

The Thing Is

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“I brought you flours.”

–From *Stranger Than Fiction* written by Zach Helm

I have been pondering things lately. Not “What’s the meaning of life?” kind of things. I’m talking about tangible things like favorite coffee cups, beloved slippers and treasured iridescent shells. We all know the sayings about why we shouldn’t fall prey to a life of materialism such as, “You can’t take it with you.” and “The root of suffering is attachment.” And yet, we are human, and our lives are filled with experiences tied to memories that are often associated with the giving, the receiving and the possession of material things.

For example, consider the character, Harold Crick in the movie *Stranger Than Fiction*. His love interest was a baker. Instead of bringing her “flowers,” he brought her “flours” ground from different grains. It was such a thoughtful gesture.

The older we get, the more things we acquire. Unlike perishable items, many of the things we accrue take up space. And because the items are often tied to remembrances, it can be hard to let them go when the time comes. Through the years, I have visited many elderly individuals who were in the midst of making transitions of some form or other.

I recall one woman, originally from Jamaica, who was preparing to move into assisted housing. On moving day, she walked from room to room in her house and pointed to items that helpers could move to the curb for others to pick up as needed. Then, she stopped in the kitchen. Pointing to over fifty cookbooks on a shelf lining one wall of the kitchen, she said firmly, “Those will be coming with me.” I said, “Moshe*, you don’t need your cookbooks. The people at assisted care will cook for you.” The elderly woman said, “Oh but yes I do need those. They are filled with memories.” A kind person obtained a bookshelf and many of Moshe’s “memories” accompanied her to her new residence.

One evening, I was called to the home of an older man. A congregation member and a friend of his said she had arrived to bring him some dinner and that he wasn’t answering the door. So I stopped by that evening and knocked on the door. Since I had obtained a paper filled with emergency information that he had filled out on an earlier occasion, I was able to call his daughter and locate the hidden key to enter.

I found the elegantly dressed man resting in his easy chair. I spoke his name. He opened his eyes and peered at me; a slight curve of his lips indicated a smile. I asked if he was ill. He shook

his head from one shoulder to the other. I asked if he would like me to call 911. He closed his eyes and whispered, "No. No." So, I sat down to simply be with him.

I looked around the room. It was filled with clocks. Each clock ticked and every one of them had a tag indicating from what part of the world it was obtained. It was clear to me that Anthony Michael* was a world traveler who loved clocks. There were also photos of family members revealing without a doubt that what he had done with his time on earth was meaningful to him.

And what was also unmistakable was that Anthony Michael was dying. The form he had filled out stated that he wanted no medical intervention when it was his time to die so I called his daughter who was out of state and told her what was happening. She asked if I would stay with him until she arrived via a flight from her home in another state the next morning. The request was slightly unusual, but the man was beloved in the congregation. It was too late to call a doctor or to request hospice. So I stayed.

All night the clocks ticked. All night, I listened to Anthony Michael's soft breathing. Finally, his daughter arrived. Anthony Michael died in his home a couple of days later. He was surrounded by his daughters and the clocks he loved.

The thing is most teachings in faith traditions point out that love and attention, intangibles, are the best gifts we can provide one another. I won't argue. And yet, it's not a bad thing to pause and explore the tangible items we cherish and to notice the memory or two tied to them. Then, when the time comes to let them go, take a photo. It doesn't take up as much space as the item, but the precious memory remain.

With you on this UU journey of love and memories,

Rev. Amy

*The names were changed in the retelling of the stories.