



THE DARK BRONZE ENVELOPE

There is a dark bronze envelope at the back of my underbed drawer. I'd carried it through four house moves, over three and a half years, unable to either open or throw it away. It held unfinished emotional business. I knew I should and could address it. Gradually. Later.

There is a letter in the dark bronze envelope. It was to the then teenage daughter of a colleague who died in her early forties. I will call my colleague Laura. It will only work in Facebook-world to say that Laura was a friend. There wasn't time enough to decide for the real world, but more time would have probably decided the same. 'Colleague' is fair. Still, her death unravelled me more than the closeness of the relationship justified.

In the village hall after the funeral, I hugged and spoke to Laura's daughter. I let jumbled words flow, trusting the sincerity of the emotion was reaching across and holding her. I told her clearly though that I had a letter for her and a toy for her little sister. I said I'd leave them somewhere there on the tables, where candles

flickered, petals shrivelled, and photos were beaming eternal smiles.

And then I didn't. Or, rather, I did, but picked them back again on leaving. I had decided I MUST re-pack the toy.

Of course, no matter how strongly I felt that the pattern of the gift bag was all wrong, that its structure was too stern and soft wrapping paper would have fitted the occasion better, this was not the real reason. I was scared what my letter might do. I was scared because my words can sometimes be more precise than you expect. I give those precise words to your pain too. I want to show you that I am trying to understand, that I truly want to understand and that I feel for you. I won't run away from you with your pain. And maybe I sharpen it rather than console you. How can I be certain what my words—of not quite a stranger, but almost one—will do to a teenage girl who's just lost her mum?

I had intended to give the condolence gifts to Laura's husband. He could read the letter and decide if it was to be given and if yes, when. But the man was a ghost: bones holding no flesh and autopilot deputising for life force. And, as becomes a ghost, he disappeared from the village hall. I really had to re-pack the toy.

In the weeks that followed, I wrote a letter to Laura's husband too (pinned to the desktop, waiting to be copied in handwriting), re-packed the toy, got a cardboard box and the address of the family. I never sent anything.

My laptop died and I stopped seeing the second letter. I was about to move. I gave away the toy. I put the dark bronze envelope in a 'to process' folder. I moved on.

UNFINISHED EMOTIONAL BUSINESS

The dark bronze envelope was, for years, the material expression

of emotional baggage being worked through—in fits and starts, but determinedly—and a reminder to complete the process. The emotional baggage was of more than Laura’s death and the dilemma of whether to give the letter and to whom.

It was about my aunt’s death from the same tumour, three weeks after being diagnosed with it and at least thirty years before her time, as per the low range of the family standards. It was about the pain of my aunt’s daughters, the cousins I’ve grown up with.

It was about ‘my right’ to feel pain in situations where ‘the true rights’ reside elsewhere (my cousins, my uncle, my mum, Laura’s real friends). It was about my right, in a completely different context, to be centrifuged by emotion when I was never the wife, never the girlfriend, never the lover, never even a recognised friend, but somebody’s best kept secret and invisible helpline.

It was about how I can offer help and compassion when my whole being rushes to, but it may be too much, I may be too much, relative to how distant a figure I am.

I completed the final piece of emotional processing—resolving the ethical dilemma of whether to give or not to give the letter—almost four years later, through a blog I wrote for work.¹ The business was finished.

The letter is, however, staying. I haven’t got round to deciding on the ritual of its release. It’s not avoidance. It’s lack of urgency. When the emotional work has been done, the physical world can catch up in its own time, especially when two pages and an envelope light.

1 Petrova, M. “The words we never said”. NIHR School for Primary Care Research blog, 21 Mar 2019. spcr.nihr.ac.uk/news/blog/the-words-we-never-said. Last accessed Aug 2022.

WHERE'S YOUR UNFINISHED BUSINESS SEALED?

Your unfinished emotional business is, obviously, sealed in your mind, body and soul, but it's in things too. It is your mum's jumper, gently folded and tightly wrapped in a vacuum bag to preserve her scent. The wedding day suit your husband left behind when he left. The envelope on which your name was followed by a heart, even if, realistically, that beautiful broken man wasn't declaring his love for you to every postman and the world but couldn't remember your foreign surname.

