

# Parting With the Personal Belongings of a Deceased Loved One Results In Resetting Your Own Priorities

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SPRING brings out the “clean sweep” genetic factor in most of us. It’s a time to unclutter, reorganize, and relinquish the boxes of stuff in the basement corner and clean the garage. Sometimes that “stuff” includes personal belongings of a loved one that died. Sometimes it’s just a potpourri of unnecessary, simply nostalgic, or clearly ready to “let go” stuff. But even though the motivational genes have kicked in, the process of dealing with it is more difficult than anticipated.

Making decisions about items that belonged to a loved one who died is emotionally difficult. Some people put this task off for a very long time because it just seems too painful. In many cases, time makes a difference, and from year-to-year how valuable the items are slightly diminishes. It’s best to conquer this burdensome task when you are motivated to deal with it. Like grief, there is no right or wrong way to handle this process. You just need to go through it.

Here are a few hints for beginning the task:

**Be Ready:** The most important step is “Be Ready.” You will know if you are ready or not to “let go” of those treasured items that belong to your deceased loved one. In some cases, you may be gently pushed to redistribute items for valid reasons (such as having to sell a residence that a parent lived in after his/her death.) In that case, the overwhelming task may have to be accomplished within a limited time. Motivate yourself by choosing to think of this job as uncovering the mysteries and messages of your loved one’s life. Scanning personal belongings can often bring a chuckle; a reaction such as, “I didn’t know that; and most of all recall memories of times that were important to him or her.

Personally, I stored tubs full of things that belonged to our son, Chad, after he died because I wanted to keep them and look through them again. How often did I look through them? Occasionally, but not as often as I thought I would. And, I confess, I still have

two tubs of things I'm just not ready to part with. For me, some items I was able to give to Chad's friends within a few months because I wanted certain people to have items I knew they would appreciate. Other things, I'm still stubbornly hanging on to for nostalgia reasons. I figure as long as I have room ...why not.

### **Determine the “Destinations” before you begin the project**

Make 3-4 sorting spots where you can put items as you begin the process. Destroy/Toss... Consignment/Sell...Keep....Give Away are good “destinations”. Items can be re-evaluated as you progress. Sort quickly and go with your first instinct. Chances are your first inclination was the best one. Lingering over items while you estimate value whether cash or memory creates a greater opportunity for repacking the item and having to deal with it later.

Keep items that make you shed a tear, warm the heart and summon a deep, hearty chuckle. For now, these have incredible value!

Give away can include many destinations. Perhaps a charity can benefit from items that might be useful to them. It's nice to give treasured items to family items or friends of the deceased. Most communities have some individual benefit going on at any given time for someone who is in dire need of household items or clothing.

Consignment/Sell: This is an ideal option for items that are less personal such as household, tools, hobby etc. There may be quick cash value for an eager buyer, but price it to sell. I would not consider putting a deceased loved one's item on the curbside for disposal or spring cleanup. There is something unfavorable about that no matter what the item is. And I would be very upset to see the item on my neighbors' back or in his house! Just my opinion!

### **Enlist help.**

Because this is an overwhelming job laced with emotions and memories, it's good to have some other family members or friends help you with the process. When there are painful “indecisions” about disposal, **don't**. Hang onto the item for another day or time when you feel more comfortable about relinquishing it.

If you have trouble throwing away personal items or clothing, enlist someone who can make those decisions. Have the enlisted person remove the bag of items so you don't have second thoughts later. Speaking from experience, I've literally rescued too many items by bringing them back into the house again. It's easy to “believe” you can't live without it!

In some cases you may require professional services. You may wish to hire an appraiser for items of value that family members don't necessarily want to keep. There are businesses that specialize in estate sales and auctions that can take some of the burden off of you. Also there are businesses that “clean out” abandoned properties and dispose of items for a fee. These are all decisions you will need to make depending upon your circumstances. If you just can't deal with the intense emotions and overwhelming tasks of all the nuisances, this is a good option. Go through first and save what you desire. Then leave the rest in good hands and don't look back!

