

“What’s past is prologue...:

The following quote from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* involves Antonio, having survived a mighty storm at sea, and coming ashore on a mysterious island, urging his fellow colleagues to kill Prospero, the ruler of the island, and thus gain power

We all were sea-swallowed, though some cast again,
And by that destiny to perform an act
Whereof what’s past is prologue, what to come
In yours and my discharge.

The Tempest (2.1.244-247)

Tonight we are looking at this quote as an invitation to explore the idea that looking at the past can provide valuable insights, and that it can set the stage for events in the future. It can provide useful lessons and serve as a roadmap to a better future. What happened before can be a new beginning - the past is not lost, it is not useless to us. And then, what is to come, is under our control...

The readings tonight will give us the opportunity to do so...

On the occasion of its 75th anniversary, I re-read John Hersey’s poignant account of the Hiroshima atomic bomb catastrophe, as told through the memories of six survivors. The amount of death, suffering and destruction was incomprehensible, yet life in some manner seemed to go on. Intrigued by this concept, using an imaginative act of narration, I created a series of breakfast meetings between two elderly gentlemen...

The small booth was held for them every Saturday morning. It was simply understood by the other patrons, that they would be there. Every Saturday, around 10 or so, two older men would enter through the door, usually one at a time, the bell on

the door announcing each one's entry. Despite their advancing age, their steps were not shuffled, and they were not hunched over in the manner often seen in old men. Once they sat down, and the preference of sides varied from Saturday to Saturday, they would chat a bit, then order from Betty their waitress. She had become a part of their routine. Coffee for one, tea for the other. Some toast, some jelly and occasionally, especially on cold mornings, some hot oatmeal. Refills of tea and coffee were standard. Their conversations were never loud, but someone sitting in a neighboring booth could occasionally overhear some of the words. Current events were often discussed. Not with any political agenda, but more simply a statement of the facts. The Reds and the Bengals would frequently pop-up and liven up the discussion. The accomplishment of their children and grandchildren seemed to dominate the conversation on most mornings, and photographs were eagerly exchanged and admired. Sometimes they just sat there. They gazed out the window or simply into a far away distance. And though on a practical basis they were gazing in opposite directions, there seemed to be a similar focus of attention - as though they both went to the same place.

They were not lifelong friends, as their demeanor might otherwise suggest. They did not grow up playing T-ball on the neighborhood playgrounds or go to the same grade school. In fact they had only met a few years ago, when Dr. Masakazu Sasaki moved into the new sub-division that was home to many retirees. Jacob Beser had been living there a bit longer, but was also relatively new to the area. Since their houses were right across the street from each other, it seemed natural that they would run into each other on trips to carry out the garbage cans, cut the grass or bring in the newspapers. A few words of acknowledgement turned into more drawn out conversations, especially as grandchildren began to dot the yards. Invariably games of catch and tag, seemed to bring the two distinct yards into a closer play area, with the two grandfathers lapsing into more prolonged discussions as the kids ran around.

It was the beginning of the school year, with an assortment of school activities occupying the grandkids time, that put a damper on these neighborly gatherings. Masakazu and Jacob were enjoying their time together, and one or the other (they can't

remember who), suggested a local coffee shop where they could get together and share their grandkid's accomplishments.

And so their friendship continued. Out of a chance meeting, a random event turned into a very predictable moment. A predictable event that became something providing great anticipation for its participants and a source of stability in their lives. They were both growing older, ailments were seeping in, friends were passing on. Their visits with each other seemed to provide some semblance of continuity, reassurance and hope. Grandkids, and certainly their own children, were busy with their own activities, and so reliving of past moments together, seemed to resurrect those memories.

There was a morning in August, the radio was playing in the background, tuned to its usual news and music station, when Masakazu and Jacob became more quiet than usual. There was a story broadcast about it being the anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing. As Betty cleared the table in a neighboring booth, one of the young men seated there remarked that both of the older men, whom they had seen on multiple Saturdays, had become more pensive and reflective, and seemed to walk out of the diner that morning with a straighter posture and a more measured gait than usual. They asked "... was it the radio account of Hiroshima that had something to do with the curious behavior?" Betty smiled and said that "you know, Masakazu survived the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Jacob had been a pilot in the Pacific theater during the war..." The young men were astounded, and wondered whether the old men just found that out? "Oh no" said Betty as she proceeded to carry off the rest of the dirty dishes, "...they knew that from the first time they watched their grandkids playing together..."

