

# The Stranger In The Mirror

- Moshe Miller

When People Lose Their Memory...

*We use our memory on a continual basis, perhaps several hundred times per hour. We are constantly remembering and recalling bits of information that assist us in performing daily tasks, ranging from getting dressed and driving a car, to computing income taxes and giving personal contact information to the dry cleaners, grocery store and bank teller. We do most of these things effortlessly (with the possible exception of the taxes). We take for granted that we will remember how to get to work and where to pick up our mail when it arrives.*

*We are shaped by the sum of our experiences and those experiences, good or bad, provide us with memories that define how we feel and act. What, then, would we do if we no longer had the use of memory, r'l?*



Dawn broke on a cool and cloudy July morning in New York City. There was a light, misty rain falling from the sky as a subway train screeched to a stop pulling into the station in Coney Island, Brooklyn. The conductor's voice announced the final stop and the few passengers streamed out until the train was empty.

Almost.

One man remained slumped in his seat, apparently asleep. He awoke slowly and blinked. There is nothing unusual about dozing off on a subway and accidentally missing your stop. It is annoying and sometimes even frustrating, but the mistake can be easily rectified by boarding a subway in the opposite direction and retracing your steps, being extra vigilant not to miss your stop the second time around.

But for this man it was not so simple. When he awoke on that fateful July morning in 2003, he found himself on a subway in Coney Island and he had no memory of who he was. No idea what his name was, who his parents were, where he lived, or what his profession was. In fact, he had no memory whatsoever. His only possessions were in a backpack that he wore on his shoulders. The only clue to his identity was the thick British accent with which he spoke.

He was taken to a police station where he told officers that he didn't know his name. They searched him for identification and when they found none, they concluded he had been robbed. From the police station he was transferred to a psychiatric ward in Coney Island Hospital. The doctors and nurses were dumbfounded. None of them had ever seen a case of such extreme amnesia. The man was young, in his thirties, and Caucasian. With no name to use, "Unknown White Male" was written on all his medical charts and records.

For several days, he remained in the hospital with no improvement in his condition and *still no memory*. Upon close inspection of the personal items in his backpack, a phone number was discovered

inside the flap of a book. The number turned out to be that of a friend's mother. The friend was contacted and arrived at the hospital. A name was finally given to the distraught and frightened man. He was identified as Doug Bruce, a successful stockbroker from England, who had moved to New York to study photography and was currently enrolled in the School of Visual Arts.

Doug was taken to his home, a large loft in the heart of Manhattan. Inside, he saw pictures of himself with friends and family. He found that he was the owner of a dog and several cockatoos, and he was apparently interested in photography. He did not deny that he was Doug Bruce, but he felt no connection to the name or the person. He was not emotionally attached to the persona of the man in the pictures. The first morning home after losing his memory, Doug woke up and asked, "Where's my mother?" She had died 10 years earlier of cancer.

Doug Bruce had no memories. Well, not exactly no memories, because if that were the case he would have been like a newborn baby. He would not have known how to talk or walk or eat. Doug had lost specific memories, those that are commonly referred to as episodic memories, or true memories.

Memories can be divided into three broad categories: episodic, semantic and procedural (there are actually many more categories). Procedural memories are the memories of how to do things: driving a car, walking, cooking, riding a bike and so on. Semantic memories are memories that contain bits of factual information or knowledge of the world: names, places, meanings of words and expressions. Episodic memories consist of the explicit recollection of specific events: high school graduation, a trip to *Eretz Yisrael*, a sister's wedding, etc.

Doctors referred to Doug's extremely rare form of memory loss as total retrograde amnesia. Retrograde amnesia is the loss of pre-existing memories to conscious recollection, beyond an ordinary degree of forgetfulness. His episodic memory suddenly vanished along with much of his semantic memory. He could not remember his

childhood, his schooling or even his current pursuit of photography. He did, however, retain knowledge of certain events. He knew how to use chopsticks but could not remember if he had ever eaten sushi. He knew the names of several cities in Australia but had no memory of the tragic terrorist attacks on 9/11. Doug began to rediscover everything in the world around him.

His first trip to the ocean following his amnesia was an incredible experience because it was all new to him. He was inundated with an immense array of new sensations, from the sound and power of the surf, to the water filtering the soft sand through his feet and the smell of salt and seaweed in the air. Doug couldn't remember whether or not he had the ability to swim, but when he plunged into the enticing foamy and salty waves, he quickly realized he could swim effortlessly through the water.

Friends describe the "old" Doug as a slightly egotistical and toughened cynic. He was raised in Nigeria, where his father was in charge of several business ventures. At a young age, he was sent to boarding school in England where he spent the remainder of his youth. After dropping out of college, Doug moved to Paris where a series of wildly successful stock market trades made him an instant millionaire.

In 1999, he became tired of his life in the world of fast-paced trading and high stakes investments. He left the business world and moved to Manhattan to study photography. A friend explained Doug's post-amnesia transition back to his life.

"It was like dealing with a child. He lost a lot of his cockiness. He became nicer."

When re-meeting a friend he had known for 20 years, Doug would respond to the friendly "hello" with a completely blank expression, a look of sadness in his eyes. Doug was determined to re-discover everything about his life and the world around him. Doctors told him that there was a 95% chance of regaining his memory.

Doug waited day after day, but his amnesia remained and he resigned himself to never remembering anything

before July 3, 2003. Doug described himself as having "the perceptiveness of a 35-year-old with the naiveté and vulnerability of a 3-month-old infant (but I am growing up fast!)." When asked what his occupation was, Doug would respond: "fugal amnesiac."

## Piecing Together the Facts

When exactly did the onset of amnesia occur?

Doug wasn't sure, but he was eager to gather whatever information he could to explain his traumatic ordeal. A friend spoke with Doug on the phone on July 2, 2003. It was eight o'clock in the evening. Doug said he was tired and intended to stay at home and go to sleep. At seven the next morning, the same friend appeared at his home to find out if Doug would join him for breakfast. He rang and rang but Doug was not home. Something had happened between eight



Doug Bruce standing at the train station where he found himself immediately after losing his memory.



The Coney Island train station.