It's in possessions stamped with death and loss. Of love gone. Of a home we've lost the road back to. Of youth that was too brief. Of brilliant selves we never lived up to or let be bitten away, morsel by morsel to bare bones of memory, by hungry rolling years.

It's in objects of relationship ambivalence—things that came to us through relationships and friendships we were never quite certain about but stayed in/with, backwards and forwards in our responses to the question of “is it worth it?!” in our intentions to try harder, in our desire to be better people.

It's in creations, of others or our own, which speak our truth like we never do. The books, the music, the art that shine our essence; full on, wild, luminous, brave, impossible if it weren't real. Right as we do, before it all evaporates like August morning dew, and we are left again needing it from imaginary worlds.

Which objects is your unfinished business sealed in?

SENTIMENTAL ITEMS, GENUINE AND IMPOSTORS

Anything signalling of unfinished business is NOT, in my conceptualisation, a sentimental item. I keep the phrase for

objects of the (often distant) past which contract time and space, catapult us back into forgotten worlds and light us up—youthful, curious and fairy-dust-sprinkled—even if they pinprick our heart.

Much of what people call sentimental items at house moves are, I'd say, impostors. Our dark, ignorant, lazy fragments love taking a hint of sentimental value and blowing it out of proportion. Apart from avoiding dealing with unfinished emotional business, this process lets us avoid dealing with:

- Expensive possessions we never or hardly ever use and which our scarcity mentality finds hard to release into the world.
- Bad matches to who we are and how we live our lives, even if they match our good intentions and were given to us by people we love—such as gifts of sporting or cooking equipment.
- Old intentions which, no matter how admirable, won't become a priority until circumstances force us—such as to brush up your (my) French, meaning I carried high school notebooks (the sentimental items) from house to house for over a decade. It didn't help. What helped was spending two months in Geneva, the new books I bought on the way there, and women's magazines from Migros.
- Objects steeped in superstition. I cannot throw coins, even if they are Hungarian fillérs from the 80s, it may affect how I attract abundance! I don't really like this icon, but how do you bin a blessed image of the Divine?!
- Perhaps most of all, towering 'rocks' (piles of possessions of the same type) with some 'gold nuggets' (the sentimental items) trapped in them. Yes, it's normal, even healthy, to be attached to your childhood books

and toys; to your mum's jewellery; to the transformative work you did in your thirties, paperwork stored in dozens of thick folders. But only some items in those collections are true gold, while it takes endless hours-days-weeks of boring, sometimes emotionally intense work to extract them. There is a sloth's logic to being deeply sentimental.

WAYS OF THINKING THAT MAY SOFTEN

ACUTE "KEEP—DO NOT KEEP" DILEMMAS

If I am forced to state my core principle for dealing with possessions during a house move (though if I thought it was of much use, why would I be writing 90,000 words on top of it?), it would be a version of "redistribute unless you love and/or use, aiming for both love and use". Yet with sentimental items and what presents as them, it will be "keep until you figure out why you keep, then keep what you love, regardless of whether you use". Here are the details.

What to do if it hits you in the stomach?

If an object brings up an emotion that is too heavy; if seeing it hits you in the stomach; if it bursts the dams of the here-and-now and the past begins to flood you; if you had it hidden because you didn't want any of that, you might be better off packing it and taking it with you. You read that right.

While states of chaos can be a fruitful time to invite even more chaos (although, typically, chaos invites itself irrespective of our desires), there are times you'd better 'box' old issues. House moving is intense enough, even without the poking of hairy old demons. But when the time comes, a ready bridge to an emotional

territory you've been avoiding can be a force for good.

Most advice on recovering from a break-up asks you to throw away HIS/HER things and everything that reminds you of HIM/HER, or put them in a box, sealing it up and removing it from sight. I've read enough on break-ups to know. Similarly, most decluttering advice will ask you to let go of the past and bury your dead.

