

The Wood with No Names

At age 90 I'm still grateful that my memory seems ok. I mean, without it my life could be quite confusing – to me and others, who have to do with me. Of course our memory nowadays has technology to support it. When I'm trying to remember who was the first baseman with the New York Yankees in the 1950's I don't have to wrack my brain. I just turn on the Internet and there he is: Bill Skowron (not a name you are likely to recall like DiMaggio and Mantle and Berra). Otherwise, I'm often surprised by my recall of people, chance acquaintances, schoolmates, events, the line-up of the forgettable Phillies of the 1930's, the winner of a local pie-eating contest in 1946 . . . trivial stuff that's available all at once or if I just recite the ABC's until I reach the letter in the alphabet that opens up a whole file on what I'm looking for.

Still loss of memory is something to worry about in our later years. Someone described dementia as a national epidemic. The gaps in awareness, the disruption of habitual behaviors, the loss of independence, even basic living skills, makes of retirement no longer something to look forward to – but possibly to dread (if by that stage we are even capable of dread).

Which reminds me of that episode in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. Alice had already passed from her actual space into the room and world inside the mirror over the mantle piece. She passed through a landscape that looked like a chessboard, crossed a brook and came upon a very dark wood. *This must be the wood where things have no names*, she thought. *I wonder what'll become of my name when I go in!*

And what happens? As soon as she entered, things became cool and she thought what a comfort it was *after being so hot, to get into the – into the – into what? . . . I mean to get under the – under the – under this, you know!* And she put her hand on the trunk of a tree. Nor could she then remember her own name. The world around her had been washed clean of all the tags humanity had placed on things down through history.

Just then a Fawn approached and they walked together, Alice's arm draped around its neck – until they began to exit the other side of the wood. Then, *I'm a Fawn!* cried Alice's companion. *And, dear me! You're a human child!* A look of alarm came into the Fawn's beautiful eyes and it darted away at full speed. They were back again in that world of tags by which we organize our world into good things and bad, things to trust and things to distrust . . . the world of journalism for example, class distinctions, ethnic, Catholic, Protestant . . . opposites.

Which raises the question in this age of increasing dementia – whether, aside from the grief it causes, there may be a lesson to be learned? In other words, maybe there are a lot of things it would be well for even the most conscious persons to forget – past wars, prejudiced education, a language of slogans instead of honest thought, intransigence in the face of new insights, illusions that hucksters assure us are true . . .

When all the while our Christian faith has ever encouraged us to cleanse our ears and minds from such deceptive noise – to keep ourselves ever in a readiness to change, to grow, as in St. Paul who writes: *From now on we regard no one according to the flesh . . . For whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away.*

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