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Personal Archeology in the Time of COVID-19

Over the past few months many of us have realized that, despite the havoc that the COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking on our society and lives, it is actually producing some beneficial side effects. If not friendlier, people at least are more respectful of each other's personal space, and many families, with parents working and children attending school from home, are rediscovering the pleasures (and challenges) of their domestic lives. In the pandemic's early months, when traffic dwindled to almost nothing, wildlife miraculously reappeared in our suburbs and even in our more densely populated urban areas, and the planet's air and water suddenly were clearer and cleaner than they had been in recent memory. All of which suggested the encouraging possibility that the earth is more resilient than we had any right to hope and that, despite all the damage we've inflicted on it over the past two hundred years, we may not have screwed the pooch quite yet.

Over these past few months, while sequestered in our homes, many of us have also turned our attention to personal projects we otherwise wouldn't have undertaken at this point in our lives, or maybe ever. Some are rummaging through boxes in the attic or garage, sifting through photographs, letters, and memorabilia, trying to recollect earlier lives and, I suspect, reclaim lost identities. Personal archeology, a friend of mine calls it. And that exercise inevitably generates a certain amount of nostalgia. In the past few months I've received emails, texts, or telephone calls from several old friends, long out of touch, and my former brother-in-law—divorced from my older sister for more than forty years—recently sent me some photographs from back in the day, because he's using his idle time at home to digitize his extensive collection of 35-mm. slides.

Me, too. I recently retrieved and opened two large Rubbermaid Action Packers where I store various relics from my past. One container was filled exclusively with my old school records: report cards, honor-roll certificates, and communications from teachers or principals from first grade through twelfth, all lovingly preserved and curated by my parents; a few college English papers; my master's thesis and papers related to my work as a graduate teaching assistant; my law school thesis; diplomas and professional certificates; and my old class photographs and yearbooks. For the past several years I've been thinking that I should review and purge this material, as a warmup for the larger, more difficult task of reviewing and purging the personal journals I've kept for many years and the old-fashioned letters from family and friends, written over the course of forty years, I've saved in numerous plastic bins. So, with time suddenly on my hands, I decided I would quickly sift through those school records; objectively (and ruthlessly)

decide which ones are still meaningful to me; keep those few; and shred or recycle the rest. Alas, I should have known that any project that involves revisiting one's past is never quick or easy. After many hours of perusing documents and trying to recall the circumstances, for example, that produced an utterly mediocre report card in the first quarter of ninth grade, I finally disposed of some of it. But not as much as I had expected.

If one has children, one can be forgiven a certain amount of hubris and self-indulgence in this regard. One saves one's personal records, believing, rightly or wrongly, that one's children will (or at least should) have an interest, someday, in learning more about their parents. But I'm sixty-six years old and divorced, and I have no children. I have two nieces and a nephew, and although they like their uncle Rob just fine, they have little or no interest in his personal history, much less in sifting through what is, by any standard, the excessive and unexciting documentation of his academic career. And yet, for reasons that were initially unclear to me, I realized I'm not ready, quite yet, to rid myself entirely of those dull archives. In ten more years (if I live that long), maybe; but not yet.

Why did I find it so hard to dispose of my school records? It wasn't because of the records themselves, of course, or the largely predictable information they contained. It was, rather, because I came to see them as signs of the past—clues to an ancient culture, artifacts of a vanished world. After reviewing them and without even consciously deciding to do it, I found myself searching the Internet and combing my memory for other information, trying to assemble the pieces of a puzzle and reconstruct in my mind a

particular time and place, and to understand why that time and place suddenly seemed loaded with significance, not just for me, but for our society and world.

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My father was a career Naval officer, and when I was growing up, our family lived the peripatetic life of the military family, moving every two or three or four years—from Colón, Panama; to Corpus Christi, Texas; to the Eastern Shore of Maryland; to Monterey, California; to Alexandria, Virginia; and, finally, to Norfolk, Virginia. I was the youngest of three children, and my father retired from the Navy in 1966, as I finished sixth grade. My father's first job after the Navy took us to Huntsville, Alabama, for two and a half years. But because he and my mother felt more comfortable in the Middle Atlantic, with its concentration of Navy families, facilities, and history, we returned to the Hampton Roads area in January 1969, the middle of my ninth-grade year.

