

Photographing Memory

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Hi Lowell House. Thanks Diana for the introduction. I'm thrilled to be talking tonight about Photographing Memory.

Over J-term, I went to Israel with Taglit-Birthright, a program that gives American Jews a free trip to Israel. We travelled around the country, hiked in the rain, and saw snow fall on Jerusalem. But this isn't a speech about me suddenly becoming Orthodox or deciding to move to Israel. Instead, I want to tell you about the camera I used to photograph my trip.

My dad was a great amateur photographer. My family has his photos printed and hung all over our house. One of my favorites is a picture of mischievous monkeys in Gibraltar, staring at the camera with what can only be described as a smirk. My mom tells me that he used to win photo competitions in his twenties so often that they stopped letting him enter the local ones.

He loved travelling all over the world and taking pictures. When I was little I would travel with my dad, although usually to a local park, and he would teach me the basics of photography. I eventually got older and stopped going to the park with him on weekends or tagging along to his business trips, because I was doing other things. Hey, I was teenager.

A little over a year ago now – last November – he passed away from cancer after a long battle. I don't want this to be a sob story, but I miss him.

So I don't know whether it's an accident or a subconscious desire to honor his memory that led me to take a camera with me to England this past summer on my IOP internship. It was the first time I had used a camera that wasn't on my phone since I was a kid. The photos weren't going to stun anyone, but I had a really great time taking them. When I started planning my trip to Israel this winter, I realized that I wanted to keep taking photos, and that I wanted to use something with a bit more firepower than my trustworthy point-and-shoot from 2005.

I talked with my mom and decided that it would be a good idea for me to use my dad's big, fancy camera – the one he had always traveled with, with the big lens and too many buttons. I'd be remembering and honoring two of the things that he loved and that I did with him. On top of that, it would be the first country I was going to that he had never been to. My more tangible goal was to take good photos of a beautiful place; the ability to zoom and focus would probably improve the shots.

So, I used his camera. I remembered him while using it, and it was surprisingly emotional for me, especially considering that I try not to get too emotional in public. I had wonderful conversations with people about family and photography, and a girl sharing my dad's name, Sasha, taught me to use the camera. I'm proud of many of my photos. There are some of the people on the trip, and a few of cats and camels with personality. In many ways, I felt like I was capturing the many photos my dad took with the camera at the same time that I was taking new ones.

There were moments where I realized my differences with my dad, which I guess is part of growing up too. I like taking pictures of people. Maybe it's the influence of Facebook and Humans of New York, but I find people a lot more interesting than things. He never really did, preferring landscapes and painstakingly crafted artistic shots. The divide runs in the family: my mom likes my pictures of friends and random people in marketplaces, while my brother only conceded that the pictures were "actually kinda good" when we got to the landscapes of mountains and deserts.

I thought about trying to draw a conclusion, but it was difficult to find one. It was an emotional experience to get to remember my dad in a positive way. It was a chance to focus not on his death or his illness, but the things he did for fun and loved. I wish he had been around to teach me what an ISO was, but I'm also pretty positive that he would have been thrilled if he could have seen me going off on my own to a foreign country to have cool experiences and photograph things. To risk a metaphor, the photos are capturing memories of my trip last month, but also the memories of photography with my dad when he was still alive.

Thank you.