have some change or relationship to your life.

works: Let me ask you, what is your own relationship to Buddhism?

Lewis: Well, I'm a lazy Buddhist, sadly. I've done a lot of practice, but I've never done long retreats. I think Buddhist literature has been the most useful wisdom literature for me, but I don't have a regular sitting practice. So, I'm a lay Buddhist who takes as many lessons as he can from the practice, but hasn't had it be central to my life.

works: Can I assume you're speaking about Zen Buddhism?

Lewis: I've always been closest to the Dharma centers that I've visited. I used to go out to Green Gulch in Marin County, and the Zen Center in San Francisco. In Cambridge, it's an Insight Meditation Center, so it's a slightly different tradition. But to my mind, the core of it is the same. Soto Zen is the tradition I know best, but I don't have a position on whether it's the best one.

works: I wanted to go back to what you said about memory and oral cultures. In your book, you point out that around AD 1200 something very significant happened. When the oral tradition prevailed, memory only lasted as long as it was held in a living person. What the elders could still remember was the limit of memory, and when the elders died and their memories were gone, new memories had to appear. But then, with the spread of writing, memory began to be captured in writing. Ivan Illich was an important person in your life, and he used to talk about how, around AD 1200, something very unfortunate happened in the Christian church. Would you talk a little about this and also say something about your relationship with Illich?

Lewis: I knew Ivan Illich briefly. Years and years and years ago, I read his book, *Medical Nemesis*. It was very helpful with something I was working on at the time. At that time he was still running his center in Cuernavaca. I had some free time, so I went down to Mexico and spent a month at CIDOC [Centro Intercultural de Documentación]. He was about to close that center, and he had friends from all over Europe and the U.S. spending the last months together. These were the people who introduced me to the anthropology about gift exchange, which I began to think was a useful way to think about artistic practice. So, in a sense, my book, *The Gift*, began at CIDOC with Illich.

It was as if Illich was a 12th-century scholar bemused and upset by what he saw in the 20th century. I don't know quite enough about him to explain his sense of what happened in the church. The thing you're pointing to from my book refers to the time when what could be called "living memory" is replaced by written memory, particularly in legal

cases. If you have a land dispute, for example, who owns this or who owns that? Memories would only go back as far as the oldest living memory that could be found, 100 years or something like that. But then this changes when you begin to have written records of land transactions.

This was the moment when people began to invent the thing in the law called "statutes of limitation." This is an invention by which the law agrees to forget the past and it appeared around the time when written records made it harder to forget the past.

works: When you were with Illich at CIDOC, did any of the people you met become friends?

Lewis: I remember a French scholar there named Andre Gorz. And another person who worked with Illich at CIDOC was Paul Goodman. I never knew Goodman, but he would be the person from that community whose work also mattered to me. I was only at CIDOC for a month.

works: Well, one of Illich's interests was the question of the meaning of proportion in actual, practical life. Your description of memory fits well with what I absorbed of his ideas around proportion. In any case, I'm wondering if you could say something about the etymology of the word "forgetting." It opens a nice avenue to this whole question.

Lewis: Sure. Our English word, "forgetting," comes out of Old German. The prefix "for" means neglecting or abstaining from something, and the Germanic "getan" means to hold onto something or to grasp it. So, to forget is to stop grasping, and then "to remember" is "to hold on." You could say to forget something is to open the hand of thought, to stop grasping.

The Greek word is a little different. We're familiar with the river Lethe, and that comes from the Greek word for forgetting. The actual Indo-European root for that word has to do with something being hidden away. So, it's as if something that's been forgotten could still be in the mind, but it's been hidden somehow. The opposite of this in the Greek is *alitheia* and that's the word that gets translated from the Greek into English as "truth." The truth is something that's been uncovered or taken out of hiding.

Let me add one thing, which is the idea that

something forgotten is hidden in the mind. It leads me to imagine that some things are unforgettable in that you can't hide them away in your mind. For instance, maybe you've been hurt by something, and you can't stop thinking about it. So, part of my work on forgetting is to think about what a curse it is sometimes to have unforgettable things.

works: That's a significant piece of the book. You described how a combination of rage mixed with grief is perhaps the worst kind of unforgettable memory because it's so widespread, and often leads to the acting out of violence, which keeps perpetuating itself. But let's stay with this whole question of buried memories that are, nevertheless, still present. You've cited Freud and also Wilfred Bion. Tell us a little bit about Wilfred Bion, in terms of this problem.

