

Objets d'heart

By Ruth Ostrow

"WHAT on earth do you need that for?" says my mother, staring at a jumper I have kept in my cupboard for several years. It's a heavy, woollen thing that belonged to my father. It was the only item of his I took from his wardrobe in the weeks following his death. Words catch in my throat as I try to explain the significance of the jumper.

"It's only going to rot," she says, yanking the jumper out of my arms and throwing it in the poor-box pile. "Over time it will grow mouldy. You can't keep things for ever. No use being sentimental."

I am in the middle of my millennium clean-out, a massive spring-clean that will enable me to start the new century free of clutter, free of the burden of heavy, emotional things.

I wanted to wake up today, on this momentous day, lighter and freer. So a few days ago I called in the woman I can most rely on to help me "chuck it out". She is a human clutter-buster, a walking testimony to the term "neat and tidy". Her floor is so clean you could lick your way around the kitchen and come up healthier than when you started.

Her wardrobes are colour-coded. She sorts her things twice a year and gives away anything redundant. Her papers are in neat folders stored in drawers with labels. And they get sorted, not hoarded and thrown into boxes, then thrown into the cupboard to gather dust and weight as the years go by.

My life is the opposite. Probably as a result of growing up with her.

I can't divest myself of any possession. Bills, diaries, old phone books, clothes, clippings, medical reports, school reports going back 30 years -- are all hoarded with the same intensity. My ex's are hoarded too, still coming around decades past their used-by date.

"But why do you need it?" my mother has always pleaded when visiting my various homes over the years. "Let it go now. Nothing lasts forever. It's time to chuck it out," she'd plead of old relationships, girlfriends gone nasty, furniture, my favourite old dress, or the masses of mementos and letters kept over the years.

And what could I say? How can you sum up the significance of photos from a holiday long gone, which now have no relevance to your life, except that as you look at them you remember the joy of being that young and that free. And you feel good about your life. For a moment. For a fleeting moment in time, which passes also.

The worst fight we had over clutter was about a decade ago, as I was packing my boxes to go to live in New York. She stood holding on to my doll collection I'd kept for 20 years. These were precious dolls, porcelain, hand-made and beautiful, passed down by my nanna.

"It's not appropriate a woman of your age keeps her dolls."

"But if I have a daughter one day, I'll give them to her."

"They'll be old and rotten by then. Material rots. Chuck them out. You can't hold on like this. You are weighing yourself down with all these boxes and memories. Stop lugging the past around," she said, yanking the dolls out of my arms.

Tearfully, I capitulated, though not a day goes by when I don't watch my daughter playing and regret giving in.

Now, years later, I pick up my father's jumper that mum has tossed in the reject pile, and hold it lovingly to my face. He died. I know that his jumper will eventually fade too.

It is the way of the world. My mother's attitude is hard, but right. We can't hold on to the past. We can't hold on to people who are dear to us. We can't keep clinging to things we no longer have use for. There is simply no room. And time does age and rot the people and things we have treasured. Most possessions die of dampness and decay.

I see mum eyeing me as I spend another moment burying my face in the wool. I imagine I can even smell a faint whiff of the man that was. In time this, too, will fade. I bravely pull the jumper away from my face and place it back in the reject pile.

The day drags on painfully. I am confused. How do we decide what to keep? More importantly as a new millennium begins, who to keep?

Why did some of the friends whose names I find in my boxes fall by the wayside? There are beautiful letters, photos, gifts from people who took the time to love me. Then suddenly they were gone from my life.

In creating a new phone book, they were somehow left out, left to languish in a redundant book, in a box, in a cupboard. Or their unanswered letters were left in the "must do" box, never to be done. Why didn't they make the distance? Why do we divest ourselves of some people and keep others?

I struggle with this question. One thing I do know, though: losing touch is not a deliberate, planned act, as my mother is asking me to enact now.

"Throw out these old phone books and diaries. You don't ever contact these people anymore. Sam, you haven't spoken with him in years. Nor Karen."

"But the diaries are evidence that those relationships did exist. Otherwise I might forget."

"That's the way it should be," says mum dispassionately, digging in a drawer. "The human mind is geared to forgetting and moving on. You can feel sad but you must let go. Otherwise how do you make way for the new?"

The new era is dawning. I want to make space for the things it will bring. Spiritual guru Louise Hay says we must clean out our clutter in order to let new energy in. Otherwise the past stands in the way of the future.

I hand mum my old diaries and phone books, saying a silent goodbye and thank you, to honour all of the people who have gone from my life.

I have always watched, in horror, news stories of homes destroyed by fire and flood. I've tried to imagine what would be lost. Connections to the past, to memory, to identity. But on some level I have often wondered: is there a relief in it?

How much easier to have God divest us of our past, without us having to make the painful step of throwing away little pieces of ourselves.

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