

# Commentary... Opening up old memories

By Katy Yoder  
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It's hard to believe that December will be my first anniversary of leaving Sisters Folk Festival and starting my career as a full-time writer. I've been asked many times, "How's retirement?" I feel compelled to say that I'm not retired. I just left one job to start another. If I was retired, we'd be traveling often, taking up new hobbies, or dusting off old ones.

I still have a responsibility to make money — much less than I was making before, but still I'm contributing to our income. Sometimes I feel guilty that I'm not making as much as I used to. But I also know that this year has been a time to slow down, take stock, and yes, relax.

During and after my treatments for breast cancer, I took off as little time as I could. That was for two reasons: I needed to keep the money flowing and working made me feel less out of control. I'm so grateful my co-workers allowed me to work, even though sometimes my addled chemo-brain made thinking clearly a big challenge.

Now that I'm not

responsible to show up for work in town, I realize I should have taken some time off after treatment — and during. Adrenaline and fear kept me going. Now it's time to rest and do what I love.

Being at home and not working away from home five days a week has given me time to open dusty boxes long taped shut. What's my excuse now for not opening them and dealing with what's inside? The contents either need to be thrown or given away; recycled, sold, or integrated into our home. Some of the boxes have sides that have caved in and split open. They were filled with the contents of my dad's family and past generations long gone. Wedding dresses, family pictures of people I don't know, books, handmade bedspreads, housewares, flat art and furniture all sit in a dusty room waiting. They seem to stare at me. Daring me to look inside and face them.

Hundreds of photos of people who share my bloodline smile, stare, laugh and grimace at the camera. Some are wrinkled with age, the corners of their mouths permanently sagging down from too many disappointments.

Others are soft-skinned children with bows bigger than their heads and outfits that look restricting and dark.

Dad's family in Michigan were mainly Scottish and Irish with a good sprinkling of English. They were a common recipe of Anglo-Americans that took for granted the land they farmed and the people they'd displaced or dominated.

Some of the boxes have finally made it inside our home. I've slowly begun looking at their contents. What do I do with hundreds of family photos that go back to the 1800s? How can I use them in a way that honors them and doesn't overrun my home with black and white images of dead relatives? There's just too many of them.

It reminds me of my own "stuff" that's been packed away for decades. I've found envelopes and water-damaged albums of high school photos with my young face so full of hope and relief. Graduation photos from high school show a tearful face and messy hair from the graduation hat I'd just thrown in the air.

I remember thinking people probably thought I

was sad to say goodbye to high school. Nope. I was incredibly relieved to get as far away from that experience as I could. High school and middle school tore me up.

I hoped college would be a new start and a chance to be somebody different. I tried on new personas like some girls tried on dresses. Preppy, jock, cowgirl, Young Republican. None of them felt like the real me. I had no idea who that girl really was or how to tap into her. So I kept making risky decisions, and trying on new facades.

Now I have time to write. I started with a memoir. Once completed, I realized it was more for me than the public. It allowed me to travel back in time and get reacquainted with the "Katy" I'd long forgotten. The memoir opened parts of myself, just like the boxes I cut open. Some things were best left where I'd found them. Others brought back good and bad memories, long forgotten. The more I open up, the less

encumbered I feel.

I'm realizing the past is what I make it — just like the present. I can see myself as a helpless victim or a person who got back up and kept going, no matter how tough it got.

None of my victories or traumas were done alone. I had loved ones and scoundrels on stage with me all the way. Sometimes I was the villain, sometimes the victim. But together we moved beyond it, scars and all.

The next book is forming in my head and on the page. I'm gathering memories and making a plan. I love this new adventure and I'm incredibly grateful to have the chance to see where it leads.



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colorectal cancer.  
Now it's your turn.

John Wright,  
Bend, Oregon

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