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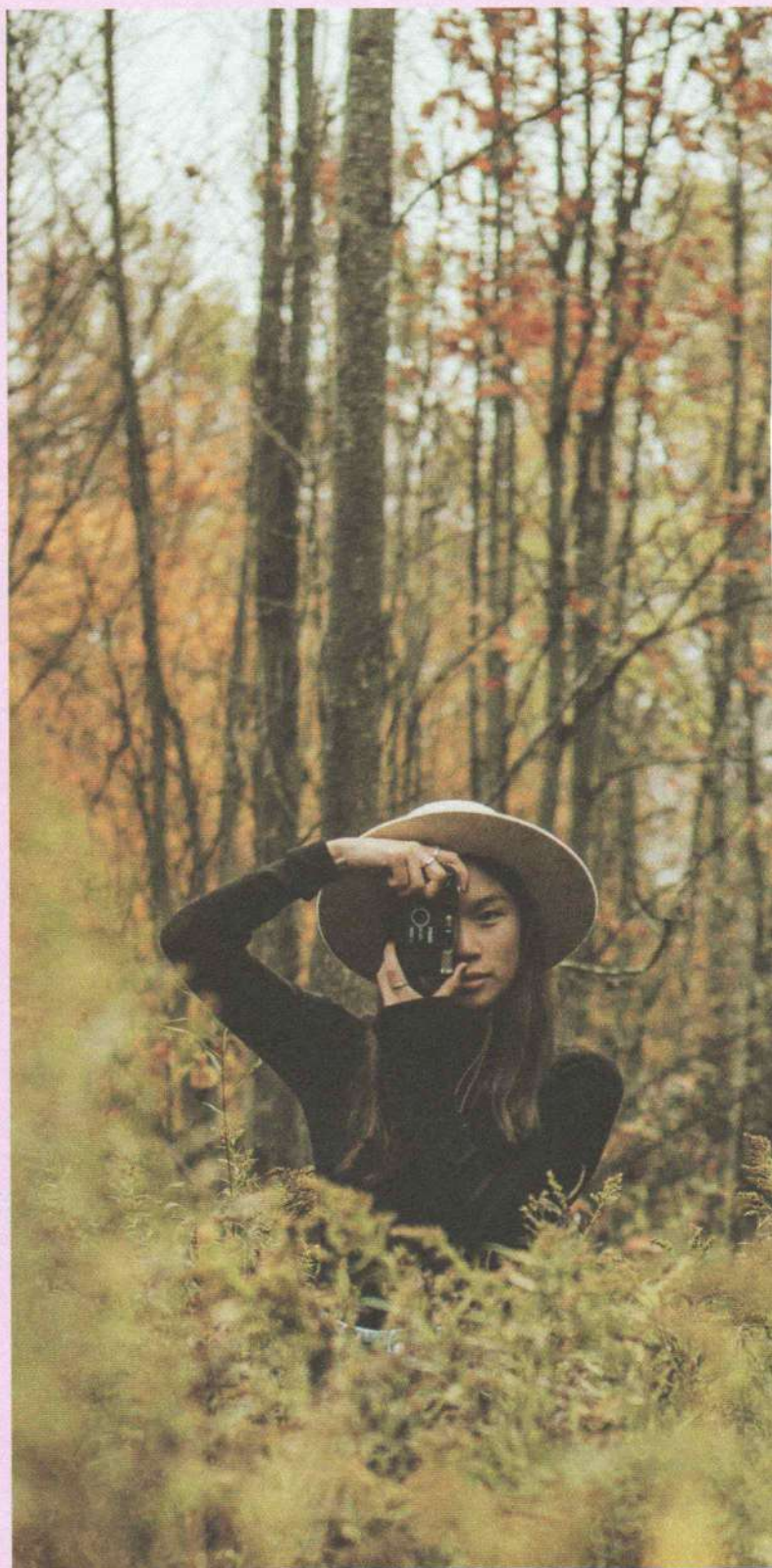
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MISTY MEMORY

Words by Marie Rowland

If life is the sum total of your experiences, then memory is that cerebral net that holds them. As time goes on, while the essence always remains intact, memories are malleable, and they inevitably get edited, even reconstructed, along life's way. Understanding how your memory operates yields insight into your self and into the nature of life itself.



