

Downsize & Declutter

I've seen that Maria Kwando on TV sorting out people's clutter. It's simple she says, you just have to remember,

'Keep only those things that speak to the heart, and discard items that no longer spark joy.'

Most of the people she helps on the TV show are just serial hoarders. I'm not that bad! Looking around the spare room, where I have emptied every cupboard and drawer onto the floor, I see items that I've collected over many years. Do they spark joy?

The first thing I pick up is the Spanish decorative sword that Dad bought back as hand luggage from our first package holiday in 1966. I run my hand along its blunt, rusting blade, it was always blunt, the rust is a recent addition. Is it speaking to my heart? No, but it is bringing back happy memories of a childhood holiday. Seriously though, I've never had it on display, people nowadays would think me slightly mad! The red, green and amber pieces of glass in the handle blink in the autumn sunshine. It's almost as if Dad is winking at me. A scene runs through my mind like an old TV sitcom. Mum had bought a new stylish, navy hat to travel in, heavily influenced by Jackie Kennedy. Dad retrieved the sword from the overhead basket after we landed at Luton airport, not much of an airport, more a large shed! Like a mushroom on a kebab skewer, Mum's new hat was impaled by the sword. As Dad waved the hat in front of her, Mum was furious, Dad was crying with laughter! The sword is the first thing to go back in the cupboard, the memory certainly sparked joy.

The next item is a beaten cardboard box, without opening it, I can picture and even smell the contents, letters from my Grandfather to my Grandmother during WWII. He died in 1978, Nana lived on as a widow for 25 years. She kept the box next to her chair in the lounge and every day after he died she would take one letter out and read it, kissing the envelope before putting the letter back. The paper is now fragile, but the ink remains as strong as their love. These letters speak to my heart as much as they did to my grandmother's. Without opening the box I carefully put it back in the wardrobe.

I've been in the room nearly an hour, the bin bags and boxes remain empty. I feel like they are shouting accusingly at me, 'feed me, feed me!' Time for a cup of tea I decide.

Going downstairs, I am frustrated that I've achieved so little except a mess on the floor. I put the kettle on and decide to ring my friend Sarah. She'll be the voice of reason, she knows I need to declutter before I put the house up for sale. I'll be going to somewhere smaller - downsizing.

"Hello love, how's it going?"

"Not so well Sarah, I haven't got rid of a thing yet."

"Oh dear, you said yesterday you haven't looked in those cupboards for a couple of years. Anna surely there can't be anything you actually need in there? "

“Well there’s nothing I physically need, but it is all stuff I can’t get rid of, too many memories.”

“Oh I see, that’s tricky. Do you want me to come over this afternoon and give you a hand, or maybe some moral support?”

I sigh with relief, I need someone here. I’m getting lost down memory lane with no map to get out.

I make a cup of tea, just how I like it. Tea bag in for 3 minutes, remove, add a splash of milk, stir clockwise 3 times, stir anti-clockwise 3 times. Put the teaspoon in the dishwasher and the teabag in the food recycling, resisting the call of the biscuit tin!

Taking the tea into the lounge, I sink into the armchair, the one I always sit in. Looking at the display cabinet, I smile at Mum’s Royal Worcester Victorian Rose dinner service. I still use it when I’m entertaining. My sister didn’t want it when Mum passed away, she thought it was too old fashioned. Mum always washed it by hand and never put it in the dishwasher. I do the same and have a routine. Dinner plates first, then side plates, dessert bowls, coffee or tea cups and saucers. If I’ve used the serving dishes they are washed up last. I won’t let anyone help me, I wait until my guests leave, I couldn’t bear anyone breaking a piece. They wouldn’t treat it with the respect it deserves, Mum took nearly 20 years to collect the full set. It’s discontinued now, so a broken piece couldn’t be replaced. I realise the similarities with how I feel, broken with losing so many, my ‘Victorian Roses’ no longer around, just granite headstones in a grey cemetery.

I go through the motions of tidying the lounge, all the cushions plumped and placed at the same angle on the settee, the throw on the back of the chair smoothed out. The remote controls on a side table, both facing in the same direction, parallel to the edge of the table.

The chime of the doorbell lifts me from my morbid thoughts and out of the armchair. Sarah arrives with flowers and a hug. Automatically I offer a tea or coffee.

