

The gentle art of forgetting

By Ruth Ostrow

I'VE been reading all those wonderful, entertaining court testimonials recently - the scandal over Australian wheat sales to Iraq, the Steve Vizard case - and it seems "I can't remember" is the excuse for getting out of everything. "And did you put a call through to X on that day?"

"I can't remember." "And did you meet Y on Friday the 15th?" "I don't recall". Such amnesia prompted cynical comments from the nation, myself included.

Until it started to happen to me. The simple question: "And where were you yesterday at 1.15pm?" would have me sweating in the witness box. "And what day is it today, Ruth?" would cause a similar reaction. Yesterday I stared at an avocado for a full 20 seconds before I remembered what it was called, and I've taken to asking my daughter to pass me the "thingo" while clicking my fingers and pointing at things.

God forbid I'd be asked to locate my mobile phone under cross-examination.

I'm not trying to excuse the disturbing courtroom antics of late, but rather to worry aloud at what happens to our poor old brains as we descend into "adulthood".

Lunching with two famous writers the other day, both said they never remembered people's names, street names, or why they were in the supermarket - although one said he had an exceptional memory for phone numbers. "A bit like autism," we all agreed.

Many of my 40-something friends are now taking ginkgo bilbo; some carry a pen, paper and street directory everywhere they go. I take a host of supplements including omega-3 capsules and raw cocoa beans to sharpen my intellect.

But most of the time I can't remember whether I've taken them or not.

Common wisdom says memory loss is a symptom of ageing, menopause, andropause and the like. I think that it's more a symptom of cosmic exhaustion; a form of emotional amnesia brought on by trying to cram too many irrelevant things into our heads over too many years. Overloaded, our senses just shut down over time.

We become like fish in a bowl: "Oh, there's a rock ... Oh, there's a rock ..." But there's a bright side to it. Zen Buddhists believe this state of seeing everything afresh is a sign of Enlightenment. Masters practise for decades to be able to live in the moment, devoid of a past or future. I would like to take heart from this fact.

Unfortunately, I will forget it tomorrow.

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