

Re-Membering *Mnemosyne*

by Brian Clark



Dante Gabriel Rossetti
Mnemosyne, 1870s

Remembering was so important to the ancients that it was embodied as a goddess. In Greek cosmogony Mnemosyne was the daughter of Uranus and Gaia, a pre-Olympian divinity who personified Memory. Being a Titan, one of the earliest deities, Mnemosyne is the custodian of our memorabilia before the advent of writing, literacy, books, recordings and photos. She inhabits the pre-literate, right-brained world where memory is not cognitive but feeling, evocatively recounted, imaginatively pictured and inspirationally sung.

Memory is not just of the past, but the poignant beginning of musing. Embodying the voices of an oral culture that communicated through narratives, images, metaphors and odes, Mnemosyne reminds us that our soul story is revealed through dreams, oracles, feelings, responses, reveries, synchronicities or sudden images that dart into awareness. Embedded in the fragments of songs, myths and fairy tales linger ancient truths that awaken the intelligence associated with this goddess. Mnemosyne unexpectedly arouses memory through our reactions and responses.

Mnemosyne was often contrasted to Lethe, the embodiment of forgetting. For instance at the oracular rituals of the seer Trophonius, initiates would be lowered into a cave symbolising the descent into the self or the underworld. As part of this journey it was important for them to cross the river of Lethe to forget their waking experiences so they might naturally descend into the depth of their inner world. However, when the initiates were pulled up from the cave, they were placed on the chair of Mnemosyne to help them remember. Mnemosyne is the aspect of memory that never forgets the soul's experiences.

To the ancient Greeks, Memory was a goddess residing in the heart, the poignant aspect of psyche that threads the fragments of our lives together with the passing of time. Creative, emotive and evocative, the ancients also knew her as the mother of the Muses. Like many early goddess she was honoured in three phases; originally Mnemosyne was celebrated through the Muses of meditation or spiritual practice, memory and song. In early myth the Muses were the triune aspect of the goddess who inspired poetry and song, including Hesiod who received the inspirational gift of singing his epic *Theogony*, which recited the birth of the Gods.¹

In the epic he names nine muses and tells the tale of how Zeus visited Mnemosyne for nine nights and fathered her nine daughters, the Muses, the inspirations that allow the soul to

¹ See Hesiod and *Theogonis*, translated by Dorthea Wender, Penguin Books, London, UK: 1973.

remember. As mistresses of healing and prophecy the Muses inspired and taught others to contact a deeper knowing through their imagination and creativity, the wellsprings of memory. Ancient Greeks personified a classical education through their nine muses who presided over the realms of the imagination such as poetry, song, dancing, music, comedy, tragedy and the study of the stars. As custodians of the arts each had a sphere of influence which they inspired and animated with ancient images and recollections:

Calliope, the Muse of Epic Poetry, narrates the soul's story with deep feelings and integrity

Euterpe is the Muse of Music who evokes the rhythms of the soul

Clio is the Muse of History who remembers the soul's past so we are free to be in the present

Erato is the Muse of lyrical poetry who reminds us of the qualities of the soul

Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy, recalls the dimensions of our soul experience that are cathartic

Polymnia is the Muse of many hymns who keeps in mind sacred poetry, chants and songs

Terpsichore, the Muse of dancing, brings to mind the folk dances and sacred movements in our past

Thalia, the Muse of comedy, reminds us of the connective and liberating power of laughter and fun

Urania is the Muse of astrology and astronomy who, through the mnemonic of the stars, reminds us of the order and blueprint of our lives

When the shift from the mythical to the philosophical period began, Apollo, lord of the rational sphere, became associated with the Muses as their guardian and leader. As rational science and logical concepts emerged, the seat of memory began to shift from the heart to the brain, aligning memory with a more logical and calculating experience, rendering Mnemosyne a passive goddess who collected and stored life's impressions. Her ways of knowing and remembering ceded to more logical methods and techniques. The power of image yielded to the power of the word and gods like Hermes took the throne of Memory. Yet it is Mnemosyne that Hermes first honours in song, as his verbal and musical talents are owing to the goddess.² While Hermes takes on the mantle of magician, it is the goddess Mnemosyne that underpins his verbal skills, insights and memories.

