We all try to remember certain things in our daily lives: telephone numbers, email addresses, facts that we learn in class, important tasks. But did you know that people once had great respect\(^1\) for memory?

People began to value memory as a skill about 2,500 years ago. That’s when the poet Simonides of Ceos discovered a powerful technique known as the loci\(^2\) method. Simonides realized that it’s easier to remember places and locations than it is to remember lists of names, for example. According to the loci method, if you think of a very familiar place, and visualize certain things in that place, you can keep those things in your memory for a long time.

Simonides called this imagined place a “memory palace.” Your memory palace can be any place that you know well, such as your home or your school. To use the loci method to remember a list of tasks, for example, visualize yourself walking through your house. Imagine yourself doing each task in a different room. Later, when you want to remember your list of tasks, visualize yourself walking through your house again. You will remember your list of tasks as you see yourself performing each one.

Nearly 2,000 years later, a man in 15th-century Italy named Peter of Ravenna used the loci method to memorize books and poems. He memorized religious texts, all of the laws of the time, 200 speeches, and 1,000 poems. By using the loci method, he was able to reread books stored in the “memory palaces” of his mind. “When I [travel] I can truly say I carry everything I own with me,” he wrote.

\(^1\) If you respect, or have respect for, something or someone, you have a very high opinion of it or them.

\(^2\) Loci is the plural form of the Latin noun locus, meaning “place.”
When Simonides and Peter of Ravenna were alive, books and pens were not widely available for people to write notes with, so people had to remember what they learned. Mary Carruthers is the author of *The Book of Memory*, a study of the role of memory techniques in the past. She writes, “Ancient and medieval people reserved their awe for memory.” In other words, these people thought that a genius was a person with excellent memory. They considered memory to be an art and a great virtue because a person with a good memory could turn external knowledge into internal knowledge.

After Simonides’ discovery of the loci method, others continued to develop the art of memory. Memorization gained a complex set of rules and instructions. Students of memory learned what to remember and techniques for how to remember it. In fact, there are long traditions of memory training in many parts of the world. In some cultures, memorization of religious texts is considered a great achievement; many other societies value storytellers who can retell myths and folktale stories from the past.

But over the past millennium, many things have changed. We’ve gradually replaced our internal memory with external memory. We’ve invented technological crutches so we don’t have to store information in our brains. We have photographs to record our experiences, calendars to keep track of our schedules, books (and now the Internet) to store our collective knowledge, and note pads—or iPads—for our ideas. By using these crutches, we don’t have to remember anything anymore. When we want to know something, we look it up. We’ve gone from remembering everything to remembering very little. How does this affect us and our society? Did we lose an important skill?

Adapted from “Remember This” by Joshua Foer, *National Geographic Magazine*, Nov 2007

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* Medieval refers to the period of European history between approximately AD 500 and 1500.

* A virtue is a very good personal quality.

* A millennium is a period of one thousand years.

* A crutch is something that someone depends on for support or help.