

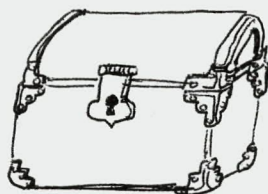
A Helper's Treasure Chest: Memorabilia from Special Clients

Many helping professionals keep small items from client contacts. These items represent special moments with clients that are etched in the memory of the helping professional. They become "treasures" to the helper. They are reminders of powerful interactions that have changed both the client and the helper. In this narrative, items from a helper's "treasure chest" (a baseball card, a dried red rose, and an eraser) symbolize the lives of some special young people. Readers are challenged to examine symbolic items from their own professional interactions and clientele.

by
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Visit any helper's office and look for client memorabilia. It will be there. Somewhere among dusty texts, photographs, and stacks of papers will be items that represent special moments with special clients. For example, a mental health colleague keeps a miniature pewter elephant given to him by a client. He says it means "an elephant never forgets." Another colleague has a glass apple given to her by her first class of students. She says this first teaching experience led her to change directions in her career. Powerful and life-changing interactions between and among helpers and clients leave no immediate, visible product (except manila files of coded notes). Small items take on great significance by representing these powerful interactions among helpers and clients. The items become a helper's memorabilia, souvenirs, and collectibles. They are the treasured "objects" of professional helpers.



A Treasure Chest

I have my own treasure chest of memories. It is a mauve and brown wicker basket placed high upon a bookshelf in my

outpatient mental health office in rural northern Michigan. Scanning it now, I can see a Detroit Tigers baseball card, an origami astronaut, a pencil drawing of a broken drinking glass, a valentine note, a dried red rose, a four-stanza poem about a parental suicide, a baby-blue ribbon from a long dead flower bouquet sent to me by medical students, and a small white eraser with a picture of a red apple and lettering that says "Washington." My treasure chest holds many of my most important awards and accomplishments. It holds items that represent much of my life's work, a work that often cannot be discussed with others. It is a secret world of accomplishments, mistakes, and memories. The baseball card, from an anxious fifteen-year-old youth, will never make it into the awards section of my curriculum vitae. It will not show up in an application to graduate school. It will never be mentioned by introductory speakers at conferences when they describe me (e.g., "Our speaker today attended... university and was given a baseball card from a young man."). It's really too bad that these special treasures cannot be shared. They signify our finest accom-

plishments (and sometimes our greatest "failures"). They signify people that we have met who have dealt with great obstacles. They signify tears, hopes, dreams, and caring. Let me share with you some of these treasured memorabilia.

A Baseball Card

My first glimpse of Larry was of a tall, lanky teenager curled up in the fetal position, feet on the seat of the "client" chair of my outpatient mental health office. His black ski parka was held tightly over his head. His face was buried in his raised knees. An anguished, angry, fifteen-year-old voice called out pleadingly from his protective cover, "I don't want to see you." During the second session, he emerged from burying his face long enough to engage in card games. We played "War." It was just after Christmas. He told me, in a rushed and angry tone, about his own war at home with his new stepfather.

"My stepfather took my game away that I got from my uncle (the one that's my father's brother) and threw it in the trash. He said I was making too much noise. He yells and yells at me all the time. For nothin'! He just does it to be the big man [sneering tone]. So I punched holes in the wall and yelled back. Now I'm grounded for THAT. And HE yelled at me first."

Hmm..., I thought, here was one piece of the power struggle—a boy and his stepfather locked in verbal combat,

"upping the ante" at each retort. "It was like he threw out your real Dad's family?" I asked.

Larry's voice sounded choked and strained. He put his face in his hands. "Yes. Even my mom doesn't want me to see my dad. I don't know when I will see my dad again."

And there was another piece of the puzzle. I wanted to know more about his "real" father who visited sporadically. I wanted this father to know his son was hurting. I was angry at him for visiting Larry so rarely. I debated whether to call him. I forced myself to be as open minded as possible and I got Larry's and his Mother's permission to make the call.

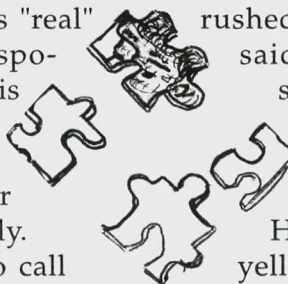
I telephoned his father. "Your son needs you," I said. His father sounded just like Larry—angry and abandoned. I was no longer angry at him; I saw him now as a person who was overwhelmed and struggling with his own pain. Larry's father said, "Sometimes it hurts so much when he leaves to go back to his mom's house that I can hardly take it." I could almost see the tears across the phone line. Since I didn't know if I would get to talk to him again, I went with a direct approach. I said softly, "You have to take it. I'm sorry it hurts you. He needs you more now than ever." And he did begin to see Larry—twice in the next month he drove 150 miles across frozen northern Michigan to pick up his son.

