

*A Letter About Memory*

a short film by Bethany J. Ostrander

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### Memory and the Collection of Sentimental Objects

While sorting through my own belongings, I was having difficulty deciding which items to keep and which to discard or donate. Consequently, I begin to ponder the question: why is purging or “getting rid of stuff” such an emotional and difficult process? After some introspection, I realized there is a strong connection between the assurance of memory recollection and the possession of material objects. As an individual who generally struggles with recalling past events (for no diagnosable reason), I realized I tend to hold onto items that I deem “sentimental” and/or items that stir up a significant amount of memory recollection. Therefore, I decided to try to identify how certain objects can be linked to one’s memory and identity. Specifically, to investigate the practical and psychological factors that contribute to the milder form of hoarding most individuals indulge in for the sake of sentimentality or preservation of the past. Additionally, I inquire into whether the collection and rediscovery of sentimental objects helps or hinders the formation and recollection of memories.

I theorize that personal items deemed as memory-laden or sentimental significantly enhance our ability to recall visceral details about a related event; details that may never have been recovered without the physical presence of that object. However, utilizing physical objects as the crutch for one’s memory and sense of identity may be detrimental to our mental health and the functionality of our physical environment. Thus, staying within a healthy limit of sentimental items is likely crucial for maintaining one’s ability to retain and organically recollect past events.

Memory is generally defined as the ability to retain and recall information and past

experiences based on a series of mental processes including encoding, storage, retrieval and recognition (“Memory”; “What is Memory?”; Cherry: “What Is Memory?”). Individual memories are actively created during the process of encoding, in which the brain aims to shape a holistic recreation of a particular experience, by incorporating a variety of details like the experience’s location, weather, participants, music, food; and/or any other sensory, psychological, emotional or physical characteristic you could possibly conceive (“What is Memory?”; Cherry: “What Is Memory?”; Mohs).

In a study investigating early childhood recollection, psychologists Crawley and Eacott made an effort to clarify unique attributes of memories and pin-point what really *makes* a memory (Crawley 292). Crawley and Eacott discovered that organic recollections are able to conjure up a “richness of sensory characteristics relating to visual detail, smell, and touch, information related to location and the spatial arrangements of objects and people, [and are] more likely to come to mind in pictorial [form], rather than verbal” (292). By defining memory in this manner, Crawley and Eacott confirm that the process of memory formation and identification is intrinsically linked to a subject’s interactions with [and recollection of] a physical environment and/or material objects. I am particularly interested in the relationship between memory and material objects, specifically how material objects deemed “sentimental” can trigger memory recollection. Psychologists Russell Belk and Yang Yang describe sentimental items, respectively, as “mnemonic” and “memory-laden objects,” which possess the power to commemorate affective experiential knowledge and evoke memories of specific times, places and people (Yang 769; Belk 29). How exactly do memory-laden/mnemonic objects trigger an individual’s recollection? The scientific community is not really sure. Memory, and frankly all complex processes of the brain, continue to evade scientific comprehension.

Research on familiarity and recollection from the School of Psychological Sciences at University of Manchester *hypothesized* that looking at familiar objects can stimulate recollection of associated thoughts which were generated at encoding--in other words, personal objects can trigger memories associated with them (Kafkas 3088). Regardless, while the study was able to confirm object-stimuli triggers the area of the brain known to perform the recollection process, whether the process actually resulted in “associated thoughts” [i.e. related memories] remained hypothetical (Kafkas 3090). Nonetheless, as humans, we all instinctively know and have likely experienced the phenomena of encountering a sentimental object and being overtaken by a flood of associated memories (Roemer; Sommerfeld).

So what does it really mean for an item to be “sentimental”? Moreover, how do some items gain the privilege of being sentimental while others can be easily discarded? Yang proposed that the happiness that an individual derives from an item is the result of a combination of at least two components: The “feature-related utility derived from item features (e.g., the appearance, functions, and specifications) [and] non feature-related utility,” such as “if an item reflects who they are (i.e., value from identity signaling), is of a favorable brand (i.e., brand value) or is a particularly good deal (i.e., transaction utility)” (Yang 767-768). Sentimental value falls under the umbrella of non-feature-related utilities, and because sentimental items tend to symbolize important moments in your life, they can hold far more significance and merit to you than other, more practical/functional items with decent feature-related utility. Notably, Yang clarifies that an object’s sentimental value is intrinsically linked to an individual’s memories of a time, place, person or event; *not* the object’s philosophical significance or contribution to an individual’s identity expression (Yang 767-768).

Why exactly is it so difficult to curb our continued collection and possession of

memorabilia? Why are the pressures of sentimental value so difficult to overcome? Karen Page Winterich, a marketing professor investigating how to increase consumer donations to non-profit organizations, theorized that “product-specific memories” and “fear of identity loss” were likely the key reasons why consumers were so reluctant to donate or dispose of unused items (Winterich 104-105). Consumers certainly are reluctant--in a survey conducted by eBay and Neilson in 2007, they found that Americans had an average of “50 unused items in their homes, [...] including clothing, accessories, electronics, sporting goods, toys, [etc.], some of [which were] still usable goods [but] associated with treasured memories” (Winterich 104-105). So many individuals believe that discarding a sentimental object will result in forgetting commemorative experiences and fundamental aspects of their personality that it results in them holding onto possessions for decades despite their lack of utility; largely as a form of identity and memory preservation.

The truth is the association of identity/memory loss with the healthy disposal of useless material objects ultimately stunts one’s ability to function. In an article for The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP), Professor Libby Sander provided empirical research which concluded that extensive clutter “drain[s] our cognitive resources, [...] and can reduce our working memory” (Sander). Disorganization and excess possessions can disrupt our brains ability to properly process information, intercept our memory processes, and consequently prevent us from forming new memories--which defeats the whole purpose of keeping sentimental items to begin with! Additionally, a 2010 study from the scientific journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* showed that subjects [largely mothers and fathers] who reported disorganized living spaces experienced more correlated mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, stress and fatigue, than their organized counterparts (Saxbe 78-80).

Therefore, while we may be supporting our brain and memory by supplying helpful hints and the occasional reminder of happy memories (if we happen to rediscover a treasured item), we may also be overstimulating our brains with excessive possessions and furthering the downfall of our mental health.

How can we (the average consumer) avoid broaching the extremities of clutter, protect our mental health, and properly manage our mnemonic collection? Luckily, Professor Winterich proposed a solution to consumers' fears of identity and memory loss by encouraging them to engage in active memory preservation techniques, such as taking photographs of sentimental items, writing a reminder note, or otherwise documenting the memories associated with the object so that they can peacefully part with it (Winterich 105 & 117). World-renowned tidying consultant Marie Kondo suggests: "Keep only those things that speak to the heart, and discard items that no longer spark joy; thank them for their service – then let them go" ("What is the KonMari Method?").

Sentimental objects are an important part of our recollection process, and can serve to stimulate positive memories and our sense of self. However, maintaining a large collection of sentimental items (to the point of excess) can be incredibly damaging to our mental health and our brain's ability to form new memories. Therefore, my advice would be similar to Winterich and Kondo's: be selective about the items you choose to keep, and make an effort to maintain an organized living space to support your mental health. Also be gentle on yourself, do not stress too much if you cannot dispose of a particularly special object--sentimental items can be incredibly precious, and your memories are worth preserving.

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