

THE SET FREE LIFE

Light the Corners of My Mind

I'm in the middle of my yearly pilgrimage to the land of my childhood, Los Angeles, specifically the area near and around LAX: Westchester, El Segundo, Manhattan/Hermosa/Redondo Beach, Culver City. Every time I come back, I drive my rental car out of the Hertz lot (which was, in my youth, the site of Airport Junior High School) and zip around to the apartment my family lived in when we moved to LA from West Virginia in 1964. I'm so pleased with how nice the apartment complex looks—even better than when we were there. Then I tool over to the house in which I lived most of my Los Angeles years, and while it has been extensively remodeled, it's recognizable and (more importantly) still there. The building around the corner at the end of the block is still there, too: the branch of the public library where I spent hour after hour, sometimes entire days, working my plan to read every book in the little building—but it is no longer a library. It will soon be something else, but it will always be the library to me.

I like taking trips down memory lane. My nostalgia is for all of the good things; I learned long, long ago to compartmentalize long stretches of my life because there are not-so-good memories, too. I'm not about ignoring them, but I enjoy remembering how it felt to be 8, or 11, or 15, and walking into the grocery store that is now a Pep Boys, or the Woolworth's that's now a discount book outlet. I like remembering what I wanted to do with my life, what kind of adult I thought I'd be. I'm not disappointed, which is probably why reminiscing so often fuels me. I know people who find looking back depressing, and I understand that. It's not that way for me. I like to see what's behind me. I don't want to live there, but I ground myself by reminding myself of my roots. Because of Facebook, I met up with 2 old friends on my last visit here, and this time it's the same. There's an energizing quality to each touchstone.



Rehearsing my past plants me. Like a runner getting into position, it fixes my stance for the future and gives me a block from which I push off and start regaining momentum. I need to return and feel my beginnings and my middles, because sometimes in the very center of my right-nows, I can't see how far I've come and encourage myself in the continuing. If life can change so very distinctly in just a matter of decades—and I, as so many of you, know how often life can change in just a day—then I am not stuck. I am not mired in the unchangeable. I'm released by looking into the face of old friends and places to define and establish my values, the virtues by which I choose to live, and the talents and gifts I've always known were mine. It's a freeing thing for me.

Whatever your lot at the moment, *remember*.

Remember what you wanted for yourself. Remember what is important. Remember the lessons of life you were given by your parents, relatives, teachers, best friends, wisdom givers, and other influences. There are some truly sad and regrettable pasts for some of you, and remembering is something you never want to do—but consider finding the remnants of good and rehydrate them. Plump them up so you can squeeze out of them the hope and self-confidence you need for today. You are not your past. You are not your yesterdays. You don't have to live your history. But what you were and what you loved and what defined you then was the open gate to your future. You're different than you were in those days and you can be different than what you are now, and the good things you've carried that have lasted—the essentials of your personality and the formation of your character—are still with you.

Remember that. ♪

Sue Thompson is a personality expert, etiquette trainer, and an instructor in life lessons. Her work on recognizing and developing talent, identifying personalities and working effectively with the people who possess them, responding appropriately to difficult experiences, treating others with respect, and behaving like a professional have caused companies and business organizations throughout the country to value her consulting skills. She trains those entering the workforce how to present themselves with style and authority; new employees in the importance of respecting one's work and the workplace; managers in the value of understanding employees' talent and temperament; and everyone in the timeless rules of behavior that will always bespeak excellence.

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Teddy Bear Says...



This month's column should be called "Tips from Teddy Bear." Allow me to give you a few pointers that will give you a little bit of an edge and help you look like you *really* know how to handle yourself.

- When dining in a fine atmosphere, when resting your knife on your plate turn the sharp edge in, toward you. This custom is a holdover from the days when the one utensil with which most people ate was a knife, and travelers carried their own.

When stopping at a tavern or inn for the night, a guest would use his knife to slice some meat or cheese and then would indicate with the same knife whether he wanted to be left alone or welcomed conversation: setting the knife on the table with the blade turned out toward others meant "Leave me alone." The knife with the blade turned in said "I'm friendly." Today it's just a formality, but it's a nice one.

- When you rise from your seat on a plane, take care not to grab the seat in front of you for leverage. If someone is sitting in it, this can be a rude awakening. Push against your own seat.
- Be quick to say "Forgive me" when you commit a faux pas—stepping in front of someone in a line by accident, bumping into a stranger, etc. "I'm sorry" is common, but "Please forgive me" often brings out people's desire to show themselves forgiving. It can also sound more sincere.
- If you have to sneeze during a meal with others, the best move is to sneeze into your left elbow. But if you find yourself in tight quarters and must avoid spraying, you may sneeze into your napkin—but do **not** blow your nose into it. Get up as soon as possible and go to the restroom to refresh yourself. You may wish to request a new napkin.
- If you're quick to complement others, they'll be quick to help you. Cultivate an atmosphere of mutual respect and goodwill.

Quotable

"I've never tried to block out the memories of the past, even though some are painful. I don't understand people who hide from their past. Everything you live through helps to make you the person you are now."

Sophia Loren

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- If you've got a number of items at the checkout counter and someone comes along with just one or two, invite them to go ahead of you. You can't afford an extra couple of minutes?
 - Glance behind you before making a sudden stop in an airline terminal or any busy thoroughfare. There may be people behind you.
 - If you've forgotten someone's name, no matter how embarrassing it is for you, keep your sense of humor and smile and tell the person you're having a brain freeze or a time warp or something along those lines. When you have the name, laugh, say, "Of course! I knew that!" and then move on. Don't turn it into a production. Everybody has moments of forgetfulness.
- Remember to whisper to your companion in the movies. Don't use your regular speaking voice—you have no idea how much it annoys others.
- It's the rare mid-priced hotel that does any effective soundproofing, so keep the television volume and your voice low.

Don't forget this one: when visiting friends, always pet the dog at least once. 🐶

Image is Everything Except When it's Not

You've got the education and background, and you continue to develop your skills. But unless you know how to package these assets, few will be interested in looking beyond what they can see to find out what's inside!

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