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## Benefits of Practicing Radical Gratitude

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## Benefits of Practicing Radical Gratitude

By J. Richelle Joe  
UCF Forum columnist  
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How I found healing through journaling and reminiscing about photographs.



One of columnist J. Richelle Joe's treasured photos shows her with her sister, Nicole, (left) and their dad in the snow.

I decided to find a therapist in February last year. My decision to begin therapy resulted from the realization that I needed to engage in some grief work as the losses experienced during adolescence have taken on new meaning in adulthood.

In hindsight, this was one of the timeliest decisions I have ever made, as my first therapy session occurred just as the country began to shut down in response to COVID-19. Therapy would prove invaluable during a year of anxiety, isolation, death and racial upheaval.

One of the healing practices that I developed through therapy incorporates my love of writing and my fascination with photographs. I have dozens of journals — filled with poems, thoughts, prayers, rants — and hundreds of photographs of family, friends and travel destinations. I could flip through those journals and gaze at those photos for hours, simply remembering. With my therapist's help, I began to transform my remembering into a contemplative tool for healing.

‘Laughter is everything. My father brought me many laughs, and I am grateful for them.’

For almost a year I have been journaling about some of the photographs that long have been trapped without meaning in boxes and photo albums. Periodically, I select a photo or group of photos and place them in a designated space created for the purpose of honoring individuals most dear to me.

I glance at the pictures as I pass this sacred space and take note of my thoughts and feelings. When I sense that I have sufficiently contemplated the photos, I set aside time on a Sunday morning to place them in my journal and sit with them for a few more moments.

Then I write.

I record my memories, emotions, questions, wishes and whatever else comes up for me. I challenge myself to remain present and engage in what I call radical gratitude. This has been a powerful practice for me.

The first photographs that I used for this practice show my father, sister and me playing in a snowstorm. I adore these photos, which have occupied space in my memory and heart for four decades. I can conjure these images even when they are nowhere in sight.

However, engaging in this new practice altered my experience with them. When I sat down to write about this particular set of photos, I wanted to record the facts and set the scene. To my recollection, the photos were taken during what has become known as the Circus Blizzard that hit Hampton Roads, Virginia, in 1980, trapping thousands of circus-goers in the Norfolk Scope arena.

In my mind, these photos of my family playing in the snow had always been connected to this specific weather event. Yet, as I examined the photos more closely, I began to question their time and location. I would have been nearly 5 at the time of the blizzard, and my sister 7; however, neither of us appears to be that old.

I spent several moments staring at the images, more curious than ever to know their context. Ultimately, I determined that the details of time and location were inconsequential in comparison to the visceral memories that the images evoked.

In my journal, I wrote how much I love my father's smile and appreciate the laughter that he brought into my life: "He was a fun dad. A silly dad. A dad who introduced me to humor and adventure."

In one of the photos, I am smiling down at him as he seems to defend himself from an onslaught of snow courtesy of nature, my sister and me. I wrote that looking at this scene made me smile, and that I visualized my mother snapping the shot, smiling too.

"Laughter is everything," I wrote. "My father brought me many laughs, and I am grateful for them."

I shared parts of this journal entry with my therapist, and she said, "Memories remind us who we are." Her statement and my experience with that first journal entry have set the tone for how I will engage with photographs in the future.

Choosing to shift away from the details or facts of a photograph and instead focus on what an image might remind me about myself and others has allowed me to better incorporate the past into the present.

In this way, I am remembering and healing. The remembering is healing.

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