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Memory Boxes

Antique trunks, vintage napkins, cyanotype on paper, thread, canvas, wooden top

My piece explores the purpose of childhood nostalgia. I always wondered whether my nostalgia was a counterproductive desire to remain in the past. Through my research, I learned that nostalgia has many psychological benefits. What stood out to me was a study proving that when people make sense of memories, they build self-continuity and personal identity.

I was inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of "eternal return," meaning that time is cyclical and everything that happened will happen again, in a loop. In my piece, I stitched together cyanotypes of recent self-portraits, images I had taken of family members and places, and old family photos to create a web of memories with no real timeline. I also learned that we do not remember events as they happened, but our emotions highlight certain points and fictionalize our memories to some degree, so I toned the cyanotypes using coffee, tea, and baking soda to evoke different emotions.

I put the images in antique trunks, using the theme of travel to represent change. Even though times are changing, we can keep memories with us. In the bottom of the bigger trunk, I incorporated cyanotypes of symbols that reminded me of childhood, including an excerpt of a letter from my grandfather and a spiderman comic. I did not include the actual items because I wanted them to be distorted, referencing the idea that our memories are not accurate. In the smaller trunk, I hung a wooden top with a spiral of red paint beneath it, showing that our memories impact our identity.

Note: I have included luggage tags and a little booklet (or "passport") in my piece. Please feel free to open the booklet and look inside.

The Purpose of Childhood Nostalgia



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Writers Note: This paper questions the role of childhood memories in our lives, and if nostalgia is a beneficial emotion. I incorporate experiences from my own life as well as scientific research to determine the impact of childhood nostalgia on identity and psychological well being.

On the morning of May 24, I put on a long white dress and silver dangling earrings and clipped half of my hair back to reveal my layers of black ringlets. I stepped out of my bedroom into the hallway and heard the door from the room to the right (my twin brother Tej's room) close. I looked up and saw him in a white tuxedo with green and pink flowers pinned to the lapel, his hair tousled from sleep, and a huge grin plastered across his face. A smile crept across my face.

"Big day," he said.

Looking back, it was a big day. But maybe its significance to me got lost in my rush to get ready and the blur of friends and faces. Or perhaps I thought getting overwhelmed by your high school graduation was cliché and stupid, considering that there were so many other monumental life moments ahead. Or maybe I just did not want to acknowledge that it was the last time Tej and I would load our stuff into our Honda CRV and drive to school together while listening to a jumbled playlist made up of songs equally selected by both of us.

My older brother Ronak drove us to school the year before, but he graduated in 2020, and three siblings became two. I had never attended a school without my brothers in my whole life. I did not give them much thought, I did not rely on them, and we had different friends. But in each year, my identity had been tethered to my brothers, most specifically my twin Tej. Looking back, I should have cherished it more. I always had someone there to support me, spent eighteen years blowing out birthday candles with someone else by my side.

After the graduation ceremony finished, my friends and family packed together to get our photos taken in our school gym. Before I knew it, Tej and I were back in the Honda, driving the same route we had taken from school for twelve years. Before we could drive, our older brother Ronak drove us, and before that, our parents drove us. As we passed familiar storefronts, the Smoothie King, McDonald's, the donut place, I felt overcome with nostalgia. Bits and pieces of memories with my brother and the rest of my family popped into my mind. Memories that I did not give a second thought to when I experienced them. Timidly walking in the Lower School Halloween parade with Tej with shirts that read "Thing 1" and "Thing 2." Spending our summers on the tennis courts in the hot Texan sun until we flushed red, damp with perspiration. Showing up to the first day of sixth grade after purchasing our school's latest trend: roller backpacks with light-up wheels. The memories felt so close but fragile – like I could put my finger out to touch them – but if I did, they would all disappear. So what purpose did these memories, and the bittersweet feeling that accompanied them, have for me? Is childhood nostalgia beneficial, or just a way to keep us stuck in the past without ever evolving?

First, it is essential to know why we remember what we do. According to *Psychology Today*, many factors cause us to remember certain events. Emotion enhances our memory and highlights aspects of experiences to make them more memorable. Our mood on a particular day may call different memories to mind. For example, if someone is feeling upset, they may think of memories where they felt sad to make themselves feel sadder at that moment. Our memories are not made up of each moment of a specific event, but instead, some moments are overemphasized, which are called the "peak" moment and the end. For example, if I had an overwhelmingly positive trip until something went wrong and the trip ended poorly, I would probably neglect the duration of the trip and associate it with negative emotions. These factors

point to the idea that we do not remember events exactly as they happened. We often fictionalize our memories to some degree since they are heavily influenced by our emotions.

Our attitudes towards the past, present, and future are called "time perspectives," a term coined by Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd in 1999. They believe that there are five different time perspectives: past-positive, past-negative, present-hedonistic, present-fatalistic, and future. The past-positive time perspective is a warm, sentimental attitude towards the past. Past-negative means an aversion to the past based on actual events, reconstructions of past events, or both. The present-hedonistic time perspective regards a risk-taking and pleasure-oriented life attitude, characterized by high impulsiveness and less concern. A present-fatalistic life perspective is characterized by the idea that the future is predestined, and individuals are not in control of what happens to them. The future time perspective is when behavior is influenced by future events or goals.

There is a negative correlation between age and the present-hedonistic time perspective (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999). Children are more immersed in the hedonistic present because they are oriented towards enjoyment in the present without sacrificing today for tomorrow. Some researchers believe that children live more in the present moment because they cannot recognize the complexity of time, including the past and future. Adults tend to think in both the past-positive and negative as well as future time perspective.

