

Column: “About Forgetting”



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I have never been a person with a poor memory, but I often cannot remember what has happened in the distant past. In a recent example, my wife talked to me about a family trip we took 20 years ago. “Do you remember during our trip when such and such occurred, and you did such and such,” she asked, “and we were really surprised?” In fact, I could not remember it at all, but I listened to her, occasionally even throwing in an appropriate but ambiguous word. My wife saw through my equivocation, however, and coolly remarked, “You’ve forgotten, haven’t you?”

Medically speaking, memory comprises three stages: memorization, retention and recollection. “To forget” refers to the inability to remember what we have memorized. In other words, although the data remains in our head, we cannot call it up. As such, when something triggers our memory, we can recall it, saying, “Oh yes, I remember that was indeed the case…”

I have heard that in order to prevent forgetting something, it is effective to call up and refresh our memories many times, so as to repeatedly overwrite and save information. By doing so, we thereby ensure that our memories can be drawn out of the storage area in our brain. Since our memories continue building up one after another, memories placed lower in the brain’s storage area are more difficult to recall. That is why we should recall important memories and reposition them at a higher level.

By the way, memory is a wondrous thing. When we recall a particular memory, it may give an impression or information different from when it was first memorized. Sometimes we do not want to recall a memory that must have been happy, and other times we have a heartwarming feeling when recalling a memory that must have been bitter. This is probably because we have overwritten and saved it with a different impression.

People memorize various experiences that they have gone through in their lives. These memories may vary widely, according to people’s attitudes toward such experiences. Likewise, when our past memories are overwritten, they are modified according to our attitudes toward the experiences that we have accumulated thus far. If we have a positive and constructive attitude, then, our memories of various difficult or sad experiences in the past can be replaced with positive and constructive memories—thereby enabling us to learn lessons from such experiences.

During a business trip to the United States in early February, I visited the 9/11 Memorial in New York. It is located at the site of the former World Trade Center complex, which was destroyed by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The 9/11 Memorial features two pools roughly the size of the World Trade Center, with waterfalls running down their edges. On the pools’ external walls, the names of the victims of the terrorist attacks are engraved.

Despite the fact that it was mid-winter, many people were visiting the memorial. As soon

as I entered the premises, I felt that the place was enveloped by a solemn atmosphere. New high-rise buildings were being constructed in close proximity, and such a cityscape could in fact give the misleading impression that no tragic incident had taken place ten years earlier. With the 9/11 Memorial standing there, however, people's memories of the incident become evoked. I entered a nearby shop and found a film playing that showed the images of the World Trade Center during the terrorist attacks, and those who were watching it were all silent. It was as if they were overwriting their memories.

There are some things that people should never forget. If we let our memories about an event fade away, we will lose something important. It is also true, however, that we are forgetful creatures. We should therefore make efforts to overwrite our memories, while simultaneously retaining what should never be forgotten.

On March 11, 2011, Japan experienced a disaster that we must never forget. Nowadays, I sometimes feel anxious that Japanese people's memories of the disaster may be fading away. While measures to recover from the great earthquake, tsunami and ensuing nuclear power plant accident in Fukushima are gradually moving forward, I think that information regarding this process is not being so actively disseminated. The incident is in fact still continuing, however, and we should never make it something of the past. In order to ensure that the disaster will never be forgotten, it is necessary that we overwrite our memories of it. In that overwriting process, I believe that we should gradually replace the tragic and bitter memories with positive and constructive ones—thereby allowing us to learn lessons from the experience of the disaster.

I hope that all people around the world will also remember “3/11” as they do “9/11”. If this occurs, they will be able to recall the 3/11 disaster several years or decades later as an experience from which the Japanese people learned many important lessons.



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