

Junk Drawers

by Abby Carmichael

*REVIEWED

Ah, yes. The junk drawer. It's a tie that binds, a universalizer across states and neighborhoods and experiences. Every home I've been in, whether it's a family house or a college apartment, has a junk drawer (or several).

The junk drawer is as much an institution as a living room or, if you're a freshman, that one comfort dorm where everyone hangs out all the time for some reason. Detective shows tell you that if you want to learn about a suspect, you should root through their trash. But I think the junk drawer is just as telling. They say a lot about us. We keep necessities inside – paper clips, tape, other things we need within reach – but we also stash our trinkets. And what says more about a person than the things they can't get rid of, no matter how menial their value?

I did a bit of research on junk drawers, and what I learned is this: when we hold onto things long enough, they become part of us. We like the comfort and nostalgia that comes with an old thing. So it makes sense that we'd keep a place in our home for all that stuff that reminds us of who we are, and of who we used to be.

Right now, my junk drawer contains the following: three half-empty packages of gum, about two dozen stickers, a handful of colored markers, pepper spray (I should probably start keeping that on me, right?), years-old tickets from museums and concerts, my vaccine card, a handful of Polaroid photos.

Each of those things says something about me. They tell a story of who I am – what I've been through, what I value, what I'm afraid of.

In writing, there's something called the ladder of abstraction. It's a descriptive tool, one that writers use to help their readers better understand a character or a place or a situation. At the top of the ladder are concepts: disease, safety, friendship. At the bottom are physical details: a vaccine card, pepper spray, photographs. Sometimes an object can tell us more about someone than a vague description.

I can describe people with words at the top of the ladder. Let's take an example: my friend and yours, the mind behind the magazine, Curren. I could tell you she's brilliant, kind, and creative. Those are top-of-the-ladder details. But if you really want to know Curren (and if you don't, you should), you need more to go off of than that. To really help you get Curren, I'd tell you about the books she keeps on her shelf, the hugs she gives to her friends, the hand-painted mirror on her wall.

Now I'm not suggesting that you start rifling through your friends' houses, especially if you'd like to be invited back. But I do think that there's a valuable lesson to be learned from the junk drawer: If you want to understand somebody, start at the bottom of the ladder. Most people, even those who don't say much, will show you who they are just by existing near you. And it's always worth trying to know and understand people better.

There's something to be said for getting to know someone, but there's also something to be said for the privacy of a junk drawer. We keep those things out of sight for a reason. Full disclosure, reader, I told you some of the things I keep in my junk drawer, but there's more I'm not sharing here. You just don't know me like that.

There's a lot that comes with being known. There's joy in it, yes, but also fear. We want those close to us to understand who we are, but we also want them to like us that way. What happens if I open up the drawer that, to me, is full of value and meaning, and you just see a mess?

I can't advise you on when or where or with whom to share the contents of your junk drawer. All I can say is this: don't get rid of it. Hold a space, however small, for the things that you care about: cheap jewelry, old photographs, bits of gift wrap. If you open up that drawer one day and you don't know why that particular thing is in that particular place, clear it out. But if it means (or meant) something to you, then it's important.

For giving us space for what matters most, no matter how worthless, I would give junk drawers four stars. But for freaking me out a little bit (who isn't a little apprehensive of the mortifying ordeal of being known?), I'll give it three out of five.

