

Lost and Found

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Instead of an answering machine, I have a voice-mail service at home. I saved a number of my mother's voice-mail messages before she died. Now I can't bring myself to erase them. Every few months, the automated system informs me, "You have had the following saved message for one hundred days, the maximum time allowed." Then I hear Mom's words beamed out to me from some digital vault at the phone company. When the message is over, I tell it to save again.

I figure I've resaved my mother's messages about ten times since she died. In one message Mom says she's sorry for getting angry and doesn't want to go to bed mad. In another she needs me right away because there's a problem with her new caregiver... Not long after that, I moved Mom into the nursing home.

In these messages, Mom is almost present. I hear her intake of breath, the familiar sound of her saying my name. Here is the voice that called me on the phone to chat and to deliver good or bad news. Now it's a digital imprint on some remote computer hard drive. But every hundred days the automated system delivers her message to me.

It called again today. I saved her once more.

Sermon

Like many sermons, the idea for this sermon began with a moment in church life. In my very first days here at Cedar Lane, a new member approached me with a question. "Where is the lost and found?" he asked. He was holding this book, "Impressionists in Winter – Effets de Neige." Someone had left it in the auditorium.

I, too, was a new member of Cedar Lane so I didn't know what to tell him. I asked around until I found a discreet cabinet in the church office, labeled "Lost and Found." As I opened the cabinet to store the forgotten book, I found a fascinating collection of things nestled among the predictable scarves and gloves.

For example, this set of shrimp cocktail forks.

And this antique wooden box. It bears a label from the Lamotte Chemical Products Company of Baltimore. Open it up and you will find the remains of what looks like a kit for mixing chemical experiments. Only in a church near NIH.

And a pair of eyeglasses. As someone who doesn't wear glasses, I assume that if I did wear glasses, I would know if I lost them. Seeing the glasses reminds me of a line from the hymn we sang this morning, "Amazing Grace": "I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

Discovering our lost and found collection reminded me of a news story I heard long ago about an artist who created an exhibit entirely out of items from the Lost and Found Office of Grand Central Station. While many of the items in the Grand Central Station "lost and found" are also predictable—electronic calendars, coats, notebooks and the like—the office also receives some unexpected articles. In a recent interview, Lost and Found Office manager Mike Nolan noted that during his tenure they have

recovered a life raft, a basset hound and more than one artificial limb.¹

How I wish I could have seen the exhibit of lost and found items! As I often go to yard sales, for me there is no novelty in a pile of used coats and sweaters. But I know that what we keep reflects who we are and what we leave behind are imprints of the lives we lead. These human lives are at the heart of such an exhibit.

Ernest Hemingway knew the relationship between objects and human life when he wrote what he considered his best story. The story is six words long: “For sale: baby shoes, never used.”²

This morning, I will tell you a story about losing and finding, about feeling lost and feeling found. My story is in two parts. The first part is about losing. It begins the morning I was preparing to lead my first memorial service.

It was two hours before the service was to begin. And although my meeting with the family the week before went well, and my jacket was pressed, and the service was printed and tucked neatly into my folder—things weren’t going well.

As you might imagine, I was nervous about leading my first memorial service. This service was for a family I hardly knew. It was a service with such a solemn purpose. But I was also anxious for another reason. When I looked in the mirror, I saw only a small hole in my ear lobe that once held an earring. An earring that my father gave me. After searching the whole bathroom and tearing apart the bed and looking all over my room it was clear that the

¹ <http://www.abcnews.com/Primetime/story?id=1431187>

² *Utne Reader*, July/August, 2005, as cited by Bill Neely in the August 17th, 2005 issue of *Kairos*, the newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockford, Illinois.

earring was nowhere to be found. The gift my father gave me was lost.

If you know my father, you know that this was not just a piece of jewelry. If you know my father, you know that this was not just a physical gift. Losing the earring was losing a reminder of my father’s personality. It was like I lost a piece of the man himself.

To say that my father is a quiet man is an understatement. It is almost as if, at birth, he received a small quota of words to use throughout his lifetime and, ever the practical New Englander, he has chosen to dispense his words only for the basic tasks of living and to respond to the occasional emergency. Like all silence, sometimes his quiet feels like distance, but I know that beneath that quiet is an ever-gentle and loving spirit. I have learned to hear my father more through what he does than through what he says.

But there is one thing that my father will talk about freely and with great enthusiasm—rocks and minerals. Since he was a young boy, my father has collected and studied stones, viewing them under a microscope and, as an adult, taking photographs of these specimens with a state-of-the-art camera. Growing up, while some of my peers went camping with their parents, my family and I would take day trips to abandoned mines to go “rock hunting.” When my parents bought their first house, they were pleased that it had a four-car garage. As you may have guessed, their yard is now a parking lot for their cars as the fruits of a lifetime of rock hunting takes up too much room.

