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Your Legacy is Probably not a Box of Stuff

By Nan Zastrow

Grandma had a knack of making me feel uncomfortable. Perhaps her skill came from growing up with a bunch of brothers who picked on her, and she was forever looking for a way to get even. Many of the stories repeated about Grandma tell about her unique way of saying or doing something that would leave me speechless in public or cause me to shake my head in total dismay. She could lead me into a conversation, like a politician, and I would find myself defending my point of view with no satisfactory resolution. She exhilarated in taking normal conversation to the brink of frustration, irritation and bewilderment. It was the “gotcha” reaction in the end that always made me wonder how I had gotten to that point.

To her, it seemed like a game, and it didn’t come about with her advancing age; it was a gift she had for the forty-some years that I knew her. In her eyes, I would see the twinkle following the evolution of the situation that tickled her pink. So it wasn’t without expectation that one of the things we would remember most about her were the stories that became the legacy of who she was and how she skillfully maneuvered us into her plan.

One such situation followed about three months after her death. We received one of her bills in the mail that amounted to \$12, but the interest charged was 64 cents. Minor, right? I paid the bill and asked the biller to waive the interest since she had died and the bill was not forwarded to our address. Next month the bill came again...for 64 cents plus more interest and a boldly marked statement that additional interest would be added until it was paid.

This really irritated me. I wanted to take 64 pennies, tape them to a piece of paper, and purposefully deliver them to the billing office. I quickly recognized my over-reaction and realized I was acting just the way Grandma would have wanted me to react to this situation. She would have loved to see me squirm as though saying, “gotcha!” This was just another story to add to Grandma’s treasured legacy!

Some people leave the world with meager personal possessions or worth, but they leave something much richer. They leave stories and memories about themselves that we will repeat long after the boxes of personal belongings are distributed.

Closing-up grandma’s home after her recent death made me think about the process of leaving our “precious belongings” to someone else. “Worth” and “Value” are very fluid words that can only be determined by the receiver. Legacies aren’t always about personal wealth or fame. Legacies aren’t found in the boxes of items left by the deceased. True legacies prove to be much more intimate and revealing. They speak to who this person was and what was important to him or her.

Among the dozens of boxes of items we packed up and loaded away for redistribution, there was nothing I valued as much as Grandma did. The worn cookbooks held some interest as she was an excellent cook, and I truly wanted to find some of her secret recipes. Her “valuables” were costume jewelry, family pictures, five-and-dime knick knacks, and lots of paper stuff. Her personal home accessories or belongings weren’t items I could use. I was grateful for a few wonderful things she had gifted us with years before. As we packed, we reminded ourselves this wasn’t about us. All these boxes of things held treasured memories for her.

About the same time as all this was happening, we were updating our own wills. The attorney offered an addendum page for distribution of personal items. It read, “Describe in detail and list who should receive each item.” As I started to write down my wishes, I found it difficult to name a person who would appreciate any one of the things I felt was valuable to me. I wondered if Grandma had felt the same.

Did I want to leave a box of stuff as my material legacy or would I rather leave something even richer? How could I resolve this dilemma knowing the emotion of removing Grandma’s possessions? I concluded it isn’t about the boxes of stuff we’ve packed and moved a dozen times. It isn’t about family jewels, or antique items with precious markings. Scrapbooks and pictures will hold interest for a period of time, but this fantasy too will pass. All the boxes of “stuff” I leave behind will be a reflection of me and my time here on earth. I am incapable of deciding who would value it.

It is rare when a group of young people have real interest in family artifacts, genealogy or grandma’s trunk. Pictures, unless well documented, stare back with unfamiliar faces of ancestors long departed, and often without names. A gift of money would be more appreciated than boxes of “stuff.” Today, leaving a legacy of family heirlooms is a lost art. A generation or more ago when we were poorer and greedier for family treasures, it would have been an honor to receive boxes of personal things. We would pick and choose items

that held a memory for us and cherish them. Today, most of us are “spoiled” and interested only in the treasures we’ve accumulated on our own journey in life.

I felt determined to plan for a way to forego the futile task of deciding what box of stuff should go to who as part of the legacy I leave. Instead, I decided, I would selfishly leave that dilemma for some family member or designated person who reconciles my estate. I plan to let them give away, destroy, sort or sell all the un-meaningful items and spend hours doing it. I don’t plan to throw away anything that I might regret disposing of too soon, because, whether or not someone else finds happiness in the item, I enjoyed it for a time. And my plethora of items will tell everyone that I had much, much more than I ever needed. There are file cabinets loaded to maximum. There are boxes with time-honored memorabilia of happy days. Enough linens and dishes for two households, and enough clothes and shoes for a small tribe in Africa. Unless I live long enough to downsize again and again, I may still have all of it when the final curtain falls. The overwhelming task might bring a moment of disgust and frustration for some poor soul, but hopefully, a chuckle or two, also.

For a period of time, I expect there will be jokes and stories, like those about Grandma with all the stuff she had. I expect there will be some puzzled concerns about why someone would possibly keep this or that, because to the heir it’s a piece of junk. I can only hope they get sore muscles from lifting all the books and calluses from patching all the nail holes. I hope they grow bored downloading all my computer files and discarding out-of-date canned goods in the pantry. The legacy I plan to leave will be something for someone to talk about.

No matter how much I unstuff, redistribute or downsize, I’m never going to have a immaculate, compact, orderly residence that takes little decluttering at some point in my life or death. After all, that stuff is all about me. This stuff represents years of finding myself, primping myself, promoting myself and living up to such an image. Finally, it’s about trying to create one or two stories that describe me and that someone will remember. All this stuff, box or no box, is just a symbol of who I am and what was important to me at some point in time. The making and telling of the stories that come from all the boxes of stuff is worth a whole lot more than anything I could intentionally leave to someone.

Legacies are grander than “stuff.” They are timeless stories that bring a chuckle, a tear to the eye or a tinge of pride. They foster a forgotten memory. You might even hear the whisper of discreet voices from the people I love telling about all the things I did or didn’t do. And out of all the boxes will come the stories of who I really was. This is the legacy I plan to leave.

Lucille Zastrow died September 15, 2009. This article is a continuation about re-evaluating “life’s stuff.” Be sure to read *For Sale, Madness, Memories, or Maybes* in Volume 7, #3 *Grief Digest*, January 2010 or at my website: www.wingsgrief.org.