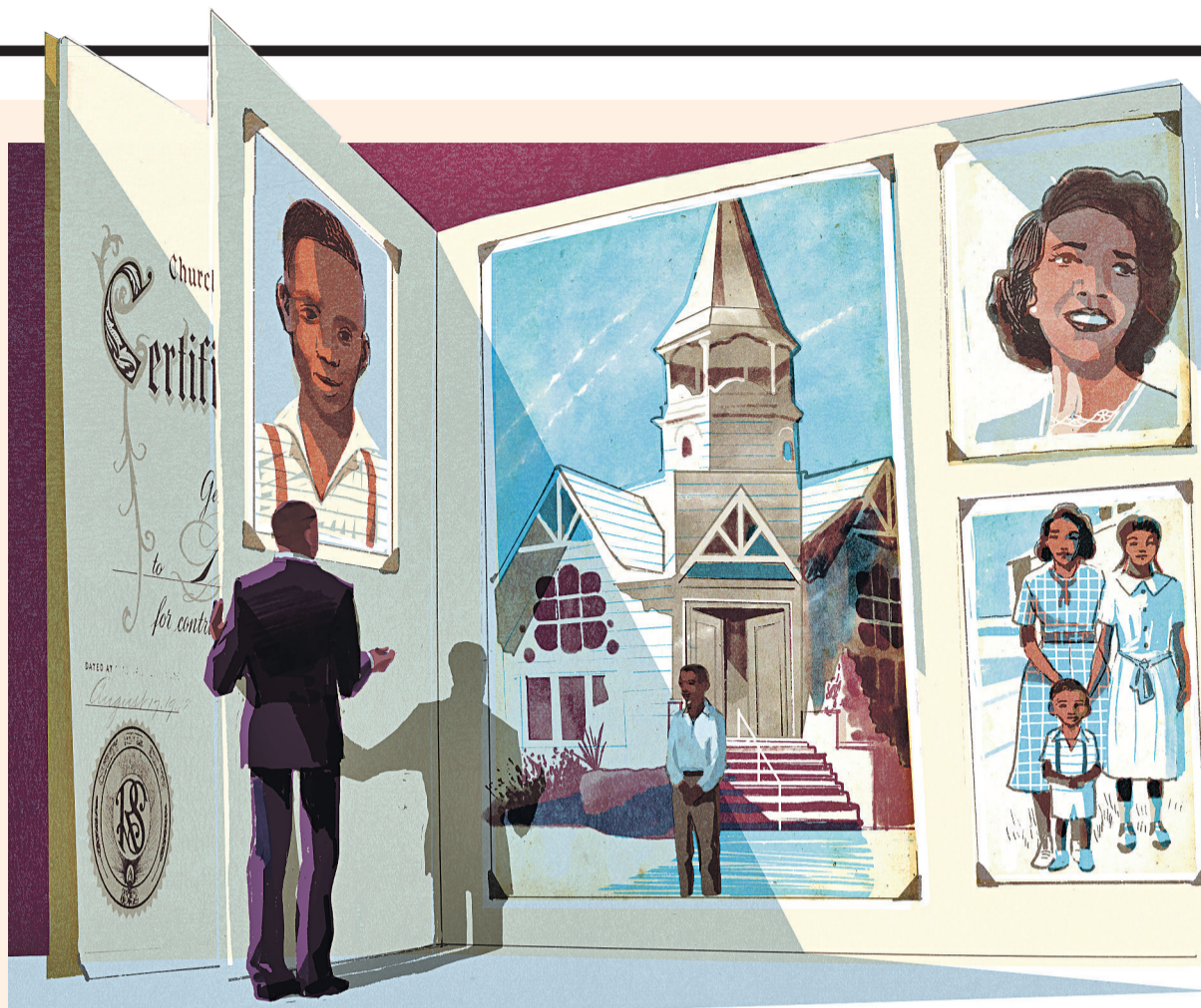


Illustration: Alex Green



MY WEEK

Alvin Hall



My trip down memory lane was good for the soul

My major focus for the past few weeks has been completing the manuscript for the companion book to my podcast series *Driving the Green Book*. Realistically, I can't work on this all the time. I need breaks, which often mean working on a totally different task, one that has a series of short-term benchmarks that are tangible achievements.

