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Words Matter: Documents of the Departed

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Background

I first met Dr. Mills in early Fall of 2003. At our first meeting he gave me a copy of Charles Herford's *Ben Johnson*, the definitive eleven volume set that took Herford half a century to complete. Two years later, I married his daughter Jane. Lloyd and I shared a love of books and when I would visit, I would always find him in his armchair surrounded by piles of titles that he had been working through. Dr. Mills was a scholar of Ben Johnson and seventeenth century English literature, a poet, and was of Professor Emeritus of English at Kent State University. To me, he lived a modest life, surrounding himself with very few things of value, except for his books. One might wonder if he sometimes secretly desired things of value but the reality was written works (whether written by him or someone else) were the most valuable things of all. Every room in his house had bookshelves. Some sat on top of one another, floor to ceiling. Others were mounted and then reinforced against walls, coffee and end tables also served as additional shelving. If it could hold a book, it did. Walking into his home was like walking into a library. Dr. Mills had so many books that the plaster ceiling above him bowed and cracked in many places from the sheer weight of the library in his study upstairs that I have only visited once. To Dr. Mills, his books were his most important possessions; they were his identity, they were filled with words that mattered. Eclectic, expensive, first-folios, multiple copies, multi-volume sets, first editions, and out-of-print works. It was a collection that he had built his life around as a true scholar.

Ten years later he was forced to sell his estate to pay for his perpetual care. His personal library of an amassed 25,000 plus books (his most beloved possessions) seemed to present themselves as more of a hindrance than something as a family we felt intimately attached to at the time. Despite the desperation of trying to organize a plan to clear out the house, there was a mindset established by Dr. Mills that had been embedded in the family which was a strong sense of responsibility that these books needed to go to people who would truly appreciate them, scholarly or not. While some families are given time to sort, clean, consider, reminisce, debate, reconsider, and ultimately decide, on the destination of all of their loved one's personal belongings near the end of life, this was not true with my family as everything occurred in a very short period of time.

In the mornings we would often arrive at the assisted living home, sit and converse over a meal. On holidays, we would change the room's décor. Every visit was an opportunity to bring a piece of life (a favorite food, a fresh razor, positive news from family or our jobs, something familiar from home). Being from out of town, we needed to maximize our time and our afternoons were spent running errands of all kinds, making phone calls related to his health, and meeting

with nurses and doctors. Then to his house, to sort through more belongings, then back later to see him early in the evening, before returning again the next morning. This is how we spent our summer and fall, leaving town and immediately planning our next return.

Despite his seemingly stable condition, on November 29th, we decided to add hospice care as a way of increasing services and providing more support. We were told that this was the right decision and that they would re-evaluate him in six months. Within ten days, Dr. Lloyd Mills had died. During the last few days of his life, our routine changed drastically. We would arrive early in the morning to catch the doctor and nurses to assess his situation and stay by his side, playing his favorite classical music and privately sharing moments with him even when he finally became unresponsive. Each night we reluctantly left late in the evening, emotionally distraught and exhausted to return to his home, now mostly emptied of all of his books and identity. What few heirlooms and objects of importance that remained, a few small statues or sculptures, a painting had already been packed. Smaller trinkets, magnifying glasses, bookends, tiny decorative wooden boxes, bookmarks, and his harmonicas lay scattered about on the surfaces that remained. And although the closets of old coats and hats had been cleared, those possessions that smelled of him, the kitchen of its dishes, items intimately involved in his daily routine, and the bedroom of clothes and its linens, we were emotionally unprepared to tackle the final remaining room, Dr. Mills' study. His study was a collection of books, tapes, CDs, filing cabinets, chests, and boxes filled to the brim with documents. When clearing out his library of books, we had started the task of collecting his published works, the notes he made about new writings, which were all words that mattered to us as a family, but we were unaware of what we would discover next.

