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# PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

## Change Your Memories, Change Your Life

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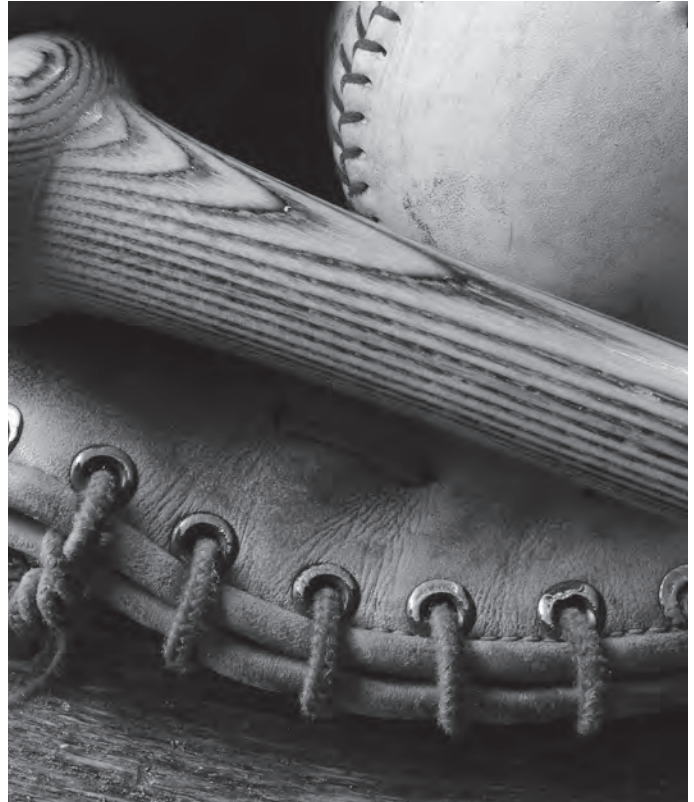
Sixty-four thousand cheering fans filled the Big A stadium in Southern California in October 1986, when Angels relief pitcher Donnie Moore trotted out to the mound to put away the Boston Red Sox in the American League Championship Series. The score was 5-4, top of the ninth, Angels ahead. Just one more out and California would be headed to the World Series.

Moore seemed up to the task: The year before, he had saved 31 games, earning him a spot on the Major League Baseball All-Star team. The Angels rewarded him with a \$3 million, three-year contract, equivalent to more than \$6.5 million today, adjusted for inflation. Moore bought his wife a Mercedes and also purchased a fancy house in the Anaheim Hills. And continued to pitch despite injuries.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1986 season, Moore saved 21 games for the Angels while enduring a throbbing right shoulder and a strain in his ribcage, which later turned out to be a bone spur near his spinal cord. He took a nerve blocker for his ribcage injury, cortisone for his shoulder and other medications for the migraines he had recently started to experience. Nevertheless, he seemed to have the right attitude to handle the pressure of Major League Baseball. In an interview before the game, Moore told a reporter: "The job I do is not easy, but I thrive on it. I can handle failure. That's one thing most people have a hard time doing. If you can go out and take all the glory, then the days you're a goat you've got to handle that, too."<sup>2</sup>

It turned out that Moore would have more difficulty handling failure than he envisioned. One strike away from an Angels win, Dave Henderson hit the ball over the left-field wall and skipped around the bases to home plate. That brought the score to 6-5, Boston's favor. Despite a game that lasted almost four hours, Boston won in the 11th inning. Moreover, the Angels' fate was sealed that day: They lost the next two games: 10-4 and 8-1.<sup>3</sup>

Moore couldn't forget what had happened that sunny October afternoon. A year later, he confessed: "More than likely, I'll think about it until the day I die."<sup>4</sup>



Two years later, Moore shot himself with a .45 revolver, having already unloaded three shots into his wife's body. Amazingly, she was able to walk out of the hospital afterward. "He could not live with himself after Henderson hit the home run," his agent said. "He kept blaming himself. That home run killed him."<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT DOES MEMORY HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

There were certainly extenuating circumstances in Donnie Moore's case, such as his being the only African-American on the Angels team. Fans booed him afterward when he ran out onto the field. Still, he had struck out 400 major league hitters during a 10-year career and saved 85 games. Yet he continued to fixate on the loss he suffered on Oct. 12, 1986.<sup>6</sup>

Other baseball players have survived ignominious losses and persevered. Brooklyn Dodgers relief pitcher Ralph Branca, for example, surrendered a home run in 1951, also in the top of the ninth, which allowed the New York Giants to win the pennant. The pitch he lobbed became known as "The Shot Heard Round the World."<sup>7</sup>

Afterward Branca asked his family priest why this had happened to him, and was able to accept the answer: "Because God knows your faith is strong enough to handle it."<sup>8</sup> Branca went on to marry the daughter of a family that owned part of the Dodgers franchise, run the Baseball Assistance Team for 17 years,

compete successfully on 17 segments of the game show *Concentration*, be a pallbearer at Jackie Robinson’s funeral, and write a memoir. He, too, had suffered many physical injuries.

In the end, “everything we are is everything we were,” opines science writer Luke Dittrich.<sup>9</sup> Scientists Nikolay Vadimovich Kukushkin and Thomas James Carew explain why this is so: Neurons in our brain collectively retain information from the past, making it accessible for future planning. Indeed, the whole purpose of memory may be to help us adjust our behavior in the future.<sup>10</sup> “Memory researcher Daniel Schacter and his colleagues put it this way: One “remembers the past to imagine the future.”<sup>11</sup>

In short, if we dwell on negative memories, that’s the future we’ll know.

### HOW RELIABLE IS MEMORY?

Have you ever looked for your glasses, with no idea of where you put them? Forgotten where you parked your car in a huge shopping mall? Spaced on what someone’s name was or had a word on the tip of your tongue, yet been unable to retrieve it? These are common memory foibles, says Schacter in *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*.

Others include:

- Incorporation of misinformation into memory due to leading questions or deception
- Retrospective distortions produced by current knowledge and beliefs, such as forgetting positive experiences with a partner after the romance sours
- Persistence—unwanted recollections that people can’t forget—such as the unrelenting, intrusive memories Moore experienced
- Attributing memories to the wrong sources
- Believing we have seen or heard something we haven’t<sup>12</sup>

Memories can be re-conceptualized, though, just as Branca’s may have been after his priest told him that God knew his faith was strong enough to handle losing the pennant. Maybe Branca experienced his faith more profoundly and felt God nearer to him. Perhaps his faith helped him to undertake new challenges with more confidence.

### HOW CAN YOUR MEMORIES HELP YOU CREATE THE FUTURE YOU DESIRE?

If our options for the future depend upon our memories, and they are often faulty, we can retouch the memories we have. You see, our memories change every time they’re recalled. It’s like editing a story on your MacBook Air: Each time you add or

subtract a sentence, the storyline can morph in a surprising way. Similarly, memories can be transformed by retelling your story in a different way.<sup>13</sup>

“Your memory is who you are now,” observes neuroscientist Daniela Schiller. But “if you tell your story differently, the emotions that are elicited will also differ. An altered story is an altered identity.”<sup>14</sup>

In that vein, I ask you to consider one negative memory that might be holding you back. Is it something one of your parents said to you as you were growing up? Or something a teacher said? Possibly a mishap you experienced for which you blamed yourself?

If you had the strength to handle it, as Branca’s priest claimed he did, what way would you change your story? What one thing would you accomplish? Write to me at [Docktor@DoreenStern.com](mailto:Docktor@DoreenStern.com) and let me know. ■



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### ENDNOTES

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