

Three Patch Podcast – Episode 1

Birthdays are Boring

January 6, 2013

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243 Types of Tobacco Ash: Mind Palaces

Consulting Fan: Methleigh

- The secrets of mind palaces (and memorizing card decks to amaze yourself and your friends)
- Citations: [The Art of Memory](#) by Frances Yates and [Sal Piacente](#)
- See [243 Types of Tobacco Ash: Further Information](#) for additional content

(Music intro)

Sherlock: *All that matters to me is the work. Without that, my brain rots!*

(Music fades)

Denzil: Welcome to 243 Types of Tobacco Ash: Sherlockian Skills.

My name is Methleigh, and I will be your host for this area of our show. In fandom, I write about the ideas in Sherlock Holmes. I like to work to solve the Final Problem, as the show so nicely frames it. In addition, I cosplay Sherlock, and I am keenly interested in Sherlock's skills.

Today I am going to focus on the Mind Palace. I will tell you a little about the context in which I encountered this wonderful thing, then its origin, and then I will explain how you may construct your very own, using examples from mine.

The Mind Palace! Such attractive words conjuring intriguing pictures. In Hound of the Baskervilles, Sherlock tells John and Dr. Stapleton that he needs to go to his Mind Palace. He then searches through various words and related words and accompanying ideas. John describes it as "...a memory technique. It doesn't have to be an actual place. The way it works, you put

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information there, and theoretically you'll never forget it, you just have to find your way back to it."

Dr. Stapleton says, "So this imaginary place could be anything? A house, a street, whatever? But he said 'palace.' He called it a palace."

John answers, "Yes well, he would, wouldn't he?"

But that is the actual name! It is a Mind Palace, also called a Memory Palace! A palace! Upon Googling it, I see it is attributed to Simonides of Ceos in the fifth or sixth century BC, which information is taken from a book called *The Art of Memory* [<http://ebookbrowse.com/yates-the-art-of-memory-pdf-d203046783>] by Frances Yates, written in 1966.

How happy I was to see they were using it in the show! So many things are wonderful about Sherlock, but I get extra joy from the small references to things that already have a special status for me.

In another part of my life I dabble in prestidigitation, cards, and parlour magic. This is the context in which I first encountered the Mind Palace. We had a lecture by a casino protection expert from New York named Sal Piacente [http://www.xellentlectureseries.com/sal_piacente_magic.html]. One of the things at which he excels, along with 3-card-Monte, is memorising decks of cards, which is very useful indeed for magicians. There is a quote from a magician named Cardini, which I always use for such examples of what I would call true magic. He says, in paraphrase, that real magic is that which is more astonishing when you know how it is done than it was when you were mystified.

In the show Sherlock says to Sebastian, "It's not a trick" about his analysis of people by observation, and the Mind Palace is also one of those truly magical things. So many of the things Sherlock does are like this. It is not a trick. No, it is better and more magical still. And it is something one may learn!

Sal Piacente uses his Mind Palace to memorise a deck of cards, among other things, and he can do it in less than a minute using this technique. I've seen him. So, here is his Mind Palace construction and technique, and I will give you examples from the palace I built.

The first thing you need to do is to choose a place that you know very well. After that you memorise every element of the place and learn to walk through it looking at all the things it contains. John and Dr. Stapleton are right. It could be a house, a street, a country path, a place of work, a school, a bus route. The important thing is that you know it well enough to be able to picture the things it holds and that it has a stable route over which you can travel. You can even construct your own building, a palace perhaps, if you can recall it in such elaborate and specific detail that you know it perfectly and can imagine walking through it.

I use my grandmother's house, which I have always tried to remember after she passed away because she was special to me, and because it was magical in itself. It was like a museum.

I begin at the front gate with the hedge and its sticky seed pods with their distinctive tang. Then I move to the gate itself, with its cold iron and the dull clang as it closes. Then the cracked paving stone with the line and the hint of moss at the edges of the crack. Then a pine cone on the grass, then the big pine to the left of the house, even the lowest branches too high for easy

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climbing, the trunk also sticky with sap. Then the sight of the basement window of my uncle's chemistry laboratory, the door to which is rarely opened so the window has dust in the upper left corner. It looks like a spiderweb at a glance, but it is just dust on the glass, and I can imagine how the old dust smells and how it feels, soft and grainy but less granular than I would expect.

One of the great things about concentrating on the house and looking carefully at the various elements and items is that they appear more clear and detailed than I had expected to remember them. If I look at the stairs carefully I can see the woodgrain and the nails, the way the lip of the step is constructed, and things to which I would never otherwise have given thought. It is like magic in itself.

After you have fixed the elements you have chosen in your mind, you must learn to move through your chosen place, encountering the remembered or conjured objects in exactly the same order. This takes some time, diligence, and concentration, but another wonderful thing about the Mind Palace is that you do not need anything at all but your own mind, not even a pencil.

First the hedge, then the gate, then the paving stone, then the pinecone, then the tree. For a deck of cards you need at least 52 items of focus. As well as a Mind Palace, or a Memory Palace, this is also apparently called the 'Method of Loci' [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Method_of_loci] so I will call these items 'loci' also.

Once you have set the loci, you can begin to use your Palace for memorisation. You do this by mentally placing elements you want to remember on the loci. You might, for instance, place a mental picture of a Knave of Spades on the hedge, a Nine of Hearts on the lock of the gate, a Seven of Clubs on the cracked paving stone, and so forth. If you want to remember things in sequence, such as a deck of cards, or perhaps verses of an epic poem, or route on a map, you place the elements - the cards, or the verses, or the turns and landmarks - on your now intimately familiar loci. Thus your memories are stored.

To retrieve them, you walk through your Palace, looking at the loci, and on each one you will see the superimposed image you set there. This is what Sherlock, presumably, is doing alone in the laboratory in Hound of the Baskervilles. He is walking through his Mind Palace, looking at his loci to see if there are incidents of the word HOUND which he has set there, and looking at nearby loci for facts related to the word HOUND which he would have set there, or superimposed, at the same time.

The sense of smell is often cited as a trigger to recall memory. The reason that this technique works is that another such trigger is spatial relations. As you walk through your mind palace, contemplating your loci, which are fixed points in the virtually 3D world in your mind, these trigger the spatial relations between the things you have deliberately set over your loci.

You can also combine other memory tricks into the items you place on your loci. Going back to Sal Piacente and the cards, he recommended creating a visual image for each card that you can infallibly remember. He suggested combining the first letter of the suits - H, C, D, S with a rhyme for the name of the card. Thus one would have, perhaps Honey for the ace of hearts (H + 1) and a picture of Winnie the Pooh with a Honey Jar, or one could have a picture of a Cluedo set for the deuce of Clubs (C + 2.) And one could superimpose these pictures over the hedge, the lock of the gate, the cracked paving stone.

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The Mind Palace is a thing of beauty, exquisite and complex, and it is freely available to anyone, lying waiting just for you to create. Your very own Palace, within your very own Mind.

Thank you very much for listening. If you have any comments or questions, please feel free to email bored@three-patch.com. The email address is also available on our website.

Thank you very much.

(Music outro)

John: *This is your living, Sherlock. Not 240 different types of tobacco ash.*
Sherlock: 243!

(Music fades)

Transcription Team

Segment transcript beta and producer: Caroline

Contact

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Music

243 Types of Tobacco Ash: Camille Saint Saëns/ Performed by Kevin MacLeod, Danse Macabre: Danse Macabre – Violin Hook (get it [here](#))

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