

Remembrance an essay by Timothy Findley



Today is Remembrance Day, and it's a strange thing to me that we confine ourselves to remembering only the dead—and only the war dead, at that. If they were able, what would *they* be remembering? Us. And we're alive. Here we are. Maybe it's sad—I suppose it is—that the dead should be remembering the living and the living remembering the dead. But the main thing is, we all remember when we were together. We remember that we were in another time. Not now, but *then*. Memory is making peace with time.

They say that loss of memory is not to know who you are. Then, I suppose, it has to follow that we *are* what we remember. I can believe that. I mean, it's very easy for me to imagine forgetting my name. That wouldn't worry me. And it wouldn't worry me to forget how old I am (I wish I could!) or to forget the colour of my eyes and have to go look in a mirror to remind myself. None of that would worry me. Because I can skip all of that. None of those things are who I am.

But it would worry the hell out of me if I couldn't remember the smell of the house where I grew up, or the sound of my father playing the piano, or the tune of his favourite song. I remember my brother, Michael, as a child. And the child I remember being myself is as much a remembrance of him as it is of me. More, in fact—because I saw him every day and did not see myself. I heard him every day—and did not hear myself (except singing). So, to be a child in memory means that I conjure Michael, not the child in photographs who bears my name.

I am my Aunt Marg, for instance, telling me not to lean into the cemetery over the fence at Foxbar Road. I am not leaning over the fence, I am her voice—because that is what I remember. And I am all the gravestones I was looking at when she called me. And the fence boards that supported me. And the sun on my back. But I am not that little boy. I don't remember him at all. I remember him falling and being picked up—but I am the distance he fell and the hands that lifted him, not the bump in between. I remember the sound of my own voice crying—but not the feel of it. That voice is gone. And I am the gloves my mother wore when she held my hand and the tones of her laughter. And I remember and will move forever, as all children do, to the heartbeats of my mother. That remembrance is the rhythm of my life. So memory is other people—it is little of ourselves.

I like Remembrance Day. I'm fond of memory. I wish it was a day of happiness. I have many dead in my past, but only one of them died from the wars. And I think very fondly of him. He was my uncle. He didn't die in the War, but because of it. This was the First World War and so I don't remember the event itself. I just remember him. But what I remember of my uncle is not the least bit sad.

I was just a child—in the classic sense—a burbling, few-worded, looking-up-at-everything child. Uncle Tif—who died at home—was always in a great tall bed—high up—and the bed was white. I would go into his room, supported by my father's hands, and lean against the lower edge of the mattress. There was a white sheet over everything, and I can smell that sheet to this day. It smelled of soap and talcum powder. To me, Uncle Tif was a hand that came down from a great way off and tapped me on the head. He smoked a pipe. And there was something blue in the room—I don't know whether it was a chair or a table or my father's pant legs—but there was something blue and that has always been one of my favourite colours.

And high above my head, there was a tall glass jar on a table and the jar was full of hard French candies. They had shiny jackets and were many colours. And Uncle Tif's hand would go out, waving in the air above my gaze and lift up the lid of the jar and take out a candy and slowly—it was always slowly—he would pass the candy down into my open mouth. Then I would lean against the bed, or fall on the floor, and taste the candy for about two hours—or what, to a kid, just seemed two hours—while the adult voices buzzed above my head.

I know he sacrificed his youth, his health, his leg, and finally his life for his country. But I'd be a fool if I just said *thanks—I'm grateful*. I might as well hit him in the mouth as say that. Because my being grateful has nothing to do with what he died for or why he died. That was part of his own life. I am grateful he was there in that little bit of my life. And I am grateful, above all, that he is in my memory. I am his namesake. He is mine.

Remembrance is more than honouring the dead. Remembrance is joining them—being one with them in memory. Memory is survival.