



Don't Look Back!

The very nature of this A Story A Week series - telling stories about things that have happened to me - means that we inevitably spend a lot of our time together 'in the past', as I 'mine' my experiences for episodes that I feel may be of interest to the readers. There is though, a real danger in this; a person who is looking 'back' is certainly not looking 'forward', and as I am only 57, it is definitely too soon to slip into a state of permanent nostalgia!

I wonder if it is inevitable that as we get older we must gradually become more nostalgic about our life, and spend much of our time talking and thinking about things that happened to us years ago. A young person doesn't have much of a personal history of course, so lives for the most part in the present. The temptation for an older person to be constantly looking backwards must be very strong indeed.

I have mixed feelings about my own behaviour in this respect. Part of my character seems to have quite a strong pull to the past. For example, I have boxes in the basement that contain: my children's school notebooks and papers, stacks of sheet music from my days as a young musician, tools for repairing musical instruments, even the helmet and equipment I used when I was a skydiver. None of these things will ever be used again; why don't I just throw them all away?

I suppose I know the answer to that question. To throw away the skydiving gear would be to completely and finally face the fact that I will never again enjoy jumping from an airplane out into a clear blue sky. As long as this equipment is still here, I can still fool myself into thinking that such activities are still part of my life. The same can be said about all those other items; they are solid links to past pleasures, and as such, help me to keep memories more vivid and real.

I am though, able to report that I am not completely lost in the past. Perhaps the best example of this comes with my printmaking work. Almost exactly ten years ago this month, I completed my work of making 100 woodblock prints of the Hyakunin Isshu poets, a huge project that had taken me ten years from start to finish. That achievement brought me a great deal of media attention over the years, and by the time it was finished, I was well known as the 'Hyakunin Isshu man'. But I made a pact with myself that I would not let myself be defined by that image, and that I would put it behind me and move on to something else. And I have managed to do that quite well; I gave an interview recently in which the reporter had never heard of the series!

Another example comes from television. Around the same time that print series was wrapping up, a one-hour television documentary was made about me and broadcast nationally in Japan. I didn't see it at the time, and it was only about five years later that I finally sat down and watched it on video ... once. Since then, the tape has sat on my shelf gathering dust. I have no interest in seeing it again.

And perhaps the best example of my attempt to avoid living too much in the past is the major change I made in my printmaking work two years ago. After twenty years of building a reputation as a craftsman re-creating traditional Japanese prints, I made a switch to an entirely new way of working - creating my own original designs, even though by doing so I lost a large number of customers who preferred my previous way of doing things.

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So although my stories may sometimes give you the impression that I live a bit too much in the past, and the boxes in my basement will certainly do so, my daily life and work sends a different message. Don't look back!

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