The famous 1970s movie with Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford, *The Way We Were*, was the story of an ill-fated love story depicted through recollections of the past. The theme song, sung by this legendary actress, contained the lyrics, "Misty watercolour memories of the way we were." These words are poetic but insightful. Memories are not clear but become hazy over time, coloured by your subsequent life story. As the song goes, "Life rewrites every line" of the narrative of any given memory.

While your memory is a personal folio of your life events that no one else possesses, some of these memories are shared. We have all been in situations when a friend or family member recalls an event and we indulge ourselves in reminiscing. But there are times when their memory of events does not quite dovetail into ours. Now it might be that the difference of opinion is of no consequence, but in some instances people with so-called shared memories are prone to hotly disputing certain events. It may be that the alternate version changes the meaning of the event which does matter. The "truth" based on memory can be a very problematic proposition. In the end, it is all subjective, and every memory stored has a personal context and encoding.

The fault in our memory

False or distorted memories occur every day of our lives. Yet we are so attached to our version of the past that we often cannot, or refuse to, accommodate an alternative version. What is occurring in these instances is that we fail to remember what actually happened but rather become attached to what we felt at that time. Can you remember getting stung by a bee or falling off a swing as a child and thinking you were going to die when actually only your knee was grazed? The memory of the experience may be so intense and magnified because of the lived experience at the time. Your memory can distort the event based on the time and the extenuating circumstances in your life when you experienced it. This happens both ways. An average night out can be revised and revisited as the best time of your life based on information which has been added subsequent to it. This is effectively a reconstructed memory and happens at an unconscious level.

At a more serious and consequential level, we see this problem in eyewitness testimony where one witness account differs from another's, even with all objective details in play. Even more dire is when an eyewitness misidentifies an alleged perpetrator based on their absolute conviction that this was the person who committed the crime. This occurrence has happened time and time again, and while the memory of a traumatic event may indeed be valid and should not be discounted, that accuracy may still be littered with factual errors.

The fallibility and malleability of memory means that every memory you have has been constructed and reconstructed immediately after the event occurred. We may scoff at the term "misremember" as people, especially those in the public eye, have abused this term when they have been caught out and need to change their story. However, it remains that we all inevitably misremember events.

Every day we make optical assumptions. We see the outline of something and the brain automatically seeks to attach meaning to that shape. For instance, what we see as a coat hanger over water we recognise as the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The brain will always seek to fill in the gaps at an unconscious level to create meaningful relationships when entities are unrelated. So a traumatised victim may identify someone in a police line-up or photo book containing convicted criminals through recognition of the clothes they are wearing because their perpetrator was wearing a similar outfit. As the brain cannot operate in a vacuum, it will seek to find similarities and connections and will be presumptive. Consequently and convincingly, but in good conscience, the victim points to the wrong guy.

In memory formation, you only detect, encode and store in your brain bits and pieces of the entire experience, which is then stored in different parts of your brain. When it comes time to recall that experience you have an incomplete or partial store. The brain slots in information that was not originally stored. These gap fillers are derived from a combination of influences including inference, deduction, speculation and misattribution, which all happen at an unconscious level. The result is that so-called vivid memory is far from accurate, even though the event really did happen and should not be discounted.

Total recall

While memory can be faulty or filtered by a combination of interferences, it doesn't mean that it should be invalidated. Victims of trauma may lose certain details, but that doesn't mean that the experience didn't happen. The brain is designed to protect us. Memories can be repressed when they are too traumatic to deal with, and they are often triggered (sometimes much later in life) by something as innocuous as hearing a song from the past or smelling a fragrance that evokes a time in life long gone but not ever forgotten. We know that people suffering from Alzheimer's will hear a melody and have total recall of that period in time as it fires up synapses that have long since lapsed. Dissociation is another mental device, where the victim unconsciously removes themselves from the experience they are enduring and the memory is stored or secreted away. Memories may be lost in the synapses but never deleted.



