

God, Life, and Everything "Memory"

When new people come to church, I always say to them the same thing: "I get to ask you your name five times before you can yell at me."

The reason I do this is simple. I have a terrible time remembering names. Back when I was a baby priest in 1990, I was trying to learn all the names of parishioners at my new church. One woman took exception to my repeated pleas of, "Would you tell me your name one more time?"

She said, "No. I've told you three times now. That's enough." That's when some quick thinking (in the midst of my humiliation) paid off, and I said, "I need five times to commit it to memory." She bought it, and I remembered her name from that day on.

My "five times" method has worked pretty well for me over the past twenty-five years. I think it works because once I say it, I'm committed to learning that person's name. It provides a framework for memory.

The reason I think of this is because there was a radio program today about a man names Solomon Shereshevsky. He was a Russian journalist back in the 1920's. His memory was so one-of-a-kind that he could remember virtually anything he read, saw, or heard. Not only that, but he remembered everything forever.

He left journalism to become a circus act, with people shouting out random numbers, words, or sounds which he would then repeat in perfect sequence. He memorized the first chapter of Dante's Inferno in Italian in a matter of minutes. He could remember it word for word fifteen years later. He was studied for years by psychologists who could not understand how anyone could remember as much as Shereshevsky.

But eventually, his memory became a problem. Because he never forgot anything, and because he made his living by having people shout random things at him, there came a point when there was so much noise in his head that he couldn't sort out the wheat from the chaff. His mind became a screaming cacophony of noise that made no sense. He could no longer separate out his children from the hundreds of thousands of other children he had seen, his wife from all the other women he had ever seen - they all crowded his mind, essentially drowning out what was important.

A psychologist on the radio program about him drew a simple conclusion. Too much memory, too much information, makes it difficult or impossible to make sense of the world.

Think of that. Information overload makes it difficult to make sense of the world.

Actually, we probably know that already even without the lamentable example of Mr. Shereshevsky. We know it because we live in an information-centric world. The internet is a gigantic memory flooding us with news, images, sounds, opinions twenty-four hours a day.

Our collective memory is overrun with information, and it, too, is a screaming cacophony of noise. And the more we take in, the less it makes sense.

And you thought it was just everyone else who was going crazy.

So, how do we deal with this explosion of memory? How do we keep ourselves and the rest of the world going crazier than it already is?

I doubt the answer is to get rid of the internet. But if psychologists are to be believed, maybe the season of Lent can point us in the right direction. You see, the

solution to information overload - the way to making better sense of the world - is to strip away things.

If you love a woman, for example, your mind conveniently screens out other women in the category of "love." You strip away all other women to make the bond with this one. It all makes sense.

In Lent, we strip things away. The tradition of giving up something for Lent is a tiny exercise in stripping away things that get in the way of our relationship with God. We learn the bigger lesson that simplifying our life - getting rid of things - actually makes life clearer, more logical, and more beautiful. Lent is like taking a plate piled high with every sort of food, then giving away one piece of food after another until there are just a couple of pieces left, which you can truly savor.

Maybe this Lent - it's not too late! - you can practice the discipline of limiting your internet time or your television time (which acts a lot like the internet). Strip away that information overload, that noise, and take time to reflect on life.

I still wish I had a better memory that allowed me to remember people's names after just one try, but it could be worse. At least there's room up in my head for a little quiet. Makes sense to me.