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The Powerful Force of Nostalgia

By Peter Telep
UCF Forum columnist
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Sure, we could sell the magical objects of our youth, but sometimes you can't put a price on your past.



Every time he dusts off his Star Wars figures from the 1970s, columnist Peter Telep says he remembers what it feels like to be 12 again.

When I was a kid, the year 2020 was a date in science fiction novels. But here we are in the future—and yet remakes, reboots, and revivals are still wildly popular across all

forms of entertainment media. There's even a convention called NostalgiaCon Ultimate 80s Reunion now running in its second year and growing in attendance.

As I'm an old school Star Wars fan, it was the original films that captured my imagination and symbolize my childhood. Recently, *The Mandalorian* on Disney+ has recaptured the magic of those original stories and has critics calling it the best Star Wars yet.

Other shows like *Stranger Things* and the upcoming *Wonder Woman* sequel are transporting us back in time, and audiences seem to be loving it. Netflix documentaries such as *The Toys that Made Us* share the behind-the-scenes drama of an industry we grew up with. The list of nostalgia-driven entertainment is endless.

So why are we stuck in the past? Why is retro so cool? My parents said don't dwell on the past. Focus on the future.

As an educator, I spend most of my time preparing students for the road ahead. Even Star Wars' esteemed First Order leader Kylo Ren said, "Let the past die. Kill it if you have to. That's the only way to become what you were meant to be."

A stroll down memory lane is good medicine, just like mom's old cooking, rich and savory and always making you feel better.

Unsurprisingly, there's a ton of research on nostalgia, and if you can imagine the good old days of actually stepping foot in a library, then go one step farther and picture rows of shelves buckling under the weight of this work. Suffice it to say that thousands of researchers (or at least four whose articles I read) agree that nostalgia can boost creativity, evoke inspiration, increase optimism, and even combat loneliness, boredom and anxiety.

Nostalgic memories shared by couples and friends bring them closer. Apparently, a stroll down memory lane is good medicine, just like mom's old cooking, rich and savory and always making you feel better.

So this is why we cling to our old clothes, photos, record albums, jewelry, coins, baseball cards, and most importantly in my case, Star Wars action figures. These are the talismans of our youth, the magical objects that remind us we are still the kids who owned them way back when. And sure, they are valuable and we could sell them for a profit, but sometimes you can't put a price on your past.

In an article for *The New Yorker* entitled "The True Meaning of Nostalgia," Pulitzer Prize winning author Michael Chabon defines the feeling as something that "overcomes you when some minor vanished beauty of the world is momentarily restored."

Chabon alludes to a Latin phrase *sic transit gloria mundi*: thus passeth the glory of the world. Consequently, every time I dust off and admire my original Star Wars figures

from the 1970s, I am 12 again. My parents are still married. When I grow up, I will be Luke Skywalker.

My action figures—or your photos or films or songs—help you recall the wonders of your half-remembered, half-imagined childhood. You need them because you're afraid to lose yourself to the future. And we're reminded of that secret when we play with our old Legos or buy new ones for our children—but we do most of the playing.

This is all OK. We're not slackers stuck in the past. In fact, photos or songs or other objects from tougher times are important to remind us how we overcame that adversity. In this case, nostalgia becomes a defense mechanism to reassure us that those painful moments are only temporary. The past can, indeed, coexist with the present and give us courage to face the future.

But beware the dark side. Collecting pieces of nostalgia can turn into an obsession, into hoarding, a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

There's an adrenaline rush I get when I'm able to score a hard-to-find action figure and add it to my collection, but if I take it too far and start down the dark path, forever will it dominate my destiny. I don't want to wind up half-man, half-machine wearing a breathing mask—because that's what my wife will do to me if I blow our life savings on little pieces of plastic.

Nostalgia is a powerful force. It's the house we grew up in, the toys we played with, and the TV shows we watched. It's the smell of hot dogs cooking on a barbecue grill and that song your mom sang before tucking you in at night. It's everything we were, everything we still are, if only we remember.

And so a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I was a little boy playing with Star Wars figures. And now, all these years later, I'm still knocking on your door and asking, "You wanna come out and play?"

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