

Geographies of memory

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [August 30, 2000](#) issue

It just didn't seem right, reflecting on my father's life and death in the midst of a city where neither of us had spent much time. There were no familiar places that stirred memories of time together, no specific places where I could go to recall the significant events surrounding his death. I was thousands of miles away from his grave. Yet it was July 18, the date on which my father had died, and a day that I now mark as a time of mourning and thanksgiving for my parents.

Why did it seem so strange to mark this time without a sense of place? After all, we think of memory as something that resides in our heads, and so we carry our memories around with us—even when we travel to unfamiliar places. But it did seem strange, precisely because memory is not *only* “in our heads.” Specific places are significant carriers of our pasts; they are geographies of memory. Specific places evoke powerful emotions and thoughts that flood our hearts and minds with resonances we cannot anticipate. They recall times of inexplicable joy as well as unbearable pain and sadness.

Our memories are often tied to particular places. We were living in that house, in this city, when our first child was born. We were on that bridge, in this resort city, when we decided to get married. It was at that spot, on this mountain, that he slipped and tumbled to his death. It was in that church, the one on the corner, that my parents were married . . .

Unsurprisingly, we want to return to the sites of joyous memories and avoid those that cause significant pain. Yet, although there are sites for each of these memories, there are also sites that evoke a complex mixture of memories that are difficult to disentangle. A friend of mine loves to return to the town where he was raised and nurtured because his parents are buried there, but he is acutely aware that the same town is also the site of physical and psychological racist blows that he has struggled with throughout life. A house can be the site of one child's birth and another's suicide, of beautiful family gatherings as well as horrifying emotional or physical violence. How do we deal with the complex memories that flood through

our lives when we return to these sites?

In addition to marking the places that shape our memories, we construct new spaces to locate memories. That is at least part of what we do with cemeteries and gravestones: we create spaces to mark the memories of loved ones who have died. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has become a collective space where we give thanks for the sacrifices of those we could not otherwise identify by name.

When we erect monuments and memorials as a public tribute to specific events, they begin to reshape our memories. A firefighter's memorial recalls the sacrifices particular people made so that others can live. A statue evokes the reconciling friendship between two groups of people who had previously been enemies.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial holds and carries extraordinary memories. A veteran friend of mine spends as much time as he can at the wall. He locates names and recalls friendships, cries over the physical and emotional wounds he continues to bear, grieves about the rejection he felt when he returned, repents of the killings he committed in the war. Visiting the memorial, he says, offers a catharsis that makes it easier to live through the rest of the year.

Some sites are the location of significant healing—or the source of a renewed passion for vengeance. The site where a key leader was killed is preserved in order to mobilize people to “never forget” what has been done to them. A battlefield of defeat becomes the rallying cry for vengeance.

We Christians have our own geographies of memory, especially as we are raised in particular places as members of specific families and ethnic and cultural communities. Yet deep in our tradition there is also a sense of people being in mission, of not being tied to particular places. Is that an invitation to the rootlessness that can all too easily flip over into a pernicious tribalism?

Or might it be that, for Christians, our most determinative geographies of memory are not particular places so much as the specific spaces of pulpit, baptismal font, eucharistic table? Could it be that in worship we locate our memories in the story of God and begin to discover thanksgiving and healing there? We are called to be less attached to the building than to the activities by which our memories are shaped, reshaped and—over time—healed, redeemed and made new. In our study and proclamation of scripture, we ought to be disciplining our memory through learning the story of God. The baptismal font ought to remind us of who and whose we are in

ways that enable us to give thanks for particular histories even as we overcome their destructive features. The eucharistic table signifies the ways in which God “remembers” us as we remember the night on which he was betrayed.

At the heart of our faith is an invitation to remember the past differently thanks to the gracious love of God manifested in the crucified and risen Christ. We are invited to place our memories’ wounds in the wounds of Christ and to give thanks for our joyous memories by commemorating all the saints, especially those who from their labors rest. To be sure, the movable sites of Christian worship do not erase other sites as carriers of powerful memories. But they relativize the significance of particular places, and offer a more determinative geography for our memories.

July 18th didn’t seem right, at least for much of the day, because I was in an unfamiliar place. But when I went to a chapel service, and heard the scripture read and proclaimed, and saw the font and the table, I began to remember again, and to give thanks.