

I remember

By [John P. Leggett](#)

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A week ago it was my sister's birthday.

She would have turned 57, only she died at 31. As I do every year on her birthday, I talked about her with that kind of wistful memory marked by both joy and pain.

As I drove my son to a school event in the early evening, I reminded him, "Today is your Aunt Sarah's birthday."

His response caught me by surprise: "I miss her, and I never even met her."

He never met his Aunt Sarah. But he misses her, because we remember her.

Frederick Buechner once wrote,

"When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years or miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart. For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost."

On her birthday, we remembered my sister.

We remembered her out loud. We remembered her for my son and for my daughters who never met her, and for all of us whose hearts know the ache her absence brings.

Those scattered thoughts that pass through my mind unspoken on other days, each bearing a memory of my sister's life, clamor to be spoken on her birthday.

"Aaron, I wish you could have known your Aunt Sarah," I finally said. "You know, she used to drive me to soccer practice every now and then. Every time I hear a certain

song on the radio, I can remember listening to it blaring from the radio in her old Volkswagen Beetle.

“And your Aunt Sarah worked at Pizza Hut, and she would sometimes bring home a pizza that someone didn’t pick up by closing time. And when I would wake up the next morning, I’d find it in the refrigerator and eat it cold for breakfast.”

I don’t know how many stories I told by the time we arrived at his event. But Aaron never stopped me.

On our way home, he and I stopped by my parents’ house. When I told my mother what Aaron had said—about how he missed the aunt he had never met—she stood up from her seat beside Aaron and walked to her bedroom. When she returned, she held a small, unframed picture of my sister in her hands.

She handed it to Aaron. “Look at her smile, Aaron. What do you see?”

My sister appeared to be about Aaron’s age in the photo, perhaps a little older.

“She’s missing a tooth,” he said. “Just like me.” And he smiled just enough for us to see the space created when he lost his first lost tooth a few weeks ago.

And I wondered. How many times has my mother summoned that picture of my sister’s snaggle-toothed smile to her mind?

On my sister’s birthday, I followed Buechner’s words to a place of gratitude.

I remembered my sister. I called to mind her face and listened for her voice.

And I spoke to her in my heart. “Sarah, you were my sister. And I love you. And I will remember you.”

I remember so that my children will continue to know the aunt they never met. Even if it means they will miss her too.

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