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# *Linking Objects*

## *When Can the Chain Be Broken?*

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Life moves forward after loss. I was warned about that early in my grief, and I accepted that it would happen whether I wanted it or not. But life has a way of teaching lessons that one cannot prepare for or write about with the same clarity. One of those recent lessons came to me as we were preparing to move to a new home.

I was pre-programmed to begin the process of downsizing, right-sizing, or whatever euphemism we choose now days, to justify getting rid of “stuff.” The rummage sale was over, and now I was getting serious about what remained hidden in the depths of never-never land and needed to be moved by the movers. I had come to the conclusion that every box must be scrutinized. That included a number of boxes labeled “CHAD” that contained linking objects (personal items belonging to the deceased that have an emotional attachment). I felt chained to the past and the memories of “things” mysteriously stored in an assortment of corrugated cardboard and plastic storage tubs.

Our son, Chad, died as a result of suicide over fifteen years ago, and through each successive move (about a half dozen since his death), I’ve kept his meager belongings and mementoes and moved them with us. Each time, I opened the lids, rummaged through the contents and closed the lids with everything still intact—just like before. I wasn’t ready. And the pain of thinking that I could part with something so personal wasn’t worth the small amount of space these boxes would take.

But this time, this move, I felt motivated and ready to let go. I reasoned that, “It’s been a long time, much too long.” Everything we’ve studied in our continued grief education suggested that it was okay to hang on to “linking objects” as long as they didn’t become an obsession and interfere with healing one’s grief. So I always felt justified in my natural hoarding.

A few years ago when I attempted this very thing, I opened an antique trunk of baby clothing and found Chad’s booties from his baptism. The tears engulfed me with regret and sadness far greater than I had imagined. I closed the trunk on the booties that would never be worn by a child of Chad’s. It wasn’t time yet. However, as I prepared to extricate myself from the boxes, I was able to wash the blankets and clothing, still in excellent condition, and package them for a missions drive. It actually felt good to be passing them on where someone could use them.

But I hung on to a few precious items. Again this time, I sorted through achievement patches and pins: Eagle Scout, Marksman—United States Army, and volunteer for a local Fire Department. These represented goals, interests and hard work doing things Chad had loved. A few went in his memory box.

Chad had bought those spiffed-up, black, dress combat boots just weeks before his death, and I hadn't had the heart to give those away before. They represented the military he loved, and they brought back so many cherished stories of boot camp and Chad's return to school after basic training in his junior year of high school. They represented the American pride that he had always so proudly displayed. He had mounted a five-foot flag on his pickup truck that streamed from the cargo box. And there was one of his graduation pictures in his military fatigues with boots almost as shiny as these. I wasn't going to wear them, and his foot was much bigger than his dad's, so we could pass those on to someone else.

Moving out of this house became challenging. It seemed to shout, "It's time to let go" of physical attachments and the emotional baggage that might come along with those items. I reminded myself about the many people in our support groups who found difficulty in doing exactly what I was trying to do. I always told them, "You will know when the time is right."

But, was this the right time for me? Would I forget him? If I parted with his "stuff," could I recall the image of his face, the beauty of his smile, the depths of trust and love in his eyes? By letting go of "stuff," would I be erasing the remaining physical attachments of his life and his once-physical presence in my home? By distributing some select items, would those who received the items (Chad's friends) treasure them as much as I had all these years? Would I have regrets weeks, months or years from now for not hanging on to every single item until I, too, was gone from this earth and nobody else cared about them?

Obviously, no one could make that decision for me, but I felt empowered to make up my mind. I prayed about it. I thought about it. I wasn't going to rush into anything. I tried shifting the decision process. I called Gary at work to tell him what I was doing, and I broke down in tears, because letting go of this stuff was such an emotional decision. Surprisingly, this gave me the permission, I somehow sensed I needed. It was as though Gary concurred that maybe this is the right time. And, he didn't tell me I was acting as though it was only a few months after Chad's death, instead of fifteen years!

But I still wasn't completely ready to give in. First, for the moment, I moved the items to a distant corner of the basement, just out of sight. Then I went to lunch, thinking a sandwich and a Coke would give me the courage to decide. I went back to the basement and ignored the items isolated in the corner. I went on to other boxes and made choices about getting rid of other stuff that wasn't linked to Chad. Finally, the day came to an end, and I decided I'd sleep on the decision before taking the final step.

The next morning, I was rejuvenated with my task and equally energetic about the decision I had made. I accepted that a few linking objects would suffice and keep me very much in touch with the person Chad had been. I didn't need to horde every item from his twenty-one years on earth. It was okay. I felt like I received Chad's blessing, too, as though he was reminding me that these were just things; the real treasures were in my heart and my head.

I accepted these strong confirmations and was ready to complete the task. It was okay to let go of the stories of Chad's life that were embedded in every greeting card he ever received and every picture he ever colored. I still knew that Dad was his hero, Grandpa his buddy, and Mom was the guaranteed biggest "pushover."

I didn't need a linking object to remind me of the funny stories...only a nudge to bring instant recollection. How could I forget the stories of the guppy that jumped in the barbeque mixture, the fire at the hunting shack, or his white suit, his first drink, and his waterbed? These were stories that were Chad's alone, and they were forever etched in my brain. They didn't require linking objects to bring forth a smile or hearty chuckle. It didn't take a pair of booties or a poignant sympathy card to tell me how precious he was. I've kept that truth in my heart and my head since the day he was born.

It became okay when I realized that letting go of the personal things wasn't about losing everything Chad had meant in our lives. It was about releasing the clutter and the negativity surrounding the circumstances of his death and the undeniable loneliness caused by his absence from my life. It became okay to release the personal items when I recognized that storing them in a box wasn't going to bring Chad back, and opening them time and time again to relive the pain wasn't helping me heal the wounds.

It became okay to pick a few treasured items to bring endless joy and use those as my link to his precious memory, not to burden myself with boxes of items that inflamed my grief and aggravated my grief bursts. I could hug Harvey, the white rabbit I had given to Chad when he was much too old to appreciate a stuffed animal. I can still talk to Harvey, and Harvey always accepts my sorrow. That alone could make me smile as I remember Chad's mischievous grin. A few items with positive energy are enough to remind me that he is still part of me and always will be.

This exercise in "letting go" wasn't about leaving behind memories, it was about moving forward with grace and gratitude. All that Chad meant in my life couldn't be captured in a single tangible item I so dearly coveted, stored, moved and kept safe for all these years.

**Yes, the time was right, now. I always said I would know.**

