MEMORY DIALOGUE

TO PRESERVE MEMORIES
WE HAVE TO SHARE THEM

“That may or may not have existed.

But what is important is the connection.”
Dedicated to my grandmother, Gertrud, and in memory of my grandfather, Klaus.
People, with whom we spend time, become witnesses of our life. If two people share an experience, both keep their very own memory of this experience. These memories are subjectively different – yet, both are each other’s mutual reassurance that this experience did actually happen. If the relationship ceases, for any reason, the memories become isolated from one another. The reassurance disappears, and it may feel as if the experience didn’t take place.
INTRODUCTION
This study aims to investigate the experience of artefact-based memory sharing, focusing on the multi-perspectiveness of different memories as a result of different experiences on the same subject. Participants were asked to create a physical or digital record of their memory about a specific experience they had together, share it, and reflect on their process of sharing.

QUESTIONS
Questions of interest included: What experiences would people want to share with each other? Would potentially problematic memories be shared or mainly “beautiful” ones? What would it be like to create an artefact representing a memory, to be shared with the person one had the original experience with? How would they want to share their memories? What would it be like for them to have someone else’s version of a memory presented to them in this way? How would another’s memories of an experience affect the way an individual remembers it themselves? How might different form factors of the
mediating device / technology influence the experience? How would memories of a shared experience, expressed by another person, be valued? Would they be accepted unquestioningly, or questioned? Would they appear authentic and credible?

**SHARED MEMORY**

Different aspects towards shared memories seem to be estimable and might emerge during the study:

**Range:** Some individuals might want to share memories only with themselves, others with a close friend, a group or a whole community.

**Multi-perspectivity:** As individuals have different experiences with a person or a situation, they also have different memories linked to that person or situation.

**Polysemy:** The same object might carry diverse meanings for different people, particularly in the context of artefact-based memory sharing as it is practiced in this study.

**Priority:** What is important to one person, might be less important to another person. Different people remember different details of an experience.

**Uncertainty:** The level of recall or confidence of subject’s memory may vary.

**Enhancement:** Different individual memories may enhance each other’s memory retrospectively. Details that subjects might have forgotten or misremembered would be filled out through the process of sharing.

**Individuality:** Memories are personal and unique. They are specific towards a certain person, situation, or place.

**Release:** An artefact representing a memory may stay sealed for a certain time before it is opened; or it may be accessible only during certain times.

**Shift:** Perceptions of experiences may shift over time, for example due to changes in relationships between people.

Initially, cultural probes were distributed to participants to introduce the topic and to initiate the process of recording and sharing a memory. Participants were interviewed individually before exchanging their created artefact, then interviewed again when face-to-face with the other participant. Individual and shared interviews resulted in a rich source of material for helping understand the memory sharing practices that participants engaged in.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study, investigating the experience of artefact-based memory sharing, combines Research through Design and Research for Design: it aims for a contribution to knowledge as well as the creation of design artefacts.


Interviews were audio-taped and pictures were taken of all participants both individually and during the exchange of artefacts in order to build a rich record of the study.

**WHAT YOU SEE HERE**

For this study it was crucial to observe the process of individuals choosing, recording and sharing an experience with another, and for that experience to be personally meaningful. In order to encourage selection without filtering, participants have been reassured that highly personal aspects of content they have shared would not be published. In this document, therefore, recorded memories are intentionally not shown in detail and the nature of the artefacts that each subject created has been obscured. Instead, content focuses primarily on the subject’s reflections on the impact, process and outcomes of sharing with others.
“Memory is dialogic and arises not only from direct experience but from the intercourse of many minds.”

Oliver Sacks, 2013
THE PILOT

DAVID DESIGNER, 33, IRELAND

AND BOB DESIGNER, 32, IRELAND

ARE FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES, AND FLATMATES

CHosen MEMORY: 10 YEARS AGO
“I don’t think that it’s necessary that your memories are the truth, you know, that’s not the point of communicating memories. You know the phrase: ‘Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.’ It’s two developed narratives that may or may not have existed. But what is important is the connection.”
“When I’m taking photos in particular, I don’t think of them as generating memories at the time. Even though that’s very much what they tend to be as time goes by. It’s just like what it is and then they become something later as time goes by.”
“Even negative memories tend to take in a positive stand over time when people remember them, I feel. They got better, fonder memories from the past when they did, when they were in the past.

