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## The Album

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# THE ALBUM

by Claire Williamson  
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It sits on my bookshelf, relatively untouched. Recently uncovered from an unrelated trip to the family storage unit, it was received and promptly stored away over 10 years ago.

This nicely bound, early digital scrapbook, is a gift from my father, given on my 11th birthday. Bound in blue fabric with a less favorite photo and title captioning on the cover, the scrapbook opens onto a tissue page and typed birthday inscription. The photos inside that follow are a hodge-podge of moments from the first 11 years of my life, and the captions are a series of identifiers and cheesy family inside jokes. The paper has a nice weight to it and a moderate glossy sheen. When I received it, I was mortified. Especially at that time, I was going through a very awkward phase, and it was painful to look through random photos and weird moments that my “lame dad” had captured for me during my childhood so far. The book instantly went into a box in my room, not to be retrieved until a few months ago.

While I still do not look at this book often, 13 years later I have an increased appreciation for the effort and love that my father put into creating it. I have come by my love for material culture honestly, going back at least as far as my great-grandmother, then my paternal grandfather, shared with his wife, and passed to their children, and then to my cousins and myself. As a child, I inherited from my father my grandfather’s stamp collection, my great-grandmother’s painting supplies, postage, and currency collections, and my grandmother’s love of buying, organizing, and using craft supplies. But most of all, our family loves photos. Just yesterday, as I poured over the photo archives at Berea College, I sent a snapshot of one to my dad saying “Wow! Doesn’t this look like one of Grannie’s old photos?” He responded by sharing with me a Dropbox file he has been compiling by scanning old photos that my aunt had saved of my grandmother’s childhood and young adulthood in Kentucky. That night, as I poured over these photos, I thought about how photography has always been a central part of our family life.

My great uncle Bill Hoge was a photo-journalist for his entire career, and even when his eyesight began to deteriorate until he was blind, he maintained an interest in photography and videography and was the family photographer long after it ceased to be practical. He and my dad would sit and talk about the latest film and digital cameras, and after he lost his vision, my dad and I would bring him our cameras so he could feel them while we talked about them.

When my grandfather died, my grandmother lost herself in scrapbooking. She made beautiful framed photo compilations for her children and grandchildren honoring her husband and made elaborate scrapbooks commemorating trips we took or parts of their life together that otherwise would have been forgotten.

It wasn't until I went away to college, and photography became the primary way that my parents and I communicated for a while, that I really began to understand the importance of this object, and the act tied up in recording the moment and reliving it together after the fact. I began to see why this kitschy digital scrapbook that my dad made for me was so important for him to share with me. The opportunity to relive these moments that we shared or that we didn't share, through a lens he created, made him present for all of these moments in my mind going forward.

My dad's penchant for taking photos was always seen as a nuisance to my mother and me when I was young; we would often give him a hard time about being more interested in the photos than just enjoying the moment itself, and I went through periods in childhood where I refused to smile for his photos because I was so fed up with them. Now, though, I see that to have this virtual or physical object as a way to relive the moment, is often what is at the forefront of his mind.

Looking at this photo album in the context of my family history now alters my initial impression. As I flip through the photos that my dad lovingly selected in 2004, I find myself drawn in again and again. Each time I look at it, I notice something new that makes me smile or laugh. The album encapsulates the strong and quirky personality I had as a child and commemorates some of the best times in those years with the people I love. It never gets old to look at pictures of my parents and grandparents—I love looking at the resemblance between my mother and grandmother and me, something that no one noticed until my face changed after braces. Seeing how young my parents looked 13 or more years ago reminds me of so much that has happened

in those years, how much we have all grown, and how, although our parents seem ageless to us, we all change over time. It also makes me laugh to look at photos of one of the women who I still consider a close friend as we went through our awkward stage together. It feels better to see such embarrassing photos when you know the person right next to you in the picture is feeling the exact same way, and you can commiserate together.

Social media and technology in this day and age promote the creation of virtual scrapbooks just like this one. Facebook and Instagram especially provide opportunities to create and curate unique content that shares your experience, history, and identity, whether through individual posts, albums, or collections. Technology promotes the digitization of photographs, in contrast (or in addition?) to the preservation of the objects themselves. Virtual culture also fosters a pattern of examination and re-examination of one's history through photographic collections. It is standard, at the beginning of a new friendship or romantic relationship, to comb through the other person's social media history, learning about who they were and are through these virtual records. There also comes a point in relationships where two people might sit down together and share their history through these photos and posts in a collective, sanctioned experience. I'll never forget when my best friend from college and I sat down together one afternoon after having been friends for about six months, and she walked me through all of her Facebook pictures, telling me stories of high school friends, her siblings, and extended family. This marked a turning point in our relationship, a deepening, and when I eventually met these important people in her life, it felt like I already knew them, both visually and emotionally. My generation may not typically carry around scrapbooks of their lives, but we do continue to identify ourselves and each other through photographic histories.

Where do I fit into this generational trend, if I am still carrying around photo albums? Am I more part of a familial culture or does this tendency still reflect today's society in general? Should I be spending my time looking forward instead of feeling nostalgic? Why am I so interested in history, above all, my history? What can I learn from these objects? These questions are sparked as I examine this album, but the central thought that comes to mind as I hold this piece is how my dad showed his love for me one year by making something that maybe took some time to appreciate, but that now I will always treasure.