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# HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN SO SOON?

By J. M. SHULMAN

A classic and time-worn story is told of the man to whom there once came such a wonderful idea that he fell upon his knees to thank God for his revelation, only to discover upon arising that the idea had slipped his mind. Whether or not the story is true, there is a powerful piece of truth about the human mind contained in its lines.

You engineering students, before you sit down to study tonight, heed and give a bit of thought to some facts about how much of the stuff you are cramming in your head now will still be there in anything like usable shape six, twelve, or a hundred months from now. Some of the data gathered by experts in educational psychology on the forgetting power of the average college student not only should interest you but also might even go so far as to astound you. If it fails either to interest or astound you, it will at least provide something to think about.

According to the results of an investigation in educational research conducted by Edward B. Green\* on the subject, *Retention of Information Learned in College Courses*, four months after completing a course the students appeared to have forgotten approximately one-half of the information reported correctly on the final examination taken immediately following the course. Twenty months afterward they had forgotten about two-thirds. This data was obtained by giving the objective final examination used at the close of an elementary course to students enrolled in advanced courses in the same subject at intervals of four, eight, sixteen and twenty months after completion of the elementary course. The students used as guinea pigs in the investigation were presumably above the average both in ability and specific interest. It is reasonable to expect that average students would forget even more rapidly.

What's wrong with the picture of a huge part of all the factual knowledge accumulated in four years of study being gone with the wind so quickly afterward? Certainly it isn't flattering either to the students or to the educators. Apparently a combination of deficiencies in the educational methods and leaky, sieve-like memories of most college students is responsible.

For the sake of narrowing the argument, let us make the highly imaginative and fallacious assumption that the educational methods are perfect. Then we can go on to reason that, as a group of college students, our memories are so poor that if the accumulation of readily available facts and data were the sole purpose of college education, this education would seem to be an appalling waste of effort. Fortunately this accumulation is not the sole purpose, nor is it considered by educational experts even a major purpose. Nevertheless, the loss of

two-thirds of what one knows about a subject within two years after studying it, still looks bad.

What is that something we have, or lack as the case may be, called memory? Is it a gift of God, or something which has to be developed and improved, or both? A psychologist would probably insist it is largely the former and contend that your memory, bad as it may seem to be is as good now as it ever will be. In the next breath, though, he would be likely to ease the pain of this realization by expounding the happy idea that so-called good memory is not so much a function of amount or kind of gray matter as it is of good mental habits. Most of us who claim to have poor memories are victims of slipshod, haphazard mental habits. Since habits are capable of being formed and cultivated, it should be possible to make a bad memory less of a nuisance by forming a few good mental habits and breaking up some bad old ones.

James Mangan in his book, *Thoughts on Salesmanship*, points out that laziness is one of the biggest obstacles in the path of human endeavor. He says: "There is one complete explanation of such statements as 'I fairly loathe the work!', 'I haven't the time!', 'I'm afraid!', 'I can't!' You don't really mean what the words say, what you really mean is: *I am too lazy.*" So are most of us too lazy mentally to do much about a bad memory except complain about it.

One of the best ways to forget things is to be sure in your own mind that you will remember them, and not write them down. Have you ever gone to bed at night and found that you could not fall asleep, that your mind seemed more alert than it had been most of the day, that brilliant thoughts and ideas kept occurring to you one after another? You probably did the easiest thing to do, just keep on thinking until Morpheus took control, and then the next morning your thoughts had flown with the night. A snap-on light and pencil and paper within reach of the bed might have saved them, and the time necessary to jot them down would never have been missed.

Thousands of pages of books and magazines are read daily by students who are too lazy to pick up a pencil. Is it any wonder that only a small fraction of what they read sticks for any length of time? Notes always provide something to refer to, and the very act of writing tends to inscribe written words on the mind. R. P. Crawford in his recent book, *Think for Yourself*, provides two blank pages at the end of each chapter for the reader to write down notes, thoughts, impressions and ideas. Most authors are not so considerate; but paper is cheap, and memory is not to be trusted. Don't forget to write it down!