Some time ago I was invited to do the “test” speech for the club evaluation contest of Moratuwa Toastmasters club. Everything was going well. I did the introduction. Addressed the contest chair. Delivered the first line. *long bewildered pause* And then nothing.

(Toastmaster, my dear toastmasters)

You may know from experience that even while you are uttering a sentence of a prepared speech, the next one is there *pause* ready *pause* to jump out. But that day I was drawing a complete blank.

After some horrifying milli-seconds, I thought of playing it by the ear and started to deliver an impromptu speech. After two or so impromptu paragraphs, I remembered my original speech and continued with it.

Memory is a very interesting phenomenon. It is not just about remembering what you ate for breakfast. Nor is it only about the tomes that you have by hearted for exams. Memory is your entire being. The entity or the lack of it that you call yourself is an emergent property of the memories that you have hoarded inside your head. One might disagree with me and say; “Nay! It is the thoughts that make the man”. Like René Descartes said, “I think therefore I am.” I wouldn’t contend with you.

But I would ask what is thought? Have you ever thought of anything that is not a derivation of what you already know? All your new ideas are based on something that you remember. A new thought is but the creative inference of what you know.

When I write; “My love, my beloved, my reason to be”, I might think that I am being original and poetic, but in truth I might be deriving from what I read a decade and a half ago.

All you know is stored up here *point at temple* as a huge net of information. I’ll say a list of words; Pencil, carrot, car, gate. As you may notice, each word brings the concept into your head. But as the memory is organized, you will not be thinking of an abstract pencil. The concept that comes to your head has a colour, the sound that it makes when it is scratching over a paper, and for some poor souls; horrors of a test that they had to answer with a pencil recently. As such, we are good at remembering stories than lists. That is why you remember that song you heard on your Kandy trip rather than the song indexed by the order that you heard them in your life.

Humans are insatiable creatures. So we have two main problems with memory. How to remember and how to forget.

Say you want to remember the list that I mentioned earlier; Pencil, carrot, car, gate. How to do this? Either you can try to by heart the list or make a small story. “Bugs bunny with a pencil in his ear eating a carrot, drove his car through a gate”... “Bugs bunny with a pencil in his ear eating a carrot, drove his car through a gate”. Picture it correct and you will not forget. Or you can use background stimuli. Eat a different flavour of gum when you are studying for different subjects and eat the matching flavour when you are taking the test. Orange for algorithms and strawberry for operating systems perhaps?

How to forget? As academics you might ask me why forget? Many reasons! Sometimes a traumatic incident. A mistake in life causing depression. The answer here is twofold. According to research, our memory is made of two parts long term and short term. There are no memory copies. When short term store is full, the contents get emptied to the long term store. Until and unless this happens, you can lose everything that is in your short term memory. Such is the case of poor Michelle Philpots who is 50 years
old. She met with an accident in 1990 and now each day she wakes up thinking that she is 31! She keeps notes to save her from the daily horror of rediscovering what has transpired. Tragic as it is, scientist are looking at this as a possible way to treat patients immediately after a traumatic incident. The victim is to be given medication that would prevent the current memories in the short term memory being crossed over to the long term memory. The patient will eventually lose a day or two of their life, but it is sometimes wished for.

What to do with old and rooted memories? This is what is discussed in the famous movie; “The eternal sunshine of a spotless mind”. The main character has a girlfriend named Clementine. But one day he meets her and she acts as if he is a stranger. After some probing with mutual friends, he finds out that she has undergone a procedure to erase him from her mind. Now resentful, he undergoes the same procedure to erase her from his memory. But since human memory is organized like a net of information, he loses more of himself than he bargained for. Even the memory of his mother singing to him the rhyme “Oh my darling Clementine” when he was a toddler had to be erased. He loses his memories of both the fruit and colour tangerine because that was his nickname for her. Anyway the movie ends proving what I said earlier. The boy and girl meets again by chance. Now devoid of all the resentment and hateful thoughts to decide upon, they fall in love again!

As I said mind is an interesting phenomenon. Mind is the master of your being. But you can master your mind. To prove the point, tell me the list of things that I asked you to remember.

“Pencil, Carrot, Car, Gate”.

Now you remember a completely useless list!

But in doing so, I proved there can be an alteration to the famous saying by Descartes making it to be;

“Memini, ergo sum”

“I remember, Therefore I am.”

(Over to you toastmaster.)