Throughout my childhood we rented houses in middle-class suburbs, and my brother, sister, and I attended the local public schools. By the time we returned to the Hampton Roads area, however, my parents had achieved a modicum of financial security, and they bought the first and only house they were ever to own, a brick rancher in a modest neighborhood of other brick ranchers, split-levels, and two-story colonials in Virginia Beach. Because they believed I showed some academic promise, they also enrolled me in a small, private, coed high school in Norfolk. Starting a new school in the middle of an academic year is no fun for anyone, but it was particularly no fun for a shy,

neurotic teenager like me, and especially not in a school where many of my classmates had grown up in the area, had gone to school with each other since the first grade, and came from families more affluent than mine. So, to the extent I remember anything about that first semester, what I remember is trying to make decent grades to please my parents and garner approbation from my new teachers, and otherwise to fit into school as unobtrusively as possible. I was quiet, hard-working, and anonymous.

Over the next three years I settled into the school, eventually occupying a small, vacant niche in its traditional social structure. I ran cross country and track, made good grades, and earned an academic scholarship to college. I left Virginia for college in Tennessee, and after college migrated farther west, eventually settling in New Mexico, where I lived for most of the next thirty years. But my parents, brother, and sister remained in the Hampton Roads area, where I visited them over the years—infrequently at first and then more often after my parents’ health began to decline in the early 2000s. During all those years, however, I rarely thought about high school. So I was mildly curious when I discovered, during my recent excavations, my high-school yearbook from 1969, my ninth-grade year. I opened it, and began to brush away the layers of dust and time.

Because I enrolled in the school in the middle of the academic year, I don’t appear in the yearbook (which, as far as I’m concerned, is a blessing). But I was curious to see other people I vaguely remembered. Each “form”—following the tradition of English public schools, the school referred to grade levels, somewhat pretentiously, as forms—included about a hundred students, but only those in the sixth form—the seniors—

merited individual photographs, along with a list of their extracurricular activities and a brief, cute description of something personal for which they were well-known. I thumbed through those pages, recognizing only a few of the seniors, all of whom were three years older than me and at the time seemed to inhabit a different, more sophisticated world. But then my attention was arrested by the photograph of one member of that senior class—a young woman I hadn’t known personally, given our age difference, and one I hadn’t thought about in many years.

Her name was Kathleen, and she was pretty in the generic way that many 17- or 18-year-old women are pretty. She wore her brown hair long and straight, in the style of the times, and parted it in the middle, with her bangs cut straight across the top of her eyebrows. Her face was fleshy but her features were well-formed; she had sensual lips; and her carefully composed (but warm) smile revealed lovely teeth. I immediately recalled that she had possessed an extroverted, vivacious personality and been a popular member of the senior class. Her yearbook entry showed that she had worked on the school newspaper and had performed in “Combo” for all four years of high school, and that she had served on student council for one. It also referred playfully to the fact that she was long-legged and well-known for wearing very short miniskirts, something I had forgotten (but now remembered with a wistful smile). I also recalled that even as a newbie ninth grader in the school, I had quickly become aware of her presence on campus. And although I could recall no direct interaction with her, my vague impression—and I can’t tell you what evidence this impression was based on—was that she was genuinely friendly and nice.

Her given name may have been Kathleen, but her nickname was Perky—a moniker that might have suggested a blue-blooded pedigree or simply reflected her personality—and that is what everyone called her. As I studied her senior-year picture, I tried to remember other details about her, but nothing came to mind. I was surprised to see, however, that the yearbook included, as an appendix, a directory of the student body—a listing of all students alphabetized by last name, including each student’s parents’ names, their home address, and their telephone number. (Ah, yes, despite the tumult of the sixties, those were indeed more innocent times.) And looking in the directory, I was surprised to see that she had a brother, Tom, who was one year ahead of me, and a sister, Susan, who was one year behind. I looked up their photos; their faces were familiar, but I had no recollection of having known that they were related to Perky, or to each other. (I may have had some academic promise, as my parents believed, but I was still largely oblivious, as only a teenaged boy can be, to the actual world around me.)

Moreover, their home address was in the same neighborhood in Virginia Beach where our family had lived—in fact, their house had been no more than half a mile from ours. I concentrated, trying to remember if I had ever been aware they were our neighbors. Did Tom have an afternoon paper route in our neighborhood when I had my morning route? Maybe ... I couldn’t quite remember. And did he cut lawns in the neighborhood in the summer, as I did, to make spending money? Again, I thought he might have, but I wasn’t sure. I tried to remember other details or encounters—in a small school like ours, I must have occasionally interacted with both Tom and Susan, if only incidentally. But I couldn’t recall anything. Nevertheless, our brains (even aged brains)

work in mysterious ways: Several days later I suddenly pictured Tom more clearly—he was wearing a V-necked sweater and a tweed sport coat—and in a scene that shimmered on the edge of consciousness, I remembered talking to him, although I couldn't tell you anything about the conversation.

