

## Old Stuff

--Kori L. Propst, MS

Isn't it funny...even when we know we don't need it...even when we don't even necessarily know we have it or want it, we keep it around. Those old running shoes that carried us over the finish line with our best times last year that are without tread, whose inner cushioning and support system has been broken down. That sweatshirt you got in college sits in your dresser drawer taking up way too much space, leaving no room for the newer, more mature, appropriate clothing that you have begun to accumulate. Yet you refuse to let it go. The shoes- you wear them now and then. They're comfortable, "easy." They gave you pleasure last year and they're just plain hard to get rid of! The sweatshirt- well, there are just too many memories attached to that thing! Football games, frat parties, late night chats with that guy you had a crush on who later broke your heart, pizza runs at 2am, and oh! the night you got caught with alcohol in the dorms! Maybe not all positive memories, but memories nonetheless. And so you hang on to it.

As we grow up we accumulate things. We end up with stuff, and as we age, the stuff gets older also! We move and we see just what we have been hanging on to. Psychologically, the same holds true. We learn at an early age through our interactions or lack thereof with our caregivers what's important, who we are, and our worldviews are shaped. We accumulate the "stuff of life." Beliefs, values, cognitions, emotions, coping mechanisms, patterns of behavior...they all accumulate. Our attitudes toward ourselves, others, and the things in our lives are shaped around the stuff we collect and that which latches on to us. We oftentimes do not even notice or are cognizant of our collections. Through watching, taking mental notes, and by living within certain environments that give certain meaning to our experiences, we collect "stuff." It's not intentional. It's survival.

Ever started packing up your belongings to relocate and realize just how many things you have not used by still have? Then there are those possessions that you used to use often but which are currently collecting dust. Finally, we can't forget the items that you may have forgotten you even have but pull out every now and then on a whim!

Do you see where I'm going here? Old stuff—things that we accumulate—is a metaphor for what all of us carry around within us. "I'm so angry! I just want to hit something!" my client screamed. Her eyes brimmed with tears, and her shoulder hunched up as she attempted to prevent the flood gates from breaking wide open. The emotion was too strong to avoid, and the tears came gushing down her cheeks. She sobbed, "I don't know what to do! I want to run away! When I was a child I would go into the quiet of the

forest. I had a spot I would sit and just be by myself. As I got older I used drugs and smoked. Last night I smoked three cigarettes. I can't believe I did that to myself. I haven't smoked in 15 + years." The choking sobs, the labored breathing continued. I slowly reached over and handed her the box of tissue, watching her with concern. "Breathe," I said to her softly. "You didn't hurt yourself. You're here, which tells me that you want to feel better, you want to change so that you don't use that 'old stuff' to relieve your pain anymore." Old stuff. Old behaviors. Ineffective now. Then they worked, they solved the problem and didn't cause more. At that period in her life she could use them and not experience discomfort. Under the current circumstances, they clearly caused dissonance. It was all she needed, and all I needed, to know that it was time to get to the root of how she came to rely on them in the first place and develop more appropriate coping skills.

I've pulled out my old running shoes lately. 'I'm going to give them a try' I thought. I came back from my run with aching knees. In our emotional realms, the use of our 'old stuff' may not be so blatant, decided. Those who have struggled with disordered eating may realize halfway into a binge, or even following the binge that they relied on an old behavior to "remedy" a negative emotion or to forget a painful memory. The husband who doesn't want to confront his wife about his disappointment about a situation in their marriage retreats to his office, refusing to discuss anything. Better just to leave it alone he has learned. He watched his father get screamed at and reprimanded by his mother when he'd approach her with his feelings. So he avoids. Effective perhaps when he was younger and uncomfortable in a situation with his mother. He'd disappear and distract himself with his GI Joes. But now, in this relationship, his wife is left wondering, hurt by his avoidance, his 'old stuff' ineffective and damaging.

Somewhere along the way, through a series of experiences, talks, voices heard, messages conveyed from the people in my life, I gleaned that in order to accomplish something, in order to be respected, admired, and thought of highly, I needed to be perfect. I needed to be without flaws and not make mistakes. Mistakes meant I'd be moving further and further away from achieving. And it was those achievements that meant I was finally somebody. I amounted to something then. I was worthy. My worldview became about what I could do to please. Don't feel. Just do. Control. Everything. If you fall apart, you are weak, you won't measure up, and you will disappoint. Wow.

