I had not planned to clean out my closet. Deadlines were approaching. I had papers to write, workshops to plan, reviews to do, and lectures to give. I was not prepared for the latest invasion into my time and space.

In February 2019, rats made their way into the crawl space under our Tampa home, into our air conditioning ducts, and up the walls into my study. They entered through a gaping hole in the drywall in my closet, allowing them to scurry in and out, hiding during the day and foraging through the night. While I slept, they took over my study, depositing rat poop behind bookcases, in crates of files, and along the walls, using their whiskers to navigate their search for food and water. They treated my closet as their home base, building their nests with materials from my storage boxes. I have no idea how long they had lived in our walls without discovery.

“Art, part of that huge heirloom tomato I left on the counter has a big bite taken out of it,” I say one morning.

“Um hum,” Art responds, eating his cereal and reading the newspaper.

“Art, did you hear me?”

“Yes. I didn’t do it,” he says, looking up and shaking his head.

“I know, silly. We might have rodents, or something.”

“Umm.”

Being two professional academics, we hoped that if we ignored the problem, it might go away. The following day, I found a large bite missing from the middle of a banana on the same counter. This led me to examine the area around the countertops and along the walls, where I then had to admit that the specks of “dirt” I had begun to see were actually rat feces. Something had to be done. So we called a service, and paid a rat whisperer handsomely to clean out the crawl space, replace the insulation, install a vapor shield, and screen all holes and entry points. Since the rats’ (hopefully) brief foray into the kitchen...
came about through the air conditioning system, another technician replaced the ducts under the house. Now Art and I had no choice but to confront the torn-up paper and rat feces that we found upstairs in our studies and closets.

The rats turned out to be an omen for me. As a newly retired professor, I had started to feel that it was time to accomplish things I had been putting off during the previous forty-plus years of dedication to teaching, research, and the many day-to-day demands of my academic life. Reorganizing my study and cleaning closets was on my list—but for later, that fantasized time when I would no longer have the pressure of work obligations and deadlines. Theoretically, that time was now. But during the first six months of my retirement, I had not slowed down and was still committing to new projects. I had not yet faced that this was a way of life that would be hard to change. The rats reminded me that I now had no excuse for ignoring what needed to be done. I did not want to leave this mess—forty years of stuffed and overflowing files and crates—to those who would someday have to clean up behind me.

But it wasn’t just the rats, or my concern about those who would come behind me, that sparked the cleanup. I yearned to organize the past as a way to transition into this new chapter of my life, which I preferred calling “permanent sabbatical.” I thought organizing the past might help me take stock of where I had been; reliving it and putting it “away,” or alternatively, bringing it back into my life now to enjoy more fully in the present. Decluttering my closet might declutter my mind as well as my physical surroundings, providing clues to how I wanted to live my life now and make room for as yet unknown experiences and adventures I hoped to have during my retirement years. The closet began to symbolize a need I had to connect the past to my future, a desire for continuity. What might I learn there?

**ENTERING THE CLOSET**

Taking a deep breath, I bend over to enter my closet through the half door. Ouch, that hurts. I laugh at the idea that this is supposed to be a walk-in closet. When I rise up too quickly, my head hits the cross beam that cuts through the space. Another ouch. Because of the clutter, I can make my way only into the entryway of this six-feet-long, three-feet-wide space. The roof is slanted, at a height of two feet on one side and about six feet on the other, so I remain hunched over in an uncomfortable position as I survey the job in front of me. Already my back and neck hurt.

