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Memories lost in the digital world

Two thousand six hundred eighty two. That's how many photos are stored in my galleries on my phone. Aside from pictures taken for work, there are another 7,833 sitting in folders on my laptop. Add those with the countless files hidden away on Shutterfly, SD cards and random flash drives, and I have a whole lot of pictures. All of which, are undeveloped.

One of my favorite past times as a child was reminiscing in my parents' photo albums. They were stored on shelves at the top of a walk-in closet. My brother and I had to remove a captain's chair from the dining room table and transfer it to the closet in order to be able to reach the memories hidden above. Whether we learned about our younger lives – peering into baptismal photos or those of the magnificent homemade birthday cakes Mom created – or found more understanding of who our parents were before they were Mom and Dad, by viewing photos of their travels, old employees or service members; we were always grateful there was photographic evidence to preserve the stories.

It's been 15 years since I moved out of my parents' home for the first time, but I bet I could still find the photo of my mom and her coworkers donning heart-shaped sunglasses at the Suburban Racquetball Club or the one of my Dad jamming out with his 1970s headphones – the throwback version of Beats by Dre – inside the Army barracks. The photos might be tattered and littered with finger oils, but it doesn't make them any less special than the over ten thousand digital images stored on my devices. There are only a few photographs from each period before the turn of the century in my parents', brother's and my existence, but the reality is they're that much more significant.

"What's your favorite picture of me or of you," I asked my son. "I don't know," he answered, scrunching his nose and looking at me oddly.



BY NATASHA BARBER
On my Sleeve

After looking around the room, he told me his favorite photo of himself was his latest school picture. Clearly, he wasn't recalling from memory as he was looking right at it as it sat inside a frame on our end table. When asked, he admitted that was exactly why he chose his answer. He fessed up to liking a photo of me in my sunglasses, but wasn't able to describe in any detail of which photo that might be. He couldn't even tell me which pair. I asked him where it was – hoping that I might be able to pinpoint a particular photograph – but he told me he didn't

know. He had seen it one time. I was in my car, but he couldn't remember where he'd be able to retrieve it. Unlucky for me, there are probably a few hundred pictures of me in my car with sunglasses. To find the photo that resonates with my son will take some work – that is, if I've even kept it. After all, it is so easy to delete the digital images we see imperfections in without stopping to think what others may see in them.

Without prompting him, Lucas spoke up. "My favorite photo of Dad and I is of us on a big rock near the water. I was really young. It's the one that's in my photo album," he said.

I had proved my point. Even if he didn't know I was trying.

With each click of the digital shutter, our family photos have become less and less noteworthy. Not because the memories we have created are less important, but because rather than displaying those good times in albums, in frames and in photo boxes; instead, the thousands remain undeveloped and forgotten. The strength of digital images – the fact that you can take as many as you want with disregard – has also contributed to their weakness. If left inside an electronic device, does it even matter that I took 57 photos of the kids and Neil playing football one day last summer? It might. But not if they never have a chance to sift through them during their free time to remember the fun they had.