

Lessons from a jar

By [Michael Ruffin](#)

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I wrote some of my deepest secrets on a piece of notebook paper, carefully folded the sheet, placed it in an empty canning jar, and screwed the lid on tight. I then dug a hole about a foot deep out behind my father's utility house, placed the jar in the hole, and filled the hole with dirt. My plan was to return to it at some unspecified time in the future to see if my fears had come to pass and if my dreams had come true.

Being 10 years old and having homework to do, baseball games to play, clover to lie in, a creek to play in, books to read, baseball cards to collect, a dog to pass the time with, and a bike to ride, I soon forgot all about the jar that was buried in our backyard.

Until one day some months (maybe even a couple of years) later the memory of the jar hit me out of nowhere and I rushed outside, retrieved a shovel—and walked around the yard trying to remember exactly where I had hidden my treasure, since the falling pine straw had made one spot indistinguishable from another. After a few false starts, I finally found the spot. I knew it was the spot when the shovel broke the glass jar.

I knelt down and pulled the broken jar from the hole and retrieved the carefully folded piece of paper that held all the hopes and fears that had been in me just a few months before, only to find that it was damp, that the layers were stuck together, and that the blue ink in which I had written my precious words had run and faded. When I tried to unfold the paper, it came apart in my hands. I was not able to read a single word that I had written.

I was disappointed. But the thing that really struck me was that I could not remember a single thing I had written on that piece of paper. Just months before I had committed my greatest fears and my fondest hopes to that blue-lined sheet—all the things on which my young world seemed on that day to hinge—and now I had no idea what those fears and dreams had been. I had, of course, moved on to new ones

or perhaps to more highly developed versions of the old ones. I had put away childish things and moved on to slightly more mature childish things.

There were things I could have done to preserve the record of my dreams and fears; I could have, for example, wrapped the jar in layers of aluminum foil before burying it. We make such efforts sometimes; we take every possible step to preserve and to hold on to what was and to what might have been. Maybe we are better off if we let them go. The truth is that even had I been able to read what I had written I would have thrown it away and would soon have forgotten it all anyway.

Such forgetting is a gift of the childhood experience. It's harder for adults.

It's bad math, but here is how I've come to look at it: we should spend 5 percent of our time and energy looking backward (because that's where we came from), 95 percent of our time and energy looking forward (because that's where we're going), and 100 percent of our time and energy living in the moment (because that's where we are). That's the way, I believe, that God would have us live, because God is the God of our past and of our future, but it is in this moment that we experience God and that we live the life that God has given us to live.

After all, the lesson I learned from the jar I learned not in the retrospective and prospective thoughts I placed in it but rather in the act of digging it up.

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