The original dozen or so neatly stacked boxes have been largely untouched since we moved into this house in 1992. Now they and the boxes I have placed on top of them have morphed into a toppling mess. I stare at the broken-down cardboard boxes, perched precariously upon the original containers, spilling paper everywhere. Tax returns and supporting documents blend with hundreds of monthly financial reports. Initially, I had added documents in carefully arranged boxes. But when they overflowed, I had been reduced to opening the door and pitching last year’s returns and other financial statements toward the top of the cascading piles. Only my most recent and important papers—this year’s tax return, my trust, living will, and a “do not resuscitate” order—lay just inside the door where I—or my executors and other loved ones—could easily reach them.
No wonder I had quit venturing into this closet. How had I let things get to this point? Did this closet symbolize the state of my life? I hoped not. In light of the task in front of me, I don protective gloves and then a mask—rat feces can have viruses. But I quickly discard the mask in the overbearing heat of this Florida climate-changed spring weather. I hold my nose and gently pick up and throw the rat pellets in the trash. Then I start tossing. Income tax documents and receipts from my first year of earning income in 1981 until now; I save only the last seven years. The rest—out. Financial reports—out. They are all online now. I carry all this clutter in dozens of bags and boxes to the screened-in porch, where they are readied for shredding. It takes many trips and several days to accomplish, during which my privileged life comes clearer into focus. Not everyone has a closet of their own, let alone one like mine.

Eventually I get down to the dozen or so original boxes. I throw away the twenty-seven-year-old expired drugstore items that fill one of the containers; then old straw hats and clothing, now chewed in pieces and used for comfy rat beds. What was I thinking? Out to the trash, all of it.

An image of a hoarder comes to mind. I dismiss it. But I do wonder how much of my inspiration comes from all the publicity about tidying up with Marie Kondo. Not much, I think. I haven’t read her books or watched her TV series, and mostly I’ve ignored the whole “tidying-up” movement. I am aware, though, that the theme, played repeatedly on social media, perhaps entered my unconscious. My conscious voice inside my head reminds me of something else: the many friends and relatives moving and/or downsizing—or planning to—into smaller homes as they age, suffer mobility issues, and retire. It seems that in my age cohort, we’re all reorganizing, throwing away, and preparing ourselves for the next chapter.

I survey my work and stretch my neck and back. So far, so good. The rest will not be as easy, but I am determined.

I sort through, read, and save the thousands of holiday and sympathy cards, and personal and professional letters. I touch and try to recall the history and meaning of every saved tchotchke and knick-knack, before determining its fate: save, discard, or give away. Then I start with the boxes of dissertation materials—files of drafts of my dissertation and book that came after, historical documents of all kinds, several copies of the hundreds of pages of handwritten field notes. Then a box of manila folders containing field notes cut into strips and deposited into the appropriate sleeve—work: socialization into, specialization, independence, norms, organization, flexibility, work control, rate busting, goldbricking, work ethic; women’s work, men’s work, fish house work; family: value of infants, children in, sibling relationships, roles, attitudes toward pregnancy and childrearing, and so on. I carry most of these materials downstairs and outside to the large, blue trash can, saving only the comments, letters, reviews, and photographs. Back in the closet, I linger with the photographs, remembering my time in the fishing communities and my relationships with the people there. When I look up many of the fisher folk on the internet, hoping to be back in touch, I am sad to find little other than their obituaries.

Suddenly I rush back to the trash to retrieve the cast-off dissertation materials. This is history I am throwing away: documentation of the activities in which I participated, the
work I did for my PhD, the life of the fisher folk and the relationships I formed as a friend and researcher, much of which did not find its way into the book I published. These sheets and fragments of paper document the history of qualitative research, pre-computer. I stand with recovered folders in hand, loose pages sliding back into the can. “Something has to go,” I remind myself, “to make room to breathe and for what will come later.” Reluctantly and with a big sigh, I drop the rescued files back into the bin. I dream about my dissertation that night, and am relieved when I hear the sound of the garbage pickup the next morning. The decision, right or wrong, is now final.

Almost finished, after days of work, I take a break and sit at my desk in my study. I glance around at the mess still to be sorted: crates of files I kept on each book and article I published with drafts, comments and reviews, and relevant articles; bloated files from each conference I attended; readings, syllabi, and notes for each course I taught; big bins of articles on every topic in which I’ve been interested during my career; file cabinets holding who knows what that have not been opened in years; books threatening to tumble from every available shelf. Behind me is yet another closet with paper stacked haphazardly from floor to ceiling. I am thankful the crates of files on the Holocaust that take up space in the library/guest room across the hall are not visible. “Maybe I am a hoarder—an academic hoarder,” I say aloud, exhausted.