Lewis: Bion was a British analyst. He describes what one needs to do as a psychoanalyst listening to a patient. Essentially, the analyst shouldn't be thinking while listening, and not have any desires for the patient, like a good outcome. The patient can sense whether the analyst has a framework with which he's listening to the story, and a framework can—in some way—obscure what is going on with the patient. Bion said every analytic session must have no history and no future.

works: Fascinating. I think he spent a lot of time in India and it's pretty clear that he absorbed some deep knowledge from Hindu and Yogic teachings. So, this ideal of emptying one's mind and somehow being unattached to one's reactions when you're listening to a patient—your thoughts, your plans, your learnings—this is a tall order. Wouldn't you say?

Lewis: Well, yes. And I'd like to connect this with another theme in the book. I'm interested in self-forgetfulness in its positive forms and, particularly, it would be the forgetting of one's own habits of mind. So, usefully we have habits of mind by which we understand and navigate the world. But these also obscure things that don't fit in with the habits of mind. If you want to have fresh perceptions and things that emerge you hadn't ever thought of, you need to be aware of your habits of mind and have some method of suspending them, at least for brief periods, to see what's going on.

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I think for Bion, when he says you have to give up all desire for results, it's to avoid putting a frame around what's going on, and then not seeing what's actually going on.

works: Yes. I think he's kind of brilliant there and he must have verified the truth of how something truly authentic can emerge in this emptiness. You cite John Cage a lot. It reminds me of where Cage is talking about the problem of listening to music after you've heard it a few times. The mind just automatically absorbs things and turns them into a kind of “mental knowing.” So, listening to music you've heard before, you begin to lose something because you know what's coming. He says this amazing thing, that if one is listening to music without this obscuration of habit, it's a *miracle*. Would you reflect on that a bit?

Lewis: Well, you've summarized nicely what Cage has to say. There's an effort in Cage, and partly he gets it from Marcel Duchamp, to not bring one's own preconceptions to one's experience. I link it to a famous Dharma talk by Dogen Zenji, in which he says “to study the Buddha way is to study the self, and to study the self is to forget the self, and to forget the self

is to become one with the world as it is.”

So, in both cases, the issues are these habits of mind. When you study the self and you see the way in which you put a frame around everything, you can then, sometimes, discard it. So, the self has its habitual way of being in the world, and if you forget that habitual way, it turns out the world is still there, and you’ll see things you didn’t see before.

works: You know, I’m sure all of us have these moments of being really present the way John Cage describes having a certain moment of listening where you really hear—a miracle, as he says. And this leads into a question for you about poetry and these pure moments where things shine like miracles. These moments of real presence to something, these are the moments of poetry, wouldn’t you say?

Lewis: This is odd. You know, I’m sitting in my study in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and right outside my study window is a big oakleaf hydrangea. It’s a plant that’s about ten feet high and it has big, oaky leaves. It’s June, and the hydrangea is in flower. It has big, white, candelabra flowers on it, and the bees have come—these black and yellow honeybees burying themselves into the blossoms of the oakleaf hydrangea. It’s the moment I would point to; it’s happening right now.

works: That’s beautiful. Let me share another quote you used from Proust. “There had been reborn in me a veritable moment of the past.” This can be pretty startling, this remembering of some forgotten moment. Sometimes it can suddenly appear in all its reality. It’s really kind of amazing when this happens. Would you say something about that?

Lewis: I mean, what’s interesting in Marcel Proust is the memories that really mattered to him, and famously, everyone knows that in the first volume of his big novel, he’s having tea and biscuits with his mother. When he bites into the madeleine, he remembers having done that as a young boy. But it’s one of maybe almost a dozen moments of memory that are in the novel, and all of them are trivial. That is, you can contrast them with the memory that seems to dominate the first volume of Proust, which is a memory about how, when he was a little boy, he used to want his mother to come up and kiss him good night, and there was one night when she didn’t

come up for a long time and how traumatic it was. He goes on for, you know, sixty pages about what an upsetting thing this was. So, it’s a major, major memory for him, in contrast to the time he had biscuits and tea with his aunt Leonie, which was insignificant.

Then what he said is these insignificant moments get preserved in the mind, because they seem so trivial that you don’t work them over. You don’t subordinate them to your own theory about life and your own emotions. They just happened. There’s like a guardian forgetfulness that preserves them intact, as opposed to traumatic memories which take over the mind and get worked and worked and worked.

