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Material Religious Aspects of a Wisconsin Unitarian Household

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Extensive time with an elderly couple in Wisconsin learning about their things showed ways in which, for them, many objects had invisible, numinous aspects, inflected by emotions. Many of their things were more than what they were, in some cases with attributions of vitality, in others with connections to the absent and the dead. As together we made an inventory of possessions and the memories they held, it became clear that for this American family, things were bound up with people in ways that did not meet the eye.[1]

The inquiry was a result of the death of my parents. When they died I realized that not only was I then unmoored and on my own, but so too were all the things in the house where they had lived and I had grown up. With my parents gone, their things – books, clothes, decorative objects, furniture, plants – had almost entirely lost the invisible ties that related them to people, places and events. While this kind of periodic erasure of family memory was normal, inevitable and even reasonable, as a saver and a keeper I rebelled against it. As a kind of remedy or compensation I set out to find a roughly equivalent elderly couple willing to tell me the memories associated with their set of things.[2]

1 I am grateful to the extended Cronon family, particularly Jean, William and Robert, to Gillian Feeley-Harnick, Lisa Godson, Adela Pinch, Lotten Gustafsson Reinius, Mary Heimann, Monique Scheer, and to other participants in the colloquiums in Pécs, Tübingen and Lund where I presented earlier versions of this essay.

2 William A. Christian Jr., "Yard Sale: Activation and loss of personal value in

The Cronons

The people who generously agreed to do this were a retired couple, Jean and Dave Cronon, of Madison Wisconsin. Jean (Mary Jean Hotmar, Princeton, Wisconsin, 1925) was trained as a nurse and had taught nursing, Dave (E. David Cronon, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1924) was a historian who had been Dean of College of Letters & Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. They had raised two boys, who by then were married and living independently with their own children. Between 2000 and 2007 I visited Jean and Dave for eight stays of up to two weeks at a time. During these visits they told me about their stuff, which inevitably entailed a recapitulation of their lives, travels, families and friendships.[3] For me, in addition to learning about things and what they mean and do, it was a way to explore my roots in the Wisconsin of my mother and to get to make two dear friends.

Dave had been brought up a Presbyterian, and Jean a Lutheran. They met at a Presbyterian student group in Madison, but eventually found the less doctrinal Unitarians more congenial. By the time they switched to Unitarianism, neither believed in the divinity of Christ, but they made sure their sons went to Unitarian Sunday school, and Christmas was a major family occasion. As Dave put it cheerfully (on agreeing to a Catholic cousin's suggestion that they bury a statue of Saint Joseph in the front yard to help sell their house):"We're Unitarians, we can believe in anything." In the period of my visits they rarely attended church.

Both Jean and Dave came from families with a tradition of fluidity among different denominations and congregations. Dave's paternal grandfather was brought up a Catholic and became a Presbyterian. Dave's parents switched from being Presbyterians in Minnesota, to Baptists in Cleveland, and Quakers in Washington, D.C. Jean's father had a Catholic father and a Lutheran mother. Brought up as a Catholic, as an adult he attended no church, while two of his brothers were English Lutherans, and a sister and a brother were Catholics. Jean's mother Lillian changed from German Lutheran to English Lutheran. After she married a Catholic she stopped going to church altogether. As a widow she attended a small Evangelical church, then a Methodist one. Jean's sister Wanda started as a Lutheran, married a

objects", unpublished lecture, Sep. 17, 1998, Getty Research Institute; Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodities as Process", in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1986, 64–91, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511819582.004.

3 William A. Christian Jr., "The Presence of the Absent: Transcendence in an American Midwest Household", in Gábor Vargyas (ed.), *Passageways; From Hungarian Ethnography to European Ethnology and Sociocultural Anthropology*, Budapest 2009 [2011], 223–240.

Figure 1. Lillian (second from left) and Jean (extreme right), with friends and relatives at the Princeton Flea Market. Photo: Cronon family.

