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Forget Memory, by Anne Davis Basting

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Book Review

**Forget Memory**, by Anne Davis Basting. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, 205 pages, $19.95 (paper), $45.00 (cloth).

There is ample evidence that Western culture is obsessed with memory. As the baby boom generation ages and grows at greater risk of memory loss, Americans bear witness to the booming market of nutritional brain boosters, memory improvement manuals and software programs, workshops to maintain your brain, and all forms of alternative therapies aimed at preventing the onset of people’s worst fear, Alzheimer’s disease. And when we do confront our worst fear, we do so with a scientific, economic, and social construction of Alzheimer’s that reinforces and metastasizes terror through a compelling, but myopic, focus on the tragic devastation inflicted on the individual, the family, and the bank account. In *Forget Memory*, Anne Basting, Director of the Center on Age and Community at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, bridges her scholarship in the humanities with her rich experience working with people with dementia to offer the reader a far more encouraging script for articulating and exploring the dementia drama.

In Basting’s introduction, she writes that her book emerged in response to the question: “to what extent do our fears about dementia and aging contribute to the tragic conditions of living with dementia and the catastrophic economic story of dementia?” (pp. 2–3). This question is being addressed by a growing number of clinicians and researchers through both social constructionist and positioning theory—that is, how do individuals build damaging social and personal paradigms about the experience of dementia and then position those affected into roles and relationship constructs that support the paradigm? Notably the work of the late Tom Kitwood (1997) of Great Britain and Steven Sabat (2001) in the United States, among others, addressed these questions while also suggesting ways of better affirming the personhood of those living with dementia. The ethicist, Stephen Post (1995) posited that the “hypercognitive culture” (p. 3) places disproportionate emphasis and value on thinking and memory functions thus fueling our fears of dementia and the devaluation of those affected.

Basting aims to answer the posited question in a number of novel ways. Part one of her book briefly examines people’s described fears about dementia as summarized from interviews with people with dementia, their loved ones, and professionals working in dementia care. Basting then offers a concise, but intriguing chapter on the complexity of memory and its often
elusive or malleable nature in an attempt to reduce some of the pressure surrounding memory performance. Part two goes on to examine the stereotypes and stories Americans have personally and culturally adopted about memory loss and dementia. Basting describes the role of science, news and film media, advertising, and literature in creating and supporting these fears.

In Part three, the author shifts her critique away from destructive influences in the dementia storyline to discuss 10 unique and inspiring programs for people with dementia that foster encouraging and creative partnerships while scripting a different kind of narrative about living with memory loss, not dying from it. Profiled programs largely illuminate Basting’s love for, and expertise in, theater and the arts and include examples that utilize drama, storytelling, song writing, dance, and the visual arts to engage participants with dementia in expressive and affirming experiences.

Finally, Basting concludes with her 12 steps that individuals “need to remember and do to improve the cultural experience of living with memory loss” (p. 155). These steps aim to affect both one’s attitudes toward memory loss and society’s systems of caring for people with dementia. *Forget Memory* is not intended as a practical guide. The reader is not given specific tools or guidelines to carry out any of the featured programs the author profiles and praises. Rather, the book is largely descriptive and reads with an overarching tone that is somewhat like a running editorial—a commentary that is heavily infused throughout with Basting’s personal opinions and critiques concerning much of what she discusses. Although this subjective tone is pervasive throughout the book, the author makes it clear from the start that she has opinions and that she is passionate about articulating them in the spirit of affecting change and improving the quality of life for people with dementia. One can agree, disagree, or question her suggestion that people can “forget memory,” but it is clear that she wants to help direct the actions and dialogue that will shape an evolution of our attitudes about, and experience of, memory loss.

Basting provides inspiration to think outside the dementia paradigm and consider refreshing methods of exploring the expression of self, imagination, and humanity that can endure with remarkable and admirable resilience in persons with profound memory loss. Although she suggests that *Forget Memory* aims to appeal to “anyone invested in improving lives of people with dementia” (p. ix) it is likely that the book’s most applied use is in the hands of professionals or people grounded in the arts who are in a position to create, modify, or otherwise support the development and implementation of innovative programs and services for people with dementia. People can be grateful that someone with the creativity, compassion, and spirit for debate that Anne Basting possesses is passionate about improving the lives of people with dementia. Although Western culture may not be ready to forget memory entirely, her work and the diligent efforts of so
many others who strive to protect the dignity of people with memory loss, can most certainly help to diminish and disempower the collective fear of forgetting.

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REFERENCES