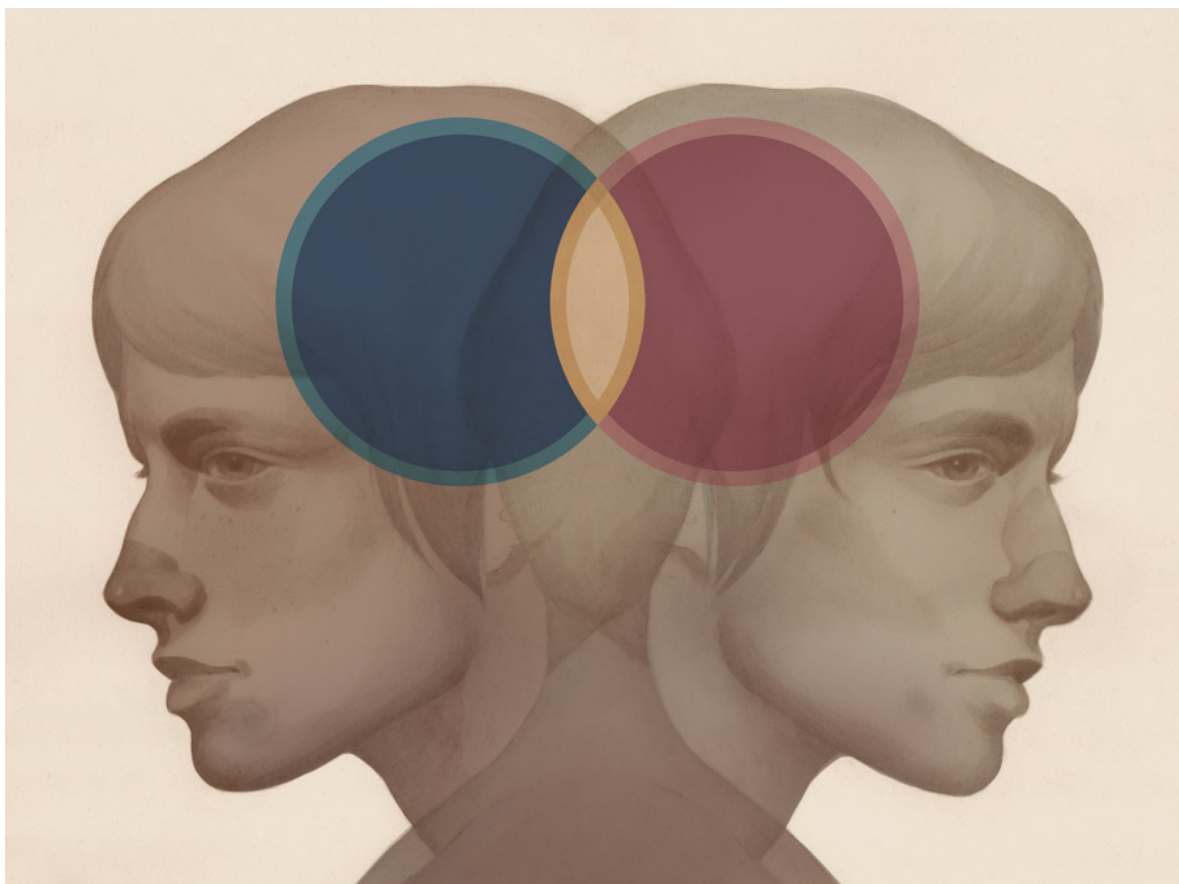


Megachurches are not churches?

by Michael Frost | Jul 15, 2017 | Homepage | 28 comments



I think the thing that's most disturbing is the megachurch because megachurches are not churches. ~ Eugene Peterson

Some years ago, my car was broken into and my satchel containing my diary and computer was stolen.

It was right on the eve of me going to the UK on a speaking tour and the loss of my diary and the notes that I stored in my laptop had a strange effect on me. I felt part of me had been lost.

I know that sounds dramatic, but it was as if I had stored not only notes and ideas on the computer, but my very thoughts. Part of me. And it really threw me. I felt a real loss of confidence going into the various events at which I was making presentations. Even though I'd presented those talks before and didn't need the notes anyway, their loss tripped me up. I felt unsteady. It was as if I was in a light fog the whole time, and not just because I was in dreary England.



We store information on screens. We're storing everything we need to know in apps, files, online diaries, websites and other screen-based ways. So the loss of our screens evokes in us an existential reaction.

