

When Memories Bring Both Comfort and Pain

Your history is still yours.



A photograph can be an ordinary thing until suddenly it isn't. You are looking for something else when you find a picture of your child at eight years old, standing in the yard with missing front teeth and grass stains on both knees.

For one moment, you smile. Then you remember.

Or perhaps a song comes on in the grocery store. You make a recipe you haven't made in years. You drive past a soccer field. Someone repeats a phrase your child used to say. Memory arrives without asking whether this is a convenient time.

And when you are estranged from someone you love, a good memory can hurt almost as much as a difficult one.

Maybe more.

When Something Good Hurts

We usually think painful memories are memories of painful events. Sometimes they are.

But after a loss, happy memories can become painful because they remind us of what is no longer available.

You remember laughing together. A vacation that actually went well. A Christmas morning. A conversation in the car. The time your child called you first with important news.

For a moment, you are back there. Then the present returns.

The contrast can be sharp. It can become tempting to avoid the memories altogether. Photographs stay in boxes. Certain music gets skipped. Traditions disappear because they carry too much history.

Sometimes we need that distance.

There is no requirement to open every box simply because it exists. But a painful response to a good memory does not make the memory itself bad.

Something good happened.

You are allowed to remember that.



Estrangement Can Rewrite the Past

When a relationship ends painfully, there is a natural temptation to revisit its entire history looking for evidence.

Was it always like this? Did I miss something? Was she unhappy all those years? Did that argument mean more than I realized? Was our relationship ever what I thought it was?

Reflection can help us understand things we did not understand at the time. But hindsight has an unusual power.

Once we know how a story currently ends, everything that came before can begin to look like evidence pointing toward that ending. Life rarely works that neatly.

A difficult ending does not prove that every earlier moment was secretly leading toward it. People change. Relationships change. Circumstances change. Understanding changes.

Something that was loving then does not become false because the relationship is painful now.

The past does not have to be put on trial simply because the present hurts.

And We Don't Have to Make the Past Perfect

The opposite temptation exists, too. When we miss someone, memory can soften the difficult edges. We remember the vacations and forget the arguments. We remember the closeness and overlook the tension. We remember who someone was during the best years and struggle to make sense of who they became later.

Grief can make us long not only for a person, but for a version of the relationship that may never have existed quite as consistently as we remember it.

That doesn't mean our memories are dishonest. It means memory is human.

We do not need to choose between two stories:

Everything was wonderful.

or

Everything was terrible.

Most relationships cannot truthfully fit inside either sentence. There were probably beautiful things. There were probably difficult things. There may have been injuries, misunderstandings, tenderness, frustration, sacrifice, laughter, disappointment, generosity, anger, and love.

A whole relationship has room for all of them.

The Person in the Photograph Was Real

This can be especially important when the person you remember seems very different from the person you know now.

The child in the photograph was real. So was the teenager who made you laugh. So was the young adult who called you for advice. And the adult who is not speaking to you now is real, too.

You do not have to decide which version is the “real” person. Human beings are not still photographs.

We continue becoming. So do relationships.

The fact that you cannot have the relationship today that you had twenty years ago does not erase what existed twenty years ago. That time belongs to your life.

You are allowed to keep it.

Memories Don't Have to Tell Us What to Do

Sometimes memories begin functioning as instructions.

A happy memory says:



You have to get this relationship back.

A painful memory says:

You should never trust them again.

A regret says:

You have to fix what you did.

An old injury says:

Don't ever let yourself forget.

But a memory is not necessarily a command. It is something that happened.

It may contain information worth considering. It may help us understand ourselves or the relationship differently. It may reveal something we want to take responsibility for.

But we don't have to make every memory responsible for deciding the future. We can remember without immediately answering the question, *So what should I do?*

Sometimes remembering is enough.

Regret Has a Place, Too

Not every memory will be comfortable. There may be things you said that you wish you could take back. Times you were distracted. Moments when you misunderstood what your child needed. Choices you would make differently now.

Parenthood provides a nearly unlimited supply of material for hindsight. We raised actual human beings while being actual human beings ourselves.

We did not have the information we have now. We were living inside circumstances that may look very different from a distance.

That does not mean we excuse everything. There is a difference between understanding ourselves compassionately and refusing responsibility.

We can say:

I wish I had done that differently.

We can learn from it. We can make amends when amends are possible and appropriate.

And when another person is unavailable or unwilling to receive what we would like to say, we can still become someone who has learned from what happened.

Regret can inform the life we live now without requiring us to live permanently inside the moment we regret.

You Don't Have to Throw Away the Good

Sometimes people believe that moving forward requires getting rid of reminders. Delete the photographs. Put away the gifts. Stop making the recipe. Change every tradition.

For some people, removing certain things brings relief. For others, it feels like another loss. There is no universal rule.

The better question may be:

What Allows Me to Remember Without Becoming Trapped in Remembering?

Perhaps some photographs stay in a box for now. Perhaps one remains on the bookshelf. Perhaps you continue making the birthday cake everyone loved even though the person who loved it most is no longer sitting at the table. Perhaps you create a new tradition. Perhaps an old one remains.

You are allowed to discover what helps you hold the past without asking the past to become the present again.



Memory Can Become Something Other Than a Wound

Early in grief, memories can feel almost entirely connected to absence. Every remembered thing points toward what is missing.

Over time, that relationship can change. Not because the memories stop mattering. Because they begin belonging to you differently.

A memory can eventually become something you are grateful to have rather than only evidence of something you no longer have.

The photograph can make you smile before it makes you cry. And perhaps one day it simply makes you smile.

There is no schedule for that. There is no requirement that it happen. But grief does not necessarily leave every memory in the condition in which it first found it.

We change around our memories. Their meaning can change with us.

Your History Is Still Yours

Estrangement changes the present relationship. It may change the future relationship. But it does not have the authority to confiscate your past.

You do not have to erase years of your own life because the relationship is different now. You don't have to turn every good memory into evidence that reconciliation must happen. And you don't have to turn every painful memory into evidence that the relationship was always doomed.

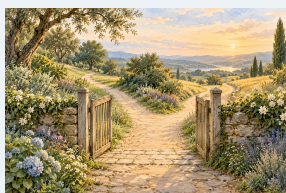
You can let the past be complicated. You can remember what was good. You can acknowledge what hurt. You can regret what you wish you had done differently. You can be grateful. You can be angry. You can miss someone. Sometimes all before breakfast.

And then you can return to the day in front of you.

Because perhaps that is part of learning to live with memory. We don't have to stop looking backward. We simply learn that we can look backward and then turn our attention forward again.

The past remains part of us. But today is asking something of us, too.

CONTINUE THE SERIES



Next: Birthdays, Holidays, and the Empty Places in Family Life

Some days make absence much harder to carry quietly. Birthdays, holidays, weddings, anniversaries, and family traditions can bring the shape of estrangement sharply into view. Next, we'll look at why those days can be so difficult - and how we might begin living them rather than only enduring them.