

The Great Forgetting

On Knowledge, Wisdom, and the Cost of Infinite Access

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“We are outsourcing knowledge faster than we are preserving wisdom.”

Some knowledge reveals itself the way a mountain emerges from fog. Something that always existed, surfacing into truth out of oblivion. No one published it. No one can quite cite it. It arrives sideways, through a grandmother's hands, a neighbor's offhand remark, the way a thing has simply always been done. It is the knowledge that kept people alive, and for almost the entire history of our species, it was the only kind we had.

We are forgetting it now, and we are forgetting it faster than we have ever forgotten anything.

I. The Slow Knowledge

For most of human time, knowing things was expensive.

A fact had to survive to reach you. Someone had to test it, usually with their own body, often more than once, and the ones who got it wrong frequently did not live to pass along the mistake. What remained was filtered by something merciless and honest: whether it worked. Which plants to eat and which to leave. How to read a sky before a storm. How to keep food through a winter without losing it to rot. How to plant corn and beans and squash together so each one feeds the others, a system refined over thousands of years before anyone could have explained the chemistry of why it worked. They did not need the chemistry. They had the result, and the result had been paid for.

This knowledge moved slowly because it had to. It passed from a body that knew to a body that didn't, by hand, in person, over seasons. The transmission was inseparable from the relationship. You learned to preserve food by standing next to someone who already could, watching for the cues that no one had words for, the smell that means it has turned, the give of the dough, the color of the sky an hour before the weather admits anything. The lesson and the elder came together, and you could not download one without the other.

It was inefficient. It was also true, in the only way that matters: it had been checked against reality, again and again, by people who could not afford to be wrong.

II. The Flood

Then knowing became cheap, and something strange happened. We assumed that cheaper meant better. It usually does. With knowledge, it did not.

The internet promised the opposite of the slow knowledge. Everything, instantly, free, for everyone. And for a moment that looked like the greatest inheritance ever handed to a generation: the sum of human understanding, one search away. What we got instead was a flood, and a flood does not nourish a field. It drowns it.

Because the thing being sold online was never the truth. It was the click. A method that actually works is worth one honest video. A method that *almost* works, that sounds new, that promises the result without the cost, can be repackaged a thousand ways and sold forever. The incentive does not reward what is true. It rewards what spreads, and what spreads is what is easy to believe and easy to share, which is almost never the same as what has been tested against reality by someone who paid for the answer.

So the quick fix multiplied. The life hack. The one weird trick. The protocol, the cleanse, the supplement stack, the productivity system, the thing that changed this stranger's life and will surely change yours. Each one arrives with total confidence and no lineage. No grandmother stands behind it. Nothing died to prove it false. It was not filtered by survival; it was filtered by engagement, which selects for the opposite qualities, the loud over the quiet, the novel over the proven, the marketable over the true.

And there is so much of it now that the signal is gone. Not suppressed, not hidden. Buried. Somewhere in the flood the real knowledge is still there, but it looks exactly like everything around it, and we have lost the means to tell them apart. We have infinite access and no discernment, which turns out to be a poorer position than limited access and good judgment. The library is infinite and the catalog is on fire.

III. The People Who Still Know

You can still find the old knowledge if you know where to look, and where to look is usually a person, not a screen.

Talk to someone who grew up rural, two or three generations back, and you encounter a kind of competence that has become genuinely rare. They can read weather off the air. They know which wild plants are food and which are medicine and which will kill you, and they know it the way you know your own name, without reaching for anything. They can find the water, mend the fence, keep the food through a winter, read an animal's health at a glance, coax the failing engine through one more season. None of it came from a search bar. All of it came from someone who came before, who learned it from someone before them, in an unbroken chain that ran for ten thousand years and is now, in many families, simply ending.