FINDING THE PHOTOS

Returning to the walk-in closet for the final push, I bang my head again. Rubbing my aching and now bleeding skull, I stoop-walk toward the last container, a bulging copy-paper box in the back of the closet. I am surprised to see that on the lid—threatening to slide off—I have written, “Photos.” My breath catches, my bodily reaction ahead of my mental one. “What is in it?” I wonder, as I quickly remove the lid. My curiosity is aroused further by the thousands of scattered photographs I see, some still in their original date-stamped folders. Two six-by-nine manila envelopes casually tossed in on top catch my eye. My pulse quickens. “Could it be? Dare I hope?” I turn the first envelope upside down, and photos of smiling Carolyns cascade into my hand.

These head shots of me looking directly into the camera are the school pictures I saved from each year in elementary and high school, including one as homecoming queen my senior year, and a few from college. I randomly sift through them again, and then reach quickly but more carefully for the second envelope, anticipating with excitement what I think is there. (To watch a video of these photos, please see the online version of the journal.)

“Ohhh,” erupts from my mouth, as I begin examining the photos of babies and children. My siblings and I stand side by side, in front of the Christmas tree in our Sunday-best in the hospital with my father when he had pneumonia beside my Dad’s trucks and new car. Here are my parents, much younger than I am now. Sepia-tone photos spread out in front of me. Though my grandparents died before I was born, I recognize them from conversations I had with my parents as we looked through the albums my mother saved. Here my grandmother is holding my father in her lap as my grandfather and my father’s twelve older siblings look sternly at the camera. I know they
are my dad’s brothers and sisters, but I cannot identify each one. I never met many of them, and the others I knew only in their older years. Here are two photos of my mother’s mother and father, looking uncomfortable in their Sunday clothing.

With Mom’s permission, I took these prints out of her photo albums when I moved to Tampa in 1981. I told her I would make copies and return them. I never did. When I moved into this house in 1992, I stored them with other mementoes. I recall retrieving them a few years later to show to my sister who was visiting. I promised to make and send her copies. I never did. Recognizing their value, I had placed them in a “special” location, for “safe keeping.” As time passed, though, I couldn’t remember where that safe spot was.

Periodically over the last two decades I had searched for my lost photos. Thinking I might have put them into the living room bookcase, several times I removed all the books from those shelves. When the photos were not there, I thought I might have accidentally thrown them away. Not giving up, I checked and rechecked several boxes of snapshots in various closets. Every time I searched with no success, I re-experienced a feeling of loss in my stomach akin to what one might feel upon recalling the death of a loved one. In the last few years, I had stopped my exhaustive searching, but when I thought of the photos—which was frequent—I still felt a deep longing. The image of the manila envelopes remained vivid in my mind as I went through mental exercises about where they might be.

When my mother died in 2002, my sister took the remaining photos from Mom’s albums, saying she would scan them for my brother and me. She never did. Instead, they accidently ended up in her storage unit in Mississippi, and in 2005 Hurricane Katrina flooded the unit and destroyed them. Several years passed before my sister told me what happened. When she did, I admitted to her I couldn’t find my photos. I wonder if my forgetfulness somehow made her feel better about losing her photos in the flood. As we lamented having lost nearly every family photo that existed from our childhood, maybe our mutual feelings of guilt made us more forgiving of each other. Though we didn’t say as much, we felt that we had lost a piece of our history and memories of those who had come before us.

Now, looking at the found photos, tears wet my eyes. They are joyful tears but associated with deep longing, memory, and rediscovery. I linger in the photos for a while, shuffling them over and over, wanting to hold onto them, fearful of returning them to their mislaid resting place and losing them again. At that moment, I feel reconnected with my past.

“I found them! I found them!” I yell to my partner Art as I run too fast down the steep stairs, waving the envelopes.

