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ESSAY



Memorial Lessons

BY REBECCA BORLAND REYNOLDS

How often do we reflect on memory? Surely, we think about it when it fails us. We may damn it when we lose our keys or forget someone's name, or dread it in the case of Alzheimer's, robbing mind of memory as bleach leaches color from cloth. We may also think about memory when our memories disagree with each other, in conflict over whether this happened or that. But how many times have we asked ourselves what is memory? Of what and how is it made? What is the difference between "good memory" and "bad?" And what of the role of memory, both for the individual and for a group - family, community, society?

Whether we think about it or not, memory is one of the key pillars of existence, of identity; one could even say, "I remember, therefore I am." And this holds not only for the individual, but also for the collective, for society. What we choose to remember and then to memorialize is as much a commentary on who we are as anything. This act of memorializing - the act of canonizing memory - is exactly what concerns Dr. James Young.

Recently, I heard Dr. Young speak at the annual Fred Marcus Memorial Holocaust Lecture in Denver, which is itself a tribute to the memory of a remarkable man and Holocaust survivor. Young, a professor of English



Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington D.C.

and Judaic studies at the University of Massachusetts, is an expert on Holocaust memorialization and memorials, and memory in general.

The theme of Young's talk was trends in memorials since World War II, and he traced the lineage of the 9/11 memorial (Young served on the jury of the World Trade Center Site Memorial competition) back through a wide range of them, starting with Georges-Henri Pingusson's stark monument to the French deportees under the Nazi occupation.

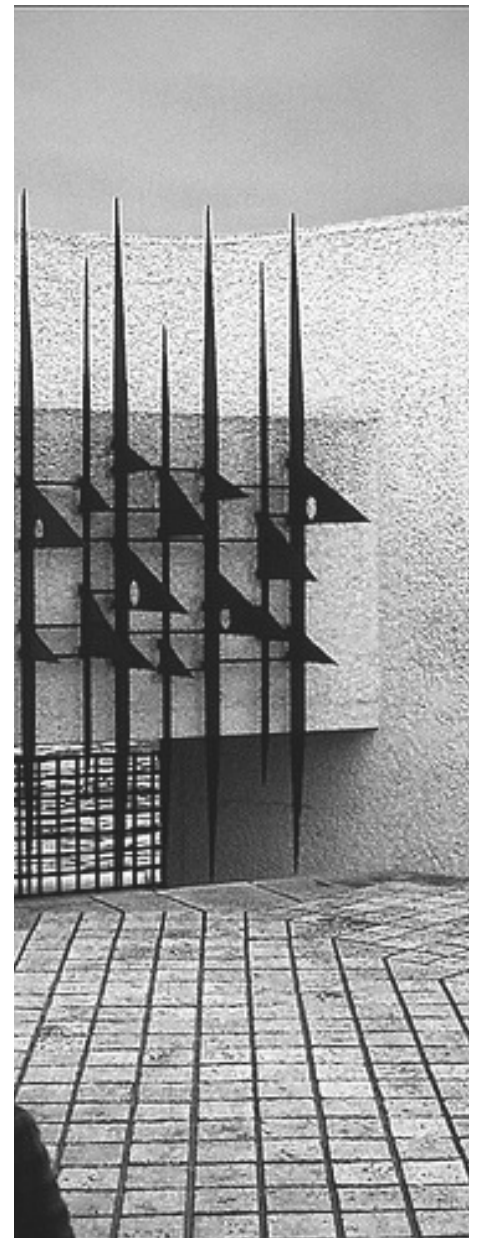
What was remarkable about Pingusson's memorial (1962) is that, unlike the traditional larger-than-life edifices towering overhead, his descends into the earth, an open pit below ground, a kind of grave from which to contemplate loss. According to Young, this monument was a bellwether of future memorials, influencing many, not only those about the Holocaust, but others, such as Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. It too, slopes down into the landscape, and adds the symbolism of one's own reflection cast by the polished black granite, in which so many soldier's names are carved. And now, the one under construction commemorating 9/11 also follows Pingusson with the footprint of both towers as negative space, reminding us of where they once stood.

Young talked about the idea of memorials as places that open up the remembering in each of us, instead of remembering for us. What he meant was that we each have different memories and ways of remembering, and these are often quite personal. He described a memorial's job as being like that of a witness: standing for the memory, but not supplanting it; rather than bestowing memory, providing a space for memory to emerge.

That got me to thinking about other human processes that, like remembering, are best facilitated, not taught. And I likened those architects and artists of memorials to others who take the care to figure out how to facilitate experience - how to support the ones doing it for themselves. To learn, to remember, to create, to release, to build muscle, to reason, to experience in all the infinitely varied ways humans do requires a carefully constructed space for all experience to be okay, to be both acceptable and accepted. To thoughtfully provide such a space - whether physical or intellectual or both - is, in my mind, the highest form of service, the highest form of teaching, the highest form of human beingness.

Coaches, parents, teachers, therapists, all when at their best, do this for those they serve. And it takes considerable time and attention to do this well, which is often completely invisible to those who benefit. Who realized just how much deliberation, angst, trial and error, even sacrifice there is behind the memorials we have visited? How much thought went into each stone, each word, each placement of living thing? All designed to help us make meaning for ourselves of a collective memory, and perhaps also a personal one. I find this so magnanimous, so full of humanity, so awe-inspiring - and I feel a particular debt to Pingusson, for his innovation on what a memorial can and should be that has illuminated this concept ever after. And it reminds me that it is just this humanity, this compassion that is behind all the greatness, all the lasting innovation we ever experience. It is this quality of attention and care for others that separates those who are serving from those being served. Let us make a monument to that.

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La Memorial des Martyrs de la Deportation, France