



## Readings



Photo by realworkhard on Pixabay

Beauty exists not in what is seen and remembered, but in what is felt and never forgotten. Johnathan Jena

### 1. *The Spiritual Practice of Remembering*

by Margaret Bendroth

Our ancestors are on the one hand terribly alien to us, yet we are also profoundly connected to them. They confront us with the full span of human diversity, in beautiful, frustrating, and challenging ways. We do not need to excuse them for their various sins and omissions, treating them as if they came from some wildly exotic civilization. We have the right — and the responsibility — to disagree and complain and rail against them within the framework of our common tradition, that extended argument constantly unfolding across both space and time. Even though they do not literally talk back, it is still possible to learn to hear their voices clearly.

Without our ancestors, we can't really know what it is to be human. Some linguists argue that the Latin word for human (*humanitas*) is related to the word for burying (*humando*). In other words, it's not a stretch to say that to be human is to bury our dead — and, even more important, to remember where they are. Archaeological evidence suggests that the earliest hearths and the earliest homes were built over those ancient graves.

...We are, after all, born of the dead, taking over their physical space, their languages, and their ideas — and we are the ones who will hand these over to our unborn. We the living are a ligament

# EXPLORATION

## Remembrance

between the generations, the only connection between what was long ago and what is yet to come.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/25877>

### 2. *Remembering the Three Sisters* by Robin Wall Kimmerer

I live in the lush green farm country of upstate New York, in a town that likely has more cows than people. Most everyone I know grows something: apples, hops, grapes, potatoes, berries, and lots of corn.

As I carry my seeds to the garden, [I remember that it was] a gift from heritage seed savers, my friends at the Onondaga Nation farm, a few hills away. This variety is so old that it accompanied our Potawatomi people on the great migration from the East Coast to the Great Lakes. Holding the seeds in the palm of my hand, I feel the memory of trust in the seed to care for the people, if we care for the seed. These kernels are a tangible link to history and identity and cultural continuity in the face of all the forces that sought to erase them. I sing to them before putting them into the soil and offer a prayer. The women who gave me these seeds make it a practice that every single seed in their care is touched by human hands. In harvesting, shelling, sorting, each one feels the tender regard of its partner, the human.

...I'm planting the way I was taught, using a brilliant innovation generated by indigenous science: the Three Sisters polyculture. I plant each mound with three species, corn, beans, and squash—not willy-nilly, but just the right varieties at just the right time. ...Three Sisters planting takes advantage of their complementary natures, so they don't compete but instead cooperate. ...This is a system that produces superior yield and nutrition and requires no herbicides, no

added fertilizers, and no pesticides—and yet it is called primitive technology. I'll take it.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2336>

### 3. *The Persistence of Memory*

by Susan Orlean

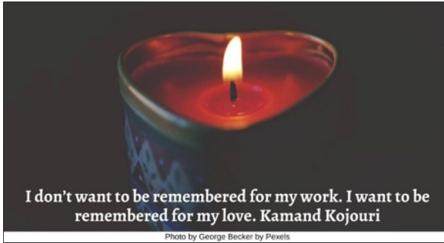
The idea of being forgotten is terrifying. I fear not just that I, personally, will be forgotten, but that we are all doomed to being forgotten—that the sum of life is ultimately nothing; that we experience joy and disappointment and aches and delights and loss, make our little mark on the world, and then we vanish, and the mark is erased, and it is as if we never existed. If you gaze into that bleakness even for a moment, the sum of life becomes null and void, because if nothing lasts, nothing matters. It means that everything we experience unfolds without a pattern, and life is just a wild, random, baffling occurrence, a scattering of notes with no melody. But if something you learn or observe or imagine can be set down and saved, and if you can see your life reflected in previous lives, and can imagine it reflected in subsequent ones, you can begin to discover order and harmony. You know that you are a part of a larger story that has shape and purpose—a tangible, familiar past and a constantly refreshed future. We are all whispering in a tin can on a string, but we are heard, so we whisper the message into the next tin can and the next string. Writing a book, just like building a library, is an act of sheer defiance. It is a declaration that you believe in the persistence of memory.

