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Saving Lives Through Photos

Someday finally came...and it's time to organize your photos

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Photo by sarandy westfall on Unsplash

With the death toll rising incomprehensibly each day, we're all facing a big question: if the unthinkable happens in my family, what stories will we lose? What

legacy will my loved ones leave?

Before the pandemic of 2020 winds down, we will all be touched in some way. It's a strange juxtaposition. While commerce has come to a halt, we're fast-forwarding to thoughts of what families and communities will be like...after.

While slowing down and skipping ahead, we finally have time to enjoy our photos. Pictures have always helped us celebrate and grieve.

Photos tell our stories.

In the days ahead, thousands upon thousands of people will use photos to help them heal.

I attended a funeral for a teenager few weeks ago, just days before coronavirus locked us all in at home. He was a child of the digital age. Most of the photos his parents ever took of him were pixels. Like at many other funerals, the family had assembled photo boards with pictures of the deceased. Why do we do that? Because it provides comfort, memories, celebration, and most of all, so that the stories of our loved ones won't be lost.

My grandmother died last year, just shy of her 90th birthday. She had planned ahead, and chose the photos that she wanted shown at her funeral, not leaving to chance any embarrassment or burden for her children. Her photos were printed. They all fit neatly in an envelope, labeled for her funeral, stored in a drawer in her bedroom.

COVID-19 is a tornado, a hurricane, a forest fire, and a plane crash all wrapped up in one. It has changed everything in an instant. People we are losing left so much undone, including organizing their photo collection. There is a sense of urgency now to save our photos that we've never had before — because once our family is gone, they can't tell the stories behind the pictures.

Most people today have a private mess of digital and printed photos. They imagine that they'll get to it *someday*. When they have time, they'll put their photos in chronological order, eliminate the duplicates, and put together a book to share that great trip they took to Europe. They'll show their kids. They'll send a copy of that funny shot to old friends. They'll *finally* put together the baby books for the

children who are now in high school and college. Maybe when they retire, they'll watch the old 35-millimeter family films and VHS tapes of their wedding. Someday, there will be time for organizing photos.

While we're home making masks and washing our hands, we can be saving lives in another way by organizing photos.

People will run into a burning building to save photos because they are proof that we were here, that we had a family, accomplishments, and love. We take pictures to prove that we were part of a trend, part of a tribe. We keep pictures to prove that our life was unique and special. When you show a photo to a friend, there is always a story that goes with it. There was a funny thing that happened just before the shutter clicked, or just after the party that night. Sometimes two people can burst out laughing with a glance at a photo because of everything that went wrong on *that* day, captured with paper and dye. You learn surprising things about your parents only because you saw a photo of them in their youth. A funny hat, beloved car, or special tradition gets preserved when you have the story behind the picture.

We're going to need our pictures in the days ahead as we heal. Some people are already so overwhelmed with their photo mess that their photos won't be much help as they suffer loss of precious lives around them.

If there is downtime in your life today, spending it organizing your photos can help you take comfort, honor those special days that will take place under quarantine, and connect with family both near and far. Use your lockdown to preserve your memories, and those of your family members, now. Take these steps:

1. Review your smartphone's camera roll. Determine how far back your digital pictures go, and where they leave off.
2. Scour your home for old computers, hard drives, USB drives, and disks for digital photos that aren't on your phone. Look for old digital cameras, too.
3. Consider where in the cloud you might still have some memories hiding.

4. Gather together your print photos, including albums, framed photos that you aren't displaying, slides, VHS tapes, reel-to-reel movies, 35mm film, and undeveloped film.
5. With all of your collection in one place, you are at a great starting point to migrate it all to a central digital hub. If your photos are mostly digital, import the older items into your Apple iCloud account, Google Photos account, or any other cloud service that you feel comfortable with.
6. If you could use some help, contact a member of the [Photo Managers](#) to turn your mess into a curated collection that accessible on all of your digital devices. The Photo Managers is a worldwide professional organization (formerly known as the Association for Professional Photo Organizers) dedicated to helping families preserve their photos.
7. Backup, backup, backup your photo collection! Multiple copies on multiple drives and cloud solutions are preferred to just one digital copy.
8. Print your most important photos. It's not uncommon for a family to have tens of thousands or even 100,000 photos in a collection. They can't all be the best. Print your favorites.
9. Make sure someone you love knows where your photos are, especially if they only exist in digital form. Give someone access to your phone, your computer, or your cloud account.
10. Share your photos and stories with someone you love. In ten years, it won't matter at all that you binge-watched the latest TV series during the pandemic. Preserving and sharing your photos today will, however, help you pass your stories to future generations.

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