Literature Review

There is a substantial body of literature on bereavement studies, memorializing practices, on how objects are transformed during times of grief and loss. A portion of this work specifically deals with the possessions of the deceased, remembrance, and their meaning. In her book, *Objects of the Dead Mourning and Memory in Everyday Life*, Margaret Gibson (2008) writes:

The right to dispose of our own property is taken for granted and rarely questioned. Getting rid of other people's possessions, however, is another matter: few people would feel that they have the right to discard the property of living people without consent, and the right to rid ourselves of the property of the dead throws up moral dilemmas; for example, whose

self, identity and household have priority – is it the deceased self, now subject to material erasure, or the self of the person dealing with the deceased’s property? (p. 14-15)

Gibson goes on to mention that, “since it is generally only a small portion of objects that truly hold special value, the living can dispose of most property without feeling that they have privileged their own interests, values, and even tastes above those of the deceased” (p. 15). But these documents were not just objects and by no means represented a “small portion” of items. Moreover, if the disposal of the property of the dead throws up moral dilemmas, becoming the assessor of the documents of the deceased; their worth and disposal presents a particularly unique moral dilemma. Transcending any definition of mere property, they were something more aeonic or esoteric, not simply material possessions that remind us of Dr. Mills’ life, but rather Dr. Mills’ life itself.

Writing earlier in the journal *Mortality*, Gibson (2004) specifically focuses on what she terms as melancholy objects, “objects that have been central to grieving, and particularly, the memory of grieving” (p. 286). She argues:

Against a background of literary accounts, there is notable absence of qualitative, sociological research into grief and material culture. While there is sociological/cultural/historical research on objects in relation to death, memory and mourning, a more intimate history of grief objects through interview research (rather than memoir and individual narratives) is missing. This is partly because research into objects and material culture has, to date, largely focused on the areas of consumption, commodity culture, and theories and practices of gift-giving and exchange relations. (p. 286)

Gibson’s study consists of a series of interviews related to grieving and death which addresses specific attributes to objects and how they are perceived among families. In particular, these objects are divided into categories that identify their importance based on how they functioned in, not only the deceased’s life, but also how family interpreted them as valuable to their own personal experience and life. The list of items expands the spectrum of imaginable things used for day to day living along with objects that represent distinct characteristics of the deceased including hobbies or things they surrounded themselves with (p. 286-287). However, absent in this list are scholarly and creative works, and while there is a mention of diaries and letters in Gibson’s article, there seems to be little to no literature that explores the documents of the deceased, the words that matter, these documents as melancholy objects.

There is also a growing amount of scholarship that discusses consumer identity with objects and the possessions of the deceased. Interestingly, many of these studies appear in journals such as *Consumer Research*, *Material Culture*, and *Business Research*, in which some may conclude an inference of monetary value associated with these items outside of the sentimental value. They also discuss the division of property and changes in consumption related to the loss of a loved one, both of which allude to pecuniary issues related to practicality and practice. And while to some extent, the documents of Dr. Mills are physically material, and also function as melancholy objects, the words that they contain uniquely make them transcend into something categorically distinctive. Almost as if they are and should be a continuation of life.

Turley and O'Donohoe (2012) in their recent article, *The Sadness of Lives and the Comfort of Things: Goods as Evocative Objects in Bereavement* investigates the expressive dimension of individuals during grief. In doing so, the authors attempt to recreate the layers of attachment to particular objects by the bereaved family members. The meaning behind these objects and the tone that is created by the family through the process becomes crucial in building the objects' symbolic worth (p. 1331-1333).

