

Memory Pictures

the children guessed (but only a few)
and down they forgot as up they grew

e e cummings

Planning vacations had always been, for me, the business of dads and husbands. After my divorce five years earlier, I had very little confidence in my ability to take two children on a 3000-mile journey, even though the ultimate destination would be a family reunion. However, I love to travel and wanted to pass that on to my children, so I felt a deep sense of excitement at the prospect of such an adventure.

Weeks before leaving I had mapped every mile of the trip with the help of Auto Club and had made reservations in advance for each stop. Very little was going to be left to chance.

Paul was 13 that summer; Shannon was 8. I was beginning to realize that the time was quickly approaching when they would move away from me as their own lives were taking shape. So, at every stop, every picnic area, tourist trap, historical marker, or wide spot in the road - I took pictures. Pictures have always been the way I hold on to the past. I carefully sort and catalog, and create photo albums that chronicle the important – and not so important – events along the way.

Paul had received a camera from his father and was eagerly going through his own rolls of film: Santa Barbara, Monterey, San Francisco . . . all carefully recorded. Mendocino. Beautiful pictures to help us remember a beautiful family trip.

As we headed north one evening near dusk, I felt a desire to drive as close to the ocean as possible. Paul checked the map and found a “coastal access” road, so we decided to try it. It was narrow, twisted and bumpy . . . but it was deserted and was exactly what we were looking for. With Jimmy Buffett’s “Last Mango in Paris” tape blaring on the radio and the three of us singing along, we headed toward the sunset. Another beautiful picture was taken that evening . . . one that Paul named “Beyond the End,” after Buffett’s song of the same name. It was to become his winning entry in a local photography contest.

Later that night at the motel, it suddenly occurred to me that Shannon, at 8, could have been taking pictures of her own.

“I’m sorry, Shannie. We should have brought a camera for you.”

“Don’t need one,” she responded in her typical all-knowing way.

“What do you mean?”

“I take memory pictures.”

“What’s a memory picture?”

“Same as yours.”

This sounded interesting. It seemed as if this whole process had been carefully worked out in her young mind. She certainly knew a lot about her “memory pictures”!

“So, Shannon . . . Where do you keep these pictures?” I asked, for want of a better question.

“In books.”

“Really?” Now I was feeling quite taken aback; I wasn’t sure what my next question ought to be, but I was unwilling to let this conversation drop.

“So where are these books?”

“In my head.”

At this point in the exchange I had to pull back and regroup. What struck me the most was her sweet, but simple attitude that seemed to convey surprise that I had never heard of “memory pictures.” Shannon’s intuitive wisdom was not new to me. From the time she was a tiny child I had learned to take notice of her matter-of-fact way of speaking the truth. I’m sure she’s not unusual. We all need to take more time to listen to children.

I decided to push the conversation a bit further.

“So . . . Shannon. Can you look at these books?”

“Yep.”

“Tell me about a picture you have.”

She closed her eyes for a few moments – then in great detail described a scene from at least a year before when she and Paul were playing in my bedroom at home and I was sitting on the bed watching them. It was not even a “picture” I recall. After she described another picture from that time period, I asked if she had taken any on this trip.

Again, her eyes closed, this time for longer. “What are you doing?”

“I have to find the page.”

“Oh.” Silence.

“O. K. There’s one of you and Paul in front of that twisty tree at “Trees of Mystery.”

“Hmm. Any others.”

Silence and closed eyes. “Paul walking up the path at Alcatraz.”

Paul joined in the game and we spent much of the evening listening to Shannon describe images from our lives in great detail. No one even asked about what was on TV that night!

“So how do you take these pictures, Shannon?”

Her hands extended in front of her eyes to frame a scene between her thumbs and forefingers. “I do this . . . then I close my eyes like this. Then I open and close them fast. That’s a memory picture.”

“Hmmm. Can you take one right now?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“I’m out of film.”

She got me again. I wasn’t expecting that . . . but was still having too much fun with the game to stop now.

“Can you get more?”

“Not now.”

“When?”

“I have to go to sleep.”

Was this just a sleepy little girl . . . or a very wise soul? We did go to sleep at that point that night, but for the rest of that trip, and for the ten years since, “memory pictures” have become an important part of my life. My camera is still always close by, but I now know that the part of the past I really must hold on to cannot be recorded on film. Shannon taught me that night, and continues to teach me, the value of holding on *lightly* to the past, and always leaving it open to new interpretations as life continues to unfold.

* * *

Bette Moore
Feb. 1997