

HSAM – Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory

By Sheila Johnson

Before Oprah Winfrey retired her talk show, I viewed one her broadcasts featuring people who were able to remember every day of their life. Initially, I questioned the validity of the stories of this unique group of individuals. Before airing their stories, Oprah authenticated their stories with family, friends, and vital statistics. I was truly amazed at what I heard. HSAM, or highly superior autobiographical memory is a rare neurological condition. Jill Price is the first of sixty known people to be diagnosed with HSAM. She can remember the day of the week for every date since 1980. In Ms. Price's words, "Whenever I see a date flash on the television (or anywhere else for that matter), I automatically go back to that day and remember where I was, what I was doing, what day it fell on, and on, and on, and on, it's non-stop, uncontrollable, and totally exhausting. Most have called it a gift, but I call it a burden."

There are indeed negative side effects of this syndrome: memory floods the brain to the extent that most people with HSAM have difficulty living in the present; it causes major disruption to their regular thinking processes; and they struggle with present and future planning.

Memory plays a pivotal part in saving or ending our lives. When we receive physical injuries that literally cause "unbearable" pain, nerve endings send messages to the brain, to shut the memory off until our bodies are able to sustain a certain level of pain. When brain cells that reside in the memory region fail to function, we can lapse into Alzheimer's disease and eventually die.

Just as physiological memory controls the workings of our brain, humans are also equipped with a psychological capacity to block out certain pain, utilize selective memory, or simply refuse to remember certain events. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to forget the pain of war, natural disasters, world economy, droughts, famines, hatred, racism, and non-humanitarian acts?

On the other hand, it would be satisfying to be able to recall the euphoric feeling of our first kiss; merciful to remember the grace of our second chance; exciting to recall the opposing team's third strike; gratifying to relive the fourth winning quarter of our football heroes; reassuring for the unjustly accused to have faith in the 'due process' of law promised in the fifth amendment; enlightening to know and understand the Godly, redemptive meaning of the six points of David's star; and comforting to feel God's breath in each of the Seven Days of Creation?

I've decided that I don't want the gift or the burden of highly superior autobiographical memory. Nor do I want to exercise my brain's ability to forget negative experiences. I want to remember the life lessons of heartache, grief, and long-suffering. I want to remember many of the things that make my heart happy. And I always want to remember that my job is to find a balance of memory.