“What are you talking about?” he asks, exhausted and taking a break from his own closet cleanup attempts. Yellowed newspaper pages and typed papers with faded print and missing corners spread out on the counter in front of him.

“The photos. All my school pictures from every grade, and old pictures of my family, when I was young and before I was born.”

“That’s great, honey. I am so happy for you.” He glances at a few of them and responds enthusiastically, though he is engaged in his own memories. “Let’s look at them together tonight. I want to listen as you talk about each one of them.”
“Okay,” I say, but I can’t wait. I arrange the school photos on the kitchen counter by grade, aided by the numbers I had written on their backs. I am also assisted by my different hairstyles—from curly to teased and finally long and flowing. The fuzzy curly ones take me back to sitting atop a stool on a kitchen chair, where I screamed from the torture of the tightly rolled curlers demanded by those chemically smelly home perms. “It’s pulling my skin,” I complained to my mom. “Be quiet, you baby,” my mom said. “I’m just trying to make you look better. We have to do something with this hair. It’s straight as a stick. Sit still or I’ll give you something to cry about.” Another clue to the proper order is the buck and crooked teeth in the earlier photos, before I had my teeth straightened.

I study other photos for clues as to when, where, and who. So many memories flood my body. Later that night, I enjoy telling Art about the experiences the prints arouse. Some of the photos and stories validate the general image of myself and my life as a kid and adolescent that I had conveyed to Art over the years—neighborhood stories, family traditions, life in the country outside a small town, and family relationships. For example, I repeat stories of how close I was to my brother Rex, who died at age twenty-nine in a commercial airplane crash on his way to visit me.3 “We used to fight a lot,” I say, “but beneath the fighting was an intense love. We’d always protect and stand up for each other. Like the time my father told me to get a switch to use to punish my brother who was swimming in a nearby pond in the dead of winter. I pretended not to be able to find one,” I laugh. Though Art has heard this story many times, he asks for details and encourages me to talk as long as I want about my antics with my brother.

Art and I have been together for twenty-nine years and have talked a great deal about our childhoods. Yet now the photos elicit many new stories from me, filled with mundane and sensuous memories, and vivid storytelling. I tell him about the exhilaration of climbing trees with my siblings; playing baseball in the fields without gloves; insisting on being part of touch football with the boys; being reprimanded for wearing shorts to school so that I could wrestle on the playground; riding bikes in the neighborhood; hearing the sounds of heavy equipment starting at 7:30 every morning; appreciating my father’s love of trucks and my mother’s joy in buying a new car; sharing one bathroom for a while with seven family members; and running really fast to my neighbor Ms. Gerdy’s outhouse when our bathroom was occupied.

As we look at photos of my father’s large family, I say to Art, “Many people, including Dad, used to call me ‘Mittie Bell,’ the name of his mother. They said I looked and acted just like her. I believe she ended up late in life in Stanton, the shorthand moniker for the area’s insane asylum. Nobody ever wanted to talk much about that story. But my father did like to tell how, as a strong woman, his mother labored hard and served a full dinner every day at noon to all the workhands on the farm her husband and sons tended. Supposedly, a professional photographer came by one day and took these photos of the family. That’s why there are so many of them.

“But I have only one photo of my mother’s parents,” I lament. “They were poor sharecroppers. I don’t know a lot about them either, though I did know almost all of my mom’s brothers and sisters. My mom didn’t tell many stories. But she did talk about
picking huckleberries for a nickel a bucket, and she loved to tell how she and her siblings would sneak into a religious, holy-roller tent revival and watch the people all ‘fall out’ when they got the spirit. She also described working alongside her mom at the Blue Bell factory where they sewed pockets on pants. You know, when she was dying, she called over and over for her mother. ‘Mommy, mommy,’ she groaned as though she were a child lost in the woods.”

“I remember your telling me that,” Art says, taking my hand in his.

