

30th December, 2021.

What Matters

I read somewhere that people who recall names are extraverts while those who remember numbers are introverts. What am I if I readily recall neither, but never forget a face? Does that mean I'm neither here nor there?

Wherever I am, anywhere in the world, if I see a face I've seen before, I can usually tell you the context from which I know that face, what sort of connection we've had, and perhaps where they're from, what they do for work, whether married, how they spend leisure time. A name, however, will likely elude me.

One of the most embarrassing situations is being asked in a social gathering to introduce two people and, suddenly, being unable to recall one or both of their names. I reshape the task via distraction. I'll say to the first, "You'll recall, I told you about him," and then detail something about the second that will intrigue and start an exchange.

At a demonstration eight years ago, I stood by one woman for three hours as we awaited security's permission to pass. Her blond hair looked like she just got out of the shower. She was wearing a sky blue, lime green, and pink floral pattern dress. Her pin said, "The struggle continues." She wore a pasty-looking necklace of imitation cubic zirconium. I wanted to make more of a connection. From her open smile, I think she did too. I can't recall her name. I'm not sure we ever introduced ourselves.

For two years I sat in the Y's sauna and chatted with a Ugandan roughly four times weekly. He had been a car salesman, but after his wife suddenly died, he re-arranged his life to be present for their girls. His only job was dog walking. He often seemed sad. "On almost no money, I could live back home like a king." One day about a year before the pandemic was declared he disappeared without saying goodbye. While I can't remember his Ugandan name, which began with an "A," I could recognize him anywhere by his face or his bodily scars.

By chance or choice, I sat beside and chatted with a woman on a flight five years ago. She was headed to Berlin to explore the possibility of moving there. She's from Baltimore and until recently was in the restaurant business. Thirty minutes into our conversation, she bent over, reached into her purse, and handed me her business card, in all-red letters, "We should stay in touch." She was wearing jeans that came across like a fine business suit. She still shows up on social media now and then but that's not enough to help me retain her name.

Over the years, I met many people at meetings around the world. If I happen upon someone I once met in, say, Edinburgh, Stockholm, Vienna, or Toulouse, when I see them again halfway across the world, I know right off when and where I last saw them, what country they were living in, and what they yearned to do instead of their current job. I'll vividly recall that he and I walked along the river under a light snowfall, or she and I worked out together in the gym, or I ate salmon and drank red wine with three of them. Their names? Forget it.

Imagine that I'm sitting in a bar in Paris. An older man enters and walks toward my table. The hair has thinned and there are wrinkles around the eyes and mouth, but that teenage face: I knew it in college. He's from the South. I sometimes hung out in his dorm room for late night "bull sessions" before he dropped out. Somebody told me he changed his name and writes film scripts. I can't recall his old name much less the new one.

It's the same way in dreams, of course. When we wake, we can often identify dream actors by name, but most likely they didn't have names in the dreams, and they might not have been the people we wakefully identify them as. Often, the people we place on a dreaming stage are our inner actors rather than anyone wakeful. Giving names to dream actors wakefully is half guessing game, half rationalization.

Now and then I'll confront in dreams the issue of not remembering names. Dreaming, I'll sometimes say, "I have two children, a boy and a girl, but I can't remember their names. How could I forget the names of my own children?" I'll ponder that and then say, "I'm married. I should be able to remember my spouse's name. This is insane. What's her name? I have to know this." I'll pause again, frantic now, and say, "I'm not fooling around, what is my own name? People must call me something. What do I call myself? Did I once have a name?"

Then I wake with a start and scream, "I'm Jim, I'm married to Ginger, and our children are Emily and Alex. Jim, Ginger, Emily, Alex." It is a relief to break that sleep/wake barrier and know that, awake, I know the names for my children, my spouse, myself. Those names, even when all the others have blown from my mind's fingers, I've got to remember them.

I've noticed that my ability to remember names of people I've met, which was always subpar, has eroded in recent years, as has my general ability to retrieve words. When I get stuck, I do better if I ask Ginger to help me retrieve a name or word because, through the act of asking, I'm able more often than not to fill in the blanks for myself. Still, I wonder, how long is it before that haunting dream becomes wakeful reality? How long until, wide awake, I say, "Who are my children? To whom am I married? And me, do I have a name?"

I only *seem* oblivious. I may no longer know the answers to questions about names and some other words, but I still know who you are. I know all about each of you and about us. I remember what we've done and who we've been and who we are to each other. And don't you ever forget that.