

A NEW FRONTIER FOR THE PULPIT  
*Long-Term Memory and the Future of Contemporary Preaching*

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ABSTRACT

Emerging contemporary worship forms are making new “memory” demands on the preacher. So far, though, they have only included “short-term memory” processes. The untapped area of human memory is our “long-term memory,” which, as this paper contends, holds remarkable promise for the preacher. It makes possible, for example, a major revision in our understanding of homiletics; namely, the possibility of what we will call “impromptu preaching,” something that is increasingly needed in spontaneous worship situations.

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1.

More and more preachers, pressed by the contemporary worship revolution, are taking up the challenge of “preaching without notes.” This gives them new freedom of movement and speech, the ability to speak with both spontaneity and interactivity. Preaching a well-prepared sermon without notes, though, gives new importance to the use of *memory* in both sermon preparation and delivery. The sermon outline must be memorized cleanly and effectively, called back as needed during the sermon, and then allowed to fade just as quickly in order for preparation of the next sermon to begin.

What is involved here—as a number of books, including my own *Preaching Without Notes* (Abingdon, 2001) explain—is what scholars know as “short-term memory.” It is the memorizing that results from an hour or two of concentrated repetition (called by memory researchers “rehearsal”) of the sermon’s seven or eight major points. This is the same short-term memory that one uses in studying for a school examination a day or so before the test is to be taken. It does not take long to demonstrate to oneself that short-term memory is extremely reliable, if one has rehearsed the outline properly.

Short-term memory, however, is only one half of the extraordinary memory facility that innately resides within every human being. While short-term memory to some degree has been mined for its use in the preaching process, the other half—called “long-term memory”—has not been. Yet in many ways long-term memory is far more complex and far-reaching—and potentially of even greater use to the preacher—than the short-term memory.

This paper represents an introduction to the nature and use in preaching of *long-term* memory, what Augustine called this “large and boundless chamber.” If we think about the kind of preaching increasingly called for in the still-emerging contemporary worship settings of our day, we may, this paper contends, find a whole new use, or set of uses, for our long-term memory processes. Here we will discuss these long-term processes, and how they may well contribute to important new ways of preaching sermons in the future. What follows here is based on research for a book on, of all things, “impromptu preaching,” which, for me, is becoming a kind of

“*advanced* preaching without notes.” It is in this kind of speaking, or preaching—the impromptu kind—where the long-term memory plays its greatest potential role in the sermon’s future.

## 2.

Impromptu preaching refers to making decisions about “*what* to talk about” as well as what to say and how to say it—immediately prior to or during the act of speaking or preaching itself. This is the ultimate in spontaneity, as far as public address is concerned. Despite the fact that the word “impromptu” sounds anathema to our homiletically-trained ears, it is not a new thing in preaching at all. John Broadus, in his classic 1870 homiletics work, tells us that Neander referred to sermons preached in the “age of Chrysostom and Augustine” as sometimes being “altogether extemporaneous,” meaning by that exactly the same thing we do with our word “impromptu.” For example, Broadus says that even Augustine in his preaching was “occasionally directed to the choice of a subject by the passage which the ‘praelector’ had selected for reading that day,” while at other times “he was sometimes urged by some impression of the moment, to give his sermon a different turn from what he had originally proposed.” Broadus tells us further that even the great Chrysostom’s subject “was frequently suggested to him by something he met on his way to church, or which suddenly occurred during divine service.” (Broadus, 1870, p. 434)

We usually use the word “extemporaneous” to mean well-prepared as to subject and content—but with the words and sentences unplanned in advance. In the case of Chrysostom (and probably Augustine, among others) extemporaneous meant speaking without determining in advance what one would speak *about*. We would say impromptu, meaning selecting a topic for speaking at the time one is speaking. It is what Toastmasters International for years has done at every meeting; each member present randomly draws a topic from a jar and then must stand and speak for five minutes about that topic. It is the practice of “impromptu” public speaking. As homileticians to believe that *nothing* justifies “impromptu” preaching, and yet that is precisely what this paper challenges—at least in a moderated form, as we shall see. What we are coming to know about the power and discipline of long-term memory is what throws a different light on the nature of impromptu speaking—and preaching.

