

Thought for the day: 28 June – 4 July 2021

by Sam Chaplin

Unboxing life

This week marks one year since we moved to Hertford. We have lived in four different places over the last 18 months and so, as you can imagine, *boxes* have become quite a dominant theme in our life. Packing, storing, shifting, unpacking. Those boxes sit there looking at me. So, for this week's Thoughts for the Day, I'm going to let the boxes speak.

Monday 28th

The first call of the boxes to me is just to keep on going. The only way these boxes are going to get dealt with is by tackling them one at a time. It feels quite overwhelming. But amidst these feelings of being overwhelmed comes the call to open just one more. Can you do that? Just one? The boxes speak a wisdom to me as I think of larger goals in my life that sometimes seem overwhelming. They say – just do the next small thing. Keep going and you'll look round and one day... it'll be done!



I have a friend who does insane endurance running. He ran a double marathon in the desert in Africa and I asked him how he does it. His answer was, "I just put one foot in front of the other foot, repeat and repeat."

The boxes speak into my feelings of being overwhelmed and encourage me to keep going. Just one more box today (maybe a very small one!) - I can do that.

'May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.' (2 Thessalonians 3:5)

Tuesday 29th

Today the boxes continue to speak to me! We've been building a house and, although we moved to Hertford a year ago, we only moved into our house in April. For the first 9 months of our life here we were renting a house around the corner. During this in-between time, we didn't want to do a full unboxing of our things, so I think we were living with around 30% of our stuff. And you know what... this was fine! And that could be the lesson the boxes are trying to teach me today - to realise that I can be very happy with immeasurably less 'stuff' in my life.

But I've been delving into boxes today now we've moved and I found some plates - these huge bowls that make even the simplest meals look like they're being served by a celebrity chef. I rediscovered my red shirt and I



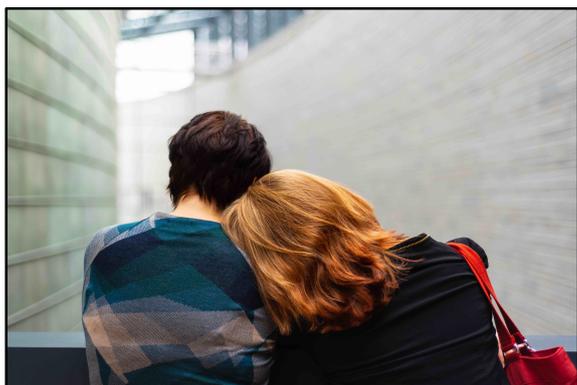
I thought, "Oh! I love this! I'd forgotten about this!" And I hear the boxes speak a deeper message:

Since the start of the pandemic many of us have had our lives shrunk down to 30% (you can make up your own number) of our normal lives. And we've got used to it. But now, with restrictions easing, it's time for us to rediscover the things that we love, that bring a fullness to our lives, that re-ignite the

fullness of our personality. It's time to open up the boxes containing the things we've learned to live without, but that bring colour and vibrancy and fullness to our life.

'I have come that you might have life, life in all its fullness.'
(John 10:10)

Wednesday 30th



Boxes everywhere. On day 1 they spoke of perseverance, but today they speak to me about self-compassion. I am feeling overwhelmed. I've got too much else to do. It's too much. Today I'm giving the boxes a break. It's ok. In fact, yesterday I put some boxes, unopened, up into our eaves in the roof. They were full of photos from when I was at university. I had planned to put them into albums. But that's going to have to wait for another day or year or decade. Maybe they will stay there unopened and my children will open them. Who knows? I'd like to interact with them someday. But maybe not today.

We can be very hard on ourselves and the tyranny of the To Do List is unending. I think many of us have learned to listen to ourselves during this pandemic and realise we need to be gentle with ourselves. Someone asked me to imagine that I was a six-year-old boy sitting in a chair – how would I talk to him? How would you speak to your six-year-old self?