I think that’s a universal thing actually. We are always rushing to get out of the present, but have fond memories in the past. So it’s kind of a strange paradox.”
“The way we do it, more often, is we make a reference to something, rather than sit down and talk about a time. Because we are so familiar with each other. It’s not like: now we are catching up.

So the concept of reminiscing kind of seems to me like that’s the whole process. That’s the event. That night. Reminisce time.” – David

“I think, as well, probably friends that don’t see each other as much, tend to reminisce more.” – Bob
It's a two way process communication. You have to imagine your user, your customer at the end (laughs). You have to imagine what they like before you can probably engage with them. It's an interesting concept, where I'm remembering memories but in the context of another person's memory as well. So there is an influence there about the things I'm choosing to remember of creating some image of yourself.
D: “To think about putting two things together, creates something new, that didn’t exist before. I think that artefact would remind us of this moment instead of that one (the original memory).”

B: “But even now the memory is been changed. Because we talked about it now.”
D: “But yeah, true... No, probably not changed.”
B: “Not changed, just... in 10 years time again and we’ll remember 10 years ago from now... We’ll also say... remember when Stephanie was there and she did the thing with us.”

B: “It’s funny, that they are both kind of the same thing.”
“Now I wonder if this event now of recalling and focussing on that specific event will then in future affect my recollection of that same event.”
ALEX, MECHANICAL ENGINEER, 27, FROM GREECE

AND DILEN, MECHATRONICS ENGINEER, 30, FROM MAURITIUS

ARE COLLEAGUES AND FRIENDS

CHosen MEMORY: 3 MONTHS AGO
“So, it was 
memory on the 
memory. 

Because if you think about it, the incident itself was not that strong as the thoughts, that were stiring inside in each and one of us and we shared the emotion. So actually Dilen proposed this memory, because we understand, that this is a milestone to our friendship. And that first of all we want to see what the other one was thinking about it. And also because it’s something, that we treasure and we want to keep it as alive as much as possible.”

Motivation for the chosen memory
“It’s a *mixed feeling* because we were all a bit sad and happy, so it’s a mixed feeling.”
D: “There is a stronger bonding to know, what we actually felt. Because we didn’t talk much about it after...”

A: “Never.”

D: “Yeah, not at all.”

A: “I think we buried it a bit as well. ( .. ) We felt awkward, I think. Because everybody felt exposed. So he didn’t want to bring it up because he was thinking about his part of the story and how he was exposed as well.

D: “Yeah. Because it was a deep experience. So we never talked about it. Until today...”

“...we never took a picture and there were things that I was not sure if I was imagining them or if they actually happened." – Alex

So it was interesting because with that process we actually can tune, also get both versions and also distinguish what’s imaginary and inside our brains and what is actually happening.” – Alex
“You can actually see it in detail when you tune back in that moment. You don’t think about these things every day. But I guess, because it’s meaningful you actually remember a lot of things in detail.

That’s what I felt. And you live this moment like how you are feeling, and it comes back naturally.”
“It’s amazing, because when you read for example text that is not written by you but about the memory that you have – you have no control of what’s in. And you have to face the fact – that it’s actually true.

Because, as Dilen said, you have memories coming back, but from a different perspective. And it’s quite good because sometimes we… I’m very self-centered, so I’m missing things.”

“It’s not about you. I think everyone is self-centered. And then, when you share it, or read it, you see different things. It’s not self-centered, it’s…”

“…normal.”
“Yeah!”
“Thanks.” (laughing)
“-pause
and rethink
where we
are going.”

From: Diagarajen
Sent: 09 August 2015 15:58
To: Alexandros
Subject: Lisbon

Fado night in Lisbon

There was a lot of purpose at the authentic Portuguese restaurant. When we started singing and roasting on the grill, Alex started to talk about his past experiences. We devoured grilled cod and sardines, and his conversation started off intense but was struggling along. We were heading towards the first time we had reached our destination. We were reaching our future plans. We are going.
LUDOVICA MATHEMATICIAN, 26, FROM ITALY
AND CHRISTOPH ENGINEER, 31, FROM GERMANY
ARE FLATMATES AND NOW FRIENDS AS WELL
CHOOSE MEMORY: 1 MONTH AGO
“I was thinking about it initially. Because we took quite a lot of pictures. But then I got away from that because I wanted to only remember things which I have in my mind rather than using other things.”

