



# 1819 NEWS

## Allen Mendenhall: The forgettable art of being born

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April holds a secret I shan't divulge; somewhere tucked inside those 30 fragrant spring days lurks my birthday, crouching there annually like an uninvited houseguest who has somehow obtained a key.

I am, by nearly every observable measure, a creature who adores company. Throw me into a parlor crackling with strangers, and I'll emerge three hours later with six new confidants and somebody's grandmother's phone number.

Yet this sociable, ebullient self goes absolutely rigid at the prospect of celebrating the anniversary of my own arrival. Friends find this baffling; I find it clarifying.

For years, I deployed a rather elegant defense: birthdays honor the wrong party entirely. What precisely have I accomplished by being born? I showed up. Gravity did the rest. If anyone deserves a cake and streamers and a roomful of

people singing off-key, it's my mother, who did the *actual* labor while I merely made an entrance. We have Mother's Day for that, of course, though one afternoon in May seems a meager accounting for the whole ordeal.

Explanations this tidy always smell slightly of fabrication, so I went digging.

I rang my mother and posed what felt like a simple archaeological question: What were my childhood birthday parties like? I asked because – and this is the peculiar part – I cannot summon a single memory of any of them.

Not one. My mother, who catalogs sentiment the way other people catalog receipts, lit up immediately.

Her particular favorite, she announced, was my party at Fuller's Park, where she'd arranged a Little League baseball extravaganza. All my friends descended in their uniforms, gloves brandished, caps tilted. A triumph, she insisted — a genuine hit.

I have absolutely no memory of it whatsoever.

She continued down the roster: a water park, putt-putt, Chuck E. Cheese, that cathedral of mechanical rodents and congealed pizza. Each venue landed with a thud in the hollow where recollection ought to live.

Nothing. My childhood birthdays have been erased as thoroughly as a chalk drawing in a rainstorm.

One thin fragment did eventually surface, though even calling it a memory feels generous. It wasn't the party itself, merely a ghost of watching the party on VHS tape years afterward, the footage grainy and slightly too bright, the way home videos always look like dispatches from a more innocent civilization.

On screen, a smaller version of me unwrapped something – a G.I. Joe, I believe – and declared with magnificent, devastating candor: *I already have that one.* The parents winced. My mother's voice sharpened. My televised face went scarlet.

On another tape, our neighbors – Jared, who was my age, and Brad, who was my brother's – were mid-celebration when their mother materialized and delivered her decree: "No more candy for Jared and Brad." A beat. Then, brightly: "Now, do you want some cake?"

Even as a child rewatching this, the syllogism delighted me. The sugar was being rationed by offering a different sugar. I laughed; I still do.

But there's something in the gift-giving theater that has always made me want to flee through the nearest window. I am, frankly, terrible at it – both directions. Selecting presents for others fills me with a specific dread; receiving them is somehow worse.

The performance demanded of an unwrapping face is considerable: the gasp, the widened eyes, the effusive gratitude that must arrive instantly and sustain itself for an uncomfortable duration regardless of what the box contains.

I'm not a gifted actor. My face tells the truth before my manners can intervene.

So, I protect myself and everyone around me by opting out entirely.

Perhaps that's the real inheritance buried inside all those vanished birthdays: not forgetfulness at all, but a child who understood instinctively that love, genuine and lasting, is far too fragile a thing to stake on a single unwrapped moment. The people worth keeping in your life are those who already know you; they don't require proof once a year in tissue paper and ribbon.

Some gifts are simply too important to be given.

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