

## "Give us this day our daily bread:"

### *Living into the Everyday Sacred*

Dwight and Linda Vogel

"Give us this day our daily bread" is an everyday prayer; it can't be prayed for yesterday or tomorrow. We pray it over and over in the Daily Office—morning, noon, and night, and in services of Word and Table week in and week out, century in, century out: Give us *this day* our daily bread.

Yahweh reminded those wandering Israelites who were afraid to trust God and thus tried to hoard the "manna" for the next day and the day after, that we do not need to be concerned for tomorrow. It reminds us to ask for what we need today, and then trust God.

So, this "simple" petition can catapult us into looking at our own need to be independent (or, we prefer to say, responsible) and our own struggle with the consumeristic values that tell us what we have is who we are. It might also lead us to reflect on what it means to be given—every day—the "bread of life."

Robert McAfee Brown in his *Reflections Over the Long Haul* writes: "I believe we are here to share bread with one another, so that everyone has enough, no one has too much, and our social order achieves this goal with maximal freedom and minimal coercion."<sup>1</sup> Contrast the prayer for our daily bread with the restaurant announcement: "All you can eat." To pray for daily bread is a sign of the sacrament of the ordinary.

We pray not "give me" but give us,— suggesting that what we pray for ourselves, we pray for all others. When we can pray with that wider sense of community, we can live in the present with joy and confidence, without obsessing about what the future might hold. This prayer for daily bread can become a sign of our ordinary-everyday walk with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, p. xx.

We are convinced that worship does make a difference in the everyday ways we engage in: both the way we *see* the world we experience, as well as the vision of the world we commit ourselves to bringing to reality. Our own experience, our observations of the experience of others, and history all give us a sense that we are right in our convictions. But how does that happen?

Our friend and colleague David Hogue, who teaches ritual studies and pastoral care at Garrett-Evangelical, has written a book entitled: *Remembering the Future; Imaging the Past: Story, Ritual, and the Human Brain*.<sup>2</sup> It is a fascinating and very readable book. Here's part of what he taught us:<sup>3</sup>

Memory is a multi-faceted capacity of the human brain. Working memory holds information for a few seconds or minutes so it is readily accessible to us. Then long term memory stores the various aspects of that information in the temporal lobe and then over time parcels them out to widespread areas in the *neo-cortex*. Visual images are stored one place, words another, memories of specific skills yet another.

"Learning" is the common term for the process of recording experiences for later recall. That process is called "encoding." Take your last experience of corporate worship as an example. You received visual images, heard and spoke words, touched the worship book and our chair, experienced people, were aware of the room and specific things in it. Not only do these perceptions come from different senses, each of them triggered memories of similar experiences. A part of the brain called the *hippocampus* brings all these together and then dispenses the components to various parts of the *cortex*. This encoding is not a quick back-up process, however. It takes up to three years to complete. All that time, working memory and long-term memory continue to dialog.

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<sup>2</sup> Pilgrim Press, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See especially pages 55-67.

The brain doesn't store a memory as a "package" in one place. Thus, when we recall any one event, story, or image, the *hippocampus* seems to reunite diverse sections from all over the brain, contributing various components to that "memory." This mysterious process is called "binding."

We know that learning and memory result from strengthening the synaptic connections between neurons. Once a cell "fires" it returns to rest. But when learning takes place, there are changes in the structures on each side of the synapse and in the synapses themselves. The receptor is "tuned" to be ready to receive the impulse. And the more often the synapse is used, the more it's ready to fire and receive. That's why practice is so important for musicians and dancers . . . and liturgists!

Hence the provocative title of David's book: "Imagining the Past." The brain reconstructs each memory as we recall it. He notes how appropriate it is for us to call this "remembering" (re-membering). So we never re-member in the same way more than once. It is always a re-creating, a re-imagining of the event.

Memories are continually being rebuilt, "the result of millions of neurons firing to bring together again multiple pieces of a puzzle." That is why persons who lose the capacity of one part of the brain to function properly can still have other types of memory working well--note the Alzheimer's patient who has trouble putting a sentence together, but who can readily pray the Lord's Prayer.

We want to call attention to one more piece of David's research: "emotionally charged memories have more supporting circuits and flow more readily to influence thoughts than thoughts do to influence feelings." Emotional memories "fire" before we recall the specific event that first engendered them—if we are able to remember it at all. Emotional memories are very difficult to change; they don't respond well to rational re-interpretation.