After two visits with Dad and a regular visitation schedule, Larry was calmer. It ap-

peared that he could think now without constant explosions. In the next few sessions, Larry and I pretended to be Ninja warriors. "How long can your stepfather last if you stay calm and don't yell?" I asked him. "The person who loses his temper loses the battle." He and I would practice Ninja warrior "mind over matter" thinking. One time he rushed in. "I won one!" he said triumphantly. "My stepfather started to yell at me and I practiced my Ninja warrior. I told myself not to yell. He got even madder and yelled some more and then my Mom told him I wasn't doing anything back and he had to stop yelling and then he got in trouble." He was chuckling with delight and bouncing up and down in the chair. Then Larry practiced his newfound mental warfare skills at school. He told me, "Being a Ninja warrior works at school too."

Larry started to "grow up." From a hooded figure curled in the fetal position in my office chair, he moved to the study of electronics, the collection of baseball cards, and the repairing of old motors—age-appropriate behaviors for a teenage male in rural Michigan. He built birdhouses for the chickadees that landed outside his bedroom window in the long Michigan winter.

In the spring, he was gone like the chickadees. He no longer needed to visit me. He was no longer grounded all the time and, once in a while, he even seemed to get along a bit with his stepfather. He visited



his dad once a month now. His grades at school were B's and C's. He had a calm look on his face most of the time and he sat upright and slightly forward in my office chair. I was immensely proud of him. Despite my nagging fear about his long-term relationship with his new family, and my worry that his father would slow down visitation again, I still felt a sense of awe and wonder. Every time I see people heal, it seems a bit of a miracle. I watched him grow from what looked like "infancy" to what looked a lot like adolescence. It was a special privilege to be included in the process.

The last time he came to see me he brought pictures of Air Force planes. Life for Larry had become a mental game, replete with strategic moves. He flipped through a stack of baseball cards and shyly described his beginning interest in a potential girlfriend. "I brought you this," he said. It was a Detroit Tigers baseball card. It said "Ruppert Jones (height 5'10", weight 170#, throws left, bats right, average .255)."

I put the baseball card in my treasure chest. Even today, one touch of the baseball card transports me back to special moments on mental battlefields when a fifteen-year-old youth and I learned from each other. Although I did not tell him directly, Larry taught me to view life as a strategic game. When I am dealing with situations of intense conflict or with feelings of responsibility overload, I think of Larry's gift to me. Mentally, I turn the overwhelming situation into a strategic battle-

field, a game of wits, and the situation is no longer the daunting roadblock it seemed at the beginning. I believe that my contribution in this learning interplay was teaching Larry to slow down his thinking long enough to form strategies of his own. His natural aptitude for strategic thinking was strengthened by new skills of delayed gratification and problem solving. He could slip into "mind over matter" mode at will. He quit getting kicked out of school or thrown off school buses, fighting with others, and acting on every impulse. He learned from me. I learned from him. Today, a baseball card reminds me of this life-changing process. In Beckett's Guide, it isn't worth much. A visitor to my office would not suspect that a baseball card in a wicker basket on the bookshelf contained such an invaluable item. If I laid the card out in the open, a visitor might not give it a passing glance. But to me, it is a priceless treasure.

A Dried Red Rose

Tiffany sat cautiously on the edge of the floral chair. She tossed long brunette hair behind her shoulder and twisted it around her fingers when she fought tears in the first interview. She came in with a request, "I need someone to talk to." She lived with an uncle and aunt and her one-year-old son.

She was seventeen years old. She wanted to talk about financial pressures, finishing school, deciding what to do with

her life, and arguments with her boyfriend. She had ambivalent feelings about making a commitment to him. She trusted only a handful of people. Her eye contact was fleeting and intermittent.

By the third visit (after a cancellation or two) she wanted to tell me her story. Tiffany described watching her mother being beaten into unconsciousness by a boyfriend and running barefoot into the night to the neighbors to call the police. She was six years old. She described holding a shotgun on this man when she was seven. Frightened relatives took the gun away from her. "I only wish," she said to me between loud sobs, "that I had killed him....that they hadn't stopped me." When Tiffany was eight years old, her mother disappeared after a loud confrontation with the boyfriend. Tiffany's mother was never seen again. Tiffany spoke of her constant search for her mother, saying, "I dreamed for a long time that she would come back. Every time I went to the mall or a festival...I looked for her in the crowd.... I try to imagine what I will say and do when she comes back."

