

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

Whether downsizing, becoming an empty nester or simply deciding it's time to declutter and enjoy some new-found space, parting with possessions – while potentially emotionally painful – can feel amazingly cleansing. But what if after having saved all those wonderful things for your children all those years, they don't want them? How do you then feel?

For years I held onto a piece of china my mother-in-law re-gifted to me when they decluttered their home in anticipation of a move. I never liked it, and finally, very gently, asked if she'd mind if I passed it on. Her "Sweetheart, get rid of anything you don't want, you won't offend me" response was incredibly liberating. After all, why should people keep something they don't like, use or feel good about?

While recognizing that loving the giver and the gift are not the same, loving someone often has us holding onto possessions so as not to offend them. Letting go of something does not mean you've relinquished a connection to either the person or the memories attached to the object. In other words, one does not need to hold on to an object in order to appreciate the wonderful (or painful) memories it elicits. For someone emotionally attached to their possessions, this is a challenging concept to internalize.

Some 24 years ago, my sister and I spent three long weeks cleaning out, donating to charity and taking to our homes, stacks of clothing and other things my dad desperately wanted out of the house the minute my mom's *shiva* ended, thinking it might help lessen his pain. I've since promised myself that I would not force my once-treasured possessions on my children or burden them with cleaning out "too many" hoarded items when I am no longer here. I've jokingly told them what three things they might want to save, and said the rest was up to them.

I could write a book on the pain that clients have dealt with in cleaning out their parents' possessions, fights that ensued between siblings over them, and more. Bereaved siblings can, however, work together. The best way you can help your children in this process is for you to focus on keeping only what gives you pleasure, thus freeing them up to make the right choices so that they too only keep what is meaningful to them.

Remember, what once gave you pleasure may eventually weigh you down and certainly may inadvertently weigh down your children.

As some aging baby boomers make plans to move to smaller premises or simply get tired of living in cramped quarters with too many possessions, many look to their millennial children to see what they would like and then feel offended when they don't have the same excitement for the family heirlooms – their first drawing or the mahogany furniture – as they do. If the timing is right and they happen to be starting out, are recently married, or love and must have

Getting rid of the clutter in your life



the possessions that they treasured so dearly from their own childhood, it's wonderful. But for many, the children have already established their own homes and let's face it, their style and taste in furniture, and everything else, likely differs from yours. They're probably more minimalist and practical, and have a smaller living space. They neither want your stuff, nor should they have to take it!

Decluttering involves getting rid of possessions that you no longer use or love and in essence can be a metaphor for simplifying your life. For those not sentimentally attached to "things," letting go is easy, feels great,

and enables clearing your mind as well as creating space for the future. For those who cherish their possessions, however, each has a story or a memory, and connects them to the past. Discarding can be slow and painful, resulting in guilt, anxiety and real sadness, as perceived losses are mourned.

So what can you do? Start first by getting rid of your own possessions that no longer add to your life or give you pleasure. Start with your bathroom, as that's typically easier and less emotionally laden. Ask what would you really want to keep in your newly decluttered abode or take with you to your new surroundings, rather than what are you ready to part with. Ultimately you'll need to find a place, space and permanent home for each object or piece of furniture and unless you really want it, you'll go through this process again later upon discovering you're still surrounded by too much clutter. Donate your discarded things to charity and imagine others getting pleasure. Remind yourself again that it is not the stuff but the stories – the memories not the objects themselves – that are important. If you aren't enjoying it, it's just stuff or clutter.

In selecting for each child what you'd like to offer them, choose what's good and worth passing on, rather than what's really junk that you may have been having a hard time discarding. Then let them decide whether to keep or get rid of it. They love you, not your possessions, so don't take their decisions personally. Your goal is to keep only what you love and has meaning. Your children may not consider the same things to be as precious or special as you do, they may not like them and they certainly may not want them. If you feel they must keep something, ask yourself why? Is there is a past history to the gift, was it expensive, or is another reason making it hard to part with it?

Finally, if your children don't want it and you don't need it, make a plan as to how to let it go. You want to live in the present and not the past. In today's world where smart phones predominate, this millennial generation takes a photo, captures it on Instagram or Facebook, and keeps their life organized in neat computer files instead of through cardboard boxes. They streamline and prefer clean simplicity to clutter and disorganization. At best they may be digital hoarders.

Finally, if your children or grandkids are still young, display their artwork, photograph their mementos, discard the originals and create a digital memory or scrapbook, storing information on the cloud for later enjoyment.

So, in evaluating your new living situation, visualize what your space looks like, and surround yourself with only those things and people that bring you happiness. By doing this, you enjoy your new freedom and do your children a huge favor in the process. ■

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