## 3.

In our own time, no better example of this process can be found than in that of Martin Luther King’s immortal “I Have A Dream” speech, spoken—or, as it turned out, preached!—from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington to a vast throng in the summer of 1963. Few have documented the details surrounding that speech better than Drew Hanson in his remarkable book, *The Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Speech that Inspired a Nation*. King believed he had to say exactly the right words for the occasion, so he spent hours working on a manuscript. He had occasionally used a manuscript for important speeches, but seldom in his sermons. Hanson’s book contains the manuscript that King took to the podium when he stood up that day. What Hanson’s book also contains—remarkably—is the transcript of what he actually said in his address. It is when the manuscript and the transcript are compared that something startling emerges.

The speech, as delivered, turned out to have two sections—unplanned and unmarked, but even visible on the black and white film of what King said, available in most public libraries. The first part was King’s reading of his carefully crafted address. He read what he had written

reasonably well, though with a certain dryness. He looked down at the pages in front of him more often than he looked at the crowd stretching out around and below him. There were seven or eight interruptions with applause—all noticeably restrained, even polite, again as can be seen and heard on the film.

About midway through his prepared speech, however, King gradually began to realize, as he said later in an interview, that what he was saying was not having the effect that he had hoped for. It was good, receiving the reaction that other noted speakers before him had received. But King wanted to *ignite* the great crowd. He had hoped that he could bring the momentous occasion alive—but he was clearly, as the film shows, not doing that. Then, as Hanson’s study demonstrates, King was down to the last two paragraphs of his prepared text. Behind him, we are told, Mahalia Jackson, who had heard King speak on other occasions, was hollering at him to “tell them about the dream, Martin.” She, too, knew the speech had no fire and little spirit. But nothing about a dream was in those concluding two paragraphs on the page in front of him.

So—abruptly—King quit the manuscript, left his crafted ending behind, and began to speak completely *impromptu*. If one knows to watch for it on the film, the break in the whole tone and drive of the speech at that point is electrifying. His head snaps up, and he virtually never looks down again at his manuscript—and instead of being two paragraphs from the end, he is now approximately fifteen minutes away from his famously rousing “Free at last” climax.

That “second part” of the address was completely unplanned. The crowd immediately sensed something different. King’s speaking became profoundly passionate, his voice trembling with tension and urgency. His words were now *impromptu*—and what he wanted to say would not be denied. The noisy, collective emotions of the thousands of people there begin to well up as King’s *impromptu* calls kicked in. The result was a shot of renewed energy to the American Civil Rights movement—and a speech, a sermon, for the ages. Ironically, if he had not left the text behind to launch into his deeply-felt *impromptu* riffs, what King said that day would have been forgotten along with the dozen or so other good speeches of important Civil Rights leaders.

For King, the break into the *impromptu* began with the words, “Go back to Mississippi; go back to Alabama; go back to South Carolina . . .” With his head now high and his face filled with new animation and pride, King now surveyed the depth and breadth of the crowd as he spoke. He rolled the words, “Let us not wallow in the valley of despair,” and for the first time in his speech there was a sustained raucous shouting and applauding.

Finally, King spoke, as Mahalia had urged, about his dream that one day “my four little children” will not be judged by the color of their skin “but by the content of their character.” So let freedom can ring, he said with a crescendo, from the mountains of New Hampshire and New York, from the Alleghenies of Pennsylvania, from the Rockies and the “curvaceous slopes” of California, and also from Stone Mountain of Georgia and Lookout Mountain of Tennessee, from “every hill and molehill” of Alabama, and even from Mississippi, with its “vicious racists.” “Let freedom ring!” became the rhetorical “mountain” that King climbed that day. Until all of God’s children can sing together, “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we’re free at last.”