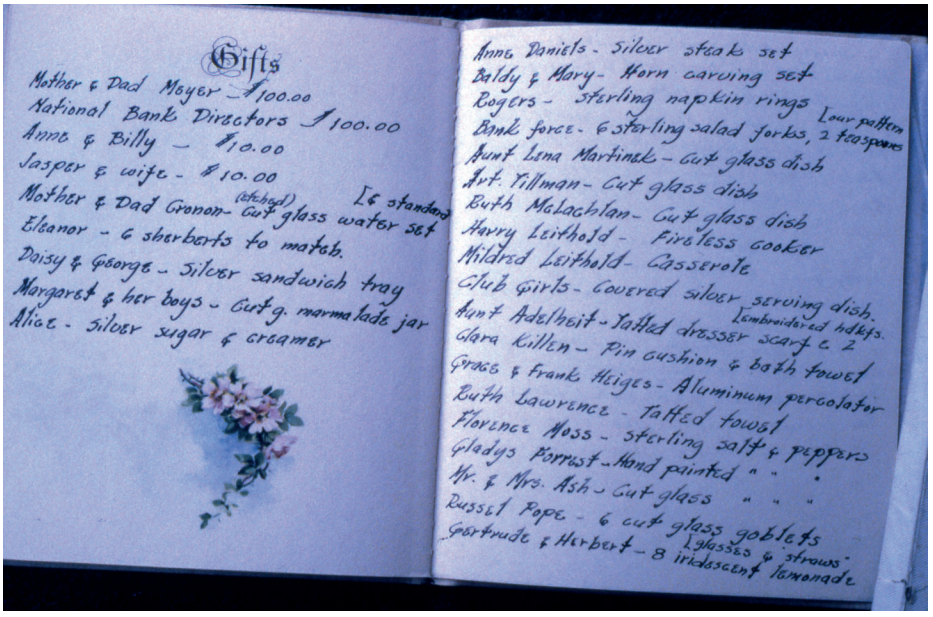

Figure 2. Wedding gifts listed in Dave's parents' wedding book, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1917. Photo: author.

Catholic, practiced Transcendental Meditation, and then took her mother's place in the Methodist church. Other relatives included pure agnostics and followers of radio preachers.

Jean's mother Lillian, Jean, and her sister Wanda had been bound tight by the suicide of third sister, Jackie, in 1956. One of their great pleasures together was present-hunting and gift-giving, which involved a close attentiveness to likes, preferences, and collections (Figure 1). I arrived three years after Lillian had died, and in 2002, Wanda died as well. In the same period, Jean and Dave decided to sell their house and move to the Oakwood retirement home. On the day of the move into Oakwood, in December 2006, Dave died suddenly. The stories of things were inflected by the deaths of Jackie, Lillian, Wanda, Dave, as well as other, earlier deaths. For many things were material memories of absent loved ones, "the things that make them alive again".

Engagement with Things in the Life Cycle

On my visits with Jean and Dave from 2000 to 2006 and with Jean in 2008, we examined together their engagement with things by considering everything they owned, in their house and their summer house, in the yard and garden, on display or in basement storage, and later in the new apartment. In the process I was helped by the many ways in which things were chronicled and tracked in their lives.

These engagements go way back and were facilitated by the immense commercial apparatus of the American economy at the service of buying, selling and giving. In the basement was the wedding book of Dave's parents in 1917, a commercial production with dedicated pages for listing the wedding presents, duly filled out (Figure 2).

When Dave and Jean were married, Dave had a Fulbright year in England 1950–1951, and they traveled through Europe, including a week in Sweden. They carried with them a commercial travel diary, which included rubrics for purchases and for whom each article was intended.

Christmas is very important in this family, and they had a special notebook for listing the presents so they could be acknowledged. When they opened the presents as a family member noted the items, pen in hand, in the friendly presence of family dogs.

Thousands of slides and family photos, like those illustrating this paper, and including pictures of object arrays on the occasion of birthdays, were powerful indications of the things a given person found meaningful (Figure 3). And an unexpected surprise was a set of slides, a set of color photos, and a videotape in their safe deposit box, taken at ten-year intervals, of

Figure 3. "These are a few of my favorite things." Mantle assemblage for Dave's 80th birthday, 2004, with Philippine carved bookends, lower right. Photo: Cronon family.

