

Picture Perfect

Could your photo obsession ruin family memories?

By Holly Pevzner on July 25th, 2011

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The “something blue” at my wedding was a picture of my mother and I from my first birthday party. I pasted a shrunken version of that photo on a pale blue square of paper and hung it delicately from my bouquet with a thin white ribbon. The picture showed me in a blue and white checked dress that perfectly matched the Raggedy Ann and Andy party decorations behind me. I sat smiling on a ride-on toy, my mom was right behind me, mid-laugh.

I can’t ask my mom about that party. She died when I was 19 years old. But I have this photo, and I see in that dress and the party decorations captured on Kodak paper that my mom wanted that day to be special. I see the smiles and know that it was.

That photo is the reason my first-born is quite possibly the most photographed child of all time. A millisecond after I pushed him out I yelled for my husband to take a picture, and the shutter-happiness hasn’t stopped since. I took multiple photos of newborn Theo every single day. At all times there were no fewer than three cameras at the ready in my living room. Leaving the house? Not without the pocket camera stored in the stroller or tucked in my bag. Going to a party or the zoo? The big fancy camera came along. Forgot the camera (gasp!)? Thank God for the iPhone.

Every month I’d send a new digital photo album to friends and family, each one containing 100+ pictures of my little man. There were the naked-butt-guitar-playing shots, sleeping shots, smiley shots, food-all-over-the-face shots. There are pictures of him meeting his great granny for the very first time, sleeping on his Nana’s chest and laughing with his Dada – all taken from several angles.

Of course, there were many things those pictures didn’t reveal. Looking at them, you can’t hear me bark, “One more picture!” at my crying child decked out in full Elvis regalia for Halloween. You don’t know that right after I snapped the photo of Theo sitting up for the very first time, he fell backward and banged his head on the floor. I couldn’t put down the camera in time to catch him.

My logic? While he might not want me to snap that picture right then, eventually he'll be happy I took it. He'll never have to wonder: What was I for my first Halloween? Did I ever meet my great grampy? Who were my friends when I was a kid? He'll know. The pictures – and the detailed captions I write for them – will let him know long after I'm gone.

And that's the crux of it, really. I will be gone one day. It's not like I live my life with the shadow of early death hovering over me, but it is there. It sits quietly in the back of my mind and compels me to grab the camera over and over and over again. These images will tell the stories in case I'm not able to.

When Theo turned two, I, of course, snapped a picture of him first thing in the morning, standing in his crib waving. I got him opening gifts from us in the living room. And I carted every camera we owned to his first real birthday party, the one with party favors and friends and ice cream cake. I hung the big camera around my neck and carried the small one in my back pocket. The thing is, I was pregnant with baby number two and moving a little slower than normal. Picture taking also had to take a back seat to toddler wrangling, pizza slicing, parental introductions and sing-alongs. I did the unthinkable: I relied on friends to take the bulk of the party pictures.

Back at home, once everyone's sugar high faded, I clicked through the photographic evidence. My heart sank. They weren't good. I had planned this perfect little party for my boy, and there wasn't even a good picture of him blowing out his candles. Tears actually welled.

My husband, Nathan, shot me a look. Are you serious? He peaked over my shoulder at the pictures. They're fine, he insisted. But "fine" isn't exactly something you build life-long memories from. Fine, my mom used to say, was the female F word. Fine sucked. But I have to admit that at least one picture stood out. Theo is on Nathan's lap listening to our friend play guitar. I'm sitting on the floor next to them with a shiny purple birthday hat on my head. We're all in the picture. Sure, it's blurry and off-center, and one of Theo's pals is looking all kinds of goofy in the forefront, but there we are – in the moment and a family, and there's no camera in my hand.

When my mom died, my dad asked my sister and I if we'd go through our thousands of family photos and put together a collage to display by my mother's casket. So the two of us sat on the living room floor silently sifting through piles and piles of photographs – I swear, my sister and I were photographed in front of virtually every fountain and bed and breakfast sign up and down the east coast when I was growing up. There were so many gems of my mom, too: Her smooching my dad on some random couch; crazy bridesmaid pictures from the 60s where my mom had to sport an actual peach veil; her stunning black and white engagement photo with her

long black hair ironed to perfection; cheerleading shots; baby shower shots. But where were all of the pictures of my mom and me? There were some, for sure, but : not enough. There were plenty of photos of me. Me and my sister. Me, my sister and my dad. Me and my various pets/friends/stuffed animals. But the ones I wanted didn't exist. She was behind the camera.

Theo's second year was much less photographed than his first. And Eli, his little brother, well, I actually neglected to take one single shot of him the entire 10th month of his life. While I'm still deeply traumatized by that giant lapse, I'm okay. Today, I'm trying to hand the camera off more and even *leave the camera at home* once in a while – or just take the pocket version.

While I still desperately want my boys to be able to look through photo albums of their childhood and feel a deep sense of love and family, I also want them to remember that I ran into the cold Maine surf right beside them, that I danced the night away with them in my arms at their auntie's wedding, and that I simply sat with them while they talked about cars and firemen and bugs. That I did not leave them to grab my camera – no matter how adorable they looked. Instead, I stayed and I listened.

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Holly Pevzner is a writer whose work has appeared in *Parents*, *Parenting*, *Real Simple*, *Cosmopolitan* and more. In her unpaid life, she's hanging out with her two young sons and husband in Brooklyn, NY. Visit her online at hollypevzner.squarespace.com.