Where, though, did King get all of that *impromptu*, unplanned material that made up the last third of his speech, his sermon? Where did the ancient preachers like Chrysostom, those who decided what to say “on the way to church” get the extensive materials that would make up their powerfully *impromptu* biblical sermons? The answer is—from their memory, from a cultivated

*long-term* memory, a memory that they not only cherished from their earliest days, and one that grew fuller and keener with each passing study-filled day. Martin Luther King had studied and read for countless hours and given hundreds of sermons and speeches. Mahalia at some point in the past had heard Martin talk about the “dream” and she wanted those on that great Lincoln Memorial occasion to know about it, too. It was material from King’s past, filed away in his memory from another time and place. But in a completely impromptu fashion, he called back not just the dream but other materials from a rich and full memory bank.

## 4.

What has this to do with contemporary preaching? We teach young preachers how to prepare good sermons, trying as best we can to get them to preach their own sermons instead of borrowing or stealing from the Internet. What we do *not* want, we say, is for preachers to “just stand up and talk,” impromptu-style. We want good preparation, and we want that preparation to issue in high-quality sermons. Yet here we are contending, if only as a minority voice, that impromptu preaching has a place in what today’s contemporary preacher is called on to do.

The argument is not quite so unnerving as that sounds, though. What we are saying, in effect, is two things. First, that within the contemporary worship world, the preaching and speaking ethos is such that a preacher simply has to become good at impromptu forms of address. Moreover, the nature of the contemporary sermon itself, with its demand for spontaneity and interactivity is increasingly demanding it.

Second, we are saying that impromptu preaching is not an “unprepared” form of speaking at all. It is not just glibness; not just saying something about nothing—though that is what we most often associate with the word “impromptu.” To believe that impromptu speaking is done without any preparation misunderstands the process entirely. It simply cannot be said that the last fifteen minutes of King’s “I Have a Dream” sermon was spoken “without any preparation.” Instead, what we discover if we look closely is that his preparation for it took a *very different form* than we are used to even thinking about, let alone being concerned about teaching.

What he did was based on the preparation, over time, of his *long-term memory*, something that would serve him well when the need or demand for impromptu speaking presented itself. This is the nature of the on-going preparation, consciously and deliberately carried out, that undergirds effective impromptu public speech. This is, granted, a new area of homiletical teaching and work—in my view one that needs to find its way into our courses that relate to preaching within the contemporary church setting. My view, too, is that over the next few decades good, even powerful, impromptu preacher will grow more and more important in the work of the the one responsible for speaking the Gospel.

This leaves us two things to consider in the remainder of this paper. First, we need to think about the kinds of situations that now and in the future will call for effective impromptu preaching; and, second, we need to consider the ways by which one *prepares* to become an effective impromptu speaker and preacher.

## 5.

We begin by imagining some of the kinds of situations in which the need for good impromptu speaking—preaching—might present itself. We will note only a couple, with an understanding that other students of preaching could readily envision additional scenarios.

First, every preacher knows what it is like to be in the midst of a well-prepared sermon that just isn't working. This is the Martin Luther King situation. It is not about whether one is reading a sermon manuscript or speaking without manuscript or notes. King was reading—and he knew he had to get away from the manuscript of his speech if it was going to ratchet up into the higher emotional territory that he wanted. But given what we know he was prepared to say, whether as a read statement or an extemporized one, what he had planned was not going to work: that much he could see coming. Again, who among us does not know that feeling? We have worked hard; we know our outline well, and we are talking rather fluently. But the *content* of what we have prepared is simply not having the effect that we had hoped for. The sermon is falling flat.

The overwhelming response to such a realization—in fact, what we usually counsel young preachers to do—is to grit their teeth, up the volume or the animation and press bravely to the prepared end. Had King done that, his speech that hot summer day would have ended with a whimper and not a thunderous shout. No, we are not, any of us, Martin Luther King, the orator—but that is not what we need to say or think at this point. King did what the well-trained speaker does: he made a split-second decision to turn from his prepared speech, his sermon, to his cultivated, well-prepared *long-term memory*. He shifted gears, cleanly, completely, and knowing well what he was doing. It is not an exaggeration to say that many a flat sermon could be rescued if preachers understood the dynamics of this impromptu process—and had been urged to make long-term memory preparations for just such an occasion.