Figure 4. Jean and Dave preparing May 2006 garage sale. Photo: Cronon family.

everything valuable in the house for insurance purposes. In the slide of a dish cabinet one can see Jean taking the photograph.

When the boys moved out and became independent, the parents had more income that was disposable, and they traveled more, it became necessary to expand the house, not because it had more people (it had fewer) but because it had more things.

I made the agreement with Jean and Dave to do the study in a long-distance phone call set up by their son, Bill, who was my friend. Months later when I arrived at the house with my video camera, my heart fell. I had never seen a place with so many baubles and kitsch. What had I gotten myself in for? But every single item on display, it quickly turned out, had a story, most were connected intimately to other people, and in a short time, hours if not minutes, the house became a place brimming with magic, and it had become clear to me that it was a kind of nodal network of human connections humming with affection.

The Logic of Invisible Aspects

In this system things (understood very broadly) carry the experience of acquisition: the giver, the testator, the seller, the craftsperson, the moment, the place, the trip; an anchor in time, connection to the I in that period; experience of use: events and anecdotes. As we worked our way through the rooms, cabinets, and closets, the emotional, ethical, and sometimes numinous logic behind the invisible aspects of things would emerge.

When Jean mislaid a little painted miniature, I asked why it was distressing.

> J returns, perplexed: Why is this troubling me? It's because these things are reminders of the past, travels, other people: past pleasure. Like that missing book on the Grand Canyon: it changed my life; I lent it out and it wasn't returned. A little piece of us is gone.

These very narratives guide assemblages of meaning on walls and shelves around the house, occasionally in the case of lineage material approaching the status of altars, as Jean describes here:

> J: Pictures on bureau, around little poem by Hilary, and grandmother's watch, now under glass. It was grandma's wedding present when she married, and she willed it to me; the watch will go to grand-daughter Carly when I die or maybe before. Carly is named after me. I'm named after grandma. The watch will not go to daughter-in-laws; that

wouldn't mean anything. To blood-line down. If not grandchildren, to my niece. So any way the watch has a new life now, a new place.

A variety of media carried and evoked other people:

- Recipes and tastes as special connections, a distinctive taste bringing back a wave of associations with people, meals, households. We will see the special place of favorite cookies in burials.
- Scents, perfumes. A neighbor, Beatrice Kabler, had a distinctive, closed, vase in her living room. When I asked about it she started weeping. When she was a child, her mother, who had a terminal illness, took her to a rose garden and had her smell the roses, then brought the rose petals home and put them in the vase, where they were still fragrant seventy years later.
- Sounds, the experience they evoke when they have previously heard or sung it, as with the Brahms German Requiem, a part of which Dave selected for his funeral.
- Jewelry as particularly lasting metal and stone connections, especially if pre-worn or shared; pearls as requiring use and touch. When Jean was about to sell a pearl necklace at a garage sale she thought it did not look right on the woman who was buying it, she fingered it, remembered when she had bought it and worn it, and decided not to let it go.

Clothes

For the women in the clan, clothes especially were bearers of connections. These included ritual clothes, which could approach the status of relics. A christening gown was passed around to siblings and down through generations, and it was visible also in the photographs of the baptisms.

Ordinary, non-ritual, clothes bore these connections as well.

> J: I want to tell you about this bathrobe. About 40 years ago, I gave this to Dave's mother (now dead for 15 years), for Christmas. She wore it and wore it, even in the nursing home, so when she died, I retrieved it; this is very old, cause I liked it myself. Now I've moved it up here.
> D: Recycling.
> J: Today I've got that on, I always think of Dave's mother. She loved it. That was her color.
> D: You look like my mother.

The sharing of clothes among siblings, mothers and daughters seems to enhance them, and incidentally prepares them for an additional relic-like status when someone dies, as with the christening gown and the bathrobe. All of which made our forays into seemingly mundane clothes-closets surprisingly moving.