The starkest version of this is out on the open ocean. For thousands of years, Polynesian navigators crossed thousands of miles of empty Pacific with no compass, no chart, no instrument of any kind. They read the long axial swells rolling beneath the hull, the flight lines of particular seabirds at dawn and dusk, the faint green cast on the underside of a distant cloud where it mirrored a lagoon still below the horizon. The entire map of an ocean lived inside the body of the navigator, placed there by years of apprenticeship that could not be written down because it was never words. Then charts and colonial shipping arrived, the necessity dissolved, and within roughly two generations a whole civilization's oceanic literacy collapsed to a handful of living masters. The knowledge did not fail. It simply stopped being needed, and a thing that stops being needed stops being carried.

This is not a romance about the past. Much of the old common sense was wrong, and some of it was dangerous, and the slow knowledge had no mechanism for correcting a confident error except the slow attrition of the people who believed it. A village could be certain of something false for a hundred years and bury everyone who doubted it. Whole generations were trapped inside the limits of whoever happened to raise them, and the reach for cheap, universal knowledge was not a mistake or a weakness; it was one of the most liberating things our species ever did. It freed people from the tyranny of the local, the accident of birth, the single fallible elder who might be the only source for a hundred miles. Modern knowledge fixed real horrors that tradition was content to live with. The point is not that the elders were always right, and the tragedy is not that we reached for something better. The tragedy is what we let fall out of our hands while reaching.

The point is that they were *resourceful* in a way that did not depend on infrastructure. Their knowing lived inside them, not in a network they had to trust and could not verify. They could be dropped into a hard world and survive it, because the world had already tested them. We have access to a thousand times more

information and a fraction of their capacity to act on any of it. We know how to find an answer. They knew the answer. Those are not the same, and we have quietly traded the second for the first without noticing the exchange rate.

IV. The Oldest Inheritance

We treat religion as the very picture of the obsolete, a set of superstitions our ancestors clung to before they knew better, kept alive now by people who haven't caught up. But look at what Christian practice actually encoded, and a different picture emerges. Strip away the question of whether the metaphysics is true, and what remains is one of the longest-running repositories of survival wisdom our species ever produced, refined across thousands of years and passed down in the most durable container ever built for knowledge: not a book to be consulted, but a life to be lived.

Consider what was in it.

There were laws about clean food, drawn long before anyone could see a microbe: which animals to refuse, how to handle meat, when to wash, what to discard. We now know the reasons, the parasites and the spoilage and the contamination, but the people following the law did not need the reasons. They had the rule, and the rule kept them alive, which is exactly the structure of all the slow knowledge that came before. A command is just a tested fact with the explanation worn off.

There was a mandate to rest. One day in seven, set down and protected, no exceptions, not for the rich and not for the poor and not for their servants or their animals. No market would ever have chosen that limit; markets do not rest. It took a commandment to insist that a human being is not a machine for producing, and that a person worked without pause is a person being destroyed. We are, at this very moment, busily forgetting this one, and we feel the cost of forgetting it in our bodies.

There was an entire architecture of social protection, written when there was no state to provide any. Care for the widow and the orphan. Welcome the stranger. Feed the hungry, forgive the debt, leave the edges of your field unharvested so the poor could eat. These are also instructions for how a community survives its own hard years, a safety net woven by hand millennia before anyone thought to call it policy.

There was the insistence on honoring your father and mother, which this essay should pause on, because it is the keystone. An entire civilization built its moral law around the command to revere the old, to keep them close, to listen. That is not only

tenderness. It is the transmission chain written as sacred duty, a culture protecting the one mechanism by which everything else it knew could survive the death of the people who knew it. Honor the old, because the old are where the knowledge lives. We have replaced that commandment with a search bar, and called it progress.

And there was the long discipline around how people bind themselves to one another and to their children. Fidelity. The vow. The family as a structure that holds across decades, that ties a man to his children and a community to its young, that asks people to choose permanence over appetite. We have grown suspicious of all of it, and there were real cruelties in the old arrangements that deserved their reckoning. But underneath the constraint was a tested truth: that children do better held inside something stable, that desire left without form tends toward disorder, that some of the deepest human goods are only available to people willing to stay. The constraint was not arbitrary. It was load-bearing, and we are discovering its function the way you always discover the function of a thing, by removing it and watching what falls.