After her mother disappeared, Tiffany moved in with her father who raped her repeatedly over the next six years. She gave me a pleading "don't tell anyone" look and said, in a tone that was somehow both matter-of-fact and angry, "He told me it was normal for fathers to have sex with their daughters. When I was younger I believed it. But when I got older I had to get really drunk when I knew he was

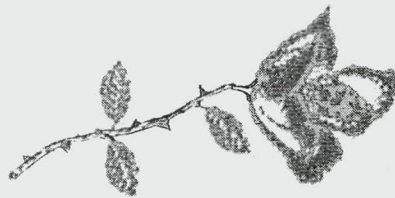
coming home at night so that I could get through it." At fourteen, she ran away. She lived on the streets and took care of herself. She got a job and a new boyfriend, and saved money for a car and an apartment. When her boyfriend found out she was pregnant, he beat her for the first time. Tiffany packed two suitcases and took a bus to an aunt's home. She said, "I wasn't going to have *my* baby go through what I did when my Mom got beat up." She had the baby and returned to school. She got help from the public health nurses. They sent her to me.

Tiffany had a hard time expressing her feelings in words. She'd had a lifetime of suppressing them. We worked with art, poetry, and play mediums. The day we did "Play Doh" families, she formed a turtle for her uncle, a kangaroo for her aunt, a rosebud for the baby son, a teddy bear for the boyfriend, a snake for her father, and a red rose for her missing mother. I picked up the Playdoh rose. "Tiffany," I said with a tremendous sense of inner pain, "your mother is probably dead. And even if she's alive, the mother you did know is dead. It would not be the same." She wept and nodded in silence. It was a long, long silence.

I fought tears myself for the little girl who had suffered so much and yet was so strong. Had I been too forthright, I wondered? Was I trying to push her too fast? I struggled with my own decision.

We had a memorial service later on for the "red rose" mother. We planned it over

many sessions. On the day of the event, Tiffany arrived with her uncle, aunt, baby, two red roses, four small white candles, and pictures of her mother holding Tiffany as a baby. We put the pictures in the window. We laid the roses before the pictures. Tiffany passed out hand-written memorial leaflets. They said "In loving memory of June B., who disappeared on Jan. 4, 1988." Tiffany, the aunt, and the uncle each described some memories of Tiffany's mother. Tiffany's uncle said, in a hushed tone, "That picture in the window was taken right after your mother came back from work and she was so glad to see you. You look exactly like her." Tiffany read the leaflet, "To my Mom, who was [her voice rising with



strain] the BEST mom a kid could ever have." She lit a candle for each of us to hold. Her uncle, with head bowed, said, "Your Mom loved you very much, Tiffany. She was a wonderful person." The aunt said nothing. Tears streamed down her face. The baby cooed and grinned throughout musical renditions of Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" (Clapton, E. & Jennings, W.; 1992, track 4) and Bette Midler's "The Rose" (McBroom, A., 1993, track 7). It seemed to me as if Tiffany's potential for growth, fear of love, and difficulty with trust was captured by Bette Midler's alto voice:

Some say love, it is a river that drowns the tender reed.

Some say love, it is a razor that leaves your soul to bleed.

Some say love, it is a hunger, an endless aching need.

I say love, it is a flower; and you, its only seed.

It's the heart afraid of breakin' that never learns to dance.

It's the dream afraid of wakin' that never takes the chance.

It's the one who won't be taken who cannot seem to be,

And the soul afraid of dyin' that never learns to live.

When the night has been too lonely, and the road has been too long,

And you think that love is only, for the lucky and the strong.

Just remember, in the winter, far beneath the bitter snows,

Lies the seed, that with the sun's love, in the spring, becomes the rose. (McBroom, A., 1993, track 7).

The baby, the only one in the room not in tears, wiggled in Tiffany's arms and tried to make eye contact with us to get our attention. The experience was so powerful; I knew it must have helped Tiffany grieve her mother. At the same time, I feared I had somehow leaped into territory that was beyond my skill level, my legitimate role. Was I a therapist or a min-

ister? Was there a difference at this moment? Did there need to be? With ten minutes left in the memorial service—just after replaying the Bette Midler song Tiffany took one red rose for herself and gave one to me.