*'As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;*

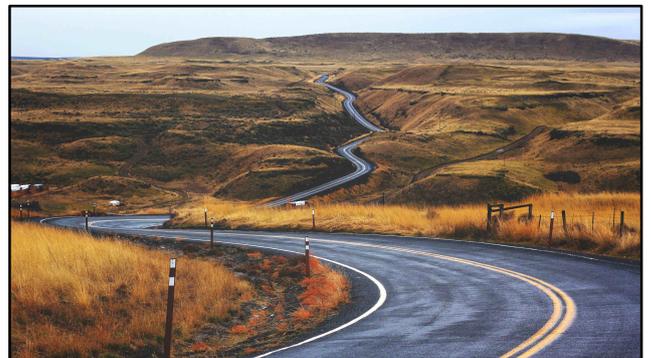
*for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.'* (Psalm 103: 13, 14)

Thursday 1st July

I packed some of these boxes 11 years ago, just before I moved in with my wife, and they've been languishing in my parents-in-law's attic. Now we've moved out of our London flat, we've been presented with our old boxes! It's interesting going through them; it makes me feel how I have changed.

There are things I had boxed up that I felt I wanted to hold onto because they are important to me. But now I open the boxes I have two feelings. I feel: well, I've lived happily without these for the last 11 years – why hold on to them? But also, here are things that felt so important to me 11 years ago, but they don't seem so important now. The boxes tell me I've changed, I'm a different person with different perspectives.

Maybe you've had this experience when visiting a city where you used to live, or a town where you grew up. You look around and notice which buildings have changed, which shops are different. But then there's this feeling in yourself, you notice you're a different person to the person who used to walk these streets. My boxes aren't asking me whether the changes are good or not, they're just giving me a moment to observe and feel the journey and I thank them for this.



Friday 2nd

One reason it takes me so long to open up some of these boxes is because of the endless choices that have to be made about where to put things. What room should these books go in? Where should this picture go? It dawns on me that I'm not just making interior design decisions – I'm choosing how I want to reveal myself to the world, or at least to my visitors.

It's funny to think that these boxes contain so much of my identity and they ask me: what version of myself do I want to present?



I've often reflected how in the pre-internet age you could walk into someone's house and learn so much about someone from their CDs, their DVDs and books. But now so many of these things are hidden in streaming devices or on kindles –

how do we choose to reveal ourselves now in our homes? How do we tell our stories to our visitors or, even more importantly, to our children.

The question the boxes ask today goes beyond the walls of my house. How do I reveal myself to the people around me? How do I cultivate friendships where I can know and be truly known?

*'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.
Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your*

foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.' (Deuteronomy 6: 4-9)

Saturday 2nd

As I unpack my boxes my mind races to warzones. I imagine having to run immediately as a missile hurtles towards my house. I imagine a fire burning it all down. I imagine not being able to take anything with me. Here I am surrounded by piles of memories, photos, letters – what would it be like to have to leave it all behind and start afresh in a new country?

The boxes are trying to lead me into empathy today. I feel a mixture of devastation and also a strange sense of freedom - cutting all ties, losing all the clutter, forced to start over. At present, I have no way of knowing how this level of trauma would feel. I know I would treasure my memories, songs that would bring back vivid settings and smells. I think I would want to find a way of recreating these memories before they become too distant and faded. Cut adrift.



I have led some singing workshops with refugees and I know friends who have led songwriting workshops with displaced people - creating a space for people to cultivate their memories and sing their songs in a foreign land.

*'How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,*

*if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.'*
(Psalm 137: 4-6)

Sunday 3rd

Today is our final day to learn the wisdom of the boxes. Today I dream of a box-free day. The boxes are temporary. They are not here to stay. They were important but they are passing. Soon everything will be unpacked or discarded. This chapter will be over.

When you're in the midst of it, it feels endless. When you're in the pain it feels so hard to see beyond it. But there are new chapters. A new day, a new dawn.

*'The Lord has promised good to me
His word my hope secures
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures'*

(Amazing Grace, John Newton
1725-1807)

