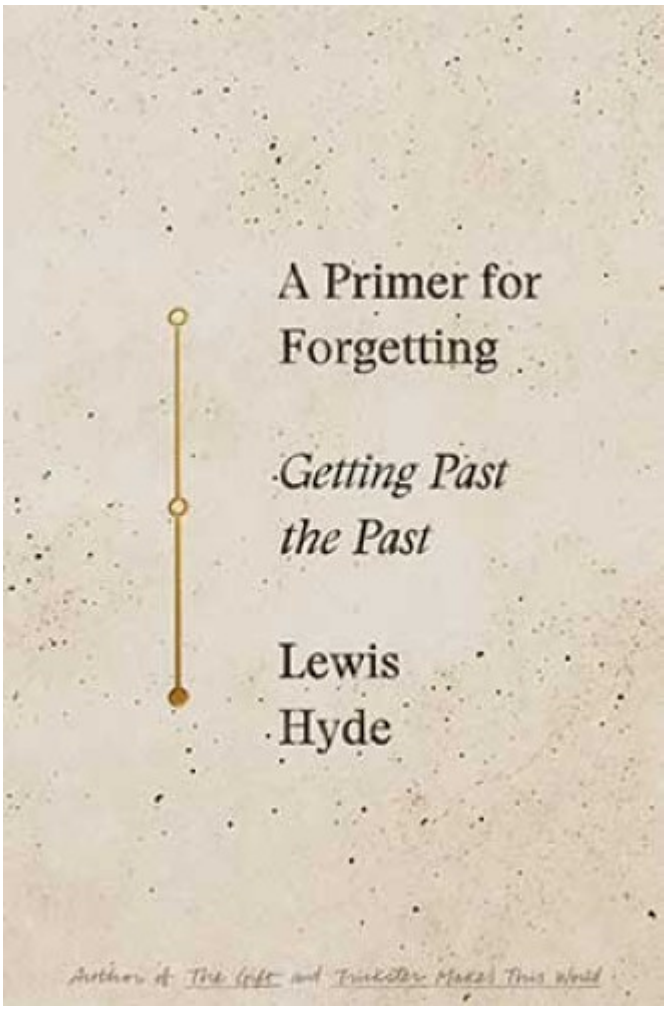
When forgetting is more useful than remembering

Some things are better forgotten, says Lewis Hyde.

by Amy Frykholm in the November 20, 2019 issue

In Review



A Primer for Forgetting

Getting Past the Past

By Lewis Hyde
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Lately I have become acquainted with a man who has some of the deepest regrets in his life that I've ever encountered in another person. He shot and killed a man when he was very young in the presence of his then girlfriend, now ex-wife two times over. "She's never been the same since," he tells me. He was a drug runner for a gang. He served as a sniper in Iraq, and he can't forget what he did or what he saw. Now his alcoholism gives him more to regret every day as he tries, ineffectively, to silence his conscience. He is also a lovely human being who is by turns tender and despairing, who sees clearly how self-hatred has gotten the best of him. He longs for release, but he cannot offer it to himself.

I thought of this man often when I was reading Lewis Hyde's *A Primer for Forgetting*. Hyde is a cultural critic, essayist, poet, and folklorist perhaps best known for his classic book *The Gift*, which is about gift economies, creativity, and fairy tales. Hyde might call what afflicts my friend "the Furies," which he describes as mythical creatures who refuse to let go of the past. "They cling to the memory of hurt and of harm, injury and insult. Their names are Grievance, Ceaseless, and Bloodlust. Their names are Grudge, Relentless, and Payback. They bloat the present with the undigested past."

The ability to remember has an important place in our culture and in our myths. In Platonic thought, Hyde says, remembering meant not so much clinging to the past as ordering one's life according to eternal truths. Forgetting was falling away, neglecting these basic essences. Moderns have cherished the cry, "Never again!" as an admonition to remember the circumstances that led to the Holocaust so that it never happens again. These are precious functions of memory.

But Hyde wants to attend to those instances in which forgetting is more useful than remembering. "Nothing good happens when unforgettable Furies make revenge the ideal you can't get out of your head. Or when memories of injury stoke an endless civil war. Or when the dead never drink the Water of Solace and the living know no end to grief."

Hyde recognizes that it isn't so easy to forget. If I told my new friend to forget all that he had done and seen, the Furies would laugh in my face. What is required is something much harder: a movement that involves deep recollection and a letting

go.

A Primer for Forgetting describes this movement in four parts, titled myth, self, nation, and creation. Each part is a collection of notes about the relationship between release and healing. The notebooks include long sections on the civil rights movement, Native American lands and memory, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. They also include sections on the purpose of forgetting in creative life, Buddhism, and moments of Hyde's mother's dementia.

In one reflection, he tells of the day care center where his father sometimes leaves his mother in order to get a little time to himself. The center gives the patients piles of laundry to fold. Hyde doesn't tell the reader what he makes of his mother standing at a table with a large basket of sheets and towels, folding them, but he connects the moment to the mythical "plains of Lethe" where souls go after having been washed in the river of oblivion. By placing his mother's illness in this mythical context, Hyde shifts to a different understanding of the self, one that involves "liquefying" and letting go.

There is loss and even horror in this movement, but we cannot deny that some form of forgetting can help alter trajectories.

In Aeschylus's play *The Eumenides*, the Furies have created a cycle of remembering and blood vengeance from which the characters cannot escape. Agamemnon killed his daughter Iphigenia. Clytemnestra cannot forgive him. She kills him. Their children cannot forgive her. They kill her. Now Orestes, her son and killer, is haunted by all of this death. He flees to Athens and begs Athena to help him. Athena sees the impossibility of the situation: she cannot release Orestes from his guilt, but she also cannot allow things to continue to go forward in the same way.

What Athena does in response, Hyde explains, is to change "guilt's relationship to time." She slows down the process and creates deliberation. She invents trial by jury, which is an opportunity for the whole story to be told. She helps the Furies transform from atemporal beings that know no relationship to time (and thus can never forget) to temporal beings that allow for "futures that do not repeat the past." The Furies become the Eumenides, protectors and honored spirits of regeneration and fertility. "Forgetting appears," Hyde writes, "when the story has been so fully told as to wear itself out. Then time begins to flow again; then the future can unfold."

Despite its subtitle, this is no self-help book. It is a rich collection of anecdotes, historical examples, mythical retellings, and thoughtful reflections on how to remember and how to forget.