And there was a discipline of the inner life that has nothing to do with the thin modern idea of positive thinking. Everything so far was external, the world a person had to survive: the food, the rest, the community, the family. But the hardest country a human being ever has to cross is the one inside, and tradition knew this too. Gratitude as a practice, not a mood. Hope held deliberately against despair. The refusal to be ruled by resentment. The surrender of what cannot be controlled. Forgiveness as a release valve for the poison that otherwise accumulates in a person across a lifetime. These were technologies of the mind, tested across millions of lives, for the problem every human faces: how not to be destroyed from the inside. We are lonelier and more anxious than perhaps any people who have ever lived, drowning in the very information that was supposed to free us, and we have set down the oldest tools we had for carrying the weight of being alive.

None of this requires you to believe. It only requires you to notice the truth that an old institution can carry, whatever your preconceptions about it. What some dismissed as fairy tale keeps proving to rest on something real. The wisdom was right long before anyone could explain why it was right, which is not the signature of a delusion but of a truth arrived at ahead of the proof. We were quick to throw it all out as superstition, and in our certainty we discarded knowledge that was truth then and truth now, knowledge we are only beginning, slowly and expensively, to rediscover.

V. The Medium Is the Leash

The spoken word lived in people and died with them, but while it lived no one could alter it but the speaker. The book changed everything: memory made permanent, knowledge you could hold in your hand and carry out of the room. And crucially, you owned it. The words on the page were fixed the moment they were printed, fixed in a way that was almost physical law: ink does not change after it dries. Your copy was yours, identical to every other copy, and no one could reach across the distance and rewrite a single line of it after you had it. A book is a promise that what you read today will be there, unchanged, tomorrow, and that the words in your hands are the same words in everyone else's. It is not just a record. It is a shared and stable point of reference, the same for all of us, which is the quiet precondition for ever agreeing on anything at all.

Then the object dissolved. Book became DVD became stream, and somewhere in that progression we stopped owning the thing and started renting access to it. You do not own the film you watch tonight. You own permission to see a copy that lives on a company's servers, and that copy can be edited, restricted, or revoked between one viewing and the next, without notice, without your consent, often without anyone announcing that anything changed at all. The shelf became a feed. The thing you possessed became a thing you are permitted, for now, to access.

Consider what viewers found in the streaming version of *The Passion of the Christ*. The film originally opened with a line from Isaiah 53, written some seven hundred years before the events it foretells:

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

In the version that surfaced on Netflix, that text was gone, replaced by roughly thirteen seconds of black screen. The company offered no explanation. And here is the part that matters more than the verse itself: most people who watched it never knew anything had been removed. There was no torn page, no missing reel, no physical evidence that the work had been altered. The artifact simply changed on the server, silently, and the version millions now carry in their memory as the film is a version the filmmaker did not release.

You cannot mourn a deletion you never noticed. That is the new condition. The old losses were visible; this one closes over without a ripple.

Now extend the line by its final step. The machine does not merely store the culture and serve it back to you. It generates the version you receive, assembled for you in

the moment, personalized, synthesized, no two people handed quite the same thing, and no fixed original anywhere to check it against. The book gave everyone the same page; the feed gives each of us a different one, written for an audience of one and gone the instant it is read. When knowledge came by word, you could at least see the speaker. When it came by book, you could at least own the page, and know your neighbor owned the same one. At the end of this chain you receive a perfect, frictionless answer from nowhere, authored by no one you can name, revisable by people you will never meet, true for you alone and untestable against anyone else's. We are losing the last thing a shared text quietly guaranteed: a common baseline of reality, the same words in front of all of us, from which it was once possible to disagree and still be talking about the same world. Each step made the knowing easier to reach. Each step also moved it one degree further from your hands and made it one degree easier for someone else to change while you slept.

VI. The Shape of the Forgetting

Here is what makes this different from every previous loss of knowledge.

Knowledge has always been lost. Libraries burned, languages died, crafts went extinct when the last practitioner did. But those were losses of *stored* knowledge, the written and the spoken, and they were usually visible as losses. Someone mourned the library. Someone noticed the language go quiet.

