**Why do people keep photos**

**A quick and unscientific review of a little relevant material found on the net**

**Paul Wilson, 11July 2012**

As part of the very time-consuming task of organising the family photos, I wanted to just reflect why I’m doing it and whether it’s worth bothering about. So I did a quick trawl of the net and came up with four relevant sets of info which are summarised below.

**Summaries of four sets of info from the net**

The Youth Coders Network is a Polish-based site and has a discussion on this very topic – “Why do people keep photographs”. (<http://youthcoders.net/photo/theory/979-why-do-people-keep-photographs.html>). Relevant extracts from the discussion are reproduced below:

* There is an extract from Agatha Christie's "Mrs. McGinty's Death" in which three reasons are given:
  + Vanity
  + Sentiment
  + Hate
* As a reminder from the past, the good memories, happy occasions and festivities
* Has more value printed than something digital. It is something concrete, something you can actually "put your finger on".
* I Keep them in my drawer. I usually find them accidentally when cleaning up and have a moment of reminiscence. This happens occasionally - until then I’m just happy to know they're there.
* I think as well that people keep them as a reminder. For example, I keep my pics on my computer and while having a break I often have a look at some of them - especially the emotional ones which show my friends and me having fun. Then I'm experiencing those moments for some minutes in my mind again and feel good. It's like a kind of escapism...
* But why photographs? We can also keep letters, tickets (from our first date in the cinema or theatre) or any other special pieces, which help us to remember. So why photographs? What is it in them?
* A picture makes it easier to recall good times than letters, tickets etc. Emotions are expressed in a more enchanted way.
* There is a lot of escapism to it. Sometimes when I feel nostalgic, I take out my albums and kind of escape to the world of the past, of the memories. For me it is important that the pictures are printed out and put nicely in an album or scrap book. If there was a fire in my house and I only had time to save one item, I would definitely choose my photo albums.
* To show and share them with people around them or in public rather self-fulfilled by reminding memories. It’s inevitable not to concern people or friends whom we want to show the photographs. As "Seeing is believing", it's easy to explain our memories and travel story by letting them see pictures or adding explanations on them.
* I also believe that people keep photos for memories. You can always go back to the pictures and see "how it really was". Cinema tickets and letters do not have the same power as photos. If my house would set on fire the first thing I would save (after my man and my daughter of course:) would be the pictures of us, especially the pictures of my baby girl. Nothing could ever replace the pictures of my new born baby. I will never have that moment again and I would be devastated if I would loose the pictures. It is something so special. I always have at least two safety copies of all my pictures and I try to make them into paper versions as soon as possible.
* For me photographs are the captures of moments. I have these moments also in my mind, but as a memory. And memories can become vague. To catch back the real moment, I can take a look on the pictures. But also reversed, when I want to laugh or when I'm in a nostalgic mood, I look up pictures which remind me of these moments.... Funny thing is that my Dad has the contradictory thought about photos. He always says ‘stop making photos and enjoy the moment’! I think this is also important, but as a memory of this enjoyable moment I always want to have a picture.
* The most common reason to keep photos is to keep memories. There are so many important moments in life to capture. Still, I'm a little bit worried about the inflation of photos. With this I mean nowadays in digital time it's too easy to take photos. Maybe you'll take two hundred photos of one event and then just keep them all. What is the value of one picture if there are ten pictures looking the same?
* People keep them because they want to be reminded their past.
* There are some photos that aren't just simple photos: there are also feelings that you will be reminded of when seeing the photo!

The second item I found was an article on The Psychology of Photography by DynamicS - <http://dynamics.hubpages.com/hub/The-Psychology-of-Photography>

Key points from this piece are summarised below:

* A picture is worth a thousand words because:
  + An expression of joy, sadness, tranquility, apprehension, concern or horror can inform the viewer about the state of mind or emotions of the person photographed
  + A picture can give information of trends in fashion, decor, architecture or landscape.
  + A picture can be evaluated for historical data and can provide some understanding of time past, which can serve as a linkage of one generation and another.
  + Photograph tells so much about us as individuals; our history, our preferences.
  + Photographs tell us about time and space and how things have evolved or remained the same.
  + A photograph can evoke feelings of anxiety, fear, familiarity, comfort or reverence depending on the subject matter.
  + Photographs can have the effect of reflecting the soul and thoughts of the person photographed. This is often reflected back to the viewer as you may feel that the subject of a portrait may be reading your thoughts and soul. For example, when I was a child we had a family portrait hanging in our dining room. Each time I looked at the picture it seemed like my mother was looking at my every move. I felt like I had to behave or else she would disapprove of me.
  + Have you ever seen a portrait that had such a captivating smile that it begs you to smile back? Many of us are drawn to pictures for varying reasons; a sense of comfort, a sense of familiarity or a sense of reverence and awe.

