

Piece of My Heart

For Cherie Gilmour, completing jigsaw puzzles is about more than finding a little piece of mind.

I was always puzzled as to why so many people were into puzzles. Op shops usually have a vertiginous tower of them in the games section, gathering dust. To me, they were like crosswords or watching Test cricket. I would happily do them in my twilight years to keep the grey matter ticking over but, right now, I am very busy and important.

The appeal of puzzles came together for me when I realised two things. One: I am appallingly bad at mindfulness. Two: I needed to do something about it, even if I think the word “mindfulness” was developed by a team of PR consultants trying to sell more essential oils.

A nice puzzle popped up on Facebook Marketplace. It's the kind you see in high-end gift shops, with a vintage poster of various cacti. Suddenly, I'm on my way to pick it up. The woman who answers the door seems normal. I can see her family sitting in the lounge room behind her, also relatively normal. On the coffee table is a puzzle she's in the process of completing, with a stack of others nearby. “You'll love this one. It's great,” she says, her eyes glittering with what I imagine to be the nourishing effects of mindful puzzling. I take the box and hand her the cash, feeling proud to be taking steps for #selfcare.

At home, I set myself up at the table and open the box. A mountain of puzzle pieces tumble out – 1000 to be precise – and I realise that approximately 99 per cent of them are varying shades of green. Rather than finding my mind, I might lose it.

I start sorting *this* green from *that* green. I become an expert on all the greens of the colour spectrum. *This one's more celadon than lime... Now, let's group these pistachio shades next to the asparagus, just in case they're the same...* Several times, I'm struck by how utterly pointless this exercise is. Someone broke a beautiful picture into all these small parts so I could spend hours agonising over it.

My two-year-old is the other antagonist in my puzzling (the first being the colour green). He's in cahoots with Gary, the budgie. Between them, they start a game of “fling as many puzzles pieces off the table as you can before she notices”. Sometimes Gary raises the stakes by flying off with a piece.

Becoming a parent involves so much attention to detail – whether you're debating with a small person about the colour of their knickers, or spending 15 minutes assuring them that, should they eat their broccoli, a small tree won't grow in their tummy. It's the relentless monotony of hurling dirty T-shirts into the washing basket and tracking the Tiny Teddy stockpile so World War III doesn't break out.

While picking up all these daily details, I sometimes wonder whether I'll get time to pick up the pieces of my former self – the person who wouldn't argue with a toddler about what constitutes “soon”. She who can laugh things off without ending the day in a frazzled mess of fried nerves.

I give up on the puzzle. It sits on the table, taunting me with its incompleteness. I wouldn't even care if Gary flew off with the whole thing. Then my parents come to stay for a week, and their interest in the puzzle renews mine. Every morning, in dressing gowns, clutching tea, we sift through the pieces until we find their homes. As we build up parts of the picture, placing each new piece becomes easier. Eventually I lay the final piece, and the picture is complete. I'm overwhelmed with joy and relief. I made it (though not without a bit of help). All these seemingly random shades of green *belonged* somewhere.

When you really start to look, every piece is uniquely beautiful. They have their own texture; some are completely covered in colour and some are almost entirely blank, except for a tiny sliver of something. They might all seem the same when you first dump them out of the box, but once you start looking – *really* looking – it's surprising how you can tell them apart.

Puzzles remind me that all these little pieces eventually make a whole; that the never-ending days of pairing socks and scrubbing bowls of dried Weet-Bix are only a tiny part of a bigger picture, in which my children will one day grow up and leave home. Piece by piece, I'm helping them build their story until they can one day do it on their own. After that, I'll have more time for puzzles than I might want or need. I might even stand back, look at them, and think, *I've made it.* ■

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