



Memory Storm: The Role of Conscious Awareness in Recall

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The true treasure of a human is their collection of memories. Memories are the persisting form of instantaneous experience. Those memories are the raw material for the stories, the fuel that feeds friendships, and the stock for self-confidence. To some philosophers, your memories are your existence- what makes you an individual.

Mnemosyne, the Titan to whom the ancient Greeks attributed the aspect of Memory, is the mother of the Nine Muses- the female personifications of Arts and Sciences. Memory is literally the mother of human endeavour.

As you go through life, experiences and impressions surround you like a storm. Sensations like raindrops, and emotions like lightning bolts, are present in everyone's life. Sometimes these raindrops sink into the ground and are lost, and sometime they are captured and used to water the fields of art and science. The lightning bolts can offer limitless energy if harnessed properly.

Memory, and the practices of conscious observation and active recall, provides a key for humans to make the most of the experiences and impressions of life.

There are many formalised techniques out there for improving your memory. It really is just putting solid form to our liquid, or vaporous, memories. At it's most simple, memory is a two-way street. It is no just about using your natural abilities to help you absorb information, but also to

recall it. This second piece, the remembrance, is where difficulties are often encountered. The brain happily makes up details to fill in the gaps. When it comes down to it, if you didn't pay conscious attention to what shoes you were wearing when you first saw the ocean, then you will likely never recall it accurately. Engaging your senses, your knowledge, and your intuitions to help you absorb any experience.

These memory skills, in past times when paper and electronic aids were expensive or non-existent, were the foundations of any scholar's education. How little we need to remember when we can write everything down! Amazingly, these skills are almost unknown to the general public, and rarely, if ever, taught in Western schools. But none of them are really difficult to grasp. Like any skill, the more energy you put into it, the more proficient you will become. Each of the skills presented here can help form a network of remembrance that will help you retain your precious memories of your fantastic travels.

The common thread to all of the skills is conscious awareness. The more things you pay attention to, the more things you will store in the vault of your memory to be found later. By consciously upgrading your passive sensations to active observations, you will find you are more engaged, aware, and connected with your world.

Some of the most fundamental tools at your disposal are obvious. The availability of paper and writing utensils is a true achievement of the human species. You can write down your observations. As an extension of this, you can take photographs, draw pictures, or record films. These extensions of our memory can create a sense of objectivity, but ultimately, because you choose where to point the camera, you are still the conscious observer of the world. It is important that you are using the camera to strengthen your observation, and not as a substitute for paying attention.

You can repeat an experience again on your travels. If you'd like to remember more details about a place, visit it again. If you'd like to remember what something looks like with more clarity, take another look. Perform your second visit or look with more consciousness, as robotic repetition is the enemy of memory. Even though time demands that all things change, the conscious recognition of these changes in the place and yourself will take on meaning.

Discover, research, or playfully invent a story about the details of your travels, and your network of memory will be stronger. Beware of mistaking the story for the reality! The unlabelled statue of an unnamed person that you encounter- you can conjecture a story about the subject of the statue. Create a story of the sculptor, and a story of the rock material, and a story for even the person that installed the statue in the current location.

Or, you can create a taxonomy for your experiences, like the evolutionary 'tree of life' used by zoologists. Organize your experiences, locations, and observations into categories- for example, restaurants, offices, dates, or work. You can make categories, subcategories, and supercategories, in the same manner as zoologists and botanists. Indeed, much of the world's scientific effort is based on memory recall to identify different living organisms. You can invert these things by using, paradoxically, what you do not know as the hook for your memories. You can label some things as mysterious unknowns, and use that to help you recall the other attributes of those things themselves.

A immensely effective mnemonic technique is to link experience to geography. The more you use your mental map, whether with the aid of an actual visual map or without, the more your memories will be organized in your mind. Think of how valuable it has been for all of our animal

ancestors, through geological time, to remember where the tasty blueberries are, and where the deadly hippos are. If you are actually marking things on a map, it will help immensely in your recall of the details associated with that place. For some people, using a grid coordinate system, such as street intersections or latitude/longitudes, is the best way to do this. For others, using a sequence of landmarks is more effective.

The most famous use of geographical memory is that of the Memory Palace, described by the historian Cicero more than two thousand years ago. This technique, used often by Roman orators, is performed by merely imagining a familiar building, or a fantasy palace, that is filled with treasures. These beautiful objects, complex and interesting, are placed carefully within each room. You can expand the definition of a palace to include a familiar place, such a university campus or a well-known neighbourhood. When you would like to remember something, think hard and associate it with an object or a room. To recall the objects, just use your imagination to walk through the palace appreciating the objects. The imaginary observation of these objects will spark recall.