### **Share and Take Day**

If there are extended family that may have an interest in some of the items you would otherwise discard, it's nice to have a gathering when these can be displayed and gifted. The hardest moment here is accepting that some items may be rejected by those you invite. Don't judge. Everybody puts a value on different things. Some people are not keepers of “things” regardless of the sentimental value. Remember, these items seem important to YOU, not necessarily someone else.

Someone told me how they handled items belonging to a grandmother. They gift wrapped selected items for each child and grandchild (items they thought the person would like) and put them under the Christmas tree that year. How comforting to open a package containing something that belonged to “grandma”!

Gary's grandmother did something similar. Many years before her death, when she was giving up her household, she had all the children and grandchildren come. In an orderly fashion (such as by birthdate), each could pick an item they wanted to remember her by. We took the item that day and kept it in memory of her both before and after her death. (She lived at least twenty more years!)

### **Sentimental Items (Picture, Family Albums)**

In your clean up task, you will likely find some items you've never saw before or some that bring back vivid memories of better times. You may want to set these aside and look through them at a later time rather than disrupt the process of sorting. Then, you can make a better decision of what to do with that item. Appreciate and enjoy the special moments as you read, touch or feel items that capture another time in your loved one's life. These are treasured experiences.

Pictures and family albums become a huge collection over time. I am facing that problem right now with genealogical information and family photos that date way back in time. No one wants to be the "keeper" of the tub full of information; yet, everyone thinks it has some value and should be kept somewhere. I finally decided to scan the old pictures that were badly worn, along with others that were good, as well as scan documents. This way I can identify them and keep them on a computer, flash drive, or cloud for someone. The tub of tangibles is up for a new home...an takers?

### **Follow through even if it gets tough!**

A dear friend of mine who now resides in an assisted living home taught me a very valuable lesson that seems heartbreaking, but truly does identify our journey through this life. She had a nice home and many treasured items

which systematically have been downsized through her illness to the present moment where she has very little of her tangible treasures anymore. It speaks to us about our transitions through life. At one point, we are "gatherers" trying to accumulate things. And as we age, if we are that lucky, we realize that things aren't what our journey is all about. Our first inclination is to give it to a family member who might really "care" about it. What we discover as we try to unload items which we thought were valuable is that they have depreciated over time—just like we have.

The lesson in this is to appreciate the blessings for all the personal items we had to use and enjoy over the years. Most of us will admit that we have much more than we REALLY needed. We had it because we liked it and could afford it. Whether you are redistributing your loved one's items or downsizing your own, the task makes us face loss and reality in very personal ways. What to salvage that really tells our story is the decision that requires honest assessment and can be emotionally exhausting. If it hasn't happened already, it resets your personal list of priorities. Ask yourself; if I had to move to a one-room apartment immediately, what couldn't I live without? And if you are honest with yourself, nothing is as valuable as all the memories or stories that came with any item in your stash.

This Spring began just like the last...we are making a project

out of letting go of a few more possessions that have served their purpose, are unused, and can give me some peace that I'm doing my part. I didn't say this was a one year project. I'm into it several years now because I've had the luxury of taking my time. In the back of my mind, I'm always thinking about those who have to clean up after us when we die. What will they think about all we've accumulated that tells the story about our life? And it's no surprise, that the items we value may not seem important to them at all. We are the ones who place value on all the things we have. It's likely Craig's list, EBay, or the local consignment shop would not agree.

The final outcome of this lengthily process is Relief and Happiness that I've accomplished a little more of the burdensome task. It even makes the future look brighter. My rummage sale closet is getting fuller and I'm feeling good about it. Okay, now that I wrote this I'm motivated to get back to the task at hand... maybe I'll even give those tubs of Chad's a second look! But I can guarantee you that next spring I'll be back at it (and there will likely be another article!)

For more information, humorous and sage advice on this subject, read Nan's articles at her website:

*Your Legacy is Probably Not a Box of Stuff For Sale: Madness Memories and Maybes*  
[www.wingsgrief.org](http://www.wingsgrief.org)