I shake that memory from my mind and turn to a happier one about taking my mom back to her home place not long before she became bedridden during the last year of her life. “We were riding around, hunting family graves at all the little churches in the community, when I asked Mom to show me where she had grown up. She directed me to a dirt road, and said, ‘Down there.’ I turned onto the rocky path, and she said, ‘You can’t go there. People live in that house.’ But she was perched on the edge of her seat, stretching her neck to see ahead. So I kept going. When her home place was just around the bend, I got cold feet. What if this family had a gun? After all, we were on a dirt road in the Appalachia hills. I stopped to back out and she said, ‘No, no, go on.’ So I did.

“We pulled up to this little boxy house—it couldn’t have been more than six hundred square feet—and I got out. When a middle-aged couple came to the door, I told them that my mother’s father had built the house, and they invited us in. I helped my mother navigate her walker along the rough terrain into the house. Though the family had made changes, the same four rooms she remembered were intact. Kitchen and living room downstairs, two bedrooms upstairs with steep and narrow steps going up between them. I explored the house, thinking about how my mother, her parents, and six siblings had lived in that small space. ‘The five girls slept in one room, the two boys in another, and the parents slept in the living room,’ she told me. But it was the low ceilings I could reach up and touch that I couldn’t get over,” I say, looking up at our twenty-foot cathedral ceilings.

“My mama told stories that day,” I say, “and I left feeling closer than ever to her and sensed I understood things I had never understood before. Really, that was one of the highlights of all my visits with her.”

Over the next few days, I periodically look through the photos. Hours go by as I linger in them. I run my fingers over each photo, lovingly, time and time again, wanting to touch the people in them. The photos momentarily elicit the past in vivid and visceral ways, a past I often have found difficult to remember. I let the memories surface and take me over. I wish I could be back in time; I wish I had known all my grandparents and uncles and aunts; I wish I could talk with and hear the stories of the many people in the photos who are now deceased; I wish I could climb trees again with my brother Rex. I let this sadness rest in my body, and focus instead on the feeling of attachment and renewal aroused by the photos and memories.

In the following weeks I begin the process of organizing the thousands of photos contained in the copy paper box into small, multicolored archival quality plastic containers that fit into a larger photo case. I look at each photo, discarding only a few duplicates, landscape scenes, and out-of-focus prints. I label the plastic containers as I go—old family
When I tell a close friend what I am doing, she laughs. “I did the same as you, bought all these plastic containers when I retired. Five years later, I still have not finished.” As I think of the hundreds—thousands—of photos from the 1990s and early 2000s stored in a footlocker downstairs, I wonder if that will happen to me. Or perhaps even worse: I will do all this organization, and our trust executors will toss these photos—including the thousands from the last two decades on my computer—without looking at them. When I mention this to Art, he replies, “We will write in our will that our heirs have to examine everything before they throw it away.” We laugh.

SEEKING MEANING IN MEMORY

“How did your day go?” Art asks, as we take a break from our cleanups for our daily neighborhood walk with the dogs.

“I managed to organize more photos and scan the family ones into my computer.”

“Terrific. Now you’ll never lose them again.”

“True, but unfortunately I didn’t get any work done [i.e., writing this article or working on any of the many academic projects I have taken on].”

Art objects. “Of course, you got work done. You preserved photos, and you enjoyed it. That is work. And it’s meaningful.”

“You’re right, of course.”

“I don’t want to judge our days solely by how much academic work we complete,” Art continues.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I say, realizing he is preaching to himself as much as to me. “Besides, lingering in these photos has taught me a lot about what’s important, and the process has provided clues about how I want to live this next period of life.”

“Say more,” Art instructs.

“I feel more connected to my past and to my family now, the people and times that helped shape me. I also feel akin to that little girl who appears repeatedly in these photos. It’s clear she has had many experiences that have transformed her and her values through the years. But “Little Carolyn” is still a part of me, and I can find the seeds of the self I am now in these pictures. Interestingly, this sense of continuity and reconnection to the past feels freeing. It reminds me of an experience of distancing and reconnection I’ve had before.”