The third piece was an article in the on-line journal Psychology Today by Mark D. White, Ph.D on What's So Special About Photographs? - <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/maybe-its-just-me/201012/whats-so-special-about-photographs>

* In "Factive Pictorial Experience: What's Special about Photographs?," a paper forthcoming in the journal Noûs, philosopher Robert Hopkins of the University of Sheffield explores the unique properties of photographs, comparing them to both "handmade" pictures (such as drawings and paintings) as well as digital photographs.
* A pictorial experience is factive if it relays facts about that object. If our experience of a picture showing a boy holding a ball is factive, then we know that that boy was holding that ball when the picture was taken. And it is this factivity that gives photograph their special status, the fact that we know—given certain qualifications—that what we see in a photograph actually existed or occurred.
* Why should we hold photographs to some special status based on their supposed factivity when they can be faked or fraudulent? Hopkins admits this, and argues that 1) photographs by their very nature are designed to be factive, but 2) this factivity is realized only if things are working properly and done right. In other words, photographs may not always be accurate, but there is an expectation that they are—there's a normative aspect to photography by which they are supposed to accurately depict reality. And this includes how we view photographs: we should look at them with the assumption that we are looking at a picture of reality and try to make the best sense out of it we can

Finally I looked at some presentation material on the subject of the Psychology of Compulsive Hoarding by Dr Christopher Mogan of the Anxiety Clinic in Victoria, Australia.

<http://www.hoardingsqualorconference.com.au/2009/files/presentations/Psychology%20of%20Compulsive%20Hoarding%20-%20Dr%20Christopher%20Mogan.pdf>

* The first point he makes is that it is common to hoard ‘stuff’ – people keep things ‘ just in case’; but that compulsive hoarding is more pervasive, dominating time, and space of self and others.
* Compulsive hoarding is characterised by packed garages, backyards, corridors, roof spaces, and rooms chaotic and unusable. The individuals concerned are unable to organize, discard things or prevent clutter.
* Frost & Hartl (1996) defined Compulsive Hoarding as “The acquisition of and failure to discard possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value”.
* Hoarders have specific problem appraisals:
  + Emotional attachment to objects
  + Memory for possessions and objects
  + Control of possessions and objects
  + Responsibility for possessions and objects
* Other hoarding-related cognitions
  + Indecisiveness
  + No confidence in memory
  + Need to keep things ‘in view’
  + Comfort from being ‘with’ things
  + Fear of forgetting important memories
  + Need to be reassured about things
* One aspect of treating the condition is to challenge the myths of saving:
  + Someone will find this useful.
  + I never throw anything away.
  + I must keep all things that recall this person.
  + I know exactly where everything is.
  + How helpful to me is this clutter and mess?
  + These things are my life…I don’t know why!
  + Throwing things away is rejecting them
  + Keeping things is to accept it into my life.

**Analysis and Conclusions**

A quick analysis of all these four sources seems to indicate the following:

The main reasons that people keep photos is a) as a reminder of the past, and b) to share their experiences with others. There are many aspects to the first reason including:

* To experience a moment again and the feelings you had at that moment
* To remind you of someone you really liked – or perhaps hated
* To escape from the present to the past because it is somehow more enjoyable than the present
* To augment a vague memory and see how it really was

People also keep other artefacts such as theatre tickets and programmes, but a photo provides a richer memory experience. The saying ‘A picture is worth a thousand words’ is appropriate for a variety of reasons including:

* Photos tell us about the person photographed, and how they looked, what they did and liked or disliked, and maybe even how they were feeling or what they were thinking.
* Photos tell us about history, trends and how things have changed or stayed the same
* Photos also tell us about the interests , preferences and lives of the people taking the photos.

Photos also have a special value over and above keepsakes or even paintings – they are ‘factive’. That is, we know that, provided things are working properly and have been done right, what’s in a photo actually existed or occurred. Of course, most people are aware that photos can give a false impression or can be doctored, but under normal circumstances photos show things the way they were.

Keeping photos is not normally classified as Hoarding – though a couple of the characteristics of hoarders might apply – no confidence in one’s memory and a fear of forgetting important memories. So, it is likely that someone with hoarding tendencies would probably want to keep photos – but just because someone keeps photos doesn’t make them a hoarder.

Interestingly, I found little mention of specific family reasons for keeping photos – either to see what one’s ancestors were like or to pass photos down to future generations. There was mention that photos tell us about our history and can serve as a linkage of one generation to another but no discussion of why those things are important. My guess is that it is just a natural human trait to be interested in where you came from and what your ancestors were like; and that any desire to hand photos down to the next generation simply reflects the value that individuals place on having such information about their ancestors themselves.

**Addendum**

After completing the write-up above I emailed the philosopher Robert Hopkins of the University of Sheffield, and asked him if he could point me in the direction of someone who is knowledgeable on the subject of why people keep photos. Her very kindly sent me the following reply:

*“I don't know of any philosopher who has addressed this specific question. However, one might use some of the views in the philosophy of photography to try to answer it. As you perhaps know, Kendall Walton, in a famous paper called 'Transparent Pictures', argues that to see someone in a photo of them is literally to see that person. So photographs are aids to vision: like spectacles, mirrors, microscopes and night vision goggles, they allow us to see things through them. The special feature of photographs, in this regard, is that they allow us to see things that lie in the past. Walton thinks that, while ordinary folk wouldn't necessarily put things that way, they are sensitive to this fact about photographs. We treat photos differently from other pictures, and we do so because they put us in some specially intimate relation with the objects in them. His account explains what that intimacy amounts to: it is seeing the thing. If he's right about all this, the answer to your question comes readily enough. People keep photographs because they want to be able to see scenes, and the people and objects in them, even when those people and things are long gone, or far away, or no longer in the state they once were.”*

The paper that Rob refers to is accessible at this address: <http://komm.bme.hu/wp-content/uploads/group-documents/76/1315656188-Walton_Transparent_Pictures.pdf>

It was published in December 1984 in the journal Critical Enquiry and is 30 pages or so of detailed discussion illustrated by example photos and pictures. At the time of writing it, Kendall Walton was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan.

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