

Hidden Treasures

May 3, 2009

I am a collector of nothing and everything. One might refer to my myriad Of collections as somewhat schizophrenic in nature as I rarely stick to the same category of like things. As a kid I collected stamps, with the idea that if I sent away to the Littleton stamp company for that mystery bag of stamps, I would someday find the rarest of all stamps. I'd sell it, appear on Johnny Carson and live happily ever after! When the rare stamp did not appear I turned to coins and collected them faithfully until I needed something and off to the store they would go into a retailers cash register for another to collect in hopes of finding the one magic coin, hit pay dirt and may he or she would live happily ever after. For a while I collected unusual insects, but that stopped when one very large horned beetle ate my collection of ladybugs that I kept for good luck. As I grew my collections changed, there were records, old books, weather charts, antique spoons, gemstones, particularly quartz crystals, tourmalines and garnets in the rough I had dug from my great Uncle Stanley Perham's mines in Maine; there were political cartoons, a collection of humorous quotes for all occasions, scale model trucks and wooden handmade pens. I particularly loved the gifts of nature such as unusually shaped tree branches and shells that I had gathered, giant sugar pinecones from No Carolina, I even had a small but complete skeleton from some unknown forest creature that had met its demise, the evidence of which lay on the earth fully intact. I saved anything that intrigued me and was never concerned with having to modify my eclectic collection of oddities until I had to move to Syracuse. They all had to be examined, re-evaluated and the majority dispensed with, which left me with having to decide, once again, what I would keep and what I would give away. A friend, who arrived to help me pack, was more than alarmed by the extent and the incompatible

variety of my “collections” and looked up at me in sheer horror with the comment, “why do you keep all of this junk?”

If you collected just dolls or teapots I could understand but this makes no sense at all, weird tree branches and pebbles, a moth-eaten old doll? I tried to answer but nothing I had to say made much sense.

It all looked like junk and to be honest I could never really explain it, other than it meant something to me that was much more than what it appeared to be. I knew someday I would be able to clarify in my own mind why I had chosen and why I kept each of these items, but for that moment I could only apologize and continue carefully wrapping each of my treasures to be moved to their new home. Someday I would have an answer, but not that day.

This Christmas a friend of mine sent me a subscription to Guideposts, which is a Christian Magazine that was started by Norman Vincent Peale in the mid 1940’s. I gratefully accepted her gift, however,

I view most of the religious literature that is sent to me with a wary eye, but in this January edition I found in an article written by the renowned biologist, Jane Goodall called “I Carry Hope With Me” It was an answer to all of my strange collections and the reason for keeping each of my treasures that I had never fully understood before.

Most of us remember Jane as the Brit from Bournemouth, England otherwise known as the ‘monkey lady,’ the woman who ventured into the East African jungle alone, to live with and to study the lives and the habits of the gorillas and chimpanzees that resided there. She had returned to the Gombe National Park in Tanzania on her 40th anniversary to reflect on the meaning of those years. She began her story as a child 18 months old who took a handful of earthworms to bed. When her mother, her lifelong mentor, explained that the worms would die unless they were returned to the earth, she carefully gathered them all up, toddled them back to the garden and returned them to their home.

As she sat on the highest peak that overlooked the forest where she had once spent 30 years of her life, Jane saw a very different scenery than that she had once lived and worked in. 'In 1960,' she recalled, 'there were forests fringing the 300 mile shoreline of Lake Tanganyika ... now cultivated fields surround the 30 square miles that of the Gombe National Park. With the tree cover gone the rain washed away much of the topsoil into the Lake, the once lush forests have been replaced by deserts. The animals are gone and humans are suffering. She understood why her fellow scientists believed that we are headed for global disaster, but still she has reason for hope.

Jane too has a collection of eclectic things, six of which she always keeps with her, things that express her reasons for hope.

The first of her treasures is a piece of an eco- brick, made from industrial waste and coated so it will last 300 years. She keeps it with her as a reminder of the ingenuity of the human brain that as an intelligent species can use our talents to preserve both the human and animal kingdoms and live in total harmony with nature. These bricks are inexpensive to produce and can be used to build hospitals and schools in the developing world and also solve waste disposal problems at the same time.

Jane also carries with her, her second reason for hope that symbolizes nature's resilience to restore itself even in the face of total destruction. She carries a single leaf from a tree that grows in Nagasaki, where the second atomic bomb was dropped. Scientists predicted that nothing would live or grow there for at least 30 years, yet the plants came back very quickly. Her leaf came from a sapling that did not die and is now a huge healthy tree that produces new leaves every year.

Her third reason for hope is in the indomitable human spirit of those whose struggles serve to better humankind, of those who face impossible tasks and never give up.

She carries a piece of limestone from the quarry on Robben Island where Nelson Mandela labored for 18 of his 27 years of imprisonment yet he returned to liberate his nation from apartheid to democracy, totally devoid of the hatred and bitterness that one would expect him to foster.

Along with the limestone is a wooden comb, adorned with patterns of woven wool. It was made by a Tanzanian man who lost his fingers to leprosy, but still found a way to make a living, weaving colored yard with his teeth and stumps. In Jane's collection she also has the left surgical glove from the hand of Paul Klien, an orthopedic surgeon whose hand was destroyed in an explosion when he was six years old. His fingers were re-attached but his thumb could not be saved. Paul became a surgeon in spite of the appearance of that impossibility and specializes in operating on children that have been injured in accidents.

Jane's fourth and final reason for hope is symbolized by a small stuffed spotted dog, given to her by a five year old named Amber who was deeply moved by the plight of one of Jane's chimpanzees called Flint, a baby who succumbed to grief after losing his mother. The child saved her pennies and bought the little dog for one of orphan chimps so that he might be less lonely.

It amazes me that the young are always empowered to act with compassion once they are made aware of the depth of the problems this world is facing.

I finished reading the article and put it down. Looking around the living room at all the treasures I had collected over the years, I now knew why I had taken them with me. Each one at some time in my life also brought me reasons to hope at a time when things appeared to be clouded or hopeless. Or when I needed to be reminded of the power we have to appreciate, to

build or to destroy, to move forward or to sulk bemoaning the misfortunes that befall us.

I didn't understand that as clearly as Jane Goodall does, and my collection wasn't as thoughtful and as deliberate, but to me, now, in retrospect, it is just as meaningful. It is also just as meaningless should one merely view each of these items without an understanding as to why they have been kept.

I am no longer alarmed when something new is added to my collection. I no longer apologize for its disorganized state, or for the vast array of oddities and ordinary items that appear to have no relationship to one another and are displayed in a place of honor in the china cabinet. I am only grateful for the small miracles that I can always find from a walk in the woods, or from the gifts that come from the love of a child, those from the shores of the ocean or treasures that result from the extraordinary efforts of another. All around us, there are more symbols for hope, for reason to go on, than there are reason to give up.

As Jane returned from the mountain peak and walked along the beach she recalled where her symbols had come from, how each of them had formed her views about life and how her mother had instilled within her and taught her to share with others her symbols of hope, for without it her mother reminded her, what is the future of all the world's children in the years to come?

"I knew," Jane said, "as I sat there on the lakeshore, that hope for the future lies not in the hands of the politicians, the industrialists, or even in the scientists but in our hands, in yours and in mine."

So when you return home, look at your collections, remember why they are important to you, what they mean and I'll bet the items of the least monetary value, the most common and nondescript, are the ones that have probably brought you in times of need, the most hope.

So be it

Amen

Rev Holly Baylies