Several philosophers had different theories about memory and time. In 1881, Friedrich Nietzsche had the idea of "eternal return," meaning that time is cyclical and everything that happened will happen again, in a loop. In the face of looming issues, we return to the past. We see "eternal return" in our culture. Nowadays, stores that cater to Gen Z sell polaroid cameras and vinyls, items that have made a resurgence in ubiquity and increased in value even though

they have known “easier” replacements. The entertainment industry constantly churns out sequels and spin-offs (ranging *Batman* to *Star Wars* to *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*), introducing a sentimental remembrance of years past. The internet is an endless memory mine, where anyone can extract a cultural moment and re-share it for the world to see. These items and media seem engineered to produce nostalgia, to provide a soothing comfort when the future seems unstable. We are drawn to these experiences, and we want to reconnect with “the good old days.” After all, the etymology of nostalgia means a painful desire to return home.

Our attitudes towards the past sometimes result in nostalgia. Nostalgia is a distinct emotional state that we feel when encountering something that cues memory retrieval. It is widely regarded as a positive and somewhat bittersweet emotion. The bitterness comes from the sense that we know for sure that we can never truly regain memories, and the sweetness stems from having experienced those memories and the ability to revisit them over and over again. However, nostalgia was not always seen defined in these terms.

The term nostalgia comes from Johannes Hofer, a Swiss physician who coined the term in 1678. The word is a compound of two Greek words: *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain). Nostalgia was initially considered a bad omen, a medical disease confined to Swiss mercenaries, thought to be caused by demons in the middle brain or atmospheric pressure changes. Symptoms were anxiety and a desire to return to an earlier life form.

Nostalgia has been referenced in history and literature, whether or not it was defined. For example, in *the Odyssey*, after Odysseus emerges from the Trojan War victorious, he sets sail for his island of Ithaca to reunite with his wife, Penelope. For three years, he fought sea monsters and other evil forces. After another seven years, he stayed with a sea nymph named Calypso. She offered to make him immortal if he stayed on her island of Ogygia. Odysseus replies, "...prudent

Penelope cannot compare with your stature or beauty, for she is only a mortal, and you are immortal and ageless. Nevertheless, it is she whom I daily desire and pine for. Therefore, I long for my home and to see the day of returning," (Homer, Book V, pp. 78-79).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, nostalgia was considered a psychiatric disorder caused by extreme homesickness. In the late twentieth century, nostalgia was diverted from homesickness and regarded as a sentimental feeling that transcended social groups and age. According to a 2015 study by Kentaro Oba published in *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, two dimensions affect nostalgia: emotional and personal significance and chronological remoteness. Two systems in the brain collaborate to evoke the feeling of nostalgia. Nostalgia is now thought to play an important role in psychological resilience, as reminiscence can foster reflection and healing.

Now, I embrace childhood nostalgia because it allows me to understand myself, stay strong in difficult situations, and reflect in a positive, bittersweet, wistful way.

Thinking about childhood can actually bring us to a different mindset. According to a 2018 study by Hubert Suszek published in the *Journal of General Psychology*, remembering childhood experiences returns adults' focus to the hedonistic present. The study had adults recall memories from childhood in both open-ended and formal situations, and both activities caused adults to increase their focus on the hedonistic present. The mindset change is regarded as self-schema activation and proves that components from childhood can be activated in adults.

Nostalgia is usually a positively toned emotion. A 2006 study by Tim Wildschut in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* researched nostalgia in adults, and even though many adults described narratives of loss and disappointment, the positive and negative moments were juxtaposed to create redemption, which is a pattern of going from a negative state to a

positive condition. The study also showed that nostalgia is a self-relevant emotion. In memories that evoke nostalgia, the self is always the protagonist, accompanied by themes of bittersweetness, redemption, and selfhood.

Some may feel that nostalgia is a counterproductive preoccupation with the past or that nostalgia causes narcissism, but that is not the case. Nostalgia is vital for psychological resilience and helps people remain strong in the face of challenges. Therefore, nostalgia can help facilitate reflection and encourage us to move forward. Nostalgia causes people to remember happiness once enjoyed and difficulties overcome. It elicits the same idea Hawthorne noted in the transitoriness of all things when he said, "this too shall pass." According to an article by Krystine Batcho in *The American Journal of Psychology*, a nostalgic person may consider the stressful events they have overcome in the past and can take on new challenges. Preliminary studies also show that reminiscence nostalgia can be therapeutic. Revisiting a healthy past can offer hope for a better future by reminding someone of what is possible.

Nostalgia also causes more social connectedness. Batcho mentions that nostalgia has been shown to respond to loneliness by serving as a healthy function to increase perceived social support. Nostalgic reminiscence has even been shown to help people with dementia stay connected with others.

When children can recall and make sense of memories, they better understand identity. According to an article by Sue Shellenbarger in *The Wall Street Journal*, children whose parents encourage reminiscing and storytelling about daily events show better coping and problem-solving skills by their preteens. In addition, some memories help build self-continuity or personal identity. These memories help people understand the person they were before and how they have changed.

My school memories with Tej are not entirely accurate. They are influenced by emotion, mood, or peak moments that outweigh others. But the constant hum of the past reflects my identity – imperfections, joys, and pains. Halloween parade, tennis camp, and first days of school and all of the other snapshots of memories that activate childhood nostalgia open a rich realm of selfhood, reminiscence, and sentimentality.

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