Source: <http://www.buuc.org/the-persistence-of-memory.html>

### 4. *Reclaiming My Culture*

by Mike Adams

...I glanced at the box with mom's ashes.... The room was burdened with



vanished opportunities and stolen familial ties.

...Eight of us had traveled two thousand miles so [my mother,] Valerie, could rest with her ancestors. Six decades earlier, she had been violently separated from her family and her tribe as part of the Indian Adoption Program. Today, she returned home: a beloved stranger. This exposed a heartbreak that had festered for a lifetime. Her eldest sister sobbed, recalling summers spent with her dad searching the U.S. for her stolen sister.

My mom, my sister, and I had reunited with Lil'wat family twenty years earlier. My wife and I agreed on a Lil'wat name for my son, and we've all formed relationships with Lil'wat aunts, uncles, and cousins. We've also built lives in New Mexico, so we live far away from British Columbia, and probably will never live with my tribe. But today, I am learning Lil'wat songs, and I'm starting to learn our language, along with my son. ...

I hope that I can visit my people often, and visit my mom's burial site. It's painful knowing that she rests so far away. I cried as we crossed the Canadian border. I was leaving my mom in another world, located far away from mine. It was the right thing to do, and it brought some closure for a community traumatized by the theft of its children a lifetime earlier.

This experience is bittersweet. I grew up isolated in white America. The only Lil'wat Indians I knew were my mom and my sister. I've gained family who look like me, and I'm reclaiming my culture. It's painful knowing my mom rests in such a distant place. But it also ties me to my people, my past. It is good.

Source: [https://www.uua.org/braverwiser/reclaiming-my-culture](https://www.uua.org.braverwiser/reclaiming-my-culture)

## 5. *Everything is Compost*

by Diane Dreher

Working in our gardens, we discover enduring principles of growth and renewal. A compost pile turns leaves, grass clippings, and kitchen waste into rich new soil. The same principle holds true for our inner lives.

Composting is part of the natural cycle in which nothing is wasted. Apple parings, ends of vegetables, onion skins, tips of green beans, last week's leftovers, vegetables that have gone bad in the refrigerator — all go into the compost bin. No apologies. Whatever they are, wherever they come from, they're part of a larger process of transformation, turning remnants of the past into better tomorrows.

In an examined life everything is compost. Cherished memories empower us and enrich our lives. But so can our mistakes, old habits we'd like to break, patterns we've outgrown. Instead of dwelling on a negative experience, we can compost it. Becoming more mindful, asking, "What can I learn from this?" and then moving on can turn any negative experience into a new cycle of wisdom and growth.

...Think of something in your life you'd like to compost: an old habit you'd like to break, a negative experience that keeps nagging at you, [or] something you did that you regret.

...It takes time to break old habits, so don't be discouraged. Whenever you find yourself falling back into the old pattern, stop and tell yourself, "I've composted that."

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/13654>

## 6. *When Forgetfulness Becomes Alzheimer's Disease*

by Jane Sigloch

...We forget where we put our car keys. We forget names, directions, tickets, lists, coats, hats, glasses, and gloves. But while the occasional loss of memory may be troublesome, it usually isn't of serious proportions. Well . . . maybe sometimes. I left water running in the laundry sink a few months ago — totally forgetting that I had intended to bleach some old towels. . . . It was a household

disaster of considerable proportions.

And yet, it was not of considerable proportions when compared to other disasters precipitated by dementia, especially by those brought on by the most dreaded of them all—Alzheimer's.

We don't like to talk about Alzheimer's. It's as if the very mention of the word might invoke demons. David Shenk, author of the insightful book called *The Forgetting*, writes that: "The fear of Alzheimer's is the fear of losing your identity while your healthy body walks on into oblivion. It is the fear of becoming a ghost.... So, we avoid it."

Victims of Alzheimer's lose their history. They lose the touchstones to their imagination and those bright shining moments when the world was full of laughter. They lose places where they walked between the drifts of windswept winter. They lose faces they once held between their hands. They lose the self. And we have to watch them walk on into oblivion. We have to stand by the side of the road and, like Ophelia, weep for minds o'erthrown.