I've seen a friend have a complete meltdown at an airport when they realized they'd left their phone at home.

But I discovered this week (or more accurately, was reminded this week) that we don't only store memories on paper or screens. We store them in other people.

Listening to Malcolm Gladwell's latest podcast, I was reminded of the social psychologist Daniel Wegner's concept called transactive memory, which he defined as "a *shared* system for encoding, storing, and retrieving information." Note the italics, they're mine. Transactive memory is an information storage facility we share with other people.

Here's how Wegner describes it:

People in close relationships know many things about each other's memories. One partner may not know where to find candles around the house, for instance, but may still be able to find them in a blackout by asking the other partner where the candles are. Each partner can enjoy the benefits of the pair's memory by assuming responsibility for remembering just those items that fall clearly to him or to her and then by attending to the categories of knowledge encoded by the partner so that items within those categories can be retrieved from the partner when they are needed.

On that basis, a lot of my memory is stored in my wife's brain.

The other day, she reminded me it was the anniversary of my father's death 33 years ago. I had no recollection of the date. I know the date of his birth (May 16), but had completely forgotten the date when he died. Well, maybe I hadn't forgotten. Maybe I just stored it in Caz's brain.

Wegner continues: "Such knowledge of one another's memory areas takes time and practice to develop, but the result is that close couples have an implicit structure for carrying out the pair's memory tasks."

A couple is better together at remembering stuff than either of them individually.

And not just a couple. Transactive memory resides in teams and larger groups. You know how the individuals in a sports team come to know and anticipate how the others will move or behave or react in a certain situation? That's transactive memory. It's also how healthy organizations come to develop a "group mind," a memory system that Wegner says is "more complex and potentially more effective than that of any of the individuals that comprise it."

That's transactive memory – the little bits of ourselves that reside in other people's minds.

I'm sure you've heard it said that when one partner of a long marriage dies part of the surviving partner dies too. Wegner says that's literally true. When your partner dies everything you have stored in your partner's brain dies along with them.

What dies might be the knowledge of where the candles are kept, or what the account numbers are for your joint investment fund, or the date your father died. But also what dies are those beautiful fragments of personal memories and recollections that your partner holds that you don't.

The panic we feel when we lose a screen gives us a clue to the far greater existential loss of balance we feel when we lose someone with whom we share transactive memory.

And this brings me to megachurches. I got thinking about churches and the degree to which their members also share transactive memory. Do we store bits of ourselves in the brains of fellow church members? Do we not only store shared memories with them, but our collective knowledge about God and the Bible? And if so, why is it possible for us (or them) to so easily leave our congregation, often with barely a goodbye?

Surely, it would follow that if we were a healthy team or organization the loss of any member would be a loss of part of ourselves.

According to Wegner, transactive memory consists of both the knowledge stored in each individual's memory combined with *metamemory* containing information regarding the different individuals' domains of expertise. That's just like what a church should be, right?

Just as the individual's metamemory allows him or her to be aware of what information is available for retrieval, so does the transactive memory system provide the congregation with information regarding the knowledge they have access to within the church. In this way, a transactive memory system can provide a church with more and better knowledge than any individual could access on his or her own.

Isn't this what Paul teaches about the church being a body comprising many different, but equally essential parts?

The fact that we can so easily leave a church or so easily see others leave and not be hit by some existential crisis is that we obviously weren't being everything a church is supposed to be in the first place.

The fact that megachurch members can attend church with thousands of people they've never met and share no transactive memory with does raise questions about the kind of church experience they're having.

No transactive memory, no sense of grief at the departure of a fellow member.

No transactive memory, no genuine church?

Recently Eugene Peterson caused a stir with his conclusion that megachurches aren't real churches. He said:

I think the nature of the church is relational. If you don't know these people that you're praying with and talking with and listening to, what do you have? I feel pretty strongly about that... I'm just upset by the fad-ism of the megachurch, but I just don't think they're churches.

For all the benefits of being a large church, isn't one of the downsides the loss of relationship and the associated loss of transactive memory with each other?

I wouldn't go so far as to say a megachurch isn't a real church. Neither would I say smaller churches all foster transactive memory merely by virtue of their size. But it is worth asking if *any* church without meaningful transactive memory is really fully being church.

I yearn for the deep, abiding intimacy that's possible between a group of neighbors who share history, values, vision and direction, and who store their best and most beautiful memories, as well as their theology and doctrine, in each others' minds for safekeeping.

Image credit: [Ashley MacKenzie](#)

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