Being aware of the natural environment will help you to embed and recall your memories. Pay attention to the location of the sun in the sky, or the phase of the moon. Be aware of the height of the tide, and the flowers on the trees. Be aware of the season and the time until the equinox or solstice. You can mark the time dimension of your experiences by the time since you started, or will begin, or ended, your vacation. Your memory can be calibrated to the years your first child was born, or your parent died, or your sibling left home. These landmarks, or timemarks, are perfect compliments to your location memory sensibilities- time is the fourth dimension to the spatial three.

Our primary sensory tools are sight and sound. You can consciously observe the sights and sounds you experience, and add more sensory dimension to the experience. Do the colors, textures, or brightness of an event make a strong impression? The vocabulary of the photographer and the painter can be used in conscious memory-making. What about sounds? Can you hear birds, wind, vehicles, crowds? Maybe you can hum a tune, or sing out loud, or make a rhyme to describe a scene or to help remember facts. If you are a musician, you may already know how to write and record a tune.

Smell and taste can be consciously engaged. How do things smell? Can you recall the strong sensory feeling to the smell of a campfire, a new car, a hotel room, a beach, your partner, or your own scent? Merely being aware of this can help cement the memory. You can drastically channel this sensibility by using bottled perfumes, essential oils, or other scents to add to an experience, and later use the same scent to trigger the memory. Taste operates in a less intense fashion, but when you are dining, you can consciously remember what you are eating. Like bottled scents, a mint, candy, or toothpick can help you to imprint and recall an experience.

What about your body posture, and your sense of touch? To dancers, the active awareness of the body is the basis of their art. You can concentrate on your spine, or your hands, or your feet. You can pay attention to your bodies signals about your health. Are you standing upright, or slouching? Are you biting your nails or rubbing your fingers together? Are you tapping your feet or wiggling your toes? Are you headachy or nauseous? Consider the feel of your clothing, and your sense of temperature. Like the senses of taste and smell, you can readopt that position to aid in recall.

Beyond our innate five senses, we have a large collection of other sense. You have senses of heat, of gravity, of acceleration, or purpose, of of motivation, of happiness, and safety. Memory binds to all of these things.

I can remember with details the chill of a midnight mountain bivouac, my excitement and purpose on boarding a plane to a new country, my joy at finding old friends, and, of course, my absolute terror at squirming through a cave passage deep underground. Indeed, if you ask climbers, cavers, and other adventurers about their memories, they will all remember clearly the moments of terror. While not recommended for people trying to learn new things to memory, terror certainly helps with building your memory when sharing your travel experiences. Other negative emotions- pain, guilt, and shame- will cement a memory, but will also cause hurt when you recall it.

What about your sense of humor? Laughter is not only a great medicine, but also a memory aid. There is a wide variety of laughs, defined by differences in sound, body, and mood. The silliness, irony, surprise, and absurdity of an event can make it memorable. Strangely, it is immensely difficult to recall an appropriate joke when asked directly for one. But it's very easy to remember when your childhood friend slipped on a banana peel in front of all your friends. Undoubtedly, they remember it as well. If they can laugh at it, their negative emotion becomes a source of joy.

Sharing your experiences with people is a complex thing for the memory. It is well-known that people remember things differently. And who is right? It seems that the person who can recall more details of the experience is regarded as the more reliable recaller. Observations, interpretations, and understandings of any event or surrounding are sometimes built in collaboration with travel partners. This can be a magic thing, but it can also divert and distract your own personal experience.

When you are with a travel partner, or a group, you can consciously play simple memory-building games. Give individual objects and events a name- "The 4:30 Fig Tree" or "The Silly Hour." Point out details of the experience to each other, using your own special and unique skills of observation. If I am a nerdy scientist and you are a passionate artist, we will notice different things when we together visit the zoological gardens and the art gallery. You can recall the details of events together as soon as you'd like, and indeed, we do this almost instinctively. Often, as you exit an exciting place with your companions, you are already enthusing, defining, and remembering your favorite points.

As you share your impressions, you are creating a common vocabulary for your recall. One travel partner and I made an regular evening habit of recalling all of the things that we had enjoyed, or that had made an impression during that day. And we could also do the opposite thing as well: we could both choose to avoid discussing the things we would like to forget- the arguments and disappointments. We could even transform these negative experiences into positive ones: by talking about the successful meeting of challenges, we could help the future remembrance of our victory and aid in forgetting the frustration.

Your endeavours, and your memories of your travels, are things of deep and abiding value. They are a critical component of your identity, and an essential link in your relationships. By making yourself an active observer, using formal memory skills, your multiple senses, and the help of others, you will find that you can create a friendly relationship with the Nine Muses, Mnemosyne's daughters. You can consciously remember the good, the useful, and the happy. These skills, can help you make the most of the experiences you encounter. Mnemosyne's true gift is to help you live your life more fully, and the Memory Storm is just her way of making the entire experience...memorable.