

Reliving the Past While Decluttering

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The large plastic tub has sat in the lounge room for almost a month. I know it irritates my daughter, Anne, who is almost OCD regarding clutter. Her father, John's influence perhaps - ex-Royal Navy and spending most of his twelve years he served on Destroyers, made him neat almost to the point of obsessiveness.

‘Everything has a place and everything should be in its place...’

‘Where does this go?’

‘Does this have a home? It has sat here for two days...’

‘Girls, have you put your clothes (toys, bags, whatever) away?’

‘This was here yesterday, do you have a plan for it?’

‘This’ could be a jam jar with a cutting from a rose or other flower, I hoped to plant. A book someone lent me or one I would give or lend to someone else. A leaflet reminder of a meeting, the school newsletter with special dates - anything that could be somewhere else because to John, and now Anne, clutter is pointless and a nuisance.

Back to the plastic tub and what to do with the contents...

Return it to the shed? Slide it into the spare room? No, it will sit by my armchair until I have read every letter, card, scrap of paper, bank statement or bill Mum saved. I must turf, scan, give to one of my siblings, or tie up with ribbons and keep for future generations. How many times have I heard the adage attributed to Benjamin Franklin - *“Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today.”*

This tub represents so many years of family life - the period 1962 - 1981 (and even beyond) when my scattered siblings wrote home and to each other.

A common prompt in memoir or creative writing classes is please write a letter to your younger self - a time when you were a teenager, trying to cope with adolescence and worrying about the future and give advice. I sat reading letters my 17-year-old self wrote to Mum, Dad, and brothers and sisters still living at home.

Mum even kept letters addressed to me when I left them at home prior to several trips overseas or went interstate to study. I assumed she'd throw them out, but she kept them. Those letters remind me of people and events forgotten or so far buried in the past, I needed the letters to remind me of their significance in my life.

I left home at seventeen to attend university - the first of six siblings to leave home so it was a momentous event. I discovered a six-page letter to my father explaining how depressed I was with the world, confused about the future, disappointed with academia and life at the ANU, and aching to travel back to Scotland - and ‘oh, by the way, I know you'll be disappointed but I've taken up smoking.’

The letter written only a few months after leaving home and as I read it, I remembered arriving home to Croydon for the winter holidays...

I stood in front of the briquette heater facing my father, relaxing in his Jason recliner, a cup of tea on a table at his elbow. His sister, Chrissie, sat opposite while mum replenished homemade scones in the kitchen.

Aunt Chrissie lit a cigarette and offered one to me. I'd been home two hours without a mention of my smoking and hadn't found the courage to light up in front of Dad. He had given up smoking a decade before, and I knew they must have discussed my confessional letter.

'Come on, you wee besom, I know you want one,' Aunt Chrissie said, with a laugh.

I stopped breathing, knew the heat on my cheeks was not from the fire, and glanced at Dad.

'Take one if you want - it's your choice,' he said, 'but you'll regret it.'

He sipped his tea and watched me take a Craven A from Aunt Chrissie's packet before adding, 'Thought you'd have more intelligence.'

I ignored the jibe as Aunt Chrissie yelled to Mum in the kitchen, 'Annie d'ya want a fag?'

Mum came hurrying through, wiping flour on her apron before the two of us lit our cigarettes from the one match. The relief on Mum's face spoke volumes. She dreaded confrontation and was glad the moment of me smoking for the first time in front of Dad completed without debate. Mum smoked most of her adult life (contracting emphysema in her 70s) and I don't think she even considered quitting when Dad did.

Now she had a fellow addict in me - a fellow conspirator, if you will, the only one of my siblings to take up the dreaded habit for any length of time. Well, the only one to be honest about starting to smoke. My sisters also smoked - the older one only at parties for a brief time, and the younger one smoked in secret for a long time, pretending to family she didn't.

After sucking on the Craven A filter tip, I blew a smoke ring into the air. Dad spoke again, 'You know, love, I can see how you're enjoying that - the way I did - you'll have a tough time giving it up. And sometime down the track you will give it away and you'll regret ever having that first cigarette.'

I often remember Dad's words of wisdom, but that day, Mum rolled her eyes and Aunt Chrissie winked at me. I guess they'd heard parts of Dad's speech before!

For several years, I smoked 'on and off' with several attempts at giving the 'coffin nails' up. Any abstention on economic, not health grounds - I'd give up smoking, save for an overseas holiday, and then smoke the minute I got access to Duty Free cigarettes!

However, in 1985, when I wanted to rid my body of toxins before conceiving a baby, I gave up cigarettes with the help of some strategies from a psychologist. I suffered a slight relapse in 1987 with the stress of being a new mum but then developed a complete smoke-free mindset. And it is a mindset.

Dad was right - taking up smoking is the least intelligent pastime anyone can do. It is burning money while having an adverse impact on personal health and anyone within breathing distance... but oh, how I enjoyed it. His observation about that spot on.

It was the hardest habit to break, but I'm glad I did.

I reread those pages full of angst and the confession from my 17-year-old self and put the letter back in the envelope. The honest confession about feeling depressed and trapped and unsure of where my life was heading or what I wanted to do with my life important too.

I'll show it to my daughters. It is an authentic depiction of a period of my life they know little about.

Now for all those other paper bundles - decisions, decisions, decisions.