In the weeks following the memorial service, Tiffany appeared to be doing better. She took the top academic awards in the graduating adult education class. She got a job and a subsequent promotion. She started college. Tiffany said she wants to be an attorney to help children who experience abuse and neglect. I hope she makes it. Right now, she's a bit more concerned about passing algebra. I still worry about her, but I force myself to think of how strong she has been, how strong human beings can be despite atrocities and pain.

I try not to pick up the rose now so that it won't crumble; it is a dried red rose, brown at the edges of the petals. I learned from Tiffany that love is sometimes accompanied by loss and pain (just as roses have thorns). I learned to appreciate what I have on any given day, for at any moment it could disappear. As Tiffany told a story of losing her mother, I imagined what it would be like to lose my own family. I don't know if she knew how scared that made me. I hope that Tiffany learned from me that she is a survivor; a strong person who can face some of life's most potent challenges. She said only, "I feel a lot better now. I don't cry all the time. I'm not as irritable. I feel like I can move ahead with my life." I hope she

learned to trust others a bit more, to be more comfortable with her own feelings, and to understand the nagging fear of abandonment that tugs at her from time to time. I hope I have helped her face some "bitter snows" so that she can blossom in her own developmental spring time. For now, she says, "I trust my boyfriend more now and I am less afraid of losing my son." As a social worker, I want more for her, but part of me is satisfied that she has come a long way in a short time, part of me is focused on how much more she has to do. She has so much more to learn about trusting herself and trusting others, about facing the future, moment by moment.

An Eraser

Jonathon came in the first time with his foster mother. He was eight years old with a stocky build and shining new front teeth with little seesaw nubs on the ends of them. The "adult" teeth still looked a little too big for his mouth. He stared through a smudged pair of glasses, the lenses thick enough to distort his blue eyes. Life, for Jonathon, was serious business. He spoke very little. He moved slowly and cautiously. He studied everything around him, vigilant, like a sentinel in a guard tower. He held tightly to his few possessions and hoarded food. At school, he sometimes diverged from his silent, alert pattern to engage in sudden bursts of intense anger and aggression. He once threw a chair at his fos-

ter mother. He had only one request of the world, "I want to go home."

He'd been in foster care for three months. When I asked him if he thought he was going home, he looked forlornly out from the thick glasses and glanced down quickly, saying, "I don't know. They don't ever tell me." He said that he missed his mother. He said that he missed his dog. He said that he missed his two younger siblings. With a worried expression, he said, "I don't know who will make them [his siblings] breakfast now." He said he wished the teacher hadn't seen his bruised face. I asked him what he would do if he could go back in time and have it happen all over again. He said, "I would tell them about not having enough food... but not about John [mother's boyfriend] hitting me and about my mom sleeping in. Then someone would have got us food but no one would take me to foster care." I understood this to mean that if he had it to do over again, he might not have told the school counselor about mother's boyfriend hitting him with the belt and locking him in his room, and that he often couldn't wake his mother up to take him to school because she had been drinking too much. He still might have told them about the times there was nothing to eat in the house. I was surprised at his simple, yet sophisticated, knowledge about the child welfare system's response to child abuse and neglect. I was troubled and angry that he had to take care of others and run the household when

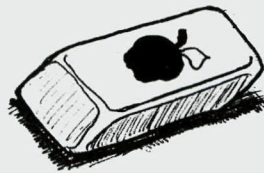
he was just a young boy. I asked him what he did for fun at home. He said, with almost a proud tone, "I mostly didn't have time for fun. I had to take care of things." I asked him, "Do you think it is your fault for going to foster care?" He nodded instantly and said with a firm tone, "I shouldn't have told."

Jonathon played a mean game of Yahtzee and liked to hit the buttons on the copy machine. I told him that it was not his fault that he went to foster care. I told him that it was not his fault that he rolled a certain dice roll in Yahtzee. Things happen that we can't control. The teachers asked him questions and he only told the truth. "Telling the truth may not make things easy." I said, "but in the long run, it is usually the right thing to do." I told him it was not the job of eight-year-olds to take care of all the people and things to do in a house. "I don't have to do them in foster care," he said, "I just have to make my bed." I nodded this time. Could I teach him what "normal" is? Do I even know what normal is?

