Chapel Talk
Philip Walsh
October 17, 2018

"On Memory and Mist"
For Will Speers, who gave his first chapel talk on October 9, 1981.

No matter where you are on the political spectrum, you've probably been fascinated, saddened, confused, frustrated, and exhausted by the news of the last several weeks, and if you're like me, you're still processing what we've just witnessed. The confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh as an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court has laid bare many of America's fault lines, and since the middle of the summer, I've been thinking about my connections to important aspects of this story: my childhood growing up in Chevy Chase, MD, the literal epicenter of this national story; and my own experiences in Catholic prep school. I followed the events closely because my grade school was Brett Kavanaugh's grade school. It fed into his high school, where many of my classmates went. His church was where I got confirmed. One of his friends who was interviewed by the FBI was my JV basketball coach.

I am twelve years younger than Brett Kavanaugh, so I can't speak to his adolescent milieu, but I remember mine, particularly in grade school: the physical bullying, the relentless name-calling, the insouciant elitism, the cavalier meanness. Not all days were bad ones, but I remember that behavior being sanctioned and sometimes modeled by adults – teachers, coaches, priests, and parents – all of whom should have known better and most of whom should have done more to protect us kids.

In addition, the sworn testimonies of Judge – now Justice – Kavanaugh and Dr. Christine Blasey Ford have also tugged on my memories of another contentious confirmation hearing: that of Clarence Thomas, who, in 1991, was nominated to replace Thurgood Marshall on the Supreme Court. I remember my dad picking me up from a Friday night high school mixer, and on the

way home we listened to a radio recap of the public testimonies of Judge Thomas and Anita Hill, who had accused him of sexual harassment.

In preparing this talk, I had to look up the date; it was Friday, October 11, 1991. I was thirteen years old, and as a young ninth grader, I didn't understand the political stakes, nor did I follow all the salacious details that were revealed. But I remember the darkness of that car ride, the silence between my father and me as we listened intently. It is the feeling of that silence that remains most vivid: a feeling of solitude even though my dad was right next to me; a feeling of apprehension over important things I did not yet understand; an intuitive feeling that my dad, to whom I looked for answers in life, could not help me make sense of a new and emerging reality. With my adult eyes, I can understand this moment as one of quiet alienation – a liminal moment that signified a move from innocence to experience.

Yet my memory of that night is also blurred. While I'm pretty sure that my dad was picking me up from a dance, I have no specific recollection of the dance itself. Did it have a disco theme, or was it a heavy metal battle of the bands? I also remember that it was raining on that drive home, but when I checked the weather records, only 0.04 inches of rain fell on that day in Washington, DC, and only during the hours of 3 and 8 pm. Why did I remember that it was raining? Why did I shape my memory in that way? Over Long Weekend, I asked my dad if he remembered our car ride home. He told me that he didn't, and that his only related memory was another late-night car ride, three Octobers later, when I was a senior in high school and he picked me up from a party.

So now I have even more questions… How do I make sense of a memory that is fragmentary and whose details are elusive? What is the relationship between my private introspection and an important public moment in contemporary America? How do I reconcile my feelings with inherent contradictions and substantiated facts?

It's at a moment like this – that is, when I'm confronted with something messy and inexplicable – that my mind turns to literature. I don't read poetry, plays, and novels for moral or didactic lessons; instead, I come to them for insight and sustenance. They give depth to my own experiences and memories; they help me think through real-life, and often real-time, paradoxes and ambiguities. Most importantly, literature allows me to reframe my feelings – to see them with perspective. Literature reminds me of who I was, who I am, or who I might still be.

This is why the British writer Kazuo Ishiguro means so much to me, and why, over the past several weeks, I've been reading through a few of his books. Around this time last year, Ishiguro was awarded The Nobel Prize in Literature, the most prestigious prize that a living writer can receive. In his Nobel Lecture, Ishiguro describes his work as emphasizing "the small and the private," but he is author of great ambition, an artist unafraid of big ideas, and his broad appeal speaks to the universal qualities of his work.

His novels defy easy categorization, but you might think of them as an alchemical elixir of Jane Austen, Franz Kafka, and Marcel Proust. With Austen, Ishiguro shares a talent for observing human behavior; his taste for the bleak, cruel, and absurd clearly recalls Kafka; and like Proust he is preoccupied with time and memory. More precisely, Ishiguro is interested in how individuals remember and how memories work: how they are fundamental to constructing who we are; how they can give us pleasure; yet how they can be hazy, incomplete, indistinct, impressionistic, and even misleading. Etsuko, Ishiguro's narrator in a novel called *A Pale View of Hills*, observes, "Memory… can be an unreliable thing… heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers" (156).