How was your process of reminiscence? Did you use any media, social networks etc. to “refresh” your memory?
“I like it a lot. Anytime I leave, I just print photos of me and my friends and maybe behind the photo I write something. It’s like: remember this moment together and all the moments. So I really enjoy to give someone something related with our past together. I think I feel that a lot when I’m leaving, or I know it’s not for a long time. And it’s the same for Chris, since I’m leaving at the end of the month.”

What is it like to create a record of your memory to be experienced by the person you had the original experience with?
What participants mentioned.
What kind of memories do you share?

With whom do you usually share memories?

**GOOD TIMES**

"With people that I don’t know that well and in a social scenario, usually, I share information mostly. **THINGS I’VE DONE, WHERE I’VE BEEN.** When it’s with some friends of mine, and I have something that was very emotionally intense than I share **EMOTIONS.**"

**TRAVEL STORIES**

"**EVENTS** that happened, what people said, what people did."

**FUN(NY) MEMORIES**

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**CLOSE FRIENDS**

- People I meet
- Husband
- Wife
- Boyfriend
- Girlfriend
- Mother
- Father
- Children
- Friends that live nearby

**FAMILY**

- Father
- Husband
- Wife
- Boyfriend
- Girlfriend
- Children
- Mother
How do you share memories at present?

FACE TO FACE
- Campfire
- Projector

FACEBOOK
- Skype
- WhatsApp
- Dropbox
- E-Mail

analog | digital

What is your motivation for sharing memories?

As a CONNECTION with people
It FEELS GOOD
To look cool
To feel more like family, even with friends
To say: Hey I’m still alive!

"If it’s in a social context, it makes you FEEL GOOD, because you show that you have an experience on something. Also, you feel, by putting all your experiences or your memories in a pool, you LEARN stuff from others as well. And also you give INCENTIVE for someone else to share as well. In a more friendly slash personal context it’s about SHARING THE LOAD as well. And SEEKING ADVISE."

- To feel more like family, even with friends
- To say: Hey I’m still alive!
“Yeah, it’s a very short tiny event but it was a good GRINDING POINT in both our friendship and carriers stroke life, that period.”

“I think that day was the most like, how do you say, INTENSE, in terms of, it was more friend if compared to just hanging around.”

“I think, normally I don’t care about food so much. But right now I think there is this culture of caring a lot about food. I guess this is know-worthy because I felt like I had a GLIMPSE TO THAT part of that culture by having this really good meal.”

“We were new to this city, and we saw: ‘HEY, you can have fun in Cambridge as well’.”

“It meant something to me... that kind of level of SOUNDNESS.”

“The memory we chose was actually the MOST INTIMATE MEMORY we have. (...) It was that memory actually and that experience together that brought us CLOSER.”

“It’s a good story. It was a BONDING MOMENT. (...) A thing I can joke about later.”

“It was a fresh start of a new phase of life for me... I think it was the very SIGNIFICANT MOMENT that we can share together.”

What is the value of this chosen memory for you?
The **MORE** engineer the **SHORTER** the interview.

43 min  vs  9 min
Designer  vs  Mechatronics Engineer
C: “I like the idea with the puzzle and the analogy to that day.”
L: “There is kind of the same match of photos. There is a pineapple, there is a pineapple. This is the Tate, that was in the Tate...”
C: “The pictures are different but it still says the same thing.”

L: “You don’t have Tom Cruise.”
C: “Yeah, I was trying to focus on really important people.” (laughing)

L: “Oooh!”
C: “He was just too small.”
c: “Not really.”

L: “I would say: yes.”

C: “Really? Nothing was planned, right?”

L: “Yeah, but it was so good. On the same day I was thinking: Oh, I’m gonna remember this.”

When you had the experience, did you already know, that it would be meaningful and memorable for you?
EYAL ELECTRICAL ENGINEER, 25, FROM ISRAEL,
AND LONG RECOVERING COGNITIVE SCIENTIST, 27, FROM THE UNITED STATES
ARE INTERNS AT MSR
CHosen MEMORY: 1 MONTH AGO
“I’m not very picky on who I share memories with. Depends on the memory...
Part of it to look cool, part of it to actually share.
’Cause I mean it’s my stories and I kind of like them. I kind of want people to experience also through my stories. I don’t know if they do.”