A second situation. It is not uncommon for a preacher in the midst of a sermon to confront a sharp change in congregational circumstances. Someone becomes ill or faints, or worse, has a heart attack in the midst of the preaching. Or someone creates, for whatever reason, a commotion, whether aimed at the preacher or someplace else. A person with a mental or emotional problem can disrupt the sermon.

It is even possible that something can happen outside the context of the preaching situation itself that disrupts not only what the preacher is saying, but disrupts the attention and focus of the congregation. Some years back, we had had a large earthquake in the Los Angeles basin, one that killed a number of people. Our church was not far from the quake's epicenter. That was Friday. We decided that it would be the right thing, of course, to carry on with our Sunday morning services as usual. The sermon I had prepared took account of our earthquake, but other than that it was within the context of a series of sermons that I decided should go on in as much a usual fashion as possible. What was not expected was the large aftershock that hit directly in the middle of the sermon, a jolt that shook the entire building for several seconds, driving almost everyone under the pews. When it was over there was a controlled pandemonium. A few people left, but those that remained wanted prayer, and then they wanted to hear what the preacher would say. At that point, the prepared sermon had to be put away, and it was necessary to speak impromptu.

Sometimes, deep changes can take place just *before* the preaching takes place, putting the preacher into a similar situation. Once, at our church in a retirement community near Los Angeles, we were into the worship singing when I was handed a note as I sat in a platform chair. Two of our faithful members, dearly loved people, had been killed in a car wreck on their way to

church an hour earlier. What to do? What to say? The prepared sermon would simply not do. Go to the study for something resembling a grief sermon? No, it was time for an impromptu sermon—as full and as rich and as sensitive as I could make it. In ten minutes, I organized my thoughts and preached—impromptu. It is strange how well people remember those sermons.

One may think these are rare situations; yet, from my own experience in the pastorate—I have maintained weekend ministries almost all of my life while teaching—I can attest that these kinds of situations happen far more often than any young preacher might imagine. Can one have preparations for them nearby? Unfortunately, not in any direct way, since seldom can a preacher even anticipate the nature of the unexpected. The preparations, though, are made by *cultivating one's long-term memory*, by creating a reservoir upon which to draw when the expected happens. How we can do that we shall look at momentarily.

## 6.

Briefly, though, three other situations are worth noting that can prompt a need for good impromptu preaching. It is not unusual for a preacher to be invited to speak or preach only to discover at the appointed time that the audience, the congregation, is not at all what was expected and prepared for. Middle age to older people are predominantly present when one was nudged to prepare for young people. What to do? Give whoever appears what you have prepared, no matter what? That is the usual response, though not by any means the best one. It would be far better is to take a few minutes to frame a new “idea” and pull together materials from the long-term memory, materials that are available and that the mind can readily organize—with practice it is a skill that can be greatly sharpened.

Or, a guest speaker has been engaged and at the appointed hour the guest does not appear. The preacher who had not prepared to speak is called on to “fill in,” or to see that something worthwhile is said even though no preparations were made. The preacher knows that the gathered congregation needs to have something like what they were expecting—and at that point can decide to preach in a potent, if impromptu, fashion. The ability to carry off such a task becomes, in a sense, an extremely useful dimension of the preacher’s public speaking repertoire.

Finally, and this is much more frequent, the preacher determines in mid-sermon that something is needed to add extra punch, or relevance, to what is otherwise a very good sermon. The mind—remarkably—can do two (and often more)\_things at once, as any experienced public speaker knows. In this case, the speaker can speak and, at the same time, be searching in long-term memory for some specific item that will add the right but unplanned touch to the sermon, giving it life and freshness that it would not otherwise have.

Not only ago, a famous preacher delivered a sermon before a group of homileticians. He preached without notes, in an animated and very charming manner. When it was clear, however, that he was at the end of his prepared sermon, he shifted gears and continued to speak in a way that was unplanned, unprepared even. It was very connected to his sermon, however. He wanted, he said, to connect his sermon to his recent trip to New Orleans after Katrina—and to earlier disasters of American life and the churches’ role in them. He preached for another fifteen minutes, adding unexpected zest and meaning to what he had already said. It was lively and vibrant—and impromptu, a combination of recent and long past events. It was a striking use of long-term memory, adding a completely unexpected dimension to a good sermon.

