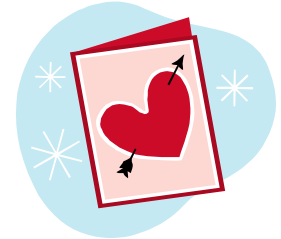




ODE TO THE SHOEBOX

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I came across the perfect shoebox yesterday. It was just the right size...not too big, and not too small. The sides weren't caved in from having a pair of too-big shoes crammed into its depths, and it still had a good top on it. It was the perfect box! I could wrap it with red and white crepe paper and add a pretty bow, and everyone would know whose box it was. And there would be lots of Valentines to go in that box...so many it might even overflow. I hugged that box when I found it yesterday.



It was perfect. Too bad I found it now--35 years too late! Ah well, that sometimes seems to be the story of my life--too late or too early or too small or too big or too something--right now, too empty.

There are lots of uses for shoeboxes. I used to be so organized that I actually put shoes in them; but now they hold odd assortments of photos, trinkets, old sales receipts, canceled checks and a million of the "To Do" lists that I made every January. Shoeboxes are like little time capsules, each one holding treasures (or trash) from the past, buried beneath the long dresses in the back of the closet or stored on those shelves that no one can reach, or jumbled into dark, secret places in the basement. There are lots of memories stashed away in shoeboxes.

Shoeboxes and Valentines are symbols of February. February seems sort of stuck in the calendar--a break from the post-holiday gloom and a rehearsal for the rites of spring (when we get new shoeboxes with new shoes in them).

No one buys shoeboxes...they just grow (like hangers do) in the dark. They are there whenever you need them, bringing comfort and security and a peace of mind that we will always have enough room to store the world as long as we have shoeboxes.

Shoeboxes are also the repository of those little dark brown fluted papers that spelled "GUILTY" whenever someone found them in the kitchen garbage. So, like all clever (and chocolate-loving) snitchers, we stored the incriminating evidence of our midnight raids on the box of Valentine chocolates in a shoebox, well hidden in the back of the closet. Usually, I could remember to empty the box by summer, but occasionally, I would find a stash of little candy papers sometime in October or November.

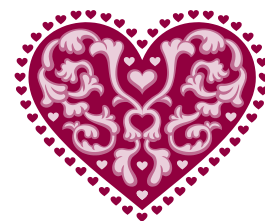




Ah, I loved my shoebox. I dreamed of bringing home a box overflowing with cards, ribbons, chocolates and those little Sweetheart Message candies--the ones that said, "I LUV U," or "SWEETIE PIE," or "CUTIE." I spent all of the end of January anticipating Valentine's Day and looking for just the right shoebox and picking out just the right boy.

Valentines haven't changed much over the years. The pictures and cartoon characters are different, and the envelope size now must meet postage regulations, but the messages are the same. Actually, shoeboxes haven't changed that much either--and I'm kind of glad. Everything else in my world has changed since then...since the days when dreams were free and the world seemed to be just waiting for me and my shoebox. So, I'm glad Valentines and shoeboxes are still around. I've perfected my chocolate-poking technique now, and I don't have to hide the fluted wrappers anymore.

I'm glad LOVE hasn't gone out of fashion. It still comes wrapped in bright pink foil and has icky tasting envelopes; and if I'm missing the sender of my special Valentine this year, I've still got my shoebox of memories and a couple of old candy wrappers to remind me of the love that sent my heart zinging!...



"Once upon a time," isn't really so long ago, and "forever," seems more manageable now, too. So I wish you Happy Hearts Day. You wouldn't be reading this if you had not loved someone at some time. The Day and the shoebox are still yours, so fill it with memories (and a chocolate or two), but don't stash it away this time. Celebrate the love that never goes away!

