

from the On —ing series

On Remembering

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For the peacemakers —

*Mandela, who walked out
forgiving;
Gandhi and King, who
refused the easy weapon;
Tutu and Gorbachev, who
chose the seam over the wall;
and the Dalai Lama, still
patient.*

*the three —
those who serve, those who
returned, and those who
did not —
who keep the peace by standing
in the way of its breaking;

and every unnamed soul who
ever wanted it for the whole
round world.*

What is the earliest memory you have?

In *On Growing* I asked you this in relativity to yourself — the person, the body, the small hand reaching for the world. Today I ask it turned outward: what is the earliest memory you have *of* the world? Not of you inside it, but of it arranged around you. The first time the room you stood in quietly became a planet.

Hold that. Let it sit a moment.

I have a bad memory. I'll say that plainly. Whole years have gone soft at the edges — unlabeled, unrooted, gone. But there are points on my timeline that refuse to dissolve, and when I stand on one of them and turn slowly in place, I can see everything. I can watch the events fan outward and feel how they moved through my life, and the lives of the people standing beside me.

1990 was a year on my timeline that resonated with me deeply, because of all the events that happened that year. This would explain why, in comparison to earlier memories, it stands out as a moment I can describe in great detail — as opposed to one I have no rooted necessity to explain.

That is the strange arithmetic of remembering. We do not keep the days we were told to keep. We keep the ones that *resonated* — the ones that hummed at exactly the right frequency to be saved.

So let us test something together. My quantum lens holds that a moment, like a word, is a superposition: many possible readings folded into one, waiting on an observer to collapse it into a single shape. I want to lift one year up to the light and let it collapse — not through my eyes, but through yours. The mind of the reader.

Let's take the year 1990, and explore it from my mind.

I

The Cold War was ending. For half a century the world had been one thing held in two states at once — two futures stacked on a single planet, neither collapsed, both armed. In 1990 it began, at last, to choose.

And in the same year, in a quiet office at CERN, Tim Berners-Lee served the first page onto the open world. December of 1990. The Web took its first breath in the very year an old war exhaled its last.

A door closed. A door opened. And we, being human, walked through the new one without checking what was on the other side.

Here is my theory, offered as theory and nothing more. The Web became a place for the mind to escape *itself*. Not the body — itself. Every screen is a superposition: a thousand possible next things, each a thumb's-width from becoming real. And we learned that we never had to choose. We could collapse one, and another, and another, forever — and never once let the world settle into a single shape. We called it scrolling. By 2026 we called it doomscrolling, and we said it like it was the weather.

The studies say the number of people living with a mental disorder has nearly doubled since 1990 — almost 1.2 billion of us now. But read honestly, the same studies whisper a second thing: the *rates* per person held steadier than the headline. The real spike is recent. It arrived with the glowing rectangle in every palm.

So 1990 did not break us. 1990 only handed us the instrument that could. The seed and the bloom are not the same season.

Then — February — they opened a cell in South Africa, and Nelson Mandela walked out into the sun.

I was told, as a child, that he died in there.

For years I carried two versions of one man and could not tell you which was true. This, I would learn, has a name. They call it the Mandela Effect — after this exact confusion, named by people who remembered a death that never happened.

Apply the lens here, and watch it fit like a key.

A memory is a superposition. Many possible pasts folded into one, waiting on an observer to collapse them into a single shape. Most of us collapse the same way and call the result *reality*. But sometimes a whole crowd collapses wrongly together, and the wrongness becomes load-bearing — real enough to build a life on.

Ask any child of the nineties about *Shazaam*, the movie where Sinbad played a genie. They will defend it with their whole chest. It does not exist. It never did. (They are thinking of *Kazaam*. Shaq. 1996.) The memory is so strong, so shared, that in 2017 Sinbad himself filmed fake footage of it — and in the short, the children say of their impossible genie: *we have our memories, they're real*.

That is the most timeless thing in this entire essay, and it is a joke.

If you can explain to me how that moment of collective insistence will *not* outlive the imaginary film it mourns — I will sit, and I will listen. I have time.

III

In April, we launched a telescope into the dark to see further than we ever had.

And we had built it blind.

Hubble's great mirror was ground to the wrong shape. Not by much — by the width of a rumor. The instrument we used to measure the mirror was itself misassembled, a spacing off by a millimeter and change, and so we polished the glass with perfect precision into a flaw. A second instrument caught the error and was overruled, because we trusted the wrong one. We observed the heavens through a broken ruler, and collapsed them into blur.

Sit with that.

The reach for the stars was not misplaced. It was *mis-measured*.

We did not aim too high. We aimed exactly right and checked our aim against a broken instrument.

And maybe the quiet stress of that decade was partly this: the further the lens reached, the smaller the rock beneath us became. The "alpha" at the top of any human hierarchy is only an alpha while the territory stays small. Step off the spinning stone, and the whole pyramid of who-rules-whom evaporates into the cold. For everyone who thought they had it figured out, the nineties handed them a telescope and said, *look how little you command*.

That is a terrifying gift. Some never opened it.

— I V —

In August, Iraqi troops crossed into Kuwait.

I remember my teacher crying. Day after day, in the church, she could not stop. Her husband had been asked to serve. I was small, and I did not understand the war — so my mind did what minds do. It took an entire collapsing region of the world and folded it down into the one thing I could hold: a woman's shoulders, shaking.