## 7.

So what is long-term memory and how it is cultivated, particularly for a public speaker or preacher? Let us back up a bit in order to define and explain it (though this is not the place for a full-scale exposition).

Serious sustained research into the nature of long-term human memory is actually less than fifty years old, even though, as we have seen, the Greeks who studied and taught rhetoric, the queen of the arts for them, were deeply interested in it. In the 1880s and 90s, the period that gave rise to the psychoanalytic work of Freud, Jung, and other students of the mind, two eminent scholars, William James and Herman Ebbinghaus, did pioneering work on the nature of memory. In fact, it is to James that we owe the richest distinction still honored in memory study—that between “short-term” and “long-term” memory.

It was not, however, until the 1960s and 70s, almost a century later, that contemporary, scientific research on memory began in earnest. Endel Tulving, a Canadian psychologist, is generally credited with the seminal work of that period, though Tulving was quickly joined by an army of young researchers, some from psychological backgrounds but most from the fields of education and learning. Note that our understanding of human memory is still strikingly new, meaning, no doubt, that over the next few decades our knowledge of the human brain and its abilities with memory will take quantum leaps.

## 8.

The most important distinction that emerged from Tulving’s research on long-term memory is one that, like James’s before him, has shaped the field since. He said there are two fundamental kinds of *long-term memory*, both innate to the human species. One kind he called “episodic” memory and the other “semantic” memory. The meaning of the terms is not immediately obvious, and in fact the second is actually misleading. A later researcher identified the same two domains in a little more obvious fashion—as “imagistic” memory and “propositional” memory. We will explain and stick with Tulving’s terms, however.

*Episodic* long-term memories are those memories formed from individual experiences, whether the individual is alone or acting with others. The key word is “experiences,” those things that, in growing up, we all live through; they are the “episodes” of our unique lives, and from those episodes we form “images” of people, situations, and events that we have the ability to hang onto for most, if not all, of our lives. The other kind of long-term memory, the one that Tulving called “semantic” is not about semantics, or even about language per se. What he is talking about are the blocks of *knowledge* that we learn, whether practical and theoretical, from the moment we start to be taught through the rest of our lives. This is school knowledge, with one kind of knowledge picked up in this class, another kind in that, and so on. Of course, not all of our “knowledge” comes from school; still, much of it, remarkably, does. That is why this has also been referred to as “propositional” memory.

While this in no way exhausts the range of long-range memory types that researchers have identified, for what we are concerned about, it is the distinction that best serves us. Let us look at each one, relating it very briefly to public speaking—and preaching. At the same time, we consider, again briefly, what is involved in cultivating that long-term memory area for use in our public speaking or preaching. Not surprisingly, there is evidence that Martin Luther King

specifically cultivated both of these dimensions of his own long-term memory, even without being fully aware of what he was doing.

## 9.

Long-term episodic memory is recognizable. How far back, for example, can you remember things that happened to you? At what age? What stories could you tell from before the first grade of elementary school? The first grade? A teacher story? Something traumatic that happened? What about a story, like mine, of Nila Fritsch, that extraordinary brown haired girl who walked to school with me in second grade; a picture of Nila and me, me in bib overalls and slicked hair, still exists in the old family album. I can still reconstruct the times of our play. What situations and events shaped you in those growing up years? Bring it up through high school, and into college. These are the episodic long-term memories of our lives. What is remarkably once we begin this process of trying to remember and piece them together is how very many of them there are. There are the ones from our twenties, for those of us long enough past that magical decade. What are stories we remember, the shaping stories, the stories that bring elation as well as the ones that bring tears?

In a book soon to be published by my brother John and I we discuss the nature of such remembered stories, real stories, episodic stories, in preaching. One of the most important things, for us, is the way that the stories of our lives so easily become parables—parables of life and living, parables of behavior, Christian parables for today. Stories play other roles in their telling, too; they can become ways of building community, of learning how differently people, even from the same backgrounds, experience things. The best stories, we know, are not “made up” ones, not the “canned” ones of the Chicken Soup books, but the personal ones that grow out of our own individual experiences.

