

Jigsaw Puzzles

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I like Jigsaws. I don't know why I like them. I always have. I like making them. I like looking at the picture when it is complete. I even like being able to mess it all up, and put it back in the box, to be re-made another day.

I remember some of the jigsaws I had as a child. I particularly remember three of them. They were the kind of jigsaws that were backed with heavy cardboard, and with a border glued in place. On the backing cardboard, the shape of each piece was embossed there, waiting for me to find its partner.

I remember discovering that at least two of the puzzles had been cut with the same die. So I could swap the pieces over, making two incomplete but fascinating pictures. I think I learnt to appreciate the shapes of each piece fitting together, as well as the satisfaction of completing the whole puzzle.

The next jigsaw I remember is one that my father used to make. I was too young to help when I first saw it, and so made me determined to be older sooner. It wasn't long before I was allowed to help and I had my favourite parts of the picture. The jigsaw was of a train station viewed from the controller's box high above the platform.

I liked the picture. It was busy. Things were happening. There was order, and 'chaos'. Not enough mishap to disrupt the trains coming and going but it was not all neat and proper. And the more I looked, the more I could see in it. It was full of life, purpose, order, and chaos. I think I learnt to keep looking at the picture, discovering not only where the pieces go but what the puzzle is all about; the reason for making a jigsaw is to see it complete, and to see it completely.

When this jigsaw was about to be thrown out just a few years ago, I rescued it and added it to my personal collection; to the record of my history.

I've been given many jigsaw puzzles over the years. Boats on still waters, castles on forest-clad mountains, horses in ploughed fields. Most of them are tranquil and still. Wonderful pictures, usually worth the time

and effort of making them. But none of them grab me. Not like the train station, anyway.

Most of these jigsaws were tricky, with similar textures in many places, and subtle colour changes making it hard to work on just one area or object at a time. These puzzles also had the oddest shaped pieces. So that one could not be sure of anything until it was finished. I think I learned to be methodical and logical with these puzzles. But sometimes the appreciation of the picture was lost in the continual effort and plain hard work to complete it. I don't make these ones now. I have some of them still, but the picture is not worth the effort. The enjoyment is lost long before completion.

Several years ago, maybe even 20 years ago now, I discovered a new sort of jigsaw. They were bright, often with a full range of colours. Some were big, with many thousands of pieces. But what grabbed me most was that the pictures were full of people - most of them going as fast as they could and heading for certain trouble. The funny thing about these pictures was that most of these people didn't see what was coming. Or sometimes, you can see the comical results of their mistakes.

Each picture is bustling and bursting with life. All across the picture a collective story is being told, humanity is being presented in one form or another. Frequently, there is humour in the muddling of the masses, each tripping over their own feet, or wearing the mistakes of others. And certain chaos awaits any attempt to gain control.

Over the years, our family has gathered 13 of these jigsaws. Most are either 500 or 750 pieces and can be made in a night. However, several puzzles have 1,000 or more pieces. I think the largest is 2,500 pieces. Needless to say, it has been made only once or twice in recent years.

I like these jigsaws. They have returned the fun of making them to me. And I know we have made some of these puzzles dozens of times. We made three of our favourites last weekend, with friends. I can make a 500 piece puzzle in a little over an hour and a half, or longer if shared with friends. But we can make a fun picture in a couple of hours, then sit back, satisfied, and laugh at the story it tells.

Some people like to make a jigsaw once and then glue it all down to hang it on a wall. I can understand this. Some pictures are so much hard work, you know you will never bother to do it again. But I have never glued one of my jigsaws down. You see, building jigsaws is not simply about 'achievement' or 'finishing' for me. The joy of any puzzle is equally in the building of it. If these new and fun jigsaws have taught me anything, it is that jigsaw puzzles are to be shared with friends.

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There's something more about jigsaws that I have learned of late. I have discovered that jigsaws are a parable of life.

In one of the three we made last weekend, there is a piece that is horribly chewed. One of our sons got hold of it when he was about 12 months old. It is so mutilated that you would wonder why we kept it. It is so misshapen that it has to be forced to fit, and most of its colour is gone. But it is still part of the picture each time we make it.

In another puzzle, we found we were short one piece and yet were given two the same of another piece. Each time we make this puzzle now, we look to find which are the missing piece and the double pieces again. It is now part of the puzzle, not incomplete just different.

The same is true for the old train station jigsaw. There must be at least six pieces missing now – maybe even eight or nine. But I still keep it and treasure it. I still enjoy it, though I don't often make it these days. It's a part of me, you see. Missing pieces and all. No one asks me why I keep it. It is mine to keep or to throw away. One day I may find that most of the pieces have been lost. But it will always be my choice, to keep it or not.

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My life is something of a jigsaw. The pieces go in and the mosaic of my life is seen bit by bit. It is a discovery about myself that I am making. Of late, I suppose I am discovering that the picture of my life is a little more okay than I thought. The comedy of errors is a reality of my humanity. I don't often laugh at it, but I am beginning to accept it, and to accept that others, even true friends, sometimes laugh at the chaos in my life. I suppose because sometimes it *is* funny. And that's life, too.

I have learnt that no one knows what my picture will look like, except the one who cut my jigsaw. But even there, he has left me with options. I have a choice which pieces I will use. Even so, he knows the fullness and the wonder of my picture before it is complete.

I have some pieces missing. And I wish I could find them. But sometimes I have to accept: that's what came in the box! I also have some "double pieces", and I need to learn to celebrate their presence in my picture.

But most of all, I am aware of the mutilated pieces, and of those lost from what was once there. I find it hard to accept that the picture will never be what it was supposed to be. Some damaged pieces will never quite fit. Some of the colours will never match. Some of the textures and shapes will be questionable, but all of them are part of my jigsaw.

"My jigsaw". Tell me honestly, what is "my jigsaw"? Am I not the sum of all of the participants in my life? Is my life not a story told and re-told with every friend and neighbour who sits to help me find another piece? I am not complete because I have not yet sat with all who will call me friend and share the experience of discovery with me.

But neither am I without shape or impression. Some have contributed much to who I am. Some have been God's kindest grace, for they have not only sat with me, but having found the mutilated and damaged pieces have cared for me so much more and found their place in what will one day be whole.

Lord, I struggle to see it all, but I thank You for the joy of life, and the opportunity to build with friends who have affirmed that the picture is worth all the effort.