One female relative maintained her deceased mother's purse, complete, on the hat rack where it habitually hung, and another treasured the cigarette burns on the desk of her grandmother, who had been a chain-smoker.

When I visited Jean after Dave died, she pointed out items in her new apartment that they had given away and she had felt a special need to recover. Several were wooden carvings that Dave had obtained in the Philippines when he was in the army before he knew her. When the couple was downsizing to move to the retirement home, she had felt no attachment to them, and they had given them to a thrift shop. After Dave's death, items like these that had been particularly his, *because* they were particularly his, took on a new importance for her, and she retrieved them from the shop and put them in the apartment where she could see them.

As Adela Pinch put it succinctly, people die, things remain. And for this and many families, things yo-yo and ricochet between the living and the living and especially between the living and the dead, often gaining momentum and vitality in the process. An example was an embroidered picture of a kitten Jean bought in China with her mother in mind. She first gave it to Lillian in Princeton Wisconsin, then recuperated it when Lillian died, then gave it to her son Robert in Massachusetts, then, after Dave died, recuperated it from Bob for her apartment in Madison.

> J: I don't know if you can see that little kitten, embroidered Chinese picture– … I had first given it to my mother, and then I gave it to Bob after I had taken it back, and he had not hung it, and I had thought about it, so he brought it back when he came, so I put it up there; I had something else above there, but I–
> Q: You brought that back from China?
> J: Yes. And I'd had it framed for my mother, because she loves cats. I'm not a real cat-lover, but it's– I like it and it looks good in this room. So I'm glad I've got it back.

Since Jean is not fond of cats, surely part of her need for the embroidery ("…I had thought about it…") came from its association with her mother, and perhaps with Bob as well.

Plants

Plants too are living connectors between the living and the dead, or in some cases stand-ins for the dead. In the American Midwest special attention is given to ferns, with special pedestal-like fern stands.

When I first visited Jean and Dave they likened the ferns to children:

> D: Those ferns are all descended from a fern that belonged to her mother.
> J: No, my grandmother!
> D: Her grandmother, that must date back at least to the latter part of the 19th century and we've kept dividing it periodically and replanting it and so the four plants that we have are only part of what it has become, we have given pieces of it away, but literally it's a fern that goes back to the 1875 or so…
> J: I said, "Dave I've got too much to do… And when we go away we have to find somebody to take care of these children and they're like your children" and so that's a little obsessive and so what do you do when…
> D: Compulsive obsessive.
> J: It really is; it's foolish.

Four years later, as the Cronons were preparing to move, a female relative reluctantly took over.

Plants also seem to serve as healing presences, living bearers of vitality that make them especially appropriate as gifts to the sick and convalescent. This aspect became explicit in the 2006 garage sale, when Jean was selling a plant called Moses in the bulrushes.

> J: So the other funny-nice thing is there was another Moses in the bulrushes. I was selling the original one that I had kept for 25 years. It had been given to me by my neighbor Bea Kabler when I had cancer in 1980, and I had kept that going, but I had kept one baby that I was going to take to Oakwood, but I was giving the mother away. And I told this girl that was buying it, I said: "You know I got that when I had cancer in 1980." And she sort of started to cry, and she said: "You know, I'm buying this for my sister, who has cancer, and I was going to take it to her." And I said: "Well tell her that I recovered fully, I was cured." And she had the same kind of cancer even. We hugged and cried together, it was very touching.

Toy Turtles

The attribution of presence and agency (here the plants are referred to as mother and baby) can also apply to inanimate simulacra. Jean comments on a small metal turtle in her turtle collection:

> J: When I see a strange turtle it just makes me want to have it. I don't need it, I"ve got so many. It's the only metal one I have. I paid actually $10 for this, which I normally would balk at. So then I put him along with the small turtles over here, that come from all over. What am I going to do with all these turtles? You don't know – I hope my children will find a home for them. It's so silly.

