

Concentrate

[Steven Connor](#)

A talk given as part of *The Human Zoo*, BBC Radio 4, 5th March 2013. [[listen](#)]

Concentrate, I used all the time to be told when I was a child, and must often have told my own children the same thing. The idea is to bring together one's mental actions, the default condition of which is thought of as being scattered or dispersed, bringing them to the pinpoint focus of the sniper. It seems to require some effort to do this, the application of some tension – one of a large family of words that come from Latin *tendere*, to bend towards, or take aim at, the original idea seeming to be that of bending a bow.

And yet, there are some circumstances where this kind of concentration does not seem to work, and may even be counterproductive. I am trying to remember the name of an actor, say. If I strain at this task, pummelling my memory to yield up the answer, the result is an immaculate white wall of amnesia. No, what I must do is to conjure a kind of alert but relaxed daydream, in which I pretend to myself I no longer care about my agony of forgetfulness, in order precisely to precipitate the release of some shred or whiff of the elusive name – it's something to do with galloping, something to do with hamming it up – Michael Gambon! If I am facing the bowling, with four to get off the last ball, and concentrating, as I watch the demon blacksmith thundering up to bowl, on the cover-drive that I know is my only hope of getting the runs, the ball is certain to scorch through my defence, skittling the stumps sickeningly behind me. No, I must force myself not to force but to float my options, dwelling in possibility right up to the last possible moment. Or, most mysterious of all, when I am doing the crossword, and trying to reassemble the letters of a complex multiple-word anagram, I will scatter the letters across a blank part of the newspaper, and then let my eyes wander, drifting, doodling, trying hard not to try too hard to wring the answer out, in order precisely to maximise the chances of it spontaneously presenting itself to me. Even stranger, the more I do this, the better I seem to get at it, the more compliantly the letters seem to slide into their required new form. How do I do this? And, given I don't know how I do it, how do I improve at it?

All thinking is unconscious thinking, Freud once surprisingly said, meaning simply that none of us knows what is actually going on when we think, or how we might be going about it. More and more, I have learned that when something really needs to be thought about hard, as we say, when there is something I really need to capture, to uncover, or invent, it will be necessary not to concentrate but to soften my attention, to the point almost of taking leave of myself. *Cogito ergo non sum*. I think therefore I dissolve.