So, the intact, preserved, trivial memory from the past has been guarded by forgetfulness and when it comes back, it seems to imply that the distance between the past and present doesn’t exist. That there’s a single being who has both of these time moments simultaneously. It’s like an escape from time itself.

works: Certainly Freud would say that. It reminds me of this beautiful quote. I think it’s from your writing. “What name shall we give these little elephants of mental life? These traces of perception that are present, but not present?”

Lewis: I was writing about a moment when I had a similar experience of remembering something I hadn’t remembered, as it were. I had a dream in which I had a pet elephant. I was washing it. It was a complicated dream. I had no idea what this meant or why I had the dream, but then a day later I realized I’d been listening to a folk song in which an elephant appears. My mind apparently, had been listening to the song and had put the elephant “on file” and made it available for my dream mind to make up a story. This is a category of thought in which your perceptions are, in fact, recorded and hidden in the mind, then are available, particularly for dreams, to do something with.

works: It reminds me of a book called *The Dancing Healers*. Do you happen to know it?

Lewis: I’ve heard of it, but don’t know it.

works: I read it years ago. The author, a psychiatrist, I believe, showed up on a Navajo reservation. He going to set up a clinic there, as I recall. A Navajo elder met with him, and asked, “What do you know about

the mind?" The author thought about all the lengthy possible things he could say, but really didn't know how to answer that question. It stopped him and there was a long silence. Then the Navajo man said, "One thing I know about the mind: it's *mysterious*." Listening to your recollection of the dream, made me think of that. It's all pretty mysterious.

Lewis: Yes. It's mysterious.

works: Well let's go back into habit again, which you write about so well. You quote Proust, "Its comforts anesthetize and stupefy. Its annihilating force suppresses original perception. Its very competence lulls our faculties into dormancy. It puts pure beauty beyond our grasp. And finally, by softening all discomfort, it stands in the way of the very suffering that our growth requires." That's really something. Any further thoughts on habit?

Lewis: You know, there's a wonderful, short book by Samuel Beckett about Proust. His idea is that the main way to enter Proust's work is to think about this distinction between habit as a good thing and habit as a bad thing. Of course, habit is a good thing. It makes a habitable world. The wonderful thing in Proust is how uncomfortable he is in a strange hotel room. If you think about your own bedroom, you're habituated to your surroundings. You can relax. Whereas if you're in a completely strange place, you have to be alert all the time noticing what's going on. Proust is clear that habit is like a great housekeeper who makes the room comfortable for you, and this is a wonderful thing. But he also understands that once that's happened, it's going to deaden you. It's going to be harder for something new to come through. There are moments in Proust when he's taken out of his comfortable life, and something happens that could not have happened otherwise, or he perceives the world freshly.

That's also my experience. I have a little photograph in the book, a tangle of telephone wires outside my study window. It's as ugly as can be, and the ugliness of my own street just never occurs to me because I see it all the time. Whereas, if I'm traveling in a foreign country and I see an ugly street, I think "How ugly that is." And it's the same thing with beauty. The beauty of your own surroundings becomes less visible, whereas if you're traveling, suddenly the beauty will strike you.

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works: That makes me think of a quote from Soetsu Yanagi that's in his book, *The Unknown Craftsman*. "One cannot replace the function of seeing with the function of knowing." And here's another one from that same book, "A sense of beauty is timeless. It may be said to exist at this very moment, unbounded by past or future, and a beautiful object may be said to exist on this very spot, unbounded by right or left." Now these are moments where habit has yielded, as you're saying.

Lewis: And you mentioned the title of Weschler's book about Robert Irwin: *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*. That comes from Paul Valéry, the French poet. He was writing about the painter Degas, and it's the same point. To see something without the intervening curtain of the name of the thing is different from seeing it and having its name there in your mind. So, there's a kind of pre-verbal perception.

works: Yes. It's fascinating, don't you think, the way Irwin would sit in his studio and draw a line, and just sit there and look at it. Then he'd draw another line slightly higher up or lower. I mean hour after hour. It seems to fit in here somehow.



Photo R. Whittaker

Lewis: Well, he and James Turrell, who appears in my book. These are people who were interested in this business of fresh perception, the same way that Cage was. There's a story about Irwin being given a space to put a work of art in, and there was a post in the middle of this room. So he just arranged the room so that suddenly, people saw the post, which they'd never noticed before. These are artists whose simple trick is to alter the gestalt a little bit, such that you see what was already there, but that you'd never seen before.

works: I love Robert Irwin's work and Turrell's. I'm wondering where the word "intuition" fits in with this whole question of memory, buried memory, et cetera. What do you think?