Motivation for sharing memories
“Long has such a...
It’s like a nice short story.”

“Hm. I mean, what’s distorting, right?
It’s all about distorting.

Memories are all about distorting, you know.”

“But that’s probably bad in a way because this distorts it, right?”
“This is a little bit cynical but I feel like oftentimes people bring up memories as a way of showing off and this is kind of why I don’t post to social media and I’m actually very sceptical of pictures. Like ‘I’m a happy person’ because there is a lot of Facebook photos depicting me doing happy stuff. So it’s like a way of creating some image of yourself. So if anything it might be like a little bit of that. ‘Oh look at this, I got this cool memory of me.’ Yeah.”

I feel like nowadays we live in this age where people take pictures as a way of not even documenting their lives but actually constituting their lives.

Motivation for sharing the chosen memory...
MACRAE ARCHITECT, 52, FROM CANADA
AND YULIA PSYCHOLOGIST, 43, FROM TATARSTAN
ARE A MARRIED COUPLE
CHOSEN MEMORY: 3 YEARS AGO
“I think it’s social bonds that we build with people. And in the case of somebody that you don’t see that often like my really old friend... we talk about things that are new in our lives but we always come back to at least a few old memories as well.

I think it helps to frame existence, almost.”
M: “’Cause I thought, I kind of pushed my way into your trip.”

Y: “No, I made you an offer, I remember it. And it was important, what you would say to me. For me it was important.”

M: “In my story I basically invited myself along for your trip and you said that you invited me, which is very nice actually.”

Y: “I invited you, dear, I remember it...”
M: “And I think it’s interesting that you made the comment about this art gallery.”
Y: “It was a strong feeling.”
M: “I remember it now afterwards. I had forgotten about that.”
Y: “Really?”
M: “Yeah.”
Y: “I nearly cried. How could you forget?”

M: “No... yeah... ’cause what happened when we were on our way up, we were going through some little town, and we pulled up behind some big truck. We thought it just stopped at a light. And all of a sudden it started backing up. And it was a big, big lorry and he couldn’t see us. And I’m driving a new motorcycle that had different controls than mine, and I was trying to find the horn. And in the meantime I was like this, going backwards as fast as I could. There was this big truck coming towards us. And I managed to get the horn just at the last minute and then the guy stopped.”
Y: “I even don’t remember it. I remember that you were nervous. That’s all.”
M: “My heart was going bunk bunk bunk bunk. Don’t you remember?”
Y: “Absolutely not.”
“In a way I think it’s really sweet that she doesn’t remember the big dangerous moment, where we nearly died.”
“I think, for a couple that has some problems, this is a good therapy.
I think... it’s very, very helpful for family history... To share it.
It makes people more close to each other. And I think this is the best result of this process.”
MARCO MATHEMATICIAN, 25, FROM ITALY
AND MAX ENGINEER, 28, FROM ITALY
ARE FRIENDS
CHosen MEMORY: 1 1/2 MONTH AGO
“It’s a way of keeping connected with a person, especially when you share things of your own life. So by giving and receiving a memory, which you normally don’t have because of the distance. And when you are close and you share memories, it’s a way to keep the relationship fun and genuine, I guess.”
“As I’m abroad... not to lose contact with my friends. That’s one motivation.
So I’m talking now about me sharing memories with friends back in Italy.

As I’m studying in Denmark I haven’t been there for three years. So it’s a way to say: Hey I’m still alive!
And then... just to create a group. I think it’s nice to share memories, to feel more like family, even with friends.”

Motivation for sharing memories
“It’s very energetic. I can feel his smile while typing.” — Max

“When I saw this drawing, I actually could remember the whole day and also compare to what I wrote.” — Marco
“He has a different perspective. I mean for him it was the day he met Dori.”
"I didn’t remember this: it was a fight between two drunk people. I remember it clearly now but when I was writing it... no."

– Marco

“We biked home while the sun was about to rise. I kind of skipped the going home part. How did we even get back home?”

