



Live in the Past

To move forward, take a look back. **BY SOPHIA DEMBLING**

"SAY HELLO TO YOUR PAST" read the subject line of an e-mail that had landed in my junk mailbox. It was from my old friend Meryl. I hadn't spoken to her in decades. A few weeks later, we met for coffee.

Later, I received a Facebook friend request from another old pal. Within days, the three of us had located more of our old gang on the social networking website. We were four. Six. Nine. Eleven. We were far-flung, but we formed a Facebook group where we shared photos of

our childhood summers together, reminiscing about the places, the people, the sounds, the smells. For a couple of weeks, our group spent every spare moment in a cloud of memory, laughing and crying in equal measures, remembering together moments we had forgotten individually.

The nostalgic fever eventually broke and we drifted back to the here and now, but the experience nourished me in ways I didn't even realize I needed.

I'm not the only one. Check in on sites like Facebook these days, where users over the age of 30 rank as one of the fastest-growing demographics, and you'll find an awful lot of Old Timer's Syndrome going on—people like me, sharing faded photos, reminiscing and reconnecting, and generally wallowing in our own histories.

Though some may feel sheepish about all this looking back, I'm having a blast. I've reconnected with friends going all the way back to my toddler days. I talk to people—both online and in the real world—with whom I've had no contact in decades. I get misty-eyed over photos I've never seen before of myself, friends, and family.

It's all good, believe it or not. And many don't.

WE AMERICANS TEND to prefer looking forward rather than back. The bright future beckons, the past is yesterday's news, and we consider looking back a

waste of time, even a sign of weakness: "Get over it." "What's done is done." "Tomorrow will be better." We tend to view nostalgia as fun for fashion, pathetic for people.

Even the word "nostalgia" has negative connotations. In 1688, Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer coined the term, a combination of the Greek words *nostos* (roughly translated as "homecoming") and *algos* ("pain"). No wonder nostalgia gets a bad rap.

But some researchers now dispute nostalgia's bad reputation. Trying to understand her own nostalgic tendencies, Krystine Batcho—a psychologist and professor at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York—delved into the subject and found that nearly everything written on nostalgia was left over from Freudian psychoanalytic theory. That dated view characterized looking back as an unhealthy retreat from the present, a desire to return to the womb. With empirical research on nostalgia, Batcho

uncovered all sorts of benefits to looking back. "I see nostalgia as the glue that keeps things together," she says. "It maintains continuity of self, helps you remember who you are despite the fact that so much happens to an individual through a lifetime."

Meryl proved that to me. Although I moved 1,500 miles from my hometown and endured all the ups and downs of adulthood, she told me I hadn't changed a bit. I even asked her what I was like when we were kids, and she described me using the same words people use to describe me today.

Having nostalgia makes me feel more firmly anchored to my own identity. So *that's* who I was, *that's* how I got here from there, *that's* how I've changed, and *that's* how I'm the same. Every time I reminisce with an old friend like Meryl, I get to know myself a little bit better.

But nostalgia doesn't always come rose-colored. Sometimes we can look back at hard times—with uplifting

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results. "When you reminisce about bad times, part of the good is that you know you've survived, overcome, and defeated them," Batcho says. "That's why it has psychological benefits."

Meryl described me in positive terms—she's a nice woman—and I was fascinated to hear how she perceived me back when I felt like I was just thrashing around, trying to hide my zits and not to say anything too terribly stupid. So I wasn't nearly the dork I imagined. This, my friends, is good information to have. Unless, of course, you thought you were cool back then and an old friend tells you otherwise. In this case, drop this person and find new old friends.

EVEN MORE THAN a way of staying rooted in your past, personal nostalgia doubles as a useful tool for personal growth. Our own history contains a narrative arc, according to Robert Simmermon, a fellow of the American Psychological Association. The Atlanta

psychologist discovered that if you look at anyone's life story, you find predictable conflicts and resolutions that not only make for interesting stories, but can also lead to self-insight.

In his practice, Simmermon asks new patients four or five specific questions about their past and gets them to write an autobiographical beginning to their life story. By editing and revising that story based on the answers to those questions, people can change how they see themselves. "Obviously, we can't go back and change the past," Simmermon says. "But by reminiscing, we can change the influence of past events."

Sign me up, Doctor. After all, reviewing my own life story has changed my perception of it. For example, one story I've always told about myself is that I was unpopular with boys as a teenager. But not long ago, I dug out my old diaries. To my surprise, I found lots of references to boys who had crushes on me but whom I didn't deem worthy of my attention. May-

be I wasn't quite the sad sack I remember. I like this new version of me.

Yes, I sometimes get wistful looking at photos of myself 30 years younger and 20 pounds lighter. But usually I enjoy them, especially the shots I've never seen before. In most of them, I'm not nearly as tubby and awkward as I remember. Seeing myself through this new perspective, I'm shedding old perceptions. Sure, I'll never look like that again, but it's great to know that once, I did.

NOSTALGIA CAN EVEN help us weather hard times and ward off loneliness. People often grow nostalgic when coping with change or stress, and nostalgic people are more likely to reach out to others during times of stress, according to recent research out of China published in the journal *Psychological Science*. That human contact helps us muddle through.

It's important to note, however, that nostalgia comes in two flavors. One is for





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your own history and goes by the name personal nostalgia, and it correlates with all sorts of good things. The other is known as historical nostalgia, the belief that the good old days (choose your era) were better (choose your criteria) than today, and this version does not seem to do as much for us.

I've found that nostalgic journeys with others take a predictable course. First, gleeful, tearful reunions. Then, if you're online—as so many reunions are these days—there's a long, virtual group hug and orgies of reminiscing. You might organize a face-to-face reunion. After that, the larger group tends to drift apart.

And that's OK. I know that by wallowing in the past, I have made new friends for the future. Sometimes, they're old friends I have rediscovered. Other times they're people with whom I had just a nodding acquaintance back then. Reunited in the here and now, we find that our shared roots—combined with adult perspectives—have created a new and interesting connection.

A few years ago, hanging out in Central Park in New York City with some high school friends with whom I'd recently reconnected, I found myself sitting on the grass and paging through our senior yearbook with a guy I had admired from afar, when he was the dreamy hippie artist on campus. Back then, I was a drama club geek with little street cred; I would never have dared approach him. These days, he's single and still has his dark good looks. Meanwhile, I've been married for decades. We were now on a level playing field: just a couple of aging hipsters, reminiscing.

"You know," he said, as he turned a page of the book. "I had a little crush on you back in high school."

Really?

"I had a crush on you too," I said. Our eyes met for a moment.

"Well," he said, with a small smile, "it's nice to know."

We left things at that. It was enough.

Sophia Dembling is a freelance writer living—mostly in the present—in Dallas.