What we are losing now is the capacity itself, and we are losing it while feeling more informed than any humans who have ever lived. That is the trap. The phone in your hand holds more knowledge than every library that ever burned, and its presence is exactly what convinces you that you no longer need to carry anything yourself. Why learn the plant when you can look it up? Why hold the skill when the search is always there? So the knowing migrates out of bodies and into the network, and the bodies forget, and the network was never built to keep us alive. It was built to keep us scrolling.

The danger is not that the information disappears. It is that we become unable to use it, while remaining perfectly certain that we could. A whole species fluent in retrieval and illiterate in knowing. We will try things that the slow knowledge spent ten thousand years learning to avoid, because the slow knowledge is no longer in us to issue the warning, and the flood has no interest in warnings, only in the next thing worth selling.

VII. The Terminus Trap

In Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*, a galaxy stands at the edge of a thirty-thousand-year dark age, and a community of scholars is sent to a remote planet at the rim to perform a single monumental task: to compile the Encyclopedia Galactica, an archive meant to hold the sum of human knowledge. Save the data, they believe, and you shorten the coming darkness. They give their lives to the catalog.

The quiet revelation of the story is that the encyclopedia was a pretext. Its architect never needed the book finished. He understood what the scholars could not: that a people can grow so devoted to recording what they know that they forget how to do anything with it, and that when the first real crisis arrives, the archivists are the most helpless people on the planet. They could catalog a civilization. They could not save one. Survival fell instead to the few who had kept the capacity to act, while everyone around them had kept only the capacity to file. The keepers of the great archive turned out to be the ones least able to use it.

We are building their encyclopedia now. We have mistaken the catalog for the capability, the record for the knowing, the fact that a thing can be found for the fact that we can do it. We are a civilization of Encyclopedists, able to retrieve everything and enact almost nothing, certain that because the knowledge exists somewhere it must therefore still be ours.

And this is not a parable. It has already happened, in cases where we kept every page of the record and lost the thing anyway. When NASA went to study the F-1 engines that lifted the Saturn V to the moon, they found that the blueprints had survived in full; not a sheet was missing. It did not help as much as you would think. The engines had been built by hand, each with its own undocumented adjustments, tuned on the factory floor by machinists who modified as they went and wrote none of it down because the knowing was in their hands, not on the page. The archive was complete and the capability was gone, because the capability had retired and died. The document, it turned out, could not tell the whole story of the thing.

Older still is the case of Damascus steel, the blades of legendary sharpness patterned like flowing water. For centuries the smiths judged the metal by the shifting color of the fire and quenched it by feel, working an ore from a few specific Indian sources whose faint trace impurities, vanishingly small fractions of a percent, were what gave the steel its pattern and its strength. No one knew the chemistry. They knew the dance. When those ore sources were exhausted in the eighteenth century, the dance no longer worked on what was left, and there was no written formula to adapt

because the formula had never been written; it had only ever been done. The art went cold and stayed cold for two hundred years. The knowing had lived in the hands and the ore, and when the ore changed, the hands had nothing left to hold.

Every generation before ours stood on the accumulated knowing of the ones before it. That was the deal, the quiet inheritance that made us what we are: you arrive into a world already mapped by the dead, and you add your small correction, and you pass it on. The map was never complete, but it was real, and it was paid for in full by people you will never meet.

We are the first generation with the option to refuse the inheritance. Not to lose it by accident, the way a fire takes a library, but to set it down on purpose because something easier is always glowing in our hands. We are letting the chain go slack. And a chain that goes slack for even one generation does not loosen. It breaks, because the knowing lived in the people, and once the people are gone the knowing does not wait in a drawer to be rediscovered. It is simply gone, and we are left holding the infinite library, fluent in finding everything and capable of nothing, having forgotten the one art that was never written down because it never had to be: how to actually know a thing, in the body, well enough to stake your life on it.

That was the oldest inheritance. We may be the ones who put it down.

Everything in the cloud, and nothing in the mind.