...But even though the victims of the dread disease forget everything, they're never forgotten. Never.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28067>

## 7. *Kitchen Table Wisdom*

by Rachel Naomi Remen

Everybody is a story. When I was a child, people sat around kitchen tables and told their stories. We don't do that so much anymore. Sitting around the table telling stories is not just a way of passing time. It is the way the wisdom gets passed along. The stuff that helps us to live a life worth remembering.

...Real stories take time. We stopped telling stories when we started to lose that sort of time, pausing time, reflecting time, wondering time. ...Most often, something unforeseen stops us and it is only then we have the time to take a seat at life's kitchen table. To know our own story and tell it. To listen to other people's stories. To remember that the real world is made of just such stories.

...The kitchen table is a level playing field. Everyone's story matter. The wisdom in the story of the most educated

and powerful person is often not greater than the wisdom in the story of a child, and the life of a child can teach us as much as the life of a sage.

Most parents know the importance of telling children their own story, over and over again, so that they come to know in the telling who they are and to whom they belong.

...Sometimes when I ask people to tell me their story they tell me about their achievements, what they have acquired or built over a lifetime. So many of us do not know our own story. A story about who we are, not about what we have done. ...The real story that belongs to us alone.

...Facts bring us to knowledge, but stories lead to wisdom.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/16128>

## Wisdom Story

### A Brother's Sacrifice

*This is a fictional account of the creation of Dürer's work, "Praying Hands." It was inspired by another story about the praying hands, but attempts to be truer to what is known about Albrecht and Hans Dürer.*

Hundreds of years ago in the fifteenth century a family lived in a tiny village near Nuremberg in Germany. The village was tiny, but not the family. Albrecht Dürer the Elder and his wife Barbara had eighteen children. He was a goldsmith. On many days he worked sixteen hours or more to earn enough money to take care of his family. Still, they were quite poor.

Despite what appeared to be a hopeless situation, two of the sons shared a dream. They both wanted to study art, but they knew that their father could not afford to have them both serve as an apprentice to a famous artist in Nuremberg at the same time.

They talked about their dreams night after night. Then they made a pact. They would toss a coin. The one who lost would work in the nearby coal mines and help support the family while the brother who won studied art. Then, when that brother completed his studies, he would support the family

through the sale of his artwork so

that the second brother could become an apprentice and study art.

They tossed a coin on a Sunday morning after church. Albrecht Dürer won the toss and moved to Nuremberg to serve as an apprentice to Michael Wolgemut who had a large workshop that produced a variety of works of art, including woodcuts for books. The year was 1486 and Albrecht was just 15 years old. His brother, Hans, went to work in the coal mine.

After he completed his apprenticeship, Albrecht followed the German custom of taking a *Wanderjahr* or "wander year" to study with other famous artists. That year turned into four as Albrecht worked tirelessly to develop his skills and become a master artist. He returned home in 1494 to marry Agnes Frey following an arrangement made by his parents during his absence. At the reception after the wedding, Albrecht told Hans that it was now his turn to become an apprentice and study art.

Hans was moved by Albrecht's offer, but wondered if he could become as skilled as his brother. Hans said, "I'm not sure that I should even try. My hands were damaged working in the mine. Look at them. Sometimes it is even hard to hold a brush."



"Nonsense," said Albrecht. "You must do what you love. Learn to be an artist and pray that your hands will continue to heal so that you can create what you imagine."



Hans became an apprentice to his brother. Daily, Albrecht instructed his younger brother, often looking at his hands as he worked. Hans developed the skills necessary to become a gifted artist. Later, like many other Nuremberg artists, Hans went to live and work in Kraków where he became the court painter for King Sigismund I of Poland. This connects him with our own religious tradition since King Sigismund was the great uncle of John II Sigismund Zápolya, King of Transylvania, and the only Unitarian king in history.

In 1508, Albrecht created a pen and ink sketch called "Praying Hands" (in German *Betende Hände*). It has become his most well-known work. Many people wonder if those were the hands of his brother, who had sacrificed so much so Albrecht could study what he loved. The two brothers are memories, but this famous sketch reminds us of their lives.

