

We've put more effort into helping folks reach old age than into helping them enjoy it.

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Old Age and Photo Albums

Text & Photos by Steve Gottlieb

[In newsletters and elsewhere, I've offered many reasons that photographers should make albums (or books) of their images. I won't repeat those reasons here. But one reason I had never thought about before came into sharp focus recently. It's a very personal story that I'd like to share with you on this Thanksgiving holiday.]

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"I've lost my identity," my 97 year-old mother said to me. "I used to be someone, and now I'm just a shell of a person. I'm..." Her voice trailed off as she started to tear up. She took her glasses off to wipe her eyes, and I could see her left eyelid drooped badly, as if the eyelid muscle had lost its power. "I can hardly walk....I can't make decisions about my own life....I don't remember what I did today....I don't even know my own address. It's all so awful."

"Mom, I wish there was something I could say to..."

"There's nothing to say. Nothing to say."

Beyond letting her know that I love her, I know of no words that could meaningfully improve this profoundly melancholy time of her life. But while I may not know what to say, I have discovered there is something I can *do*. Whenever we're together, we look at family photo albums. As someone who often proselytizes about the value of photo albums, I'm embarrassed to admit that this didn't occur to me until quite recently. Those albums had been lined up on shelves gathering dust. Gather dust no more.





My father was a passionate album maker. His photographs were often accompanied by tiny, carefully handwritten captions with dates, names and locations. He also threw in assorted memorabilia, like news clips about family members. (I was startled to find four targets I had shot in a rifle competition inserted into a 1960s album.)

When mom and I leaf through the pages, something truly astonishing happens. While my mom has lost most of her short-term memory, it becomes obvious that her long-term memory is intact. It's vivid. Clearly, short and long term memory depend on different parts of the brain. With animated body language, she talks about the pictures. This is who that person is, she says, and this is what they were like. Oh, I remember our Norway vacation. That's when Edward [my brother] was seven years old and he accidentally locked himself in the bathroom. We needed a ladder to pull him out of a second floor window. Story after story. Observation after observation. Decade upon decade, the memories pour out.



My mom has had as full and remarkable life as anyone I've ever known. But at ninety-seven,

that life seems to have slipped out of her reach. And then she looks at those pictures, and her life force flows back into her. Her voice is clear and energized. For a little while at least, she has gotten in touch with her identity once again. I think of my mom, like her fellow residents at the assisted living facility, as old cars that have been retired to a communal garage where they sit, dormant. But a photo album on her lap acts like a key to the engine that revs on all cylinders, strong and sure. She's in the moment. Clearheaded. The past comes alive. Time vanishes. Her sense of self, lost moments before, returns like magic. Oh, the power of photographs!

With most photos these days stored on computers and phones instead of albums, will the next generation be able to experience what I experience with my mom? That's up to them. As for me, I will cherish those "photo album moments" I've had with mom for as long as I live. And I will create albums that I can look at with my kids.

Happy Thanksgiving to one and all...and especially to Mom.