The point is that the cultivation of our long-term *episodic* memories—as material for impromptu preaching—involves the tending of our own stories. Not as though we are heroes in our own eyes, not that at all. But our own stories that are the stories of other people, who they were and what they did, not just for us but for others around them. We are the “witnesses” to the stories of people who shaped us—that’s what we are searching for. Spend time resurrecting the stories of great people who touched you at 10, at 16, at 25, at 40, people and their situations who did things that made you (and others, no doubt) successful.

Moreover, make notes, notes, notes—and think the stories through in your notes. Get others that you grew up with to tell you their versions of any situations or events you might have shared. You will have real surprises in store when you do that. Fill notebooks, and when you need some good stories for impromptu preaching, they will be there waiting for you, whether you have fifteen minutes to get them together or have to come up with something while you are already on your feet.

## 10.

The second kind of long-term memory, Tulving’s “semantic” kind, is also one that can, and should, be systematically *cultivated* as a basis for effective impromptu preaching. This time it is material to be *learned*—most of the material being historical, biographical, or about ideas—yours and others—even extended metaphors, which all preachers need to constantly develop. We know from interviews with King that he filled and kept notebooks of ideas and metaphorical

ideas that appealed to him. Read the last part of his speech again to see some of those learned metaphors of his. When he read materials that appealed to him, when he studied contemporary writers, he kept notes that, from time to time, he would study in anticipation of giving speeches or preaching sermons. Where did King get the unique ideas made the last third of his Dream sermon so important and memorable? From his notebooks where ideas, metaphors, paragraphs, and quotations were written down.

This kind of note-taking and studying may be likened to two things, as a means of making it clear. First, it is like studying for complicated examinations. Like others, when I was completing a doctorate at the University of Illinois, I had to write essays eight hours a day for five days running, two essay questions each day. I knew the general territory over which I could be questioned, but I did not know what the questions themselves would be. So I studied by taking every conceivable topic that could come up, preparing and learning an organized outline of material on that topic. No matter what the question was, then, I was prepared to fit the question into the topic as I had studied for it. The process worked. I knew it would from the experience of others before me. For years, moreover, those topical outlines of information that I learned for my exams were the outlines for lectures I gave to my own students.

## 11.

This process can also be likened very usefully to one other thing. The preacher, let us say, in lieu of the sermon has to hold a weekly “press conference” with the congregation, along the lines of a Presidential news conference. The preacher will not know what questions will be asked, since they can come from anyone present—but he knows the general parameters of acceptable questions: anything about the Bible, church doctrine and polity, the relationship between Christian ideals and the political and social world, and, just for good measure, anything about the preacher’s life that may impact his ministry among the people.

How can the preacher best prepare each week for his congregational “press conference?” Let’s say he takes a cue from how Presidents of the United States have traditionally prepared for similar press conferences. All of them, we know, have several large loose leaf notebooks containing a hundred or more possible questions and answers covering every possible topic that could come up. They will spend time regularly with their notebooks, reviewing “what might be said” in response to any potential question. When a question similar to one in the book is asked, or even if it is on the same topical track as one in the book, the President can mold his response out of what he has learned from his “preparation” books.

This is how the lifelong learning is turned into long-term memory—or the “learned” kind, Tulving’s semantic kind. I am one who believes that most preachers are already conscientious “students;” most like to study, even given their severe time constraints. I believe, too, that what this asks of preachers is that they bring some order, some organization, some discipline into what they already tend to enjoy doing.

I fully understand that in this paper I am stretching the boundaries of homiletical meaning and education. But the work of the preacher is already changing; the demands of the contemporary church are for more flexibility in preaching, for more variety and spontaneity from the pulpit. It is not too early for us to think about impromptu preaching as another important dimension or frontier in the proclamation of the Gospel. There is a way to do it—one that requires a whole

new orientation to sermon “preparation.” The best preachers are already doing it. How can we get the next generations of preachers ready to follow them?

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