As I enter the early stages of my eight decade, I am often confronted with the dilemma of how to react to situations that have not gone my way. My initial reaction is often “I am old, and damn it, I want it done my way!” But what I want to do, by relying upon years of experience, retrospection and hopefully acquired wisdom, is to react with more understanding and forgiveness. Forgiveness and reconciliation with the possibility of second chances and the importance of addressing these chances as actual opportunities to redeem oneself.

This is not an easy process. Forgiveness is emotionally difficult because evolution has endowed us with the psychological motivation to avoid being exploited by others, thus the urge to retaliate is deeply rooted in evolutionary history, and is a passion that is present in every human being. It may be the quickest way of reversing any gains by the aggressor. The counter argument to revenge suggests that important relationships, damaged by aggression, can be repaired to the benefit of the group members, thereby improving their evolutionary fitness.

Because we are cultural learners, we can learn valuable lessons about where and when to seek revenge, and when to forgive. We do so by observing our parents, our teachers, our mentors; we also learn by reading and studying myths, religious teachings, history, literature and acknowledging traditions. Forgiveness is thus not an elusive concept, but rather an existing skill already present in the human mind, and simply requires that we learn how to use this tool. This learning process of understanding the interplay of forgiveness and revenge, is often enhanced by looking at the past as we struggle through this conflicting thought process.

Epics, movies, operas often deal with issues of revenge. It goes without saying that the role of forgiveness, or the lack thereof, is a driving force in a number of Shakespeare’s plays. Prospero in Act V of *The Tempest* says:

Though with their high wrongs I am stuck to th' quick
Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
Do I take part. The rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance. They being penitent,
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
Not a frown further. Go release them Ariel,
My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore
And they shall be themselves. (5.1.25-32)

Shakespeare's musings on forgiveness, as seen in three of his plays, had a lasting impact on my own understanding of forgiveness and revenge. In his soliloquy "Alas poor Yorik," Hamlet admonishes the reader that the destination of all mortals, even Alexander the Great, "retrench to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam." (5.1.189-190). It is a reminder of our finite time and our finite role in this great play of life. The time to make amends is indeed limited.

No one needs to be told that Hamlet is a revenge play, and whether one considers Hamlet's "madness" as a viable excuse for all of the mayhem and death (eight bodies by my count) occurring in the play, even the final apologies and subsequent acceptance of those apologies by both Hamlet and Laertes, do not hide the magnitude of the devastation and the carnage of revenge upon Hamlet's own house.

The plot of Othello hinges upon Iago seeking revenge through convincing Othello that he must avenge Desdemona's supposed infidelity. And it is the stark contrast of Desdemona's reply to Emilia's question of "who hath done this deed," where she answers "Nobody. I myself." (5.2.120-121), thus providing cover to her husband even after he has just smothered her, that the reader sees the full horrific impact of revenge.

And so it was with the Tempest, a revenge play in which the revenger, Prospero, in full control of his enemies, ponders their forgiveness over seeking revenge. He asks

the airy spirit Ariel what she thinks, to which she replies that she would forgive - "Mine would sir, were I human" (5.1.19) Prospero thus acknowledges that he is himself human and utters the seminal quote of virtue over vengeance.

It is in the context of Prospero's quote that the coffee shop scenario between a survivor of the atomic bombing of Japan and a pilot who very well may have been involved in the air attacks on Japan, expands and amplifies the deeper meaning of forgiveness. The degree of animosity and hatred is hard to imagine, and yet as Prospero suggests, the greater virtue was to forgive, that revenge would not bring any more satisfaction and it was indeed time to move on. I think Masakazu and Jacob both realized that the hope of their future lay in the image of their grandchildren, their grandchildren's future and their very own place in that life.

It is in the closing monologue of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that Puck asks the audience "If you pardon, we will mend." (5.1.416) And so it is with these words, that I also move on....

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