The turtle carries with it the feeling it provoked when seen in a shop, its distinctiveness as a metal one among stone and plastic ones, the amount paid for, its/his incorporation into the turtle menagerie, and a disquiet for its future. Note here its agency: "it just makes me want to have it", and the transition, after acquisition, to a kind of gendered living thing, from "it" and "this" to "him". She worries that when she dies, the turtles, a kind of turtle family, will become homeless orphans, and hopes her human children will adopt them or find foster parents. At the same time, she is totally aware of the ridiculousness of her feelings. "It's so silly."

Garage Sale

The anthropologist Annette Wiener suggested the term "inalienable possessions", referring to the heirlooms that could not be disposed of outside the lineage because they belonged to the group and not the individual.[4] An example is a table in Wanda's summer house made by her father from a wheel, known as "Daddy's table". As Jean put it: "This is the family's; whatever happens to this we have the right to know."

But here I am getting at an additional aspect of inalienability, stuff tinged or imbued by the presence, invisible or visible, intentioned or unintended, of loved ones.

That table, like the ferns, was common property because it was made by a common, loved, father, grandfather, great-grandfather; that is, things bind people who are alive, by means of their common connection with the dead. Just how loved and how close affects the situation.

From my very arrival at the house Jean and Dave were already thinking of what a move to a retirement home would mean for their things, and how,

4 Annette B. Wiener, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*, Berkeley 1992.

in the going usage, "good homes" could be found for what they could not take with them.

A standard American practice, advertised every weekend in newspapers and by signs on residential streets, is the garage sale or yard sale, where used goods are passed on, if possible with some of the memories attached, to friends, neighbors, or dealers who try not to seem like professionals, for prices that are often symbolic. I filmed the preparations and sales of one sale, in 2002, and the hard decisions Jean and Dave had to make in choosing what to sell, how much to ask for and, especially poignant, what to do with the things nobody wanted (Figure 4).[5]

Beforehand, from her pricing table Jean delivered soliloquies on value, including what to do with her grandmother's hair. As she looked around the house for things to sell, she considered her collection of teacups in a china cabinet in the living room. First, she considered a pink one: "The trouble with this one, this belonged to my grandmother. I even had that appraised: $35 in 1997…"

Then she looked at a blue and white one:

> J: This was brought to me; I was always in charge of our nursing school reunion; 3 others lived in Madison from our class, there are still 2; one, Ginny Showers, helped me with the printing of a little booklet; she died of blood disease; her husband gave me a cup from her cup collection, as he did to other close friends, neighbors, and family. It means something to me; it's not family and a recent kind of thing, but it's hard in a way. Two dollars? Would that be sacrilegious for me to put that out there? Yes it would. Just because it was a very sweet gesture that he wanted me to have that. I guess I have keep it for while yet. Maybe our bigger estate sale.

The pink cup, whatever its value, was inalienable as an heirloom. The blue and white one, while "not family and a recent kind of thing", was still more than just a cup, affected as it was by her friendship for Ginny Showers and the solemn gesture of Ginny's widowed husband. Selling the cup, even in the friendly market of the garage, at least at that moment, would be a sacrilege against some god or gods (the dead, the loyalty, the sentiments, the conscience), and could simply not be done, yet. We hear Jean, here, calculating with precision the ethical, emotional, and even religious implications of her level of personal attachment to the cup, to the woman it represents,

5 I presented an untitled 45-minute digital video assemblage of the 2002 garage sale on March 17, 2004 at The Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California.

and to the woman's husband, using a slide rule that determines when it can be released, under what circumstances, and for how much.

Moving out

The move out of the house also helped make explicit some feelings about things that had heretofore rested unexpressed. Photographs are special condensations of connection, depicting as they do the absent and the dead; and photographic arrays can be like images in a reredos or iconostasis. But when a "stager" came from the real estate company to prepare the house for prospective buyers she suggested clearing the hallways and depersonalizing the walls. The family photos in the master bedroom, she said, had to come down.