I remember the Christmas I received the earrings. Opening the velvet box, I knew at once that this was not an ordinary gift as the box revealed three earrings. Having only two ears, I was confused.

“The earrings are from a white quartz crystal I found,” my father said. “I had a friend of mine from the collecting club cut and set

them.”

Soon after Christmas, a close friend who was apprenticing with a jewelry maker, took the extra earring and used the stone to fashion a ring.

That following summer, my father and I spent a rare afternoon alone together by taking a hike in the New Hampshire mountains. After about an hour of climbing the winding trail, over roots and boulders, we reached the top—a bald expanse of rock above the timberline. As we sat and rested to catch our breath, my father pointed to a small, non-descript hole in the ground and said, “From that pocket I found the crystal I used to make your earrings.”

From that pocket to the creation of the earrings to my ears and, as we speak, now somewhere closer to the earth. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

So, when I began the memorial service that day, I did not feel centered, having discovered the loss of something I cherished, a special gift from someone I love. Yet, feeling the loss of a symbol of my father’s love helped me imagine what was in the hearts of those on the other side of the memorial service, those feeling the much more painful loss of a father.

As I joined the assembled community in the experience of loss, I found meaning in these words I read by Elder Olson:

“Nothing is lost; the universe is honest.
Time, like the sea, gives all back in the end,
But only in its own way, on its own conditions:
Empires as grains of sand, forests as coal,
Mountains as pebbles. Be still, be still, I say;
You were never the water, only a wave;
Not substance, but a form substance assumed.”

That day, I was reminded that what we love is never permanent; nothing is ever “the water.” It is always “a wave.” And while love is a sacred gift, it does not come without a cost—the pain of loss with its absence.

What we keep reflects who we are and what we leave behind are imprints of the lives we lead. In this way, as I stood before those grieving a lost loved one, I found a window into my own bonds with my family. I did not know how much comfort I got from a quartz crystal earring until it was gone. That day, I learned the power of objects to symbolize our experiences and relationships.

Our attachment to special objects was one lesson I learned. But, as the Buddhists teach, I also learned the dangers of attachment. Had I remembered that everything is transient, that everything is in motion, like water in a wave, losing my special earring would not be a painful event. Losing would not be felt as a loss but just a natural part of life.

It is hard to accept emotionally but we know that it is true—loss is a persistent reality of life. As one Cedar Lane member said, “no one survives life on earth.” For this reason, at some point we all have the experience of losing a loved one. And it is inevitable that, hopefully after a long and rich life, we lose ourselves to the transition of death. And human mortality is only one type of loss. We lose places, relationships, careers, dreams, hopes.

While loss is a persistent reality of life, I have learned one additional truth—being found is also a persistent reality. “Time, like the sea, gives all back in the end.” Because it is hard to accept on an emotional level, when we suffer a devastating loss, it is sometimes the only thing we can see. Loss is our worldview, our landscape, that which eclipses everything. However, the additional truth I have learned is not that “time heals all wounds” but more

that what is good is indestructible. What we have lost is gone only in the form that we have known it. It is still here and we will see it in its new guise when we are ready and open to its presence.

I learned this truth about finding in the second part of my story. And it begins right before another memorial service.

Almost two years ago, my mother died suddenly at the age of fifty-six. Our family gathered at the funeral home about an hour before her service was to begin. On this side of the memorial service, I had a much more powerful understanding of the experience of loss.

During this early gathering, my father, ever the practical New Englander, handed me an old velvet box. Inside, I found my mother's rings, along with two quartz crystal earrings. Apparently, when my mother's body was prepared for cremation, her jewelry was removed and given to my father. I then remembered that from the same stone he found on top of that New Hampshire mountain, my father made earrings for my mother as well.

With the absence of my mother, the hole inside me was much bigger than any pocket in the earth. But, with her quartz crystal earrings in my hand—what I understood as a strange and terrible returning of the earring I lost long ago—I had little choice but to find new truth in the minister's words that morning, words that affirmed that:

“Nothing is lost; the universe is honest.
Time, like the sea, gives all back in the end,
But only in its own way, on its own conditions...”

“On it's own conditions,” indeed.

Like you, my story of losing and finding is still being written. But from this story, these are the truths I have learned:

What we keep reflects who we are and what we leave behind are imprints of the lives we lead.

We cannot keep anything forever. Everything is in motion, like water in a wave.

But what is good is indestructible. What we have lost is gone only in the form that we have known it. It is still here and we will see it in its new guise when we are ready and open to its presence.

As my story of losing and finding is still being written, you are invited to bring your lives, your stories to this sanctuary. For as we gather, week by week, to marvel at the miracles and birth, death and everything in-between, it is in our time together that we find meaning. It is in our time together that we transform from strangers to friends. Together, we find home. Let not one of us enter into these mysteries alone.

May it be so. Amen.