Lewis: Intuition is a part of the research. You have a topic that you're fascinated by, and you study it as much as you can. Then at some point, you have to watch what just drops away, because it never stirred your feelings, and what stays with you. To me, that's partly the function of intuition.

works: You bring up the feelings and it reminds me of something attributed to Gandhi. He was asked, "What should we be afraid of?" And his response, essentially, was "heartless intellectuals." So what do you think about the place of feeling? In the temples of Western scientific materialism—where the kinds of knowledge we need to take seriously are certified—is there a role for the intelligence of the heart?

Lewis: Well, that's the question. You know, I decided in writing my book about forgetfulness, not to get into the neuroscience, partly because it's so complicated. I have great respect for these people who are really trying to figure out how the wetware works in our brains and the advances they've made. But at the same time, the danger is that it becomes mechanical. There's a wonderful thing called the Zeigarnik effect.

A woman named Bloomis Zeigarnik had noticed that when a friend of hers ordered his meal in a café, the waiters could remember the bill exactly until he paid it. At that point, they'd forget about it. The idea was that uncompleted tasks stay in the memory, and

completed tasks drop out. I think that's true, but the point I was going to make is that people have tried to study this. What they do is get undergraduates and give them tests involving memorizing a list of words or flowers or something. Then they interrupt them while doing this task—or they don't interrupt them. The idea is to find out if there really is a Zeigarnik effect.

My problem with the way these studies are done is that they drop out the emotional part. If you're just studying a list of words, there's no feeling, whereas with the waiter who needs to get paid, he's upset if he doesn't get paid. So true memory has an emotional component to it. In the book I say we need to get these undergraduates, and interrupt them while they're making love, or interrupt them while they're cashing a paycheck. Then we'll see if the Zeigarnik effect works. The simple point is that a lot of science factors out the emotional level, as if freeing the study from contamination, whereas it's actually the emotional level where the real action is.

works: It's kind of a disaster, really, don't you think? Yes, science demonstrates its great power, but the lack of a relationship with feeling, I think, is a big issue. It devalues the possibilities that feeling has for opening us to new knowledge. Do you want to say anything about that?

Lewis: No, not right away. But one thing that's of interest in the book is what makes something unforgettable. It tends to be drama, being wounded in some way. If you have a great day, you do remember it, but it doesn't haunt you the way a horrible thing haunts you. And then the problem is how to forget the unforgettable. What are the processes by which you could begin to work with trauma? Or politically, what needs to be done if you're going to work through a country or civilization's civil war, or gross violations of human rights.

In the book, for example, I talk some about what they tried to do in South Africa with Truth and Reconciliation. This is a country where everybody had been marked by the feeling life of apartheid for decades, and if you're trying to bring that to closure, what do you do? What the South Africans tried to do was to set up a system where you would give amnesty to some people who had been involved in the crimes. Amnesty is judicial forgetting. The law agrees to not remember your crime. But to get amnesty in the

South African system, you had to tell the truth fully about what had happened. The system was called Truth and Reconciliation, but in fact, reconciliation was not required. It's one of the interesting factures of the TRC; you just had to tell the truth. In fact, some reconciliation did come out of the TRC, and there are a lot of cases in which it didn't, but at least the truth was known.

So, there are many steps to trying to forget the unforgettable, and the first step, to my mind, is to know what really happened. I have a bunch of aphorisms in my book, and one of them is you cannot forget what's not first in mind. You have to know the truth before you even begin to work with it and lay it aside.

works: It's encouraging to hear about these efforts and I know other such efforts are going on. And I we're coming up on the hour. Pavi, what do you think?

Pavi: I think we should open it up. There have been so many wonderful threads woven in here and I'm going to jump in with a question of my own. Lewis, one of the things I was really struck by in reading the book was how generously you included glimpses of your personal experience, and particularly with your mother's dementia. Could you speak a little on your decision to include that in this book? And then also, the decision to use third-person when referring to your younger self? For our listeners, there are some humorous, poignant glimpses of Lewis' childhood that include the fact that he was, at one point, paid to read books, some of his early challenges with spelling, and a beautiful tradition of family letters, which I found fascinating. So, if you could speak to all of this, Lewis, that would be wonderful.

