Genova, Lisa. Remember: The Science of Memory and the Art of Forgetting (pp. 29-30). Atlantic Books. Kindle Edition.

(1) Think about the vast amount of information that your senses are exposed to in any given day. If you’re awake for sixteen hours today, your senses are open for business without a break for 57,600 seconds. That’s a lot of data.

But you simply can’t and won’t remember most of what was available to your eyes, ears, nose, and brain today. Here’s an example that will probably feel familiar.

I frequently drive home to Cape Cod from Logan International Airport. About an hour into this trip and about forty minutes from home, I cross the Sagamore Bridge, a 1,408-foot, four-lane steel-arch bridge that spans the Cape Cod Canal. It’s a formidable, memorable structure.

At some point during this ride, I will typically and suddenly wonder, “Wait, did I already go over the bridge?” And then I’ll notice that I’m at exit 5 on Route 6, which means I crossed the canal about ten minutes ago. I’m on Cape Cod and have no memory of driven over that enormous bridge.

But surely my eyes saw it. The visual information was perceived by my eyes, and the image of the bridge made its way into the visual cortex in my brain. My brain definitely saw the bridge. And it’s not as if I’m now asking my brain to recall some obscure detail I experienced from childhood. I drove over the bridge only ten minutes ago! But I can’t recall it, because this memory was never created in the first place. It’s not enough for my senses to perceive that information.

My hippocampus can’t consolidate any sensory information into a lasting memory without the neural input of *attention*. So, because I wasn’t paying attention to the bridge, the experience of driving over it slipped out of my brain within seconds, gone without a trace.

The number one reason for forgetting what you just said, or a person’s name, or where you put your phone, and whether you already drove over a really big bridge, *is lack of attention*. You can’t later remember what is right in front of you if you don’t pay attention to it.

For example, if you don’t *notice* where you put your glasses, you can’t form a memory of where you put them. Later, when you’re frustrated, unable to find them, you’re not experiencing a true memory failure. You haven’t forgotten anything, because the memory was never formed. Your glasses are missing because of a lack of *attention* (they’re usually on my head!).

So, if we want to remember something, we first have to pay attention to it. Unfortunately, this isn’t so simple. Even if we didn’t live in such a highly distractible time, paying attention isn’t easy for our brains. In driving over the Sagamore Bridge, for example, I might have been distracted by a conversation, or some delicious daydream, my attention diverted. More likely, I didn’t register driving over the bridge because that detail wasn’t particularly important to me. It was a routine experience. I’ve driven over that bridge hundreds of times. As it is with brushing our teeth, taking a shower, getting dressed, drinking our morning coffee, and commuting in the evening — because these experiences are essentially the same day-to-day - we don’t pay attention to them. And because we don’t pay attention to them, we don’t remember them. We tend to pay attention to — and therefore remember — what we find interesting, meaningful, new, surprising, significant, emotional, and consequential. Our brains capture those details. We ignore, and therefore forget, the rest.

(2) Not long ago, somewhere in my mid-forties, I drove to Kendall Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from Cape Cod and parked my car in a multi-story. I checked the time and knew I had to hurry. I was scheduled to give a talk a couple of blocks away in a few minutes and had hoped to arrive sooner.

Normally I take a photo of the floor number or the row letter as a record of my car’s location whenever I park in a multi-story. But worried that I was going to be late, I raced out of there as fast as I could in heels without snapping a photo of my space and, worse, without consciously registering where I had parked.

I arrived on time, gave my forty-five-minute talk, answered questions, and signed books. The whole affair probably took an hour and a half.

When I returned to the car park, I walked to where I thought I had parked, but my car wasn’t there. I paced up and down ramps, becoming increasingly frustrated and hopeless as it remained missing. I walked from level to level, my feet screaming in my heels, sure I had parked on the fourth floor, but maybe it was the third or the fifth. And did I park in section A, B, or C? No idea. I couldn’t remember. My car was nowhere. Gone.

I knew I was in the right car park, but that’s all I had confidence in. I kept pressing the button on my car remote, trying not to panic, praying I would hear a beep-beep or see a flash of lights in response. Nothing.

I was just about to report my car stolen when I stumbled upon it exactly where I left it, in 4B. Relieved, embarrassed, and sweating, I reflexively wanted to blame the whole maddening experience on my memory, but the neuroscientist in me knew better.

I couldn’t find my car, not because I had a horrible memory, amnesia, dementia, or Alzheimer’s. Temporarily losing my car had absolutely nothing to do with my memory. I couldn’t find my car, because I never paid *attention* to where I had parked it in the first place.