

This past weekend, I hazarded a number of cosmetic changes to both my physical and virtual residences. That is, I transported a variety of goods from my childhood home to my apartment, and I dared to change the background photos on my phone. Such tasks were not undertaken lightly. Being something of a minimalist at this stage in life, all perturbations from the status quo bring with them a sort of anxiety. *Any* change to the environment has to have a reason, as any change made without a reason can increase the amount of suffocating *stuff* one is exposed to. It is my hope these changes were worthwhile. We have:

- The addition of *The Princeton Field Guide to Prehistoric Mammals* as a candidate book for the coffee table. Along with three other books – two dinosaur encyclopedias and an illustrated encyclopedia of Ancient Rome – it rests on the bottom of the table as a backup to what is currently on display. The book currently on display, *The Student's Guide to Cognitive Neuroscience*, is somewhat intimidating and perhaps in need of rotation.
- The addition of four books to the right side of Drawer 3R of my primary dresser. These include three field guides and a book about eastern alpine hiking.
- The addition of stargazing binoculars to my non-clothing closet.
- The addition of a pair of athletic pants and two long-sleeve shirts to my clothing closet.
- The addition of a pair of pajama pants to Drawer 2 and two pairs of hiking pants to Drawer 4 of my secondary dresser.
- The addition of a box of old photos and two plastic bags of old photos to Drawer 2 of my tertiary dresser.
- The temporary placement of an EZ Pass on my primary dresser.
- The change of my phone's lock-screen photo FROM the view from Gothics in the Adirondacks TO the view from Windham High Peak in the Catskills.
- The change of my phone's general background FROM the view from Gothics in the Adirondacks TO a closeup of *Ramaria aurea*. This latter photo is from the same hike on which the Windham High Peak photo was taken.

Most of these changes reflect a resurgent interest in the natural world following a hike undertaken the previous day. The changeup to my phone background – something which hasn't been done since the summer of 2019 – involves two photos from this hike. The books, of course, all pertain to natural history. The binoculars, meanwhile, make for fun viewing on future summits. The new clothing marks preparation for colder hikes and for the fall in general, and the EZ Pass allows me to reach the Catskills without having to worry about tolls.

The only exception, it seems, is the pile of old photographs. While the neuroscience-enthused, free-will-denying part of me wants to rope the old photographs into the above narrative via the hippocampus – the idea here being that the part of the brain responsible for mental maps of locations is also responsible for episodic memory, and that increased blood flow to the region due to navigation of a new environment may, as a side effect, increase interest in one's personal history – I don't have enough science to back this up, nor can I rule out a simple coincidence. Taking an intuitionist, humanities-style approach, I can more convincingly link the photos to the hike in the following way: family photos are *warm* and *organic* and *homely*. Their value is *context-dependent* and *heavily localized*. They act upon the mind in a *foggy* sort of way, and they *with*er in competitive contexts where portability and rationality and communicability hold sway. They are *visited* by the mind, and persist like *massive fungal growths* in the interstices between these visits. They possess a beauty which has been *molded* and *baked in* through tradition.

Put another way, the same homeliness that would precipitate a jaunt in the woods, a hunt for mushrooms, and an hour spent overlooking a sea of farms would also lead one to cherish family photos; the same quasi-pity that leads one to choose the farmer's market over the grocery store would lead one to choose the old home video over Netflix. *C'est le temps que tu a perdu pour ta rose qui fait ta rose si importante.*

There it is – “quasi-pity.” Over time, in my experience, the warmth and the boundless love and the fogginess of these pictures lose their appeal. There comes a point where the brain feels “full” and any more stimulus of this nature feels sickeningly sweet. In such moments, I develop a craving for the rational, the cold, the objectively good. I find myself seeking out bands like King Crimson and Rush. There's even an appreciation for the ratings put upon family photos by the “likes” of social media – as if these silly things are bringing much needed *standards* to what would otherwise be a chaotic lump.¹

Look, Drawer 2 of the ternary dresser has a lot of old photos sitting around. They aren't doing anybody any good – not even the guy who owns them. I would like to, at some point, add value to these photographs through an act of sorting. That is, I would like to, through my own efforts, bring about a state of affairs where the average enjoyment per unit time of these pictures is massively increased. I want to cultivate the crop I've inherited.

A Daoist would say that I need some *yang* to balance out the superfluous *yin* that is these photos. Only then, once decisive, crystalline masculinity has forced a shape onto this diffuse lump, will true harmony be achieved. Borges' famous cartographers, meanwhile, would hold that the unsorted bag of photos – with its one-to-one correspondence between photos received and photos viewed – is useless. Only once the extraneous details have been disappeared can we say that an intelligent act has been performed. A category theorist, meanwhile, would hold that the *essence* of intelligent behavior is this process of abstraction – the March of Progress being no more than a cascading series of whittlings.

What I'm trying to get at here is that there may exist a *general excellence* in the sorting of old family photographs. In fact, there may even be someone outside the family who, despite lacking important context, could breathe more life into these photos than myself simply through possession of this general excellence. I'm talking more advanced variants of rules like:

- Group the photos by event.
- Identify the people in the photographs.
- Identify particularly interesting photographs.
- Attempt to put the photos in chronological order.

Are there any non-trivial rules of thumb you guys would follow when digging through a pile this big? Any reliable means by which I can locate a narrative that could be exported to an outsider? Perhaps I can start by counting the photos...

1. It was Zuckerberg, more than anyone, who brought the Rule of Thirds to the masses.