Source: Touchstones

## Snippets

"The landscape tells—or rather is—a story. It enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who, over the generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its formation. To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perpetually with the environment that is itself pregnant with the past." Tim Ingold

"We achieve some measure of adulthood when we recognize our parents as they really were, without sentimentalizing or mythologizing, but also without blaming them unfairly for our imperfections. Maturity entails a readiness, painful and wrenching though it may be, to look squarely into the long dark places, into the fearsome shadows. In this act of ancestral remembrance and ac-



ceptance may be found a light by which to see our children safely home.”

Carl Sagan

“Nostalgia is not indulgence. Nostalgia tells us we are in the presence of imminent revelation, about to break through the present structures held together by the way we have remembered: something we thought we understood but that we are now about to fully understand, something already lived but not fully lived, issuing not from our future but from something already experienced; something that was important, but something to which we did not grant importance enough, something now wanting to be lived again, at the depth to which it first invited us but which we originally refused. Nostalgia is not an immersion in the past, nostalgia is the first annunciation that the past as we know it is coming to an end.”

David Whyte

“When we walk down the memory lane, it can be unconsciously, willingly, selectively, impetuously, or sometimes grudgingly. As we look for lost time and things past, we follow our stream of consciousness. Some reminiscences become anchor points that can take another scope with the wisdom of hindsight. We are what we remember. If we lose our memory, we lose our identity, and our identity is the accumulation of our experiences. Remembering our past can be a healthy exercise. We should yet beware of manipulations of our memory. By sticking to things that torment us, we can be tempted to brood over what should have, could have, or would have been done. We need no ‘shoulda, coulda, woulda.’”

Erik Pevernagie

“A blessing is not something that one person gives another. A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind

of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another. By making a place for wholeness within our relationships, we offer others the opportunity to be whole without shame and become a place of refuge from everything in them that are not genuine. We enable people to remember who they are.” Rachel Naomi Remen

“People tend to see only the stubble fields of transitoriness but overlook and forget the full granaries of the past into which they have brought the harvest of their lives: the deeds done, the loves loved, and last but not least, the sufferings they have gone through with courage and dignity.” Viktor Frankl

“The woods do that to you, they always look familiar, long lost, like the face of a long-dead relative, like an old dream, like a piece of forgotten song drifting across the water, most of all like golden eternities of past childhood or past ... [adulthood] and all the living and the dying and the heartbreak that went on a million years ago and the clouds as they pass overhead seem to testify by their own lonesome familiarities to this feeling. Ecstasy, even, I felt, with flashes of sudden remembrance, and feeling sweaty and drowsy I felt like sleeping and dreaming in the grass.”

Jack Kerouac

“What shall I do with my parents? Act such that your actions justify the suffering they endured. To act to justify the suffering of your parents is to remember all the sacrifices that all the others who lived before you (not least your parents) have made for you in all the course of the terrible past, to be grateful for all the progress that has been thereby made, and then to act in accordance with that remembrance & gratitude. People sacrificed immensely to bring about what we have now. In many cases, they literally died for it - & we should act with some respect for that fact.” Jordan Peterson

“Czeslaw Milosz said: ‘Our planet gets smaller every year, and with its fantastic

proliferation of mass media is witnessing a process that defies definition, characterized by a refusal to remember.’ ... Yet memory is critical if a people are not to be at the mercy of the powers-that-be, if they are to have something against which to measure what the partisans and propagandists tell them today. Memory is critical if, as democracy requires, we are to make midcourse corrections in the affairs of state and our personal behavior. ... We can reflect on our experiences and share the insights with others. Life becomes a conversation [among] ... generations — past, present, future. ‘New ages don’t begin all at once,’ Bertolt Brecht said. ‘My grandfather lives in the new age. My grandson will still live in the old. ... From the new antennae come the old stupidities. Wisdom is passed from mouth to mouth.’” Bill Moyers

“When I awaken in the night and sense my hands cupped together under the pillow, or when I sit somewhere on a porch, idly watching wind crossing a ripening field, and look down to see my hands nested in my lap as if asleep like two old dogs, it is not hard for me to believe they know. They remember all they have done, all that has happened to them, the ways in which they have been surprised or worked themselves free of desperate trouble, or lost their grip and so caused harm. It’s not hard to believe they remember the heads patted, the hands shaken, the apples peeled, the hair braided, the wood split, the gears shifted, the flesh gripped and stroked, and that they convey their feelings to each other.” Barry Lopez

## Questions

1. In reading #1, Margaret Bendroth writes about ancestors. Where do your ancestors fit into your sense of self? Do you observe any rituals of remembrance with regard to some of your ancestors? What motivates you to do so? Do you have a favorite story about an ancestor? Can you share it? Bendroth concludes, “We the living are a ligament between the generations, the only connection between what was long ago and



what is yet to come.” How can we faithfully discharge the duty that such a connection requires?