Dave described the moment, and even had Jean take a photograph of it for my benefit (Figure 5):

> D: For me symbolically, the breaking of the tie to this house came as I was taking down those family pictures, wrapping them up, and there's a picture that I gave you showing me wrapping those pictures in the bedroom. That was when symbolically and psychologically felt, I am moving, I am leaving this place.
>
> And the same in my study, I had all those different pictures and award citations and that stuff on the wall behind my couch, and Jean said: "Well you're certainly not going to take all those to Oakwood." And I said: "Of course I'm taking those things to Oakwood, that's who I am! Without those I'm not me." So psychologically I broke another tie to the house when I put those in a box.

As they got ready for the movers, Jean and Dave realized that there were things, like the family photographs and Dave's memorabilia, that they preferred to put into a separate storage facility themselves. "Now our home is in that little shed there, all of our favorite things, that we personally didn't want any mover to touch, are there." Jean explained why she packed treasures for the storage unit herself; how she wrapped the stone eggs, the ceramic house for the Christmas crèche, the perfume bottles, her box collection. [D: The whatnot shelf; J: Oh the mini shelf! I never would have trusted any movers to move that].

Figure 6 shows the last photo taken of Jean and Dave in the house, after everything had been moved out, five weeks before they moved into the retirement home and Dave died, taken on the hearth where they and the boys had posed for Dave's father when they moved in forty years before.

Figure 5. Dave taking down the family photographs in the bedroom, April 29, 2006. Photo, Jean Cronon.

Figure 6. Jean and Dave on moving day, Oct. 26, 2006. Photo: Richard Pearce.

The Littlest Angel

Some the items that had been in Dave's study were on tables at the visitation at the funeral home, and a week later at the memorial service in the Unitarian Church (Figure 7). Note that in some ways the former was a wake and the latter a funeral, but in both, familiar objects and photographs partially stood in for the corpse. Here again the notion of relics comes to mind. We see the stone thrown through his office window when he was Chairman of the History department, on which he mounted a proletarian figurine, which symbolically combined his defense of academic values during the turbulent years of anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and his rejection of the Soviet Communism they saw up close in their year of Fulbright teaching in Moscow in 1974.

Next to it was the book *The Littlest Angel*, by Charles Tazewell, a family favorite that Dave and Jean read to their sons and grandchildren. It is about a scruffy, disobedient 4-year-old angel boy, who does not behave well in heaven because he misses his box of favorite things from earth. When the box is brought to heaven he becomes a model angel, and when the Christ child is born, he chooses to give the box, including his deceased pet's dog collar, to the Christ child, and God is so impressed he converts the box into the star of Bethlehem. As a parable about the intimate connection of things to a sense of self and the religious virtue of relinquishing them, it struck a chord in the United States when it was performed as a radio play starting in 1939, and published in 1946. For the Cronons it was a signal way of transmitting to the next generations the enchantment of objects and their quasi-religious valence.

The family, the sons inform me, had an annual ritual of reading it aloud on Christmas Eve. As Bill Cronon wrote in an email, "…there's a lot going on in this story: not just our parents' association of objects with cherished memories, but our family's love of dogs; the centrality of Christmas gatherings and rituals; and our longstanding tradition of reading books out loud and oral storytelling in general." Both sons, it turns out, maintain the tradition in their own families. And each time they struggle to avoid weeping when they get to the part about the dog collar.

Burials

The more explicitly religious aspect of things and their intimate connection to persons were visible in the family's funeral rituals.

When Lillian's corpse was ready, Wanda put a toy cat (which Jean had given Lillian) by her head, with Lillian's glasses, a $5 bill, her crochet needles, a ball of yarn, and Lillian's mother Mamie's sweater. They also put a blank

Figure 7. Items on display for the visitation, Cress Funeral Home, Madison, Dec. 9, 2006. Photo: William Cronon.

check, and a bed jacket under her pillow "for passing the pearly gates, so she could go out like the pharaohs did". Since Lillian had always carried a Kleenex in her hand after she stopped smoking, Jean and Wanda made sure she was buried with a Kleenex in her hand.

