

The Thrift Shop Angel and the Power of Memory
Beacon UU Congregation
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When the idea for this sermon was first a glimmer, I intended to start it a bit differently, but then I happened upon a website this past week called “Legacy Box.” Actually, it found me since I had been googling words like “memories, legacy, and mementos”...algorithms, right? ...what can I say? What caught my eye was the tag line for Legacy Box. It goes, “The most important decision you’ll make is what memories to keep. Let us help you.” I guess your selected memories need to fit inside this box....at least in order to use this product. And I had to chuckle because my memories fill several big blue Rubbermaid bins in the basement storage room in my Pittsburgh house. Newer ones are stored here and there in my Flagstaff apartment and my office.

The blue Rubbermaid bins have the words “RZ memorabilia” scrawled in big black Sharpie block print on the lids. There is one for my daughter too - “MZ memorabilia.” My son Sam’s is, thankfully, at his father’s house in New Hampshire and God only knows how it will ever make its way across the ocean to Spain.

Inside my bin is an assortment of treasures - from a fragment of my childhood blanket called Bünie to my Camp Wingfoot green corduroy jacket ablaze with pins and patches, to the exuberant, Jack Kerouacky letters I wrote to my parents on impossibly thin foldable blue aerogrammes while I was on my Junior Year abroad in 1976, to a pressed corsage from Prom (presumably). Photo albums galore. I’ve preserved pins and my ID badge from when I was a volunteer at the 1980 Olympics in Lake Placid, and an old autograph book from elementary school...”2 Good to B 4 gotten!”

More recently, my closest childhood friend Ellen moved from her house to a condo and she sent me a bulging manila envelope of long ago written cards and letters attesting to the endurance and depth of our friendship. Such a gift. And she included the homemade program from my wedding in 1981. Yep –we are divorced now, but it was a lovely day. She was a bridesmaid, and well, memories are a mixed bag, aren’t they? Some memories make us angry or sad or revive a hurt, but we can’t just throw them away.

When I’m in Pittsburgh in July, one of the tasks on my to-do list is to pick through those bins and thin them out. Best of luck to me on that score...I’ve tried to accomplish this several times now and very little gets tossed. I’m sentimental. Do you relate?

These memorabilia items, which may seem trivial to others, are my “moments.” Last week on This is Us, in a deeply touching episode called The Train, the character William says to Rebecca (at the end of her life), “There is no such thing as a long time ago, just the moments we string together and choose to remember.” Maybe “Legacy Box” is on to something, after all. Our kids may not want our heirlooms anymore - the china or silver service or the knick-knacks and tchotchkes (it’s a trend apparently), but we do continue to decide which representative objects to store in bins and to treasure, nonetheless.

In a blog post written in April of this year, a woman named Shlomit Auciello writes that her 10x15 storage unit is her share of the 1.7 billion sq ft of storage space in the US. She calls it “a dusty land where things go to die, or at least, languish.”

She finds *i-cards* (whatever those are) from a company she worked for. And a trophy for “Employee of the month.” She laments that there are so many faces in the photos in a moldering manila envelope, whose names she has forgotten. Is it Ron or Rob?

In one of her blue bins, she unearths her submission to the 2004 World Trade Center Memorial competition. She notes ironically that back in the 1990s, she started another unfinished book project called “Living Lightly,” all about reducing one’s footprint on a planet overburdened by humanity’s unending desire to create and acquire stuff. It’s mostly on zip disks and other media she can’t access anymore. I can almost see her blushing as she shares this confession.

Yet, Shlomit comes to a realization which I share: “The value of things is not in ownership, as convention suggests, but rather in experience. Memorabilia serves to trigger the sensation of the time and places from which they were gathered; giving things away, she argues, offers others a chance to encounter these moments even if they may not know what the events meant to me.”

But what if we regret parting with these objects of memory, or they are swept up unintentionally in our moves or life changes or a fire or other happenstance? Enter The Thrift Shop Angel of NYC. Her name is Chelsey Brown and in the summer of 2021, she spied an old handwritten letter at a Manhattan flea market. On a whim she decided, “I am going to buy this item for a dollar, take it home with me, and try to trace it.”

Within a half hour, she had found descendants on a genealogy site, reached out and offered the long lost missive. From that moment on, she was hooked and has to date, returned hundreds of heirlooms. Each weekend, she visits thrift shops looking for items with distinctive clues, and usually spends between \$1 and \$5 on each acquisition. Postage to descendants is typically \$8 and she reckons she has spent thousands of dollars on her quirky quest.