I went through high school achieving. I got straight A's. I graduated as the Valedictorian. I navigated the muddy waters of relationships, grades, friendships, and when it came time to be thinking about college, I was told that if I didn't get scholarships I would not be able to attend. So I did. I received a full ride to UW. I did what I had to do. I

controlled. 'Stuff' guiding me along my way. College brought new challenges, new experiences that I had to think about differently. In subtle ways I'd change, but with the worldview remaining. Classes were more difficult. Routine had to be reconfigured. I gained some weight with the new schedule, later nights, and different eating habits. But that didn't matter to me. I was focused on controlling to accomplish. I met a boy. And then change happened quickly. My old controlled environment, the ability to maintain structure and balance and that perfectionistic ideal was suddenly eroded by new, foreign feelings....and one comment. This boy said to me one evening as we were chatting in my dorm room, "so you're majoring in exercise physiology....aren't exercise physiologists supposed to be in better shape?" I remember this moment like it was yesterday. No, more like an hour ago. The memory is so vivid, I can feel my heart being crushed beneath my breast bone. But the memory stops there, fragmented into a million tiny pieces, like my spirit. Suffice it to say, this was the beginning of my unhealthy quest for thinness and my fear of failure and imperfection ramping into a full blown year of anorexia. My confidence and trust in myself shattered.

'But wait,' you might be thinking, 'your self image was all based on an unrealistic ideal!' Yes! Exactly! Now, in that moment, I may have realized this and thought 'Wow! You superficial pig! I should be cherished for my charisma, my intelligence, and my compassion...how dare you treat me with such disrespect' OR, even more emotionally mature would have been something like a non-response of confrontation and just recognition that this boy was ignorant and naïve, and likely meant no harm. I laugh now, thinking about how far from that sort of response I was. At the age of 18, with a worldview based on being and doing everything "right"? Now I could say that, and easily, but then I didn't know. Then I did not have the sense of myself to understand that I'm okay the way I am. I'm beautiful and loveable because I AM the way I am. So I turned inward on myself with disgust, disdain, and a focus on my flaws. My question to myself—what do I need to fix? Old stuff! Controlling behaviors to maintain perfection. But I was killing myself. Get it? NOW they were ineffective. They got me through high school, but I needed new skills now to acquire and maintain a balanced life. I needed to redefine perfection, come up with a new working definition of who Kori is and start rebuilding where I was deriving my confidence from, who I wanted to be, and what skills I would begin practicing to be that individual.

When I get uncomfortable, when there are moments in my life that start to feel reminiscent of that moment when I was criticized by someone I looked up to, when I hear words similar to those uttered by people in my life as I was maturing, 'old stuff' comes up. I may have a critical thought about myself and begin to attempt to exert control...but now I catch it. I've done the work. I CONTINUE to do the work toward awareness of the stuff and what can lead me there.

For my client it wasn't okay to feel. Having gone through significant emotional and physical abuse as a child, she learned to survive by shutting off her feelings. As she begins to trust that they are NOW safe to experience, she will struggle with discomfort, feeling foreign in her body. She came to me overweight and unhappy, having stuffed her emotions down deep with food.

The 'old stuff,' the voices that say "you're bad if you cry" or "you're not worth anything unless you stay silent," or "I will hurt you if you tell," rears its head, and she is working on trusting herself to contradict it, trust herself to do the opposite, and know she will be okay...even better than okay.

The 'old stuff' hangs on. We hang onto it, sometimes kicking and screaming and clawing to keep it! When we are feeling weak and tired, the 'old stuff' just seems easier to revert to. We learn the consequences of hanging onto it though. If we are willing to look into, through, and beyond it. We cannot simply replace it. Something replaced is still broken! We must take the time to reveal it, examine it, deconstruct it and identify the origin of the glitch. Then you can decide if it's worth fixing. You can ask yourself if it's worth the effort. If it is, you must start a careful, well executed plan examination. If not, you still must throw it away. But even this will require some discerning, concentrated energy. Like a bone marrow transplant, you must clean out what is there first, then fill it with a healthy replacement. We require *closure* to put away 'old stuff' that has to go in order to change. In other words, we need to reassess, declutter, reorganize, identify what it is that is worth staying attached to, what we can throw away, and what we'd like to replace it with. Do the work. One of my favorite quotes, by Iyanla Vanzant goes like this: "Who I am is not who I used to be, but who I am is all of who I used to be." We must use our 'old stuff' as a guide to creating the new.