The directory identified their parents as “Cdr. and Mrs.,” meaning that their father was a commander in the Navy, as my father had been. My father knew most of the active or retired Navy families in our neighborhood, but I couldn't recall him ever mentioning this family. I asked my sister, who has now lived in that same neighborhood for almost forty years, if she remembered them. She said no. For some reason I was distressed I knew, or remembered, so little about this family, which had been so similar to ours. Indeed, almost a doppelgänger. Why hadn't our parents been friends? Attended barbecues and cocktail parties together? And why hadn't we kids known each other better? Gone to the beach or hung out at a pool or in an air-conditioned rec room during the sultry Virginia summers? Why, fifty years later, was I suddenly interested in knowing more about them than I had been when we lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same high school? That we hadn't known each other better seemed incomprehensible to me; and the capriciousness of my memory, unforgivable.

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I Googled Perky. My motives weren't nefarious or even creepy. I had no interest in trying to contact her or investigate her life beyond what I could discover with a quick,

superficial internet search. I just thought that she might have done something interesting with her life. All the kids who graduated from our high school went to college—the best and brightest to Ivy League schools, many to public or private colleges in Virginia, and most of the rest to small liberal arts colleges in the South or Midwest—but most of them later returned to the Hampton Roads area to go into the family business or to practice law or medicine. (In that 1969 yearbook *Ars Medica*, a sort of high school pre-med society, was by far the largest extracurricular club.) All perfectly fine careers and lives—just predictable and not very interesting. But Perky, to the extent I could remember her, seemed like someone who might have chosen a different path. I also figured her nickname might make her easy to find on the internet.

I was right. When I typed in her name, the first search result was about her. It was her obituary. She had died in 1994, at the age of forty-three, in Kansas City, Missouri. Following the usual form, her obituary provided a brief outline of her life: She had been born in Seattle, Washington, and had lived in the Philippines, Colts Neck, New Jersey, Virginia Beach, Virginia, Los Angeles, California, and Montpellier, France, before moving to Kansas City in 1976. She had received a bachelor's degree from Occidental College in 1973 and a master's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1976. She had been a freelance writer, with many articles published in the *Kansas City Star*. It didn't specify a cause of death, but, given her age and no mention of an accident, I guessed it was some sort of cancer. She was survived by her husband and two sons; her parents; and two brothers and two sisters, including Tom and Susan. The obituary appeared in the local Norfolk newspaper, where her parents and Tom still lived.

I was more affected by the news of her death than I should have been, especially given that I was reading about it twenty-five years after the fact. I wondered briefly about her husband, about whom the obituary said very little, and her sons, who were probably teenagers or even younger when she died. It was all very sad. But I was also pleased to know that she had attended a college in California where, it is safe to say, nobody else from our high school had ever gone; had earned a master's degree in journalism from one of the preeminent programs in the country; and had worked, at least part-time, as a freelance writer. All of which confirmed my vague adolescent impression that she had been different from the usual student in our little high school and made me think again that, had I known her and her siblings better, I would have liked all of them, and probably been totally smitten by Perky, as only an adolescent boy can be.

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The next two search results for Perky's name were her parents' obituaries in the local Norfolk newspaper, and they reinforced my feeling that our families had shared eerie similarities. Her father had been born in 1922, two months before mine. He had grown up in southern California and had worked his way through Occidental College—which helps explain his daughter's college choice—and the Harvard Business School. Like my father, he had served in the Navy at the end of World War II and then through the Korean and Vietnam Wars. He had spent a total of twenty-six years on active duty, retiring in 1969, Perky's senior year in high school, and later worked as director of

Finance and Administration for the Virginia Port Authority. The obituary highlighted the fact that while working at the port authority, his greatest personal satisfaction had come from breaking the color barrier in hiring staff. Like my father, he had been active in his church, and he had served as the president of our neighborhood civic league. He had been a troop leader in the Boy Scouts of America; had actively supported the YMCA and the SPCA; and had enjoyed running a fishing boat out of Hatteras Inlet, North Carolina. He had apparently possessed a fine singing voice, performing in summer operas and his church choir. Like my father, he had been a dutiful, honorable man who had proudly served his country and community. He had died in December 2009, a year and a month before my father.

