

My Brain

Not everyone has a human brain preserved in formaldehyde on a shelf at home. I acquired it from a friend who worked at Mass General. He inherited an office with a number of brains, all well-preserved in formaldehyde, unlabeled, and neglected. My newly acquired brain was helpful in teaching neuroanatomy to college students. It was also helpful in the talk to my daughter's elementary school class on the importance of wearing a bike helmet. Because her mother was the invited speaker, Sarah was given the charge of introducing me. How does a 7-year old introduce her mother? This is my mother and she has her brain. It made sense—none of the children saw this as odd.

It wasn't unusual in those years to have a brain for demonstration and/or teaching. In my early training at the Neurological Hospital in London, I attended the Clinical Pathological Conference every Wednesday wherein a pathologist would dissect a brain, discussing its numerous lobes and fissures and their intricate connections via multi-complex pathways. This conference just happened to coincide with the time of high tea, at 3:30 in the afternoon. As the pathologist sliced and discussed, the department secretary poured tea and passed around biscuits.

I stopped teaching after some years, engaging full-time in a clinical neuropsychological practice, evaluating nature and extent of cognitive/memory/neurobehavioral changes to other people's brains. My brain, sitting in formaldehyde, remained neglected.

Now, at the end of my career, and in the process of getting things out of my house, I have refocused on my brain, wondering what to do with it. What has surfaced is a deep contemplation of the emotional significance of the brain of someone's loved one residing on my shelf, and my ethical responsibility towards it. The image of someone dumping my mother's brain into the trash for Tuesday morning pickup is unfathomable to me. Or, dumping my own neural powerhouse and thinktank generator without a concern. Having neglected my brain for years does not excuse inadequate attention to it or improper disposal of it at this stage of my life.

I might offer it to science or to a teacher of neuroanatomy. However, the computer and vivid three-dimensional images have largely replaced the use of real brains. I could list it on Facebook Marketplace or Craigslist, but that doesn't seem appropriate. An option would be to bury it, with proper ritual of thoughtfulness and tenderness, similar to what we extended to our Teddy Bear hamster, Greedy our rabbit, and Dawson, our Cairn Terrier.

I would bury it in the same part of the yard, a section unlikely to get built-upon or disturbed, and where the wood chucks have never dug. If I do nothing, and my house is left to my children, they will inherit the formidable task of deciding how to dispose of their mother's brain. I appreciated the small amount of money and objects inherited from my parents—my children may not be so pleased inheriting their mother's brain, more accurately a stranger's brain, with its ethical and moral ramifications.

I am aware that whatever choice made in the disposal of my brain may elicit negative reaction, describing me perhaps as brainless, which ironically at that point may be apt.