Lewis: So, in the last years of her life, my mother had dementia. We don't know what kind of dementia it was. She lost her ability to speak a lot. My book oddly has the agenda of trying to think about the positive sides of forgetting, and the thread that goes through it about my mother's dementia is a kind of negative of that. This is grievous and was upsetting to everybody. It's something we fear. At the same time, perhaps the project is also to interrogate the fear, to say dementia is going to be part of life for those of us who live a long time. So, death is part of life for everybody, and rather than simply refusing to look at it and taking it

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as a dark and fearful thing, perhaps we can look at it more dispassionately and just accept it for part of the landscape of being alive.

As for the personal threads in the book, the word trauma originally just meant wound, and it now means grievous wounds, things that are hard to heal and hard to forget. But I got interested in expanding the definition of trauma to the everyday markings that all

of us have—something coming out of childhood.

I used myself as an example for some of it. My parents were big book readers and wanted me to be a book reader. My father was handy with tools and he wanted me to be handy with tools. There was a lot of emphasis on being a smart person as opposed to being a dumb person. All of these are, in some sense, minor elements of how your personality gets shaped. But I wanted to name them as a kind of scarring that begins to form an identity, which then you carry into adult life.

Sometimes I think that our interest in horrific trauma is a way of ignoring the fact that there’s much more subtle work to be done around how your identity gets made, and whether you can begin to change it, and grow in different ways. And yes, I do refer to myself in the third person, because that’s the way I appear in the letters that my parents wrote.

caller: Hi. I’m curious about your work in *The Gift*. You applied Marcel Mauss’s work in the context of creative workers and artists. I’m curious what you think the relevance of a lot of those principles are today in the context of our broader capitalist system. Do you see openings for a gift economy?

Lewis: *The Gift* came out in 1983, and I think it’s as relevant today as it was then. One of the surprises was that the rise of the digital Internet enabled a lot of collaborative communities to form that had not formed before. Many of them rely on a gift exchange system. Wikipedia is the most obvious example. I should say that a Canadian filmmaker named Robin McKenna just last year released a documentary film inspired by my book on gift exchange. The film is called *Gift*. She finds four different situations in which gift exchange is currently practiced. One of them is in a Kwakiutl tribe in Alert Bay, Canada, still practicing potlatch, the ancient ceremonial gift exchange ritual. She documents this wonderfully. She also has a Taiwanese-American artist, named Lee Mingwei, whose installation practices always involve a performance of gift giving.

So, if you have eyes to see, it’s all around us. In a way, I think it’s even more important. Who knows? The fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s released in the U.S. a market triumphalism among people who think the market is the best way to organize social life. It’s gone into areas we never thought they would go into before. Education’s been given over to commercial

ends, where teaching, at its core, needs to be a gift exchange. So, that's the short answer.

Pavi: And for our listeners, the 25th anniversary edition of *The Gift* has an afterword by Lewis called "On Being Good Ancestors," where he talks a little more about this. It's a fascinating read. Just looking at the trajectory of your work, right after *The Gift*, you wrote *Trickster Makes This World*, which speaks back to *The Gift* and pulls the rug out from under it a little bit. And there's so much of the trickster spirit in *A Primer for Forgetting*. In the beginning of this call you made reference to your contrary spirit. I was wondering how this spirit has served you as a writer?

Lewis: I suppose it's probably an intuition about where intellectual life would be lively, and it tends to be on the underside of whatever the dominant thought is at the moment. Just to say, to affirm the thing you said about my book on trickster figures, it got started partly because in *The Gift*, I talk about Hermes, the Greek god of theft. When I was done with that book, I thought there was more to Hermes that I hadn't been able to explore. In a sense, Hermes is not the gift giver, he's the thief.

So, yes, the second book is a contrarian take on the first book. There's a moment when Hermes, in the mythological material, has gone out and stolen the cattle of Apollo, and Hermes is of undetermined status. His father is Zeus, but his mother is a cave nymph. It's not clear if he's going to be a god or not. He says to his mother, "If my father will not give me honors, I will steal them."

This is the answer of everyone who's excluded from the gift economy. They need to find some way to penetrate the center of the dominant culture, and if they can't be brought into the gift circle, they're going to become thieves. So it is a contrarian book.

Pavi: Nora, listening in from New York, asks, "In a culture that's free to forget, people can be more easily propagandized and manipulated. For the individual, being present in the moment can be enlivening, but for society, don't you think forgetting could open the door to all sorts of perfidy and mischief?"

