

THE LESLEY GARNER COLUMN



Box Of Dreams

Feeling weighed down by a jumble of possessions? Having to pack up all hers for a house move allowed Lesley Garner to edit her clutter and make space for her future...

PHOTOGRAPH NATO WELTON

I'm looking for the box that's got my future life in it. That's not the box containing pristine, empty files which might come in useful for projects I have yet to think of. It's not the box containing empty sketch books which have yet to be filled with great art or even doodles. Nor is it the box filled with old diaries which record in far too much detail just how preoccupied I was about whichever problem at the time was acting as a lightning conductor for my habitual current of anxiety. No, all these are safely stowed away in the wonderful wall of fitted cupboards in my new bedroom in my new flat. The box with my dreams in it is in there somewhere, but in the frenzy of unpacking and being reunited with a life which was in store, it has temporarily disappeared.

There is nothing quite like being parted from the detritus of your life for a few months to make you see it all in a new light when it reappears. Some time last August a team of brawny, cheerful young men with antipodean accents and infinite muscle power packed up my life, stacked it into containers and took it off to a resting place on London's North Circular Road. Six months later, just two brawny, cheerful young men reappeared with my life, unpacked it and carried it up to my new flat and left it for me, hidden inside some 40 brown cardboard boxes. My life and I were reunited. I picked up the little knife I use for slashing through all the cardboard and got to work.

I have written before about the purging, cleansing process that is throwing things out. I have an inner nomad who thinks it would be brilliant to float her way through life with no more than a few carefully chosen rugs and a boxful of totem possessions. That's one boxful, not 40 boxfuls. I am not sure how to describe the process of unwrapping one's life again – could it be throwing things *in*?

If you had been listening as I unpacked my boxes you would have heard some funny noises. There were glad cries at being reunited with a favourite picture or a stash of childhood books. There were quite a few "ohmigods" as I stared in disbelief into an expensively packed and moved box that held nothing more than some old torches without batteries, a jar of assorted screws and some scorched teatowels. There were inarticulate cries after five minutes of tearing padding and sticky tape off some unwieldy parcel, only

to find that it held a framed student poster I had completely forgotten about and didn't want, or yet another mirror. It seemed half the boxes held things that I didn't really want and yet had to make room for. No wonder my friend, Jenny, when she came round, looked puzzled and said, "I thought when you moved in here you were going to go all minimal, but it looks just like your last home."

Well, it does and it doesn't. I hope it looks like my last home, only better. I hope it looks like my last home with the dross sifted out and the good stuff displayed better. What I've learned in this whole exhausting process, apart from the fact that lifting and unpacking boxes is an excellent and foolproof way to shift your winter weight gain, is that when it comes to a clash between your dream life and the material world, the material world will win every time if you let it. Like fighting the flab, the struggle against stuff and its demands is a constant, daily battle. Which is why I am still desperately searching for the box which holds my future life. I need it to act as a guiding star while I negotiate my way through the still-endless lists which read "contact utilities, check household insurance, send change of address cards."

There really is such a box. It is one of those clear Perspex boxes which contains white blank file cards, only this particular box contains file cards which have possible projects written on them. I created this box of ideas two years ago when I had finished a week-long experience called the Hoffman process which I will tell you all about some other day (though, if you can't wait that long, you can look it up at hoffmaninstitute.co.uk). The effect of the Hoffman process on me was to leave me energised and fizzing with ideas, lovely creative ideas which would take me off in new directions and turn my life from monochrome to Technicolor. But somehow, life kept on happening. Nevertheless, the very existence of this box and the knowledge that there existed a me who could fizz with new ideas despite being driven by the old ones has been one of the things that have kept me going through upheavals and removals.

Without the impetus and clarity provided by the Hoffman process I wouldn't have found the focus and energy to move at all. I would still be living in the shell of a former life where I lived in the suburbs, did weekly

supermarket shops and school runs and gazed out at a row of late Victorian terraced houses exactly like the one I lived in. Now I step out on to a city pavement where I can see boats on the river, walk to shops and museums, and feel a galvanising current of life flow past my doorstep. I am beginning to feel more like the person I once wanted to be.

Unpacking the brown cardboard boxes has enabled me to carry out a further process of dream editing. I don't want to be – never wanted to be – a person weighed down by old tea towels and torches without batteries. I am delighted to rediscover the person who bought pictures she liked and has the chance to do a rehang of her life, mixing up her favourite possessions and displaying them in new ways. And I know that, as I planned, it is time to pull out the box of ideas, pick a card, any card, and begin exploring. I just have to be a little more patient yet.

This whole protracted moving process has taught me a few more lessons in how life works and I can see that life works like ordering food in hospital. When you go into hospital they bring you a menu and you tick cauliflower cheese and apricot crumble and are surprised when they bring you cod in white sauce and apple pie. What you learn is

"I don't want to be a person weighed down by old tea towels and torches without batteries"

that everything is out of sync. The cod in white sauce and the apple pie were probably ordered by the person who was in the bed before you and the cauliflower cheese and apricot crumble will turn up in good time, just not quite when you expected it.

My box of useless torches and dishcloths was a wry gift from a former me, a person who felt smothered in such things but doesn't want or need them any more. The box of ideas, the one which contains my future life, was drawn up in the past but it is waiting for me in a future which is nearly here. At any given time we are not necessarily living the life we dream about but we are probably living the life we dreamed about in the past. It just goes to show how essential it is to have a box of dreams on the go. It probably contains your future life.