



## The Sorting Through

How to deal with the things that have been left behind

By Thom Dennis, LCPC

I love to watch reruns of *Antiques Roadshow*. If you have never seen it, you may want to consider tuning in. Viewers watch as antique appraisers travel across the country and spend the day evaluating the trash and treasures that people bring to them. Admittedly, this program does not offer much in the way of gut-busting comedy or high drama, but it does offer one thing; the possibility that you could be rich and do not even know it.

On the show, it is a regular occurrence for someone to find out that the old lamp they found in their grandma's attic was made by Tiffany & Co. or the appraiser reports that, "On a good day at auction, your father's baseball card collection could possibly pay for your children's college education."

Learning about the history of things is interesting to me, but my favorite part of the program is watching the person's reaction when the appraiser reveals how much their family heirlooms are worth. Usually the monetary value far exceeds anyone's wildest expectation; but surprisingly, few people express any interest in selling the item! They invariably respond, "That's nice to know, but I would not dream of selling it!"

When I watch this program I become shockingly unsentimental. I say to myself, "Boy if that were me, I'd only slow down long enough to cash the check on the way to the French Riviera." However, I imagine that were I to inherit something from a person I truly loved and respected, I would treasure that thing more than silver or gold.

As a grief counselor, when I listen to family members left with the task of sorting through a loved one's possessions, I am reminded that the emotional value of a thing usually far exceeds its monetary value. Except for ratty old underwear and socks, most people have a hard time disposing of inexpensive personal items; his razor and toothbrush, her eye glasses or the hairbrush she used every night before she went to bed. These and other small inanimate objects vibrate with an energy that can move our emotions in ways that are mysterious and tectonic.

Counselors call these things, *linking objects*, because they instantly connect us to someone who is no longer present. They come in all shapes and sizes, they can also engage one of our other senses such as his favorite song or the smell of her perfume.

Sometimes I hear of well intentioned friends and family members who rush in soon after a death and quickly dispose of someone's personal effects, "No one is gonna want this ratty old sweater, right?" I also hear of deeply grieved individuals directing their helpers to, "Get rid of it all!" The pain of seeing something that belonged to the deceased seems to only deepen the wounds of the heart. When I can, I plant a red flag and caution these folks to consider slowing down. Decisions made in haste can seldom be corrected.

Admittedly, everyone grieves differently and some people need to be active, they need to **DO SOMETHING**, and being assigned the task of sorting through often helps them cope with their grief. However, when I can, I always encourage individuals and families to take all the time they need to dispose of a loved one's belongings. Ideally there should be no timeframe. In my experience, most people do not even feel up to the task for at least a year. They

may quickly dispose of medications and things associated with illness or declining health; after all, who wants to be reminded of sickness and disease? Durable medical equipment, such as walkers and wheelchairs, are always needed by your local senior center and most people are glad to know someone else will benefit from their use. When it comes to everything else, it is best to follow a few simple guidelines:

### 1. Get help.

This is going to take some work. Extra hands, a strong back, are always helpful in situations like these. More importantly, it is essential to engage the help of someone who is willing to listen to your stories, allows you to set the pace and is capable of being present to your tears.

### 2. Use a fork, not a pitch fork.

Have you ever heard the old saying: (Q) "How do you eat an elephant? (A) One bite at a time." Divide things up into manageable pieces. It is going to take some time to sort through a lifetime of accumulated stuff. Remember that this is physical *and* emotional work. Do what you can and then take a break. Deep breathing and drinking small sips of cool water are simple yet effective tools to calm yourself.

### 3 Make three piles.

- The keep pile,
- The give away pile,  
(to charity, to friends, or to family members) and
- The I'll decide about this later pile.

This last pile may end up in a box in the basement or garage. Sometimes it is just hard to let go of some things. Give yourself time, life is a journey, when you are ready you will know it. Like the early pioneers, at some point you will realize that you have to leave things by the side of the wagon in order to lighten the load.

### Side note:

Adult children, please do not be alarmed. The idea that your parent must "let go," in order to successfully "move on," is outdated and misguided advice. If having a few old suits or dresses in their closet brings your grieving parent some degree of comfort, let them keep it. Bereaved parents, remember that your kids are going to have to deal with all this stuff when you are gone. S e e

what you can do to help your children and grandchildren with the task that you are now facing by lightening their load. If after an extended period of time you realize that nothing has moved or changed and the house has become a shrine to the deceased, seek out the help of a professional grief counselor. They are going to be able to help you find ways to stay connected as well as reengage with life.

### 4. Caution: this is hazardous work.

Let's face it, more than one family has been broken by this experience. This may be caused by a number of factors: Different family members grieve in different ways. Each person in the family had a different relationship with the deceased. Different temperaments mean some will be less sentimental about certain items. In this economy it is possible that someone in the family really needs their inheritance sooner than others. Finally, let's be honest, sometimes GREED does factor in. What is required is patience, sensitivity to other's feelings and a willingness to enter into dialogue. When all else fails, engage the services of an arbitrator. Keep this question in mind: Is that old clock really worth not talking to your sister for the next 30 years?

Sorting through can be draining and time consuming work, but for those who are willing to do it, there are treasures to be found. The lamp in your grandma's attic may not have been made by Tiffany and the baseball card collection may not be as valuable as once thought, but every item has a story that may reveal a part of their story that you never knew. What I am suggesting is that before you throw out that pile of old newspaper clippings, take the time to read them and wonder what possessed her to keep them. Before you shred them, really take a look at those old check stubs to learn about what kinds of things he valued. Your perseverance will be rewarded when you come across a drawer full of children's drawings and twenty years worth of Mother's Day cards. More importantly, sorting through all the stuff slowly, methodically, intentionally allows you to sort through your relationship. It allows you to examine the emotional baggage you carry and provides you with a way to decide what you want to get rid of and what you want to keep.