Wanda's funeral was at the Methodist church, but it was rather secular. Family members talked to the minister, a very young woman, "to kind of turn this", Dave told me, "into a Unitarian church service. She was very cooperative. Instead of a sermon she read a child's story about a tortoise". In remarks at the service, someone referred to Wanda's proclivity for shopping. He said there were two things he couldn't understand, why this wonderful spirit had been taken from us when she still had so much life; and why the K-Mart Company had gone bankrupt. At the gravesite there was just family, and, Jean said, "they put in little things, including her K-Mart charge card. I put in a note; a sugar cookie (her favorite) and little stones I had, feely stones. Someone brought a crystal Hershey kiss, we all touched it, then put on top, and a flower". Others put in Scrabble cubes and lipstick.

I myself was present at Dave's burial, where family members put small things in with the urn (an essay, chocolates, a miniature schaum torte, a coupon from Mel's Custards), and I too put something I brought from Las Palmas.

In the habitus of this American family, there is a sense, almost completely unformulated, but implicit in feelings voiced and decisions about retaining or releasing, that most possessions are more than what they are. This became explicit when, after systematically inquiring about things on display or in collections I asked about workaday objects in the house that were purely utilitarian, like a fork. As Jean variously put it, "some things are just what they are, some things no"; "utilitarian pure and simple"; "doesn't mean anything to me." For Dave this included cars, which were "like any other commodity". Such things were sometimes dismissed with the word "just", as, on opening a cabinet: "just towels".

This absence of connection contrasts with things that "mean something", "have meaning", "are meaningful" or "have memories attached", things that people "have attachments to", that "can't be let go" and "can't be gotten rid of".

On examination, it turns out that the vast majority of objects in a household like the Cronons" carry with them or within them inflections, associated memories that endow them with a varying power of retention or retentiveness, and the capacity of connection to people, places, times, situations, and events. And of these, many objects, while unrelated to churches, cults, saints, theology, or God, may, I suggest, properly be considered

religious, in the sense that they connect with the deepest of emotions, with invisible or absent beings, and a sense of awe.

Time and Place

I conclude with some considerations about time and place.

While the Cronon household, the sons tell me, was unusual in their neighborhood for the quantity of "tchotchkes" on display, I do not think it was exceptional for Middle America in its intersection of things, emotions, and memories. And I should add that what I have described here has not at all seemed foreign or exotic to student and adult audiences of presentations I have made in Spain, Hungary, Germany and Sweden.

But some more specific factors may be at work in the particulars.

1. How much is this product of a historical period: recipes, when there was home cooking; accumulation, when there was space and prosperity; and a particular family configuration – a daughter's/sibling's/aunt's suicide.
2. The relative permanence of these people's presence in their houses may make remembering easier. One thinks of the use of place-locations in memory systems of ancient Greece and Rome, and Mateo Ricci.[6]
3. On the other hand, the Cronons' mobility as academics made their most special things more important when relocating the household. Before coming to the house I studied, where they resided for 40 years, they had lived in six other places. Dave said that on arrival in each new dwelling they would immediately put out their memories on display. "It was silly, but important to both of us."
4. When people live somewhere far from their parents and far from their children, even the most vestigial place-holders may mean more. Such a factor would hold for emigrants, migrant workers, refugees, slaves, orphans, military personnel, multinational employees, as well as mobile academics.
5. I knew Jean and Dave and Wanda at a stage in their lives when their parents were not just absent, but gone. Death evokes or enhances the presence of the absent in things. There is an almost physical transformation of comfortable, taken-for-granted stuff to poignant relics at the loss of a wife, husband, parent, or sibling. Or the unbearable poignancy of the things of a deceased child, in the case of Jackie, and Nanni Moretti's 2001 film, *The Son's Room* (*La Stanza del Figlio*).

6 Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory,* London 1966; Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, New York 1984.

