

Whatever gains I had, these I count as loss
Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14

My brothers Thomas and Micah and I recently lost our mother, and, over the last number of weekends, we've packed up her belongings and cleaned out her house. She was an exceptionally organized person, so I know that the things that she kept were special to her. They weren't shoved into a dark corner to deal with at another time and they weren't in this or that random box or file by accident. She was keeping them on purpose, and everything had its place.

So, what does one do with these objects that were once precious to someone who is no longer here? This Lenten season, I have given up many of my parents' things. Some of them have found new homes and some of them will be forgotten in a landfill along with other forgotten things. This process has been brutal, but also cleansing. Fitting for Lent.

There is an ancient belief in something called "contagious magic" that can be found in many cultures and religions around the world. The law of contagion dictates that persons or things that have once been in contact with one another can still have influence on one another when separated. For example, some practitioners of contagious magic take great care to not let their hair, fingernails, teeth, or clothing fall into the wrong hands for fear that magic could be performed on these objects with negative consequences.

While this belief is generally associated with shamanistic religions or cultures that practice witchcraft, it is also found in some form in the Abrahamic faiths and in Buddhism and Hinduism as well.

In the city of Kandy, Sri Lanka, one can visit the Buddhist Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, which claims to house the tooth of the Buddha. Historically, it was believed that whomever possessed this relic had the right to rule the land, so it was stolen many times before it found its home in the Temple. On Wednesdays, there is a ritual bathing of the tooth and then the remaining bath water that came into contact with the tooth is believed to have healing powers, hence, contagious magic.

Catholic pilgrims visit many sacred relics, such as the bones of saints, that are believed to possess curative properties for those that come into contact with them. Places can also possess certain holy qualities, such as the Bosnian town of Medjugorje where the Virgin Mary appeared to a group of children. More than 1 million people visit the site of these apparitions every year.

Protestants, on the other hand, are often suspicious of practices such as these due to our iconoclastic nature. Protestants tend to view the veneration of images or objects as idolatrous. But even Protestants have to admit that the Bible includes some fantastical examples of contagious magic. 2 Kings 13:20-21 reads:

[The prophet] Elisha died and was buried. Now Moabite raiders used to enter the country every spring. Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man's body into Elisha's tomb. When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet.

There is ambivalence in the Hebrew Bible concerning magic. On the one hand, magic is seen as evidence of the influence of pagan practices on Jewish religion. On the other hand, it is seen as a way for Yahweh to demonstrate his great power.

I feel a certain magical power when I hold special objects. Some of the things that I treasure are my grandmother's diary, countless photographs that revive forgotten memories, some pieces of art and too many of my parents' books, most of which are covered in my dad's mark ups. I love to look at my grandmother's handwriting and my father's handwriting. It evokes something intimate and unique about the person who held the pen.

My husband Mike inherited an interesting item that now sits on top of one of our bedroom bookshelves. It's a caviar dish that says "best caviar" in Russian on it. Mike's mom's side of the family fled from Russia to Canada in 1924 and, like many people in the world who are forced to flee their home because of war or persecution, they had to leave almost all of their valuable possessions behind. Mike once told me the story of this caviar dish – that it was one of the few things his great-grandparents brought with them when they moved here. Can you imagine? Of all of the ridiculous, useless things they could've chosen to bring, they brought a caviar dish?

When Mike and I started dating, I also heard the story of an ominous wooden spanking spoon that had been brought from Russia and later hung in Mike's house growing up.

Over March break this year, we drove to Kansas, where Mike spent most of his childhood. Mike took time to go through some of his family's things in his mom's basement. He came across the famous caviar dish and asked his mom if he could

take it with him because of its historical significance. His mom looked a bit confused about why he'd want it, but gave it to him anyway.

It turns out that in reality, Mike's dad had found the caviar dish in a dump somewhere and picked up the wooden spoon from an antique shop. So much for family history.

The memorable things we own are imbued with the significance we give them and we can become transfixed by their illusory power.

The Buddha once told a parable about a travelling tradesman who came home to find that his house had been robbed and burned to the ground by bandits. Amidst the rubble were the charred remains of a body. The man assumed that the remains were those of his son and he grieved deeply. He put some of the ashes into a pouch that he wore around his neck so that he'd never be separated from his son.

A few months later, the bandits were caught and the man's son was found alive, having been held captive by them. The son returned home and knocked on his father's door, but his father would not believe it was him and turned him away. The father became stuck in an idea and refused to open his mind to the truth beyond his own illusion.

Whether the stories behind them are strictly *true*, or not, Mike and my inherited *things* remind us of who we are and of who our parents and grandparents were. These things are associated with generational identity and family history and by keeping them, we are remembering beyond our own individual memories.

When I touch my mother and father's things, it feels as if these objects contain something of their essence – like contagious magic. And this feeling engenders both love and suffering. A Buddhist may interpret this loving suffering as caused by attachment to objects that are, in reality, impermanent. If I meditate on the true nature of these objects, I see that they are already dust. But still, I cling because I'm not fully ready to accept this reality. This is what I have been reflecting on during Lent. How to remember and how to let go.

My brother Thomas and I have had lots of time to talk while packing up mom's house and, this week, he shared some thoughts with me from the 14th century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart that are reminiscent of this Buddhist idea of clinging that causes suffering. Eckhart writes:

If you want to...find complete joy and consolation in God, make sure that you are naked of all created things, of all comfort from created things; for truly, so long as created things console you and can console you, never will you find true consolation. But when nothing but God can console you, then truly God does console you, and with him and in him everything that is joy consoles you.¹

Impermanent, created things cannot ultimately bring us the joy or comfort that God can bring. Think of this as a Lenten emptying of our spiritual closets to make more room for God.

In our passage from Philippians, Paul lists his accomplishments and gains under the law. But when he becomes a Christian, he sees all of these accomplishments and gains as loss. He calls them “rubbish” in the translation you heard. A more literal translation of this word is actually “excrement”! Paul says that when he sacrifices these lofty things which have become like excrement to him, he gains the knowledge of Christ.

But Paul isn’t talking about letting go of material possessions, as I have been. He is talking about letting go of attachment to ego. The gains that he refers to served to bolster his image of himself as righteous before his community. And when he lets go of these things, he makes room for the eternal Christ to dwell within him and through him. He becomes free and empty – ready to accept the joy and consolation of God.

This leads me to reflect on the nature of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Paul writes:

For Christ’s sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere [dung], so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him. I no longer have a righteousness of my own...All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection (Philippians 3:8-10).

Perhaps we can view Jesus’ death as the death of individual ego and his resurrection as the birth of God within us all. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are united with God.

In conclusion, our loved ones may depart from us in the physical realm and we may find ourselves clinging to them through their things. But sometimes these things hold us back from our true inheritance. As my favourite poet, Patrick

¹ Meister Eckhart, *The Book of Divine Consolation*, 220.

Friesen, writes, “your bones...are the bones of everyone before you”.² I take comfort in this kind of contagious magic. That my mother and my mother’s mother live in me. They don’t live on in a collection of precious objects. They live in the reliquary of my body and soul. And when I walk on the earth, I walk with *our* feet.³

² Patrick Friesen, “caught in the sky” from *carrying the shadow*.

³ Please see Thich Nhat Hanh, *no death, no fear*.