Perky's mother had been born in 1923, a year before mine. Like her future husband, she had grown up in southern California, and she had attended Wellesley College, graduating in 1944. She had met her husband at a Wellesley-Harvard mixer, just before he reported for active duty. Her given name was Margaret, but, like her daughter, she was known by an affectionate (and apparently apt) nickname, derived from her maiden name: Beamie. And like her husband, she had been active in all kinds of community activities. Her obituary, written by her kids, made me sorry that I had never met her:

Even with a boatload of children to care for, Mom worked full-time, [teaching and serving as a guidance counselor at local public high schools].

Mom was known for her unfailing positive energy and productivity. Even while working full time, she made many of her own and her daughters' clothing (when clothing for tall girls was not available), and served as Den Mother, Girl Scout Leader, Church Youth Group leader, Sunday school

teacher. She endured hardship without self-pity and realistically. She was sharp (and suffered few fools), had a great sense of humor and absolutely loved a good party, often being the last person standing—and with energy to spare. Her home was always open to others, whether they were children's friends, exchange students, extended family or the many friends she and Dad made as they moved around the world. Many kids learned to swim in Mom and Dad's pool . . .

Mom leaves behind four living children, seven grandchildren and one great-granddaughter along with a continuing legacy as a full participant in America's Greatest Generation.

She had died in 2014. At the time of their deaths, both of Perky's parents had been living in the same retirement community in Virginia Beach where my parents lived.

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That was the end of my research. I had begun to feel slightly creepy reading and thinking about these people I had never really known. Although all the documents I had found were posted on public websites, available for free viewing, what I was doing had begun to feel unwarranted and intrusive. So I stopped, and instead tried to understand why this newly discovered information about Perky's family was affecting me as much as it was.

Part of it, of course, was that it caused me to think about my own family—especially my own parents—and to mourn again the passing of their generation. Over the past twenty-five years it has become cliché to refer to theirs as the Greatest Generation. But clichés are rooted in truth. Their generation suffered, endured, and prevailed, and after World War II they created the privileged, mostly white, largely suburban world

where we, their children, grew up, and whose comforts and opportunities we largely took for granted (and sometimes disparaged). And now they are nearly gone. My father—a man whose character and accomplishments were comparable to Perky’s father—died in January 2011, after a long, debilitating illness. My mother—like Perky’s mother, a college graduate and an independent, accomplished woman who devoted herself to her family and friends—is still living but is confined to a room in a nursing home, physically frail and suffering from steadily worsening dementia. Which is not unexpected, given her age, but that doesn’t mean it’s not also sad and hard.

Thinking about Perky and her family also forced me to acknowledge again the relentless and seemingly accelerating passage of time, and of my own life. Not having thought about high school in many years, I found it hard to believe that more than fifty years had passed since I was in the ninth grade, when I was a young man—all unactualized potential—and most of my life lay ahead of me. Now, by any biological or societal standard, I’m approaching geezerdom. I’m sixty-six years old, and although I started my professional career relatively late, I’ve now worked for more than thirty years for the same federal agency, and I’ll probably retire from full-time work in the next few months. I’ve worked steadily and hard, and when I look back at my career, I’m proud of my modest accomplishments. But I’ve done nothing exceptional, nothing that will leave a lasting impression on the world, and in my more pensive moments I wonder if I’ve done anything that will matter to anyone in another five years.

And what of the days ahead? Sixty may be the new forty—yeah, yeah—but seventy ain’t the new fifty. “The days of our years,” according to Psalms, “*are* threescore

years and ten; and if by reason of strength *they be* fourscore years, yet *is* their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.” Seventy is still considered a respectably long life, and the obituaries are filled with notices of people who died younger. I’ve already lived longer than most people who have ever lived on our planet, and I believe that I’ve accepted, as best I can, the fact that I’ll someday die. Right now, at least, the prospect of death doesn’t unduly shadow my life. What concerns me more is the prospect of senescence—the inexorable and sometimes humiliating deterioration of one’s physical and mental capacities. My father was a fit, vigorous man until a stroke at age seventy-seven suddenly sapped his life. Thanks to my mother’s care and devotion, he lived another ten years, but they were years of disability, pain, and frustration. I’ve always taken care of myself—eaten well and exercised regularly—and I was blessed with a quick, acquisitive mind. But I can sense now that my body is beginning to break down, and my mind to falter. Despite diligent stretching, my hips and knees are often stiff and achy; I’m a restless sleeper, and I snore; and I’m beginning to conflate old stories and mis-hear words (sometimes comically, like Emily Litella, one of Gilda Radnor’s ditzzy characters on “Saturday Night Live”). Of course, none of that is unexpected or unusual, and I’m more fortunate than many.

