

TO HAVE OR TO HOLD—LETTING GO OF RUMMAGE AND GRIEF

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Upon the recent death of my husband, I'm brought to task again to have or to hold. It's just as difficult as it was years ago when Chad died, but after re-reading this, I accept that it is also the act of "letting go." It's not the personal items that connect us so much. It's the memories. And the beautiful part about memories is, no one can take them away from me. A few precious things I will place in Gary's Memory Box. The stories are in my head. And the love he had for me is forever in my heart. I couldn't ask for anything more precious to hold me over until we meet again.

It's rummage sale time of the year again. In our previous neighborhood, this was more than just a weekend de-cluttering project...it was an EVENT! Big time! It was known for bargains, socializing, and clutter control. Hundreds and hundreds of people swarmed the streets for 2-3 days looking for bargains for everything imaginable. It was about repurposing someone's obsolete items into something perfectly useful for another reason in someone else's home.

Little did I realize before we moved to this part of our city how important this ritual was in consolidating baggage and neutralizing regrets. And especially, how it parallels to another important current "event" in my life... healing my grief. For years, I've stored items with once-important memories and hung on to the things I bought in a weak moment and later regretted buying. Keeping them was my way of not facing a bad decision or the loss. Now focusing on putting these things in a rummage sale has been a fundamental lesson in "letting go." I didn't understand this important ritual at first, but when I got caught up in its redeeming factors, I wrote an article a few years ago confessing my lessons learned ([FOR SALE: Madness, Memories, and Maybes at my website.](#))

We are a culture who prizes our possessions. Some gather toys—both big and small. Some hoard favorite collectibles for value, whimsy, prestige, or estimated resale. And some possess...just because they can. After the death of a loved one, family members are often charged with distribution of these prized possessions and may be seriously challenged to make appropriate decisions that would satisfy the deceased if he or she had a say.

We are often asked in our grief groups, "What do we do about the stuff—the personal belongings of our loved one who died?" That's where the pain comes in...that's when the grief bursts hit home. It can be a formidable task to realize you have to deal with your loved one's personal



items. The first thing I tell everyone is "You have to be ready to let go of each item. If you aren't, DON'T! There will be a time later when it won't be so painful."

I remember a few years after my son's, Chad's death, I was going to go through a trunk of many baby clothes that belonged to Chad. I was ready to pass them on until I opened a very small shoe box and inside were a pair of baby booties that reduced me to sobbing beyond control. Of all the things in the trunk, I'm not sure why this item made an intimidating connection. I closed the trunk and instinctively knew; I wasn't ready yet. Years later, I resolved to open it again...knowing the booties were still in there but prepared to make my decisions about distribution at that time. This time I was ready with my emotions and my resolve. It was okay.

And here I am again, just years later facing the same dilemma of repurposing, distributing, and managing the possessions of my beloved husband. It's something we all dread doing because to others it may appear as though we want to remove things that remind us of our loved one's presence in our lives. That is probably the very last reason for this particular act of "letting go" of a loved one's

personal items. I surrendered this time around, to accept that it is more about simplifying so someone else doesn't have to do it upon my own death. I admit to feeling weak every time I opened a closet door and saw Gary's things or walked into the garage to a surplus of tools and toys and wished he was here to use them. Truthfully, many items I touched turned my stomach inside out with this awful feeling of anxiety and sadness. Wondering if I should hold on or gracefully let it go. And then I would picture him telling me (like he always did) when I asked about getting rid of items, "It's just stuff. If you feel it has a strong memory, keep it. If not, it's okay to discard it, because it's of no treasured value to you or me." That was my saving grace for letting go. As hard as this process is—again this time—I'm okay knowing he would approve.



Today I reminded myself, this is a yearly event not something I just dreamed up. It's an annual therapeutic ritual of "letting go" of unused items to the church rummage sale, Goodwill, or Habitat for Humanity. Gary was probably right in that respect. Most things in my rummage sale, are items that deserve to be there. They've out served their purpose; have been replaced with more up-to-date counterparts; are duplicates and not needed; or simply, haven't been used or looked at in the past year or two. Just taking them off the shelves creates harmony within. It's all about making that decision to "let go." Will I miss it tomorrow? Or five years from now? Not likely. That is the key to "letting go."

This year the rummage sale ritual coincides perfectly with the relevant stages in my grief right now. Letting go of things that are holding me back is the only path to healing.

For example:

- When I let go of my anger...I surrendered to the fact sometimes there isn't always an answer to "Why?" We

just trust and rely on faith. (It's not the only mystery in my life or question without an answer to Why?.)

- When I let go of my pride in "owning so many great things" ...I accept that life is not about what we have. Things are just things. (I'm comfortable with less is more...and grateful for what I have.)
- When I let go of my shoulda, woulda, coulda I concede that Gary's death was not a choice. (I couldn't have changed the outcome no matter how I tried. Not with wishes, hopes, or prayer. It was to happen.)
- When I let go of my regrets...I take comfort in knowing that I really have nothing to regret. (Our marriage was the best through all the ups and downs. We loved each other unconditionally.)
- When I let go of my fears and uncertainty, tomorrow becomes brighter. I can get up in the morning and know that God's got this and I'm on the right path.

Yes, after all the work, all the decisions, and all the preparation, rummage sales are purposeful. They are exhausting and frustrating but in the end, they are also cleansing.

A great sense of release and relief has come over me.

I ended my past article with this observation and it's still true today.

Rummage sales don't just weed out the unwanted. They open the closet door to the forgotten and the discarded. They persuade us to unclutter our lives, live more simply, and be grateful for and honor the treasures of the past. They allow us to grieve what we have lost, choose to remember what was important and commit to valuing what we have left.

Don't grieve and rummage sale then have similar intrinsic values?

- To discard your regrets
- To confirm that you have lived.
- To savor what you have loved.
- To have enjoyed and to have shared.
- To have brightened lives with cherished memories.
- To ultimately give meaning and purpose to someone else because of your experience.