That is how memory survives. It collapses the vast into the single point that resonated.

That was the year I learned, in my body before my mind, that war is not the answer to happiness. The world is destructive, and defense is necessary, until the day we all wake at once. I hold both. But the act of crossing into another life over greed, over power, has never stopped ringing in me as wrong — at a frequency I cannot tune out.

So my heart goes out to the three. To those who serve. To those who served and returned. And to those who served and did not return. Until time decides, every soldier is all three at once — a life held in superposition by everyone who loves them, and waits for them to come home. I have no words that compare to the selfless honor of an individual who would dedicate their life to the safety of their loved ones.

Your dedication to keeping this world free is unmatched anywhere in my life. I only pray that one day the people who lead you will see the world the way I am trying to see it now.

— V —

In October, East and West Germany became one country again.

For forty-five years, Germany had been a single word with two readings — one people observed into two, held apart by a wall that decided, every morning, which half you were. In 1990 the two readings collapsed back into one. The seam closed.

It was this — not a textbook — that first sent me down into the depth of the Second World War. Not as American history, or German, or Japanese, or English. As *human* history. A wound the whole species took in the 1940s, and a country that did not finish healing the seam until 1990.

A nation reached up and pulled down the wall it had built through its own heart.

I hope every country does this one day. I hope we do it to the quieter walls, too — the borders we cannot see, the ones we carry between each other and call common sense.

— VI —

And in November, Margaret Thatcher walked out of power, as Mandela had walked out of prison ten months before. The year opened with a man freed and closed with a titan deposed.

She is the clearest superposition in the whole year — and here the lens offers its quiet mercy. Every observer collapses her differently, and every collapse is *true*.

If you remember the woman who steadied a stalling nation and handed working families the keys to their own front doors — hold that. It is real,

and it is a good thing to have seen. Your memory of your leader is an honest one.

And if you remember the one who stood unbending through the long ache of the mining towns — hold that too. It is real, and it is a good thing to have felt. Your memory of your leader is an honest one.

The lens never asks you to surrender your reading for someone else's. It asks only that you let theirs be as real to them as yours is to you. That is not weakness. That is the beginning of peace.

Coda

Here is what I have come to believe.

To remember is to collapse. The past is a superposition — every year stacked with a thousand readings — and the act of remembering chooses one, and lets us stand on it. We do not keep what happened. We keep the shape we collapsed it into.

Which means remembering is not a record. It is a *responsibility*.

The point of it is so that we do not make the same mistake twice. We keep our shortcomings on purpose, so we will know them again in the dark. And it starts at the smallest scale — you, alone, with your own past. Then it widens. To your family. Your neighbor. And, if the lens holds, to all of us at once, collapsing the same history into the same lesson.

I have a bad memory. But I believe that if I look back far enough — past 1990, past the wars, past the walls, past the first word ever spoken — I can

collapse the deepest part of the past into a shape of harmony. Not imagine it. *Remember* it. And what we can remember, we can choose again.

How I would love to be old, watching the sun go down on my one life, recalling the afternoon I wrote these words — and laughing. Laughing at how impossibly far away I once thought peace was.

What a dream come true that would be.

For a small, insignificant human like me.

Notes

on the doubling. The figure — nearly 1.2 billion people living with a mental disorder, roughly double the 1990 count — is from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2023 (IHME, in *The Lancet*, 2026). The same literature notes that age-standardized rates have held comparatively stable for several disorders; the steep recent rise in depression and anxiety dates largely to 2019 and after. Cause is not correlation; this essay claims only resonance.

on the first page. Tim Berners-Lee had the first web server and browser running at CERN by the end of 1990; the first web page went online on 20 December 1990. The Web opened to the wider public in August 1991.

on the Mandela Effect. Nelson Mandela was released on 11 February 1990, served as president, and died on 5 December 2013. The term "Mandela Effect" was coined around 2009 by Fiona Broome, for the shared false memory of his death in prison.

on Shazaam. No such film exists. The false memory is commonly traced to *Kazaam* (1996, starring Shaquille O'Neal). The "lost footage" of *Shazaam* was an April Fools' collaboration between Sinbad and CollegeHumor in 2017; the line "we have our memories, they're real" is spoken within that short.

on Hubble. Launched 24 April 1990. Its primary mirror suffered spherical aberration, traced to a misassembled reflective null corrector — a lens-spacing error of about 1.3 mm — which led the mirror to be ground precisely to the wrong shape. A second measuring device flagged the error and was discounted. Corrected on the 1993 servicing mission (COSTAR).

on the year's turning. Iraq invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990; East and West Germany reunified on 3 October 1990; Margaret Thatcher resigned in November 1990 after eleven years as Prime Minister.

Colophon

On Remembering belongs to the On —ing series — an ongoing sequence of lyric-philosophical essays. The series keeps no numbers. Each piece stands as it arrives.

On Facing · On Rising · On Arriving · On Seeing · On
Observing · On Counting · On Forgiving · On Creating · On
Being · On Joining · On Mirroring · On Feeling · On Living · On
Growing · **On Remembering**

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Written through the quantum lens — set down as a jay, a legible trace left on purpose.

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Set in Fraunces & EB Garamond.