6. Among these people the detailed attention to household things, where they are, whom they came from, whom they went to, what memories they bear, seems an overwhelmingly female skill and preoccupation. There is a gendered division of labor. The men tend to have hazier memories, aside for items they themselves may have bought or made.
7. There is great variation from family to family, and within families from sibling to sibling. When an extended family member's mother died, the widowed husband had a bonfire and burned everything. Lillian would be careful what she gave to Wanda, because Wanda was wont to let things go. And Jean was surprised that Dave's sisters showed less interest than Dave in their parents' things.

Meaningful Things

Rather than decommodified, or enclaved, in the usage of Arjun Appadurai,[7] loaded, charged, or affected objects could be considered (using Jean's term) meaningful. And meaningful possessions seem to serve as mortar for lineages and anchors for a sense of self. I venture to say that these are the vast majority of human artifacts. Goods in stores or on the assembly line, rather than commodities or merchandise, can be understood as things not yet meaningful; and in yard sales, second-hand stores and flea markets, as things somewhat pre-charged with meaning.

A customer at the Cronon's garage sale summed it up. Kathryn Englebretsen picked out a homemade ceramic box made by Jean's father, John Hotmar, as Jean informed her when she paid for it. I asked Kathryn why she bought it.

> K: I really like the design of this, it's a very nice shape, I like the color, I have a sister who collects antiques, and she has a bedroom set from the 1930s, and I think this would be beautiful on her dressing table. And then I was just told the story of how it's from Princeton. I grew up in Pardeeville, and when I was in grade school our basketball team would play against the Princeton basketball team. So that makes it even better.

I approached her again as she was leaving: "I want to see the happy customer." Kathryn held up her purchase with a big smile.

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7 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value", in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life*, 3–63 [24], https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511819582.003.

> K: Well, of course I'm happy. And I go to garage sales because it's an inexpensive habit. Instead of spending my money on cigarettes or alcohol, I like to find interesting little things that may have really meant something to somebody at some time, and use them myself until I pass them on.

Dave and Jean chimed in from the check-out table. "That's the essence of your story." "All in a nutshell."

So, to sum up. These particular people are Protestants in upbringing, and, as Unitarians, particularly short on creeds, saints and religious images. But there is an invisible side to what they are and what they do that does not have much directly to do with religion, but gets at the kinds of things that religion also gets at. They are steeped in and relish things that connect them to others, living and dead, and nourish and practice these connections on a daily basis in a way that approaches religiosity. They are aware of the potential oddness of their activity in the eyes of outsiders and even to themselves, and acknowledge it with words like "funny", "funny-nice", "sacrilegious", "sick", "foolish", "obsessive", and "silly", that may express an awareness not so much of irrationality or childishness, but something else, similar to what Freud called the *unheimlich*, the uncanny. This is paradoxical, as this feeling here is so in fact associated with the home, so *heimisch*. Be that as it may, it seems to be part of their very nature, and they would be betraying themselves, their families, and their ancestors if they did otherwise.

What I am suggesting then, is that, as in these essays we think about more explicitly religious objects, that we remember that all charged things, every meaningful gift, not just the gold, frankincense, and myrrh of the Magi, and all objects, depictions and remains of lost loved ones, not just the relics, statues and icons of saints, have a religious quality and may indeed provide the emotional building blocks for material religious emotions. Or, to turn it around, all of us are ancestors-to-be in the process of bespiriting our own homes and things, and are on our way to ourselves becoming Lares and Penates. ▲

SUMMARY

Extensive time with an elderly couple in Wisconsin learning about their things showed ways in which, for them, many objects had numinous aspects. Many of their things were more that what they were, in some cases with attributions of vitality, in others with connections to the absent and the dead. As together we made an inventory of possessions and the memories they held, it became clear that for this American family, things were bound up with people in ways that did not meet the eye. This article enforces the need to remember that all charged things, every meaningful gift, not just the gold, frankincense, and myrrh of the Magi, and all objects, depictions and remains of lost loved ones, not just the relics, statues and icons of saints, have a religious quality and may indeed provide the emotional building blocks for material religious emotions. Or, to turn it around, all of us are ancestors-to-be in the process of bespiriting our own homes and things, and are on our way to ourselves becoming Lares and Penates.