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Does it Ever Become Too Late to Get Back in Touch?

By Jim Clark
UCF Forum columnist
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The saved black-and-white pictures are hard to make out and for most of the people there is no information on the back to identify who they are. In one, I am sitting in a highchair with three other children with a cake and candles in front of me. In a second, there is a birthday cake on a card table and I am standing next to a large dog.

In my teenage years the photos show me dancing with some long-forgotten girl. Those photos gave way to prom pictures and high school graduation photos.

Looking back, the events came in a pattern: the birthday parties and the dances followed by invitations to high-school graduations, college graduations, weddings and birth announcements.

During the past decade there has been a dramatic shift, from events I celebrated to those which more often bring sorrow.

The pace seems to be quickening, bringing notices of death and retirement. The retirements are usually announced in nice invitations with food and drink and speeches that range from funny to boring. The death notices often come in a phone call at odd hours or in an email. Over the past few years I have learned about far too many deaths through Facebook, tucked among the cat videos and complaints about politicians.

They all bring back memories and I am struck by how unique the memories are.

My cousin died in California. We were never close, the result of a family disagreement dating from World War II. I never knew the details, and now never will. The most I could figure out was it involved \$25 my aunt needed for a medical exam to get a job in a defense plant. It seemed small, but enough to keep a feud alive for decades.

In Minneapolis, the mother of a high school friend died. Her husband was a former governor, so I learned about her death through the news. I last saw her half a century ago, and we exchanged letters about a decade ago. I never responded to her last letter, creating another regret that cannot be undone. She was the cool mother when I was a

kid. She joked around with us and always made us feel at home. There is a photo of us with our feet on the furniture, something that could never have happened in my house!

The retirements have seemed to come in droves as I reached a certain age, although I have noticed a greater reluctance to retire. My Dad could tell you how many days were left until his retirement; now, most of my friends and colleagues are in no rush.

There have been several at the university by people who helped shape my life in the 30 years I've worked here.

The former chairman of my department left a year ago, staying well beyond retirement age because he enjoyed teaching. He had been at the university almost from the day it opened the doors in the 1960s and was a constant source of help.

The former dean of the College of Arts and Humanities also stepped down. His life is one great story. He was born in Cuba and came over as a child with Operation Peter Pan, which brought more than 14,000 children from Cuba following the rise of Fidel Castro. The parents sent their children to be placed with new families in the United States. At a retirement gathering for him, the tributes were funny and emotional, but as I watched I kept thinking how he had held the college together during some difficult financial times. He had saved jobs by working financial magic as the nation in 2008 went through an economic nightmare that saw the Florida economy falter. During the speeches, I kept wondering if I was one of the people whose job he had saved.

Finally, the president of our university is retiring next month after more than a quarter of a century. His list of accomplishments would fill this whole column, including starting a medical school and tripling the university's enrollment. One of the things that personally affected me a few years ago was when he went on a health campaign and inspired people, including me, to follow his example and change our lifestyle habits – for which I am grateful.

One of the most overused phrases in the English language is “Let's keep in touch.”

Perhaps, like you, I have said it scores of times, but find I have too often ignored my own advice.

I wonder if it is too late to do anything about it?

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