Always up to your better judgement, but allow me a tinge of scepticism. Your mind will find its prompts even if you change planet. Moving on emotionally by telling yourself that it's time to move on is about as efficient as winning a marathon by reading on how to win a marathon. In a few years' time, you'll also miss smiling at old love letters. More sadly but crucially, you'll have obliterated some of the best tests for the tumour of a painful love, which may be growing largely symptomless.

That said, of course it makes sense to let go of 'unfinished business' objects in response to the exigencies of a house move! Having a material reminder of what you need to work through is not a requirement for remembering to do it. The physical letting go can also be a powerful symbol of starting the work. Only don't mistake the letting go of objects with the letting go of the dark emotions around them.

You may also be surprised that what once hit you in the stomach is now just another thing. Somewhere along the way you've done the work. The shift may have also happened without you realising. It's now time for your material world to catch up with the emotional one. It's a non-issue.

Extract trapped people and relationships from the objects.

Decide about each on its own terms

Don't conflate objects with the relationships that brought them

in your possession. If you donate, sell or throw away something which a loved one gave to you, you *say nothing* about the relationship and *do nothing* to it. The thought and the gesture mattered. You appreciated them. The quality of the relationship matters. You have that. And you appreciated the former and have the latter with or without a fruit ball, an Ascot-style hat, or a ceramic mushroom with phallic undertones.

Do not repair/ justify a relationship through its objects. Many of us will find we've kept presents from people we can't embrace fully, no matter how earnestly we try. *I rarely use this serving plate, I wouldn't have chosen it myself, but it's perfect for such occasions! And it was so generous of her. Yes, she sucks life out of me after the first fifteen minutes, bless her, but she has some truly fine qualities. And it's a pretty plate, isn't it?*

Separate the object from the person. Decide about each on its own terms. Serving plate now, kind-of-friend later, whichever you need to decide about during this move. If you love the thing, love it full-heartedly and don't let that create an obligation to the person. If you are uncertain about the thing but feel guilty about wanting to disconnect from the person, don't try to evade the guilt or strengthen the relationship by keeping the object. It ain't gonna work. And don't make a poor plate, bowl, cushion, painting (can I add a dog, a cat, any pet, even if it's not their chapter) a hostage to your inability to be truthful to yourself and to choose, with honesty and an open heart, the people and objects in your life.

Respect the resistance

If you have objects of sentimental value you want to separate from but also can't, consider if finding a person who'll truly appreciate them can shift the balance. Sometimes finding a special home is

all you need to do to release such possessions.

If you still can't feel fully that letting go of something is a good thing, respect the feeling. There is an inner calculation that's happened, and it carries a truth or a systematic error you can't yet access. Pack it again. Your brain has done some work. It will work it out sooner or later.

DEALING WITH THE PHYSICAL CHAOS

Sentimental or unfinished-emotional-business paperwork— letters, cards and photos

Whether separating the chaff from the wheat makes your collection of letters, cards and photos straightforward to move around, depends on your thresholds for 'sentimental'. Such thresholds are highly personal. They also fluctuate a lot within the same person depending on the demands of a move (or a series of moves).

I keep all **handwritten letters** I've received, including love letters from ex-boyfriends. I'm not making a recommendation. I am asserting that moving on from loss, hard or intensely emotional times does not demand a particular type of attitude to the possessions of those times. It can go either way, any way.

I keep **cards** whose messages continue to move me. I recycle the rest, no matter how pretty the card or dear the person who gave it to me.

Being of a generation who needed to have **photos** developed in a studio so as to see them at all, I used to have plenty of printed images. I've whittled them down to the very best.

Sifting through sentimental paperwork may take you several moves if you've never addressed the task seriously. It starts as intensely moving and heart-opening. It soon progresses to just as intensely boring and tiring. I can't even remember how many

moves it took to complete mine ('complete' for old stuff, there is always new to go through at each move).

Burn after reading!