So, if things matter, and some things matter a lot, they are likely to do so at particular times in a consumer's life. Bereavement suggests itself as one such time. Things loom large in the lives of survivors, and the loss they feel, and the things that matter go beyond houses and heirlooms. Some things were personal, others were shared. Some carry a past, others point to a painful present or a future that is now no more. The clothes from the hospital are in a suitcase on the floor. Mail for the dead still comes through the letterbox. Their book lies open on the bedside locker. The yogurt nobody else likes sits in the fridge. Their new shoes for the wedding they will never attend are still in the box. The two-seater sofa has only one occupant. Individually and collectively, these become 'evocative objects', 'companions to our emotional lives', and 'provocations to thought' (Turkle, 2007, p. 5), and do so with a passion and intensity they never had before, precisely because somebody has died. (p. 1332)

Turley and O'Donohoe also identify two divergent paths in their examination and review of how "death, dying, and bereavement, intersect with the world of consumption," (p. 1332) one which focuses "on the role of goods in preserving the memory of the departed loved one" (p. 1333) and another on "how goods can be active partners with bereaved people as they embark on a sense-making and identity maintenance enterprise" (p. 1333). Where these two courses intersect is

where the documents of Dr. Mills seem to exist, physical documents, material objects, that represent the memory of him, and the words in them that intimately detail his identity, and inevitably ours as a family.

Lim and Fitchett (2011) address the logistical dilemma of how to respond to the wishes of the deceased concerning their objects and possessions. In doing so, they emphasize the emotional conundrum experienced by the bereaved as to how to handle possessions (presumably of value) to the deceased simply by virtue of their existence.

How do we treat the objects of someone who has died? When someone dies, they leave their goods and material possessions behind them, and it then falls to others to assume responsibility for disposal or redeployment. And it is usually those material possessions that the deceased actively resisted inevitable disposal and decay while alive which retain the most significance and symbolic value for the living. (p. 611)

Dr. Mills' documents exposed a side of personal dedication that he had to his students, that revealed his commitment to friends, critiquing their poetic ideas, offering advice, condolences, and philosophical refutes through a life of letters. These were documents that illustrated every aspect of his creative process, how he reworked ideas and academically refined arguments. In reading them we discovered documents that filled in the gray spaces between his relationships with colleagues and friends while others uncovered a multitude of facets, which were all part of him and all things that we never knew.

The Documents

The documents were diverse in scope and type. There were letters to chairs, deans, and colleagues, complaints and quarrels, official memos, documents on promotion and tenure. Lecture notes and Xeroxed chapters with analysis in their margins. Graded work from students. Teacher evaluations along with thank you letters were filed away. Literally a physical, almost day to day paper trail of over 30 years in academe was maintained by Dr. Mills.

Kent State University was a large part of Dr. Mills' life and not just his academic life. May 4th, 1970 was a historical moment, nationally, locally, and personally for Dr. Mills, who always walked to and from work every day and that day was no different. He crossed the campus ten minutes prior to the shootings on his way home and upon hearing the news immediately walked to Central Elementary where his children were being held in lockdown. That day he continued to provide

walking “convoys” for all of the neighborhood children, making sure that they returned home safely. His dedication continued as he served on a committee to uncover the events and formulate findings related to the tragedy and he compiled a sizable collection of local, community, and university documents, including university reports related to the event. We learned in the correspondences he kept from friends and colleagues that he remained frustrated with the process throughout his career. Dr. Mills wrote several poems about May 4th, one of which was published on the front of the Kent Stater on the first anniversary in 1971 *In Memoriam* (1971) and two others entitled *5 4 70* (1970) and *Mr. Nixon Announces Peace* (1978). An additional piece was also published entitled *To Michael Loitz, d, Vietnam, 1968* (1974) about a close family friend’s loss of a son in the Vietnam War. May 4th and the events surrounding that day were deeply personal to Dr. Mills and he continued throughout his life to collect and archive information about it.

