

Wrapping a Present for the Future

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I am the family documentarian, and have been since I got my first box camera back in childhood. As long as I can remember, I have taken snapshots, not just of birthdays and weddings and 4th of July picnics but also of siblings brushing their teeth and kids wrestling and grandparents cooking dinner. Really mundane stuff. I also write anecdotes and fragments of family memoir because . . . well, I don't really know why. I just do.

I'm not alone in this. And now, of course, everyone carries a camera and everyone is connected through social media, so our lives are more documented than ever before. Is this a good thing, or not? My kids think it's a annoying intrusion at times, and they are not alone. Other critics also feel that our preoccupation with archiving memories may be diminishing the experiences themselves.

I'm not so sure, and I am heartened by some recent research on this subject. A team of psychological scientists at Harvard Business School, led by Ting Zhang, knew from past research that we are all very bad at forecasting our future emotions, and they wondered if this might include our future curiosity and appreciation of the past. That is, do we underestimate the future joy we will get from rediscovering today's seemingly trivial experiences?

The scientists ran some experiments to explore this idea. In one, for example, they asked volunteers at the beginning of the summer to create personal "time capsules"—with songs they were listening to, an excerpt from a school paper, thoughts about a recent social event, a photograph, and so forth. They also asked them to predict how curious they would be about this time capsule in the future, and how meaningful and interesting it would be later on. Then, at the end of the summer, the scientists interviewed the volunteers again: How curious are you? How interesting is this photo? How meaningful are these songs?

The idea was to see if the volunteers were off base in their predictions, and they were. They were actually much more curious to open the time capsule than they thought they would be, and once opened, they were surprised at how enjoyable the rediscovery was. In short, they didn't expect to savor these trivial experiences from the past, but they did.

Okay, so I'm partially vindicated. But there's more. Zhang and her colleagues wondered if the kind of experience matters. We expect to enjoy looking back on special vacation photos and wedding albums, but how about the more ordinary stuff? To see, the scientists asked a group of volunteers to write about a recent conversation, and to rate how ordinary or extraordinary the conversation was. Then they forecast their feelings about this conversation in the future.

This time the scientists waited seven months, but they got the same basic result. The volunteers consistently underestimated the value of rediscovering experiences later on. Importantly, the more ordinary the experience, the worse they were in their predictions. It seems that people get unexpected

value from reflecting on the simpler, more mundane aspects of daily life.

If we're so skeptical about the value of future recollections, is it possible that this cognitive bias is keeping us from doing the very documentation that could bring future joy? That's the question that Zhang and her colleagues wanted to investigate in their final study, so in a variation on the other studies they made documentation voluntary. Subjects could choose to write about a recent conversation with a friend, or they could choose to watch a short clip of a talk show interview. Then they did the same sorts of predictions and compared them with actual future feelings. The results were interesting and a bit ironic. As reported in a forthcoming article in the journal *Psychological Science*, the individuals who underestimated the pleasure they would get from rediscovery were less likely to document the present experience, but they were just as likely to want those rediscovered experiences in the future. They were out of luck. Such a disconnect between forecasting and actual future experience is a recipe for regret.

Maybe there *is* some risk in overzealously documenting our lives. There are certainly times to put that camera away and join in the fun. But these findings suggest that there may also be risk in failing to create mementos. The seemingly dull and quotidian details of our everyday lives may be the emotional treasures of the future.

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