I gave him the 90's versions of marbles at the end of each session: Pogs—flat cardboard tokens with pictures of skulls, spiders, yin-yangs, and magic eight balls. He especially liked the yin-yang pictures. It seemed a "teachable moment." I said, "Jonathon, people are like yin-yangs too. All people have a little bit of both good and bad in them. It is okay to love someone for their good parts and not like all of the things that the person does." I asked him if he thought this seemed true for

anyone he know. "Like my Mom," he answered with a logical tone, "I still like my Mom but I don't like it when she drinks and sleeps too much." "Exactly," I replied. I was proud of him for understanding.

After six months in foster care, Jonathon made the honor roll. He stopped throwing chairs. He began to laugh a little. He said he still missed his mother. She began to show up for his sessions. We were to "re-unite" them to prepare for his return home. His mother sent her boyfriend away. She made every visit. She cut back on her drinking. She tried hard to get Jonathon back.



Jonathon began to go home for visits. The second-to-last time he came in, he was going home for good. He showed me a flat, white eraser with a red apple on it. Below the apple, there was lettering that said "Washington." He said he was given the eraser by someone at his school. He was happy about going home, he said, but he would miss some things about the foster home. His glasses were broken that day and he couldn't see very well. He couldn't read the blackboard at school. Mother said his glasses needed a tiny screw for the frame. When I gave him his pog at the end of the session, he

handed me his eraser in return. Jonathon, the hoarder of all possessions, had given me his eraser. I understood. It was a great honor. I had received an Academy Award.

When he came in for the final visit, a month later, his mother said she had been too busy to get the glasses fixed. He still couldn't see. He was nearly nonverbal again. He said the boyfriend was not back in the home. He was lying. We both knew it. Jonathon's mother said they would be moving. She was tired of being badgered by the child welfare agency. I felt powerless to do anything. I felt as powerless as Jonathon had felt many times in his life. The court had already discharged the abuse/neglect petition. The legal clout, the "club" that had motivated his mother to make changes, was gone. Things were sliding backward. I felt discouraged. I could only hope and pray for the future.

Now, I have my memories of Jonathon, a little white eraser and some lessons learned. From Jonathon, I learned that life does not deal everyone the same hand. The dice roll is not always fair. As in the Wizard of Oz, "there is no place like home." Home and "attachments" matter above all. They cannot be "erased." I hope that Jonathon learned from me that he is not responsible for the choices of adults. I hope he learned to keep his temper when showing it would be self-defeating. I cannot honestly say if he learned those things. A few minutes of Yahtzee may not make up for a belt buckle and a hungry stom-

ach. The only thing I know he learned is the yin-yang: people are all a little bit good and a little bit bad. I hope that's enough to carry him for a while.

Summary

When we examine client memorabilia, it is an opportunity for personal and professional growth. Search your own office. What small items have clients given to you? Whom do they represent? What do they mean to you? In what ways have you and your clients been changed by the helping interactions? How do you know? What lessons have been learned? These are the questions of a developing helper.

I believe that the wicker basket high on my office bookshelf is a veritable treasure chest of memories of special young people who have changed me in significant ways. A baseball card, a dried rose, and a white eraser tell the stories of Larry, Tiffany, and Jonathon. They are, to me, priceless. They connect me to the "yin-yang" condition of my clients and myself: co-existing frailty and strength, attachment and loss, stability and change, hope and fear. We change. We stay the same. I am better for the moments spent with these young people. The objects they left behind are small, but the ways these clients touched me are not.

A baseball card, a rose, and an eraser are treasures because they remind me of how many people have come into my

life and then left me; they are souvenirs from the ebb and flow of attachment and separation within my relationships. These objects are as important to me as my dead grandmother's blue plastic suitcase that I cannot bring myself to throw away and the faded baby pictures in my living room of my now grown-up children. The objects are a cognitive bridge—a memory connector—back to these relationships; they are a reminder of the memories of those whom I have loved and cared for. I have cared for these young people and their stories of pain, adversity, and challenge. It was painful to have them leave me. I have their gifts to keep me in touch with them. The gifts are my "transitional objects."

A baseball card, a rose, and an eraser are also treasures to me because they remind me of the lessons that I have learned from the people in my life who have helped me develop new skills and beliefs. My clients—just like my friends, family, teachers, and, really, all of my relationships—have become threads in the tapestry of the weaving of my life. I believe they have offered me rich learning experiences. My clients have taught me to face pain, abandonment, responsibility, fear, sadness, the unknown, and even death. I am who I am today because of the people with whom I have shared human interaction. I have done what I can to repay my clients by giving them words of support, ideas from my life, and the skills to implement them during the time we were together. Now

that we are apart, I treasure the objects they leave behind that remind me of human connections and lessons learned in the journey of my life. □

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