

Unknowing

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It is easy to forget that the Israelites were not slaves when they first arrived to Egypt.

The book of Genesis ends with the story of Joseph. Joseph who was sold to the Egyptians by his own brothers when he was a child, yet who quickly rose to some prominence in Pharaoh's court.

He was a trusted advisor. Renowned for this ability to interpret dreams.

He correctly forecasted that a great famine would befall Egypt and because of his warning people, people stored up grain, and survived.

He was well rewarded for this.

And so the first Israelite in Egypt became wealthy, with many flocks, and overflowing bags of gold.

He has sent for his entire family, and when they arrive they are given tracts of land, and honored.

The book of Genesis ends on a hopeful note.

Joseph lives to a ripe old age. He holds even his great grandchildren before he dies peacefully, and is buried in a tomb in Egypt, where his family is prospering, and enjoying a good life with a grateful people.

And yet if the book of Genesis ends on a hopeful note.

The book of Exodus which follows it picks up with an ominous beginning.

“There arose a king in Egypt who did not know Joseph.”

Several generations have passed.

Joseph, forgotten.

And things get bad, quickly.

The new king says to his subjects, “Look, the Israelites are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”

And so the Israelites are enslaved. Not so much from a need of labor, but because the king was afraid, afraid that these foreigners would soon outnumber native Egyptians. Afraid that such a situation might shape the power that he had grown so accustomed to.

The king is afraid.

And so he responds by ordering that a whole group of people be

enslaved. Worked, nearly to death. Lest they have free time, or free energy, to grow in number, or to plot anything against him.

The Israelites are oppressed. Enslaved. Worked to the brink.

All the while Pharaoh is stirring up the Egyptians:

“These people are not like us.” He says, in a later verse.

And this hatred, and animosity, and bigotry, gets so ramped up. So quickly.

Pretty soon you could forget that the Israelites were anything other than the slaves of the Egyptians.

It would be easy to forget where it began.

“There arose a king in Egypt who did not know Joseph.”

It all began because the king forgot something, something that everyone once knew.

He forgot that these Israelites were the descendants of a man who had once saved his people.

He forgot that there was a man named Joseph who was once counted among the Pharaoh's family.

He forgot all the complexity and nuance of history.

But at a very basic level. At the most basic level.

He forgot that the Israelites were people. People like him.

That they were human.

“There arose a king in Egypt who did not know Joseph.”

It begins, it all begins, not because of what he things or knows.

But because of what he forgets.

We humans, all of us, are all hardwired from birth for connection, for community, and for love.

None of us were born hating anyone.

And yet, that part of us that is intent on love, although it is the most original feature of our souls, is also the most vulnerable in the face of a frightening and violent world.

That fact of our shared humanity with all others is a truth. An instinct.

That is so. so. easy to forget.

It slips through our fingers, and our lives become ruled by fear, by scarcity, by suspicion.

The loving heart of our spirits is so tenuous and easy to lose, and yet it is the most original part of who we are.

All hatred. All bigotry. It is learned. We pick it up as we go along, in ways more often subtle than overt.

Usually, nobody sits anyone down and teaches them bigotry the way you might learn math. But we all live and move in a culture where we can breathe in prejudice from the air around us, small signals, policies, images, and the permissions of silence, pull us, draw us, little by little away from the truth.

But Nobody. No ruler, or terrorist. No white supremacist or neo-nazi. Nobody, can cultivate hatred unless they have first forgotten something basic.

Hatred cannot take root and grow in a human heart until they forget that the person they have come to hate. Is a person. Like them.

No system of oppression can be built. No community enslaved. No angry bile can be spewed, until the simple truth of our shared humanity. Our shared history. And our shared destiny is forgotten.

And yet, we live in a world, as the Israelites did before us, where the simple truth of our shared humanity is forgotten.

With terrifying. And violent consequences.

We live in a world, as the Israelites did before us, where the truth of our shared humanity can be drowned in anxiety and fear.

Here's the good news.

It didn't work. Not in the long run.

As the story continues, "the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread." And of course we know, that the

Israelites were long slaves much longer. God led them out, through the waters of the sea. To freedom.

Even if the power people forgot their humanity. God never forgets. God never saw them as anything but God's own people. Their cries rose to heaven and God set the path to their freedom before them.

And to walk through this world as people of faith, is to walk through it with confidence that the world is in God's hands. A God who has never tolerated oppression indefinitely. A God whose heart is inclined to freedom and flourishing.

And we, who are created in God's image. I believe that we are wired that way too. Inclined toward freedom.

It's the way we were made, inclined toward love.

I believe that deep down, every single person on this planet has an innate memory of the shared destiny of humanity.

Everyone, was made with that divine impulse etched in their soul. To see the other as our kin. No matter who they are. No matter how many times we have been told otherwise.

We come from one another. We share a destiny together. We belong to one another. We are responsible for one another.

Every human heart is born knowing that.

The problem is that somewhere along the way, something, or someone, persuades us that is not true.

Somewhere along the line. We forget.

But we could. All of us could.

Any one could.

Everyone could.

Reach back. Reach deep.

And Remember.