– Max

Things forgotten
INSIGHTS

GENERAL

12 participants (6 pairs) took part in the study and 18 interviews were conducted in total. The following are key insights that emerge from these discussions:

Participants share memories usually when they see each other face to face and on Facebook. Since many of the subjects are geographically distributed from their friends, digital ways of sharing stories, pictures, and videos were particularly emphasised, including Skype, Dropbox, E-Mail and WhatsApp: “I have several groups with people – one with my classmates from the high school, one with my close friends, one with my basketball team I was playing with.”

Participants share many personal experiences including good times, funny memories, travel, “events, that happened, what people said, what people did.” One participant said: “With people that I don’t know that well, and in a social scenario, usually I share information mostly, things I’ve done, where I’ve been. When it’s with some friends of mine, and I have something that was very emotionally intense, than I share emotions.” Sharing sad memories was not mentioned and if raised by the interviewer, dismissed.

Photography was often mentioned as a favourite way of sharing memories with one another. “Anytime I leave, I just print photos of me and my friends and maybe behind the photo I write something. It’s like, remember this moment together and all the moments: So I really enjoy to give someone something related with our past together. I think I feel that a lot when I’m leaving or I know it’s not for a long time.”

Participants mostly share memories with family, life partners and close friends or to help someone out with a memory that refers to a similar experience. People decide what memory, and to what depth they share, depending on the audience. People who see each other often tend to reminisce in a more casual way.

The main motivation for sharing memories is to establish a connection with people and because it feels good. One participant distinguished his motivations for sharing memories: “If it’s in a social context it makes you feel good because you show that you have an experience on something. Also, you feel by putting all your experiences or your memories in a pool, you learn stuff from others as well. And also you give incentive for someone else to share as well. In a more friendly slash personal context it’s about sharing the load as well. And seeking advice.” Another motivation mentioned by a participant was “to look cool”.

CHOOSING

Participants did mostly choose positive memories, although two participants shared a memory with mixed feelings. Remarkably, all shared memories were described as “bonding experiences”. Participants emphasized this by describing the chosen memory as “a grinding point”, “intimate”, “intense” or “significant”. One participant commented: “The memory we chose was actually the most intimate memory we have (...) It was that memory actually and that experience together that brought us closer.”

The motivation to share the chosen memory with a selected person was mostly to get a different perspective on the experience, to “keep it alive” or to reconstruct the remembered event. Interestingly, 7 participants commented that they knew at the moment when the experience took place that it would be memorable to them in the future.

CREATING

Participants created artefacts in a range of media, both physical and digital. In total there were 7 physical artefacts (1 3D-model, 2 papers with pictures on, 1 handwritten note, 1 printout of text, 1 puzzle, 1 drawing) and 7 digital artefacts (5 written documents, 1 audio, 1 video). To create their artefact representing a memory most participants reminisced using only their own memory: “I have it here in my mind. Just through like internal pictures if you can call it so, and feelings I guess. No media.” A few participants looked through their pictures, e-mails, websites or WhatsApp to refresh their memory, even if the experience was a month ago: “I looked on our conversation on WhatsApp of the day to see how we started the day.”

Participants predominantly chose a form for their artefact that was most comfortable for them to create. One said for example: “I guess writing it down is like the easiest for me.” Besides the comfort other aspects were considered as well: “I wanted to do something that was appropriate to what the thing was, that we originally made together.”
One participant did decide to choose a form that was unusual for them: “I guess since I’m working with texts and words for so long, I just decided to have a picture, because it was kind of refreshing and nice to think in pictures instead of words.” When it comes to analog vs digital: “I didn’t handwrite it because my handwriting is terrible. First of all. Second, the online document actually, I can have a copy, just in case I forget. And the video was an addendum... to make it a little more personal, I think.”

Most participants only marginally considered the other person in their pairing when planning what form their artefact should take: “I guess, I just wrote it more for myself in a way.” / “I think I’ve done it in a more spontaneous way without thinking. So now that I think about it... he will not understand anything of that picture.” (Note that the “he” referenced here actually did understand the picture quite well.)

4 of the participants did however reflect on the role of the other person in the creation of their artefact: “The text I’m writing, even though it’s just my thoughts pouring into the text, surely is being affected by my relationship with him as a result to be the format in the way I’m writing and the way I’m expressing myself, it’s directed to him, is affected by our relationship and him.”