This past week's task was to clean out and reorganise the storage closet in my study. This seemingly mundane task opened up memories I hadn't reflected on in years. In the back of the closet on the floor I found a box that contained an album (in truth, a scrapbook) that my grandmother had kept when I was growing up. Just seeing the mottled, lime green leatherette cover with its simple gold-leaf border immediately took me back to the day I'd retrieved it from a box under my

grandmother's bed a few days after she died.

The album's musty smell sent me on a journey. I thought of the TV show *This is Your Life*. On the first page were certificates in recognition of 'work done' and 'classes attended' – all secured with folded rectangles of cellophane tape on their backs – from the local vacation Bible school I attended every summer while in elementary school. Almost immediately, I remembered the smell of the clapboard church, the rows of pews that each group sat in by age, the Bible passages we memorised and recited and, when I got home, eagerly telling my grandmother about what we had done.

On the same page was my first formal elementary school picture. While growing up, we were too poor to own a camera, so these pictures are the only record from that part of my childhood. We sat for these portraits only when my mother was earning enough money for us to afford them – and for quite a few years, there are no pictures.

Over the next few days during breaks, I reviewed certificates of awards for outstanding citizenship, outstanding performance – countywide spelling bee – having been neither absent nor tardy, proficiency in typing and/or shorthand, driver education, and more. The array amazes me. There are even citations for winning the *Time Magazine*

Current Affairs Award and the American Legion School Award.

Going through the album prompted many thoughts, feelings and recollections. At that point in my young life in the rural Florida Panhandle, I remember being determinedly, but quietly (closer to secretly) focused on the future, especially getting away from there – even though my parents admonished me about 'always living for tomorrow and not enjoying today'. Yet they also advised: "The past is done and can't be changed. The only thing you can change is your future, what's in front of you." Those words flooded my memory and heart a few days later when I rediscovered a vintage Belding Corticelli sewing kit. Inside were all the medals I'd earned in high school for achieving top grades in different classes. All were still shiny gold and blue in their original containers, only the material on which they were pinned had faded. After I was awarded these pins and medals, I probably never looked at them again.

Each time I took a break from writing my manuscript, I thought what a meaningful gift my grandmother had left me by preserving in that album the records of my achievements during my childhood. I thought of how much hope, pride and love my grandmother had for me. I thought of her sitting in our small living room in our house in the woods, carefully placing each certificate and commendation on the blank pages of the album.

My past is indeed 'done and can't be changed'. But last week, I found inspiration and motivation for a current project by looking not forward, but backward – reflecting on what the accumulation of each and every page in that album said about my grandmother's dreams, what she believed was possible and deeply wanted for me.

RESERVING TIME FOR ME

A friend who is part of my small, protective pandemic pod – for daily walk-and-talks or cocktails or simple dinners at my apartment – has begun pressing me to spend more time with her. "We are lucky we have each other," is her favourite pronouncement. While it is a compliment, it has become the set-up line as her requests morph into demands and even escalate to commands.

Every two or three days she asks, "What is your schedule for the week?" This is followed quickly by "I'll certainly be home." This woe-is-lonely-me comment is designed to make me feel guilty. I make sure my responses are clear and firm: I'm writing a book, I like to keep my schedule flexible so that if my creative juices are flowing well, I can keep going. Her immediate response: "Can't you give me a consistent day every week like you do with your walking friends?" I say, "No. I can only accommodate one fixed commitment a week." She shoots back, with a mildly hurt, guilt-intensified tone.

As the frequency of her requests kept ratcheting up – and realising she hadn't detected my increasing annoyance – I decided the truth was needed. I really do not enjoy going over my schedule every few days, I said. It makes her feel like a domineering mother, not my understanding friend. At this, she went silent and ended the call. After two days off she called, immediately launching into an apology that ended with: "Do you have any time for me this week?" I just had to laugh, and luckily, so did she.