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How I Got My Short-Term Memory Groove Back

By challenging my brain, my 'senior moments' became fewer

posted by John Stark, May 24, 2012 [More by this author](#)



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The other night I was talking on the phone with a friend in New York when she had what many of us know all too well as a “senior moment.” She was trying to tell me the name of a late-night comic, but couldn’t think of it. “It’s not Jay Leno or Letterman,” she said. “It’s, it’s. . .” “Craig Ferguson?” I asked. “Yes, that’s who it is!” she exclaimed. I nearly fainted.

So how did I come up with Ferguson’s name so quickly?

Before you say, “He’s on CBS every night hosting the ‘Late,

Late Show,’” I should point out that there’s no way I could stay awake to watch a late show, let alone a late, late one. As far as I know, I’ve never even seen the comic perform or be interviewed. I have no idea what he looks like. I didn’t even know he was Scottish until I Googled him. As a celebrity his name is in the public consciousness. So I guess it wasn’t all that weird that I knew his name.

But it was weird because my ability for instant recall over the last few years has been up there with Rachel McAdams’ in “The Vow,” right after she woke up in a hospital bed with amnesia from being in a car wreck. Poor thing didn’t even know she was married to Channing Tatum.

After talking to my friend in New York, I came to a startling conclusion: My memory isn’t what it used to be. It’s better. And it involves more than being able to invoke Craig Ferguson’s name.

Take the following incident, which happened on my couch.

A few weeks ago while I was watching TV and channel surfing, I came upon the movie “Poltergeist.” I hadn’t seen it since it came out in 1982, and thought it would be fun to revisit. So I put down the remote and settled in for a viewing. As you may know, “Poltergeist” tells the story of a family that moves into a suburban tract house and gets spooked by the ghosts who are living there — the house having been built on a sacred burial ground.

The movie proved to be a more unsettling experience than I had bargained for, and not because of its otherworldly plot or special effects.

As cast members made their appearances, their names came instantly to me, starting with the actors who played the parents: Craig T. Nelson and JoBeth Williams. OK, that can be explained: They’re still stars, sort of. But then halfway through the movie the actress Beatrice Straight made her entrance as a parapsychologist. Right away I said to myself, “That’s Beatrice Straight.” There was no “wait, wait, don’t tell me” hesitation. OK, skeptics. That can be explained too. Straight isn’t

an unknown, having won an Oscar for *Network*. But that was way back in 1976, and she was only on screen for 5 minutes and 40 seconds. And she's been dead for over a decade.

Then the plot thickened, and not just in the movie. The truly unexplainable began to take place in my hippocampus.

Toward the end of the film, a feisty, 4-foot-tall spiritual medium is brought in to help rescue the family's little girl, who has been abducted by the house's evil spirits. It didn't take more than a nanosecond for me to recall the performer's name: Zelda Rubinstein (who died two years ago, according to my Google search). Zelda Rubinstein is not the kind of name that sticks in your crawl space. I grabbed an arm of the couch and sat upright.

The only major performer in the film whose real name I couldn't come up with was the little girl's. I did remember that she had died young (in 1988, six years after the film's release.) When "Poltergeist" was over, I went straight to bed. Moments after falling asleep, I was jolted awake. *Heather O'Rourke!* That was her name.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized there was a pattern here:

Since joining a health club in March, I've not once forgotten my locker combination. No more standing there in a towel and endlessly spinning the dial. Not only that, I've consistently remembered to bring my lock home with me, rather than leave it on the locker door. I recognized, too, that it has been months since I've gotten up in the morning and stood in my kitchen screaming, "*I'm out of coffee!*" Now when I see I'm running low, I remember to pick some up when I'm at the store.

At first, I thought maybe my memory reboot was due to a lightening strike. But had I been hit by lightning, I would have remembered that no matter what. Was it the fish oil supplements? The acai berry juice? Perhaps it was the pork-belly ice cream that I sampled at the Minnesota State Fair.

No, there had to be a more plausible explanation.

And then it hit me like a stiff drink.

For the last few years, I'd been feeling like my better days were behind me. I was in a rut and bored to death.

But my job now, though stressful at times, never fails to give my brain an intense daily workout. I'm constantly learning new things about myself and my generation.

After 40 years of being a print journalist, I had to make some adjustments to work on a website — ones that required I be on full mental alert. I had to learn how to write for the Web and master new technologies. Because I work from home, it meant turning my den into an office. I had to adapt to a brand new computer. With no IT person in my house, I had to learn how to solve problems on my own, and quickly. I am not very spatial and have always hated assembling things. But lately, with an Allen wrench in hand, I've put together enough furniture — from bookcases to a desk to a computer table — to qualify me as a master carpenter on *This Old House*.

I don't need scientific data — and there's been a ton of it lately — to prove to me that if I want the rest of my life to have vitality and meaning, I need to keep my brain challenged at all times. It's how brain cells are created. And from what I can tell, it's an antidote to "senior moments." If I should forget to remember that lesson, just whack me over the head with the nearest Allen wrench.