But why? She responds that “there is nothing quite like the feeling of satisfaction that comes from returning a lost item to its owner or family.” She has returned wayward valentine’s day cards from the 1960’s and a baby journal from 1908. No one has ever said No. These aren’t just items, she tells us, “they are treasures. They are proof that someone has lived a life.” Our mementos offer the same proof, the same reassurance that we are connected, that we existed.

There is some science in the human instinct to attach significance to places, things, and sensations. Studies have shown that more people would rather save a special heirloom than their most expensive laptop or TV in a house fire. And according to recent psychological research, studies are showing that the part of the brain that stores and recalls memories is possibly the same part that integrates experienced sensations (the smell of a rose, the taste of honey, the feeling of a sandy beach on your toes). Our brain records these memories but can’t store it all. Objects can help us remember and evoke a sentimental feeling.

Consider a teddy bear you received as a child from a grandparent. You stumble upon it in your Rubbermaid bin, perhaps. The very sight of it, the feel of its fur, and the

smell bring back memories of your grandparent and sensation of holding it in your arms and she holds you in hers. This is also why its so hard to give things up! Why there are 1.7 billion sq feet of storage space in our country and even more in attics and basements.

Nostalgia can evoke these desired positive emotions and they can also trigger negative ones, especially if we are lonely. Social isolation during COVID has ramped up loneliness and our emotional regulatory systems have tried to correct this by evoking memories of happier times when we felt more connected. We seek to restore what has been lost.

If you were raised as a Catholic, you might have learned the ditty, “Tony, Tony turn around, something’s lost that must be found.” My former husband sometimes recited it when he misplaced his car keys. It’s a prayer to St. Anthony of Padua who is believed to be the patron saint of lost things. It traces back to a scene in his own life when he lost a priceless book of psalms. It was his prayer book, in which he had handwritten all kinds of notes in the margins. He prayed to have it returned and it was...by a thief who had encountered a demon (allegedly) in the forest upon attempting to flee Padua. Soon after Anthony’s death, people began praying through him to find lost objects.

We each have a lost and found box for our lives – relationships, keys, one missing glove, glasses, loved ones buried or estranged. Some things are lost and it’s difficult to find them again. They cannot be stored in Rubbermaid bins.

I have one more item for this morning’s “altar of memory” that represent this truth. It is the mask I have worn most frequently these past two years. I can’t pretend the pandemic didn’t happen in our collective lives or the collective grief and change it has precipitated. It has been a very real experience. Trying to forget it rather than incorporating its lessons is unhelpful and unhealthy. Can we find our way back to some mythical better time before COVID or do we carry forward what we have found in the pandemic to a new normal? Do we have a choice, really? “Tony, Tony turn around, something’s lost that must be found.” Yes – here’s what we can strive to find again - joy, safety, healing, connection.

Nostalgia can be tied to grief as readily as it can be tied to joy. In an op-ed piece for the New York Times, the writer Gary Greenberg notes that we can mourn the loss of anything to which we have become attached: a person, a pet, a job or a way of life. In bereavement, what is best about us – our ability to love – becomes a source of our suffering. And he notes that we have much to mourn – the loss of loved ones, climate change, our polarized nation, and the loss of the familiar. He asks: “What is nostalgia but a yearning for what once was, at least, in imagination, and a wish to have it again.” His silver lining is that we can mourn in unison, pick up the pieces and see if we can fashion something better out of the grief.

In the memorial services I officiate, I offer this sentiment – It is good and right to remember, because a human life is sacred in its living and in its dying. Remembering is a spiritual practice. Teddy bears are talismans of love experienced. Postcards from London represent our connection to other humans. That trophy. It means something.

So, may we recognize our unique treasures, and unapologetically save the Royal Doulton Fisherman creamer, the COVID mask, the wedding program from a broken marriage, the aerogrammes and postcards, and teddy bears, and blanket fragments, and

yearbooks; the photos and love letters and camp jackets and the stuff others might view as junk.

These pieces of our lives are the moments of our lives. They are the evidence that we lived a truly human life of joy and sorrow always woven fine together. Preserve the moments in your heart or a Rubbermaid bin, or a “Legacy Box” (don’t forget the discount code) and remember to pass them on, trends be damned.

What happens to them then? Well, it’s hard to say, but the Thrift Store Angel or St. Anthony might make it right in the end.

So may it be. Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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