

The 'main basic' thing my son's collections have taught me

by Ashley Lefrak

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My son collects rocks. He says he loves that there are always new ones to find. He is not especially into geology. He's into beauty.

He keeps a few in a box, but the vast majority are on display. His room is crammed with things he loves. There is a little plastic wolf family, pictures of Abe Lincoln, smooth boxes filled with assortments of shells, a tiny vase with tall feathers. There was, for many weeks, a perfectly circular patch of moss, poised atop a small puddle of water, pooled in the center of a dinner plate.

My impulse, when I go in his room, is to organize, clear, dust, dispose of wet moss. "There is so much stuff in here," I say, my tone revealing less than total admiration. He also has a bunch of glass bottles that he keeps because he loves "the shape, and the feel, and the look of them." It's an uncomfortably large quantity of glass in the already crowded room of an 8-year-old boy.

I resist my cleaning impulse, beyond the most minimal, beyond basic safety. I resist because I see in his collecting an impulse that's larger than mine, an impulse toward love, toward affection for the world, toward noticing what's remarkable all around.

“What’s this?” I’ve asked, picking up some nondescript stone. “Oh, you should feel that,” he says, and I do, and I get why he has kept it.

“What’s this?” And he turns away for a moment so he can put on the slightly broken but hilariously large sunglasses he has found in a field. “Check it out,” he says, wheeling around with a grin.

My son returns the generosity of a world that gives him random treasures with a generosity of his own. When my mother is preparing to leave after a visit, he comes flying down the stairs to give her a favorite flat rock, an almost perfect oval. Over the holidays, he surprised us all with gifts he’d found or made: a rainbow pen wrapped in a blue washcloth, sealed with Scotch tape for his little brother; his older brother’s gray underwear, confiscated, and given colorful improvement with his fabric markers; a cracked geode for me, in a velvet bag he had saved from who-knows-where. The same, but different, for his dad.

When his brothers opened their presents, he jumped up and down, tapping his knees in midair, like a magical creature from some woodland tale, so filled with joy to see them laugh at the fabulous underwear or light up at the sight of the pen. He had prepared all these gifts in secret, which befits his elfin ways.

A few days ago, we came across a Jan Steen painting in a book, and seeing that it was based on an Aesop’s fable, we decided to read that too. Because the fables have morals written at the bottom, I asked, “Do you think this painting also has a moral?”

“What’s a moral again?” he asked. “Moral” is a word we don’t use too often. But before I could answer, he answered himself with a phrase he invented, one of my favorites, “Oh yeah, you mean the main basic?”

The “main basic” is, for him, what others call the “point,” as in the “main basic” of this board game is to collect the most resources, or money, or whatever. He doesn’t think the painting has a main basic. Or, he thinks that, if it must, the way the fire is painted, so gold-orange and bright, or the way the rectangular stones on the ground are “similar but different” is the main basic.

I’m not sure what the main basic of the painting is, or the main basic of anything, really. In my life, it has changed over time — my understanding of the point of it all. To be a good daughter, to survive the rigors of schooling, to be a good friend, to find my way, to be a decent wife and mother, to become a better observer, listener, writer. Now 43 years in, I feel less sure than ever about the main basic of this time we have on the planet. I feel more disconnected from community than I’d like to be, less connected to the land, more distant from family and friends. I feel, in turning toward my immediate family, that I gain something essential but lose connections to the wider world.

I don't think 8-year-olds can teach 43-year-olds how to live in some one-to-one type of way; my life feels more complicated by history and responsibilities. But I put my son's rock collection, an approved assortment, on my shelf, and it helps remind me of at least one main basic I want to abide by, which is to be open-eyed. And another, which is to give freely. And another, which is that seeing treasures all around is a kind of love. And also, a room can only hold so many things.

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