Long-term memory can be split into two categories: declarative (also known as explicit memory) and non-declarative (or implicit memory). As the term suggests, declarative memories consist of events and facts such as what you had for dinner or what you wore to the movies last night. Non-declarative memories are those consisting of motor skills such as how to drive a car, as well as emotions or feelings. The implicit memory process does not require conscious thought, and cues in your environment can trigger negative or positive memories. By contrast, explicit memory references spatial, cognitive, linear time frame and language details.

Stress affects brain circuitry, which has an impact on both implicit and explicit memories. Emotional or non-declarative memory is supported by the amygdala, while the declarative memory determining the what, when and where of an event occurs in the hippocampus. But an extraordinary thing happens when stress levels rise from moderate to extreme levels. In these extreme conditions, storage levels in the hippocampus become dysregulated as stress hormones flood the system causing it to effectively shut down. At this point the amygdala switches on and becomes more effective in storing the memories – but it only records the emotional responses and bodily sensations and not factual details.

This is important to understand when people who have undergone a traumatic event try to recall events. They inevitably cannot retrieve facts, but they know how they felt during the event. You may remember what a friend wore at dinner last week but can't remember what the person wore who tackled you to the ground to steal your phone.

This is the same with people when they are in highly stressful emotional situations such as heated arguments with a partner or colleague. You know how that person made you feel, but for the life of you you can't remember what you were actually fighting about.

My recollection, your misconception

In the heat of battle, we say and do things we often can't recall afterwards. However, we become attached to what we felt at the time and construct a narrative to fit how we felt. We may only get some elements right, but not all. Sometimes it can boil down to a he said/she said scenario when recounting a contested issue. Therapists are constantly grappling with different versions of the same event. There are two opposing stories, and then of course somewhere in all that lies the truth.

When memory is so imperfect and unreliable, it is important for people to find a way to reconcile their versions to come to a place of mutual acceptance or agreement. Rather than tearing down or trying to poke holes in the other person's account, a way of coming to a place of conciliation is to not dwell on the event specifics but how each party felt at the time. Empathising with the other person's perspective assists

in understanding how memories of the same event can be so contrasting. Sometimes the facts underpinning an event pale in comparison with how it affected those involved.

Over time agendas, prejudices, trauma, learned behaviour and automated responses all combine to affect the memory. The perceived experience often contrasts with and supplants the actual experience. This reconstruction becomes your living memory. Memories are faulty and imperfect because we are imperfect.

An excerpt from the seminal work *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez describes how our memory recalibrates and self-adjusts: "He was still too young to know that the heart's memory eliminates the bad and magnifies the good and thanks to this artifice we manage to endure the burden of the past."

When we think about the past, we often do so through the lens of rose-coloured glasses. We remember just the good times and unconsciously choose to forget the bad. While this can be an effective coping mechanism, it can also be problematic as it only presents part of a picture, perhaps resulting in us making the same ill-fated judgements or choices in the future. Nevertheless, we all do it. By their nature, memories are unreliable keepsakes.

Mental mementoes never to forget

We don't remember days, we remember moments. We may not remember the date, but we remember the fragrance, the song or the feeling.

Memories, sad and happy, good and bad, comprise so much of who we are as we rely on them to make sense of our past and to realise our future. As the song goes, memories "light the corners of our minds" but often don't provide full illumination. Memories provide the narrative of your life, but inevitably that account is partially fictional, even if you believe it's real. If you use memories to guide you to be more compassionate and forgiving, then you can write your present story in a meaningful way.

Memories tell a story that at times serves and at other times unnerves. Either way, without them we lose who we are. Maybe the last word should go to novelist Nicholas Sparks, who wrote *The Notebook*, which as a movie is a real tearjerker. It tells the story of an elderly woman suffering from dementia who has who lost her long-term memory. Her loving husband of many decades visits with her daily and repeatedly tells her the tale of their lives as if they are characters in a story.

Sparks reflects, "There are moments when I wish I could roll back the clock and take all the sadness away, but I have the feeling that if I did, the joy would be gone as well." 🍷

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Marie Rowland is a writer and psychotherapist in private practice based in Manly on Sydney's northern beaches. For more information go to talking-matters.com.