In Dr. Mills’ study, we also discovered a plethora of his written works. Some of them published though unknown to us, some unpublished, collected, unfinished poems, prose, notes, papers, and antiquated floppy disks that presumably contained even more of his work. We discovered a poetic version of original translated Creole poems that he had been working on, but had put aside presumably to finish later. There were also handwritten and typed notes on every size and sheet of paper imaginable, organized and cataloged works for future collections, short stories that were written early in his career that he had just begun to revise, and letters written to family members that were never sent. There were filing cabinets overflowing with documents, some carefully filed into folders with multiple revisions behind, others completely disorganized. Among stacks of newspaper clippings and publisher acceptance and rejection letters were early 20th century pictures and correspondences written to his grandfather (a charged and held confederate soldier in need of money) post marked 1868 from Gibraltar, Spain. As we tried to discern how to work through all of these documents, pieces of Dr. Mills’ life began to fill in around what we already knew. There were also boxes that contained correspondences from friends, former students now teaching at other universities, and printed emails from an earlier decade and even within nine months of his death carefully stored.

These documents were distinctly mementos to him, pictures drawn by his granddaughter with poems written about her put deliberately in place where he could always associate the two. Overwhelmingly the questions began. What was the next step? How can we possibly sort through and decide what documents were important and to whom? In bags and boxes we simply took them all not knowing what they contained and afraid of discarding any words that mattered.

Conclusion

In the eight months since his passing we have continued to work through many of these documents, discovering letters from a dear friend that he had saved each week since the 1940's. They have provided a partial picture of Dr. Mills' life, but more importantly spoke to his sincere dedication and care to those he felt closest to. Using one of the most recent addresses in Japan, my wife blindly attempted to contact Dr. Mills' friend to inform him of his death. Successful, she has since corresponded with him several times; a continuation of her father's friendship manifested through her efforts. Through this correspondence we were able to receive more documents and pictures that were not included in the collection we had already been sorting.

The documents also contained contact information for many of his former students who he had stayed in touch with over the years, sending him updates on their lives, career advancements, and the poems and prose they had written. Using these documents in the days before his death, we sent letters to many of his former students knowing that Dr. Mills' devotion and dedication to his students was a priority to him. This was done in hopes of gathering messages, thoughts, and experiences to share with him that emphasized his positive contribution to literature, creativity, and mentoring through his teaching. Their responses were overwhelming and we were able to share these words with him in his final lucid moments. One student wrote, "His books are on my bookcase. His poems and pictures are on my walls at home. He is in my mind every day, as I write and otherwise." Another wrote "I am glad I had the chance to tell him in person that his teaching had been a positive influence in my life and that I appreciate and enjoy his poetry. He seemed surprised that I had kept all the poems, but I like them. I couldn't ever get rid of that work!" It was where we first learned the phrase (albeit his philosophical principle) "words matter" from one of his former students when she responded to our message "The most important lesson that he taught me was that words matter. While writing has been a focus in my job, 'the words matter' lesson is one that carried through my personal life too."

As we have continued to carefully sort through and organize these documents, it has become evident that this undertaking is more about how we define the importance of these documents. Their importance to Dr. Mills and their importance to our lives and identity, because these documents are not inanimate objects, possessions that evoke a sentimental response, they are a vibrant telling of Dr. Mills' words and thoughts detailing the process and history of his mind and life. We have come to learn that out of all of Dr. Mills' possessions, the objects that allow us to remember and memorialize his existence are different and what is in his writing transcends those physical objects and we have found that these

documents are what matter the most to us. And while these documents have served as melancholy objects, they also in many unique ways have offered us a continuation of his life through their contents. While this paper serves as a cathartic account of the documents left behind after the death of Dr. Mills, it also raises several questions about how will other families or even colleagues respond (if they have not already) when faced with the physical documents from this generation of scholars? These are the documents of the departed. How will the critical choices to keep, preserve, and discard be made and by whom? Will the names and contacts be pursued? Will unfinished ideas be completed? Will their contents be published? These decisions, surrounded by discussions of importance and ownership, will also invite questions of practicality, storage, archiving, and even digitalization. “Death vacates as well as raises the meaning and value of objects” (Gibson, 2004, p. 296). Those who will in their life be faced with a similar undertaking will do well to remember that words matter.

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