Indeed, Ishiguro's narrators are famously unreliable: Mr. Stevens, in his most acclaimed novel, *The Remains of the Day*, is a distinguished English butler who chooses work over love and family. There's Christopher Banks, in the novel, *When We Were Orphans*, a Sherlock Holmes-like detective who stubbornly seeks to find his missing parents. And there's Kathy H, the likeable

caregiver in *Never Let Me Go*, who nostalgically reflects on her days in boarding school in order to deny the harsh realities of the present.

All of these books chart how individuals are subject to their memories, but in his most recent novel, *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro goes a step further, exploring how both individuals and communities remember – and how they forget. The novel is situated in pre-modern Britain, a world of ogres, wizards, and Arthurian knights, and we discover that a peculiar mist has robbed the Britons and Saxons of their essential memories. Previously, the Britons and Saxons were engaged in a brutal war, but this "mist of forgetfulness," breathed out by a dragon named Querig, allows them to live in peace and proximity. That peace, however, comes at a great personal cost. As Ishiguro writes, "the past was rarely discussed" (7). The last hour is forgotten "as readily as a morning many years past" (153). Children go missing or die, but parents forget about them and are thus relieved of any anguish or grief. The novel follows an old couple, Axl and Beatrice, as they journey to visit their son, although they don't know where he lives and can't even remember what he looks like.

I won't spoil the ending, but ever since I finished *The Buried Giant*, I've been thinking about this amnesia-inducing mist. It's a bold and imaginative idea – a magical mist produced by a dragon that induces forgetfulness – but because of this outlandishness I can't help but think that Ishiguro wants his readers to relate the plot and themes to our world... What if we in 2018 – both as individuals and as a community – are caught in a mist of forgetfulness?

I'm speculating here, but it seems to me that the daily dramas of global politics command so much of our bandwidth that we become distracted. As hours turn to days, days turn to weeks, weeks turn to months, and months turn to years, the drama is normalized, and that distraction evolves into forgetfulness: we forget who we are and what really matters. The news has metamorphosed into a can't miss reality show; many of our national leaders are now ever-

auditioning entertainers, whose words and deeds only deepen cynicism, tribalism, and incivility.

Equally problematic are the algorithmic pastimes of social media, which induce additional symptoms of forgetfulness. They habituate us into focusing on the quick and the superficial, at a time when we need more than ever to be thinking about nuance and context. They seduce us with the appearance of community, but in the end they leave us lonely, angry, fearful, and desperate.

What makes this mist particularly pernicious is that it's not dragon-made but man-made. It's in the air that we breathe; it glides between the lines of newspapers and computer code. This mist is "mind forg'd," and if unchecked it will lock us up in an "ideological mansion," to borrow Mr. Speers' phrase from a few weeks ago. Metaphorically living in a majestic residence, our lives may be pleasant, but at great cost. Will we remember what we may be missing: the value of service, the importance of family, the meaning of patriotism, the dignity of faith, the capacity of love, the joy of disagreement? What do inhabitants of a mansion know if only a mansion they know?

Fortunately for us, we have Kazuo Ishiguro, whose lifetime of work honors the human experience by asking us to consider the significance of remembering and forgetting. Because of his ability to tell stories of tragedy, heartbreak, guilt, and time, he stands with other living writers like Toni Morrison, Jesmyn Ward, Colson Whitehead, and Colum McCann – some of our favorites at St. Andrew's – whose books strike at our souls and shake us to remember.

These public figures inspire us to see through the mist, but at St. Andrew's we are doubly fortunate because we have this private space, this chapel program, in which members of our community inspire us with their own stories of service, family, patriotism, faith, love, and disagreement. Our chapel program is a powerful corrective to a Lethe-like mist; it helps us to

recalibrate, remember, and begin again. It seems to me that our commitment to remember – to excavate, when we find them, the buried giants in our history and in our lives – pushes us towards the truth – or ἀλήθεια in ancient Greek. The Greeks are always wise and perceptive, and it's very interesting that the etymological opposite of ἀλήθεια (the truth) is λήθη, the word for forgetfulness… Thank you.

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After the talk, the congregation sang "Puff the Magic Dragon."