Art nods for me to continue.

“When I left home to go to the College of William and Mary and then to Stony Brook in New York for graduate school to become a professor, I tried to disconnect from my early life. I still visited my family and loved them all deeply, but I felt I was different from them, and I emphasized that difference. You know what I mean?”

“Oh, yes, I had the same experience. It’s pretty typical for working-class kids who go away for more education.”

I nod. “Some of that feeling of ‘being apart from’ was challenged later when I developed a closer relationship with my mother, which incidentally came partly from writing stories about her. I experienced renewed interest in my hometown community during the last year...”
of my mother’s life when I visited frequently to help my siblings take care of her and saw how locals rallied around my family. The same feelings emerged when I went home to participate in the funerals of my brother Rex, my parents, and other family members. Death and illness are community affairs in a small town. Though I felt a renewed sense of “belonging,” I still felt that the socialization I experienced after I moved away from Luray had radically altered who I was. The reign of Trump in the last few years deepened some of those issues for me again, especially given the difference between my politics and those of family members and most of this community. But on each of these occasions, deep examination and the stories I’ve composed have helped me to see that I don’t have to throw away the past in each phase of my life in order to reject some of the values I no longer share.

“Finding these photos has been a watershed event. They remind me of my past and have inspired me to move on to the next phase of life, accompanied by, but not held down by, images of the past.”

Art smiles. “So how has this kind of thinking helped with this next phase—retirement, I mean?”

“Sometimes I’ve viewed retirement as a break from the past, just as I anticipated about my life after leaving home for college. But I’m finding out it’s not, just as it wasn’t then.”

“Yes, we’re still doing many of the same things that we’ve always done. Writing, reading, reviewing, talking, laughing, traveling, hiking, eating.”

“There’s that,” I say. “But there’s more. Lingering with these photos reminds me that I am still much the same person as I was before. I may be more mature and seasoned. I’ve had joys and adventures, grief and loss, and some of my values have changed as a result of those experiences and the people with whom I spend most of my time. But this wide-eyed kid with energy, imagination, and love is still alive in me, though in a body that creaks more often.”

Art laughs. “Isn’t that the truth?”

“I appreciate that now you and I have more time to linger in memory, and to think about the continuity of our lives,” I say. “And to remember all those relationships that were so important to us. For example, the people in these photos plus all those who came along later—friends, colleagues, and former students who contributed to and expanded our work, constantly supporting what we did. You know, that’s what I ended up saving from my closet along with the photos—letters and mementos from people who were important in my life.”

“We also have more opportunity now to linger in the moment and connect to those present in our physical world as well,” says Art, bringing me back to the here and now. “Let’s not forget that.”

“Yes, yes. That’s important. It’s easy to say this, but I really want to figure out how to live it. Though I have loved my life at the university, I hope you and I can control the pressure to move lock step from one task to another as we did when we were employed. That’s one way I do hope retirement will be different from the life that came before it. You know, to some extent retirement gives us a possibility of returning to our childhood and being kids again. We can ‘sit a spell’ on the porch, swinging, and visiting with friends, neighbors, and family. Or maybe we might just want to dream while swaying,
probably more now about the past than the future. We can be more spontaneous, waking up each morning without a prescribed agenda and taking more pleasure in mundane activities."

“Like gardening, walking, and playing,” Art says. I nod. He and I latch fingers while the dogs who, feeling the emotional tone of the conversation, slow down and glance back at us. Intuiting that all is well, fifteen-year-old Buddha stops to sniff, calling on the sense that now stands in for sight and hearing. Younger Zen pulls on her leash, eager to work off her Australian Shepherd energy.

“I agree. Now we have more time to call our own,” Art says, “and I want to make the best of it.”

“We’re on the same page,” I say. “You should know, though, that I’ve decided to write about this experience of lingering in the closet and finding the photos.”

“I’m not at all surprised.”