I was born in 1954, and my personal experience of aging signals a more momentous shift in our society. The entire Boomer generation is beginning to fade away, and our time of leading this country and altering history is coming to an end. Although a few may continue to work into their seventies or even eighties (and those few will be increasingly viewed as eccentric cranks), most of us will retire in the next few years,

relinquishing whatever authority or influence we've wielded. But "relinquish" isn't exactly the right word, for it implies a voluntary act, and the truth is that we're beginning to tire, and succeeding generations are beginning to catch us, brush by us, and leave us slowly but surely behind. We may struggle for a while to stay with them, but sooner or later we'll give up the chase. We'll retire, and to fill our days, we'll do what recent generations before us have done: take adult-education classes at the local community college; volunteer at the local library or hospital; play golf, croquet, bocce ball, or bridge; and go out to dinner with friends. In short, our time for making a difference in the world will be over. And as years turn into decades, history will remember and judge our generation, as it does every generation, for what we did with what we were given, and I fear the judgment will be harsh.

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When America was younger, and we were younger, the road beckoned, and we took to it, driving west toward a bright, distant horizon. It was morning, and our senses were alive. As the sun traced its arc across the sky, the road branched, and we chose one way; it branched again, and we chose another; and then again, and again. It felt as if the branches were infinite, and each branch represented a choice that led to more choices. We were heady with choice. Hours passed, the journey continued, the day advanced. By late afternoon we had begun to tire, and the end was not in sight. The landscape began to change. The road narrowed and entered a winding canyon; its centerline faded, and its

shoulders dropped off into nothingness. Dusk fell, and we began to wonder if we had made a wrong turn. Are we on the right route, we asked? Is this the way we're supposed to be go? We gripped the steering wheel harder and strained our eyes in the deepening twilight, trying to see around the next curve, hoping to glimpse the silhouette of a familiar landmark or the glow of a lamp in a window, and instead were blinded by the glare of oncoming headlights.

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As we grow older—and particularly as we enter the fourth act of our personal dramas—our view of the world tends to darken. By this time in our lives we have learned that everything is mutable—all is flux—and nothing stays the same. But we find ourselves slower to accept the changes, and the aggregation of changes over the course of decades transforms the world into a foreign, vaguely threatening place. I remember my grandmother's wariness, even fear, of the modern world. When I accompanied her on a cross-country airplane flight in 1973, she gripped my hand tightly the entire way. She had been born in 1899, had grown up with horses and buggies, and had lived to see men land on the moon. She had also survived two world wars and the Great Depression. By comparison, what my generation has seen and lived through seems benign, almost trivial. At the same time, every generation comes to think that the changes it has witnessed are dire, portentous, and that the world is beginning to spiral downward. And every generation wonders, How did we allow this to happen? How did we get here? But the

earth is resilient, and humankind always seems to bumble forward. I know all this. And yet, recent events give me pause.

In America my generation had many opportunities, and we were inordinately lucky—some would say spoiled. We came of age in the aftermath of victory in World War II and lived through a long period of relative peace and unprecedented prosperity (notwithstanding our government's grandiose and expensive misadventures in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan). And most of us never had to worry about the basic necessities of life—food, water, and shelter—or our physical security. All our lives we enjoyed the luxury of choice—of being able to do what we wanted, more or less when we wanted to do it—and we indulged ourselves. All of that was given to us, and we took it as our birthright and used it without appreciating how lucky we were or acknowledging our duty to nourish and, from time to time, refresh the tree of liberty.

Looking at that 1969 yearbook and reconstructing in my mind that tableau of a golden era in our society and lives, I understood, finally, that what affected me so deeply was my realization that all of it—that moment in history, those youthful opportunities, that feeling of hope—was irredeemably past, lost, at least for me. My generation came of age during an era of security, prosperity, and promise, when boys delivered newspapers on bikes and cut lawns in neighborhood to make spending money, and during the summers we hung out with friends around the swimming pool or went to the beach, and America still represented the world's best hope. It was a time long ago, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the boorish behavior of our forty-fifth president, and the recent, violent fracturing of American society, politics, and ideals. And yes, it may have also

been a time of conformity, small-mindedness, and prejudice, as all times are, but then, at least, our leaders understood the meaning of sacrifice and the common good and appealed to us to try to make the world a better place, and it seemed, if just for a moment, that America might fulfill its promise.

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