Lewis: Yes. I agree entirely. This is why I try to say that we cannot forget what was not first in mind. Another aphorism in my book is that the goal is to live

"To the degree we're talking also about the feeling life of memory and forgetting, that is about the body. If you're wounded, it's a physical experience. If you're joyful, it's a physical experience. Part of the reason that it's so difficult to work with is that it happens somatically. The question is what is the mind? The mind is embodied. It exists in the cellular structure. All these things are connected."

steeped in history, but not in the past. In the book, I have a section called "Nation," in which I go back to several moments in American history. One of them is a massacre called the Sand Creek Massacre—Arapaho and Cheyenne Indians were killed by Colorado troops around 1865. The other is the American Civil War.

In both cases, I point out that we are a nation that does not remember this at all; therefore, we can't work through it. Our own history is obscure to us. Gore Vidal used to say that we were the United States of Amnesia, but I think we are the United States of Agnosia, which means not even knowing.

So, I believe the first step is to know the truth, and

to work through the truth if, in fact, it's something traumatic. Only after that is forgetting in order.

Pavi: That section "Nation" in *A Primer for Forgetting*, is sobering. It's a difficult part of the book, but just deeply profound in the insights it offers.

Lewis: The book is an experiment trying to find the places where forgetting is useful, and in the section "Nation," I end up declaring that the experiment failed. There are political situations in which forgetting is not appropriate.

Pavi: Here's a listener, who asks "Regarding the political example of apartheid, isn't it that 'to know the truth is not to forget it,' as much as it is to accept it to avoid the Zeigarnik Effect of unresolved business? To move on without obviating the revealed truth, but to incorporate it into a new narrative?"

Lewis: That's true. It's different to know the truth and have it in your narrative, but then not have it be something that's on your mind all the time. There's a wonderful remark some psychoanalysts will say, that what you can do with trauma is to lay it to rest in a grave. You can visit the grave if you want to, but you don't *have to visit* the grave.

In the South Africa case, they have thousands of pages of clear testimony about what happened under apartheid, and you can go and read them. The stuff has been broadcast nationally on television. People cannot deny now what happened there. It also means it doesn't have to be part of your thinking every day, that you can begin to try to make a new world.

Pavi: Beautiful. I was rereading *The Gift*, and in the preface, you describe being asked by your first editor, "Who is your intended audience?" The thought in your head was, "All thinking humans," but what you actually said was, "Poets."

Poetry is what led you to this work in the first place, and I'm wondering, in the decades of your work as a writer, is there a particular ripple from your writing that you're particularly honored by or proud of?

Lewis: I mean, it's been gratifying that the work has mattered. To my surprise, it's had influence. I mentioned this film in which Mingwei Lee, a Taiwanese artist, read *The Gift* in an illegal Chinese

translation when he was a young artist, and it influenced his work.

The people who do Burning Man, Larry Harvey in particular, were much influenced by this work. And I'm one of the founding trustees of an arts organization called Creative Capital. We give money to individual artists. Creative Capital came out of the Andy Warhol Foundation. They heard me give a talk about the problem with funding the arts, and invited me to collaborate with them in designing a new institution to give money to artists. So, Creative Capital has roots that are entangled with this work of mine, and it's been wonderfully affirming to see not just that the ideas matter, but that they get instituted in actual practice.

Pavi: Here's a question from Albert, who says, "The conversation has been centered on the concept of mind, and I'm curious how you might speak to the body and its memory in relationship with the mind?"

Lewis: Well, to the degree we were talking also about the feeling life, of memory and forgetting, that is about the body. If you're wounded, it's a physical experience. If you're joyful, it's a physical experience. Part of the reason that it's so difficult to work with is that it happens somatically. The question is what is the mind? The mind is embodied. It exists in the cellular structure, and all these things are connected.

Pavi: Richard, it would be great if you would close out our call for us.

works: There are so many more questions to ask, but here's one. Looking at the roots of words, I've noticed they often seem to take one back to concrete experience. But in actual use, our words no longer link us to their concrete origins; they don't take one back to any connection with the body, for instance. In language we tend to float away into abstraction. Would you happen to have any thoughts about that?

Lewis: Well, maybe it goes back to the way the call was opened with a minute of silence. Those are important spaces in our daily life, when we stop talking and stop reading and stop thinking in words and notice the bees that are harvesting their pollen from the oakleaf hydrangea right outside your window. ♦

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