“No thank you darling” Sarah replies “Let’s get on with it and have a cuppa when we’ve had a breakthrough. I’ve bought some lemon drizzle cake for afternoon tea.” I love Sarah, she knows my favourite cake. I’ll make it a proper afternoon tea using Mum’s teapot, cups and saucers.

Following Sarah upstairs, my steps get heavier. I don’t want to go back to the room, I don’t want to sort through my memories.

“How do you want to do this Anna? Shall I hold up bits and pieces, then you say to keep it or throw it away? Or are you going to pick up something and give me the reasons you need to keep it?” smiling Sarah gives me a playful wink.

“Come on, let’s do it!” I heard myself say.

Whilst Sarah sat in the chair, I picked up the blue baby bag from the floor, I tipped out the strange array of contents; two silver teething rings, a baby’s hairbrush, pale yellow with a lamb printed on the back, one navy blue Clarks sandal, toddler size, a tiny hand knitted white cardigan, two hospital name bracelets and several baby toys.

“Ok” said Sara, she had also watched Maria Kwando “Are they speaking to the heart or sparking joy?”

I looked at the reminders of my children's early years, the tears were near and I was breathing deeply to try and stop them.

"Yes they are doing both." I was almost whispering.

"Could you tell your face that because it's not agreeing with what you've just said?" She laughed and I tried to.

"Well they are very happy memories of when the boys were born and how elated Peter and I were at the time. We just thought we had it all, a nice home, good jobs and two healthy children."

"But do you need these things to remind you of those times? You have photos of them as babies and surely those memories are in your brain? You could take photos on your phone of all these reminders, then put them in a 'memory file' on your phone and on your laptop."

"Yes I could, but I can't touch them then or even smell them."

Sarah raised an eyebrow,

"It just wouldn't be the same" My eyes were stinging and before I knew it the tears were escaping and I was sniffing loudly.

Producing a tissue, Sarah tilted her head to one side, "but Anna love, you haven't looked at all these things for at least two years and maybe longer. Is it time to let them go? It's been twenty years now."

I had stayed in the house far longer than I should have, partly because I hadn't been able to face sorting everything and partly due to the memories it held. My eldest son Nick had asked me to move nearer to them, to spend more time with the grandchildren and to be on the coast, something I had always wanted to do. Now was the right time to do it rather than rattle around the family home any longer.

I opened one of the large cube faux leather boxes, there were two more.

"These are all the condolence cards and letters we received at the time."

"Anna, I am sure they are beautiful, but do you need to keep three boxes full? Do you remember when you last read them?"

I thought back to Nana sitting reading Grandad's letters, but these were different, they were actually the outpourings of grief from others. I took out the letter on top, it was on headed paper from St Stephen's, the boys' school,

Dear Mrs Jordan and Nick,

We wanted to express our sincere condolences on the loss of Mr Jordan, a devoted husband, father and valued member of the school community and on the loss of Joshua, an exemplary student, who will be greatly missed by his classmates, rugby team members, and fellow actors in the drama group and all the staff members who had the pleasure of having taught him...

The letter continued, but I couldn't read any more. Peter had gone to pick Joshua up from a rehearsal at the school on a wet and miserable November evening. The last thing I'd said to Peter was 'be careful'. An hour later two police officers stood at the door telling me there had been a car accident and they believed my husband and son were involved, both were seriously injured. They would take me to the hospital, Nick had insisted on coming too. By the morning the medical team agreed there was

nothing more they could do, my husband and my baby passed away in intensive care, side by side.

“They aren’t speaking to my heart or sparking joy.” I nodded at Sarah, “You’re right, I can’t remember the last time I read them. I’ll ask Nick if he wants them and if not” I paused and took a deep breath “It’s time to let them go.”

Sarah nodded, “I think it’s for the best and it’s a good start. On that note we should celebrate with some lemon cake and a cup of tea. What do you think?”

Drinking our tea from the Royal Worcester service, I asked Sarah,

“Do you think I need professional help with my issues? I had grief counselling about a year after the accident, but my OCD, anxiety and control issues are getting worse as time goes on.”

“I think you’ve turned a corner today. See how things go. Now shall I wash up the tea things? I know you don’t put these beautiful cups and saucers in the dishwasher.”

I smiled and said “Thanks Sarah, that would be lovely.”

I didn’t even say be careful, instead I ran upstairs ready to start sorting and filling those black bin liners.