Notes from finished emotional business

If you are somebody who takes notes, if you were born in paper times, and if you've not moved recently, prepare for the paper storm. My emotional business externalised on paper used to be mostly of ideas, quotes, intentions, self-explorations, streams of consciousness processing bad days....They would be invariably mixed with notes of the professional and the mundane—presentation notes, book references, addresses, task lists....I would find them in diaries, folders, cute boxes, writing pads, post-its, fleeting sheets of paper....Most were chaff to be recycled. A small number, I transferred into electronic format. I followed up on the active intentions. But the most precious of my notes—pieces of paper that carried insight, clarity and visions—I burnt.

Whenever the notes were of hard times, a way of processing them, I would burn the pages so as to turn the past into ashes. Whenever I'd written positive visions, good luck charms, affirmations, etc., I would burn them so as to have a wildfire's energy feed into their execution. There is practical convenience in the duality of symbols.

It requires safety precautions. It STINKS. But it's liberating. Intoxicating. Strike a match. Touch a sheet. Tongues of fire blacken and shrivel your life's drama. Add sparkle to your dreams. Ashes in the sink.

Don't let jewellery and watches darken unworn

Speaking of witchcraft, I usually wear jewellery I've loved on

receiving (or buying) as if it wields magic powers. I don't take it off, even if sleeping. Then, as if out of nowhere, I stop wearing it. Never again. I kept such old loves for long, until I decided they were suffering unworn.

I donated the costume jewellery (many charity shops take it), sold the gold and silver, and kept a tiny collection of favourites. In parting with an item, I found myself led by the lack of a story—not being able to remember who gave me a piece of jewellery or how I bought it, and not having any distinct memory of wearing it. The remaining old favourites are mostly to smile at, though they can get some airtime. I recently wore a wristwatch from teenage times, a present from my granddad. I wanted to go out without a mobile. I wanted to be infused with the peace of times when watches needed winding and the family I grew up with were all alive.

***Honour your superstitions with one hand
while dismantling them with the other***

If you have superstitions around what you can and cannot throw away, you may try honouring them with one hand while taking them apart with the other. I cannot throw away coins. They may be the smallest coin of a foreign currency out of circulation, yet I can't. It's ok. I'll spend far less energy if I find a charity box for foreign and/or old coins (most recently in my local hospital) than if I stage an inner debate on the energetic impact of throwing money in a bin. I make a trip to a charity box. I drop my coin(s). I waste hours. But, in parallel, I also do the far more constructive work of learning about true wealth from those who've mastered its energy.

***If you are one for thoughtful gestures
and small acts of kindness***

...you may have a reserve stock of cards, presents and wrapping paper at home (jump to the next subsection if that's the last thing you'd keep). You'll carry less, re-connect with people you've lost touch with, get a high out of the randomness and, of course, relish in starting afresh in your new home.

I sometimes send more cards during house moves than I do at Christmas. There is no social obligation. No expectations or need for expectations management. I don't struggle to write a smart deeply felt message, as I sometimes do with occasion cards. I don't feel constrained by pre-printed messages. As per a creative solution I stole from our team administrator and dear friend, one can always cross out the 'birth' in a 'Happy Birthday' card and send a Happy Day instead.

In one of my moves, I sent a bunch of cards and little presents right before I left a home and a city. I was lightening my luggage. Unintentionally, I had weaved a protective web. As is often the case in a new city, I felt like a rag doll: "Here hang pieces stitched together with a thin symmetrical smile." I was heart-broken too. Until the thank-you notes started arriving. I was real. And I was loved.

Don't die before you've sorted it

Even if you can't do it during this move, please commit to going through your sentimental collections, singling out what's truly sentimental and dealing with the rest. Don't leave it for those of us who'll outlive you. It's too much work. Ours is enough.



There are only three regrets I have from nineteen years of donating, selling or throwing out ‘things’, which must have been in their thousands.

The biggest of them is having sold a pair of heart-shaped pendant gold earrings from when I was about fifteen, to a gold buyer who didn’t look me in the eye during the whole exchange.

I would never have put them on again. So childish. So old-fashioned.

I should have kept you though. Once you made me indescribably happy. I made you happy too.

I hope you’ve found new ears to be your home.

Mine is still where the heart is.

Pendant.