

The Heaviness of Paper

Category: Paperwork

written by Andrea Sinclair | January 2, 2018

There's an old binder still sitting on the bottom shelf of one of my bookcases. The cheerful primary colors of the label stand out amidst the other books, especially because it takes up nearly twice the width of the next largest spine. It proclaims itself to be the "New Family Handbook" from the local NICU, and it has been sitting on that shelf for nearly six years now. That binder became the dumping ground for all the paper associated with my son's premature birth, his month-long hospital stay, the small hernia he needed surgically repaired.

Inside there are also all sorts of forms and policies. Ground rules for how we will behave in hospital spaces, and how we can expect to be treated. Resources ranging from lists of nearby food to setting up a family phone tree are provided on pages of various copied quality. The decryption key for the beads given to each tiny patient as they progress on their individual journey. It is an unflinching orientation for the job you never knew you were going to have as a new parent. The pockets on the front and back overflow with invoices and insurance statements; those bills added up to more money than we spent on the house where we brought him home. Pumping logs and sticky notes from the lactation consultant praising me for "power pumping" map the quest I undertook to feed my baby. Each of those pages represent so much work: from hospital staff; from an insurance case manager; from us; from him.

That binder is a testament to the amount of emotion paper can carry; the memories imprinted on the "not NOW" of disorganized and cluttered filing. Occasionally I have taken it off the shelf, opened it up, wondered what should be saved and what recycled. There are ghosts in that binder I could happily banish from our home. But the weight of facing those decisions is more than I can stand. They far outweigh the pounds of paper inside. So the binder goes back onto the shelf: a piece of our history, an unintentional baby book, documenting so much more than tiny footprints on an optimistic card.

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