2. In reading #2, Robin Wall Kimmerer reflects upon the *Three Sisters*: corn, beans, and squash. She writes, “Holding the seeds in the palm of my hand, I feel the memory of trust in the seed to care for the people, if we care for the seed.” She then adds that, “These [heritage] kernels are a tangible link to history and identity and cultural continuity in the face of all the forces that sought to erase them.” How do you regard this strong connection with the past and it how it shapes identity? What links do you have to history, identity, and cultural continuity? What did it mean that in the US and Canada residential schools were established to destroy the language and culture of so many young indigenous people? In what ways can we affirm that indigenous lives matter?
3. In reading #3, Susan Orlean begins, “The idea of being forgotten is terrifying.” Do you share her concern? Why or why not? She counters this with the belief that we are all “a part of a larger story that has shape and purpose—a tangible, familiar past and a constantly refreshed future.” Do you agree? Some place their immortality in an after-life, but others ground it in one’s good works, one’s descendants, one’s friends, etc. Where do you find immortality? For what do you want to be remembered?
4. In reading #4, Mike Adams writes about his mother’s tragic loss of her culture and identity, and therefore, his, when she was removed from her family and adopted by a white family as part of the Indian Adoption Program in the United States. It and a successor program operated from 1958 to the early 1970s.

This theft of culture and identity, was also a theft of memory. In his actions to reclaim Lil’wat culture, he is creating intentional memories for his son. Have you sought to create intentional memories? If yes, what was the context? What role does society have in protecting the culture and historical memory of minorities, especially those who are often oppressed? (Note that this task is part of the work of UNESCO.) What role do we have in educating ourself about the history of indigenous peoples, minorities, immigrants, etc. that has been ignored by the dominant historical national narratives that we were taught? What impact might such learning have on our collective memory and action?

5. In reading #5, Diane Dreher writes, “In an examined life everything is compost.” How is this true? She continues, “Cherished memories empower us and enrich our lives.” Are there particular memories that have empowered and enriched your life? Can you share an example? How has this memory enriched the “soil” of your life? Dreher also recommends that, “Instead of dwelling on a negative experience, we can compost it.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. In reading #6, Jane Sigloh writes about the tragedy of Alzheimer’s. Have you known someone with Alzheimer’s or another type of dementia? What was the experience, like as near as you can tell, for them? For you? What do the ravages of dementia indicate about the relationship between memory and identity? Sigloh writes that victims of Alzheimer’s lose their history, moments of laughter, imagination, places, and faces. What do each of these contribute to memory? To identity? Sigloh concludes, “even though the victims of the dread disease forget everything, they’re never forgotten. Never.” Does this reality offer some solace? Why or why not? If yes, then how?
7. In reading #7, Rachel Naomi Remen begins, “Everybody is a story.”

What value do you place on story, especially personal stories, family stories, and community or congregational stories? As communication technology has advanced, has storytelling declined? Why? This reality is, writes Remen, interrupted when “something unforeseen stops us and it is only then we have the time to take a seat at life’s kitchen table.” What unforeseen events might cause you to stop and take a seat with others at the kitchen table? Why do we return to storytelling in response to these events? What value do you place on having “a seat at life’s kitchen table?” What have you learned there? What wisdom have you, would you share at life’s kitchen table? Remen adds, “...The kitchen table is a level playing field. Everyone’s story matter.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What wisdom have you learned from children’s stories when seated at life’s kitchen table?