David observes that worship operates on the foundation of memory. He notes the instructions: "remember your baptism" and "as often

as you do this, do it in remembrance of me." Memories may be triggered by symbols or sounds or smells as well as words---and they may come unbidden, without conscious invitation.

There's a lot more fascinating material in David's book, but let's take this taste and reflect on what it tells us about the world-making capacity of worship. The way he understands the work of the brain is amazingly close to the way in which sacramental theology has understood *anamnesis*, *prolepsis*, and the *present moment*.

*Anamnesis* is the re-membering of the past as a present re-creative event. *Prolepsis* is the way our vision of the future reconfigures the present, again as a present creative event. Although it is not a scientific description, we even have a theological way of understanding the mysterious binding process that takes place. In the *epicletic* prayer of the Church, we invoke the Holy Spirit to "fire the encoded synapses" as we pray: "Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood."

Because emotional memory is hard to change, the emotional memory bank persons bring with them will color the way they see and experience the liturgy. If it's been boring, or made them angry, or they've felt excluded—that will color how they can appropriate each new service. Words of reinterpretation by themselves won't break that pattern. But *a new emotional memory can*. If there are positive experiences and each event reconfigures the memory, something new can happen.

On the positive side of the ledger, repeated liturgical events build up the patterns that enable us to see and envision the world. In them we learn to do a redeemed world.

Of course, Christmas and Easter hold such potential. Because there are emotional memories residing beneath the current practices of non-attendance, people we seldom see show up for such festivals. Rather than bemoan that fact and joke about it, we ought to look beneath it to note that there is a residual memory at work. We

usually think of it as restricted and inadequate—perhaps tapping parts of the memory bank we think are less important---music, sights, sounds, smells. But remember: those are the very parts that have the most power to carry emotional memory. So we need to offer those components of the Church's memory and pray for the Holy Spirit to fire those latent synapses with new power.

But it's the ordinary services of worship in *ordinary time* that are our special concern here. In them, too, the Holy Spirit is at work, reinforcing and strengthening patterns. If everything is always different, those pathways won't have the opportunity to develop. But everything isn't different, even if the words are. The depth dynamic of worship will still be at work, especially if we are aware of its re-creative power. The pattern of our worship should be relatively consistent. Every word and every sound need not be different every service.

And yet, what is new or different in a service may serve to move us out of routine expectation, and see with new eyes even that which is familiar. It may not even happen during the service itself, but later as our brain organizes and re-stores the memory.

Recall Br. Bob Jarboe's witness in the Spring, 2005, *Sacramental Life*.<sup>4</sup> He contrasts a service in which the Eucharistic pattern that had nourished him was absent, leaving little to trigger the synapses of liturgical memory in a positive way. But a few weeks later, in another service, they were present. Br. Bob tells us he tried to focus on the words, but couldn't consciously do it. While consciously unaware of it, however, we know that those encoded synapses were firing and being reinforced. He writes:

"Even though I spoke the responses, the only words I truly grasped were "Take . . .eat . . . drink." That was all. So I did. I went through the motions automatically without thought or feeling."

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<sup>4</sup> "Sacramental Depression" in *Sacramental Life*, vol. xvii, no. 2, pp. 38-40.

Ah, but if those patterns had *not* been there, automatic pilot couldn't have taken over. When it did, those encoded patterns were strengthened once again—body memory, emotional memory, deeper than propositional verbal articulation. He continues his testimony:

"Later that day, reflecting upon the morning's Eucharistic service, I realized that three simple words and two simple elements had offered the sustenance I sensed. And they were all embraced by the grace of God. God's immeasurable love took a hold of me and just told me what to do: take . . . eat . . . drink. That was all I could handle emotionally at that time and God knew it. God was like a mother giving medicine to a sick child. The mother does not go through all the explanations of the benefits of the medicine but just gives it. The child asks for no explanation but just receives it, trusting in the mother's love and care. So it was in the Eucharistic experience."

That is the power of the ordinary—the conditioning we are so likely to dismiss as "mere repetition." But if we don't practice it when we don't feel it as well as when we do, it won't be there for us when we need it.

Both the way our brains remember and the human need for ritual point to the way worship can be world-making. As we pray: "Give us today our daily bread," and live into the everyday sacred of Ordinary Time, we give thanks to God who created us to be that way, for the way we are made is itself an expression of God's grace.

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