In the new rational order, Memory's daughters, the muses, remain to inspire and enchant the soul. Through Mnemosyne and her daughters we are still able to engage in weaving the fragments of memory together to evoke meaning and soul-felt memories. She reminds us to take into account the ancient ways; as goddess of deep memory, she is not just a passive recorder of experiences and events, but a poetic and heart-rending process that inspires the

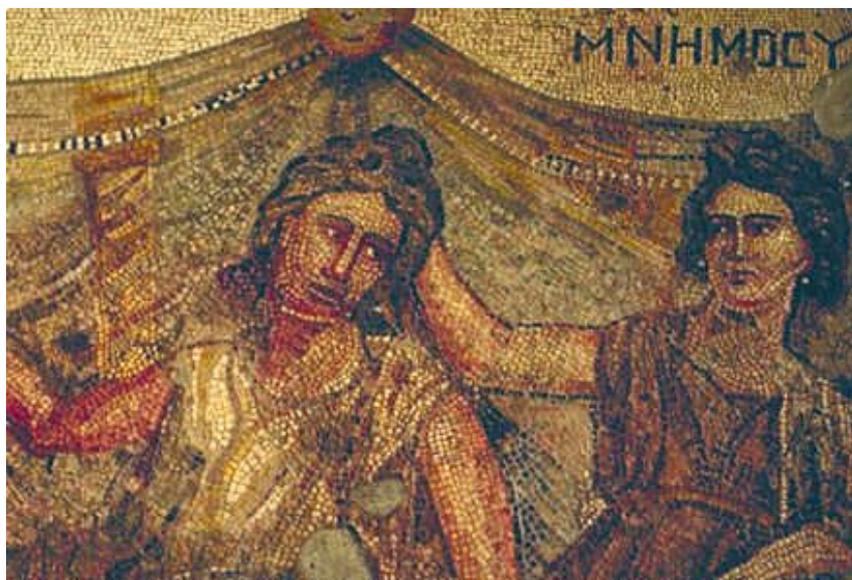
² "The Homeric Hymn to Hermes", from the *Homeric Hymns*, translated by Michael Crudden, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK: 2001, 58. The hymn was probably written about 2500 years ago and suggests Hermes honoured Mnemosyne for she was 'assigned' to the young god.

imagination. Mnemosyne re-collects the emotional experiences, feelings and impressions of our lives. She is the metaphors and myths that relate the deeper story; she is the archive of all that we have tasted, touched, wanted, smelt and felt. Her memories are stored in the psyche as images, symbols, feelings, impressions, instincts and become imprinted in the body, in the adrenal or olfactory glands, the tension in the muscles, allergies and illnesses. Mnemosyne is rhythmic and reflective, not linear, evoking dreams, images, songs that give continuity to our life's narrative. Memory and imagination are woven together when Mnemosyne and her daughters are aroused.

To the ancients the sacred sanctuary of Mnemosyne and the Muses was the museum. Originally the museum was 'the seat of the Muses' dedicated to what inspired the soul through learning and the arts. These ancient shrines dedicated to the goddess ceded to the structures we know today as museums where we house the great works of the imagination. On an inner level the museum is the sphere of Mnemosyne where impressions and feelings from the past are evoked in the present situation. In a psychological way the inner museum is our creative collection of soul memory

In astrology Mnemosyne, the goddess, helps us remember images and impressions from previous phases of our life in order to give meaning, context and insight into these experiences. She acts as a loosening agent, allowing buried complexes, taboo feelings, repressed memories to breathe again to find some place in the sunlight of consciousness. She connects passages of time together. Links can be made back to times in the previous cycle allowing space for the process of reflection and musing. Through Tarot she loosens memory through musing on the images and symbols that make up the tapestry of a spread, whether that is one or many cards. Mnemosyne arises in the moment through what seems to be a disconnected thought, a mythic fragment that arises out of the blue, the words of a song, a movie or television storyline that evoke strong feelings associated with the images in front of us. She is pre-literate; she finds the images, songs, stories, myths, metaphors and feelings long before she can even know what words could possibly describe what she knows.

Mnemosyne is ancient, before Hermes, always there underneath the words, musing, remembering. And being Hermetic, to me, means honouring her presence.



Mnemosyne from a Greco-Roman Mosaic, ca 2nd CE