Five-Minute Guide to Nostalgia

One of the most pleasing of all grownup indulgences is traveling through life looking backward. You can see everything you care about that way: the kids in the backseat, sleeping peacefully; the hometown you grew up in; the highway lined with crowds of familiar faces—crazy bosses, missing pals, third-grade bullies. It’s an addictive pleasure. In fact, looking in the rearview mirror is a great way to go—until the paramedics pull you from the wreckage saying, “Why weren’t you looking where you were going?” That’s the downside of getting lost in nostalgia. Everything looks better in hindsight—especially memories. They are, after all, the guaranteed asset of every human being’s life, no matter how dull it may have been. Nostalgia makes memories into something that bad poets and greeting card writers like to call “precious.” It puts them on a shelf, to be enjoyed like cute porcelain figurines. Here’s a thought instead: strip the romantic gauze from your memories. Take them off of the shelf and you’ve got a handy set of hard-earned tools you can use to do a little repair work. That’s how to get real value out of your memories: use them to propel yourself forward instead of hold yourself back. If you want to be nostalgic about something try this: be nostalgic about the future. Dream about the way things ought to be, then do something about it with the skills you have accumulated in your life. After all, the way things were is what got us into this mess to begin with.