***The following questions are related to the Snippets.***

8. Tim Ingold writes that, “To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance....” His point, in part, is that the landscape includes its past, even if it is not apparent. Ecosystems evolve, trees live and die, species encroach or recede, the change is endless. What are some of your favorite landscapes? Why? What urban landscapes would you add this? Why? Have these landscapes changed over time? How? Did these landscapes form you? How?
9. Carl Sagan writes about ancestral remembrance and acceptance. He places it in the context of recognizing “our parents as they really were, without sentimentalizing or mythologizing, but also without blaming them unfairly for our imperfections.” Do you agree with him? Why or why not? What makes this difficult? Why is it important? Has this process for you reached back to grandparents and other family members? Why or why not? In what ways does coming to terms

with our roots contribute to self-acceptance?

10. David Whyte writes, “Nostalgia is not an immersion in the past, nostalgia is the first annunciation that the past as we know it is coming to an end.” How might this be true? What are some instances of nostalgia for you that have been especially powerful? As you recall these, were they more about what was with delight or what is gone with regret? As you consider these memories, is there something, as Whyte suggests, “something now wanting to be lived again?” If yes, what does that mean to you? Does nostalgia, done well, involve coming to terms with your past?

11. Erik Pevernagie is a painter who writes engaging reflections about his paintings. You can review some of his paintings and reflections at [http://www.pevernagie.com/index.php?option=com\\_rsGallery2&page=inline&gid=4&limit=1&Itemid=6](http://www.pevernagie.com/index.php?option=com_rsGallery2&page=inline&gid=4&limit=1&Itemid=6). His writings are so engaging that his admirers collaborated by choosing and publishing 200 of his quotations along with an illustration for each. (See *Words of Wisdom: Selected and Illustrated by his readers*.) Memory is a topic to which he has returned again and again. Pevernagie writes, “We are what we remember.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Remembering can be healthy, but it can also be a problem if we are, as he writes, “tempted to brood over what should have, could have, or would have been done.” Have you ever been immersed in this kind of brooding? How did you address it? Pevernagie concludes, “We need no ‘shoulda, coulda, woulda.’” Do you agree? Why or why not?

12. Rachel Naomi Remen defines a blessing as “a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another.” Have you ever experienced this kind of meeting? If yes, was it a blessing?” In terms of fostering authentic interactions, Remen writes, “We enable people to remember who they are.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Has anyone helped you remember who you are? What were the circumstances? What was the impact on you?

13. Viktor Frankl compared the “stubble fields of transitoriness” to “the full granaries of the past.” He was concerned that we look at our past as being a glass half empty instead of a glass half full, if not overflowing. Why might people be tempted to see their past as a glass have full? What impact might this have on their sense of the present and anticipation of the future? Frankl defined the harvest of a life as including deeds done, loves loved, and suffering with courage and dignity. In your experience, have these contributed to making your life full? What are the most important things to you in your harvest of life?

14. Jack Kerouac wrote about the experience of being in the woods noting “they always look familiar, long lost, like the face of a long-dead relative, like an old dream, like a piece of forgotten song drifting across the water....” Do the woods have this kind of impact on you? Kerouac was aware while in the woods of “all the living and the dying and the heartbreak that went on a million years ago.” When you contemplate the past, how far back do you go? What is the impact of viewing the past narrowly, perhaps just your own life, versus taking a wider and longer view? Which is your tendency? Why?

15. Jordan Peterson asks, “What shall I do with my parents?” By this, he is asking, what should I do with all of the sacrifices that my parents and others made that I might have a better life? His answer is “to act in accordance with that remembrance & gratitude.” What is your answer? While it is called ancestor worship, the better term is ancestor remembrance. Why do you think that ancestor remembrance is important in so many cultures and religions? Is it important to you? In what ways?

16. Bill Moyers recalls Czeslaw Milosz’s concern: a refusal of people to remember. Moyers then writes, “memory is critical if a people are not to be at the mercy of the powers-that-be.” Do you see a refusal of people to remember? If yes, why does this happen? What dangers does this present? What can be done about it? Moyers asserts that memory is critical to democracy. Do you agree? Why or why not? How is it critical?

17. Barry Lopez reflects on the fact that his hands remember. What do your hands remember? Your body? What stories do the scars, broken bones, surgeries, and serious illnesses tell about your life?