Asked if there were facets of the relationship with the other person that surfaced in the created artefact, one participant answered: “Well every single detail. So I understand what he likes. A lot of decisions when I put this together were just about you, know, keep it minimal, keep it kind of pure to the original idea.” Another one said: “I think the puzzle […] he loves games. […] So I know he loves to do something. So it was kind of a game for him.”

The shared experiences in the study ranged from 1 month to 10 years in the past this seemed to have little impact when it came to similarities or differences between participant’s recall. Some participants reflected on how this process of recalling and sharing the memory with another would influence the recollection of the same experience later. Overall, participants found the experience of the memory sharing process to be a positive one.

Some were very similar, like a puzzle of pictures from one subject and a collage of pictures from another. In some cases the artefact would become more a conversation starter than a stand-alone record. This was especially the case when a physical object was created, as it was harder to “read” than a written document. These items are subtle in what they imply about the shared memory and contain no inherent chronology about it. Compared to memoirs and diaries they are not composed linguistically and therefore not directly readable by others. How a received artefact is interpreted, then, depends on many things, including the closeness of the relationship between participants or the specificity of the chosen memory.

The process shown in “Memory Dialogue” also has value as a tool for uncovering and reflecting different memories from multiple participants of the same experience. While it might set up tensions over things that had been forgotten about or remembered differently, overall it can be a useful vehicle to share cherished memories, as well as those that are complex, tricky or buried. As one participant, a psychologist by training, pointed out, the process could be used to explore family history or as a form of therapy. It might help to playfully create a way to talk about things that are ordinarily hard to discuss.

As a next step it would be interesting to explore how this process of artefact-based memory sharing could be developed without the need of facilitation by a third person. It may also be interesting to explore a broader space for different form factors as well as how technology might influence the experience. How might a person’s artefact combine both physical and digital elements? Could it be portable, carried with the subject, as a mobile memory or should it be kept in a private place?

SHARING

After exchanging artefacts participants would reflect on what they had received before starting the joint discussion. Participants usually felt the need to immediately discuss their thoughts. Often they had similar feelings towards the memory as the other subject. When reflecting on the received artefact they would recall details that the other subject forgot or misremembered: B: “These are the images that you did for me. I remember that night you went home and...” D: “What! Really?” B: “You don’t remember them? You made them [...]” D: “No you must have done those.” B: “No you did them. You did all that.” D: “What was I thinking... I didn’t know about...”

Besides differences in details some participants had different focuses in their recollection. In one case, for example, priorities were evidently different: one participant couldn’t remember a dangerous situation that had occurred for both during the period of their shared memory. Both remembered significantly different details of the experience that they had had together.

Participants observed how their individual memories enhanced that of the other, and vice versa: “It does enhance. There is a stronger bonding to know what we actually felt.” Another said: “For me it does fill in a logic of how we ended up going to a restaurant that had only bad reviews.” Sometimes one had a different scope than the other: “It had in perspective all three of us, while my version had only us two.”

Although the possibilities of a joint artefact created by both participants was considered, but dismissed as potentially problematic. Some participants could imagine a record that would combine elements of their individual records, but most participants didn’t wish for a joint item: “I personally feel that it’s better that they stand by themselves... Because it should be each person’s perspective on things. It doesn’t necessarily have to be merged to be more authentic” or “because it’s a new thing that you are putting together, a new event, a new piece of creativity. To think about putting two things together creates something new, that didn’t exist before. I think that artifact would remind us of this moment instead of that one (the original memory).”

COMBINING

The possibility of a joint artefact created by both participants was considered, but dismissed as potentially problematic. Some participants could imagine a record that would combine elements of their individual records, but most participants didn’t wish for a joint item: “I personally feel that it’s better that they stand by themselves... Because it should be each person’s perspective on things. It doesn’t necessarily have to be merged to be more authentic” or “because it’s a new thing that you are putting together, a new event, a new piece of creativity. To think about putting two things together creates something new, that didn’t exist before. I think that artifact would remind us of this moment instead of that one (the original memory).”

CONCLUSION

Exploring artefact-based memory sharing led to reflect on many things, both general as well as specific. Hopefully, insights outlined earlier are of interest to others when designing applications or services for sharing memories.
“You know, I’m jealous of your ability to be sentimental about the past.

I’m not able to do that. I remember things as they were.”

Trudy, Mad Men
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