“What’s wonderful about the kind of autoethnographic writing we do is that it doesn’t take us away from the rest of our lives; it is part of our lives. Writing about our lived experience enhances and deepens our lives, especially our memories. Take these photos, for example. Thinking and writing autoethnographically about finding them has added greatly to the experience, the meaning, and the memories I now have from my time in the closet. These aren’t just found photos; they’re something more.”

“I see that,” Art says. “Just make sure you don’t let the recording of life take over the doing of it.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t intend to live at my computer. It’s too hard on my creaky back anyway.”

“I’m glad we have more time for reflection now,” Art says. “Ironically, university life, which emphasizes the life of the mind, often doesn’t leave room for deep reflection.”

“So true,” I say, chuckling. “Instead it stresses moving fast, producing more, and getting ahead, whatever that means.” After the hubbub of the last forty years—which, don’t get me wrong, I relished—I’m looking forward to appreciating some quiet time and sense of peace.”

“Me too.”

“Besides, there’s other parts of life to be explored and appreciated. Just look at that sunset.”

“Don’t you love Florida winters?” Art asks.

“Yes, as much as I love summers in our North Carolina cabin. We have a great life. I don’t want to ever take that for granted. Just as not everyone has their own closet in which to linger, not everyone can afford to be retired or to have the kind of retirement we have. Nor might they have the luxury of time or means to contemplate it as we do...”

“Or a partner with whom to share it,” Art adds.

“Or adequate health and health resources,” I contribute.

“Or dogs to play with,” says Art, pulling a tennis ball from his pocket and throwing it for Zen. Buddha scampers around, trying to participate in the play but staying out of the path of danger from the flying leash and Zen’s robustness.

As I take a video of the action, I think about how much I learn about living and aging from our canine companions. Suddenly, I click off my camera and dart ahead. “Race you
home,” I say, reminding myself of that little girl captured in the photos. “Come on doggies!” I yell over my shoulder, as Zen barks and grabs at my hand, determined to herd me. “There are treats there, for all of us, for now, to eat and enjoy before dinner—they always taste better then.”

REUNION

Three months after finding these photos, I attend my fiftieth high school reunion in Luray, my hometown of 4,800 residents in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I take with me copies of the photos in the manila envelopes along with other discovered pictures of classmates in high school and at the twentieth and thirtieth high school reunions I attended.

I stay in a cabin in the woods with my four closest girlfriends from high school. We laugh and share old photos and stories into the night. I take more photos.

At the reunion dinners, we all delight in telling stories of our past. The excitement of sharing experiences is palpable, especially when attendees gather around to share memories elicited by the photos I show them. I am delighted when several women take copies of the prints of my father’s family and say they know someone who will be able to identify each of my uncles and aunts. Many of us take more photos, sharing them with each other on Facebook.

I spend a night with my eighty-two-year-old brother and seventy-nine-year-old sister-in-law, who still live in my mother’s home. We share stories and then drive through my old neighborhood, stopping to look at the house I grew up in, visit my nephew, and tend the family graves.

While in Luray, I am fully immersed in being there. My thoughts focus on how much I have in common with people in this community, rather than on how we are different. I glimpse in those I meet—and then in my own comfort level as I interact with same-age classmates—so many forgotten pieces of myself as the little girl who grew up in this small, southern town. I feel loving, open, and delighted with this visit and the reconnections I make. When it is time to leave, I am nostalgic, yet excited and ready to return to the place I now call home and the people (and canines) I consider my chosen family. I take with me old and new stories, and more photographs to linger over and enrich my memories of the past, my current life, and my dreams for the future.

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NOTES


5. See Alasdair MacIntyre, who makes the case for the self as a unity of narratives that run from birth to death and are embedded in our communities, traditions, and history. “The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition,” in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 2007), 217–25.


7. See Carolyn Ellis, *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009), for stories about taking care of my mother and an extended description of my journey from Luray to college and back.


10. On using family photos to elicit family experiences, see Krystal Bresnahan and Alyse Keller, “Performing Family Photographs: Photo Elicitation as Relational Practice,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 5: 30–46.
