Remember when…..

Memory is not like a recorder that we can rewind to give a precise replay of what happened. We have all heard about the unreliability of expert witness accounts of events. This unreliability occurs because memories are constructed, rather than replayed. The building materials of this construction include the actual events, but also include the feelings, other memories, interpretations of the event and our general worldview. All of these other variables affect the meaning with which we infuse the event. I often see couples in therapy argue over what “happened” that precipitated an argument – each giving their own unique “expert witness” account of what happened and who did what. I often tell them that since we don’t have a way of rewinding and seeing an actual video account of what happened, we shouldn’t waste time debating the specifies of what happened. Rather, the focus should be: What the interpretations of the event tell us about the patterns that each person feels is characteristic of their relationship. So, if a wife recalls that her husband behaved selfishly in a particular instance, he may argue that the facts of what happened, presenting his memory as evidence he wasn’t being selfish. Each person’s memory is affected by his or her view of the relationship; her recollection likely affected by the feeling that, in general, her husband exhibits selfish behavior. Whatever *actually* happened, her memory of the event was *constructed* with her general feelings and beliefs about her husband’s behavior. And this interpretation, or construction, of the event is what needs to be addressed in the relationship. Rather than focusing on the “evidence” of what occurred, therapy is the place where couple’s can address the more important relationship issues, such as what each person expects of the other in terms of give and take, self-interest vs. sacrifice, division of labor, thoughtfulness, etc. If those issues are examined, there is less need to debate memories and more proactive efforts to compromise about things like self-interest vs. sacrifice, etc. When shifts are made in these areas, and the relationship feels more “equal” to both, there will be a shift in interpretations and, most importantly, happier memories constructed with less negative feelings and beliefs.

Memory itself is an internal rumour. ~George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*